

For my daughter, Jóhanna Engilráð Hrafnsdóttir. My North star in the North. She, who said when walking the beach in Stóra-Ávík at the age of five, “Mother, maybe we are just a story someone is telling.” May these stories be breadcrumbs for you to find your way to our old bones one day.

For wild Esq. Stephen Jenkinson, my North star in the West, the great rememberer. May these words honour your work in this beautiful world and worlds.

For Guðmundur Jónsson, the last farmer in Stóra-Ávík. Your generous and grief-filled heart was my way in, to this place that has fostered me and these stories since the day we met. You are remembered and missed. Our tears and laughter are mixed.

For Mystery and the Wild, my king and queen. Long may you live and reign!



PROLOGUE

She's tall with black hair and wild eyes. They can see two directions at the same time, maybe two worlds at the same time. She is sitting across from me at my kitchen table here in Drangnes. We have rolled up our sleeves and are ready to work together in the darkness. The days are short. The sun is sinking deeper behind the sea and the mountains each day. We are attempting to build a boat of written words. She thinks of the great Basque whaling boat that was found by Newfoundland and I think of the longboats of my ancestors. It is probably a folly and an invitation for danger to talk about what this work is before it is even begun. Maybe that will be our lesson in the long run. I do know, though, that I dream of writing about whaleroads and boatmaking. And remembering. And maybe also dragons, if I have time.

What has already taken place between us has now to stand as the keel: my travels West to her and Javier's home in Toronto, her travels to my place here in Iceland, our journeys to our school sessions in northern Ontario. The gifts that have been exchanged and the feasts also have to stand now as the silverthreads across the whaleroads; they need to hold whilst we live our daily lives that are marked by distance. Distance and absence are grande characters in this story.

Preparations are over. All that has happened needs to stand now, nothing will be changed, edited or rewritten. As life. All has to stand for what it is. Nothing in this story is a metaphor. There is no rehearsal period, no dress rehearsal show and then premiere. That is theatre. Life is always ON. All will and must stand as it is.

We gather stories and wonderings and we shall see if they will make up a boat that will hold the water. We carve and make the “planks” and fasten them to each side of the keel. The main thing is that he will float. That he functions as a boat. The “*siglingataekni*¹” and the travels on the whaleroad is another story which is not timely at the beginning. Everything has its time. There is mystery in the thing, my favorite sign of them all.

She comes from Irish and Russian ancestry and her people have lived for quite some time in the West, at least compared to many of those who came from away and settled there. That story, the story of the immigrants and settlers on Turtle Island is a complex one with many thorns. And often beautiful too. It is a big story that we here on this volcano island, where no one was living before our arrival, do not know. I mean no people were living here. Still they say there were some Irish monks here when my first

1. *Siglingataekni*: maritime technology

ancestors arrived. But that's not a story we think about much. It is not a story we nourish and tend to.

Still, we are a part of the story in the western world, *Vesturheimur*², on Turtle Island, for my people, a third of the nation, went there on boats, to seek shelter in the late 19th century during famine and big volcanic eruptions. There, they founded the biggest Icelandic settlement outside of Iceland, in Gimli, Manitoba. We also have an older story of coming to Turtle Island when *Leifur heppni*³ and crew sailed there in the year one thousand. They say that marked the merging or meeting of these two worlds, two people, who until then, didn't know the others existed. A thousand years later, here now, there a this sense that nothing is undiscovered. That Mystery has been illuminated with knowledge and information. The mysterious is only found in folktales and adventures for children and so just dead and strange stories to us. Us the enlightened ones. Darkness may have the best chance of undoing that.

Winter solstice is approaching. So, here we go. We sit down to write here in the dark. Slowly we

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2. *Vesturheimur*: The western world. How we and our people, who moved West during the 19th century, referred to North America. *Vestur Íslendingur* is a western Icelandic person, an immigrant in North America who refers to his old home or ancestry.
 3. *Leifur heppni*: Leifur the Lucky, the nickname of Leif Erikson

turn from each other until our backs meet and we look out from the darkness in this northern world. We are trying to see something in the dark.

Her name is Panya Clark Espinal, tall with black hair and wild eyes that can see two directions at once. We have exchanged many gifts. We have travelled in the sky, above the whaleroad, many times, to each other houses. We take turns being guests and hosts to each other and in between us, story is rumbling and breathing. It has become rare to receive good guests on these shores and the skill of hosting is withering at the same rate.

Now it is time to make a toast, to drink to remembering, to eat well and feast well. To feel the blood sway and swirl and who knows where this might lead, in this full darkness. May this be the occasion where the old ways of tending to living Story take hold of us and Mystery awakens to willing Souls.

*Veistu ef vin þú átt
Þann er vel þú trúir
Og vilt þú af honum gott geta.
Geði skaltu við hann blanda
Og gjöfum skipta, fara að finna oft.*

(Hávamál, 44)

If you have a good friend,
and really trust him,
and want good to come of your friendship,
you should speak your mind with him,
exchange gifts,
visit him often.

—*translated by Jackson Crawford*

LANGUAGE

I wrote this story and these wonderings in my native language, Icelandic. For many years now a big part of my life has taken place in the English language, with her being the native tongue of many of my dear friends and comrades. I translate my words here into broken and simple English, which is the way I speak English. I do love and admire the English language. She has been kind to me and opened up ways for me to meet with kindred spirits in many lands. I have learned to hear her beauty and nuances. I've read some fine stories of hers and I can hear my mother tongue in her sometimes—more often than people tend to think and to remember.

I love the language of my ancestors beyond words, so to speak. She, Íslenska, the Icelandic mother tongue, is old and lyrical and flexible. People have said you need to sit down and think before you form your sentence in the Icelandic language. There is a little truth in that.

When we as a nation sought to become independent from the rule of Denmark in 1944, they asked us what was the reasoning for our claim. We said: "We speak our own language, the Icelandic language, and we wrote the sagas in the middle ages in this language!" "Oh, it is so," they said, and gave us back our independence. Well that is how I like the story to be told.

*For you who have English as your mother tongue
and might read this, I sincerely apologize for my lack
of eloquence and skill with your language. I did my
best and it is not good enough, but for now it must do.*

THE STORY SAYS

There is a story ending in Árneshreppur, a thousand-year-old story. There are deep stirrings these days in this story. My daughter and I cannot be in our home there this winter. There is a war raging, two flocks of people warring. Not with weapons but with words. The ending of the village is visible. We are suffering from amnesia about how it all began and we have long since stopped following Óðinn's ways when the world is ending. To go and seek out the Seeress and ask for her memory of what was before. She recounted to him the time before men were in the world and told him the beginning of the saga that ended in Ragnarök. Ragnarök, it seems, took place as she was speaking. The creation story told by her was written on skin in the 13th century, by Christian scribes, preserved in a book by the name of Codex Regius. The creation saga told by her we call Völuspá in my country, which simply and perfectly means, the divination of the Seeress. Here is the first verse she speaks, to all clans, saying she is doing so by the request of Óðinn who is seeking the old memory.

*Hljóðs bið ég
Allar kindir
Meiri og minni
Mögu heimdallar,
Vildu að ég valföður*

*Vel fyr telja
Forn spjöll fira
Þau er fremst um man.*

(*Völuspá*, 1)

Heed my words,
all classes of men,
you greater and lesser
children of Heimdall.
You summon me, Odin,
to tell what I recall
of the oldest deeds
of gods and men.

—translation by Jackson Crawford

We have other sagas, written on parchment in the 12th and 13th centuries in the vernacular language, that tell the stories of the settlement of our ancestors in the 9th and 10th century. Stories about us coming over from Norway. The official year of the settlement is 874 AD. That's the year, the story says, that Ingólfur Arnarson and his crew settled in Reykjavík. I'm born eleven hundred years later in Reykjavík. These sagas, the Icelandic sagas, are said to be our contribution to world culture. These stories have bound us together as a nation, woven us to this land. Perhaps they were written for remembering the beginning that was being threatened by forgetfulness or amnesia—by

swift changes in culture and customs at the time.

