

# A Hard Year for Birds

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CHRIS BAILEY

Friday, September 23, the house hums with wind, a low thrum like you'd expect from a low-toned tuning fork. The bedrooms are upstairs and the place isn't wind tight. Doors and windows rattle and the rooms tremble. My bed shakes. It is like being inside the heartbeat of a nervous heart. No rain comes in, not even in the porch, water damaged from past rains and melts. The power goes out at 1:22 A.M. I fall asleep, and at 2:45 the wind wakes me. Eventually, I get up after struggling to get back to sleep. What else can you do in a dark like that with wind like that and rain sounding like stones against the windows?

Texts ask if I'm alive. I give affirmative answers and step out for a quick gander. Strips of siding gone, a fistful of shingles from the house, the surrounding buildings. Flashing off the east roof. The wind's diminished but pushes me around. I call my folks and am told that where we park the rigs during the spring and summer fisheries was water to my brother Tommy's knees. He put on shorts and old sneakers to check the boats. He had to pump out our father's retirement boat, the *Sybil C*, as the watertight floor slopes incorrectly, so water pools instead of drains. When at the mackerel, we pumped blood and water out instead of hoping it would find the scuppers. Tommy is taking over the lobster fleet, and his boat, *Grampy's Boat*, has a keel just low enough she stays on the side of the wharf she was tied to. Dad hadn't slept awhile. He was nervous about the boats. Everyone pretty well put theirs ashore, with my family's making up three of the five



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still in the harbour. My father tied his to the floating dock to allow for more tidal surge.

“There’s nowhere you’re going to be safe from a wind like that,” he says.

I’m in my car when I call, which is where I’ll charge my phone and listen to the radio for the first bit of what will be, for us, an eight-day blackout. A

clock radio came with the house a cousin and I rent, and while it plays cassettes, it doesn’t take batteries. The rain still comes down. The wind picks at my cousin’s engine bonnet.

Dad says, “Young Gallant stopped by, and he says, ‘Arnold, will you take me to my boat in your tractor?’ I said, ‘Yes, but I’m only going far as I’m

comfortable and then you're on your own.' I have him in the bucket, and I stop when the water starts above the front axle. I tell him, 'You'll have to walk from here. Or you can stay in the bucket.'

"And?"

"He stayed in the bucket."

Dad says there were building doors blown off. A house on the road to the harbour gave its roof to the field, and another house, Danny Wilfred's that we use for a landmark while fishing, is gone.

"The house above the bush is no more."

I get a series of texts from my brother Will, who lives across the street, saying he needs my cousin and me. We run over. Trees are felled at his yard's edge. The air full of fresh pine. His toddler's playset blown to pieces.

Seeing us coming, Will says, "The wife got her wish about that tree, anyway."

Him just back from the harbour, an hour away on a good day. We tie down plywood he bought for a building he plans to raise in Elmira. Will says he dodged pines and spruce and power lines on the drive.

"Over south there's so many trees down with the wind and everything, it smells like you're in the woods with the saw going. I was going to cut my way through, but the trees creaking. You just don't know what wants to come down," he says. "I drove around what I could, over what I had to." Will sighs, looks at his truck, a big, newish GMC. "I probably shouldn't've. Fucking poplars. Their roots are shallow. Not much good when the hard wind blows."

CBC radio has peak East Coast content during the blackout. A caller from South Rustico, and the host

says to him, "And you're an Islander? I mean, you're *from* the Island?" To be from the Island is to be born here. Elsewise you're from away.

Ryan Young's building at the harbour collapsed. The woman my uncle calls *the wharfinger* is on the radio, and the host says, "What's the building for?" and she says, "Gear storage."

"And what happened with the gear?"

Exasperated, she says, "It's still there."

The gear would be the lobster traps. You pile them to the roof and to the sides. They'd be holding the building up if it were full. How little you know of a job if you're not the one working it.

A woman from Port aux Basques says the road by hers is washing away. The side wall buckles, and there're buoys and pieces of buildings afloat. A mile marker that unhooked from its mooring is in her bay.

