

*The Ghost of Morris Graves*



by  
*Valerie Constantino*

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*On the sixth night of my eleven-day residency at the Morris Graves Foundation, I awoke sometime around 2 AM to the sound of someone or something prowling around outside of the studio. At first, I thought it was a critter out on the deck, nudging the rowboat, which Robert had just that day hauled up out of the water so that the wind's knocking it about in its slip would not keep me awake. But what or who could be out there at this hour?*

*As I lie prone, I listened intently as this entity began to move from the deck and around to the other side, the south side of the studio. I dare not open the door. I had never encountered a bear in the wild and had no wish to do so just then. Up there at The Lake, the former residence of artist Morris Graves, I could hardly imagine a lone human having found his or her way up to the property, either intentionally or accidentally, so out of the way as it is.*

*I willed myself up passed the fear, could see nothing out through the windows but the blackness of night, and locked both doors. Eventually, as the sound of footfall faded, I fell back to sleep. I mentioned this to no one, at least not during the next day or the next.*

*Allow me then, to return to the beginning, to before my arrival, and in so doing, to include some of my notes made on site.*

*The application for a residency at the Morris Graves Foundation is rigorous, as many such applications are and should be. Here, there are some very particular questions one must respond to before one is extended an opportunity to apply for a residency in Graves' former studio.*

*Briefly, my seminal artistic training occurred in the area of textiles, which led to considerations of time-based and ephemeral forms: film, video, audio, performance, installation, collage. It is inaccurate to describe my work in terms of the traditions of painting, drawing and printmaking, yet I found through my research of Graves' life and work, a philosophical affinity. I perceive in his work a response to the essence of substantive form, which lies at the root of my studies of materiality. Though his work may offer recognizable representations, birds, small animals and flowers, for example, his sensibility belies an abiding interest in the relationships between matter, form and atmosphere. Writing thusly, I was happily offered a short stay.*

*The term 'retreat' is not presented lightly here. In deference to Morris Graves, co-founders and hosts Robert and Desiree Yarber have structured this opportunity with stringent guidelines. An artist must agree to leave all forms of digital communication behind. While some of us may find this challenging and perhaps unreasonable, many including myself submit to this restraint with glee – as our experience of the constant feed is often stressful, oppressive, even toxic.*

*Off I did go then, into California's northern climes, navigating my way up the winding private dirt road, passed farmland and forest until there at the very end of the gravel drive, stood Robert and Desiree, cheerfully waving and welcoming me through.*

*They showed me around, first into Graves' prior home, left I presume, much as it was at the time of his passing in 2001. Like many other artists, he was a collector and an assembler, as every available surface is arranged into its own work of art through the precise placement of the valued and the random precious: an eagle feather, a crystal, a weathered magnifying glass.*

*And here too, many of his own works are displayed. As we know, it is exceptional to view original works firsthand. More remarkable still, to see them in a private setting rather than in a gallery or museum, where they are subjected to the vision of an independent curator. If Graves hung this work here, the reason is personal rather than academic. These rooms imparted the sensibilities, convictions and insights of Morris Graves, gathered and carefully considered during the course of his long and dedicated life.*

*The house was there for me to visit, for the use of the one emergency telephone, and also for the use of Graves' vast library and archive. Having traveled with several books of my own, I did not think I'd devote much time to investigate, but in fact I became quite curious as to what I might discover within those oft-referenced stacks.*

*The next stop on my tour was the studio, my designated place of work and residence. Like the main house, it was situated in such a way as to seem to float upon the water's edge. There was a deck between the two buildings, with its roofed slip for the rowboat. From the deck, one can see all the way around the lake and can see then too, the bonsai-like islands that grew out from below the surface of the lake. Like Japanese Ikebana flower arrangements, each kufi-shaped tangle of flora imparted that delicate balance between thoughtful arrangement and care that nature alone has set forth.*

