

# Quiddity

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## Ascension

*A stand-alone excerpt from Voices from the Radio Operator's House (2016) as translated from the Icelandic by Larissa Kyser*

I'm looking down the basement steps of Austurbær Junior High, clutching the fresh hamburger bun I found in the schoolyard. I want to enjoy it in peace. I've had an insatiable appetite since I got my feathers, though I was rarely hungry during my life as Siggí the Ciggy. Actually, I was always half-sick then, no matter whether I was at sea or on land. But, of course, it was the cigarettes and alcohol that did that to me, and we know now how that went. Hindsight is 20/20.

Yes, well, that's just the way it is, I guess.

It's strange to be plucked out of a mortal, earthly existence and then wake up with wings. And I'm not talking about angels here. Of course, it took time to get used to it, but many have met fates worse than being reborn as a raven. The obvious examples being pigs and chickens.

I get nightmares just thinking about it.

But now I turn my attention back to the hamburger bun. It is, of course, too much to ask that a guy be able to eat in peace. Ragnar Pétur, a famous surgeon in his past life but a haggard-looking raven in this one, plonks himself down heavily next to me and pecks indifferently at the sesame seeds on the top half as if nothing could be more natural, leaving nothing but the white, unhealthy bit behind.

"This is actually my bread," I say mildly.

"But you won't begrudge me these scraps, will you?" he asks reproachfully. "It's not as if there's some kind of famine going on. There's never a genuine food shortage in Reykjavík. Not even in the winter," he adds solemnly. "People get flabby and idle living high on the hog like this. There used to be real weather here. Take for instance, January 1920, as I recall, or was it '21? In any case, I was fetched in the middle of the night, on horseback, to assist a woman having a difficult birth. She lived on the other side of the fjord and..." He's about to continue, but I interrupt him.

"There are certain rules in effect here regarding provisions and they apply as much to you as everyone else," I say sternly, but when he doesn't reply and just looks at me blankly, I let the matter drop.

There are several of us who are here under the same circumstances, although most of the ravens don't seem to be anything other than plain old ravens. Truth be told, we avoid their company. I'm not clear on what happened, how this came to pass. We're always wondering about it amongst ourselves, arguing over all sorts of hypotheses. We go around and around in circles trying to come up with explanations, but we aren't any closer to doing so.

Now that I think about it, I can see that we're a curious mishmash of a group. Depression is common among us ravens, not to mention mental illness. Ólafur's a good example. The poor bastard has the hardest time making himself understood. He's excitable and aggressive and everything he says is total nonsense. We don't know who he was, and are mostly of the mind that even he doesn't know, but Ragnar thinks it's likely that he was some kind of religious nut.

"When murderers listen to angels, then the devil's on the loose," he tells me confidentially, ruffling his black wings gloomily.

Poor Ólafur was close to starvation when he first came here. He was fractious, had no appetite for anything, but expected, nonetheless, that we bring him food and let him in on all the best spots. Now he's always hanging around by himself—he hasn't found himself a mate and prefers to loiter up at the very top of the church tower where he can sit and look down on the world without having to expend much effort. It's a pitiful sight to see.

I want to cheer him up.

The former surgeon is, of course, in the middle of an anecdote about an appendectomy he performed on the kitchen table of a Skagafjörður housewife.

"Spotlessly clean and tidy woman," he says. "A product of the Homemakers' Academy, no doubt about it. The whole place gleamed. She'd scrubbed the table with a steel brush and lye. The fumes from the scouring powder steamed up from the floor like ground mist. And he survived—the man. Yessss, siree, they had guts, those folks...my lord, did they have guts..." He falls silent and stares ahead gloomily.

I nod my head politely. I have actually heard that he was skilled with the knife. People say that even after he got so senile that he mistook the door to the broom cupboard for that of the operating room, he was still performing complicated procedures. His abilities had become second nature to him.

But I don't feel like listening to more right now, so I let him have the rest of the bread and take off. It's always just as amazing. The wind is cool under my wings and the further I drift up into the heavenly blue, the more beautiful and still the earth becomes. Jumbled details bleed into geometric patterns and I myself become invincible. I am in total control of my movements and let myself float unhurriedly.

The old bastard follows me. He gets up to where I am and flaps, moaning, beside me. He never seems to enjoy having wings, being able to fly. I feel guilty for being so absurdly happy and let gravity pull me down gently. We sit side by side in front of the old corner store.

