

THE SEASONS OF GARDEN
AND FASHION MAKING

LIFE IN CLOTHES
ALMANAC

A Collaboration with
Dr Mila Burcikova

Bella, Céline Houde, Elen,
Mélisha Wago-lala, Stephen Swindells

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facing page — Céline wears a dress by Mila Burcikova, a headscarf by ound and earrings by Hana Kim.



A better system will not automatically ensure a better life. In fact, the opposite is true: only by creating a better life can a better system be developed. – Vaclav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, 1978

The 17th-century farmhouse of fashion researcher and designer-maker Dr Mila Burcikova is only two hours away from the bustling heart of fashion in Paris, yet it feels like a world apart – a calming refuge where creativity and nature reside and cross-fertilize. In the beautiful woodlands of France’s first national park, the Parc National du Morvan in rural Burgundy, Mila and her partner, the artist Stephen Swindells, have been gradually renovating the house for the past four years, building their studios and turning their acre of land, divided into five walled gardens, into a space to relax, nurture their passion for gardening, and grow their own food. It is a laboratory of sorts, where Mila conducts most of her investigations, dividing the time between her rural home and research base and her work for the Centre for Sustainable Fashion at London College of Fashion.

Her current project, “Life in Clothes: Place-based organic fashion systems for human and environmental healing”, for which she holds the prestigious Sheepdrove Trust Postdoctoral Research Fellowship, is a three-year design-led exploration examining the interconnections and parallels between fashion-making and farming practices. It is here in the Morvan that she observes firsthand the unfolding of nature throughout the year’s seasons and distils insights for her studio practice and the fashion system at large, capturing them for her end-of-year publication, the Life in Clothes Almanac.

Drawing inspiration from historical farmers’ almanacs – periodical publications that have appeared in print since the mid-15th century, listing weather predictions, planting schedules, astronomical tables and celestial events according to the yearly calendar – Mila’s unique version will come to life over the course of a year. Her Life in Clothes Almanac is a work in progress, a continuous process of capturing the flow of natural seasons in the garden and the fashion studio attached to it. It is a conversation between gardening and fashion making, a learning journey on how working with the rhythm of natural seasons throughout the year can inform and reframe the process of fashion making, and ultimately present a new paradigm for fashion that places human and environmental health and wellbeing at its heart.

DÖRTE Mila, you started your year-long academic research project, the Life in Clothes Almanac, in January 2023 to investigate how fashion and farming systems that are better attuned to the rhythms of nature can contribute to better lives. Could you paint us a

picture of what your journey of discovery looks like on a day-to-day basis?

MILA The Life in Clothes Almanac is a 12-month practice element of my larger, three-year research project “Life in Clothes: Place-based organic fashion systems for human and environmental healing”. This research, funded by the Sheepdrove Trust, investigates the links and parallels between fashion and agriculture. Not many of us instantly make a connection between the clothes we wear and the ways we grow our food and other agricultural produce. Yet, albeit unknowingly, every day we make a choice of wearing something that has been grown (e.g. cotton, linen), reared (e.g. wool, leather) or extracted (e.g. fossil-fuel-based fibres such as polyester) from the Earth. In short, we live our lives in clothes that all originated from Earth’s living systems – hence the title “Life in Clothes”, looking at fashion and agriculture from a systems perspective.

The Life in Clothes Almanac is then a micro-scenario for an in-depth understanding of both fashion and agriculture at the smallest end of the scale – designer-maker practice and gardening. Almanacs are yearly handbooks that map the cycle of the year and contain key practical information and tips for everyday actions. I was interested in how this age-old concept could help place fashion nearer to the context of natural seasons and its embeddedness in nature.

As a researcher, I am used to tackling big contextual questions, helping people to understand the many interconnected issues of the current fashion system. In my Almanac work, I also wanted to understand where and how I could make a difference, how I could help to shift the system through my own everyday practice. Some years ago, I came across a short passage from Vaclav Havel’s *Power of the Powerless*, that seemed to capture exactly what I was interested in exploring: “A better system will not automatically ensure a better life. In fact, the opposite is true: only by creating a better life can a better system be developed.” I wanted to see what this “better life” would look like and what lessons could be learned from it for fashion practice.