*Upon entering the studio, we passed the bedroom with its one lake-facing window. I loved this feature, as it meant that each day upon rising I would encounter the light and life upon the lake's surface. The workspace included a wall of cabinets, a skylight and an entire wall of north-facing windows. And beyond the efficiency kitchen was another private lakeside deck. Simply heaven.*

*Invited residents are instructed to bring supplies of their choosing, which of course I had. The studio cabinets contained art materials left behind by former residents to be used if needed by subsequent visitors like myself. Perhaps, I wondered, had some of these remaining materials been used by Graves himself? This matter would figure into the metaphysics of my experience, which is the subject of this writing.*

*Friday, April 26<sup>th</sup>*

*That afternoon and evening, as I unpacked and arranged things to my liking, I stopped periodically to gaze upon my new surroundings. And then I saw him, a bald eagle, orbiting around the lake. This was his domain, which he'd consider sharing with me. That evening when Robert came back with the supper, I'd asked if he'd seen*



*him. He confirmed that he was a bald eagle, and noted that his presence on the first night of my residency was auspicious.*

*When I told Robert that I felt privileged to be here, he magnanimously stated that I'd 'earned it.' It was as if my art-life had led right up to that moment. Like the eagle I am free, strong and solitary.*

*I slept for ten hours on that first night. And I dreamed of an aloe-like cactus growing out of the back of my left foot and calf. The doctor of my dream could impart no information about this first-of-its-kind 'disease.' I feared an alien life form at first, but as the dream continued, I relaxed with my new attribute, as it gradually felt like just another part of myself. In my journal of that first morning I pondered: 'What is in the water?' Yet, as I sat throughout the day with this dream image, and considered my shifting attitude towards my odd growth, I embraced it as a metaphor for the unconditional acceptance of that which is intrinsic to one's being.*



*grass in water*

*Saturday, April 27<sup>th</sup>*

*'Mommy's birthday,' I wrote on that day, because it was.*

*Worked the whole day through, feeling rooted. Reminding myself of all of the usual distractions of home, unmissed: the computer, phone calls, emails. I was just there - quiet, alone, working, comfortable in my skin.*

*And on this day I began my cycle of three daily works in response to the energetics of space, color and the substance of things. Sitting quietly, waiting for something to stir. I will make a simple line drawing in response to perceptions of movement; not a representation of a thing that moves necessarily, but say, like my first less oblique observation, grass growing from the lake. The second work of the day will be a watercolor; just an impressionistic rendering of the colors associated with this original sighting. The third: a collage of various papers, textile scraps and other materials I'd brought along. No images. Just adding textural elements to what took place within the first two pieces. These will be small works, a 4.5-inch square centered on an 8.5-inch square of very lovely handmade paper. Small, yes, but actually quite challenging.*

*Sunday, April 28<sup>th</sup>*

*An unusually warm and sunny day. Went for a walk around the lake, quite fearlessly I might add.*

*During that initial tour, Desiree had handed me a map and a whistle, and instructed me to toot that whistle during my meanderings around the property. Why, might you ask? Well, to warn the bears and mountain lions of MY approach. They would then, she assured me, depart, preferring not to encounter a human. Although I can well understand such a disdainful response to humans by any other species with whom we share the planet, I found her assurances quite startling. In Arizona, where I'd lived before coming to California, we were advised never to walk alone for fear of mountain lions. Now, I was encouraged not only to venture forth with a mere whistle for company, but also to recognize this truth. And that this is the truth I am quite certain: the animals, even those with the big teeth and the sharp claws are far more frightened of if not simply disinterested in me.*



*eagle over lake*

*Later on that day, my re-acclimation still in progress, after a few simple breathing and stretching exercises, I worked through my three-work cycle and made a post card. I wondered if perhaps I'd rushed.*

*I thought of two old boyfriends – or should I say, 'former' boyfriends. I suppose such recalls are an outcome of being alone. Although I am most often alone, here in this absolute quietude, where there is nothing whatsoever to push the past back into its hidey-hole, allowing thoughts, feelings and memories to freely screen before my waking consciousness. But these were not unpleasant recollections. I feel fortunate to have known these men, flawed as they were, and perhaps are still. As if I am not?*

