

BERNARD Elisabeth

Anthropologist

.BIRDS ARE BACK, IN NATURE AND IN MIND.

.ICELAND.

„A seed becomes a tree becomes a forest green as a carpet.

An egg becomes a bird becomes birds fill the sky like clouds.

An egg becomes a bump becomes a man becomes mankind. [...]

In the beginning all this must have been contained in the egg and the seed.

Forest. Birds. Mankind.“

Lovestar, Andri Snær Magnason, 2012.

„Sunrays break through between the Sitka spruces of the Höfðaskógur forest, in the South of Iceland. It is only the beginning of the afternoon, but the sun is low on the horizon. After all, we are still in the middle of February. We feed on these rare moments of timid warmth like addicts. This winter is dark, cold and seems endless. The joyful atmosphere of the pre-Christmas period is long gone.

The air is moist and fresh. The sunrays highlight the frost that lines the blades of grass. While walking the forest path who leads to the lake, I can feel the tip of my nose and my fingers getting colder, my breath forming water vapor clouds as I exhale. Trees on the left, trees on the right. They are not so big yet, only two meters high maybe, but they will survive. I carefully lean my attention towards the pines of the trees. If they sting, it's a Sitka

spruce. If not, that's an Engelmann spruce. If they are shorter and greener, Norway spruce. I try to remember what my informers are teaching me; I try to see the invisible differences that separate one species to another.

Suddenly, my attention is caught by something on my left. I don't know what, but there is something there, where the sun hides itself behind the trees. I leave the beaten path and walk towards a grove of tall trees. There. Someone has been pruning the low branches of the trees and has created natural fences with the branches to create clearings. On the trees, wooden bird houses are suspended and wave with the wind. Apple peels, and balls of grease and seeds hang on the branches. Unnoticed, the misty rain stops, and the sunrays get stronger. The friend who

accompanies me today –who works for one of the forestry associations I am following for my study – tells me that the person who did that is not one of their members. She never asked the association for help, and the association did not discourage her.

The scenery is bucolic and mysterious at the same time : the moment gets in density, each detail, sound and smell adding itself to the painting. Time slows down imperceptibly. It almost looks like the trees – planted several decades ago – were meant to host this person's love for the birds. We silently admire how she carefully arranged everything to give the birds the chance to survive the cold Icelandic winter. I am subjugated by the fact that she took upon herself to create a place for both birds and humans to feel comfortable. My friend precedes me, and I end up following him to another clearing where we can see more bright red apple peels hanging from the trees. Facing the entrance, a rustic bench made of logs has been installed. While we explore the place, the sun starts disappearing behind clouds and the rain starts pouring again. Safe among them, we decide to sit on the bench and let the rainfall pass. We can see the motion of the wind altering the rain showers, like visible waves in the air. But slowly, a weird feeling takes a hold on me. I can tell something odd is happening, yet I struggle to name it, not sure what is the

nature of the event occurring. I simultaneously experience feelings of strangeness and of familiarity, which put me in a liminal space of confusion.

The birds are singing. They chirp in a continuous joyfull squawking like the birds I could hear as a kid from the window of my bedroom in the French countryside. This astounds me. I realize I had not heard the sound of a flock of birds hiding from the rain since I arrived in Iceland nine months ago. Following the disappearance of the Icelandic forests as the settlers from Norway and their descendants established their new society, the birds have slowly disappeared from the soundscapes of Iceland. I had been tirelessly visiting woodlands and forests whose number I have simply stopped counting ; I had interviewed tens of people who enthusiastically declared that the birds were back thanks to the forests they were planting ; eagles were spotted by my coworkers ; local scientists were praising the return of biodiversity ; I had even heard individual birds since then. But for the first time, my field appeared anew : the perception of my ethnographic fieldwork switched. The tens of thousands of kilometers separating this forest and my hometown in France were erased, as if home had found its way through this one minimal detail.

Even on far away lands, within different societies, and in harsh climatic conditions, it still is easy to forget how far we are from home, so focused on the field and the spectacular events happening in the Arctic. But the memories of our daily lives always kick back in.

Yes, the forests and their inhabitants remain strange to a people that has survived without them for about a millenium. But as a baby who hears sounds for the first time, I am finally able to understand what Icelandic people experience whenever they enter a forest ; this strange new world which they had never experienced in Iceland before. But there must be something about them – and the birds – that justifies all these efforts I am witnessing to reforest the country. They must somehow also bring a feeling of familiarity – of home –, as if something had always been missing without anybody noticing, on this large island of the North-Atlantic.