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Adam M. Sowards

War and Geese

I.

PLEASE PARDON OUR NOISE. IT IS A SOUND OF FREEDOM. The billboard, standing just outside Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, implored locals and visitors to tolerate the nuisance. A free society must pay certain costs, it told us.

In high school, I traveled with my basketball team to that community, connected by two high bridges, over a narrow gap, beneath which water furiously whirlpooled. The gym's domed roof capped the space claustrophobically, just like the military presence and secrets. A trip there always felt a little different: on an island, under a dome, near instruments of war.

I recall nothing of the game my senior year except overhearing my mom, emotional, talking about it the week after. "The national anthem seemed different. All those military kids...."

The Gulf War, what we now must call the *First* Gulf War, had just begun and brought with it unbidden lessons in the geography of conflict and the geopolitics of oil. But some links were more personal. My brother in the Air Force was stationed in Texas, but for how long? Good-byes were said.

Much later, I married someone from that island. Several weeks ago, after decades away from western Washington, we moved to a home that looks out at it, and sometimes the sound of freedom scorches over our roof.

II.

When I gaze west toward the island, my eyes first glance across acres of flat farmland, a foreground I'm already accustomed to, a place I'm beginning to love, a scene that feels familiar.

Out among the fields, behind dikes meant to improve drainage and contain flooding, pockets of land are dedicated to wildlife. In some, that means, paradoxically, a place for public hunting; in others, keep your dogs and rifles at home. I prefer the latter. My favorite is less than ten minutes from our new home, and it tempts me often.

Birds call. My first week living here I experienced a murmuration of

dunlins that opened up senses beyond the five I knew. Sight, sound, and my belly all fluttered, keeping time with a flock's synchronized dancing in the wind, skimming overhead with a noise you could feel. My daughter, visiting from college, joined me too, and we shared this mesmerizing experience beyond ourselves and family and history in a way that seemed to bond us to the birds and this new place.

III.

I keep going back, not so much seeking to capture that coordinated movement of dunlins as though hundreds of birds shared one mind, but to find out what other mundane miracles might extend my perceptions of nature and the familial.

After an unusual Christmas snow in this moderate climate, the temperatures rose, but the wind at my favored place slammed open my car door when I took a respite from work one Monday, seeking distance from thoughts. It wasn't frigid, but coastal winds blowing hard at even 50 degrees will make your nose run.

One part of the estuary, a former field that had been reclaimed by water after breaching a dike, usually is full of floating ducks but now stretched out mud beyond birds. Looking above, I saw a sky of clouds, gray but not foreboding. I heard some ducks behind me, saw a few ahead, and noticed maybe some eagles rustling at the shoreline.

I trudged on, hoping to lose myself in more of something. Not seeing much, I turned around as though beckoned. To the northwest, a half-mile away, a flock of snow geese at play. There's no other way to describe it.

IV.

I've read that a flock of geese in flight is called a wedge or a skein or a team. These geese aren't flying south in that telltale chevron known even to children. So not a *wedge*. And *skein* conjures coils of yarn, wound around predictably and self-contained. But with these geese, pandemonium. And if they are a *team*, playing a game, I cannot discern the rules.

They swirl and undulate, almost cyclonic at times. Up and down, right and left. They respect a perimeter, flying only so far that way and only so high, before turning back or diving down, circling, nearing invisible walls before sharply redirecting. They break up and combine in the hundreds, no thousands, expanding and contracting the size of our universe. Yet this isn't chaos. This is resplendence painted in feathers.

Despite their name, snow geese are not all white. Their wingtips are black, as if dipped in inkpots.

So, when they fly,
 a distance from you,
 in the dim light,
 of a late winter afternoon,
 at just the right angle,
 they can appear almost gray,
like the sky domed above.

Until.

Until they turn, slant, shift...then flash. Incandescent.

It's not just the brightness of feathers that alters the scene. The air moves as a solid. It shimmers, vibrates, shakes, as if the wings of the geese produce shock waves you can see. You can look through the team, the flock, because beating wings need space. And that? That is like looking through solid air.

I am queasy with this, my stomach unsettled by the blurring and blending of what is solid and what is not, what is real and what is illusion. And I am queasy with joy. For not the first time in this place, birds have shown me a beauty that quickens my heart, steals my breath, and brings tears to my eyes. This magical world I did not know existed.

I say magical because I'm ignorant. I'm new to watching birds generally and snow geese specifically. An ornithologist, no doubt, would find this flight behavior explicable, not miraculous. (Although the best ones would still recognize the magic.)

A yellow school bus bringing children home drives on, a bright distraction oblivious, or merely accustomed, to the miraculous flight and the cacophony that reminds me of a million frogs with megaphones.

Then the snow geese seem to disappear, for now.

V.

When I walk at the reserve, five miles from home, I'm also walking on Wrangel Island. Nature connects us across almost 2,500 miles. The geese teach us this, if we hear them. Despite their noise, though, they have been easy to ignore.

The decade before my grandparents were born, two to three thousand snow geese survived on Wrangel Island north of Siberia. When I was born, 50,000 bred there, and a little more than 10,000 snows wintered in river valleys here, near where the international border sutures British Columbia and Washington. Today, more than 100,000

stay, eating in the estuaries and fields, while 300,000 geese join a hundred other migratory species to summer on the Russian nature reserve in the Arctic Ocean.