*And I began to notice too, that what I may have considered an affinity for Graves' work was evolving into a palpable relationship. There, handling these items in the cabinet, just for the experience of doing so, I felt as though I could talk with him. And there too, if I may be so bold, was John Cage whom Graves' knew. If Graves' was contemplative, Cage was audacious. If Graves' was intentional, Cage was fearless. Lenore Tawney, for*

whom I worked for several years and whom I consider a foremost mentor, instructed me to interact with materials in a straightforward manner, without artifice. And from the work and writing of John Cage I learn to fuss less, to actually do less. Notably, he stated: "I have nothing to say and I am saying it." (**Silence: The Lectures and Writings of John Cage**)

On this day I'd made a list of things I would like to do including: 'visit the waterfall,' - check; 'visit the grandparent redwood trees,' - check; 'row out into the lake,' - not. For this latter activity, I never came to feel that I had the strength, or on the one day when I might have had, it rained.

I have noticed that it is a bit difficult for me to remain truly still, to not be occupied in some way, however banal. I brought so many things to do with me, reading, writing, sewing, and I seem to have a tendency to bounce around from one thing to the next. Yet, the days are long and slow; they unfurl before me like a length of silk. And each little work is becoming less precious, less structured than the last. How does one feed the work? I don't know, really.

Monday, April 29<sup>th</sup>

Slept that night with some difficulty, a shift from the last several nights of that narcotic-like country air sleep I'd been experiencing. I began to lock the doors at night to the sounds of wind and other unidentifiable interferences from the vast outer world. Stiff shoulders, back and neck, remind me to do some exercises.

The day began with a great show of falling mist from above, onto and across the surface of the lake; literally spilling as if from an overflowing carafe. The day was grey and green, very pale, almost imperceptibly white, translucent. Again, the influence of Graves, Cage and Tawney, particularly in relation to my approach with collage. I'm just fussing too much. Looking for that haptic response. I must get inside that mist and intermingle with its invisible particles.



*falling, gliding mist*

*Tuesday, April 30<sup>th</sup>*

*Another unsettled night. Very windy, noisy outside. Body aches.*

*Today I feel I want to get closer to the eagle. Can I ask for that? Walked around the lake, making little sketches and notes. It is a clear day. Sitting out on the deck, so many sensations and inspirations. Birdsong is everywhere. Damselflies and dragonflies. I feel so much for these creatures, the realm they inhabit, alongside of ours. Who needs proof of alternate universes? We can witness this at any time, any time. Thinking today about Angelika in Arlington and Bill on Molokai. And then all at once I notice how much better I feel.*

*Although I love the idea for today's series, the collage has been giving me some trouble. Must be just tired, distracted or both? But by what would I be distracted? So many people from my past are taking up space in my*



*mind, especially those with whom I've lost contact for various reasons including the problematic ones. The wind today is also quite intense.*

*On a piece of paper I write a list, like this, to be read from the bottom up:*

*Levels of consciousness*

*oneness*

*lightness*

*creativity*

*sobriety*

*sadness*

*depression*

*anger*

*fear*



*damselfly, dragonfly, mosquito*

*Wednesday, May 1<sup>st</sup>*

*The whole day has gone by and now it is evening. Tired. Woke really early to a pair Canada Geese having an important conversation, perhaps a domestic squabble. Today's work, simple and strange. One idea to the next and the next, a steady stream.*

*Really enjoying reading while I'm here, something I don't manage to do quite enough while home. JB had given me Sue Halpern's **Four Wings and a Prayer**, about the migration of Monarch Butterflies. Heartbreaking really, as their numbers across the globe are, what else? - declining.*

*Writing is a bit difficult for me here for some reason. Not so much the ideas, but organizing my thoughts.*





