

Wildernesses: Physical & Spiritual

a chapbook to accompany the
EASE Gallery Show

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Photographic documentation of artwork by Stephen Takacs Photography

Advent

Lisa E. Dabill

Up the trail to Hart Lake, where the path tops a ridge
two miles from the village,
fresh bear tracks.

They draw up
my body's alertness:

Does it see me, this bear?

I turn back and startle at our tracks
overlapping,

its claws emerging from my boot.

Suddenly I am the bear, shambling along
this morning, sharp and musky and fat with fall,

senses open to creatures and climate,

and I am the human spooked –
something ancient of animal in me come alive,

suspended toward this bear with its

mind and life in these near woods.

Something fierce and wild could meet me here,

stench of a G*D who is alien, not mine,

not human and not safe.

Animal speaks to animal:

the focused ferocity in me

that lives its life outdoors, outside
human purview, has strong jaws.



Deep Blue Sky and Odd Shaped Dead Trees
John Holliger

His Blue Period

John Holliger

His blue period. Later, I learned that's what they called it. But when I came upon the painting, I stopped. I couldn't move. The loss, the despair, the isolation were arresting. A single woman holding an infant looks away. Another figure is curled against some threat.

When I am that bleak I hardly breathe.

In 1965 I frequently found myself wandering the silent galleries of the Cleveland Museum of Art. Each time I appeared at the massive doors, the space rooted itself in me by its stillness. It was the only place in which I could be numb, where nothing was expected from me. I had nothing to give. I don't know how to speak when numb.

I slowly passed through the galleries, seeking something. But none of the religious art, the elegant English landscapes, the portraits with every possible expression, none of it grabbed my sleeve and silently stopped me except for Picasso's painting, "Life". I couldn't move.

Remembering that year, these words of Juan Jimenez come forth: "I am not I. I am this one walking beside me whom I do not see...who remains calm and silent when I talk." I was split into a false self with a mask that did all the talking, but my true self was quiet, not verbally visible.

My head fabricated the smiling, extraverted mask. When asked, "How are you...really?" the mask said, with deceptive confidence, "Everything is OK." The mask lied promiscuously. But the one walking beside the mask knew that the truth was otherwise. There was nothing I, or my mom, or my dad, or the tall, commanding, take-charge, politically-connected minister, or my childhood image of "God," or the doctors, could do to

heal my sister, who was one block away in the Cleveland Clinic Cancer Center.

When I passed Picasso's melancholy painting, my mask didn't want to stop, didn't know why I was transfixed. Only that painting told the somber truth about the hospital room one block away. My mask didn't understand why it found itself in the museum gift store, buying a postcard of the painting. The mask hid it in a book. It didn't see the connection between that painting's terrible beauty, and the room one block away.

Picasso was two years older than I was at the time, when he painted this lament. Perhaps in his four year long Blue Period he painted his way through his grief after the death of a dear friend.

Following the death of my sister, the mask faked it with, "everything's OK." But the Universe persisted in offering open doors to me for 15 years, until I finally heard the soft, gentle voice of a friend, who said, simply: "Tell me the story of your sister." And the one who walks beside me began to weep.

I began describing the last scene of her story. We were around her bed. She took one gasping breath after another, and then stopped, and there was silence. Her life disappeared into silence.

Now, decades later, I am drawn to the darkest blues of the night, to the solitude that awaits me there, to the stillness at dawn, to the silence out of which I have come, and into which I'll disappear.

In the darkness, the one who silently walks beside me knows I am loved.

In the blue solitude before dawn I want to believe that I am with all sentient beings in their suffering, and in the silent disappearing of their species. And I do.

At first light when the first trees begin to appear, I want to believe that beneath the chaos and grief there is a hidden wholeness. And I do.

When I look into the lovely blue at dawn that fills the forest, I know there are rhythms of the Universe I know nothing about. I want to believe that they are flowing in patterns of wholeness, just beyond sight and touch. And I do.

I want to believe that all pain and grief are on their way into a distant darkness. And I do. We are all One.



