I. When the Sparrow Drops

My heart leaps exactly once while watching Alfred Hitchcock’s 1963 film, *The Birds*. And it isn’t during a bird attack. I am not particularly stoic or inured to horror cinema; nor do I think *The Birds* falls short of unnerving or nightmare-inducing. It is those things. It just doesn’t make me flinch. The one exception occurs shortly after a swarm of sparrows invades the Brenner house through the chimney. After the chaos, the sheriff has arrived and is processing a report. No humans are injured, but the living room is “quite a mess”; the floor, table, and couch are strewn with the corpses of sparrows commingling with broken Brenner belongings: fruit, sugar cubes, plate ware, etc. It is a frightful landscape. The camera leers on it: the celebratory disorder and potential decay, the networking of dead birds and domestic life. (Fig. 1)

---

During this scene Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) watches Lydia Brenner (Jessica Tandy) clean up. Lydia moves to straighten the crooked portrait of her late husband, Frank, but she does not see the dead sparrow balanced at the top of the frame. Like most observant viewers, I do notice the sparrow, and yet I gasp along with Lydia when it drops. It is at this moment when I am repulsed. (See Figs. 2 & 3) Perhaps it is that tried-and-true horror trope: the aftershock. Perhaps I am influenced by the camera having positioned my gaze with Melanie’s at a moment when Melanie seems to over-empathize with Lydia’s plight. (Afterwards the camera turns to a concerned Melanie, who suddenly changes her plans and decides to stay the night.) But I will argue that this moment taps into something more: an unease about things inhabiting the wrong spaces. The (dead) bird does not belong inside, let alone atop the face of (dead) Frank Brenner. This very adjacency is a violation: a filmic abject that must be jettisoned.

But this is what the birds in The Birds do. They are agents of disorder. They attack neatness, whether that neatness is Melanie’s perfect updo or the smooth trajectory of a love story. They gather in the playground while teachers preach order in the classroom. That they resist explanation is one of the defining features of Hitchcock’s film and its critical discourse. Robin Wood, for example, labels the birds “a concrete embodiment of the arbitrary and unpredictable,” while Lee Edelman argues that the birds stand in for “the violent undoing of meaning.” It is their “nature,” or lack thereof, to go where they don’t belong, to behave like they are not supposed to. They cause confusion of protocol. They, as the ornithologist says at the Tides restaurant midway through the film, describing a similar bird-related event in Santa Cruz, “always make a mess.”

And yet, this mostly unanimous understanding of Hitchcock’s birds hasn’t stopped critics from attaching more specific functions to these creatures of dysfunction. Slavoj Žižek links the birds with a maternal super-ego, while Margaret Horowitz argues they represent the excesses in Lydia’s desires. Jack Halberstam celebrates the birds as a positive form of wild femininity, while Edelman famously aligns these sinthomosexual metaphors with reckless (male) homosexuality. For a wide spectrum of film scholars, then, the birds are simultaneously irruptions of the Lacanian Real; metaphorical slippages of the violence in human relationships (“the human monster displaced”).

---

and even dramatizations of the cinematic apparatus itself. In all of these cases and more, the birds are usually gendered, and they are always diving, biting, pecking, and clawing: living. Never, however, are they dead.

This is despite the fact that dead birds play a central role in *The Birds*. Beyond Lydia’s horrific sparrow, there is also the “poor thing” which breaks its own neck on the door of Annie Hayworth (Suzanne Pleshette)’s home, and the dramatic and emblematic seagull-in-glass in Dan Fawcett’s deathscape of a room. It is these two figures, and the spectacles they offer, that this essay will examine further, using both Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject and Edelman’s position against futurity. The result is a representation of death that perhaps re-imagines Hitchcock’s
apocalyptic, bird-razed landscape at film’s end, moving instead toward a potentiality-rich dystopia: a limitless zone as theorized in Joyelle McSweeney’s notion of the “necropastoral.”

II. When the Glass Breaks

Death, of course, is implied in the film’s source material. The degree to which Daphne du Maurier’s 1952 short story, “The Birds,” is referable for Hitchcock’s film is a favorite debate among the film’s critics. No characters, except the birds themselves, make their way from page to screen: except, perhaps, that of Dan Fawcett, in death. (Fig. 4) Defenders of du Maurier’s influence, however, point to a strong thematic carryover from the short story to the film: i.e., the ineffectuality of authority; the opacity of the birds, including their “unnatural” behavior (pecking at the door “with all the deft precision of machines,” feeding “without hunger, without desire”); even the sonic engine of the film’s skin-crawling affect: its silence but for the fluttering wings. Most of all, however, the film carries over the reader’s (audience’s) heightened awareness of the story’s most important binary, and one which profoundly implicates the spaces of life and death: i.e., the (im)permeable boundary of inside/outside.

