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Down to Earth

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HABITAT

BÓLSTAÐUR

The haunts of my youth have vanished, in two senses — they rest under layers of mental debris, accumulated along life's way, and under the lava that flowed from the flanks of Mount Helgafell, "Holy Mountain," in Iceland's Westman Islands in 1973. These facts evoke in me both pure curiosity and a poignant sense of loss. Where is my home? As have so many others throughout history, I long for a world that is no more, for a place of belonging that can never be regained. Can I have something in common with a lava field? Can I identify with a mountain, or connect with a contemporary event in the geological history of the Earth, the way other people identify with their generation, genetic fingerprint, or zodiac sign? In the terms of the Christian burial ceremony, what is this earth, these ashes and dust, from which we come and to which we return?

For most people, the place where they live is significant; it defines and shapes them. Birth certificates, passports, and official reports require an address, a village, a country. But place, as a word, rings rather flat, referring to geographical coordinates, to two-dimensional space. *Habitat* implies something deeper: a three-dimensional home supplying roots and groundedness, an intrinsic bond between a person and the earth. In a sense, con-

Fig. 1. Heimagata, Westman Islands, in 1942, Bólstaður is down to the left.

sciously or unconsciously, where you live becomes your habitat, the center of your universe, your vantage point.

My first habitat was a small, wooden house on the isle of Heimaey in the Westman Islands, forty-nine square meters in size and built on bare rock that thousands of years ago had been hot lava, welling from deep below the Earth's surface. The house had the name of Bólstaður. I have always thought Bólstaður a fine name, literally meaning "habitat." As my habitat, Bólstaður was a microcosm of Heimaey, whose name means "Home Island." Bólstaður was a place where the future was certain.

One of the oldest pictures of me is from Bólstaður (fig. 1), at number 18 on Heimagata, "Home Street." I am leaning against the south side of the house in bright sunshine, next to the steps that many generations of people had climbed on all kinds of errands since this worker's cottage was built under the Danish monarchy in the early twentieth century. That little boy was probably mischievous, maybe shy and a bit of a loner, although there was no lack of good company (fig. 2). Perhaps he wondered what he would be when he grew up.

Fig. 2. The author at Bólstaður.

Bólstaður succumbed to glowing lava in the middle of the eruption of 1973. I was not there, nor were my parents or siblings. I was a graduate student in England, while they had moved to the mainland four years before. We were not among the five thousand refugees fleeing the eruption that night. I did not see Bólstaður destroyed. But I came across a picture, the final photo of my birthplace, around the time that I began writing this book. I was startled to see it. When I showed it to my siblings and our mother, they reacted the same way I did: shocked and silent. Nothing has outmatched Nature here. A light westerly breeze carries off the clouds of steam rising from the lava, giving the photographer a clear view of what once was Bólstaður. The advancing lava has already buried one end wall of the house where my mother "birthed me in the bed," as she put it. The other end wall has been thrust forward, and the lava has set the house on fire; flames lick the roof and windows (fig. 3). In the heat, the sheet asbestos of the roof has exploded into white flakes, which

Fig. 3. Bólstaður on fire, April 2, 1973. Photo by Eiríkur Þ. Einarsson.

flutter down like snow onto the black volcanic ash that has settled around the house.

The bulky television aerial on the roof of Bólstaður is still standing. It presumably still picks up a signal from the mainland, but there is no one home to receive it. I gaze at the photo for a long time, my eye drawn again and again to that aerial. Is it a metaphor for the present day? A reminder of our feeble attempts to respond to terrifying natural disasters? Of the indifference of people here and abroad, despite unequivocal knowledge of the state of the world? Although the Earth is everything to us, we take it for granted until it reminds us uncomfortably of its existence. The eruption of Mount Helgafell in 1973 was one such reminder. The destruction of my home, Bólstaður, while the Westman Islanders battled with lava on the village's doorstep, now seems to me a warning.

