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Spring 5-16-2014

# In Pursuit of Distant Horizons

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## Recommended Citation

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Washington University in St. Louis  
Graduate School of Art

**In Pursuit of Distant Horizons**

Whitney Polich

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## ABSTRACT

Our lasting human desire to rationalize the phenomena of nature manifests as ceaseless attempts to fix fluid landscapes within the rigid boundaries of an image. Each landscape with its own physical language, rooted in the temporal and subjective particularities of sense—taste, touch, smell, sound, and sight—requires a lived immersion to be read and as such, elude static interpretation or expression. The physical horizon provides both a physical and metaphorical reminder of the limits we constantly find ourselves confronted with—those limits of perception, language, and knowledge—as we seek to express the immediate experience and profound vastness of a world far exceeding our human reach.

Acknowledging these limits, yet still longing to move beyond them, the exquisite space of poetics offers a foundation from which we can, at the very least, grasp towards the ineffable. The potential for metaphorically understanding landscapes through the filter of comprehensible human experiences, terms, or qualities allows us to move beyond the boundaries of language and knowledge into what we *could* imagine—hinting at what we cannot know. Anchoring the physical language of landscapes to ephemeral landscapes of collective human longing, desire, and emotion emphasizes a translation revealing more about human nature than nature itself. Valuing the infinite meditations of a humanly expressed landscape subtly brings to light a more elusive, shifting interior horizon—the invisible boundaries of self. Drawn towards extremes of landscapes and self, we perpetually redefine human boundaries in the blank space of sublime repose, the cavernous echo between immediate experience and the stilled distance of expression.

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## LANGUAGE OF LANDSCAPE

Tired of all who come with words, words but no language  
 I went to the snow-covered island.  
 The wild does not have words.  
 The unwritten pages spread themselves out in all directions!  
 I come across the marks of roe-deer's hooves in the snow.  
 Language but no words.  
 Tomas Tranströmer

Language is rooted in the exchange of a message or information and implies two different bodies, as an exchange implies movement from one to another. Language—be it through the written word or visual expression—is an expression of thought or feeling. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty had begun to pull apart an idea of “human language as a profoundly carnal phenomena, rooted in our sensorial experience of each other and the world.”<sup>i</sup> Thus, language fundamentally begins as information collected through sensory awareness of that which occurs outside oneself. Its form varies as visual, written, spoken, or sign, but the origin and purpose is consistent across all variations as a mode of communicating a physical experience of our surroundings. Going further, David Abrams concludes,

...communicative meaning is always in its depths, affective; it remains rooted in the sensual dimension of experience, born of the body's native capacity to resonate with other bodies and with the landscape as a whole. Meaning sprouts in the very depths of the sensory world, in the heat of meeting, encounter, participation.<sup>ii</sup>

The notion that meaning in language arises between the contact of two separate bodies is demonstrated in the way children learn their first languages. They do so by exploring their surrounding world through their senses, putting objects in their mouths,

tasting them, grasping for objects so they can hold them in their hands and feel textures or weight. One learns that a lemon is sour by placing it on their tongue, one recognizes the texture of tree bark as rough and is able to create distinctions between different trees with different bark as they reach out and touch more. Consequently, the more varied exposures and encounters one has with their surroundings, the more complex and specific their vocabulary becomes.

Children also learn by mimicking the sounds they hear in their surroundings whether the voices are human or non-human. “It must always begin with a mimicry preceding comprehension; from there, a little darkness grows.”<sup>iii</sup> Understanding the meaning of each sign only takes place after it is first collected through the senses. Thus, one’s native language, both in its physical form and underlying meaning, is learned through physical encounters with their surroundings. In this embodied language, “linguistic meaning is rooted in the felt experience induced by specific sounds and sound shapes as they echo and contrast with one another, each language a kind of song, a particular way of singing the world.”<sup>iv</sup>

So, in realizing that all language is a sensory response to one’s surrounding world, whether that world is Montana prairie or a high-rise in Seoul, Korea, it follows that the natural world is the basic, primary beginning of every language. When we reduce our surroundings to their most basic form, we are left with the natural world. We come to human language only after we sensually experience our world—after we encounter earthly language. In this conception, there is no real division between nature and human nature. “Ultimately, it is not human language that is primary, but rather the sensuous, perceptual life-world, whose wild, participatory logic ramifies and elaborates itself in

language.”<sup>v</sup> Human language arose after we reached out to touch and let ourselves be touched by the world around us. We understand ourselves through a relationship with landscape, no matter its forms or direct connection to “the wild.” Crafting a human language, allowed us to collectively share the bodily experience of the world with one another.

To go a step further, one can conclude before humans, the natural world already had its own physical language. “It is not the human body alone but rather the whole of the sensuous world that provides the deep structure of language.”<sup>vi</sup> Animals have their own unique bodily languages, just as the earth itself has its own nonverbal language constantly shifting in structure between visual, auditory, taste, and olfactory forms. For example, weather is foreshadowed by the patterns communicated as colors, forms, and movement of clouds across the skies. These subtle visual differences in clouds function as adjectives and adverbs that distinguish a particular outcome within the specifics of form. Describing clouds as heavy, gray, ominous, rolling, or charged is an indication of how the physical language of earth has also shaped human language as the earthly language unfurls visually before we affix human language. “It is no more true that *we* speak than that the things and the animate world itself, *speak within us*. Language, writes Merleau-Ponty, ‘is the very voice of the trees, the waves, and the forests.’”<sup>vii</sup> Accordingly, the landscape exists as a collective language, the most elemental, universal, and ancient form, from which all human language and understanding originates.

At birth, we stepped into an already established language and are still constantly trying to understand, catalogue, and describe through translation within the boundaries of our own human terms. Art, as an extension of human expression, must similarly grapple



with the challenge of translating one form of language into another. Human words must be matched to the sensory, bodily language of the natural world; as Tomas Tranströmer wrote in regard to the landscape, “language but no words”. Reading the landscape, one must first realize it is a language written entirely in the senses, rich with textures, tastes, smells, sounds, and sights, and requires a physical reading. “To be fully felt and known, landscape literature must be experienced in situ.”<sup>viii</sup> One must be thrust back into their bodies where the senses collide in a nonhierarchical manner. The same can be said for visual art, especially the form of installation, which prioritizes an immediate, physical, and sensual experience of a landscape. In this way, art can be like landscape literature—something that at once encompasses our bodies yet still must be understood through the filter of human nature as art is another human constructed language.