During this time, there were many great *Skálds*⁴ in Iceland. The Skálds and the common people knew the *kennings*⁵. Snorri Sturluson wrote about the old gods and the kennings in the 13th century for scaldic poetry to survive amongst our people. A kenning shows the relations and connections of the world. No one is swallowed up in the kennings. Everything is what it is and life is found in the relations. We are villagers in the world. That's where the great poetry of my ancestors lived a thousand years ago and more. The sea is the whaleroad for instance. Fire is the sun of the house. I am my relations in the world. I'm not an independent automotive being. Life is not an inner life. Stories are life. You are within the story and the maxim is what goes well with the story.

The story says it was Ingólfur Arnarson who found this land and was the first one to settle here. His wife was there as well, Hallveig Fróðadóttir, but she doesn't get much mention in this saga. In fact, it was ravens who found the land. The story says that in the old times the ravens were *blótað*⁶ to empower them for great work. That is one of those old ceremonies we have long ago forgotten how to practise. Ravens

4. *Skáld*: A poet with great powers in his writing and or speaking.
Same root as scold in english

5. *Kenning*: Old Norse word which is used in english as well.
Not very well known these days in either language

6. *Blót*: pagan ceremony in Norse customs

and men found. who found this mysterious island in the north together approximately thirty-three human generations ago. The men masterfully built the ships to sail across the whaleroad with ravens on board, who they then released to find the land. I sit here now, eleven hundred and forty-four years later, with the whaleroad outside my kitchen window and the ravens *krunkandi*⁷ all around.

Here she was. Here she is. This volcanic island in the middle of the whaleroad. So new and warm and cold and mysterious. The story says there wasn't anyone else here then. No one, according to our understanding today, that is. Oh, except, apparently there were a few Irish monks meditating in the bright summer nights and days. But they swiftly left, seeing us come. The story says that there were many *landvættir*⁸ and all sorts of beings we have forgotten the names of now. Some knew *hamskipti*⁹ at this time and sent whales and other beings ahead to look at this land without having to sail ships. It was during one of those visits that a whale saw the island was full of landvættir in different forms and sizes.

When we came over from Norway, we left behind kings and queens and instead gave ourselves laws and chieftains. Each summer we would ride to

7. *Krunk*: the sound the ravens make.

8. *Landvættir*: spirits of the land

9. *Hamskipti*: shapeshifting

Pingvellir where the Alþingi was held, where the laws were spoken and judgments made in disputes.

It is only a few years ago we found out through scientific methods that almost half of our blood is Celtic. The story was a little more complex than what the old sagas had told us.

We hadn't been here on this island long when the conversion forces made land here too. In the summer of 1000, we asked the pagan Þorgeir Ljósvetningagoði to rule in this matter at the forum in Pingvellir the summer of one thousand. Pingvellir is the place where we come together for big matters of the nation. Pingvellir is the place where the American and European tectonic plates come together above water. You can see the crevasses and canyons clearly in Pingvellir that are formed by the plates moving apart little by little each year. These crevasses are great magnifiers for voices, to speak laws and make judgments and such.

The two main parties of Pagans and Christians that came together in Pingvellir in the summer of 1000 agreed to ask Þorgeir to make the ruling for this pressing matter—what to do about these two different beliefs in the country. Þorgeir went under a fur cloak and looked for *fréttir*¹⁰, which is a fully Pagan custom to receive divination from gods and spirits and ancestors and perhaps many more. When he rose from under the cloak, again he said to the

10. *Frétt*: divination in the old sense. Today it means 'news'.



A small bronze statue found in northern Iceland dated to AD 1000. One of Iceland's oldest archeological objects, which has been believed to be an image of Þór with his hammer. We call the statue Þórslíkneski for that was the first story we told ourselves about him. Today specialists aren't as sure, and in the National Museum of Iceland, where he is housed, it even says that this might be an image of Þór or it might be an image of Christ.

stone wall in the crevasse, who echoed and magnified the speech back to all those who had gathered, that from now on the people of this land would be Christians, for we cannot have two customs and two cultures in this land.

The story says that we were barbaric and unruly enough to get three exemptions from the new customs: we could still blóta, we could still eat horsemeat, and we could still bring newborns out to the fields to die. This happened one thousand and nineteen years ago. When I think about this now, it seems to me

that this new god of my people, the god who thinks he is the only god, was more liberal in the old days. Still, I wonder if this was the birth of this black and white, binary maniac way of thinking, that seems to have all but fully conquered our minds today.

The ravens found this land and the ravens are the messengers who bring news between the human world and the gods' world. The ravens are messengers of death and are vultures themselves. They are friends with Óðinn and tell him every night what is happening in the human worlds. *Guð launar fyrir hrafninn*¹¹ we still say when we put out food for the ravens. Maybe it was plural 'gods' in the beginning but today we say it in the singular. Perhaps this saying is an old memory since we had a working relationship with ravens and we knew where the gods lived.

11. *Guð launar fyrir hrafninn*: God will reward you for the raven.

AMNESIA

I have forgotten how to tell ravens and gods news to bring home with them to Ásgarður¹². I neither remember our language nor how to shapeshift. I sit down to write for I have the sense that amnesia is submerging my people and myself. Perhaps this news can travel mysterious paths to them. The old gods weren't all knowing, all seeing, and all powerful. They were in relationship with each other,



Þráðarleggur / Threadleg

the animals and men and each one had their own role and responsibility in the arrangement. It was our duty to bring them the news regularly and seek news from them.

This living story of ours has ruptured. The thread has worn and broke, though the leg, the old bones, are strong. I shall learn how to spin and spool my

12. Ásgarður: Garden of the gods, home of the gods.

thread onto this leg. We still have the scripts and there are stories that need our breath and wonderings and unscientific approach. They dream of us remembering the thread between us, dream of us spinning new threads from their stories that can bind us together. I sit down to write and I'm also spinning a thread and building a ship.

The story tells me that Auður Djúpúðga, a famous settler, was my foremother thirty-three generations ago, Egill Skallagrímsson is my forefather twenty-nine generations ago and Ýr Geirmundardóttir my foremother also twenty-nine generations ago. They and their people, my old bones, knew how to build tremendous ships and sail across the oceans. They knew how to travel the whaleroads on dragons! At that time, the laws said you had to take down the dragon head on the ships so as not to disturb the landvættir. Leifur heppni, the first man to sail across the whaleroad to North America, was probably born at Eiríksstaðir, here in the Dales. I have a look in our online database, *Íslendingabók*, and see that I can trace my lineage to him, back thirty-three generations.

I come from them. I am their dream. I'm also the dream of my forgotten forefathers and foremothers, those who came from the East and the Celts.

But even if I can look into these old files and read learned articles on the DNA of my forefathers and foremothers, I still have forgotten. Forgotten the beginning and what happened before. I have forgotten how to tell ravens news and how to make

peace with startled landvættir. I have forgotten the role of humans in these dangerous and uncertain times that we live. I do wonder if we can remember something we haven't lived ourselves. Can a place remember the Story and stories, can a place adopt me and could I then remember the Story through the place without having a personal experience of that Story?

I wonder if and how we can step into a living story again whose thread has broken. Do we need to remember what happened so that he broke?

MY PEOPLE

I know only little about the stories of the first settlers and their Grande Sagas. The sagas that were preserved in the scriptures and that show the world at special occasions.

The everyday lives of my ancestors, those who maintained the lineage up until now, is for the most part hidden from me. Yes, I did know my grandparents. They are the generation that lived during the Industrial Revolution in Iceland. They left the turf houses for concrete houses. Or their parents did. They saw radio and television and electricity and geothermal heating systems. City life was being born. It is not very long ago. Still, somehow, it seems it was always like this—roads and cars and phones and sushi and being like the others. It is such a short time since the Industrial Revolution hit these shores and we still suffer this persistent complex that we are uncivilized, backwards, poor, ignorant and without manners. There has been this deep complex over the fact that we survived in turf houses long into the 20th century and chanted rhymes for our entertainment. We survived because of the land, and the sea, often barely. There were volcano eruptions and famines and stories we told each other. We always knew that we were the last place where civilization landed. In the travel books written by foreign travellers in the 18th and the 19th centuries, ‘the noble savage’ was

never far in their descriptions of us. This complex wasn't just born from our inner workings.

I know that in my father's lineage there are many lawyers and priests. My great grandfather was a priest, so too his father, and his father before. I wonder when and how it came about that we made laws for ourselves. There doesn't seem to be any place for mystery in today's laws, as if they are the opposite of mystery. But in our oldest laws, in the old heathen laws, as they are referred to, there was the passage that we should take down the dragon heads on our ships so as not to scare the landvættir, the spirits of the new land. So, it is not fully true that laws have always been governed by enlightenment and reason.

