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## BETWEEN WORD AND IMAGE: A GALLERY WALK THROUGH CONTEMPORARY HAIGA

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It's a good thing I broke my foot in the summer of 2017, because all the time I would have spent gallivanting around, I devoted instead to organizing an exhibit of haiga for the Residential College of Arts and Humanities (RCAH) LookOut! Art Gallery at Michigan State University (MSU). The idea for *Haiga: The Poetry of Images*, aka *Between Word and Image*, had come to me in a flash some six months before, as a means of outreach to students and community members for Evergreen Haiku, the monthly study group I facilitate for the RCAH Center for Poetry. With funding from the Haiku Society of America and MSU, and support from study group members, chief among them Steve Hodge and Michael Rehling, Evergreen Haiku put together a show focused on the picture-poems of two regional, yet very different haikai artists—Chase Gagnon and Lidia Rozmus—and placed them in a context of international English-language haiga.

The pairing of Gagnon and Rozmus evoked a number of apparent polarities, not only between word and image, but between novice and master, old and new visual arts, realistic and figurative approaches to representation, and the inspirations of man-made and natural environments. Gagnon is a young roamer of streets in down-and-out Detroit, relatively new to haiku and to the urban photography that lends his haiga their hyper-realistic power. Trained in the traditional black-ink painting called *sumi-e*, Rozmus has produced hundreds of ethereal haiga over the last twenty years or so, many appearing in her own books or as covers for haiku journals such as *Mayfly*.

At the exhibit opening, which attracted a good-size crowd, I made a joke about my walking boot and recalled that the word

haiga means “playful painting” in Japanese. Play in general is simultaneously purposeless and practical, subversive and affirming. Play is a mash-up of the literal and the figurative, a momentary improvisation for keeps. So, too, these haiga, which thrive on the separate, yet side-by-side fictions of poem and picture. The very incompleteness of their relationship is what drives their connection. That said, I invited gallery guests to peruse the haikai art on display and play around with meaning. I, too, immersed myself in the challenge.

I started with the twenty or so haiga Gagnon had chosen for display. Over and again, the haiku spoke to me of loss, hope, brokenness, persistence, despair, resolution, decay, and growth—his own and others:

old neighborhood  
volunteers painting  
over my graffiti

His gritty depictions of the urban underbelly, in grainy, stark color, drew me out of my comfort zone, to places I normally avoid and people I do not really see: ghetto streets, abandoned buildings, back alleys, homeless men, exhausted women. Haiga by haiga, Gagnon dragged me into the physical and emotional labyrinths of his reality—and pointed me the way through, to respite, beneath a desolate underpass:

dead of winter  
my lungs fill  
with moonlight

At their best, Gagnon’s haiga demanded my empathy for lives led in empty places—and did not take no for answer. *maybe they can / and there’s a reason they don’t*, insists the haiku he placed with a monochrome photo of an abandoned house on an abandoned street (Plate 3). For all the real decay, I suddenly realized, *these speechless walls* also let in light from a fleeting break in the clouds. The transcendent moment captured on film lends a sub-

lime dignity to the place and its people. In another haiga of an apparently well-kept house and walled-in garden, Gagnon once again gnawed through my first responses. *monochrome filter / how much of this life / have I suppressed* had me noticing that graffiti covered every surface of the story.

Limping from one side of the exhibit to the other, from Gagnon to Rozmus, felt like passing through the looking glass. Rozmus quells inner doubts and demons by turning away from the urban landscape to the natural environment, from distraction to simplicity:

silence  
I hide in  
for a moment

In her haiku, one feeling at a time gains entry:

nothing else matters  
just this wind  
touching my skin

Or say, rather, that the artist has created a cloister of her own imagining within which she strives to pin down the peace that so constantly calls and confounds us:

winter dream  
I am sewing on the button  
with one hole

There is an ecstatic element to Rozmus's art, as ably expressed visually as verbally. In one ink painting silence is rendered as a bending brush stroke, a heartbeat, a detour, a return. In another, breath becomes an infinity of circles scratched on black board. And consider the haiku, *starry night*. An objective observation in the second line, *I'm here*, is followed by the subjective realization in the third, *and there*. In a moment of intuition, the *I* diffuses into the nothing of everything. The insight is visualized in an

accompanying photo so close to its subject as to elude recognition. Thus the image complements and expands the verbal surrender of self.

