

Water's Edge

OPEN TO INTERPRETATION

CLARE O'NEILL

As a photographer, the comment I hear most often regarding my work is, “your photographs tell a story.” But I was never sure what story the image was telling. So I started to ask what people saw in my images. I was fascinated with the varied narratives that different people would attribute to the same image. I realized that I was creating moments in which the viewer could participate — inviting them to imagine what comes before and after the shutter is released.

At its most sublime, art can transport us to a time, a place, a feeling, or a memory. It may be the entire image, or the smallest aspect of the image, but we are reminded of some profound connecting thread; it becomes a commentary on our lives: past, present, or imagined.

The title and framework of this project, *Open to Interpretation*, addresses both the human impulse to create art, as well as the urge to try to define or make sense of the work created. I recently learned from my friend, art historian Cynthia Bland, that we are still trying to interpret the meaning of prehistoric cave paintings. Because the paintings predate written language, we will never know the true intent of the imagery. We are only able to interpret the images as we imagine the past to be, and bring our own lives into the picture.

Did women paint the images while men were hunting, hoping to symbolically affect the outcome of the hunt? Were the painted animals a prayer of petition to keep the herds in abundance or factual records of seasonal change? Or were the animals depicted on the walls used as initiation rites or instructional tools? We simply don't know and likely never will. What keeps these prehistoric cave paintings alive in our cultural imagination is the fact that they remain open to interpretation. The imagery gives us important information about our collective past, and it is up to us to discover what it means for us today.

What we do know from our prehistoric origins, is that artistic expression has been a primal need, a tool to share our experiences. Inherent in its very existence is the ability of art to engage and inspire the viewer; the power and meaning of art doesn't lie solely in the mind of its creator.

To quote Picasso: “A painting is not thought out and settled in advance. While it is being done, it changes as one's thoughts change. And when it's finished, it goes on changing, according to the state of mind of whoever is looking at it.”

Art continues to change in accordance to the viewer who perceives it. Each individual, through varied life experiences, offers new and different understandings to a work. Art constantly evolves as each individual contributes their own richly textured interpretations. It's not telling us things we don't already know, but rather, reminding us of what we do know, or may have forgotten. What then, is the role of the artist? Does the artist imbue the work of art with meaning or does the meaning reside within the viewer? What, if anything, is intrinsic to the art itself? Does our interpretation say more about us as viewers than it does the artist as creator?

By introducing layers of interpretation, this project encourages us to think about the way we view and understand art. *Open to Interpretation* investigates the power of visual imagery to tell a story, and was the concept of my first solo exhibition, which paired 12 images with 24 stories and poems. I found the interaction between the images and narratives combined in such a way that when together, they were stronger than they had been independently. At first I thought it was an interesting twist to an exhibition, but later found the words added another dimension to the work — allowing me, as the artist, to rediscover the image in ways I had not imagined.

This book, the first in the *Open to Interpretation* series, began with a call for photographic entries to address the theme *Water's Edge*. More than 1500 photographs were submitted, and Douglas Beasley, founder and director of Vision Quest Photo Workshops, oversaw the selection of photographs. Once the finalists were established, 203 writers then submitted their interpretations of the images in either poetry or prose. Anastasia Faunce, a writer, editor, educator, and arts administrator, chose two written narratives for each photograph.

The themes that emerged during the process were as varied as the images themselves, and ranged from the literal to the abstract. It was during the writing selection and review process that it became obvious that some photographs elicited a greater response from writers than others. Several photographs generated dozens of entries, while others had relatively few. This prompted such questions as: Why do certain photographs ignite a creative response in a writer? Do some images tap into basic human drives and speak more viscerally to our collective human understanding? Or are some images more visually powerful than others?

The pairings offer the reader different points of entry to each image, opening a dialogue between artist and writer, image and audience. We need to ask ourselves then, can the written narratives be open to interpretation as well, or are the narratives closed?

Open to Interpretation invites artists, writers, and audiences to collaborate in this exchange. It taps into fundamental questions about how we perceive, experience, and interpret art. The power of this project is evident in its global reach. Nearly 500 participants, from 25 different countries, and 40 states, submitted their work for consideration. I believe that viewers and readers complete the work. This collaboration deepens our investigation of each work of art, allowing us to be active participants. Certainly, the narratives presented here, whether pictorial or written, remain open to interpretation.

— Clare O'Neill, Publisher

What we do know from our prehistoric origins, is that artistic expression has been a primal need, a tool to share our experiences. Inherent in its very existence is the ability of art to engage and inspire the viewer; the power and meaning of art doesn't lie solely in the mind of its creator.

