

WILLIAM STANISICH

Land's End #9, 2004
Watercolor on paper, 20 x 38 in



COURTESY ANDRA NORRIS GALLERY

NANCY LORD

The Flat Earth Society, 1985

*“We don’t have time for a meeting
of the Flat Earth Society.”*

—President Barack Obama

Her plate of cheese and crackers in perfect balance, Marjory paused on the doorstep to survey her world. The wide, desolate California desert stretched out below their hillside, the sand and the scrub both nearly golden in the evening light. The sun, that wondrous disk of light, was falling toward the distant mountains.

It had always been thus for her: the obvious truth of the sun rising and setting across the vault of heaven. And the moon, God’s other illuminator, covering the night.

In the light, in the lawn chair, in the khaki pants that rode up his legs and exposed his skinny pale ankles—Charles. With a hand to his white-whiskered face and studiously staring down his nose, he looked, as everyone always said, *distinguished*. He could have passed as a professor, smudged eyeglasses and all.

She set the plate on the folding table between their two chairs. Charles, immersed in the day’s mail, made a puffing noise from the corner of his mouth, either in acknowledgement of her arrival or in response to the letter he was reading—it was hard to know, with him, which. He was easily pleased, with cheese or achievement, fandom or challenge. This, more than his looks, is what had attracted her to him all those years ago, when their eyes met across a bin of records. Some would have (and had) called it a chance meeting, but she believed otherwise. How else to explain that they would both be looking for the exact same recording by Acker Bilk in the same place at the same time? She’d seen right away that smart little twinkle in Charles’s eye. He’d said, later, that when he heard her speak to the clerk in her Australian accent he was both amused and enraptured.

His word. *Enraptured*.

Who can resist being the source of enrapture? Certainly not Marjory (née Waugh) Johnson.

They still had the record—two copies. *Stranger on the Shore*. And weren’t they both strangers on the shore? Still? Twenty-five years after their meeting, Charles sometimes said it was the two of them against the world. It wasn’t as bad as that, of course. The organization had 412 members by her latest count, and the numbers were growing. Now that NASA was engaging in its latest hoax, the so-called space shuttle, more people were paying attention.

“Listen to this,” Charles said, amusedly as ever. He read from a typed letter. *Apollo is a powerful God that*

A certain few were
from Round Earthers,
or as Charles liked to
put it, the believers
in the Greaseball
Earth Theory.

has inspired several demonic Gods. Apollo is another name for Satan or Lucifer. Interesting choice NASA made for its Moon missions.

“That might be something to highlight in our next News. And analyze the names of their other missions. Really, wouldn’t you think those NASA people would want to be less obvious about what they’re up to?”

Marjory knew that after the Apollo flights in the sixties and seventies, America and Russia teamed up for Apollo-Soyuz and that *soyuz* in the Russian language meant “union.” So, devil union, a union with the devil. She harumphed quietly to herself.

Charles reached for his yellow pad and dashed off a note, folding it around the original piece of mail. This was his way; he answered every piece of mail that arrived, whether it was someone sharing a thought, asking a question, joining the society, or being rude. On average, the mail brought about half a dozen letters each day. A certain few were from Round Earthers, or, as Charles liked to put it, the believers in the Greaseball Earth Theory. Greaseballs. They made her mad sometimes, but Charles was more patient. It wasn’t easy, he reminded her—undoing a five-hundred-year-old myth.

Charles set the letter he’d finished on the table, tucked under the edge of the plate, exchanging it for a cracker. He would do this with each of the day’s correspondence, passing them along to her to read, record, seal, and stamp, in her duty as secretary.

He opened the next envelope with his pocketknife and waved a ten-dollar bill at her. “Another membership!”

A flock of chattering songbirds—she didn’t know what kind—swung through the Joshua tree beside the house. She and Charles were proud of that tree, standing alone there with its raised branches like arms open to the sky, to heaven. It was nearly the height of the house now.

Charles was taking a long time to read through the next letter.

“Why they think we should have all the answers, I don’t know,” he said, finally setting the letter down and passing the yellow pad to her. He reached into his shirt pocket for his tobacco and rolling papers. “Dear Gregory,” he dictated, “the difference between our theory and the globalist view is that we don’t pretend to know everything.” He waited for Marjory to get this down before continuing. As was his practice, he emphasized the words she should capitalize. “Our *Minds* are open. We accept that there are *Mysteries*. What exactly causes lunar eclipses is one of those *Mysteries*. Our observations tell us that occasionally the light of the *Moon* is blocked when another celestial body, known generally as the *Shadow Object*, passes between the *Sun* and the *Moon*. The *Shadow Object* is never seen, because it’s close to the *Sun*’s surface and the *Sun*’s rays blot it out. We think, though, by our calculations, that it has a diameter of five to ten miles.”

