CREATIVE NONFICTION / ESSAY

THE BIRDS: ON NOT LOOKING

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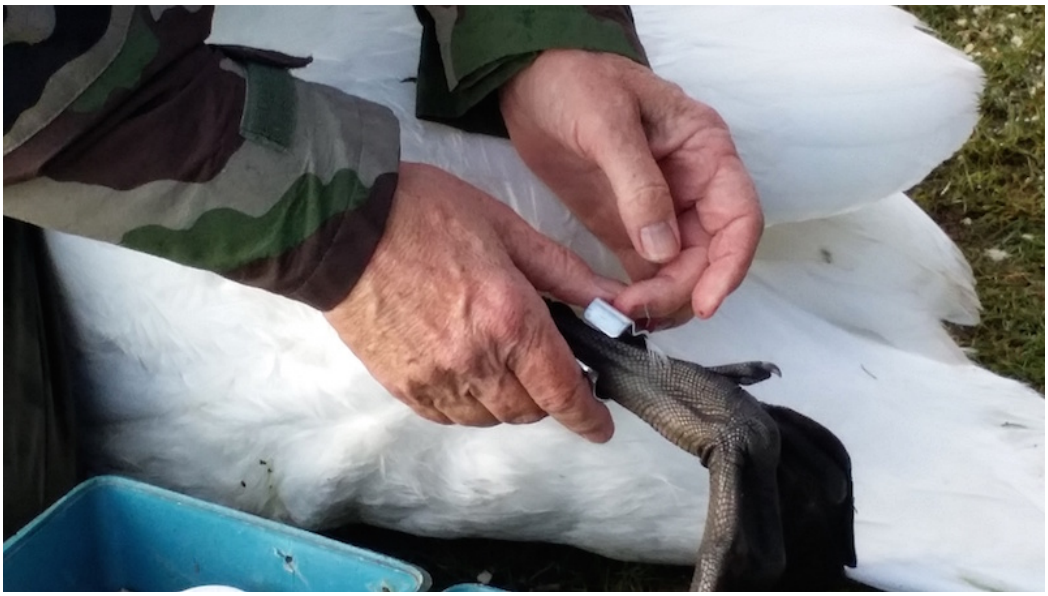

The swan's heartbeat surprises me. I'd expected something frantic, not this steady, gentle beat. "He's not afraid any more," Richard says.

I hold my hand against the heart; feel the down of the feathers. The swan is hanging upside down, its long neck almost touching the ground. A minute earlier, Richard had captured it, flipping it over in a flurry of beating wings, a sudden squawk.

I've been taking a course on birds and Richard is my teacher. Today, he's working in the field, and he's brought the class along to observe. We stand with our backs to the estuary and watch as he attaches a numbered ring to the swan's leg. He enters the number into a small black notebook he carries in his pocket, along with the swan's weight, age, sex. The details will be transferred later to an electronic database.

I'm not sure why I've suddenly become fascinated by birds. When I was a child, I paid no attention to nature.

I was too busy reading.

The only birds I could identify were the magpies that took up residence in a neighbour's tree. Their chattering disturbed my concentration. But I knew the old rhyme, forgave them for their literary associations. One for sorrow, two for joy.

"This bird's a country cousin," says Richard, showing us the underside of the swan's foot. "No cuts or scars from concrete." He traces the outline of the foot with his finger, examines the webbing between the

I didn't learn the names of birds until I had children of my own. "Bird!" I'd say, pointing to a large, black crow, and "bird!" I'd say again, pointing to a small, red robin. My linguistic shortcomings embarrassed me, and I bought a poster identifying common garden birds, taped it to the wall.

I enjoyed teaching the children the new words. But I'd no interest in the birds themselves.

Today, I can't learn enough about them.

The swans in the estuary are mute swans, Ireland's only resident or domestic swan. The flock is made up of young adults. They'll spend the winter here before pairing up and dispersing for the breeding season. "The ballroom of romance," says Richard.

Besides the mute swan, Ireland is home to two visiting or wild swans: the whooper swan and Bewick's swan. Every October, the whooper makes its way here from Iceland and the Bewick's arrives from Siberia. I've followed the journeys on maps, calculated the distance covered. Over a thousand kilometres for the whooper; maybe ten thousand for the Bewick's.

Richard has taught us how to distinguish the species: the beak of the mute swan is red/orange; the beak of the whooper and Bewick's is yellow and black. The whooper makes a loud trumpeting call in flight; the Bewick's wings make a whistling sound.

When my children were little, I read the *Children of Lir* to them. Every Irish child learns the story at school: four children turned into swans by their jealous stepmother. I wanted my children to learn the story too, even though they were living in America at the time. So I bought an illustrated edition, and every time I looked at the illustrations, I thought: What a beautiful picture.

I never thought: What a beautiful bird.

Richard has been tracking swans for over forty years. He's noted the fluctuation in populations. The mute swan is in rude health, but the numbers of Bewick's swans wintering in Ireland has been declining. Warmer weather in Siberia and Europe mean the birds don't have to migrate as far.

The swans in the *Children of Lir* were probably Bewick's, Richard tells me. "*The Wild Swans at Coole*?" I ask. "Not wild at all," he replies. "Mute."

I've always loved Yeats; spent much of my college years studying his poetry. But it wasn't until recently that I understood his reference to the sound of a swan's flight.

I'd just moved into our house in Dublin and was sitting in the garden. A single swan flew overhead, the slow rise and fall of its wings measuring out a bell-beat.

I watched it make its way to the river; legs trailing, neck stretched. Was this the day I first saw a bird for what it is; not as a symbol or a picture, not as a supporting player in literature?

There are roughly two hundred species of birds in Ireland. So far, I've seen about fifty.

Sometimes, when I think of the birds I haven't yet seen, my heart beats wildly. I'm certain I've left it too late.

I watch Richard's swan bend its neck, and the elegant shape shames me.

Aileen Hunt is an Irish writer whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in Hippocampus Magazine, Work Literary Magazine, Sweet: A Literary Confection, and Compose: A Journal of Simply Good Writing. Her essay *The Shell of your Ear* appears in Oh Baby!, an anthology from Creative Nonfiction. She lives in Dublin and blogs regularly at aileen-hunt.com.

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