

A subtly funny and sometimes ambiguous story about when everyday life is turned on its head and death comes knocking.

## DEATH OF A FOREST

by Jonas Reynir Gunnarsson

*I imagine myself shooting through the night on a motorcycle. That I'm driving out of the town and letting myself disappear into the darkness. I'm as good as gone. This is why I went to Spain, to disappear.*

It has been raining nonstop for several days when the forest slides down the hillside, setting off a series of events in the life of the landowner and family father, Magnus.

Shortly afterward he discovers the bombs.

- **Nominated for The Icelandic Literary Prize 2020**
- **Shortlisted for the European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL) 2021**
- **The Icelandic Booksellers' Award 2020 (3<sup>rd</sup> place)**

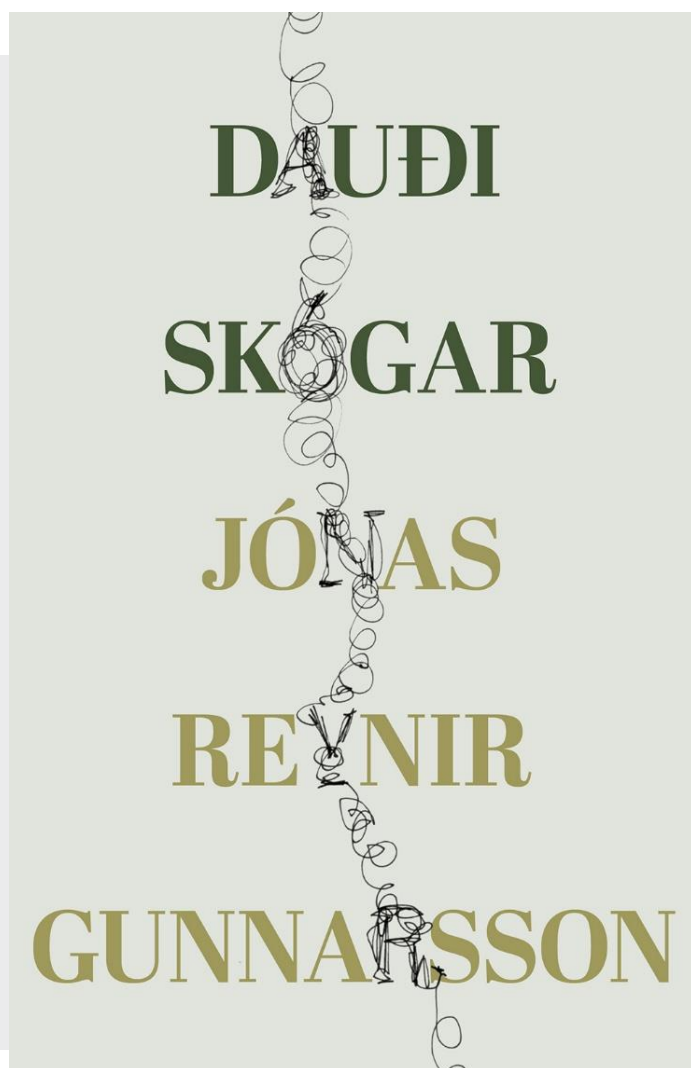
180 pp, 2020  
English sample translation available  
SOLD TO: Hungary (POLAR Könyvek)

*"I didn't read this book – I absorbed it.  
An uncomfortably convincing portrait of  
contemporary Iceland."*

**HALLGRIMUR HELGASON**  
(ON CONNECTING FLIGHT)

*"...it is no longer possible to call  
Gunnarsson promising as he has  
already become one of the most  
interesting writers of his generation."*

**EINAR FALUR INGOLFSSON**  
**MORGUNBLADID DAILY**  
(ON STARFISH)



## REVIEWS

★★★★ (four out of five possible)

"The forest, both as a physical place and as a symbol for various things, is the main theme of Jonas Reynir's book, *Death of a Forest*. ... The forest is palpable in the book, the forest that was and the forest that will be, the forest that died and the forest that burns, and is intertwined with nearly every word in the novel. It's a symbol for memories, life and death, and thus it provokes a deep sadness in the reader when a tree falls or dies, just like if it were a person.

... Jonas Reynir's text has roots that all cross and adjoin, and each fragment of text is connected to another. The flow of the novel is delightful ... It's hard to put the book down and Jonas Reynir manages to enchant the reader and build anticipation about what happens next."

RAGNHILDUR THRASTARDOTTIR, MORGUNBLADID DAILY

★★★★ (four out of five possible)

"*Death of a Forest* is an unusual but well-written novel that keeps the reader suspended in uncertainty throughout. Everything falls apart in Magnus' life because he doesn't know how to deal with his problems in a healthy way. It is both tragic and sometimes funny to watch events of the poor man's life unfold but often he only has himself to blame."