Four years ago, my partner and I moved to rural France where, after a long search, we found a house where we could both have studios that would flow in and out of the garden (my partner is a painter). So, every day when I wake up, my first instinct is to go to my studio and look out into the small walled garden

that is attached to it. It is perhaps my way of waking up, delaying the reality, facing the day. This year, after four full-year cycles, having tended or planted every single plant in that place, I noticed an interesting thing. When I look out into the walled garden, though sleepy, I now start seeing things, rather than just looking at them. I now see how each branch of the *Perovskia* grew differently as a result of my pruning. I see how each of the seedheads of poppies I leave on for structure during the colder months will turn into a flood of lovely spiky green leaves popping all over the place with the first signs of spring. I also see how some plants that I was initially determined to eradicate, as they didn’t fit with my idea of how/what the garden should be like, are actually perfect where they are. I see that one of the birches, of which we planted nearly 20 at the front of the house, has more yellow leaves than it had two days ago and so it will need water and perhaps some feed too.

In this way, for me, the relationship between the garden and the studio is physical not only in that they are next to each other, but also in that very similar processes and principles often apply in both. This is exactly what I am trying to capture through careful observation, photography and keeping a diary of both my gardening and design and making practice throughout the year.

DÖRTE You describe the Life in Clothes Almanac as a learning journey. Could you share some of your observations with us? For example, how do you experience changing seasons and cycles of nature in relation to your creative work? Have you had any “aha” moments or surprising or inspiring insights?

MILA I think that one of the most significant “aha” moments that I have had so far was noticing how my own creative cycles shift with the shifting cycle of the year, flows of natural energy and light levels.

My original intention for the Almanac work was to regularly spend time in the garden and in the studio and capture what was happening in one and the other in parallel. However, over the winter months I found that I did not feel like creating anything in the studio. Firstly, it seemed to me that it was the garden that needed my attention more urgently. When we bought the house, most of its nearly one acre was just lawn surrounded with a laurel hedge, and a few fruit trees; now we have five separate gardens – the chicken garden, the

rose garden, the orchard, “Mila’s meadow,” and the vegetable plot and edible native hedge.

Secondly, I saw no reason to make anything. When following the natural cycles of the local landscape and the garden, the early months of the year are very much about rest, recovery, repair – it’s like being given extra time to rethink and recommence, a chance to correct mistakes and failures of the previous year and have another go at unfinished plans. And I felt the same in the studio. It was not a time for making. If anything, I brought in my mending pile, including both my own and clients’ garments, and started slowly working through it. My thick winter cardigan with worn-out patches from almost every-day wear in the cold months felt like the first priority.

I thought to myself that if I repair it now, it will be ready for the next cold season when its comfort will be much needed (winters can be very chilly, wet and grim in the Morvan). At the same time, now, as we are coming into high summer and entering the period of first harvest in the garden, I feel in full creative energy and can hardly keep up with noting design ideas for the future. So, in this sense, the learning from the rhythm of natural seasons is as much about things one would do, or those that one would do differently, as it is about things one would not do or stop doing altogether.

DÖRTE Your studio design and your gardening practice are informed by permaculture principles and the Fibershed soil-to-soil approach. What does this look like on a practical level? Could you share one or two examples?

MILA On a more conceptual level, one of the key inspirations for the Almanac work is David Holmgren’s notion that “complex systems that work tend to develop from simple ones that work”. In this sense, the Life in Clothes Almanac is a micro-scenario for an in-depth understanding of both fashion and agriculture at the smallest end of the scale – sole designer-maker practice (at the fashion level) and gardening (at the agriculture level). In addition, as the other co-originator of the idea of permaculture (permanent culture), Bill Mollison, said, in response to the environmental crisis, permaculture is “about what we want to do and can do, rather than what we oppose and want others to change”.

On a practical level, the materials that I am using in the studio to make the Almanac collection also

came out of the permaculture principles. The first rule of permaculture is to “observe and interact”. This also means that before developing new solutions and sourcing new tools and materials, one first looks around at what is readily available in the surroundings and landscape, and only looks for additional solutions elsewhere where these are not available in one’s own situation. In this spirit, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown, I started thinking what materials would be available to me as a designer-maker if I could never leave this place again or order materials from my tried and tested places.

