ANN LOFQUIST

Alamo Creek Lower Grove: North View III, 2012
Oil on Canvas, 7 1/2 x 16 in.

courtesy: Winfield gallery

TRANE DEVORE

In the Depths of Groves

1 Froudland

When I was a child, I spent much of my time trespassing. I grew up in the countryside, in a cow town surrounded by chicken ranches and dairy farms. That was Sonoma County, in Northern California, north of the San Francisco Bay Area, before the grapes became ubiquitous and before the tech boom gave much of the county the dull contour of an upscale bedroom community.

Most of the cattle in the area where I grew up were free range, which meant that the hills and fields surrounding my house were easily walkable. There were still plenty of woods amid the open fields. Oak, bay, and buckeye trees grew thick around the creeks at the feet of the hills, while monumental eucalyptus windbreaks dominated the horizon. Small reservoirs—good for bass fishing—dotted the hills. Hilltops were defined by small outcroppings of igneous rocks, like remnants of some prehistoric barrow, with signs of hawk habitation scattered about—mouse skulls, hawk shit, and the winged remnants of other birds. Hills not covered with rocks would often be topped with small oak groves or, sometimes, dense oak forests that, from a distance, resembled nothing so much as bunched broccoli.

Up the road from my house—past the pine forest that was once a Christmas tree farm—was a small eucalyptus grove split down the middle by the shallow creek that ran through it. This grove became the headquarters for the wild explorations that my friends and I began organizing as soon as we realized how easy it was to cross fences and stay out of the sightlines of adults. We were children of the counterculture, and our parents' desire to break with the stultifications of American society and form new relations with the natural world is etched in our names—Crystal, Leaf, River. We were about nine, ten, and eleven then, and since our parents let us roam freely, we would spend days at a time in the groves, returning home at dinner and coming back the next day to continue inhabiting the strange world we had made for ourselves, our own secret forest culture.

At home my book world was twofold. On the one hand there were science-oriented books: Audubon field guides, books outlining the basics of doing scientific fieldwork in

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the wild, various wilderness survival manuals, and a well-worn copy of *Mushrooms of North America*. I collected insects, took spore prints, and identified every animal and plant that I could find within walking distance. I kept a notebook with maps of alligator lizard sightings, and I trapped blue-bellied fence swifts with lizard nooses made from stalks of grass. I hunted rocks and minerals (lots of quartz) and arranged my findings in display boxes. I kept a chicken embryo in a jar of alcohol on my bookshelf. At the same time, I was rereading the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and devouring Le Guin's *Earthsea* trilogy, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and just about every book of Greek and Norse mythology that I could get my hands on. These were the two poles of my world, a set of contradictions that resulted in a mind-set as thoroughly vexed as that of Melville's famous fighting Quakers, a metaphysical yoking together of opposite concepts to birth a chimeric attitude we might call "scientific fantasism."

It is often said that the world of post-Enlightenment capitalism has become disenchanted, that all of the beautiful half-goat creatures and beings with tree-bark skin and leaves for hair have been banished from our experience by our rationalized consciousness, evicted in favor of a lucid utilitarianism that seeks to improve human well-being without recourse to the mumbo-jumbo of spirituality and the supernatural. In *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, Max Horkheimer lays out what is at stake when industrial capital and instrumental reason combine their forces in an attempt to dominate the natural world—and the hidden interiors of human nature. We are not born disenchanted but enter a system that engineers our disenchantment, or at least channels our enchantment into expressions of harmless consumerism. Just as Freud and his successors like Lacan describe our psyches as formed by the trauma of curbing sexual desires, so we might think of the process of coming into adulthood as a series of forced partings with enchantment. As David Abram has pointed out, in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, the human sensorium has evolved in conjunction with the natural environment; natural space has been the context of our lived experiences for 99 percent of our time on the planet. It's not just that we contain a sexual animal that must be repressed—our body and senses are attuned to natural space just as the strings of an Aeolian harp are attuned to the wind.

There were many splendors in the groves of Sonoma County. The first of these was a bright orange shelf fungus that grew from the stump of a fallen eucalyptus tree and resembled a large, alien brain. This was the famous sulfur shelf, the *Laetiporus* fungus known as the "chicken of the woods," but for us at the time it was simply "the brain," or "the fungus among us." Other splendors came from the trees themselves. The bark peeled off and rolled up into the shape of tubes that we used as spears, hurling them back and forth across the creek as we dodged and ducked behind trees for shelter. The bark spears were just strong enough to retain their javelin-like shape as they flew through the air, but delicate enough that when they hit our bodies, they split apart and shattered, leaving only small bruises and cuts behind. Even better than the bark of the trees, even better than the smooth, fleshlike skin below the bark, were the eucalyptus flowers. The flowers, a ring of white stamens surrounding an open green button, contained a beautiful secret inside: a few drops of perfectly clear nectar that tasted like honey water, with the lightest flavor of eucalyptus mixed in. Sticking your tongue inside these flowers was like sticking your tongue into the furry pit of a sugary albino eye socket.

