

A CATALOG OF EXTINCTIONS

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The preface describes the construction of a book-length, interwoven sequence of poems. This type of sequence differs from other types of poetry collections in its use of an overarching narrative, repeated images, and recurring characters. Three interwoven sequences are used as examples of how to construct such a sequence.

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PART I

ANOTHER JAR: ARCHITECTURE OF INTERWOVEN BOOK-LENGTH SEQUENCES

Introduction

When I approach a new collection of poems, I look for those moments when a poem grabs me and won't let go, but I also want to see the collection accumulate into a whole greater than the sum of its parts. I sometimes want to find that a poet has constructed a collection in order to present it as a single narrative, like a well-written poem, as opposed to a book that feels much less homogenous, like a collection of loosely related images. This narrative collection of poems has been interwoven; it adheres to itself and focuses on one story (or topic, dialog or event). And a poet planning the architecture of such a collection has other obligations for his poems; he has higher standards of order, placement, character, narrative, and setting than the author of a more miscellaneous collection.

A continuum exists between these two types of collections. At one extreme, we have the miscellaneous collection that feels truly miscellaneous; this book has few visible organizing themes, and is more a representation of a poet's last fifty (or so) pages of poems. Somewhere in the middle of that continuum, we find the collection that is crafted to explore some aspect (or aspects) of the human condition—whether it be love, perception, aging, or any of a thousand others. In those collections we find a sense of motion and transition, even complication, in their imagery, but not the same sort of tight narrative focus that we find in the truly interwoven sequence.

At the other extreme of that continuum exists the interwoven sequence which focuses closely on its subject, often through the repeated use of characters, events and images that create an overarching storyline. One of the strengths of an interwoven sequence is that it allows us to become deeply immersed in a single example of the poet's narrative, whereas a more miscellaneous collection might offer a broader treatment of the same topic. I will use three

collections as examples of the interwoven sequence: Nick Flynn's *Blind Huber*, Maurice Manning's *Lawrence Booth's Book of Visions*, and Louise Glück's *Meadowlands*. The poems in these sequences all worry at not only similar themes, but closely related situations that often include a set of characters bound to each other by some reason (love, war, etc.). For example, instead of a reading about man's relationship to the natural world, Flynn's *Blind Huber* offers us an interpretation of two men's experiences studying, living with, and absorbing bee culture; instead of a series of episodes concerning life in the South (or the country), Manning tells the story of how one boy grows up there (though mostly he grows up in his own imagination); and rather than making broader statements about tumultuous love, Glück immerses us in the details surrounding the story of one couple. This kind of architecture has informed my own work, impressing upon me that, in order to create a successful interwoven sequence, I must pay attention to these ideas of narrative, setting, character and poem order.

First Impressions

Sometimes a poet will front-load a miscellaneous collection with most of the best poems in the series, immediately drawing us into the collection with a high point; David Shumate begins *The Floating Bridge* with “Mannequins,” a poem about finding partnership and willing participation with the muse, but he almost never returns to any of the specific ideas or images of this poem in the rest of the collection; he’s written a strong, miscellaneous book of poems with few conceptual linkages. Another poet might try to find the one or two poems that set the pace for the collection, ones that will give rise to the successive poems in the collection by introducing us to a general motif, as Terrance Hayes does in *Wind in a Box*, starting with a piece that concerns voice, the importance of how we shape reality with our perceptions, and how speaking (or writing) can be a primal act. Additionally, if a poet is less concerned with simply hooking the reader and more interested in what the collection says about its themes, he is more likely to start with a poem that sets the stage for the series to follow; in *The Shadow of Sirius*, W.S. Merwin begins with “The Nomad Flute,” a statement on the impermanence of memory and its cyclical nature, and the dichotomy between what is learned and what is spontaneous. Hayes and Merwin then expand on the ideas presented in their introductory works, each new poem providing us a step further into the space they have opened for us.

But the poet writing an interwoven sequence must decide whether the collection will be best served by a first poem that provides an expansive portrait of the conceptual subject at hand, or one that gives the reader a lens through which to read the book and tools that enable the reader to understand some of the sequence’s subtleties—its characterization, plot, and methods. In order for us to follow this logic and navigate the work, the poet must make a choice between the potential impact of a particular poem and the needs of the collection as a whole. He primarily

wants to give the reader two things: instructions for how to read the sequence, such as the significance of poetic forms, conventions of stanza breaking and indentation; and a lens through which to read the sequence: details that will inform our journey through the collection.

Manning begins his sequence by introducing us to his characters, focusing on Lawrence Booth and his internal landscape, the Thirty-Seven Acres. Manning also gives us a brief window into his narrative by providing some of the images that will come later in the collection:

“L.B.PlusTheM.W.EqualsTrue- / UnfalteringLove,” “Mad Daddy riding / around and around on a flaming horse,” “*this is the wilderness, Kemosabe! which explains the undeserved / suffering and abandonment and the mocking*” (3). These images will return throughout the collection. In this way, Manning prepares us for some of what’s to come by introducing us to Booth (who will be our constant companion) and showing us glimpses of events to come.

Manning first shows us the characters we will encounter in “Dramatis Personae,” where we meet Booth’s family, his dog, Black Damon (Booth’s “pastoral comrade” (5)) and several others. Here, Manning has broadened the scope of his text by giving us his entire cast. This poem also serves to introduce us to the idea that this is not a miscellaneous collection of poems; having a cast of characters puts us in the mind of a play, and we understand that we’re going to watch a story unfold as we continue through the sequence.

Nick Flynn also establishes the attitudes and relationships of his characters in *Blind Huber* to show us that this is an interwoven sequence: he describes Huber’s (and Burnens’) desire to understand the bees and the bees’ general diffidence toward people. We understand quickly that we are not only going to see poems about bees, we’re going to be asking questions about them, and about people in general. In “Blind Huber (i),” Flynn presents us with Huber’s perception of the hive: “their city softening, now twisting / just out of shape” (4). We are just

beginning to witness a transformation, and perhaps we don't yet know everything there is to know about these bees. The title of the poem suggests that we'll be seeing Huber's perspective again; the number "i" implies that there will be at least a second "Blind Huber" poem, and Flynn wants to make sure we are prepared to reencounter this character.

Flynn then indirectly asks us to believe that bees can talk; he uses this introductory device to begin the suspension of our disbelief. The second poem in his sequence is "Swarm," in which we first hear the voice of the bees and begin to catch some of their attitude toward people:

When you see us swarm—rustle of
wingbeat, collapsed air—your mind
tries to make us one, a common
intelligence, a single spirit un-
tethered. You imagine us merely
searching out the next
vessel, anything
that could contain us, as if the hive
were just another jar. (5)

The passage puts us in a frame of mind in which we can begin to question what we know about the bees. The first assumption that we must make is that the bees can communicate with us, and we realize that the swarm is more like a single being than it is hundreds. The unspoken statement behind these words is that we don't know anything – "as if the hive were just another jar," as if we really know anything about their culture. To prepare us for *Blind Huber*, Flynn immediately sets the mood for his collection (transformation, discovery), introduces us to his characters (Huber and the bees), and implies that we will be seeing recurring characters.

Glück immediately shows us her recurring characters with dialog. She writes what is ostensibly a tragic love story in *Meadowlands*, and while she could easily open her collection

with a poem that makes general statements about love affairs, she instead opens with a short moment of dialog that precedes the book's one section, an untitled piece that serves a few purposes. It first establishes that we're in the middle of a dialog between two recurring characters. Glück uses a sort of question-response pattern to ground the poem, and when we see the small statement, "it's your turn; sing one for me" (xi), because of the intimacy of the request, we see that we're in the midst of a previously existing relationship. Because this poem heads the entire sequence, we can safely assume that we'll encounter these characters again. Second, she sets up a pattern of dialog that we will see in some of the collection's more focal poems; we see that her pattern of indentation is a device that indicates which of the two characters is speaking; when we see this pattern, we automatically know that we're listening to the dialog of these two characters. And third, she tells us not just that we're reading what seems to be a love story, but what kind of relationship we'll see – she uses images from opera: Tannhauser, a story that concerns itself mostly with the difference between sacred and profane love, and Figaro, a large portion of which centers on one man trying to undermine two lovers who are to be wed. We see from these examples that this sequence contains a less-than-blissful relationship.

Glück begins the sequence proper with "Penelope's Song," a poem which invokes *The Odyssey*. Here we see Penelope waiting for Odysseus' return – the return of the man who has cheated to the woman who has "not been completely / perfect either; with your troublesome body / you have done things you shouldn't / discuss in poems" (3). With these lines Glück shows us that *The Odyssey* is going to be a counterpoint to her contemporary love story, and once again emphasizes the dysfunction in the sequence's central relationship. We witness Penelope waiting for the bittersweet reunion and we understand that something contentious has happened. Through Penelope's point of view and the stress present in the first poem, Glück shows us that we can

expect to read the story of a single divisive love affair, and begins to give us the tools we'll need to immerse ourselves in her work.

The Shape of the Sequence

Each poet must manage the architecture of the consolidated sequence to support its deeper narrative. The order and grouping of poems becomes paramount since we'll be reading to experience a single narrative; just like the order of images in a single poem help us to understand that work (as will stanza and section breaks), the poems in an interwoven sequence must also provide us with some understanding of what's at stake, who's involved and how we move from the beginning of the sequence to the end. In a miscellaneous collection, a section break can imply a shift in theme, voice, tone or form. Regardless of what it implies, a break generally gives us the idea that something has changed. Or it could simply offer the reader a moment of pause, perhaps to place emphasis on the last poem or signify the end of a grouping, much like we would place emphasis on a stanza by beginning a new section in a poem. In the interwoven sequence, we can assume that a section break serves a similar purpose (either to shift or emphasize), but what else might the architecture of these sections mean for the sequence?

Manning separates his collection into three parts. In Part One, he introduces us to his cast of characters, focusing on Lawrence Booth, and then shows us Booth's aspirations in Part Two; Manning then uses Part Three to show us the pivotal events that shape the man Booth becomes. The first section, which comprises nearly half the collection, introduces us to his various characters and settings. In it, Manning describes Booth's family, his dog, and Black Damon; we travel with Booth and grow familiar with his desires. Red Dog and Black Damon are Booth's constant companions, and they represent his feelings as an outcast - Damon is the subject of prejudice, Red Dog is less than human, and all but Booth treat them as such. This section prepares us to explore and understand Booth's desire for harmony, and Manning needs to convey this background so that we can understand Booth's motivations.

