

An Account of the Decline of the Great Auk,
According to One Who Saw It

This rock was perhaps an island once, but now all that is left is a dowager's hump breaching the ocean sheer on all but one side and on that side it slopes so that you can bring a ship in close. I come here every year. At first we came for fish. Sometimes we came for whales. We couldn't carry enough food for the journey both here and back, but that didn't matter because of the birds. This was thirty years ago. They were the size of a goose; larger: the size of a large goose, and they packed themselves on to the rock, its surface hidden by them already and more coming all the time up out of the water; the way they came it was like they were made from

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the sea itself, like the waves formed them, water to flesh, and spat them up on the land. Looking at them, at the numbers of them, you would have thought them infinite, you would have thought there could be no end to them, to their proliferation. This island was larder to us then, store and pantry for all it bore no vegetation, not grass or moss, no tree, no soil, nothing but the rock and the spray and the birds; and now not even the birds.

The first years we climbed out of the launch and we went ashore wading through them, hip deep, to find a flat place which we would clear of birds with a club swung about circular and, when the birds were cleared, in the gap they left we could see their eggs spread across the ground like scree, like shingle, each the size of a fist and a half a fist. I have never seen so many eggs. These numbers deceived us. It was not possible to realise from that expanse that each egg represented also singularity: that each pair of birds laid only one egg, each spring, down on the bare rock. This truth did not become clear to us until their numbers had reduced to the point that we could, in fact, count them: the birds, the eggs. The number of the birds twice the number of the eggs.

After we had made our clearing, we caught the birds to eat. This we did in the following manner.

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With a board laid down from the shore to the ship, two of us drove the birds before us and in half an hour we could have filled the hold twice over, they went like sheep to the shambles. Some of the birds we ate at once and the rest we salted, laying them nose to tail in barrels, nestled. On one ship we broke the legs of thirty of the birds and then they couldn't move and we could keep them easy to eat fresh when we wanted; but the noise they made was near intolerable and they didn't last us home anyway but died all of them barely three days out from Nova Scotia. That was at the beginning when we had yet to see the possibilities. Then we saw and for a long time we came here not for fish or whales but for feathers; and then when the birds were so few that we could count them on our fingers we came for the birds themselves to take to the collectors or to the universities who would pay excessively for their preserved corpses; and now it is the fish again, and the whales, and we must carry food or catch it from the sea because there are no more birds.

To collect the feathers, there were different ways. We could not take the bodies all the way back across the Atlantic because they would spoil. At first we killed

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the birds and plucked them, and we tossed the corpses off the cliff and they fell into the sea. The birds looked so much smaller without their feathers on. Then we told ourselves this method took too much of our time. Only some of the feathers were worth plucking. Instead we walked through the birds and they would not run away; they were too tightly packed to move, and even when their numbers had thinned a little they seemed not to understand that we were a threat to them and at most they would shuffle out of reach or they might snap their beaks, nothing more. In addition they were clumsy, they waddled, their walk was ungainly; they swayed and rolled as they struggled to put one flat foot upon the rock in front of the other and often they fell over. We caught them up and pulled the feathers that we needed and let them go half-plucked and even then they would not run but only stand bemused and blinking and naked where we put them. And then later they would die of their own accord.

The other way to get the feathers off was to boil the birds whole. To do this we hit them once about the skull so that they were dead or stunned and put them in a kettle, two in the kettle, having to push quite hard to get them in, and then under it we laid more of the birds like logs and the chicks if we could

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find them like kindling in the centre. The birds were fat and their feathers greased and they burned well, better than I would have expected, long and hot. When the kettles were boiled the feathers came away quite easily and we could stuff them into sacks and throw the leftover mess into the sea as before. This way was the easiest. We congratulated ourselves on such a practical solution to the apparently intractable problem of fuel on the barren rock, and we said that amongst so many birds how could this few be missed, or this next few, or the few after that even. Even when year by year we noticed their thinning we said it must be for some other reason than us and besides we had come two thousand miles and more so we could hardly just turn back. This was what we said.

These are the names the birds have been called: great auk, garefowl, esarokitsok when in Greenland, penguin, pin-wing, geirfugl. Other names too, probably. They could not fly. Sometimes we would see them swimming and note their elegance when in water. Even at sea they could be caught with a little fish as bait; they would come close to the side of the ship and we would snare them and then they would swim alongside with a string around their neck and

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if startled they would dive despite the string. It seems unlikely but I never heard of one being strangled this way. I know that some collectors have wanted to keep them alive but away from the sea they won't stay so for more than a month at the outside. Once when they were all but gone we came home past Kilda and they gave us one there, the last one they ever caught, and we kept it tied to the side of the boat in the water so that it would still be alive when we reached Liverpool, but it slipped the noose off the Mull of Kintyre and we lost it. If the birds had stayed always in the water and not come on to the rock then I think that even though they were still such quick catches we might not have killed so many of them because of how much easier they were to pity in the water.

I will say how the last of them died. The ship had been chartered by a naturalist. Because of the scarcity of specimens by this time, the prices had become enormous and it was cheaper probably to send us to where a few had been seen than it was to buy a stuffed one, even if there was one to buy. On Eldey off the coast of Iceland we found them, a pair. We landed and climbed up the steep rock to where they stood. They had not tried to hide. They seemed

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confused. As we got closer they began to look around them, as if to find others of their kind to huddle with against us because they had always thought to find safety in numbers, but there were no others. One of them ran a little while in circles. We drove them back against the cliff wall so that they were trapped and then they stood still and we caught them and we strangled them. Their egg we smashed and although we said afterwards it was an accident that we did that, I don't know if it was or not.

Those were the last two Great Auk and we killed them.

Here is the truth: we blamed the birds for what we did to them. There was something in their passivity that enraged us. We hated how they didn't run away. If they had run away from us we could have been more kind. We hated the birds. When we looked at them we wanted nothing more than to smash and beat and kill. We felt in them a mirror of our sin and the more we killed of them the cleaner we became. Sometimes we would be two days at the killing or three even and we wouldn't sleep. We would keep at our slaughter through darkness with the light from the fires only, and in the morning the bodies

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thrown from the cliffs would cover the sea for yards about the rock. The eggs we trampled, dancing across them in our boots. No matter what we did the birds stayed huddled to the rock, waiting for us to reach them. This was why we killed so many of them, because of this way they had of watching us; this was why we killed so many more than we needed, without thinking about what might happen the next year: this and the way their numbers deceived us, making us think there could be no end to it but we could go on and on for ever. It was a kind of madness they caused in us and afterwards we would be exhausted and on the way home we wouldn't talk about what had happened but only about how much money we could make from the feathers. But alone with ourselves we blamed the birds.

If people ask, I tell them it would not be true to say that I feel the loss of the birds apart from the money, except that it is always a little sad when something is gone, because in any loss you can see a shadow of the way that you will be lost yourself. It used to be that on a warm day you could hear the rock before you saw it and smell it before you heard it but it's barely a hand of winters now since the last bird went

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and already the rock is clean. It was three fingers deep in filth but now it is the colour of ox-tongue it is the colour of pewter and all the shit is washed clean by the rain.