Open spaces here signal danger: the birds, whether they attack or not, are always just off screen, in every direction. Wood describes the film’s exteriors as creating a “constant menace of instability,” as if in opposition to the film’s “safe” insides (TB 168). Indeed, in both story and film, the men board up their homes in effort to further separate these two zones: to keep the bringers of death from bringing death indoors. When Melanie spots the lone (living) sparrow at the mouth of the fireplace, in those brief moments before the rest dive-bomb into the Brenner living room, the sparrow causes alarm; it reveals a previously unnoticed gap, the chimney, which connects (and problematizes) the boundary of inside/outside. Just when the viewer begins to anticipate danger for characters outdoors, attention is drawn to those moments when these categories, inside and outside, are transgressed. This is foreshadowed in the film’s opening sequence, when Melanie lets the canary out of its cage in the pet shop, leading to excessive panic from the shop owner. The Brenner house, the car, and the phone box are all cages, too, as Wood points out (TB 168). And the failure of these boundaries to retain their integrity—keeping the monstrous out, the precious in—is a major source of the film’s anxiety.

A bird inside but uncaged must be captured. But more than that: it is a threat of contamination. Dead or alive, Lydia’s sparrow fits within Mary Douglas’s definition of “dirt” as “matter out of place.” There is a symbolic excess, Douglas notes, in the marking of unwanted elements as “unclean”; undomesticated animals inside are not only considered “filthy,” but carriers of

contagion. Food is perhaps the one exception, but in a Hitchcock film, even those dead birds considered appropriately inside—i.e., on a dining table—cause repulsion: sandwiches lie side by side with disease and decay. It is not quite a “perverse meal,” as David Greven has described Rope, but The Birds does continue a thread in Hitchcock’s films connecting consumption and violence, from the chicken neck-breaking story in Rope, to Norman Bates telling Marion in Psycho that she “eats like a bird.” This is despite the fact that, in The Birds, birds are never food. Because they are never safe. Even the lovebirds, in the context of a Gothic film, are harbingers of death; they herald the birds that dive, claw, peck, and bring death more literally. This is the action of The Birds—winged creatures cross from outside to inside, from life to death, breaking down and inhabiting the barriers between the two zones. They emblematize the space where the two zones meet. Perhaps due to the medium—the cinematic fourth wall as a sort of “glass” or “window”—birds show a predilection for invisible barriers: as Lydia explains returning from the Fawcett farm, “All the windows were broken in Dan’s bedroom. All the windows.” There are also the windows of the Brenner house, and the eyeglasses of Cathy’s school friend. In perhaps the most illustrative example, it is the seagull banging again and again at the glass of the phone booth, trying to reach Melanie. It is the moment when the glass breaks, when the bird’s neck snaps, when blood is drawn. (Fig. 5)

III. The Little Corpses

As Douglas writes, “any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins” (PD 122), and these bloody, broken birds mark the cracks in Bodega Bay’s tidy, small-town life. They pile up as the film goes on,

as the small town falls into disarray. It starts with the seagull on Annie Hayworth’s porch, dead in the act of trying to cross such a threshold. Annie and Melanie are talking when they hear the crash and investigate. When they open the door, a dead seagull is shown in the center of the shot, framed between the two pairs of legs. (Fig. 6) The neck is broken from impact. The black eye, lifeless, stares back up at the camera. And like the dead sparrows that later startle Lydia (and me) and make a mockery of the Brenner dining table, the dead gull seems to fill up the screen with meaning. This dead bird, early in the film, is presented as if a clue to something gone terribly wrong.

