

An Artist's Environment:
Using Nature to Examine the Self through Writing

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the role of the human self in nature poetry by asking how poets use the natural world as the context for examination of the self. Through close readings of Robert Hass's poem "On Squaw Peak" and Brigit Pegeen Kelly's "Pale Rider," this essay hones in on nature as setting, subject matter, and inspiration for the two poems. Beginning with the lens of craft, this essay then addresses the role nature plays for the speaker in each poem, and culminates with a discussion of how the inclusion of nature in a poem can lead to an experience of "poetic transcendence."

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Introductions: *a beast in a clearing*

In the canon of poetry written in English, there are a great many deer poems. Deer delicately enter English poetry in *Beowulf* as “the heather-stepper, the horned stag.” Sir Thomas Wyatt abstracted Petrarch’s Italian Rima 190, beginning his famed conceit with an invitation: “Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind.” Modern poets such as William Stafford place deer in contemporary settings: “Traveling through the dark I found a deer / dead on the edge of the Wilson River road” (1998), or back into mythic settings, as Robyn Schiff in “A Doe Replaces Iphigenia on the Sacrificial Altar” (2016). Schiff writes, “I feel like a girl in heaven, / but I am a beast in a clearing.”

Part of the deer’s prevalence in English poetry must be a simple matter of biological distribution: deer live everywhere, with the exception of Australia and Antarctica. In addition, deer have historically provided an important food source for humans, and our art confirms the spiritual, as well as material, importance of this predator-prey relationship. In Welsh tradition, it was common belief that “hunting the stag would lead the hunter to the Otherworld” (Weis, 66-67). Deer played a large role in American Indian hunting and spirituality as well. An unnamed Taos Pueblo poet writes: “I went to kill the deer / Deep in the forest where / The heart of the mountain beats / For all who live there.” The two poems discussed in this essay, Robert Hass’s “On Squaw Peak” and Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s “Pale Rider,” both feature a single deer as a keystone image. For each poem, the appearance of the deer signals a change in mode for the reader, and for the speaker, it impels the spiritual self-examination that lies at the core of each poem. In both poems, nature is an active agent in the speaker’s self-examination.

Raymond Williams writes, “Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language,” so before we get too deep, an etymological distinction (qtd. in Hirsch 2). In my

discussion, I use the word *nature* to refer to “the great amorphous mass of otherness that encloaks the planet” (Neil Evernden), and though my focus is biological, I do not address what Evernden terms capital-N *Nature*, which refers “specifically to the system or model of nature which arose in the West several centuries ago.” When looking at the role of nature within poetry, I use Wendell Berry’s definition of nature poetry as one that “considers nature as subject matter and inspiration” (qtd. in Hirsch 1). By no means exhaustive, my close reading of the two nature poems that follow focuses on nature’s role as a setting, subject matter, and source of narrative, as well as nature’s connection to larger themes of time, spirituality, and poetic transcendence.

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Robert Hass: *bodies and places*

“Bit by bit, bodies become relational, territorialized in specific ways. Indeed, places themselves might be said to be exactly the same: they, too, are made up out of relationships between, within and beyond them...bodies and places are woven together through intricate webs of social and spatial relations that are made by, and make, embodied subjects.”

—*Places through the Body*, Nast & Pile

Robert Hass’s poetry interweaves the personal, the philosophical, and the political into poems that often draw on images and inspiration from the natural world. Though fairly classified as a California poet, Hass has lived elsewhere, and studied regions other writers have been influenced by: “Faulkner on Mississippi, Dostoevsky as a poet of St. Petersburg, Lowell and New England” (Hass, Poet’s Q&A with *Smartish Pace*). A catalogue of various locations makes its way to his poems as well: New York, Scotland, Seattle. Of California, Hass says, “I liked writing about my place. It gave me a subject.”

Hass believes that “Poets, especially, need to pay constant attention to the interaction of mind and environment” (Steven Barclay Agency). This constant attention is verified in Robert Hass’s work.

When describing a place in a poem, Hass's "constant attention" to nature is so focused and particular it often seems lightly scientific. His speakers often observe fauna, discuss trophic relationships, and name plants by their specific names. Rather than "a flower," Hass's poems will feature mimulus, or cinquefoil, or lupine, or all three, and frequently Hass also directly names the location a poem is set in. In *Field Guide*, poems such as "On the Coast near Susalito," "Black Mountain, Los Altos," "Palo Alto: The Marshes" use the title to identify the physical setting of the poem, as the setting may not be explicitly stated in the text of the poem. Many of his most moving poems are those grounded in natural description of an environment that may be California...or anywhere, really. To paraphrase Nast and Pile, places, like bodies, are relational, and Hass uses the titles of such poems to attune the reader to the relationship between location and a poem's speaker.

Hass also is interested in exploring the intricacies of human nature in modern life. Over his career, Hass has garnered inspiration from interpersonal relationships—being a son, friend, husband, and father. In poetry, "representations [of nature] reflect and attempt to contain particular structures of values and interests" (Evernden), and Hass's poems reflect his value of nature and of people. His poems often seem as if they're addressed to an intimate friend over a cup of coffee "in the sun," with "the baby...sleeping, the green...emerg[ing] from the rind of the cantaloupe." That's from Hass's poem "Museum." Though my mother is not a poetry lover, she read "Museum" at my insistence and liked it for Hass's gentle attention to the people in the poem. "It's beautiful," she said of this attention. From Hass's same book, titled *Human Wishes*, the poem "On Squaw Peak" displays a similar intimate tone and a different, more actively rambling attention. "On Squaw Peak" is a homage, Hass writes, "especially to Wordsworth who often addresses his sister

Dorothy in his poems. I had some strategy or model like that in mind as a way to muse over the issues the poem muses over” (*Smartish Pace*).

As we muse over the poem itself, I approach my guiding question—how is nature serving this poem’s aims?—from a close reading method. Rather than a genre survey of how poets use nature or an argument about how to interpret the poem, my discussion represents a working-through the poem at this point in my poetics. For ease of addressing the poem, I break the monostrophic “On Squaw Peak” into sections, interspersed with my discussion and, just as often, questions.

§

On Squaw Peak

I don't even know which sadness
it was came up
in me when we were walking down the road to Shirley Lake,
the sun gleaming in snowpatches,
the sky so blue it seemed the light's dove
of some pentecost of blue,
the mimulus, yellow, delicate of petal,
and the pale yellow cinquefoil trembling in the damp
air above the creek,—
and fields of lupine,
that blue blaze of lupine, a swatch of paintbrush
sheening it, and so much of it, long meadows
of it gathered out of the mountain air and spilling
down ridge toward the lake it almost looked like
the wind.

