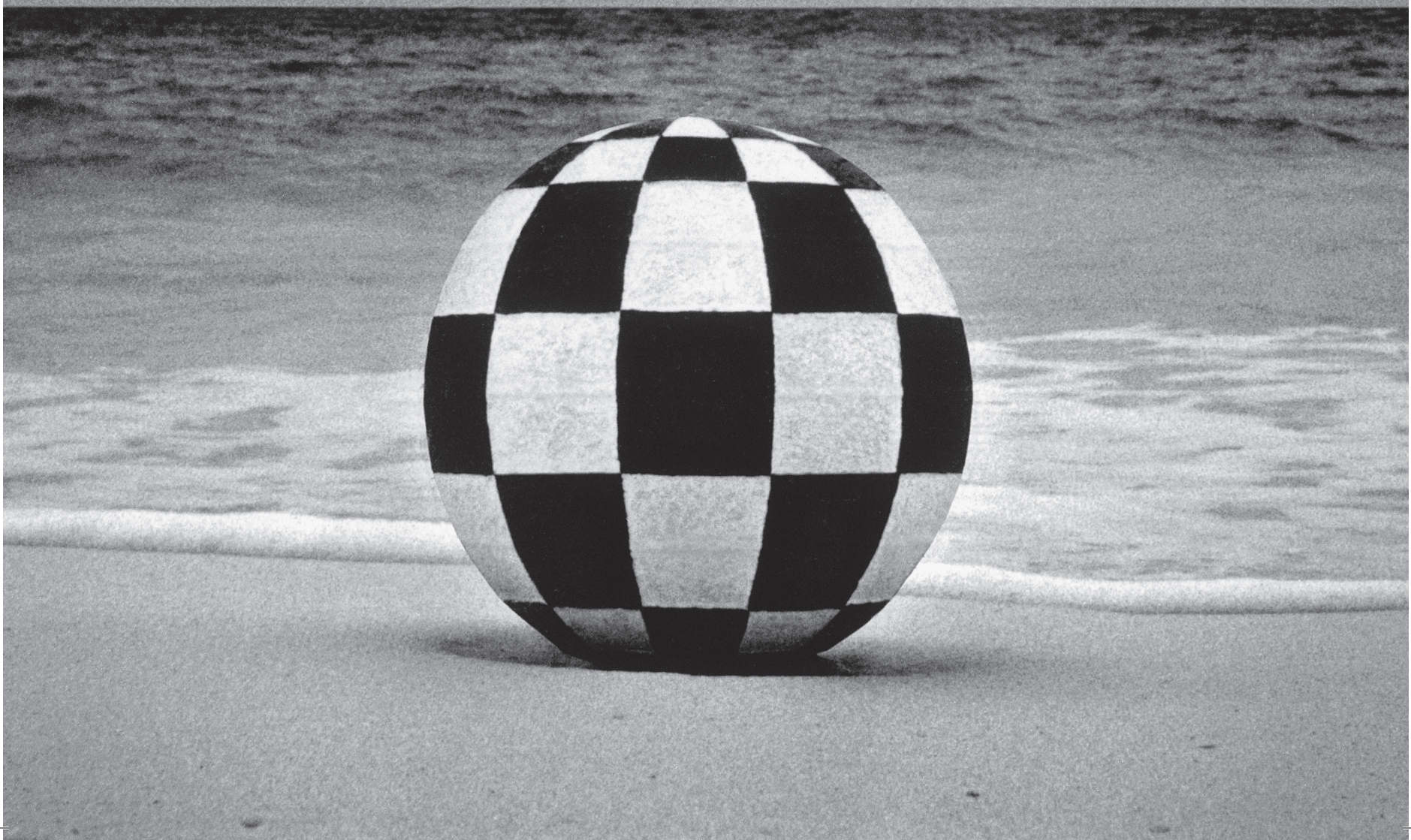


APRIL 2020

JESSICA DUFFIN WOLFE The Virus **MICHAEL THOMAS** Canadian Reggae
JEFFREY F. COLLINS Our Security Council Bid **BRAD DUNNE** Gone Fishing

Literary Review of Canada

A JOURNAL OF IDEAS



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Forebodings

Notes on climate catastrophe

Susan Crean

At dawn he hovered in the grey sky, his lungs swelling with the cadence of his mating song. Now she didn't respond to the offer of courtship feeding. The tundra call was irresistible. He flew again and called once more. Then he levelled off, the rising sun glinting pinkly on his feathers, and he headed north in silence, alone. — Fred Bodsworth

IT WAS MID-NOVEMBER WHEN THE JUVENILE purple gallinule was found shivering in the sub-zero cold, too weak to fly away when people approached. A glance was enough to know the tall, yellow-legged shorebird didn't belong where it was. So rescuers brought it to the Neskantaga First Nation band office nearby. The reserve lies in the northern Ontario bush, in that vast area of dense black spruce and frozen lakes due west of Attawapiskat and northeast of Winnipeg. No one had seen anything like the gallinule before, and pretty much everyone dropped by to take a look. It was a buffy beige with subtle markings of unusual hues, for it had yet to develop the signature plumage of adults, with their olive wings edged with aquamarine and iridescent greens.

