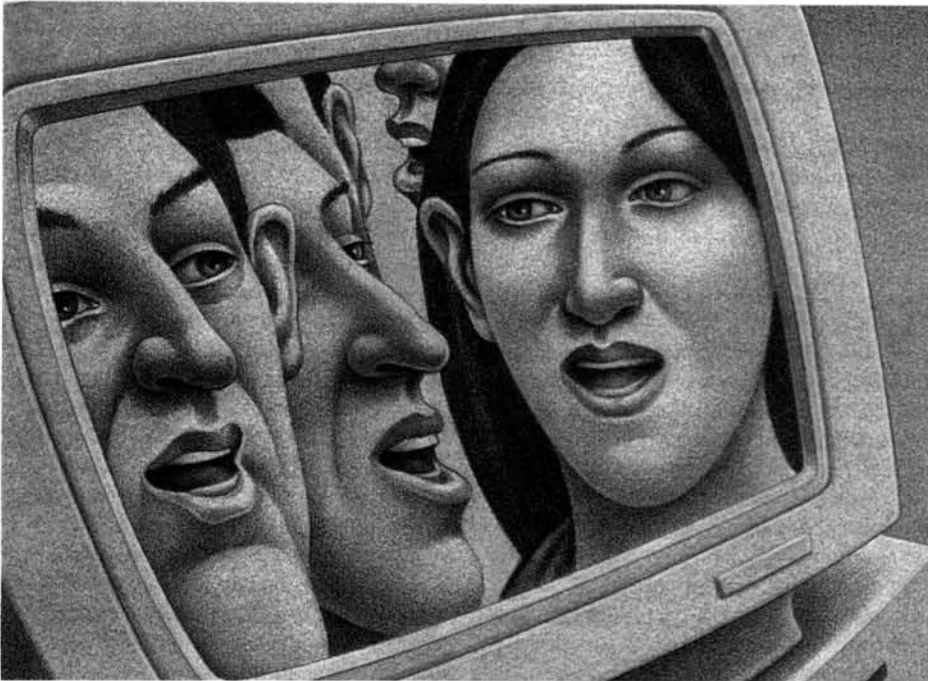


THIS SIDE OF THE TRACTS

CYBERSAINTS: MORMON SETTLEMENTS ON THE ELECTRONIC FRONTIER

By Sheldon Greaves



If Mormon electronic discussion groups are encouraged and allowed to flourish, they could be an incredible contribution to LDS discourse, scholarship, and activism.

DURING OCTOBER general conference 1993, a grassroots coalition of concerned Church members presented one thousand white roses to the general authorities with a request that sanctions against feminists and intellectuals be stopped. During the course of the presentation, some Church officials reportedly asked the coalition representatives who had given them the funds for the roses and the accompanying newspaper ad. They wanted to know how so much money could be raised from so many people so quickly. The coal-

SHELDON GREAVES (prfSheldon@aol.com) is a Ph.D. candidate in ancient Near Eastern studies at the University of California at Berkeley and a cyberspace junkie.

tion representatives explained that the money came from individuals, many of whom had learned of the project through world-wide electronic mail networks. It was a potent example of the increasing unofficial Mormon presence in that ill-defined phenomenon sometimes known as cyberspace.

CYBERSPACE

It's another world with its own evolving rules where interested individuals are electronically linked around the globe in trivial and substantive conversations.

CYBERSPACE—both the word and concept—often appears in computer-related or “cyberpunk” science fiction popularized by William Gibson,

Bruce Sterling, Neal Stephenson, and others. Sensational news stories of illegal hackers, computer outlaws, and techno-anarchists describe cyberspace as the “place” where computer break-ins and similar antics occur. Another way to define cyberspace is to think of it as the place where a telephone conversation occurs. There is no literal space involved, naturally, but for people who spend time in electronic communications media, it's another world—one with its own rules.

One of the largest tracts of cyberspace is an international computer network called the Internet. The Internet comprises a worldwide network of thousands of smaller networks used by some 20 million people. These smaller networks include commercial, private, government, nonprofit, academic, and military systems. Because these networks are connected, an Internet user has access to an unbelievable amount of information.

The hardest part about using Internet is coping with its size and complexity. The few available indexes are incomplete or out of date. Thousands of public-access data bases and storage areas provide means for people to exchange software and files. Electronic mail (or “e-mail”) systems let people communicate almost instantaneously anywhere in the world using an e-mail address that always has a “@” in it, like the one in my biographical description on this paper. Electronic discussion groups and conferences have become commonplace.