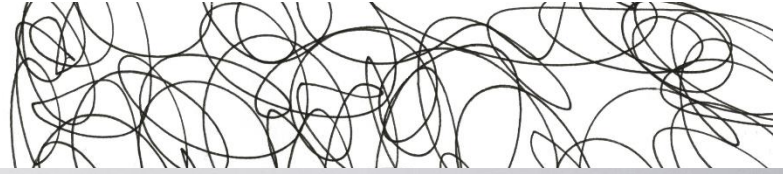
REBEKKA SIF STEFANSDOTTIR, LESTRARKLEFINN BLOG

"The forest is a symbol for everything that goes wrong, its foundations lie of bombs from the Second World War after all ... The tone is reminiscent of stories like *The Stranger* by Camus ... *Death of a Forest* is also about the grief of the main character, he experiences the loss of the forest and his father almost simultaneously ... a story about grief, the narrative itself is a way of processing the inevitable, it's like a pact with the impermanence of life, one's self, one's loved ones and even the earth itself."

GAUTI KRISTMANNSSON, VIDSJA, RUV, NATIONAL BROADCASTING SERVICE

"A successful and entertaining novel."

OTTAR KOLBEINSSON P ROPPE, FRETTLADID DAILY



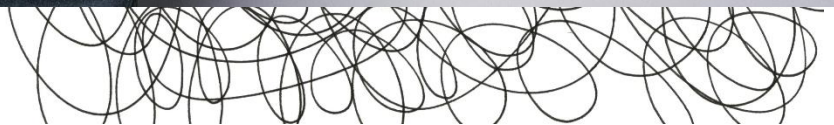
## JONAS REYNIR GUNNARSSON

**Jonas Reynir Gunnarsson (b.1987)**  
studied Creative Writing MA at the  
University of Iceland.

His previous novels, *Connecting Flight*  
and *Starfish*, garnered much attention,  
the former being nominated for the  
DV Culture Award.

His poetry book *Big Oil Tankers* received  
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Award and the collection *Laundry Day* was  
recipient of the May Star Award.

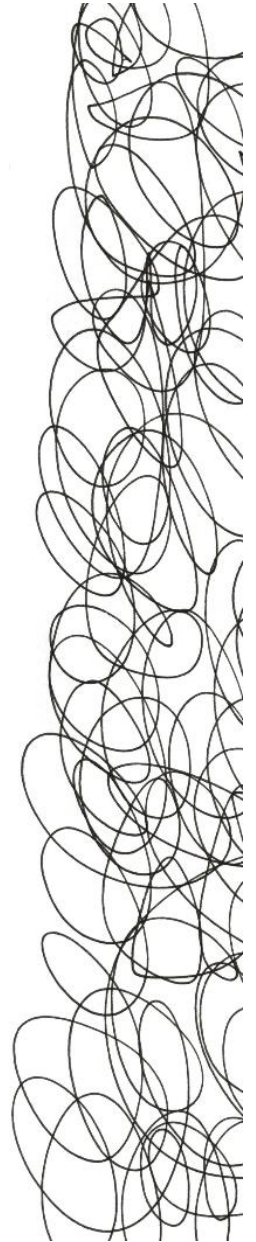
**[jonasreynir.com](http://jonasreynir.com)**



# The author on his book

**"My favourite place in the world is the little woodland near the village I grew up in. When I went there on summer vacation several years back, I was horrified to see there had been a mudslide on one of the rock slopes, and trees had slid down onto the road. It stayed with me. I had always thought of the woods as a large, immovable phenomenon - something that would undoubtedly outlive me. Later I read about an accident involving an explosion on the edge of a field in a nearby farm, an adult male and three children lost their lives. The British army had training exercises out there in the country during the Second World War and left explosives behind. These two things affected me greatly and became the motivation behind the story.**

**You might argue that this little village in eastern Iceland is the most peaceful place on earth. And yet it belongs to a planet that is having a hard time not wiping out its entire biosphere. Even though wars end they continue to take lives, NATO jets fly patrols over my home and forest fires rage all over the world – I recognized the struggle for existence that my species is engaged in right where I grew up, saw how everything is connected: the fate of ancient forests with the fate of my woods, the fate of humanity with those organisms wiped out a million years ago due to climate change, life and death, and the desperation in trying to create a safe environment for you and your family. All of this boiled together and exploded into the main character, Magnús, a man from a tiny village in Iceland who is trying not to lose his grip on life while death is all around."**



# DEATH OF A FOREST

Translated from the Icelandic by Mark Ioli

## 1

IN MY MIND my mom will always be the same age she was when she died. In addition I always become twelve years old again when I think about her. This despite having overtaken her in years. So in some ways our relationship is a bit of a paradox.

And what exactly are memories?

Nerve cells in your brain, according to Google.

When we die, we leave behind a certain neural pattern in the brains of those who knew us. We are in fact like a plant inside someone else's head. Growing and branching out all around this soft, wet landscape reminiscent of the marshes that the first forests sprouted from.

