SMASHING THE BOX

Although I've dabbled in fiction, I consider myself a nonfiction writer. Often, the inspiration for my work springs from an outdoor experience while birding, hiking, or boating. However, my near-absolute allegiance to writing about the natural world sometimes causes me to reflect on the fine line that can separate a groove from a rut.

I joined a writer's group a little more than a year ago. Other members of the group often tackle genres and situations foreign to my own experience: gritty, sometimes macabre noir mysteries; zombie-esque apocalypses; elaborate, engrossing tales of fantasy; period pieces set in Europe and elsewhere; and essays that reflect on the interpersonal dynamics encountered in the corporate world or teaching profession. It's not that their work doesn't move me. Quite the contrary. I'm impressed and a bit envious of writers who can create something from nothing . . . or at least something beyond their own first-hand experiences. Although I have an unpublished novel and a long-neglected outline for another work of fiction, time and again, I find myself returning to the natural world for inspiration.

Inspection + reflection = inspiration is a familiar formula to my writing. However, the mere act of writing these words makes me want to escape from this self-constructed creative gulag for . . . er, if not greener pastures, something exotic—topics I've yet to explore.

For the science-based writing I do, I need to stay true to the facts; the natural world contains boundaries that I must always acknowledge. I can't give a character long-range views through a leafless hardwood forest in mid-summer. Or claim that returning adult salmon, far from the ocean, have shimmering silver bodies, when, in fact, their bodies are riddled with the black-and-white fungus of decay. To do so would mean that my writing has lost its tether to the natural world.

How I choose to interpret the same or similar event can spawn a variety of responses from me over time. How an experience is framed: which aspect is fore-grounded and which I relegate to the background makes all the difference. For instance, the passing of an elderly, beloved pet—experienced when one is six years old versus sixty—conjures different take-home lessons. To the elderly, seeing or experiencing another's death recalls the Russian proverb: *The fall of a leaf is a whisper to the living.* Whereas, a family dog's death seen through the eyes of youth likely serves as a first glimpse of mortality. It serves notice that the road doesn't run on forever. Yet the lesson isn't internalized; death is still an abstraction to the young. The consequences only apply to someone else. How could it be otherwise when children are preoccupied with springtime waves of green grass rippling in the breeze, or the joy of playing in a pile of autumn leaves?

There are no simple answers to the twin questions "Is creativity something that only takes root, flourishes, within bounds?" and "Is this a stance that limits or liberates?" My near-absolute allegiance to nonfiction has been an ongoing issue in my life. I carry this I-gotta-be-me stance too far, though. While others are having fun, adopting the persona of their chosen Halloween costume for the night, my friends know I'll muster only a tepid effort to temporarily inhabit another body. *I'll be Bruce Springsteen, circa 1984. Slip into jeans, grab a red bandanna from my sock drawer, and I'm good to go*. *No muss, no fuss*. *It's either that or stay home.*

Recently, however, I made a vow. Not only to think outside the box, but also to revel in smashing and incinerating that box altogether. To step outside the writing bounds I've created: non-fiction, always a point-of-view in the first person, and dealing only in scenarios supported by physics and reason. So, here goes:

The Aviator

Daylight came to the island of Kauai. The wind was slightly out of the west on that day, Monday, May 3, 1998. The Lihue airport was hectic, with a number of arrivals and departures scheduled. The aviator prepared for her return to Alaska. She'd done the run only once before, in the opposite direction. Clouds shifted and a shafts of sunlight knifed through, bathing the grasslands surrounding the tarmac in a hazy pink glow. All had been made ready. With resolute purpose, the aviator took off. Slowly, she rose to her cruising altitude and settled in for the long journey.

The sky, clear at the airport, began to fill with approaching cirrus clouds, portending a storm. Although the weather continued to worsen, the next several hours passed without incident. The wind—initially out of the west—shifted to out of the north. Heavy rain persisted throughout the next day; the aviator could feel the unceasing push of the strong north wind. Mindful of its effect on her course, she made a flight path correction, to the northwest. Despite this, the pounding rain and gale-force winds conspired to force her ever eastward: further and further off course.

Finally, the aviator glimpsed land. She was cold, tired, low on fuel. Approaching the coastline, she noted the details of the landscape: rocky point, grassy headland, cove. Suddenly, she was seized by a thought: *I don't recognize this place.* However,she could little afford the time for such a question. Her first priority was to land and fuel up. The aviator reduced her altitude, nearly colliding with…

A tall, two-legged creature. Startled, she wheeled and emitted a sharp cry, *Chiu-eet*, before finally alighting upon a steep, gravel-and-sand beach. She searched her memory for a recollection of the tall one. Yes . . . she'd seen several of his kind from afar during the past several months she'd spent in the mowed grasslands near the Lihue airport. The creature gestured wildly to his companion. Through the howling wind, the exhausted shorebird heard the creature shout, "Look! That one has a cinnamon rump!"