An electronic discussion group works something like this: You join a group by sending e-mail to the computer that manages the list of subscribers (this computer is called a list server). Once your subscription has been processed, you can send or “post” messages through e-mail with your views on (presumably) the topic under discussion. You send your messages to the list server, which in turn forwards it to all the other subscribers. In this way all of the subscribers can follow the subject under discussion, and respond if they want to. Often several subjects are discussed at once, but you just read the postings that interest you. Some lists have digest features that send a summary of the week's discussion to people who don't want to read every posting.

Many discussion groups also have archives available by transferring (or “downloading”) them to your computer. These files might be logs from previous discussions, papers, rants, or general information files that answer Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). Very often you don't even have to be a subscriber to download these files. Some groups or member networks also maintain File

Restriction and monitoring goes against a fundamental principle sacred to many in the electronic community: The free flow of information.

Transfer Protocol (FTP) sites with archives available to the public. Once you learn how to use FTP sites, these archives can be rich sources of information on every topic imaginable.

What do you find in these discussion groups? Anything. Everything. Read them long enough and you will inevitably find things that surprise, repel, inspire, gratify, disgust, tickle, and enlighten. There is poetry, humor, ranting and raving, news, gossip, scholarly discussion, political fireworks, lengthy treatises, and responses fired from the hip. In short, the postings are as varied as the Internet community itself.

Mormon-related discussion groups are not much different. The level of discourse ranges from incredibly inane to sublime. Like any other discussion, there is a lot of "noise," as well as some real gems that make you glad you signed up. For late-breaking, detailed news related to the Church, however, you can't beat it. Sometimes differences over doctrine or politics will reduce a few list members to long-winded, vindictive name-calling ("flaming" in Internet parlance). This was partly responsible for the recent demise of the MORM-ANT list. Flaming aside, however, you will find discussion of tithing, both concerning how much one pays and the recent national controversy about whether tithes can be impounded by courts to pay a bankrupt tithe-payer's creditors. People also use lists to locate old friends and relatives, exchange recipes, and share experiences both positive and negative. Other topics include Mother in Heaven, history, and women's issues. The ongoing tensions between the institutional Church and some in the intellectual community provide a lot of grist for extended discussions. There are also fairly open discussions of homosexuality and other sexuality issues. Some of the content of these discussions prompted the forced relocation of the MORMON-L list from its original home on the BYU list server. Recently, a long and quite articulate discussion has taken place on doing proxy baptisms for Jewish Holocaust victims. Both Jewish and LDS opinions have been aired. (See sidebar for extended recent excerpts from MORMON-L. A list of most LDS e-mail groups is at the end of this article.)

The LDS online community is still learning the finer points of discussion on the Internet. "Flame wars" are still to be found, but people seem more aware of them and the

more responsible users try to avoid flaming. It is very easy to be uncharitable toward someone you can't see. Moreover, your own "anonymity" and distance from an antagonist presents further temptation to fill postings with verbal bile. As the level of discussion continues to evolve, many hope that our LDS teachings will more strongly inform the style of what we say and how we say it. Persuasion, kindness, gentleness, and charity inevitably make for the best posts, even if you completely disagree with what is said.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

As more and more people obtain access to Internet and cyberspace in general, Mormon-related forums will multiply.

MORMON-related discussion lists provide a lively forum for discussing Mormonism in depth. For all their activity, however, these groups continue to develop, grow, and change. As the White Rose project demonstrated, these forums offer an effective communications network for grassroots activism. As more and more people obtain access to Internet and cyberspace in general, Mormon-related forums and groups will continue to multiply.

This growth will probably manifest itself in various ways, some of which are visible in other parts of the Internet. For example, some religious organizations maintain unofficial and official sites where users can access Sunday School lesson materials. The Internet provides a remarkably easy place to publish your views, either in a quick diatribe that is easily forgotten, or in a more permanent file stored in a discussion group archive or FTP site. Freedom of the press used to belong to those who owned one, and for the price of a laser printer, any computer user could "publish." Now the cost has plunged to the price of a modem and a telephone line, and distribution barriers are virtually gone. The potential for sharing and publishing information is astonishing. Updates can be sent out at a moment's notice. The delays associated with traditional publishing vanish. More disturbing to some, perhaps, is that correlation, editorial boards, or other forms of content control are impossible to enforce. People will publish and say what they want, which can be positive or negative depending on your point of view. These scenarios reflect only the smallest fraction of the Internet's potential for the LDS

online community.