Manning uses Part Two to explore Booth's wishes in a series of visions. In "Allegory," Booth has a dream in which the Missionary Woman says, "*Oh, you, and your cantankerous visions / of peace*" (45). She uses the word "cantankerous" to describe these visions, as if to say that a vision of peace could be its opposite: contentious. The Missionary Woman's attitude emphasizes Booth's status as an outcast. From this point until the end of the section, Manning provides us with several visions and a few memories, each of which illuminate another aspect of Booth's feelings of exile. In "Act V, scene iv," he hides in the barn, waiting for an approaching storm, and "vaingloriously hoping / the God of Rain still approves of him" (53). Manning uses this moment to foreshadow the coming turbulence in Booth's life. The clouds gather as Manning closes Part Two with Booth's flight from home because

He was tired of algebra and inclined planes—he cried
out against The Very Heavy Vector which creates
the terrible pattern of falling apart. (58)

Here Manning re-instills us with Booth's desire for harmony, or wholeness, if you will, by which I mean the opposite of "falling apart."

In Part Three, we see the tension between Booth and Mad Daddy, his increasing alienation from society, and his worry about the future; in order to transmit this to us, Manning focuses on the relationships between Booth and those close to him. Booth begins to think that his "kentucky home had become a dream against the law" (69); Lawrence Booth's nickname is Law, so this becomes a play on words where we can see that Booth's home is becoming either a dream against him personally, or a dream against order itself. After Damon is seriously injured we see Booth's concern for him in "Eclipse." Though we don't know for certain what caused Damon's injuries, we know that Booth fears what might happen to his friend when he "beseeches the heavens" to spare Damon's life; Manning tells us that "Black Damon's death would sorely /

diminish Booth” (72), showing us that Booth not only loves his status as outcast, it is in integral part of his makeup. Booth fears that this piece of his life will break from the whole. The final piece in Booth’s falling apart takes place in the penultimate poem, “A Dream of Ash and Soot,” which shows us Mad Daddy’s suicide. Mad Daddy turns himself

into a galloping yellow torch. And his flames
reach to Heaven, and a cloud swirls
through the Great Field, and the sun falls down. (79)

Manning paints this image of Daddy as the sun, riding to the horizon and “setting.” He blurs the division between Booth (son) and his “setting” father (sun). Booth becomes the man of the house; “the sun [son] falls down,” or ceases to be the son, and becomes the father figure: a metaphorical passing of the torch (if you’ll pardon the pun). Having provided us with sufficient background in his first two sections, Manning shows us how the last of the disorder in Booth’s life disappears. Manning spends a great deal of time detailing Booth’s life, and without this information, we might miss that Mad Daddy’s death is a symbol for Booth’s freedom, the end of his chaotic existence.

Similar to Manning, Flynn also divides *Blind Huber* into sections which begin with techniques to try and get us to empathize with, or at least relate to, the bees and Huber. As he moves through the sections, Flynn pulls us farther away from both the bees and Huber, until finally we’re left with a tremendous sense of alienation from both.

Flynn first opens with a section that introduces us to François Huber, his blindness and his fascination with bees; we begin to learn about the daily lives of these bees. This section contains many physical images that deal directly with the body. In “Blind Huber (ii),” Huber instructs himself to “think of / a hive, each bee, each thought, the hive / brims with thought” (7); in this poem, with its focus on the body, Flynn compares the hive to the mind, flitting with

thoughts. In “Workers (attendants),” the bees lie beside the queen, “our mouths / at her belly, counting / her breaths” (9). Instead of using the scientific vocabulary we might expect Flynn to use when describing bees, he uses the human equivalents (“mouth” and “belly”) to conceptually link humans with bees. These images allow us to begin to relate to them, to understand some of their thoughts and their collective personality. But Flynn seeks for more than just understanding; he wants us to relate to the bees on a visceral level. The use of “mouth” and “belly,” and later “tongues” and “hairs” (9) all evoke the human form. We relate first to what we know, and what we know best in this situation are our own bodies. Through the lens Flynn has created, we begin to imagine what in the bees is similar to us as people.

Flynn ends this first section with “Blind Huber (v),” in which Huber begins to question reality: “I no longer know what is outside my mind / & what is in” (22). The blurring of this line prepares us for Flynn’s second section, in which we move from the physical to the thoughts and perceptions of Huber and the bees. In “Amber,” the bees describe a “chamber built of scent” (30) in which they become trapped, preserved for ages. Understanding the dimensions of a room made of scent is beyond human experience; though we might begin to rationally understand something new about the bees, here Flynn reminds us that we are, in reality, alien to each other. In “Geometry,” the bees mention “hexagons wired into / our sleep” (28). Flynn shows us that the architecture of their hives is an instinctive compulsion that is also beyond human experience: we have no way to relate to the concept of creating something as complex as a hive without thinking about it. We also move from Huber’s blindness and his work with Burnens & the bees to his thought process, and the belief he expresses in “Blind Huber (vii)” when, in contemplation, he says, “false / promise that, once under- / stood, it will end” (35), “it” being the thought process itself. He hopes that once he has reached a certain understanding, he might escape to a “moment

/ empty of thought” (35). We see that his study of bees is what he hopes will allow him to find some peace. This second section is brief, but effectively links the first and third section, and marks the beginning of Flynn’s turn toward alienation.

Flynn ends the second section with “Xenophon’s Soldiers,” a poem that moves from the imagination— “sometimes / you come upon a vessel”—to history—“near Trapezus...ten thousand soldiers / lay as if dead” (39). The third section primarily addresses questions of history and folklore. Flynn discusses bee cultural history, religion and Huber’s history, and how these things lead to the distance between both the bees and other creatures, and Huber and other people. Here we see the instances in which the bees mention spirituality: “Without God you rip our bodies / apart....With God you cannot trust / what even your own body tells you” (43) starts the section’s first poem, “Without.” The bees seem to be condescending to us, as though we can’t live properly with or without God. Without God, we can only see the bees as enemies, but with God we don’t even trust the evidence of our senses. They claim to understand something intrinsic to the world that we cannot grasp. Whereas Flynn had used images to help us relate to the bees, now he places more emphasis on the differences. This sense of alienation culminates in “Blind Huber (xii),” when Huber has Burnens turn his house into a giant hive with factory pressed comb, “so we can live inside a hive, / my chair dead-center, beside my / queen” (56). This emphasizes Huber’s sense of separation from his fellow man and his growing desire to reside with the bees.

The final image in the third section, “we lift, / like the soul as it exits the body, / except you can see us / & we are not quiet” (60), directs us into the death and transformation imagery of the final section. The bees awaken from their “seven-month slumber” in spring, and work themselves to death within seven weeks (63). The bees rise into the new season and kill

themselves in their greed for honey. When Huber brings the hive inside during winter, Flynn writes that “the orchids ruin their sleep, / Burnens reports, they fight each other / for access” (70). The scent of the “rare” flower and its “scant” pollen is irresistible to the bees, and interrupts their hibernation; they are more interested in the wealth the flower can provide than in their instinctive drive to hibernate. In “Blind Huber (xiv),” Burnens hand feeds Huber samples of different kinds of honey which Huber names by taste; this symbolizes that the nectar has transformed from its original state to that of the bees’ wealth. At the end of the section, Burnens asks, “Who else / to make his words real?” (80), emphasizing that Huber’s thoughts would have been nothing without the hand that did all the physical work and put them to paper. Without Burnens, Huber’s thoughts would never have been anything more than just images in a blind man’s head. This poem reveals that, according to Burnens, everything we’ve read up until now is Burnens’ translation of Huber’s work.

In opposition to Manning and Flynn, Glück does not divide *Meadowlands* into sections; she offers us her sequence in one, undivided grouping that allows us to see the entire series as a cycle in a repetitive process. She lays out her narrative in a semi-chronological fashion and by constraining her poems to one long section, she demonstrates the cyclical nature of this unhealthy relationship: each successive try repeats the same results with the book’s single chapter representing one turn in the cycle. Glück injects her interpretations of scenes from *The Odyssey* throughout the sequence, and the ancient epic becomes a counterpoint for the contemporary relationship of her main characters. By providing us these scenes in the third person, and then weaving into and out of the contemporary dialogs, she allows us to see direct conversations (discussions or arguments between the main characters) and then infer what is happening in the background with her implied conversations (those based on *The Odyssey*).

Though she doesn't always follow the timeline of *The Odyssey*, she keeps a steady chronological progression in the story of her main characters (the ones in her dialog poems). Glück starts with the relationship in mild turmoil, moves through its difficulties, and finally leads us to the closing in which she suggests the rebirth of the relationship (more on this later). Since this sequence is a singular unit, we're reminded of the circle – a symbol of singularity and repetition. Had Glück cut her poems into sections, she would have weakened the sense of circular narrative she creates; instead of seeing the entire collection as one cycle in an ongoing process, we might have interpreted each section as its own cycle. We might not conclude this until we've read the final poem in the sequence, "Heart's Desire." Here we can see the characters falling back into the habit of each other. Glück emphasizes this with her two first poems. In the first, one of the characters in the dialog says to the other, "it's your turn," bringing to mind the kind of alternating roles that take place in children's games. We see that the characters in this dialog will take turns playing different roles.

Last Impressions

The poet writing an interwoven sequence of poems uses his poems and the narrative they create to impress some commentary about life upon us. Therefore, the finale of the interwoven sequence takes on as much importance as the climax and conclusion of a novel. Whether the end of the sequence ties everything up in one nice package or not is less important than the poet's ability to effectively convey his narrative to us. This is the poet's final opportunity to convince us of the sequence's argument.

Manning optimistically relies on the idea of rebirth. In "A Dream of Ash and Soot," Manning delivers Mad Daddy's suicide, but he offers us no reaction from Booth. This would appear to be a disturbing and sad moment on Booth's life, but Manning shows that it is not by following this poem with "Pilgrims," in which Booth celebrates the crows' return to the Great Field, heralding the beginning of spring. He announces to the other birds in the field that "the black darlings of the field and sky, / the raven-tressed wayfarers, are at last arrived!" (80). Booth celebrates the return of the crows, as they signify the possibility of new life. We receive a description from Booth's point of view:

Here come the crows!
with their fat gleaming breasts,
their leathery feet, their nutcracker beaks,
their perilous eyes and tribal squawks,
their famous longevity, and all
the other noble crow traditions! (80)

Here is Booth's unbridled joy at seeing these birds. Manning allows us a view into Booth's joy when he finishes the list of crow traits with "and all / the other noble crow traditions." Here again, Manning makes a play on words with "crow." He subtly reminds us of the Crow Indians. This reference brings us back into the mindset that Booth had as he left his home in "Like a Tree" with a copy of "*The Ways of the Indians*, copyright 1923" (58). Booth wants to live like an

Indian, in freedom. These crows symbolize freedom from the tyranny of Mad Daddy. “And what good fortune!— / Booth can give them sanctuary” (80). He feels blessed that he can treat these symbols of new life and freedom with the respect they deserve. Manning brings his sequence to a close by showing us Booth’s emancipation.

