Stand Your Ground¹
April Freely

In this white wilderness, men and women and children move all day, carrying washing, wood, buckets of milk or water, sometimes skiing on Sunday afternoons.
– James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” from Notes of a Native Son

The Landscape is Absolutely Forbidden

That man standing in the snow is a potential lake-effect situation, and I am waiting for him to go off.

A man, alone in snow, is an offense against the nature of man. No one belongs in snow without a covering.

Sometimes, such a covering may be a simple, red gable, pushing out against the white world at both ends. Other times, a lone telephone wire overhead with three pigeons on it, sitting side by side. In winter, shorn of the fierce work of the deciduous canopy, everything thin black sticks. It’s worse, when snow reveals only the intimations of houses, when we can’t even find the houses anymore.

The sky has given him up. Though our man is bundled up, his thin skin. Red hat and dark Carhartt jacket. Snow packed into the folds of his heavy denim. Layers of fabric cover the blank eye of his body.

Other times, relationships instead of structures or textiles work to form a hold over us. In this case, here I am, looking through the windshield at a man standing on his two feet. I am that rolling inclemency beside him. In my car, I am also, perhaps, the closest I can come to him, without being with him. Around me, the glow from the streetlight hits the snow, even though it’s still day. Next, I watch him plod along with the stiff, slow steps we use when traveling through a world that is deep, and thick, and full of the possibility of falling.

This is all kinds of wrong.

¹On November 23, 2013, the local legislature passed Ohio House Bill 203, which removes responsibility to retreat from any place it is lawful to be, before one may use deadly force against others—much like so-called “stand your ground” legislation nationwide. The House Bill has been presented to the Ohio Senate for a vote.
Their Only Bulwark Against a Moral Chaos as Absolute as the Physical Chaos of the Continent

Here is a warm, live, vulnerable thing, and he can’t help it that the warmth is always going out of him, to be swallowed up by the mean and the cold. The ultimate aim of the man’s activity in such snow is hidden from view, like my mother’s flowerbed, underneath the snow, her little clay-brick border falling to pieces.

When the sense is taken away, when the road is obliterated by snow and the city reverts whole-cloth back to a landscape condition, what goes off is the mechanism of my belief: trouble comes when I am not so sure of the road beneath me and nothing is marked to remind us how quickly and repeatedly we leave one another. Set loose in the snow, it is as if there is nowhere else. Though I try to use whatever references I can find to mark a path, I don’t get very far.

Beauty can be found, however, in the underlying structure of branches that reinforce the arresting image beneath the precarious behavior of wet snow piling up on bare, radial branches, like some kind of cold, costly fruit.

Take this man, lost outside the covering of a car or a home, somewhere along his journey between an invisible “here” and an invisible “there.” I am aware that my perception of him is flawed. He looks like he belongs nowhere, revealing the unconscious bias that cripples my sight. Here is a man in possession of no service of shelter against these great white squalls. My basic error of logic is a fallacy of composition: so that when standing out in the unfriendly weather condition, I perceive the human being as the transgressive feature of the scene, instead of the snow cover, which obliterates the town. Under this lens, our man is the alien, that lone mark on the land.

Headings from this essay can all be found in “Stranger in the Village.”
April Freely

A spectacle means that even while seated in my car, I press toward our man. The closer I come to him, closer still is the oncoming potential of my mechanical body—the sound growing, the noise—my wheels on ice drawing dangerously close. In the condition of snow, I am faced with the challenge of attending more closely to my surroundings. A challenge I love, of not skidding out, the risk, watching for the pedestrians. I know, despite whatever is broken in my sight, that I become homeless, too, when I can’t understand the existence of any human being on the landscape, whenever human existence in any place becomes a crime, a wrong—the indigenous birds and squirrels, also missing in a storm.

At the stop sign, I look to the left and right, and then I keep moving.
The Villagers are Able, Presumably, to Come and Go as They Please

As for the rest of the city folks, in your cars: I hear your wheels turning and pulling in the snow, not getting anywhere. I hear you, turning and pulling, so I know where you are not going.