"People never seem to get over their addiction to junk food," says Ragnar, looking resignedly at the green-painted door, which I know conceals a little bell on the other side.

"Pff, most often, it's the places serving junk food that have the friendliest service," I reply. I'm fed up with the lack of tolerance and, trying to put an end to the conversation, begin to peck at the colorful Christmas lights lying on the sidewalk in front of me.

It occurs to me that us ravens could amuse ourselves with these, do something fun. I'm on the point of bringing up the idea with Ragnar, but stop when I see how dispirited he is. So instead, I politely hang my head in solidarity. We sit together in silence for a long time—far too long, I think—until he laboriously heaves himself into the air again.

When I look after him, flying high over Skólavörðustígur, my relief increases in direct proportion to how much smaller he's getting, right up until he disappears in the direction of the harbor. He's not a bad guy, ol'

Ragnar, and it's upsetting to observe how despondent he is, even when he's flying. A raven that flies like it's carrying all the world's burdens on its back is a dismal sight.

I'd like to cheer him up, too, and then I remember the Christmas lights. They're so colorful and cheery. We'll throw a party here—definitely tonight, and definitely in front of the corner store. Everyone will be invited—Ólafur and Ragnar and the other ravens, too, even the ones who don't seem to have a single thought between them.

When I take off, I decide to head east, all the way out to World's End, the horse stables in Kópavogur. I go there sometimes to enjoy the peace and quiet. One time, I went on New Year's Eve. It was an extremely cold and starry night. There was quiet music coming from the stables and everything was illuminated. I've always thought superstitions and old wives' tales were for fools but I'm more open now than I used to be, and I wondered whether it was conceivable that there were hidden people or elves there.

When I got closer, however, I discovered that it wasn't the echo of elf songs that I heard. Rather, the electronic music and heavy bass beats pointed to there being a party there. That pleased me, because there's often some edible or other to be found around celebrations. But the stable was empty except for the horses, which were milling around, agitated and fidgety. There were two horses, though, that were different from the others—the two standing furthest in. They seemed to like the music quite a bit. It was almost as though they were swaying in time with the beat. It dawned on me that maybe they were in the same situation as me, although they were most likely younger if they liked that music. Since then, I've often flown over and watched the horses from a distance, but I haven't seen those music lovers since.

As for me, I've never had it as good as I do now. Although for what it's worth, my life as Siggí the Ciggy wasn't so terrible. Or anyway, no worse than most people's, I suppose. More often than not, it was all right.

Naturally, I was at sea for a long time, and that was ok. My finances were in good shape—not least because I smuggled in cheap cigarettes that I sold in my friend's corner store—and a few years after that, I got engaged to a country girl from back home.

But that didn't work out. My fiancé couldn't imagine being tied down to a sailor, so she broke our engagement and married a dairy farmer. At the time, this laid me so low that I offered to come ashore and take whatever work there was to be had, but she was more than likely just looking for an excuse.

The night she dumped me, we sat in Hljómskálagarður park and looked at the sunset over Tjörninn pond. She'd gotten a short-term job in the SS abattoir—this was around autumn and the slaughtering season was coming to a close. We had bilberries and crepes filled with cream in a lunchbox. And we sat in silence.

I didn't dare say a thing, tried to chew without making a sound, but it was difficult in the quiet of the evening. Maybe she'd already met the dairy farmer by then.

Yes, well, that's just the way it is.

But today, I'm happy and in love. I get a tickle in my stomach just saying it and it's good to know that she's waiting for me in our nest, glossily proud and dark. She was an upholsterer in her last life and what's more, I knew her. A single mother of five, looked a bit like Doris Day, struggled her whole life. And now the two of us soar, blissfully happy, over the city in the evenings, no obligations, but always together. I've never had better company.

That's not to say it wasn't friendly, the atmosphere back then when we sat, us boys, all together in the back room of the corner store here playing cards over a glass and a smoke with Dean Martin and Sinatra on the hi-fi, and the future around the next corner. The owner always hid a bottle of brennivín in the cabinet under the

sink. Pétur hadn't started to lose it and Biggi still had teeth in his mouth, was always on the brink of getting rich, always had something fabulous in the works that he'd try to get us to invest in.

That was before the goddamn cancer. Which was bad. I was always so afraid of death. It started right off when I was young. I often woke before dawn and knew that one day, it'd be my turn. That the moment was getting closer, was waiting there, in the indeterminate future. The darkness.

