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On Reflection
vignettes & images



Sam Gill
2019

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Djúpalónssandur

Walking a crushed grassy path, the massive glacier Snæfellsjökull, splatted atop a once-fery volcano looms over my shoulder. Some say it is one of Earth's energy axes. It was Jules Verne's portal to commence his *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Iceland is the land of fire and ice. Green pads of moss cling to sharp black lava, once red liquid fire. In their sluggish skirmish I'm pretty sure I know which will prevail. Continuing along the trail, massive lava rock formations abruptly open to afford me a glimpse of pure white waves smashing onto a black beach, Djúpalónssandur, curving round to a distant shadowy mesa jutting into the sea. I feel myself gasp instinctively reënacting the first creature crawling brand spanking new from the briny deep with fresh lungs frantic for air. Needing to be on the beach, I run the rest of the way down the narrow treacherous path. Perhaps this stony strand is the very spot my fishy ancestors, taking their first panicky breaths, dreamed vaguely of feet and thumbs and big brains. I walk on smooth black glistening sea-wet pebbles. In a few million years they might be ground to sand. I pocket a couple to put to my ear one day back home that I might hear echoes of my first dance steps.





Fonteng Studenterfunden

I had to be dragged from the huge bowl-shaped International Fountain in Seattle Center near the Space Needle. Enthralled, was I. Dozens of water shooters programmed to turn music into dancing. Inspired by the old *magister ludi* Friedrich Schiller, who taught me play, Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" appears before our eyes as water rhythmically blasted, spewed, and spurted into the air. Joy to Ludwig's unhearing ears. Enthralled, a word that in the sixteenth-century meant to put into slavery, now indicates being pleasantly entranced, enchanted. For hours, day and night, I circled Buckingham Fountain in Chicago's lakefront Grant Park even for a while on a Segue—think about that!—riveted by its ever-shifting moods. Water mimes the shape of its vessel. At repose, water is a reflecting puddle or picture, its shiny face imitating ours; beguiling, ask Narcissus or Frankenstein's creature. Fountains liberate water from its thrall. Even from its nature? By dancing with gravity, spouting water finds its own dynamic shapes. Kinetic ephemeral sculptures. *Fonteng Studenterfunden*, a fountain in the student grove behind Oslo's *Nationaltheatret*, recalls the magical eternal dying and rising progenitive strategy of *salix*; the end of life glory of the giant dandelion some call goat's beard. The slaying of death by death itself. Daisy-chains of life upon life. A fleeting orb comprised of tiny helicopters awaiting lifesaving flights upon breeze's breath. Since the time of Herodotus and later when Christ's blood dripping wet from his wounds imitated the eternal life of *trigonos*, we've searched high and low for the Fountain of Youth and the Fountain of Life; the grail and the golden bough. Yet, isn't vitality—youth and life force—the moving essence of any fountain? The dying and rising of any flower?





Bakklandet

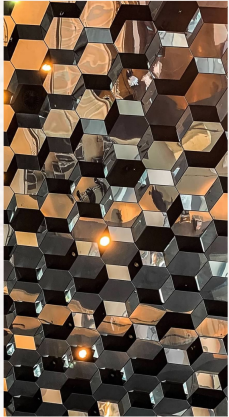
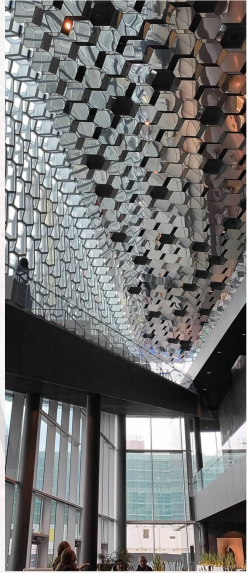