Keep pushing the pedal down.

I listen in the dark to your effort to rock the machine out of that rut. Out of your ice-melt, out of your wet depression. A possessive determiner is in order here. Rock the machine through the consequence of your own weight and heat—your tendency, in existing, to warp and melt down the world around you.

This is one way my car becomes a home: as I take up residence. Sometimes, I get in that place, turning the stereo to max volume. Sometimes, I hide in my body, in the city, parked: as if driving away from the pitiful math of myself.

Sadly, I am often not on the ground, walking, where I can see you clearly: one of the failures of my life is a town full of commuters.

Snow-homelessness is an event in the realm of my sensory perception that requires a fair bit of snow—a structure of belief must be built regarding the incontrovertibility of the landscape, so it comes to be that the driving snow and the driving is all there is—a complete, overriding culture.

Under the snow, then, the world becomes a closed set.
April Freely

More Terrible, More Subtle, More Meaningful

What we talk about when we talk about what “feels true” is really a kind of devastation, the revelation of a split between “reality” and the testimony of my body. A good driver has both a great capacity for feeling and the ability to respond quickly and appropriately to said feelings. A good driver knows how to feel for the ground beneath her, through even the horror of the machine. She listens for the sound of your faraway distress, your engine not turning over, and registers those deep depressions in the snow as a sign of upcoming trouble.

Please: cruise around in your boat, don’t slide. Please: I want your foot off the gas when changing lanes; I want you to make it over the hump of ice between us without that jerk at the wheel.

Reckless drivers cause collisions safe drivers may avoid.

When I fail to behold a man, standing before me, despite the noise of the snow, I misplace one of my faculties: my dear capacity to recognize his face. If I employ, without thinking, the category of homelessness over you, like a hood, as if this is the only way I can understand the fact of your body in this place, please watch out for the coming deadly force.

Even my feelings can be corrupted. Even the mechanisms of sense within the privacy of my body.

Let’s be clear about how snow comes to cover a world, how we come to grow quiet in a storm, under several feet of accumulation.

Very carefully.

Though I recognize immediately the error in my perception, I admit that my othering work reflects bona fide feelings in me—even if only those hidden feelings that thunder through me right before the
flash of fear hits. The good news is that all of this snow makes some structures especially visible: take the red garage next door, which I am free to contemplate, all day on the road, in the treacherous weather, so that the magnetism of that red structure, a simple gable against the snow, grows, moment by moment, into the emblem of the heart of my traveling.

Driving in snow, we hope it’s not long before there’s someone, anyone, we can reach.
April Freely

A Certain Awful Wonder as to What Kind of Human Being it Is

And then, there are the little ungloved hands of the woman before me in the dark.

When you are not dressed appropriately for the weather, you carry your house alongside your traveling, like a tent. I can perceive this invisible structure—her thoughts toward her home, her wet socks only temporary, her mental-figurings of warmth and the hot chocolate to come.

It means: this must only be a short walk.

She is not cold. Not really.

It means bare ankles in the dark, in snow, fall, therefore, under the projection of warmth, in her mental mobile home.

It is a status symbol to be undressed in the snow. It means the pedestrian ahead of me this time has not yet humbled herself. She is not ready to confess belief in the cold.

The hubris and swagger of this woman’s failing dress in snow—in contrast to our man bundled up in his Carhartt jacket—is exactly how I know that, for this woman, home is only steps away.
Whether or Not One Likes to Think So

We know “homelessness” is a measure of belonging, not a lack of home ownership.

The concept of homelessness is, after all, a labor in itself: a mechanism by which I hide from my beliefs about where people belong, unsheltered. Note this logic: who has the audacity to hold his or her face to the sky, as if to own all of it?

A stick figure, on the other hand, is hardly thinking, whose history seems to blow away in the wind.

So, to draw out our diseases, I write the word “man” where the head would go, then, and pull a line downward for his torso from there. Short, stabby arms, next. Then, only one leg visible out in front, as if he were switching what would be his hidden weight onto his other stick leg.

