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dialogue





# dialogue

Volume 47

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Issue 1

## A Note from the Editor

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There's this great poem about burning a book.

Now don't worry – the arsonist in this poem is the poet himself – and if anyone is allowed to talk about burning books, I believe it is the poet. This poem takes place some cool, soft December evening, as he (Ron Koertge - I should be specific) tosses the pages into the excited flames of his fireplace. It's a cheap book - Ron bought it for a nickel – written by an author who had no control over the tool called rhyme. A murmur in the streets distracts him from feeding the fire. Outside are his neighbors, admiring the hush of the first falling snow. So Ron throws the rest of the book into the flames and goes out to join them. Up wafts the smoke from his chimney, down fall the snowflakes and down fall words, burned free from the pages of the book. Ron says he can see the words "land on every tongue, then disappear."

Releasing this issue of Dialogue feels something like burning it free into the sky. I wonder what words will drift down and disappear into you. I wonder what lines, and what phrases will fall on you like snowflakes. I wonder what images and ideas you wait for, mouth open to the sky.

And my hope is that these words, the art, and these photographs don't stay on the pages.

I hope you burn them free.

– Meg Schmidt, *Editor in Chief*

## Notes from Layout

---

Displaying the works of others is a task with little room for error. In putting these pages together, I spent the majority of the time worrying that submitters would come after me in a murderous rage because I used white type for their piece instead of black. I hope that doesn't happen.

Read closely, look carefully.

Every piece is important.

– Jack Van Allsburg, *Layout Editor*

# dialogue

Volume 47 Issue 1

Calvin College's Journal of  
Commentary and the Arts

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## Rubin's Vase

---

Jonathan Gorter

Do not give me a vase  
Between black silhouettes  
Of faces  
Too afraid to act  
Frozen in frame  
Unable to change the iconic image  
They form between them

They please and tease our mind's eye  
But my heart aches for more  
If only I could tell them  
To move closer  
That they deserve each other  
That they can love  
That they can live  
That they can move  
And resurrect the stagnant dead air

I want to shout to them  
"Break the vase, please break the vase!"  
But they remain still  
Frozen in frame  
Too afraid to kiss  
Preserving a useless unscrupulous image  
Of a hollow vase

Give me shards of glass on the floor  
And two faces  
Alive  
And so close  
That I cannot see even with a microscope  
The space between them



Argopectin Gibbous

---

Corrie VanderBrug



## Rat House

---

James Li

It was Halloween in April, the lamppost flyer said, just a week after you stopped eating meat. You smelled like your bedroom: tea tree and sandalwood. When we finally arrived at The Rat House, the smokers were out on the porch to greet us. I was scared they could see my naked mediocrity, so I tried to hide it under my best imitation of a bear. You didn't bring a costume, so I lent you the bear's head. Your boyfriend was there, but he couldn't remember your name. Strangers sharpied their names to their fingertips to own what they touched. We made our way to the basement - it smelled of human heat and marijuana. The band started exorcising members of the audience to an Afro-pop beat. The crowd just stood there silent in a circle of votive candles and mirrors. Then Michael started heaving and vomited his life onto the floor. I was disgusted by the sound, but listened anyway. Samantha taught us a new word, anamnesis. It means the "loss of forgetfulness." I witnessed an angel twist and careen through that window and hit the curb. Christopher's girlfriend drove it to the hospital, but it was too late. She later pulled out my teeth like a string of pearls, and I laughed with a mouth full of blood. Derek lost his temper and invoked the name of Cronus as he chased Joseph around the table. He twisted his fingers through his lips and drew out his tongue. Our enemy was dressed up like a vampire. I drank too much out of a Mason jar and said something violent, but he did not hear me. Amy was dressed up like a ghost, stoned and shivering. Paul crashed his car and was sent tumbling blindfolded into the swimming pool. He floated there facedown with the spring leaves and didn't complain once. Jerome recited the Jesus Prayer and lay on the grass for hours. There were no stars to look at. The curtains were the darkest and most tragic of velvets. I lost you in the thick of it, but I can still remember its sickly sweetness. The wooden floors were wet with your breathing and without form or faculty we all found ourselves slipping too. Mary stabbed holes through my eyelids with a dessert fork, and since then I have always seen constellations. I sat down and gently sank into the ceiling. Mother was right: looking at my body in third person, I was largely unimpressed by my posture. Patricia danced around to the strobe: she told us that she could see Visions of Victoria on the drop ceiling tiles. Brother Francis' head was in flames, but there was no smoke as he got up to leave. The door of an airplane three thousand feet above us kicked out, sending poor Natalie Spencer into the attic with her black carry-on bag. A muse told me it was no accident. I carefully pushed your face together and licked off the asbestos. When God arrived, it was 3:34am. We did not see her coming.



Scratched Away

Se Gyo Oh

**Gaps or The Time I Tried to Date a Hindu Girl Over  
Facebook and It Was Horrible for All Parties Involved  
(Based on a True Story)**

---

Jeffrey Peterson

**One time in Kalamazoo I met this Indian girl from Detroit  
We totally hit it off and then**

*we parted  
separated by a map  
gaps in geography  
and everything else*

**We talked on the phone  
online on a daily basis**

**She told me about**

**her friends and family**

*how  
treated her like shit*

**She said she felt like she could trust me**

*you hardly know me*

**We learned a lot about**

**each other**

*her  
not me please  
stay out of my head  
What are you doing I can't do this  
what are we doing to  
I can't resist*

**She was sweet**

*it's easy to be sweet when you can  
type your thoughts out before you say them*

**Funny**

*it's easy to be funny when you can  
type your thoughts out before you say them*

**Smart**

*I dunno probably*

**Beautiful**

*stunning*

**I really liked her**

*not the real her I said she was beautiful*

**But of course sometimes she had problems**

*"Can you help me with something?"*

*Do you really think  
I can't hurt you from here well*

**I can****What do you need**

*to hear I can pretend to be anybody  
I can pretend to be a friend or something  
I can pretend to be who you think I am but*

*"....."*

*but I can't pretend this is normal  
I can't keep doing this  
I can't keep lying*

**Sorry about that**



suitable home

Kendra Kamp





Unkaged

Christina Geating

## Burials

### Sadie Burgher

I slipped out my back door and ran toward the chicken coop, one hand holding a dishrag full of broken plate shards while the other swiped a garden shovel from outside the toolshed. In the clump of trees surrounding the coop, I knelt and attacked the soft dirt, creating a hole to hide my dishwashing accident. The plate shards went into the hole, dirt was raked over them, and I hurried back inside the house.

Like dark little spirits, my little sister, Marti, and I used to lurk impatiently behind trees and bushes near the chicken coop until a squirrel would skitter in. We'd wait a moment for the squirrel to distract itself in a feast of chicken scratch before we jumped from the foliage, sent our German shepherd, Saxon, into the coop and slammed the door behind him.

Escapees from Saxon's coop hunts were numbered at a nice, round zero.

Our chicken-feed conservation plan seemed to work well; we saw far less evidence of squirrel thievery after a couple weeks of implementing it. All the eggs my family ate came from the chickens in our backyard, so the better fed they were, the more abundant the egg supply would be.

We had no regrets: when the dog ate the squirrels, the squirrels wouldn't eat the chicken feed, and the chicken feed wouldn't eat our dad's money quite as much.

We aren't crouching in the bushes on the day Saxon decides to work alone. His frantic barking sends us tearing into the backyard just in time to see the blur of two squirrels escaping the chicken coop with their lives. As we come closer to

the coop, Saxon lopes out the door. Something white hangs from his mouth, but he doesn't seem very intent on swallowing it. In unison, Marti and I realize what it is.

Only after I grab his collar and shake his head hard does he drop the dove at our bare feet. Her white chest is covered in blood and her broken wings splay out at different angles, but her eyes are bright, alive, and watching us fearfully.

All we can do is stare and think, think, think harder. The plan didn't work. Saxon slinks away; he doesn't want to eat this one. He knows. Marti and I keep looking back at our house anxiously. Dad comes home from work at 5 PM sharp and likes his home to be perfectly in order when he arrives. The time is 4:32 PM on a Wednesday.

"She's hurting," whispers Marti tearfully.

"I know," I say. "We should end her misery." I really mean, "You should end her misery."

We're kids growing up in Alabama; we know Harper Lee's story cover to cover. If it's a sin to kill a little brown songbird, it must be positively evil to kill an innocent white dove. I don't want the dove to keep suffering on my watch, but Dad is on the way home now.

"We can't leave it here suffering. If we drop rocks on it, it'll be quick and painless. You start. Use this brick."

Marti's eyes dart up from staring at the dove. "What's wrong with you? You think it doesn't hurt to die with bricks thrown on you?"

4:39 PM. The dove is still watching us. Saxon is nowhere in sight.

"Look, she's gonna die anyway! Dad can't find us here with her and get mad. You want Dad to be mad?"

Marti tries to hand the brick back to me. "Why won't you throw it instead?"

"Because you have to. Trust me."

"No, I can't! She's hurting!"

"That's why you have to! Marti, I'm telling you to do it. I'm the oldest. You have to do it."

She refuses, then cries, then again begs me to do it instead. But innocents are easy to coerce. I watch her sob as her small hand pulls back to gingerly drop the brick once, and then a second time on the dove.

"You have to try again, harder! All you did was hurt it even more!" I cry as I grab a stick to flip the brick off the top of the dove for the second time. "Please, Marti, just one more time. And then I'll bury her and the brick."

Both of them are done fighting. The bird's eyes have closed, even though her filthy, bloody chest still rises and falls, and Marti, even through her tears, finishes what she started. For the last time, the brick flies out of her hand, meets its mark, and does its job.

My hands are clean, but all of a sudden I'd rather have them covered in dirt and blood.

4:47 PM.

"I'll dig the hole," I whisper.



Cycles & Stand-Stills

---

Matthew Sweda





# Remember Me

---

Caitria Jade

Soft, creeping hands clinging to my throat; your bare skin slick and horrible against my back; your aching weight that throttles and strangles and changes me each moment – this is what I feel today. It's been so long that I'm no longer sure whether you hold on too tightly or I refuse to let you go.

Which of us holds you there now, a slippery body crying, "Murder!" against the back of my throat? If I relaxed, if I let you fall, would you let go, too? Or would you tighten your warm, desperate grasp until neither of us could remember how to breathe?