Accurately reading a landscape is fundamentally dependent on an awareness of one’s senses and an ability to remain present as a receptive listener. “You must come with no intentions of discovery. You must overhear things, as though you’d come into a small and desolate town and paused by an open window.”<sup>ix</sup> Being versed in the language of landscape means being an active listener, tuned into all the senses—just as one must be an active viewer to “read” the world of contemporary world. Attuning to the subtle shifts in a state of heightened sensory perception, allows one to open the window of the human body letting the space of the natural world drift inward. With each deep inhale, we take in the exhaled breath of our natural surroundings—a tacit exchange as intimate as the nourishment we received from our mothers. “Perceiving is the same as receiving and it is the same as responding. Perception means all of them...and is the primary experience. Thinking compares everything we have perceived with everything that we are perceiving

at the moment.”<sup>x</sup> Reading a landscape is actively perceiving and on the periphery of perception, one is constantly associating the present experience with previous experiences, organizing, and assimilating new information.

Perception ultimately must give way to thought, for it is human nature to reconcile the new or unknown experiences with already known experiences—as we try to make sense of it all. This sixth sense, the sense of thought, is the inner voice of expression, consciousness, and emotion. It is what allows us to internalize the external material of the natural world—to claim a place.

Thinking is the condition of everyone, the human condition;...we all carry this weight. Or rather, we do not carry it: we are this weight. The weight of existence is being outside oneself – having one’s landing point of place of presence, one’s earth, ground, or void, one’s belonging or abyss, outside of oneself. Weight means to fall outside of oneself.<sup>xi</sup>

In the moment of falling from bodily perception into disembodied thought, we distance ourselves from the actual experience. As perception gives way to thought, the raw, sensual, immersive material of nature transforms into a view apart from us—what we understand as a landscape. The process of sensing and our resulting desire to express our experience, reconfigures the ineffable language of nature into a comprehensible landscape image. As “the catalyst that converts any physical location – any environment if you will – into a place, is the process of experiencing deeply. A place is a piece of a whole environment that has been claimed by feelings.”<sup>xii</sup> Uncontainable nature becomes “landscape” as we assign it a name, or in the case of visual art, as we attempt to contain the human experience of being in a place within a photograph, painting, sculpture, or installation.<sup>xiii</sup>

When reading a landscape, one must recognize the conflicting states of being both present during perception and simultaneously absent during comprehension. The human conception of landscape is apart from one—experienced through the veil of distance as a view separate from the viewer.

Merleau-Ponty's 'intuitionism of the flesh' emphasizes original immediacy, sensible presentation, and coperception. Yet, Derrida points out, it simultaneously reveals an equally intuitionist reinscription of "an experience of apartness, inadequacy, distance, indirection, noncoincidence." Even the maidens gentle hand can never coincide with the things; apartness already dwells with the bower<sup>xiv</sup>.

While reading a landscape, "the touching is never exactly the touched"<sup>xv</sup> as our human relationship with the natural world is paradoxically both one of immediate participant and absent observer. The distance between the experience and the expression—the gaps of translation between language of landscapes and human language—spotlights our inability to every entirely grasp nature but awakens our earthly desire to continually reach towards the apple of the tree

## HORIZONS OF LONGING

*We are floating in a medium of vast extent, always drinking uncertainty, blown to and fro, whenever we think we have a fixed point to which we can cling and make fast, it shifts and leaves us behind; if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips away and flees eternally before us. This is our natural state and yet the state most contrary to our inclinations. We burn with desire to find a firm footing, an ultimate, lasting base on which to build a tower rising up to infinity, but our whole foundation cracks and the earth opens. Virginia Woolf*

The human desire to know what is beyond the limits of what we already know—reach the unreachable boundaries—is a condition of our existence. In one way or another, we are always reaching towards some idea of a horizon, a place visible without being physical, and only experienced at a remove by the limited stretch of sight alone. Distance collapses into vacancy; the faraway feels powerfully near, palpable in our human experience of the present as space and distance transform desire into the blurry expanse of longing—“longing, because desire is full of endless distances.”<sup>xvi</sup> Longing is sustained by a constant absence, a vast erasure of something, someplace, or even the presence of a person. It is an intense desire born of that which is always just out of reach, for to reach the physical horizon is an endless pursuit, as each movement forward eternally pushes the faint thread of horizon further outward. We will never reach the horizon, but a human constructed place of arrival—whether on the page or in an art space—compels us to grasp for this ceaseless limit nonetheless.

It is easy to understand how the first people conceived of the earth as flat with edges falling away into nothingness, for that is how it appears to the human eye. The earth’s horizon is a visible boundary, existing as a limit on perception, our world, and

ultimately as a level reminder of human limits. “Drawing not the empirical boundary of the world but the soft edge where perception fades off, the “offing” is really a trick of vision. Where it glimmers, sight beholds its own vanishing. This vanishing—the trace of human vision seeing itself out—is indeed what we mean by horizon.”<sup>xvii</sup> In the end, we can only see so far and in feeling the hazy limits of our perception, we too feel the limits of our own human boundaries.

In the philosophic domain, Merleau-Ponty described the limit of perception as the “visible invisible” and rather than using the horizon as an example, used cloud studies.

Clouds are confusing, not so much because they mix elements or constantly change shape, but because they challenge the phenomenology of the visible with what cannot be seen: the luminous opacity associated with the phenomenology of sight. Clouds are untouchable; yet (like the eye) they envelop and palpate the visible sky, creating depth and feeling. We cannot experience the thickness of a cloud and see it at the same time; once in a cloud, we have lost sight of it. Clouds puzzle us by representing not so much the mind in a state of reflection, as the latency involved in all visible representation—not fullness versus flatness only, but absence—the ungraspable or unattainable; things we cannot see, as well as things visible to the eye. Clouds provide a metaphor for what Merleau-Ponty calls an element or incarnate principle (like water, air, earth, fire) “midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Similarly, the structure of human language poses another horizon, as the gap between an immediate, physical experience of nature and its distanced, contemplated expression, emphasizing yet another limit of human existence manifested in the limits of language. Nature is never a fixed entity—it is perpetually moving, changing, always in flux—and resists being fixed in a still form within the confines of any language be it written, visual, or spoken. This fleeting quality of “presentness” which philosopher John Fowles refers to as “an experience whose deepest value lies in the fact that it cannot be directly described by any art.”<sup>xix</sup> What is gained from an experience of nature, landscapes, or natural phenomena lies outside the rigid habits of a language—a name, a

photograph, a painting, etc.—because “ it is a little as it is in atomic physics where the very act of observation changes what is observed; though here the catch lies in trying to describe the observation. To enter upon such a description is like trying to capture the uncapturable.”<sup>xx</sup> Just as Merleau-Ponty’s clouds exist without being tangibly grasped by the palm of hand, the horizon exists without ever being set firmly afoot as the wavering voice of nature remains outside the boundaries of a fixed language—beyond still words and images.