In contrast, Flynn emphasizes Huber’s confinement. Flynn leads us to the end of his series with “Unfamiliar” showing us Huber’s aging, and pointing to the uncertainty of his own existence.

Years pass, look
around you. This garden,
overgrown. This glass box. There must be somewhere
else, but how
will you recognize it? (78)

We see Huber in his untended greenhouse. Flynn’s use of “box” suggests a prison cell.

Something other than this must exist, but how would a blind man recognize new surroundings?

We see resignation in the fact that Huber knows there is more to life than his study of the bees in his home, but his hope falls when he realizes that he would have no way of knowing whether he was somewhere new. Flynn suggests that archangels came down and brought the bees to Huber then asks the question, “What comes down now?” (78). This suggests that Huber’s blessings have abandoned him or been used. Huber has no more hope for the future.

Flynn also give us a premonition of death in “Workers.” A bee comes upon an orchid and stumbles inside: “the scent / pulled me deeper, not caring / if she closed on me forever” (77).

This image symbolizes resignation – a lack of concern about dying surrounded by something that one loves. We’re reminded of Huber’s hive that Burnens helped to create. In these surroundings, Huber can accept his own death, alienated from humanity, enclosed in his hive.

Flynn completes this cycle of desperation in “Burnens (ii).” Burnens compares his home to a jar that broke (79). Flynn shows us that Burnens grieves the loss of his home. When he later compares Huber’s room to a jar, we see that Huber was Burnens’ life. However, his reaction is not all grief. Burnens claims his part of the work: “the spot of blue paint on the thorax, my / mark, two miles / distant” (80). He finds one of his bees well away from his home and immediately follows with the question, “Who else to make his words real?” As we’ve already seen, this statement is Burnens’ claim to the work that he shared with and performed for Huber. He asserts that it all would have been impossible without him. In this brief moment Flynn brings Huber’s life to a physical and conceptual end. The man dies; in addition, his work would die were it not for the other man who records it. In the end, Huber cannot legitimately lay claim to his own accomplishments, completing his isolation from other people.

As Burnens provided us an outside perspective of Huber’s relationship with the bees, Glück gives us another perspective of her characters. She ends *Meadowlands* with “Heart’s Desire,” which shows us that she has been describing a cyclical love affair. She prepares us for this idea in advance: in “The Dream,” one of the characters says, “I dreamed we were married again” (56), foreshadowing that these two people will be reunited. In “The Wish,” Glück offers a reversal of these roles; if she has taught us how to read this properly, we assume that the indentation of her stanzas determines who is speaking, and that the pattern of indentation remains the same throughout the collection. The one who scoffed at the dream answers the question, “What do you think I wished?” with an answer that seems to counter what was said in “The Dream.” The character says, “I don’t know. That I’d come back, / that we’d somehow be together in the end” (58). Each character alternately displays a longing to reunite with the other. In this way, Glück sets the expectation that they will reconnect.

Glück shows us that here characters are on the verge of that reconnection in “Heart’s Desire.” By stitching together images from several previous poems (“Rainy Morning,” “Ceremony,” “Void,” “Penelope’s Song,” “Otis” and “Moonless Night”), she reminds us of previous details, but takes these images and twists them slightly so that we can see how the characters’ perceptions have changed. In “Rainy Morning” we learn about a character’s “clandestine passion for red meat” (16), while “Heart’s Desire” begins with that character’s desire “to order meat from Lobel’s” and have a party (60); this also counters a moment in “Ceremony” in which that character is accused of refusing to “have people at the house” (6). Glück is preparing us for the idea that these two characters, regardless of how close they may have been, don’t know much about each other – or they’re acting in defiance of each other. This provides a new soil for them to replant the seeds of their love affair. The meatlover says that “it will be spring again; all / the tulips will be opening” (60). The tulip commonly symbolizes love, and this character expects this love to be in full bloom soon. The same character later says, “Trust me: no one’s / going to be hurt again” (61). This is first a plea for trust, and second, an optimistic view of what will happen if they try their relationship again. Of course, this could also be an expression of denial. Glück wants us to believe that this reconnection is imminent and to think that perhaps the two lovers are oblivious to this cycle.

The final image in Glück’s sequence returns us to music, bringing us back to her starting point. She gives us the promise of renewal:

I have it all planned: first
 violent love, then
 sweetness. First *Norma*
 then maybe the Lights will play. (61)

She starts with the idea of “violent love” which we read about in this sequence (though the term “turbulent” is probably more accurate); from there we move to “sweetness,” a promise or hope

that what is to come will be a positive experience. In “Penelope’s Song” Glück had compared Penelope to Maria Callas, a world-renowned Greek soprano; *Norma* was Maria Callas’ American debut. We see that Penelope’s song, meant to bring Odysseus home, will call the estranged lover back; this is the promise of reunion between Glück’s two characters. We move from *Norma* to the Lights who, in “Moonless Night,” were practicing klezmer music which is derived from Yiddish music and is characterized by instrumental sobs and laughs. So we move from the beauty of Penelope’s love song to very emotional and turbulent music. Glück emphasizes the repetition of this love affair by repeating the cycle in imagery: “violent love” to “sweetness” and “*Norma*” to “klezmer.” From this we see that this relationship will return to its beginning, and always circle back around on itself.

Conclusion

What is the appeal of an interwoven sequence? For me, as a writer, it provides an opportunity to weave individual poems into a larger narrative. Part of this appeal is that I can start to write poems to the sequence; instead of collecting my last fifty pages of poems and figuring out how they might fit together, I can use repeated images, forms and conventions from the beginning of the process. In writing *A Catalog of Extinctions*, I was able to start using some of the environmental imagery and to develop the narrative of this small family as soon as I started to realize what kind of sequence was taking shape. In this way it was like shaping a larger, complex poem; it provides an enigma that can only be deciphered through close reading. There was an epiphany that came with realizing that my poems could be shaped into an interwoven sequence. It led me to delve more deeply into the poems to find their connections: the death of a young girl, a dead family dog, a mother's grief, the descending health of the environment, etc. The process provided me with the joy of resolving each individual poem, but it also allowed me to probe into this particular narrative more deeply than a single poem would have. As readers move through the sequence, they get to watch the narrative unfold in the same way that the concern of a poem becomes clearer the farther they read into it, the more attention they pay to it. I wanted to give readers the kind of experience that an interwoven collection can create with its structure.

Manning, Flynn, and Glück each accomplish this in their own ways, but what seems universal in their work is that they use repetitive imagery throughout their sequences: Manning provides us with "A Prayer Against Forgetting Boys," a poem which refers to several of the poems in the sequence (whether they come before or after it); Flynn continually returns to the idea of oneness – he represents the hive as one being and parallels that with the one unit that is

Huber and Burnens (Huber the mind and Burnens the body); Glück uses “Heart’s Desire” to connect the major images in her dialogs, responding to several of the statements made by her characters in earlier poems.

When we come across one of these repeated images and recognize it for what it is, it has the power of coincidence and epiphany. We understand that we’re experiencing something larger than the most we could expect from a single poem. We also recognize the arc of the poet’s narrative. In some cases it may be more obvious, as in Manning’s work, where each of his sections represents a marked transition in theme and purpose. Flynn makes this slightly less obvious; we feel the movement from familiarity to alienation, but his section breaks make this less obvious—he slowly takes us from one feeling to its opposite. In other sequences, this recognition of the arc may be more obscure: discovering the cyclical nature of Glück’s fictional relationship is more difficult; we might feel that “Heart’s Desire” is the happy reunion of these two lovers or at least the naiveté of one. Until we can see the repetition of her imagery and realize its purpose, we’ll fail to unravel the truth of her narrative.

That is not to suggest that there is only one successful way to construct this kind of sequence, that repetitive imagery is the sole path down this road. These sequences have similarities, but each poet also has his or her own approach to the interwoven sequence. *Lawrence Booth’s Book of Visions* relies heavily on narrative. Manning’s primary tools are Booth’s surroundings and the major events that take place in his life. In contrast, *Blind Huber* focuses more on internalizations. Flynn is less concerned with the events that take place than he is with our understanding of the bees and Huber, of their internal landscapes. *Meadowlands* lies somewhere between the other two. Glück uses metaphor and dialog to carry us through her narrative. She suggests events and attitudes with her dialogs, and offers *The Odyssey* as a

metaphor for what has taken place between her characters in the story; she avoids explicit description; she hints at attitudes and events.

Manning relies heavily on the voices of certain characters, particularly Black Damon who is the voice of the “Dread Chapters.” Manning employs a very believable phonetic vernacular to invoke this character. As well, we hear from Booth regularly and each boy his own distinct voice. Manning’s success relies largely on his ability to flesh out his characters through dialog. In doing so, he creates a living cast of characters with which we learn to empathize. Manning also experiments widely with form; he uses the sonnet in the “Dread Chapters,” but also moves into some very experimental formats. For example, he follows “Dreadful Chapter Two” (almost a perfect sonnet) with “Proof,” a poem that is very ambitious in its formatting (it includes some line drawings, the infinity symbol, and numbered lists). This all evokes the chaos that is Booth’s existence, and we can feel the structures of some of these poems straining against each other as we continue to our journey through the sequence.

Conversely, Flynn writes small poems with short lines, and makes no drastic changes to the structures of his poems. As well, he consistently switches between the voices of Huber and the bees. These poems seem like glimpses through a keyhole as opposed to episodes, and when he moves from Huber to the bees, it feels as though we’re moving from one side of the door to the other, spying from both sides. Early in the sequence, Flynn tries to get us to relate to the bees, and this closeness to the human experience (of Huber) helps us to better empathize with them; but later this serves to alienate us further from the bees, as the differences between the human and insect experience become more pronounced. The economy of Flynn’s language prevents him from being overly descriptive; he relies more on his conceptual material than he does the events

that take place in his sequence. Since the book is about understanding, Flynn is free to abandon the narrative style in favor of concept and metaphor.