The story says that we gave up on governing ourselves in the year 1262 when we handed our power back to the Norwegian king. Later, the Danish took over our governance and it wasn't until 1944 that we gained full independence from the Danish. That's when we took up our crest with four landvættir and no crown at the top. This is the crest of the republic of Iceland. We teach our children about these four principal landvættir and ask them which one ruled which quarter of the land. We don't tell them how to live with them in peace on this island.

Now everything has changed. We are a nation amongst nations. We have become fully civilized. Iceland is being spoken about, which wasn't the case when I was growing up, and sometimes it feels

like half the world has put it on their “bucket” list to visit this rumbling island. We now have millions of tourists coming each year and they tell us that they find something intriguing here, that we are like them for the most part, though they want to believe that we believe in elves and other unseen things. It sounds to me like they want us to be more in connection with nature and still hold our old stories true. We tell them stories of Vikings and elves that live in stones and cliffs, but also that we are now a fully western, civilized, people. We don’t really believe still in landvættir, ogres and elves, and our hospitality is now for sale. We, just like them, always choose progress and efficiency and enlightenment and reason. Our strange old stories are now only read to elementary school children and they’re told that people in the old days used to believe this, but we don’t. We don’t seem to be concerned at all that mystery has been made homeless on her very own island!

Everything we got on our way to western civilization only cost us our memory of who we are and where we come from. We don’t belong¹³ to this land anymore as we did. We are rootless like the others now. It seems to me now, that we have offered up the most beautiful quality of us as people, our hospitality, on the fast rollercoaster of tourism that

13. Belong: Icelandic is *tilheyra*, *til* is to and *heyra* is to hear. To belong is to listen to a place, to hear a place.

is troll-walking¹⁴ our land, and thereby the skill of being a guest. This old ceremony of when people, who didn't know each other too well, gathered and relied on the etiquette of guest-and-host relations, to prevent war and conflict. And simply to be honourable. I read of great feasts and the reputation they gave the hosts in the old Sagas. A good feast is a long-lived story. One's reputation never dies.

*Deyr fé,
Deyja frændur,
Deyr sjálfur ið sama.
En orðstír
Deyr aldregi
Hveim er sér góðan getur.*

(*Hávamál*, 77).

Cows die,
family die,
you will die the same way.
I know only one thing
that never dies:
the reputation of the one who's died.

— translated by Jackson Crawford

14. Troll-walking: *Tröllriður*. Takes over.

My people have now stepped beyond story. We live the age of information and calculations. We have given this age our own name, Anthropocene, for it is us now who govern and affect the world. This way of seeing doesn't seem to be working too well for us. Mystery is homeless, our old gods are homeless and we are ever more rootless ourselves. There are no lands still to be explored, no landvættir left to revere and praise, and no dragons to fear! Our relations to the seen and unseen are forgotten. We can become anything and everything. We can pick and choose customs or beliefs from any place in the world and so keep on forgetting our own. Our personality and inner life are the ultimate truths for each one of us. There is conflict in the world and between worlds. We are literally burning the earth. That is not a metaphor. The old ways of nourishing and praising the world and those who share him with us are forgotten and handed over to the trolls¹⁵.

Grande and swiftchanges in a culture can be a trauma, and amnesia often follows in the keel-track¹⁶. After two or three generations, nobody remembers how things were before. Even the trauma herself can become idolized as the light of the world in due time.

15. A saying that goes: *týnt og tröllum gefið*. Meaning that something is lost and given to the trolls. Not likely to be ever found again.

16. Keel-track. Direct translation from the icelandic word *kjölfar*. To follow a trail made by a keel.

It is a challenge to remember something through a text that you don't have a lived experience of. It takes a lot of hard work. Did the man in *Landnáma*¹⁷ really turn into a dragon? What is this thing with dragons? Are they stories born in the east after a rare northern light dance? Are they the threat from the east from the old old days? Or perhaps an ancient memory of dinosaurs. We believe most of the text in *Landnáma* but not this story. There are no dragons left in our world. My people are often referred to as story people. I'm afraid that during this amnesia we are losing our skill of telling and seeing stories, especially the stories we are in now. Oh, and my theory about dragons is that dragons simply are dragons.

17. *Landnáma*: "Book of Settlements"

ÁRNESHREPPUR MY LOVE

Árneshreppur, the place where a thousand-year-old story is coming to her end, is a county where the road ends on the eastern side of the Westfjords. Some see the Westfjords as the head of Iceland. Then Árneshreppur is located right where the old brain is located, the amygdala. That's the place of memory and no time. Also, the place where shock and trauma are stored. Árneshreppur is known in Iceland as the place of sorcery and witch burnings. Isolation from other places made sure that hardly any news got out from this place to the national annals of the middle ages—that is until the witch burning craze invaded the island and three men were burned to death in Árneshreppur, more precisely in Stóra-Ávík in Trékyllisvík. The isolation was also the reason that there wasn't a road made to the place until 1966 and electricity wasn't connected until 1976. The Basque came there to hunt whales in the 17th century, just a few decades before the burnings. Trade and communications between the Basque whalers and the locals was said to have been good, until an order was given that no foreign people could hunt whales around the country and this story ended with a sheriff putting it into law that the Basque could rightfully be killed. This was the prelude to the only known mass killing in this country when thirty-one Basque men were killed in 1615. This

reputation will live with the Icelandic people for all time. These laws were formally removed from our law books in 2015, four hundred years after the killings. In those four hundred years, no other Basque was killed. Though, these laws were put in place by a powerful official who was protecting his own interests. Nothing new in that story.

Árneshreppur is around one hundred kilometers further north than Drangsnes, by a gravel road that follows mountainsides, small bays and a steep pass. You drive this road carefully for he is bendy and sometimes a steep fall is between you and the sea. After a long drive heading further north, it seems all of a sudden that a few farms appear, two churches, a community hall and the smallest village imaginable by the harbour. There is also a tiny bank, a shop that closed last fall and it is uncertain if she will open again, and a cafe that is open in the summer. From May until September we receive cod on the harbour from the fishermen. Then I put on my apron I received from Nathalie Roy, some nice earrings and play the role of the Harbourmaster of Árneshreppur County.

This winter there are seventeen people in the whole county. Both the school and the shop were closed last fall for the first time, and the youngest man is over fifty years old. There are four sheep farms this winter.

If you pass these houses you can go further north. You follow a trail, of sorts, who is very much a part of the landscape. There is no highway to drive on

without thinking. This road, this trail, is very much a part of the land, this land that still hasn't been fully subdued by the will and want of men today for straight lines and speed. You go over Eyararháls pass and follow the road into two depopulated fjords, Ingólfssfjörður and Ófeigssfjörður. Both of them were settlement farms. It was Ingólfur and Ófeigur who were the first men to live in these fjords around eleven hundred years ago. This road-trail fully ends in Ófeigssfjörður. That's where the wilderness takes over. You sense it when you drive these hundred kilometers north from Drangsnes to Árneshreppur that you are drawing ever closer to the wild. There were people there from the age of the settlement until the middle of the 20th century, in the area up north from Árneshreppur. There were never any roads there and when towns and employment in towns started growing in the 20th century and the Icelandic Industrial Revolution blossomed, all the people from these northern territories moved away. This area, named Hornstrandir, is now what hikers and outdoors types call paradise, a place beyond civilization and stress. The climate and weather make sure there aren't any people around during winter and hopefully the wild can then stretch out a little and move about.

The people in Árneshreppur are in some ways like mountains and the mountains in some ways like people. There is perhaps a kenning in here that needs some work. They are there together, by the sea, next

to the wild. Or as close to the wild and mystery as possible. And that seems enough to brush the dust off the memory when most of us did live in little clusters, or little villages, like this one, always next to the wilderness.

It wasn't us precisely, but our people, those who dreamt us into this world. They remember and we can feel their memory in our marrow when we come to Árneshreppur. Or that is what befell me, at least, twelve years ago. I have an inkling that it is truly the occasion for me still being here. It is a mysterious thing, for sure. I could feel memory stirring deep within my marrow from the first moment in Árneshreppur, a memory of something I have no lived experience of and I just can't stop listening for it.