Photographer
Agnieszka Sosnowska

SELF-PORTRAIT IN THE YORK RIVER, MAINE



Writer

Kris Bigalk

MISCARRIAGE

Here, in the river, the backwater,
despite lye and bleach, the blood stain
still an outline of rust,
like the map of a lake
sketching the contours of my lap.
I never could get anything quite perfect,
always the impatient cook, the roast bleeding
onto the plate, cold to the touch
in the middle,
my porcelain sink discolored
with rust circles, crusted with
scales of lime. I scrub and scrub
but the ghosts come back,
my goblets glazed
with milky soap residue,
the very bottom of the globes
stained with dried red wine,
like my uterus once filled
with salt water, now
draining dry, this dishrag, my skirt
stained with its dregs,
the taste of iron weeping
from my tongue.

Writer

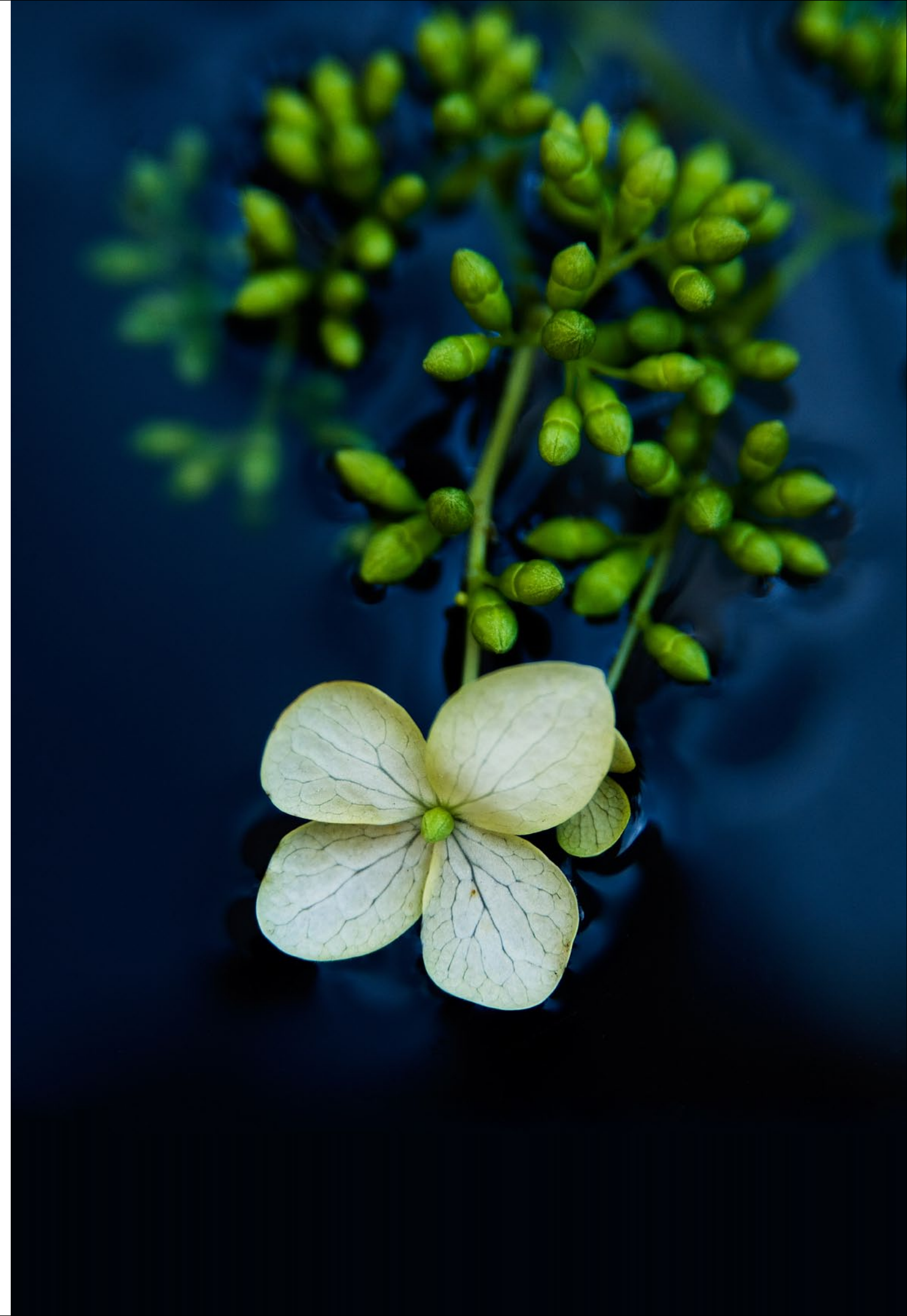
Cynthia A. Graham

SKULLBONE CREEK

All the water in Skullbone Creek could not wash away the sin of Sally Hawkins. She was just the sort of woman everyone called *exemplary*. Her home was spotless, her children polite, and her husband well-satisfied. The unseen Sally was as mired as the mud of the creek that squished between her toes as she stood there. Sally's great sin lie not in her actions — she was no succubus. Faithful to the husband of her youth, she had given him five children; with every child nursed, another tooth lost from her jaw. Her sin was not borne in her words — her conduct was becoming of the wife of the minister she had wed — her speech was seasoned, as it were, with salt. The great sin of Sally Hawkins lie in the inconvenience of having a great mind in a time and place where such a thing was not valued, and was moreover, discouraged. She would have done well to never marry, but the thing was decided by the untimely death of both her parents and the need for sustenance. The newly widowed Reverend Hawkins looked upon the child with that delicate and odd combination of lust, domination, and pity that is found only in the male of the species, and Sally was rescued from one sort of poverty only to be delivered to another. For twenty years she had been a diligent wife and mother. Yesterday, the last child of the household was wed and today, Sally stands in Skullbone Creek. For too long her life has been one of acquiescence, but on this day, the baptism will be her own. And Sally Hawkins sank into the water of Skullbone Creek and let it swallow her.

Photographer
Colleen Leonard

ZEN PUDDLE



Writer
Carolyn Cray Arnold

YES, YOKO!

She enchanted John with the profound and simple word *Yes*, a reward for being curious enough to climb the ladder. Yet, I never appreciated Yoko Ono as an artist. She was so avant-garde. The Fluxus movement confused me. Her films were just plain strange and the caterwauling was an embarrassment. And of course, I blamed her for interfering with my beloved Beatles.