Recent network traffic includes rumors and allegations that the Church is paying more attention to LDS-related electronic discussion groups. Reportedly, groups are monitored in much the same way as publications like *Dialogue* and *SUNSTONE*, and postings are treated as "publications" by Church officials who monitor "alternate" authors. If these reports are true, expressing your honest opinion on MORMON-L might buy you your very own file with the Strengthening the Church Members Committee. Another concern is that Church officials could easily obtain the subscriber lists for electronic discussion groups, since many groups on the Internet maintain lists. The primary concern, of course, is what one might do with such a list. If subscribers faced censure simply for subscribing to an unauthorized symposium, albeit an electronic one, this would cause considerable concern. On the other hand, network traffic can also help Church officials keep a finger on the pulse of a growing segment of Mormonism. People who have grown used to the free-wheeling, no-holds-barred, largely unrestricted discussions that dominate the Internet find these rumors unsettling. Restriction and monitoring goes against a fundamental principle sacred to many in the electronic community: The free flow of information.

An additional cause for concern is the possibility of what might be called cybernetic sabotage directed at any one list or a segment of the LDS online community. It is fairly easy to forge e-mail messages in such a way that they are almost untraceable to their true source. Using this kind of falsified information, a person or group of persons could place messages on the network claiming to come from a particular person, but which in fact do not. The possibilities for disinformation, "dirty tricks," and character assassination are very real. So far LDS-related discussion groups and forums seem to have been spared this kind of abuse, but unfortunately it may be only a matter of time. Part of the problem lies in the fact that the Internet was built without built-in security safeguards; in its infancy the Internet was used by a handful of researchers who shared a sense of trust and responsibility. Today that is not the case. Verification and encryption technologies exist to make this less of a problem; until they become widely available,

however, the best defense is to maintain a sense of trust within our electronic communities, even with people who completely disagree with you.

Despite these drawbacks, the prospect of more and more conferences discussing Mormonism is an exciting one. If encouraged and allowed to flourish, they could be an incredible boon to LDS discourse, scholarship, and activism. They fill an important need among people who use the networks to find other Mormons who share their interests and concerns. As the number and variety of participants increase, its usefulness as a tool for understanding Mormonism will likewise increase.

HOW TO GET STARTED

The simplest way to get limited access is to sign up with a major online service. Here is a list of current Mormon groups.

FIRST you need a computer, a modem, and telecommunications software. Then you need to sign up with a major online service that offers e-mail access to the Internet. America Online, Compuserve, Genie, and Prodigy all offer at least e-mail access to the Internet. If different subscription options are available, make sure the option you pick includes e-mail access to the Internet. Not all of these services offer other Internet features. For most of the dis-

cussion groups listed below, e-mail will suffice. Once you get used to the e-mail system offered by your service, send e-mail to the group list server that interests you as described below. Some discussion groups are private, and you need to personally contact whoever runs the list if you want to join. Others are by invitation only.