If I should be the first in my family to die (which isn't the most pleasant thought, although the alternative is worse, and by that I mean Hildur or the children going before me) I would only exist as a string of Christmas lights in the brains of those who remembered me, those bulbs presumably burning brightest in Hildur, Alli, and Elín. The pattern would be in the shape of a tree, and it would find nourishment in the areas of the brain governing happiness, sadness, fear, rage, and anxiety. One has no control over this growth, no power to decide what another person thinks of you. It is, however, the only *afterlife* one can count on – to become a tangle of branches in someone else's emotional life.

I don't know whether memories of the same person create similar patterns in each of those left behind, or whether it might be possible to print them out using a 3-D printer, if

the technology is that far along. I wonder what mom's pattern might look like in Hildur, Alli, and Elín, who never met her. Maybe like a small shrub that wastes away, bit by bit, as they get older. Its roots gaining only a shallow foothold in the soil. The branches snap, one after another, and the shrub dies.

I'm lying awake in a hotel room in Spain and this is what is knocking around inside my head.

I hear scooters tearing up and down the street.

The sound of their engines calms me. I had a dirt bike when I was a teenager. It was a confirmation gift from my dad.

I imagine myself darting through the night on a motorcycle. That I'm riding out of town, vanishing into the darkness. I'm as good as gone. This is why I came to Spain, to disappear. I'm on the run from the events of recent months.

THERE WERE BOMBS beneath our forest. Here is a rough sketch:



They were shaped like thermos bottles with fins, if that isn't clear from the picture, covered in rust, as they were from the Second World War. I had been dancing on top of these instruments of death my entire life without even knowing it.

What the hell were bombs doing underneath the trees?

This one can be pinned on the army. The Brits held training exercises there during the war. Choir practice, as my father called it, because the soldiers were so young and inexperienced, with ruddy cheeks like choir boys.

I don't know what kind of drunken revelry led to the bombs being left behind. Suffice it to say that over time they sank down into the ridge of turf and were gradually covered over. Then along came Mom and Dad who planted some larch trees. The roots would wrap themselves around the bombs like fingers, tickling them.

Their presence came to light shortly after the forest was destroyed, that autumn when it wouldn't stop raining. When the earth ran down the hillside and crumpled up like a blanket at the bottom of the slope, leaving behind a small, horseshoe-shaped grove.

There is no precipitation in the forecast here in Spain, but I still listen for the rain. I start thinking about that night I lay awake, back home, when the downpour began.

Hildur had turned up the heat. She enjoys keeping the bedroom like a bakery oven. I waited for her to fall asleep, snuck out of bed to open the window, then lay back down and listened to the rain singing on the roof. The sound of rain has always spoken to me, which makes sense as the body is mostly water. It is easy to forget. Flesh is the vocal minority of our anatomy.

At first it was possible to make out individual drops. They splattered onto the roof, one after another. Then the silent intervals between them began to grow shorter. The water streamed down the roof, along the windows and walls and down the driveway, watering the moss and weeds in the cracks between the pavement before running like a stream along the sidewalk and down into the sewer. The raindrops jingled off the upside-down paint can lying on the patio, and the tarp covering the flower beds sounded like a poorly tightened drum. The yard had become a trash heap. I had neglected to clean up; there were tools lying out



and pieces of lumber I still needed to seal.

The wood is going to warp and crack, I thought to myself, and the tools will rust. But I didn't feel like dragging myself out of bed in the middle of the night to save them.

Hildur likes keeping the garden neat and tidy. She is generally far more sensitive to mess than I am. This is likely due to my upbringing; my mother hoarded all kinds of trash, and my father was too cheap to throw it out, especially after mom died. Hildur on the other hand grew up surrounded by an obsessive asceticism, with rarely more than three days passing between full-scale purges of the house. She has tried to sever ties with her childhood and teenage years, barely speaking to her parents except on the kids' birthdays, but this cleaning compulsion still slumbers within her.

After we bought the land and built our house, Hildur wanted to tear out the vegetation and completely level the yard. I had a hard time getting her on my side. She didn't like being told what to do, it reminded her too much of childhood. We argued about it for several weeks until finally having the alder and willow tree removed, installing cotoneaster and fencing around the entire lot, and satisfying ourselves with this as a tidy solution. But the rowan tree up on the hill was allowed to remain, and in fact another joined it. Likewise we left the aspens in peace, along with the birch on the west side of the house. I tried to keep the garden in good shape, but sometimes projects dragged on, and I flitted from one thing to another until it all ground to a halt and the yard filled with trash. So I was happy Hildur was asleep beside me and couldn't hear the rain hitting the empty paint can or the wheelbarrow filling with water.

Hildur would never struggle with insomnia. Falling asleep is like child's play to her.

Different tree species give off different sounds, both in wind as well as rain. It is possible to identify them with your eyes closed. I distinctly heard the birch trees and could picture the bark, shiny like a new magazine, the wind blowing its leaves as though flipping through pages. I began to think about my forest, even though there hadn't been any deciduous trees in it. But the rain can also play a mean conifer.

In the introduction to the book *A History of Palaeozoic Forests*, which I read over a hundred times in my youth, it stated that water and plants enjoyed the most poignant love affair on the planet.