Rozmus magnified this resonant effect for me by presenting each of her haiku in three languages and coupling them to three different art forms. Her haiku in English went hand in hand with the black and white photography of Iwona Biedermann. The same haiku in Japanese (calligraphy by Masanobu Hoshikawa) accompanied Rozmus's sumi-e painting. And, finally, the haiku translated into Rozmus's mother tongue, Polish, partnered with her spare pencil drawings on black board. (These collaborative haiga were all drawn from Rozmus's 2017 book, *In Silence*, published by Deep North Press.)

In each art form, the representation of reality is abstract, which is to say, whittled down to essence. I was free to see in the bare lines and shapes what I wanted and needed to see. In *starry night*, for example, I and other gallery guests might contemplate three times over the nature of our fusion with the universe: as a formation of frost on ground in Biedermann's "unrecognizable" photo, mentioned above; as a spray of ink in Rozmus's sumi-e; and as a constellation of points on an infinite plane in Rozmus's black board drawing (see Plate 5, the Polish translation replaced by the haiku in English). Each iteration of the haiga, each alteration of language and imagery, added nuance to the kaleidoscopic view of a singular feeling.

As I read Rozmus, art meant stripping experience bare of the very details that called Gagnon to expression. On the surface of things, these two haikai artists occupied opposite ends in the spectrum of practice. And yet, I felt some fundamental likenesses. Both artists appeared to value spontaneity of expression, both found sustenance in imagination and dream, both sought communion with what is other—Gagnon tiptoeing on thin ice to Nirvana (Plate 2); Rozmus in search of the brush stroke without beginning or end, in this instance paired with her own photography (Plate 1). Whether engaging or disengaging from a troublesome world, both chose the art of haiga to see and to understand more deeply.

The same must also be said for the seventeen haiga artists who contributed one or more images to the show's contextual display of English-language haiga from around the globe. These included Ion Codrescu of Romania; Ron C. Moss of Australia; Kris Moon of Japan; Adjei Agyei-Baah of Ghana, alone and in collaboration with Helmut Lotti of Belgium; Tatjana Debeljački of Serbia; and Guntram Porps of Germany, in collaboration with Robert Moyer of the U.S.A. The display featured other American haiga artists as well, notably Alexis Rotella, Sandi Pray, Roberta Beary, and the late Jane Reichhold. Four Evergreen Haiku members also provided haiga.

Making my way along this third display one step at a time, I looked for a sharing of purpose and meaning in an otherwise solitary game, the idea of which was neatly captured by Rotella's haiga, *Hey* (Plate 6). Agyei-Baah used photomontage to illustrate rather literally the words *leafless tree— / lifting a cup of nest / to the sky*. Debeljački used mixed media to describe almost stroke for stroke the spoken scene in *sudden rain / waiting for someone's / umbrella*. Exploiting the same illustrative approach to the relationship of image and word, both haiga thematically explored the consolations that made up for pain and loss.

In similar vein, I found myself comparing Porps's scribbled figure of a woman, presented with Moyer's *10 years later / in your voice on the phone / salt air*, to Pray's pointillistic rendering of a tree, accompanied by her *seed catalog / the colors of / a winter daydream*. In both haiga the visual and the verbal go beyond simple illustrative connection to interpret one another and to evoke the imaginative powers that make of the past or the future a present thing.

Roberta Beary's haiku matched to a family photo, along with a multi-media dreamscape by Kris Moon, made one last matching set of haiga that resonated with one another—and with me. On the *church steps* (Plate 4), a space just shy of the contemplation of eternity, Beary sees *a mourning dove / with mother's eyes*. (The haiku won 1<sup>st</sup> Prize in the 1<sup>st</sup> Basho Haiku Challenge.) Moon's figurative image of a glowing lantern or a beer mug frothing with ethereal foam toys with conceptions of *moonlight*

*escaped* (Plate 7). Despite obviously different visual and verbal styles, both haiga take an expansive view of the relationship between image and word. And both evoke the call of this world as a summons to spirit.

Wherever they hailed from, however they expressed themselves, haiga artists in the global display made a point of noticing, questioning, crying out, connecting, and, yes, playing deep as if their lives, our lives, depended on it. And don't they? William Carlos Williams once suggested that without the insights of poetry we risk dying a little every day. Leaning on the crutch, I took one last look at two haiga by Ron C. Moss.