We collected fallen branches to make a small shelter that we called our Hobbit House. It was a world inside a world, its door so low that even as children we had to crawl to enter. Inside, our wildnesses made themselves known. We allowed ourselves to abandon the second nature foisted on us by adult discipline so that we could experiment with our first natures, our playful, libidinous selves. The first sacrament was stolen liquor, tiny flasks full of vodka, or brandy, or schnapps that had been clandestinely excavated while the adults were away. We took only small tastes, enough to make us different. But one day while we were out riding our bicycles we stumbled across a true prize: there, sitting in a pile of ice by the side of the road, were a dozen bottles of cold beer. We put the bottles in the baskets on our bikes and in our backpacks, and we rode back to the eucalyptus grove as fast as we could. The beers were stashed in the Hobbit House, and we drank them slowly over the course of a few months, never more than two at a time, always expecting to be caught out.

There were other sacraments, such as smoking coffee beans through a small wooden pipe and using cinnamon sticks like cigarettes. The bark of the cinnamon tree, like that of the eucalyptus, curls as it peels off the tree and forms a natural tube. We would hold the ends of the sticks in the fire until there was a bright red ember on the tip and then smoke them for as long as they would stay lit. As with clove cigarettes, the smoke from a cinnamon stick retains a good deal of its flavor and is delicately delicious until you inhale too strongly and it rips your lungs apart.

It wasn't uncommon to find alcohol hidden here and there in the countryside. There was the box of red wine we found stashed in a culvert and moved to our own hiding place, and there were cans of beer hidden along the ditches by the side of the road. That wasn't the only forbidden fruit we gathered up, like plucking mangoes from branches. Hidden in the culverts, or sometimes in the hollow of an old oak tree, we would find stacks of *Hustler*, *Penthouse*, *Cherry*, and *Oui* that we would collect and remove to our secret zones.

We kept our largest and dirtiest stash of pornography in a stand of eucalyptus trees that was at the far end of one of our landlord's cow pastures. Unlike our little grove, this small forest had gone completely wild and was thick with fallen trees, some with wild bees living in them. There was a small set of fallen trees that had been cut into sections, and it was under one of these that we hid our magazines. Looking under logs to discover mysterious things was a standard occupation in the countryside. Under logs arranged like benches in a clearing I found alligator lizards, pale flat-backed millipedes, harvester spiders, and even a large black scorpion. Somehow it made sense to add our magazines to all of this, the sex we found within ourselves being kin to the creatures living beneath the damp belly of the log. We would sit together, four of us, and stare in wonder at the dirty, voluptuous meatiness of the photographs that were offered to us, never quite sure how much was real and how much erotic fantasy.

There's a kind of dreamwork that takes place in the gap between our conscious, rational understanding of the natural world and the way we experience that world at the unconscious level of sensation—emotional states attached to certain types of natural encounter: the deep power that the ocean has over us (Freud's oceanic feeling, Melville's "ungraspable phantom of life"), the calm silence inside that seems to accompany the sound of thousands of leaves blowing lightly in the breeze, the way the shapes of certain stones grip our consciousness, the delight we take in shooting stars and the opening of buds. These feelings are not learned (though their expression may be informed by culture), but neither are they simple biological expressions of some kind of evolutionary zero-sum game in which we end up either eating or being eaten. Instead, they express themselves in the form of monolithic constructions like Stonehenge; or in the *karesansui*, the dry sand gardens associated with Zen Buddhism; or in the desire to go hillwalking, or to collect specimens, or to plant a flower garden; or in *ikebana*, in which plants are arranged and twisted to amplify certain aspects of the natural, as though to become more natural than nature itself.

It is said that religion arose to explain aspects of the world that we had no way of understanding. Thor's anger, for example, comes to stand in as the source of thunder and lightning; the Greek deity Helios drives the chariot of the sun across the sky each day, returning at night via an underworld ocean. But the notion that gods are merely anthropomorphized expressions of our confusion about the world has always seemed simplistic to me. Why is it easier to make a river into a god rather than simply to accept that the nature of water is to flow? Instead of assuming that deities are a product of our ignorance, why not figure that they're a product of extravagance, of those innate feelings about nature that our bodies carry with us wherever we go?

