



The Journal of Urgent Writing



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Volume 1

2016



**The Journal of
Urgent Writing**



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Introduction

Nicola Legat

urgent

In mid-2015, when I was interviewed for the position of founding publisher of Massey University Press, I was asked what sorts of books I might be interested in publishing. This book was at the top of my list. It didn't have a name then, but I knew it was what I wanted to publish.

In content it's not so very far away from the essays I published when I was the editor of *Metro* magazine in the early 2000s, or indeed from the essays that had been the magazine's stock in trade ever since it was launched in 1981.

Nowadays, such essays are often called narrative long-form journalism, which seems a too precious, portentous and self-conscious appellation for what is simply terrific writing, grounded in fact and in careful observation and reporting, by people who know a thing or two about a thing or two and who have extended contact with others who are similarly well informed.

The fact that it has to be given such a grand title is often offered as evidence that such writing is an endangered craft in an increasingly shallow media environment. There is no doubt that it is pivotal to intelligent discourse, and as a publisher at a university press I felt duty bound to offer it a home. I also knew that I would have a great time working with the impressive people who agreed to write for me. I haven't been disappointed.

Why *The Journal of Urgent Writing*? 'Journal' because it will be an annual publication, and 'urgent' because these essay topics are matters in which their writers are deeply engaged. They are issues they are angry about, fretful about, excited about. And 'writing' because . . . well, that is what they do so very well.

Nicola Legat
November 2016

Salmo

on

n

Salmon on tuna

Dan Salmon

n tuna

My mum used to make a microwaved curry with canned tuna and raisins, zapped in an smoky oval Arcoroc microwave dish. My impressionable brothers loved it, or said they did, but I thought it was the second-worst meal in the world. Canned tuna was up there with Brussels sprouts for the pre-adult me. Thirty years later, forking the flaky tuna with cheese, tomato and lettuce onto a fresh baguette tastes better than a BLT. Throw some capers on that and I could eat it every day. Sadly, I've spent the past year talking tuna for a large NGO and my head is now so full of tuna, with every hard-earned swallow carrying such a weight of environmental and human-rights baggage, that I struggle to eat any fish at all.

Even the prescribed pole-and-line-caught can of environmentally friendly skipjack comes with the metallic aftertaste of guilt. And I'm over the jokes linking the gig to my surname. Yes, it's an aptronym, and yes, I used it in the title, and yes, it was funny for a few minutes, but now every question from other tuna lovers seeking easy answers in a complex world simply sinks me deeper into a fish-free miasma.

I've directed enough dog-show reality TV to know that the way individuals treat animals generally reflects the way they treat people. I haven't come to the fisheries conversation from an animal-rights perspective, but I can see how you might. From the mighty bluefin and the imaginatively named yellowfin, to the ubiquitous skipjack and albacore, the blackfins and longtails, bullet tuna, slender tuna and the

little tunny, tuna are astonishing animals. Fifteen species across five genera, they're not one fish. There are so many species, so many ways of fishing for them, and so many different countries, companies and cultures catching and consuming them, that everything I say about tuna has to be checked by the lawyers, checked by the scientists, then checked by the lawyers again; by then it no longer makes sense, and it all needs a redraft, which will of course need rechecking. Some tuna are on the verge of collapse, a technical word you have to be very careful how you use, but, while tuna populations have declined on average by 60 per cent over the last half-century, there are still some; if we can fix the way they're caught, that could continue to feed and employ millions of us for the foreseeable future.

Sleek and streamlined, tuna are built for speed. Through chemical trickery, they, along with mackerel sharks, are the only fish that run their body heat higher than the surrounding water. In the ocean, they are like the fleetest of birds or the most agile of great cats. Powerful, hairless aqua-cheetah. I've watched them from the mast-top, flashing silvery blue or yellow, and they are fast, man are they fast. I love them as wild animals, but I also love to eat them, and there in that very human contradiction lies the rub, the marinade and the wasabi. The problem is that the very people who catch them are the people who make me feel bad about eating them.

Tunnies, pelamyds and bonitos enter the Pontus in spring and spend the summer there, and so do practically the majority of the shoaling and gregarious fishes.

— Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 350 BC

We've been eating tuna since before Jesus, but it should surprise no one that the biggest run on them began in the twentieth century. The US tuna industry, synonymous with the canned-tuna industry, was born when a San Diego sardine fisherman met a seasonal sardine shortage with the local albacore. While soldiers on the battlefields of both world



wars ran on the US-caught protein, tuna only replaced sardines on US supermarket shelves when the sardine industry collapsed — a moment in time immortalised in John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, named after Monterey's sardine-factory seafront street. The real-life version of his character Doc, a marine biologist known as Ed Ricketts, investigated where all the sardines had gone. His answer: 'They're in cans.'

Cannery Row is now home to the respected Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute. It's a good-news place with great bars and restaurants, a tourist town that celebrates the abandoned sardine factories with frou-froued façadism, preserving the proud image of the industry with new paint and cheerful signs, while ignoring the dark side: Steinbeck's whores and homeless, and the collapse of the fisheries. The only sign I found there of the once-popular novelist was a faded awning marking the backstreet entrance of Steinbeck Plaza, home to the Candy Factory, Sharky's Shirts and Adventures By The Sea.