In the first, *winter orchard* (placing fourth in the Zen Garden Haiku Contest for 2007), a stark black and white photograph highlights the sheen on two lusciously ripe fruits (Plate 8). My first thought was to remember the play-with-your-food meme that has us carving faces in oranges and eggplants. My second was to deem Moss's play deeply serious and subtle, for without modification these fruit mysteriously stand in for other things: the huts of fruit pickers, as the accompanying haiku suggests, or a fruit picker and the poet, perhaps. There is a communion beneath the moon that eases the rigors of winter, of hard work, of difference.

In the second Moss haiga a black and white photo of a bird's head, vertically mirrored, is equally realistic and abstract in impact. Set in middle ground between the bird and its reflection, the haiku directed my gaze outward and also inward, to the creative tension between what breaks and what mends our lived experience:

refugee huts  
ravens rest inside  
their shadows

*A slide show of Haiga: The Poetry of Images, featuring the entire exhibit, will be posted sometime soon on the HSA website.*

*Plate 1: Lidia Rozmus*



one breath  
one brush stroke  
one

*Plate 2: Chase Gagnon*

thin ice  
I tiptoe my way  
to nirvana







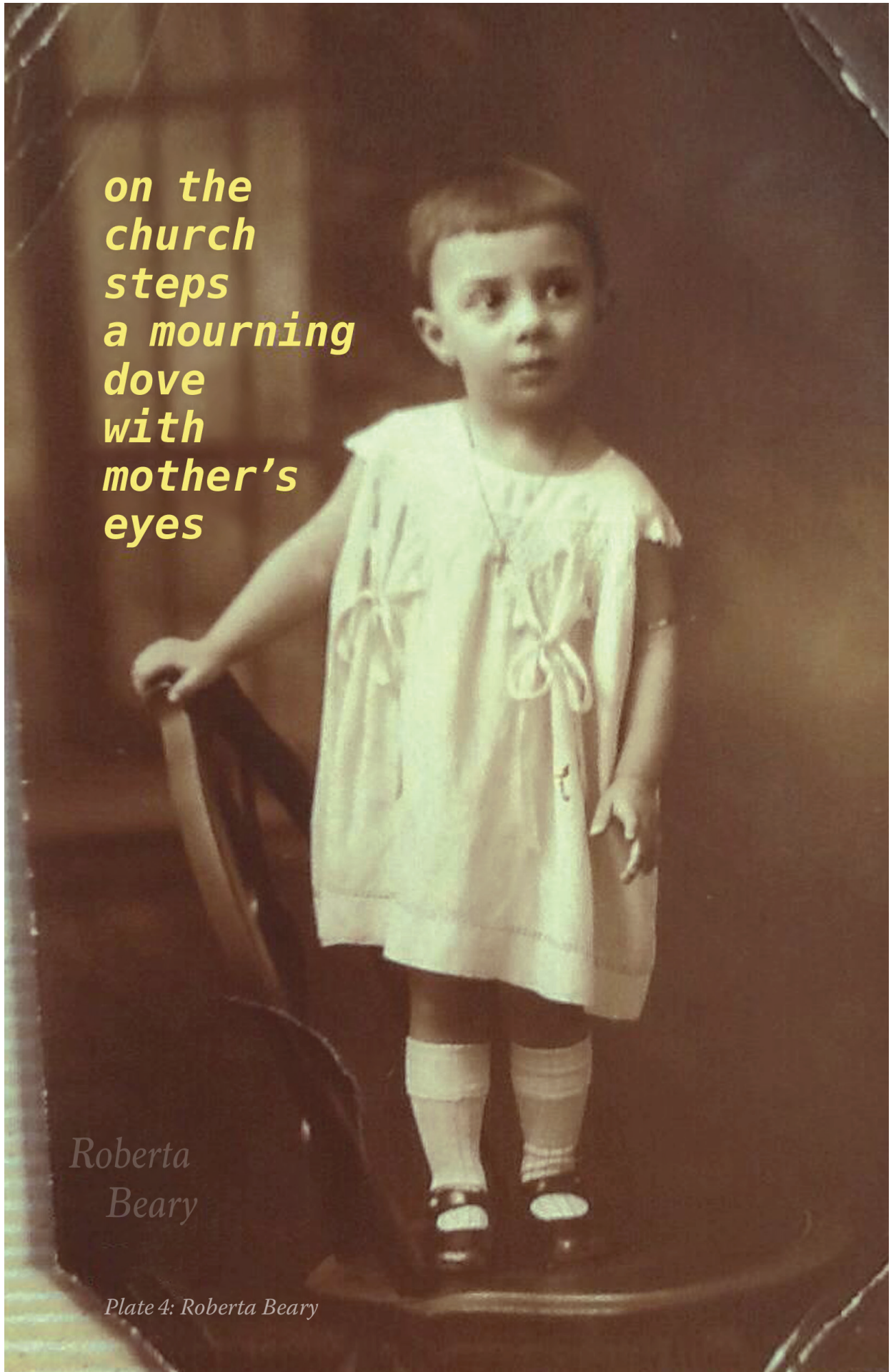
*Plate 3: Chase Gagnon*

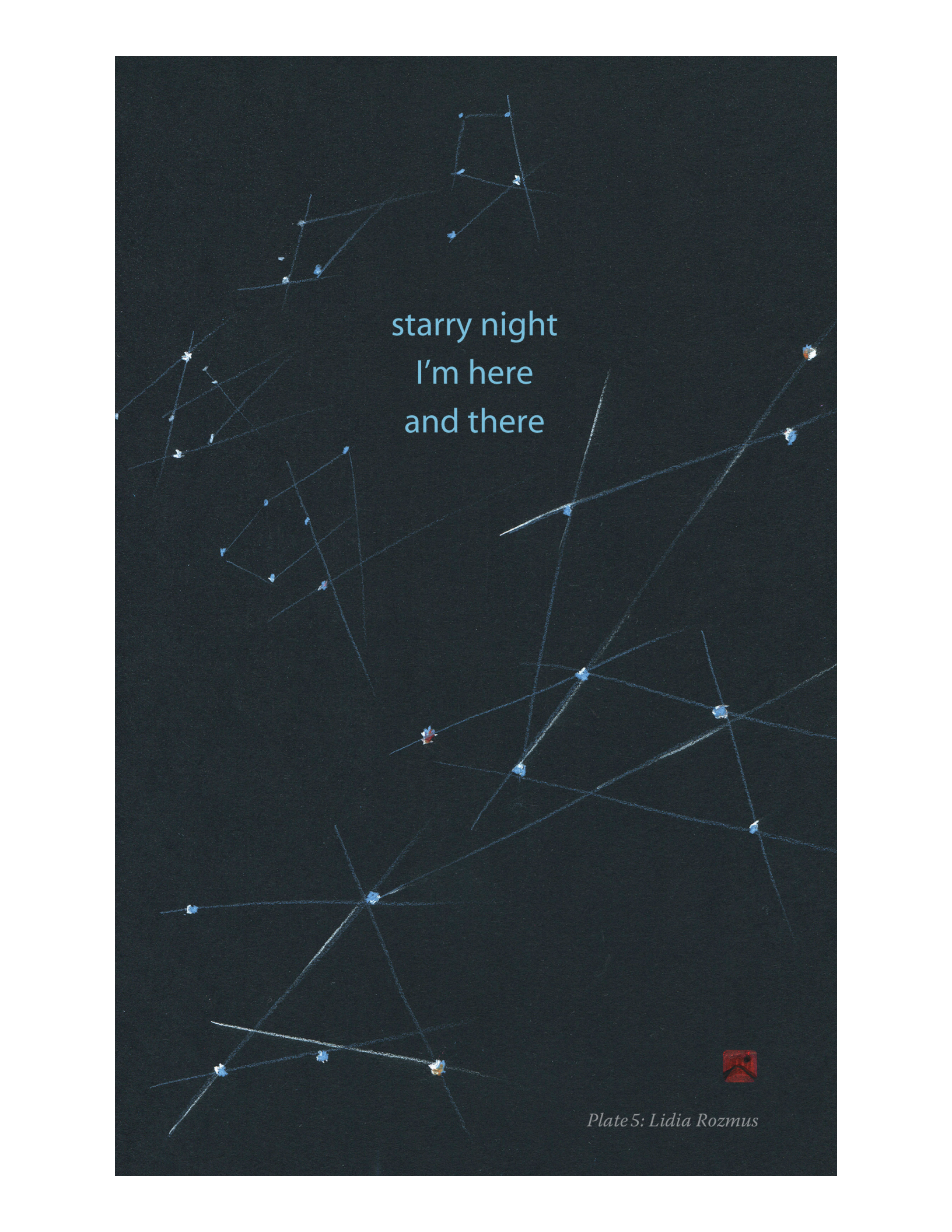
*Maybe they can  
and there's a reason they don't  
these speechless walls*

