

An aerial photograph of Seattle, Washington, taken during the 'golden hour' of sunset. The sun is low on the horizon to the right, casting a warm glow and creating a faint rainbow in the sky. The city's skyline is visible, with several prominent buildings. In the foreground, a large, modern skyscraper stands out. To its right, a brightly lit Ferris wheel is visible. The city extends to the waterfront, where a large container port is filled with colorful shipping containers. The water of the harbor is calm, reflecting the city lights and the sunset. The overall mood is serene and picturesque.

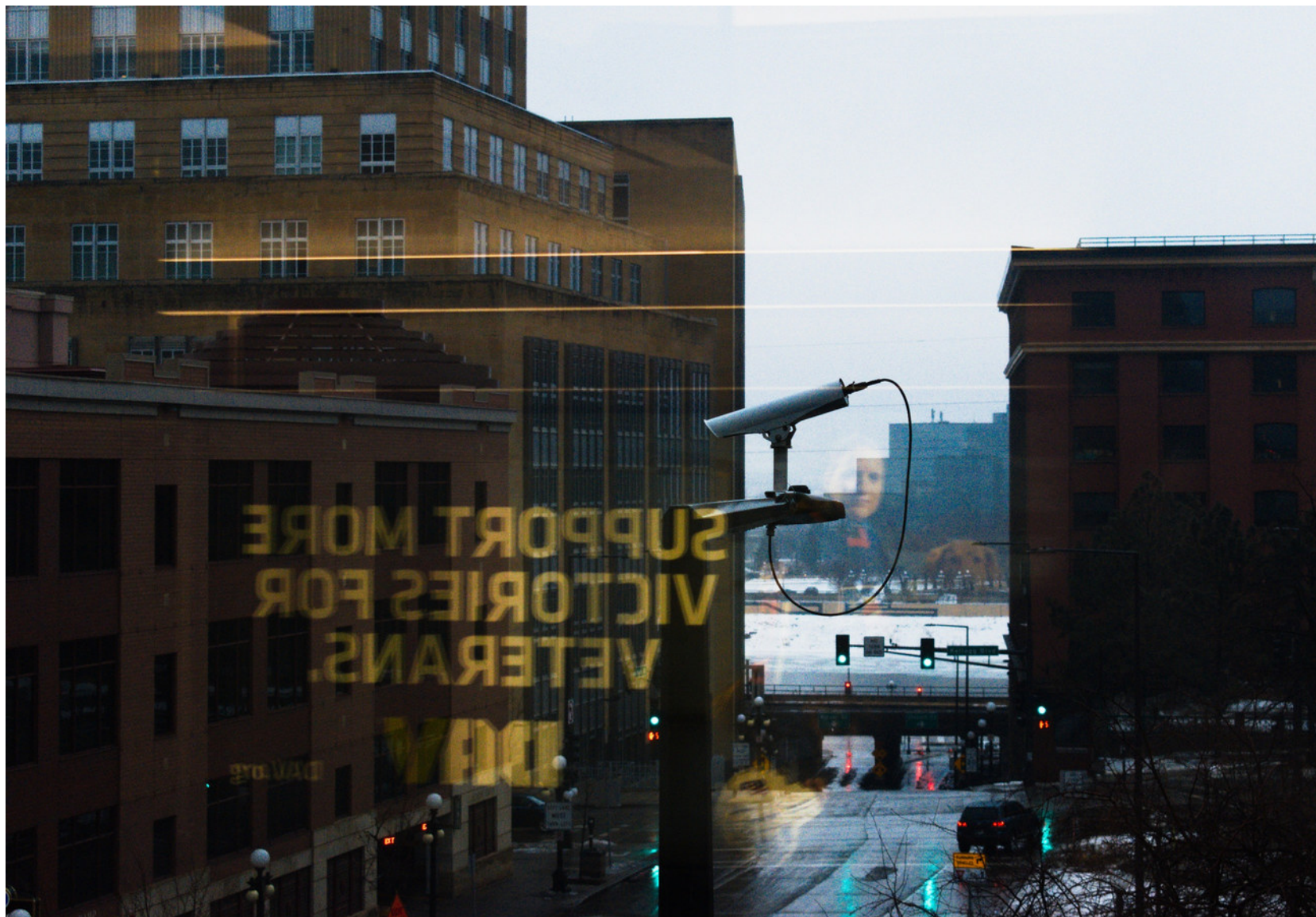
LEAH LONG
REFLECTIONS

REFLECTIONS

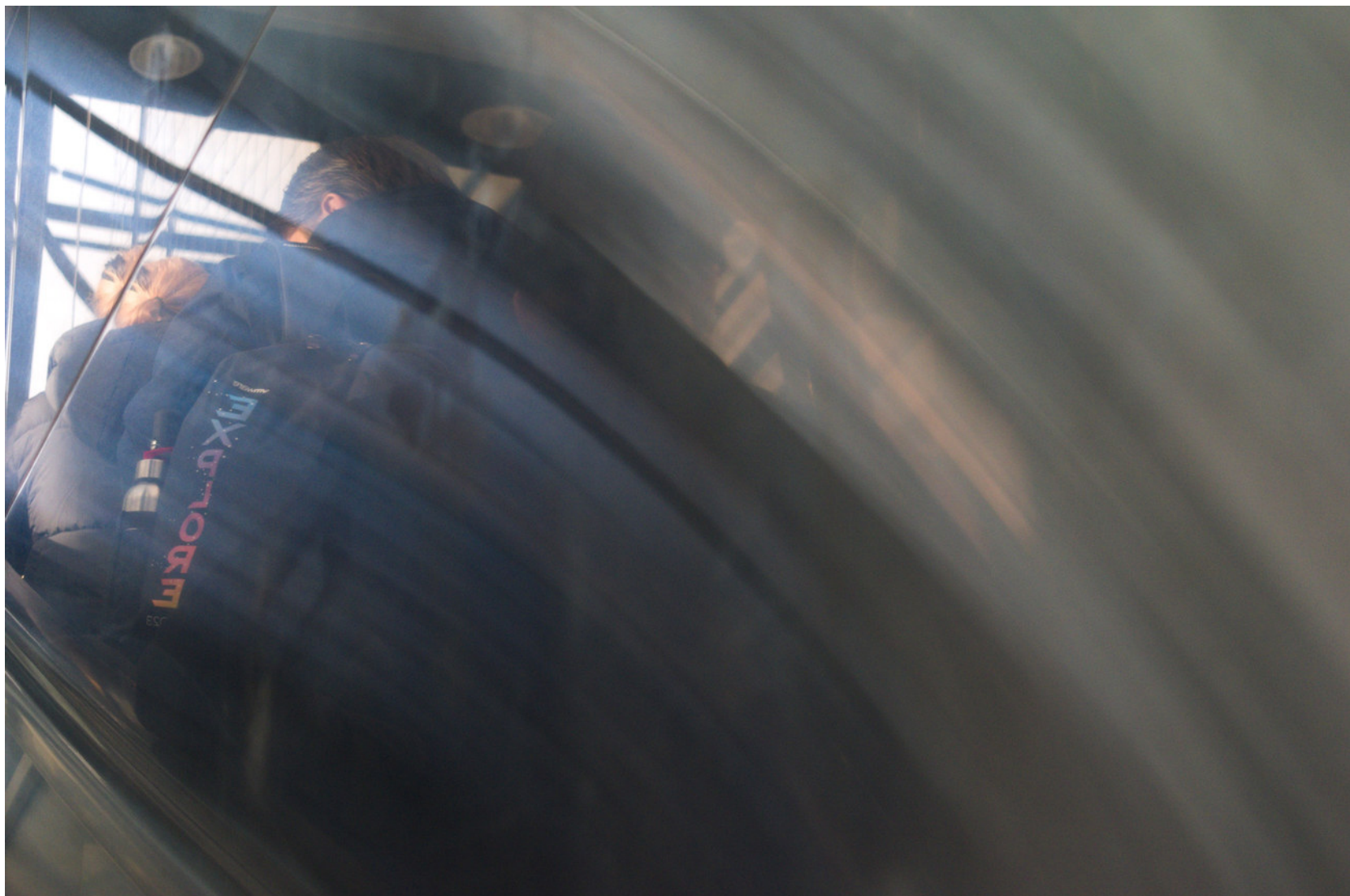


LEAH LONG



























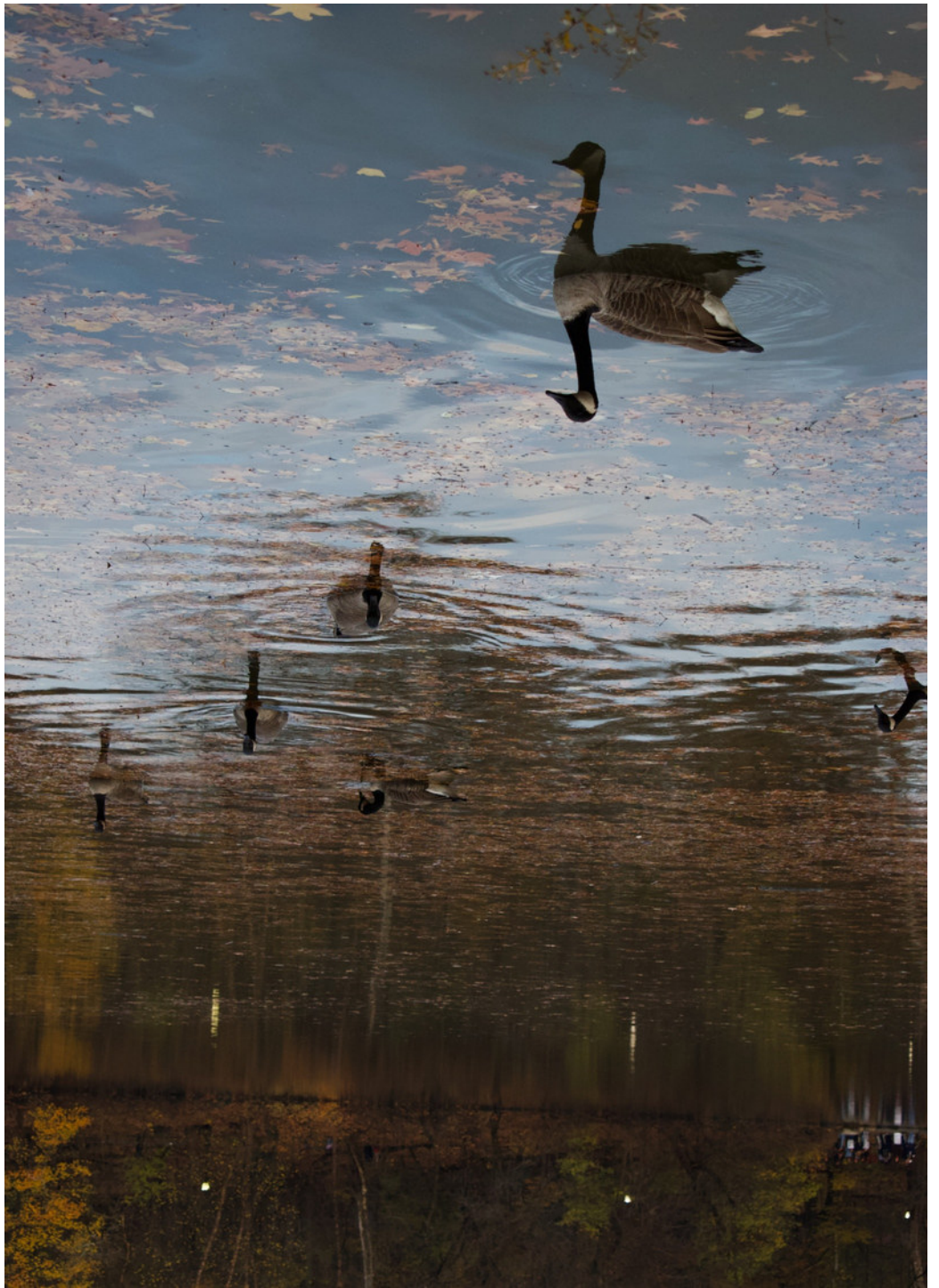




















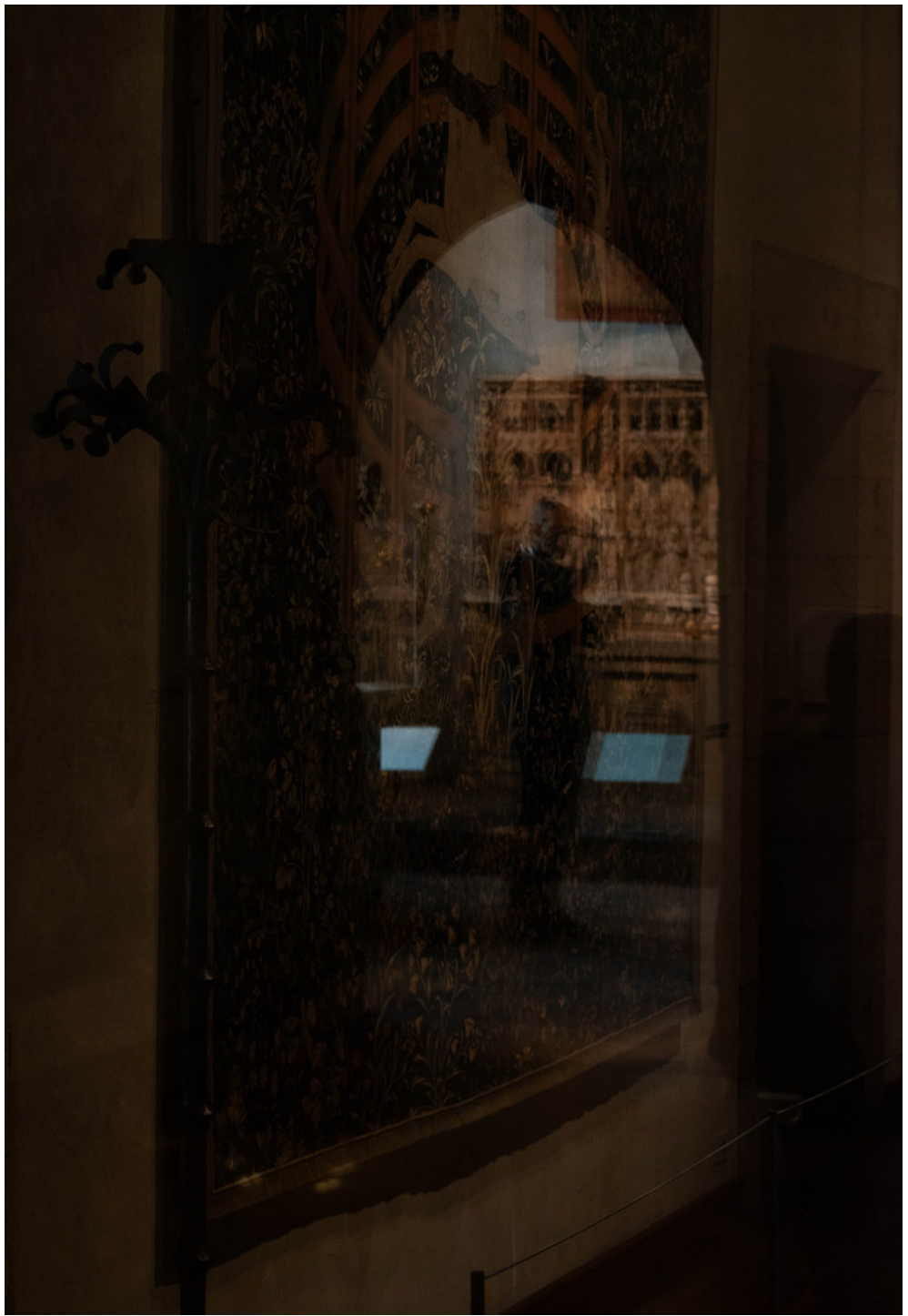


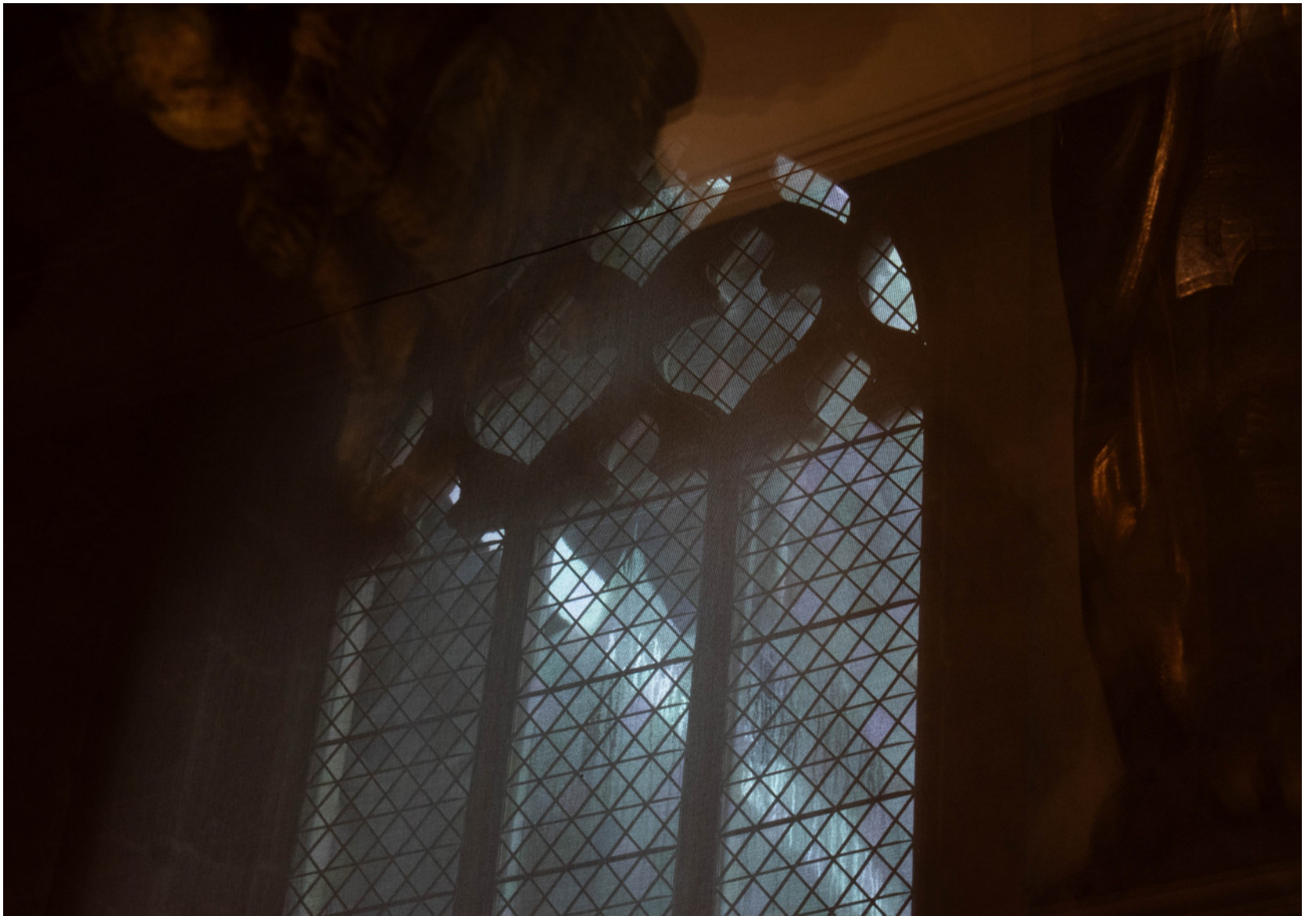




















