

Martin Malone



Gannet...

offers quarter point, banks left
and is the compass rose of self,
drawn by the sea's dark magnet
to narrow on its dive. That beak
could nail you to a bloody rood,
eviscerate the dull mind's scrod,
fall ravenous on an idling flex
from nowheres of insipid sky
and still come back for more.
Here, against the ocean scrim:
white cross on Payne's grey,
corn-tinged torc of neck,
post-punk graphic head,
those brown bastard wings
angle steel-tipped greed
to cleave the surface water
and feed a boundless want.
Firebolt cruciform retracting in-
to knife, you've glid the season
by me, swept aside my morning
for the zero sum of your hunt.
In turn, I sift the cortex
of near-forgotten dread,
to lose you in the thinking
as this sharp beak hits white.

I'm a lucky man, indeed, to live in a place like Gardenstown, up on the Banffshire coast north of Aberdeen. One is spoilt for the choice of daily wonders on our doorstep and it yet feels like there's a fragile ecosystem hanging on in the face of climate catastrophe. One of the stars of this Grand Finale is the gannet – a maritime echo of the winged dinosaur – which lives in large numbers at the colony that pixelates the vast cliffs at Troup Head. With the in-drift of Spring and scrod (small fish), comes a *blitzkrieg* of gannetry out in Gamrie Bay; sheering off from their flight paths to arrow into the water for their prey. It's truly spectacular and always a privilege to witness. High on my list of poetic 'To-Do's' then, The Gannet Poem was bound to feature. And, of course, being such a quintessential feature of life here, this brought with it a certain pressure to get it right: you need to pay due respect to your neighbours, after all.

The poem, therefore, felt like a true sounding board for one of the two collections I have on the go right now: the one putatively called *Noweheres*, which I suppose one might call an 'eco-collection', or at least, a return to the landscape poetry of my first: *The Waiting Hillside*. So, this is a very 'worked-on' poem, but one created in a fever of focus over a relatively short space of time. I think that when you're working on the material that is particularly close to you, the subject or situation tends to demand a heightened watchfulness in order to get beyond the risk of intimacy which can clog up the machinery of a poem with extraneous emotion or desire. You almost have-to will this type of poem to mean less to you and *more* to the reader. Helpful to this situation was my love of Ted Hughes' early masterpiece 'The Thought-Fox': that staple of school anthologies like *Nine Modern Poets*, when I was a kid. The Hughes lyric is essentially a poem about writing a poem and, I suppose, it was my first exposure to the concept of metatextual writing. I love its deftness and wished to capture something of this in conjuring up my gannet, hence 'the thinking' and '*this* sharp beak' at the poem's end. In certain respects, it is also Heaney's pen from 'Digging', though I'll fish with mine.

'Gannet' first came about because I regularly collaborate with Bryan Angus, a wonderful printmaker who lives in Banff, with whom I'm preparing two pamphlets for next year. One of these is a long, five-part poem – about 500-lines –called *Gardenstown*, which will have my poem on the recto pages with his linocuts on the verso. The other is an *Aviary* collection, with my bird poems on the verso and Bryan's gorgeous images featuring on the recto pages. It's for the latter that this poem was written and the lovely image is Bryan's superb response. 'Gannet' did alright for me in this year's Ginkgo Prize, where it was published in the competition anthology: a rare thing for me, as I've mixed feelings about competitive poetry and it usually shows.

I could break the poem down further but, really, it ought to speak for itself and to the reader, who'll recognise it as an attempt to summon up something true to the spirit of its subject.