*Judean Wilderness or Yeshimon, Israel, around Kana'im valley, between the
city of Arad and Masada*
Charleston Wang

And Hatches Them Not

Brad Modlin

—Egypt, 500 AD, The Desert Fathers

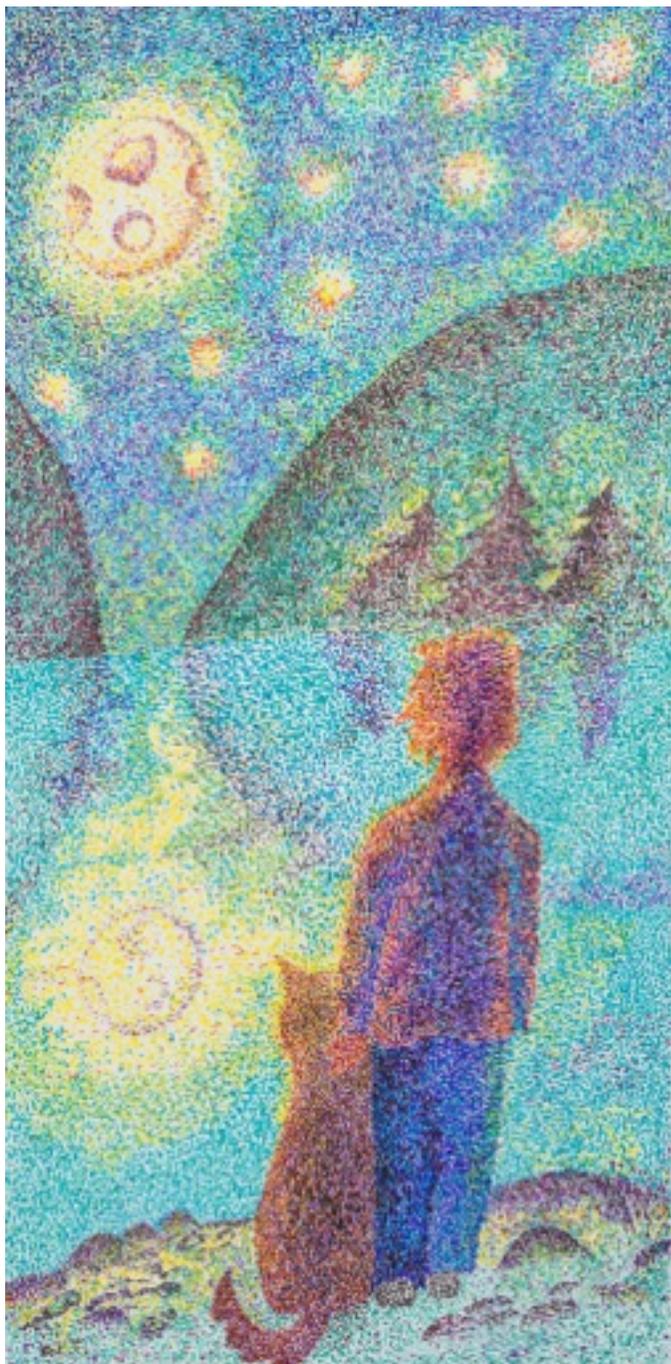
Before dying, the young monk's grandfather ripped papyrus into a fat strip. It contains one handwritten chapter of the Book of Jeremiah, although the young monk doesn't know which because it's unnumbered and he's never seen another copy of the book. He reads this chapter every evening before sleep as if confessing. Even though each word winds through his body like thirst—familiar and new each time—and he doesn't need the papyrus, he likes to think he and another person in the world are reading the same sentence in an identical moment. Maybe one day he will overhear their voice through the ink. He tries to outshake the thought that the hand of his grandfather's scribe could copy clumsy, that maybe his strip alone says, *As the partridge sits on eggs...* These are the brainpebbles of doubt. But he's sure that those monks who have achieved perfection, they probably fill each hour with trusting (which sometimes means walking away from secret hopes). If you ever find one of these monks wandering across this desert, kidnap him for as many minutes as you can. Take his steady hands to your ear. Tap his wrists together to hear them ring. Know they have grown into metal because he crucifies himself each day.

The Room

Nancy Ross

The room is empty.
A single bulb dangles
From shadowed ceiling,
Dim yellow light,
Stains ashen walls, and
Patch of scarred, gray floor.
This room holds no appeal, yet,
As though compelled by some unseen force,
I step through the open door.
Slowly, I circle the perimeter,
Fingers gliding along finely cracked plaster.
Silence, broken only by the steady beat
Of my own careful footsteps,
I walk round, and round.
Four barren walls,
Four desolate corners.
Each looks exactly like the one before it.