### The Silence

Though the air is full of singing  
my head is loud  
with the labor of words.

Though the season is rich  
with fruit, my tongue  
hungers for the sweet of speech.

Though the beech is golden  
I cannot stand beside it  
mute, but must say

“It is golden,” while the leaves  
stir and fall with a sound  
that is not a name.

It is in the silence  
that my hope is, and my aim  
A song whose lines

I cannot make or sing  
sounds men’s silence  
like a root. Let me say

and not mourn: the world  
lives in the death of speech  
and sings there.<sup>xxi</sup>

Ineffably so, nature makes us keenly aware of the limits of human knowledge because in resisting explicit classification by language, nature also resists being fully known. Simply saying the word “tree” will never precisely communicate the infinite variations a tree could be. The process of naming or image making serve as concise vessels for knowledge and demonstrate an assured sense of ownership over the held content. The silent resistance we find ourselves constantly crashing into as we attempt to package nature into precise frames of an image or a word, provokes the strained state of pursuit. “All human desires, temptations, and aspirations, are the polarized values, existence of which leaves people to move at least in the imagination beyond the norm to the extremes.”<sup>xxii</sup>

In toeing the limits of perception, language, and knowledge, we reveal yet another metaphorical horizon existing as an inner boundary of self. A limit between what we know and what we could possibly know—what we can *imagine* to know. “The things we want are transformative, and we don’t know or only think we know what is on the other side of that transformation. Love, wisdom, grace, inspiration – how do you go about finding these things that are in some ways about extending the boundaries of the self into unknown territory, about becoming someone else?”<sup>xxiii</sup> Looking out at the horizon thus ultimately becomes a way of looking inward, examining those boundaries of the self. “Whatever we see without is a symbol of something within—and that which is farthest off—is the symbol of what is deepest within.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

We long for these experiences where we are able to step beyond all boundaries of perception, language, knowledge and ourselves because that is the experience of life. Life, most palpable in the presence of nature, is a constant state of unfurling. The

temporal trait of nature lies in its inherent language as each season subtly unfolds into the next, decay into growth, night into day, and so forth. In keeping cadence with this rhythm, humans, also creatures of nature, crave this cyclical emergence from dark to light as a mental state of moving from not knowing to knowing.

With similar encouragement, Thoreau encourages us to “lose the whole world, get lost in it, and find your soul.”<sup>xxv</sup>

To lose yourself: a voluptuous surrender, lost in your arms, lost to the world, utterly immersed in what is present so that its surroundings fade away. In Benjamin’s terms, to be lost is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery. And one does not get lost but loses oneself in, with the implications that it is a conscious choice, a chosen surrender, a psychic state achievable through geography.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Vast, open landscapes, such as prairies, deserts, and oceans, where the horizon blankly confronts one as if they were looking into a mirror, more easily present physical openings to experience an inner horizon and the transformative capacity of geography. These landscapes evoke feelings of longing more than those of cities or forests where distance is contained, defined by manmade boundaries and only experienced as a few, safe reachable miles, rather than several thousand uncomfortable miles endlessly stretching outward. Scale is distorted in these immense landscapes with few landmarks to locate one’s sense of self in relation to the world and exists in extremes, edging towards a grandiose human feeling infused with equal parts boundless freedom and blatant insignificance we call “sublime”.

Immersed in this dizzying “medium of vast extent”, all one has to encounter is themselves without a fixed point, no solid tree from which to cling, overcome by the muteness of distance unfolding in every which direction—both an “end and beginning



without end.”<sup>xxvii</sup> Consumed by these landscapes we are able to lose our sense of self, if only for a brief moment, and exist in a state of sublime repose, lost in our surroundings. What was once invisible or ineffable, presents itself as “the point at which we are linked to the world by what we cannot perceive: ourselves in the act of perception.”<sup>xxviii</sup> The interior horizon towards which we feel we are always straining for, whether consciously or not, is the distance we feel between ourselves and the unfolding exterior world. Longing’s root is ultimately the human desire to see ourselves *in part*; to step into “space which the heart feels—space in which we too are located and to which we are closely and organically connected by our sensory perception.”<sup>xxix</sup>

The immersive, sensual quality of both nature and art provide multiple moments for this kind of dual outward and inward perceptual feeling, as both languages are written in the material of senses and meaning arises through every human encounter. “A subject feels: that is his characteristic and his definition. In this way, to be straining will always, then be straining toward or in approach to the self. Listening strains toward subjectivity, sounds apprehended on the edge of meaning—external to the self.”<sup>xxx</sup> Each small seashell pressed gently into the soft flesh of ear, only plays back the rolling ocean of one’s interior depths—the vast sound of space, a hollow cavern of self.

The audible is always mingled with the inaudible; the noises we make become part of those we hear. The ear sings, breath comes and goes, the heart beats time; even in silence, you you’re your own body resonate, your own breath, your heart and all its resounding cave. This cavernous interior silence is what we hear in the intervals of listening. Sense opens up silence.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Furthermore, embracing a poetic language of expression—be it visual, written, or spoken—allows us to get “outside any web work of names mistaken for how things really are”; to go “beyond the spoken ghosts enabling language to be what it is. Other than these

silences of profound meditation, the only remaining escape from illusions built into nomenclature would be to speak names truer to their things than any names those things presently have.”<sup>xxxii</sup> In this way, a poetic language allows one to voice the internal noises and silences eluding logical reasoning; thereby embracing a human expression of nature as we can imagine ourselves closer to the unreachable horizons of longing.

