

THAT GOD THING



ROBIN PACIFIC

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SOMETIMES I wonder what my friends – particularly my artist friends, and especially my political friends -- think, when they hear that I have “got religion”. Sometimes I imagine myself trying to explain the rather surprising shift from a lifetime of atheism to a belief in – what? The divine, the transcendent, the spirit, the “more”, or as they say in AA, “a higher power whom I choose to call God”?



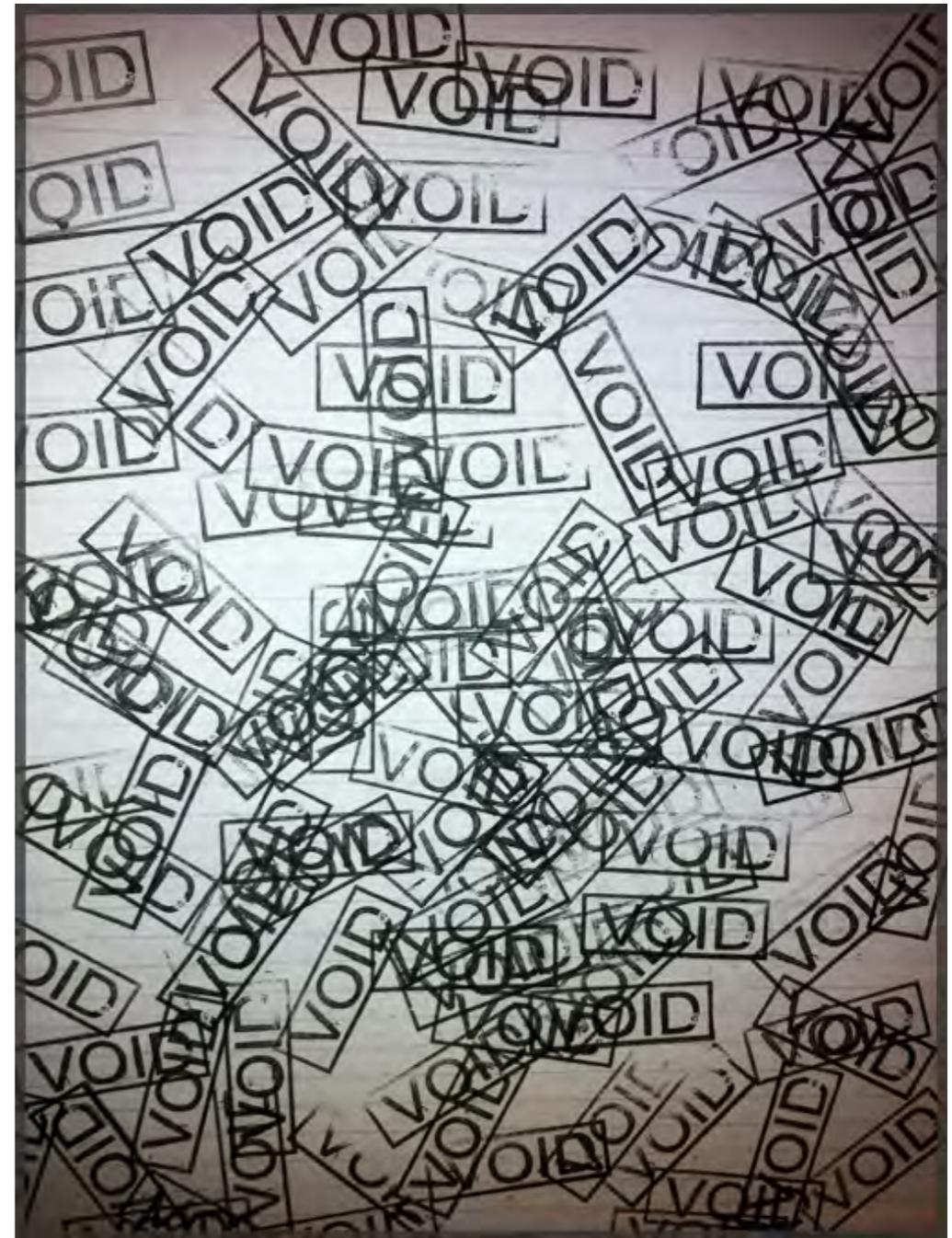
WHEN my husband died in 2003 I experienced, in addition to debilitating sorrow, what is glibly called an existential crisis. Simply put, I lost all sense of any meaning or purpose, in me or in the world.