I am lost.
“God help me, don’t let the light go out,”
My whisper pierces the stillness.
Beneath the dying lamp,
A small spider swings on invisible thread.
I continue the endless journey to nowhere.
Eyes on the tiny creature,
Fingertips reading the walls,
I barely notice,
When suddenly,
The floor vanishes with a sigh.
Like the spider, I do not fall.
I hang by invisible thread,
In a room, filled
With emptiness.



Light in the Wilderness
Stephen Hash

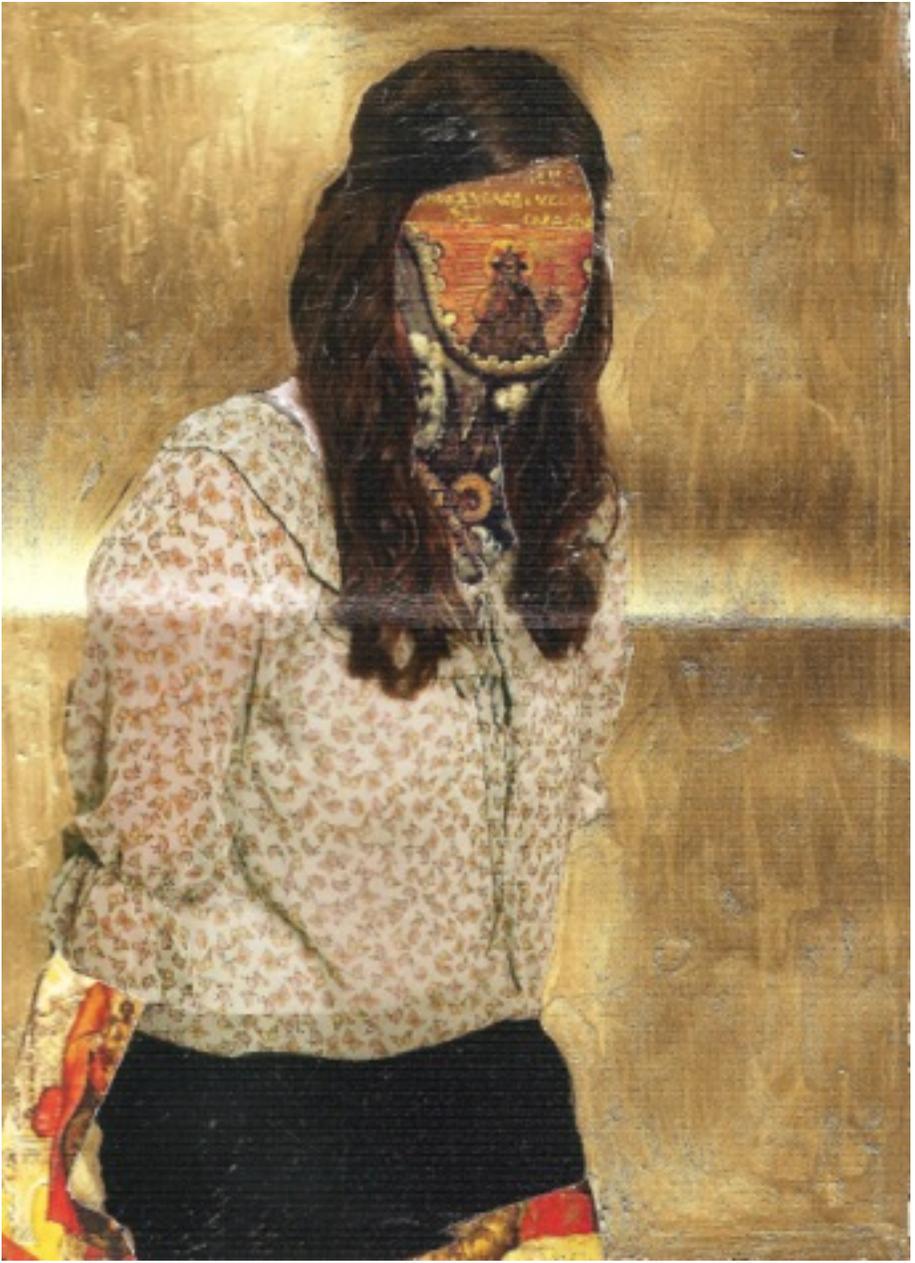


Sandhill Cranes
Chris Donaldson

Thirst

Nikki Seger

The date stitched to quilt
August 8, 1964.
Born.
The date laid tightly fast
January 6, 1914.
Died.
Shelly, friend of Kevin.
Both older than Valerie.
All younger than me.
Shelly, exactly 2 1/2 years younger.
All thirsty.
Black Ice.
Hurricane.
Steel Reserve.
Three abandoned cans --
24 ounces of high gravity grain alcohol
Pushing aside the Budweiser red and white,
Decorating the ground.
Crushed and tossed,
As if the final drops
Did not quench the thirst.
No honor given to the aluminum.
Only an empty vessel.
This land is so dry.
So thirsty
Not even teardrops
Lessen the drought.



