

Letter to a seabird

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Introduction

In May 2020, when I should have been experiencing spring in Scotland, I was instead living in Queensland, surfing the point breaks of the southern Gold Coast as the autumn swells rolled in. It was there that I noticed a bird I had never seen before and didn't know how to identify. Over coming weeks and months, I would watch this bird and others like it dive for fish from a great height, mesmerised. I wanted to know more. In my strange/letter, addressed to the birds, I track my attempts to identify and understand them via close observation and research, a process that led me back to Scotland through Bryan Nelson's monograph, *The Gannet* (1978). I trace the way in which I began to feel a sense of kinship with this animal, while also interrogating the limits of that kinship, amid a backdrop of border closures and uncertainty that was the strange southern winter of 2020.

Crea

When the lift unheaved me, me a living creature
 Wind from the wave upblowing; and as wide as far
 Bore me o'er the bath of seals—say what is my name?

—*Exeter Riddle Book* (qtd. in Nelson 275).

It is early May when I first see you, a few days after the full moon. That morning, the wind is offshore, blowing from the south, over land and out to sea. Autumn is finally here—I can tell from the angle of the sun, the way it slides from horizon to horizon on the elliptical, never reaching a point where it is directly overhead. I'm not supposed to be in Australia—if it hadn't been for Covid, I would have been in Scotland now—yet here I am.

As are you. I am surfing at the time; or, more precisely, I am sitting on my surfboard close to the clump of submerged rocks that I have come to call 'the little reef'. I call it the little reef for the simple reason that it appears to be a smaller satellite to the main Kirra Reef, which sits a little further out to sea. Both reefs are sheltering places for sargassum, sea grass and sea squirts, the saltwater-dwelling invertebrates that attach themselves to rocks and shells. These underwater cities are home to schools of reef fish and wobbegong, and for at least the past few months, a couple of loggerhead turtles, which I have sometimes seen beneath me, who from time to time pop their heads up to take in a gulp of air.

You have no doubt sensed all of this. You have your own way of knowing the world—of reading it—different to mine. You have your own needs, your own priorities. As passionate

as I am about surfing, as drawn as I am to saltwater, as much as I feel at home there, it remains a choice for me, and a privilege. Your drives are deeply instinctual. I think in some way I envy that about you. You belong here in a way that I don't, and never will.

During the lulls between sets, I shift my eye away from the horizon and watch you instead. I tip my head back to gaze at you circling, admire your ability to see or sense fish from a hundred metres away, the way you rearrange your body into acute angles—beak primed, wings crooked and flattened—before shooting yourself like an arrow into the sea. I am amused by the way you sit atop the water like a duck, feathers ruffled, content, apparently unconcerned—or perhaps even comforted—by the presence of surfers nearby. I see that your feathers are not white or black or grey, but somewhere in between; your plumage, especially about the head, is a mottled black-brown. When you take flight, using the water's surface as a runway, I think of Orville, the albatross from *The Rescuers*, the 1970s Disney animation about two mice who go in search of a kidnapped girl. I don't remember Orville's name at the time, just the image—his aviator goggles, his uneven gait.

Until now, I have only been a casual admirer. I have a vague memory of Neville Cayley's *What Bird is That?* (1931) sitting on a bookshelf in my childhood home. I think my grandfather gave it to me. I'm pretty sure the book spent most of its life on the shelf. I did not treasure it. I don't know where it is now. Yet I was aware, even as a child, of the changing patterns in bird visits, that the ducks would come and go, and that some years they did not come at all. I hoped their eggs would not be eaten by snakes, and that their ducklings would survive. I'm sure I used to sit on the back verandah and watch the willie wagtails flit their way through the woodpile, hopping from log to log. I remember my mother cutting up steak and placing it on the fence post for the kookaburras, that when I heard them laugh I would think—or someone else would say—that rain is on its way. Someone of your species was always there, in the background, whether I paid attention to you or not.

