

# THE SIGH PRESS

ISSUE 13 • SUMMER 2017

## NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

We hope you've had a chance to read our recent Ampersand interview with poet Elisa Biagini whose book *Da una crepa* (Einaudi, 2014) has been translated and is forthcoming in the US by Xenos Books. From that collection, two poems—sharp, haunting, physical—appear on these pages. We also caught up with Elisa at NYU in April for a discussion with students about literary arts in Florence, and, more broadly, about the creative process and practice of an artist.

In this issue, our theme is “a turning point” and we are looking at immigration through the writings of a young immigrant from The Gambia whose chapters (in English) came to us through the back door. Sani was glad to learn a selection from his longer memoir project would appear in this publication. Offering another point of view, an excerpt from *Madness and Civilization*, a story by Lee Foust, also addresses immigration. The full version of Foust's story can be found on our website. Photography by Mark Wyatt enlivens the issue with evocative, snapshot portraits that capture aspects of our shared humanity.

Be on the lookout for our Ampersand interview with Baret Magarian over the summer and remember to visit [thesighpress.com](http://thesighpress.com) for our Autumn Issue theme and deadline and our Facebook page where we post at least three times a week.

Mundy Walsh & Lyall Harris

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A QUESTION, The Sigh Press



FLORENCE, ITALY, 2014

MARK WYATT



## WHY I DON'T COMPLETE MY EDUCATION

SANI

I started school at Botrub nursery school when I was six years old, two years after I went to Kembujeh primary for my primary one level and later during primary three level I transferred to another school (Bundung primary). There I was elected as a Councilor (senior prefect) because of my hard work and discipline.

Then in my primary five as I continued achieving I was forced by my school headteacher (late Mr Gibba, God rest his soul) to stand as a candidate for the election of the school Head Boy but unfortunately I couldn't stand because I was shy to stand before the crowd and give my speeches so with respect, I went to his office and explained to him my reasons for not being content.

With all this good character of me, I won the heart of many teachers in my school.

In primary six level I started facing challenges by my class mates, which gave me a hard time for studies. My primary six teacher gave presents at end of every term exam for the first position. I always burn the midnight candle and with all those challenges, I won the prizes for every term except our second term which was won by a female in my class (Adama).

Adama was beautiful and vain, she was intelligent and so respectful but very quiet. Because of that challenge then my heart runs for her and I look her up until she became my date and she was madly in love with me, but how I wish she never came in my life because she ruined my life and she drove me to adversity, she spoiled my education and because of her I went for a journey that I never imagine in this world but it also became my safety. Though she loved me and I love her too but I blame her for every pain in this world and because of her I run from my country to be a refugee by illegal way and now am surviving in different world as my family and friends when I cannot go back to my people [or else] "death."

At first in our primary six, to junior school level eight, we were madly in love with each other and I really enjoyed her love for those moments but problems occurred after the end of our junior school level nine (i.e., when she was forcedly married to a man of not her choice), then she ran and came to me for protection when I have no power to help her and it is forbidden for a man to make love for a married woman in our country (that is called adultery and if committed then the man will be stoned till death).

So as she was in my room trying to explain her reason for running, the neighbours heard her voice in my room and this makes me to leave Gambia that very night and run to Senegal (where I know no one) and I was there for two months, then the girl's family heard for my whereabouts in Senegal and they plan to come for me when my good people told me to move from there because I am still in danger (because Gambia and Senegal are bordered). Then I move to Mali (where I was for four months

without a good job or good shelter but sleeping at the market places and looking customer for drivers (as my job).

Again, life was difficult there, then I decide to move again to Libya and see if I can feel some changes since I can't go back to my country ever again.

