

SAINT SEBASTIAN

VII

Sevent

THE SAINT SEBASTIAN PROJECT



Saint Sebastian was considered the protector against the plague and Mantegna had recovered from the plague. His painting is a gesture of homage for his recovery.

Giverny is a terribly small town. Even with a world famous garden across the street there comes a time when it is absolutely necessary to escape the village life, to run to the chaos of the city and explore the museums of Paris.

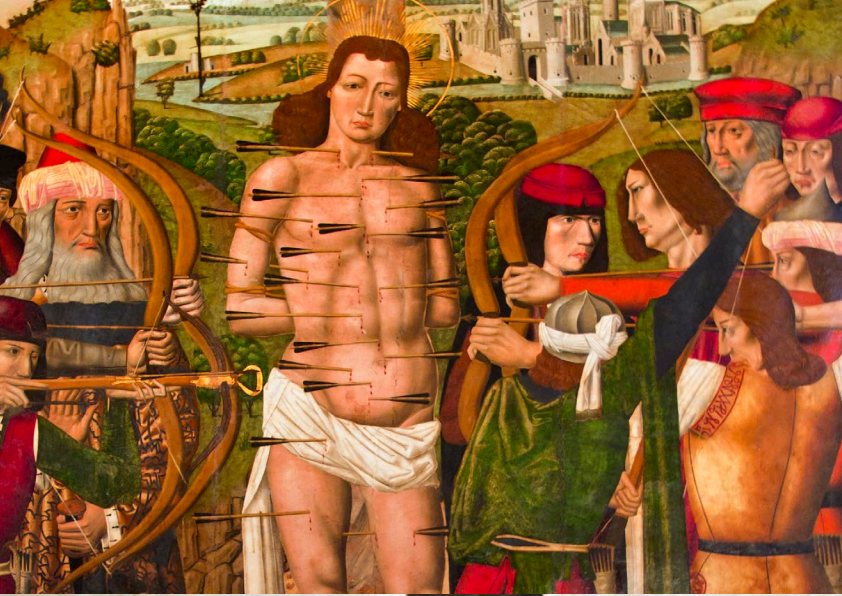
An hour by commuter train and I was back amongst the throng. Passing thru such delightful spots as Bonnières-sur-Seine, where Monet used to keep a small boat as a marine painting studio and where the locals would maliciously cut his mooring line and let him drift down stream. The train passes through Mantes-la-Jolie, (Mantes, the beautiful) where Flaubert had trysts with his mistress and I am sure he thought it beautiful then but if he saw it today he would think he was in a concrete hell, more reminiscent of a North African slum than his France of the 19th century. Then again, all things are not perfect in Normandy just because you live across the street from a beautiful garden.

The musée du Louvre is where the word *too* was invented. It is too much, too big, too impressive, too grand and too tiring. Thank God it is there.

My friend Paul Gardère once told me he would only go with me to the Louvre if we only looked at 14th century ivory miniatures. Attempting to see more was simply overload. Of course I would overlook his advice and still wander aimlessly; and for a time, I stood quietly in front of Andre Mantegna's painting of Saint Sebastian.

His pose is called *contraposto*, which I think means 'against a post', which I think fits with what he is doing, but art historians will scream about this interpretation. Another Mantegna painting of Saint Sebastian is in the Kunsthistorisches museum in Vienna and has a much more languid pose. In that painting he also has an arrow directly in his forehead. The number and direction of his arrows varies enormously. In Venice there is a later painting that has arrows galore and a lot more pained expression on his face. There appear to be thousands of renditions of St. Sebastian in museums throughout the world. And I began to wonder what was his story.

The following pages are images of paintings of Saint Sebastian. Many were collected surreptitiously in museums where they commonly prohibit photography. The painting by Goya in the Prado Museum has three arrows, others have only one, some have more than twenty.











Even though this painter seems more intent on rendering the fanny of the archer with red pants than getting Sebastian's eyes straight, we can still be astounded by the number and direction of the arrows. The real questions here are: How did the archers keep from hitting the other archers in such a crossfire and, did it really take twenty-one arrows to kill someone tied to a column?