The personal confession of the first line creates a tone of candid conversation, as if with a close friend. Though the personal content is established from the poem’s outset, the personal quickly melts into an environmental catalogue—the weather, the natural colors, and the plants are listed in luxurious detail as the speaker recalls the day at Shirley Lake. Though the content has shifted outward, the speaker’s tone is still conversational, and is a tone not of catalogue so much as it is a Wordsworthian “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”

Hovering on ecstasy, despite the explicit sadness of the first line, the tone and description of the poem call up the Romantic tradition.

In the vein of “overflow,” the section I’ve excerpted above is a single sentence, the whole of which serves as an individual “piston” whose function is not to “get you down the road by itself, but you could not move the vehicle without it” (Silliman 79). This beginning section of the poem could seem nothing more than a detailed list of images without Hass’s structured syntactical order imposed on it. The structure of the subordinating style Hass uses above implies logic and order, and makes readers feel as if the overflow of nouns—the sun, the sky, the creek, the lupine—ushers us toward something just beyond the natural images. The images of the first sentence of “On Squaw Peak” do not align to form an argument so much as they help Hass move us toward his “analytical examination of truth” (Pound, qtd. in Voigt 34). In characteristic Romantic style, this movement does not seem overtly linear, and this too is related to Hass’s use of the longer sentence, which tends to come off as less pre-packaged than the short sentence. The poem seems to be organized on the principles of a conversation rather than writing, an organization principle that creates an intimate quality in the poem through what I’ve lightly termed “organic order.” The monostrophe form of the poem contributes to this organic order and the poem’s quality of overflow as well.

David Baker presents Romanticism and Realism as literary opposites, writing, “Romanticism is a matter of the spirit. Realism is the matter of matter” (19). Historically, Romanticism arose as an aesthetic in reaction to the Enlightenment values of structure and rational reasoning. But in the excerpted section above, I find Hass has interwoven the two matters, that of spirit and matter, emotion and logic. He is able to do so because nature can give the spiritual world a physical manifestation. The speaker of “On Squaw Peak” finds

nature's visual beauty has spiritual resonance, and we see this in his description of the sky as "the light's dove" and a "pentecost of blue."

In the next section, Hass brings a Romantic sense of the spirit and the natural world into relationship with Enlightenment values such as logic, philosophy, and "thinking about thinking" as we see below:

I think I must have thought
the usual things: that the flowering season
in these high mountain meadows is so brief, that
the feeling, something like hilarity, of sudden
pleasure when you first come across some tough little plant
you knew you'd see comes because it seems—I mean
by *it* the larkspur or persimmon curling
and arching the reach of its sexual being
up out of a little crack in granite—to say
that human hunger has a niche up here in the light-cathedral
of the dazzled air. I wanted to tell you
that when the ghost-child died, the three-month dreamer
she and I would never know, I kept feeling that
the heaven it went to was like the inside of a store window
on a rainy day from which you watch the blurred forms
passing in the street.

In this, the second sentence of the poem, we transition from a space of conversation into something more like a "light-cathedral." This sentence is in the additive style, a style "which gives the impression of speech and writing just haphazardly tumbling out of the mouth or the thoughts of a writer who is not worrying about getting every particular just right" (Fish 134). We recognize this sentence as a hinge, and register the change from ecstatic description to a more halting and frank tonal register, though the sentence remains descriptive. Upon reaching the compound word "light-cathedral," the poem hinges again, this time into a more traditional poetic register. Simultaneous with this shift in diction is a shift in setting as well: the speaker's figurative language takes us to the first "unnatural" location in the poem. The "heaven" the speaker imagines is "like the inside of a store

window.” The vehicle of this simile seems in another world (that of an urban or suburban environment) than that of nature, and thus relates back implicitly to its tenor.

What is the purpose of all this diction and syntactical shifting? In order to get at this question, we may ask another: what effect does it have? The change in syntax to a more disordered, rambling-seeming style alerts the reader to the speaker’s difficulty, through the change in tone and a correlated change in subject matter (to one more difficult to speak of). We see the speaker vacillating, which highlights the uncertainty of the speaker, but also highlights *presence* of the speaker. In relation to this, there’s a syntactical shift to “I” statements: “I think I must have thought,” “I mean,” and “I wanted to tell you.” In diction, Hass moves us almost implicitly toward a subtly narrative movement—identifying the plant as a “sexual being” fits with “human hunger” and makes us think of procreation—priming us for the subsequent referral to a child. The aim, then, of the change in diction and syntax of this passage is to direct us from the catalogue of the exterior world inward toward the speaker’s emotional state.

One further word on syntax. If we strip down the second sentence of the poem, we find: “when you first come across some tough little plant...it seems...to say that human hunger has a niche up here.” In the world of the poem, the meditation on humanity is directly spurred by coming across the tough plant. The speaker’s “I” statements and his personal mediation mean that despite the natural setting, we’re unable to escape from the speaker’s interior.

In her book filled with the natural world, *Vita Nova*, Louise Gluck writes, “Like a costume, my numbness was taken away. Then a hunger was added.” In Robert Hass’s poem, the natural setting serves as the location, and impetus, for the speaker to return to his emotions. Nature in this passage is the inverse of the pathetic fallacy, in that nature doesn’t

clue the reader into the speaker's emotional state; rather, the speaker realizes his emotion because nature reminds him of it. Here, Hass plays with the Romantic trope of a human going into nature in order to undertake a personal journey, as well as a prevalent Enlightenment trope, in which a human goes into nature in order to study the natural world. Lyric language such as "the light-cathedral / of the dazzled air" suggests the speaker is a Romantic, while scientific language such as "human hunger has a niche up here" presents the speaker as an amateur naturalist. Hass uses nature to interweave the two modes, and balancing between the two is highly productive. Too much "spontaneous overflow" could be saccharine; too much science could be bland.

Or to tell you, more terrible,
that when she and I walked off the restlessness
of our misery afterward in the Coast Range hills,
we saw come out of the thicket shyly
a pure white doe. I wanted to tell you I knew
it was a freak of beauty like the law of averages
that killed our child and made us know, as you had said,
that things between lovers, even of the longest standing,
can be botched in their bodies, though their wills don't fail.
Still later, on the beach, we watched the waves.
No two the same size. No two in the same arch
of rising up and pouring. But it is the same law.
You shell a pea, there are three plump seeds and one
that's shriveled. You shell a bushful and you begin
to feel the rhythms of the waves at Limantour,
glittering, jagged, that last bright October afternoon.