The morning after I return home from Norway I begin the day with personal habits. I open my bedroom drapes and lean with both hands on the window sill taking in the expanse of the Rocky Mountains as I assess the mood of the morning and the prospects for the day. This morning, rather than on the majesty of the Rockies, my eyes fall on the gray and brown colored houses of my neighborhood. My heart sinks, morning high spirits wane; the feeling of drab. In Trondheim, I delighted in the rows of three-storied barn-shaped houses and businesses, each in a different color, standing on stilts abutting the Nidelva River in the Bakklandet neighborhood near the Old Town Bridge. I couldn't get enough of this vibrancy and its ever-changing moods. A theatre of kaleidoscopic delights reminding me of wandering the streets of Puebla, Mexico, where the colors are similar yet in subtler hues. I live in the wrong neighborhood; perhaps the wrong country. I used to imagine designing a home with the intention of giving full play to all the senses. Just ponder the possibilities! *Louissane!* I realized this dream only in bits and dabs in decorating various homes. Red. Yellow. Purple. Concrete. Steel. Brazilian Cherry. Walnut. To the cosmos color is physics. To animals it is also biology including survival itself. To humans color is all these and also psychology, ethnicity, class, race, language, history, botany, geology, taste, geography, aesthetics, gesture, identity, and, above all, story.

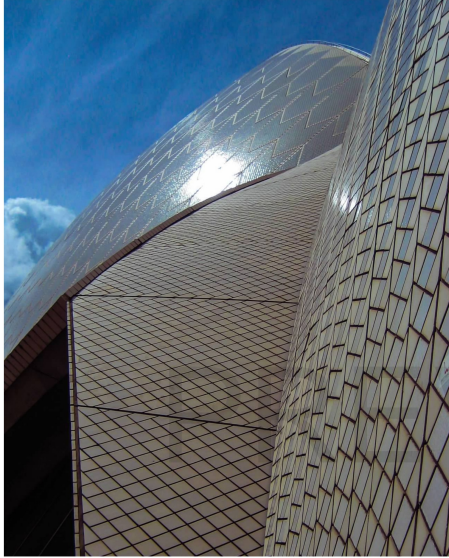




Bjrvika Opera and Ballet Theater, Oslo



Harpa Concert Hall, Reykjavik



Björvíka & Harpa

Once considered an unfinished folly, a shameful failure in an abandoned railyard, Sydney Opera House swells my heart as does no other structure. In close proximity its sheer shiny massiveness grounds as it inspires. From a distance its white sails catch the wind and travel the sea on a voyage of Argonauts. Having twice been in its presence years ago including attending a concert in the acoustic marvel of its great hall, I was delighted by the opportunity to return once again so that I might spend a day in its presence. My favorite vantage is where its concrete arcs interplay with the steel girders of the Sydney Harbor Bridge. A few other great halls in surprising places that I have visited remind me of these Sydney feelings: Björvíka Opera and Ballet Theater in Oslo and Harpa Concert Hall in Reykjavik. I'm thrilled that many cities consider music and dancing so important that they build enchanting venues for the moving arts. I think these edifices are so captivating to me because they honor the evolved human capacity to surpass ourselves, honoring our biological power to transcend. Tethered by gravity yet seeking escape from the boundaries marked by skin, our senses aspire to otherness and in these transcending encounters with the beyond, we wonder, imagine, dream, hope, create, make, learn, inquire, express, perceive. The banality of the unfathomable capacity for self-transcendence, for movement, is a treasured gift of our evolution. Music and dancing are surely the purest means of immanent transcendence, of corporeal incorporeality. As a student of dancing I've come sometimes to imagine it as the exploration of the infinite potential of human movement; the limitless freedoms experienced despite the distinctive physical limitations of our bones. We dance, like Nataraja, for no reason other than that it bubbles forth as vitality itself. We dance because it is of our nature to do so; just observe any child. Impossible to grasp, the essence of dancing is being in no place, constantly transcending, never just here, not yet there. It is fitting that music and dance have both a constant presence in daily lives—I'm thinking of toe-tapping country fiddlers and banjo players, jazz bands playing for grating dancers, the ubiquity of chic car buds, and the street cultural home to hip hop—as well as being appropriately honored by renowned artists performing in lavish productions to tuxedo and gown clad audiences in grand opera and dance theaters that soar beyond their materiality.







Björkträäd

What a delightful gift to be in Umeå in October when the *björkträäd* are at the height of their autumn beauty. Joined by many other tree and plant species, the parks and streets are ablaze with colors that remind of their origin story. Umeå lore is perhaps lighter and warmer than most Norse mythology. In 1888 a fire devastated most of this Swedish city. Wisdom earned of red-yellow flaming loss shaped the plans to rebuild. Umeå was resurrected around wide streets lined with birch trees thought to be resistant to fire. In my youth I knew the birch as the trees providing the Indians bark for canoes. Umeå is popularly known today as the City of Birches. How often loss and destruction give rise to beauty and wisdom; and an occasional canoe. We are made of the stories we want to tell again and again; the stories of the blazing autumnal *björkträäd*; hopeful stories of the phoenix rise from ruin.