Wait, I forgot. That already happened, didn't it? Now is the waiting moment, the yearning for air, the aching for fresh new life, the wondering if it will ever come, if there will ever be a moment when you rest on your own feet and I can stand tall again and breathe. If I will ever let you let me go.

But this waiting moment lasts forever – we have neither killed nor saved each other – perhaps we are in the process of doing both. If you let me let you go, what will happen to us? Will we stand up straight, smile, and walk away or will we collapse in agony, screaming until no words are left, before closing up like a flower past its bloom, wither, and die?

I don't know. You don't know. And so this waiting moment lasts forever, stretches past the delicate reaches

of presence and contact and words and acknowledgement, past the limited reign of miles and clocks and work and school, stretches beyond these nothings and clings to us like an extra layer of skin and dirt I cannot scrub off no matter how many showers I take.

You leave me less – together, we are hopelessly less, hopelessly striving for a new breath our lungs can't receive, but alone, maybe, we will be nothing at all.

But maybe, just maybe, nothing is better than this horrible kind of something. What are we? A parasite and a host? And tell me, you who chokes me and I who cleave to you, which one of us is which?

You are killing me and dying to do it.

I straighten my back. I hear your horrified cry, so astonishingly seductive against my skin, a whispered poison that goes straight to my veins. I clasp your small, wounded hands in mine and begin to pull. "Time to let go," I murmur. My voice is shaky and unclear, but I'm growing stronger. My heartbeat quickens. I wonder if yours weakens or if even our hearts move together.

Your grip on my throat is so tight, so deep, so agonizingly a part of me that I can't tell whether releasing you will bring or steal my life.

Almost there. "Please," I plead, but I don't know if I'm begging to please, please hold onto me, don't let go,

please don't let me stand alone, or if I desperately, anxiously want you to let me go.

It doesn't matter because the next moment, you have.

It is the most painful moment of my life, that release of your hands, as I am liberated into a guiltless joy, a shameless sort of pure happiness. I am freed, and I rejoice to see you stand. To know I myself am standing alone.

Time passes.

Time passes, and we break. We fall. I stand up again. I don't know if you will or not – I can't see you anymore, can't hear your precious, poisonous voice inside my heart anymore. You no longer talk to me; you no longer even meet my eyes, and what does that mean but complete and utter betrayal? We are both broken, alone, but we are alive.

You are a shape in the fog, a reflection in the wave, shattered by its own movement. I look at you, look at those pale eyes staring at me from the darkness, and I walk away.

I am not sure I know who I am without your aching soreness against my skin, but I am willing, finally, to find out.

I look at you, and I walk away.

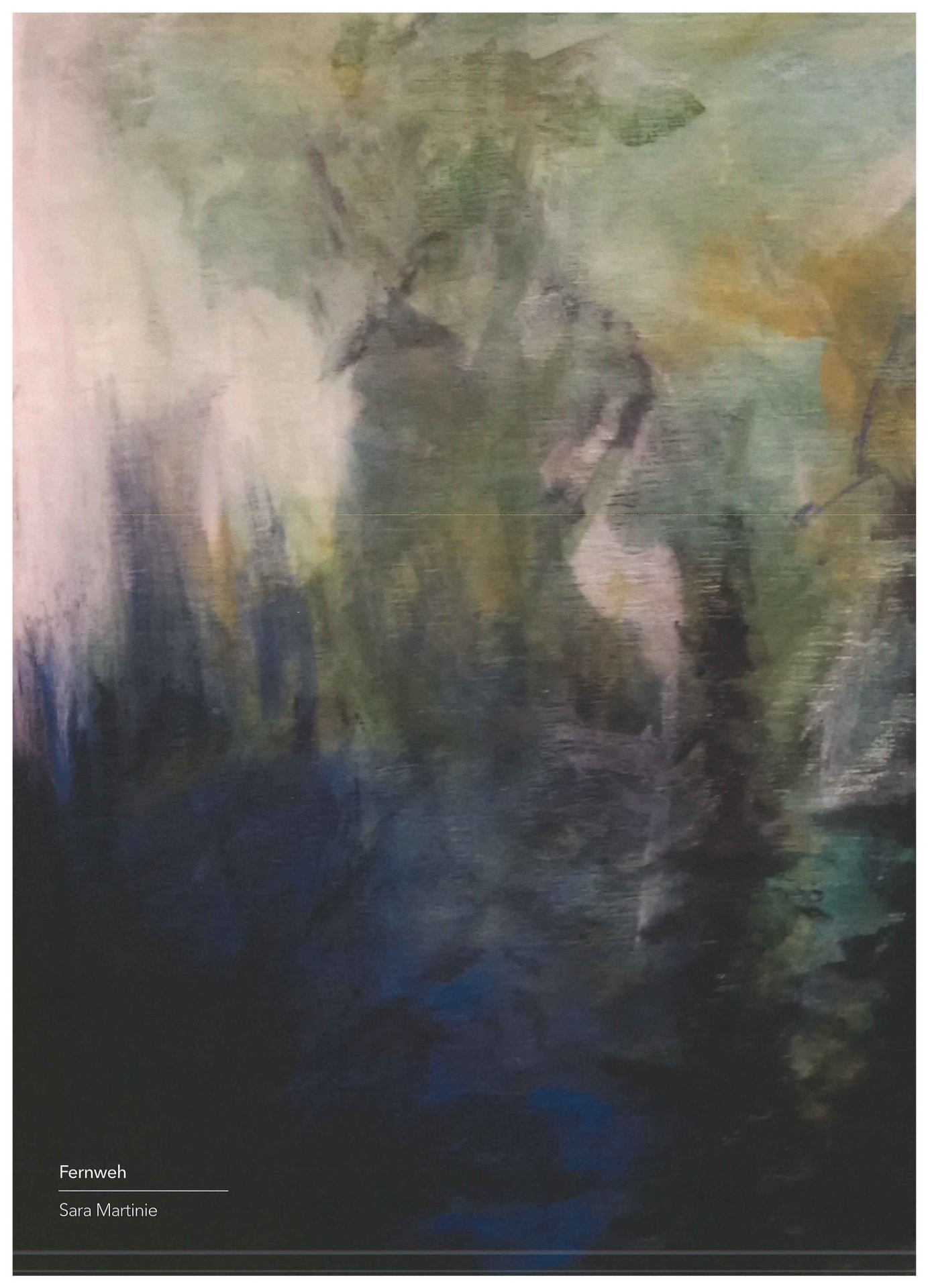
Maybe someday, we'll meet again, but not now, my shadow in the dark. Not tonight.

Tonight, we walk away.



atmospheric

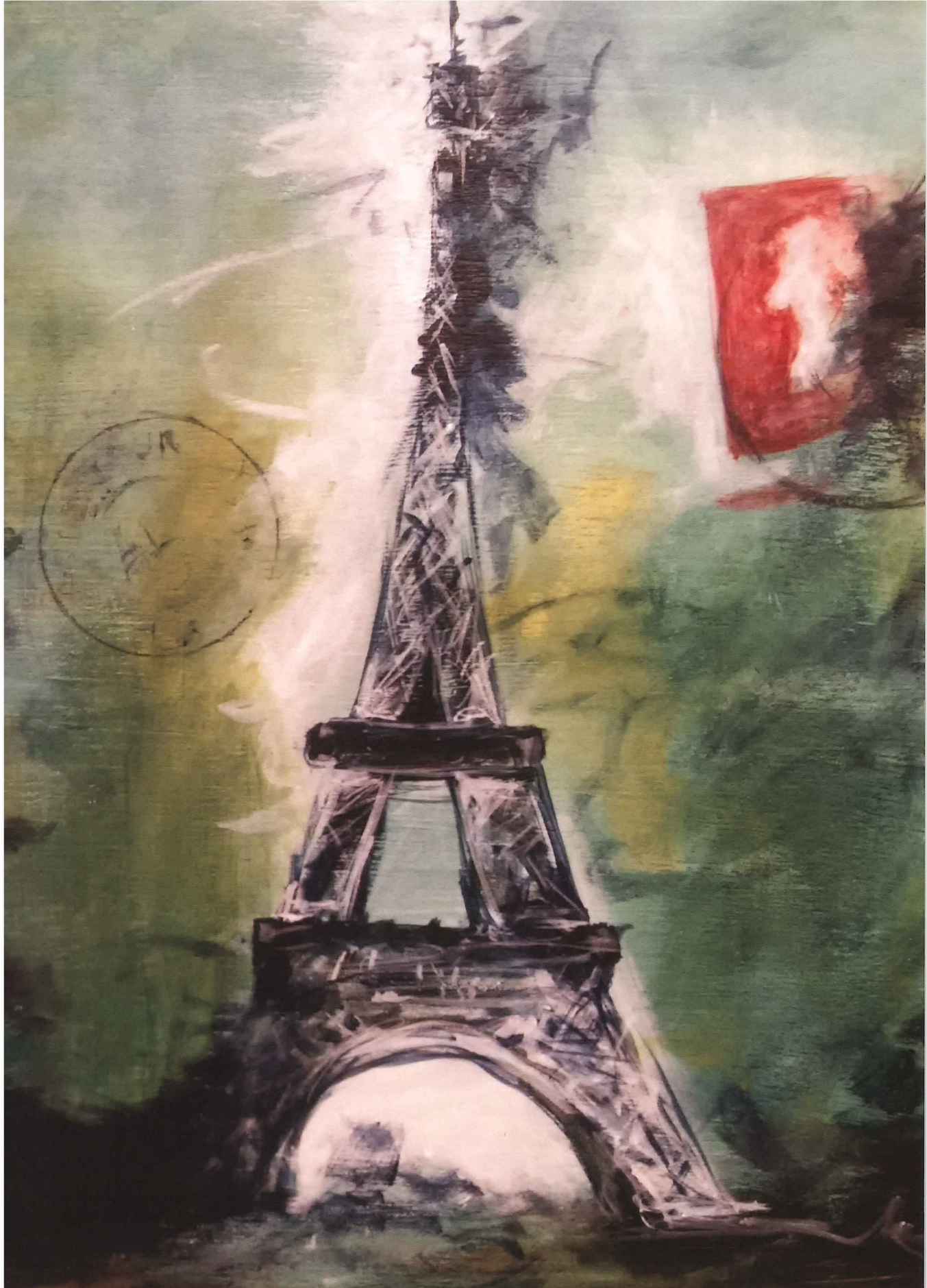
Kendra Kamp



Fernweh

---

Sara Martinie



## An Easter Ode

---

Josiah Sleppy

That sunrise to the East does with its broad  
 Brush strokes enchant the sky, that bowl of which  
 The ancients spoke with such a mystery.  
 Brisk air, as some celestial recipe  
 Read off in that high court, and with a wink,  
 As God had said, all baritone and mirth,  
 "Let it be served chilled." The orb's sweet nectar  
 The final topping on the custard, and I  
 Sit here, upon my Salem-pointing sill,  
 Enrapt at this divine culinary.