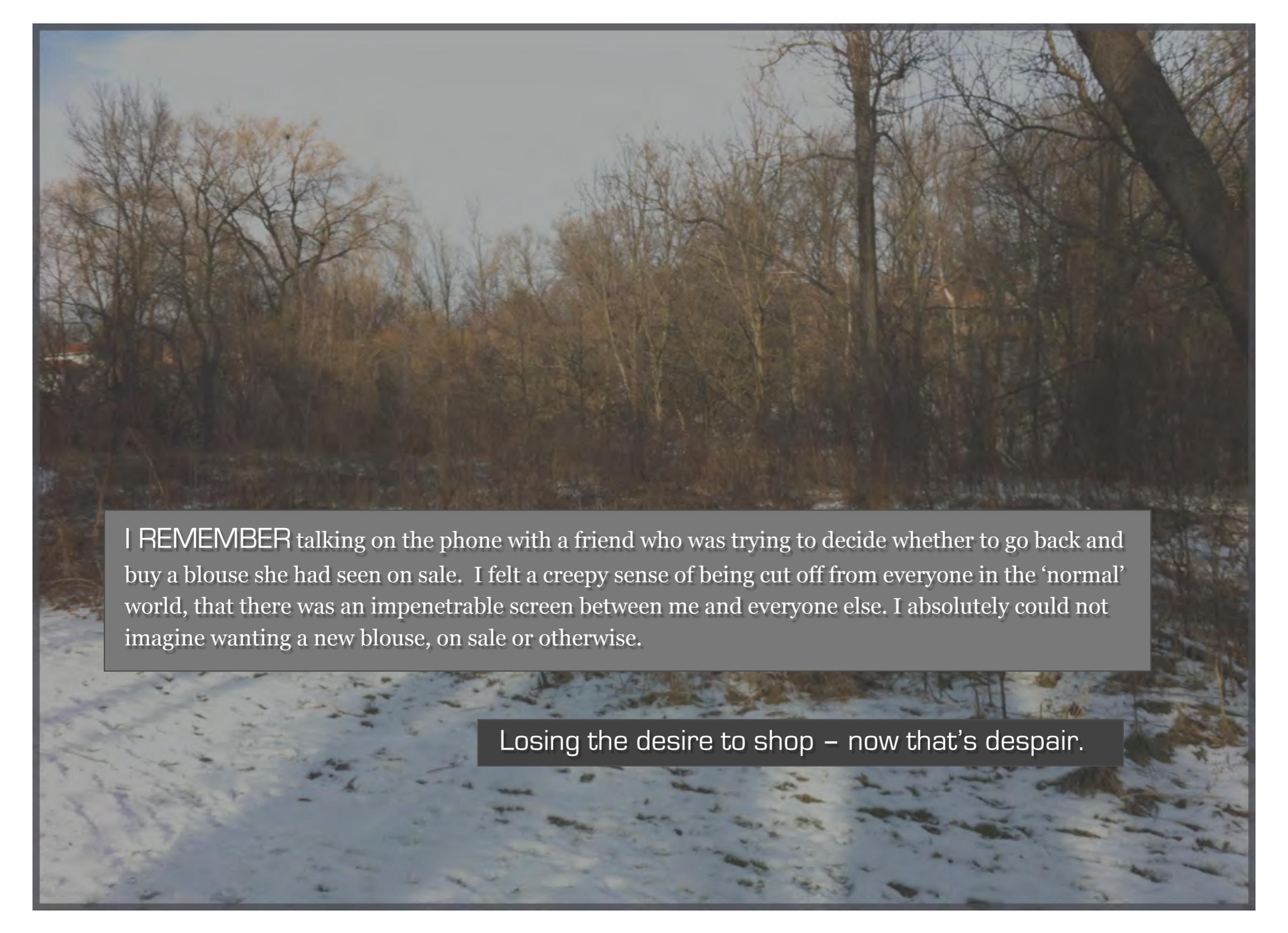
For a very long time, I woke up every morning with a feeling of dread through my whole body so intense that I didn't think I had the strength to get out of bed.



