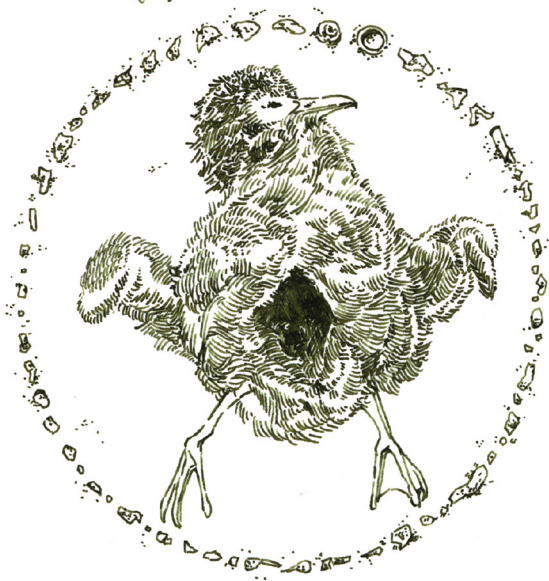


WASTE: A RECOGNITION



STRANGER'S CHILD

GEORGE OPPEN

Sparrow in the cobbled street,
Little sparrow round and sweet,
Chaucer's bird—

or if a leaf
sparkle among leaves, among the
season's
Leaves—

The sparrow's feet,
Feet of the sparrow's child touch
Naked rock.

REFERENCED FROM PHOTOGRAPHY
BY CHRIS JORDAN: *NECROPSY OF
LAYSAN ALBATROSS CHICK, MIDWAY
ISLAND, 2012.*

INK ON PAPER, 2025

II. WALKING TO SCHOOL

Near the end of November, a half-eaten Oreo McFlurry appeared on the sidewalk route I walk on to go to school. By the next time I passed it, it had become a speckled milky puddle, container askew on the grass, nestled in a wreath of fallen leaves. It remained that way for a day or two, and then it disappeared.

Around the same time the container appeared, a plastic water bottle materialized beside it, cap screwed on, half-filled with urine. I still walk past this every time I go to school.

Around the same time, I dreamt vividly one night (if a dream can be characterized as vivid by a single clear image retained upon waking). In the dream I knew I was indoors somewhere in Charlottesville, and the single clear image was a fraction of a glance at a window where I saw a dense fresh snow on still-autumnal trees. The next morning on the walk to school it was a balmy 65 degrees out, and the holly bushes walling the perimeter of one of the fraternities in front of the arts building had started to flower, perfuming the air with a heady spring scent.



On a good day a walk can make me feel as if I were a struck bell. Was the dense snow on autumn leaves in my dream another life of the McFlurry on my walk, seasons melting into one another until the characteristics of one came to define another? How long would the piss remain intact in

its plastic vessel before it took on (or was taken on by) a different form, a new life? Would it be before or after the microplastics shed off the tires of the cars zooming past me found its place and use in life forms, the way mitochondria are speculated to have become organelles of cells?



On the walk to school it is not uncommon to encounter the dead. One of the more jarring encounters: a young fawn in the gutter of the street, the tips of its ears inches from the wheels of speeding cars, tips of its hooves just edging over into the sidewalk across the grass buffer, perfectly intact, as if asleep on its side with its eyes open and glassy. It was so perfectly intact that for the three days it was there I didn't once see flies come to visit it, though I'll admit it was hard to look at directly as I walked by it. There was no avoiding it, I found myself wishing I didn't see it, but it felt wrong to avert my eyes. A few feet away from the fawn was a dead goldfinch, wings splayed out. The goldfinch's body disappeared much quicker than the body of the fawn.

Another time, I encountered a dead squirrel, flattened in the road. A crow picked at it once or twice before flapping itself over a couple feet near a living squirrel, who had glanced at the crow's earlier activity with apparent disinterest, quickly returning to its task of burying acorns.

