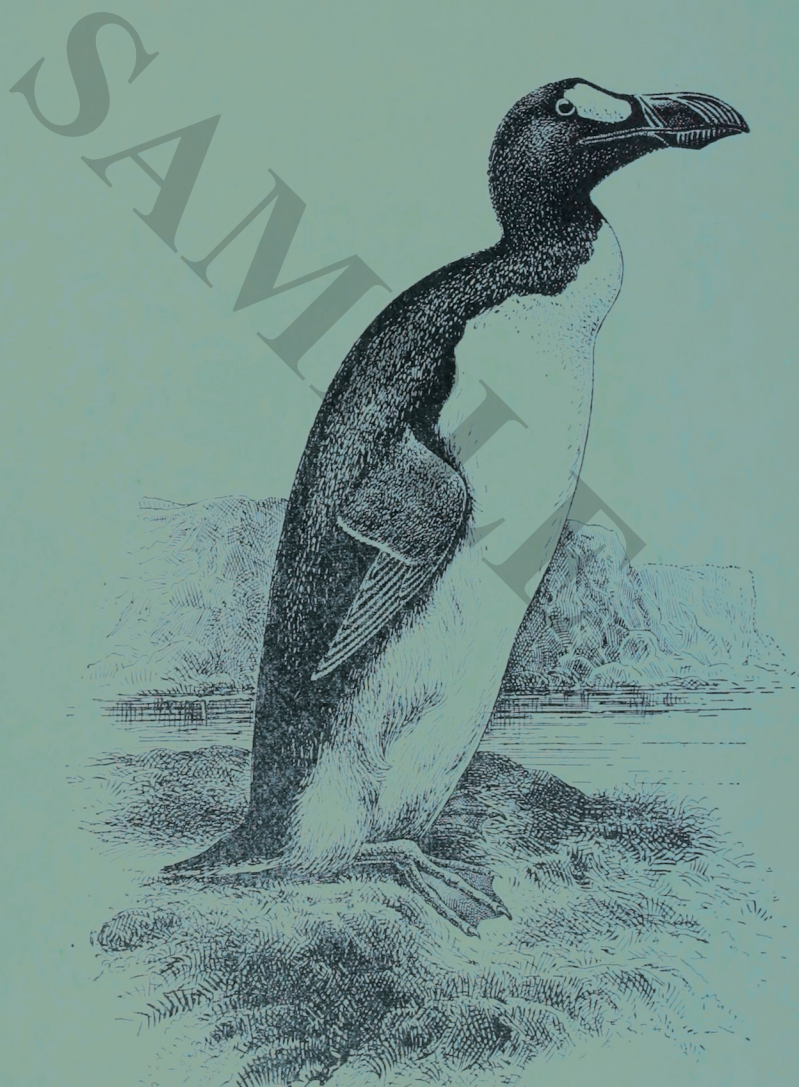


# THE LAST OF ITS KIND *a novel*

translated by Aleshia Jensen SIBYLLE GRIMBERT



THE LAST OF ITS KIND  
SIBYLLE GRIMBERT

Translated from the French by Aleshia Jensen

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FROM A DISTANCE, ONLY THE PATCH OF WHITE ON THEIR bellies stood out against the rock face, then a glinting beak, hooked like that of a bird of prey but much longer. They moved forward wobbling to the right and left, almost as though they were taking their time, testing every step for solidity, and with every step recentring their gravity with a pelvic tilt. The men, too, struggled as they approached, searching for purchase on the small island's soaked, heavy ground, backs nearly perpendicular to the beach, arms and legs spread wide like giant crabs in a row, facing the penguins that kept edging toward the shore with a precautious manner much unsuited to the situation.

It was fair weather on Eldey, the isle of sheer rock from which, in the distance, the coasts of Iceland can be seen, at least today better than most days, when there were enormous waves, though even without rain something damp and cold always stagnates in the air and clouds the view. Today the sky was a uniform grey, and you could see, in the still light, the crisp silhouettes of humans and animals as they approached each other on the shore, and then, suddenly, the men tackling the seabirds, some clubbing them, others crushing them under their weight, wringing their necks as the birds fought to break free. When the murderers rose again, they took the limp bodies with them, clutching the heads in their fists, tossing the corpses in a heap, and you could still make out the two white spots between the beak and the eye, like butterflies resting on a carcass.