Sedano, Alonso and Terrencs, Pere (XV cent)
Museu de la Catedral, Mallorca

The legend of Saint Sebastian is a bit complicated because there are conflicting versions, but there seems to be general agreement on the following:

He was born in Narbonne, Gaul (France). He became a soldier in the Roman army at Rome in about 283, and seems to have spent considerable time promoting Christianity. He is supposed to have cured his wife of deafness and cured the gout of a Roman Prefect.

Sebastian was named captain in the Praetorian Guards by the Emperor Diocletian. During an Imperial persecution of the Christians it was discovered that Sebastian was indeed a Christian, and he was ordered to be executed. He was tied to a column and shot with arrows and left for dead, but when the widow of St. Castulus went to recover his body, she found he was still alive and nursed him back to health. They pulled out the arrows and he lived.

He was a very lucky fellow, but as it turns out, not very bright, because after he became healthy again, he re-enlisted in the army. After a short time he was again discovered to be a Christian and, as one story has it, Diocletian promptly had Sebastian's head cut off. Hence the Saint.

St. Sebastian is considered the patron saint of archers,
(Now there's an irony!)

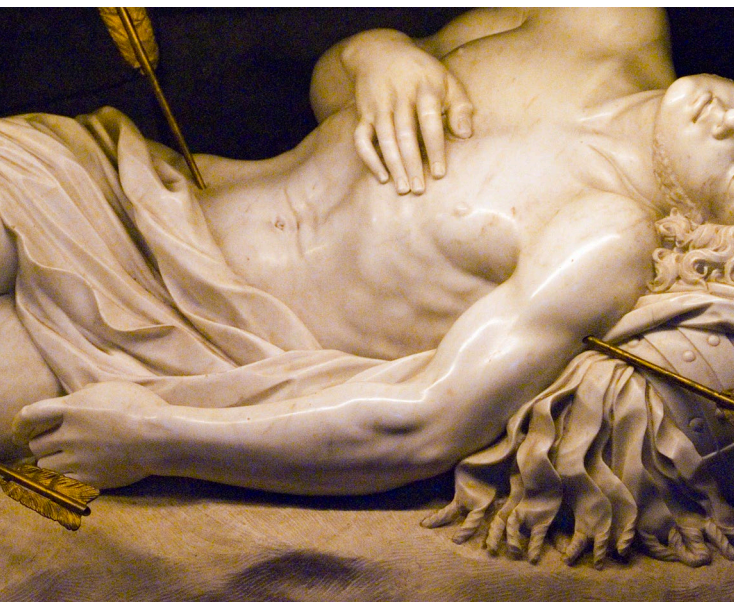
He is also the patron saint of soldiers because he was a tough soldier and because he is purported to have cured many diseases, he is appealed to for protection against plagues.

Immediately adjacent to the Eastern edge of Monet's water garden is a plantation of poplar trees. They are columnar cottonwood trees and are planted in strict rows and just look like the trees adjacent to Rousseau's tomb. The difference is that these trees are agriculture. They are planted as a crop and intend to be harvested. Specifically monoculture with none of the visual interest or diversity of either a forest or Monet's garden. The edge of Monet's garden has been carefully planted and screened so as to distract the visitor and have their attention directed inward to the garden.

Sitting on a certain bench in the garden it is possible to see the rows of trees and to glance at the garden at almost the same time. This comparison may help understand why there is a relationship between what happened to Saint Sebastian and the idea of a garden as a *mediator* between us and the natural world.