Then I went to an exhibition of her work and the scales fell from my eyes. One piece in particular has stayed with me — it gave form to a long-held belief that I have often struggled to express. Encased in museum plexiglass, was a Cartier box opened to display two perfect acorns. Yes, Yoko! How simple! What genius!

We fall all over ourselves trying to combine the ultimate words, render the consummate image, hit all the right notes: fussing and fluffing, editing and revising, adding too much, working it to death. And yet, the ideal we are striving for is there. All we need to do is open our eyes and accept.

WATER'S EDGE | OPEN TO INTERPRETATION

Writer
Ana Mae Bellisio

IN A BAY OF THE GULF

The phantom petals of Pound's wet, black bough;
Fourteen words, no verb, Imagist precision.

14 | 15

Photographer
Yoichi Kawamura

UNTITLED



Writer
Barrie Jean Borich

CREASE

As a girl I walked waterlines, sometimes on sand along oceans, sometimes on the paved paths downtown, between Lakeshore Drive and the waves, always parallel to the groove where destination folds into the present tense.

When I walked the Gulf Coast beach for the first time, age 15, I was that girl from the cold city, tanning too quickly in her stringy striped bikini, bare feet marking sand, sun-blond and uneasy in her long swimmer's body — no tattoos yet, or surgeries, or histories of love.

The crease is what the gaze inhabits but the body cannot. I walked out of time, stepping forward and forward again, for longer than I thought I could keep on, knowing I'd have to walk back again, past the same greased-up college kids, screeching mothers chasing toddlers into the surf, future architects building shell cities and burrowing limbs into the sand. The gauzy line, amber interrupting blue, hovered over first my right shoulder, later my left, the crack of waves standing in for the end of things.

I see her now, that blond girl, walking, pretending not to notice men watching her, the way men gaze after blond girls in bikinis, or after the figments they make of blond girls. She will not remember if she longed for any part of those bare-chested linebackers, collarbones glinting with Italian gold, their bodies taut as they dove into the breakers. She will only be sure of what she did not want: their babies, their houses, their hovering mothers, their jealous breaths in her ear.

Though she may have wanted their wanting, as I do sometimes still, hoping to be seen as much as anyone walking the crease of future's plainness, even knowing too well the difference between fascination and erudition — that interruptible blue.

WATER'S EDGE | OPEN TO INTERPRETATION

Writer
Kristen Radtke

UNTITLED

16 | 17

Refracted motes of light wander the floor in ghostly bluish orbit. Kept dark for the clearest exhibit viewings, the aquarium fills with the churning of filtration and buzzing of air-conditioned muteness. Jellyfish curl translucently through thin circular tanks, too fragile for squares and edges.