Offending, living birds bring the panicked hand-waving iconic to the film, but dead birds provoke reactions as well: indifference, repulsion, fascination. With this first corpse, The Birds sets up a difference between Melanie and Annie, these otherwise possible doubles of each other. Annie, investigating the dead gull, says, “Poor thing, probably lost its way in the dark.” Melanie, however, responds, “But it isn’t dark Annie. There’s a full moon.” Annie seems content in her boxed-in world as a teacher, directing children in orderly rows at the schoolhouse, “helping out” the Brenners and specifically Cathy, ushering in their “reproductive futurity” (Edelman, NF 2). When Annie beholds the corpse of the seagull, she quickly explains it away: the bird is merely a bird, entirely separate from her human life. She is like the sheriff, who holds the dead sparrow in his hand and is not repulsed (“That’s a sparrow all right,” he says), or the ornithologist, who reasons with statistics. Melanie, on the other hand, resists any explanation for what has happened. Although implying a kind of agency and therefore meaning to the gull, she ultimately leaves the dead bird figuratively splayed open, uncanny.

According to Julia Kristeva, “the corpse” is the primary figure of “the abject.” Beholding a corpse puts one at the very border (the abyssal edge) of living: it throws into doubt the presumed distinctions between the self, the living human, and dead flesh. Indeed, its mere sight must be thrown aside in disgust in order to reiterate one’s mastery over it, or else all meaning collapses. The danger of contact with a corpse is “the breaking down of a world that has erased its
Kristeva, of course, is referring to a human corpse: for something to require abjection, there must be something intimate, something not entirely foreign, in the abjected object. One’s own blood, for instance. When Melanie touches her bloodied forehead after the gull attack in the bay, she gazes at her red stained glove—fascinated, but also amused. She dabs at the blood, looking at her pocket mirror, as if applying makeup. She has already shown a predilection for the abject, and she beholds the nonhuman corpse with similar fascination. For Melanie, the dead bird is not entirely separate, and it pulls her toward “the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva, PH 2).

Lydia shares Melanie’s vulnerability to avian misadventure, if not her bemusement. Lydia is the maternal, Kristeva’s abject par excellence, ever repulsed, ever judging, ever on the verge of responding to the world around her in horror. Her reaction to the dead sparrow that falls from Frank Brenner’s portrait (like my own) is one of repulsion. Shortly afterwards, Lydia drives out to the Fawcett farm. She notices broken teacups, and then ventures through a dark hallway, as if driven to its endpoint (not unlike Melanie’s ascent up the stairs at the end of the film). Reaching Fawcett’s room, we spot the iconic seagull, which Wood calls “the horrible-beautiful image of the dead gull caught in the smashed window” (TB 162). It is bloody and trapped in the glass like an art piece, dramatically posed, even choreographed. (Fig. 7) This emblem of intersection—animate life and inanimate death—dramatizes the interstitial space between inside and outside, natural and manmade. Blood marks not only its neck, but also its beak; it has attacked before. It is simultaneously dead and a bringer of death. Lydia stares open-mouthed, stunned.

This seagull, of course, is also fake—a movie prop. And in the same room we can spot a terrarium with, what appear to be, fake birds meant to be fake birds: a blue and a black bird

perched on bare branches behind broken glass. But it is hard to tell if these are fake or real, next to the seagull—also fake, also real. They are all, we might say, both and neither. Needless to say, there are many points in *The Birds* when the birds are neither living nor birds, but props attached to the heads of fleeing children, for instance. Or conflated with the camera apparatus itself, as in the famous shot after the gas station explosion, zoomed out above Bodega Bay, looking down at the town with a “bird’s eye view” as gulls hover betwixt. Even the living birds, according to Richard Allen, might be read as deathly: “If their beady eyes suggest an inside, it is a hollow interior.”12 These creatures are sometimes real, sometimes film props; sometimes alive, sometimes dead.

The lovebirds, especially, figure in this indeterminacy. Cathy asks Melanie at one point: “Is there a man and a woman? I can’t tell which is which.” Melanie responds: “Well, I suppose.” But she does not know. Lydia covers them with a cloth when they chirp. They remain hidden, neither male nor female, neither quite normal nor stricken with the same “disease” which has affected the rest of the birds. They become a Schrödinger’s symbol of neither-both, of categorical and boundary confusion. They are not unlike many of the birds that may have died during the film’s action sequences, and that only appear (and disappear) during moments of border crossing. Such “little corpses” gather at the margins of *The Birds*.