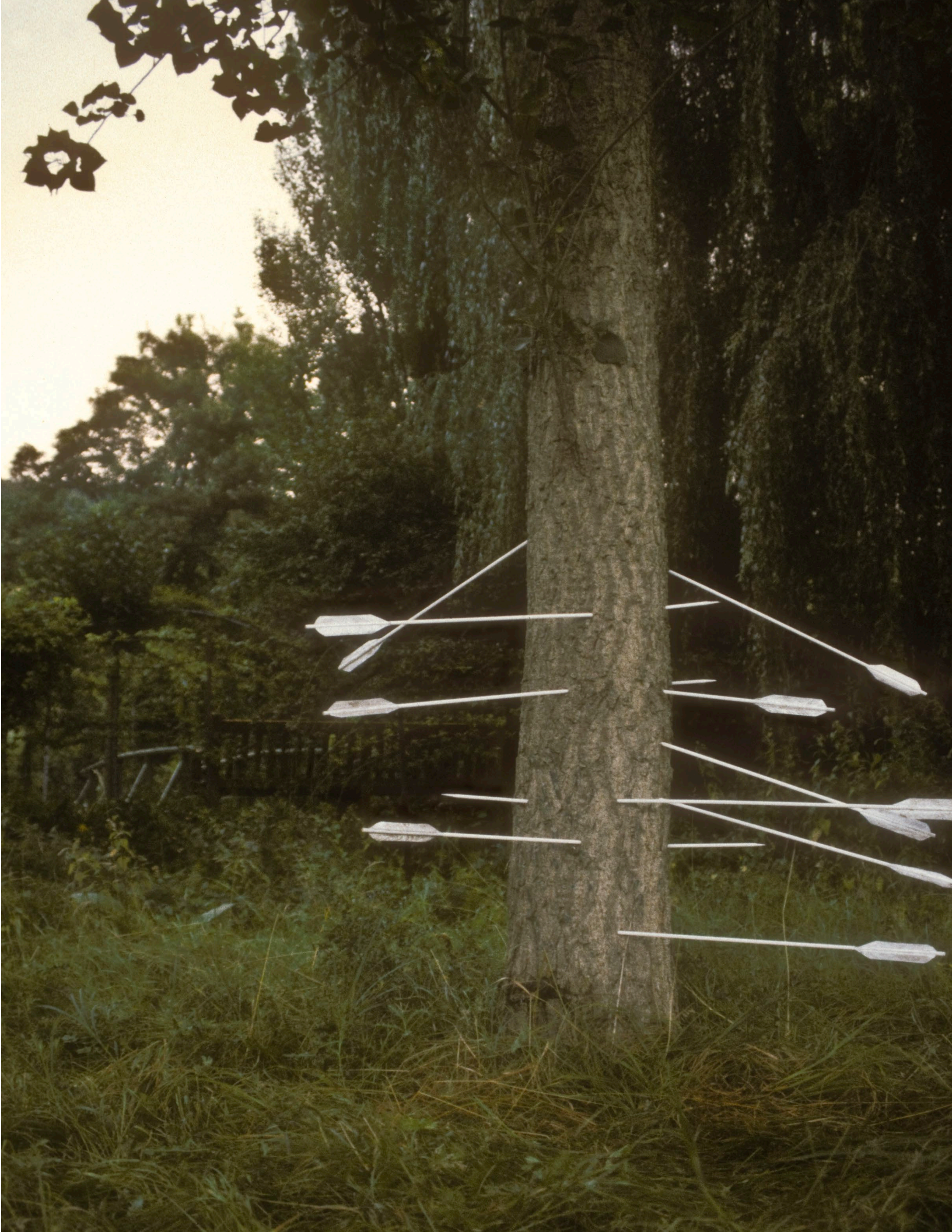
Sebastian got shot full of arrows. His friends pulled the arrows out and he got healthy again. *Nature has been shot full of arrows by us. We have raped pillaged and plundered. And if we just pull out even some of the arrows and leave it alone, nature will get better.*

Sebastian didn't have to reenlist. He could have just left it alone. He could have thrived. The garden, like Sebastian, needs help from friends to thrive. Since nature is no longer overwhelming, we are the only ones around to be friends and help. We need to take some of the arrows out that we have shot into nature and then watch it heal. We do, indeed, need to "tend our own garden." And a lot of the rest we just need to leave alone.



The poplar trees planted next to Monet's garden will be made into toilet paper. It will be a very nude and bald spot when the trees are harvested. In the mean time, the trees can be a symbol of how much we use nature and how it might do better if we left a lot more of it alone.

This single poplar tree is part of that plantation and is just outside Monet's Garden. After consulting with botanists, *The author, shot this poplar, this Saint Sebastian Tree, full of arrows, and if we leave it alone, it too, is going to survive.*





Nature left alone: Vines do have a way with windows.

Santa Sabina Aventine
Rome



Can we hope that nature is not completely out of whack because of our meddling? If we just got out of the way for a while a lot of wounds might heal up. Is not that the work of time?

Paros, Grece



When the most recent Balkan War stopped, the plants took over.