Biologically speaking, a "pure white" deer is actually a red deer. A little less than one percent of red deer are born with leucism, a genetic trait sapping their skin and hair of all pigment. Though unrelated, albinism can make an animal appear white as well, and cultures around the world commonly recognize both leucistic and albino animals as spiritual symbols. For Celts, white deer were messengers of the Otherworld; for the English, the white stag represented a perpetual quest for spiritual knowledge. Mythology of many American Indian tribes features a white deer, including the Seneca, Roanoke, Algonquin, Nanticoke, and

Pocomoke tribes. Therefore, we're primed to recognize Hass's "white doe" as an image with a mythological echo, even if we've never encountered a white deer before.

The familiar, especially when implicit, is a powerful tool in poetry. Frost writes on recognition:

"In literature it is our business to give people the thing that will make them say, 'Oh yes I know what you mean.' It is never to tell them something they don't know, but something they know and hadn't thought of saying. It must be something they recognize."

The white doe also has a relevant literary history: Wordsworth, the poet Hass spoke of as the major muse of "On Squaw Peak," has a relationship with a white doe in his own writing, in the *White Doe of Rylstone*. In this poem, the white doe allows Wordsworth to "explor[e] the psychology of loss in its relation to memory and shed further light upon the poet's own state of mind at the time that the poem was conceived and written" (Gates 234). Of the white doe, Wordsworth himself wrote "all the action proceeding from the will of the chief agents" exists "in harmony with the shadowy influence of the Doe, by whom the poem is introduced and in whom it ends."

Animals are agents, and are not changed with their action in the world or their function in literature. Unlike objects, they are absolute; they have essence (Pinker 324). As in Wordsworth's *White Doe*, Hass's doe carries the "psychology of loss" on its snowy back. The lineation of the doe's entrance is curious: the line break masks what it is that arrives "shyly," but this seems to fit with the "shadowy" quality of the doe herself. Hass grounds the symbolically heavy figure of a white deer by placing it in a concrete setting, using the technique of naming locations throughout—Squaw Peak, Shirley Lake, Limantour—a move which lets us know for the world of the poem, the doe is a real, absolute agent. The moment that the speaker sees the deer is the center of action in the poem, one which orders all other events.

It killed something in me, I thought, or froze it,
 to have to see where beauty comes from. I imagined
 for a long time that the baby, since
 it would have liked to smell our clothes to know
 what a mother and a father would have been,
 hovered sometimes in our closet and I half expected
 to see it there, half-fish spirit, form of tenderness,
 a little dead dreamer with open eyes. That was
 private sorrow. I tried not to hate my life,
 to fear the frame of things. I knew what two people
 couldn't say
 on a cold November morning in the fog—
 you remember the feel of Berkeley winter mornings—
 what they couldn't say to each other
 was the white deer not seen. It meant to me
 that beauty and terror were intertwined and powerfully
 and went so deep that any kind of love
 can fail. I didn't say it.

In this passage, the white deer takes on a specific metaphoric meaning in addition to its historically symbolic past. The white deer is what the couple can't say to each other, and proof that "beauty and terror were intertwined." And add to that another layer still, the white deer was "not seen," meaning perhaps the deer was lurking in the November morning in Berkeley, just unseen in the morning's fog.

"It killed something in me," the speaker confesses, "to have to see where beauty comes from." This line echoes Wallace Stevens' famous statement made twice in his poem "Sunday Morning" that "death is the mother of beauty." There is an invitation to a double irony here for a reader who recognizes the reference. The idea that death gave birth to beauty is one layer of irony; the speaker's assertion that "It killed something" in him to see "where beauty comes from," implying *death* "killed something" is another layer.

On the topic of the familiar again, the aim of the poem is not to tell the reader "beauty and terror were intertwined." The aim of the poem is the speaker *recognizing* that "beauty and terror were intertwined" so deeply that "any kind of love / can fail." Take a moment to imagine how trite it'd seem if Hass began the poem with that line. T.S. Eliot, in

his essay discussing the Metaphysical poets, writes, "Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose." Here, Hass's poem enacts the speaker *feeling his thinking* through various "organic" strategies: the alteration of line length, the additive style of syntax, the momentum of the monostrophe all serve to create the expression of subjects that seem to be just coming into thought.

The deer is also a symbol of what is unsaid between lovers. The speaker asserts, "I didn't say it." The short, definitive syntax allows the sentence's pronoun to be clear: the "it" refers to the speaker's realization that "any kind of love can fail." The not "say[ing] it" changes things. It allows the reader to realize the distance between the speaker's internal and external environments. The intimate tone, the realization, and the meditation on the realization are all within a "light-cathedral" wholly contained within the speaker. The shortest line of the entire poem—"couldn't say"—puts additional emphasis on this theme. What the speaker "couldn't say" is seemingly an oxymoron, as he's telling the reader the very thing he couldn't say. However, there's an intimate tone between the speaker and his addressee, while Hass has curated a sense of distance between the couple in the poem.

What does this distance look like? In the poem, we see distance as the silence between the couple. Though they hike the same peak, see the same white doe, though they lost the same child (who was half of each), in the poem the couple have no verbal and few nonverbal exchanges. In contrast, the person the poem is addressed to—modeled after Wordsworth's Dorothy—seems quite close to the speaker, though in a more epistolary way. The "you" may be far away physically, and statements like "you remember the feel of Berkeley winter mornings" indeed imply distance, but because of the poem's conversational tone and personal content, the two seem quite intimate. In Hass's poem, distance is the "spaceless" unsaid between people. Hass also doesn't anthropomorphize the deer, or use it

as an objective correlative for his speaker's feelings. Instead, the deer becomes, in the poem, how distance looks.

Anne Carson writes, "How does distance look?" in her book *Autobiography of Red*. "It's a simple direct question. It extends from a spaceless within to the edge of what can be loved. It depends on light. *Light that for you?* he said pulling a book of matches out of his jeans as he came towards her. *No thanks dear.* She was turning away." I bring in this passage from *Autobiography of Red* because I think Hass's portrayal of interpersonal distance in "On Squaw Peak" is similar to Carson's representation of it as a matter of "turning away," one that "depends on light."