*floating island*

*Thursday, May 2<sup>nd</sup>*

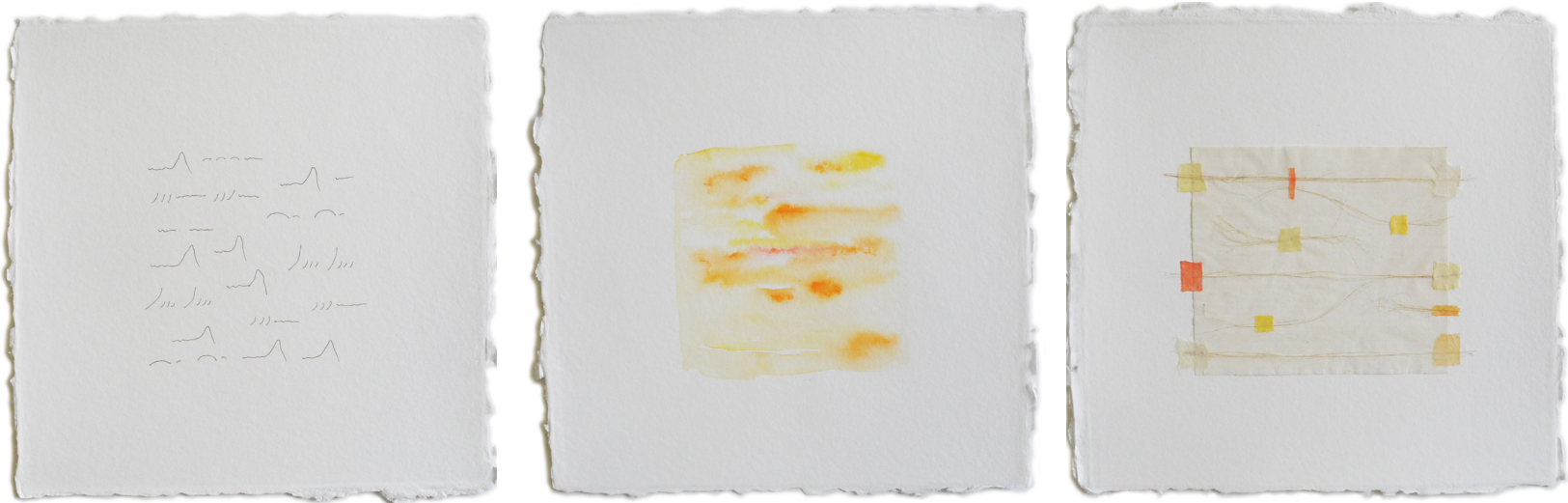
*Last night was the night of my opening paragraph, when I was roused from my sleep by what sounded to me exactly like footsteps outside on the deck.*

*As noted, I did eventually go back to sleep, maybe for about an hour. And I dreamed that I was having a show at a library or some other kind of community space in Munich. The work was mostly blue and purple with unfamiliar, arcane symbols. And there were two large portraits of a man who although I could not upon waking recall who he might be, he must have been known to me because I'd identified him in my dream as my alter ego.*

*I will not go for a walk today because my foot hurts. I'll stay in do my stretches and work on my foot with herbal salve.*

*I continue to reflect upon and engage in conversations with those who have come before me, artists whom I've know personally, Lenore most especially, and others I like to imagine I know: John Cage, Merit Oppenheim, Leonora Carrington, Hannelore Baron, and now too, Morris Graves.*

*Graves made many paintings of birds, among other things, including one that he may as well have made with me in mind. It is called 'Bird Maddened by the Sound of Machinery in the Air.' Anyone who knows me well enough will attest to my intolerance of leaf blowers, or any other of our cultures' cacophonous intrusions into the pleasures of quietude. What ever happened to the rake, that paragon of efficiency?*