A WEDDING AND ADOPTION

Árneshreppur is the place where I got married and my daughter was born. Where I am learning how to move to a place which isn't mine or my ancestors and where I became a vernacular culture farmer; where I'm learning how to listen truly, belong and be claimed by a place by mysterious means. Now at the time of information, efficiency, and blind faith in reason, something mysterious swells up from the ground and it isn't anything too personal nor stems from my inner life. It is a memory of a village, or village-mindedness, that was aroused there through the soil and claimed me. I look in two directions at once, where I am walking to, as well as behind me. The year is 2007, one year before the grande bank crash. I have never been to Árneshreppur and have no lineages to trace back to there through my ancestry. Not that I know of. I'm an cultural orphan and this all-pervasive Western civilization that has engulfed us here, tells me I can live wherever I like, I don't have to put my staff down and choose one place over another. I'm a cultural orphan—we are cultural orphans—for we stepped outside of the story.

I came to Árneshreppur for the first time and this story took me into her arms, like a man who knows how to treat a woman well.

It was a *hrafn*, a man by the name of Hrafn, which is our word for raven. If you look closer you can

see that both words come from the same root. This Raven came to England to gather me home again. I lived in England for I could live wherever I liked. I joined a Buddhist community, for I could choose my customs and beliefs, and I chanted foreign mantras from Mongolia and Tibet. It was in England where, my then English boyfriend, did not understand my passionate longing for the mountains and the sea of the land that fostered me and my people. He said that my speaking of them sounded like I was proud of my country. This was a sentence I had to meditate on for many years to make sense of, to understand why his tone had scorn in it, was meant for scolding.

The Icelandic Raven man remembered the magical ways of the mother tongue and knew them by heart. Our people have always believed in the power of language and words. He wrote me stories and love-words and I never stood a chance. All my foremothers stood up at once, in a straight line, and got weak at their knees at the same time. He then came flying from the island to bring me home from the green English country and flew me across the whaleroad, all the way to Árneshreppur to get married. This Hrafn had, himself, been culturally adopted into Árneshreppur when he was eight years old. It was during the time when almost all children in the city, Reykjavík, were sent out to farms during the summer months to work. Often, they were placed with people they didn't know or had any relations to, as it was in Hrafn's instance. He was sent to the

farm Stóra-Ávík in Árneshreppur and later he led me to that same farm and to that village. He started out as a guest of Árneshreppur and then became a host. I think no-one truly can be a host without belonging to some measure to the place of the feast.

I arrive at a place where the story is still alive between and in relations of the people, the animals, ancestry and the unseen. I'm invited to this tremendous feast and the blood boils and swirls from this deep stirring.

Guðmundur Jónsson, who was the last farmer in Stóra-Ávík, before farming stopped there some years ago. He was the farmer of the boy Hrafn, and his best man in our wedding ceremony. The first time I met him was in my wedding. In the evening, he said to me: "You'll be the headmistress here, have children here, and take over Stóra-Ávík!" I laughed at his prediction, for everybody knew especially myself, that I only came to this faraway place for a few days to get married. But Guðmundur was right, of course. Or he had a good ear for the story whilst she was unfolding. He was an ambassador of cultural adoption to this tremendous and generous place. He died on April 25th, 2009. Blessed be his memory and spirit.

Shortly after the wedding, I did become the Headmistress of the elementary school in Árneshreppur, a school that had only two students in total, a seven-year-old girl and a ten-year-old girl. I did give birth to a girl there and I lived in a place

where I could see seals outside my kitchen window, sheep grazing, and mountains unfaltering during the bank crash and other days. There were a few days during the bank crash that the nation felt that the ground had been pulled out from under their feet. I looked outside the window and knew the ground was still there. The sheep were still there. The sea was still there.

TWO PLACES

*We live now in two places, we are of two worlds,
like the seals.*

Twelve years ago, there were about fifty people living in Árneshreppur. Today there are seventeen people left and no children living there during winter. Around the middle of the last century, there were around five hundred people there. Hardly anyone left Árneshreppur during the mass migration to North America in the 19th Century. This region has always been a good place to live for humans. A truly nourishing place for life. You have the seals and eiderdown and good fields for sheep, good fishing grounds and plenty of driftwood. Good peat as well. Good community. Village-mindedness seems to have been the order of things, despite a couple of wars. And that isn't because these people are different, that they are sacred cows, so to speak. It is due to the place and the location. The isolation. They are the occasion for this village-mindedness. It is obvious to everyone that life here at the farthest whaleroad is impossible if we aren't in it together.

It is my generation that is not coming back to this place after their schooling years in the city. The thread is breaking. 'Now you cannot live in this place' people say. The seal is here still, the eiderdown, the driftwood, the fine sheep and the generous fishing

grounds. Perhaps the village-mindedness left the place, or the impatient culture of more service and more efficiency has his grip on both city young and rural young. Either way, local culture is tearing up its roots all over the world and generally we call it freedom and progress, and no tears follow that



Jóhanna Engilráð, the last child of Árneshreppur, with her late friend, Lappi from Steinstún

description. May the Skálds and poets conjure stories now that bring the grief and tears to this story. May this tremendous ending and endings be spoken to. Tended to.

I left Árneshreppur in the fall with the last child of Árneshreppur, my daughter, to spend the winter in Drangsnes, the next village. There were no other children left and one child cannot spin the thread of a village even though the bone leg is old and strong. We will go back to Árneshreppur in the spring after the school in Drangsnes finishes for the

summer. Whether we come back to Drangsnes after the summer, stay in Árneshreppur, or go somewhere else I don't know yet. I haven't heard the news yet. I'm listening attentively for this news.

So, we are in fact living in two place this winter, both in Drangsnes and Árneshreppur. My daughter, Jóhanna Engilráð, was born in Árneshreppur nine years ago, nearly ten. She starts our days here by going out into the darkness the same time every morning to go to her school three houses down the road. She's been invited into a beautiful school of seven children where my friend and comrade, Marta Guðrún, is the Headmistress. It is a struggle to wake in the darkness that still has a few hours left before daybreak. It is also a struggle to take away the last child from the place I love so dearly.

Our home and precious things are still in Árneshreppur though we have set up a temporary home here in the little house by the sea. Drangsnes is a little fishing village. The school has seven students and the village about seventy people in total. There are two swimming pools and hot tubs on the seafront. There is a living old-school hospitality here too. I can feel the village-mindedness in the people here. I can also feel and hear their worries that their young people are not coming back home after their schooling in the city. They are worried about becoming the next village, like Árneshreppur, to become a childless place. What will be here? It occurs to me that I've become the angel of death for small

periphery villages. That I can hear their calling, their final call, and for some reason I respond to the calling. But this is only at my more dramatic moments.

THE GRIEF

I don't know if I can find a place and a time to grieve these Örlög¹⁸

There were signs that the village was dying in Árneshreppur when I first came there. There were only two children in the school when I took over as the Head Mistress. There was a lot of talk that the place could not become depopulated, he was too precious for that fate, too precious for the whole of the nation. That's what people generally said. My generation, that hadn't returned back home, didn't want to see the ending of the village. Politicians and artists and tourists all said the same. Many offered their free advice on what to do to save the village. New jobs were in the talking, mainly through increased tourism. My blood was also stirred to do whatever I could to save the village, to prevent this looming depopulation. Slowly these reflexes to rescue have lessened. The next phase was to simply want to do my best to maintain the village by being there. Today I will be victorious, if I manage to be a truthful witness whilst the ending unfolds in front of my eyes. I try to set my sights further, imagine myself

18. Örlög: often translated as fate. I prefer 'the natural order of things'.

as an old woman, feeding children a few too many pancakes and telling them stories from these days.

We try to remember how to read the signs. Today these are mostly numbers. There are seventeen people left this winter, with an average age of around 70 years, and not one child. These aren't very esoteric signs. There is an ending unfolding, an ending we don't really know how to name or speak to. We don't have stories of good endings of villages, how to tend to and nourish such tremendous endings. I've tried and failed. I failed to rescue the village. Of course I did.

I am grief-stricken but I don't know how to speak to it well. I long for us to gather, to cry, and to tell stories. I envision blowing a horn and calling people to a feast, a feast where we will drink memories, and the ending will have his place at the high seat, as is proper. It is this silence about the grief and this örlög which is the tragedy.