I think the mountain startled
 my small grief. Maybe there wasn't time.
 We may have been sprinting to catch the tram
 because we had to teach poetry
 in that valley two thousand feet below us.
 You were running—Steven's mother, Michael's lover,
 mother and lover, grieving of a girl
 about to leave for school and die to you a little
 (or die into you, or simply turn away) —
 and you ran like a gazelle,
 in purple underpants, royal purple,
 and I laughed out loud. It was the abundance
 the world gives, the more-than-you-bargained-for
 surprise of it, waves breaking,
 the sudden fragrance of the mimulus at creekside
 sharpened by the summer dust.
 Things bloom up there. They are
 for their season alive in those bright vanishings
 of air we ran through.

The central question of this close reading is: how does nature serve the poem's discussion of the personal? At the heart of "On Squaw Peak," nature serves as the impetus for the speaker to come closer to the grief he feels for his lost child. The speaker realizes, "the mountain startled / my small grief." The next sentence, "Maybe there wasn't time," refers to the morning scene, the couple "sprinting to catch the tram," but it also implies the

mountain gave the speaker the time he'd not had to narrow the distance toward his grief.

In addition, the natural world provides the setting for the speaker's realization. Readers receive a detailed description of the setting; Hass provides it to us primarily through nouns. The poem is bolted in place by Hass's use of specific nouns: mountain, gazelle, waves, creekside, dust. Familiar with these natural objects, we are able to attach our own connotations to each without much pause. These nouns, once easily digested, serve to root the speaker's more abstract meditations with the poem's concrete setting. Hass uses adjectives sparingly in this poem, but those that he incorporates are sometimes humorous and always precise. Anne Carson on adjectives: "Adjectives seem fairly innocent additions but look again. These small imported mechanisms are in charge of attaching everything in the world to its place in particularity. They are the latches of being" (*Autobiography of Red*). Hass's adjectives do latch us—in some cases to the spirit, as in the "white doe"—and in some cases, to the body—as in the "purple underpants" of the woman in motion. In the penultimate line of the poem, the fact the vanishings are "bright" leaves us with an ethereal sense of hope. "Bright" calls to mind mist catching the light. Also the body of the white doe melting back into the thicket.

In a poem by Robert Hass called "Then 'Time," the perspective shifts back and forth between two former lovers, each observing the other while having dinner out. The woman in the poem "finds herself thinking what a literal man he is, / Notices, as if she were recalling it, his pleasure / In the menu, and the cooking, and the architecture of the room." Hass's strength in detailing the literal—"sun gleaming in snowpatches," fragrance "sharpened by the summer dust," "bright vanishings / of air"—gives great pleasure in his poems. Even when the underlying content is one of sorrow, or distance, or failing human connection, the end result of Hass's descriptions of nature is pleasure in the reader.

This would have pleased Elizabeth Bishop. In her essay on Charles Darwin, she writes, “What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.” The kind of “perfectly useless concentration” the speaker of “On Squaw Peak” perceives the natural world with is a Romantic tendency. Through situating a poem’s speaker in nature, appealing to the body’s sensory authority, and cultivating an intimacy of tone via direct address, Hass takes up Wordsworth’s work. Even the syntax of “On Squaw Peak” seems Wordsworthian; compare the a passage from Hass’s poem with a passage from Wordsworth’s “It Was an April Morning:”

In this continuous glen, where down a rock
The Stream, so ardent in its course before,
Sent forth such sallies of glad sound, that all
Which I till then had heard, appeared the voice
Of common pleasure: beast and bird, the lamb,
The shepherd's dog, the linnet and the thrush
Vied with this waterfall, and made a song,
Which, while I listened, seemed like the wild growth
Or like some natural produce of the air,
That could not cease to be.

...the sun gleaming in snowpatches,
the sky so blue it seemed the light's dove
of some pentecost of blue,
the mimulus, yellow, delicate of petal,
and the pale yellow cinquefoil trembling in the damp
air above the creek,—
and fields of lupine,
that blue blaze of lupine, a swatch of paintbrush
sheening it, and so much of it, long meadows
of it gathered out of the mountain air and spilling
down ridge toward the lake it almost looked like
the wind.

Both passages set up their respective literal settings, but rely on the energetic description of nature to convey a metaphorical meaning as well. In the Romantic poetic tradition, nature functions as a subtle lexicon of symbols; in fact, nature functions “as language” (Baker 18). Robert Hass agrees, writing: “the world given to the senses is the vocabulary with which we express everything that is not visible, or not given to the senses. We can tell people something about thought by describing certain kinds of bird flight, something about certain dispositions of the heart by describing an aspect of trees” (*Smartish Pace*). As poets, harnessing our sensory perception of the natural world is a powerful tool to convey immaterial human emotions.

This poetic usage of nature is indeed a use, but not an exploitative one. The birds’

flight path and the trees are unaltered by metaphor, unlike many current-day practices that involve using the environment. Romanticism grew out of uneasiness with cities expanding over forests and with machines exploiting natural forces such as wind and water. Despite their battle cry of “back to nature” and despite the efforts of poets like Wordsworth, Shelly, and Keats, our cities have only grown bigger, our machines more complex. Meanwhile, we’re still writing poetry. Hass writes:

“So the thought I had went something like this: if I live in my place and live my life and write about my subjects, whatever they turned out to be--love, grief, the nature of things, the nature of our nature, the riddles of existence--and drew on the materials of my place as the idiom of that expression, then that would be the kind of environmental writing I'd do. And that's roughly how the northern California landscape functions in my work, I think.”

For Hass, California is a subject matter and a material medium to convey the immaterial. In his essay “California: State of Light” John Paul Calavitta writes, “I use the term “immaterial” to refer to the world of things that are physically imperceptible, as that which needs to undergo processes of transformation and time in order to be perceived.” Calavitta lists examples such as “surf and sand dunes, earth quake lights and after-shocks...mountain clouds and weather, fossilization and ancient tree rings.” These things, without the transforming power of time, would be as unknown to human perception as infrared vision snakes have, or the high-pitched frequency of whale songs. But this discussion about the immaterial in nature brings me to the question: isn't time itself immaterial?

Robert Hass spent years working with Czesław Miłosz translating poems from Polish to English, and Miłosz defines poetic transcendence as “time lifted above time *by time*.” Is this definition rational? George Steiner argues no: “The ‘irrationality’ of the transcendental intuition dignifies reason. The will to ascension is founded not on any ‘because it is there’

but on a ‘because it is not there.’” Nature is there. It is material, and we can perceive it with our senses even as it is transformed by time into something else. George Steiner again: “We are the creatures of a great thirst. Bent on coming home to a place we have never known.” The place Steiner speaks of is not the natural world, but rather the human self.