IV. Avian Gothic

In du Maurier’s short story, the protagonist Nat Hocken is thrown into constant contact with dead things. When he investigates the neighbor’s farm after an attack, he finds the wife: “He could see her

---

legs, protruding from the open bedroom door. Beside her were the bodies of the black-backed gulls”—human and bird, equal in death. After fifty birds attack him in his children’s room, he beats them “with his bare hands.” Afterwards, “Nat gazed at the little corpses, shocked and horrified.” He, like Lydia, is “sickened” at the sight of it. When the birds attack through the chimney and Nat fights them off with fire, he is taken aback by the “the smell of singed feathers” and struggles to rake up the “burning, smoldering bodies.” In “The Birds,” there is an obsession with the affect of these dead objects, so much so that the threat of birds includes a proliferation of their corpses around Nat’s home, which is “heaped with birds.” In the story’s most desperate moment, Nat devises a plan to use these dead birds as protection against the live ones. He picks them up, one by one, and wedges their lifeless bodies into the cracks of the farmhouse:

The bodies would have to be clawed at, pecked, and dragged aside before the living birds gained purchase on the sills and attacked the panes. He set to work on the darkness. It was queer. He hated touching the dead birds, but he went on with his work . . . . He stuffed the cracked panes with bleeding bodies of the birds and felt his stomach turn.

In du Maurier’s story, then, the house itself becomes an undead creature, a grotesque birdhouse. In the Gothic tradition, of course, the association of seemingly idyllic, pastoral houses with (“queer”) unnatural dangers is nothing new. But the image of Nat’s home—of live birds pecking at dead ones, of dead birds somehow fortifying the boundary between inside and outside—gestures towards a portrayal of the “pastoral” as not just a place where innocence is lost, but where death and the abject thrive and reinvent.
Something similar is happening with the house in Hitchcock’s film. The Brenner home is an unusual Gothic castle: Mitch Brenner (Rod Taylor) lives there part-time, leaving it to his mother and sister most days. Although Kyle William Bishop singles out Melanie as a trespasser typical to the genre\textsuperscript{13}—i.e., someone who becomes privy to the house’s inner-workings while remaining an outsider, her trek up the stairs at the end of the film akin to the Bluebeard (or Bluebird) plot—, the Brenners themselves could be seen as a sort of (“queer”) uncanny family, with a son that seems like a husband and a sister that seems like a daughter. Thus, like Melanie’s infiltration of the Brenner house(hold), the birds threaten to expose certain (im)permeable barriers—and Mitch, like Nat, must board up his home.

Indeed, the Brenner house becomes, like the symbol of continuity analyzed in D. A. Miller’s essay, “Anal Rope” (1990), an anxiety-driven effort to hide the gaps between inside and outside, the same way Hitchcock’s Rope (1948) attempts to hide (or intentionally fails to hide) its cinematic cuts\textsuperscript{14}. Such a house, however, cannot live up to this cut-less ideal. Sparrows enter through its chimney and ravens claw through its doors. In the film’s climax, Melanie walks upstairs to Cathy’s bedroom. She looks up, and gasps at the ceiling ripped open like a wound; the sight of it—the gash, beyond the capacity of mere bird pecking—triggers sublime terror: the castle has become grotesque. Like the gull frozen in glass, the Brenner house is hybridized with dead birds. Wood and steel becomes blood and feathers; it starts to resemble McSweeney’s description of the necropastoral,


where “the membrane separating the pastoral from the urban, the past from the future, the living from the dead, may and must be supersaturated, convulsed, and crossed” (N 22).

V. The Molting Season

Border collapse can be read in multiple ways. A queer reading might valorize that which exposes the fragility of the law, which challenges culturally sanctioned borders between “right” and “wrong” “identities.” Engaging with the abject, embracing a collapse of the inside/outside (or even the invited/uninvited) binary, might seem worth championing, and Melanie appears to be such a border-crosser: she breaks into the Brenner home to deliver the lovebirds; she pushes herself into Lydia’s life, and Annie’s social circle, without either’s permission; she (reportedly) jumped naked into a fountain in Rome; and her entry into the narrative, retroactively, is a prank which results in “the breaking of a plate glass window.” Like the birds, the action of Melanie is to cross from outside to inside, to escape the “gilded cage” and ignore propriety; and like the birds she is perhaps dive-bombing to her end. Melanie is also the closest thing without wings to Edelman’s “sinthomosexual” in The Birds. She operates, as if free of a rightful place, without assigned positionality in Bodega Bay, a sort of incoherence in the fabric of the town. Her social status allows her to go where she wants, do what she wants. Melanie becomes—as Douglas describes certain marginalized, hybrid figures—someone “who confound[s] sacredness with uncleanness” (PD 160). She is an inarticulate figure, morphing from socialite to shopkeeper, and from perfectly kempt to increasingly disheveled. She represents the sort of anti-categorical potentiality that needs to be abjected in the cycle of social realization: to be separated, like the birds in the pet shop, “to protect the species.” And certainly the concerned mother in the Tides restaurant stands in for this process when she calls Melanie “evil,” associating Melanie with the birds and reacting to her illegibility as contagion. (Fig. 10)

