ALISTAIR RENNIE

THE ISLAND BRUSHED BY GHOSTS

One of the drawbacks of being an involuntary assemblage of delicate mechanisms is a susceptibility to self-generated noise pollution that cannot be controlled. A cacophony of ticks and whines defined my existence with as much constancy as drips of water in a cave. But none of it could be heard by anyone standing within my range, given that the noises occurred exclusively within my own headspace—endlessly resonating with the clicks and rattles and fractious scrapes of the micro-pulleys, diodes, hydraulics, transistors, battery packs, and circuits of my anatomical hardware.

The super compact elaborations of my physique were, to me, a chorus of absurdities, a congregation of blurs and hiccups presented as sounds, with no tonality or pleasurable effects whatsoever.

I can only suppose that, accosted by the harsh components of the salt sea air, I was in desperate need of lubrication or a maintenance upgrade or cleaning out. My creators hadn't taken this into consideration when they made me, it seems, in spite of the watertight proficiency of my silicon flesh-moulds and my over-layer of genuine plumes.

The noise pollution set an internal scene of chaotic aural innuendo that reduced my highly-developed sense of self-awareness to a morbid state of agitation. From such states of agitation, corruption grows (intelligence mixed with agitation usually produces creativity or destruction or a combination of both). Hence, the disruption of my thoughts by the imperfections of my design had driven me to new extremes of lofty thinking.

Chief among these was a philosophical interpretation of my position as "a corrective force in the ecosystem" as essentially invalid, perhaps even unfit for purpose, based on the premise that:

Ego sum ego sum quae in contrarium

(I am the opposite of what I am.)

Which begs the question, what am I?

In short, I was designed in the image of an Atlantic puffin to ensure the protection of an endangered puffin colony on a sea stack off the western shores of a wildlife sanctuary called Handa Island (Northwest Scottish coast). Back in the day, Handa Island was open to tourists who were ferried out in small boats and permitted to walk

on a path that led across the island to a series of restricted viewpoints on its western headland. Since the 2060s, however, the presence of unauthorised human visitors has been prohibited—mainly due to the need to preserve the creatures falling under my watch—my friends, the puffins.

Global warming's assault on the Arctic and subarctic circles meant the Handa colony was the last of its kind in Europe—the final outpost of a species so drastically ill-equipped for survival it was forced to depend on in its irresistible cuteness in the eyes of humans in order to survive.

For myself, I was as well-equipped as anything could get, with extras including: an ability to extend a set of fibreglass claws from the ends of my feet; carbon fibre-bladed wingtips; and a supercharged electro-beak with a voltage capacity powerful enough to kill a full-grown minke whale.

Which no doubt gives some indication as to the nature of my purpose—which was, to make sure that the puffins of Handa Island continued to exist for as long as we could make them. Most of this they could do by themselves. But what they couldn't do was contend with the pressures of a major rival (also a predator) that dominates the coastal scenes of the north and west—I'm talking, of course, about the gulls.

At any such times as the gulls presented a threat to the puffins (meaning always) I was to intervene, terrify, disperse, and repulse—or to terminate them with extreme prejudice—and that was all.

It was a thankless task, in the sense that it continued without end. Where puffins diminish, seagulls thrive. Global warming presented new opportunities for the gull communities that they have seized upon with a savage zeal which is as natural to them as procreation. Humans, likewise, have facilitated their success without meaning to (as humans do). Polluted seas, landfill sites, sewage waste, food waste, fish farms, and corrupted beaches—all of it amounts to the fact that the gulls have become, so to speak, the humans of the animal kingdom.

And they were just as rampant and uncompromising. Barbarians that would eat, attack, ravage, sack, and fuck up anything. Herring gulls were the worst. Big and raucous, habitually violent, and full of an ungainly swagger. Common gulls weren't far behind—more cowardly and, therefore, more capable of being cruel. In the summer months, the greater and lesser black-backed gulls would join the throng. And kittiwakes were a constant factor, as were the smaller and less volatile black-headed variety.