A feeling I share with countless other trans women is my fear of attracting unwanted attention to myself. Pointing a camera at people in public is a surefire way to draw that kind of attention. Street photography as a genre is predicated on an ability to blend in and become one with the crowd. I imagine this is why many of its practitioners, throughout history, have been (white, cisgender, able-bodied, you know the list) men. If your aim is to capture your environment without altering it in the process, it helps to appear unremarkable.

I, myself, became a street photographer as a fifteen-year old boy. A few years later, I took my first dose of estradiol. I began to stand out more. The street felt less and less like my own. I grew anxiously aware of the fact that when my eye is pressed against the viewfinder, my peripheral vision falls away. Street photography took on a new precarity. I started harboring resentment toward the (white, cisgender...) men of my trade, who did not have to fear for their safety like I did. Soon, this bitterness latched onto photography itself. I seriously thought about quitting.

I knew from experience that my creativity flourishes under constraints. I learned to photograph on my phone, where in the absence of a twenty-four megapixel sensor adding a professional gloss to my images, I was left to figure out what actually made a good photo. A year into my transition, in a last-ditch effort to save my enjoyment of the medium, I introduced a new constraint. I wouldn't use my favorite crutch, the 70–300mm telephoto lens through which nearly anything could be eye-catching if I found the right focal length. I picked up a shorter lens, which at first I liked less, but it meant I had to try. My ongoing exploration of reflections is a result of this trying.

