

**Go ahead and turn to page one before you  
climb the stairs.**

If I were standing next to you, I would ask for your jacket and offer you something to drink. I would say, “I have really nice tea that my aunt sent from Japan. I also have coffee. And some berry juice.”

While I go down to get our drinks, you could look around. Sometimes I forget that there are always things to look at.

When I come back, I would hand you your drink and say, “Let’s sit for a minute before we head up.” We could sit on the stairs—you leaning against the wall and me leaning against the banister.

“I’d like to hear about your day,” I say.  
“What did you see on your way here? Is it cold out? I’ve actually been inside all day.”

I would tell you about the mighty chocolate croissant I had for breakfast. How it’s powered me through the day even though I had a restless night. I might tell you that I’ve started doing aerobics before going to bed and that it helps me fall asleep faster. I would definitely tell you that I’m happy that you’ve come to see the show.

I can see from the tilt of your cup that it’s empty. It might be about time we stood up, but then I remember an exciting thing that happened today. I found an ad for a sunny little apartment.

I could show you photos if you'd like. Do you notice that almost all of them are taken from one spot in the apartment? Here's a shot of the mezzanine, one of the living room, and another one of the kitchen. But what do you think is between here and here? There's a human-size fragment of the apartment that's missing.

Shall we go upstairs? I can show you around the place. I don't know if you've been here before, but the exhibition is in a few parts of the building.

When I called the number on the ad, a man answered. A man on a surprisingly clear line, considering he was abroad. He could have been next door.

"Or on a tropical island," you say.

"That's nicer. I hope that's where he is," I reply.

I can picture him standing in the apartment, composing the photo on his screen. He might have imagined his new tenant walking across the room.

When I think about the future, I imagine a place before I imagine myself. A carpeted floor, cream-coloured walls, a wooden table, a comfortable chair. It's easier to imagine myself if there's a setting I can position myself in. Otherwise, the future feels like outer space.

I point to the floor. “Did you notice the carpet?”  
I say.

I know it’s not a popular choice in Belgium anymore, but in Canada, it’s still very common. I grew up with it, and I like it because it’s soft and warm. (It’s also probably full of dust and dirt, but I only realized that after talking to Belgians.) The importance of these qualities is that they make it comfortable to lie on. The largest open area of carpet in my parents’ house is in the living room. The carpet is about two centimeters long and mottled gray. My head sinks into it a little. Strands stick up between my fingers like grass.

I’ve always liked lying on it and staring at the ceiling. The ceiling is made of textured stucco, so that it looks like vanilla frosting sprinkled with flecks of silver. It reminds me of the sky. It’s like looking at clouds and stars at the same time. It’s neither day nor night, but both.

If you were a guest in my house and looked up at the ceiling, you would probably find it quite ordinary. It's not an unusual finish. It's only when you lie directly under it that you feel something different.

"Why is that?" you ask.

"It's partially the horizontal position of your body. Partially the feeling of the carpet beneath you. And partially the distance between you and the ceiling, which feels much farther when you're on the floor," I say. "I know the ceiling's not the same, but you could try lying down here."

"Right now?"

"Yeah, so you can experience what I'm talking about. But only if you want to."

Let's head this way. If you need to use the washroom, it's here to the left. Hans might be here today. He's the other half of the collaboration. He said he had some more rocks for the collection. Oh look, there he is.

"Hey Hans, you made it out," I say. I haven't seen him in a couple of weeks, and his beard has grown. I think he has a new striped shirt.

"Hey. Doing your guided tour?" he asks.

"Yeah. Well, kind of. We've been doing more talking than looking."

"Nothing wrong with that. I have to make a quick call, then I'll catch up with you."

"Okay."

I've learned a lot from Hans. He lives in this concrete world of objects, making things with his hands, whereas I mostly live in my head. He once said that I give him the impression that I want him to know me. It made me look at him closely. I'd never thought about it before. I'm always so busy wanting to know other people.

Hans has been this surprise. Most people in your life you meet by chance, and you never know in what way your lives will connect—or not connect. It's both wonderful and terrifying at the same time. On a good day, I might say it's wonderfully terrifying.

It makes me think of this documentary I once saw about two turtles that were the last of their species. It starts with the female being released into the pond where the male lives. They eye each other through a metal gate. They spend the night on their own sides, and in the morning, the scientists decide that they like each other enough to meet. The gate is slowly opened. It's the male that makes the first move. He glides through the water, through the gate, and into her side of the pond. They disappear under the surface in a cloud of bubbles.