Ousia
Kelly Latimore

After a Plague

John Sherer

Step into the painful cold.
The sunshine on the snowfields
makes you Moses
glimpsing the nape of God's neck.
Once your irises have tightened
and you're by the lake — its edge
an icy hangnail —
flour-fine snow tumbles on the wind.
A single cloud holds the sky on its back,
and trees bare their nakedness.
Your fingers split in winter,
as if you slipped them down
a fishing line too far
and got hook-nicks.
The fissures are tiny —
you only care because you want
to live forever, because locusts
have eaten another of your years,
because you must learn not to wither
from the ache in your gut,
because you feel like a child
slipping out of sweaty hands;
all you see is white carpet
charging out of the universe.

Wanderlust

Dustin Faulstick

The wanderer lusts
for the wandering itself,
getting there while she's getting there,
breathing while she's breathing,
stopping or not stopping,
doing or not doing,
paying some good
attention
to all that she has no reason to pay attention to:

newness,
people,
the way the wood smells at the old bar,
the color of her beer
and the color of everyone else's beer,
light-green grass,
white-blue skies,
average-looking old houses,
crummy-looking new office buildings,
immaculate churches
where no one goes
anymore,
the sounds other people make with their mouths
that she only sort of makes with hers,
dogs running by rivers,
bicycles being used for transportation,
castles in the middle of nowhere
or in the middle of everyone's
busyness.

She calls it guided wandering,
taking a Spanish
vacilando –
pursuing the space between,
just going for a little stroll.



Yellow Leaves and Woods Path
John Holliger

When My Love of Trees Began

John Holliger

The persimmon and witch hazel trees were planted before I was born. By my early teens I had been going along with my Dad as he “took a walk around the yard” after a day’s work, as Mom prepared supper.

The persimmon tree was rarely known or even joyfully eaten in our parts. The witch hazel was twisted back and around so much that I gave up following one branch bending back upon itself and through the loops of her siblings.

The story I love to tell from our “walk around the yard,” is about the family of rabbits who didn’t move when we approached them under the white peach tree. They looked up and some fell over, too dizzy to move. The others took a few steps and collapsed. They were drunk from the old, fallen white peaches.

Years later, after my Dad had died of a broken heart following the death of my twenty one year old sister, I learned how his “walk around the yard” (1/2 acre) began. Having already struggled to recover from polio as a young man, there were days when my Dad would wake up, lost in his own interior dark wood. When my mother saw this she handed my Dad something that slowly brought him back to us: the Wayside Gardens catalog. He would pour over the pages, looking for exotic trees that had a chance to survive in northern Ohio.

Then came the days of anticipation, and reading again about the trees that were on their way to him. And so began his contented “walk around the yard,” touching and gazing with great care and affection each tree, their branches and leaves

and fruit. I imagine him becoming one with them, and they with him.

My dad was a photographer of tiny, fragile biologies like mosses and lichens, something that suited a quiet, gentle spirit. He joined a botanical society of university professors who took yearly hikes among the trees. He brought back exceptional photographs in the 1940's and 1950's of the beauty of the tiny lives that lived under the protection of the trees, that were always filled with light.

Years later when I found myself lost in my own interior dark wood, I too walked among the trees, the only plant species that lived upright like me. I carried my cameras as an outward explanation for walking among my brothers, but now no longer with my Dad.

Then one day I saw him, hiking a narrow ridge at the top of the Cataloochee in the Smokey Mountains. "Cataloochee" is a Cherokee word meaning, "those who walk upright." I could see clearly between each tree at the top of a narrow ridge, and between them, my Dad, a Cataloochee, one who walks upright.

On one of these hikes, when I was lost in my interior darkness, the Loving Mystery who embraces and gently holds all things, stopped me in my tracks. I was given this sense of Presence all around me. The Light of my Cataloochee brothers was vivid and vibrating, as if each were a silently singing tuning fork. What I heard was the soft singing of leaves.

