CREATIVE NONFICTION / ESSAY

THE BIRDS: THE HURL AND GLIDING

written by Guest Contributor March 25, 2020

I like the modesty of the display cases; their white frames arranged like paragraphs on the wall. Within each, a bird or a group of birds, mounted against a light blue background. Handwritten labels, over a century old, note Latin and English names, sex, date, and place of capture.

Behind me, the museum's showstoppers spread out in Victorian exuberance: stuffed elephants and giraffes; a rhinoceros whose horn has been removed for safekeeping; the skeleton of a humpback whale. Dublin's 'Dead Zoo' is thronged as usual with toddlers and tourists, but few join me in front of Barrington's Birds.

Fine by me. I'm not here to socialize. I'm here to pay my respects.

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The pain is difficult to describe. Less a pain, maybe, more a tenderness. Plus, there's a lump. I don't want to make a fuss, but I don't want to be stupid, either. "There, Doctor", I say. "Right there."

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Early attempts to explain the seasonal appearance or disappearance of birds were widely inaccurate but strangely beautiful.

- Barnacle Geese were thought to hatch from trees that grow over water. In Ireland during the Middle Ages "bishops and men of religion make no scruple of eating these birds on fasting days . . . because they are not born of flesh."
- In the 16th century, Swedish cartographer Olaus Magnus popularized the theory that Swallows bury themselves in the mud of riverbeds to hibernate for winter.
- And in in the 17th century, English scientist Charles Morton pondered the annual departure of familiar birds only to conclude: "Now, whither should these creatures go, unless it were to the moon?"

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It's difficult for me to see birds in the wild. I mean, really see them. My eyesight is poor, and the birds are usually too small or too far away. But standing in front of Barrington's collection, it's easy to see their frozen beauty: the bark-like plumage of the Scops Owl, the brown eye ring of the Water Rail; the olive legs of the Green Sandpiper.

The birds were donated to the Natural History Museum after Barrington's death in 1915. They'd been sent to him by lighthouse keepers from around Ireland, part of an exhaustive research project into bird migration funded by Barrington himself.

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The doctor writes a referral for a triple assessment: mammogram, ultrasound, surgical consultation. "Public or private?" he asks, and the thought of a three-month waiting list is unbearable. "Private", I say. I'll figure out the money later.

I try not to worry; keep myself busy with work and home. I go to the cinema and the library, pick up books and put them down again. Two weeks crawl by.

I open my laptop to write.

Nothing.

* * *

The "Pfeilstorch" (Arrow Stork) is the first recorded proof of bird migration from Africa to Europe.

In May 1822, a German nobleman, Count Christian Ludwig von Bothmar, shot a strange-looking bird on the thatched roof of a house near his castle in Mecklenburg. The bird was a White Stork and its unusual appearance was caused by an arrow embedded in its neck. Von Bothmar brought the bird to the University of Rostock, where the arrow was identified as originating in Central Africa.

* * *

There's a photo of Richard Manliffe Barrington hanging in the museum, a studio portrait in profile. It shows a serious man wearing the respectable uniform of the day: dark jacket and white shirt, collar stud and tie. A watchchain peeks from his waistcoat. Light falls on his face, illuminating high cheekbones and a receding hairline. His goatee is graying. His eyes small and light-colored, impossible to read.

But there's another photo of Barrington I've come across, this one taken a few years before his death. He's sitting on the beach at the Saltee Islands, wearing a flat cap, a fisherman's sweater, and a pair of heavy-duty trousers rolled up to the knee. His left hand grasps the neck of a startled-looking Shag; his right hand holds its wing extended. Barrington looks straight at the camera, poised, competent. A man at ease in his work. In his element.

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That letter in my bag. Thin as a wing. Heavy as a heart.

- Sand Cranes congregate on the River Platte in Nebraska before heading to their breeding grounds in Canada, Alaska and Siberia.
- Amur Falcons breed in Siberia and migrate to Southern Africa, stopping off in India along the way.
- Golden Plovers travel from Alaska to the Pacific Islands.
- Ruby-Throated Hummingbirds travel from their breeding range in the United States and Canada to their wintering grounds in Southern Mexico and Panama.

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By the 1880s, it had become clear that migrating birds were attracted to the beams of recently-built lighthouses, particularly in conditions of poor visibility. Barrington enlisted the help of the country's lightkeepers to record their observations and to forward specimens of birds 'killed striking' the lantern. This wasn't the first time lighthouse keepers had been co-opted to help naturalists. Barrington had been part of an earlier survey that used a similar methodology to study migration in the British Isles. But that survey had ended after three years. Barrington was dismayed, believing that information needed to be collected over a longer period to be meaningful.

Unable to attract funding, he covered the cost of extending the survey in Ireland himself, providing lighthouse keepers with schedules and labels to be collected by the relief ship and then forwarded to his home in Co. Wicklow. He included prepaid envelopes and the following instructions:

"It is to be hoped that the Light-keepers will not think it too much trouble to cut off and label the wing and leg of every common bird which is killed at their station. Rare or strange birds should be sent entire…If no boat comes, steep birds in methylated spirits."

* * *

On the morning of my appointment, I skip breakfast and arrive at the hospital at seven-thirty. Four other women are already waiting: two in business dresses; two in jeans. We sit in silence, heads buried in phones and magazines.

