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## POEMS OF BEAUTY, ISLANDS OF GRIEF

ALEX LOCKWOOD

The fulmar had not been fed for four days. It was very still in its nest, waiting for its mother to return, nestling its flurried neck on fledgling wing. It was not a chick, but neither had it flown. We could see it by leaning over the safety rail of the lighthouse's viewing platform. Hers was the nest closest to us, and yet just out of reach; it may as well have been on the other side of the cove at this sanctuary on the western tip of Rathlin Island, looking out to the Irish Sea.

The populations of seabirds who shared the sanctuary with the fulmars – the razorbills, guillemots, kittiwakes, a family of rare chough, and an adolescent peregrine learning to hunt, but especially the charismatic puffin – were in decline due to a lack of food sources: sandeel, sprat, squid. There was nothing I could do for this graceful seabird with the straight grey wings that floats in widening arcs, a serene glider of the gulled sky. If its parents did not return soon, it would die, and it was breaking my heart.

'The love that shuns what opposes it is fear, while the love that feels that opposition when it happens, is grief,' wrote the fourth-century Saint Augustine. My love of the bird felt as its opposition a puncturing grief at its loss.

What do we understand of grief? It is a question I have sat with since seeing the images for Chris Jordan's forthcoming documentary *Midway*. It is the account of the

deaths of thousands, if not tens of thousands, of Laysan albatrosses each year due to the ingestion of plastic trash picked up from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. The bits of plastic on the surface of the sea, brought together by vast currents, look like its favourite food, squid.

Watching a clip from the film was for me a grief rekindled of the struggle of seabirds to which I have borne witness. But nothing has come close to the scale of suffering on the Midway atoll, some thousands of miles from human habitation, a seabird colony in the Pacific that, as Jordan says, is a parable for our time that we ignore at our peril.

'The story of Midway has broken my heart a lot more times than I thought I had the capacity for,' says Jordan, slogging away at a keyboard in Seattle in between post-production shifts on *Midway*. Jordan, an artist, filmmaker and cultural activist, has brought awareness of the tragedy to our eyes through his photographs of the birds, many of which die before they ever fly. He began taking photographs in 2009 in an open-ended project: 'Midway: Message from the Gyre'. They are dispatches from, to misquote Yeats, a centre that is no longer holding; a gyre that has widened out of control. The images are, in Jordan's words, 'iconic', but the horror is absolute.

'The first few times I visited Midway, I did a lot of crying as the albatrosses died in front of my camera, or choked to

death as I held them in my arms,' says Jordan. 'We would open their still-warm dead bodies with scissors and find handfuls of plastic bottle caps and cigarette lighters; the feelings were overwhelming.'

The Laysan albatross has one of the longest lifespans of any bird in the world, often living (and breeding) into its sixties. There are over a million birds on the small atoll, and many would naturally die before reaching adulthood. But its population is predicted to decline sharply and it may well join the other 19 of 21 albatross species that are threatened with extinction. And yet it was just a single albatross, and not one that was dying of plastic ingestion, that gave Jordan one of his clearest 'teaching moments' on the island.

'That came when I accidentally killed a healthy baby albatross,' says Jordan. 'She was sitting in her nest waiting for her parents to come home and feed her, and in a moment of inattention I ran over her with the front wheel of my bike. I returned to visit her numerous times as she died over the next four days, and it was astonishing to discover how much I felt for one individual innocent creature whose life I had inadvertently taken. I couldn't stop thinking of the pain she must be in, and about all of the years she could have spent zooming in the winds over the Pacific, dancing with her mate, raising her young.'

'She was so innocent and beautiful, and yet I also had to acknowledge that there was nothing particular about her that made her more lovable than any of the others on the island. I had to conclude that I must possess that much feeling for every one of them, hidden somewhere in my heart; and that realization then cascaded to other creatures as well – through a series of insights to discover my love for "all beings", as my Buddhist friends like to say. Indigenous cultures tend to remember that love in a way that we have forgotten, and they make a daily practice of reminding themselves. But in our culture it gets lost and covered up by all the layers of anxiety and rushing around.'

To help tell the story, Jordan turned to environmental writer Terry Tempest Williams. When she saw Jordan's images, she cried. She said she could not imagine 'the weight of this vision' that he had documented.

'I need a metaphor,' Jordan asked her.

'You don't need a metaphor,' said Williams, looking at the pictures. 'This is the metaphor.'