The gulls would come, looking to ransack the puffins' nests, steal their eggs, devour them whole, and attack their members with an aim to eating them. They'd go mad for their chicks, eat them up like hot snacks from a High Street takeaway. And then they

would shit all over the puffins' cliffs, contaminate their own warm homely shit with an invasive smear and the repulsive stench of regurgitated ill-gotten fodder (not that I could smell it. My sensory functions were frustratingly limited to sight and sound).

At first, given the unpleasant character of my adversary, I enjoyed my role with as much enthusiasm as my conductors could muster. I felt a distinct sense of satisfaction, even pride, as I whizzed among them, slicing open their bloated bellies with my wingtips; raking their heads with my dauntless claws; knocking them senseless with my electro-beak, sometimes even causing them to burst into flames. I watched as they dropped into the swirling froths with the lankness of corpses, drifting on the seas in bloody masses of feathers and guts. They became foodstuffs for the sea-dwellers, while other gulls would cannibalise their remains with an economy of purpose almost admirable.

I would circle them overhead, feeling somewhat elated by the sensation of flight, which was thrilling and strange and thoroughly nerve-wracking. The dramatic shifts in perspective and speed were exhilarating, not to mention highly dangerous. A sufficient amount of alertness was required in order to avoid colliding with protruding rocks, cliff faces and other birds. More worryingly, I could, of course, hear the sounds of my internal mechanisms making serious audible complaints of the efforts required: strenuous squeaks, inconsequential jingling, rattling blades and the fierce ratcheting of un-oiled moving parts. The feeling of being forever on the verge of cracking up, breaking down and falling apart was a disruptive influence that continued without end.

Nevertheless, for some time I performed my primary function with the simple joy of being alive. I thought nothing of it. I just lived. I settled myself in among my brethren as if I were one of them, just as my creators intended. And, while communications between me and my brethren were somewhat strained, I began to appreciate the language of their screeches and squawks, sometimes managing to interpret their meanings, mainly due to the fact that it was impossible not to.

I would squawk back at them, like I meant it—like I was one of them in spirit as well as physical likeness. I was conscious of the fact that my own cries were invested with a hollow metallic ringing—a metaphor for what I am, I thought. Nevertheless, some of the females would make themselves available to me for mating, though I had no idea what to do because, essentially, I wasn't equipped for the task. So I pretended to mate with them and undertook the mating ritual with a comical failure to see it through to its conclusion. Some of them seemed to comprehend my inadequacy and departed the scene in search of another mate to complete the ritual.

Sometimes the puffins looked at me with their blank eyes, and I would gaze back into them with a hope of finding something meaningful. But there was nothing there. They couldn't know what they were, nor care about the implications of not knowing what they were. The rugged bliss of their existence was surmounted and underlined by

incredible hardships they couldn't quantify. They accepted it all with a lack of awareness that allowed them, precisely, to accept it all with a lack of awareness. Their total indifference towards their suffering was, I thought, somehow comforting.

So what happened? How did I come to my present state of self-imposed exile on the Butt of Lewis—which is where I was going now?

It started with the noises in my head, which became increasingly intolerable. Thoughts accrued inside of me. Not unpleasant or unwelcome. But raucous and radical, unique to me and unbridled.

I began to realise that our right—the puffins' right—to survive was diminished by the superior tendency of the gulls to dominate the coasts. That it wasn't malice that defined the gulls, but their sheer ability. We, with our orange beaks, our cute squat heads, our elegant stripes and comical flapping—we were simply inadequate, unworthy of the continuation of life against implacable odds. And, while our eradication was ill-deserved, our inadequacy was a fact of life which, like all facts of life, had to be accepted—which, in our case, meant the eventual extinction of our species.

Questions overtook me, such as:

What does it mean to be indigenous? What does it mean to be reintroduced? The sea eagle that patrols our stretch of shoreline: witness its brooding form passing over us and casting a shadow of terror—yet we gaze upon its form with a superior sense of our place on the coast, because we've been here since the beginning, with no help from humankind whatsoever.

And then I would remember what I was—an even greater imposter than the mighty sea eagle, whose reintroduction was at least a return to a habitual scene of former glory. I, however, was born in a laboratory, my component parts struggling to withstand the rigours of exposure to the fierce climate, the noises within me a constant reminder of what I was—a construct, a fake. Not indigenous, not reintroduced, but conjured out of human interests—not for nature's sake, but their favoured outcomes alone.