§

Brigit Pegeen Kelly: *the seer and the seen*

“If you see something with a constant bearing it means that something is on a collision course with you.”

—Radiolab, *Apocalyptic*

Let’s continue our discussion of transcendence. In James Merrill’s foreword to Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s *To the Place of Trumpets*, he writes: “Here the language of transcendence is deflected onto the landscape surrounding” (xi). For many, it’s hard to think of *transcendence* without calling up religious connotations. I’m no exception: the word brings numerous Sunday homilies skulking forth from my Catholic past. What is the role of transcendence, then, in poetry? Poet David Baker in *Show Me Your Environment* defines “Transcendence [as] the conjoining of the body and the bodiless.”

This definition seems fitting for Kelly’s poetry. In her lifetime, she wrote three slim books—*To the Place of Trumpets*, *Song*, and *The Orchard*—of lyric poetry. By communicating in the language of the body and the spirit, Kelly’s speakers reach toward transcendence, but in *this* world. And this world, for Kelly, is a natural one. In her poems, her spirituality is rooted in natural settings and images, and her poems often utilize the powerful transformations of the body that we see in nature, such as birth and death. Shapes in her poems morph—a human boy is transformed to a black swan, a scorpion turns into a library—suggesting transcendence is inextricably linked to bodily transformation for Kelly. Of *To the Place of Trumpets*, Kelly’s first book, James Merrill wrote that Kelly “retains the wild, transforming

eye of childhood” (ix). This eye seems to only sharpen during her poetic career, and in Kelly’s final book, *The Orchard* (2004), many of the transformations that occur bridge the natural world of the body with a surreal bodiless one. Baker’s definition of transcendence as merging “the body and bodiless” connects with André Breton’s metaphor to describe the *surreal* as when the mind and the world are not separate but instead transmit information seamlessly as “two connected vessels” (*The Communicating Vessels*, 1931).

Something that is seamless has no visibly discernable parts or components (Tester & Irniq, 49). There is no dividing rivet or border within *seamlessness*. Our bodies and minds are seldom more seamlessly communicating with the bodiless surrounding world than when we are dreaming, and when we’re in nature. It’s why many of us go to the woods for extended periods of time, and return there, time and time again. We are drawn there even when it’s not convenient or comfortable.

My first transformative experience with Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s poetry was in nature. My friend and I had not seen another person that day. The two of us were on our final day backpacking in Oregon’s Crater Lake National Park, and it felt, despite hiking along the popular Pacific Crest Trail, that we were totally alone. When we reached our campsite, the light was streaming through the thick ponderosa pine forest. Our campsite was in a “grotto,” of sorts, pressed up against the side of a talus slope. It was very quiet. Two deer picked their way through the clearing as we set up the tent, fixing us with limpid eyes. In the tent that night, as we were falling asleep, I pulled out Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s *The Orchard*, and read her poem “Pale Rider” aloud. The moment I stopped, the dead deer in the poem still seeming to float in the dark tent above our heads, my friend and I froze at a rustling near our tent. There were whispered voices and a light—so we knew it was a human disturbance, not an animal one. In my entire life, I’d be hard-pressed to recall a time I felt more afraid. I’ve rarely

felt so present in my body: I could feel the blood warm in my fingers, my breath grow shallow, and my pulse jump in my throat. My body and my brain were of one mind—to run from an incorporeal threat.

This is what Brigit Pegeen Kelly's poetry does on the page. She persuades us, "poem after poem, that the surreal is no less real than what we call the real," writes Carl Phillips. She is able to do so effectively because she relies on precise natural images to carry her poems' weight. Though most of her poems do not necessarily rely on narrative, the images we see are unfailingly from a first-person perspective, and thus we observe the world through an individual's eyes. "No art form," George Steiner writes in *Grammars of Creation*, "comes out of nothing. Always, it comes after."

Brigit Pegeen Kelly was raised in southern Indiana, and later lived in Illinois. She was a private person: though she taught for much of her career, her personal life was kept separate from her public work. In an Internet perusal, I was unable to find a single online interview with her, though I did find an interview with her husband, Michael Madonick, also a writer and professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. In an interview with *Hunger Mountain*, Madonick states, "Both of us, my wife and I, are observers of our natural surroundings, and we are often starved for things to be attentive to...mostly we are dumbfounded, staring out the window, waiting for something to mistakenly migrate in our direction."

No art from nothing. While gazing out the window, in the long stretches of time between animal anomalies, Brigit Pegeen Kelly must have taken in the huge skies of the Midwest, its hot summers and snowy winters, its flat grasslands, and the occasional warped tree. In *To the Place of Trumpets* she writes of an "ash-colored" sky, the "heat under the elephantine vines," and "snow crow[ing] from the clouds down." She tells of grasses "oddly

green, still,” and “burning grasses from the fields.” She writes of “the hushed willows,” “the black walnut,” “scrawny forsythia starters,” and the apple tree with “purple fruit.”

In an obituary, former mentee and current poet Amie Whitemore wrote that nature in Kelly’s poems is “as much about the beauty of the Midwest as its relentless desolation and redundancy. She squeezed the rag of that dull landscape till it spit out all its secrets.” Kelly’s writing was a veritable garden, but not necessarily a verdant one—the plants inside are never far from fire (a word that appears thirteen times in *To the Place of Trumpets*), and fire is not the only threat: every once in awhile, a natural monster does “mistakenly migrate” towards Kelly. These monsters are sometimes surreal or mythic—as in the poem “The Dragon”—but more often commonplace, such as the huge dog in the poem “The Orchard.” Many of these creatures undergo transformations, as we see with the deer in her poem “Pale Rider.”

In both the form of the animals approaching and the “landscape surrounding,” the natural world is rooted firmly at the heart of Kelly’s poems, but is this nature personal? Unlike the speakers of Robert Hass’s poems, Kelly’s speakers prove elusive through tone, syntax, and a pervasive sense of private spirituality. The speakers of Kelly’s poems are often prophet-like, spinning riddles and speaking with authority of a strange spiritual realm. When Anne Carson writes of prophets in her book *Float*, she states: “So it goes with prophets. You see them float and how they float and how can they” (“Cassandra Float Can”). This is our central problem. Brigit Kelly’s speakers float away from us before we can identify facts or attach personal meaning to them, or to the poet herself.