A great white shark is the aquarium's newest, yet temporary addition, still young enough not to kill his companions. For now, he is content to eat what his keepers bring. He swims the surface to devour the ground-up dead things, and in a few months he will look around the tank and recognize prey where he once saw only movement.

"What is it about water," a man next to me says to someone else, "that makes everything seem so empty?"

Steel schools of tuna swim walls of glass as we stand in line, watching.

"It's so pretty," says his someone else. "I could die here."

UNTITLED



UNTITLED

That summer he made her tiramisu as a surprise, because it was her favorite. He'd brought the mascarpone, icing sugar, lady fingers, and Marsala wine; the eggs and strong coffee they'd already included amongst the breakfast things. He even remembered to pack the special glass dish he liked to serve it in, and cocoa powder — the good stuff — for sprinkling on top. But on that day, he realized he'd forgotten vanilla essence. He dithered for a while, wondering if he could leave it out, before deciding that the tiramisu wouldn't be quite right without it.

He'd driven the manual up the steep, steep road from the beach. He enjoyed flirting with third gear before settling back to second. He rode with the window down, the cranky old stereo blaring. He left her reading on the beach.

They ate the tiramisu after dinner with the second bottle of wine. They sat out on the porch, citronella candles burning to keep the mozzies at bay — the sea lapping at the shore. Later they had sex and went to sleep.

Sometime between 3 and 4 a.m., he woke up and she was gone. He stood with the fridge door open, arm resting along the top edge, the light spilling onto his naked skin. He ate tiramisu out of the dish. One teaspoon. Then another. And another.

She got as far as the next town before she pulled over and lit a joint. The familiar action soothed her, the tiny glowing ember became a focal point in the dark. She was on a country road, heading nowhere. She'd only grabbed a jacket, her handbag. The rest of her things were spread untidily across the apartment. It would be just as easy to turn back as to keep going.

FANNY DUBOIS, GONE CARTER

To be clear: I'm Fanny Dubois now. Fanny Carter is a person of the past.

One thing I miss from those days is our bed, Jack's and mine. I have slept on more expensive beds, but that queen-sized, aging mattress beats all. Heavy and thick, the headboard and footboard were not really my style, but the large spheres on the corner posts fit perfectly in my hand. I pressed my palm wholly to the orb each time I walked by and somehow felt more grounded as a result. Over time, I rubbed away the finish with this ritual.

When Jack traveled, I made snow angels between the sheets to double my body heat. The white quilt was not quite thick enough to keep me warm when alone, but it had enough weight to hold us there together. I also switched the pillows. Jack's held his scent. It wasn't cologne, because he never wore any. It was just the essence of him and his pomade. At first, I didn't like the smell; but over time, the musk and oil became a comfort — especially when he was gone.

Jack died six years ago, and now, here I lie in a strange hotel bed with a new husband on our wedding night. Lance is wonderful and I love him. But this bed is not ours, and I don't yet like how he smells.

Photographer
Elizabeth Brooks Barnwell

CHLOE



Writer
Paul Mattes

UNTITLED

It is fundamentally human
to treasure the ephemeral,
the improbable,
a coincidence of things
that should not be,
to know it is beautiful,
and hold it deeply,
and gladly spend a lifetime
hoping to find another.

