

Carole Giangrande

## ***Land's End***

### I

My partner Brian and I are driving along Route 132, the coastal road, across Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula to its wild edge at Parc Rocher Percé. The mountainous road dips and glides, weaving down the sheer cliffs to the St. Lawrence River. From the heights, the near-vertical hills of Sainte-Anne-des-Monts draw us upward and into a steep descent, so that as we roll downhill, the mountain before us appears to rise from the earth, a primeval force, a green, reptilian creature. We'd traveled there years ago, out for the drama of gannets and kittiwakes nesting and mating in the sheer rock cliffs. Yet with the passing of time, we failed to remember that wild looping highway, the rippling thread of it weaving us into the pattern of the hills.

Older now, we've returned, our love for each other still intact, our passion for seabirds tailored with a measure of wariness and caution. *Slow down, the sign says twenty-five kilometres*, I want to say, but Brian's a cautious driver, a physician, a calm and reliable presence while I'm a writer, cursed with the plague of a good imagination. Once I was fearless, but now I live humbled by so much beauty and terror.

Yet two different temperaments click into place like the tongue and buckle on a seat belt as we rumble along on this road trip. We're from Toronto – American expats and native New Yorkers from opposite ends of that state. Brian has family in Quebec; what's left of mine's in Manhattan. Canadians now, we love La Belle Province, yet it doesn't take long to realize why we've both forgotten these fearful mountain roads. Something is pulling us forward like the tug of a planet on its moon: the thought of watching magnificent gannets, creatures of sea and sky.

### II

That said, it's possible to overcome fear and forget you had ever felt it. The body has this gift of erasure so that we may continue living, so that the mind makes space for new understandings. One can learn to navigate a serpentine road in safety. Mountainous seascapes are there to be

treasured. Yet sometimes memory, for good or ill, returns and holds fast. We only think we've forgotten. Nothing is lost.

### III

When I was six, I wriggled out of an anxious spring – eye surgery and a brief stay in hospital – and slipped into the pure light of summer, in a new home. We'd moved to an old and settled neighbourhood, our yard so thick with greenery that it felt as if we were nesting there. Perhaps that was why I began to read *A Guide to the Most Familiar American Birds*. I was a precocious reader, but it was the watercolour paintings that caught my attention. They featured birds in their habitats – a mourning dove perched on a fence with barn and silo in the background; a wren at rest on a birdhouse; a mockingbird sitting on a raspberry bush; a belted kingfisher with a trout trapped in its dagger-beak. Yet what I recall was not specific birds, but my wonder at sculpted bills, shining eyes, the grip of claws, the soft lustre of feathers.

In memory, my first bird book does not connect with language. It carries instead the moist and pleasant air of a warm summer day ebbing away into evening, a child resting on cool sheets, experiencing perhaps for the first time an intensity of awe at the gleam in the eye of a black-crowned night heron, the sense that one could look and look, yet never quite grasp the wonder of a bird's construction, or the utter strangeness of the avian world.

I have not lost the belief that profound mystery lies at the heart of everything, a gift the senses apprehend as well as the mind, the eyes of a child wide open.

### IV

The word *Gaspeg* means "Land's End" in the Mi'Kmaq tongue. Yet having returned to a place so fierce and brilliant with life, we are shadowed by thirty years that have passed since our last visit. We know that we carry with us the poignant truth of our own mortality.

Perhaps we are here for the last time. It's a thousand-kilometre road trip, and we're in good health, but we're not young. We talk about this. Maybe we could return next year by plane; fly to Quebec City and hop a puddle-jumper east to Forillon. Yet for now, it seems more important to enjoy our circuitous drive. And so we make our way through the countryside, past Sainte-Anne-des-Monts toward Forillon and Percé where villages glimmer like tiny beads in an ancient tapestry of saints'

names – both celebrated (Saint-Pierre, Sainte-Madeleine) and less so (Saint-Yvon, Saint-Maxime), all part of the elaborate beadwork of Quebec's history stitched into hills and valleys, prodding the secular mind with the insistent presence of the holy. The tallest structure in each village remains the glittering steeple. No doubt there are few worshippers these days, the spirit having escaped the formalities of church, residing instead in the countryside, brimming over with its own past and haunted by the presence of the Cross. It tops steeples, it plants itself by the sides of country roads, then rises up from a sloping path that aligns with a view of the beautiful Percé rock. A resonant sign, immersed in suffering, death and rebirth, holding together the four directions, the unity of creation, the paradox of grief and blessedness.