"What do you think they said to each other under water?" I ask.

"Nice to meet you? Hello, woman of my dreams?" you reply.

"Do you think they know they're the last of their kind?"

"It's unlikely."

"But it's possible, right?"

"Yeah, it's possible."

"It seems a greater tragedy if they didn't know."

"How come?"

"If they knew the stakes, they might put a little more effort into it. Or be more forgiving," I say.

"It's a lot of pressure."

"Maybe not having a choice is easier."

"You think?"

"No, probably not," you say. "It's okay. They don't think that much."

I think about those turtles from time to time.

When I imagine my future self in the apartment, I see myself looking out at the park. I would be able to look at trees instead of at the people in the buildings across the street. They both change slowly, but trees don't look back. That wouldn't be a bad thing.

My bedroom growing up had a window with a view of the backyard. My favourite time of year was when the cherry blossoms were in bloom. They flowered a little after my birthday, and the entire window filled with white. It was like snow in spring.

In my house, I had a plant by the window that was getting a little too much sun. It developed brown spots on its shiny leaves so I moved it away. Its new home is a stool next to the kitchen door. If I wander downstairs in the dark, I forget that it's there and brush past it. The leaves rustle, and I stop mid-motion. For an instant, I'm walking through the forest.

**What do you like best about your place?**

“I’m not sure what I like best,” I say.  
“I was reading about semi-slugs. Have you ever heard of them? They’re basically snails that are morphing into slugs.”

“How are they morphing?” you ask.

“Well, they used to have shells, but I guess they stopped needing them because they’ve evolved to have only a little hump.”

“Like a camel?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Never heard of them.”

What would have caused such an evolution? Change in climate? Change in diet? Changes in the flora and fauna?

“We’re entering the main part of the exhibition,” I say. “Wouldn’t it be nice if we didn’t need a house anymore? If you could be perfectly comfortable sleeping under a tree.”

“That sounds like a terrible idea.”

“Why is that?”

“I love my couch.”

I laugh.

“You can sit on it, lie on it, eat on it…”

“Jump on it!”

“Oh! I haven’t jumped on it in a long time,” you say.

“Then you know what to do tonight,” I reply.  
“The best part about being a slug is that you’re completely self-sufficient.”

“But there’d be nobody to worry about you if you didn’t come home.”

I think about that for a moment. “I could live with that.”

My favourite apartment is actually at the top of this building, above the café. It's a place for artists to stay while they're working at the Beursschouwburg. It's surrounded by windows on three sides and is one open space except for the bathroom. The living room is in one corner, the bedroom in another, and the kitchen is along the back. I've never lived above the second floor, and I think it must put things in perspective to be able to wake up and see that people on the street are the size of your thumb.

I think of all the nights that it must remain empty. The lights off, the curtains closed. It occurs to me that it might be the cleaning woman who knows it best.

She is the one who opens the curtains, changes the sheets, empties the garbage cans, and wipes off the counters. She has stood at the window and seen the city under different skies.

This place in particular feels like a refuge in the middle of Brussels. Sometimes the cleaning woman lies on the bed and closes her eyes. Then she gets up and smooths out the blanket.

She's been dusting, washing, and mopping the place for years. But after so long, it seems like every other apartment she cleans. Slowly, it's blended into the sea of other flats in the city. And now, it's disappeared completely—quietly, like music turning into background noise—and she floats from place to place, locking one door behind her as she opens another.

**“But background noise can turn into music again,” you say.**

**“That’s true,” I reply. “Like if a good song comes on.”**

**“Yeah, or the volume is turned up. Sometimes you also notice when it goes down.”**

**“I guess it’s a matter of keeping an ear out.”**

**“Both ears way out.”**

*August*

If I were standing in front of you, I would tell you that I've really enjoyed talking to you. Thank you. And that you could write me a message in the book at the front. It would be nice to stay in touch.

## **A collection of rooms**

*September*

In your house, the lights turn on and off in different directions. Some switches flip up to turn on, while others flip down to turn on. In the living room, there's this bank of five switches: to turn on the lamp by the couch, the lights in the ceiling, the spotlight in the display case, the fixture above the table, and the hall light. Although the switches point in different directions, there is a logic to them. They create a map of the lights in the room. I didn't realize this until much later.

Before you start up the stairs to the first floor, you can switch on the hall light upstairs. And when you get to the first floor, you can switch off the hall light on the ground floor. Light switches guide you through the house. One on, the next off, so that you're never standing in the dark. We've never met in darkness.