One material that has always fascinated me was plain household linen, especially if handwoven. I have a collection of vintage Slovakian linen (both fabric and folk costumes, including a roll of fabric handwoven by my great-grandmother). How lucky I felt then, realizing that my local antique markets and charity shops were full of amazing vintage linens of a quality that is rarely seen nowadays. These large linen sheets, so-called *draps*, come in an amazing range of textures, often beautifully softened through years of use. Their potential for making comfortable, everyday clothes that would feel new and old at the same time has become a kind of obsession to me. In this context, the Fibershed ‘soil to soil’ approach seemed to be an additional (and very fitting) articulation of many of the things I had been thinking about and working towards for years.

DÖRTE The Almanac is a place-based and embodied practice – you yourself design and make the clothes, and work in the garden in your rural home. What would you say is the essential difference between working with a place rather than on a place?

MILA I think this is exactly where the mutual learning between gardening and fashion design-making comes through. Not instantly, but through time, experience and endless openness to pause and listen. Both gardening and making take a lot of time, patience and humility. What I find interesting about gardening is that you cannot rush things. You have to accept that they happen in their own time, you cannot make a plant grow faster or look established and happy in its position from Day 1. Yes, you can buy a larger or more mature plant to accelerate things a little, but you will find that even so the plant will take all the time it needs to come into its own.

This is important, as in fashion and design we are used to constant acceleration, we are told that fashion is about change, about incessant readiness to move from one thing to another. I do not agree with any of this. In

addition, through my long-term research on emotional durability in people’s wardrobes, I have plenty of first-hand evidence that people often value continuity more than change.

What one learns through gardening (as opposed to much more invasive large-scale landscaping, for example) is that one’s gardening efforts are really a kind of co-design, co-development process. One may have a strong idea of what one wants to achieve, but one’s soil, situation and microclimate may have completely different ideas. It is also a co-design process with those who looked after the garden before you. For years, no matter how much you may already have changed, you are still working with and around their ideas, decisions, successes and mistakes.

This kind of captures what to me is the difference between working “on a place” (trying to impress one’s vision regardless of context and response that we are getting from our surroundings) and working “with a place” (taking time and patience to look and listen to the materials and environment on hand – rather than blindly impressing one’s own idea of beauty and order). It is as much about learning to work with limitations as about being receptive to opportunities that may not always come from one’s own “master plan”.

This is also the way of working I prefer in my designer-maker practice, such as for example when working with the vintage linen, where each single sheet is different in feel and texture and so offers endless opportunities to learn something new and design with the material. For me, this is a much more interesting, if admittedly often much more demanding process. A quote comes to mind here: “The Garden that I Love is very perverse, very incalculable in its ways – falling at times as much below expectation as at others exceeding it. They who have no patience with accident, with waywardness, should not attempt to garden” (“The Garden that I Love”, Alfred Austin, 1894).

DÖRTE How does your collaboration with the natural dyer Kate Turnbull inform and enrich your research project?

MILA The one challenge I sensed in working with these materials was their monochrome colour range, which could limit their versatility for everyday wear (they’re mostly white or off-white). I therefore started exploring options of altering the tones (and possibly also the handle of some of the heavier ones) through natural dyeing. This is where the collaboration with Kate came in. Her enthusiasm for natural dye research, including my very specific requirements on dye plants and plant-

based mordants, sourced from local landscapes here in the Morvan and around Kate’s home (and my second home) in rural Oxfordshire, endlessly energizes me. The local palettes that we have been exploring together, focusing mainly on those that I can source in my own garden or those that are readily available for careful foraging in the Morvan, bring a completely new and enormously exciting dimension to the sense of appreciation and belonging that can be nurtured through textiles. This is then further reinforced through the embroideries that often decorated the *draps*. These textiles were initialled as cloths of this kind were a valued possession and an important part of homemaking. Young women and other female family members would embroider them in preparation for marriage.

DÖRTE Have you gained any new or deeper insights regarding your own wellbeing needs, and the way you experience humanity’s role in the ecosystem, by conducting your research as an embodied practice?

MILA Perhaps rather than new insights I feel that by being able to work on this project I was given the amazing opportunity to articulate to myself (and to others through means such as this article) a way of working in which I feel most comfortable and where I feel my life’s work up until this point all beautifully comes together. It has enabled me to connect everything.