The scene was short-lived, a few minutes at most. As

always when something unusual happens, the birds that could fly, those whose wings had not been stunted by centuries of happiness and tranquility, circled the cliff calling out. The ground seemed to soak up the blood—from afar no red stains could be seen—but the eggs the men had carelessly crushed on the volcanic black scree of the beach left a gleaming and certainly slippery residue. More often the men gathered the eggs and set them down, unbroken, near the pile of remains of those who had been, and would have been, their parents.

The longer you looked at the scene from the fishing boat or second rowboat waiting halfway out, the more the movements grew abstract: dots of various sizes followed repetitive geometric lines under the gauzy curtain of grey light. And you forgot that these were living things, men and great auks. The scene was no longer hypnotic, just a touch dull. Then the eye refocused on some detail: a leg, a beak, a seabird being dragged to the boat like the corpse of a child. And the faces of the mariners came back to mind, the pulse that no one had ever before felt of an animal no one had ever before touched vibrated in its chest before ceasing, palpitated under its elastic skin between the thumb and index of a hand holding the railing of the rowboat or fishing vessel.

Then, again, a sudden calm. Even the men on the island grew quiet. Something to the left disrupted what appeared to be a brief pause in the work: crumbling rock, a chunk of the cliff tumbling down. A cry came and was quickly stifled. A mariner approached the rock face, lifted a large stone, leaned down, and jumped back as he dropped it again. A beak had near bitten him. The man picked up the stone again, raised it over his head, and you could hear a kind of dense swoosh as he threw it onto the bird. Later, on the boat, he would recount how the seabird had remained still and stared at him in that moment, making no attempt to escape, its curved

beak resting on the egg it was incubating. The man leaned over and picked up the dead bird and still-intact egg, which the animal's body had shielded.

Now not a single animal was left alive on Eldey. True, it had been a small colony, less than thirty or so of the creatures; some of the mariners, who had been the year before, told that it was even smaller than before. The men returned to the rowboat with the corpses. You could hear them singing. There'd be a solid supper that night of tender bird meat, an enormous protein-filled omelette to wolf down.

As the rowboat from whence Auguste had observed the scene headed back to the vessel, he saw a black shape in the water near the boat. It looked a little like the mop Mrs. Bridge used to wash the floors. He bent over, grabbed the bird, and felt its panic, its strength, compromised as it was—or else it would have swum away—and when he pulled it onto the boat, the creature, with a stumpy broken wing hung at its belly, let out a cry. It tried to bite Gus, its one good wing stretched out as straight as possible, its body, the height of Gus's waist, slid between his hands, solid as muscle. But like the rest of its kind, it was helpless out of water. Someone grabbed a net from the bottom of the boat and threw it onto the bird, and it found itself trapped, struggling in vain, emitting repeated squawks that, according to one of the men, sounded like the cries of a witch.

On the boat they put the great auk in a cage. It stopped crying once inside. They brought over a fish, but the auk refused it. From behind the bars, it stared at Gus, furious or hateful even, and Gus's hand shook as he dropped another fish at its feet. Until that second he hadn't noticed the penguin-like creature's expression. He imagined himself telling the naturalist who had employed him that a great auk was

capable of an accusatory stare. In truth, Auguste had never believed he would have the chance to capture one. He had rather pictured sending a dead specimen to Lille, to be stuffed. He'd gotten on the fishing boat expressly because the mariners were passing the island of Eldey, the nesting spot of the last-known great auk colony of the region. But it had never occurred to him to bring back a living creature, an animal he could then study in depth before it died, wretchedly, in captivity, as likely it would.

Later the bird slept, or pretended to. Gus watched it closely through the bars. He noted that, while he had always known a great auk to be feathered, its down was surprising; until then he had imagined the great auk to be an oily creature, akin to a seal. At dinner, swallowing a bite of auk meat, he felt that a seal must taste similar too. The meat was nauseating and fatty. He didn't take a second helping.