Zagreb, Croatia



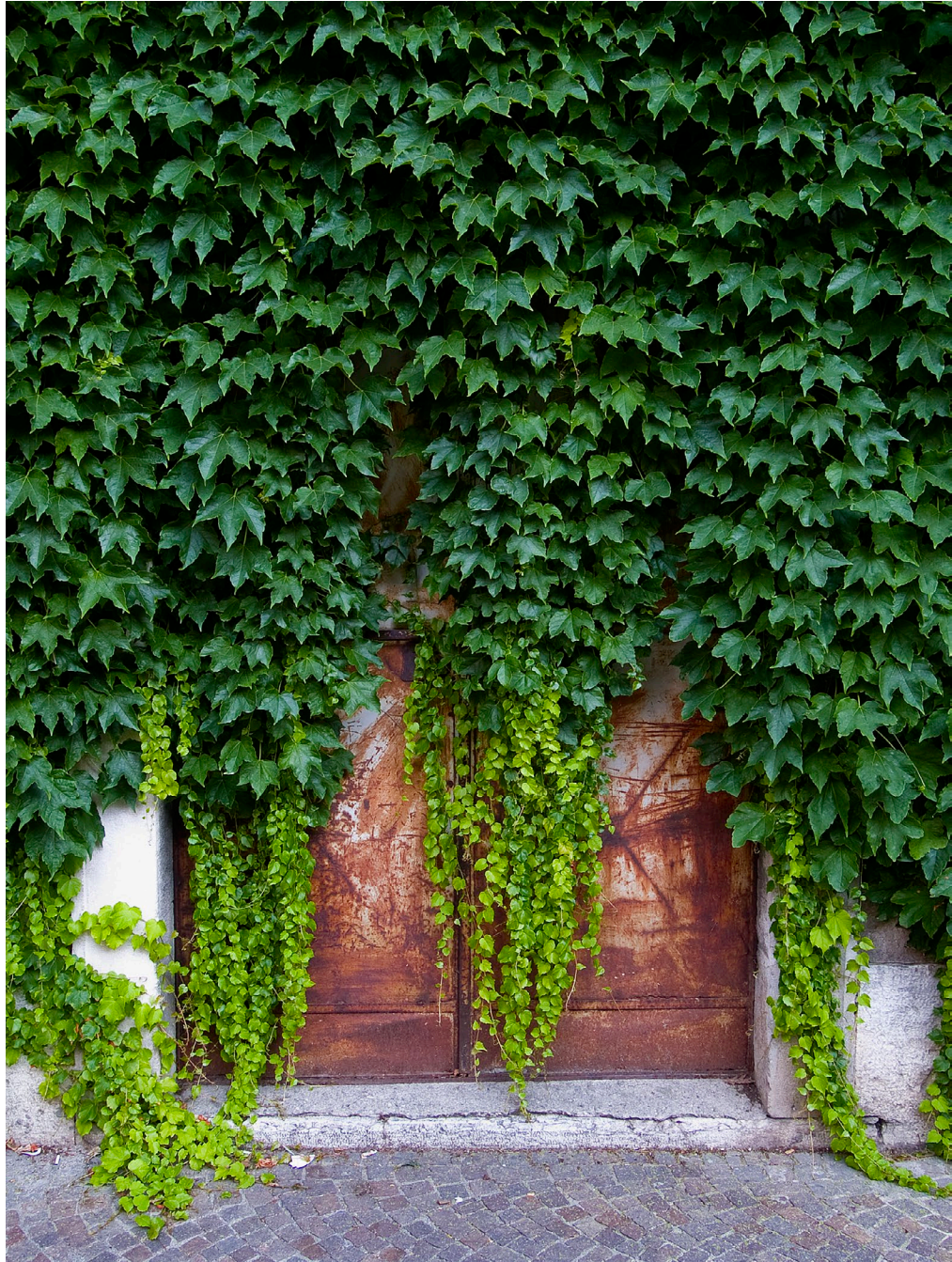
Gardeners are obsessed with control, but even they know it is a losing battle.
No, Mr. Wilkins, you don't need to trim this hedge any more. It is going to outlast you. Just give it up.