Glück uses suggestion to carry the weight of her narrative. Though we hear often from her main characters, we never really get to experience the events that take place between them, outside of what their dialogs provide. Glück uses a series of parables and snippets from *The Odyssey* to imply the events in this relationship. We must infer from her selection of these tales what has happened between these two lovers. She allows Odysseus, Telemachus, Penelope, and Circe to tell us what has happened to her own characters, and leaves us to discover what in each of these glimpses of *The Odyssey* parallels her contemporary love story. This architecture provides us with a sequence that at times is quite difficult to unravel, and because of this, the book stands up well to successive readings.

Since I often enjoy the sense of piecing together a puzzle that these interwoven sequences can provide, I have made use of many of these same tools. Like all three of these poets, I use repeated imagery; bees, dead birds and the ghost of a dead daughter make their way into my narrative on a regular basis. These “characters” strengthen the connections between poems and allow the reader to move deeper into the narrative; when the reader stumbles upon of these repeated images, they’ll automatically sense a connection between the poems. One of the challenges of doing this was finding the right balance between the repetition of images for emotional or conceptual impact and the repetition of images for the sake of repetition; for example, I use images of dead and dying birds to emphasize the hopelessness of my characters’ situation. In the works of Flynn, Manning and Glück, I don’t always recognize the reoccurring images the first time through the sequence. Part of the appeal of the interwoven sequence is its “replayability.” When I first recognized that I was seeing the same image in several places, I

looked for what those images and what they did to push the narrative forward. I placed images in much the same way that these three poets have.

I also saw the value of placing a less narrative poem at the beginning of the sequence in order to shed light on the situation I had created. I wanted to begin, as Flynn and Glück do, with a short poem that helped to set the stage. I chose a 13-line poem that introduces the three main characters, predicts the possible death of one of them, and establishes some of the nature imagery and grieving I will return to throughout the sequence. I follow this opening with a few poems that expand on the relationships between these characters (a three-person family) and the events which surround the young daughter's death. I start here so that I can prepare the reader to join me on the more important journey that takes place as the sequence unfolds: the aftermath of a young girl's death because of a chronic, terminal condition becomes a journey deeper into the condition of grief and a way of exploring one family's reaction to devastation through image and narrative.

In opposition to Manning who saves most of his narrative until his last section, I inserted the major events of the sequence into the beginning. Though I save some of these scenes for later sections, I want to ground the reader in the narrative so that I can explore its consequences throughout the sequence. I try to ground the reader in this situation (the death of a daughter) so that the later sections will have more resonance, so that the reader can journey through the grief alongside the girl's parents. Glück does something similar by telling us her story as *Meadowlands* progresses; we see the changes in her characters and their situation and receive the impact of their actions as they take place. However, I chose to clump these more narrative moments toward the beginning so that they would inform the reader's entire experience. Whereas Glück maintains a consistent chronology in her sequence, I break the order of time as

Manning has done. Because I enjoy unlocking the puzzle of an interwoven sequence, I try to offer my readers the same experience. And since the reader will be unlikely to retain all of the images and scenes that ground the sequence in its narrative, this opens the sequence up to further readings.

When we read a poem multiple times, we learn to appreciate and enjoy its subtle architecture; our respect for the poet who writes an interwoven sequence increases tenfold since the sequence itself becomes something of an extraordinarily long poem. These three books show us approaches that a poet might take in constructing an interwoven, book-length sequence to provide us with the extra pleasure we can derive from reading it. Though Manning, Flynn, and Glück have differing agendas and use different tools, their works expand on the experience that poetry provides. Instead of unlocking the meaning of one poem, they leave us to delve into the entire sequence as though it were a single work, each poem representative of a line in a stanza.

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PART II
A CATALOG OF EXTINCTIONS

I.

Kicking the Clock

In the midst of life sprouting in the garden
you disclose the date of Zoe's surgery.
Looking up from the zinnias, I stare
past you, across the field, at the boundless white
explosions of dandelions, their survival instinct predicting
a change somewhere in the language of soil.
Their vital roots listen for a shift in the wind
that will signal them to open their innards and expose
the essential germ.
Take her, then! Tear her apart
and scatter her soft insides over the fields! Or else nothing
of her might sprout again and invade
the harmonies between these rows.

Ghost Bird

Zoe and I found a dead owl
on the side of the highway.
It was a young Snowy,
a forbidden kill.

I ran to it as I might have
if she were dead on the asphalt.
I stretched out the wings
to see its span.
Take a picture—
an owl crucified to her father's body.

We have to keep something.
I chose a talon, holding the leg
outstretched from the downy body.

She closed her mouth and tried to hide her hands.
I handed her the knife and showed her where to cut.

Flesh and sinew cut easily.
She sawed at the bone
for the rest of her childhood.
Old, thick blood
and bits of feather coated the blade.

I stuffed the talon in a sandwich bag
and kept it in a drawer in my desk,
occasionally showing it off to an interested visitor.

On some quiet nights
she would dream of owls that couldn't land
scraping at her hair and eyes. Those mornings
she would sneak early into my office
and open the drawer, to make sure the talon was still.

The Sea

Her disordered lungs take
oxygen in faint
recollections wisps of air
emptying storehouses and rasps

Beside her here my breathing
seems massivehanded
concentrated a being of roots
and soil lumbering
viscerally I understand her days now
Her stresses this weight
handed to her the unfortunate

it is all a lack
of exhalation

At close to thirty I snapped
the twigs in my arm a fall
from a skateboard
reliving a far-removed past

She never remembers details
*I bled and because no one
else seemed able
you hyperventilated*

A Catalog of Extinctions

Tonight I'm drawn home by a light
in the kitchen. Leftovers: quarter of a roast,
half-bowl of macaroni, beans
and rice, and on the front burner, a pot
for tomorrow, almost over-boiling with the last
of our grocery bags.

Her favorite.
The meal she bragged about at recess.

I remember walking through brush
in England, as the new oaks began to sprout;
we stayed long enough to watch them

transform a plain into woodlands.
When the land became too loud,
we remembered cities,
and fled.

We sorted through her room, arranging
her leftover possessions: plaid socks,
a half-jar of honey, three eerily
lifelike dolls, her one dress, the acorn

we meant to plant, her collection
of tail feathers, and a book about bees.
We turned everything to face
the door so that, when we celebrate
her birthday on the 30th,
her guests can see it all from the entrance.

Where the corpse of a blue whale once fell,
the ground distilled, reclaimed what was once itself;
a field of black bat flowers

sprouted from the soil for an afternoon.
They looked like they should be able to fly,
half-buried in the loam.

Distance only becomes apparent when we apply waiting.

We spent the next three days sorting
ashes, separating hers from stray cigarette matter,
collecting it in the ornate wooden box
we got for her on the Pacific Rim.

Sifting the leaves and feathers
became unbearable, when all we chased
was a handful of essential ash. I used my ring finger to distinguish
between what was once tobacco,

and what was now our innovation.
A mild breeze threatened
to unsort it all.

I remember the rain; birds diving for meat,
springing the cats' traps. Red, happy
cats and feathers littered the park.

If you stand near the playground, you can still hear
the mayhem: the squawks, the hisses,
the mix of bodies and gravity.

To avoid argument, each little girl
will receive a number. In order, they'll enter
her room and take one item; the excess
we'll take to the beach. The gulls will pick
it over, and feed it to their children.

We brought what we assumed
was all of her to her place at the table.
A plague of doves took roost in her room,
their corpses eventually littering her bed,

her plastic jewelry
and a heart-shaped rug. The house
never seemed so unresponsive.

—

I remember church, and your postpartum depression,
how it would resemble, years later,
your womb's ache to refasten.

We used to walk in the evenings, past the skeleton
of an old dog which, even now, chases
the skeleton of a young girl. She must still tire
quicker than it does, but it always waits.

The Allegory of Stock

Late summer and the freeze approaches. The squirrels frantically finish their business for the long sleep. All but one: Sammy.

Zoe always cheered for Sammy,

even though *he would lie in the sun for hours, idle. The other squirrels admonished him (the nut-filled stress sacs) but Sammy always said God would save him.* You told the story so well

that she (actually, we) would humor you, laughing in the right places, acting worried when Sammy would stumble through chest deep drifts (nearly deaf with hunger),

clapping and whooping when Sammy was saved. She said she preferred my version, told when you were absent: *the squirrels warned Sammy that he'd die this winter, but he said God would come.*

(You understand?
She didn't want to play
favorites with her parents)

In his weariness, Sammy fell through a knothole in an oak and broke his spine. That winter, the other squirrels buried him to his eyeballs in empty husks.

The Family Scrapbook

She has feet like most people have stomachs.

—

She and I like that she enjoys dresses
(I think they'll last longer than they do,
waiting for her to grow into them)

but you've always hated to see her
at play in anything that's too easily stained.

—

They say she is a fast runner
for her size; I alternately want to thank
and pummel her coaches (I don't quite know
what they mean by that).

—

She prefers to eat her vegetables raw.

—

Cats adore her. Her stare can paralyze
a sparrow. And when she doesn't quite get her way,
she'll start dropping them

from the sky until you give in.
I've learned to ignore the dead
and grounded birds.

Exhaust

I dreamt all night of smoking, the ceaseless
inhale and exhale of blight, the danger
in exhausting each square.

Years later we celebrated the forgotten dead:
you as a trash heap, six-pack
rings and plastic sacks;

smoke billowing
from your innards, my feathers
drowned, we thought maybe

we could be three again.

We agreed to noon in November,
a last chance to see Fall's closing,

to watch overripe birds come loose
from their branches, impact with the ground, soften
in the nearby soil. I waited under an ash,

kicking the bloated corpses of birds
into the perfectly mowed grass.
On opposite ends of a bench

we watched Zoe with two
new playmates; she climbed and circled
the jungle gym, the slide, trees, the still laying

bodies of cats and grackles, bottles, needles.
You disposed of another sack
of remains. I broke into daylight,

pickaxe at my side, carrying a transparent
canary, its small wooden cage. She complained
of a feather in her waffle,

and began the last third of her life,
her four years of coughing.

I was reminded of praying

*for the smokestack we called
grandfather, waiting for test results.*

She climbed an elm, stopped in its heights, waving,
yelling. I turned as she threw a worn finch
my way, lost her balance, plunged past branches

and her emphysemic breath.
Three days of fever, no words. We each stayed
part of the night to watch her fragments
of breath, to be there for CPR.