The journey back to the Orkney Islands took nearly two days. The auk kept its head turned toward the railing when it paced past them, to the point that neither Gus, who took an interest, nor the sailors, who didn't, could see anything but the bird's back and its motionless tail, its neck stooped so low that it appeared headless. No one questioned whether the cage was too narrow, except for one fisherman who suggested they fasten a cord to one leg and let it out on the water, but Gus refused, fearing the bird would break free. Luckily the sea spray, the humid sea air, and the rain kept the creature drenched.

Back in Stromness, the largest town in the Orkneys, where he'd settled six months earlier in January of 1834 to study the fauna, Gus found a slightly larger cage than the one on the ship, which he placed, with the bird shut inside, in a room of the house he was renting. Mrs. Bridge, who cooked his meals and cleaned the house, was scandalized by the presence of this

ghastly, terrifying beast that had no business being indoors. Gus had to promise that she would never be asked to go near it. After two days he moved the cage to a fairly large room on the main floor—where he decided he would work from then on, far from her mop and bucket—and instructed the old woman never to enter.

Every day Gus poured pitchers of water over the cage. The bird would spread its wings, crane its neck, pass its beak across its belly then across its back for minutes at a time. It was the only time it moved, except, of course, to swallow the fish Gus left at its feet. The auk would hop back feebly, then lower its beak between its closed feet and snap it up. The rest of the time it stood perfectly still, beak nestled in its chest, body slumped over as though its feet were lashed down. When the bird stood in profile, Gus could sometimes see its black or very deep brown eye staring out at him, strikingly hostile. Gus felt almost afraid. He told himself Mrs. Bridge must be right, the creature must be dangerous; the seaman had said as much, after all: It looks like a witch, with its hooked beak and hoarse cry.

That beak was a true wonder. Gus had already remarked on the single engraving of a great auk he had seen in *Buffon's Natural History*, an engraving based on a description and not, as he would be the first to do, observed in nature—at that thought alone, he flushed hot and his heart began to race. Up close the beak proved more bizarre than anything he could have imagined. Nothing like a parrot's beak, for instance. It was longer, closer—in terms of drawing it, that is—to a crab's pincer in the space where a nose would be. It was black, of course, shiny too, but with thick stripes across it, neither pretty nor ugly, as impressive as the markings painted on faces in villages in Africa or near Australia.

THERE WAS NO IGNORING IT: THE AUK WAS WITHERING away in its cage. Three days had sufficed for an odour of rot to invade the room. When Mrs. Bridge passed the study door to clean the second floor, her aged, austere face crumpled and puckered into a sort of cone, as though she were trying to clench her mouth and all other orifices as tightly as humanly possible. For the last two days, she had also worn a crocheted bonnet that covered her ears, no doubt to afford further protection from miasmas. She avoided looking at Gus, who was left thinking he must be the source of the stench. Perhaps being shut in the study with his bird had, in the end, impregnated him with an odour of rotting fish mixed with thick-laden dust.

He had to be quick. So quick that he did not stop to write Garnier, a naturalist at Lille's Museum of Natural History and his employer, to notify him of the sensational capture of such a rare specimen. What he had to do was sketch the auk before it died, from every possible angle. Of course, facing a bird stuck in its cage, he was forced to demonstrate some creativity. The first few days, every time Gus had poured buckets of water over its head, the auk had regained some air of normality. But now nothing worked. It remained still, nearly cowering when the water touched it, since to reproduce the moments when the auk incarnated the very essence of its species, Gus had been flooding the cage, fetching bucket after bucket. He knew it was idiotic, but who exactly until this moment had drawn a bird twisting its neck behind its back to clean itself?

Gus was a good sailor, an adventurous type. And now, as the very first man to observe a living great auk at his leisure, and also a singular traveller, he was potentially a valuable assistant to the Museum of Natural History, which would be sure to finance his subsequent voyages. Though his zoological background was somewhat thin, having, in fact, studied pharmacy, he knew enough to see that this bird, sometimes compared to an African penguin, but of an altogether different species (it lived in the North Atlantic after all), had become a legendary animal since its disappearance from the coasts of North America, where hundreds of thousands of them had once lived.