Nonetheless, the species was quickly identified, and the obvious confirmed: the bird had been spectacularly off course. Moreover, at half its normal body weight, it was unable to keep its wings folded for warmth. It was, in fact, beyond help and died within days, leaving an enigma behind. For what can possibly explain its presence in the dead of winter, some 600 kilometres north of Thunder Bay and thousands farther from its natural habitat in the temperate, marshy regions that circle the Gulf of Mexico? Gary Quisess, who saw the gallinule, described it to the *Globe and Mail* as visibly wasted yet oddly impassive, as if traumatized. Empathizing with the creature, he'd found himself quietly talking to it, even asking the unanswerable question: What are you doing here?

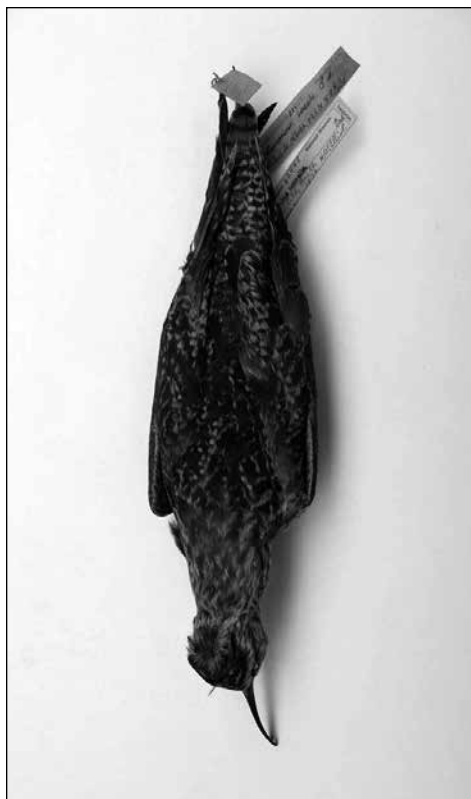
Purple gallinules are famous vagrants, likely to stray and well known for extraordinary feats of long-distance flying, turning up as far afield as Iceland and South Africa. Still, this particular gallinule's situation seems odd. Was it lost? Had it failed to reach its destination before running out of fuel? Had it encountered circumstances it couldn't handle — gale-force winds, perhaps, or habitat disrupted by clear-cutting? The answer almost doesn't matter. Given human history and our blindness to catastrophe in the making, it's easy to see the young bird's plight as emblematic of our own.

♦

ONE OF THE MOST MEMORABLE BOOKS I READ AS a child was *Last of the Curlews*, written by a

newspaperman named Fred Bodsworth and published in 1955. It's the story of a small shorebird — with a long, downward-curving beak — that flew from the pampas of Argentina to the Canadian Arctic each year to mate. Once hatched in Canada, curlew chicks had a scant few weeks to gain strength before setting off on their heroic 12,500-kilometre flight south.

Bodsworth's book was my introduction to the world of migratory birds. It was also my introduction to the word "extinct" and the alarming notion that it was possible for an entire species to perish, never to be seen again. Indeed, this was the fate of the Eskimo curlew. In my lifetime, it ceased to exist, joining the ranks of



The absent curlew.

the dinosaurs — though not done in by natural causes such as giant asteroids or volcanic eruptions. First described to Europeans by Johann Reinhold Forster, a Scottish naturalist who joined James Cook's second voyage to the Pacific in 1772, the Eskimo curlew was one of North America's most numerous shorebirds. By the late 1800s, hunters were slaughtering 2 million of them each year. No one noticed when their numbers slid past the fail-safe point. The last confirmed sighting was in 1963, in Barbados, and today the bird is considered all but extinct.

Years after the last curlew left the Arctic, Fred Bodsworth took me birding. In fact, I'd made the highest bid to spend an afternoon with him on the Leslie Street Spit at the annual meeting

of the Writers' Union of Canada. (Pierre Berton served as auctioneer.) So one spring morning in 1988, Fred and I headed to the spit — a five-kilometre headland that juts into Lake Ontario in Toronto's east end, made of cracked-up concrete, twisted cable, and other detritus of downtown construction, with a solitary road to accommodate the daily parade of dump trucks. But it's also an ideal location for spotting more than 300 species of birds.