In the rhapsody of grief that at times overwhelmed Jordan, it would have been difficult to structure a narrative that made sense, when so much of what he was bearing witness to was senseless. Perhaps that is why I have also found myself turning to poetry to help me understand the images, and the grief I feel at the loss of these birds. I want to see how that grief is shaped by the causes of loss, the plastic throwaway materials of inattentive killing. To come to terms with a grief I both want and do not want to bear about our world.

A few weeks after speaking with Jordan, over dinner with a friend, the poet Abi Curtis, I tell her about the film. Abi sits up, a little more attentive, a catch in her throat. She tells me of her poem 'Albatross' in her most recent collection. When I returned home I sit down and re-read the poem. It ends in a way that catches in my throat:

Months later you're walking the strewn beach  
and bend to the perfect, blown-out tracing

of a half-grown chick, covert feathers unzipping  
to reveal the plastic jetsam in its belly:

the buttons, bottle caps and lighters  
that transformed creatures to miscellany.

The one-dimensional mantra of many NGO-led environmental campaigns is that crisis-framed messages of grief and loss are too negative, and people switch off. But Curtis saw the pictures of the Laysan albatrosses and was moved to write about them. For Jordan, a radically open approach to 'fully facing one issue' has changed him to the very core.

'It has been a transformational experience to plumb the depths of my own feelings for what is happening to our world, through the multi-layered metaphor of Midway's story,' says Jordan. 'As a young person I was taught that grief is a "bad" feeling, and that when I was having any of the bad feelings (grief, anger, rage, fear, anxiety, etc.) then I needed to snap out of it – which meant shoving those feelings out of consciousness and pretending they were gone. More recently I have come to view those feelings as a natural part of human experience, in our everyday lives and relationships, and also in response to the mass destruction and loss that is happening all around us. They may not be comfortable feelings to hold and process, but they are always still there, whether we acknowledge them consciously or not. It feels healthier to bring them into the light of awareness rather than banishing them back into the unconscious, where they can fester individually and collectively in all kinds of ways: depression, hostility, alienation, addiction, violence.'

'I also wrestle with fear of sadness, as a barrier to stepping into grief's transformational power. Yet I am discovering an unexpected character of grief. At its core, I am finding that grief is not sadness; it is a directly felt experience of love for something we are losing, or that we have lost. In honouring my pain for the world through the dying birds on Midway, I am discovering to my astonishment that I contain a vast ocean of love for those birds. But in that way, I don't think I am special or different from anyone else: I believe we all possess a tremendous abiding love for the smorgasbord of miracles that is our world. Love is an innate part of our being. It is what we are made of. The question is how do we reconnect with it, on an individual and collective level? I believe grief can be a portal.'

Poetry can also be a portal. Paul Muldoon's collection, *Maggot*, uses a Jordan picture of one of the chicks in its 'blown-out tracing' on its cover. Muldoon translates, or, rather, reimagines, Baudelaire's 'The Albatross' from 1861. It is the tale of the torture of an albatross that follows a ship, whose crew captures the bird, mock it and cripple its wings, at one point sticking a pipe in its beak. Muldoon's version is the more graphic:

Barely has he been flung down on the planks  
than this Lord of the Blue is lamed and ashamed; he  
piddles



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along with two white wings hanging from his flanks  
like a pitiable pair of paddles.

In both versions the poet ends by likening himself to the bird. The bird itself is forgotten, effaced in metaphor. Here Baudelaire expresses the ugly act most clearly:

The Poet is like this monarch of the clouds  
riding the storm above the marksman's range;  
exiled on the ground, hooted and jeered,  
he cannot walk because of his great wings.

There is something in this that angers me deeply, beyond the tale of cruelty. That a poet could liken himself to the albatross and profit from that likeness, for his soaring, poetic fragility. Is poetry sufficient as a means of witnessing the tragedy or, as critic Lauren Berlant writes, have these poets, Baudelaire and Muldoon, fallen into the trap of believing that their recognition of a 'true feeling' is enough, and that the alleviation of the pain of that true feeling (through writing a poem) is enough for them to consider their work done? And if poetry is not sufficient, can it be at least, like grief, a door to change? Or is it rather a key that unlocks – and goes beyond sufficiency, providing us with something like an answer? Something like hope?

Perhaps. Poetry can show us the power and danger of metaphor – show us, as Tempest Williams hinted at, where it is enough, and never enough. The simile of the struggling poet/crippled albatross actually brings us back to the albatross, our

need to fully face its fate; how that fate is also ours. It is difficult, almost impossible to do so – but the rewards are potentially incredible.

'What if we could reconnect on a collective level with our innate love for life and the miracle of our world?' asks Jordan. 'The potential for healing is hard even to imagine.'

