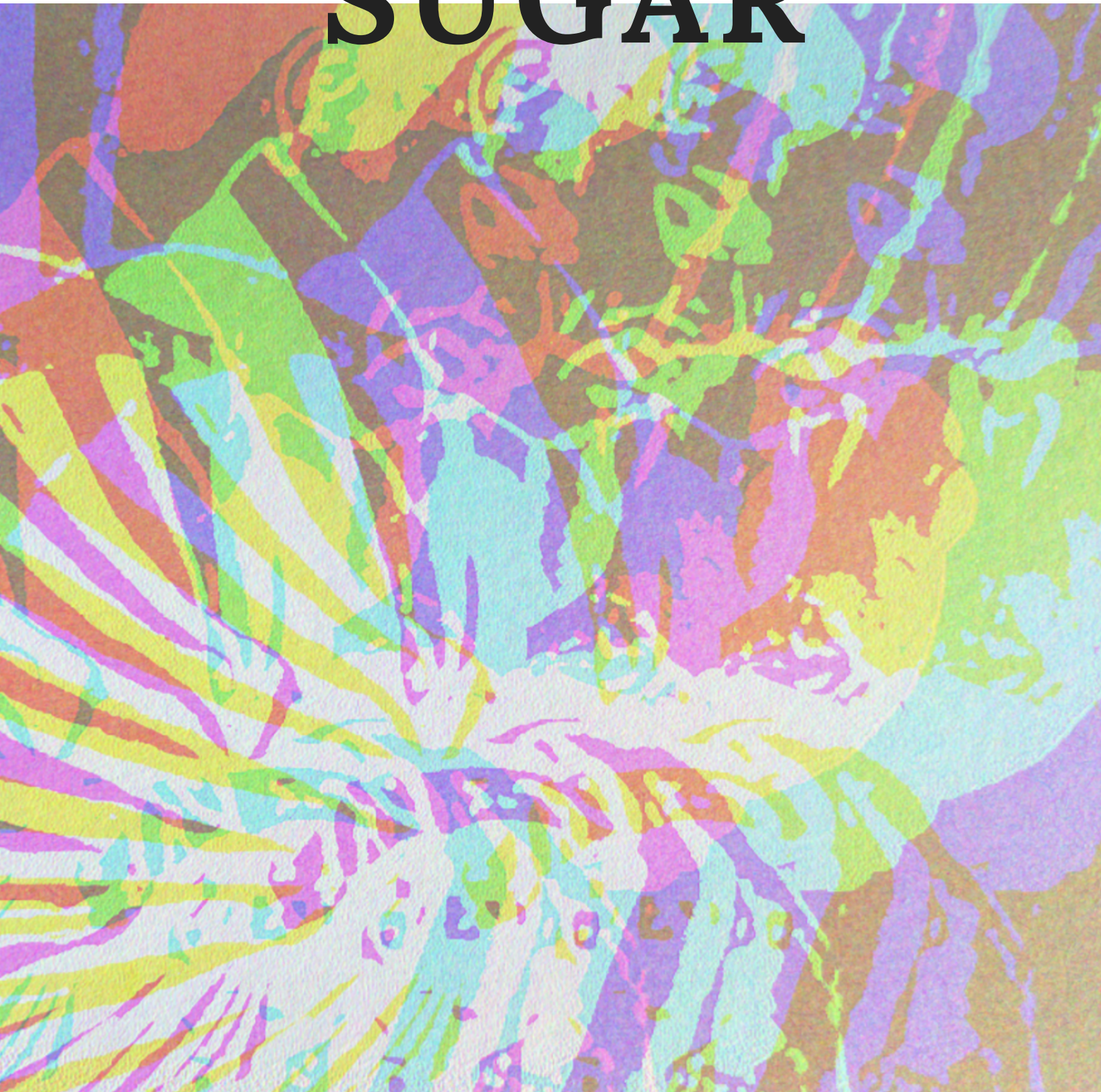


The Fieldstone Review

SUGAR



Bridge of Dreams

Lev Raphael



Every night when I was growing up, the George Washington Bridge gave me a gift. From my eighth-floor bedroom windows in a slightly shabby Gilded Age apartment house high on a Washington Heights hill, I would watch the golden lights strung along its length come on as if a magician had uttered a loving spell.

For me, as a shy, bookish kid who sensed he was different from his peers but wasn't sure how, that necklace of lights spoke of dreams, connection, and mystery.

I knew that they lit the way to the lush green Palisades across the Hudson in New Jersey, but that was reality. Then there were the schoolbooks which mentioned that a battle had been fought somewhere nearby during the War of Independence. And one elementary school teacher had explained to us that the bridge was nearly 5,000 feet long. Those facts were like something I'd have to memorize for an anxiety-causing quiz. But they didn't matter to my heart.

For me, the lights coming on at dusk signaled a change in the state of quotidian reality. I could dream of traveling almost anywhere deeper into the continent because I lived on the country's edge, the son of immigrants haunted by their horrific past in the Holocaust and struggling to adjust to a new, demanding city that didn't want to know what they had survived. That was the past and New York was surging into the-

future, constantly tearing itself apart to build, build, build.

Gazing at those hypnotic lights that were brighter than stars, I could fantasize about escape. School was behind me, and so was being mocked or bullied by other kids and profoundly harassed by one snooty teacher who seemed to think my living on the border of Washington Heights and Harlem was a sign of inferiority.

From her point of view, she was right. We weren't remotely like the middle-class families whose kids peopled her classes, families who had been in the U.S. for several generations. Mrs. Zimmermann in fifth grade—tall, dour, in perpetual sneakers—was of German-Jewish descent like most of my classmates, but my parents were Eastern European Jews. The European enmity between these two groups which now seems like a rusty, worthless antique, was still toxic and divisive in the 1950s and 1960s. German Jews by their own estimation were more cultured, while they saw their "opposites" as vulgar and crude.

This was ironic, given that between them, my parents spoke nearly ten languages. My classmates with their American names of Michael and Scott and Laura and Richard and Lizzie and Dennis and Ronnie inhabited a different world than mine: they were privileged, going to Disneyland and summer camps, bragging about their expensive models and toys.

But I had my view of the bridge, a glowing promise that the world was all before me if only I left my eyrie and crossed over. Discovered America, and myself.

Image Credit: ricardocostaphotography