Kirkjufellsfoss

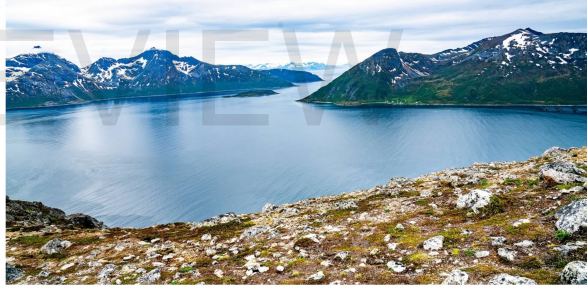
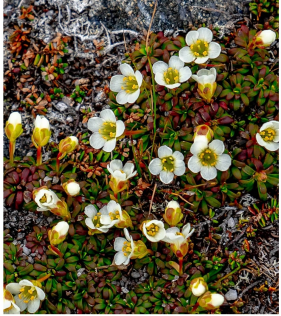
As the road along the rim of Snæfellsnes Peninsula begins a descent to the sea, Kirkjufellsfoss, Church Mountain, appears as a massive blocky mesa. Does it deserve its name? From across the end of a fjord I make out a feature near the far end that resembles a bell tower. Aha! Farther on, the massiveness of a cathedral on the sea gives way to the standalone sloping tower, among the most iconic landforms in Iceland. Its pyramidal shape would beg the question of the appropriateness of its name were it not for Hallgrímskirkja, a wedge-shaped church (an *axis mundi*?) towering above Reykjavik. God's rocket ship prepared to blast off heaven-bound. Shifting perspectives remind me of a little essay I wrote using the Sesame Street inspired title "It's Where You Put Your Eyes." I suggested that perhaps the most powerful experience of a mask, as an example, is not when seen as a piece of art on a wall, but rather seen as the face of a character in ritual drama. Better yet, by performing the mask oneself, dancing it, being the masker looking through the eyeholes so as to feel within how the world responds to the masker's moving presence. Now, more than sight, I prefer the synesthetic matrix that comprises the whole body, yet I continue to marvel at the impact of a plethora of vantages—the eye would call them perspectives, the body storytracks—appreciating all the more that it is in the ever-shifting multiplicity of creative encounters that we realize ourselves and the promises of our humanity. The shifting vistas of moving about with the imagination to discover lively characters in the rocky landscape awaiting their role in stories.





Tromvik

Morning and night I take a moment to remember my mom (1914-2001) and dad (1915-2007) by looking at my favorite picture of them which I keep on my bedside table. It was snapped high in the Rocky Mountains on a walk across the tundra. The image captures them, heads tilted slightly together, smiling; Mom holding a recently exposed Polaroid; Daddy, in sunglasses wearing my blue ski jacket. In the framing background is the snowy grandeur of Longs Peak. As Kansas flat-lander dirt farmers, later small town grocers, this occasion likely was the only time my parents, in their near centenarian lives, ventured above the middle elevations of the great plains. They were enthralled by the miniature alien wonders of the tundra: tiny vibrant plants huddled together like a pin cushion, elusive pikas peeping their locations sounding like sonar, and mottled ptarmigans easily mistaken for lichen-covered rocks. At forty degrees north latitude, the tundra is a mile above the plains, two above the sea a thousand miles away. Dwellers of middle earth, we think *here* is everywhere; a comforting mistake. My Norwegian friend, Bjorn Ola, takes me for a hike near Tromvik at seventy degrees north latitude. Here, well above the Arctic Circle, the tundra meets the sea. Tiny bouquets of perfect flowers bloom within view of crashing sea waves. Grouse huddle nearly invisible among the lichens-covered rocks as sea gulls sail overhead. Black-eyed fuzzy-antlered reindeer graze the roadside skirting the fjord. With middle earth corn-fed humor, I ask if any of these magical creatures have red noses. With a straight face Bjorn Ola tells me that, as it is summer with its midnight sun, Santa and Rudolf are on vacation. With sea waves lapping the tundra. I can't feed where to live. Near and far, sky and sea, collide without a between. Tromvik is a raw enchanting primeval vastness where awful teases awe.