Now you're in the foreground. One day I hear a loud splash beside me and turn to see the water spiralling outwards. I wait for you to pop up. When you do you just sit there, satisfied with yourself, in no hurry to leave. I paddle myself over in your direction, not to try to touch you but to watch, more closely, or to try to catch your eye or, perhaps, to see how close I can get. You have become familiar to me, like surfers I see regularly in the line-up, not close enough to call friends but not strangers either. On days that nothing seems to come together for me as a surfer—when there are too many people out, and my timing is off, and it feels as though the force of the outgoing tide is stronger than the wave's power—and my mood would normally sour, I am placated by your presence, your wild beauty. I let unriden waves pass me by.

As May passes and June begins, and the days get shorter and shorter, you are still here. As am I. I know by now that a return to Scotland any time soon is unlikely. On the surface of things, I am resigned to this, embracing of it even, willing and ready to reshape my life and my plans around the unexpected diversion, my relatively good fortune. My years of wandering have meant that for a long time I was unmoored, never bound to one particular place. It is, as you know, an exciting way to live, but only for so long. I am realising now that deep local knowledge can only be gleaned over time, is forged with stillness and attention.

I capture and store details while surfing—feather patterns, shape and colour of your feet, shape and colour of your beak—and compare the image I have in my head with those I find on Google. I know by now that you are not an albatross, nor a petrel, nor a blue or red-footed or Abbott’s booby, though you are a member of the *sulidae* family to which the booby belongs. I suspect you might be a gannet, specifically a young Australasian gannet. Though your breeding grounds are thousands of kilometres away in southern Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, where you are called tākapu, you are a regular visitor to these waters, following the trade winds north and west on prolonged foraging expeditions. You have been sighted in the autumn months at jungar-ngahriyahn/Cook Island, in Coodjinburra country just over the border in New South Wales; you are a signifier of Guyumbu, the Coodjinburra season of sea mullet, a time of oceanic abundance. A search of #australasiangannets on Instagram confirms it: I find a photograph taken off the headland at Jellugal/Burleigh, about ten kilometres to the north-west as the gannet flies. The mottled feathers on the bird in that picture are the same as yours. It’s you, I know it’s you.

You are closely related to the Atlantic gannet, which breeds on cliffs and islands around Scotland, Norway and Iceland, migrating as far south as the equatorial waters off western Africa in winter, as well as the Cape or African gannet which also migrates north, overlapping with the Atlantic gannet at their southern extremity. Contemporary scientists seem to favour the notion that you are a distinct species, *morus*, which would make you *morus serrator*, but the British ornithologist and gannet expert Bryan Nelson considers you a *sulidae* superspecies, a relative of the boobies. In the early 1960s, while completing his doctorate, Nelson and his wife June spent their three-year honeymoon living among you on Bass Rock in the Firth of Forth. They lived in a garden shed, erected within the ruined walls of St Baldred’s chapel, no electricity, no way of communicating with the outside world, only each other for company. Apart from you of course. They effectively spent the next fifty years observing you, at times living among you and other *sulidae* for months or years at a time, not only on Bass Rock but also in the Galapagos Islands, and at Cape Kidnappers/Te Kauwae-a-Māui in Aotearoa. They worked side-by-side, and ultimately wrote together, with June typing up Bryan’s notes (Perrins 222–223).

I find a second-hand hardback of Nelson's monograph *The Gannet* online at Andrew Isles Natural History Books in Melbourne, a first edition published in 1978, with illustrations by wildlife artist John Busby. I order it, and a few weeks later it arrives by post. In the book Nelson wrote that you are, 'essentially birds of the continental shelves, observing the sharp boundary between the pelagic and offshore waters' (212). He said that you can live at sea for long periods, roosting on the water. He suggested that, although you follow predictable migration routes, your foraging behaviour is more haphazard. You can struggle to fly without the assistance of wind or gravity, especially with a belly-full of fish, and would rather hunt in choppy waters when your prey is less likely to see you. This makes sense: that day, when I first saw you, the wind was up, and it's on windy days that I have seen you in groups of twenty or thirty or more, wheeling and diving like an aerobatic troupe, following shoals of baitfish.