The window is a fragment  
of the world suspended  
in the world, the known  
adrift in mystery.  
And now the green  
rises. The window has an edge  
that is celestial,  
where the eyes are surpassed<sup>xxxiii</sup>

## VALUE OF POETICS: MOVING BEYOND HORIZONS

*Poetry's extended metaphorical vocabulary allows things and poetry to be thought together and experienced as rebarbative – resistant to understanding, translation, or paraphrase but not to memory, feeling, or learning by heart. All the translator, whether she is using words, paint, images, or some other creative material, can do is to offer a distinct version in another foreign language.<sup>xxxiv</sup>*

The assumption, common to alphabetic culture, that ‘reading omens’ is a superstitious and utterly irrational activity prevents us from recognizing the practical importance for foraging peoples of careful attention to the behavior of natural surroundings. This manner of watching and interpreting of the world’s gestures, as if every movement bears a meaning, accords with a worldview that simply has no notion of pure meaninglessness.<sup>xxxv</sup> As a linguistic example, place names used by oral cultures are often entirely poetic phrases used to connote the lived, human experience of being there. In speaking the place names, one is able to imagine what it would feel like to be there in comprehensible human terms, both physically and psychologically. In this way, incantations replace logical explanations in order to evoke the experience of a place— what it would feel like, externally and internally, to be present.

“The point about beauty is to see it. The point of the poem is not to say anything about beauty, but to enact the vision of it.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> The same is true of visual art that is trying to say something about the aesthetic appeal of landscapes; a poetic sensibility/approach offers an alternative way of evoking landscapes that fall outside the limits of mimesis in visual art. Abandoning Cartesian models of language also makes room for “nonnormativity”, which Merleau-Ponty calls “knowledge of the natural world riddled with gaps, which is how poetry creeps in.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> These gaps exists, as previously

discussed, because “there are facts beyond the reach of human concepts—facts which could never be represented or comprehended by human beings”<sup>xxxviii</sup> and due to our human instinct, the desire to rationalize the world we inhabit, compels us “to recognize their existence without being able to state or comprehend them. Such inaccessible facts elude propositions expressed in human language. This is where the metaphorical language of the poetics enters the picture.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Rather than relying on the empirical habits of a language, be it visual or spoken, to describe something, poetics speaks in terms of associations and human experience, which seeks to show us something anew about a subject seemingly familiar.

Furthermore, if earth is instinctual: perfect, irrational, and semiotic,<sup>xl</sup> then poetic structure, which originated in rituals and incantations, offers a form similar to oral cultures within which the felt evocation of natural phenomena takes precedence in human communication. And just as meaning in nature arises in the “heat of an encounter between bodies”<sup>xli</sup> so to does meaning arise in metaphor as one form is fit to another. Like a conversation, a metaphor is not a static thing, but a fluid relationship between things wrought with differences and resemblances. This process of comparing and contrasting allows us to create known anchor points that fasten abstract ideas to concrete forms. Poetics as a structure for visual or written language “shares, then, with myth and fable the strategy of building story around human experience, as a means of explaining that experience, or attempting to, and as a means of (sometimes) offering instruction regarding that experience.”<sup>xlii</sup> Authority, in both poetry and in visual art, derives from metaphors full of sensuous power and particularity that have the potential to preen and rustle as we draw nearer to what we are attempting to describe.<sup>xliii</sup>

“Even the crackling sounds made by the new ice on the lakes are a kind of earthly utterance, laden with meaning: In fall time you’ll hear the lakes make loud, cracking noises after they freeze. It means they’re asking for snow to cover them up, to protect them from the cold.”<sup>xliv</sup> A metaphorical explanation allows us to express the mysterious natural world in comprehensible human terms as we take our experiences of being human and gently press them upon the interpretation of natural phenomena as a filter for locating understanding. “Metaphors grounded in landscape guide how humans think and act. Emerson observed humans understand and experience one kind of thing in terms of another, projecting bodies and minds onto the surrounding world: trees and clouds seen as unbounded, a river seen as having a mouth, a mountain as having a foot, front, back, and side.”<sup>xlv</sup> In this way, humans consciously move around the world in a state of echolocation, blindly feeling our way around by means of touching both exteriors and interiors.<sup>xlvi</sup> “The poem itself reminds us that our urge toward fabulation arises from our need to rationalize both the exterior and interior aspects of our experience.”<sup>xlvii</sup>

In linking and thinking about material and non-material things<sup>xlviii</sup> through metaphors, the “lyric process is propelled by the sounded repetition of sameness and difference, of rhymes thrown forwards as both moving line and anchor.”<sup>xlix</sup> The same can be said in visual art, as material and process are frequently used as metaphors to connote deeper meanings embedded within the artwork itself. Formal qualities of any artwork, sculpture, video, or installation, can be used as a poetic device to highlight either the similarities or differences between the creation and the reality. Going back to the example of clouds for a brief moment, choosing to create a “cloud-like” object, as we can never truly create a cloud itself, from a material such as wool, an artist is intentionally

creating a relationship between the apparent softness of clouds and the physical texture of wool. The material is thus used to “anchor” a formless cloud as a tangible form, while at the same time casting out infinite possibilities a cloud expresses.

As such, the poetic process of creation sets up a kind of rhyming game where pattern, variation, and repetition provide a framework for material quality—the physical reality—to resonate and saturate the idea—the image—with specific associations “recovering knowledge by means of awakening affect or sentiment.”<sup>l</sup> The repetition and resonance of an image, in the case of visual poetics, essentially stops or at the very least slows time as we are given a moment to reflect by stepping out of moving time. “It is indeed possible to use the word *rhyme* to describe certain senses of rotation and repetition in time—as when we note coincidences or have a sense of *déjà vu*. Our temporal powers of retrospection and projection depend upon abilities to hold in mind and attend to resonances that are employed in the apprehension of rhyme.”<sup>li</sup>

The still life, still frame, rests in musical score, are filled with the resonances of life and all its absence suspending the narrative, turning “the self into a dreaming scene, if only for a moment.”<sup>lii</sup> Poetics offers us a language focused on opening thought up to intuition<sup>liii</sup> further emphasizing the space between what one tangibly feels with their senses and what one *imagines* they feel. Just as in reading omens, meaning surfaces as imagination flows into these openings of exquisite space between what is and what could be. Like an axe coming down into a log, a poetic gesture dents consciousness; wedging it wider and wider until we notice something we could not see before.<sup>liv</sup> In A Place of Sense, John Haines writes:

