

*Inspired  
by  
Nature*



Inspired by Nature

Final Project Version 2.0

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# Preface

At various points in my life, I believe that I have experienced nature religiously. I have felt a godly presence while standing on a pier off the Atlantic Ocean, I have gained a better understanding for my place in the universe by looking at a full moon from my desk, I have deepened my appreciation for the seasons on a walk during the first day of spring. And yet, I did not recognize these moments to align with religious naturalism until much later. After studying religious naturalism for the past semester, I now understand it to be something that can be practiced by just about anyone, and I want to extend this realization beyond myself. With *Inspired by Nature*, I hope to share my understanding of religious naturalism through a series of original poetry in order to reach a wider audience.

Firstly, I understand religious naturalism to entail complete appreciation and respect for the entirety of the natural world, accompanied by the belief that the natural world is both

metaphysically and religiously ultimate (Crosby). In other words, nature is all there ever has been and all there ever will be, and it is worthy of devout dedication. Furthermore, nature is understood to encompass everything which has naturally come into existence (plants, humans, society, earth, space, and so on) as opposed to the supernatural (gods, infinite beings, etc.) in which most major faiths believe. While religious naturalism can certainly be paired with other religious beliefs, its core value lies within a deep respect for the natural world and all its many components, positive and negative (for more on this, I encourage a further reading of Crosby's *Living with Ambiguity*, described below). This value can be manifested in myriad ways, including but not limited to practicing environmentally sustainable consumption, mindfulness exercises, and community building, but it has yet to become a major religion. I believe there is potential for this religion to resonate with a significant amount of people, and I created this body of work in an effort to reach them.

To inform my writing, I have largely drawn from the religious naturalist works of Donald Crosby and Ursula Goodenough. Crosby's book, *Living with Ambiguity: Religious naturalism and the menace of evil*, defends religious naturalism against common criticisms, especially the argument that nature is incapable of being a sufficient object of faith. I hope to similarly put such accusations to rest by acknowledging nature's ambiguities without succumbing to nihilism. Likewise, Goodenough's book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, also argues that religious belief in nature is justified, but she focuses more heavily on nature's positive contributions. She outlines natural phenomena in a way that is both scientific and personal, and her vulnerability is a testament to her deep connection with the faith. I believe that such personal accounts can be a

powerful tool in advocating for the practice of religious naturalism, and I hope mine will be similarly effective.

Furthermore, my work aligns with Loyal Rue's structure of religion, wherein aesthetic contributions strengthen the central myth of a given religion. In this case, my collection of original poetry is intended to appeal to audiences in a way that encourages them to participate in religious naturalist thought and ideally practices. Additionally, it is worth noting that American writing in particular has a longstanding tradition of using lyrical prose to profoundly describe the natural world (Elder). In this way, my work here could be considered a contribution to the genre of American nature writing in addition to contributing to the existing religious naturalist literature. Overall, I hope this project gives rise to a more casual and recognizable conversation about religious naturalism.

\* \* \*

Each of the following poems was inspired by experiences I have had, as recounted through the lens of religious naturalism. I wanted to convey the major themes of religious naturalism in a more accessible format than the academic texts I have consumed leading up to this point, so as to make the subject more approachable to the layperson. Poetry felt like the appropriate medium to employ for this project seeing as it is one of the most accessible forms to read and to write in, and it traditionally relies heavily on emotion, which I felt was important to include in this project. While I encourage readers to interpret my words through the lenses of

their own experiences, I have provided a bit of commentary for each piece below so as to clarify my original intentions and how they fit into the current conversation of religious naturalism.

**full moon.** I wrote this first poem when I was working at my desk one evening and saw the moon rising out of the corner of my eye. It seemed so much bigger and more colorful than usual that I almost didn't recognize it as the moon at first. Taking a moment to just appreciate this temporary optical marvel moved me to consider my place in the universe: how big the moon must be for me to be able to see it from such a great distance, but also how small I must be in comparison to everything. I felt really lucky to have happened to catch that moment, and it made me reflect on the relative insignificance of the work I had been doing in the moments before. We tend to exaggerate the importance of things going on in our lives, but in the grand scheme of things, we're all just specks of dust. In my eyes, this experience represents the belief held by many religious naturalists that we should be careful not to overestimate our role in the universe, and also that we ought to appreciate such phenomenal moments when they occur.

**spring walk.** Over the past year or so, I've started taking walks with my partner around town every day. This poem was inspired by the first time we were able to comfortably walk outside without jackets on, and how special that felt. To me, this poem speaks to a religious naturalist's deep appreciation for nature — such as that expressed by Goodenough — and to the understanding that negative experiences can make positive experiences feel even more enjoyable — in line with Crosby's defense of nature's ambiguities.