More commonly the dead I encounter on this walk are lanternflies, and their bodies are not intact but mangled, noticeable mostly because of their bright red lower wings, exposed through their crushed or crumpled upper wings. In a class held outdoors earlier in the semester my classmates and I watched as a lanternfly flickered into the discussion circle the class had formed, and then we watched righteous satisfaction light up one classmate's face as they brought their shoe down onto it. With a shrug they said it was their civic duty. Lanternflies are condemned with invasive status in most places they're found in the United States, marking their bodies for righteous mangling. Along with the tree-of-heaven, the lanternfly's preferred host plant for feeding and laying eggs upon, the species' origins are traced to the southeast of the Asian continent. In the United States, both the lanternfly and tree-of-heaven thrive in areas that have been instrumentalized for human use, whose previous occupying ecosystems have been decimated or cleared to serve human purposes. These "disturbed" areas include road and utility easements, edges of forested areas, edges of urban or suburban developments, and agricultural lands. Invasive status is conferred mostly due to the

lanternfly's entanglement with the last of these: it successfully feeds on fruit trees and grape vines, affecting the trees' yield, and subsequently, their economic viability. The lanternfly's introduction to agricultural contexts spurs humans to turn to insecticides. The claim that lanternflies—among other so-called "invasive" species—are ecologically destructive or pose an imminent threat to biodiversity requires a conservative notion of biodiversity and of ecosystems themselves. New entities, living and non-living, have always been introduced into the assemblages from which ecosystems arise; the equilibrium of an ecosystem is in constant flux, as are the ecosystems themselves. Quite obviously, to me anyways, it is not the lanternfly that engages in destructive interaction upon introduction with its surroundings, but the humans who have in the first place capitalized upon the land for their own ends, assigning it and its inhabitants economic value based solely on its utility to humans, dismissing the needs of its other inhabitants; and who follow up subsequently with poisons aimed at removing all lifeforms other than the one that it has determined value in.

Most commonly the dead I encounter on this walk are scattered at the foot of the architecture building, all around its glassy perimeter. I had never seen a dead hummingbird before, much less three dead hummingbirds. A robin, a thrush, others, various states of decay, feathers oddly neat in their patterns, small bones neater still in their skeletal arrangements. These dead birds are what I dread most about walking to and from school. I learn others feel similarly. I learn there are initiatives to make the large glass windows of the school visible to birds, though most of these initiatives have been blocked by the school's architect, who is protective of the aesthetics of the building. The aesthetics of the building! I wonder if the architect realizes that the aesthetics of the building for me are now characterized by callous indifference to the presence of the dead, or preference of the aesthetics of decay and inverted bodies, or failure to recognize the moving beauty of the living birds that animate the building, offering it song, dashes of color, flashing delight. If life is precious where life is precious, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore suggests, then here, according to the architect, it is not.

Life reinvents itself in many ways, and one of those ways is through death. It isn't death that is offensive to my ethic; what is offensive is the rendering of life into something unprecious, disposable. This disposability becomes a foreclosure of possibilities, of recognitions and resonances. It invites meaninglessness. ✱

On the ETYMOLOGIES of WASTE

original: WILLIAM VINEY¹

9 January 2011

edited: 5 April 2025

It is worth recalling the etymology of the word ‘waste’ and its relationship to ideas of the divine, the human and the land. We take the word ‘waste’ from *vastus*, giving it the same Latin root as the word ‘vast’ and meaning a space that is void, immense or enormous. The vast etymology of **waste** takes in its vacant neighbours, *vanus* and *vaccus*, and includes the verb *vasto*, “to make empty or vacant, to leave unattended or uninhibited, to desert”.²

Waste is both an *a priori* emptiness and a thing that has become empty: it is both a pre-existing desert and a space that was once but is no longer inhabited. It is important to stress the landed nature of this conception of **waste** as well as its temporal and causal flexibility. The earliest uses of the word invariably denote an enormous and empty sense of a depopulated landscape, “uninhabited (or sparsely inhabited) and uncultivated country; a wild and desolate region, a desert, wilderness”³, spaces that humans had either left uninhabited; or, literally, land that had “*bicam waste*”—land that

1 This was originally posted on William Viney's blog, *Waste Effects*, on January 9, 2011. It is presented here without the author's knowledge. <https://narratingwaste.wordpress.com/2011/01/09/etymologies-of-waste/>

2 See Charles Lewis and Charles Short (eds.) *A Latin Dictionary: Founded on Andrews' Edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary* (1879; Oxford: Clarendon, 1945).