If you draw a house next to the stick man, he can’t enter it. Even if I situate the house around him like a screen, at best, our stick figure can only be stacked against the surface of the house: he still won’t fill it.

Like the woman I saw with those ungloved hands, a similar mental mobile home is built, and portable, ready to be deployed—for those who, at the end of their driveways, are shoveling.

A man remains tethered to the house yet, who doesn’t let the house out of his sight. I can feel his impatient, pending authority, calf-deep in snow, as I slowly cruise by in my boat. He stands his ground, in the shadow of the house, flinging the white powder over his head. I can feel the threat of the personal mountain of refuge at his back, two stories tall. When the man breathes out, I see what looks to be a kind of smoke. This condensation has its own feeling, separate from the man, like the child of his consideration—as if his breath on the air is
the slip of a second body. The house at his back guards the apparent population of belief within this indigenous culture like a god.

The ferocity of his work, and the sacrifice he pays to his Ownership, indicates that this man belongs right here.

Yet, if the road continues to be obliterated by snow, if it keeps coming down and there is no use shoveling, then there is no drive, no getting out of the whiteout condition. Within this welt. Within the paw of it. When the sky is white and the earth is white, I lose the boundary between up and down. Land becomes a dream I forget upon waking, where everything I loved to recognize, every holy named thing, has been run off the continent of sense.
That Which Will Give Him Sustenance and a Voice

One moment, I apprehend the outline of a man, but in the next glance, he’s gone.

Or, I don’t perceive him at all: the man I see as the emblem of fear itself.

To have unyielding, irreconcilable fear of another is to commit a crime against something human—unrelenting fear is nourishment in the belly of the growing Indomitable.

The hazard of the dark man, homeless in snow, then, is my own monstrous, willful, effort to abandon him.

I let him be an offense.

The emotion I perceive in that weather is my own ruthlessness.

I mean to be talking about othering work as a matter of perception. We give ourselves a break, as it seems such things are so “buried” beneath this white wilderness.

Yes, snow may be an artificial covering over the world, but it’s also a revelation in me: this is what it means to become a stranger in the village, to no longer belong to the taxonomy of the world. It’s only whites here.

When I talk to you, I think you can see me. I sometimes think my voice proves my body. Out of sight, I know you can’t help what you hear. Despite these dark marks.

I want us all to feel the weight of such overwhelming snow. I want you, then, not to have the words for this, stumbling around in the struggle to recover yourself, knee-deep in it, having lost the words. Something is blowing about in your head, or over your head, when you belong in the distortion where I am.
April Freely

Everyone in the Village Knows my Name, Though They Scarcely Ever Use it

If you love winter, you also know your love for snow shelters under your real love of a similar sense of transgression. Persisting where it hurts, pressing through the frostbitten: here is your lovely, belligerent joy in snow activities and snow games.

Or else, you are a mystic and your love is tied up in the snow as it would be in any manifestation of the otherworldly.

Together, I suspect, between these two, there is just a single point.

Stand your ground; stand your ground. Damning cousins, beside one another.

Otherwise, it is very cold. This snow is real snow.

Protecting the visible surface of your body isn’t enough. What about the rest of your power, your reactive potential?

For instance, the way you call out your mother’s name, in smoke, your voice ricocheting off the icy auditoria.

What about the magnetism of your dark body. Your wrecking power. Your will.

Leave space for the inevitable, scattered, icy shot.

Otherwise, the energy of your body, spilling out forever. Please: leave space in your house, or else you risk breaking the machine, you’ll run it out, the thing won’t turn over.

My mother says, what are those black marks on the snow? I don’t think they should be there, on my snow. I tell her those are leaves, blacked and folded-up, conspicuous atop the snowy, white sheet.
His Human Weight, the Complexity, and the Strain

Opening the door, noticing the man lying at my feet, I did not scream.

I did not scream, even though I wanted to, even though I almost lost it, his soft body so unexpectedly in my power.

I did not think he was dead.

He was just a man, being belonging, so I caught myself, stepping clumsily over him, as if through the snow—years before my wintry Ohio.