Meanwhile the creature seemed to be festering on its feet, and it was dire. It was shedding and looked a complete mess, and less and less like how one would expect a great auk to appear: sleek, imposing, skin with the sheen of a top hat. Entire sheets of plumage whirled around the room, its body had become a sort of world map where continents of down adjoined the oceanic surface, glossy with feathers, the whole in a chaos devoid of logic just like the earth itself. It took Gus two days to realize his auk was moulting. What rotten luck. The bird moped about in its cage, displaying little to enjoy in the way of a pleasant attitude, neither grooming its feathers nor swallowing the fish tossed its way. To be precise, it was no more than a shapeless creature, the rough resemblance of a bird who would be a poor model for any sketch.

On the fourth day, it refused to eat.

What an obstinate beast, thought Gus. No intelligence, no foresight. A stupid animal, in fact, that would rather die of hunger than remain caged. How exasperating. Would a man stop eating just because he'd been imprisoned? No, the auk was clearly weak-willed in the face of adversity—a defeatist. It stuck its head into its breast, evoking a stick of wood,

some sacred Druidic object, or a menhir from Stonehenge in miniature.

Each day at the sight of the auk, Gus was struck by its size, as though he had to get used to it all over. He would observe the bird, but there was nothing new to study. If it refused to move, he would never know how it positioned its feet on the ground, how it held its neck while walking, nor would he be able to accurately describe its cry. All of that he'd have to invent. He had an animal no one had ever been as close to, and he'd be forced to doctor the observations. He still had to write to Garnier, bring him up to date, ask what he should do with the fowl. He'd have to do so before the bird's death, otherwise Garnier might not believe him, or might be angry he hadn't written sooner. He might even reproach Gus for the manner in which he'd cared for the animal in his charge. Yes, he needed to write today, omitting mention of the deplorable state of the great auk, or perhaps hedging his description so as not to arouse excessive optimism in Garnier.

He opened the cage. In such a miserable state, the bird would not escape. He returned to his desk, leaving the auk to its own devices. Nothing happened. It stayed where it was. Gus went back over to it, held a finger out near its wing and poked into its sickly feathers, as one would touch a troubling unknown substance, then jerked his finger back. He had felt the coarse, delicate, and bony texture of the wing. Then he remembered the animal had been wounded on Eldey. Yet it did not seem to be suffering, since it had not even flinched.

Gus made a cooing sound as though calling a pigeon. The auk kept its head stuck into its breast, dull and motionless, "empty" thought Gus—an empty, listless thing. Then he tired of observing it and returned to his desk.

A sound made him look up from the letter he was writing to Garnier. The auk, a dozen centimetres from the cage, had

just fallen. It was shaking on the ground in stationary distress, as though trying to swim across the terracotta tiles. Gus went over to it; as soon as his foot was near the bird, it moved its beak to bite the ankle just within reach, above the Achilles tendon. Gus stepped back, whispering “gently now,” as though addressing a puppy. It emitted several highly unpleasant and hoarse, shrill sounds that would be sure to throw Mrs. Bridge into a panic. It writhed around on the floor, slid from right to left, without moving forward even a millimetre; its injured wing sometimes fell under the weight of its body, which only increased its cries, as the bottoms of its feet floundered and its claw scraped the ground.

Gus had the idea to grab the animal from behind. And it wasn't a bad one: It scared the bird to the point where it quieted and, between Gus's hands, went almost limp and motionless once more. No doubt the bird expected to die, resigned before an incomprehensible destiny that had extracted it from its aquatic environment and prevented it from perceiving the dangers to its life. Gus felt its heart beating beneath the downy newly formed feathers covering skin softer than he could ever imagine, something that seemed also velvety, as smooth as kid gloves, yet thrumming, quick as a locomotive. “Easy now,” he said again, and he placed the auk upright. It was wobbly. The muscles in its feet are swollen from days in captivity, thought Gus. After putting it back in its cage, Gus brought over a fish and left the cage door open.

He could no longer focus on the letter. Back at his desk, he could only watch the bird. He couldn't help it; he would try to finish a sentence, but he would look up, and the sentence never reached an end, nor did the mental draft that should have preceded it. He heard Mrs. Bridge go from room to room banging doors behind her, dragging the furniture, beating the rugs to show her offence at being forced to share air with

a wild beast, and a noisy one at that. She was afraid, and the auk was afraid, yet Gus was calm.