They were quiet after that, listening to the birds and the chickens scratching, watching one of the cats slink behind the yard’s cacti. Charles smoked and the sun went down. To the east, the lopsided moon hung in the sun’s shadow. Marjory didn’t really understand the geometry of it, only that the sun and moon each wobbled as they changed altitudes and the sun blocked some of the moon’s light.

She was a little nervous about the next day. They would drive all the way to LA to meet her sister, who was flying in from Australia. She hadn’t seen Barbara in a dozen years, not since their father’s funeral. They had never been close, and, since neither one had really liked their father, there was not even that. But now, Barbara was going to some kind of dental conference in Chicago and wanted to stop and see them. It seemed to Marjory a long way to fly, from Sydney to Chicago, to talk about teeth.

Charles was, somewhat to her surprise, enthusiastic about the visit. But then, even though so many of them

disappointed him, he liked people more than she did. He liked to talk. He could discuss things for hours and hours, arguing his points. And having another person, a witness, for the experiment would be a good thing.

* * *

On the car ride home from the airport, Marjory sat in the back, and Barbara sat up front with Charles so that she could see how beautiful southern California was. If their ancestors had not been criminals, they (the ancestors) might have come freely to America and discovered California instead of being shipped in chains to the kangaroo continent, and then who knows who they (the sisters) would be today and what beachfront property they might own. Not that Marjory was complaining about her life at the edge of the desert, but it could have shortened things up if she’d been born in the States instead of having to boat across a very wide ocean.

Charles was telling Barbara about having been an airplane mechanic. “I know a few things about planes!” he said. “Ha, ha, ha!”

Barbara might not get it right away, but she would eventually. Airplanes and the other kind. Flat surfaces.

Marjory heard only snatches from the back seat, but she could tell that Charles wasn’t catching all of what Barbara said about her sons and her job, because of her accent and some of her non-American words. Marjory herself was enjoying hearing some of the old familiars. Rellies, for example. Relatives. And sunnies. Barbara was digging in her giant purse for her sunnies, which, Marjory noted once she’d put them on, were very fashionable, with jewels at the corners.

After some miles, the two in the front seemed to have exhausted their efforts, and Charles was doing that funny humming thing he did. Marjory studied the back of her sister’s head. Barbara was four years older, but she dyed her hair black—a black so blue black no one could mistake it for natural. Her own hair, which she kept swept up in front and pulled back in back, so that it fell across her shoulders, was streaked with gray. Barbara had put on some weight, and the skin of her upper arms flabbed. These developments, along with her disdain for showy sunglasses and dyed hair, gave Marjory some ungenerous pleasure; she still weighed the same as she had in her school days.

Barbara’s flight had been long, overnight. “You must be knackered,” Marjory said, pulling up some of their shared language. “Feel free to take a kip.”

“No worries,” Barbara said, turning in her seat. “I’m just not used to traveling halfway around the world. I’ll get a good night’s sleep and be fine.”

Charles stopped humming. A minute passed as they all looked out the windows at the dry, rubbly landscape and the snake of traffic ahead of them.

Marjory could see the start of a curl from the corner of Charles’s mouth. The professor was about to speak.

“How easily we adopt the language of the masses,” he said. “We don’t even think about it. We say ‘around the world’ as though the world is spherical. As you know, based on your experience, you flew here in a straight line, the most direct route. What airline wants to waste time and fuel to do otherwise? Marjory has assured me that you, along with most of your countrymen, understand that the earth is flat.”

Marjory had, it was true, said something like that. As far as she could remember, growing up, everyone believed that. Although she wasn’t sure that Barbara hadn’t been taught something else since then, hadn’t been persuaded by the photos, supposedly taken from space, of a round blue earth. It was not something they’d talked about, although she’d put Barbara on their complimentary mailing list and so she certainly knew about the Flat Earth Research Society. She hoped she’d taken the time to read their articles, especially the column called One Hundred Proofs Earth Is Not a Globe.

Barbara said, “I guess it’s a figure of speech, then.” Charles kept going. “Did you have a window seat?” “Yes.”

“Did you see the earth spinning underneath you?” “Mostly it was cloudy. Or dark.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have. If the earth was a spinning globe, as the spinning round ball earth theory has it, it would be moving at sixty-eight thousand miles per hour, which would be a blur. And of course, we don’t see or feel anything like that, from planes looking down, or from cars, or when we’re standing still. Right now we’re going”—he looked at the speedometer—“seventy-two miles per hour. The whole idea of a spinning globe is idiotic.”

