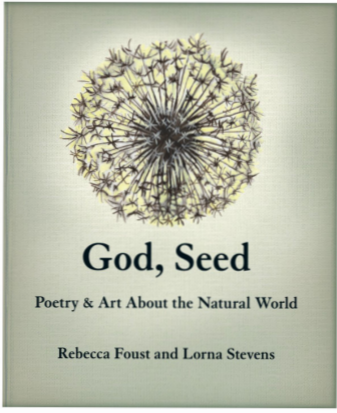


**God, Seed: Poetry and Art About the Natural World**

by **Guest** on February 13th, 2011 | 2 Comments »

by **Rebecca Foust and Lorna Stevens**




It was in San Rafael, in a tiny subterranean artist studio with walls of thickly plastered brick that I made my acquaintance with New Zealand's huia bird, meeting it in my friend Lorna's intricate twig sculptures and an altered artist's book whose pages had been painstakingly excised, erased, and inked with images of haunting delicacy. I learned how the bills of males and females (his squat cudgel for shredding bark, her curved needle for finding insects) had evolved so as to make them mutually dependent mates-for-life. I also learned that the huia had recently become utterly, unalterably extinct, so that not only would I never see it with my own eyes, but neither would my children, nor my children's children, nor their children and so on and on down the long, bitter corridors of never.

As Lorna showed me photos of what now remains of this remarkable creature—stuffed specimens, Victorian hats and brooches fashioned with plumes and beaks—I felt a terrible sadness. But I also marveled at how Lorna had managed through her art to recall the bird in a way that its relics, stored in their musty museum cases, could not. Instead of evoking the sorrow and revulsion we feel when we see dead things, her work conjured the huia alive, singing, and in flight. What I saw was less imprint-left-on-sand by a passing wave than a reincarnation of the wave that had passed, more like Roethke's *I think a bird, and it begins to fly*. More like Keats's nightingale as symbol of the power of art to dismantle the dread machinery of death. It was a powerful moment, because I was still in mourning for a childhood paradise lost to the coal mining and railroading industries in the mountains of western Pennsylvania and was becoming increasingly concerned about the serpent in the garden here in California, the golden state of my adopted home.

Within hours of leaving the studio I'd written "Last Bison Gone" and emailed it to Lorna, who responded with a drawing (*Huia Feather*) that inspired me to write another poem ("After"). And then we were off, sharing poems and art and in the process giving each other new ideas. Poem led to image and back to poem, and over the next two years we wrote, drew and painted in a fever of creativity communicated in more than 2500 emails and many meetings with papers spread across my dining room table. Our collaboration became all-consuming at times (just ask our husbands and kids), but it felt like a personal revetment against the grim news of ecological setbacks like the Gulf Oil Spill and the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. At some point, we took a breath and found ourselves with a pile of poems and images based on nature and the environment. A very large pile. When my husband paged through it, he asked, "What are you going to call your book?"

Our Book? We hadn't set out to make a book. But then, there it was, nearly 100 pages nurtured in a rare, luxurious welter of creativity with no thought given to whether or how it would be published. That part came later, sometimes making us yearn for the days when all thought and energy were for the next poem and image. But we were fortunate to find a press willing to take on the project of printing four-color images as well as poems, and in the end we had *God, Seed: Poetry and Art About the Environment*, the book from which the following excerpts are drawn. Our hope was for a book that would echo the seasonal cycle, emulating in its small way what nature, against all odds, accomplishes again and again: recovery, renewal, resurrection of life from death and blight. That, and perhaps also the hope that we can learn from our love of this world how to take better care of it.

It is with this hope for poetry-inspired *tikkun olam* that we share some of our poems and drawings with you all on Tikkun Daily — we have included a selection of nine poems and illustrations below.



**SEEDS**

*of the giant sequoia  
come cone-burn, encased  
in diamond-hard coats,  
something scented  
encrypts them against  
climate and time  
lets them wait out  
the cold-ground  
generations of winters  
for that lightning-crack  
thunderbolt trunk-split of fire  
that will focus them to life.*

*Dull glint of years  
layering down, but when  
the firestorm comes,  
the ground melts and boils  
like stew, swelling each seed  
from germ to loam,  
seeking meaning  
from rain, memory  
from pain, how it feels  
to feel anything.*

**PERENNIAL**


*When you've gone, it won't matter to the streak rose  
twining the old trellis over the eaves, Willow  
will continue to pour her yellow-green waterfall*

*next to foreytia, one half-tone better on the scale  
of bright, and white juncop spinners will sail  
their acre of negata*

*past lyscop's rising pale flower foam, it will  
crest and subside and weave a sweet mat  
to bear the thick blanket of snow,*

*and none of it matters. Not how you loved it, not  
how you knelt in each dark December plot  
to part the rich plait, reached*

*through the wicker of winter to find something born  
of the decay of all that was young once,  
something still growing and green.*



**Notes and Acknowledgments**

**God, Seed.** The reference is to the Native American agrarian practice of planting seeds in mounds and using fish heads as fertilizer to renew the soil.

**Seeds of the Giant Sequoia and Pine Cone.** Fire plays a role in the life cycles of many forests, for example, by preparing a seedbed and promoting seed germination. See Bruce M. Kilgore, *Naturalist* 23(1): 26-37 (1972).

**Perennial.** This plein air watercolor of perennial blossoms, made while the artist was on a picnic with friends in Minnesota, captures the essence of spontaneity. After making many subsequent versions in her studio, the artist decided to return to her first draft.

Grateful Acknowledgment is made to Tebot Bach who published the book, *God, Seed: Poetry & Art About the Natural World* (2010) and also to the following journals in which these poems and images first appeared: *The Atlanta Review*, *Knock Journal*, *The Sand Hill Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *The Texas Review*, and *The West Marin Review*.

*God, Seed* may be ordered from [Small Press Distribution](#), [Book Passage](#), and [Tebot Bach](#). A portion of the royalties is donated to the David Brower Center in Berkeley, California, home to organizations working for environmental and social justice.

Lorna and Becky will read from *God, Seed* on 4/7/11, 7:00 pm, at Books, Inc. at 2275 Market Street in San Francisco and on 4/8/11, 6:00-8:00 pm, at the Marin Arts Council Gallery at 906 Fourth Street in San Rafael, CA.



**2 Responses to "God, Seed: Poetry and Art About the Natural World"**

**says:** lizbethsgarden [February 14, 2011 at 4:27 pm](#)  
This post is so timely for me. I have been thinking a lot lately about the damage humans do to the natural world, and this post and these themes are very important to me right now. In fact, I enjoyed this post so much I blogged about it today. <http://lizbethsgarden.wordpress.com/2011/02/14/i-was-waiting-for-this/> Thank you for writing the book, and thank you for this post.

**says:** Pomes - A day in the [July 14, 2011 at 10:55 am](#)  
life of poetry Very nice posts and poetry.. thanks for sharing