*birdsong*

*From a book on Murphy's Law, borrowed from Graves' library:*

- Hindsight is an exact science.*
- Just because your doctor has a name for your condition doesn't mean he knows what it is.*
- An optimist believes we live in the best of all possible worlds. A pessimist fears this is true.*
- First law of lab work: Hot glass looks exactly the same as cold glass.*
- Law of Innovation Prevention: Unless the results are known in advance, funding agencies will reject the proposal.*

*Friday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>*

*Slept much better last night. Think I need to change it up a bit this week. Make a spiral after the fiddleheads, make a black painting, re-make the eagle collage, then see. Work on some other things too. Break the order of how I work now and then really look at what's there, what's good, what I'd like to jettison. Maybe I'll have less to show for my time here? Does it matter?*

*Notes from another borrowed book, this one on legendary places: Atlantis / Santorini; Avalon; Mt. Fuji; The Ganges; Serpent Mound; Petra; Hagia Sophia; Assisi; Mt. St. Michel.*

*I find am very interested in the fantastic here, in fairies and specters, the old world, magic. It's the woods, the remote place where spirits reside.*

*New group: fiddlehead fern and slug; I like this. Remaking the bonsai collage too.*



*fiddlehead fern and slug*

*Saturday, May 4<sup>th</sup>*

*Slept better, in spite of my tingling foot. Still waking often with difficulty getting back to sleep. Glad to make contact with Desiree. I like these two people very much. Weather spectacular.*

*It has seemed that the post cards are easier for me. Less precious I guess, so my approach is freer. Good to know.*

*A momentous day. Damselflies mating mid-air. Stand of grandparent redwoods. Wind kicked up just when I was hoping to watch the fast moving ripples across the lake.*

*A few notes from Mel Bochner's essay: "Barnett Newman: Writing Painting / Painting Writing"  
(Reconsidering Barnett Newman, ed., Melissa Ho)*

- The subject matter of creation is chaos.*
- The basic truth of life... is its sense of tragedy.*
- Formal elements of art as tools, not repositories of meaning.*
- Art as philosophy; the artist as a philosopher.*

*Tomorrow will be the last full day. Don't think I will have completed everything as expected, but now this is all right.*

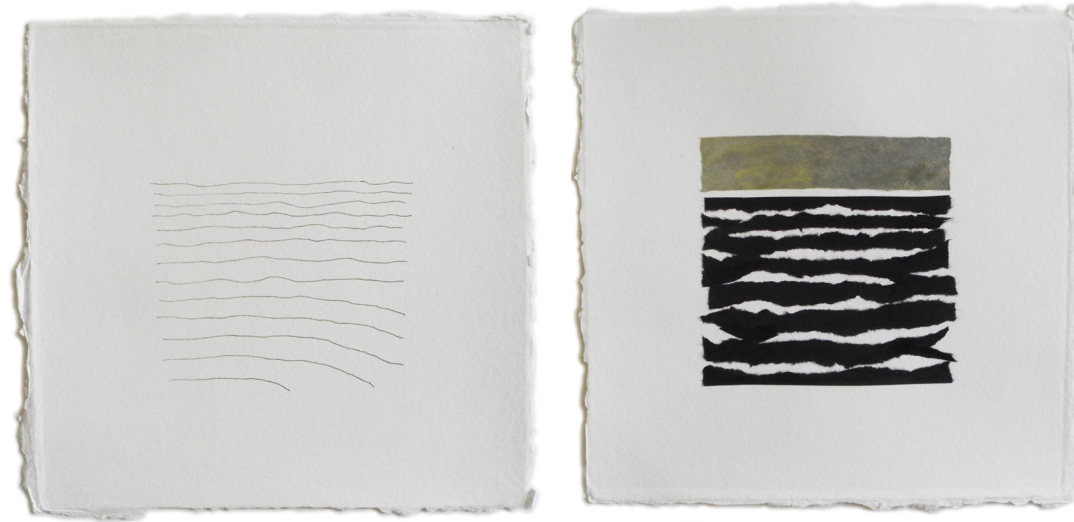
*Sunday, May 5<sup>th</sup>*

*Not a very good night. Some serious concerns re: tingling in both feet now, arms and even my face during the night. Heart pounding in chest, keeping me awake. Stiff neck and shoulder. Trying to work it out today, but fearful. Not sure if this constitutes an emergency? Should I be asking for help? It would have been complicated to do so at that hour. I would have to go across to the house and call Desiree and Robert. I would have to ask that they take me to the nearest hospital. I would have to wait there and likely undergo a series of tests, for which there would be no immediate results. As I was scheduled to leave in two days, I wondered if this process would be useful. Of course, if one is actually having a heart attack, this is a moot point.*