Marjory added, “Charles loves mathematical proofs.”

“Here’s more evidence, if you need it,” he went on. “From where you were sitting in the plane, you probably couldn’t tell the attitude of the plane, but if you’d put a marble on the floor during cruising speed, you would have seen it stay there—aside from turbulence of course. That’s one sure proof that the earth is flat. If it was round, the pilot would need to be adjusting the attitude constantly downward, or the plane would fly straight off into outer space. I’ve done the calculations. For every minute going five hundred miles per hour, the pilot would have to descend over half a mile.”

Barbara cocked her head. “I’m pretty sure I saw a curved horizon out the window.”

“That’s easily explained. Airplane windows are curved, so they distort what you’re seeing. The horizon, in fact, is always flat. Look there in front of us. Better yet, you can view the horizon from our house. It’s clearly flat.” He chuckled. “Trust your eyes.”

Barbara leaned back against the headrest. She was going to take a kip after all.

But Charles had more to say. “The first time that Marjory came to the States, she came by boat. It was pretty obvious that the ocean was flat, all the way from Australia to San Francisco. No question about it. Neither of you hung upside down in Australia, did you, Marjory?”

No, Australia had been just as upright as anything in America, and she hated it, still, when people referred to her homeland as “down under.” She’d been nowhere down and certainly not under the earth. Years ago, she and Charles had written up an affidavit so she could officially swear that she’d never hung by her feet in Australia. It was a shame she had to do that, when common sense should have prevailed. Couldn’t everybody see that the whole idea of hanging upside down was crazy?

* * *

The next morning, early, the three of them set up the experiment on the flattest part of the desert floor Charles had been able to find within easy driving distance. Charles left the sisters holding a large white bedsheet while he drove off to position his poles and the camera with its telephoto lens. He was using a new altimeter to establish that the

sheet, the two six-foot poles, and the camera were leveled at the same height.

The experiment was a version of others Charles and Marjory had conducted before and that their predecessors had used to prove that the earth was flat. The easiest process was to make measurements across water, which is so clearly flat. Charles and Marjory had done this in the past, on Lake Tahoe and the Salton Sea. Now, using the altimeter, they could do the same over land. Charles would take photos and Marjory would write up the experiment’s results for the next issue of the *News*.

Facts, reason, common sense, and observation—these were their tools as researchers.

“So,” she was telling her sister, “if the earth was round and if, as those who believe it’s round say, the circumference is twenty-five thousand miles, in one mile an object on the surface would fall eight inches, in two miles thirty-two inches, and in three miles it would fall six feet. This has to do with the arcs of a circle, the square of the distance multiplied.”

She could tell that Barbara was not as thrilled as she was with the mathematics—and probably with the whole idea of standing in the desert sun with a white sheet, looking to those who stared from the few passing dust-stirring cars like abandoned chambermaids. Her expression was hard to read, with most of her face behind her stylish sunnies and a big floppy hat, but the slumped shape of her shoulders gave a clue. Also her sighing.

Barbara had been the one who had been good at math in school. Good at most subjects, actually. When Marjory had followed in the same classes with the same teachers, she’d watched as the initial teacher enthusiasm and goodwill waned along with her grades. She had been a disappointment to others, if not to herself. She had never had great expectations, only a desire to see—not star in—Hollywood. Whoever would have thought that, all these years later, she’d be explaining distances and arcs to her big sister, in the California desert no less. Wonders did never cease.

Barbara sighed again. “How long is this going to take?” “Not long.”

“This place is as dry as a dead dingo’s donger.”

A mile off, Charles was standing on a ladder and pounding a post into the ground. The *clunk-cluck-clunk* echoed across the land. It was a beautiful and windless

desert morning, a few fluffy clouds making shadows on the mountains. The air stung with the creosote smell Marjory had always liked. Thorny bushes scattered over the sand curled their brittle branches and tindery gray leaves into themselves.

Barbara sat on one of the milk crates they’d brought along, and then Marjory sat on the other and took out her notepad. She wrote down the day, time, weather, names of participants.

“Okay, then,” Barbara said. “If the earth is flat, then what happens at the edge? Why don’t we fall off? Or does it go on forever?”

Marjory frowned at her. “Don’t you read our newsletter?”

“I guess not. I guess I missed that.”

“There’s an ice wall at the edge, around the rim. I’ll show you the map at home. It’s basically the same map that the UN uses.”

“The United Nations?”

“Yes. The North Pole is at the center, and then the continents surround it, and then Antarctica is around the edge.”

“The United Nations says the earth is flat.”

“Yes.”

Barbara pulled at her lip.