**atlantic ocean.** When I first began this project, the experience recounted in "atlantic ocean" immediately came to mind. The poem describes a memory of mine from when my family visited my grandparents in Florida one year, and it was the first time I had ever seen the Atlantic

Ocean. I remember standing on a pier, looking out at the water, and feeling a distinct spiritual presence. I was filled with an overwhelming sense of calm that has stuck with me ever since then, and I figured that if there was a god, they must live in the water. In a way, this poem addresses the notion that religious naturalism can be paired with theistic beliefs, but it also proposes that perhaps nature is ultimate in a way that other religions reserve for the supernatural.

**collective pain.** With this poem, I aimed to engage with a discourse proposed by some religious naturalists wherein the whole of humanity is essentially one organism, and that any harm done to the individual is harm done to the whole. While this argument is appealing and theoretically sound, I take issue with the practicality of it because of the overwhelming amount of injustice that exists among humans that continues to be caused and sustained by other humans without consequence. On one hand, I wanted to demonstrate that we should be thinking critically about ideas proposed within religious naturalism, but I also wanted to express optimism in the agency held by human beings. That is to say, while we are capable of creating negativity, we are equally capable of creating positivity. I believe that it's important that we don't let our fascination with the natural world overshadow our need to tend to our social wellbeing.

**self care.** In addition to tending to our social wellbeing, I see it as an essential practice of religious naturalism to tend to our personal wellbeing. If the goal of religious naturalism is to fully appreciate and respect the natural world, that includes our selves. I chose to compare personal wellbeing to a garden to illustrate that humans are not separate from nature, and that we require just as much care in order to meet our full potential.

**the only home we have.** Finally, I couldn't write about religious naturalism without addressing the alarming rate at which humans are modifying the Earth. To my understanding, the

Earth will continue to exist for long after humans have gone extinct, but we can not survive as a species without this Earth, and it seems like not enough people know or care about the hierarchy of that relationship. But while I hope to evoke a sense of urgency with respect to reducing climate change, I also hope to instill a sense of appreciation for how much this Earth has to offer us. I find it pretty incredible that we even exist, given the probability of it all, and that to me seems worthy enough of religious devotion.



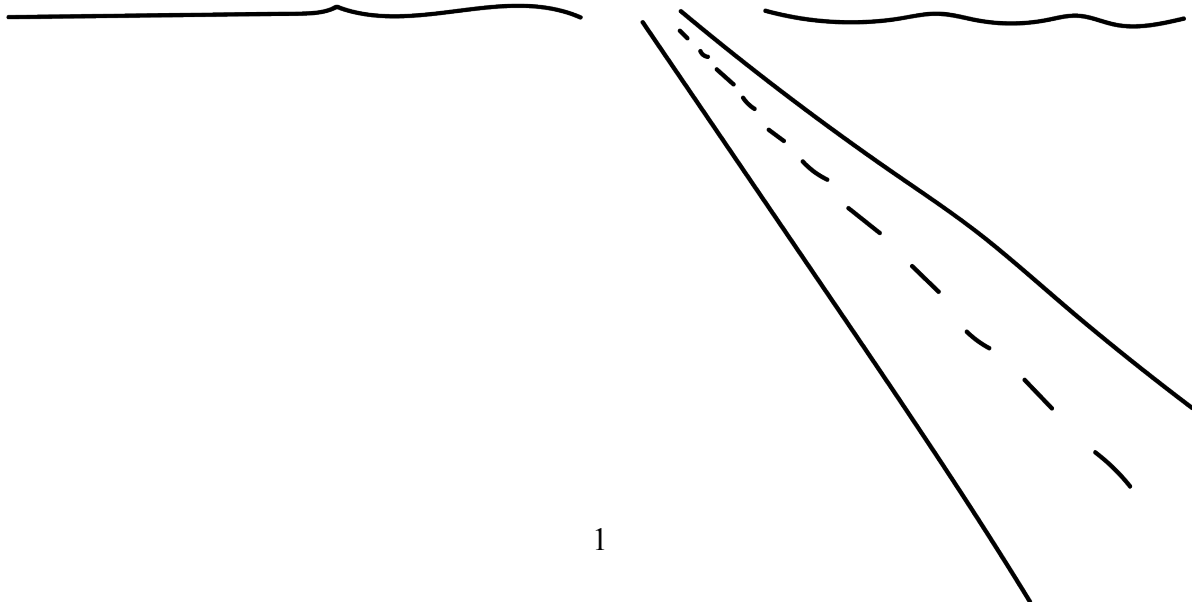
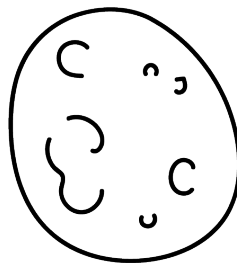
*Inspired by Nature*

out of the corner of my eye  
a sight so out of the ordinary  
my heart skips a beat  
a lunar tangerine  
a distant wheel of gold  
hovering over the horizon  
as if I could reach out and touch it

I remember how small we are  
compared to how big it all is,  
how big this all is  
to be able to be seen from so far away,  
how lucky I am  
to have caught a glimpse of such a sight