As a species ourselves, we don't tend to learn from our fuck-ups. We can still buy sardines from the supermarket, so things can't be too bad — right? Globally, we pull over 7 million tonnes of tuna out of the ocean each year. In 1950, as sardines collapsed, we were only taking 0.6 million tonnes. If we're talking the small animals, most of it goes into cans. If we're talking the big species, it becomes sushi and steaks. Eighty per cent of the world's sashimi tuna is eaten in Japan. Hold on to that figure for a second. If you're not from Japan, enjoy the feeling of 'Oh, it's them again' for just a few moments longer. And stop.

The most valuable wild animal in the world is not the white rhino, which is killed for its horn, nor the leopard, which is killed for its hide, nor the brown bear, which is killed for its gallbladder. It is the giant bluefin tuna.

— John Seabrook, 'Death of Giant', from *Harper's Magazine*, June 1994

Horried by the latest Ricky Gervais social-media shaming of an ersatz-sexy corporate Ayn Rand acolyte with gun in one hand and dead endangered beast underfoot, we revel in the opprobrium, greedily

sucking oxygen from the public-media pile-on as we outrage-emoji our way to a climax of self-righteousness. Dentists from the Midwestern US or the over-entitled children of property developers, these people are not hunters: they are the most vain of consumers. They never understood the metaphor in *Moby Dick*. Their mothers never told them the world was theirs to share, not destroy.

How we judge. And yet, every second photo on Tinder has a bloke with a fish or a fish-chasing boat, and close friends order at-risk species in restaurants or bring home orange roughy. Social media has no reaction at all when tuna chasers from our own South Island brag-flaunt photos of fresh-caught, critically endangered southern bluefin tuna loaded into trucks for big-buck export.

Why the double standard? Is it because we can't see undersea, or that we choose to believe the myth that fish are cold-blooded and don't feel pain? Southern bluefin are warm-blooded; they can accelerate almost as fast as a Tesla (faster than a sad-arse Porsche). They have a light-sensing third eye, a pineal organ they use to navigate thousands of miles of ocean like sleek, shiny godwits the size of a small submarine.

They are our lion, our rhinoceros, our giraffe, and yet we seem to like them best in a trophy shot, hanging from the tail, with some bloke or blokette in rugby shorts and beer-brand T-shirt smirking at the extraordinary skill their wallet has given them in pulling yet another spectacular wild animal from our oceans.

I fish. I've been pig hunting. I didn't stick the pig but I was holding a camera and doing my own sort of shooting. I know industry is important, jobs are good, and we all have to eat. I believe we should have a fishing industry. I'm not precious about this stuff, but the numbers in which the industry is killing these wild animals are insane and unsustainable. The double standards touch us all. The pescatarian who says 'I don't eat meat but I eat fish' is like a gin-drinking teetotaller. Here is a cold, hard fact: fish flesh is meat. If you eat fish you are not a vegetarian (pauses for mass social-media defriending by half of Grey Lynn).

Here,
among the market vegetables,
this torpedo
from the ocean
depths,
a missile
that swam,
now
lying in front of me
dead.

— Pablo Neruda, 'Ode to a Large Tuna in the Market'

I'll catch them, I'll eat them, and with every bite I know I'm eating meat. But even more than tasty protein, I love seeing them in the wild. It's a buzz. Not the buzz you get seeing flashing silver when you're baiting a hook or seeing the birds working, but the deeper buzz you get the first time you see a wild animal you've only read about in a distant country. That first holy shit glimpse of reeking sea elephant or wild bear, or even the 'that's not a lizard; it's a dinosaur' moment mountain-biking past your first goanna on the outskirts of a dusty Queensland town. I remember the first time I saw a woodpecker in the woods at Bear Mountain, New York — an actual bird rat-tat-tatting the side of a tree, not the cartoon Woody I grew up with. A real, living animal.

I can still see my first flash of yellowfin in the slow-rolling swell on a windless day off Cape Brett. Becalmed, bored and 21, bombing from ever-ascending points on the rig. We'd worked our way up to the topgallant yard (the highest possible jumping platform on the ship), the horizontal spar from which the highest square-sail hangs. With the sails set, the square-sail yards are held firm by the wind, but with the sails furled it's a wobbly perch a house-height above the wooden deck. The shifting spar kicks away behind me, soaking jumping momentum, so I go into the fall too soon, a little close to the hull. And on my way down, a blaze of silver in the Pacific blue below. That slow-motion fall with my mind now screaming *shark*. And I'm back aboard, breathless, in almost as short a time as the fall.

Fifty metres from the port quarter, a pair of yellowfin leap, twisting, out of the ocean, delighting all aboard: the dripping me, the friend clinging to the mast-top, and the shark-atheist crew laughing with the sheer joy of seeing one of the world's fastest ocean creatures. As I've never been to Africa, it's as close as I've come to seeing anything like a lion, leopard or cheetah in the wild. Dolphins and whales are our elephants, giraffes and hippopotamuses, but the big tuna are our big cats.