Writer
Kris Bigalk

A DISSECTION OF FAITH

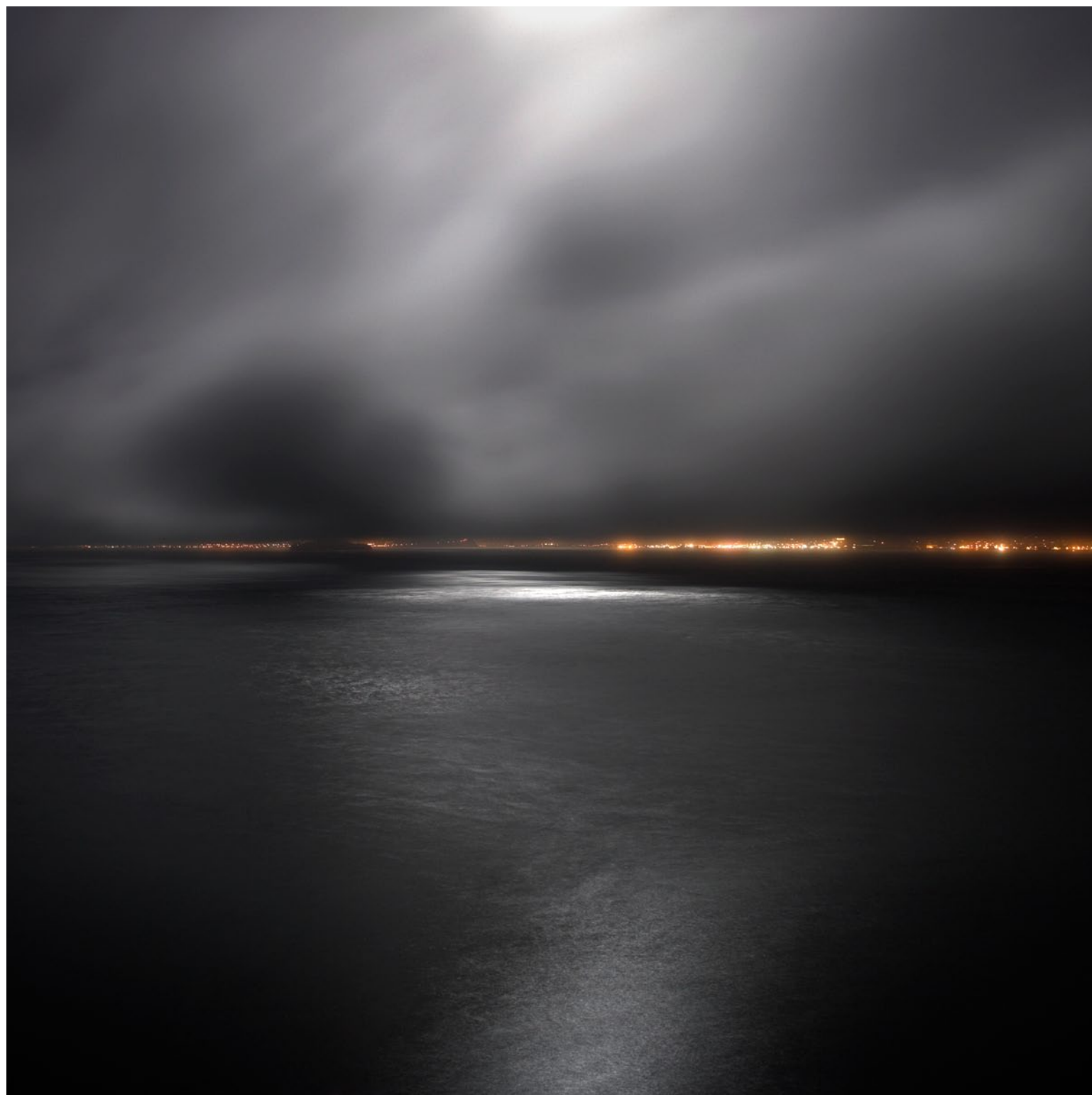
One half relies on the details
of photosynthesis
a religion of chlorophyll and light —

the other half is
held up by oceans.

A leaf, a stepping stone, leading flesh
to air, focusing the mind's eye.
See, an entrance to a tree knot,
the scent of sweet sap
circling like a catacomb.

Photographer
Mark Jaremko

NIGHTSCAPE 1, 9:43 PM



{ Honorable Mention }

Writer
Patricia Weaver Francisco

LIGHT, THE HORIZON

The necklace of light across the bay, sleek boats that come and go, for others, others. They are clinking glasses, they are shining — women move in and out of rooms, apricot and leather, white wicker on the wide porch. They wake to wind lifting the veil, clothes draped over a yellow chair, quiet morning rooms, buttered toast and figs, someone gathering flowers, someone murmuring, a long-haired girl, long-legged and at ease, crossing to kiss the patriarch, no deception slowing her gait, inclusion filtering her gaze, the patriarch's kind and settled face, spectacles burnished with cunning, and with love.

The watery world darkens into what cannot be accounted for, what can never be crossed — no coin sufficient, no ferryman able. The horizon eludes me. There is only the harsh burn of industry and a harboring desire. *Come, come, come!* The sirens sing from winter's dry dock. Someone is lying. There's broken glass in the underbrush, and the necklace of light always beckoning, always true.

{ Honorable Mention }

Writer
Joyce Sutphen

LIGHTS ON THE HORIZON

The moment he took the picture,
he knew it was the one he wanted —

the lights were like windows
on a train coming into Chicago

and Sister Carrie was there, gazing
into the darkness. Nothing

had ever happened. Or the lights
were the lights on another train —

the one that sank to the bottom
of Fingerbone Lake (I often think

of that train, imagining the lamps
lit and golden under the water —

some Atlantis, some strand of light
on the dark throat of night).

22 | 23