Bryan Nelson taught at the University of Aberdeen for twenty years. Both *The Gannet*, and a second monograph *The Sulidae: Gannets and Boobies*, were published while he was working there. His lectures about you were legendary. When Nelson died in 2015, former student Tom Brock recalled, in Nelson's obituary: 'When lecturing about "sky-pointing" – when, for the chicks' safety, a gannet signals to its partner that it is about to leave the nest – he didn't just show a photo. He became a gannet, using his whole body to imitate that distinctive posture – unforgettable!' (Davison). I was based at the University of Aberdeen while in Scotland. I would have been there still. Your presence here, now, in some way connects me both to the place I should have been and the place that I am now. In a year of so much strangeness and uncertainty, but also stillness and wonder, that you led me back to Scotland while also anchoring me here, seems less strange than it does serendipitous.

I track down a short film about June and Bryan made in 2019 to coincide with the four-year anniversary of Bryan's death. It's called *Life on the Rocks*. In the opening scenes, shot in black and white, a wrinkled hand clutches a rail. June is climbing the stairs on Bass Rock, the place she had honeymooned with her husband, a place she hasn't been to for twenty years. You are everywhere around her, out of focus at first but as the camera zooms out you all become clear. There are hundreds of you, maybe thousands; breeding pairs roosting in the steep cliffs, and troops of you circling overhead. You are underwater, diving for fish. June's delight at being back there, among you, is clear. She squints into the sun. She is smiling, but her words are infused with portent. Talking to the camera she says, 'It's really interesting that man makes such an impression and in such a short time it's reduced to ruin.'

In the last chapter of *The Gannet*, 'The gannet and man', Nelson gives an overview of some of the earlier accounts about you. 'The relationship', he writes, 'has been woefully lop-

sided, for whilst gannets have been eaten by man, have helped him find fish and have excited interest, legend and admiration, man has wantonly destroyed the gannet, and latterly, polluted its seas' (274). He pays particular attention to the myth of the barnacle goose. The barnacle (or bernicle) goose was said to hatch from waterborne trees or molluscs that attached themselves to ships and driftwood. Nelson hypothesises, as some others have, that it may have been about you.

That myth, which dates at least to the twelfth century, was probably a way of understanding how you, and others like you, would suddenly appear in Scotland, fledged from unseen breeding grounds. As Nelson observes, the myth may have arisen from the concurrent arrival each Autumn of migratory seabirds and barnacle-encrusted timber driven shoreward by equinoctial gales. He is not the first to suppose that the legend's origins lay with Aristotle, who in his *History of Animals* wrote about 'a sort of animal which lives and flies until the afternoon of the same day, but presently at the sun's going down withers and languishes, and finally at the sun's setting, dies, lasting no longer than a single day, whence it is called ephemerus' (275). Yet you are anything but ephemeral. Your existence predates ours by several epochs (Patterson et al 291). We are your biggest threat, but we are also our own; you could very well outlast us. As Nelson writes, 'It takes a lot to starve a gannet' (16). For some reason I find this comforting. You might well be here long after we have gone.

In late July I go surfing at Kirra on an overcast afternoon. I have been away, in Sydney and out bush, so haven't surfed much in the last few weeks. The waves are small, the wind is from the south, the faces are holding up. I am out of practice, ungainly and slow to pop up. But once I'm up and on the wave, feeling the momentum beneath my feet, my body remembers what to do. I am wondering, supposing, that you may have gone, chased away by the planes that have started to land again at Gold Coast Airport now the borders have reopened, or simply moved on to another fishing ground, north or south of here. In the first hour or so, I see only seagulls. Then, later: one lone gannet, way out to sea, a biplane high above it. From where I am sitting, you are the same size as the plane, a trick of the eye like the moon and the sun.

As the tide turns, and starts coming in, you follow. There are three, four, five of you, maybe more. I hear a familiar splash behind me, turn to see feathers re-emerging, a bird sitting on the water nearby. I see another take aim, swooping in a low arc then piercing the water from a horizontal position as a needle pierces cloth. I duck as a gannet flies low over the water towards me, and only just clears my head. I watch in awe as one bird performs a vertical half-twist mid-air, spearing the water backwards. *You are still here*. Later that month, out walking one morning near Snapper Rocks, I will see a troupe of you hovering, cloudlike, over a shoal of fish. I stand there and watch you: circling and diving, circling and

diving, two or three or four at a time, in a syncopated beat that is slightly off tempo yet as finely tuned, and as exhilarating to watch, as an orchestra.

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