She struck the hopscotch course, erupted
into a shower of sparks and ash,
a celebration of the dead to which we attend

separately
over the birds, the grass, the septic air.

The Ghost in the Yard

She asked what happened to Jack
(the lab we bought for her
fifth birthday) and sensed something
in our brief silence.

—

You and I would alternate
evenings, naked in front of the remains
of the television, his head on your lap
or mine, his steady respiration
unburdening us of the day's weight.
I still relive months he spent
chasing grackles around the living
room, thinking that I had thrown them
on purpose.

—

Backpacking in New Mexico when she was six,
he caught her jacket in his mouth, kept her
from falling through the space between us.
We thought she was old enough,
but she never remembered that day,

or the 30th of November, after her ninth
Thanksgiving, when you and I took him
to the gardens, where a vast whale's bones
protrude from the ground
like naked trees. A bearded vulture smiled
hungrily and handed us
the perfect barkless branch.
Just to see how long it would take, we threw it
repeatedly across a field.

How many times did he sprint and return?
Until, after an hour, under our constant
encouragement, his body quit.
He skidded to a dusty halt
in the undergrowth,

facing home, eyes unfocused
and breathless, tongue hanging
muddy, from one side of his mouth.

—

We told her that he ran away to be with his estranged family.
She begged us to tell
where they had gone
to become *estranged*.

Neither of us had an answer.
It was such a shameful lie,
like the single time, bloody and frantic,
we made love
face-to-face,
blind to each other.

II.

Intermediate Biology

We undress each other and wait
on the couch, clothes haphazard on the floor.

I always need help with yours.
As my knuckles enlarge,
your buttons become smaller
and stouter. The bra that I could once open
with a flick, requires concentration

and, more importantly, silence.

Eventually, you'll have to unclasp
yourself; I can barely put a run
in a nylon, your skirts are heavy
to my hands. I'm sweating

before we've turned on the TV,
in the drought-stricken living room;
the birds refuse
return. The two of us
and your still empty womb

await the news: disappearing icebergs,
legless owls, children
that walk through walls, storm clouds

gathering in our skylights, fresh bones
in the soil, the team of scientists who've proven fate
is genetic,
who isolated the gene
in silence.

Vulnerability

The Laysan albatross will spend nearly half its life at sea. This amounts to almost twenty years spent adrift, and though we might follow its journeys across tides, the landscape will seem, to us, repetitive. If we had also spent decades over the same tidal patterns, we would recognize order: anomalies like the oddly formed boulder behind your parents' house; how it reminds you of an upright thumb, though I always secretly felt it was Nebraska's penis. In the same way, no two Laysans remember their location from cognitively similar details: this one remembers that here live the tastiest squid; the other knows that the waves react differently due to a small island nearby that governs the currents; still another remembers how the water starts to get warm as you head north toward an undersea volcano; It makes for a nice, relaxing spot to spend an afternoon and soak.

At year's end, thousands of Laysans will gather near Midway Island. Their presence looks, from the shore, like an island of snow a mile or so off the coast. They discuss each other's families, where fish migration patterns are leading this season; but mostly they gather to vent their anger at the airbase nearby, cackling at the orderly, uniformed MPs and pilots. They come to mourn their grandmothers and grandfathers, much like the month we spent outside the waste water management plant. Occasionally, a Laysan will approach the flight path. That one will invariably fail to return. The MPs regularly see to the funeral details. There is little ceremony and no salute. Once finished, they will return to their rounds and the heckling of the Laysans.

Colony Collapse

We grew accustomed
to the sight of their small
bodies one or two
at a time lying dead
on their own doorstep

But this morning
you say you feel something new
a sense of unfamiliar stillness
I have to open their door

to believe you
they fail to answer
to my presence the hush
of their absence

the lack of faces and constant
droning conversation

My hands storm
through their homes
their viscous sweet mortar
clinging to my knuckles

and the hair on my hands
Still
nothing explains

no stir in the breeze
betrays their story

I ransack their neighborhoods
every home
the same walls
crumble in my grip

dining rooms and nurseries
wiped off on my pant leg

Those few that remain do not lie

where the dead belong

I find them in the study the foyer
fold their wings carefully
shut

move into the surrounding
orchards *search every leaf*
and flower call out

to something that cannot respond

that will not hear

Vulnerability

A few good-hearted people, mostly women, imported tons of topsoil to the beach on Midway Island in an effort to prevent it from eroding, to preserve the Laysan albatross' nesting grounds. A contingent of the birds approached proudly, as though they knew the origin of their human name: the moniker of the small island on which they made famous their sexual prowess. These Laysans puffed themselves up to seem more attractive. I tried when we first met, but you were too impressed with my older brother. The women giggled at the Laysans and joked about the cuteness of this act. The Laysans were confused at their lack of authority. Many of them headed to the airfield. A few stayed, and followed these women across a length of the beach.

If you were to walk alongside them for a few miles, you would come across a public swimming area. Surrounded by families and tanners, a group of insecure men raised an outdoor gym. They imported sand from across the island to secure its foundation; some of it contained feathers and egg fragments. No one has ever seen a Laysan at this gym, but men from all corners of the island come here to build onto themselves. Sometimes there are fights. One man had to be carted off in an ambulance after almost dodging a thrown dumbbell. But always there's the constant, rhythmic clanking of iron. The women tend to giggle and throw around the word *cute*.

Chasing the Sleep of the Innocent

I discarded the forced
wrappings before the sweat dried;
it sloshed and slapped against the inside
of the toilet; your toilet,
the strange familiar seat
of an unknown empire.

You didn't give me a tour.
I had to rummage for a restroom.
A flick of chrome and the sole
remaining physical evidence
of our disunion vanished

to eventually join the schools
of small fish suffocating in a miasma of waste,
surrounded by clean, usable oxygen.
You asked if I would stay, and I graciously,
routinely, declined.

I waited in front of your door,
imagining how I might describe a tear
in the rubber, how I would say it emptied into you.
Every day for the next two years, I stood
in that doorway, mute,
arguing with myself
about whether we had ever met.

Six months later, I chartered
a ship in the Pacific.
My crew and I spent days
sorting through used condoms,
but no trace of you
existed in their wet folds.

III. Supplemental

He moved through the crowd like an invalid elephant, with a child's curiosity in the inner workings of each thing he saw, for the world appeared to him as an immense wind-up toy with which life invented itself.

-Gabriel García Márquez

Protein – a collapse of the immune system

We carried the false embraces,
the candles, and all we could scrape
from the skin of your uterus,
spread it all out on the beach
and watched as barges carried trash
to the island landfill.

Gulls orbited the columns
of scent: a dozen above us,
hundreds over the island.

You said, *This is how
her story ends. We wash it all
into the harbor, the birds eat it
and go where we never can.*

I had a momentary vision
of Zoe, popping up in hedgerows
and gardens across the state,
tearing through the soil
like each garden was a piñata,
spilling its sweets onto the ground.

I turned and described it to you.
You walked away in silence.

En – the act of propagation; diminution

The couch harbored your depression

the outline of your back a chain

of divots that described your spine hedgerows
of ribs reaching uphill
into other counties

We made lakes here shores littered
with groves of elm and chatter

enough firewood to raise courthouses churches
pubs The population sank

into the ground dried to a rot there

and spread a thin layer of sticky ash
on the undergrowth

macaws stuck their feathers in it and starved

escaping beehives were sealed rodents refused

to eat The skies rained salt

and the waters washed up visages
of our gods onto the shore

We gave the one resident everything
she would need put her back onto the shore

each time she wandered too far

into chill removed all bothers from her footprints

and spread a wash of loam over her hair

She ran away to join the mice
in their not-breathing

We filled the lake
with deterioration buried the forests

in smoke dispersed the shores

turned the land over

waited for ash in level rows

Kermes – bright red; the motherless tree

They cautiously approach your sleep grateful
that you have carpet

remove their shoes by the door turn the knob
cautiously take slow breaths

through the nostrils hoping each night you will
not have drawn the covers over

your head They once raised the thermostat to heat the room
so you would move your comforter from your face

though sweat makes their work harder They kneel and wait
for regularity in your breathing

for the signs of your dreams horses dancing soundlessly
along the room the rush of air

as you plummet laughter from distant horizons
Once convinced they raise

a silver platter and razor blade into the dark lean over your face
swatting away memories

of a nonexistent child and tenderly scrape skin from your cheek
rising and falling with your breath

allowing the grains of flesh to fall onto the platter regularly
stopping to recheck your breath

until they have their quota They take your skin and make paint
for their gardens

to camouflage their plants
in the crimson soil

Aubade – a metaphysic, set to sunlight

Conventionally, the act of conception requires the combined efforts of a male and a female. However, sharks have recently joined the ranks of creatures to have performed parthenogenesis (the birth of a child without the aid of a male), leaving mammals as the sole class of animal in which this phenomenon has not occurred

naturally, you wore fertilization
as would any good field,
ready to provide a herd, a village
with its next supply of food.

We never stopped to wonder
who you might feed
next, walking the neighborhood,
scanning the horizon for bats,
careful not to step on the hidden graves
of our former pets.

I accompanied you out of the desire
to protect the growth in you.

That last month,
I thought you were hideous

a failsafe in most bee species if the queen dies—some workers will lay eggs without the need to mate. The eggs hatch into more drones, which are unable to breed; so in a relatively short time, the hive will die. But in some African bees, the worker can produce male and female eggs. Before long, one of these will replace the queen, and the hive will continue

to prosper, we rose each morning
to collect the nectar of the saguaro,
stored in white cups, waiting
to be tipped and drained.
We were careful never
to get the plant's pollen
on our clothing or hands.
It felt like theft
and genocide.

I would carefully drop
my own seed on the sandy ground,
near the tall cacti, wondering

if my roots could intertwine
with theirs, and produce something new.

Later, I would let it fall
onto your belly, waiting for my sap
to bore a hole in you
and find its purchase.

I waited for you to bulge.
We watched saguaros
dying in the meadow and remained

unconcerned with the consequences of his research, Gregory Pincus (the man who would later give us The Pill), produced parthenogenesis in laboratory rabbits. In his excitement, Pincus couldn't wait the 33-day gestation period, so he killed and slit open the does to find that there were well-developed embryos

inside our room, I would wake
beside you and check your breath
by holding an eye open
in front of your mouth.