YEARS ago when I was making the transition from being a writer to a visual artist, I played a lot with rubber stamps, and my favourite was a cheap little office stamp with the word “void”. I made several pieces using the stamp, often with the phrase “a(void) art”. I remember loving the idea of the void, of a velvety darkness, a womb.

BUT when I actually fell off the edge of the world after Terry's death, I experienced a raw terror that can still chill me when I think of it. I was in freefall through blackness; at times it felt as if my nose was being violently pushed into pure arbitrariness. Admit it! the force pushing the back of my head seemed to snarl, nothing matters, nothing means anything, nothing is worth doing, or thinking, or caring about. The universe is chaotic, random, arbitrary and cruel. I saw the truth, and the truth was unbearable.



A photograph of a snowy landscape with bare trees in the background. The foreground is covered in a layer of snow, and the background is filled with tall, leafless trees under a pale sky. The overall mood is quiet and somewhat desolate.

I REMEMBER talking on the phone with a friend who was trying to decide whether to go back and buy a blouse she had seen on sale. I felt a creepy sense of being cut off from everyone in the ‘normal’ world, that there was an impenetrable screen between me and everyone else. I absolutely could not imagine wanting a new blouse, on sale or otherwise.

Losing the desire to shop – now that’s despair.

TEN days after Terry died, I flew to New Brunswick to stay with a friend at her cottage near Parlee Beach on the Northumberland Strait. For most of the week the weather was cool and damp, the skies were grey, and that suited me just fine. I was in no mood for sunshine.

TERRY loved the classical guitar repertoire, and in his last days I often played him Vivaldi's Guitar Concertos, even as he fell into unconsciousness. In New Brunswick I walked along the beach for hours each day, listening to Vivaldi, lost in my private world of pain.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grgiE2LxTxk>

ONE drizzly morning I walked out, glanced up, and saw that there was no horizon line. The sea and the sky were one shimmering, opalescent, dove grey, and the colour seemed strangely familiar. I realized that it was the exact shade of the late summer evening sunlight on Terry's ashes as we scattered them in the ravine behind our house. It was as if Terry's spirit filled my field of vision, as if the world was made of pure light.



THEN I saw, only about twenty feet in front of me, a
heron, standing as they do, absolutely still.

I DON'T know how long that bird and I stood there, in
blessed communion. It seemed as if the whole world was
infused with the softest and loveliest spirit, a spirit that
connected me, the heron, Terry, everyone I knew and
loved, both living and dead--and beyond: every being,
every blade of grass, every grain of sand.

I WAS shaken, not with grief, but with joy and gratitude.

The Blue Heron

In a green place lanced through
With amber and gold and blue;
A place of water and weeds
And roses pinker than dawn,
And ranks of lush young reeds,
And grasses straightly withdrawn
From graven ripples of sands,
The still blue heron stands.

Smoke-blue he is, and grey
As embers of yesterday.
Still he is, as death;
Like stone, or shadow of stone,
Without a pulse or breath,
Motionless and alone
There in the lily stems;
But his eyes are alive like gems.

Still as a shadow; still
Grey feather and yellow bill:
Still as an image made
Of mist and smoke half hid
By windless sunshine and shade,
Save when a yellow lid
Slides and is gone like a breath;
Death-still – and still as death!

--Theodore Goodridge Roberts

THE INADEQUACIES of language make it seem as if these two experiences are polar opposites. Perhaps in some other language, or in a Buddhist koan, the darkness and the light could be expressed, as they feel to me, as one and the same thing. As Engels said about social classes, they require and necessitate one other.

I CARRY them both, always.

BROKEN AND BROKEN AGAIN ON THE SEA,
THE MOON SO EASILY MENDS

WHO can see where the moonlight ends, where the black ocean begins?
It is the light and the dark, the being broken and the being mended:

THAT IS THE GOD THING

I love to see the old heath's withered brake
Mingle its crimped leaves with furze and ling,
While the old heron from the lonely lake
Starts slow and flaps its melancholy wing...

John Clare from **Emmonsail's Heath in Winter**





The End