

The Question of Godwits (and Life)

In 2007 a kuaka flew 11,680km from Alaska to New Zealand, the first iPhone was released, and a little girl called Kate reluctantly started school. The world stopped to watch as godwit E7 flapped its way down the globe in eight straight days wearing a little tracking backpack. I remember listening to the news and feeling sad that its name was a letter and number. So in solidarity I wrote my name as K8 and went to school wearing a backpack that drowned me. E7 unwittingly became a celebrity for doing what she and her ancestors had done forever — finding her way.

My mum bought me a book about godwits a few months later. Maybe she thought it would give me direction, or would shut up my incessant questions about life, *what are we doing here, where are we going?* I read it cover to cover about ten times. Godwits flap non-stop on their migration. They average 60km/h. Godwits undergo auto-phagy which means they absorb large chunks of organ tissue to prepare for flight. Half their brains sleep at a time. They can live to 28 years old. Scientists *think* their retinas carry a pigment that allows them to see magnetic fields. I thought, *my god, what other wonderful invisible things swirl around us.* I noticed gaps in tūi songs next. Their clicks and whistles interspersed with silence as their wattles and beaks still moved. They have a dual voicebox and can make sounds we will never be able to hear. They organise gatherings, pass on information about the most sweet harakeke, they laugh at us mere humans with our limited ears and limited eyes. And they think, *look at them with their big brains and small minds.* What else does the world hold that I am blind and deaf to?

I began school shy and upset. I found it was important to know the unspoken playground rules, who sat in what corner of the field at lunch, and where the year sixes went to play kiss tag. Godwit facts were less important. Just as the rules revealed themselves to me, just as I worked out the patterns, they changed. I felt lost amongst the questions, swimming in a river flowing uphill. But each year the godwits still arrived like clockwork and the bells in the Christ Church Cathedral tolled. They rested on the Avon-Heathcote Estuary, battered and skinny, after somehow flying with pinpoint accuracy to an island nation called Aotearoa. Scientists guess they were

aided by unseen magnetic lines, unheard signals, stars in the sky, land below, and instinct. Is it inherent? Passed through their blood and genes? It feels unreal. But we believe in lots of things we can't see.

In year two I learnt how the first waka navigated by the stars. From Hawaiki they floated into a world where some nights the inky sea and the inky sky would have looked like one. They may have wondered whether they would hit land. They had seen godwits fly overhead at a large island called Aotea which made them think there was land further on. They took off buoyed by questions, brave and adventurous, listening to the small whispers of the world. In year three my grandpa sailed across the Pacific from Saint Lucia. He had a GPS. On our classroom wall we had a map, everyday for weeks we pinned his location. I think now, was it about learning, or was it to reassure me he was coming home? Would the stars show him the way, would the godwits reveal their magnetic lines, would he sail on instinct trusting that the way was in his blood? For thousands of years people have been taking off into the unknown. Yet I'm paralysed. Why can't I do the same? Where is my life going to go? In the 1870s my great great great grandfather sailed from Portugal to New Zealand. He wouldn't have heard of the place, he just ended up here and never left. What made him take off into the void with more questions in his head than stars in the sky?

In year twelve I spent five days in the bush with nine girls from school. It took us two hours to bush bash 300 metres with compasses. To get around a large obstacle you sent one person ahead to get the bearing, then the rest of the group followed. Our teacher told us we'd all cry at some point. None of us did. Ten girls and no tears. A compass was a fact – I felt like a godwit following magnetic lines. Me and one other girl were the navigators. I couldn't pull out my iPhone to check we were on track, we'd handed those in when we arrived. I found I enjoyed not being tethered to a thing that fed me more confusion than clarity. In the bush I heard faint echoes of my ancestors, I strained my ears hoping for guidance. What is life, where am I going?

In my first year of university I walked out into the mud at the estuary and squatted down. My shoes were swallowed and my pants turned brown, but for hours I watched godwits move.

Amongst them young ones who had undertaken their first migration stuck their beaks into the water sucking sustenance into their bodies. Their mottled feathers sat slick across their backs and they seemed at ease with their mammoth feat, as if all creatures possessed the ability to make remarkable journeys. No bells tolled to mark their arrival, they fell down in the earthquake. The godwits slipped in quietly, unannounced, but a girl, a young woman, decided to watch. I left my phone in the car and suddenly I could see. We are nature. We mirror it because we are it. Our veins part and meet like braided rivers. My hair has roots, my torso is a trunk, my eyes are pools, my freckled skin is a sky of stars. Am I too a godwit, able to undertake great journeys guided by unseen things?

My flatmate is Catholic and she believes unseen things guide her. Each week she goes to church where light streams through stained glass windows and ethereal voices fill the space from the choir loft. She believes God is looking out for her, that He has a plan for her. She knows He is there not because she can see Him, but because she can see the effects of Him. Small whispers. Small miracles. Her life unfolds because He makes it so. I know I believe in things I cannot see too. I can't see gravity, but I know it's there: we fall over, we drop something, a bird stops flapping and it meets the ground. I can't see tectonic plates moving beneath the earth, yet they are, because I can feel earthquakes and see a stratovolcano reaching towards the sky. The world reveals itself. We know day has begun, not by the clock, but by the sun illuminating the world. I don't have to see the sun to know it's there. Maybe she and I, we're not so different. Maybe me and godwits aren't so different. Maybe I can let unseen things guide me too.

Young godwits only four months old make the migration for the first time alone. Their parents leave earlier, before the chicks are ready. Do they possess an internal GPS like that of an iPhone? What tells them to take off? They'll be eating and eating, doubling their body weight, then they look to the sky and start flapping. Do they know how long it will take, do they know what trials they will face, do they know what speeds they will reach, do they know the way, do they know about a tiny island nation called Aotearoa? Despite the questions, they leap. Godwits are wayfinders, explorers, navigators.

On the table sits my copy of Letters to a Young Poet. Tonight Rainer Maria Rilke is feeding me wisdom from the early 1900s. He speaks as if no time or distance exists between him in Europe an age ago, and me now on the edge of the world. I have this underlined on a tattered page, 'And what matters is to live everything. Live the questions for now. Perhaps then you will gradually, without noticing it, live your way to the answer.' Maybe the further we fly the more we can see, but if we never open our wings we'll never soar mountains, over valleys where rivers of clouds run, over oceans, over alps striped by crisp lines of sun and shadow. Waka sailed the same seas my Grampa did in 2009, both thousands of kilometers from anywhere, waka navigating by the stars, my Grandpa by a GPS. Godwits fly to the same country all my ancestors ended up at. Surely that's a plan, or is it a miracle? More questions. There is an invisible world beyond our senses, radio waves, tectonic plates, souls, magnetic fields, the quiet whispers of Ranginui and Papatūānuku. Just because we cannot see things it doesn't mean they aren't there. I open my wings and I leap out into the world, believing – yes believing – that all these invisible things are carrying me in the right direction, we are held aloft by questions, not answers. I never want to reach the end of my insatiable curiosity, so as I leap, I say to the godwits, thank you.