I'm on the road with the last child, owning nothing, beyond hope. I long for us to remember how to gather during times like these. Where we can gather around the center of village-mindedness and know both the role of the host and the guest. I long to know the calling for these types of gatherings. But I am also a part of this story where amnesia and speechlessness of grande things has stolen our voice.

I have this lump in my throat and am on the verge of dressing all in black, fetching my staff, and placing myself at the little square by the shop,

next to the harbour, crying and wailing with the ground beneath my feet as my witness and comrade. But that isn't welcomed anymore. Now it is only personal grief and all these numbered methods to overcome grief that prevails. The not-personal grief has become homeless. Still I feel him rise up from the ground, through my feet and whole body. This gorgeous grief that is more than proper at the ending of a village by the furthest whaleroad, at the end of the road, after a great and storied life of a thousand years.

*May this grief find his place again, in our midst,
and loud and public crying be welcomed in the
squares when he calls us in.*

A RED BASQUE SKIRT IN STRANDIR

December 1, 2018

Today we celebrate the hundred years of sovereignty of Iceland. The Danish still held rule over us but we were allowed to govern our internal affairs, similar to how it is now in Greenland and the Faroe Islands in their relations to the Danish. Twenty-six years after we became a sovereign nation, we became fully independant. We celebrate at Þingvellir on the 17th of June 1944 in the pouring rain. I'm two months old in 1974 when I go with my parents to Þingvellir to celebrate eleven hundred years of settlement.

Panya has come our way again, now to visit us in Drangsnes. She has travelled again along the sunpath in the ironbird. This time she arrives to the deep darkness of the North, not the deep brightness of the North summer, when the sun rules the night too. This is a different world in winter. The magic is different. Heavier and more serious. There are things that can only be thought and spoken of in darkness. Darkness is his own master. He isn't the absence of light. He IS darkness. Perhaps failure is more bearable in the darkness than in the endless summer nights.

I do find the winters here a little too long. It takes something out of me to go deep into this grande darkness, to be at his mercy for such a long time. But, I did learn to love the sun and life in a deeper way after going through my first winter in Árneshreppur. I had never known this type of darkness before, being of a place and generation where the streets are fully lit at the first signs of darkness. In the old days, we would speak of age in relation to how many winters you had lived. To me now, it is obvious that you haven't really lived until you've gone through winter. We still speak of sheep ages in winters, when we say "This ewe is seven winters old."

Panya flies over the whaleroad to come to us here in this little house in Drangnse with stories and mysterious gifts so gorgeously woven into her beautiful red Basque skirt. She honours me and my ancestors, the spirits of the land and the spirits of the sea, with her manner of approach. The way she walks and looks around, in two directions at once. How she applies herself to pronounce our names correctly and is willing to be in this story who is unfolding before our eyes. She is willing to listen to her rhythm. How she was willing to stay up all the bright summer nights with our accomplices, speak to the old rocks and their spirits when needed—all the while wearing her red Basque skirt, the one that goes so well with the deep green of the arctic grass, the ancient looking cliffs, the sea all around and,

of course, the sky. A perfect colour palette. It has always been difficult for us to find bright red from the Icelandic fauna. The Basques may have played an important role in the matter. Perhaps we traded with them for the colour red. First and foremost, the skirt is perfect for the occasion, it goes so well with the story that is here. She's wearing this skirt in the summer night at Seljanes when we decide on the place for the dream, for the tent that will be raised in the Night Pasture at Seljanes this coming May, all willing.

It was a few years ago now, during one of my school visits to the old man Ontario, that I met wild Esq. Javier Espinal, for the first time, this handsome Basque man. We exchanged gifts and that very same day I received news from my home that a memorial of the Basque killings was unveiled, that there was a ceremony of reconciliation and a removal of those barbaric laws that allowed you to kill a Basque. I stuttered and stumbled in my speech when telling him this story. The story that my people had killed his people. He gifted me some locks of wool from The Basque Country he had collected from the fences in the fields and mysterious blocks of pyrite that he referred to as Basque Tears. He also gifted Jóhanna a beautiful carving of a seal made of soapstone from Nunavut. It was after these gifts and our school session that Javier invited me to come to stay in his and Panya's home. There is a journey in the works to

their home again in the spring where there will be a feast and a weaving of our writings. All willing. We shall see if our work will hold water, if our longing for belonging and yearning for a village can be an occasion for a feast. *May old-school hosting and gifting govern our days again.*

SEEING SEALS

It is not given to see what is.

In my fridge in Árneshreppur there is a two-litre bottle of seal oil. It is the product of a memory practise by a friend who was working hard with his hands, to remember the oldest neglected story from our settlement here. He was remembering the story of exploitation and slavery and the connection to *Bjarmaland*¹⁹. The story he was remembering was of settlers here with many slave farms, hunting walrus to extinction for export and exchange for slaves from Ireland. It is the story that didn't survive the story selection of the Christian scribes or the loyalty to our creation myth of peaceful farmers being the only ones who settled this island.

It happens sometimes that I see seals outside my kitchen window when I'm doing the dishes here in the little house in Drangsnes. Seals are magical beings and probably have old knowledge of ancient ways and powers. At least they know how to be of two worlds, both of land and sea. Sometimes I also see them from my kitchen window in Árneshreppur.

There are old, old stories of seal people, selkies,

19. *Bjarmaland*: A word used in the old sagas referring to the place in the north east somewhere, maybe Siberia, where they would go to trade in the old days.

from the islands in our corner of the world: from Ireland, Orkneys, Shetland, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland. The home of the seal people is here in the many shades of blue. Some of the stories said that seals were humans under spells. That could be seen in their eyes, for they look at us as if they are remembering something they had forgotten. I imagine them thinking something along these lines:

Ah, I remember now, I remember us dancing by the fire in the old days, when weddings and funerals lasted for days. Where we cried together, danced and laughed. We weren't shy then and the heart still wild during magical hours, in the bright summer nights and the deep dark of winters. We dared to shed our skins and leave unprotected whilst we gathered in ceremony and whatever else life bade us. Happiness²⁰ was in knowing how to shapeshift when needed. I miss it.

I've also heard the story that it is humans that are seals under spells and that is why we look at them the way we do, as if memory is being stirred in our marrow seeing them. When I'm on the beach and a few of them come to watch me, I watch them too, in the stillness by these grande mountains, and I think the same:

20. *Hamingja*: Root is hamur, meaning skin. Hamingja now means happiness.

Ah, I remember now, I remember us dancing by the fire in the old days, when weddings and funerals lasted for days. Where we cried together, danced and laughed. We weren't shy then and the heart still wild during magical hours, in the bright summer nights and the deep dark of winters. We dared to shed our skins and leave unprotected whilst we gathered in ceremony and whatever else life bade us. Happiness was in knowing how to shapeshift when needed. I miss it.

Our selkie story, here on this island of fire and ice, says that selkies need to watch their skins very carefully so ruthless men, who cannot control their own greed for beauty and love and all that is sweet and good, don't steal their skins—their happiness. The men steal their skins, if they can, to keep the selkie's love bound to themselves. She cannot return to the sea without her skin. These men cannot bear for the sweet and beautiful to end. Everything is done to prevent the ending. When our selkie in the story finally found her skin, that her husband had hidden from her for years, she put it back on and returned to the sea. She left her children on land and returned to her children out at sea. I wonder if she could have lived in two worlds if he hadn't tried to ground and capture her by taking her away from her seaworld—her home in the whaleroad.

It is a real skill to see seals. I notice it when I drive the coast with people who haven't trained in this skill and I have to point out to the sea or to the

beach for them to see the seals that are there. It is not a given that we will see the seals right in front of us. Nor the northern lights. It is not a given to see what is there.

Sometimes a feeling captures us that the world is so beautiful and wondrous that we can only think of singing praise in response. A feeling and longing to give something back, to nourish the world and not only be nourished by him. This yearning is gifted to me by the seals and the northern lights. I'm overwhelmed with longing to nourish the world.