Maybe this is why animism assigns gods to everything. Japan is famous for having eight million gods, most of them manifestations of the natural world. There are fox gods, sacred trees, stones that are worshipped as gods, sacred waterways, turtle deities, and just about everything is said to have a soul of some kind. The *kasa-obake*, the one-eyed Japanese umbrella ghost, is the spirit of a discarded umbrella that has reached a hundred years of age and has come back to haunt all those who cast aside their umbrellas before the umbrella's natural life of use is up.

The folklore of the British includes a reverence for standing stones, the existence of sacred or haunted groves, and the increase of spirits throughout the natural world in the form of faerie creatures. A book called *Faeries*, by Brian Froud and Alan Lee, inspired us. *Faeries* offers up a world that is often chaotic, dark, and full of erotic charge. In one painting from the book, replicated in an interview with Froud that ran in *Playboy*, a goblin holding an exceedingly wet and phallic mushroom hovers menacingly above a beautiful and delicate faerie that is asleep on a mushroom cap. Even when I was young, there was little mystery about what this image signified.

The hills where we lived were full of faerie haunts. There were stone outcroppings that were just the place to find an entrance to the realm of faerie. Down the hill from my house was a creek lined with oaks, a favorite spot for faeries to gather. After the spring rains, mushrooms would spring up everywhere in the woods, including those large circles of mushrooms that are called "faerie rings." We began to see faeries everywhere. It didn't matter that we never encountered an elf, or a goblin, or a Coblynau—spider webs loaded with morning dew rhymed into existence the image of a faerie wing, and the dusk fields rustling in the breeze were stocked with a thousand unseen presences.

Along an oak forest path, amid deep drifts of oak leaves that coated the ground, I first encountered *Clavaria*, the coral fungus. White and almost translucent, it would burst from the underbrush in clumps like misplaced transplants from a tropical reef. But the most mysterious discoveries in those woods were large cairns made up of sticks that we discovered under the trees. Up to a meter tall and shaped somewhat like beehives, these piles were nothing I had ever seen. A single, small hole toward the bottom of the pile seemed to afford entrance—the front door, as it were. We dubbed these "faerie houses" and treated them with great caution.

Some of us started taking precautions against faerie magic when walking in this area, including wearing items of clothing inside out and carrying bits of iron in our pockets (faeries are said to hate iron, surely a cultural registration of the destruction of folk tradition by industrialism). A few years after this, I was walking in the oaks with River, who was in the process of become a young tough, as many people who grow up in the country do. He had no time anymore for our childish beliefs, and when we came across one of the mounds, he kicked it apart to see what was inside. When his foot came down on the pile, a part of me viewed the scene with a calm and rational reserve, but an equal part waited in horrified expectation to feel the black power of an otherworldly curse. The twigs and branches flew through the air, and though there seemed to be no inhabitants inside, we could clearly see the tunnels where something had been living.

Years later, I was walking along the bed of the creek that runs through the oak forest. The banks were high enough to keep me out of sight of the property owner's house. It was spring. There had been a recent rain, so there was quite a bit of water in the creek, and I must have been wearing rubber boots. I followed the creek bed farther than ever before. Pushing my way through an overgrown part of the creek, I slipped between some fence wires and found myself at the edge of a large pool of water moving in slowly looping currents. The movement of the water was hypnotic. Across from me, on the other side of the pool, was an ancient California bay laurel with several trunks growing out of a large and bulbous central trunk covered with thick green moss. There were seven holes in the trunk, like seven mouths, and out of those holes flowed seven streams of cool, clear water. The water, the product of a small stream that flowed directly into the back of the tree, shot out in all directions from the bay, arcing into the pool like arms spread wide with offering. Although I had long ago stopped believing in faeries, I stood entranced, unable to move before the power of the being that stood in front of me.

2 Yaegaki-jinja

I moved to Japan in 2005 to teach at a university in Osaka, which (despite efforts to green the place since the 1970s) is still thought of as a concrete city. In the summer the block of concrete that defines downtown absorbs the energy of the sun and spits it back out at night, creating a heat-island effect that keeps the city almost as hot at night as it is during the day.

Yet even in the middle of the densest urban space, it's not uncommon to come across a small grove of trees, or even a forested hill standing out starkly against the glass-fronted high-rises that surround it. These are sacred groves, usually containing a shrine, and they are the inviolable home of the resident deity, the local *kami-sama*. In the middle of Osaka Prefecture's Sakai City, there is an enormous sacred forest to which access is forbidden. This is the tomb of the Emperor Nintoku, an enormous burial mound covered with trees and surrounded by a moat. The island in the center, the mound itself, is shaped like a keyhole, as if waiting for the enormous hand of a sky god to puncture the tomb with a key and crack open the earth.