3 The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the first recorded use of the word ‘waste’ can be found in the Trinity College Homilies, written in the first half of the twelfth century: “Ac seðen hie henen wenden, atlai pai lond unwend and bicam waste, and was roted oueral and swo bicam wilderness.” *The Oxford English Dictionary: Second Edition*. 1989.

humans could not inhabit, such as deserts, seascapes or mountain ranges. Through words like 'devastation' we see the other concept of **waste**, as destroyed or depleted material conjoined with its vast etymological root, a space in which humans cannot or can no longer subsist, a space where their relation to the environment overwhelms utilitarian exchange. What is important is the relationship struck between land and the human capacity to cultivate or otherwise make that land a productive place in which to dwell: this landed notion of **waste** exceeds more modern associations with the commodity form, environmental depletion, financial excess or bodily excreta, carrying with it broader intimations of stewardship, scale, shelter and time.

ON WASTE AND TIME: Time is codified by how, if, and when humans might use something; on the other hand, **waste** is apparent emptiness, the 'nothing' that characterises all that falls beyond human control. **Waste** describes spaces that gain definition from the productive time that they cannot perform. Put another way, **waste** is a condition which does not coincide with the time of human activity.

ON THE BIBLICAL ORIGINS OF 'WASTE': **Waste** is not only something created by humans but is something primeval, a condition that occurs prior and in distinction to the human, a condition that separates the sacred and the profane⁴. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, **waste** forms the condition by which humanity can come to be and take ownership of its environment: it is the condition that precedes a "heaven[ly] benediction"⁵.

(continued on next page)

4

Echoes of Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*:

"All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, **all that is holy is profaned**, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere."


5

This is something to which King Lear appears all too aware when, in response to Cordelia's refusal to accept the gift of his land, he expounds the classical maxim *ex nihilo nihil fit*, "Nothing will come of nothing" (F.1.1.88). In doing so, he recalls how God's creation and redistribution of the earth's resources was founded upon a formless void that is described in the Book of Genesis. Lear's act of division parallels God's intervention: both are done in distinction to and against a sense of 'nothingness'.

(cont.) From what kind of ‘something’ does God create? Many Biblical scholars continue to translate the formless, primeval vacuum that precedes God’s division of earth from sea as a state of **waste**. Genesis 1:2 can be (and has been) translated:

“And the earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.”⁶

Variants suggest that the earth was “without form or void”⁷ or was “formless and empty”⁸ but, semantically and etymologically, all conclude the original state of the earth prior to God’s intervention was one dominated by the immense and uninhabitable conception of **waste** that medieval uses of the word upheld: “a wild and desolate region, a desert, wilderness.”

This variation is born out of the peculiar and rather idiomatic Hebrew expression, *tohû wābohû* *והת ובהו*, through which Judaic scripture describes the condition of the earth as in this ambiguous and desolate condition. The expression *tohû wābohû* is of obscure providence, appearing at just two other occasions in Judaic scripture (the others are Jeremiah 4:23 and Isaiah 34:11, both of which effectively return the earth to Gen 1:2). There remains considerable debate about how to interpret and translate *tohû wābohû*, but, following David Tsumura, we may make the following distinction: *tohû* means a “desert” or “**waste** land” and *bohû* means “empty” or “uninhabited place”. Comparing the twenty other occasions that *tohû* appears in the Old Testament, Tsumura concludes that *tohû wābohû* should be understood as “unproductive and uninhabited”⁹. For Albert Barnes, this amounts to “an absence of all that can furnish or people the land” and Keil and Delitzsch gloss that, “The coming earth was at first **waste** and desolate, a formless, lifeless mass”¹⁰. The state of the earth prior to God’s intervention has been considered, therefore, to be one of mingled confusion, a noisy and desolate plane of water that can produce nothing. 