*I did then what I usually do, which was to wait it out. And all the while to wonder, am I perhaps just your household hypochondriac, where every newly experienced symptom is an immediate sign of an approaching fatality? Or, by doing nothing, do I play with fire?*

*I slept not at all that night, and then spent that last full day reviewing my work, reading, and making a few notes. Still drawing breath, still ambulatory, if not particularly energetic. I listened to Gurumayi's Guru Gita and*

*lay on the floor with a towel under my neck, which seemed to help. By 5 PM I'd cleared off my workspace. I have 24 works, 8 groups of three. I like most of them. I also have one remaining thoroughly unused piece of paper.*



*fast ripples*

*In the video about her exhibition at MOMA, “The Artist is Present,” Marina Abramovic tells us that the hardest thing to do is nothing. I am most happy with work that seems just to have worked itself out with me as little more than an observer. Oddly, some of those very same works took the longest. I found myself at times, staring at the tiniest details for hours, moving one bit of paper ever so slightly, tearing another bit of paper into a smaller bit, and so on.*



*I am ready to leave now, although I do sense some anxiety about returning. What will it be like to drive, to be back online, to be in the world with others, the latter, still for me the most difficult part of being human?*

*That evening when Desiree arrived with supper, I did tell her about the events of the previous night. I wanted to know what was possible should there be a repeat performance. I've described these particular experiences here, not because I consider my varying array of symptoms and anxieties to be such awfully compelling reading material, but because of what she shared with me next.*

*Desiree told me that May 5<sup>th</sup> was the anniversary of Graves' passing, a detail I had not been aware of. And I relayed to her then, my having heard those footsteps outside, several nights before. She was not surprised by this, and said that often times around this date, extraordinary things take place.*

*After she'd gone, I recalled the one day, in coming up against my limitations with paint, when I'd opened those cabinets with all of its random supplies, the dried up paint tubes and hardened brushes, the rags and the coated bottles and jars. Rummaging around for just the right brush, I eventually found a clean one, a Japanese sumi brush, and held it in my hand for a while to accustom myself to its weight and balance. And I spoke out loud to Morris Graves, who was of course a master of all liquid media, imagining that this brush belonged to him and that by sensing its material nature I might glean some fragment of his knowledge. The messages were always the same and clear. It was always all about courage. As LT has also said, "To be an artist, you must be brave."*

*I was not really that surprised to learn of the coinciding date of Graves' passing, and I felt certain that it was an aspect of himself outside on that evening. And I am also inclined to believe that his presence triggered my pulsating body sensations. We are of course, besides the more corporeal stuff of flesh and blood, conglomerations of highly charged particles and waves. What we see, the recognizable plant and animal forms, ferns, slugs, dragonflies and eagles, may also interpenetrate, transform and infiltrate our spaces and selves beyond the boundaries that separate the one from the other. And this I believe is especially so when one has, as I had, asked for it.*



*And so on the morning of Monday, May 6<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of my father's death, I visited for a while with Robert and Desiree Yarber before driving back down that winding dirt road, through forest and farmland, and back onto the highway, with all of the other humans behind the wheels of their cars and trucks. I pumped gas and bought a coffee in the next town. I rejoined the so-called civilized world, and though somewhat disconnected from my former sense of self, I navigated the long way home without incident.*



*Morris Graves (1910-2001)*

*Spirit Bird Study, 1952*

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