I can get lost and stuck in trying to change what cannot be changed. But when I "walk around the yard," the trees call out, "Stay awhile." The light flows from their branches. And they call again, "It's simple," they say, "and you too have come into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine."

Whispers

Erica Partridge

I know you
We are old friends
I recognize those towering trunks
The scent of pine surrounding me
Those lofty branches
I have felt their embrace before

I hear your whispers as the wind sweeps through your arms
A language I have long forgotten
Even though we were crafted by the same hands
The same breath of life breathed into us

In your whispers I sense the pain
I feel it in your embrace
I see it in your wrinkled faces
Your whispers speak of a brokenness
That only love can mend



The Last Migration
Agnes Burris

Spirituality Meeting Identity

Asa Killion

My parents raised me as an Episcopalian, and took my brother and I to church for years. As a child, I believed everything the church told me. It seemed to make sense, and my own experience in the world confirmed that existence appeared from nothingness. After all, I had simply come to exist. At one point, there was no me. Later, I had consciousness. Since I was completely not present for the process of creating myself, the possibility of a divine omnipotent being who created the rest of existence without anyone knowing about it seemed probable.

I also took the tropes of Christianity very literally. I quite genuinely envisioned heaven as a physical place in the clouds above me. I thought that I would someday remain there with haloed angels in white gowns for eternity. But gradually, some facts I had accepted became complicated. Many people take this development well, and feel no incongruence with their religion. I, however, flew in a plane above the clouds and I did not see any angels or harps. My vision of heaven needed to include animals and plants, and the more I thought about it the more I realized that I just wanted the afterlife to look like Earth. It was hard to look forward to an afterlife with no nature and where over half of my loved ones would go to hell.

By age twelve or thirteen, I started seeing ghosts. Whether I was hallucinating or channeling a collective consciousness or encountering spirits is utterly up for debate. In any case, because of those experiences, I knew that I needed to reevaluate my religious affiliation. Suddenly, with no afterlife or higher purpose, I arrived at an existential crisis that added more dependency to middle school than necessary. I could not

understand why I existed. Did I exist solely to pursue my own happiness? My life became worthless in comparison to the greater picture of the universe, and my own mortality terrified me. I knew that I would die someday, and those few people who knew me would also die. I felt an overwhelming requirement to perform some task for the good of humanity, and do it so excellently that people would remember me longer. However, in the following years of trying to be a stellar artist, my average abilities and the ultimate inevitability of being forgotten invalidated my effort. Even if I became recorded in history books by an extraordinary feat of perseverance, those books would die someday too.

I turned to nature for a sense of harmony, order, and purpose. In my search, I concluded that humans existed for two reasons. We existed to preserve our own life, and we existed to reproduce. I had observed people bending to these pressures in my daily life, so it fulfilled my questions at the time. Gradually, nature held greater spiritual significance for me and I became obsessed with abiding by its rules. I saw a spiritual perfection to nature that I pursued. My hair grew out, my eyebrows filled in, I learned to ride horses and shoot a bow. The Lord of the Rings trilogy was my spiritual book of choice. This fixation on returning to basic ways of living and “naturalness” gave me a sense of connectedness with all of nature. I could not be so meaningless if I was a part of a living tapestry and integrated into the ultimate expression of authentic harmony—nature itself.

I needed nature to fill in the blanks where religion used to be. But nature had flaws and imperfections, too. Genetic mutations happen, wild animals enact senseless brutality, and humans modify their bodies. Nature did not create everything perfectly and its creations weren't for everyone. Even as I came

to these conclusions, my need to be natural made coming out as gay very difficult. Being gay contradicted one of my reasons for existing, namely the need to reproduce. I could not understand why nature would create gay people. At the time I was unaware of homosexuality in animals, so queerness in humans seemed to be even more of an anomaly. Although I accepted queer identities in other people, as someone affixed to a particular concept of naturalness there was no way for me to reconcile queerness with myself.