- 6 S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (1904; London: Methuen, 1948). Others have “a formless waste”, see E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1983).
- 7 Revised Standard Version
- 8 New International Version
- 9 David Toshio Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2: A Linguistic Investigation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989) 31, 42.
- 10 Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Bible*, Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1866) vol. 1, 48.



Fig 1. Flowers of the Bradford pear tree.

豆梨 (dòu lí)

BRADFORD or
CALLERY PEAR
(*Pyrus calleryana*)

It's mid-April now, full-swing of spring. The earliest bloomers, those first heralds here in Virginia, have by now mostly lost their flowers, intent instead on putting out leaves. Among them is the Bradford pear tree, a cultivar of the Callery pear, that has in recent years become the subject of popular derision. Those in the know are quick to inform anyone admiring of these early sprays of white blossoms that, actually, these trees are a highly invasive species that should be considered an affront to the eyes as much as they are to the nose— don't you know that they smell like rotting fish, don't you know that they smell like *semen*?

Originally native to East Asia, its botanical name *pyrus calleryana* is in reference to Joseph Callery¹, an Italian-French Roman Catholic missionary who collected plant specimens from his early 19th century visits to Southeast Asia, bringing many back to Europe. In the United States, the Callery pear's introduction was the work of Frank N. Meyer². At the turn of the twentieth century, Meyer was commissioned by David Fairchild, the head of the then recently-established Foreign Seed and Plant Introduction Office³ in the U.S. Department of Agriculture⁴ to "collect, purchase, test, propagate, and distribute rare and valuable seeds, bulbs, trees, shrubs, vines, cuttings and plants from foreign countries for experiments with reference to their introduction into this country"⁵. At the time, a chief concern was the decimation of economically valuable edible French pear orchards by fire blight (caused by a bacteria) in the Pacific Northwest. On Meyer's expeditions to China, he was particularly interested in pear varieties that exhibited resistance to fire blight.

One such varietal was the Callery pear. Seeds were sent back to the United States to further investigate its resistance to fire blight and its viability as rootstock for grafting.

In 1952, John Creech, a USDA horticulturist, noticed a particularly globular Callery pear tree for its potential as a landscaping tree. He grafted cuttings from this tree to other rootstock, preserving the genetic information of the original tree so that these, too, would mature into the same aesthetically-pleasing form. This specific variety became known as the Bradford pear, which was commercially released in the early 1960s, coinciding with the development of many suburban neighborhoods⁶. The idyllic suburban dream that captured so much of the American imagination drove many of the new suburbanites to incorporate the Bradford pear tree as part of their lawn landscaping.



- 1 Theresa M. Culley, Nicole A. Hardiman, The Beginning of a New Invasive Plant: A History of the Ornamental Callery Pear in the United States, *BioScience*, Volume 57, Issue 11, December 2007, Pages 956–964, <https://doi.org/10.1641/B571108>
- 2 Culley, Theresa M. The Rise and Fall of the Ornamental Callery Pear Tree. *Arnoldia*, 74(3): 2–11.
- 3 Jones, J.J. (2004). The World Was Our Garden: U.S. Plant Introduction, Empire, and Industrial Agri(culture), 1898-1948 (Publication No. 3166642). [Doctoral dissertation, Purdue University, Lafayette, Indiana]. Purdue University ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.
- 4 Volk, Gayle and Patrick Bryne. "The USDA Plant Introduction Program (2020)". *Crop Wild Relatives and their Use in Plant Breeding*. Pressbooks, 2020. <https://colostate.pressbooks.pub/cropwildrelatives/chapter/usda-plant-introduction-program/>
- 5 Language quoted from the Appropriations Bill that created the Section of Seed and Plant Introduction with the USDA.
- 6 In the postwar-Cold War period between 1950 and 1970, 83% of all U.S. population growth occurred in suburban places. [https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/National_History/U.S._History_\(American_YAWP\)/26%3A_The_Affluent_Society/26.02%3A_The_Rise_of_the_Suburbs](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/National_History/U.S._History_(American_YAWP)/26%3A_The_Affluent_Society/26.02%3A_The_Rise_of_the_Suburbs)