There was this year we had thirty straight days of rain in November, and we never saw the sun. Or the moon. Afterwards, you climbed the roof and installed a ten-meter pole with a globe lamp attached to it. It hangs above your little garden, and sometimes you go out to look at it in the middle of the night.

On those nights, the neighbourhood seems unusually quiet, and the outline of my window becomes a picture frame.

We are sitting outside, even though the chairs are damp. I wrap the blanket around me a little tighter.

"Good thing is, there are two more minutes of daylight every day," I say.

"Oh! What is that, like the length of time it takes to make a sandwich?"

I think for a moment. "Or brush your teeth," I say.

"It's just long enough to look around and smile," you say.

With your hands in your pockets, you're doing just that.

“What are you so smiley about?” I ask.  
You shrug. “I’m having a good hair day.”  
“That is something to be happy about.”  
“And it’s almost your birthday,” you say.  
“Really? When?”  
“On Tuesday.”

By then, we could be surrounded by snow. The night sky will take on a purple hue, and the city will come to a standstill. On your birthday, the tulips were out. It was warm enough to ride your bike without a jacket.

Tonight, there are two moons. One is full. The other is not. One temporarily hides behind a cloud. The other remains radiant. We stay here just long enough to see one moon float past the other.

One always knows where the other is in the house. Your bedroom’s on the second floor, but I can hear you cough when I sit with a cup of tea in the living room. You hear me on the phone with my sister. You ask me later how she’s doing.

At first I searched for a lock on the bathroom door, but realized there is none because you can always tell if there’s someone inside by the light coming through the frosted glass.

It’s like living in a house without walls. I think of you standing in the grass and remember we have met once in the dark. Once, when I blindly flicked switches and plunged us into darkness momentarily. In the dark, you were an afterimage burned on my retina, and you seemed doubled, as I saw you a split-second later in the light.

“I’ve been noticing time go by really fast lately,” I say.

“But there’s plenty of it,” you reply.

“Yeah, I forget that sometimes.”

We’re sitting outside. You’ve recently put out the garden furniture again. The soil seems ready to grow things.

On most mornings, I look at a weather cam image from back home. There is a new photo every fifteen minutes until the sun goes down. At sundown, it is the middle of rush hour. Headlights line the bridge. It is the last photo of the previous day and the image I often wake up to because of the time difference. And so it seems that yesterday stretches into today. That night stretches into day. That the lights dotting the horizon there continue to burn as the sun scales the sky here.

I imagine someone like you, climbing the roof to clean the lens on a fine spring day.

You glance at your watch. "Like there's still a hundred and eighty minutes left of today—give or take."

"I don't think I've ever seen you wear a watch."

"It's new. See how useful it is? It even lights up." You hold up your wrist.

"Nice. I'm a fan of anything that makes life easier. Life is hard, don't you think?"

You look at me sideways. "Only a little."

"I knew you'd say that."

You are walking around in a T-shirt like it's the middle of summer.

"Well, I guess you're on easy street when tomorrow's your birthday."

"Tomorrow? That's still ages away."

"And what are you going to do with all that time?"

"Oh, I dunno ... Whip up a gourmet meal. Alphabetize my books. Maybe dye my hair a fun colour."

I laugh. "I guess the possibilities are endless."

The morning is slightly overcast. I count one, two, three patches of blue sky. The day is just about to begin.

"Is there something you really want but don't have yet?" I ask.

You are leaning against the railing, looking out across the water. Your T-shirt flaps in the wind.

“I’d say there are things that I look forward to, like travelling and owning a farm ... Having a family ... Being old.”

“Being old?”

“Yeah, like all the life experiences I would have. All that wisdom.”

When you turn your face, your voice almost disappears in the sound of the engine. It’s been almost half an hour since we left the harbor.

“Do you feel like you’re getting wiser?”

I ask. “I wish I could feel it on a day-to-day basis, but sometimes, it hits you suddenly. Like I’ll look back and see that I’ve changed a lot.”

You scratch your shoulder. “You?”

“I realize how unwise I actually am, and it’s like I was just too naïve to notice before.” I wiggle my toes in my shoes. “I’ve never looked forward to being old.”

“Why not?”

The wind has turned your hair into a cloud above your head.

“Like imagine being seventy-seven, and realizing that this might be the last time you’re here in this very spot. It’s been really fun but also exhausting, and you don’t think you’ll have the energy for it—ever again. And I’m talking about the conscious understanding of that because lots of things could be your last time without you knowing it.” I press my eyes with my palms. They burn.