After a time, I thought I had overcome these presumptions about what is or is not natural. I came out to my family and friends as gay at seventeen, hoping that was the end of my identity upheavals. At the time, I still saw my gender as being significantly masculine, but I reasoned that being a masculine woman made sense for me. I felt a distinct disconnect between myself and girls, so I presumed that I was a different kind of girl. Other people began to define me as lesbian, but I did not embrace that term. Initially, I assumed that my discomfort with a lesbian identity just stemmed from my personal dis-ease with coming out. But over time, I still tried to avoid identifying myself as lesbian, partially because I found myself attracted to a variety of genders. I came to feel acceptance and pride towards my queerness. I joined LGBT interest organizations and patronized gay nightclubs. If asked what I identified as, I said gay or queer. Even when I thought of butch women I felt no internal resonance, particularly since I felt androgynous on the inside.

At some point in my junior year of college, it clicked for me that I neither felt like a lesbian or butch because I did not see myself as a woman. I did not feel hyper masculine, but my androgyny did not sit comfortably in a female body. I had never felt validated in identifying as male because of the voices of

ridicule I imaged others speaking. I felt no rightful claim to a male identity because genetics and coincidence had neglected to confer that authority to me. Instead, the voices I imaged told me that I was not a man, that I could never be a man, and that any attempt would be both despised and pointless. As I considered using male pronouns, I felt a sense of discomfort at claiming an identity that I felt ashamed of taking. It felt like theft. My identity shifted to genderqueer. Once I started researching transgender experiences on the internet, my consciousness towards trans identities expanded enough to allow me to also define and understand what it means to be cisgender. While being cis had been an inevitable, nameless default for me before, its new definition proved my relationship to that model impossible. I do not relate to the experience of feeling a congruence between body and gender.

To me, it feels highly unlikely that someone's gender would match their body. I assume that others simply make their bodies work for them or ignore the discrepancies, but it is not something I hear people talk about, perhaps because it makes them uneasy. But given that gender is one thing and a body is another, I would think that those two things would only align a rare percentage of the time. But to the contrary, nearly everyone feels content with the gender assigned to their body. I wonder how this is possible. It makes me question whether my personal dissociation from my assigned gender holds any validity. Am I just hung up on an aspect of existing that others ignore? Why did going through puberty turn my body into this sex? I blamed myself for being the cause of my transgender identity, and not nature. If nature had meant for me to have this gender, I felt that it would have produced me with a congruent body or at least nullified my feelings of internalized transphobia.



Dangerous Beasts Lurk in the Forest
Agnes Burris

But nature is not God. Nor is it predictable. And least of all is it perfect.

I am not perfect either.

My focus on the sanctity of my body and complete authenticity led to some key decisions. I rejected modification of my own body, choosing against tattoos, piercings, and hair dye. I reasoned that doing any of those things would transform my body from an anonymous template into an expression of my inner self, and I felt more comfortable with the potential of having a non-personalized body. If an acquaintance examined images of my naked body, for example, they would be clueless about my identity or personality. I feel safe behind the mask of a body that I dissociate from. At the same time, I value the scars on my body and the stories they tell. Being stabbed by a pencil, leaning on a glassblowing pipe, getting molten metal droplets in my shoes. I appreciate the non-anonymity of my scars because I'm not responsible for them, they're justified, and they say something experiential about my past.

Similarly, I often wish to lose responsibility for my trans identity. I don't want to have to explain myself, advocate for myself, fight for myself, validate myself. Every once in a while, my daydreams envision a life with ambiguous sex chromosomes or a scientific explanation for my transness so that I could lift the blame off of my feelings when trying to navigate the subject with parents and friends.

By spending every hour trying to unravel this internal puzzle, philosophical issues of gender as a subject crop up. If gender is socially constructed, why would I feel an inherent need to live as the gender I was not assigned at birth? Could I not simply acknowledge my gender identity without physically transitioning, because to what degree would transitioning just be building the correct interference between self and

environment? If gender is socially constructed, and I rely on the man-made institution of medicine to align my physical gender with the social space I feel the most comfortable in, then that makes me feel utterly unnatural and inauthentic in my identity. It's transphobic thinking and it impedes me.

But, my existential beliefs about natural authenticity do offer a form of support and comfort for my identity. If I accept that this life is all that I have, then it follows that I might as well make the most of it. Why not live my life as my gender? Why not tamper with my body in "unnatural" ways if it's mine to tamper with and I have the right to enjoy it? I could live each day with others being able to see me honestly. As things are, it feels like I lie just by existing.

But I feel morally guilty for desiring this physical change. I feel ungrateful. I find nothing wrong with my body, at least not now that I recognize where my anxious criticisms and systematic battles towards it came from. The problem is no longer my body—for a cisgender woman it looks perfect to me—but instead its gender. It's a beautiful body. It does everything I need it to. It just doesn't feel like home.