Thus began an unprecedented event: a fallout of Bristle-thighed Curlews along the Washington, Oregon, and northern California coast.

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Well, I tried, I really did. To concoct a story, to build a fictional world that lies beyond the bounds of my own experience. I've failed, for the truth is this:

An air of mystery surrounds the Bristle-thighed Curlew. Science has known something of the winter distribution of the species for quite some time, as the species was first described in 1785 by a naturalist aboard Captain Cook's ship while in Tahiti. However, more than a century and a half later, this enigmatic shorebird was the lone species in North America whose breeding location remained a mystery. It wasn't until 1948 in Alaska, near the mouth of the Yukon River, a curlew nest with four eggs was located by David Allen and Henry Kyllingstad. Newspaper headlines proclaimed: *163-Year Search Ends in Alaska*.

The geographic scope of the Bristle-thighed Curlew's migration astounds: from Polynesia to Alaska, across open ocean.Until recently, it was not known whether those curlews that winter south of the main Hawaiian Islands stop to rest and feed there for a time before continuing their migration.Studies of marked birds have confirmed that they are capable of overflying the main islands, resulting in a nonstop route of 5,500 miles. Because of their migration route, far from any continental land mass, the species had been recorded along the west coast of North America south of Alaska prior to 1998 on only one occasion: May 31, 1969 on Vancouver Island, British Colombia.

Then, during late April 1998, an immense low-pressure system formed—then stalled—off the coast of southern Oregon. Beginning in late April, Alaskan-bound curlews flew directly into this low-pressure cell, and its strong, northerly air flow. On May 6, Dave Lauten posted an Internet message to an Oregon bird chat group that he and Kathy Castelein had possibly seen a Bristle-thighed Curlew at Floras Lake, near New River in Curry County. Two days later, two of the birds were discovered at Point Brown Jetty at Grays Harbor, Washington. The next day, two were detected at the South Jetty of the Columbia River.

On May 14, the first bird was reported in California by Alan Barron at the Battery Point lighthouse in Crescent City. Never having before seen this species—despite searching for it on several islands of the Hawaiian chain—several companions and I traveled to Crescent City. There, in a vacant lot with discarded concrete rubble and feral cats, rested the bird. Oblivious to the burgeoning crowd of bird enthusiasts, it wandered slowly about the unkempt grass, feeding and preening its feathers. We marveled at the bird's landfall, consulted our field guides, and documented its presence with photographs. This bird was considered by experts to be one of 15-25 that made it to the West Coast during spring 1998.

I tried to imagine the sequence of events that had conspired to misdirect these birds to the West Coast. As the seasons shifted and the number of hours of daylight each day increased, flocks of curlews experienced an urge for going, known as *zugunruhe*—a seasonally occurring restlessness that immediately preceded their migration. The turn of the seasons affects humans as well. Songwriter and musician Joni Mitchell explored the sensation—albeit autumnal rather than vernal—in her song "Urge for Going."

Prior to the advent of agriculture, a twice yearly human migration was the norm in many places: to the mountains in summer to escape the valley heat, then return in the fall, to flee winter's grip. Genetic memory runs deep, which explains our inherent autumnal restlessness, the urge to follow flocks of migrating birds to someplace warm and alive. Legions of "snowbirds" submit twice yearly to this urge for going. In the northern hemisphere, their fall journey is an example of "human heliotropism"—bending toward the increased light of lower latitudes.

Now that I'm retired, Joni's words have a special resonance, as my wife Sue and I spend the winter in sunny Arizona. During March, lengthening hours of daylight portend the arrival of spring, which prompts our desire to return north. About a month later, in preparation for their departure from Tahiti, Bristle-thighed Curlews abandon their winter territory. Milling about with others, they ready themselves for the trip north. And so it is for snowbirds, too. Packed and ready, we join the surging tide northward.

Imagine a jet flying non-stop from San Francisco to New York City… and nearly back again. This is the one-way distance the Bristle-thighed Curlew covers. The bird's arduous migration over inhospitable open ocean—offering no food or respite—inspires awe. In 1948, Arthur A. Allen, the leader of the expedition to pin-point the nesting grounds of the Bristle-thighed Curlew, marveled at their tenacity:

Why these curlews should want to leave the warm, luxurious shores of Tahiti and the other South Sea islands, fly 5,500 miles over the open sea, and arrive at one of the most forlorn stretches of tundra in North America, deserted by all other birds and still largely covered by snow, just to lay four eggs, is hard to understand.

As wildlife biologist and writer Scott Weidensaul observed in *Living on the Wind*, "Bird migration is the world's only true unifying natural phenomenon, stitching the continents together in a way that even the great weather systems fail to do." For birders, the opportunity to study a Bristle-thighed Curlew along the Pacific Coast transcends the mere act of seeing a bird. A veil's been lifted. We've glimpsed—and in doing so, been woven into—a vast and mysterious world-wide tapestry, if only for a few hours.