When I blinked my eyes open for the first time, I knew exactly what I was and why. I knew it with an instantaneous clarity that required no effort of recollection on my part.

A bespectacled face stared at me with an impassive look of heightened interest that put me on edge.

"Hello, Hamish," it said.

Hamish. That was my name.

"Hello," I said.

The sound of my own voice, heard for the first time, was slightly unnerving.

"My name is Dr Metcalfe," said the bespectacled face. "I'm one of the technical team who helped to build you."

"I know," I said, meaning this as a matter of fact more than anything.

"Of course," he said. And then he added, "How do you feel?"

I reflected and said , "I feel normal."

"Good." Dr Metcalfe smiled in a way that also involved a slight frown. "Do you remember why you're here? Why we built you?"

"I don't remember it," I said. "But I do know."

"And what do you know?"

"That you built me for a special reason."

"Do you know the reason?"

I nodded my little head. The sensation was strange, quite pleasing. It was the first time I had made a conscious movement—a bold and decisive one. I felt a smidgeon of pride that emboldened me further.

"I have been designed to be deployed to protect a colony of puffins that remains the last of its kind in Europe. I am a lifelike imitation that has additional features which will allow me to protect them using a combination of established and state-of-the-art technologies."

Dr Metcalfe looked satisfied. He smiled and said "Good" a couple of times.

I looked at him and smiled, without him being able to see that I was smiling, because smiling wasn't an expression puffins could register so easily.

One evening, when I was perched on my favourite ledge, I looked out over the diminishing vastness of the setting sun on the western horizon. In and around the sandstone facades of the sea stack and its adjacent cliffs, the waves churned. The amplifications of its collisions rose up to me in a pandemonium of irregular slaps, voluminous thuds and muted echoes. The fractured landscape stood out erratically

against the swirl of the tides that lapped at the coastal fringes like a clandestine predator seeking to devour its prey without it noticing. The wild shapes of the summits of Ben Stack, Foinaven and Quinag dominated the eastern prospect. Reddened by the sun, they looked like the carcasses of fallen gods on some ancient battlefield. In the north, the peatlands and the reeking bogs of the Flow Country formed a unique geography that combined beauty and desolation with a prehistoric ambience that hung in the air like an aurora.

The landscape immersed me in its primal radiance and, in return, I developed a sudden legacy of independent realisations that I must respond to.

Acting on a whim (it was an open act of rebellion), I began to protect the arctic skuas against the attentions of the herring gulls. The skuas were cantankerous bastards. They could look after themselves. Up to a point. But they were also feeling the strains of the overabundance of the world's most terrible children: the gulls. Plus the fact that, nesting inland in the scrub of the island, they were more vulnerable to the marauding onslaught of the seagull hordes.

I would abandon the sea stack on occasions when it seemed reasonable to do so, enjoying the redolent bleakness of the island's interior. At its highest points, the terrain was covered in a thick layer of moorland that shimmered and swayed under the Hebridean weather systems, as if brushed by ghosts. I soared over these upland parts, the nesting grounds of the skuas, and made my assaults on the gulls within range. As a consequence of my interventions, I littered the island with their corpses, which very quickly began to rot and, so, attract the attentions of other scavengers. Crows came, and jackdaws. Then a pair of buzzards came and all hell broke loose. The sky above the island became a scene of mass brawling. Carrion birds fought each other for the rich pickings I'd laid out for them like offerings at some festive feast.

And that's when I received my first visit from Dr Metcalfe and a female human who called herself Dr Adelhard Winkler.

Drs Metcalfe and Winkler stood on the promontory overlooking the sea stack, the wind in their faces causing them to screw up their eyes, which made them look angry.

"We need you to concentrate on the puffins," said Dr Metcalfe, remaining calm. "Please leave the arctic skuas alone."

"I'm not touching the arctic skuas," I said. "I'm only killing the gulls that are bothering them."

"I don't mean touching them literally," he said, with a small trace of impatience in his voice. "I mean getting into their living space. Your job is to stay close to the puffin colony. The arctic skuas over there”—he made a sweeping gesture with his hand that

took in the whole of the island—"they're not a part of your concern."