I'm not "trapped in the wrong body." I'm in a great body, and I love it. But it's not home.

That said, I don't feel anger or regret towards having this body. I enjoy and respect the perspective I have developed from living my life as a woman-assigned person. That said, I can't resist smiling when I think about who I want to become in the future. It's important to me that I know what it is like to grow hips, have a period, and live through sexism. However, the misogynistic implications of the rejection of my womanhood still really bother me. Despite my fears about that subject, I am quite sure that my problem is not with womanhood, femininity,

or feminism. Predominately feminine gender identities and the women in this world are wonderful. I'm just not one of them.

I've spent so much time trying to be really good at womanhood. But I was trying so hard to live up to gendered expectations that I neglected to consider my own identity and feelings. I am so afraid that I will forget what it was like to be seen as a woman. If every cis man in this world could experience a year at the receiving end of sexism, I'd have him do it because that experience shaped my sense of self to this day. It's one of the reasons I am finding pride in being trans.

I do live only once, after all.

Perhaps one of nature's many imperfections is me, and my challenge is to find the beauty in that.



The Known World
Agnes Burris



Halloween Pennant
Chris Donaldson

Leviticus

K.P.B. Stevens

The rain falls through bats and birds,
through insects, through their slivered wings,
and other things, through sweat dried
against the wind, and blood - through flies,
the hungry slide of their spattered legs,
through worms that rise in clutching beaks,
through earth, it tumbles in each drop,
through dust to dust - and any thought
of purity cannot abide. Leviticus
is only words, blank and bleak,
forgetting rain, which falls and will
evaporate, will rise again, with birds.

Cubism

Brad Modlin

I once shared a house with a man who spoke only on Sundays.

It became my compulsion, collaging pieces of his biography: the Marine Corps belt buckle, the cane he limped with, the barber's brush left in the bathroom, something bronzed visible through the cracked door. I beat him to the mailbox to study return addresses and magazine subscriptions, waited to eavesdrop on telephone conversations that never happened.

He chased his weekly Communion wine with scotch and afterward, if I was careful, I could get him to answer questions: a trip to Egypt, a divorce, a crop dusting plane.

*

Proximity does not equal unity: No two objects can occupy the same space simultaneously.

This is a cause for war. It is why we teach our children about priorities.

*

For Lent I vowed to give up being so angry—to be patient, to remember that there was a world and real people outside the car I was living in. To stop screaming in the cab at slow pedestrians, and acknowledge that store hours and snowstorms were not scheduled around me. I wore a

medal of St. Francis, which I fingered when quoting, *Make me a channel of your peace.*

Months after losing the medal, I am cursing at red lights.

*

If the word holy has etymological connections to whole, then what are we to assume?

*

Because I had been thinking a lot, and because no one knew me there, I resolved to be honest with masking tape and a marker. The first day I wrote across my chest, I own too much. In the next town, I modified *I am selfish* with *some days*.

I quit before I worked up to *Sometimes I think I am the center of things*, or the obvious, *I have trouble connecting with—or talking to—other people*.

*

Tropical fossils in North Dakota support Alfred Wegener's theory of Pangaea: 250 million years ago, Earth's one landmass fractured, and the resulting continents began the drift they continue today.

Do not confuse movement with progress.

*

I believed against tarot cards, but I translated for a Quebecois tarot card reader. Because I wanted to show him I could. He didn't even have to ask my help in spreading his New Millennium deck face down in front of a bony Galician woman. In broken English, he fed me instructions to give her in broken Spanish. *Flip the card that speaks to you*.

From the center she selected the Schizophrenia card. The illustration was of a nude woman suspended between two cliffs. She clutched one with fingers, the other with toes. *We don't need to do this, to try so hard to hold two different things*, he told me, I told her. *Sometimes all we must do is fall*.

*

They are wrong, those who say the fruit from the Tree was an apple, unbroken and with a core.

Divided, parceled into fleshy segments, it was an orange.

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Descending to the Dead Sea
Charleston Wang

In God's Waiting Room, II

Robin W. Holland

My father is sleeping.

My father is sleeping
in his hospital bed.

My father is sleeping
in his hospital bed
in and out of consciousness.

My father is sleeping
in his hospital bed
in and out of consciousness--
dreaming...