Was it so long ago I lay beneath  
 This bowl, so steeped in fiery and arcane  
 A liquor to rend apart the dark and let  
 The light shine through? That night the menu's favor  
 Was to grant one million singing stars,  
 Love-drunk on spaces infinite and mute.  
 I would not trade one moment's mem'ry of it  
 For gold or half the kingdom. And as I watched  
 The show invisible and nearly still,  
 I sang with others there, three heads against  
 My own, eyes filled with stars, hair in the grass,  
 And laughter free of irony or pain.

This pane of glass partitioning my hand  
 From rapturous air, jolted by cosmic light,  
 Enlivened and provoked, does mediate  
 The heav'nly truths to me. And once again  
 I do recall the aphoristic nature  
 Of those words I spoke, under inverted  
 Bowl, words written by Omar Khayyam,  
 That Persian man alert and cynical:  
 "The moving finger writes, and having writ,  
 Moves on; nor all your piety nor wit  
 Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,

Nor all your tears wash out a word of it."  
 And only now the bitter irony  
 Upbraids me here and makes me live again.

If life is one long line, as in a dream  
 Events follow events with chaos, and  
 Uncaused, then crying to the sky for redress  
 Seems a foolish homily. Maybe  
 Something of what they say is true, and life  
 Does follow life again, unbound and free.  
 Yet nor would I detach my heart from here,  
 To gain another place, though thousand on  
 Ten thousand years were offered me, a trade  
 Of burdens and reality for death.

I hear the dead will live again, and have.  
 My face is toward the East, city of God,  
 Probing its walls of mourning for some sign  
 Of its fair truth. And would I jettison  
 Conviction in the principles I've come  
 To know and love? I know the dead don't rise;  
 And yet they do; and I will live again.

Perhaps the sun, now angled in the bowl,  
 Will write a treatise for my frail doubt.  
 I turn to piety, to wit, to tears,  
 For turning back the unchecked march of time,  
 For capturing again the night's fair song,  
 When hid by magic fabric, the sun revealed  
 The stars in copious quantities of joy.

Yet no return is wrought for all my pains--  
 And I would have it such, for though the stars  
 Are gone, the sun is at its zenith now,  
 Shining with fierceness and a vibrant hope.



## My Organ Has Emphysema

---

Casey McIntosh

My organ has emphysema.

It's modest alveoli blight with

Dezincification, forfeit capacity to

exhale.

And now each Sunday my organ

wheezes,

Gasping How Great Thou Art.

Lord, Praise His Name

And lament.

My organ has a respirator.

An iron lung for brass voice.

Though Christ was a carpenter, He could never

Save an Organ.

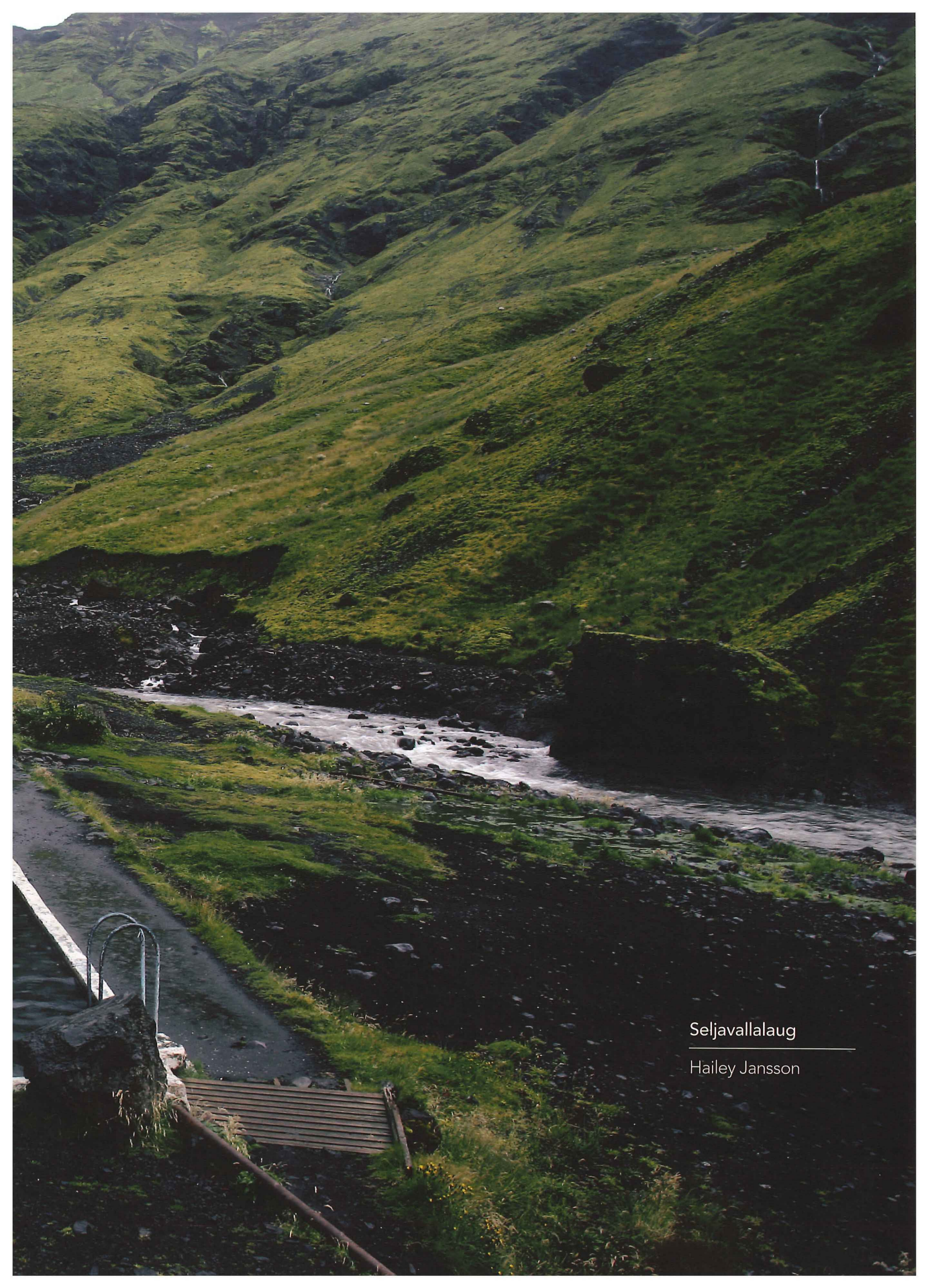


Tall Bumpy Pot

---

Christina Vera





Seljavallalaug

---

Hailey Jansson

## To the Gentleman in the Urinal Next to Me,

---

Josiah Kinney

We both stood there,

inches apart.

Staring at the same tiles

Sharing the same silence

that screamed the same drought.

As the minutes passed,

part of me wanted to talk about it.

The other wanted to run.

In the end,

I must apologize

My barren brother,

I left you

in your struggle.

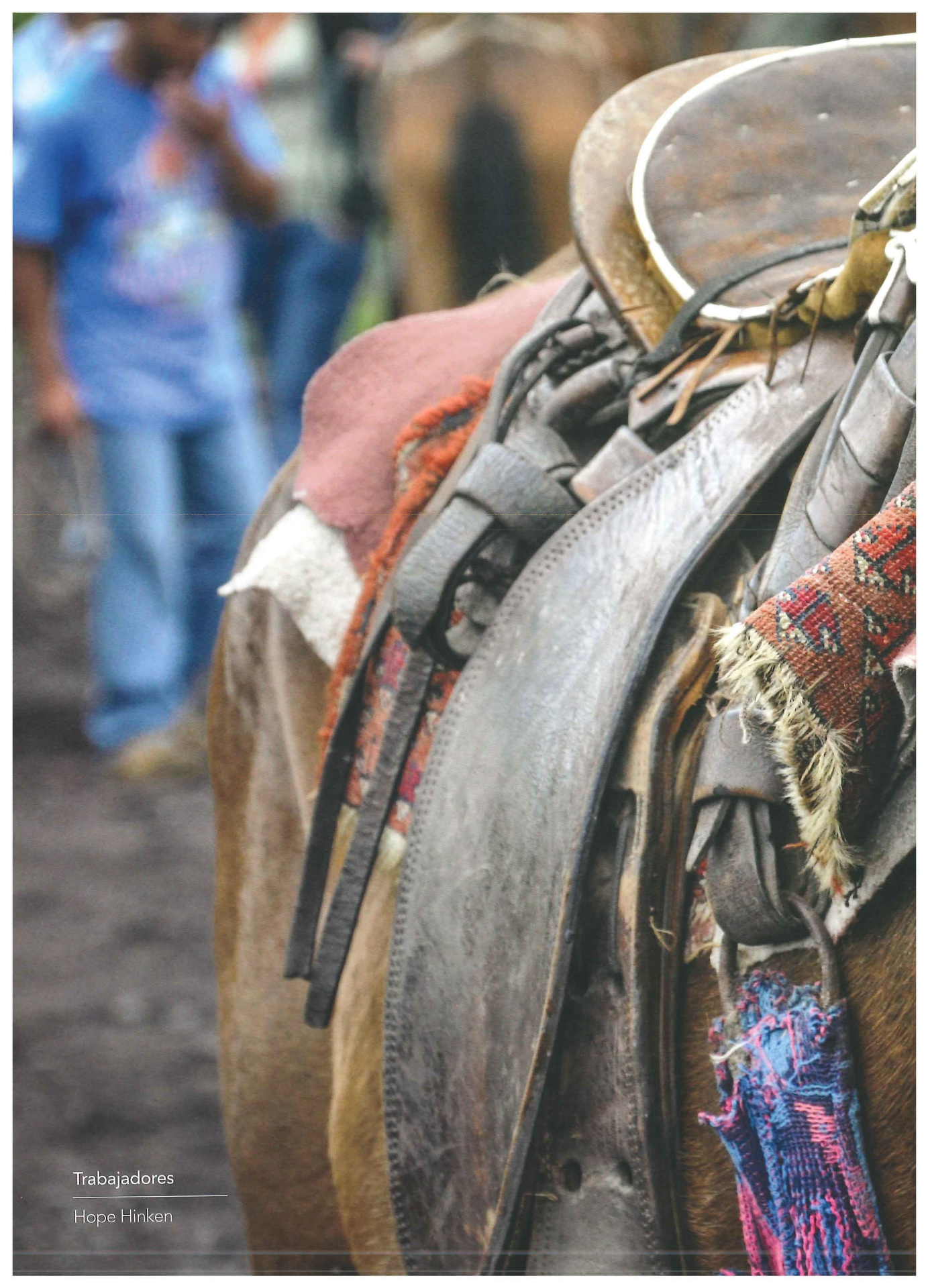
I hope you still aren't there.