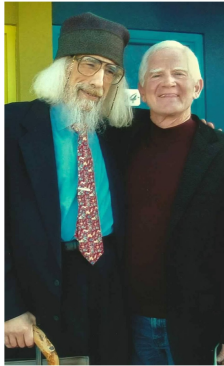




Nidaros



While celebrating the life and works of my mentor Jonathan Z. Smith (1938-2017) in Trondheim Norway I had the opportunity to visit Nidaros Cathedral (built 1070-1300) including crawling around in the basement among the bones of those buried there over the centuries. Dominating the façade, rows of relief sculptures remind of stones: Adam and Eve, the crucifixion, and one saintly figure holding a basket containing three severed heads. I asked to be told the story of three heads in a basket, but no one seemed to know. Perhaps I should make one up. Nidaros triggered a flood of "church memories." A few years ago, I returned to Java primarily to again experience Borobudur (built in the 8th and 9th centuries), a massive multi-layered mandala covering an entire hill. The lower levels are comprised of hundreds of bas-relief panels telling the stories of Buddhism. On the upper levels, peering over the surrounding forest, Buddhas sit in lattice stupas. In another memory I experience the mission churches that dominate the Pueblo architecture throughout my old stomping grounds, the American Southwest. Atop a high mesa, the pueblos of Acoma stand in the shadow of the massive San Estevan del Rey mission church (built 1629-1641) with its dark history of using forced Pueblo labor to haul the enormous ceiling beams from far-away forests across the desert and up the mesa and up, once again, to the top of tall thick walls. Another church memory. At Hermannsburg, west of Alice Springs, I stood before a one-room Lutheran Church (built 1880) imagining the straight-laced Germans who made this first church in Central Australia in which to introduce their German god to the aborigines. How odd their mission! At this stage of my life, I have the luxury, perhaps more so the duty, to reflect on half a century during which I devoted myself to the study of religion. It now seems incredulous that I have done so. My memories of these "church" places haunt and mystify me; my own story now uncomfortably entwined with theirs. I never sought nor found god in these places. The closest was perhaps in the plaza in front of the tiny Yaqui church in Guadalupe on Easter Saturday; yet that was surely due to the dancing masked Chapayekas. I'm beginning to realize and accept—indeed, celebrate—that what has persistently amazed me is the sheer creativity of human beings who everywhere build such remarkable structures, story them with a host of imagined beings and mythscapes, and use them as settings for sensuous ritual dramas. I have been inspired by human biology and anthropology and art and dancing, not by theology or a longed-for glimpse of the spectral or eternal; by the incorporeality of flesh, not the immanence of spirit.





Helgafellssveit



Roaming across the Snaefellsnes Peninsula I chip the edges off my total ignorance of Iceland. With my forty-two-megapixel mirrorless Sony as my cyborgian prosthesis, I become an intelligent amalgam of carbon, silicon, metal, and glass; gooey fleshiness conjoined with the clean hardness and exacting precision of technology. From the road's edge near Helgafellssveit, the smallest community in Iceland with fifty-three people, my carbon body endeavors to grasp some of the distinctive features despite the overwhelm of sheer vastness. So much eludes me. I walk the landscape breathing the scents and feeling the atmosphere. I even taste the food at a nearby ranch. As cyborg I also practice the alchemy of transduction from hard to virtual reality by grabbing impressions of unimaginable dimension captured as a matrix of electronic pixels. Home again in Colorado I revisit Iceland virtually as a metahuman; a cyborg jacked-in to my computer prosthesis. I import eighty-megabyte files and travel this landscape anew in its virtual possibilities; a cyborgian creative encounter. Dehazing penetrates the gauze that muddies the biological eye. Adjusting clarity, shadows, and highlights reveals hidden features and rich hues. Stitching individual images into a panoramic seamless quilt reshapes the vastness; a wide slot giving focus to the peripheral. Zooming removes cloaks of invisibility. Features with the splendor of detail magically appear, rabbits from the cyborg's hat; endless stretches of lava almost obscured by green-brown moss and time, a large body of water surprisingly tucked in this arid enormity, distant blue mountains surrounding the area, a dark fin-shaped feature suggesting a subterranean shark; all summoning a feeling of the pristine beyond prehension. Helgafellssveit whispers its secrets in my metahuman ear. As cyborg I trek where my fleshy feet cannot. With charmed super powers, far from Iceland, I return through a wormhole in defiance of the biological bonds of time and space.