Gardening was a part of my childhood, I remember preparing the ground for planting and sowing beans with my grandfather, I remember the two of us wrapping apples in newspaper to store them for winter. From my early teenage years, I collected plants for their medicinal qualities; people used to come to me for this knowledge. I was really moved when I last visited the village in Eastern Slovakia where my grandfather grew up, and the local women came to ask me if I were coming to pick wild marjoram with them. “We’ve been doing this every year since you taught us this when you were 12,” they said.

At some point, I wanted to study garden design, but in the end I was perhaps more interested in people’s stories, the way they went about their daily lives. I also had a passion for making clothes. So I ended up studying ethnography, I trained as a dressmaker, and years later I did a doctorate in fashion and sustainability.

The work on the Almanac has helped me to connect all these interests and histories that were always a part of me, and to develop them into a future way of working. It has enabled me to live my life as a whole, now also in close connection to the place where I live. Though it’s not always easy, it makes me very happy.

DÖRTE How do you think that working in tune with the cycles of nature could turn fashion design and clothes making into a practice guided by love, connection and nurture – instead of what we predominantly experience, a practice characterized by burnout, exploitation and depletion on a planetary and a personal level? How do you think the Life in Clothes Almanac could present a new paradigm for fashion and help us create a fashion system that thrives within planetary boundaries?

MILA What working in this way has taught me (or how it has reassured me) is that to create a way of life and work that is healthier for people and the ecosystems that surround us, the main shift that needs to happen is in our mindsets and expectations – the things that matter to us. Currently, there is a lot of talk about regenerative fashion, part of the argument being that sustaining/sustainability is no longer enough: instead, we need to actively take steps that have a positive impact on improving ecosystem function, soil health, biodiversity, etc. While on one level this is a commendable effort, in my view and experience the danger is that “regenerative” becomes the next term that is co-opted into fashion’s still (and increasingly) essentially extractive *modus operandi*. Sadly, the fashion world seems to be too good at capturing and profiting from stories that can put a new, shinier label on what is essentially the same as before.

Having said that, I still like the idea of a regeneration/revival of nature’s capacity to thrive, bouncing back from disturbance caused by many years of destructive human action. What I have learned, not only through the months of working on the Almanac, but also through the years of my “Life in Clothes” research, is that it is mainly us, humans, who need regeneration. Working the land that surrounds our home and studios has taught me that one needs to be constantly giving to rather than just taking from the soil and landscape. Taking only goes so far in nature. So, what we really need to do is to regenerate ourselves. The main shift needs to happen within us, within our mindsets and values. We need to relearn to put into the ecosystems more than we take out. In fact, living in tune with nature is often more about giving rather than taking.

The Almanac is only a micro-scenario. This means that it cannot in itself change the world. However, working in this way changes one. While the world may not change straight away, I still believe that with enough people changing themselves, the seeds of a new paradigm for a better fashion system (and for better, more connected lives) will have been sown.



this page — Mila wears a dress by Mila Burcikova, Mélissa wears a top by Santapalma, trousers by babaà and a wrap skirt by llanatura.
facing page — Elen wears a dress by by Mila Burcikova, Céline wears a top by Katerina Knight; both wear hats by Maleza Hatmakers.



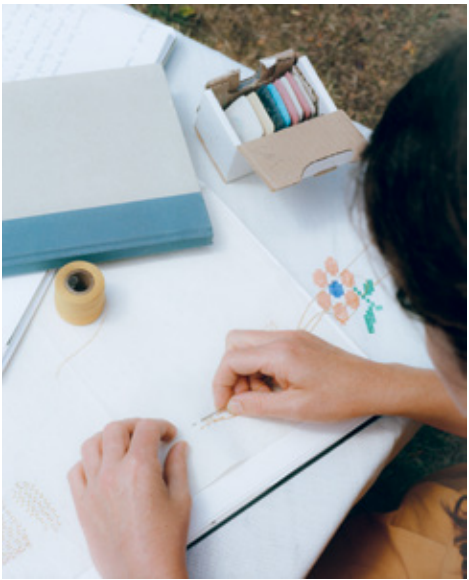
clockwise from top left — Mila wears a dress by Mila Burcikova, shoes by KM by LANGE and garlic earrings. Mélissa wears a top by Santapalma and a wrap skirt by Ilanatura. Céline wears a handpainted silk blouse by Subin Kim. Elen wears a dress by Mila Burcikova and a straw accessory piece by Leonie Sinden-David and Céline wears a top by Katerina Knight and a vintage skirt; both wear hats by Maleza Harmakers.