We left in the semi-darkness to make it to the ferry on time. You unlocked the car, and your door slammed shut before mine. The sky grew bright over the mountains as we drove. Even at that early hour, it was noticeably cooler in the shade than in the light. The windows on both sides were open.

“What would you say if you knew this was the last conversation we were ever going to have?” I ask.

“That’s a tough one.” You rest your chin on your hand.

Last night, you wanted to stay up until the sun came up. You suggested it like it was the best idea you'd ever had.

"Maybe we would just reminisce about the old times," you say.

"Like a summary of all the important things?"

I quickly try to think of all the important things.

"Or we could just go with the flow."

"I guess it would be too late for anything new."

The patches of blue sky are slowly shifting, and the forecast for rain seems to be fading.

"I just hate that feeling of knowing that something is your last time," I say.

"There need to be endings so that new things can start."

"I'm trying to sort through all my junk."

I pull on my hood.

"Oh yeah? How's that going?"

"Not as quickly as I'd hoped."

I bend down and grab a granola bar from my backpack. I took too long in the shower this morning and only had time for a small breakfast. Half awake, I felt like I was standing in a lagoon under a pounding waterfall. I might have heard birds.

"Do you want a snack?" I ask.

"Maybe later."

I take a bite.

"Sometimes I'm tempted to throw everything away without going through any of it," you say.

"To just set it all out on the curb. Wouldn't that feel good?"

You would break a sweat carrying all your stuff up the driveway. I imagine you coming home in the evening to find it all gone. I think about my drafts of letters, maps people have drawn me, lists, clippings, ticket stubs—all making my drawers difficult to open.

"I probably wouldn't miss most of it since I only look at it when I'm cleaning," I say. "But oh, I don't think I could ever just get rid of it all."

“Just in case?”

“Just in case.”

The ocean is nearly the same colour until the horizon. We might see whales.

“So what about you? What do you want?” you ask.

“I’ve been thinking about that, and I can’t come up with anything.”

“Nothing?”

“I mean, how can you know you want something if you’ve never had it before?” I wave my granola bar around for emphasis. “So maybe I just want more of what I already have. Like I want my good friends to become better friends. Keep working on my own stuff. Keep travelling. Go farther. And have new things come out of that.” I shrug.

“So it means you’re happy with what you have. That’s good,” you say. “But I think we often want what we’ve never had before. Probably a gift and a curse at the same time.”

“Sometimes I feel too easily influenced. Like I just want what the cool kids have.”

“I think we’re all susceptible to that. Weren’t you one of the cool kids in school?”

“Are you kidding?” I frown. “I was a goody two-shoes.”

You try to hide a smile. “I think you probably just wanted to do your best.”

“When I was little, I had to look perfect before I left the house. Like my braids had to be smooth and even, my shirt had to be tucked in just right, and my socks had to be pulled up properly.”

You laugh. “I just got a mental image of a little you standing in front of the mirror.”

When I look at old photos of myself, I feel like I haven’t changed as much as my sister has. Sometimes I like that. Sometimes I don’t.

“What happened if everything wasn’t perfect?” you ask.

“It would be a bad start to the day and I’d feel uncomfortable.” My scarf unfurls in the wind. “I bet your socks didn’t even match.”

“I won’t deny it. Maybe a shirt without a button.”

“And look at you now, a free spirit,” I say.

“And what are you?”

“That’s a good question.”

The sun appears like the moon through the clouds. I look at it directly. “After a while, I realized that getting ready made me really anxious, so I started having ‘imperfect days’ where I’d just throw on my clothes and comb my hair really fast,” I say.

“And did you feel better after that?”

“It bothered me at first, but I eventually got used to it and I did feel better, so I started having more imperfect days until all my days were that way.”

You lean back and put your hands in your pockets. You look at the ground. “You know, there’s only one of you so you’re fine the way you are.”

“Chaplin once won third prize in a Charlie-Chaplin look-alike contest.”

You shake your head. “Poor guy.”

It occurs to me that I’m only minorly happy that we didn’t stay up all night.

“When we were talking about getting old, I forgot to say that I hope I know you for a really long time,” I say.

“Me too.”

“Maybe there will be so many fun times we won’t be able to remember them all.”

“I’ll help you remember,” you say.

“That’s friendly.”

I watch a propeller at the top of the ferry turn steadily. I point to it. “What is that?”

“Radar. To detect other boats and objects in the water.”

“Oh! And to signal its own location, I guess.”

“Yeah. Seeing is to be seen,” you say.