When I was born, in the middle of the last century, humankind seemed capable of anything and progress seemed evident in most fields. Now our habitat is faced by problems greater than ever before — the temperatures are rising and the glaciers are melting. Storms, floods, and fire wreak havoc and many creatures, including humans, must flee their homes. And these problems are largely manmade. I was just over a week old when

the Age of Humans began. No wonder I find the subject has a hold on me. The Age of Humans, or Anthropocene which comes from the same root as anthropology, the study of humans, is a new geological epoch characterized by profound, possibly irreversible, human impacts on the Earth. These human impacts, like the traces of earlier epochs in geological history, are recorded in the Earth itself, and manifest in a variety of ways, one being an increase in volcanic eruptions. Guided by Earth scientists, I choose to take the view that this new age commenced in the middle of the twentieth century, with the harnessing of atomic energy, which left its chemical imprint in glacial ice and lake bottom sediments. Geologists like round numbers, so I choose as a start date 1950, even though the first atomic bomb was deployed in 1945. Sometimes this new age is dated from the beginning of industrialization in the eighteenth century, from the founding of the oldest nations, or from the first attempts to make and harness fire around 400,000 years ago. In any case, it is only a very small period in the history of the Earth, the solar system or the universe, which is over twelve billion years old.

Awareness of the Age of Humans is even newer. Irrespective of its exact start-date, the concept was not coined until the twenty-first century. I first wrote about it, from an anthropologist's point-of-view, in 2013. Like most of those who have spoken up about it, the idea that humans are changing the Earth somewhat alarms me. I wonder how it will affect me, how it will affect my habitat, here in Iceland, in the vicinity of volcanoes. The answers I have found are not comforting. Studies of ice cores from the glaciers in neighboring Greenland have helped trace human impacts on the environment, including the rise in global temperature. This warming is causing glaciers around the world to melt, reducing the pressure on the Earth's crust, which leads to increased volcanic activity and more frequent earthquakes. Iceland has many glaciers. Research here has shed light on this link between global warming and earthquakes. As summarized by the British newspaper *The Guardian*: "Climate change is lifting

Iceland — and it could mean more volcanic eruptions."[1] Some media have described the Icelandic crust to be like a trampoline, in constant motion. Iceland is thus like the island of Heimaey, my "Home Island," which floated, unaware, on top of a pool of glowing magma for a decade before the eruption came that destroyed my home, my first habitat, Bólstaður.

How does one deal with such knowledge of impending doom? Some Icelanders, reading the media reports of the new research, joked that the new times could create new opportunities for our tourist industry. For visitors in search of adventure, the message could be: "Welcome to the trampoline! Jump on!" But I am an anthropologist. My response was not a new joke, but a new perspective. I began to rethink those tired binaries — nature versus nurture, nature versus culture, human versus environment — that separate us from the Earth. I began to think of myself as part of the earth.

It is not as strange as it sounds. Think of eating. Eating links your body to the soil in which crops are grown, as well as to the histories of farming, fertilizer, property ownership, and the process of soil formation. People are made of the same elements as our planet (hydrogen, carbon, sulfur, etc.), and cannot survive without them. As Russian chemist Vladimir I. Vernadsky put it, "the material of Earth's crust has been packaged into myriad moving beings whose reproduction and growth build and break down matter on a global scale. […] *We are walking, talking minerals*."[2]

This new way of thinking challenges the very definition of "alive." To me, for instance, as an Icelander, few things are more alive than the volcanic activity I have witnessed. Volcanoes are full of life, even though they may lie dormant for long or short periods, and people rightly speak of "their" volcano with due respect.

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1 Suzanne Goldenberg, "Climate Change Is Lifting Iceland," *The Guardian,* January 30, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/jan/30/climate-change-lifting-iceland-volcanic-eruptions.

2 Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *What Is Life?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 49.

EYJAFJALLAJÖKULL [ei:jafjatɬajœ:kʏtɬ]

From Heimaey, my "Home Island," just south of the Icelandic mainland, the Eyjafjöll mountains are entrancing and beautiful, with their shining white icecap all year round. The name means "mountains opposite the islands," and some of my ancestors came from the farms at their feet. The eruption of Eyjafjallajökull, named with *jökull* meaning "glacier," in 2010, and the subsequent turmoil, made me write this book. I was prompted to turn my passion for anthropology towards "firmer" topics than usual, towards the Earth itself, its ash, ice, floods, fire, and lava. As I began to write, the loss of my childhood home and my life lived almost entirely in the vicinity of volcanoes coalesced in a way that I found challenging.

