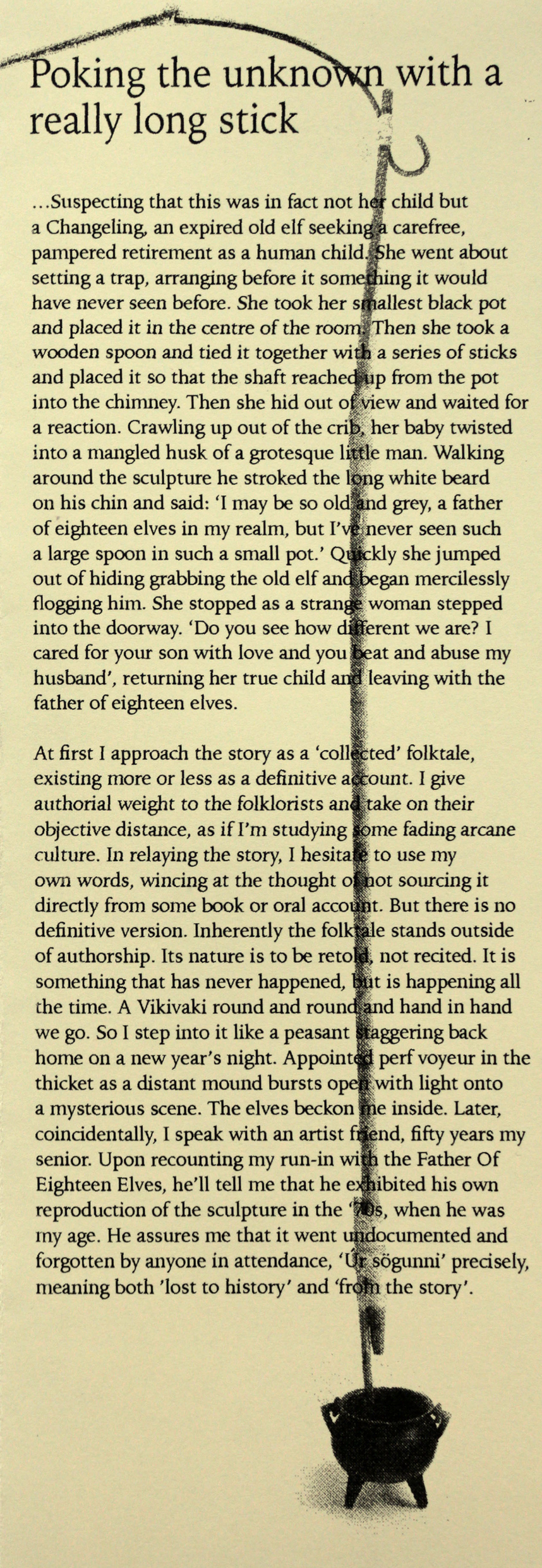
Poking the unknown with a really long stick

...Suspecting that this was in fact not her child but a Changeling, an expired old elf seeking a carefree, pampered retirement as a human child. She went about setting a trap, arranging before it something it would have never seen before. She took her smallest black pot and placed it in the centre of the room. Then she took a wooden spoon and tied it together with a series of sticks and placed it so that the shaft reached up from the pot into the chimney. Then she hid out of view and waited for a reaction. Crawling up out of the crib, her baby twisted into a mangled husk of a grotesque little man. Walking around the sculpture he stroked the long white beard on his chin and said: 'I may be so old and grey, a father of eighteen elves in my realm, but I've never seen such a large spoon in such a small pot.' Quickly she jumped out of hiding grabbing the old elf and began mercilessly flogging him. She stopped as a strange woman stepped into the doorway. 'Do you see how different we are? I cared for your son with love and you beat and abuse my husband', returning her true child and leaving with the father of eighteen elves.