So why the fall from Americans' good graces? Bradford pears were selected to be economically viable landscaping varieties because of their full flowering, their resistance to fire blight, the quickness of their maturation, and their ability to successfully grow across a large range of soil types. Because they are grafted trees from common rootstock, they were originally all genetically identical, incapable of producing fruiting bodies. However, cross-pollination occurred between the Bradford pear and other Callery pear varieties, in addition to possible cross-pollination from genetically unidentical sprouts coming from the rootstock itself. This made it possible for them to produce fruits, which were eaten by birds who deposited the seeds elsewhere, giving rise to a profusion of Callery pears in places where they were not planted and their subsequent designation as "invasive". Their early flowering, hardiness, and adaptability across many soil types allows them to outcompete other species, allowing them to quickly dominate landscapes they are introduced to. Many of these are "disturbed" landscapes: patches of growth along roadsides and at the edges between urban development and forests. Irritatingly to people, the branches of the trees are weak, attributed to the branching pattern that gives the tree its signature globular form, causing the trees to split easily. Some varieties have developed prominent thorns, capable of popping automobile tires.

According to the National Invasive Species Information

Center run by the USDA, an invasive species is:

- 1) non-native (or alien) to the ecosystem under consideration and,
- 2) whose introduction causes or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health.⁷

This designation marks so-called "invasive" species for eradication. Both clauses play a part in shaping the argument: it is a species that we do not recognize as members of an ecosystem, and it is a species that is a detriment to human economy; thus, it is a moral imperative to destroy it. Rather than inviting ourselves to also adapt to form new relationships with flourishing species, because they have become alien to our conception of them, it is not us who should adapt; it is them who should be destroyed.



The Callery pear's rise to prominence in the United States has been driven by its objectification: first through evaluations on its economic viability for industrial agriculture, and later its aesthetic desirability as commodity. But in its abundance, it has escaped human containment and developed an existence of its own, what might qualify for Anna Tsing's definition of *feral*⁸. In the single-family residential areas where it was willfully planted, its weak branches and automobile-stopping thorns are now seen as insurance liabilities, more of an economic risk than an asset. In marginal areas, in

7 <https://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/what-are-invasive-species>

8 <https://feralatlus.supdigital.org/index?text=introduction-to-feral-atlas&tttype=essay&cd=true>

areas designated in the American imagination as “natural,” they serve as stubborn reminders of the failure to contain them to their purpose as ornamental objects, marring the purity of the fetishized “native wilderness.”

The argument for the invasiveness of the Callery pear is largely predicated on its ability to thrive upon introduction to an ecosystem, disturbing the balance previously achieved by the species native to that ecosystem, and subsequently leading to a reduced presence of some of these species⁹. Of course, the Callery pear has proven its role in these ecosystems; its very introduction—by way of cross-pollination, by way of seed dispersion in natural areas—would not be possible without its pollen distributed by pollinators, or its fruit being eaten by bird species. Rather than mere disturbance, what has been destructive to native ecosystems are the circumstances behind the profusion of Callery pears: the industrialization of American agriculture and the ever-expanding sprawl of the American suburbs and their asphalted automobile networks. The Callery pear’s introduction and subsequent thriving is indicative of lifeforms adapting, to their own ends, towards more life.