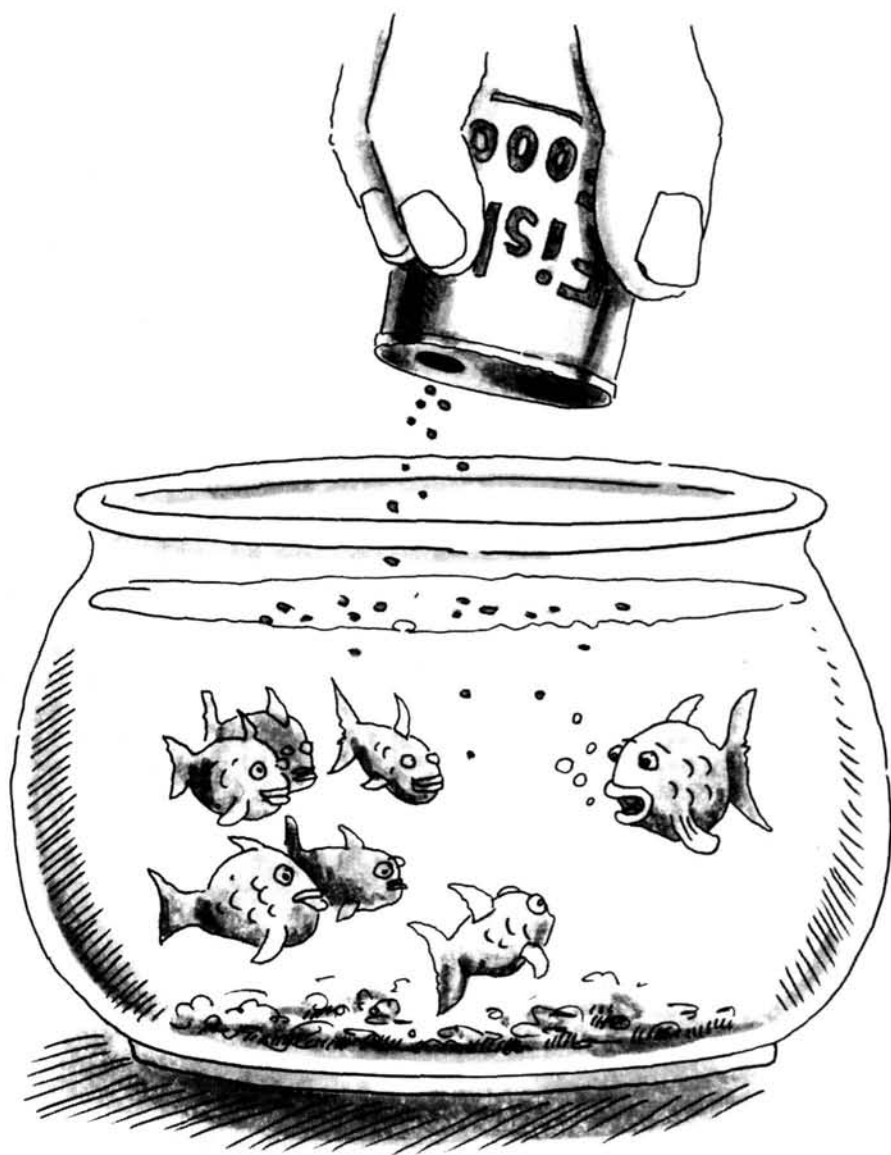
A word of warning, however: the Internet is not for the timid and can be tough on the uninitiated. You might encounter less frustration if you do some background research first. Some useful guides to the Internet are listed at the end of this article, and more appear all the time. You will doubtless have some stumbles getting used to it, but be persistent. The Internet may be techno-nerd heaven, but it also rewards tenacious curiosity. Below is a description of some of the major electronic discussion groups on LDS subjects.

- LDS-Net, the original Mormon Internet group, is a fairly active list averaging about twenty messages a day. This list is run by hand and does not use a list server. The turn-around time for people posting messages or joining the list is about one day. If you want to join, send e-mail expressing your interest to lds-net-request@andrew.cmu.edu. Once you join the list you can post submissions to lds-net@andrew.cmu.edu.

- MORMON-L, the best known active discussion group, averages about fifty messages a day. Until recently it was run by two BYU history professors, Michael Allen and David Wright (not the Brandeis professor David Wright who was recently excommunicated). To join, send a message with no subject heading to the list server, majordomo@teleport.com. The body of the message must consist of the single line:

subscribe mormon-l. MORMON-L also has an extensive archive of previous discussions and other materials available through the list server.

- SAMU-L (Studies in Antiquities and Mormonism [Uncontentious]), a spiritual descendant of the now defunct, F.A.R.M.S.-flavored MORM-ANT. SAMU-L is a new list that describes itself as "a moderated forum for discussion of Mormonism and the past. Its focus is on the Book of Mormon in all its many facets. SAMU-L was created to assist individuals in expanding their understanding of the internal record of the Book of Mormon and the circumstances of its nineteenth-century manifestation, and of external studies, such as archaeology, that shed light on the phenomena. Multi-disciplinary approaches are particularly encouraged." While this list as a whole assumes historicity of the Book of



"God's food comes equally to the just and the unjust."