For days, the pendant light had been out above the doorway of our San Francisco flat, too tall for any of my housemates to reach. A simple missing bulb, and behold: a man sprouting up, as if the dark itself was a kind of incubator.

He came back every night. Like you do with your house.

The next day, once again, I clucked at the man sleeping under the cover of darkness at the foot of the stairs, as if I were my mother, waking her child from a hard sleep.

Ok, baby, it’s time. Come, the light is up; you must needs get on up, now. Morning is here.

While I said this, I thought about the three women upstairs, my housemates who would soon be flying out of this very same door. I wanted to save them from the morning’s heart attack. These three women were the reasons I found anything at all to say to a man who had found a place to sleep away from the light and the wet conditions.

I know my housemates really would feel fear. Young people may live a precarious life beneath only the lightest covering of a sense of safety.
April Freely

After work, I asked everyone about him, our rugged man, but no one else had seen him.

In fact, sleep, when it comes, is a gift I should like this man to have. When he has sewn himself up finally in the security of the shelter of sleep, I'd rather do nothing more than float by.

As I made my way through the traffic, across the panhandle of Golden Gate, large, bounding mastiffs ran in wide circles through the mud.
Sporadically Until Today, Despite the Cruel and Totally Inescapable Ambivalence of His Status in His Country

I crossed this muddy swamp every day on the way to work. In my heart, I had come to think of this small section of the panhandle as my own front yard.

On this night, light from the streetlamp overhead flooded the ground behind the back of my friend, as he told me that the mud I encountered daily was just an unintended side effect.

It's really just a matter of public safety, he said. The over-active sprinkler system in the panhandle was specifically conceived as a deterrent against the homeless.

Looking at the park, over his shoulder, under the cover of night, it was easy to imagine how this might be the case.

It does get very dark.

He looked off, downward slightly and to the left—either because he was at that moment taking on our collective mantle of shame, or, because he was slightly embarrassed by the extent of his own knowledge.

I couldn’t tell which.

I thought instead about what it must be like, to feel the earth is pissing on you, or the city is pissing on you—to feel the very ground beneath you welling up.
Yet One Must Also Recognize that Morality is Based on Ideas and All Ideas are Dangerous

“Fight or flight” is often thought of as a series of purely autonomic reactions.

We like to think we just can’t help it.

It’s only that I know better. I know we don’t always have to be afraid.

Not that I’m perfect. No moral high ground here. I just know that I had better not scream.

This is a warning or a lesson from my dear mother, who teaches us to watch that any person, simply existing, is, to us no cause for exclamation.

I recognize my willingness to be unafraid of my neighbors as a humanizing act.

A culture where fear has, as a status symbol, passed into the realm of art, is a culture in which we love being overtaken. In place of real trepidation, we carry the hope that the art might thrill us or decode us. Over time, the neighborhood of our fear is much more pedestrian and familiar to us than ever before, despite what our analysis of basic brain stem functions might suggest.

Fear is deployed similarly in war—first, fear as a tactic to stagger the mind, then, fear as a trigger, fit now to arm that body driven by whatever appeal on behalf of the federation will serve.

In art, or aggression, the goal is to exert control over the faculties of another, either through a kind of terror, or a kind of awe. This is how we come to like to think that we can’t help it. We enjoy being lost to ourselves. For good and for bad, we pay to submit to the violence of our own willful disbelief.
So Burning a Question

My students don’t believe in homeless people. For them, this is simply one more article of faith.

They are interested in homeless folks with iPhones, who they think they see, hanging around Akron, Ohio. The students suspect these women and men are gaming “the system.” This is what they want to write about for their investigative essays.

All the faces light up, and I look into their bright faces.

Then I look down, toward my left. My map-making kicks in again: I start to pace the floor.

So many slouching bodies scattered about me, it’s hard to know where to step.

Where were we?

A student near the front weighs in, Instead of making us write another essay about synecdoche, or however you say it, finally, here’s something I have personal experience with. And she’s partially right: actual homeless people are indeed many loose stitches in the fabric of the campus landscape within this city.