Although Japan is heavily forested, most of the forest is not ancient growth. Millions of cedars have been planted as part of a reforestation project that has had the unfortunate side effect of producing an early-spring pollen allergy season that is brutal in its intensity. If you want to see Japanese forest in its original state, you need to travel far into the countryside, to the dense protected forests of such places as the Kumano Kodo, the ancient pilgrimage route that runs through the Kii Mountains, or Yakushima Island, which is said to be the inspiration for the forest scene in Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke*. There is a famous *shinboku*—a tree that embodies divinity—on Yakushima. These trees are generally ancient and large, the kind of tree that feels as if it's anchoring the ground to the world. They are often marked as divine by a *shimenawa*, a straw rope that surrounds the trunk of the tree and is usually festooned with zigzag-shaped pieces of white paper called *shide*. One of these trees is at the center of *My Neighbor Totoro*, one of Miyazaki's most popular films. The tree, an enormous camphor tree, is a *shinboku* that houses Totoro, a friendly, enormous, and hairy wood spirit that makes its home inside the tree, or is the physical embodiment of the tree itself.

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Another place where remnants of Japan's original forests can be found is in the smaller groves that surround Japanese shrines. These groves often feature one or two *shinboku*, though in theory all of the shrine forest is sacred, an expression of the divine life force associated with the *kami-sama*. A particularly famous grove can be found at Yaegaki-jinja, located in Shimane Prefecture. The second least populated of Japan's forty-seven prefectures, Shimane—the site of many of Japan's most important myths—is known as the home of the gods.

Yaegaki-jinja is a shrine dedicated to the god Susanoo and his bride, the princess Kushinada, and it is said that the main shrine building is located on the site where Susanoo built the house that he and his bride lived in. Yaegaki Shrine is an *enmusubi* shrine—that is, a shrine dedicated to the tying of love knots and to marriage. On the shrine grounds is a plaque that commemorates two visits to the shrine made by the writer Lafcadio Hearn, who is known as Koizumi Yakumo in Japan. It was while living in Shimane that he wrote many of the sketches that would later form a major part of his 1894 work, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*.

Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan includes a chapter about Yaegaki-jinja that reveals the meaning of the shrine's name by way of the famous story about how Susanoo rescued a young girl, Kushinada, from the Yamato no Orochi, a gi-

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ant snake with eight heads and eight tails. Susanoo ordered eight barrels of sake to be brought and placed within eight doors. When the serpent came for the girl, its eyes glowing red and cypress trees growing out of its back, it stuck each of its eight heads into a different door, drank the sake, and fell asleep. At this point, Susanoo took out his sword and cut off all of the serpent's heads, one by one.

One of Yaegaki-jinja's most popular features is the Mirror Pond, which is located in a dense forest grove behind the main shrine building. Even though it's a short walk through the forest to the pond, it's easy to feel the thickness of the place, the green sense of weight that accompanies a steadfast and ancient forest. Here's Hearn's description of what the grove was like a hundred years ago:

> *This ancient grove—so dense that when you first pass into its shadows out of the sun all seems black—is composed of colossal cedars and pines, mingled with bamboo, tsubaki* (Camellia Japonica)*, and sakaki, the sacred and mystic tree of Shinto. The dimness is chiefly made by the huge bamboos. In nearly all sacred groves bamboos are thickly set between the trees, and their feathery foliage, filling every lofty opening between the heavier crests, entirely cuts off the sun. Even in a bamboo grove where no other trees are, there is always a deep twilight.*
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> *As the eyes become accustomed to this green gloaming, a pathway outlines itself between the trees—a pathway wholly covered with moss, velvety, soft, and beautifully verdant. In former years, when all pilgrims were required to remove their footgear before entering the sacred grove, this natural carpet was a boon to the weary.*

At the Mirror Pond you can discover your fortune in love and marriage by floating the fortune on the water and placing a coin in the center. The fortunes, bought at the shrine for 100 yen, are written in such a way that the writing is difficult to read until the paper becomes saturated with water, a bit like homemade invisible ink. The weight of the coin eventually causes the paper to sink below the surface of the water and it's the time it takes for the paper to sink that indicates your fortune. The faster the paper sinks, the luckier in love you're destined to be.