I remember how it felt to photograph before transitioning. I've been chasing that feeling in the narrow, fleeting reflections I find in department store windows, car mirrors, and pools of water. In these corners of the city, I can point my lens away from my subject and yet still find them. As I peer through the viewfinder, I covertly watch my back through the light reflecting off my camera's darkened screen. Reflections lend me a degree of access to the street and the city that has otherwise dwindled.

Being a trans woman means being looked at. Gawked at. Leered at. Laughed at. For much of the last two hundred years, from the street to the stage, our presence has registered primarily as spectacle. Even in the cover of anonymity the big city supposedly provides, trans femininity tends to shine brightly. They may not know who I am, but they know what I am. My womanhood confounds people to the point that they don't seem to notice they are staring, or that it is still rude to stare at someone like me. They only avert their eyes, regaining their usual manners, when I meet their gaze. Staring back reminds them that there is a person on the other side, and that she can see them too. Until that moment, the idea that a trans woman is not just a sight, but a seer, remains almost inconceivable. When I am spotted traversing the city with my camera in hand, though, this fact is hard to ignore. The pictures I produce are but one window into the world of things a trans woman might decide to look at.

Sometimes I, too, enter the frame, along with my camera. Occasionally, reflections reflect the fact that the photographer is flesh and blood; that this is me, Leah, who is looking, not the disembodied (read: male) gaze of the street photographer. Images of trans women are nothing new, and they are certainly nothing radical on their own. Between police sketches, medical photographs, mugshots, and popular media, the vast majority of the pictures that have been made of us have served to criminalize our public appearance, surveil our bodies, and circulate false perceptions about us. Historically, we have had little control over these images, resulting in narrow depictions that inevitably fail to grasp us in our totality. We are never portrayed with a canvas, or a sketchbook, or a camera. Doing so would risk suggesting that this image of us is not the only one possible.

The single place where I can be pictured in the act of looking, the act of imaging, wielding my camera, with no intermediary except the surface I am projected onto, is in my reflection. There is no perfect way to be seen — even in the window, our likenesses are followed by the caricatures that have been made of us. But in this mirror image, I am as close to full control as I will ever be. Reflections are no guarantee, but they are still an invitation — to view the world through my eyes, and to see me as I see myself.