Now everyone wants to talk at once. Every semester, I note the same press of sound on this front. I’m always shocked by the overwhelming consensus. I ask the students why they want to wish people away: what’s in it for you—in this quest to believe that homelessness is a trick? Why go around blacking people out of the known world?

I look out the window: snow piles up on the soccer field and soon will obliterate any sign of the penalty box altogether.
Some of the students, I know for a fact, have recently been homeless, so you’d think they’d understand that it’s not always a thriller or a game. Others may yet be homeless now, if you want to think of it that way. They usually don’t. I know this about them, though they don’t know this about each other. Do I look away?

I suppose the students are simply seduced by the beauty of such a frame—that things simply must work out for you, if you try.

After all, they do all want to get As.

The students, for their part, have largely been protected from the various, nonsensical implications of the mean, cold world around them. I know the students’ disbelief is simply a structure they shelter under to keep out the storm.

Likewise, crashing on friends’ couches, here and there, is fine for now.

As usual, the students stand their ground on the homelessness issue. It’s easy to do, as a united front. While I do challenge them, I don’t push too hard.
I am Not, Really, a Stranger Any Longer

As if this were a combat mission, I tell my students the following week, how I caught a glimpse of the new “pickers” in my neighborhood on the move, fanning out through the ward methodically, like organized troops. Something awful and beautiful was about it. I watched them work from inside the cab of my car, on the way to campus. Folks looking for the goods among what even poor people have thrown away. This, I tell them, is amazing in a neighborhood where you can’t even get a pizza delivered because it’s too dangerous.

What I saw on the street corresponded to the essay we’d read about a literarily minded man who’d gone Dumpster-diving with his dog. The man was not necessarily homeless.

In fact, he doesn’t say. The students noted, however, the author’s erudite, formal inclinations.

As they talk, I cover the floor, throwing my chalk in the air as I go, and its dust, catching the stub in my hand on the way back down.

I ask, Why is our author trying so hard; why does his painful insistence on etiquette catch us off-guard?

We are especially shocked by his formal stance when viewed against a landscape of refuse, like those folded black leaves on top of the snow.

In a YouTube video, I show the class clips of a different man—but oddly enough, he has the same, fine posture of formality—as he outlines for us the four C’s which conscribe every effect of proper decorum for the Dumpster-diver.

Did you see this coming? I ask them. We have arrived at the secret boundary of a subculture, where there are “insiders” and “outsiders.”
The gatekeeping we see here is the indication of a door, where lives, previously hidden, now become visible under the cover of the structure of transgression.

I am delighted to show the students the wealth of such a hidden village. I like for them to think about how one might hide homes so large right in plain view.
It is Necessary, Nevertheless, For Me to Repeat This to Myself

Underneath all of this, I am really thinking about the snow.

I look out the window, where a walking bundle, in his own body, makes me doubt myself: my rolling position, horsepower pulling me further away across the ice. This is the stranger I become, when I can no longer map the distance between myself and another.

Without any sense that the land before me is populated with something human, I grow uneasy: my three-dimensional identity is secured by the visible horizon—without it, in all that snow, I experience some kind of crippling effect.

How could this be me? As a woman and a black person, I recognize the danger—and the labor—of my othering work across this landscape. Baldwin’s language, then, pops into my head, a red gable on which to focus: There is often something beautiful, there is always something awful, in the spectacle of a person who has lost one of his faculties, a faculty he never questioned until it was gone, and who struggles to recover it. Here, Baldwin is writing in reference to “the cripples” who come for the hot springs in this snowy mountain town. When I first read “Stranger in the Village,” this scene felt like a kind of tangent. The cripples don’t show up again in his essay after these initial quick observations. As metaphorical figures in a similar struggle toward full, human recovery—I see now how such a scene very much belongs in a text about our fears of stark dark indomitable bodies. There is often something beautiful and always something awful—even the writers’ own culpability.

Where my faculties are hidden, I should know. It’s a miracle, to come up untrue, a mistake, even on top of the snow, not to have a sense of the true depth of your own form.
April Freely

And This is So Despite Everything I May Do to Feel Differently

When the earth reverts back to one thing blowing about repeatedly, here is the dazzle—the where, and the how—the earth prepares for a wreck.

