

an excerpt from

VALENTINES: STORIES. By Olaf Olafsson. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. 216 pp. \$23.00.

Reviewed by Kelly Cherry

There is a kind of story that is less minimalist than bald, shorn of detailed description, metaphor, and hyperbole, techniques that are standard operating procedure in much contemporary American fiction. Without these attributes, character and plot take the foreground, and in Olaf Olafsson's excellent new book *Valentines* that is exactly what happens. In twelve stories titled and ordered by the names of the months, Olafsson develops intriguing and sometimes startling situations whose outcomes reveal both psychology and its relationship to event—how event so often is the combustion of combined psychologies, which is to say, how character shapes plot and plot shapes character.

Olafsson is not, as it happens, American, but he has been living and working in this country for many years. One is hard-pressed to determine whether the severe barrenness of his literary landscape is a consequence of his being from Iceland (which, as one story reminds us, is green—unlike, say, Greenland), or of his academic background in physics, or of his job as an executive vice president for Time Warner, or of his own fortuitous making. The prose is flattened out, like a plain, but emotions threaten to erupt, their volcanic rumblings all the more ominous as they assault a featureless surface. Whatever its derivation, the spare telling lends Olafsson's work a distinctiveness, while the twisting plots, often Oedipal, suggest fellow northerner Ingmar Bergman's haunting cinematic explorations of life and death.