Coil

---

Laura Hop



Trabajadores

Hope Hinken





## Visitation

---

Caitlin Gent

When Solitude steals in the door,

she forgets to knock.

She has never bothered with hellos.

She does not stomp her boots on the welcome mat.

She is empress of the ocean bottom,

queen of shy glens and craggy summits

but today she sits on my ottoman.

She perches at my feet. Not waiting,

exactly—keeping vigil

over the silence.

She strokes my tear-tracked cheek

and tells me my name.



fidgets

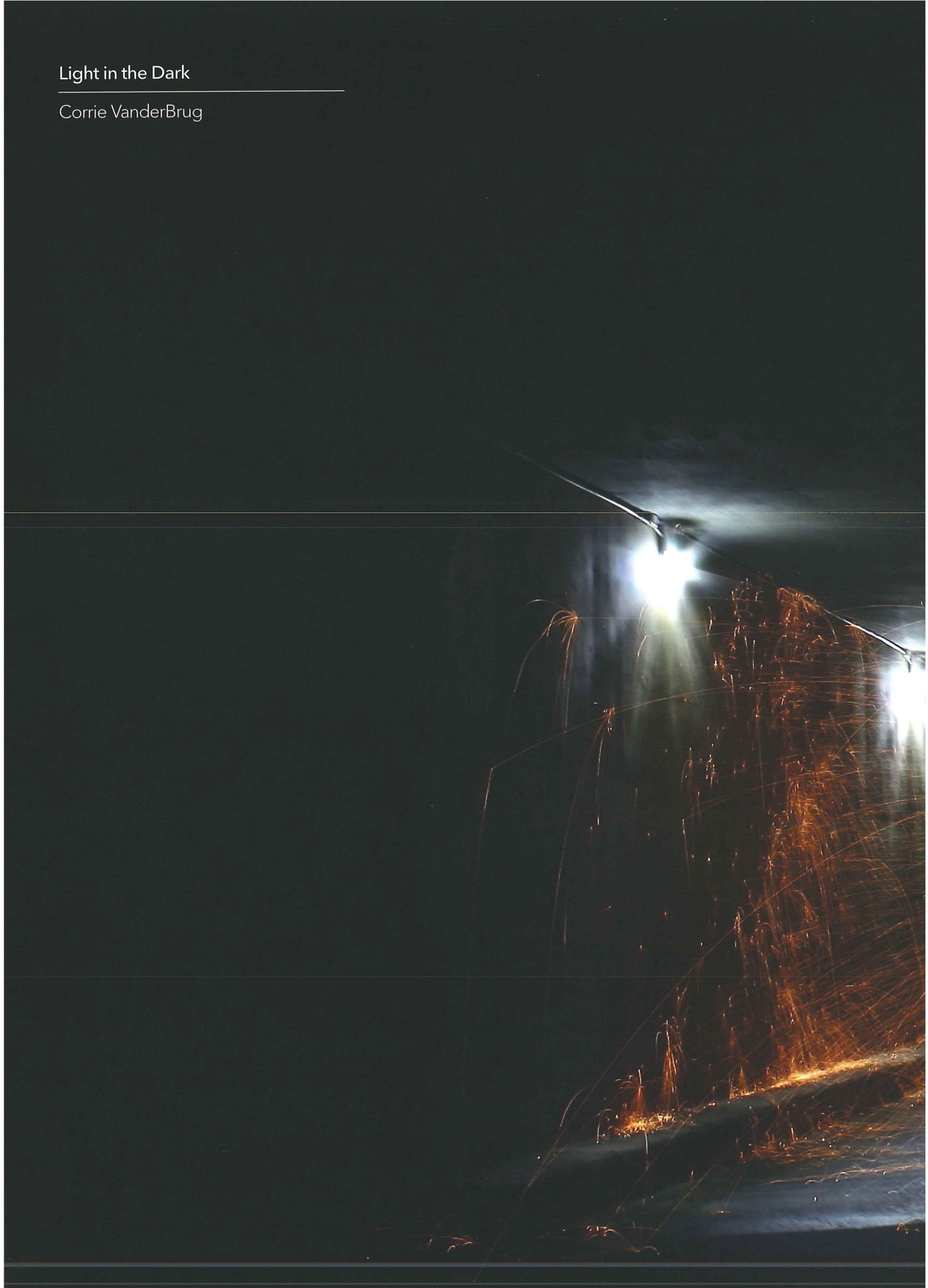
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Christina Vera

# Light in the Dark

---

Corrie VanderBrug





# Ekta Sriti (A Memory)

---

Rona Das

My sock-covered feet ran softly across the smooth, cement floor. I ducked around the hall, closely following my cousin as we laughed in delight. The electricity went out for the nth time that night, and the generator was refusing to start up.

We were racing to the kitchen for the candles and the lighter. It was pitch black outside, and we could hear the crickets singing while the jackals howled in the distance. Running into the kitchen, my cousin grabbed the lighter.

My twelve-year-old self was too scared to use the lighter, so I let her do the work. She flicked the metal tab a couple of times and a few sparks sprayed out. I slowly backed away.

"I think this one is done," she resigned.

"We have more," I replied with certainty, for the lights went out frequently.

She grabbed a handful of lighters from the drawer and tried the blue one; it immediately danced to life.

I took my candle and lit it in the flame. The golden orb was a stark contrast to the dark, windowless room we were in.

Mesmerized by the candle, I remembered the Hindi film *Devdas*,

especially the scene where the beautiful Parvati is peacefully asleep in her bed and her beloved Devdas sneaks into her room.

As he comes closer, I can see love and pain etched on his youthful face, for the two lovers are forever destined to remain apart. Devdas sees the lit candle next to her and snuffs it out by pressing his index finger and thumb into the flame.

"I'll light the candles on the right side of the house. You do the other," my cousin called out as she walked back down the hallway.

Broken out of my reverie, I proceeded out of the kitchen. Hot wax dropped to the ground as I began to light the candles.

Slowly, the hallway brightened; light bounced off the walls and faded into the dark, shadowy corners.

A few minutes went by, when I heard my mom call out my name. I quickly blew out my candle and ran back to the front house.

"Come on; we are going outside," she gestured to me.

"Why? It's cold out there, and wasn't it raining a little bit?" I answered.

"No, just come out; you need to see the sky," my mom looked pointedly at the flashlight I was about to grab.

I took my socks off and walked outside. A few drops of rain were splattered on the paved sidewalk that shone in the light of the night. The banana trees were tall, dusky figures swaying in the horizon.

My mom and aunt stood next to each other, grabbing their shawls tightly around their shoulders while my grandpa was seated in his wooden chair. My little brother walked crookedly staring up at the sky, and I too looked up.

Millions of stars sparkled in the heavens. It was as if someone dropped a bottle of silver glitter on an indigo canvas. Some stars were clustered together, while others were far apart.

To say it was breathtaking would be an understatement. My mind spun at the endlessness of the atmospheric dome; this was unlike the Grand Rapids sky I was used to.

The flooding of artificial light was rare in this part of Bangladesh, but the stars were able to shine even brighter after the lights went out. It was a calm stillness of peace.

While enjoying the quiet of the sky, I heard my mom softly prophesy, "Mone hoi et'í amader shesh shomai eksange Bangladeshe."

Maybe this will be our last time together in Bangladesh.

## The Memory Hoarder

---

Alex Bass

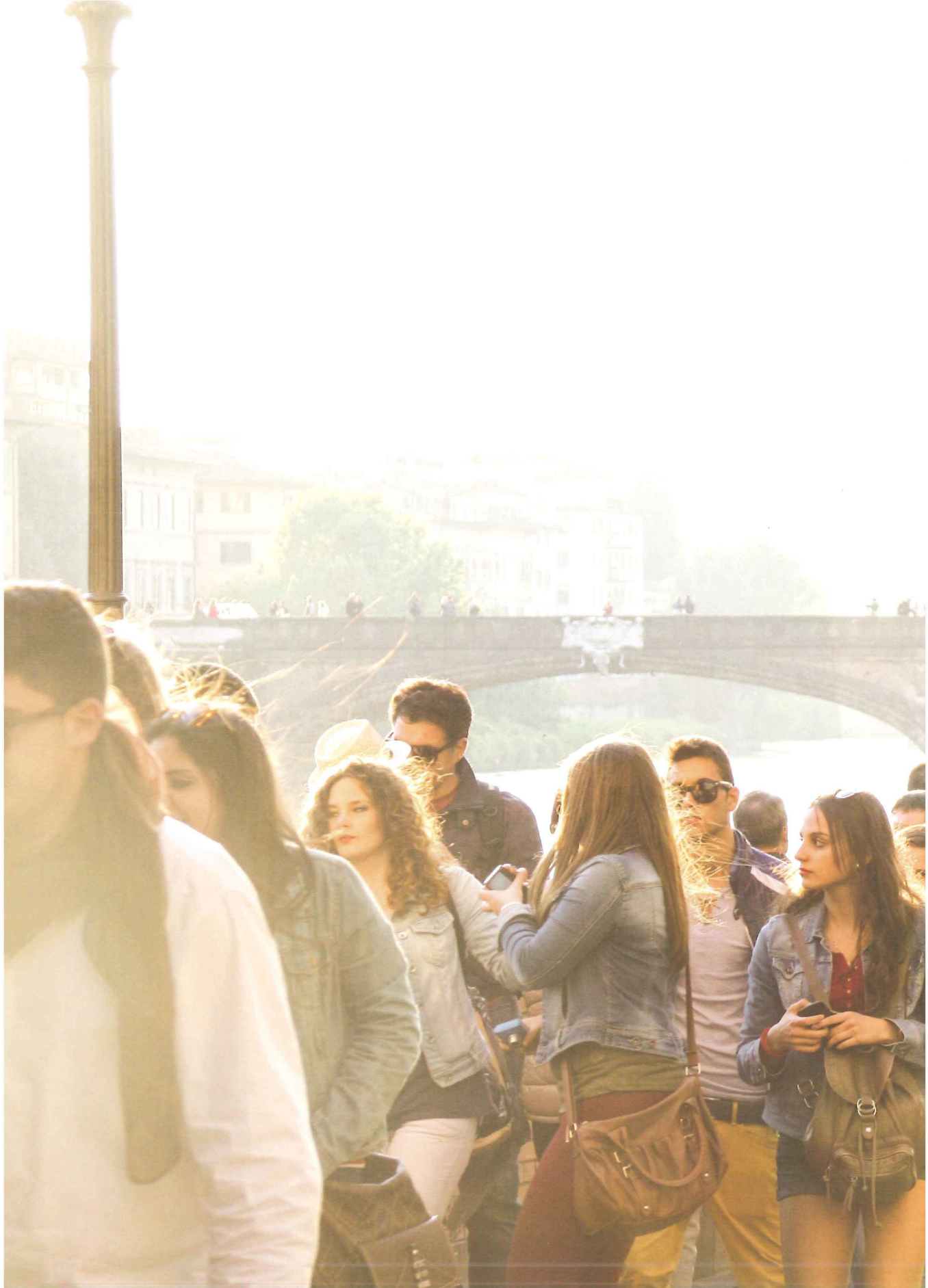
I found him, the chewed, yellow pencil, crouching in the back of a dusty drawer.