On nights it was steady and deep,
I would gather my gloves
and rain gear, crawl between your legs
and slowly climb into you,
carefully parting panels of flesh.

I would hold Zoe to my cheek
and gently sing, until she became
too large to do so.
Once, I brought her back out
with me and showed her our room,
its hangings and ornamentation.

She seemed more interested in warmth
than in my talk of her potential.
I warned her:

(one day the sea will subside
this island becoming a deadly constricting sack
and you will be thrust
into air it will be cold
it will be unfriendly)

Fancy – a nautical bribe; scurvy

we scouted the malls for almost a year,
counting the carriages
(frequency, volume, protection), sizing up
the parents (large fathers, single
mothers), and plotting escape

routes (theatre, food court, service
hallways, parking garage).
The more we planned together,
the more codependent
we became.

The day we brought all our gear with us
(the basket, a wireless mouse,
some opaque goggles), we were practically cuddling
during the walk into the mall,
past the security

station, the diversion, into the food court,
to the defenseless target;
we shouldn't have been able to smell her
father nearby, so we broke
into a run, finally

separating, each one of us
holding one
of the baby's feet, almost
splitting it in two
when we ran

to either side of a pillar.
We howled
in the car, on the ride home;
and it howled
with us.

Khaddar – a blood vessel, which might be made out of cotton, silk, or wool

We stopped near our neighbor's garden,
smelling something familiar other than turnip
or zinnia. I closed my eyes to think,
while you approached his yard, hands in your pockets.

I imagined you pounding
through his door with murdered
stalks in your hands, staining
words into his walls in green
and red: *suffocate* *hurricane*

canary

dissipation

swallow

Each one meticulously rendered
on the walls over his bed,
behind his television, around the water
stains in his bathroom ceiling.
I broke into his garage *the sea*

and rifled through his tools;
I could hear you *repetition*
yelling and scraping against the walls
Unable to keep

you in check, they cracked, *extinct*
spilling out plaster dust.
I clutched a heavy wrench, feeling its weight,
its potential *abort*
energy. We regrouped in the driveway, laughing, *carcinogen*
and I threw the wrench meaninglessly

at his tomato plants.
It landed in the crimson soil
beside the sound of our mirth.

Pulchritude – a widow with a black eye; a swollen tear duct

The night after we closed
her box you heard toads
at the levee and mistook them

for children suffering
You ran half-naked
into the reeds nipples first
in whispers pleading

with them to quench
what you thought
was an enduring lack
of nurture but eventually

you were hands and knees
in the bog mother-screaming
at them to *hush*

and siphon your poise
You clutched handfuls of muck
and grass spread it

over your breasts
and mouth demanding
through mud bubbles

for something to drink
from you

Indigenous – containing one or more pheromones

Your first scent—limbs snapping
from a tree in high summer winds.

Brattice – prelude; investment

I joked, when you weren't around,
Zoe's cough could have been
a hunter's greatest ally.
It sounded so much like a goose:
wheeze, honk, wheeze, honk.

She wouldn't have laughed either,
self-consciously hiding her sweaty hands,
going from adoring to murder
in a short breath. Had we known her structures
would lose their shape, that the rasp and wheeze
were tremors felt only in the mineshafts,

we'd have extracted her ore, daily
a fortune of phlegm, and set to dividing it
amongst our poorest relatives.
We waited while her reserves grew
thinner.

I remember the day my canary died
and the cough almost silenced. I was entranced
by their feathers – their failure to heave
and collapse; you drove Zoe to the hospital alone,

watching as her wisps of air
became narrower and candles dwindled—
waiting for someone—anyone
to escape that precarious excavation.

Matrix – the sensation of starving for questions

Pseudocyesis, or false pregnancy, occurs regularly in dogs. The phenomenon will last for weeks sometimes; the dog will often produce milk, and mother random objects, such as toys or pillows. The dog will begin nesting habits, the abdomen will sometimes swell, and the animal may even go into labor.

We slept with the trowel
lying between us;

you shrugged off any suggestion
to put it back out

in the garden,
caressing it to your chest,

stroking its blade,

cleaning it, coaxing
it to say *mama*.

You begged me to watch

over it so you could go

out with your friends

and have a night free
of responsibility.

I buried it in the park,

near Jack's grave,

thinking that its absence
would provide you with relief.

A female dog can become so lonely that she enters pseudocyesis. Her mammary glands will swell, and she will become confused when she has no pups to care for. Often, she will carry around small toys and try to nurse them. Eventually, the milk will slowly drain from the dog's mammary glands.

You starting locking yourself
in the bathroom after dinner,

taking with you anything
that you thought

was smiling
(a book, marbles, cutlery).

Each morning I wiped the small white pools
of what your body wept

from the pages, the blades.

IV.

The Cold Shoulder

Zoe and I lost you once, in narrow streets lined with foil,
corpses on walkways suggesting your recent passage.

Stopped, asking for directions, we spotted a snow leopard
slinking between dumpsters, head low, haunted

with memories of is demilitarized homeland; a strip
of neighborhood four homes wide and 200 miles long

swallowed us all. Assured of your presence by sympathetic hives,
we stalked the leopard as it gathered stray flaps of meat

and returned to its cub. We spent days like echoes with it, always gauging
the speed of our scent, taking cover behind abandoned phone booths

and newsstands. Maybe it realized our kindred desperation;
or maybe it was sheer chance when it raised its head at the scent

of your sweat and gave chase. We followed, continually fading
in and out of its trail, until we finally arrived at a patient intersection,

store fronts on all sides. In all the windows, statues of you, frozen:
here in winter fleece, across the street in torn strips of red.

Collecting

Without need of our effort
the bark peels itself away
releasing minute puffs of whispered heat;
a whole language falls to the forest floor
intermingling with its leaves and roots.

Always prepared,
you remove the lid from a coffee can
and begin the process of recording
the cryptic silent conversation,
its six-legged words.

Later, sifting through it on the kitchen floor,
we laugh at its subtleties,
fill ourselves with its grief,
watch unmoving as whole sentences
scurry beneath the cabinets,
under the refrigerator, into the peeling walls.

Next week, you say,
we'll take the empty can to Signal Hill,
and listen to what's whispered
under the trunks of long fallen pines.

Red-Crowned Amazon

We wake into an empty,
almost unfamiliar home.
Where is the ring of children?
The stamps? The feral
humans, the instinct?

The living room seems somehow
smaller,

as though the furniture has grown,
sprouted wooden, plastic
roots into the carpet,
staid itself against re-occupancy.

Where once we could move
through the kitchen, frying
the last eggs, your brush
against my arm is more startling

than the tiny grease burns on my wrists.
I would swear this was a house when we bought it.
But fragments of our habitat

continue to fold off into neighboring lands:
today, the den; next week, the back third
of the living room. For the first time
in years we'll crumple onto the bed together,
in a heap, lacking the room to roll

without encountering walls,
enclosed like two loads of laundry.

In a month we'll wake
into a telephone booth,
without the space to spread our arms
or parrot each other's speech.

They've moved me into a bigger office at work,
complete with a familiar child in a cage.

A Catalog of Extinctions

Do you remember
Sunday mornings?

Dusk, whole flocks of snow
geese searching for the moon
in a storm, their orbits creating
inertia; the power lines
blades in a blender.
And the children,
do you remember them falling
from the sky?

Sam, the tabby we sheltered,
and his son still wait at the foot
of thrumming towers for a gosling
buffet to land at their feet.

—

We spent four months hunting
down that house. And it wasn't until you
saw the elm out back, remarked
on the crows roosting in its arms,
how healthy and plump they looked
when you reached in,
pulled one down, raised it to your face,
and took a mouthful, that I conceded and called
off the hunt. Do you remember pulp
joining the atmosphere?

—

We read in a guide to the caverns,
the bats were starving,
farmers consuming their food.
We saw one of the dead drops
of fur at the base of a flow
stone. It was so still,
so unmajestic in the dank.
Do you remember harboring

serial killers?

In front of the couch, the window
cast a thick ray of sun
during summer afternoons.

They stretched out
in plush carpet, tanning
and digesting their victims,
 until they got the call.

Do you remember the music
that blood and rot composed?

I hung my rosary and changed
into my boots.

It would be another month
until either of us dared
cross the kitchen barefoot.
Something unsettled the rain:
a noise outside like the falling
of hundreds of trees.

—

That autumn we stood at the Gulf,
monstrous hands slammed
down at our feet. You shrieked
with each wave's crash,
then laughed. Three hours later,
the island was sucked back
into the water, while we waited
for redemption with an albatross.
It shared its meal, said we were eating
squid, but I couldn't stomach it.
It tasted like the skins
of our groceries.
Do you remember when
they ate the sky?

—

I stepped slowly onto the porch,
saw battalions of housecats marching
across the neighborhood toward a ring
of dark shapes on the horizon.

The birds had found it first.
their feeding frenzy became a banquet
for the cats. Do you remember the Sunday
a blue whale died in the botanical gardens?

We carved three words for each other
into the side of the elm. Its resident crows
threw stones at us from their nests. Whole
families took flight, screaming.

Do you remember when our names used to rhyme?

The Islands

You breathe rivers flow like oak thickets
stand partially rooted unrooted clinging soil
half waving half balance

You exhale thorns rafters aeries
always a little spit I never saw you breathe
utter moan you didn't spit when once

you waved led dunes in our direction all directions
became our self-proclaimed oasis moisture grotto
Your hands still upward twin palm fronds
glisten ominous with chronic undoing
just the barest space for a parcel of terns to lay

Knowing the need for large water you faced the sun
allowed an ocean to flow escape sever your inner thighs
We share hours in your shorelines bodies lying
like broken bodies basking

bottles resting in your shade
One day you decide *turn* your back to the sun
adjoining oceans surrounding your colonies
hatcheries until you transform a desert island littered
with grey-white departures

Zoe carves a boat from her lungs

I float the off-shore current gravity wish
pulling me away the boat springs final leaks
Slowly at first in seconds over my head in cold
seizing blue and pale I turn
through the surface in sight of dry warm palms

Your Evening Commute

In the midst of your talk about global warming
the fog rolled in, the air dampened and a sheen
appeared on all the fixtures in our living room.
I was doing my best to ignore you, reading the headlines
that concern us most: Paris Hilton's venereal diseases,

the rapists in Forney. Soon the words on the opposite page
began to bleed through the photo of an undernourished face.
The page disappeared; only Paris and the reversed words remained,
floating between my hands. I turned from the cloud of gibberish,
reached into the dense mist, found the remote, and pointed it to where

I remembered the TV lies. Instead of the eight o'clock
forecast, I made out a few sparks in the distance,
a television drowning in the wet air. Then the deluge.

