

The Ravens of Tomorrow

by Sjón

As someone who trained his creative senses in the laboratory of the Surrealist group Medúsa in Reykjavík in the 80s, I am no stranger to the importance of games in culture. So, when I first heard about Katie Paterson's *Future Library* I instantly recognised its strong game-like qualities. A game is an invitation to play against or with a number of people, accepting a set of rules that allows the players to move in a marked-out space, over a given time, with certain restrictions and a promise of enough freedom to make it their own. But it was also clear to me that *Future Library* was quite unlike the parlour-games of my youth, played out in the span of an evening on a friend's writing desk: it is a game played on the grandest of scales.

Still, it wasn't until I was invited to contribute to it — and had gladly accepted to do so — that I started to understand the depth of its challenge. Like the best of games, *Future Library* makes the player aware of the skills and flaws he or she brings to the playing field; in this case it tests the fundamentals of everything an author must deal with when sincerely engaging with the art of writing: *Am I a writer of my times? Who do I write for? How much does the response of the reader matter to me? What in a text makes it timeless?* And for some of us it poses the hardest question of all: *Will there be people in the future who understand the language I write in?*

And now that I have played my part with enthusiasm and earnestness I can only hope that out there — hidden by the fog of the future — there is a mountainside that one day will echo with the words my written voice produced in the Spring of 2017.

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My favourite Icelandic folk tale has to do with the future. In it we learn about an old couple who live in extreme poverty on a desolate farm in a dark and narrow valley somewhere beyond the bluest mountains. The storyteller makes much of their poor circumstances and their old age. They are so frail they can barely move. The cow, the cat and the dog are nothing but skin and bones. The man is around eighty years old, she

is over ninety. Their farmhouse is sinking into the earth.

One day a stranger knocked on their door. It was a man who had lost his way while sheep-gathering in another county, a rider swallowed by the fog out in the wilderness only to be released from it days later by the desolate farmstead. The old couple welcomed him into their home. But unfortunately, they were sorry to say, they had nothing to offer a starving newcomer but a glass of whey. And, well, he was lucky – yes, he was lucky – there was the peel from a single potato to go with it.

Just as the man sat down to eat this meagre meal — the old couple hungrily watching his every move from across the table — a young raven swooped down from the rafters and landed in the old woman’s lap. It croaked softly and looked up at her with its black pearls of eyes. And while she petted the bird the old man shuffled to a cupboard and brought from it a trough brimming with morsels of lamb, hardened butter, dried haddock and other food loved by man and beast alike. The creature opened its beak and together they started feeding it.

Upon seeing this, and realising that the old couple lived at the point of starvation in order to be able to feed the raven, the guest asked them why they were doing it. The ninety-year-old woman answered: “It is said that the common raven can live to the age of two hundred and we want to see if it is true.” Her octogenarian husband nodded in agreement.

I was reminded of this story when Katie Paterson wrote to me and invited me into the *Future Library*. The marvellous project has all the qualities of a classic folk tale:

Each year for the next one hundred years a new author will write a work for the library. A forest has been planted just outside Oslo and in 2114 the collection will be published in a book printed on paper made from the trees that will grow alongside the literary corpus. Until then the texts remain unread, the imagined and the real stay separated.

Those of us who contribute to *Future Library* in its first decades will not know how our works fare. But as the old couple and their fledgling raven have kept living for centuries in their story, maybe we can hope to survive in our writing too.

There is always hope in folly.