The practice was a bit different in Hearn's day, when the pond was clearer, cleaner, and full of newts:

> *The water is very clear; and there are many of these newts to be seen. And it is the custom for lovers to make a little boat of paper, and put into it one rin, and set it afloat and watch it. So soon as the paper becomes wet through, and allows the water to enter it, the weight of the copper coin soon sends it to the bottom, where, owing to the purity of the water, it can still be seen as distinctly as before. If the newts then approach and touch it, the lovers believe their happiness assured by the will of the gods; but if the newts do not come near it, the omen is evil.*

I've been to Yaegaki-jinja quite a few times now, but I've never seen any newts in the pond. However, my friends and I did run across a cute orange-bellied newt relaxing near a small stream as we were leaving the grove. The newt eventually slipped into the water and swam away, oblivious to the practice described by Hearn that may have claimed the hides of many of its ancestors:

> *It is believed that the flesh of the newts in the sacred pond of Yaegaki possesses aphrodisiac qualities; and the body of the creature, reduced to ashes, by burning, was formerly converted into love powders.*

There are two sacred cedar trees in the grove at Yaegaki, though they are fenced off, so they can't be approached too closely. I was curious about these fences because I haven't seen them elsewhere, but a clue about their purpose can be found in Hearn's essay, in which he describes a type of rush matting that was used to protect the trees from those who would peel off strips of the bark, which was believed to have magical properties. While many of the traditions that Hearn describes are no longer practiced at Yaegaki-jinja—including the beautiful practice of bringing seawater and seaweed from the ocean as offerings—it seems that ripping bark off of the sacred trees might still hold a fascination for some.

Hearn doesn't mention the numerous phallic totems that are still scattered around the shrine grounds. These wooden phallic totems are not uncommon around Japan. Shinto, like many animist religions, places an emphasis on fertility. While fertility rituals involving the planting of rice are probably the best known of these, fertility and sexual potency figure large at many shrines and in many festivals, including Kawasaki's famous Kanamara Matsuri, the Festival of the Steel Phallus. Not only are giant penis shrines paraded through the street, but you can buy penis-shaped lollipops to increase your potency. These are also available at Yaekagi-jinja, at the souvenir shop located next to the sacred camellia tree that's just outside of the shrine's main gate.

Though it's now separated from the main shrine by a major road, and though the area in front of the stone wall that protects it is often used as an impromptu taxi stand these days, the sacred camellia at Yaegaki is worth visiting:

> *There is one more famous thing to be seen before visiting the holy grove behind the temple, and that is the Sacred Tama-tsubaki, or Precious-Camellia of Yaegaki. It stands upon a little knoll, fortified by a projection-wall, in a rice-field near the house of the priest; a fence has been built around it, and votive lamps of stone placed before it. It is of vast age, and has two heads and two feet; but the twin trunks grow together at the middle. Its unique shape, and the good quality of longevity it is believed to possess in common with all of its species, cause it to be revered as a symbol of undying wedded love, and as tenanted by the Kami who hearken to lovers' prayers—enmusubi-no-kami.*
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> *There is, however, a strange superstition, about tsubaki-trees; and this sacred tree of Yaegaki, in the opinion of some folk, is a rare exception to the general ghastliness of its species. For tsubaki-trees are goblin trees, they say, and walk about at night; and there was one in the garden of a Matsue samurai which did this so much that it had to be cut down. Then it writhed its arms and groaned, and blood spurted at every stroke of the axe.*

It's remarkable how closely Hearn's goblin trees sound like something straight out of Froud. *Faeries* says, "Willow trees actually uproot themselves at night and stalk muttering behind unwary travelers." In the dreamwork, our bodies stand in nature and make stories out of the nerve stuff that vibrates in the space between our rational understanding of the world and the fullness that our flesh registers as something that is more than the objectively given. Like a circuit overloaded with power, we shed sparks at every moment in order to avoid the world's overload. These sparks peel off of us as dragons, as faeries, as an overwhelming desire for luck and fortune to have a place in this world. They peel off of us and become psychic presences in the spaces we walk through, casting those spells that imbue the topography of everyday life with charm and quirk, danger and dark threat.

In the forests of my childhood, and at Yaegaki, so many correspondences appear—the way water in a grove becomes a deeper mercury replete with fertility. Animals that inhabit these places become totemic and replete with meaning. Trees abide and anchor the landscape around them, while other plants seem desperate to transform into creatures and roam the world. All of this slippage points to the human desire to be a changeling, to find the loophole of escape, and to be transformed by the open wound of nectar.

Trane DeVore grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he lived for most of his adult life before moving to Japan in 2005 to teach at Osaka University. He has published two books of poetry—*series/mnemonic* (Avec Books, 1999) and *Dust Habit* (Avec Books, 2005)—and his work has appeared in numerous publications. When he's not busy keeping up with academic work, he likes to write and take photographs.