And then death took its shape. Got a name. I felt like I'd run into a wall.

The doctors did what they could and advised me to quit smoking. I tried. The boys weren't exactly sure how they should treat me and they didn't visit me often. Men like that don't make hospital visits with bouquets in hand.

On one occasion, when I'd been smoke-free for several days, I rushed outside. In a total frenzy. I ran, breathless, with a stabbing pain in my chest and a single, burning desire. When I got to my friend in the corner store and bought a pack of Camels and matches, I was so ashamed of myself that I couldn't light up. But I still felt him looking sorrowfully after me when the bell chimed and the door closed.

I staggered off. Half-stumbling. All the way to the yellow lighthouse in the harbor. Then I could go no further. There I lit my cigarette. After I'd finished half, I felt sick, tossed it into the gravel, and tromped it down with my foot until it had disappeared. I threw the pack into the next trash can. I never dared go back there. I avoid the lighthouse to this day.

Sometimes, one thinks back. Loses oneself in remembrances. When I snap out of such recollections here, jet-black and content, I feel like I'm waking up from a nightmare.

Yes, well, that's just the way it is.

Someone's chucked a piece of pizza on the sidewalk next to the old Landsbankinn building. Life couldn't be better.

**Steinunn G. Helgadóttir** is an Icelandic visual artist, poet, and prose writer who has previously published two volumes of poetry. Her collection *Kafbátakórinn* ("The Submarine Choir") was awarded the Jón úr Vör Poetry Award in 2011. In 2017, she was also named one of Literature Across Frontiers' "New Voices from Europe." The story "Ascension" is a stand-alone excerpt from *Raddir úr húsi loftskreytamannsins* ("Voices from the Radio Operator's House"), a novel-in-stories, or short story cycle, which earned the author the 2016 Fjöruverðlaunin, an annual award for women writers.

**Larissa Kyzer** is a writer and translator who was awarded a 2012 Fulbright grant to Iceland, where she lived and studied for five years. Her translations include works by Andri Snær Magnason, Auður Jónsdóttir, Kari Tulinius, Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir, and Steinunn G. Helgadóttir and have appeared in *CV2*, *Gutter*, *Os*, *The Journal*, and *Words and Worlds*, and are forthcoming in *Lunch Ticket and Exchanges*. She earned her Master's degree in translation studies from the University of Iceland in 2017.

Matthew Minicucci  
On Disappointment

I don't own a motorcycle, but my friend John lets me borrow his whenever I'd like. This is nice, though complicated, as my own unobtrusive personality would hate to have the bike at the very moment he, in a moment of panic of one sort or another, really wants to ride it. Nonetheless, I take him up on his offer once a week or so most summer months here in Central Illinois.

It's a beautiful bike: a 1974 BMW, a deep, beet red. Tremendous shape for its age, and well cared for. The seat has a hidden compartment beneath suitable for all sorts of small necessities: manuals, needle-nose pliers, my sunglasses case. John has an original toolset tucked in the bottom, complete with a ragged burlap case, the sort you unfurl on the poured concrete of your garage. An item he no doubt haggled into the original price of the bike.

It's nearly impossible to describe to you what it's like to ride if you've never done it. This is a problem when discussing the matter publicly. Have you ever flown commercially? Statistically, you almost certainly have, so I feel safe making the comparison. You know that feeling when your plane makes the wide turn from taxi lanes onto the runway? How it rolls almost to a complete stop, revs the engines to max, then lets the throttle go out nice and slowly? How your heart can do nothing but press into the back of your chest?

It's sort of like that, only you're sitting directly on one of the engines.

Of course, it's not exactly like that. Your standard jetliner is lifting off between 150-180 miles per hour. On the back roads of Sydney, Illinois, just 10 minutes from my apartment, I rarely get past 60. But the acceleration across a newly-paved road splitting two corn fields, black and fallow, can almost knock you from the bike. Really. I weigh more than 250 pounds and I can feel the wind lifting me off the bike while accelerating. Like, actually trying to push me airborne.

I've always wanted to be airborne. Not in a plane. I hate planes. Actually air-borne, with nothing between me and the air. Nothing comes closer than a motorcycle.

This desire, I imagine, severely disappoints my father. Not so much the feeling,

But the act itself. It's a treasonous act, one that crosses many impossible lines. It's an act that can't be brought up at the dinner table, or even the lunch outing. It can't be posted about on social media, or discussed while driving to the supermarket. It's a secret act, and secrets are such because of lines they cross.