The view from my kitchen window in Drangsnes

TO BELONG

**It is rare to see seals outside my kitchen window.
It is not daily bread. It is a gift.**

This deep knowing of being at home is stirred in my blood and bones, that I'm at home as the northern lights are at home. I belong to this place. I feel the seals claim me. And I call back to them, 'Hello there. Good to see you today. What's the news?' All doubt has vanished. In that moment, I choose this place over all other places and he chooses me. I take my place and am not daydreaming of faraway lands with sun and white beaches. It is here that I belong. My home is by the cold whaleroad in the northern seas. There are endless hues of blues depending on the brightness and seasons and weather. We belong here together, the seals and ravens, the eiderduck and mystery. There is also the potential of a white bear visit from Greenland. Just for thrills!

And even if the winter here is a little too long for my liking, it is my örlög to be of and to be in a-little-too-long winters. And all these blues.

The most amazing vivid pictures of the northern lights don't come close to this feeling when one is alone out in the cold and the dark and the only sounds are the soft songs of the waves and you just want to go back in under the duvet and warm up. But it is the potential of mystery and magic which is always there that gets you to stay a little longer,

staring longingly at the sky when all of a sudden there is a dancing green dragon above your head. And maybe the whole world is watching me. Or maybe the old stories of dragons really are true. Mystery is the grande director, the skáld, of the whole thing.

I watch the sea at all times, out of the corner of my eye. There is a part of me that is dedicated to seeing seals. It is not an obsession. It doesn't take over life. It just has its place. That's how you see seals. One part of existence is dedicated to them at all times.

When I lived in England I would stare at the sky and look for green dragons every time there was a starry night. It took my body a long time to realize that they wouldn't appear over my head all of a sudden, the dancing green dragons and green goddesses. I didn't know the old tales from England and now these dancing green beings over my heads were far away. Perhaps nothing can ever replace the magic and the stories from the lands that fostered you as a child.

THE WEDDING STORY

An elder in the Westernworld once told me my own wedding story, in front of a room full of people, out in the country in Ontario. He was in fact telling them the story, and I could listen in. He hadn't been at the wedding but he still had a deep understanding of what had taken place in the ceremony in Árneshreppur, at Easter in 2007, in the old church in Trékyllisvík, but more importantly what had taken place in the feast after, in the community hall. This elder knows how to tell stories as I think my ancestors knew how to tell stories. There was old power in his speech, a conjuring, transformative, power. It is very hard to tell a living story that is still taking place. Our scribes in the middle ages were telling stories that happened two or three centuries before. Still they were living stories and their skill was that they didn't kill them in the process.

It is not a given that we see what is right in front of us. Neither seals nor stories. This elder has a skaldic power in his speech and his story was true. He hadn't been there and it changed me to hear my story from him in front of all those people.

He said that the people of Árneshreppur had held a feast for us, despite my refusal, because they didn't know how to not pass on the gifts of the place that they had been given. They didn't know how to not share the abundance and nourishment of the place,

especially during ceremony. What happened between the people's skills of hosting, their hospitality, and my willingness in the end to be their guest, and the seals that received my wedding bouquet, and the gods who reside there in the wilderness at the end of the road, all this is what my life has been dedicated to ever since. It is becoming ever more clear to me, as time passes, that there was real magic in this ceremony of guests and hosts and a living village as a witness. The world changed. I was adopted and claimed by a place without knowing it when it happened.

THE RYTHM OF STORY

I think of the Icelandic Sagas that were written long after taking place. They wrote them on parchment, skins, still here about eight hundred years later. That is why we still remember one of our beginnings. And I think of how little time there is now between us, to gather and tell stories, to remember and recount, *to drink memory of*²². I think of how it was for them to come to this new land where the stories hadn't been woven between the land and the people yet, between the seen and the unseen, and how my forefathers and foremothers managed to move to a new land and weave the stories and land together for me to live in.

I moved to Árneshreppur from the city. Here no one has a watch and no one is in a hurry. Except when herding sheep, of course. There is always time for stories. And there are stories told after the sheep herding, that is a fundamental part of this culture at the end of the road. All good stories are told again and again. It is new for me coming from the city where new is always better, and time is running out so I must hurry.

22. To drink memory of: *Að drekka minni*. The old way of saying that we are toasting, that we are drinking the memory of something or someone.

Slowly, in real time that is, I'm initiated by them into seeing and saying story whilst she is taking place. Story mandates the rhythm and tempo. Learning to speak so as to not exhaust all topics in two nights. I learned how to stretch the wool²³, speak the details. To not hurry to the end. Slowly I'm initiated into this old village, or their village-mindedness, though she was probably, even then, deep into her own ending, without me knowing. And without me knowing that maybe things don't need to be eternal, never ending, to be magical and nourishing and worthwhile. There is something special about the last chapter of a story that no other part of the story has. And maybe all she needs are witnesses and to be allowed to set her own rhythm.

During our first winter in Árneshreppur, we are guided with strong hands into the sanctuary of the place of everyday life. After the New Year, there are gatherings called The Club every other Saturday in people's houses. The men gather in the rooms to play bridge and us women sit in the living room, sewing and knitting and chatting. I don't know how to knit or sew like they do. I'm getting to know these women. I come from another world in many ways. I'm a being of two worlds akin to the seals. It was during the first winter, when we had attended three of these clubs, on our way to the fourth one,

23. To stretch the wool: Teygja lopann. Now we use this phrase for people who speak at length on a subject.

just recently having moved to this place at the end of the road. We are sitting in the car before entering the house of the club and it hits me, I cannot go in there, to sit with these women for five or six hours, again. It felt to me as if we had utterly exhausted all possible subjects. The demand for new things, new subjects, just anything new, arose in me like an old neglected and angry ogre. It felt like at that moment as if the evening would be awkward and boring, so best to turn around and go back home. But we didn't. I did go into the living room and sat there for five or six hours with these women, knitting and talking. Their strong hands and their rhythm guided me along just fine. Slowly, this type of panic left me. Today the thought of sitting with them, for years even, doesn't frighten me in the slightest. I know we could talk away, in good rhythm, without me ever getting bored, or losing heart.

Looking back, I see how this learning took time, real time. To get to know the rhythm of the place. The rhythm of this story planted himself in me.

There is one trick I can share though; to never hurry towards a conclusion or explain things too much. It is better just to say the thing. Work towards slowing down the story until she is in sync with the life-rhythm of the place. That is how colour is brought back into the world, and the way out of the black and white frame where endings are banished. A living story needs an ending like other stories. These are some of the gifts I received during the long sittings

in the clubs, in the not-much-happening daily life during the little-too-long winters. To go to this place to get married, quickly and quietly, and instead be woven into a ceremony that still holds my heart is a whaledrift in my life²⁴.

I think of the *þráðarleggir*, threadlegs, the bobbins made out of lamb's legs, an old woman's gift, where the leg is handed down the generations and each holder of the gift has to spin their own thread and to wrap around the leg. I received this threadleg as a gift from people I didn't know, in a place I didn't know. I must learn to spin a thread to complete the gift.

24. Whaledrift: *Hvalreki*. A whale that has drifted to the shore.

FLOATING GEYSERS ON THE WHALEROAD

What is different in living by the sea here in Drangsnes, or living by the sea in Árneshreppur, is that here there are a lot of whales. There are many whales in this whaleroad. The people here tell me that the whales are staying longer now into the winter and arriving sooner in the spring. There are rapid changes in the climate.

Sometimes I can hear their breathing through my kitchen window and see their signals, the erupting steam-geysers up into the air. They are floating geysers in the whaleroad. There are stories that say whales are the keepers of the oldest tales, the oldest memories. Sometimes there is a group of them and sometimes only one. I listen for their breathing as often as I remember, but often I don't remember. I'm in a place where you can hear the whale's breaths through your kitchen window. I wonder if I'll hear them if I'm not listening for them; if I practice the skill of hearing and seeing them, as I've done with the seals in Árneshreppur. If so, I've properly moved here to Drangsnes. I could be more at home, if one part of my being was at all times dedicated to the possibility of hearing and seeing whales.

Now, we mostly speak of whales when there is an argument in the media—whether to protect or hunt them. We wonder if the image of Iceland is damaged if we continue hunting them, whether there is more

money in it for us to protect them and run these tourist boat tours for whale watching. This is one of the many arguments of today's media where you only have an option between the two, there are only yes and no answers. I don't hear anyone speak of the whales being the keepers of the oldest memories and that we need them to help us remember. There is no room for mystery in this binary forum format. I don't remember any songs of praise to the whales. The Basques who were great whale hunters in the old days and followed them across the whaleroads might have beautiful songs of praise to them. I must ask Javier the next time I see him, all willing.