Arnarstapi

Splotches of yellow and pinkish red command my attention as I walk, nose to the ground, along the sea cliff at Arnarstapi. Lifting my head, I take in a few quaint houses at the foot of a black conical lava rock mountain accented by a nearby snowy glacier; a grand juxtaposition of fire and ice. I turn round and round in sync with the swirl of birds. Tiny grass-topped isles white-washed with droppings and dotted with nests are avian homes with landing strips. Feeling a vertiginous thrill, I peer over the cliff's edge, amazed by a glorious world of rock formations, arches and pillars, constantly washed and engraved by the foamy sea. My eye follows the dark cliff facing the bay around on a trajectory toward mountains, colors fading to blue-grey in the distance at the very edge of the earth. Looking south, the great Atlantic! Uninterrupted sea all the way from Iceland to Antarctica. Where the sky-sea colors blend, a barely noticeable line reveals the slight curve hinting the shape and size of our planet home. So vast, yet we are spoiling it. Horizon! Amazing. Always there—far, farther—yet somehow also here. Horizon! Always beckoning us to wonder and wander; promising something beyond, some outside. Horizon! Like a rainbow excusing itself as our pursuit of it nears, taking with it the pot of gold. Always more. Always unknown. Always out there. Always beckoning. Horizon! A miracle of our species—won upon a moment's musement—the unattainable *there* beckons us *here* to move, to seek, to imagine, to transcend, to live.







Tulipan

In Trondheim I wander the streets fascinated by doorways and street cafes; neighborhood character markers. In the tiny garden area just outside one charming door, I am captivated by a *tulipan*, surely a fancy fringed version of the flaming parrot variety. Peering past the showy fringes, the inner world of botanic beauty, all sex and gender, comes into focus like adjusting a microscope on a drop of pond water. Utterly remarkable. Such an intricate universe of reproduction secreted in its depths; its beauty rarely appreciated. Where are you Georgia O'Keeffe? I've spent much of the last few years thinking and writing about human making; especially those audacious claims made across the centuries by arrogant men who brag they can create sentient beings, most always women, sexy women at that. Pandora, Galatea, Eve, Ava, Samantha. Let's ask these gentlemen to start small. How about making this flaming parrot tulip? Oh, and be sure to include all its beauty and intricacy and functionality and fragility and fragrance. How about making a hummingbird, or even a honey bee, hovering about aiding and abetting this tulip in the mysterious acts of botanical sex? No future without them. Despite our grandiose claims to making, to production, to stamping out one damned plastic thing after another, it is clear we are far better at un-making and it seems more natural to us. A pity. Perhaps we should pledge to make no more than we un-make and to un-make nothing that we are incapable of making. We might also spend more time on our bellies being seduced by the flowers.