In these conditions, to come across a man, suddenly—I meet my own human body vis-à-vis his silhouette on snow, a man who is my shameful confession, the shock or the horror I am approaching.

His presence captivates me. I can’t look away.

I may, in such a case, become a kind of monster—where a monster is simply any being on the landscape missing one dimension.

What we do when things don’t make sense reveals a lot about us.

I should understand what it’s like to be that thing hidden in plain sight—even hidden while being pointed out—an exotic, a wonder, an exception—that I can count and read and sing and question and understand and know and stay quiet.

I should understand this as one awful way to belong.

Minor changes in weather can occur, however, when we’re not looking, often to disastrous effect. For example: the change from sleet to ice, dry falling snow to wet falling snow. The cold growing more bitter.

Bless your heart.

So that a dark man on the map may cause a change in the physiology of my body, without my actually having to look at him. Without even my noticing that I have seen him. I try to catch myself.
Their Blue Eyes Shine Like Ice

Riding down the escalator in the shopping plaza, I found, staring at me, two pairs of small blue eyes. Two blond children, twins, adorable. A boy and a girl. They must have been no more than five years old.

The parents were a covering over them—the children holding hands between twin parental columns.

Moving forward, the parents were looking forward, toward the exit, but the little ones, facing the wrong direction, were turned back, to look at me, as if Something Was Coming.

That steely look on their faces, I recognized, eventually, as the look of offense.

I felt like an invasion of their privacy.

I hate to know too much about the strangers I meet.

This was not just the look of one beholding a spectacle, but disdain, a budding belligerence—how had they already been taught to magnify difference, without, likely, any kind of conscious direction toward this from the parents, who were covering the children. Parents the children revealed. This work aged the children, so that their physical contours seemed to grow into smaller versions of that face the adults hide away.
A State of Innocence Long After that Innocence is Dead

The woman couldn’t be more than five-foot naught, though she did jump a little bit when she screamed. It was a strange kind of exclamation.

In the back of the room we were busy getting coffee, a dozen women milling about in the fellowship area at church. You know. Cookies and clucking. I explained to the woman next to me which carafe held the hot water for tea.

I was, as usual, the only black person in the room, but I had been around the place for over a year. I wasn’t new, I wasn’t a stranger, but the little woman looked right at me and screamed in genuine fright, as if she’d seen the boogie man in a place where she had not expected to meet him.

Though the room was full of people, no one said anything. No one asked her what she saw or why she screamed.

Instead, I asked if she was okay.

What’s it worth, wishing people away? Wishing away the crippling effect?

The ladies who said nothing are worth mentioning, because: when a seventy-nine-year-old woman screams in a room full of people, it belies their knowledge—as opposed to their innocence—when these ladies do not respond to her.

It’s a shame there’s no way I could help her. She seemed rattled, but not embarrassed. I wished she had been. Her lack of embarrassment only means she’s standing her ground. Though I’m a short woman, usually smiling, not wearing any dark hood, I knew exactly what was going on, or not going on, in her head: here is a moment of mercy I bear for her, even if she’s afraid to regard it.
Through fright, or indifference, either way, it’s an attack on one’s character to say: How dare you face a mean, cold world I am looking away from?

This is guilt-fright: the house where your guilt is hidden. It’s especially dangerous weather, when my guilt is hidden in my fright, because fear is a more stealth emotion than mere indifference. In indifference, at least I feel the aggression of my own ugliness. Guilt-fright is unreflective: aggression hidden beneath the cloak of passivity, hidden under the dress of victim-behavior. In any case, my guilt and fear and indifference effectively shield me from the magnitude of the mountain of my own feelings.

Something changed, briefly and suddenly, in that woman—or else, something young and powerful in her let go—and I am always aware of the possibility of this change. Yet a lovely woman who means well, she has just fallen into a vacuum of reality, which I understand: it’s the way you feel, banked and numb in a storm in winter, having fallen over into the nonsense of snow.