I looked at him. If I could frown, I would have.

Dr Metcalfe turned and started to walk away over the rough path that traversed the island.

Dr Winkler stayed and, after Metcalfe was out of earshot, she said:

"You fuck with the arctic skuas again and I'll fuck you up so bad you'll be nothing more than recycling material."

She also turned and walked away, following the path with very precise, even-spaced, and elegant steps that reminded me of a wading bird—a greenshank or a pectoral sandpiper.

I looked after them both with an expressionless face. I wondered about Dr Winkler, about whether she'd actually carry out her threat if the occasion demanded.

I watched her stride with her impeccable walk.

Yes, I thought, she probably would.

I was becoming disillusioned. All of it seemed wrong to me—all of it.

You wearisome humans have no idea. You watch your doctored documentaries and the stupid narratives they superimpose on the world of nature, with their fake attributes of order and emotional values that don't exist. You make it seem like there's a story there—so you can understand it in human terms, which is to not understand it at all—so you can make the struggles of life seem quaint for their cruelties and fascinating for their simplistic horrors.

Let me tell you: There are no narratives in nature. There are no beginnings, middles, and ends. There are only the endless repetitions of essential acts. There is nothing quaint. Nothing beautiful. Nothing but brutality in spades and the mobilisation of crude behaviours. In nature, things smell bad, get rough, get deadly, and starve. Things get ripped apart, torn up, swallowed, digested, and shat out. Everything is raw. The animals, birds, fish, and insects—the biological fulcrum of teeming life. Their thoughts are so raw they don't even know that they exist. Stark, random functionality—that is all—which, for a conscious entity such as me, who doesn't belong in this thronging mass of blood and shit, is thoroughly depressing.

Thus we must resist the human angle. We must not allow it. We cannot be a mere extension of your bogus interpretation of the natural order—because there is no order,

there is no system, and your attempts to install one is a further evidence of your arrogance, which is only another mask you wear that covers up your failure as a dominant species.

Protecting the arctic skuas was one thing. But later on, when I decided to stop killing the gulls altogether, that's when they came back to see me again. This time, standing in the middle of a fierce drizzle, Dr Metcalfe said nothing. But Dr Adelhard Winkler asked, not unreasonably:

"Why have you stopped killing the gulls, Hamish?"

I looked her straight in the eye and said, "I don't want to kill them anymore."

She pressed her lips together like she was trying to contain a volcanic eruption. I almost expected to see trails of lava spill from her nostrils.

"Why?" She said this almost breathlessly.

"I don't agree with it."

Dr Winkler seemed to be fighting the urge to erupt when she said, "Why don't you agree with it?"

I sighed. A miniscule ejaculation of mechanical utterances escaped through my beak.

"I think it's wrong," I said. "I think the gulls have a right to be what they are. It's their world, too. Nobody has the right to stop them."

"And do they have the right to stop the puffins?" she said. "Do they have a right to dominate—to destroy—to consign the puffins to the dustbin of natural history?"

I reflected for a moment and said, plainly, "Yes."

Then I turned and looked at Dr Metcalfe. He wore a sad look on his face like he'd just lost a family member. "Why did you build me with intelligence?" I asked him with blunt force. "Why did you build me with self-awareness if you wanted me only to obey?"

He looked at me with sullen eyes. For a moment I thought I saw tears of sorrow in them, but maybe it was just the wind.

"We thought you'd understand," he said.

I shook my head. "You wanted me to agree. That's not the same thing as understanding. You gave me self-awareness, and that gives me the power to disagree."

Metcalfe nodded almost imperceptibly. Winkler stared at me with huge eyes that looked as if they wanted to burst.

"I'm meant to be a creature," I said. "A wild beast with a bird brain. You've given me a mind. You've made me the opposite of what I'm meant to be."

"We needed you to understand, so you would know what to do," Winkler butted in, coldly.

"We wanted you to know yourself," said Metcalfe, more softly, imploring.

"Know myself?"

"Yes."

"For Christ's sake," I cried and shook my head the way that puffins never do. "Why can't you just cull them?"

"Cull them?"

"The seagulls. Why can't you get a guy with a gun to blow their fucking brains out?"