GOD REWARDS FOR THE RAVEN

When winter arrives, the raven is the only bird you can hear on the mountains. Most of the other birds have left for warmer lands; they seem to find the winter a little too long as well. Winter and darkness are the ravens' kingdom. I wonder if I will start to follow the migrating birds to faraway places when winter falls. Being a sole peacock in the dark and the cold in Árneshreppur all through winter doesn't seem like good örlög to me. Then again, you don't really argue with the natural order of things.

I feed the ravens leftovers through my kitchen window in Árneshreppur. Below the window is a little roof where I put the food out for them so I can watch them come and receive my gifts through the window. Ravens are very careful and easily startled. I know that he is watching that little roof carefully, for he will fly past many times each day. When he sees that something new has been put out he will fly back and forth, pretending not to notice the new gifts as if to be on his way to some important job. But I see his quick glance my way, checking if it is safe for him to come closer. If he is sure there isn't anyone there watching him, he approaches and lowers himself, a little awkwardly and almost



doesn't dare to take his food into his beak before he rushes away to a safe distance.

If I turn off the lights and stand completely still and practise my patience, it sometimes happens that I almost have a raven come to visit in my kitchen.

It is only this glass between us. I can see him so closely, and admire him while he grabs the French toast and the piece of bacon, before he hurries away.

'God will reward you for the raven' my people said and still do. Some would call it a belief from the old pagan times, when the whole world was alive with spirits and everyone was related. One of the things I love most about my people, is that we were never really great at keeping paganism and the new faith fully separate.

But nothing lasts forever and I'm seeing signs that we have succumbed to the black and white, binary way of thinking. What then becomes of our stories?

THE FIRST FEAST

During winter, Árneshreppur very much belongs to the ravens, the seals and the foxes. And then there is the potential of a polar bear coming over for a visit from Greenland. The ravens tend to fly together in twos.

My story in Árneshreppur began twelve years ago with a raven flying me home from across the whaleroad, he gathered me home from England with his clever ways and conjuring words, his *skáldskapur*²⁵. That is one of the mysterious ways to my heart that is in line with my blood and marrow.

Riches, luxury and position are nothing against the *skáldskapur*, when the marrow in your bones can be traced back to the mead of poetry himself. This shapeshifting raven-into-a-man flew me across the whaleroad, over the Scottish isles and the Faroe isles all the way up north to Árneshreppur. I'd never been there before but had a vague image in my mind of the place as a magical, pagan, mysterious and a little scary place. Something along these lines is often the image Icelandic people have of this place. Whether they've been there or not. The raven and I travelled to this place to get married. So, we could

25. *Skáldskapur*: The poetry of the skálds in the middle ages

sneak away to find privacy and solitude for two, we chose this mysterious place at the end of the road. Our old Sagas tell us that Svanur at Svanshóll farm and other great sorcerers would protect the place by conjuring fog and other obstacles if unwanted persons wanted to travel there. It has been a haven for outlaws for hundreds of years, the common people are said to have welcomed them into their humble little homes and shared with them the little they had. There was a sanctuary from the official powers in this little village. Except during the witch burnings.

And when these women of Árneshreppur, who I didn't know back then, heard of our secret plans, they would not stop until we agreed to allow them to throw us a feast to mark the wedding ceremony properly. "You cannot have a wedding and no feast" they said. I tried to refuse. I didn't know anyone in the place and I didn't know how to receive such radical generosity. They didn't listen to my refusal, these country women and hosts by the grace of the gods. Later I learned that you cannot stop the force of these women when they are serving the natural order of things. I was sensible enough to see that the matter was out of my hands. I had refused them three times to hold us a feast after the ceremony in the old church, where I didn't know anyone. Something did take place. The place took me into his reign. The seals lay there on the rocks in the sea, the ravens flew across the sky and this old, old hospitality, ruled the day. This deep and radical hospitality turned

me into a good guest without me knowing how to be one. I had never known this kind of ceremony before. It was that day I met Guðmundur Jónsson from Stóra-Ávík, and heard his divination about my life, which has mostly turned out to be correct, though the story isn't finished yet so I cannot declare if it has been fully realized or not.

Shortly after the wedding Hrafn had a dream where a little girl appeared in the community hall with cries of joy alongside her foremothers. Outside the hall the world was completely white. It was winter. Nine months later a little Hrafnasdóttir is born under the glacier.

Now she is the only child left in Árneshreppur. Her father, Hrafn, got startled and unsure of his place in the world and flew away. But the ravens who are still there watch her closely. Before he flew away, we held another feast in the community hall, where the village people and our families joined in naming our daughter Jóhanna Engilráð Hrafnasdóttir.

I imagine that the ravens would miss us humans if the village became depopulated, and perhaps, wherever we have a lived relationship with them. I suspect that they don't think of us as pests in the world, which seems to be more and more, a common way of viewing ourselves-this belief that the world would be better off without humankind. Adults speak like this in front of children. I wish I could remember now how to shapeshift and I would go and speak about this matter with the seals and the

ravens and the whales. In their mother tongue. In our mother tongue. I could swim with them, lie on the beach with them or fly across the sunpath with them. I would just ask them simply: "Would it be better if we would disappear from the world, or do we still have a place and work to do?"

On our wedding day, there were many seals in Trékyllisvík. I went down to them on the beach, alone, and gave them my wedding bouquet. Ten white tulips floated amongst them and none of them got startled by my presence. And I said, not knowing if they could hear me or understand me: These flowers are from me to you, may we remember our ancient relations, may we share a life full of mystery in our midst! My marriage to Raven lived for three years. But I'm still married to the seals and the place and the other ravens. And Ravensdaughter, Hrafnasdóttir, is growing as she witnesses this ending.

*Þar kemur inn dimmi
Dreki fljúgandi,
Naður fránn, neðan
Frá Niðavöllum.
Ber sér í fjöðrum,
Flýgur völl yfir,
Niðhöggur nái,
Nú mun hún sökkvast.*

(Völuspá, 63)

Then the dark dragon
will come flying
down from the dark mountains,
that glistening serpent.
Nithogg will bear corpses
in his wings
as he flies over that valley...
now I must retire

—Translated by Jackson Crawford

THE OLD MAN IN THE WEST

I see the ending draw closer in Árneshreppur. Now she will sink, the *völva*²⁶ declared in her prophecy in Völuspá, in Ragnarök. This old, honourable village life, with war and peace, and the rest is coming to an end. I thank the spirits of the land and of the seas, the seen and the unseen, that I have had the incredible fortune to live there for some years.

I read a book²⁷ by an Icelandic woman my age who have lived for a few winters in Manitoba. There she had learned old ways from an Anishinaabeg man, the wisdom of the seven teachings of his culture. I didn't know anything about the Indigenous cultures of Turtle Island. I had only seen and heard about these teachings in relation to "new age wisdom." I had never owned a dream catcher and the rest.

I had gone in the other direction, to the East, when finding myself a new custom and faith. I read this book about the seven teachings and a deep stirring happened. This was as true and real as I'd ever heard. The way this Anishinaabeg man spoke of fire and air, the way he praised and spoke of the world as alive, as if all is alive and with spirit.

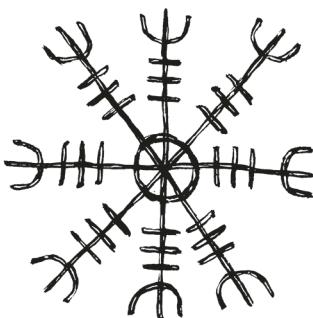
26. *Völva*: Seeress

27. Garry "Morning Star" Raven, *The Seven Teachings and More: Anishinaabeg share their traditional teachings with an Icelander*, Collected by Björk Bjarnadóttir, 2014

So, I did as my people do now, I went on the internet to search for more. And for some mysterious reason and pathways that I've lost sight of now, another man appeared during my search. Well, his image appeared, shall we say, and he looked like the Dranga-brothers from up north of my house. There was something in his speech that reminded me of these ways that my people and I have forgotten.

This man, who describes himself simply as "just a white guy from Scarborough", has this way about him—an approach, a manner and a way of speaking as if all is alive. Later I traveled to his house in Ontario, principally for remembering. It was he who later told me my own wedding story. He walks in a way and speaks in a way that stirs my memory of my ancestors. Long forgotten stories get a new wind from his conjuring speech. And yes, there is plenty of mystery there.