For Jordan, the process of filming *Midway*, of 'the witnessing process' has taken on additional layers, and one that draws on the transformative nature of grieving.


'My team and I filmed *Midway's* hatching season last February, and there we encountered large numbers of baby albatrosses who failed to hatch from their eggs for a variety of natural reasons. Many of them never even get to open their eyes before dying; their whole life happens inside the egg, and then it's over.

'Seeing and photographing these failed hatchings, I began to wonder about the nature of spirit on a different level. If there were just one spiritual entity inhabiting all of those birds simultaneously, what would that entity be experiencing? And in that context, what is the spiritual nature of the entity who is looking out through my own eyes, and asking that question? The world's external problems (the destruction of our forests, extinction of species, pollution of our atmosphere) can all be viewed as symptoms of a deeper emotional/spiritual disconnect that is happening inside of us. I am interested in addressing and healing that internal dis-connect on a collective level – and from there I trust that new legislation, new leaders, new solutions, etc., will emerge.'

Perhaps *Midway's* lasting legacy will come because of Jordan's willingness to accept and to use his grief. It is what the eco-critic Catriona Mortimer Sandilands would identify as a political melancholy in response to environmental destruction. The refusal to 'let go' of the lost object and simply replace it with another one, to move on in the usual processes of consumer capitalism, suggests that grief can be positive. To feel it fully is to hold onto something lost or being lost, in defiance of 'capitalist imperatives to forget, move on, transfer attention to a new relationship / commodity.'

Jordan hopes *Midway* will be a love story, something that reminds us what love is. As Hugh Warwick eloquently argued in these pages [*Earthlines* Issue 4]: 'to prevent the numb non-reaction to the destruction of so much beauty, we need to find our way into profound love.' But it is a hope that does not end Jordan's grief. Rather, it makes it more profound. As the poet Abi Curtis writes, we come to realise of the albatross that 'the world soars through her / it is that way around.'

'My wish for humanity is for us to realize our potential as self-aware spiritual beings,' said Jordan. 'I mean, what gift could possibly be more amazing than to be alive, right now, on planet Earth? Humanity could achieve global mass-transformation tomorrow if we decided to, and from there we could step into a whole new world together. There is nothing stopping that from happening; and at the same time, people say

it is idealistic and perhaps even arrogant to hope for. Isn't that a strange paradox? *Midway* offers a parable for our times that is so powerful on so many levels that I can hardly bear it. My job is to convey that story as clearly and beautifully as I can with the limited resources I have available to me. I guess that's the role of any artist, isn't it? You work with the materials you have, and try to articulate something you care about. And if there is some integrity there, then perhaps someone might want to look at it.' 

ALEX LOCKWOOD is a writer and academic with a special interest in our emotional relationships with environments and animals. He teaches journalism and has just completed his first novel. He also runs the social enterprise Nature Stories, using writing workshops in schools and community groups to encourage pro-environmental reflection and activism.

## POEMS

JANE MCKIE

### THE LITTLE MAGISTERIUM

*That preparation which alchemists believed would convert any baser metal into silver*

My daughter calls it The Blue Tomorrow,  
at her bedroom window just before dawn,  
when our garden has the cast of moonlit snow.

I look towards our back fence and see slow  
frost-melt, saliva of ice on the small hawthorn.  
My daughter calls it The Blue Tomorrow.

I examine at her averted face. I don't suppose  
she's awake, she's pale as a goat's horn.  
Our garden has the cast of moonlit snow.

Our two reflections in the window throw  
shapes like half-formed beasts across the lawn.  
My daughter calls it The Blue Tomorrow.

I want to become her, know all she knows,  
just for a moment, before the silver's torn  
and our garden has the cast of moonlit snow

and nothing more. Silly really, what's below  
has been there since before she was born.  
My daughter calls it The Blue Tomorrow  
when our garden has the cast of moonlit snow.

### THE ARCHAEOLOGIST

On no account brood over your wrongdoing  
— *Aldous Huxley*

There she stands, a statue under Lake Nemi,  
bubbles visible behind her badly sealed  
copper helmet. I have tried to talk to her  
for years now, but the transmission is hazy:

*The time has come to make for the surface!*

I wave my arms, windmilling, while slimy  
weed binds my gesticulations.  
Come up, for God's sake! But even God moves  
like he's on the moon, everything so much slower

here—where birds dip upside down, and grit  
punishes the skin of tender feet like nails.  
Guilt holds her back, of course, body of water  
reluctant to give up its cursed pearls.