My father is sleeping
in his hospital bed
in and out of consciousness
dreaming
of past places
of next places
everywhere but now
every place but here
occasionally waking
to acknowledge our presence
and to eat
and to ask for water
a bottle a bucket
a shower of water
a thousand drips of water
a baptism
an anointing.

He is building
and supervising
and planning
and singing.

As he dreams
he has been to church
where the service is good.

He has been to the Upper Room...
And believed he was dead for a moment.

My father is sleeping...



Hezekiah's Wall
Charleston Wang

Dump Run

Nikki Seger

Adrian tumbled out
Arms askewed elbowed into a right angle
With weathered brown hands
Chalked to an ashen gray
Catching his lean, bloated Lakota body
Soiled black boots
Holding up jeans
Covering collapsed legs
And Adrian tumbled out
At the gas pump
At Big Bat's
Alongside my daddy's truck
After a dumpster run
Adrian tumbled out
Earlier Adrian had stumbled in
After stumbling along
From White Clay
A couple of miles down the highway
Trailing a vapor
Of alcohol fuel
When opportunity came at the dump
A load to unload
Stumbling
Humbling
Helping
Handing
Adrian tumbled out
His story
Of needing a ride to town
From the dump.



Curving Trees Over Snow-Fogged Road
John Holliger

The White Quilt of Fog

John Holliger

Sometimes you need the road ahead to disappear into white fog.

Sometimes you don't want to see the horizon.

Sometimes a fog descends around you with such soft grace, without any hint of its coming... It is what you have longed for, without knowing.

In this fog it is a relief to lose your sight and not see the horizon.

Such moments are an unexpected reprieve, a yearning to one of the mysteries that alerts you to those helpful voices who rush in and fix you.

The blessing of such fog is its tender blindness to everything and everyone.

Except the ones who cherish you, the ones you treasure, the one to whom you most want to be attentive, you.

Into this gentle blindness the world companions you, becomes the gift of silence with you, listens for the one song of the one bird, the one squirrel rustling her leaves... just so... as if hurriedly recovering from a dream.

Now you ask that one question you have avoided, because now the lightly feathered fog has become a down-filled quilt, inviting you to wrap yourself within.

There is a time of awakening beyond your choosing... a rustling of leaves...

And then you fold the quilt of your life... just so...

And begin again, walking deeper into the white, unknown horizon.

Insomniac's Prayer (A Response to Psalm 42)

Jennie Kiffmeyer

As my hand reaches for the coffee cup, so I reach for you,
O God of Wakefulness.

It is four in the morning and I have been searching
all day for signs you are near.

The door propped open, screens
removed from windows yawning wide.

My only visitors: a couple moths and a squirrel
who paused at the door before thinking better of it.

Instead, Lord, it is my daughter who finds me
in the afternoon, presses her small self into my side.

Her older brother has said something that hurt her
and now she hides her face in my waist
that the years have made soft.

Operating on the belief that if she cannot see,
she cannot be seen.

So it used to be with us, God.

But now, I know differently.

May you not so much seek to be consoled as to console...
this was your wish for me.

And how good it felt to acquiesce to you,
Provider of All,
to do you a favor.

But dearest, this does not mean I have forgotten
the weight of your arm around me.

How I would lean in to you,
unaware of tragedy's gravity,
and let the rising and falling of your breath be
the rhythm of my heart.

A stranger waved me down this morning to ask for directions.

"Where is your God?"

My map, out of date and smudged, is no help.

Seeing us, a man crosses the street. Accuses: "Where is your God?"

And I wonder, *Did I misplace you, Lord, in the wilderness?*

But no.

I remember the Saint Joe's Street Fair--
the sausage and peppers on the open grill
hunks of bread with glistening oil,
free, pushed into our hands.
The polka band that played
while you and I danced barefoot
until, flushed and sweaty, you commanded the rain
that ripped open the sky and sent us shrieking,
squeezing ourselves into a doorway.
You and me
and everyone else who had ever lived or would ever live
there, rejoicing, with grease on our chins.
We sang your praises.
This my soul remembers.
My help and my God,
do not keep yourself from me.
The coffee pot is empty.
By day know that your love
is the road that leads me.
Your song, every night, forms my pillow,
your candlelight my dream.
All things come of Thee, O Lord,
including this thirst within me--
to never slumber,
to always be awake
to your glory.

Amen