But indeed Libya was the worst of all. Because they took from you all that you work for in a day (which is very painful to survive in a situation like that). I never saved money all because of armed robbers (Asma boys) in Libya. They always attacked us with arms and took from us all that we saved and again we non-Libyans will be stealing from each other because more than hundreds of people living under the same roof and not all of us fit. Sickness all over, sorry for you if get sick there, never can you go to their hospital for treatment, not even good medicines, insects all over the places, bad smells around and everyone scratching his or her body because of "karanko" bites. Even feeding yourself becomes problem at times and some people even die for nothing because hundreds of people will be living under the same roof. Libyans never allowed us to have good health since they believe that all black people smell, so unless you go to their rubbish places at the market side and pick some better foods to feed yourself, hunger kills other people, sickness kills others, and others are killed by Libyans for disobeying their command. And Libyans will kill non-Libyans for nothing just because they hate your colour, and again covering their nose saying that black people smell, but nothing other than belittling us and showing us that they don't have human sympathy.

Because of this painful situation then I decide to risk my life "better to die in the ocean than to die in Libya" where you'll be thrown in the

desert without burial. And so luckily God has allowed me to live but I never expect to survive and still am living in this suffer world. Am now far from my mum and sister and I never know their conditions and neither do I know their feelings. I will miss my mum, miss my sister, miss the moments we had together, and even miss her daily stories and tales. I am without homeland and without a country to return to again without a culture again, without ancestors again, without my grandmother's stories again and without seeing my family again.

I really enjoyed school life for those moments and so sad that I couldn't complete my education as expected.



COMO, ITALY, 2014



COMO, ITALY, 2014

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UNTITLED, FROM THE PLANET OF DREAMING

ELISA BIAGINI

When the eye grows dim  
don't look for the warmth  
of the hand that lowers the eyelid,  
escape from the melody of the word,  
the voice that smiles at you through false teeth.

If language is world, is  
mirror, be in it with your pupil  
wide open, fish out from that black  
the ink that speaks words  
vertically. In its shadow questions  
grow, space is given  
to thoughts breathing.

Not horizontal words that submerge,  
but the white of margins, the pause that  
covers the absence between you and me.

AGAINST THE WIND

I take – no less than skies –

Emily Dickinson

I twist the paper in my hands,  
reknot the breath in my throat:  
look at the letters with all those blades,  
like the shadows of things never said.

I make night and then hold the paper close  
your darkest word brings me light,  
pulses in my palm all of its silence.  
A seed this that is never consumed.

Against the wind words  
are only callings out,  
saliva that comes back  
in your mouth.



FLORENCE, ITALY, 2014

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EXCERPT FROM MADNESS AND CIVILIZATION

LEE FOUST

It took me a while to come to consider everyday madness as an acute form of desperation, and yet I now believe it to be an inevitable conclusion. The concept sounds simpler than it is. Desperation, we know from experience, sets in when we lose our moorings, when we no longer know where we belong, when we have to re-learn how to behave, how to speak, when everyone looks at us—our foreign clothes, alien manners, and the odd color of our skin—funny. Yet immigration has made us dependent on these suspicious strangers for our next meal.

I first saw this particular form of madness in the eyes of the street vendors and beggars of Bologna, an Italian city where I sometimes work. One just now gave me an interminable speech about how much he loves me and the unimportance of our different skin colors. He must have guessed (from my second-hand clothes?) that I would be sympathetic to such a spiel. Indeed, a lifetime of the working-class struggle in my own white, first world bubble predisposes me to empathy for others worse off than myself. He talked and talked until I bought a lighter from his portable cardboard showcase.

Biological needs, the encounter reminds me, turn on repetition. We've hardly finished eating before we have to move on toward procuring

the next meal. We recite our pitch, earn a couple of coins, and move on to the next mark. We call the hours between shifts “free time” because they earn us no money. Survival is an endlessly revolving merry-go-round. We can’t get off while the ride’s in motion; it’s a constant struggle to hold on to enough sanity to play along with the game.