There's confusion about the date of my last mammogram. The nurse says it was 2015. But that can't be right. I'm careful about things like this, know the importance of scheduled checks. Still, I begin to doubt myself. Could I have blown off my 2017 appointment? Missed a reminder text? The nurse sees my confusion, senses my rising panic. "Let me check again," she says, and returns waving a piece of paper. "2017", she says cheerfully, and for a moment, I feel something like relief.

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- The swallows that flit around the stables in Bray where my youngest daughter works spend the winter in South Africa.
- The Brent Geese that descend on my son's football pitch in October spend the summer in Arctic Canada.
- And the Little Terns – oh God, the Little Terns! They nest on the beach at Kilcoole where my husband and I walk our dog, then return to the West Coast of Africa and spend the winter off the coast of Cameroon.

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I imagine Barrington standing at a polished desk, stiff brown envelope in hand. He slips his knife under the flap, then tugs it upwards. Flumppf of paper tearing. A flip upside-down, the severed wing slipping out of its swaddling, settling like silence on the desk.

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Technology has revolutionized our understanding of bird migration. Satellite imagery, featherlight tracking devices, data analysis, and even social media allow scientists today to plot migrations in real time. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, for example, blends the sightings of tens of thousands of birdwatchers around the world with satellite photos and wildlife data, producing digital maps so precise they can predict which fields migrating birds will stop at and what time they'll arrive.

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Barrington analysed more than 30,000 observations from Irish lighthouse keepers and corroborated more than 2,000 specimens. His great work "The Migration of Birds as Observed at Irish Lighthouses and Lightships" was published in 1900: a handsome limited edition of 350 copies, bound in red leather and embossed with a tiny lighthouse.

> "Few, perhaps, can realize what the collection of statistics, the preparation, the printing and the publication, of this work have cost in time and money," Barrington lamented in his introduction. But his satisfaction in publishing his analysis was genuine. "Some of these results may be new, and if so, to have placed them before other students of this most fascinating subject, Ornithology, is a more than sufficient reward."

The book is a collector's item, well outside my price range, but I bought a digital copy a few years ago and keep it on my phone.

I find it comforting, this record of disciplined observation, this ode to sea and sky.

* * *

More waiting. The surgeon doesn't recognize me, but I haven't forgotten him. Five years ago, he operated on my oldest daughter, removed her thyroid and parathyroid glands. He promised the surgery would be routine, her recovery from cancer swift. It wasn't – and I could never decide if his breezy assurance was born of an excess of confidence or kindness.

I remind him of our prior acquaintanceship, and he asks after my daughter, seems delighted to hear she's moved to Texas and is planning to fly around the world before she comes home.

* * *

Recently, Purple Sandpipers that winter on the western shores of Ireland were fitted with electronic data loggers to record their migration routes. On their flight to Arctic Canada, they stopped off at the southern tip of Greenland, but on their return to Ireland, they surprised scientists by crossing the Atlantic nonstop.

* * *

Goldfinch 16th October 1889, Old Head of Kinsale, Co. Cork.
Yellow-Browed Warbler 14th October 1890, Tearaght Rock, Co. Kerry.
Wren, 30th October 1897, Fastnet Light, Co. Cork.
Wryneck, Rockabill, Killed Striking, September 5th, 1896, H Kelly, Light Keeper.

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In the end, the consultation is brief. A review of the ultrasound, a comparison of mammograms. "I'm happy," he says, and a nurse bundles me back to the waiting room. All that's left is to pay the bill.

* * *

We know more about bird migration today than Barrington could ever have hoped: the exact routes birds take and the mechanisms they use to navigate – topographical cues, polarized light, the earth's magnetic field, the

strike are no longer lighthouses. Skyscrapers are the main culprits, their glassy, illuminated facades a fatal magnate in rainy or foggy weather. As many as 100 million migrating birds are killed annually in North America alone.

But scientists are working on a solution. They can now pinpoint the 10 to 20 days per year when migration is at its peak and advise cities accordingly. Dimming the lights of our tallest buildings during that brief period would prevent bird strikes and increase the odds of migrating birds making it home again.

* * *

"I am forwarding you herewith the wings and legs of what I think is the white Black Bird. It was shot in Kildysart Co. Clare and sent to me. I am sorry I cannot send you the whole bird. Unfortunately it is too far gone and past all caring."

* * *

I hand my credit card to the receptionist. "Go get a cup of tea," she says. "And something to eat. Some sugar before you go." I try to keep my voice neutral, aware of the open door behind me, the other women still waiting to be seen.

"I'll go straight to the coffee shop," I promise, even though I know I won't. I'm flying out of here, just as soon as she gives me my receipt.

I drive home via the Strand Road, and the Poolbeg Lighthouse is visible in the center of the Bay, ready to pulse out its familiar warning once darkness comes. I crank up the music. It's almost summer and the Curlews and Godwits and Oystercatchers will be here any day.

Aileen Hunt is an Irish writer whose work has appeared in various online and print journals, including *Sweet*, *Hippocampus*, *Slag Glass City*, *Flashback Fiction*, and *Cleaver Magazine*. She is torn between exploring the lovely, digressionary freedom of the lyric essay and the tight constraints and challenges of flash nonfiction.

featured photo by John Edmondson

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