I was quite sure from the moment I heard him speak that if anyone could help me see and understand what was truly taking place in this little village of Árneshreppur, so far from Ontario, it would be him. I wanted to understand this rift that I was witnessing—this rift that was between how



Ægishjálmur / Helm of Awe

people spoke of loving this place, but when it came to doing something, or moving there, nothing seemed to be able to happen. When it came down to it, there wasn't any money to be found by the politicians, and the people who had declared their willingness to live there more than anything, couldn't actually do it now because of such and such.

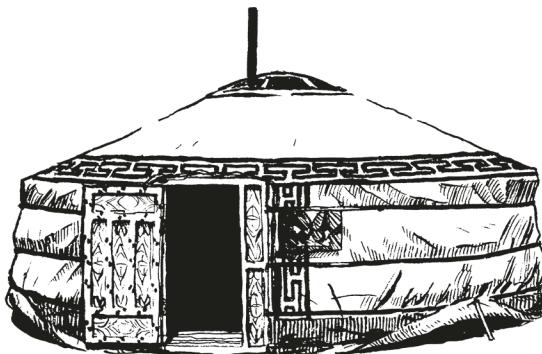
I believed that if I was able to see and say what was taking place in that story, right in front of my eyes, I would come to understand this apparent paradox in our culture. I would learn to see what is.

If I manage to stand strong during these end times, the stories could make home in me and, all willing, one day young people will ask me what happened.

THE THIRD FEAST

The old man travelled across the whaleroad to come to Árneshreppur, and there were many people who came with him. He showed us the most ancient ways of tanning skins, spoke about our relations to the sheep, and showed us ways of praise and nourishing the world. He told us the oldest story from Britain, the story of Beowulf, and of ogres and dragons. I knew there are dragons in the world, I knew it.

We hosted a feast together in the community hall. This was my third feast in that hall where real ceremony, despite everything, took place. We invited the whole village and all the people who had come from away. Later he asked a man to carve images into pillars of driftwood that we brought



This Gimli: rising in the night pasture of Seljanes in the spring of 2019, all willing.

out to and onto the whaleroad. The carver was one of the Dranga-brothers, who I had thought the old man bore such resemblance to, when I first saw him. These pillars were released on to the water, in the same manner as the stories tell us my people did during the settlement. It was my people's graceful and ceremonial manner of approach to the new land that is the beginning of our story here, the beginning of us as a nation of this land. This Bard from the West brought the old ways of deep etiquette and magical manner of approach back into my life and to Árneshreppur.

May we remember again the old ways of being good hosts and good guests. May we remember our place in this village of relations and stories. May we walk in the manner that we can be recognized by our old ones from afar. May we come to remember who nourishes us and our ancestors, and may it show in us that we remember it all.

*Sal sér hún standa
Sólu fegra,
Gulli þaktan
Á Gimli.
Þar skulu dyggvar
Dröttir byggja
Og um aldurdaga
Yndis njóta.*

(*Völuspá*, 62).

I see a hall standing there,
more beautiful than sunlight,
thatched with gold,
at Gimle.

There bold men
will dwell
and enjoy cheer
throughout their lives.

— *Translated by Jackson Crawford*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Marta Guðrún Jóhannesdóttir for her comradeship, her generous invitation for us to find shelter in Drangsnes this winter and her skillful editorial work. May your ways keep inviting people into this wonderful place.

I thank Árneshreppur and all his inhabitants for sheltering us and adopting. May your story keep nourishing and helping us to remember that things haven't always been this way.

I thank my mother Sigurðóra for her always generous open home and heart, for sheltering and nourishing us at all times needed. May we keep alive your open-hearted lineage.



ELÍN AGLA

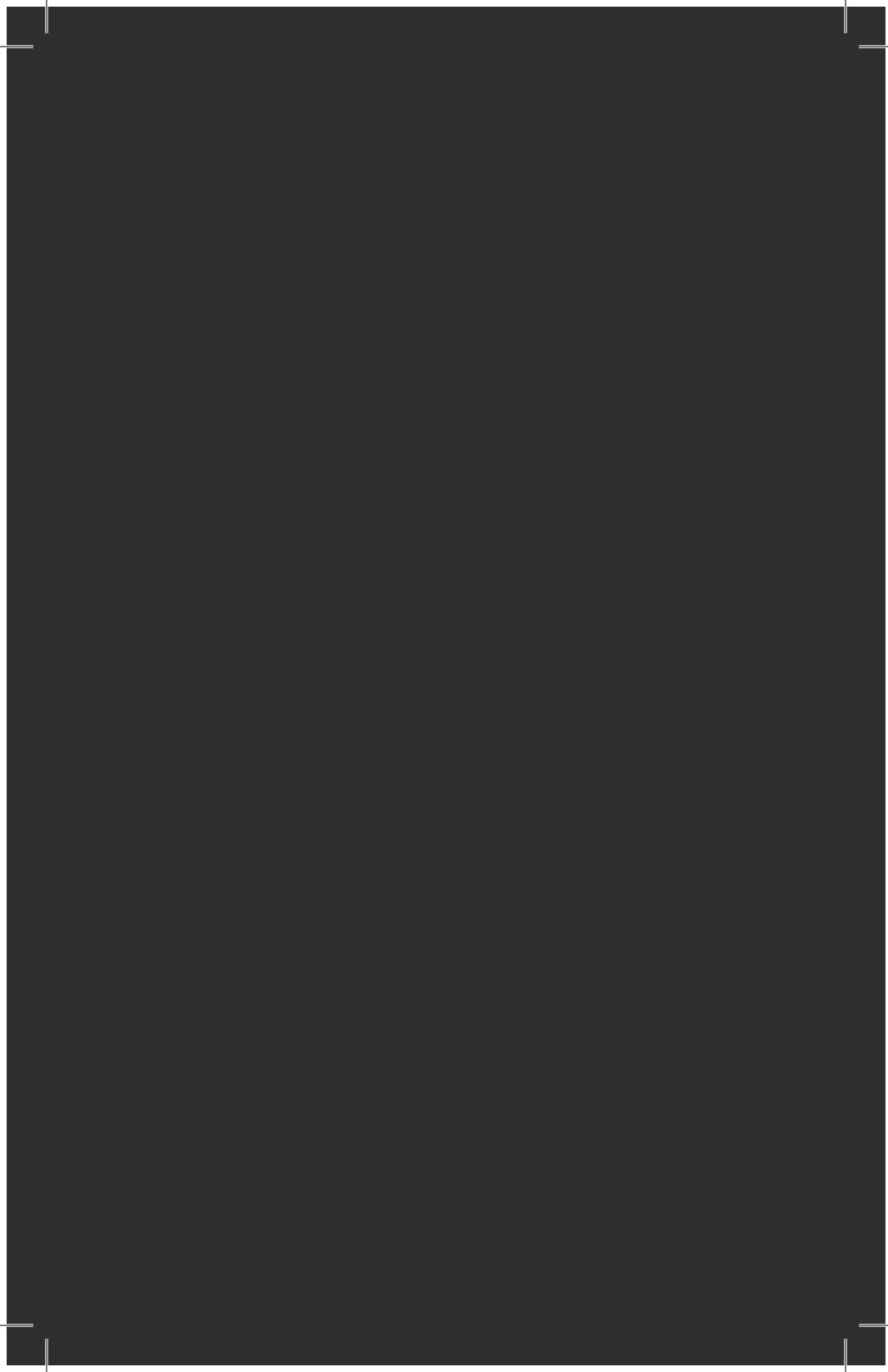
Born in Iceland eleven hundred years after the settlement of the island. She is a Vernacular Culture Farmer and Harbourmaster in Árneshreppur County on the eastern coast of the Westfjords. A place on the verge of depopulation. She is dedicated to the old dust rising and remembering the living story within her bones. Mystery is her queen. Blue is her favorite colour. She has one sheep named Örlög.

Her writing is a praise, a testimony, a witness—a call to arms in the cultural redemption of remembering our place in Story and stories.

An attempt to breathe and voice the longing and yearning for a life, for a world, where all are alive, spoken to and tended to. Her writing is an invitation.

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ON WHALEROADS
AND BOATMAKING

ELÍN AGLA