I have been led by this and other realizations to feel that there are always two places, dream and actual life. When the two are brought together by

an act of imagination there occur those sometimes brief moments of compelling clarity and completeness. And those moments are, or ought to be, part of the real life of humankind: place and image, reality and dream made one. It seems to me that one important function of the poet, of the artist, is to discover, to reveal, and to complete that vision, the bits and pieces of which are all the most of us ever see and can seldom identify...a poetry of the earth, a new sort of innocence and passion finding the world around us.<sup>iv</sup>

This static filled state between dream and actual life, place and reality, is the vast landscape of the imagination—a no man’s land where one is constantly without firm footing—“moving seamlessly from not knowing to thinking to near actualization of a statement that would be. To be conscious of our mortal condition, and to instinctively want not to be conscious of it. To be human.”<sup>lv</sup> In the words of TS Eliot, we are always wavering:

Between the idea  
And the reality

Between the emotion  
And the response

Between the desire  
And the spasm<sup>lvii</sup>

In this silence between the bits and pieces, the space of landscape, or the blank page, we can project ourselves through imagination surpassing the limitations of our own bodies. Art that relies on the possibilities of imagination through poetic structure, can thus “transcend the limits of experience or provable knowledge in order to make a thing that is whole...by accepting its formal limits and then answering within those limits all the questions it raises.”<sup>lviii</sup> In doing so, we acknowledge both our limits as humans and our power of extending the self beyond the boundaries of our earthly reach. “*How things*

*really are* is one of your concerns, but by no means the only one. You have begun to ask also how things will be, how you want things to be, how things ought to be. You want to know what are the meanings, both temporal and eternal, of the condition of things in this world.”<sup>lix</sup> This state of “sublime repose” grants the human imagination freedom to operate distinctly from the objects of perception, reaching towards new extremes of experience, expression, and knowledge.

In moving towards a poetic imagining of the natural world as a means of bringing forth more than the eye can see or the hand may reach—to surpass the horizons of perception and observation—is to step into a new kind of “advocacy” for the earth. “An advocacy” as Wendell Berry explains, “questioning how a human economy may be conducted with reverence toward everything involved.”<sup>lx</sup> A mindset in which nature, every landscape perceived, every phenomena felt, exists not as a quantifiable value or something we must preserve for it’s “worth”, but as a thing far greater than our human reach, too grand for us to ever fully grasp.

With that, a poetic interpretation by Reg Saner expresses the ineffable feelings, qualities, and value of a “trueer- nature” of which these clumsy words have failed to contain:



## The Tongue as Red Dog

When "soul" was still locked landscape  
 frankly empty as steppes, a few maimed weeds  
 tried standing up for lyres  
 the wind strummed. But that wasn't it.

To the east, broods of heliotrope pigeons  
 meant to be "daybreak"  
 or "sunset" and couldn't tell which. Everything  
 that had swum up through the mire  
 wanted to speak.

Occasionally the vast stands of blue timber  
 launched a hurtle and dart of feathered flutes  
 coming close, yet not quite "utterance" --  
 more "reservoir." Whose ripples, like concentric syllables,  
 went on dying toward "shore."

Thus epochs.

And the nights wore mere sandpaper  
 mistaken, glittering like "stars," gnawing rough edges.

Who could say? A voice might yet turn up  
 if only a blur, once common as lichen  
 grown brighter than ice. When lo! Over the dumb rim  
 of the spectrum, out of some animal idiom  
 for water circled with daylight  
 tripped this nimble little dog  
 leading an odd constellation of bones.

Feeling out  
 new ways for them, drawing them further  
 into the astonishing grammar of fire,  
 into earthly declensions of air,  
 into the green syntax of rain.<sup>lxii</sup>

## ANALYSIS OF ARTWORK

In my most recent work, a longing to express an ephemeral experience of nature, either as a landscape or phenomena, is manifested through poetic devices such as metaphor, articulated spaces, and rhyme. Approaching *once in a while, i see my breath* (fig. 1) from a distance, one sees a white paper blanketed room brightly illuminated by an inner glow pulsing from the sheer opacity of the material itself. A long stack of white crumpled parchment paper draws one into the light filled room from the dark exterior. The stack slowly builds in height from feet to waist as it stretches inward, reaching towards the back wall like the long train of an endless winterscape “deep with snow, thick with forebodings, silent, inward, and trackless.”<sup>xiii</sup>

The floor is also covered in white paper of yet a slightly different opacity softly diffusing the gray ground beneath. Sheets of paper like fresh sheets of snow gently obscure what is actually underneath, blurring the known surface. Edges overlap irregularly as if they were moved by the wind, drifting across a patchwork made of fields.

Tiny, pencil-sized sticks roughly poke through the surface of the brittle paper like worn fence posts in an empty snowfield. They jauntily stand upright in a long procession that seems to be going somewhere but nowhere at the same time. They are a measure of space and time, like ticks on a clock, a solidification of thought as black as words on white paper.

Upon closer inspection, long sheets of layered opaque paper are draped from floor to ceiling as the rear wall creates a hazy field everything recedes towards. Space seems to

go on as the sticks and stack of papers disappear at a barely perceptible horizon line softly absorbed by the atmosphere of distance (fig. 2).

At the point of entrance, the threshold between one room and another, one must make a decision whether to enter into the pristine room or stand at the doorway and peer in. Cloaked in varying shades of light-infused whites, the interior is so pristine, so untouched, as if it were a sacred space meant for transcendence.

The room has been washed of all human traces, seemingly lifeless and frozen in stilled silence, heavy with the weight of emptiness. The still life, as Kathleen Stewart writes “is a genre that captures the liveness of inanimate objects by suspending their sensory beauty in an intimate scene charged with the textures of desire.”<sup>xiv</sup> Time has stopped in here and what remains are “fragments of experience that pull at ordinary experience but rarely come into full frame—and unnamed condensation of thought and feeling.”<sup>xv</sup>

One hesitates at the doorway, for entering would mean disturbing the scene. Entering would mean leaving a mark, a dirty footprint, on the blank pages announcing an invisible presence that quivers just below the surface of everything.