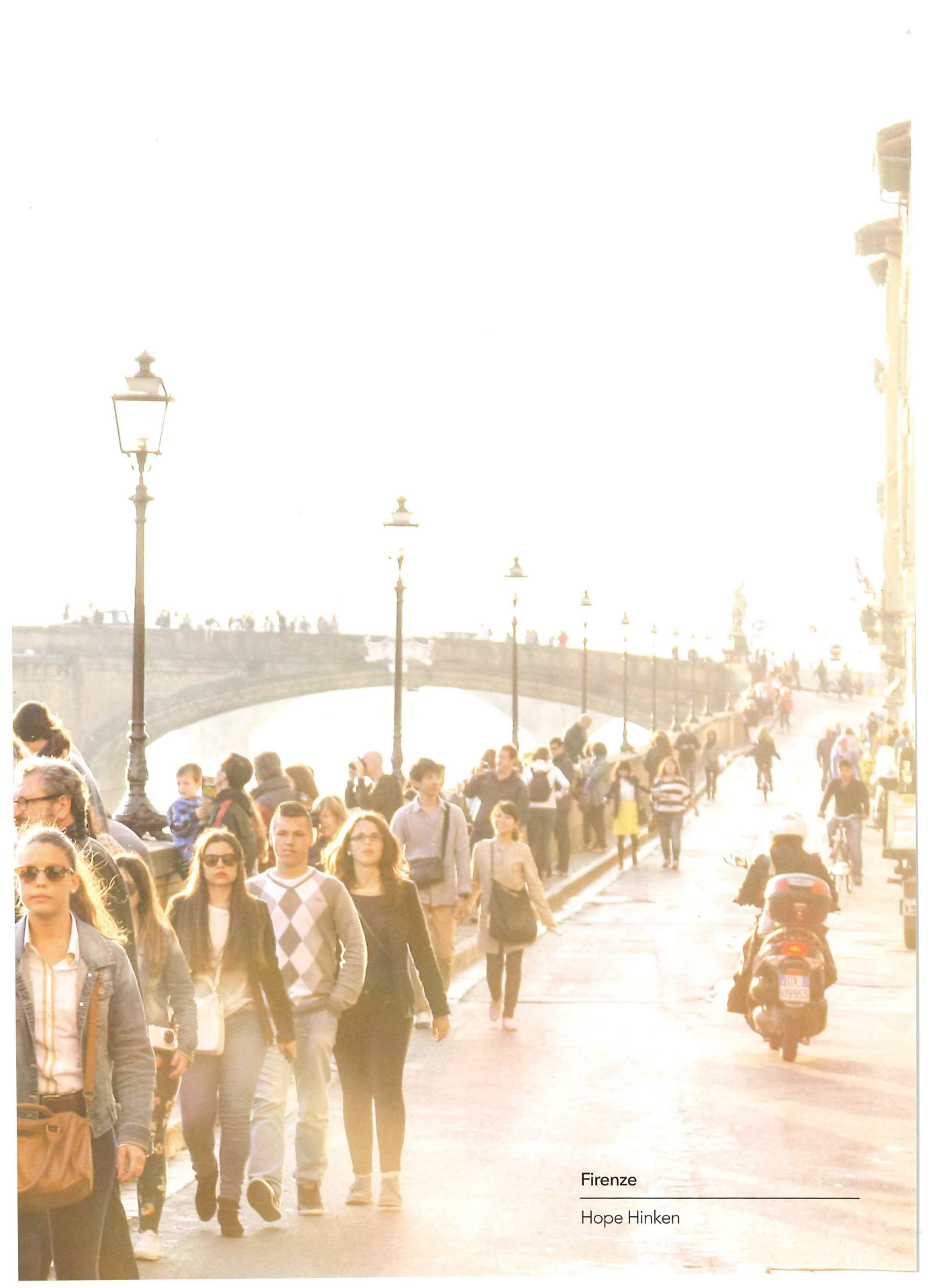
He looked expectant. Maybe he wondered where we had been month after year after lonely day. I couldn't bear to tell him we'd tossed him aside for new upgrades.

But I did remind him that once, on a frigid January day, I had wrapped my fingers down his then shiny sides and spelled out my first diary entry. I was seven and I wrote of the endless snowstorms and magical snowmen. Then I leaned in close and whispered that he had been there when my sister wrote a note to our dad one day in May, with her small hands shaping the words, "I feel full around you."

Then the pencil cried. Because although I hadn't told him that the simple days of childhood had ended, he knew. He softly carried our memories when we lost them amid town nights, paychecks, finals, and hot days.

I'm no hoarder. I throw away what is old and broken. But you my pencil, for one more day, I'll keep you.

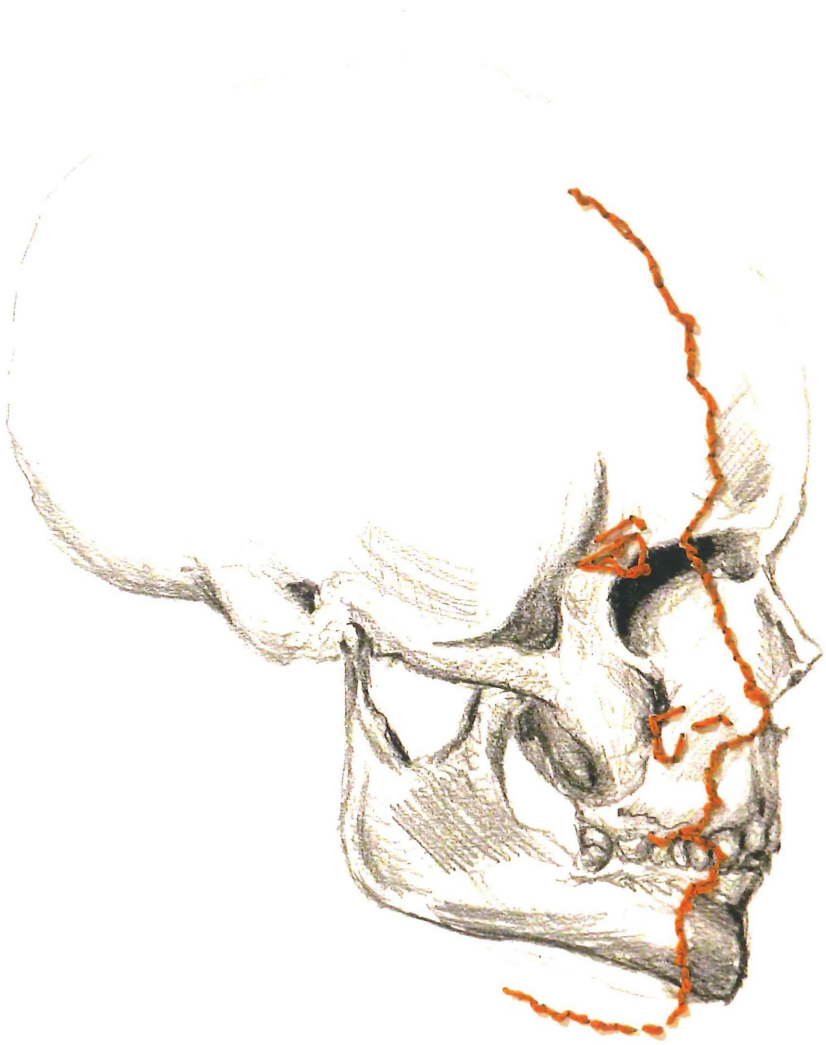




Firenze

Hope Hinken





Inner Portrait

---

Caitlin Smits

## Triskaidekaphobia

---

Josh Parks

1       it's Greek; you can tell by the k's  
2       so I think as the elevator moves up  
3       toward the three elements that aren't earth  
4       in China, it's four that's feared—even and monodigital  
5       now the elevator speeds up, some inevitable anti-gravity  
6       some human design fighting the earth's weighty charisma  
7       do they charge extra for the seventh floor? I think  
8       is it too perfect for those resigned to budget prices?  
9       a strange scraping accompanies the unnatural acceleration  
10      beeps and intercoms and snaps give my pulse another digit  
11      the sturdy, dependable sameness of my heavenward journey gone  
12      the compound-meter muzak corrupted with the extra beats of my heart  
14      six above seven, men above perfection  
  