“Water?”

They drank from their canteens. Charles had stopped pounding and had driven to his next location.

Barbara said, “I’m sorry that I used to tease you.”

Marjory said, “You could be mean.”

“Remember when I told you that Daddy’s pig head in the den went through the wall, and the rest of the pig was in the closet on the other side?”

Marjory did certainly remember that. She had been terrorized for years by the idea of the dead animal body behind the wall. She had been afraid to go near the closet, where a row of old coats on hangers shielded the wild boar behind them. She had had nightmares about that pig, with its head stuck through the wall: its huge snout, its leer-ing mouth and dagger teeth, its hard eyes following her whenever she had to go into the den, where Daddy was most likely going to smack her with his metal ruler anyway.

“You would believe anything,” Barbara said. “I said you were adopted, and you cried and believed it. I said Mummy

*The North Pole is
at the center, and
then the continents
surround it, and
then Antarctica is
around the edge.*

and Daddy were going to give you back unless you cleaned my room, and you cried and cleaned my room. I told you to eat those red berries that grew in the backyard, that they were cherries, and you ate them. They might have killed you, for all I knew.”

It was true that Marjory had believed, for a long time, that she was adopted and could be given back. Barbara had even, one time, pointed out her real mother—a homeless, toothless old woman collecting cans in a park.

Barbara adjusted her hat. “My therapist says it was a reasonable reaction to our home situation, me bullying you, because of the way Daddy bullied us all. You were the only person weaker than I was, that I could try to control.”

“You have a therapist? What kind of therapist?”

“Don’t look so bloody shocked. What kind do you think? I’m only now figuring why I’m up a gum tree. We had an abusive father and a mother who was a few tinnies short of a slab.”

It had been a long time since Marjory had heard the tinnies expression, which seemed a little harsh for their mother who was, perhaps, a little odder than most. By the time she died she’d found a reason to underline just about every passage in her Bible. But, Barbara, with a therapist? Of course it would look bad to a therapist if you told him—or was it a her?—that your father stuck you with a fork. Some things were better left unspoken.

They could just see, far in the distance, the moving glint of what Marjory assumed was their van.

Barbara drank more of her water. “So, explain to me, darl, how this is going to work.”

“We’ll hold up the sheet and Charles will take photos.”

“You’re assuming he’ll see it, that it won’t be below the earth’s curve.”

“Yes.”

They were quiet for a minute while Marjory scratched a bite on her arm.

“I’m no scientist,” Barbara said, “but I know there’s something called refraction. Light can bend. Something about differences in temperatures. Mirages. Things far away can look higher or lower than they are.”

Marjory had begun to write her article in her head. The photo would speak for itself, of course. But she would write of their witness: *Mrs. Barbara Gunst of Australia, a dental expert, accompanied her hosts in the experiment and helped hold the sheet that was seen from a distance of three miles. Although previously a skeptic, she was now satisfied with proof that the earth was flat.* She would not mention that Barbara was her sister or was seeing a therapist. Mirages were covered elsewhere in their materials.

They sat quietly for several minutes. And then there it was—Charles’s flare. A little gray smoke, and then the bright light, like a shooting star, falling back. Their signal.

Marjory lifted her side of the sheet. Barbara held the other side. The bottom edge just touched the ground. They stretched it into the perfect king-size shape, seventy-six inches in height, eighty inches side to side.

“We look like a sail,” Barbara said. “Which, by the way, reminds me of that Captain Cook exhibit I went to. When some indigenous people first saw his ship, they thought it was coming out of the ocean, because at first they saw the top of the sail, and then more sail, and then the ship. So they called the first Europeans they’d ever seen ‘the underwater people.’ They thought they had come from under the water.”

Marjory imagined Charles zeroing in with his telephoto lens, now clicking the camera. Checking the altimeter, clicking the camera. Lining up the two posts. Measuring the white sheet with his eye. Accounting for the unevenness of the terrain, for the bushes in the path.

Who you gonna believe? Charles always said. *Your own eyes or the teachings of globalists who want to beat the divinity out of us with a dying myth?*

Barbara said, “So I guess there’s two explanations. Either objects disappear as they go over a horizon, if the earth is round, or objects go down into the ocean, if the earth is flat.”

Charles liked to argue the fine points; Marjory did not. Charles would have an explanation, and it would have something to do with Aristotle not understanding perspective. Her arm was tiring, so she traded arms without shifting the position of the sheet. Now she could see her sister better, and Barbara was frowning at her.

“You’ll see,” Marjory said. “You’ll see the photos soon enough.”

