

60 Knots of the Nor'wester's Whistle

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i.

It is not possible to exist on the margins of the weather. I grew up in a city that remains under the enduring presence of Big Weather. Mention of its impending arrival took on a familiar tone that is not dissimilar to the way one might fondly refer to a distant relative soon coming to visit. Growing up in Te Whanganui-a-Tara, Aotearoa (Wellington, New Zealand)—an archipelago consisting of three main islands—nautical figures of speech were common. Weather can shape the language of a place.

The primary school I attended was located a 1.5 kilometre walk down the hill from our house. Our walk home was always dictated by the strength and direction of the wind and we had to best gauge the safest route home. In the case of a Northerly, we'd walk up the eastern side of the hill; in the case of a Southerly, we'd opt for the western side. If either exceeded a galeforce of 120 kmph, we'd take the lower footpath. We learned how to make use of the roadside railing, linking arms to anchor each other, leaning into, or against, the wind so as not to lose our footing. Occasionally, we'd defy parental instruction and intentionally choose the least safe route. In an attempt to become airborne, we'd leap into the wind, our jackets acting as a pair of wings. It was not until I moved away that I realized people who did not live where I grew up had a very different relationship to Big Weather. People did not share my belief or resignation that we'd one day get blown off the hill and into the sea.

ii.

I have been following the migratory path of the Kuaka (bar-tailed godwits), via the Miranda Trust account on Twitter. Fitted with tracking devices, the birds are observed by ornithologists. The account has been tracking their flight path as they make their way from Alaska to New Zealand, a journey of 12,000 km across the Pacific Ocean.

On September 11, 2021 Miranda Trust tweeted that some of the godwits had hit a significant storm, and had turned back to Alaska to wait out the weather. These reports were paired with an image tracking the path of the birds alongside a meteorological map showing elements of the weather—wind direction, speed, and barometric pressure. These visualizations not only identify the reasons for flight path digression, but also point to how a rapidly changing climate with extreme shifts in weather has affected their already risky journey. The godwits typically feed, rest, and take shelter wherever they can. The logic of a nation state's borders do not prevent them, though their disrupted journey bears the consequences of human actions that have accelerated the effects of climate change. In considering the Kuaka, I reflect on what it means to be “blown off course” and to involuntarily succumb to a path alternate from the one initially intended. I think of how, in Zoe Todd's concept of kinship, reciprocity is shared between human and non-human relations and extends as well to the more-than-human.¹ The reciprocal nature of these deeply held relations ultimately reveals how we collectively bear the effects of climate change, some more unequally than others.

¹Zoe Todd, “Fish, Kin and Hope: Tending to Water Violations in amiskwaciwâskahikan and Treaty Six Territory” in *Afterall* Issue 43 (Spring/Summer 2017): 102-107.

iii.

I have always appreciated the gravitas contained in every mention of the Northwesterly wind in the city I grew up in. The Nor'wester was held responsible for innumerable wrongdoings and misfortunes. When the Nor'wester blew through, hospital emergency rooms filled, aches would flare up; a sharp spike in divorce proceedings and crime rates would register. People walked out of their jobs, and committed to decisions stacked heavily towards significant cons. There is no quantitative evidence to back this claim, but it's compelling to consider how a shift in wind and barometric pressure could permit and excuse us to behave otherwise. Being blown over, by, and about the wind is a reminder of how susceptible we are to the elements—how elementally porous we are—and how we're only here temporarily.

There is no word for the sound of the Nor'wester. Psithurism is the word for the sound of whispering wind in the trees. Far from a whisper, the Nor'wester's persuasive whistling, howling, and screeching has the capacity to rattle—to force us to reckon with any complacency or complicity we'd otherwise settle into.