So many of those calling for the systematic eradication of the Callery pear from lawnsapes do not call for the systematic eradication of the suburban lawn, whose existence implies a selection of flora indicative of

the property-owner’s aesthetic sensibility and environmental consciousness, all in service of property designation. This is understandable, for the suburban lawn is a crucial component of the suburban home, itself the symbol of achieving the American dream, that successful concentration of individual wealth. So instead, they suggest that a more amenable flowering tree—preferably a “native species”—serve the aesthetic and functional purposes previously satisfied by the Callery pear. They want their vision of the American suburbs, and they want their pristine native wilderness, too.

It is misdirection to say that the mistake that must be undone is the introduction of the Callery pear. The responsibility for the changing climate and destruction of ecosystems does not lie with the Callery pear. It lies with people, with our sprawling lawns and our constant mowing and removal of leaves; our insistence on suburban single-family homes as the primary mechanism by which assetized wealth can be secured, and by which local municipalities collect revenue for public services, and this as the driver of developmental sprawl, requiring more miles of impervious asphalt services to facilitate the personal automobile, all of which requires so many more tens of thousands of miles of piping, wiring, energy, material extracted from the earth, all of which expands the domain where humans dictate and design what should exist on that land. That is all squarely our responsibility.



In China, the name for what is known as the Callery pear is 豆梨 (dòu lí) — “豆” means “bean”, so the direct translation is “bean pear”. This is because the pear fruits produced are small, about the size of beans. The wood of the tree has been used to make furniture, carve seals, and make other crafts; the roots, stems, leaves, and flowers are used in Chinese medicine. Leaves and roots are used to treat dry cough; branches are used to treat cholera, vomiting and diarrhea, and nausea; the fruit is used to treat dysentery. The sugar content of the fruit generally reaches between 15-20%, and though not generally desirable to eat, can be used to make wine¹⁰.

Life is more abundant, more richly experienced when we form relationships to be sustained with the living world we are part of. Why does it feel like an option to gleefully paint the Callery pear as invasive villain, to “phase it out” by suggestion of eradication, as opposed to learning to live with it? The birds have learned, so why can't we? ❀



Fig 2. A robin attends its nest. Robins are one of many bird species that enjoy the fruits of the Bradford pear tree.

Recognition

CHARACTERS AND NOTES FROM HANZIYUAN
[HTTPS://HANZIYUAN.NET/](https://hanziyuan.net/)

mù

Original meaning:

tree or wood

Resonant meanings:

tree, wood, lumber, wooden, nature

Character decomposition notes:

a tree with branches at the top and roots at the bottom

mù

Original meaning:

eye

Resonant meanings:

eye, look, see, division, topic

Character decomposition notes:

an eye

xiāng

Original meaning:

similar, to look seriously, to observe, to judge

Resonant meanings:

mutual, reciprocal, recognition, each other

Character decomposition notes:

a tree and an eye interacting

xīn

Original meaning:

heart

Resonant meanings:

heart, mind, intelligence, soul

Character decomposition notes:

the human torso showing breasts, stomach, and navel, referring to the heart

xiǎng

Original meaning:

to think

Resonant meanings:

think, speculate, plan, consider

Character decomposition notes:

to look at with the heart



Oracle bone script

(1600 to 1100 BC)

Oracle bone writings mainly recorded the results of official divinations carried out on behalf of the Late Shang dynasty royal family. Divinations took the form of *scapulimancy*, where bones were exposed to flames, creating patterns of cracks that were then interpreted.



Bronze script

(1400 to 700 BC)

Refers to the formal script engraved in Late Shang and Western Zhou dynasty bronze vessels, such as bells and *ding* tripodal cauldrons.



Seal script

(Greater seal 1000 to 200 BC;
Lesser seal 200 BC to present)

A decorative engraving script that evolved from bronze writing during the Zhou dynasty ("greater"). The Qin variant became somewhat standardized, and was adopted as the formal script ("lesser"). It was still widely used during the Han dynasty.



Li Shu "clerical" script

(200 BC to present)

Evolved from the late Warring States period to the Qin dynasty. It is characterized by its rectilinearity, a trait shared with regular script, and named for its use by Qin-state clerks.