In No Future, Edelman argues that such incoherencies “can endanger our idea of the future, conjuring the intolerable image of its spoliation or pollution” (NF 113). That concerned mother, who shields her children from the apocalyptic dialogue in an earlier scene, represents the audience’s fear that the credits will roll before a future safe for their children is secured. There is an apparent conflict, in other words, between the desire to explain the birds and clean up their mess—i.e., what we might call the hygienic, heteronormative plot—and queer “indeterminacy.” And yet, the trajectory of The Birds is not linear so much as it is cumulative. The birds merely proliferate. “Don’t they ever stop migrating?” Annie asks, as if there is something continuous, and undead, about their behavior. No, they keep circling, and there is no stopping them. They continue to gather. They will spread across the landscape, adding to that fetid futurescape: the birds having taken over the Brenner house, watching the family drive off, as Bodega Bay is overcome by a plague of feathers.

Such figures are difficult to assign meaning to, let alone political utility. Donna Haraway’s “cyborgs” are perhaps too brightly optimistic, too cleanly robotic, to harness these avian agents. Instead, Tippi Hedren’s movements when the birds attack the Brenner house that final night, rubbing herself against the couch and walls of the house, call forward to Mel Y. Chen’s memoiristic account of object-intimacy with a “dead” couch, “an intimacy that does not differentiate, is not
Fig. 10: “I think you’re the cause of all this. I think you’re evil.”

dependent on a heartbeat.”15 In “Toxic Animacies, Inanimate Affections” (2011), Chen seizes on “the potential to resignify toxicity as a theoretical figure” that straddles “life” and “nonlife” and the boundaries of bodies (TA 266). There is potential for a queer productivity in toxins, in the osmotic mixology of the improper and the proper that cannot be denied, ignored, or abjected, because it is something which occurs microscopically and thus inseparably. It is also, arguably, another way to organize *The Birds*, as when Lydia wonders about the chickens: “You don’t think there’s something going around, do you?” Here is an alternative trajectory: “something going around” is its own teleology, a spreading or building-up that permeates barriers. The plague of feathers is a “future” displaced on the “present” horizontally.

VI. “A Particularly Dangerous Time”

Toxicity destabilizes understandings of the natural world. Decades after *The Birds*, this knowledge has become secondhand: “nature,” previously mythologized as “pure,” is impacted by pollution and industrial processes, creating a hybrid environment: the “Anthropocene.” Heather Sullivan, drawing on Timothy Morton’s concept of “dark ecology,” has highlighted the discursiveness of nature in order to muddy the urban/natural binary in literature. Sullivan theorizes the “dark pastoral” as a modern representation of nonhuman life where humans can no longer conceive of themselves as

such an enmeshing is thematically central to *The Birds*, starting with du Maurier’s short story. Written in 1952, “The Birds” cannot but recall the bombings during World War II, nor can it avoid the new atomic age, when the sky becomes a place of possible military attack and radioactive material. Here is the “queer bioterrorist” of Chen’s imagining *en masse*—the fictional cleanliness of human lives undermined by abnormalities of nature in which humans are inextricably implicated. In such a dark pastoral, one can no longer look down at the dead bird on the porch without feeling pulled toward that place of meaninglessness.

The pastoral, as McSweeney points out, has traditionally been the site of death: of leprosy, of the plague, of burial. In the age of the Anthropocene, it is also the radioactive slippage of Fukushima washing up on the beaches of the Pacific Northwest, complicit with Chen’s toxicity. It is the seagull choked by the plastic six-pack ring, emblematic of the dark pastoral. If the classic pastoral shores up separations between unhealthy urban strife and wholesome rural peace, the necropastoral explodes this binary. It is a double of the urban, separate but still adjacent, and “entailing an ambiguous degree of access, of cross-contamination” (McSweeney, N 21). In the landscape of the necropastoral, death is an ever-present horizon; in its visual language, the abject becomes an aesthetic, and infection and decomposition become artistic “styles.” The necropastoral is, in other words, a queering of the literary pastoral, one that, I believe, applies potently to *The Birds*, a film that offers glimpses of such a landscape in its periphery.