*on the  
church  
steps  
a mourning  
dove  
with  
mother's  
eyes*

*Roberta  
Beary*

*Plate 4: Roberta Beary*





starry night  
I'm here  
and there



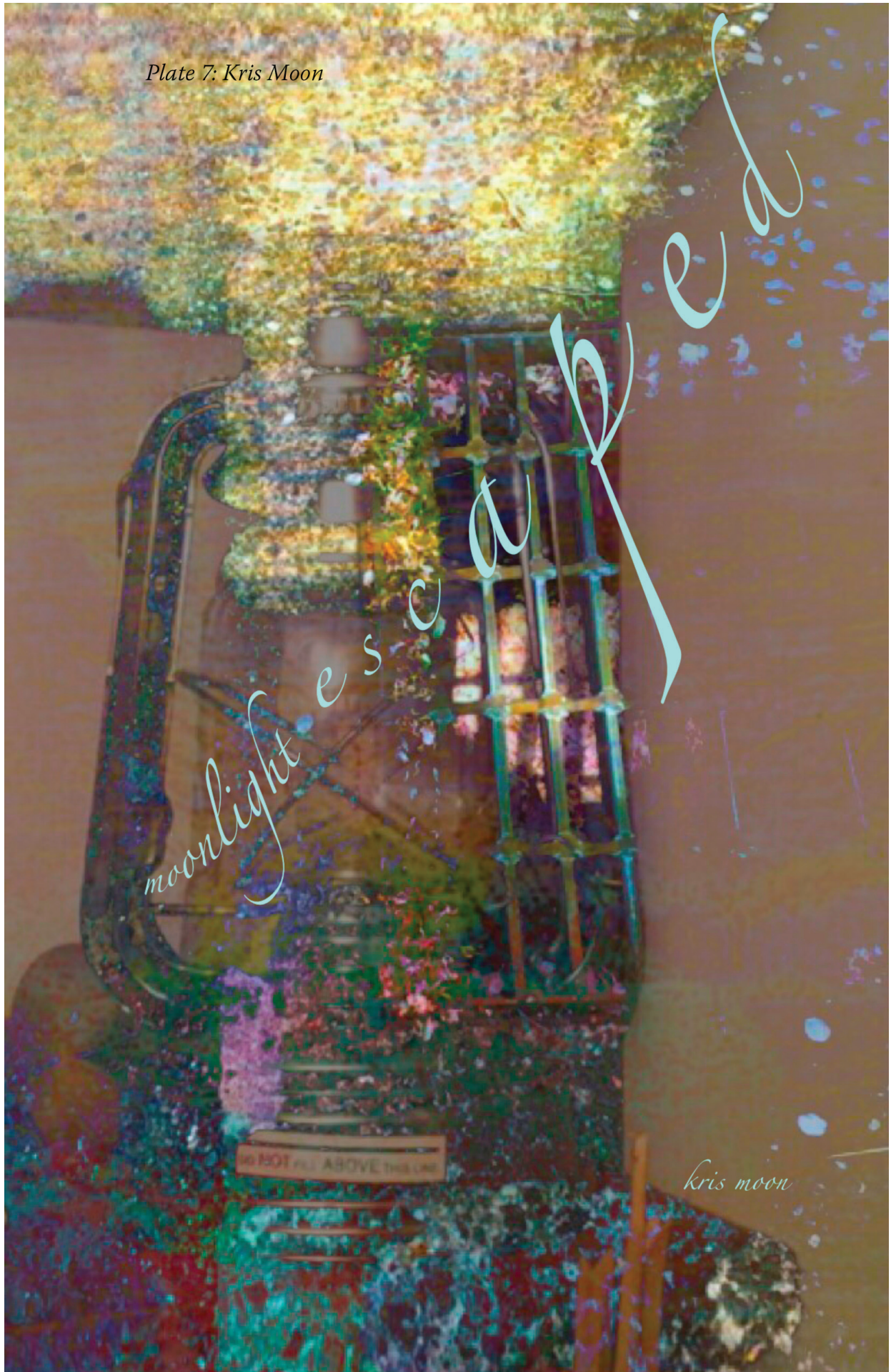
*Plate 5: Lidia Rozmus*

*Plate 6: Alexis Rotella*

HEY  
WE'RE  
STANDING  
UNDER  
THE SAME  
CLOUD

ALEXIS  
ROTELLA

*Plate 7: Kris Moon*



*moonlight*

*escaped*

*escaped*

*kris moon*

NO HOT AIR ABOVE THIS LINE



winter orchard  
a fruit picker's hut  
lit by the moon

*Plate 8: Ron C. Moss*