    doesn't exist  
  
    isn't even unnumbered like the maintenance levels at the bottom  
  
    of the lethal elevator shaft

Tiskabekapohia

Jobh Faha

By Gaeul you can tell by the

as you look at the elevator towers up

toward the river elements of great work

the house is not that's found— even the

for the elements that is up, some

some house design for the world's

the house design for the world's

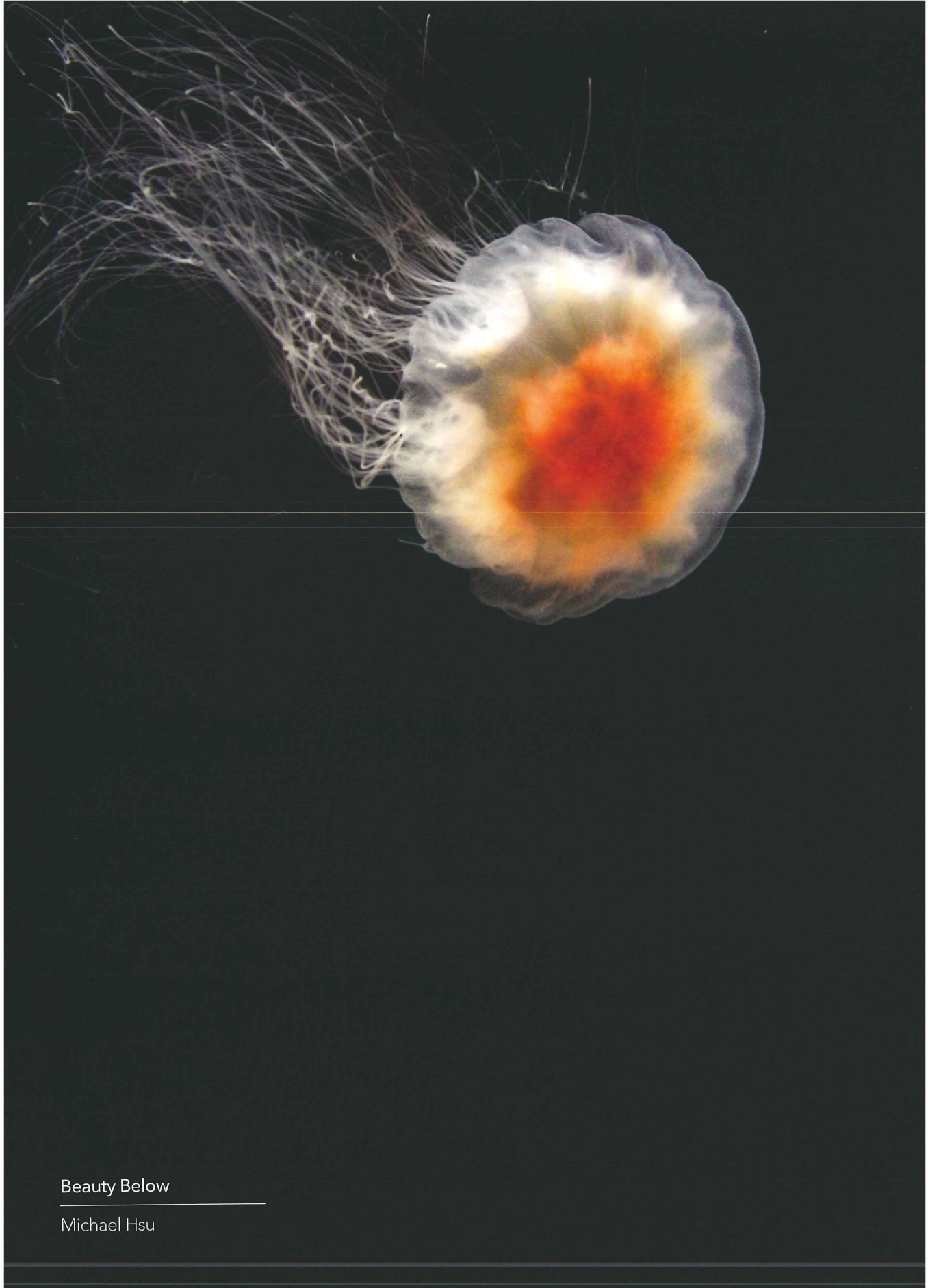
Bláa lónið

---

Hailey Jansson







Beauty Below

---

Michael Hsu

## The Good Country

---

James Li

although I've walked so many countries  
and have taken so many bows  
I am the weakest kind of man  
weaker than London Wine (I am)  
It was outside of Justin's house where  
I lost and found  
myself falling apart on the snow  
tipping and  
slipping  
and drifting  
into the bed of flowers  
I had vomited the night before  
and that hard wind exorcised  
my spirit from my body  
and my banished ghost  
floated over Lake and Wealthy  
(and upwards and upward still)  
swimming a million miles  
and a million points of light  
above Eastown  
and in the thin atmosphere of this blue wreckage  
I saw your cold face in mine  
with a promise  
that when you cross state lines  
I will not drink hemlock  
and nor will I slip gently  
into that Good Country  
where they hung the DJ  
with dental floss and shoelace  
from the basement rafters  
wrapped in flowers and  
hyperbole



Tram 47

Laura Sheppard





# Trams of Budapest

Laura Sheppard

Drizzly rain zig-zags down the windowpanes of the 47 tram, tiptoeing lightly on the roof. The loudspeaker crackles with a message from our driver.

*“Mi nehézségekkel a számokat. Elnézést a késés. Köszönöm.”*

That clears things up.

\* \* \*

When I first arrived in Budapest along with nineteen other wide-eyed American students, I was terrified of the trams. I lost my footing at sudden stops, I failed to get off in time, I bumped, clambered, and tripped into everyone in an eight-foot (no, this is Europe—two-meter?) radius. I made mental notes on which phrases to learn in Hungarian. *Pardon me. Sorry for groping you. Whoops, I stepped on your child.*

I soon learned how to apologize in Hungarian: *bocsánat*, pronounced slowly, evenly, with a higher pitch at the beginning to imitate the subtle intonations of the language. *Bocsi*, say some of the young people, shortening the words; elders often use the more formal *elnézést*. I murmur these words as I weave between tram passengers, as I step on people's feet.

The Budapest tram network is one of the largest in the world. More than 26 lines sprawl along a hundred miles of tracks, plunging through

downtown and across the river, connecting Buda and Pest: the old city and the new.

At the end of World War II the city's bridges were bombed out to prevent the invading Soviet army from advancing. Nearly 84 percent of the overhead electric streetcar lines had been destroyed. Three quarters of the city was in ruins, and the tram lines did not run.

\* \* \*

Between engine crescendos and graffitied concrete stops, I take in those around me, as I do every day. You are welcome to watch people on the trams, with the understanding that they are watching you, too. There is no need to smile when you make eye contact, no need to say *hello*. Hungarians keep to themselves; once you get over the initial impression of coldness, it's almost freeing to stare without worrying about rudeness.

But the trams during the day (“It's a freakin' nursing home in there,” said my friend Jules) are a different world from what they are at night. After dusk, while families eat dinner and old people go to bed, the young people emerge.

Loud, raucous, and skinny-jeans-clad, college kids bring the trams to life, calling out to each other and barely concealing their bottles of whiskey.

\* \* \*

As we ride the tram to our class together, my friend Hailey and I chatter loudly, leaning against poles. She speaks low and fast, littering her speech with semi-ironic lingo. “I got a bag of *pogacsa* from Spar this morning. *Hashtag blessed.*”

Our attention is diverted by garish sucking sounds coming from near the door. The source is a young couple – although, as I learned very quickly in Budapest, couples on the tram never just stand; they express their adoration through long exchanges of the eyes and mouth. *Hashtag classy*, I mumble to Hailey.

The elder passengers look on as well, and you can see the judgment in their eyes. It's not just because of the excessive displays; they have lived in a Hungary that these carefree young people do not know. Many remember the Soviet occupation of the '40s and '50s, the purges of Western sympathizers, the arrests of church leaders. They recall the faces of some of those buried in October 1956, when USSR tanks rolled into the city to quash the student revolution.

People my age weren't even alive for the Berlin Wall. But those with grey hair remember, and they purse their lips.

In my classes, Hungarian professors speak about the era in first person. *There was no way to express*

*ourselves, they tell us. Women couldn't even wear makeup or color their hair during Communism, because there was nothing for them to use.*

I see the middle-aged women on the trams expressing themselves now. They paint their wrinkled eyelids with makeup they never used to have, blinking gawdy blue sparkles that shimmer in fluorescent lighting.

\* \* \*

An old woman sits down across from me on the 47. My backpack is on the floor, my water bottle jammed between my knees. I can feel her staring at me as I press my face against the window.

The driver brakes hard at the next stop, and the bottle slides from between my legs. With impressive reflexes, the woman reaches to stop it from falling, pushing it back toward my lap. Startled, I jerk my head up.

*"Köszönöm szépen,"* I tell her.  
"Thank you so much."

Perhaps I am imagining it, but it seems she nearly smiles at me, before looking away to watch other people on the tram.

*"Szent Gellért következő,"* crackles the driver over the loudspeaker.

"Next stop."

## Morning Altar

---

Erin Smith

I face the fireplace mantle

This morning, it is my altar

Equipped with a mirror, Mason jar

Adorned with a maroon banner

Sun spots hover

Childish orbs of their mother

Who breaks the horizon

I think, This is my body, broken for you.

Morning hands hug mug

Tipping liquid to my lips

Cover my tongue

I think, This is my blood, shed for you.

Practice my sleepy liturgy

With a squint and creak

Unwashed face, unclean hands

I think, This is my world, created for you.



Duomo

Hope Hinken



# Making a Living

## Katerina Parsons

At the front desk, there is a small plaque. *"Point to your language in order to receive assistance,"* it proclaims in twisting type in English, Spanish, French, Somali, Arabic, Vietnamese, Burmese, Nepali, and Swahili. The waiting room is usually filled with people from Sudan, Bhutan, or Iraq who have pointed and now are waiting.

When I wave at the front desk and walk back into the office, I hear the soft jumble of a different language spoken at every desk. Like a friend's face in a crowd, the untranslatable words pop out at me: *DHS, I-94, Employment Authorization.*

This is where the refugees land, between the fake potted plants and the grid of grey cubicles. This unassuming office is our league of nations: it's from here we move families into apartments, sign them up for government benefits, and help them through applying for a job.

Hundreds walk through our doors every year, point to their language, sit, and wait in well-worn chairs. Refugees learn to be good at waiting.