Excerpts from recent MORMON-L conversations:

Date: Mon, 21 Feb 1994 08:28:25 -0500 (EST)
 From: Gordon Banks <geb@dsl.pitt.edu>
 To: mormon-l@byu.edu
 Cc: Multiple recipients of list <mormon-l@byu.edu>
 Subject Re: moral vs. legal rights
 Message-ID:<Pine.3.89.9402210801.A10991-0100000@cadre.dsl.pitt.edu>

The statement about gay marriage may have been provoked by a Feb 8 vote in the European Parliament recommending that all countries in the community allow gays to marry and adopt children. Nothing about the LDS statement made the Pittsburgh papers, but today there was an article about the pope condemning this ruling.

 From: Clark Goble (dgoble@fox.nstn.ns.ca (Clark Goble))
 Subject: Just another gay

The First Presidency's Letter will do much more to harm families and pull them apart than it ever will to preserve them. Gay and lesbian marriage is not a threat to the family. It is a celebration of it. Homosexuals do not want to destroy the family. They want to take their rightful place as part of it.

 From: Dwight Cook (no address given)
 Subject: Just another gay

But such things must be done on the Lord's terms. What you said in your letter was that you tried to have a family and were physically unable to do so. I wish you and all other homosexuals to take your rightful place as a part of a family also. I simply admit that I don't know how to enable someone to do that.

 From: Christopher Ogden <OGDEN@caedm.et.byu.edu>
 Subject: sex after death

I agree that we must be able to copulate after we die. If this weren't so, then Heavenly Father couldn't have as many spirit children as he does. He couldn't have had all of us as children during his experience in a mortal probation. I am not sure, however, that we can not feel sex, because after resurrection we will have bodies that are more perceptive and have heightened senses.

Considering that Jesus's resurrection apparently showed that gender is indeed among the qualities possessed by resurrected bodies, it seems unreasonable to me to suggest that there should be gender without sex.

 From: Spencer Tasker <stasker@laurel.ocs.mq.edu.au>
 Subject: sex after death
 Isn't this called necrophilia?

 From: Gordon Banks <geb@dsl.pitt>
 Subject: Re: Profanity in the Theatre
 > AP News SALT LAKE CITY (AP) -- A Mormon Church official has protested profanity in a production at the University of Utah's Pioneer Memorial Theatre and has threatened to withdraw an annual church grant.

What was it, a play about J. Golden Kimball?

The eclectic nature of e-mail is obvious as these cyberspace junkies banter about issues ranging from gays and the Church to sex after death to profanity at the Pioneer Memorial Theatre.

Mormon, other viewpoints are apparently accepted as long as no hostility is included. For more information, send e-mail to PACAL@bingymb.cc.binghamton.edu.

- SAINTS-BEST is a recently formed list, but not a discussion group per se. It is better described as "an LDS-related electronic magazine." The editors are David Anderson, Lynn Matthews Anderson, and a few volunteers who comb the postings of other online discussion groups and post what they consider to be the best from each. The volume is quite low—from one to ten messages a day at the most—so it is an excellent alternative for people with limited time who want to stay informed. You cannot post messages to this service, and a digest option is not available. To subscribe, send an e-mail consisting of SUBSCRIBE SAINTS-BEST YOUR NAME, substituting your first and last name for YOUR NAME, to listserv@mainstream.com.

- UNCOMMON-SAINTS deals with doctrinal subjects such as Adam-God, blood atonement, calling and election, etc. Subscriptions are handled through a list server. Send a message to listserv@mainstream.com containing the line: subscribe uncommon-saints Eliza Snow. Substitute your real name (not your e-mail address) for Eliza's. Archival materials are available from the list server.

- ZION, another recent addition to the various LDS discussion groups, is a list for "believing Latter-day Saints and friends." The discourse of this list is of a more conservative bent. You can subscribe to ZION by sending e-mail to: listserv@bolis.sf-bay.org. Leave the subject line blank, and put SUBSCRIBE ZION as the body of the letter. Do not include your name in the subscription line.

- The Cumorah eJournal is a fairly new addition to the online offerings. It is a peer-reviewed, quarterly electronic journal for discussion of a wide variety of topics related to Mormonism. Authors, reviewers, editors, and other volunteers are being solicited. For more information, send e-mail to trey@thelab.biology.rochester.edu.

- JOSEPH (Just Ordinary Saints Endeavoring to Promote Harmony) is another new list that attempts to take a moderate tone. Topics avoid fringe elements on both the Left and the Right. Gospel-related topics are emphasized. "This is not a forum for political or social issues." For information, send e-mail to joseph-req@edu-ssu-cc.cc.ssu.edu.