She says, "My house has her dancing shoes on, and she's doing the hoochie-coochie," and, "There's streets missing, old houses gone. Where there was neighbourhoods, there's devastation."

At Covehead, Donnie Watts had his boat put on the wharf for him by Mother Nature. This will become part of drone footage showing the extent of the damage for play on CBC. The outage will last weeks for some in Charlottetown, and a week after the storm, Premier Dennis King will declare himself one of the three hardest working people on P.E.I. and vanish from further Fiona press conferences. I recall a snowstorm in Ontario and Doug Ford with a small spade and untied boots, him out to shovel, or at least pretending. P.E.I. doesn't even get a perfunctory photo-op. But I didn't expect the long blackout or the vanishing then, just that we were down a few apple

trees and that the old rotten and treacherous deck I expected to be splinter only lost one plank. More of my home province had washed into the ocean.

A woman on the radio says, “The landscape of P.E.I. has changed.”

The wind goes out of it late Saturday. I’m in my car, and the sky’s clear to the west, a patch of clean grey under a ceiling of clouds, and the starlings start to fly again. A beautiful sunset. I make notes of things seen out here: the neighbour’s trees bent to the road, one bird trying to fly when the wind was too high and being carried away. Will, speaking of North Lake, said sheet metal tore off a building and was took before he had a chance to warn anyone.

“It just missed me,” he said, before moving onto gannets. “I feel bad for them, man. You never see them on land, and they were in the parking lot, standing around dying.”

With the bird flu and now this, it’s been a hard year for birds.

We get an old generator going. There’s no fuel conditioner for the sands of time and it does the job but not without complaint. It doesn’t so much surge as it threatens to die. It needs a new spark plug, a new fuel filter. This is an evening thing. Fuel can be hard to come by, and many places only take cash. There’re eighty-two thousand customers (that’s houses, apartments, not people) without power, though it starts to come on in pockets. The original notion floating around was that eighty-two thousand of eighty-six thousand customers for Maritime Electric were in the dark, but a reporter

finds out, no, eighty-two thousand is about all the customers they have. I got fuel this morning in Scotchfort where they have a Robin’s. I jump at the chance of an outside coffee. This, my first venture out since the storm, and power lines are laid across pavement and splintered and frayed, and trees take up half the road. On the main stretch, poles in the trees, trees in the wires. One guy already blocked up his fallen trees, and they look ready for the wood stove in winter.

My first hot meal in the better part of a week comes from A&W, and I inhale it. Charlottetown looks apocalyptic in spots, trees uprooted and the roots still holding onto the ground the trees sprang from. Craters left behind. Power lines dress trees like garlands, and loose branches sometimes hang on wires like ornaments.

There is a closeness to people across the Atlantic provinces stationed around radios, listening to the same station. Out in the car, looking at a clear sky, I hear hesitation in a reporter’s voice as she tries to place a town on the western or eastern part of P.E.I.’s north side.

A retired firefighter out on a walk introduces his dog, Bella, and says to the reporter, “This is a day to count your blessings.”

At 7:17 P.M. on September 28, I try to get the generator going. It takes four hours, but it goes. Two thirds of the province still without power. King got *upset* with a journalist for asking after an estimate on how long some Islanders could expect to be in the dark, King saying something like You’re insinuating

we're getting joy from keeping people without power. The road I rent on remains untouched. The trees, the downed lines, the broken poles.

While trying to get the generator going, Will tries his best and leaves, and Tommy, the most mechanically minded of us, comes to take a look.

Watching, I say, "I think Will already did that."

"Yeah, well, I don't think Will always knows what the fuck he's doing."

Tommy gets it running, an orange glow of fire when the generator sputters. Seeing this, he makes a face and looks at me. Our father is retiring from fishing. Tommy will be the captain in seasons to come, and neither of us knows what this all brings.

"Will said that's all right," I say.

Tommy lights a cigarette, says, "Yeah," as he inhales. The generator joins the others around us, drowns out every other sound in the world. B