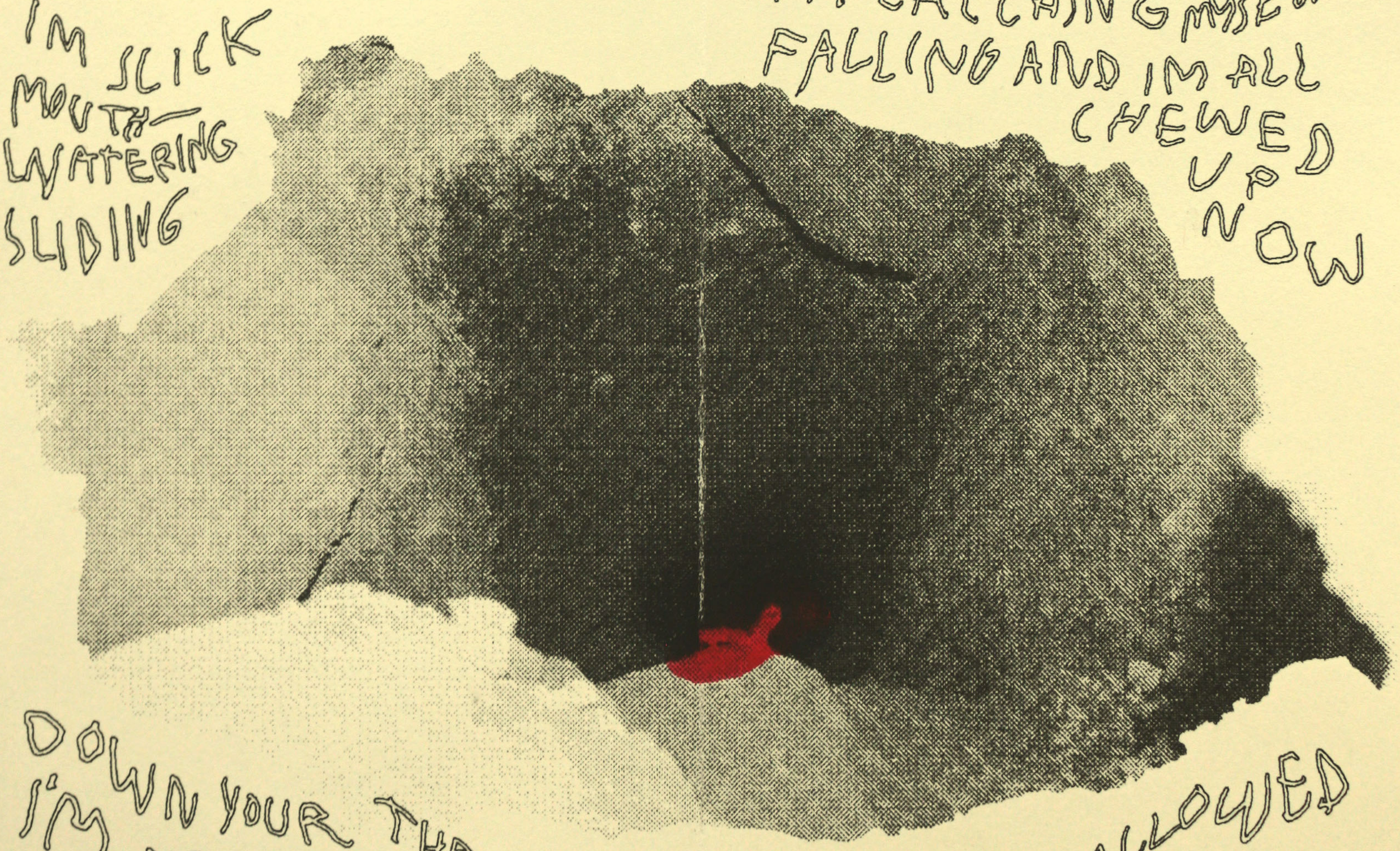
At first I approach the story as a 'collected' folktale, existing more or less as a definitive account. I give authorial weight to the folklorists and take on their objective distance, as if I'm studying some fading arcane culture. In relaying the story, I hesitate to use my own words, wincing at the thought of not sourcing it directly from some book or oral account. But there is no definitive version. Inherently the folktale stands outside of authorship. Its nature is to be retold, not recited. It is something that has never happened, but is happening all the time. A Vikivaki round and round and hand in hand we go. So I step into it like a peasant staggering back home on a new year's night. Appointed perf voyeur in the thicket as a distant mound bursts open with light onto a mysterious scene. The elves beckon me inside. Later, coincidentally, I speak with an artist friend, fifty years my senior. Upon recounting my run-in with the Father Of Eighteen Elves, he'll tell me that he exhibited his own reproduction of the sculpture in the '70s, when he was my age. He assures me that it went undocumented and forgotten by anyone in attendance, 'Úr sögunni' precisely, meaning both 'lost to history' and 'from the story'.