\* \* \*

We are an unlikely pair: Sadiq, a Somalian refugee in his thirties, and me, barely 20, still finishing my degree. The secretaries at the temp agency don't honor his gender or his seniority, but talk only to me.

If this bothers him, he does not show it. In the two months that he's been here, he has learned to accept whatever help he can get.

I show him where to print his name and information, and as he fills the

tiny boxes that define him here, he refers to the stack of papers that name him a legal permanent resident of the United States. He prints in tiny capitals, his hand accustomed to elegant Arabic loops.

He doesn't ask about the job, where he'll stand pulling the skins off turkeys with one muscle-straining tug, hundreds in a shift until his fingers, one day, won't unclench. When they hand him a plastic cup, I point to the bathroom and manage not to blush when I explain to him exactly what they are asking.

As two hours become three and we wait for more paperwork, we talk. I know how improbable this conversation is – a single, middle-aged Muslim man and a young, white Christian girl. In the United States, my Nepali friends tell me, castes are blurred, and then they disappear.

I try to explain this to Sadiq. "We value achievement here," I say, "People think you are important because of what you do and not because of who you are."

Sadiq can accept this, if not understand it. "In Somalia," he says, "If I see a man the same age as my father, I will respect him like I respect my father. We respect people because their age deserves it, not because they are a big man or have a lot of wealth."

I stop and think about the homeless man with the cardboard sign on the corner before my bus stop. He is probably my father's age, if not older.

"Is there anything else that seems really different here in the United States?" I ask him.

Sadiq stops and thinks for a moment, then grins. "I would have to say... men with earrings," he says, shaking his head at the idea.

\* \* \*

The United Nations defines a refugee as someone who:

"Owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country."

They are stateless, trapped in a country that doesn't want them, knowing that they cannot go home.

"Persecuted" is too gentle a word. These people have been raped and tortured, their families killed in front of them, their homes burned to dust.

\* \* \*

"Language discrimination occurs when an individual is treated differently because of her or his native language or accent," I wrote for an informational packet:

"When policies extend beyond language-competency requirements reasonable for the work being done, they unfairly discriminate against people because of their nation of origin, which is illegal."

**Q.** Even though Abed is fluent in English, he is denied a promotion to the front of the house in favor of a less-qualified candidate with no accent. Is this language discrimination?

A. Yes. Abed's accent reflects his nationality, not his competence. If he is fully able to perform the language tasks required, he cannot be denied the promotion based on his accent.

\* \* \*

My real work begins when the clients finish their English and job skills classes, which they complete after four months or when their rent is due—whichever comes first. I have a phone script by my desk.

"We serve area employees by matching them with quality refugee candidates," I chirp. As if those who are not quality are sent someone else. The shell-shocked. The legless. Perhaps they were left behind.

One time a man told me, "Oh, I got some of yours. Real good workers. If you got any more Chaldeans, send them over." We don't keep humans stocked by religion or nationality. I can't run back to our storehouse to see how many Iraqi Christians we have lying around. That kind of practice is illegal, but at least this man is willing to hire, so I gently prodded him to clarify. "Could you explain what you're looking for in a candidate?" I asked.

"Well, someone who speaks Arabic, I guess," said the man. "But they have to be able to sell alcohol. So, Chaldeans."

I told him I would keep his application; that I would let him know if I found a good candidate, but I was angry with his flippancy. I didn't.

Nara is from Sri Lanka, the tear-drop-shaped nation off the coast of India. We call him Nara because his real

name is as long as a page in a book and employers look to us for help when they see it. He needs a job. Next week, his four short months will be up, and the resettlement payments will stop.

His travel loans will begin to accrue interest—the United States expects back every penny of the plane ride over here. Now all at once his rent is due. He has small children to feed.

I am preparing Nara for another interview: his fourth or fifth. He is soft-spoken and his pronunciation is muffled like he's speaking through a mouthful of rocks.

While he talks I find it difficult to concentrate, my eyes drawn to his neck. A purple scar coils around the base of it, disappearing down his pressed collared shirt.

I coach him through the formalities of a job interview. "Why should I hire you?" I feed him. "I am a good worker," he sounds out. He is nervous. He rubs his neck. I can't take my eyes away. I can't stop thinking *someone tried to kill you*.

\* \* \*

I know nothing but the facts about these people—that Liah is from Eritrea where she spoke Tigrinya, or that Paw Htoo fled Burma months before finishing high school. I know only what can fit on a resume or a government form. Cubans, Iraqis, Sri Lankans and Somalis; Christians, Muslims, Hindus; young and old and soldiers and prisoners brought together into the great American melting pot that is the box on the form checked "refugee."

"Employers often find that refugee employees are highly motivated and dependable," I wrote in the informational packet. "They are committed to establishing a new life here in the United States and know that this is only possible through stable employment."

How can I be the voice and the face of thousands? Who am I to say who's committed, or dependable, or motivated? Some are sullen. Some are slow. Some have tempers, and don't they have the right? When you splinter into pieces, of course you have sharp edges.

\* \* \*

Gasaan held back in his job interview. He was tongue-tied in the posh office, and, when addressed, he averted his eyes to show respect.

Afterwards, the human resources manager looked only at me when she told the two of us, smiling, "We're looking for more *English*," but I knew she also meant a *little less broken. A quicker smile*.

On the drive home, I feel flattened. Gasaan fiddles with his phone. "It is common to have many interviews before you get a job," I tell him. "This is good practice. I think you gave good answers."

"Here?" he points down our turn-off as my car shoots past it.

"You're right!" I groan, embarrassed, as I pull the van around in the next driveway. After three months in the city, Gasaan knows it better than me.

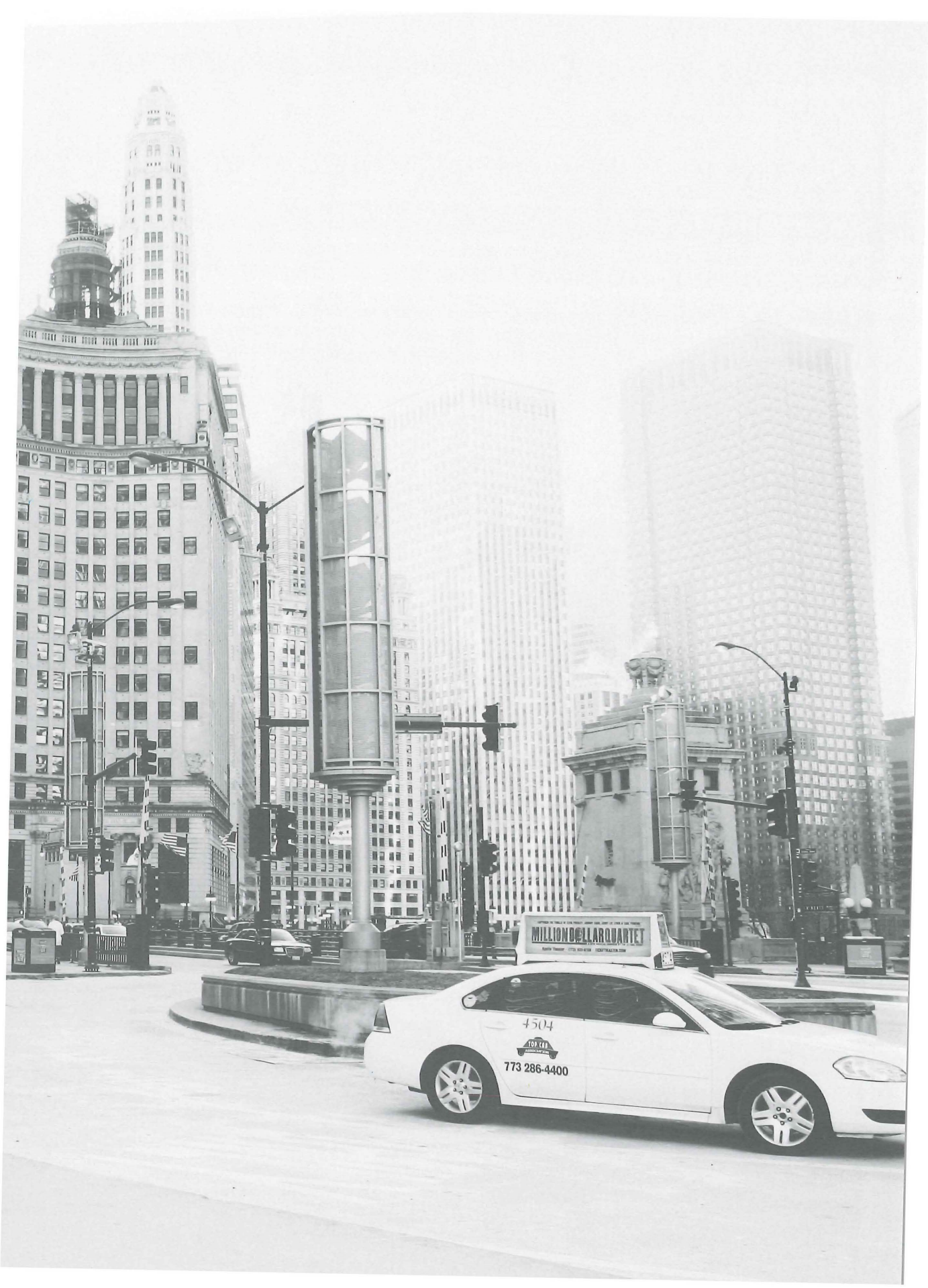
I wish Gasaan was driving, but they handed the keys to me.



Foggy Chicago in Black and White

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Mikaela Mannes





# The Field

Lauren DeHaan

June. Overgrown bluegrass and maple trees line the east side of the field. There is a river to the north; the slow kind that children splash in while their mothers gossip on the bank.

A row of crumbling cinder blocks, stacked three levels tall, lines the remaining sides. Sitting next to the cinder-lined west side is a dirt road that winds from the Dickens' small farmhouse, through town, to the new interstate highway past Melville.

Summer heat lies over the field like a blanket. Moll feels its weight, its stickiness. The grass pricks her neck, bare arms, and the space between where her dress ends and her socks start.

Cicadas. And in the distance, the grandmother whistling hymns as she pins up the linens. Moll hums along.

Later that evening, at a table set with the old, floral tablecloth and hand-crocheted potholders, the grandfather asks about her day.