He gave up on the letter. Time passed, but he didn't notice. The bird moved its neck, rubbed its beak against the floor. It would swallow, then freeze. It cried out, then quieted. Gus stayed where he was, leaning his head right and left, following the animal's movements as he leaned his chest flat against the table to observe it more closely without disturbing it. The front door of the house slammed shut. This time Gus stood up and left the study, only to find Mrs. Bridge's apron hanging from the front door handle, like a flag some enemy plants in your yard as a declaration of war. From the window, Gus saw the old woman come through the entryway waving her arms. With strips of lace streaming from her bonnet, she looked like a scarecrow in a raging storm.

Gus went back to his study. He did not have time to chase after Mrs. Bridge; he could not leave the auk. In truth there was no question: The moment he had laid eyes on the animal again, he had fallen captive to even the slightest of movements, which were similar to what he had already observed, except that any variation in the light or a varying emphasis of the beak on its feathers changed everything. Time passed, still without him noticing. Finally the bird left its cage and took two steps, and then a third, balancing to one side and the other, its healthy wing spread away from its breast. Without thinking, Gus grabbed a fish and drew nearer, knelt down a few feet away and placed the fish on the ground. The auk paused, edged closer, paused again, then took another step.

On the white wall, the outline of the bird's beak stood out in sharp relief. Its profile was visible as it turned to look at Gus and stared at him with only its right eye, its body still facing more or less forward. Gus looked at the iris, a light brown, or at least lighter than the pupil. He was surprised;

he had been expecting a solid colour, deeper browns. A milky circle bordered the iris and diluted into a sliver of white, more troubling still. In the bird's eye he could discern intelligence and, of course, mistrust, but from somewhere deep down, as though the animal were thinking, figuring out what to make of this unknown creature before it. It was also standing its ground, which showed a certain amount of courage. Gus carefully observed the one-eyed gaze of a creature ruled by pure instinct. He had the impression of finding himself face to face with a thoughtful, courageous animal, one that appeared to calculate the danger and the unknown that he, Gus, represented. All of this because of a somewhat pale iris, which so resembled those he had seen in the eyes of friends, without ever thinking much of it.

Maybe solitude was starting to weigh on him and a single eye seemed extraordinary only because it was alive and able to stare back and see, see *him*. Just then, he noticed the patches of white feathers the auk had above its beak had disappeared. This was a shock. It was no longer a question of a gaze, of depth, of creatures seeing and sizing up one another, but a question of an animal that had changed, that was moulting, but also one that had lost a fundamental defining feature. Gus returned to his desk to jot down the detail in his notebook, but as he did, he decided that, upon further reflection, he would continue to draw the auk with its highly recognizable spots: the clean shapes near the sharp, clear irises encircling narrowed pupils.

It was already five in the afternoon, and not yet dark. The bird kept moving, mostly along the back wall of the room. When it came face to face with an object, such as a piece of furniture—the chest of drawers or a chair—it would sometimes tap the thing with its beak, as though to figure out its material of origin. By half past five, it had made its way across

the width of the room, around six metres. Ten minutes later came a knock at the door. Through the window Gus saw Mr. Buchanan, the Stromness notary. The bird would have to be put back in its cage. Gus lunged forward and grabbed the auk from behind, picking it up as though it were a duck. Everything happened so quickly; it seemed the bird had no time to dodge him. It let out a low but furious sound, a croak of resignation and offence, as its clawed feet batted against Gus's stomach.

As Buchanan delivered a second volley of cheerfully polite taps on the door, Gus shouted, "I'm coming!" the bird still in his arms, one of which was around its wings and the other at the base of its neck. He held its tense torso as it struggled weakly against him, with the same fatalistic intensity of its cry. It was another story, however, at the door of the cage. Gus did not know how to fold the auk to fit it inside, and quickly. The bird had gone completely limp, either out of fear or strategically, to avoid an accident that would damage it, so much so that it was difficult, in this rag-doll state, to push it through the cage door. "I'm coming!" Gus shouted again to Buchanan, his frustration growing and his forehead dampening. He shoved the animal's head through first, then pushed on its back end, which swayed slightly in protest. The auk was still in this pathetic position when, after closing one door, Gus headed to another.