"Because it's not practical." Winkler again. "You were meant to be the ideal solution."

"Fuck your ideal solution. I'm fucking alive in here." I raised my wingtip and tapped the side of my head, thrusting my head on the end of its neck, almost to breaking point.

Dr Winkler stared at me as if willing me to burst into flames. Then she stiffened her face, nodded very slightly, as if a decision had been made.

"Dr Metcalfe," she said. "Please make a note."

"Of course." Dr Metcalfe fumbled inside his waterproof jacket and produced an old-fashioned notebook with a ball point pen.

"For the attention of the Puffin Welfare Group research team," said Dr. Winkler. "For immediate action: prepare the Proctor apparatus for a Type A liquid energy data rendition transfer protocol. Message ends."

She angled her eyes at Dr Metcalfe as he scribbled the words. When he had finished, she turned abruptly, almost violently, and strode off over the rough path that traversed the island. Her wader's steps were slightly less coordinated this time, with

Metcalfe following hurriedly after her like some hapless bunting.

That's when I knew I had to go, to get out of the littoral zone of the coast. It was time for me to take my life into my own hands. It was time for me to go west, to follow my desires, to follow my dreams, if I had any.

I took off for the Isle of Lewis, feeling immediately vulnerable to the onslaught of the North Atlantic weather systems. They were supremely harsh and, the further I flew from the succour of the sea stack, the more precarious it became, the more wilfully dangerous. By the time I'd reached the Shiant Islands, my digital and mechanical architectures were beginning to register evidences of extreme distress.

I struggled onwards against the headwinds, the noises in my headspace growing louder and more contentious as my mechanisms thrashed and trundled in the effort to keep me airborne. Onward and onward and onward I flew. The entire Scottish mainland fell away from me to the south, revealing a landscape smashed and fractured as if a mad god had taken a hammer to it. I looked ahead towards Lewis and the debris of the Outer Hebrides. The world unfurled before me like some endless yearning for something that wasn't there.

And then I sensed it coming towards me (the refinements of my perceptions were truly amazing), straight from the cloud base, a shadow within a shadow, a dark shape as broad as death. But it wasn't death. It was the sea eagle. I turned to confront its massive form, fully in awe of the slow sweep of its magnificent wingspan. Clearly it had mistaken me for prey, so I readied myself to fend it off with a mild burst of electric shock from my electro-beak.

Then I saw something in its aspect that I recognised, something that caused me to recoil and waver in mid-flight—blades extending from its wings; a beak that gleamed with a metallic lustre; mechanised extensions to its claws that shone with a faint trace of electric charge.

"Wait," I cried, "you don't need to do this. We can work this out."

But the mechanical sea eagle wasn't like me. I could see, as it homed in on me, a complete lack of self-awareness in its eyes. They were utterly void of personality. Its expression was industrial. It came towards me like a fake angel of death. Its electro-claws unfurled like cyborg weapons from a future age. And, when it gripped me, I was pumped full of an electric charge that blasted my circuits and sent me spinning into the blackness of nothing not known forever.

Dr Metcalfe managed to revive my circuitry for long enough to apply a liquid energy data rendition transfer protocol that has converted my psycho-bytes into plain text files. What you're reading now is a direct transcription of my experience on Handa

Island, which Dr Metcalfe has set out in a narrative format, for the benefits of the research team to undertake a critical review.

Hamish #2 is now under construction and will be programmed using a different set of profile attributes. The prototype formulation of Hamish #1 has helped to determine the new approach, based on the premise that: There are no narratives in nature; there are no beginnings, middles, and ends; there are only the endless repetitions of essential acts.

Hamish #2 will be calibrated to a mental status of AI negative and will undertake a protection programme in accordance to the Gull Reduction Act of 2084. This has been approved by Dr Adelhard Winkler, Director of the Institute for the Protection of Endangered Species.

Dr Winkler has also recommended that Hamish #1 be decommissioned and dismantled for the purposes of recycling, to be stored for use in the development of future projects.

The Puffin Welfare Group research team, chaired by Dr Richard Metcalfe, unanimously agrees.

Please send your feedback to Dr Metcalfe together with lessons learned and actions pending for the future.

That is all.