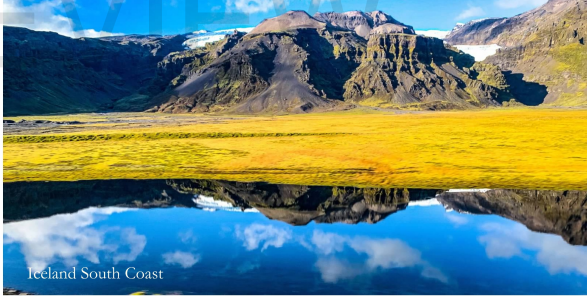




Brainard Lake

Nidelva

Smashing my face against the glass pane of my upstairs library window, peeking through the space between neighboring houses, I can glimpse a sliver of Sienna Pond. A bit awkward yet I do it daily. Sometimes I'm rewarded with a Canada goose or two. My workspace, on the other side of the house, offers a more direct view of another small pond, unnamed so far as I know. Early mornings it is usually a glassy surface holding an upside-down image of Longs Peak and the stirring back range of the Rockies. Why does my eye seek water? Is it thirsty? Perhaps it is to marvel as the occasional squadron of landlocked pelicans swoops in for a spectacular water ski landing or now and then to see a great skinny-legged blue heron standing in water up to its knees. A snowy egret was there this morning. Frozen water turns white, sometimes blue. I occasionally wonder what it would be like if water and blood switched colors. Who decided these things? At odd hours I was drawn to the Old Town Bridge to catch the differing moods of Nidelva River in Trondheim. While I found it difficult to discern any movement of the sun in the sky—sunrise was but a couple hours after sunset—my body felt the shifting moods of the Nidelva as it absorbed and reflected the buildings, clouds, and sky around it. Home in Colorado, several times a year I visit Brainard Lake to gawk at the grandeur of the lake-cloned Indian Peaks and Indian painbrush. Why are we so fascinated by the world conjoined with its upside-down double? Water moves, hides, reveals, reflects, shimmers, clouds, colors, echoes, supports, sounds, forebodes, runs, plays, dances, waves, rises, falls, erodes, quenches, irrigates, escapes, floods, washes, buoys ... for starters. Yet perhaps most amazingly it mirrors, reflects. Reflection: to bend back. As tots we discover self in a mirror. Then we spend the rest of our lives reflecting on who we have discovered there. On reflection we pause for memory and dreams; wisdom and regret.



Iceland South Coast



Lily Lake Colorado



Vatnajökull



Chewing on pieces of crystalline glacier ice frozen a thousand years ago, I taste the double crunch marking our time as I drift around bergs floating in a lagoon at the foot of Vatnajökull, the largest chunk of ice in Iceland and nearly also all of Europe. This huge deep lagoon has greatly expanded in the last few years due to the melting of Vatna Glacier. I am tasting the delicious purity of these ancient waters as byproduct of our penchant to pollute our air and dirty our water and warm our planet. The stark and overwhelming beauty of this place comes at an ugly price. Just a few days ago, I walked by the Parliament building in Stockholm where Sweden's young environmental activist, Greta Thunberg, sat daily for a year to protest climate change. In her speech at the United Nations she scolded, "How dare you!" Some of us felt uncomfortable as we returned to enjoying our oil-lubed lives. She speaks a simple truth. We are not only stealing the future of our youth and our planet, we also don't even have the courage to admit it, much less take decisive action. It is ironic that it is in the overwhelming beauty of a glacier lagoon floating among sparkling icebergs in a remote area on the fringe of a nearly vacant and sparsely populated country on the edge of the Arctic Circle that the melting ice in my mouth belies its sweetness with the foreboding taste of things to come. How we must feel hearing ourselves say, What beauty this is! How pure and delicious!



Stockholm Parliament
Greta's Protest Place





Stortorget

Wandering through the labyrinthine narrow streets of *Gamla Stan*, the old town, on *Stadsholmen*, the island at the heart of Stockholm, I take a random left heading up an even narrower steep street named Käkbrinken. At the end of a short block I unexpectedly emerge in *Stortorget*. A slightly sloping cobblestone square surrounded by gayly colored buildings, the Grand Plaza feels to me quaint and more festive than grand. Yet it has a gravity born by its long and storied history. The most modern looking building—*Børsen*, the Old Stock Exchange, built 1773-1776—currently houses the Swedish Academy, the Nobel Museum, and the Nobel Society. This highest point on the island is the oldest part of the city. Across a thousand years this place has been the setting for cycles of rise and ruin, the fragrant grandeur of wealth and the sickening stench of poverty. Every building on the plaza houses a long story of hope and regret and love and loss. My attention is drawn to the row of tall colorful buildings along one side of the square. These, the only buildings occupied by private citizens, were built in the eighteenth century yet they stand on medieval foundations. As the living hub of a great city, the square has been the setting for festivals, protests, and acts of violence. As a septuagenarian my end-of-life anxiety is modulated (or perhaps intensified?) in this small plaza. Across a thousand years, right here were I stand, so many human beings lived out their years to become swiftly diminishing memories passing into history as but a number, a footnote, a nameless member of a group; most all of them totally forgotten. The *Stortorget* event most mentioned to me by those I chat with here is the Stockholm Bloodbath that took place November 7-9, 1520. Religious reasons were given for settling political differences by beheading and hanging nearly one hundred people, many aristocrats, in this very square. As I stand mid-plaza in awe of the Nobel and enchanted by the row of colorful whimsical buildings, I can't help but conjure, as a shadowy overlay, dark bloody images of bodies hanging and severed heads rolling. Is this jarring conjunction life?



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