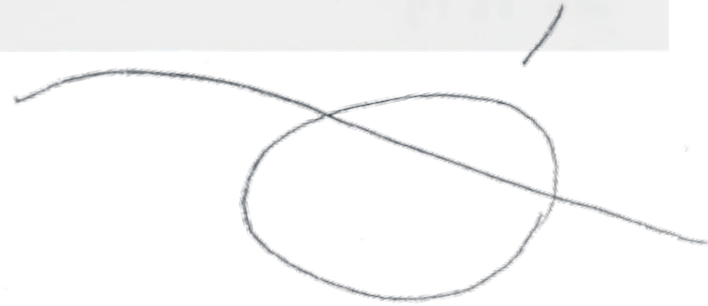


With a gentle touch, plucked from sprouting
seeds, she tested her hands gently in her
lap, palms to the silky down



facing page — Elen wears a dress by by Mila Burcikova and a straw accessory piece by Leonie Sinden-David. Céline wears a top by Katerina Knight and a vintage skirt; both wear hats by Maleza Hatmakers. *this page* — Mila wears a dress by Mila Burcikova.





previous page — Céline wears a top by Katerina Knight and handwoven bags by Uri. facing page clockwise from top left — Steve wears a jacket by Birgitta Helmersson and his own hat and trousers. Mélissa wears a dress by Lana Siberie and a vintage skirt. Céline wears a dress by Mila Burcikova, a naturally dyed headscarf by ound, handwoven bags by Uri and spiral earrings by STUDIO ĚNA.



STEVE

Stephen Swindells is an artist who lives and works in France. Formerly a professor of contemporary art, he now manages an artist residency programme in Burgundy, see: www.stephenswindellsstudio.com.



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CÉLINE

Céline Houde is a botanist and founder of *Ferme du Bouéjo*, a family farm in Burgundy that she runs with her partner, Eric. They currently supply vegetables for 100 households in the surrounding area, using organic farming principles on livingsoil to run their market garden. www.fermedubouejo.com

this page — Céline wears a dress by Mila Burcikova and a headscarf by ound. Elen wears a handwoven jacket and trousers by 11.11, a straw hat by Emma Bruschi and straw shoes by KM by LANGE.



facing page — Céline wears a top by Katerina Knight, a vintage skirt and handwoven bags by Uri.





facing page — Mélissa wears a blouse and straw trousers by Emma Bruschi.

AUTUMN SEASON — 20 SEPTEMBER TO 20 DECEMBER





I remember wrapping apples in newspaper to store them for winter.



Every day when I wake up, my first instinct is to go to my studio and look out into the small walled garden.



facing page clockwise from top left — Mélissa wears a blouse, straw trousers and earring by Emma Bruschi. The moon cycle cushions are by Future From The Past. The straw eggcups are by Emma Bruschi. this page clockwise from top left — Elen wears a dress by ound and straw shoes by KM by LANGE. Mélissa wears a blouse and earring by Emma Bruschi. Céline wears a top by babaà. Mila wears a dress by Mila Burcikova and a sheepskin vest by Future From The Past. Steve wears a jacket by Brigitta Helmersson.



this and facing page — Mélissa wears a blouse, straw trousers, straw earrings and a straw hat by Emma Bruschi.