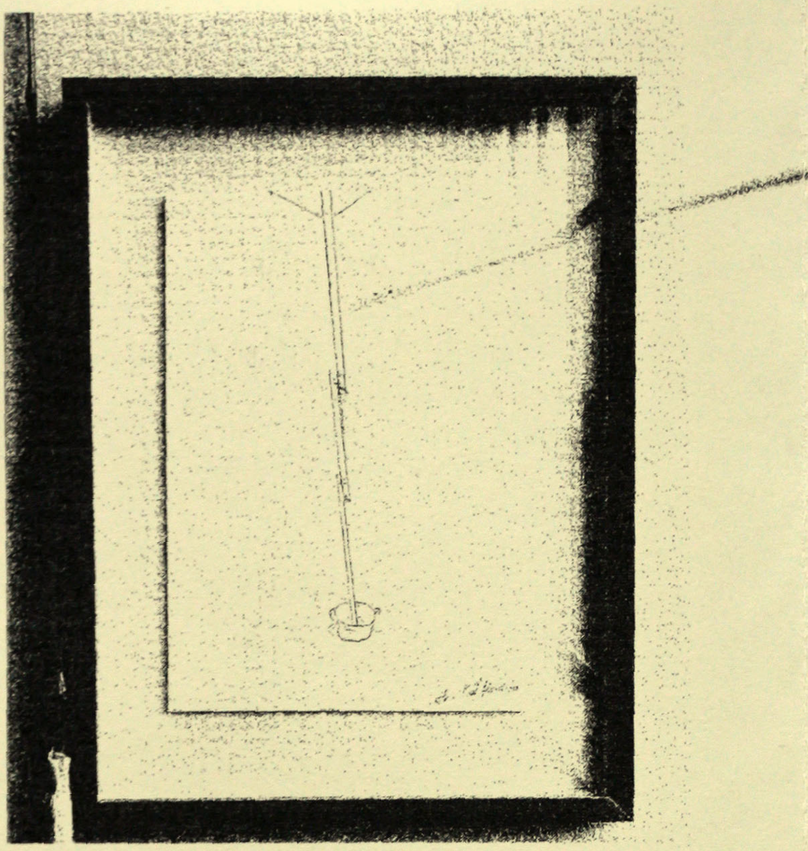
I'm a wide-eyed waif as I manoeuvre up a tight pass, hell for leather, skipping between crusted rocks recently exposed by thaw. Reaching the plateau above, the air is dense with a haunted weight, more pinned than floating, a body of water pressing against your empty stomach. On the horizon facing east, a series of large rock figures loom. A procession of trolls petrified by an unforeseen solar refraction off the glacier some centuries ago. Fucking awe sunk pit extends into my body further than I physically know is possible. This is irritated earth, a cursed, hard cyst on the landscape. I make my way through withered bogs, across soiled sheets of moss covered in witch halos, up to the leading figure and the whole area vibrates as I approach. There is this sense of shame in being alone in the middle of nowhere. Insecurity tinged with the satisfaction of walking the line between control and disaster. A perilous perversion and timid recklessness as I hesitate before the troll, a fissure straight across its face, its mouth agape. Looking down the throat, its diameter is just big enough for a person. A gorgeous gap gulping howling hole straight into the ground.

Lo! The nauseating glissando of cold and brittle harp strings and whiplash as I crash into consciousness with the full weight of my body behind me. My voice, thoroughly tethered to my body, has disproportional weight to it. And then these words stick ten meters out of my mouth: Halló…halló?
The following weeks I visit the well as often as I can. Bringing a pack of equipment to measure and study it. Ten meters I lower a lantern tied to a rope with a knot on each meter interval. Staring down through the pitch black darkness at the faint glimmer at the bottom of its bowels I can just barely make out the shape of something. Some partially obscured, vivid red and otherworldly object. A caruncle in an empty eye socket. Young artists will always draw the eye's caruncle, way before they give eyes eyelids and the means to close, they give them the ability to cry. I find that by fixing my attention on the object some part of me is psychically down there with it. A lump of consciousness buried deep in the earth. On my last visit I'm followed by a Ptarmigan in its brown spring plumage. Above each of its eyes like flipped eyelids, is a bright red spot of caruncular flesh. The bird skitters behind me the whole way up. Shivers down my spine every time the Ptarmigan emits a long croak. It is the low groan of a ghostly door creaking open onto a world hidden inside the rocks and hills. When we come upon the pillars the Ptarmigan catches up with me and in that same groaning, clicking voice it speaks:

FIND YOURSELF
IN THE LARGEST CHAMBER,
IN THE BRIGHTEST HALL.
GOING BACK AND FORTH.
REGURGITATED IN AND
OUT OF WAKE.
I'M CATCHING MYSELF
FALLING AND IM ALL
CHEWED
UP
NOW



DOWN YOUR THROAT
I'M
MEDITATING.
IM FERMENTING. MY WHOLE BEING SWALLOWED
WHOOOOLE



A sketch by Hreinn Friðfinnsson of his undocumented and forgotten reproduction of the Father Of Eighteen Elves sculpture from the '70s

The sculpture from The Father Of Eighteen Elves is intended for a supernatural audience. A trick played on the hidden to have it reveal its true form to us. The underlying motive in Changeling-lore is the mythological justification for infanticide. Determining whether this body is worthy of resources, the sculpture becomes an instrument of socioeconomic espionage.
The partially obscured red ready-made is its opposite, a lure to pull us into the unknown. It is an idea, undefined and buried deep in our consciousness. It lingers like a lost word on the tip of our tongue, a visceral notion of an unnamed entity, the aftertaste of something that we once knew. Glimpsed out of the corner of our eye, it is the notion that drives us to delve deep into our crevices seeking answers. They are shadows of each other. Both are an invitation and demand to transform ourselves and our perception, to descend down into the unknown and to reveal ourselves as other. So I step out of the crib a mangled husk, shedding this playful performance of a kitsch ideal of precarity, this varnish of a wide-eyed waif painting from the '70s. As I arrange the two side by side in my home, this is the deed, the moment of conception. The consummation sealed with passion. I approach the unyielding cycle of myth like a bard taking liberties with the source material. I add my own vulgar verse to the fatalist poetry. The erotics of useless appendages invites a liminal mass appeal. And as I serenade the anointed couple, my rigid finger gestures tentatively toward a hole in the other hand.

Smári Róbertsson, November 2020

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