Fingers and gobstick fail,
the hook's fast in the gullet,
the barb's behind the root
of the tongue and the tight
fibre is tearing the mouth
and you're caught mate, you're caught

— Allen Curnow, 'Canst Thou Draw out Leviathan with
an Hook?'

But let's not forget, they're food. I remember hooking my first yellowfin on a different square-rigger, sailing for Tonga. Two lines out, we hooked two. Under full sail, the second mate and I physically pulled them aboard, hand-over-hand on thick trolling lines. When they reached the boat they were near dead, so we kept both. The biggest fish I have ever caught. Together they would have weighed more than me. With 16 mouths aboard we did our best to eat them, starting with the first still-warm sashimi slices cut back towards the head. Dipped in soy by the bold, dunked by the less so, and avoided by the wary and suspicious. I have no words for the mouthfeel of that Tangaroa-sent taste. In those times most Antipodeans were still sashimi innocents — the 'ota 'ika, ceviche, poisson cru craze had not yet caught on — so that first, virginal taste has stayed with me.

Easier to forget was the increasing feeling of 'not fish again' as the cook bravely tried to make the dinner fillets a different dining experience, with fishcakes the next day. How quickly too much turns something precious into something resented. One tuna would have left

us wanting more, more for tomorrow, more for the oceans; two left us over-sated and cynical. That second fish would have had more value fighting and fucking its animal ways across the Pacific.¹

I am only one human, my impact negligible, but there are billions of me. We all take fish: on boat trips, from supermarkets, at restaurants or sushi bars. It's a global, billions-of-dollars business, and it's crooked, very crooked. Google the tuna business and you'll see some of the biggest companies in the world are implicated in scandals. The three largest canned-tuna companies in the US are facing price-fixing charges. Tuna boats have been caught smuggling drugs, smuggling people. Workers have been boiled in cannery pressure cookers. The global industry is a hotbed of human-rights abuse and Pulitzer prizes. With luck — and don't hold your breath in white-collar crime — someone is held accountable. And it's going on in our backyard. I have been involved in documenting conditions on Pacific long-liners, and workers on every single boat had stories of deaths, disappearances or murders at sea.

And so, reversing the idea that dog kickers are more likely to kick their kids, how does an industry that treats its people so poorly treat the oceans and the wild animals that live within them?

The answer is predictable. That same search engine is full of wild animals drowned as bycatch: rays, turtles, seabirds, whale sharks; rare and endangered sharks with their fins sliced off live and left to drown. The fastest growing way to catch skipjack for canning is to set nets on fish aggregation devices. FADs are small, floating islands set to attract fish. The nets take everything — the rare sharks and rays, and often the juveniles of the larger at-risk tuna species. Scientists have documented fishermen setting nets for skipjack, but instead hauling in 80 to 100 per cent baby bigeye or yellowfin tuna. Thousands of wild tuna from declining species that will never reproduce, never even grow to full size where they could be worth thousands of dollars each to the sashimi

¹ 'First, tuna don't fuck and so they don't need to fight except maybe for their lives from sharks and humans . . . They do spread their sperm and eggs far and wide so maybe sowing their wild oats? Bit too much anthropomorphising there.' Fact checker: Dr Cat Dorey, science adviser and campaigner for Tuna Project, Greenpeace.

market; no longer wild animals swimming the oceans just for the beautiful sake of it.

Like other extractive industries — oil, gas, coal — fishing companies race each other to strip every last dollar from our planet for profit. If one corporation doesn't clean them out, another will. It's like the water polo my kids play; cheating has become such a part of the culture the coaches encourage it. If you don't cheat you can't win. In the fishing industry the fines are so negligible and profits so immense that breaking the law and getting caught is just another business expense.

Someone once said that if the fish die, we all die. It's greenie grandstanding, but let's look at the figures. An ever-increasing global population, ever-increasing fishing effort, and we have never eaten so much fish as we are eating now. Tuna makes up between 5 and 10 per cent of the 100 million-plus tonnes of fish consumed annually, and the catch is global, so it's safe to take tuna as analogous to fisheries worldwide. There are better-managed fish stocks, and much worse. If we are worried about tuna, we should be worried about the entire ocean ecosystem. The legitimate global fish trade is worth over US\$100 billion per year. Add to that the illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) trade, recently estimated at US\$10 to 23.5 billion per year (potentially more than the illegal gold, diamond, gem, arms, and human organ trades combined), with those dirty fish profits largely going to organised crime. It's big business on both sides of the broken fence.

Seafood represents around a quarter of all global meat consumption; that's a big chunk of the protein we rely on to feed humanity. The world consumes more fish than dairy products, but with fish the usual property rules don't apply. Fish recognise no human borders, and don't belong to the corporations catching them. Ignoring aquaculture, the vast bulk of fish caught belong to the people whose national waters they are caught in, or, if they are caught in the high seas, they belong to all or none of us. In the words of my son, those free-market capitalist one percenters are fucking our shit up.

Let's get back to that choice we make when we talk about fish. Do we talk about them as wild animals or commodify them as seafood? As an