- MORONI is an unusual addition to the latest bevy of new lists. According to the posting announcing it, "MORONI is an e-mail list for Mormons and their friends to discuss political, conspiratorial, religious issues, etc."

The tenor of this list appears to be very political, controversial, religious, and patriotic. Tone and subjects on the list are determined by a list committee. To subscribe, send a message consisting of the line subscribe moroni to majordomo@zilker.net.

- If you have access to FidoNet, try the MORMON forum for general discussions about Mormonism. The moderator is Malin Jacobs: (malin.jacobs@f438.n104.z1.fidonet.org) 1:104/438.0 -or- 1:104/424.0. The FidoNet MORMON conference is also carried on LDSNET, which also includes LDS Research and LDS Private.

- LDSNET (different than LDS-Net) is part of ECUNET that carries networks for many different religions. For more information contact Larry Allen of BizLink Corp., 1186 Pleasant Ridge Road, Colfax, NC 27235.

- MormoNet is another small FidoNet network running on a network between Bountiful and Logan, Utah. The best way to subscribe is to get an account directly on Dan Bachman's Bulletin Board System (BBS) Zion's Cache. One advantage of a privately-run BBS is that you don't need access to Internet to use it. You can access it directly through the phone lines, although you will have to pay any applicable long-distance charges. Dial (801) 752-5059 with your modem to access this BBS. Other LDS-related forums on MormoNet network include FireSide Chat and GospelStudies (Private).

COMMERCIAL NETWORKS

Many non-Mormon networks have Mormon-related discussion groups on them.

SEVERAL major non-Mormon online services provide active discussion areas for LDS-related topics. Genie has both public and private groups. Contact hays@Genie.geis.com who leads the LDS Categories in Religion Roundtable. Compuserve also offers a Mormon discussion area. Use the command GO RELIGION, section 13. This discussion area is moderated by Keith Irwin (75415.1756@compuserve.com). This is a very active discussion area, averaging fifty to one hundred messages per day. America Online (keyword RELIGION) and Prodigy also have Mormon-related forums and software archives with files specific to Mormonism and of general religious interest. On Prodigy, jump to Religion, and pick Latter-Day Saints from the list.

America Online is also the home of Orson Scott Card's e-ward; however, Card declined to provide any further information for this article. Interested parties should probably contact him directly at orsoncard@aol.com.

If you are interested in general religion, the Internet maintains some remarkable resources. Electronic versions of scripture available for downloading include the LDS standard works, the Koran, the Bible, and other documents. You can also get your own copy of Lynn Matthews Anderson's *Easy-to-Read Book of Mormon*, which you may then read online or print out if you wish. Another valuable resource is Michael Stranglove's monumental "Mystic's Guide to the Internet." This voluminous file is available from a number of FTP sites. It describes religion-related FTP sites, discussion groups, and many other resources especially for Internet users

interested in religious subjects. While not complete, it is still extremely useful. ☐

BOOKS FOR BEGINNING INTERNET USERS

Kehoe, Brendan P. *Zen and the Art of the Internet: A Beginner's Guide*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1992. \$22.00. One of the most concise guides to the Internet, this text is also available from various ftp sites and commercial online services.

Krol, Ed. *The Whole Internet User's Guide & Catalog*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly & Associates, Inc., 1992. \$24.95. This work is both a guide to using the Internet and a catalogue of services and resources. It's primarily aimed at graduate students who want to use the Internet for doing research.

LaQuey, Tracy, and Jeanne C. Ryer. *The Internet Companion: A Beginner's Guide to Global Networking*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992. \$10.95. One of the least expensive introductory guides.

Online Access is a magazine that deals almost exclusively with online services and products. It's aimed at new or intermediate users. Check your larger bookstores or computer dealers.



THE BODIES OF TREES

Once in a forest,
straight road cutting
to a blue stripe of sky,
I drove until the close trunks
hummed for me to stop,
stare through the dark
slats between trees
where layers of fir
told the light
don't touch,
and the forest floor
kept silent—
hair-root to branch, needle
to sky, communion tapered at
both ends.

I tried to enter
their cones of knowledge—
that yearning from the softness of bones
to turn everything
to marrow
My feet sprouting moss,
I walked the road
toward the vanishing—
trees marching firmly
forever away—
and came almost to touch
the dark light we long for
and fear to know.

—DIXIE PARTRIDGE