Although I have not lived on Heimaey for many years, this glacier-topped volcano, Eyjafjallajökull, touches me as closely as it does those who live nearby and observe it daily. It didn't escape my notice when the historic eruption began. About midnight on March 20, 2010, a harmless little eruption began on the rocky pass that separates the glacier from a much larger icecap to the east. Countless tremors had heralded this eruption. They had begun late the previous year, gradually intensifying until the earth opened. One day, I drove towards Eyjafjallajökull in the winter twilight, stopping where the road ended and the volcanic plume could be seen. A group of people had gathered to watch. The eruption was impressive even from this distance. People called it a "tourist eruption," an ironic term for an eruption that is spectacular enough to attract sightseers while posing no threat to life or property. About fifteen thousand people went onto the glacier to stand within half a kilometer of the glowing crater.

After a brief hiatus, on April 18, the volcano began a second phase, this time erupting close to the middle of the glacier. Now about 800 people in South Iceland had to evacuate their homes, as the eruption covered the land with ash and melted the ice. Icebergs in the floodwater destroyed roads and bridges. At my

home in Reykjavík, Iceland's capital, 150 kilometers west, I experienced for myself some effects of this second, more powerful phase of the eruption: the volcanic gases, falling ash, and accompanying anxiety. Would everything be buried once again, and toxic fumes pollute the senses? I put a white dish out on the balcony to monitor the ash fall and bought masks and protective goggles in case the ash and fumes exceeded safe limits.

The eruption became a globally significant event. It was compared to the Laki eruption of 1783, the most catastrophic volcanic eruption in Icelandic history, when ash and fumes spread across the world — although that was not understood until much later. As ash from Laki fell on fields and meadows and a dark haze drifted across the heavens, no one at the time knew why. Some say that the French Revolution of 1789 was caused by crop failure and famine due to the Laki eruption. Millions of people in India, Egypt, and Japan starved to death. But this time, in 2010, thanks to satellite technology, the progress of an eruption in Iceland could be watched live around the world. Soon Iceland was on everyone's lips, this time not because of famine and revolution. Eyjafjallajökull closed airports across Europe. It had a considerable impact on daily life and travel for ten million air passengers and their families all over the world, far from the actual volcano.

When the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull was at its peak, people wanting to travel to and from Iceland had to seize an opportunity to fly. Since volcanic ash can cause engine failure, planes could only fly when the wind direction was favorable. I set off for a conference in northern Norway on May 7, expecting to return two days later. But the wind changed, and my flight home from Oslo was cancelled. A day later I was on my way, but flew first to Scotland, where a special facility had been set up to receive planes that had had to change their flight plans, and from there we flew on to Akureyri, in North Iceland, one of the few Icelandic villages to have an airstrip long enough for our plane to land. Next came an overnight coach journey to Reykjavík. We stopped briefly at a service station, so that people could eat, stretch their legs, and use the facilities. The coach

Fig. 4. Under Eyjafjallajökull, 2010. Photo by Ragnar Th. Sigurðsson.

reached the city at about nine the next morning. The passengers, feeling slightly high after all their wandering, compared notes and admired the morning sun. The surreal journey home from Norway had taken 26 hours, instead of the usual three. A similar experience must have inspired the French comedy film, *Eyjafjallajökull* (2013), which chronicles the trials of a divorced couple who, when their flights were cancelled, were forced to drive together, willy-nilly, across Europe to get to their daughter's wedding in Greece.