It's Christmas Day, and my father and I are moving a table out of my grandfather's "apartment." We call it this because it does, in many ways, resemble an apartment. Strangely, it most resembles a college apartment, with so many doors stacked to a floor, and people shambling about in their bathrobes. But, more accurately, this apartment is more a room in a facility. A place where someone can come check in on him from time to time. A place where a thin cord wraps around the floor of the bathroom that can be pulled in case of emergency.

And so we're moving a table, because we need it for Christmas dinner. But before this, we have to pack some of the things on the table, odds and ends. My grandfather doesn't live in his apartment any more. He's across town in a different facility where they can keep a closer eye on him. This is because he's taken to getting up in the middle of the night and walking across the street to the fire station. Once we know about this, the first time, and once he's back safely in bed, we ask the firefighters what he specifically asks for when he shows up, half-naked, at the fire station. They can't quite tell us, not understanding most of what he says, the words passing as if from a baby's mouth: muted and trickling. My father assumes my grandfather's unsure of where he is, and can only think to go to somewhere safe. My father assumes he sleeps too much, and

wakes disoriented in the night. In these moments, there's only dark-ness, and no one to be found. My father wonders if his own father's mind wanders there between the real and the imagined; the line of a freshly-paved road slicing two open fields apart.

There's a lot on the table that needs to be boxed away: collected mail, cross-word puzzles, an old scrabble board where each piece neatly locks in. And two pictures. As it turns out, my grandfather has only two pictures framed in his apartment. One of his wife, my grandmother, Vera, who passed away from lung cancer when I was six. My grandfather was 63, an impossible age when you're only six. It's been nearly thirty years since then. Another kind of impossibility.

The other picture is of my Uncle Peter, who was killed in a motorcycle accident at 19. Again, something of an impossibility in my mind. My grandfather, in all the years I've known him, never mentions this son's name. My lost uncle. The picture is ubiquitous, and nearly as recognizable as my grandfather himself. But I know nothing about Peter.

With the table loaded in the truck, my father passes the keys off to me. He doesn't like to drive anymore, and certainly not a truck. He's just turned 57, so I wouldn't put him in the "old" category quite yet, but he's only six years from his father's age at the time of his mother's death, a distance equal to one whole six-year-old me.

We drive through the back roads of Vermont, rolling a bit too fast through empty junctions, and hitting cornered dirt roads with the four wheel drive off, because we don't know any better. And I tell him, finally, in a moment of strange contentment, about the motorcycle. I tell him about John, and the red bike, and how the air likes to push you right out of the seat, or maybe pull you closer to the sky, I can't quite decide. I tell him everything: the little compartment above the engine, the burlap tool case, my sunglasses, safe below deck. I finally tell him how much I ride, and how much it means to me.

And he doesn't say anything, for a while. He's busy with the open window, or the hanging clouds in the distance. And then he tells me, neatly, as clear as a bill of sale, that his brother's death tore his family up. Destroyed them. That they were never the same. He tells me that he, himself never had any problems with his weight until his brother's death, but never could quite get a handle on it after. He indicates that this, most likely, and perhaps ironically, will cause his own death soon enough. He tells me his brother Mike won't come to visit anymore, and that his sister, the woman whose house we are rapidly hurtling at, never knew what to say to him, and left home for the wilds of a 148-acre house and a 6'7" husband, a bear of a man, as soon as such an opportunity arose.

He tells me his father never talked to them about it. He only went to identify the body, tossed suddenly through the side of a delivery truck as the driver ran a red light. He told me he was too young, even, to attend the funeral. Only six. The last of five children.

My father's never spoken of this before with me. I had known what happened, but it had never been explicated. The rips in the fabric never before pointed out. And then he turns back to the road, running out now. The sun and the mountains, he turns to them, too. He tells me *don't do it*. Just like that. *Don't do it anymore*.

And so, I don't.

**Matthew Minicucci** is the author of two collections of poetry: *Translation* (Kent State University Press, 2015), chosen by Jane Hirshfield for the 2014 Wick Poetry Prize, and *Small Gods*, forthcoming from New Issues Press in 2017. He is the recipient of fellowships and awards from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the Wick Poetry Center, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he received his MFA. His work has appeared in or is forthcoming from numerous journals and anthologies, including *Best New Poets 2014*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *The Southern Review*, and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, among others.