South Island, New Zealand



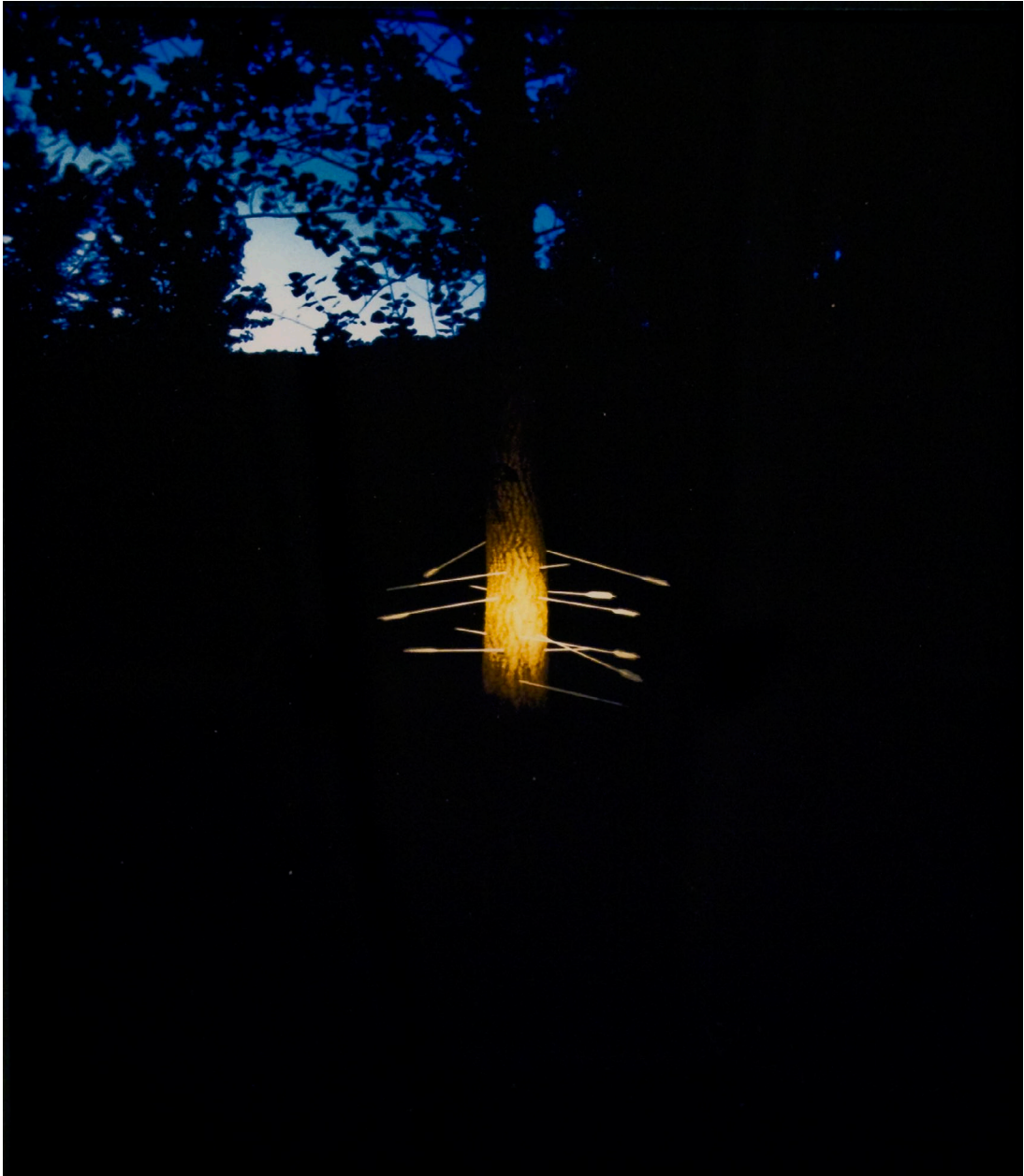
This deer has a lot more broken than one ear. It is a broken promise. It is an attempt to make up for the loss of the real deer that used to wander here. It is a concrete votive offering, hoping the real deer will return someday.

Central California



There is a small crack in my driveway and grass continually sprouts from the crack. Every time I pass by I want to cheer for the grass. I want the grass to take over the driveway. Like in the photo above, I want to say, 'Go ahead vines, eat this building.'

Skagen, Denmark



The Saint Sebastian Tree, just outside Monet's Garden

We have certainly done terrible things to the natural world. Now the question is what to do about it? Nature, like Saint Sebastian, has been shot. If we just stop shooting it full of arrows nature might be able to heal itself. We may even have to remove some of the previous arrows, but if we stop terrorizing nature, it might just survive and perhaps even thrive.

The GARDEN and all the ideas that go along with it might just survive too. We will always have to tend our garden.