The sky behind it is blue.

The sun breaks through the clouds, and the ferry casts a shadow on the water. It ripples over the surface in cobalt blue. On the deck, there are two small figures. I wave and the silhouette waves back. As I continue to watch, I get the impression that the shadow is actually a vessel underwater, travelling at the same speed as us. On board, its two passengers are also pointing, wondering—marveling at an entirely different world to theirs.

My sister has a small projector that shines constellations around her room. She got it as a birthday present, and I always wanted one of my own. The stars turn slowly, and it's as if the earth has somehow speeded up. It came with a book that explained the star systems, and we used to study it carefully with a flashlight.

My sister is very good at recognizing constellations in the night sky, whereas I am not. In the real sky, there are so many more stars than were projected on her ceiling.

Here, there are still fewer visible stars. It never really gets dark in the city. I wonder if my sister still has that projector. I've gotten you one for your birthday.

When you turn it on, the universe will shrink to the size of your bedroom. All four seasons will pass in one evening. On sleepless nights, it will seem that the earth is turning faster, that day will come sooner, and you, just another star among millions, will float towards the sun.

"I think I may have chosen the wrong day to do this," you say. There is only one tree in the yard and you are sitting in it, untangling a string of Christmas lights. The wind has been picking up steadily in the last hour, and you are bobbing up and down on a branch as if you were moored to a buoy. I slide the door closed behind me as I step outside. Your hair whips in the breeze.

**“Maybe you should come down before you get seasick,” I say.**

**“Almost ... Got it!” you say, as the last few lights unravel. You secure the end to the tree, and I hold the ladder as you climb down.**

**“Wait, we can’t go in until we see the fruits of my labour,” you say. You pick up the plug and hold it to the socket. “Ready?”**

**“Unleash the magic!” I say.**

**The lights only illuminate the bottom half of the tree and burn against the blue-gray sky. Your face lights up. Clouds skim the sky.**

**“I think today was the perfect day to hang them,” I say.**

**The lights sway to and fro, open, upwards, ready to catch whatever may tumble down towards us.**



## Titles

- × *Arrangement of Ceramics and a Hole*  
Hans Demeulenaere  
Coffee table, ceramics, brick, mirror, hole
- × *Behind, Before, Above, Between, Below*  
Hans Demeulenaere  
Wood, fabric, hinges, wheels, paint
- × *If the Sun Were the Size of a Red Blood Cell, the Milky Way Would Be the Size of Canada*  
Emi Kodama  
Text on mirror
- × *I Hate When We Switch From Daylight Savings Time to Standard Time*  
Hans Demeulenaere, Emi Kodama  
Fluorescent lights, photographs, timer, glass
- × *You Open the Door, I Open My Eyes*  
Emi Kodama  
Laser print on paper
- × *Living Room*  
Hans Demeulenaere  
Carpet and objects that could function as a stool or a coffee table when they're not a sculpture
- × *Sunday Afternoon*  
Hans Demeulenaere, Emi Kodama  
Origami paper, construction paper, staples, plasterboard, carpet, baseboard, tape, nails, paint
- × *Arrangement of Stones*  
Hans Demeulenaere  
Rock collection
- × *What Would You Do If You Didn't Need Sleep?*  
Hans Demeulenaere, Emi Kodama  
Text on paper, painted wooden structure based on the measurements and colour of a ping-pong table
- × —  
Hans Demeulenaere  
Modules based on tatami
- × —  
Hans Demeulenaere, Emi Kodama  
Publication of a conversation, a short story, colours
- × —  
Hans Demeulenaere, Emi Kodama  
Performances in the exhibition



# Colophon

Texts

**Emi Kodama,  
Tom Van Imschoot**

Colours

**Hans Demeulenaere,  
Emi Kodama**

Graphic Design

**Joris Kritis (with Terry Kritis)**

Performers

**Celine Aernoudt, Neus Barcons  
Roca, Mohamed Boujarra,  
Tim Choin, Erik Eriksson,  
Anne Fonteyn, Meri Pajunpää,  
Michael Valdez, Katrien  
Vandemeerssche**

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Kendrah Jespersen, Thomas  
Jouanjean, Rowena Koh, Helena  
Kritis, Cathérine Lommée,  
Caroline Lonneville, Mihnea  
Mircan, Samyra Momouh,  
Chayenne Note, Odilon Pain,  
Guido Robin, Julie Rodeyans,  
Sanne Rous, Marnix Rummens,  
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**Hans Demeulenaere & Emi Kodama**  
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