You had shifted from weather to vast islands
of plastic that float unchecked in the oceans. Thunder
from near the garage. The ceiling fan wilted,
its blades overtaxed, sagging toward the floor.

We upended the couch for shelter so we could hang our clothes
to dry, but it wasn't until naked that you seemed to realize
the glaciers had sublimated and sped across continents to fall
on your grandfather's old rocker and our favorite couch:

the one with the two depressions in it,
so close that they might be making love.
I stared at your wet breasts until you laughed,
took me by the hand, led me into the downpour,
splashed me with water from the fireplace.

Feed Store

On the way home, a bag of seed
broke open
in the truck bed,
went spilling

across the lanes
and onto the shoulder.
Deciding it impossible
to reassemble, we left
it for the wind to collect,
to deposit in the loose, infertile
earth between homes.

Within four hours,
dead rodents littered
the highway, trading their
viscera, their black colons
for a chance to fatten
their loved ones.

Later you awake
from a dream of bursting rats;
I do my best to calm you,
but I only know one way.

With clenched teeth,
in mid-gasp,
I spill
onto your smooth stomach.

You whisper something
I lose in my daze:

*Why won't they come?
Why don't they
swarm our bed
and feed
when there's no danger?*

A Checkerboard Floor

We've spent years tracking the world
across this kitchen:
weddings, soccer games, campouts,
pub crawls. On some Sunday evening,
you or I had that glorious revelation while dusting.

When was that? Two years ago
we traded our sedan for a half-ton pickup?
We rarely thought of the house,
the mop saw less and less
of the sun, and we stopped
scrubbing the white half of the floor.

Eventually we re-sodded the yard and returned
from four days dodging *javelina*
and drug traffickers on the border;
it was that evening—repairing gashes
in shirts, and uncaking Mexican blood
from our boots—you or I noticed
with a measure of humility

the floor had gone from contrasting to all black.
Resting the needle on the ground,
you or I put a hand on the tile
looked at the other, and said *I don't want it*
then drew the shade and opened the door;
with a brief glance back, a breath
of hesitation, and a last look at the tile,

stepped into the yard,
got stuck waist deep
in the fresh soil,
and stopped breathing.

You or I remain drowned
in fresh air; the other shakes cobwebs from the mop,
meticulously cleanses the floor
and hires three living Mexicans
to wrest the refrigerator from its roots,
pry the dinner table from the floor,

and rip up the tile
to expose the immaculate concrete.

After a week in the sun,
our skin has peeled back, revealing bright,
colorless bone and layers of buried flesh.

V.

Repetition Is the Death of Art

They put me in the company van
and cuffed my wrists to the steering
column, with just enough reach
to steer and shift. I had to lean
forward to pick at the corner of my mouth,
and in the drive-thru, the well-acned cashier
juttred most of his oozing face
through the window to hand me a bag,
transparent with grease.

He yelled an invitation
over his shoulder to a pair of bees
waiting nearby. They flew in,
passed near my face, and headed
to the passenger's seat.

I remember being upset
that first day, since it's so difficult for me to imagine
what one bee might think, much less the thoughts of two.
Had the chains been longer,
I would have attacked them;

instead, I continued the drive nervously
through the standardized brown
and white neighborhoods. The bees circled
each other. My hands were so sweaty
I slipped off the gear shift four times in an hour.
At the end of the day, they left to nestle
among their family, with a promise to return at breakfast.

Within a week, all three of us were excited
to see each other. They know there's no need now
to wait for an invitation; they just head
for my window the moment I pull
into the parking lot. We spend the afternoons laughing,
and they've learned a bit about how to drive stick.
I would say we're friends, but when my cell rings,
they sprint to the back of the van and orbit each other
angrily, until I snap the phone shut. We're laughing again before long.

My family comes to the van
for Sunday dinners, they stare at me
suspiciously when, in mid-drink,
I remember a particularly humorous detail
from one of the bee stories, and I spit
my beer onto my pants. They stare.

How could they understand the humor of bees?

Vulnerability

In 1952, London accidentally coined the term *smog*. For two weeks in the first part of December, coal fires burned to keep cold air at bay; fumes took residence in the streets and eventually the homes and lives of locals. Days worth of *Singin' in the Rain* and *High Noon* showings were cancelled because of lack of visibility. Hopeless romantics wandered the streets, grief-stricken when they discovered that florists had run dry of flowers, that they had given precedence to funerals. For some, the price of a warm home was high.

It was a bloody inconvenience for those who held tickets to the much sought after productions of *The Mousetrap*. The stage was invisible, the roads even more so. Londoners declined outside hospitals, undetected by nurses who couldn't even see the ends of their own wards. The daily death toll rose as high as 900.

To everyone's great relief, Queen Mary was unaffected.

Drinking in a Dive

We swallowed three barrel punches of your gin
and held our noses, smiling with the urge
to cough pain, or vomit. You exhaled first,

illuminating the dank cellar with a cloud of flames,
our own private fireworks. Faces appeared
at the windows, near the ceiling:

children, adolescents, crows,
heading toward light, a sure sign of food.
My eyes watered with the effort of holding it down,

acidic drops rolling out of my tear ducts.
Just when you were about to stop me, I belched
and the cloud came. No flame this time:

pestilence filled in toward the ceiling, rotting
the wallpaper and rafters.
Mildew and insulation snowed from the ceiling,

covering us in seclusion.
Most of the audience fled;
the others, stupefied,

couldn't lift their feet.
Some gasped the cloud
and, spiritless, shattered

through the windows,
relinquishing their bones
to the carpet.

We ducked under an oaken table,
clambering at femurs,
sucking out the fetid marrow.

Your Morning Commute

I was snapped from my droning
reverie and forced from the feeder road
onto the interstate by a care flight helicopter
idling on the pavement, her crew
leaning against their queen, chatting,
some of them smoking. No fitful signals
of urgency; the female pilot let down
her honey hair, combed and refit it
into her helmet;

two firemen slowly walked an empty
gurney toward the droning sirens ahead.
The hour had quickly drawn closed.
The first stage of some grief,
now one less thought, one less
pulse, had been safely contained.
This had become a non-emergency.

Up ahead, a uniformed officer,
the city's soldier, waved us on, standing
next to a silver hog, red and riderless,
overturned in the grass. Looming
above them all, a semi sprawled
across the road, its driver quaked,
delivering a statement, waited to fall
apart like a paper sack filled with bees.

Without carnage, the traffic moves on.
When my cell rings,
a confused bee
thuds into glass;
a rolling stain
pollinates the windshield,
travels my field of view,
over the horizon,
back into the sky.

Vulnerability

A thick haze settled over Donora in late October '48 as the DHS Dragons took the field. Fans said the game was all but invisible in the smog, that the only way they knew these stout boys had scored a touchdown or recaptured a fumble was to listen for cheering from the front rows. No one could explain their loss. Donora was famous for tough football players and hearty steel workers. But by the beginning of the next week, funeral homes had run dry of caskets. 20 dead. Over 6,000 ill.

Residents hid in their homes and put gasmasks on their children. Men still waited in line to punch in at the Zinc Works which burned on, despite the toxic cloud at its shores. Local veterans frantically tore through cellars, attics, and closets, searching for old rucks and mildewed gasmasks. They panted and trembled, waiting for the sound of mortars; for the order to come across the trench (*Over the top, boys!*); for blisters in the lungs.

The rational-minded commented on headlines that read, "Atmospheric Freak of Nature." The terrified clutched to their chest the papers that proclaimed, "Act of God."

And

I spent most of last year suspended
in the distance of remember
treading rum *try not to inhale*
Each morning I found myself
in a clear pool in a cavern

the ceiling pointing accusatory
spires down
toward me the occasional chirrup
of albino crickets their blindness
lending authority to their message
you don't deserve the chance to hide

Like a klaxon call the song
brought bats shrieking
to the pool were they flying
at me or the albinos

they swarmed into the cavern their air
pushing against my scalp
I gasp hold

shut out sight tuck in sink
always waking coffee in one hand
steering wheel in the other maneuvering
along the road to work
I once regained consciousness while cutting

someone off and throwing them
the finger I pitched my mug
out the window at his truck

Yesterday I woke into a full stop
car swimming with bees windows up
honey already beginning to pool
in the ceiling I relax and wait
for them to encase me
as they would the corpse of a drone

VI.

Canaries in the Coal Mines

I

We would never touch them without gloves, or lift their stiff bodies from empty yards, parks and lots, unless we could first breathe another air, shield ourselves from this infected one. We have learned

unloving, how to lack gentility. The science of failing to flinch at the pop of stiff cartilage when we peel back wings to examine the feathers beneath, and insert a needle. We need their blood,

or more specifically, the disturbance it contains. And once we have what we want, once we've pierced and extracted the essence, like a drunken tryst, we discard them, clean

our needles, and callously move on to find their dead sisters. With the least possible ceremony, we'll cremate them. Their remains have become dangerous and irrelevant.

II

By the time I'm home, my hands are barren from repeated scrubblings, antibacterial foam; yet every surface I touch still sprouts scores of birds which race frantically

through the kitchen, across the den, the living room, into the garage, where I can hear them colliding with the tools over my work bench. They drop and break on tables, bookshelves, tile, and cutlery. Not one is spared.

Weeks ago I stopped moving their bodies aside; their ribs snap under my feet as I walk to the kitchen, a new flock springing from the refrigerator door.

When I sit on the couch, a dozen necks
break, a hundred fledglings rise
into the room, skirt the ceiling,
die in a storm of beaks and feathers.

I focus on the television.
You simply kick them aside
as you walk across the blood-stained carpet.

At her request, we remove our shoes
before we enter our daughter's bedroom.
We have yet to see one in there.

III

Usually by Sunday, I can touch your face
without a new confusion
of fowl emerging between us.

I kiss Zoe's freshly washed forehead,
and climb down the shaft
I've been digging behind our home.
As I toil, I consult a canary
in a small wooden cage.

I hold the lantern close to the frail
lungs and watch those thin, undulating
membranes. Their stagnation will warn
of coming danger.