V

Then, in time, we arrive at Forillon, the great cliffs rising from the sea, laced with tiny kittiwakes and a few huge gannets. We make our way to an observation point by the water, opposite the sheer rock face. Brian's an expert birder and he scans the shoreline with his binos in search of murrelets and razor-billed auks, seabirds I've studied in *Les Oiseaux de Québec*, a fat bird book which allows me to brush up on fauna and French at the same time. I spot a park guide and ask him a few questions. Were there puffins in the area? Were the kittiwakes still nesting? (No and yes). He's astonished to meet a traveler from Toronto in a remote (and French-speaking) vacation spot. I don't tell him that slipping into another language may be the next best thing to flying. I suspect he might feel the same way. He tells me he studied English in university. Maybe everyone who comes here wonders about flight, sensing the transforming power of the place. Maybe we are not the only ones who may visit here for the last time.

The guide connects with another traveler while Brian returns, pointing to the thousands of kittiwakes nesting in a feathered patchwork of grey and white, exquisite little seabirds lifting their wings, drifting back and forth against the darkness of sheer rock. To and fro they move, like the pendulums of tiny clocks, but time as we know it does not exist for them, and perhaps we ourselves have broken through the bonds of time, looking upon the same birds we loved so many years ago. Maybe it's the intensity of love for this avian world that crushes time and folds it into a way of holding and seeing all we remember, all that is.

It is possible that we have never left the massive cliffs with their great striations, the story that nature etches into rock to remind us that we are

held by something much larger than ourselves. It is possible that in memory, the past is now.

## VI

Days later, we take the boat from Percé to Bonaventure Island. As we approach the cliff side, we can see hundreds of enormous gannets and tiny kittiwakes, white specks roosting in the nooks and crevasses of rock, dancing and playing as if air were the great sea roiling under their wings. Both sight and sound are overwhelming. When we hear their raucous crying out, feeling the air ripple and shudder as if it might break apart under the shrill, impossible grammar of avian language, it is then that we let go of words, throw away sense and meaning and enter the core of silence at the heart of sound.

There's no explaining this. It just happens, that we find ourselves abiding in stillness that defies language, entering the strangeness of what we can't understand. People are talking – this time, a couple next to us is speaking Italian – but although I understand their exclamations of wonder, the words dissolve into a void. I'm alive with awe at the sight of birds which live their lives at sea – fishing for food, resting at night on the pitch and roll of the ocean, flying together as a colony to their spectacular cliffside nest in spring and summer. Only then do I realize that I will never understand them or what they have to say to each other. I am silent in the face of their wild ululations, their unerring sense of direction, their inner clocks that do not tell time but draw them into the light of spring, returning them to the same rocky cliffs for a season of mating and begetting. Avian life is as strange now as it was to me when I read that bird book at the age of 6. I understand nothing.

## VII

The boat rounds the cliffs, sailing toward the opposite side of Bonaventure Island where it docks at the quay from which we hike back and upwards toward the southeast edge of the cliff where the gannets flock. We are not alone on the rocky uphill trail. Hikers equipped with backpacks and binoculars form a line ahead of us and behind. We find ourselves part of a quiet procession, focused and purposeful, all of us headed for the same destination.

Yet we are exhausted from the steep climb in the heat of the day. Later, Brian tells me that he's not sure he could do this again. I'm not yet prepared to agree.

Around a bend, the Gulf of St. Lawrence nudges the eye, prodding the ear with the faint cacophony of a hundred thousand spectacular birds at work and play in their nesting grounds. The grass slopes down toward the colony, the two sections separated by a single strand of rope fence. The gannets remain on their side of the rope, indifferent to human presence, absorbed in the vitality of their own mysterious lives. They are photogenic, their pale yellow heads and blue eyes fading into the gleaming white of their bodies. Most dramatic are their long blue-grey beaks edged in black, their slender black-tipped wings. Seen *en masse*, the sight is unforgettable.

The gannets draw the camera to the eye. Watch them flying, heads tilted forward, elegant wings slicing the air. Some carry fish, or ragged plants for nesting, flapping their wings as they land in the crowded colony, “fencing” with those enormous beaks, pecking in love-play, preening and tending to their young – one hundred thousand magnificent creatures, proclaiming in avian language their noisy passion for life.

We had seen this in our youth, yet still we gaze in wonder at the extravagant scene, its playful joy. Ineffable, beyond the passing of years, touching our own good lives of passion and connection, all inseparable from what we see before us: the vitality and strangeness of the great birds touching our spirits, holding us fast. All perhaps for the last time.

Yet I think of Whitman, what he wrote: *For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

I raise the camera to my eye, feel words vanish in the extraordinary drama of a beautiful seabird, its image flying on a beam of light refracted by the lens, sliced to a thousandth of a second, yet well beyond the reach of time.

My finger on the shutter.

Silence.

## VIII

White creatures scattered like flowers in the grass. Pull back the lens; frame this exquisite field of light. Take a picture that tells the truth in a way that words cannot. We may never return here, yet in our inner worlds, we share the vagrant life of the birds – their extravagant comings and goings, the endless return of newness and hope.

I am seeing them whole – a child whose finger has never left the shutter, whose eye is forever composing an image of the radiant world.