That day with Fred, I learned quickly that watching birds is as much about listening as it is about looking — that and knowing what you are observing when it appears. (I remember we spotted a Wilson's phalarope, a migratory wader that also winters in Argentina.) I discovered, too, that birding requires a multi-dimensional awareness of the natural world, as well as attention to detail. But tracking the depletion of bird populations is different, for how do you track absence? Like extinction, it's not usually an observable phenomenon, although there are always clues, including the thinning of numbers.

And the numbers aren't good. It's not just the Eskimo curlew that's gone, of course. Last fall, we learned that North America's bird population has plummeted by some 30 billion since 1970. Which came as a shock, even if you have been paying attention.

♦

SCIENTISTS, NATURALISTS, AND INDIGENOUS elders have been pointing to the evidence for decades, their messages about irreversible damage largely ignored by governments and the mainstream. One such voice is Derrick Pottle, a trapper and hunter who lives in the Inuit community of Rigolet, in Labrador. Pottle began noticing things twenty-five years ago. "They were subtle changes that didn't jump out at you," he told me recently. "But they increased each year, until it got to the point where our winter season is now at least a month behind where it should be." There have also been not-so-subtle changes, including the decimation of the George River caribou herd — from approximately 800,000 in 2001 to 5,000 today. One year, Pottle observed a near absence of calves, which he now points to as a clear sign of trouble: "You need to have seventy young animals to a hundred adults for a herd to sustain itself."

Like many in Nunatsiavut, the autonomous Inuit region of northern Labrador, Pottle has long known that the weather is changing, the oceans are warming. He and others have understood the seriousness of the environmental decline the planet is experiencing. They've seen prevailing winds change and the earth's axis shift. All of us can now see the increase in catastrophic storms and ungovernable fires. In January, Australia saw record-breaking

temperatures, which fuel massive conflagrations that put more than 100 animal species at risk, including some now facing “imminent risk of extinction,” according to the government. Canada has also had fires — aggravated by dry forests and petroleum spills — yet there is no serious debate about leaving the rest of the oil in the ground.

Global greenhouse gases have grown by 1.5 percent every year for the last decade, according to the United Nations Environment Programme’s latest *Emissions Gap Report*, released this past November. It came with the warning that emissions have to *decline* by 7.6 percent every year between now and 2030 if we are to play it safe. Nonetheless, the world’s biggest polluters — the United States and China — once again *increased* their emissions last year, while the twenty richest countries continued to emit more than three-quarters of the world’s total. And Canada has the dubious distinction of being committed to reducing emissions at

home, while attempting to expand the production of fossil fuels for sale abroad.

I HAVE VISITED NUNAVUT TWICE IN THE PAST several years, travelling by air to gathering points — Kangerlussuaq in Greenland and Kugluktuk on the Coppermine River — then sailing with a company called Adventure Canada, which leads expeditions through the Northwest Passage and other Arctic waters, with experts like Derrick Pottle on board. (While Adventure Canada often invites writers to join these expeditions, I have travelled as a regular passenger.)

Nunavut is a part of Canada that few Canadians ever see, sitting above the tree-line, where time is measured in millennia and history is recorded in the sweeping vistas of mountains, their striations read by geologists and elders alike. Some mountains are curiously flat-topped, with vertical ridges, a motif that Inuit women use in textiles and tattoos. It is a compelling landscape, bright with lichen and live with mammals and birds, but not one to be experienced solo. Visiting can be quite costly — monetarily and, yes, in terms of carbon.

On these expeditions, we made stops in Dundas Harbour, on Devon Island, and Grise Fjord, on the southern edge of Ellesmere Island. We took daily trips ashore in Zodiacs, and on one occasion while hiking across Jenny Lind Island, we were treated to the gaze of a snowy owl, perched on a large rock fifty metres away. (I haven’t yet seen a snowy owl on the Leslie Street Spit, though they have started to visit.) In Greenland, floating in those same Zodiacs, we approached glaciers rising like Egyptian temples from the sea, calving mammoth chunks of ice, which break off with thunderous cracks and sail down the Davis Strait like ghost ships.

Greenland’s melting ice cap is the symbolic ground zero of global warming. Whether big or small, changes to the ice were what people all across the Arctic noticed first. “It would be later making and would melt out faster,” Pottle told me. “We had no concrete evidence other than what we observed.” Measurements from NASA’s Oceans Melting Greenland project corroborate such first-hand observations. And the science is alarming. On a single day last August, 12.5 billion tons of sheet ice was lost — the largest one-day loss ever recorded. (That’s enough to cover Germany in seven centimetres of water, the climate scientist Martin Stendel calculated.)