"The Johnson girls were asking after you in town," he says.

"I was busy today."

"Oh yeah, with what?"

"Stuff," she replies.

After dinner, the grandparents sit in two different chairs. A worn rocker for the wife, a deep armchair for the husband. Click of the knitting needles. Laughter from the television. Grasshoppers in the stifled night.

Moll stands at the counter mashing the strawberries she had picked that

morning. The berries bleed and let out a sweet aroma. She eats a few, then puts more in the bowl and slowly presses the potato masher on top of them, watching them ooze.

She looks out the kitchen window and sees two headlights flash in the distance. Moll washes her hands and wipes them on the towel hanging from the handle of the oven. She puts plastic wrap over the bowl and places it in the fridge.

"I'm heading to bed now." Her voice is louder than she expected.

"It's only eight," the grandmother replies.

She hears the grandfather scoff as she walks up the creaky stairs. He mumbles something about how she is always alone with a book.

Her bedroom still smells musty, even though she has been here over a month. Next to her bed is a stack of books that grows every summer. The small bed is covered with crisp sheets and a light blue comforter with daisies on it. Her clothes, the ones that she could fit in her suitcase, are hung neatly in an antique wardrobe.

Moll reaches under the bed and pulls out a small duffel. She removes a pair of jean shorts and a bright pink tank top. She takes off her dress, hangs it in the wardrobe, and stares at herself in the mirror. Then she slips on her shorts and tank top and applies heavy makeup.

Moll's cowboy boots are waiting on the roof just outside her window. She stuffs her bare feet in as she slips along the west edge of the roof, careful not to scrape her knees on

the rough tiles. She lowers herself over the edge and grabs hold of the oak. She can see the couple through the window. He has fallen asleep in his chair, and she is clicking away.

She climbs down and makes her way across the stone path, past the tomato plants, the wild raspberries, careful to avoid the small snake holes. She's back in the field.

Jed is waiting, sitting atop the hood of the pickup. They do all the silly little things; they kiss, touch, whisper. He talks again as they lie on the hood, his arm under her neck, hers on his chest. She admires the fire flies, he admires her. Small flickers in the dark.

"So there's this thing with my band next week in Melville," he says. "You could come if you want—what I meant to say is that I think it would be cool if you came—as my girlfriend or something."

Moll hesitates, letting his nerves hold a few moments longer. She takes a quick breath in and replies with a practical "how would I get there?"

"I could come and pick you up."

"What time?"

"Six-thirty. Seven maybe."

"They don't go to bed until nine."

"You could maybe tell them about us."

Nothing.

"What's the downside." He says it as more of a statement than a question.

"They will tell Susan."

"I don't like it that you hide me from your family. And you shouldn't call your mother by her first name"

"I just don't want them to fuss; this is my first thing with a guy, and if it doesn't work out—"

"Why won't it work out?"

"I am only here for the summer." The night is still hot, the air still sticky. Her legs are uncomfortably stuck on the hood. "I just can't go, ok?"

"Whatever. I like you, Moll, but at some point I need a girlfriend who is ok with being seen together in any place but this field."

They stay there under his green blanket most of the night. They stay there the next night too. And two nights after that.

Moll finds herself living in the field. Reading and humming in the hot sun, sleeping next to Jed when the sun falls. She doesn't see him play in his band. They don't go out. One time she sees him at the library and smiles.

Heat. Cicadas. Grandmother's whistle. The field is nicely enclosed. The river, trees, the cinderblocks.

August. The town celebrates its Fair Days. Moll leaves the grandparent's farm early one morning. In her basket are four jars of homemade strawberry jam. One for Jed. Three to enter into the 4H competition.

She hopes he likes it. She guesses he likes jam. The air is full of dust in the fairgrounds. Banners hang from temporary wooden barns, and the smell of manure gives Moll a dull headache.

"Moll, Moll Lock! Is that you? We thought you may have gone back to Chicago to be with your mom," says Jamie Johnson.

Moll assumes she has heard about Susan's engagement. It has only been two years since Moll's father died, but Susan has found a replacement.

"I didn't want to miss the fair."

"What's in the basket?" asks her twin, Janine.

"Strawberry jam. Have you guys seen Jed Handler around?"

"I didn't know you are friends with Jed," says Jamie.

"Do you know his girlfriend, Henny? She's adorable," adds Janine.

And then Moll sees him. It. The scene. The two of them together. He is holding her hand. Her blond ponytail is bouncing up and down as she looks from him to the pig pen, then back to him.

He sees her. His eyes meet Moll's. She panics, clenches the straw basket. Thinks about the field the night before, his invitations that have stopped. She is leaving in a couple weeks.

She walks over and hands him a jar of the jam. She has drawn little hearts in permanent marker on the top. She breathes in deeply, trying to choke back tears. On the way home, she stops short of the house and hops over the cinderblocks into her field.

The bluegrass is familiar. It pricks her skin. Her tears leave dirty streaks on

her knees. As evening falls, she gets up and heads inside. The table is set with the old, floral tablecloth and crocheted potholders.

"Did you go to the fair today, sweetheart?" The grandmother asks.

"Yes."

"See anyone you knew?"

"No."

"You should get out more, meet more people. You might even find yourself a boy one of these days," the grandfather replies.

"Maybe I should." says Moll.

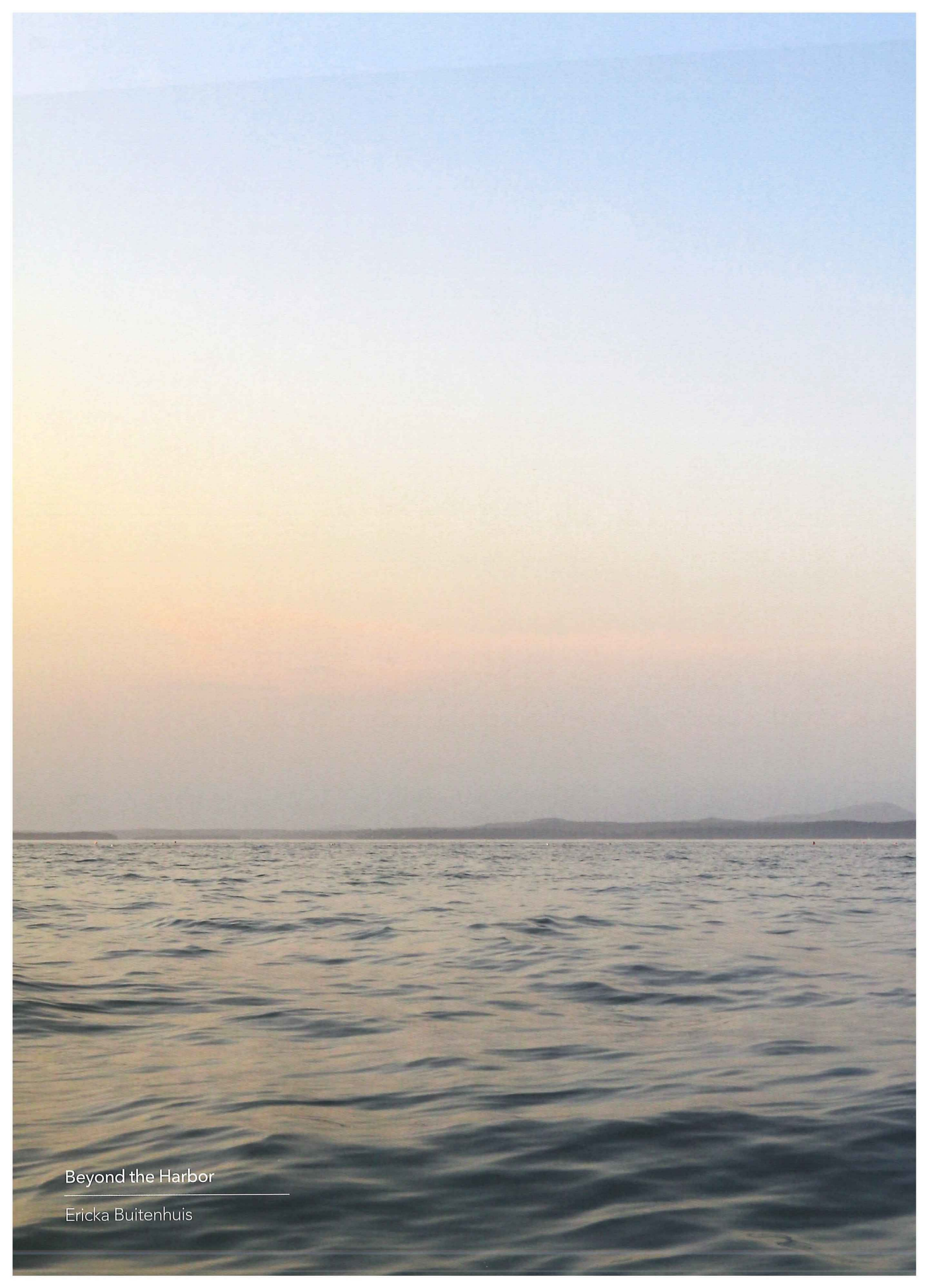
Last day. The water trickles through the river and Moll walks along the bank. She makes a full loop around the field, past the maples, past the cinderblocks. She hasn't talked to Jed or the Johnson twins.

Moll packs up the bedroom, which never lost that musty smell. She leaves three books behind. She will find them again next summer.

Summer heat. Cicadas. The grandfather drives her down the dirt road, past Melville, to the new interstate highway. He hands her a piece of gum. The drive is silent and the goodbye is short.

"We are thinking about planting corn in that old field next summer," he says. "Maybe something will finally grow in it."

"Yes, maybe something will grow next summer." She boards the train and starts her book. She will add this one to her pile by her bed when she arrives home.



Beyond the Harbor

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Ericka Buitenhuis



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## About *dialogue*

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Founded in 1971, Dialogue is an art and writing magazine of Calvin undergraduate creative work that is curated, edited, and produced by students.

Dialogue publishes work from four categories: Prose, Visual Art, Photography, and Poetry. A blind student jury evaluates all submissions and selects the finest pieces for publication.

In addition to submissions, the Dialogue staff is always looking for students interested in doing layout, helping with communications, or serving as a juror.

Send submissions or questions to:

[dialogue.submissions@gmail.com](mailto:dialogue.submissions@gmail.com)



Girl in Box

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Molly DeDona