I would argue, though, that nature is personal in Kelly’s poetry, not only in that the natural world seems drawn from the locations the poet lived in her lifetime, but also because she uses nature, much as Hass does, as a setting for self-examination. We’ll explore a poem, “Pale Rider,” in which the speaker walks into the woods and a vision of a deer appears. In

this poem, the natural world reveals, transforms, and serves as an entryway to the spiritual world. The poem is quite long, and for ease of discussion I've included only the parts most productive to discussing how nature intertwines with the personal. Amie Whitemore writes: Brigit was “private as a diary. I think of a bird’s wing, covering its body in sleep. You want to know the hard, clear, soul of Brigit Pegeen Kelly? Read her poems.”

§

*Something stranger and stranger
is getting closer and closer.*
—Mary Ruefle

Pale Rider

I found her beneath the fruiting honeysuckle,
The fallen doe. The hunter had cut her legs off,
And because the doe was so small, killed out of season,
The leg wounds looked huge, like neck wounds.
I found her in summer and then I forgot about her.

Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s poem “Pale Rider” begins with these five lines, and is one of several longer poems in *The Orchard* —“Pale Rider” is 128 lines long, with most lines containing 10 syllables. Aesthetically, the poem is dense: its monostrophic form suggests a seamless image from the very outset of the poem. Later in the poem, the monostrophe suggests an overflow of emotion as well. The speaker of the poem does not give us more than sparse narrative—that of the speaker walking into the woods and witnessing a doe’s strange transformation—in the poem. Primarily, the poem relies on image to create meaning for the reader.

But many months later, on a day of cold rain,
And then unfallen snow, when I was tired because
I had not slept, and because I was tired, anxious,

Here, Kelly allows the natural world to function as a hinge, where she transports us from description of the mutilated doe into the body of the speaker. The doe and the speaker

are not set up as parallel at this point in the poem; that is, the doe is not yet an objective correlative for the speaker. However, the action of the poem—observation—and the metaphoric resonance of the mutilated doe’s image—needless slaughter of the innocent—carries beyond this passage, further into the poem. What does seem parallel with the speaker here is the natural world. The cold rain and the unfallen snow reflect the speaker’s interior feelings in a use of the pathetic fallacy. Emerson asserts, “Words are signs of natural facts. Articulate natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts. Nature is a symbol of the spirit.” This is a common trope in poetry, and works here to subtly characterize the speaker, with no need of an explicit narrative for why the speaker feels as she does.

Nature here does contribute to the narrative arc of the poem, however, in its work as a temporal locator. Based on natural clues, we learn the poem takes place not in summer, as the speaker mentions earlier, but late fall or early winter. As is the case with nature’s symbolic role in the poem thus far, it’s worth noting how quick the work of nature to locate the reader in time is in the above section. Kelly’s syntax thus far has been straightforward and her diction plainspoken; however in the first eight lines she’s set up important grounding details for the poem, clarifying who (a tired and anxious “I”), what (“The fallen doe”), when (winter), and as to where:

I walked back to the grotto in the oldest part of the woods.
It is a dark unsettling place and I am drawn to it.
No sun finds its way through the trees, even in winter,
And, as if the place were cursed, birds pass through
Quickly or not at all, and they will not sing.

Lakoff and Johnson write about clearings in their book *Metaphors We Live By*. They describe how the spatial reasoning part of the human brain gives solid objects orientation, and how it implicitly imposes “orientation on our natural environment as well.” A clearing in the woods, they argue, “has something we can perceive as a natural boundary—the fuzzy

area where the trees more or less stop and the clearing more or less begins.” This same orientation principle could be applied to Brigit Kelly’s grotto—only we recognize the grotto as where the woods grow deeper and the light grows infinitesimally dimmer. Because we recognize something like a clearing or a grotto has a boundary, we can identify the poem’s speaker as being inside or outside of it. This, I’d argue, is the goal of the poem, and some argue the aim of the entire book. “The work of this collection,” Pamela Hart writes, “is to lead the reader deep into the region of archetype, of dreams, to spend time in the oldest part of the woods.” The grotto in Kelly’s “Pale Rider” functions as a natural container the reader is driven to stand inside of with the speaker. Once inside, the reader begins a journey through the underworld. In this way, the grotto is also a portal.

In secular and religious texts alike, grottos such as the one above are locations of prophetic power. Numerous Greek oracles are reported to have lived in caves; in myth, it’s where one would have to travel to receive a prophecy. The topographical feature of the cave itself had spiritual significance. In ancient Greece, caves were seen to have two entrances: “one for the mortals and the other one for immortals only” (*Oracles and Caves*, Ustinova). In the Qur’an, the prophet Muhammad experienced his first revelation in a mountain cave; in the Bible, the prophet Elijah also receives a message from the Lord while in a cave. Ustinova writes that “prophecy and the quest for ultimate truth...were connected with underground chambers and grottoes in so many cases that the association cannot be coincidental” (4).

We learn more about the woman in the grotto in this section, I’d argue, than the last. “It is a dark unsettling place and I am drawn to it,” she states. The speaker is beginning to change as she goes deeper into the woods: she’s begun to transform from being “tired” and “anxious” to shrugging on a prophetic cloak. Her assuredness with unsettling statements and situations lend her a prophetic authority that continues to burgeon in the poem, and her

movement deeper into nature is the driving force affording her prophetic power. The natural setting of the grotto, the winter chill, the vaporization of the not-quite-rain, all play a role in allowing the following vision to occur. The vision's occurrence itself is seen at first as a natural phenomenon of mist:

I looked up: whiteness, milky, lit from within,
 And, like mother-of-pearl, something, not clear, a shape,
 The shape of an owl or a snowy hawk, hanging
 Perfectly still, the way a hawk will hang for hours
 In a stiff wind, but there was no wind. And the shape
 Was not an owl, nor a hawk, but a shape my mind
 At first resisted, the way my mind sometimes refuses
 To make sense of words that are perfectly clear,
 Simple words, spoken slowly and with great care,
 Because the words are so improbable, or will tell me,
 Good or bad, the thing I most wish not to hear,
 "He is dead," say, or, "Take up your bed and walk."

As discussed above with natural "containers," metaphor can reveal inherent mechanisms of how the human brain operates on a level below consciousness (*Metaphors We Live By*). Lakoff and Johnson distinguish between a container *object*, such as a bucket, and a container *substance* (water). Mist, as vaporized water, is a container substance that is the target of three metaphors in this section. The mist is "whiteness, milky, lit from within," and the unclear *something*, no, the *shape* that appears in the mist is "like mother-of-pearl," no, the shape is "an owl or snowy hawk." Above the table, Brigit Pegeen Kelly gets her reader to think about milk, mollusks, and birds of prey. We're also introduced here to the syntactical structure of negation that continues to escalate in the poem, and it's this syntax of negation that implies, on a subtle level, transformation.