Date Night

The road disappears behind us
in flames, driving aimlessly,
the only relief we can afford.
You bear your red silks,
some mascara and cellophane.

when I was 24 I found
a newly hatched robin
on the ground abandoned

In my coat and tie I negotiate
gears and bends.
Each time we stop for gas,
the station attendant asks if we're going
somewhere special. One asks
if we're in love.

No trace of remorse or surprise in your voice,
I remember stepping outside when I was a kid.
Their voices, incomprehensible.
A total lack of that quaver you carried
when describing our daughter's fall.

its quivering neck barely
supported its head fragile
as the dead grass around it
how could this hollow object
one day leave the ground

The trees on either side of the road burn.
As we pass, we watch those sanctuaries melt.

I scooped out a hollow
in the soil and rested the hatchling there
safe from the wind

You look at me, ask if I know
how many birds are hit by cars every year.

I buried it

with three handfuls
of damp earth

and waited on that soil
until nothing moved

Repetition is the Death of Art

-for Nick Flynn

Lessons in the van

*You can't hear it but the lilac
the orchid even the whore
daisy opens and says please
come take my sex*

*Have you ever imagined what it would be like to be nothing more than just the
delivery mechanism for conception you might be highly rewarded But do you
think the flowers would say that any creature could serve a higher purpose*

*The flowers know we know
even the ants seem to know
you could stop this obsession with cloning
yourselves if you all
simply had the same mother*

*She would probably be very loving
though you wouldn't see her
often.*

*You question obedience because you have always wondered what is a clean
bedroom for Would you rethink if it was the only place new children could
unfold into the world*

*When she calls, we do not question
bring nectar bring nectar
bring pollen bring nectar
There is no I in hive*

Escape Artist

I'm frozen by the thought that, when I'm much older, I'll realize, at the wheel, I have no idea where I am or my destination; surrounded by unfamiliar trees

with the wrong leaves, near an unknown elementary school, arousing suspicion as I exit the car and stare along the busy playgrounds

and teeter-totters. Or worse, I might sit in my own home and fail to grasp its geography, wonder why the couch suddenly faces south,

question what south is, or gape at my dinner of fresh corpses: canaries, sparrows, and zinnias. I might pull a picture

from the mantle to decipher who this girl is, or this young woman with this man that's so strangely like the one who brushes my teeth.

I'm afraid I'll assassinate the bats roosting in the garage, the bees in the walls, the honey in the ceiling. I'll stare blankly at the reflection in her headstone

and wonder why the man in there appears so forlorn, why he appears at all. Sometimes I'll turn from it and ask where she is, whose car I'm driving.

Moving Day

With its remains draped across my fingers,
I follow up the length of the vine.
The garden has become a collection
of paper-thin limbs and crumbling stalks;
a hard stare might shatter it all.

My foot slips off the edge of a flagstone.
First the heel, then calf
and thigh unmake the gray blades of grass.
I tumble and cut through
what was once a rosebush.

My eyes open into the haze
and catch a hint of green,
mostly hidden from the sun.
A shoot, no larger than a finger,
Starts from the soil.

I cup my hands to protect it;
breathing onto it:
grow.

I distract myself with a memory:
your hands bloom
with barely a sound,
bony petals against my ribs and spine;
the burden of your trunk.

Founder's Day

Prologue

The lengths we would go to for privacy, proof
that it was still available. Just stumble
onto the correct expanse of nothing.

Near it, in something
like our own private gulley:
how could the corpse of the Labrador
have stayed there, unmolested, for so long?

The carcass was surprisingly clean,
mostly bone. We stared,
then I asked you to hand me the water.

Red Eye Flight

You said,
some birds are dying for lack of mating grounds.
We were a wall of limbs, mortared with sweat.
I hesitated, and though I almost didn't, I pulled out
and threw a towel and my disgrace over a shoulder,
walked to the shower.

I felt something unnatural in it:
all that sweat, the saliva,
a hand full of screams,
and nothing.
A handful of potential.

*Birds die because they're too stupid
to dodge wires and windows;
they don't even fear their own reflections.*

The Feeding Grounds

That morning, they wheeled Ms. Bailey
out of her house. They stopped

to ask if we had seen her kids, if we could say
they had a motive and her car.

We thought they were on vacation;
the car had been gone for three days.

When the cops left I felt like a statue
in the lawn, a nesting ground.

Your brother called, told you
he had just delivered his first son
in his bathtub; a bird's nest
issued from my open palm,

two eggs, jealously guarded by their mother,
who would sometimes stop and tell me
how hard it was to lay them; that same unrelenting
story about nothing. I was afraid to move

until the day I could feel their hearts.

It was silly, feeding the babies.
They didn't want anything,
until you suggested I chew for them.
I didn't know that earthworms are filled
with soil; they ate
and eventually survived.

A Fortunate Meeting

Washing the down
from my hand, you said *finish*
and I did. It was the first
day I felt
I could be a father.

We slept with our potential
between us.
I dreamed of the sun
and flight, sweat
and silence.

Progress Report

*In response to your request,
we cannot allow you to purchase
an abandoned newborn;
though we may see them from time to time,
we cannot, as you suggest, auction them off.*

*We have yet to determine
if we have delivered a child
with abnormally strong lungs.
The lab report follows:*

*(1) Your entitlement is undermining
the purity of your sperm
samples. (a) We will eventually have to retest,*

*but due to the possibility of contagion, (b) we cannot
allow you to imagine stability, or harvest*

*your hangnails for a period
of at least nine months. (2) Potential young daughters
you have, but the absence*

*on your patio was enough
to drive back even the stoutest*

*of our analysts. (3) Your blood sugar level is high
but not totally abnormal. (4) Please resend
the stool sample; (a) your first was mixed*

*with feathers, and it has become impossible
to separate your tissue from the many
species of bird present. (5) Your choice of burial
plots interests us. (a) Most men your age*

*prefer shade, for themselves
and their loved ones, (b) though no one has recorded*

*a lack of sweat at this destination.
(6) The bloody saliva will normalize*

*with prescribed contemplation: (a) spread a light
blanket over yourself (b) and in a dark room,
with only your toes,
negotiate the revenants
of your self-abuse.*

Prisoner Abuse

You grab me by the sleeve and tear me
from the couch, deaf to protest, cell
of a ruthless urgency.

My feet follow out of instinct
and balance; the will stays
behind in the den.

Barefoot into the snow, past the porch,
press me up against an oak. I know
this might be the end, this stillness,
the lack of motion, the pale quilt
that has become everything.

Your hand on my chest,
pinning me.
Hush. Wait.

My eyes water with chill as it starts:
 the rush of air
 into everything:
 the oak, the hidden
 soil, hibernators, your skin,
 my teeth;

 a wind – like breath,
 moving from all directions
 into each living thing.
Everything expands with the effort,
this sudden and surprising source of air.

Turning from it, I remember
an interrogation scene; a man
dunked repeatedly into frigid water.

Pull him up; he sucks in
one final massive gasp;
down one last time; hold
everything 'til it's still.

The Islands and the Sea

The albatross reaches sexual maturity slowly. During its adolescence, it comesles with many potential partners, until the field is finally narrowed down to one. The two will join in what appears to be beak-to-beak combat: a bizarre mating ritual. Most of this ritual is never repeated, but it culminates in a unique language that the two share. They use neither these calls nor this body language to communicate with any albatross other than their partner.

We understand each other. I know
what *fine* means, and where I need to follow you
when you fail
to tell me how your day went. I remember when,

four years ago, we would caress,
nose-to-nose when we said goodbye for more than a day.
This morning, finishing my third beer,

I'm afraid that if we were to try that again,
we'd break
each other's noses.

Squid beaks are the one part of the animal that the albatross cannot properly digest. Analysis of these beaks shows that many of these squid are too large to have been caught while still alive. Many of these species live beyond the reach of the albatross. And while some albatross have been known to dive as deep as 12.5 meters, they must have, at times, scavenged dead squid from beaches.

For the week before she was born,
every piece of food I touched
sprouted mold. Between waking
and work, the fridge would be thickly carpeted.
I found myself more than once,
face-down in your scraps,
chewing bone, gristle, and onion skins.

I lost nine pounds
and the confidence to rub my eyes
or chew at my fingernails.

That day, you squeezed my hand
so tightly I thought it would rupture

in a cloud of spores.

The albatross feeds its young mouthfuls of plastic bags and garbage; it frequently mistakes these toxic articles for vast swarms of squid that float near the surface of the world's oceans to mate. Young albatrosses rarely survive long. You can see their remains on beaches. Their ribcages resemble prisons for litter.

I dreamed last night:
I went into the pantry,
grabbed a handful of old grocery sacks, stood
over our Zoe's crib, and waited for her
to cry out
in hunger.

Superstitious sailors often believe it disastrous to harm an albatross. But the reality is that they regularly kill and eat these birds, even though some of them believe the birds to be the souls of lost sailors.

Our albums have reduced to cinders,
brittle, that crumble with any pressure.
I woke from the dream and started
turning pages. Under my right hand,
the remainder of a trip to the coast;
under my left, a loose collection,
sleeves of ash.

Clutching the Ceiling

He suggested I find a bar,
and spend days in the fog.
I stumbled, off-
balance, from his office, imagining a tomorrow
in which I would hand over my keys,
my roost, the scent of her room.

I couldn't operate the hallway elevator,
so I echoed my way down a flight of stairs
until I found that I was unable to turn,
to continue down. I shut my eyes
and walked through a "30" painted on the wall,
through inches of concrete, insulation, and wiring;
through a steel girder and a family of rats,
and out into the air.

My latent wings wouldn't open.
I could not ascend.
I briefly remembered I'd left
my wallet in Zoe's room,
as I plummeted through smog
and 30 stories of gravity.
I caught my reflection in the passing windows,
and wondered if it was all right to fall asleep here.

On the ground, near the cave's entrance,
a dead bat, spotted white with fungus,
clutched it to my chest, curling myself
as far into myself as possible,
how I felt the first time I met her,

she knew only to shut her eyes,
flex her slender hands, listen
for the sound of her own voice.

Founder's Day

With two branches, I removed the dog's desiccated
face from its skull. It was like tearing apart
leather and then nothing.
It rolled over, inside-out,
onto the dirt and its own skin.

We boiled the skull in bleach
and water for an hour;
once it had cooled we wondered

*how anything could have stuck
to such a smooth surface.*

Sometime later, the three of us started
rubbing the skull for luck:
me on the way to my deliveries;
you heading to the shop; and her
(though I hear the tear of leather),
when she steps out,
a silhouette that sinks into the spark of dawn.