At the farm directly below the glacier, the eruption's consequences were not comedic. Ash, possibly toxic, buried the sprouting crops and covered the meadows. It reached the point where the family had to pack up and leave. Farmer Ólafur Eggertsson took what he expected were the last photographs of his farm, Þorvaldseyri, images of huge, roiling clouds of ash enveloping the fields and houses. His pictures appeared widely on the internet and helped establish Iceland and the glacier in the minds of millions of people around the world (fig. 4). On social media, people who knew no Icelandic competed to spell and pronounce the glacier's tongue-twister of a name, some-

times with the help of the standard phonetic alphabet. When the eruption was over, tourists began pouring into Iceland as never before. Many headed straight for Þorvaldseyri, where Ólafur and his family have now built a visitors' center for curious guests. There they can gaze towards the glacier, enjoy a documentary film about the eruption, buy a vial of ash or a T-shirt, and remember the dark days of 2010. The volcanic activity that drove Ólafur's family away is now an important source of their income. The ash from Eyjafjallajökull, it turns out, was not toxic, as it had been when Laki erupted in 1783. The meadows at Þorvaldseyri are greener than before the eruption.

Some volcanoes, like Eyjafjallajökull or Mount Helgafell on Heimaey, lie dormant for hundreds or thousands of years, believed to be extinct, then wake suddenly from their slumbers. They don't bother the same people twice. Others erupt every few years, and the threat looms over the local people throughout their lives. Mount Etna on Sicily, for example, one of the world's most active volcanoes, is almost constantly at work. Many other natural disasters, such as floods, fires, and storms, assault people generation after generation. Should they not make us think about the close connection between humanity and the earth?

In our schools, for generations, no one was taught to think that way. Anthropologists like me were taught to study humanity. Anthropology and the other social sciences established themselves in the wake of industrialization, a little later than the earth sciences, and placed themselves on the opposite side of the scholarly tectonic plate boundary. Social scientists embraced daily life but ignored the earth, except for the thin surface visible from day to day. Conflicts in societies and geological upheavals, we thought, had nothing in common.

Lately, with the rising awareness of the scale of environmental change, more and more scholars are now daring to cross these borders in the academic world. Even these daring boundary-crossers, however, often persist in sidelining their own personal experience when writing about the Earth, when it should instead be examined and used systematically. Messages from the

depths of the earth, recorded in tangible form as seismograms, can be preserved in archives — although the seismogram that bore the clearest message of the eruption which destroyed my first habitat, Bólstaður, recorded at Skammadalshóll on January 22, 1973 was lost. It was sent to be copied, and nothing is known of it since. But it is harder to grasp what has been written in the flesh and bone and cerebral cortex of a human being. Sometimes it is best to forget. There were Westman Islanders who had been through difficult times as children who, unlike me, rejoiced, in their heart of hearts, when their home vanished under ash or lava. They wanted to forget the building and what happened there, but memory does not always obey our orders.

Even when we think we have a cast-iron memory of certain events, it is not necessarily so. British neurologist Oliver Sacks, author of popular books such as *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985) that explored the human brain, nerve impulses, and memory, spoke from experience.[3] In London during World War II, Sacks experienced German air raids; he believed he had a memory of a large bomb falling behind the family's house and setting buildings on fire. But his brother, who was five years older, knew better. Oliver had in fact been evacuated to safety by that time, so he could not have seen or experienced the event. Yet he "remembered" it as if it had happened yesterday. "It is startling," he wrote, "to realize that some of our most cherished memories may never have happened — or may have happened to someone else."[4]

Although many of the secrets of the past will never be unearthed, we can sometimes shed light on them by reflecting, by conversing with ourselves or others, or by archaeological excavations using diggers and drills. Much of what I have written in this book draws on my own experience or has been brought to light with help from others. It was important to me to go

3 Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (New York: Touchstone, 1985).

4 Oliver Sacks, "Speak, Memory," *The New York Review of Books,* February 21, 2013, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/02/21/speak-memory/.

to the locations in the story, talk to people, seek out significant documents and images, display respect for memories, and give them space. A narrative of any kind is inconceivable without a point of view, and all who compose texts must explain who they are and where they stand. Without such transparency the reader cannot trust what is being presented or assess the influence of the author's connections and vested interests. So, let me be clear: A personal "partial" account is not a weakness but a strength. It is essential that I, the person tapping at this keyboard, the author Gísli Pálsson (sometimes called "Gísli from Bólstaður"), say something about myself and step, quite literally, down to earth.