Not only is the poem's setting natural, but all figurative language up to this point is as well. Ellen Bryant Voigt, in her essay on poetic "Image," defends the images in a poem by Sylvia Plath, saying "the idiosyncrasy of her figures necessarily make them decorative or indulgent; they are the weight-bearing walls of the lyric structure" (60). The nature imagery

in Kelly's poem is not decorative, but it is weight-bearing—it's the container that carries the poem's meaning. The speaker's journey, which would otherwise be abstract or ethereal, is made tangible by natural images, such as the mist and the hawk, that work dramatically, as Frost defined "dramatically:" "easily heard as sung or spoken by a person in a scene" (61).

And the speaker in the poem's scene speaks in a pattern of rebuttal. We're told the shape is not a bird of prey, as the speaker previously thought, but what replaces it is a shrouded figure the speaker's mind "refuses." We watch as the shape morphs before our eyes, becoming "a pointed shape, golden," though it is "Not a hawk, nor a boot, nor a silk hat...But something else, until my mind gave in to my eyes" the speaker tells us in the next section. "The prophet must prove to you that she is a prophet by telling you unbelievable news," Anne Carson writes, and Kelly's speaker appears to be having difficulty believing the news her own senses bring to her. David Baker paraphrases Jorie Graham, writing, "Faith's fate is transformation, but an "impure" one" (28). The speaker at this point is resisting the transformation of the poem, suggesting she's also resisting the self-exploration transformation requires. In this passage, we see suggestions of the speaker glazing over self-exploration—someone is dead, she tells us, and references faith (John 5:8)—but both are so slight, so deft, so quickly moved past that they seem like ornament to the images of the natural world, not the other way around. The ambiguous shape floating above the speaker begins to "take on weight" in the next section and becomes "the doe," no, "*that* doe," the one killed by the hunter in summer.

Taking on weight above me, four heads on four long necks,
Attached to one legless body, one golden swollen body
That smelled of fallen fruit splitting in the sun and shone
The way an image from a dream will darkly shine,
Floating up from childhood, a hand holding out
A piece of torn bread that turns for no reason
Into a block of honeycomb filled **not** with honey
But with a marbled black and red substance,

Dense and sweet as charred flesh.

.
the fifth head was **not**

The doe's head at all, as I had thought, **but** the head
Of a grown child that the doe was trying to deliver
From her breast, and I knew that the child would **never**
Be born, **but** must ride always with her, his body
Embedded in hers, his head up to the sky. I wanted
To reach up and touch that head **but** I did **not** do so.
I kept thinking that the doe would disappear, or that
She would say something, that her four mouths, five,
Would open and she would speak, **but** she did **not** disappear,
And she did **not** speak.

Let's pause a moment to note the literal transformation the doe has undergone. First, the original dead doe is somehow reanimated. The substance of the revenant deer is mist; the mist solidifies into a shape; and the shape is milky whiteness, mother-of-pearl, an owl or a hawk. Then the shape becomes a deer's face—four faces, if you'd like to count them—with a body trying to give birth to a child. The syntactical construction mirrors the poem's literal transformation: the “not...but” constructed I've bolded in the section above highlights how images are continually morphing before the speaker's eyes. And our eyes as well—the constant negation of precise, clear images prevents the reader from settling into the poem, as one might with an unchanging image, strange as that image may be. In “Pale Rider,” the “not...but” pattern hinges on the ultimate negative “never,” and inverts to “but...not.” This subtle reversal indicates a change in the poem: the doe has stopped transforming, and becomes a static vision that will not disappear, and will “not speak.”

The doe will not speak, but the recurring theme of silence is not extended to the speaker, who seems trapped in a trancelike narrating mode. Claudia Ingram writes that Kelly's distinctive tone comes from the speaker's combination of different modes: “This poem's speaker is thus dramatized at once as mortal (maternal, abject), as fictive (produced by, and producing, a web of storytelling), and as calling out in and to a voice of divine

prophecy. None of these productive or destabilizing forces is marked as error, sin, or illusion; they freely contaminate one another.” The final transformation of the doe is into a pregnant animal frozen in the state of giving birth—eternally “maternal, abject” in Ingram’s words.

In chemistry, a *phase change* is a term to describe what happens when a substance moves between one state of matter to another. For example, water vaporizing into mist is a phase change. If we were to impose the concept of phase changes onto organic matter, there would be three phase changes: birth, metamorphosis, and death. Brigit Kelly’s doe is poised at the intersection of all three. Transformation, and fluidity of forms, are themes abstracted from nature, but alteration discomfits us. Many of the world’s mythical creatures are based off this fact—sphinx, griffin, centaur—but in poetry, unsettling the reader allows simple, unchanging statements to seem, when the reader arrives at them, especially revelatory. We see this in the poem’s final movement:

And I thought
of the tongue, of how it is a wound, a pool of blood,
And of how you should bind a wound. And I thought
Of the earth covered with poor forked creatures
Walking around with broken faces, their substance
Pouring out in the form of words. And I thought of how
The mist would thicken further until it thinned,
All at once, to nothing, in the night air that smelled
Of sewage and poor man’s roses, and of how the sound
Of the water dripping from the trees would return,
Tinnier, less insistent, as the water grew colder.
And I knew that soon on the high hill above the grotto
The fine dry snow would start to fall, and the field
Would draw silence to itself, and then as the air
Grew soft, the dry snow would turn to wet snow,
And the wet snow would lie heavy against the earth,
And the silence would multiply, a dark mass of pulp
And wings stirring above a darker bed, until nothing
Was recognizable to itself, and things were as if dead,
Wrapped in sheets and soaked in spices and oil, and death
A great mercy. And the snow seemed to hiss softly,
Or the falling mist hissed softly, or the water sliding

Down the stones, and the doe's form became more ghostly—
 Pale rider, lost in the woods where I was lost. And I stood
 In the dark until I closed my eyes. And then I stood no more.

When reading this passage, the Catholic homilies begin to creep forth again, and I'm reminded of St. Vibia Perpetua's autobiographical account of her martyrdom in the *Passio Sanctarum Martyrum Perpetua et Felicitatis* (*The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitatis*). Perpetua wrote of her days in a Carthage prison, during which she received several visions from God before her execution by gladiatorial beasts in 203 AD. *The Passion* is one of the earliest surviving documents of Christianity, and the oldest written account by a female Christian author.

