

Black on Black in the Beautiful Light

by [Karen An-Hwei Lee](#) in the [September 2023](#) issue

Together, we paint the diaphanous forest of light
filtering its rayed veils through the fog.

No need for phthalo blue nor the azure or aqua tonight,
none for sea light or acres of sky above the clouds.

Instead, we pay homage to the dim figures of silver birches
without the glossy gesso of gypsum or chalk. We foreground
black on black, the roughest bristles
of prairie grass prickling a brushy path under the canopy mist.

We start with a light source singing through angular trees;
a little gray softens the light. Brighter trees in the distance
remind us how every stroke is a branch,
numerous ones with new, lesser stems.

In my girlhood, I once held a goat-hair calligraphy brush,
ground the block of burned pine ash on a smooth inkstone
as my dark hair fell across the page.

This is the luminous beauty of black on black—
while we sleep, the lampblack soot falls gently around us—
ash trees alive inside us, alveolar in the air,
breathing a bronchial life—

*the light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.*