CF010257 UNALTERED STOMACH
CONTENTS OF A LAYSAN ALBATROSS
FLEDGLING, MIDWAY ISLAND, 2010

CHRIS JORDAN
PHOTOGRAPH

What is the first thing you see when you look at this photo? The first thing that strikes me is the cheerful color in the plastic pieces, cheerfully and unfailingly serving its designed purpose, to catch the eye of its would-be consumer, to attract their curiosity. An inkling of a feeling blooms, one akin to shame or maybe indignation, one that I locate in seeing or smelling waste. It is the feeling that comes when I sense something that has been abandoned, some sense of shorn responsibility, maybe not mine. But such a feeling is only possible here because my responsibility—for every piece of plastic I have ever placed in a wastebin or dumpster and never thought about again, not even now, because there are too many and I did not take note—is represented in the photo, too.

This feeling forces my eye to wander, and it settles next on what it recognizes as death: feathers disheveled but neat, in a way that suggests they were once part of a structured arrangement whose tension has since been lost; twinned shards of a beak and the arc of an unseen spine give orientation to the decomposing container for those bright plastic pieces.

Maybe it's the ghost of an ordered body that brings the thought, but there's something resonant of discernment in the plastic pieces. The photograph's caption reassures me that the discernment is not the photographer's. Nor is it that of the plastic's most recent fledgling vessel; the resonant discernment I felt in the plastic was—is—from love, bestowed upon the fledgling by its parents, as gifts and sustenance. Adults of Laysan Albatrosses with chicks to feed will take foraging trips that last up to 17 days, traveling up to 1,600 miles (straight line distance) away from their nest in order to find something to feed their young. These plastic pieces caught the eye of the albatross parent, not unlike how it caught my eye, but for them, from the expanse of the Pacific Ocean. It is their love that gave the discernment that left its ghost in the plastic.




What has been made external does not disappear, not its beauty, not its weight; it is, irrespective of mine or anyone else's will, undeniable, self-evident. If capitalist processes were able to internalize these externalities, they would. I'm thinking of what Beatrice Adler-Bolton and Artie Vierkant write in *Health Communism*, with the understanding of 'surplus' as external to labor and capital:

"The surplus population has become an essential component of capitalist society, with many industries built on the maintenance, supervision, surveillance, policing, data extraction, confinement, study, cure, measurement, treatment, extermination, housing, transportation, and care of the surplus. In this way, those discarded as non-valuable life are maintained as a source of extraction and profit for capital.

This rather hypocritical stance- the surplus are at once nothing and everything to capitalism- is an essential contradiction."

Even as a source of extraction or profit, surplus is not internalized; responsibility is not taken by capitalist actors for these externalities. What I mean is this: we could maintain, supervise, surveil, police, extract data from, confine, study, cure, measure, treat, or exterminate the plastic-filled fledglings on Midway Atoll through capitalism's mechanisms; we could not ensure that plastic would never again be ingested by a fledgling albatross by those same mechanisms. That would require the wholesale internalization of plastic 'waste' by capitalist societies. The 'waste' would not be what it currently definitionally is; it would be reconfigured as something with boundless value to capital and thus never be discarded as externality. Denaturalizing disaster can perhaps be understood as an accounting and recounting of what has been rendered external by capitalist necessity. If disaster can be natural (another word to describe what is external to capitalism?) in any sense, it is in the sense that disaster is a rupturing event or process caused by what capitalist societies have externalized and what they can never internalize. To act on these conditions, what is necessary is to internalize 'waste' (surplus, externality). This is a mechanism that cannot be capitalist.

I wonder if we have an act of love in us equal to that of the albatross, to recognize all the waste as ours and claim it out of the sea. 



REFERENCED FROM PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS JORDAN:
CF010257 UNALTERED STOMACH CONTENTS OF A LAYSAN
ALBATROSS FLEDGLING, MIDWAY ISLAND, 2010
INK ON PAPER, 2025