The room is eerily quiet despite the low ominous rumblings from black speakers mounted on the walls near the ceiling and subwoofer squatting in a corner. The white noise resonates as vibrations through one’s body and extends the space of experience beyond the rigid walls of the small room. The only recognizable sound amidst the rumbling blur is a brooding caw from a black crow piercing the white silence with stark clarity—an unhumanly voice announcing a humanly presence.

Metaphorically crows are foreboding; they alert others to the presence of humans, are creatures of the dark, and sinister signals of death as predominately scavengers. Situated high above humans, watching us more than we can ever watch them, their shadowy nature is unsettling; the unexpected caw infuses the installation with a terrifying uneasiness. “They attend to what we shy away from, darkening the wastelands of our inattention.”<sup>lxvi</sup> Thus, the caw not only emphasizes human presence but to a greater extent signals the lack thereof.

Furthermore, the crow and the sticks function as similar waypoints for locating oneself in relationship to the rest of the empty landscape. Both relate scale to our bodies, as they exist as spatial punctuation marks in a predominately empty landscape. Their miniaturization allows space to feel larger than it actually is as one imagines themselves situated within the tiny yet expansive space as one experiences themselves looking from far away. The forced perspective in the receding stack of paper towards a distant horizon reinforces a physical experience of distance as the far becomes near.

The air is cool and crisp; the ice-cold floor on shoe-less feet a quick reminder of one’s vulnerability.

Behind the paper wall, slightly above and to the left of the miniature landscape, a shadow, unbound by gravity, mysteriously appears and disappears to no predictable rhythm gracefully dodging any fixed form—coming into and out of focus (fig. 3). It appears as a figure walking in the hazy distance, teasingly just beyond the reach of human eyes and without a clear definition of form. The consistent surface obscurity sows slack murmurings as one attempts to draw precise boundaries around what it is they are perceiving.

As one finally bends down to peer around the suspended sheet of vellum, the indiscernible shadow reveals itself as a black feather dangling from a barely visible string fastened out of hair. Gently swaying in space, dancing on the invisible air currents in the room, the feather echoes the subtle weight of foreshadowing evoked by the uneasy tone of the crow caw. Moved by what is moving, the feather reminds one of their own floating presence in the emptiness of the room, another barometer of what little is actually present. In all this whiteness, the human figure stands out in contrast to the surrounding environment, just as the crow pierces the silence and sticks puncture the paper. Each one a word printed on paper, a voice spoken, an attempt at articulation.

Just as blurry and ungraspable as the feather, the installation speaks in a whispered utterance moving towards the gesture of a landscape unconcerned with precisely defined surface contours. The ambiguous nature of nature itself leaves space for one's imagination to interpret what is read by the senses as we come to know a landscape. In the work, the only actual elements of a tangible landscape are the projected soundscape and floating feather; whereas, the remaining elements are human made constructions. These translations of real landscapes essentialize the elements presented in a way that evokes a human experience of being immersed within the landscape. Vacillation between what is real or imagined and what is experience or translation emphasize the impossibility of knowing a landscape as a place outside oneself.

Sonja Braas's recent series of photographs, *The Passage*, are similarly concerned with the tension between reality and imagination in the representation of landscapes (fig. 5). Her photographs are constructed by combining actual images of landscapes with images taken from meticulously hand built models in her studio. The models, as well as

the final photos, rely heavily on 18<sup>th</sup> century Romantic landscape painting traditions subordinating the reality of nature to human idealization . Each resulting photograph conflates the space between what is actually present and what is imagined to be present, confronting one's idealized conceptions of nature through constructed images depicting the representation of a representation. In the end, each model is destroyed and all that remains is the fabricated image.

Whereas Braas is more concerned with questioning the representation of the idealized image, Katrin Sigurdardottir's installations investigate the representation of the essentialized experience. The medium of installation creates a sensory environment for one to physically experience situated within the frame whereas photography only allows one to imaginatively enter the frame. In *High Plane I-IV* (fig. 6), the frame exists as a stage or a container for one's experience. The ladders leading up into the ceiling simulate the experience of climbing mountains. Once reaching the top of the ladder, viewer's heads emerge into an essentialized miniature mountain scape (fig. 7). In surrounding her viewers, embodied perception allows one to fill the role of an active participant within both the conceived and perceived experience of a landscape.

However, the use of a miniature landscape and the controlled vantage points within the installation create a physical removal and distancing of an actual experience. Similar to Braas, the miniature fulfills the same function of creating a landscape set in perspective as the photographic image. In both instances one is denied entry, except by imaginatively inhabiting the contained landscape by projecting themselves into the scene.

The miniature offers us a transcendent vision, which is known only through the visual. In approaching the miniature, our bodies erupt into a confusion of before-unrealized surfaces. We are able to hold the miniature

object within our hand, but our hand is no longer in proportion with this world; instead our hand becomes a form of undifferentiated landscape, the body a kind of background. Once the miniature world is self-enclosed, as in the case of the dollhouse, we can only stand outside, looking in, experiencing a type of tragic distance.<sup>lxvii</sup>

Returning to my work, standing both in the installation and the presence of the miniature, one is simultaneously within the space of an immediate, embodied experience and yet still remains outside the constructed landscape (fig. 4). Constantly caught in a state of tension between being within and without, as both active participant and distanced observer.

The loneliness of nature spreads out before the solitary figure at the edge of the cliff as the stage of his consequent (and consequential) experience. But this beholder must always remain aware of the frame, aware of the encompassing role of nature. Hence the natural in the sublime is always a tamed beast, is always a transformation of an action into object and distance into transcendence, and hence always sublimely ironic.<sup>lxviii</sup>

The experience is both of and as a result. Just as in reading a landscape, an individual is immediately implicated as one constantly moves between body and mind while sensing and making sense. Thereby bringing to light the slippery task of accurately fixing any experience of nature into a rigid form true to the ephemeral experience of it because the experience is always subjective—dependent on meaning arising in the heat of encounter between two—one and another. The feather behind the opaque paper will always be just a feather, yet human desire to rationalize the experience of the installation as a whole, by connecting the fragments placed before us, we ascribe meaning to each detail through human metaphors we can relate to. In this way, the human is present by implication – “the thing is the thing itself. All the resonances and connotations of it are imposed on it by human consciousness.”<sup>lxix</sup> The “sublime” landscape and any landscape

perceived is thus truly a manifestation of the inmost landscape of human desire, the extremes we *wish* to reach.