A moment later another refugee passes. He stops, hatred in his eyes, and asks for a handout. I decline and he marches on, re-convinced of the world’s hostility to his survival. For him it’s personal. Even if love—as the previous street vendor proclaimed so insistently—is the answer, it might be the question unformed that prompts us toward madness. In this world we all live a quiet desperation, scheming how we’re gonna get down from the merry-go-round’s spinning: a handout, a stock option, the lottery.



SAN FRANCISCO, USA, 2014

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When did you last turn on a dime?



FLORENCE, ITALY, 2014

## CONTRIBUTORS

### BIOS & TSP QUESTION

TO OUR CONTRIBUTORS: Tell The Sigh Press about a small or big decision you made recently that was unexpected or out of character

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MARK WYATT has been photographing people on the streets of places he's travelled since 1980. The images are not cropped or processed more than is necessary to recreate what he saw when the shutter was released. They are snapshots that hold memories of his world, and wherever they overlap with another viewer's world, they can hold their memories also.

[MWWYATT.WORDPRESS.COM](http://MWWYATT.WORDPRESS.COM)

BIG DECISION: I went to the dentist. I'd had braces when I was a kid, and that convinced me that I didn't like hands in my mouth that weren't my own. The last time I'd been to a dentist was around thirty years ago, to get crowns installed after I knocked out my front teeth.

~

SANI is a 19-year-old immigrant from The Gambia who was forced to flee his home country. He arrived in Italy in July 2016 with the hope of finding a new life in Europe.

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ELISA BIAGINI lives in Florence, Italy, after having taught and studied in the U.S. for several years (Ph.D. Rutgers University). Her poems have been published in numerous Italian and American reviews and anthologies. She has published six poetry collections, some bilingual, such as *L'Ospite*, (Einaudi, 2004), *Fiato. Parole per musica* (2006), *Nel Bosco* (Einaudi, 2007), *The Guest in the Wood* (Chelsea Editions, 2013, which won the 2014 *Best Translated Book Award*) and *Da una crepa* (Einaudi, 2014, forthcoming in the US by Xenos Books). Her poems have been widely translated and she has been invited to participate in important poetry festivals around the world. She has translated several contemporary American poets for reviews, anthologies and complete collections and teaches Art History and Writing at NYU-Florence.

ELISABIAGINI.IT

MORE THAN A DECISION, it is something I said that, only last year, I would have never said...quoting myself: "The Pope is the only left wing political leader at the moment and I would gladly vote for him!"

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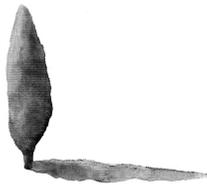
LEE FOUST, native of the East Bay in California, relocated to San Francisco at the tender age of 20 to study creative writing at SFSU. Abandoning both SF and his studies, Lee traveled to Europe, a novel idea for him in 1986. There he fell in love with the city of Rome and the idea of Italy. Later, he studied in Florence and New York City, obtained a Ph.D., wed a well known rock

critic, and co-edited *Resister* magazine. Washing again upon Tuscan shores, Lee re-married and became a father. Nowadays he teaches in Florence and recites his own works, with and without banging a drum, to anyone who'll listen. Author of *Sojourner*, a collection of stories and poems about the mystery of place, and *Poison and Antidote*, nine Bohemian tales of San Francisco from the Reagan era, Foust's fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in literary journals, magazines, and newspapers in The US, Canada, Australia, and Italy.

[LEEFOUST.COM](http://LEEFOUST.COM)

[SOUNDCLOUD.COM/LEE-FOUST](http://SOUNDCLOUD.COM/LEE-FOUST)

PERHAPS I'VE READ TOO MUCH Pirandello but, to beg your question rather than answer it, I wonder which comes first: our decisions and actions or our character? If such decisions go against one's sense of character can that be anything other than a lapse in the definition of self rather than the oxymoron of an uncharacteristic action? Walt Whitman, after all, noted that we all contain multitudes. Or, to paraphrase John Lennon, I've not been able to do anything that can't or shouldn't have been done—although I'd sure like to!



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