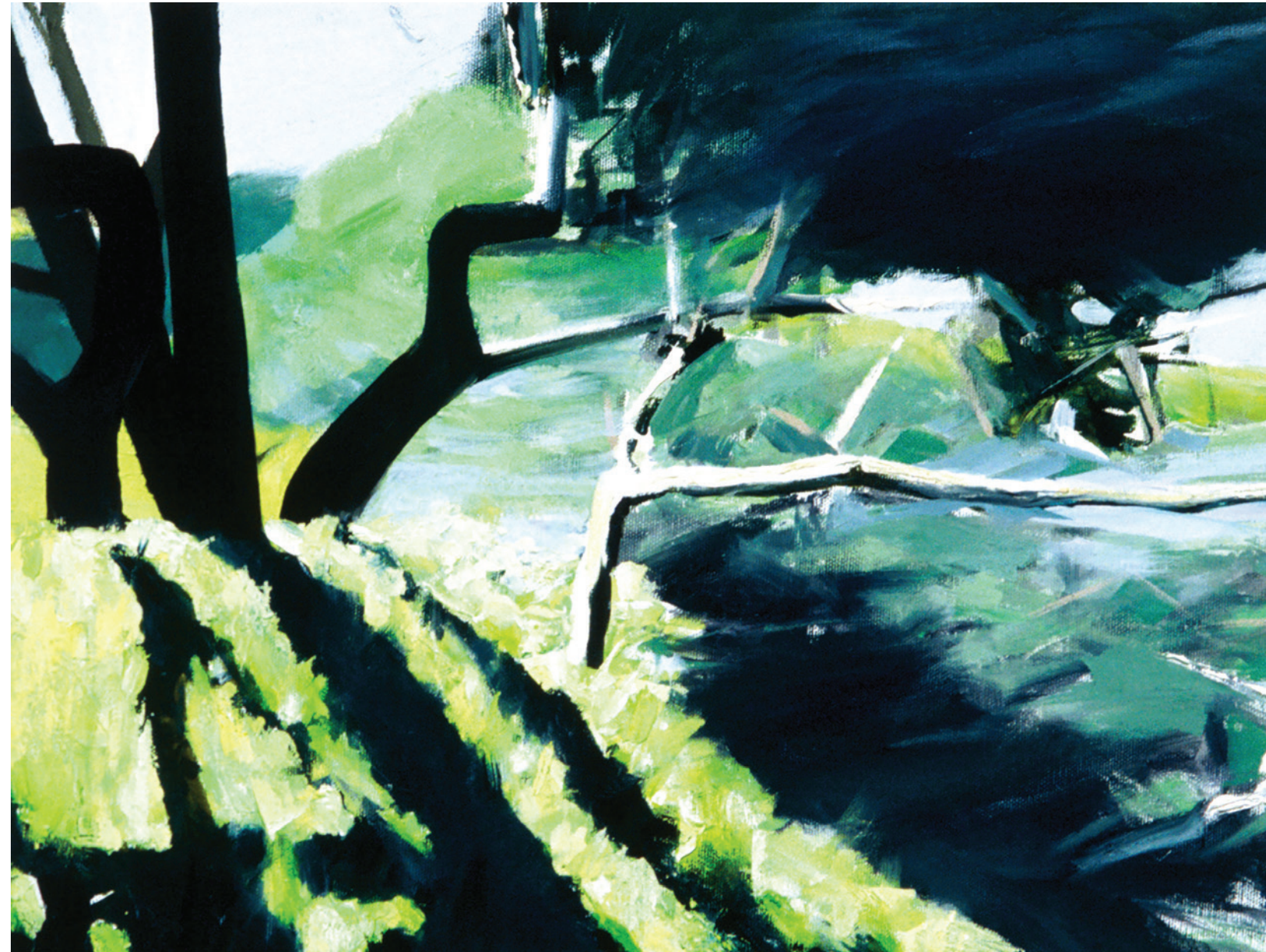
Now, the second flare, the one that meant their work was done, shot into the sky. In the seconds it took to gain its height and then burst into its dazzling fall, Marjory believed that she and her sister had never felt anything but love for one another. She believed that they had been loved by their parents, as she was now loved by Charles, and that some things could be unprovable truths, with or without the help of science or religion or therapists. She opened her hand and let go of the white sheet, just as the last light of the flare reached the earth.

Nancy Lord is a former Alaska State Writer Laureate and author of three short story collections, five books of literary nonfiction, and, most recently, *pH: A Novel*. She teaches creative writing at the University of Alaska and science writing at Johns Hopkins University.

WILLIAM STANISICH

Land’s End #2, 2006

Oil on canvas, 12 x 18 in



COURTESY ANDRA NORRIS GALLERY