I take a minute  
just to admire the beauty  
of something so routine  
yet so magnificent  
to remind myself  
that we're just specks on this great rock  
floating through nothing and everything  
so much nothingness  
is our everything

*- full moon*

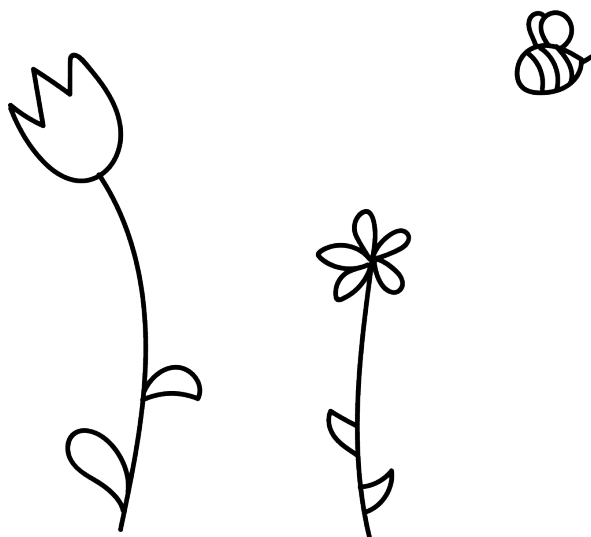


isn't it wonderful  
to feel the air on the surface of your skin  
without the need for a barrier in between,  
to smell the buds birthed from the earth  
to witness their first encounters with existence?

clouds of pollen tickle my nose  
and waves of April insects gather  
but without them, the grays of February couldn't have subsided  
into such a breathtaking array of hues

the attitude has shifted  
as if every one of Earth's creatures has collectively sighed in relief  
for we made it through another trip around the Sun  
and how rewarding it is to have gotten here

- *spring walk*



if ever there was a god  
I think they would be one with the water  
in its seemingly endless blues and greens  
shimmering beyond the horizon

I stand on a pier  
on some continental peninsula  
and I feel calm  
I feel so clearly that everything is exactly as it should be  
that everything will happen as it must

a sense of wholeness among  
children screaming, men fishing, people dining  
a sense that the ocean has been here long before us,  
and that it will remain long after we are gone

I feel serene  
and in my serenity  
I feel the enormity of the ocean  
and the negligibility of me

- *atlantic ocean*



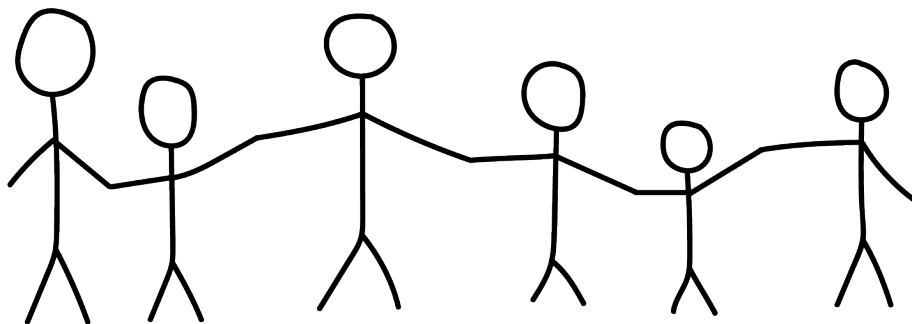
it's nice to think of us as one  
one collective being  
comprised of so very many parts  
each contributing in our own unique way  
to the wellness of the whole

to think that any damage done to a part  
is damage done to the whole  
and that the actions of one  
can heal collective wounds

I have my doubts  
for it seems that despite our interconnectedness  
evils continue to be committed without consequences  
and the offenders sleep soundly  
while the whole aches

but perhaps if enough of us commit instead  
to healing collective wounds  
we can one day experience this world as it is  
as one

*- collective pain*



if we could tend to our selves  
as we tend to our gardens  
imagine how much  
we could grow

we look at our fruits and our flowers  
and admire the beauty in all that they are  
we note how they've changed since the last time we checked  
and we do what we can to facilitate their flourishing

we give them time  
we give them space  
we give them an environment suited to their needs  
we keep a watering can on hand  
for when rain alone is insufficient

if only we treated our selves this way  
with as much attention, care, and forgiveness  
maybe the fruits and the flowers we contain  
could flourish as we always hope they will

- *self care*



as far as I know  
the universe is mostly nothing  
the occasional star or planet is just  
an interruption of empty space

so how incredible is it  
that this floating blue dot  
contains everything we require  
exactly as we require it?

we use this Earth  
as if its gifts to us are a given  
we employ every last inch  
as if it were made for us  
as if it were unending

but it wasn't made for us  
nor is it unending  
we are merely a byproduct  
of a series of temporary conditions  
and our Earth is finite  
as is our time on it

we overestimate our importance  
while we underestimate our impact  
the Earth doesn't need us  
but it is everything we need

*- the only home we have*