In particular, *The Birds* gestures toward the necropastoral as a sort of queer utopia (or at least an inverted dystopia) in those moments when boundaries and categories fall apart, which become flashes of a not-yet-here potentiality in the form of a (morbid) aesthetic. And what better emblem for such a potentiality than a dead seagull stuck in a broken glass window? In both *The Birds* and its source material, death becomes pandemic at such membranes. It is the heap of dead birds beyond the door of Nat’s house. It is the corpse of the sparrow atop Frank Brenner’s portrait and the bloody bodies of Annie Hayworth and Dan Fawcett. With death as its “theoretical figure,” the necropastoral offers a potentiality on par with any utopian impulse in Chen and Haraway: a breakdown of the line between man and nature, inside and outside, between proper and improper bodies, and between supposedly healthy living and supposed unhealthy living (something often associated with and misdiagnosed as the “death drive”).

**VII. Avian Time**

Bishop has described Melanie’s ascent to Cathy’s bedroom at the end of the film as her final invasion into the heart of the house, “moving on her own accord from the space of social discourse to one of sexual intercourse” (GP 143). Certainly Melanie, like the birds, is going where she doesn’t belong. It

---

is not, however, her first infiltration into the Brenner home. She has, for example, spent the night already, and lain with Lydia at the height of their potential lesbian realization. Rather, Melanie’s ascent upstairs, to the place of death as crossed-boundary, is a sort of culmination. She is graduating to the place of meaningless that the abject promises. (Figs. 12 -14) She has been doing so all along. She has become less concerned with her performance as woman, and is moving headlong toward the formlessness that the necropastoral represents. She is, like birds, molting.

In Cathy’s bedroom there are disassociated limbs, scattered at different angles and points-of-view, and multiple species of birds all combined into one mess. It is not death, though it is certainly death-like: a “creative formlessness” that, according to Douglas, is as much a “symbol of beginning and of growth as it is of decay” (PD 162)—a wallowing in necropastoral filth. Melanie gives in to the violence of the birds, just as those of the necropastoral play in the abject, as if allowing it to pass through and break down their bodies. This is not Edelman’s “death drive”—the empty repetition of beating wings in a vacuum—that does not affect the greater structure. The monstrosity of The Birds has been deconstructed into something enterable, something Melanie can be absorbed into—as soft as a bed of wings. Embracing the necropastoral’s toxic fecundity is a jouissance in the glee of abjection. It is a rush headlong not into oblivion, but into compost. In the process, Melanie becomes a “dead bird” stuck in a broken window at the shattered intersection of endless binaries.

The difference between the drive to formlessness, here, and the “death drive” of Edelman’s No Future has to do with the matter of time. Where Edelman’s “no future” implies “no human-shaped future,” The Birds, like many other thrillers, is militantly in the present tense, forced as such by the always-imminent interruption of birds. The necropastoral, too, is eminently in the present. “The present tense rejects the future,” McSweeney writes; “It’s self-defeating; its rejection of survival into a future may be infanticidal” (N 153). Indeed, if Edelman’s normalizing
future is linear and triumphalist, then the necropastoral works to grind this trajectory to a halt. In this limitless zone “time runs like a fluid in all directions” (McSweeney, N 13); it builds up and spreads—is nonlinear. Thus the necropastoral provides a way to read optimism in anti-futurity, in the present-day middle ground between life and death. Granted The Birds does not begin with such a zone, but by the end of the film, how else can one describe Bodega Bay? As the Brenners leave by car, the sky still dark, maybe dusk, maybe dawn, the birds waiting and the future indeterminate, how can one force closure upon such a narrative? Melanie was driven to the death-by-feathers just a few minutes ago, and who’s to say she won’t be driven there again?

McSweeney has likened this churning, chewing, mutating cycle of the necropastoral to “corpse time,” or “bug time,” as if stuck in constant decomposition, “permanent posthumousity” (N 33); “a time defined by a spasming change of forms, by generational die-offs, by mutation, by poisoning, a dynamic challenge to continuity, and by sheer proliferation of alternatives, rather than linear succession” (N 41). At the end of The Birds, there is, perhaps, “avian time”: when the dead-like take to the air. They migrate and spread in all directions. Society in Bodega Bay has collapsed, ushering in a nuclear half-life, a return to a primordial state: a sludge of molted feathers, a toxic imaginary that will perhaps create the right muck for some new evolution to crawl out—or rather, fly out: amphibious and avian, human and nonhuman, alive and dead.