In keeping with this state of sublime repose, my recent work, including the installations *from inside this tree* (fig. 8,9) and *come as light little plinth of sky* (fig. 10, 11) are all attempts at a poetic translation of what it means, in human terms, to understand the significance of each encounter—each conversation with a landscape. They are meditations on fleeting moments, the distance between fence posts, and what we might see in these exquisite spaces when we acknowledge our own earthly desires to see what is humanly in nature. With every press of rough bark into fingertips; the leaf, out of arm's reach, caught in light waiting to fall; the clouds I see my own reflection in, then splash into a thousand tiny water drops scattering over the dirt; are all ways of slowly feeling out past horizons of what I knew into those I have yet to.



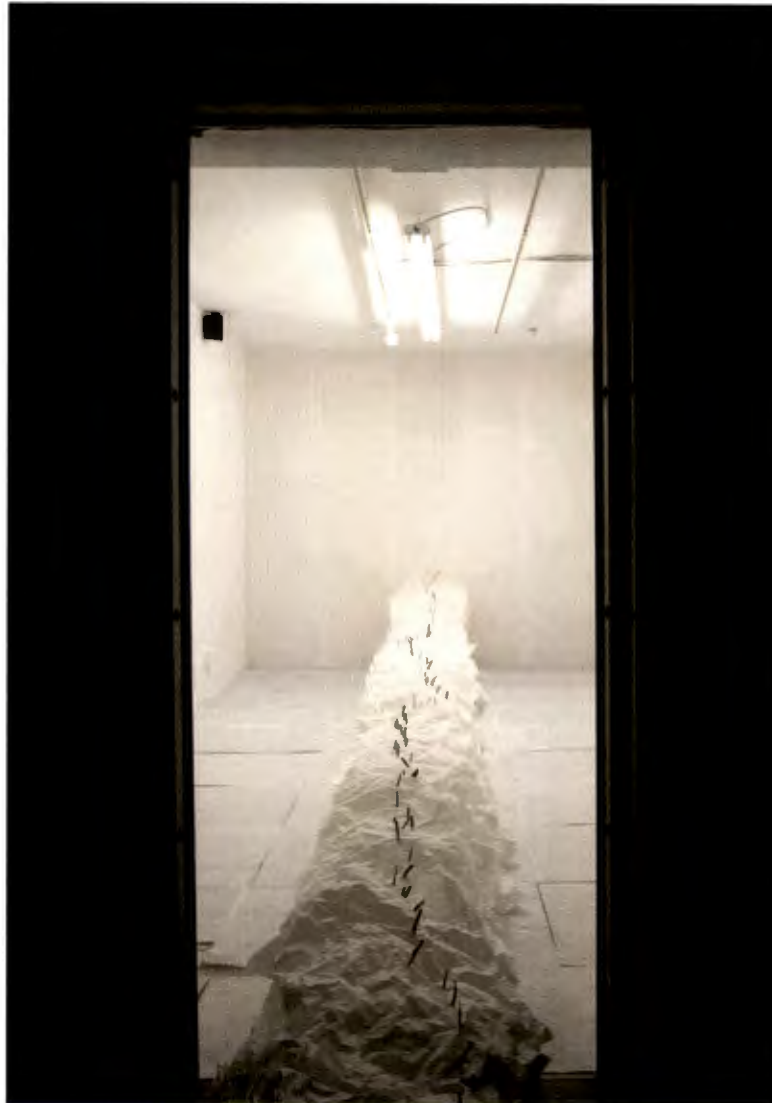
**ILLUSTRATIONS**

Figure 1: Whitney Polich

*once in a while, i see my breath*, 2013

Parchment paper vellum, sticks, feather, hair, 6-channel sound projection. Dimensions variable