Perpetua describes receiving a vision:

“And I asked, and this was shown me....**And** from beneath the ladder, as though it feared me, [the dragon] softly put forth its head; **and** as though I trod on the first step I trod on its head. **And** I went up, and I saw a very great space of garden, **and** in the midst a man sitting, white-headed, in shepherd's clothing, tall milking his sheep...**And** he cried to me, and from the curd he had from the milk he gave me as it were a morsel; **and** I took it with joined hands and ate it up; **and** all that stood around said, Amen. **And** at the sound of that word I awoke, yet eating I know not what of sweet. **And** at once I told my brother, **and** we knew it should be a passion; **and** we began to have no hope any longer in this world.”

In this passage, Perpetua describes her vision of climbing to heaven and being greeted by a shepherd as a prophecy of her and her cellmates' martyrdom. “And” appears frequently Perpetua's passage (8.0% of words in the passage are “and”); a coincidental similarity with the final passage of “Pale Rider,” where “and” appears 20 times (7.9% of words) that shows the emphasis of the additive conjunction when describing a vision for both authors. It's worth noting that this passage has, of course, been translated many times from its original Latin, but when comparing several different translations into English, all of them display the marked use of “and.”

What is the significance of the “and” and vision? For Kelly, the construction is flatter and more straightforward than the “but...not” passages earlier in the poem, which hinted to

us that a transformation was occurring. Syntactically, “and” implies no transformation. What it does do for both authors is link together the various moving parts of the vision, in a way that calls to mind “seamlessness.” With a catalogue joined by the weak conjunction, there are few borders or distinctions. Instead, things are linked by association, as they’d be in the mind. A thought process is not linear—it branches out, loops back in on itself, and doesn’t stop along the way to subordinate or order—and when we are in communication with the world around us, our mind acts the “connected vessel” André Breton wrote about.

The word “and” also conveys an authority that “but...not” fails to. At first in “Pale Rider,” the speaker was “having trouble seeing” and her mind “refused” what she saw, but when she does see it, Kelly’s speaker is physically moved to stand “no more.” This is in contrast with what we sometimes refer to as “the relationship of mastery predicated between seer and seen” (Pratt, qtd. in Newmann 97). Rather than an agent in the “seeing” of a vision or a prophecy, the seer suffers from it as if it were a sudden ailment, such as a seizure or (as has been suggested in Perpetua’s case) a migraine. Whatever the ailment, being a prophet seems a great burden. Robert Frost writes of prophecy in *The Figure a Poem Makes*, saying that poetry “must be more felt than seen ahead like prophecy. It must be a revelation, or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader.”

Revelation is most commonly used to describe “something that is revealed,” but in Perpetua’s writing, a revelation can be further specified as something that is revealed by God. Despite parallel images with the *Passion* and the lurking Christianity in Kelly’s poetry, in “Pale Rider” the vision does not seem to be from the Lord. The only religious images are ones that are also natural: the flock is a flock of deer, the resurrected shape is a mollusk or a bird of prey, and even the Eucharist-like images are not the dry flat wafers I received as a child but rather bread turned honey turned “marbled flesh.” Religion seems a vehicle for

natural forces in Kelly's poetry, not the other way around. For Kelly, the active agent in the vision is nature. The doe, part of nature during its life, comes back to life in the mist of a "dark, unsettling" grotto in the woods, a place the speaker walks into willingly, but for no logical reason, rather: she is "drawn to it."

What's striking about both Perpetua's writing and Kelly's is the powerful role of the female prophet. Though both prophets did not start as women of power—Kelly's speaker in a state of weariness and denial, Perpetua in a physical prison—the vision transformed them. And the poem's metaphors transform the reader—we see the figurative language as the substance and sustenance of the poem. Through the momentum of the monostrophe and syntactic construction of "and...and...and," the reader feels metaphor piles up at an unrelenting pace. "As we turn into something else, we turn into ourselves," Baker writes. "And as we share the experience of literature, we turn into each other. We share the body...And we know something resides there in the magic of metaphor" (29).

§

Conclusions: *then a hunger was added*

"If one is totally connected to his or her feelings, then one sees and hears and witnesses—fully engaged—and one will have to address what one has seen and heard and dreamt. We address the internal and external, and perhaps speaking of both terrains can almost make us whole."

—Yusef Komunyakaa

A poetic transcendence is the combining of the body and the bodiless that can happen—rarely, astonishingly—when we're reading a poem. Despite reading being a primarily cerebral act (a bodiless one), poetry can allow the body of the reader to respond physically to sensory data or figurative language written on the page. If I'm able to draw a link between poetic transcendence and the natural world, it is that both can act as reminders of one's presence in a body. Sometimes these reminders are gentle ones—a white deer

appearing from the thicket, as in Hass's poem—and sometimes frightening, as the revenant deer in Kelly's, but when a poem does this successfully, the reader is able to experience what they read on the level of the body *and* the level of the bodiless.

Interestingly, the speakers in Hass's "On Squaw Peak" and Kelly's "Pale Rider" are in communication with all three physical "phase changes" such as birth, metamorphosis, and death. While meditating on his partner's miscarriage, the speaker of "On Squaw Peak" speaks of his unborn child as a creature caught in the midst of metamorphosis: "the ghost-child," the "half-fish spirit." In "Pale Rider," the deer the speaker sees is an apparition of a dead doe undergoing a metamorphosis of growing three additional heads, all while attempting to give birth. As readers, we've all experienced birth, but are unable to remember it; we will die, but most of us are able to conveniently forget this for much of the day. However, when poetry achieves transcendence and unites the body with the bodiless, we are able to recall that the natural container of the body is a temporary one. That is, poetic transcendence is able to remind us of the intrinsic mortality of the "phase" we're in. Baker writes that, "transcendence requires a death...if only for an instant, a release from our identities" (29).

I might add to this that transcendence requires an exchange. Whether the "bodiless" world of nature or our own body, transcendence, like metaphor, requires transformation via transference. Transformation sustains nature, in the mixing of fresh water with saline in an estuary, in the grass digested by the deer's false stomachs, in the methodical process of fossilization, in evolution from one thing to another. When we witness these transformations, through our own bodily senses or through poetic metaphor, our "numbness [is] taken away." We're able to *transcend* time, if only for a few moments, and we hunger for these moments, as they reveal something about ourselves.

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