Sailing in the Arctic in 2019, we encountered loss of a very different kind: Parks Canada invited us to view the wreck of John Franklin’s *Erebus*, where it has been lying in shallow waters off King William Island since 1848. Though many had searched, the ship had not been discovered until 2014. It was a macabre sight — part submerged museum piece, part embalmed body of evidence. Either way, there it was, imperial history bobbing about in an ocean of time, a telling reminder of the trouble that comes from ignoring the people who know the land and ice, from ignoring the adage “Paese che vai usanze che trovi.”

IT WAS BETWEEN MY TWO TRIPS THAT THE PENNY dropped for many who had not been listening. Climate change is now the undisputed overarching issue of our time, warranting a global strategy and a UN special envoy in the form of Mark Carney, who must convince titans of private finance to put “a net-zero economy into

the heart of financial decision-making.” The language we use to describe the crisis has also evolved, from “the greenhouse effect” to “global warming,” from “climate change” to “climate emergency.” Eco-activists have filled the streets. Groups like Extinction Rebellion are warning us that we’ve got just “twelve years to save Earth.”

What scientists have been warning us about has become a movement.

Sixty years ago, writers like Fred Bodsworth and Rachel Carson, whose *Silent Spring* described the poisoning effects of pesticides on songbirds, predicted a crisis. Today, we know that we’ve failed to avert it. We know that time is running out for the planet and for us. Every so often, children step up to shame adults into action. In 1992, it was a twelve-year-old Canadian, Severn Cullis-Suzuki, who addressed the UN’s Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. In 2020, it is Greta Thunberg of Sweden who prods us to ditch the lip service and actually do something. My generation called for change when we were young in the 1960s; Thunberg’s generation cannot fathom why we don’t act, now that we’re in charge.

In short, we have been sleepwalking to climate catastrophe. Are we finally waking up? Nearly a decade ago, the American photographer James Balog and a team tracked retreating glaciers in Greenland, documenting their multi-year Extreme Ice Survey in the 2012 film *Chasing Ice*. It depicts the degradation of the ice cap with vivid images of gushing rivers, while anguished scientists report the bad news.

However we perceive it, whatever our response, we are living the paradox that is revealed in the melting ice: It takes a great deal of effort to get to the Arctic. And interlopers pose challenges to the small communities once they get there. But the Arctic is no longer in any sense peripheral. Parts of the world that are among the least travelled, and the most distant from industry and cities, are anything but pollution free. Though vanishing, the ice has too long been our dumping ground for plastic and toxins, which make their way to the poles in the air and in the seas and in the marine life, including birds.

I CONTINUED BIRDING AFTER THAT FIRST TIME ON the Leslie Street Spit, often joining Fred on his excursions. He was something of a birdwatching celebrity — a naturalist who grew up in Port Burwell, on the shores of Lake Ontario, along the flight path of the hemisphere’s migrating flocks. He began observing them as a boy, on his own, without binoculars or guidebooks. He made notes, kept track of what he saw.

Fred died in 2012, at ninety-three, leaving a book on climate change unpublished. He found it an inexhaustible topic with new discoveries and new science constantly emerging. Which is one part of this story that doesn’t change. Another part? *Last of the Curlews* has stayed in print for sixty-five years, kept there by readers of all ages, who’ve been moved by the curlew’s story — and the tragedy of our forgetting it. ▲

Inspirations

Last of the Curlews
Fred Bodsworth
Dodd Mead, 1955

Chasing Ice
Directed by Jeff Orlowski
Submarine Deluxe, 2012

Lacunal

For Harold Heft

We were once ambitious
and conflicted. We had
projects in mind. I
remember an anguished
argument over Woody
Allen’s sins. While hoisting
baby boys into bumper
cars we made sweeping
judgments and plans. But
now the tumour has made
off with the strength
of your right hand and
a fifth of your prodigious
vocabulary. So I pour
the milk and supply
the odd abstract noun.
Meanwhile your tone is so
upbeat I can’t decide
if it’s mortal bliss
or mood alteration.
We briefly discuss a book
you’ll never finish and finally
your wife returns
from her hour of frantic
errands to escort you away
home. Through the café
window I watch her tuck
under your elbow as you
wait, perfectly composed,
for the light to change.

Adam Sol

Adam Sol is an award-winning poet. His latest book, *How a Poem Moves: A Field Guide for Readers of Poetry*, came out last year.