The population rebound that produced the spectacle I experienced is because of humans. Wildlife refuges created here and there helped. Programs with farmers to leave crops and restrictions on hunters made a difference. Climate change helped, too, because the snow-free season on Wrangel Island lengthens the breeding season.

The snows used to just pause here before continuing south to California's Central Valley. Now, the majority stay, a boon for my birdwatching; a more complicated calculation for the gaggles, I reason. Flight is shorter. Food may be better. But the southern grounds may simply be too warm in the Anthropocene.

VI.

The show over, I turn my attention back to the ducks and eagles, the noise of the wind and its biting at my fingers.

Honk.

Honk, honk.

Just a few snows scrape over my head. No longer in their big team, they fly as a wedge. A dozen.

A dozen dozen, which sounds like a lot, but after the display a few moments before, it seems to be nearly nothing. Only now do I begin to comprehend how many snow geese I saw at play over the fields.

Long necks stretch south like a malfunctioning compass. Their fat bodies, somehow graceful, are held aloft with wings that flap effortlessly. I don't mean that it looks easy, although it does. I mean that their wings hardly seem to move compared with ducks who always seem frantic. The snows' wings roll up and down in what seems like barely expending energy. I hunch trying to keep the wind from piercing my coat and sweater and pants, unable to hear clearly with the wind shouting in my ears. Meanwhile, the snows roll on.

Scanning the sky and horizon brings the landscape into focus. I'm standing in a river delta, and the hills and mountains that define the watershed enclose me at a great distance. In the gray day, the snow-capped mountains remain clouded and obscured, but the forested (and deforested) foothills paint a dark background. The sky, a lighter hue, feels cold. Against this, the geese stand out. To the east, I see the remnants of the large flock rolling like a white wave against the dark green hills.

But the smaller groups close above me keep my attention. Like giant identical snowflakes, their white bodies, improbably aerodynamic at five plump pounds, are shaped like a bottom-heavy triangle. Wherever more than three geese fly, they shift into formation. “V” formations heading to the open bay and island beyond.

In World War II, “V” stood for “victory.” I’m marveling at them, swiveling my head to follow their mission-flight south, when I realize they resemble planes in formation heading off to war. Pulling back my focus to blur and allow my surroundings to fade, I’m in a war movie or in one of those books I read in childhood glimpsing squadrons moving to battle Nazi Germany. The Good War, always imagined in black and white and grays like today.

Shhhhhooooooooop!

A noise too loud for even the wind to block out. My head turns in time to see a small but mighty jet streaking across the northern sky, finding the only opening among the clouds, on its way back to the naval air station.

A few days later, one of these jets, an EA-18G Growler, flew over as I walked through the woods, its sound intermittently piercing the branches of cedars and alders. Its long nose pointed the way, its wings heavy with fuel tanks and missiles making it bottom-heavy.

How do these imbalanced things fly?

VII.

From my house, I look west-southwest. In that direction, when the sunlight is right, I see far-off mountains and the bay close up. My wife’s home island crests in view just across the shallow water. But gazes seldom hold still, and when I look west-northwest, I see steam, always rising. At night it billows out, bright artificial light illuminating the plumes from below; during the day, even in rain, columns curl upward.

These two refineries help make our carbon economy function. Together, they process roughly 11 million gallons of crude oil daily, oil that comes via a pipeline from Canada or a tanker from Alaska after its own pipeline trip from the North Slope. The United States never went to war for Alaska, and it’s unlikely to invade Canada, although past the stacks I can see what had been disputed territory in the nineteenth century. But the fossil fuel economy sinks US interests around the world, making us vulnerable to regional instabilities and geopolitical entanglements. Such commitments and addictions and greed took us into the Second Gulf War. And took my brother to Afghanistan.

So many kinds of returns make our worlds.

Returns on investments drive corporate decisions.

Returns to D.C. where the powerful depend on attention and contributions that forestall action in a cycle of cynicism.

Returns of carbon to earth unable to escape a greenhoused atmosphere, sinking instead into oceans and changing life and water's biochemistry.

And returns home.

My brother did, only to migrate south later to join Arizona snowbirds, earning his keep within the technological-defense complex comfortable in the air-conditioned desert.

And so did my wife and I. We've homed back close to the farms where we grew up, where our parents still live—me, not quite 25 miles away; she, 20 by air, 50 by ferry, 75 by road.

The snow geese, too, return to these fields, arcing over the Arctic Circle, within view, perhaps, of the North Slope drilling and pipeline that brings crude to awaiting tankers. Boat and bird navigate the route in tandem. One docks at refineries; the other settles in estuaries, in refuge.

That afternoon, when I stepped out of the car, I intended to escape my mind, to follow my senses until self-consciousness dissipated when I would be left only with the immediacy of the present moment's saltwater smell, bird calls, and stretching horizon. But there is no escape in a world such as ours. The health of Russian islands affects the birds I see. The state of pipelines fuels the local tax base. The political economy of oil, of terror, rends lives in nature and families, close and far. My new home reminds me that in the Anthropocene, I am linked within the globe. And though there may be times when I may wish to fly alone, the snow geese show me that we are connected and magical and on the same team.