Figure 2: Polich

*once in a while, i see my breath, detail*

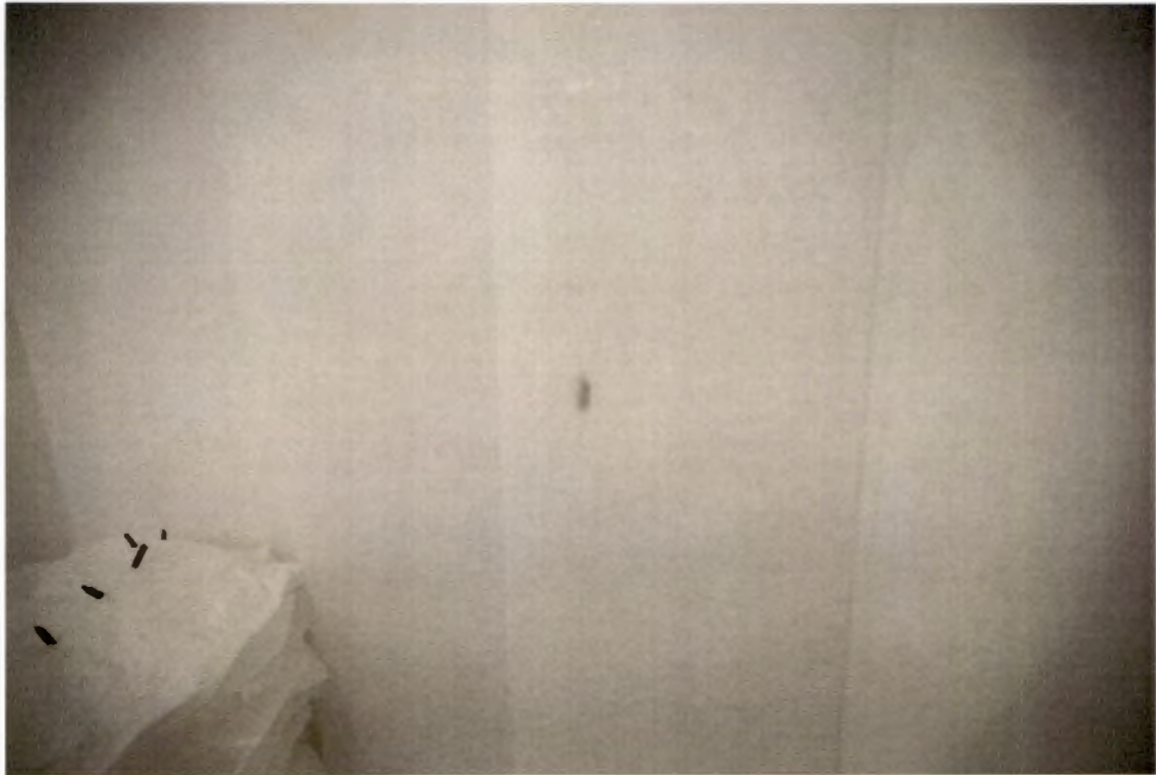


Figure 3: Polich

*once in a while, i see my breath, detail*



Figure 4: Polich

*once in a while, i see my breath, detail*

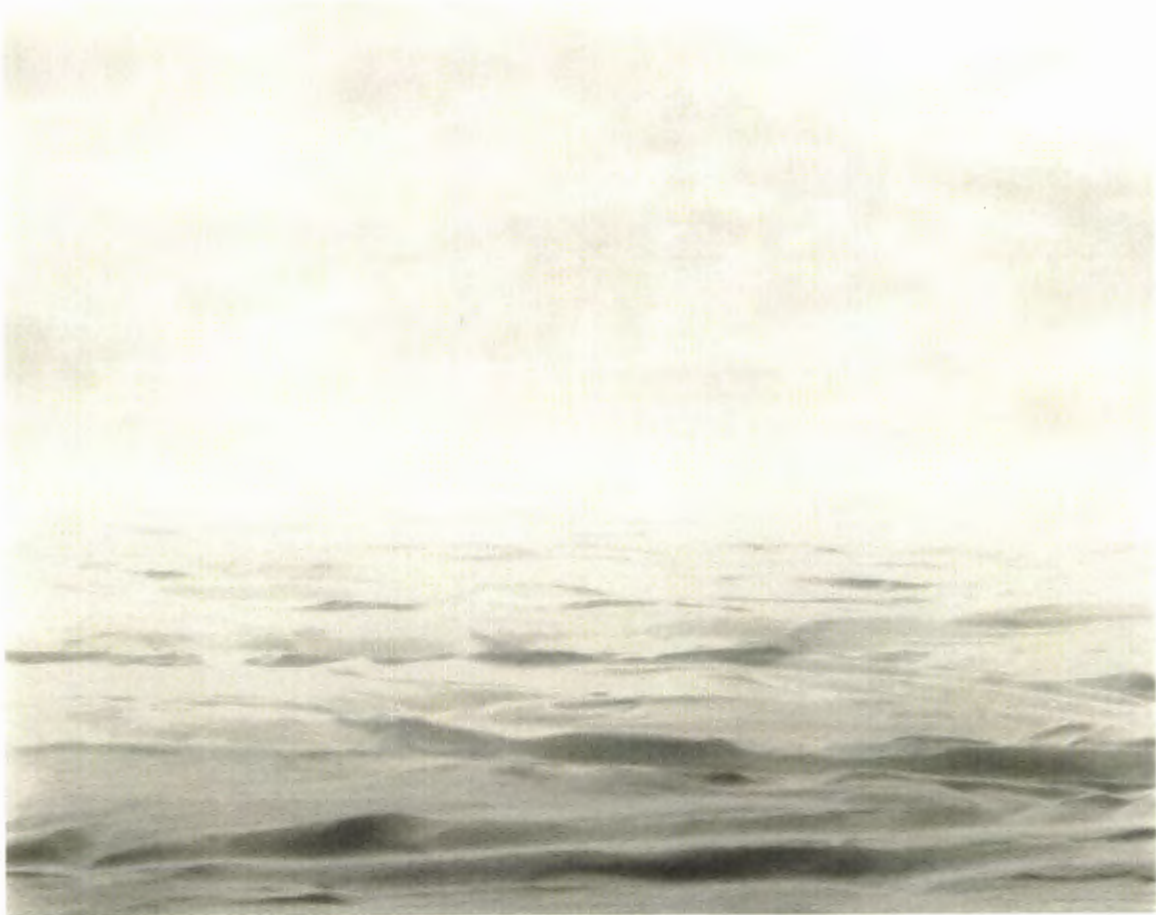


Figure 5: Sonja Brass

*The Passage: Week 49, 2012*  
C-Print, Diasec, Framed. 40.5 x 50.4 inches.



Figure 6: Katrin Sigurdardottir

*High Plane I – VI, 2001 - 2007*

Polystyrene, wood, steel. Dimensions variable.



Figure 7: Sigurdardottir

*High Plane I – IV, detail*



Figure 8: Polich

*from inside this tree, 2013*

Oak table and chair, contact microphone, and amplifier, field dirt, hair, gold leaf, leaf, glass, milk, video projection. Dimensions variable





Figure 9: Polich

*from inside this tree, detail*



Figure 10 and 11: Polich

*come as light, little plinth of sky*, 2014

Oak chair, porcelain, hair, natural materials. 20" x 16" x 16"

## NOTES

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- <sup>ii</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*, 1st ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996).
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- <sup>iv</sup> Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 1996.
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- <sup>vi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>viii</sup> Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Language of Landscape* (New Haven [Conn.] ; London: Yale University Press, 1998).
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- <sup>xii</sup> Julian Hoffman, *The Small Heart of Things: Being at Home in a Beckoning World* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2013).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Yi-fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).
- <sup>xiv</sup> Jacobus, *Romantic Things*.
- <sup>xv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Reprint (Penguin Books, 2006).
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- <sup>xviii</sup> Jacobus, *Romantic Things*.
- <sup>xix</sup> John Fowles, *The Tree / John Fowles; with a New Introduction by Barry Lopez* (New York: Ecco, 2012).
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- <sup>xxiii</sup> Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Henry David Thoreau, Thoreau Society, and Henry David Thoreau, *Daily Observations: Thoreau on the Days of the Year, The Spirit of Thoreau* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005).
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- <sup>xxvii</sup> Berry, *Collected Poems, 1957-1982*.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Jacobus, *Romantic Things*.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Reg Saner, *The Four-Cornered Falcon: Essays on the Interior West and the Natural Scene, Creating the North American Landscape* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
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**IMAGE SOURCES**

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