MÉLISSA

Mélissa Wago-lala started her journey as an accessories designer. After a year in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, she continued her professional career as a product designer and established herself as a set designer in the world of beauty. Based in Paris, she is the founder of *Lalastudio*, a creative studio specialized in naturally dyed fabric and rental textile elements for photography and film sets.
www.melissa-wagolala.com



this watery world, cold, ice, snow
sends sleep with no warning
and solitude creeping



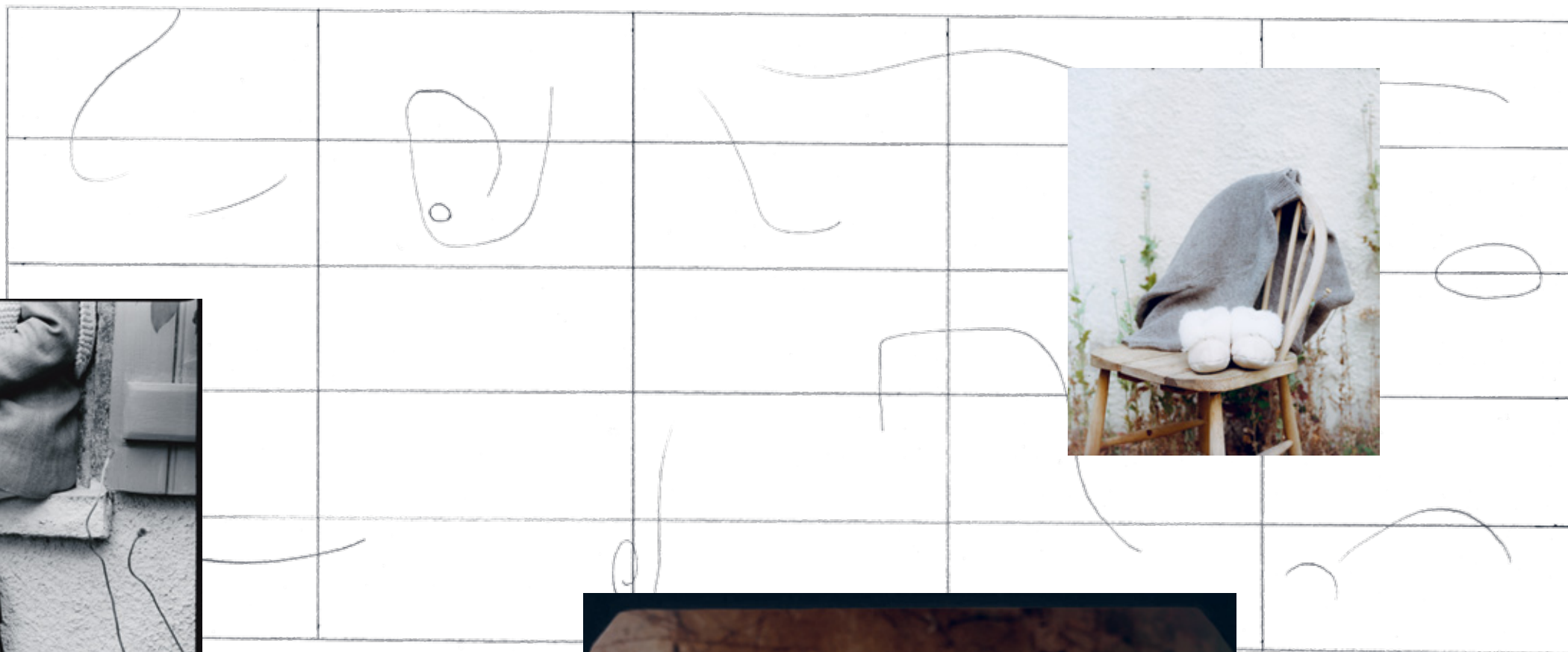
this page — Mélissa wears a woollen jumper by babaa and a vintage linen dress by Lana Siberie. facing page — Céline wears a jacket by Cortana, a woollen vest by ound and trousers by babaa. Elen wears a top and trousers by babaa and shoes by llanatura. The shawl is by NORLHA.



and with the richness of earthy textures, the
sun slept a while on the Louisa.



facing page — Elen wears a shawl by NORLHA, trousers by babaà and felted woollen shoes by llanatura. Céline wears a jacket by Cortana, a woollen vest by ound, trousers by babaà and shoes by llanatura. The sheepskin vest is by Future From The Past x ound.
this page — Sheepskin shoes by Future From The Past and woollen jumper by babaà. Elen wears a dress and a woollen vest by ound, earrings by Hana Kim and a harvest bouquet by Emma Bruschi.



ELEN

Elen is a baker and the founder of *Le Fournil Moulin Neuf*, a family business that she runs with the support of her husband, Joseph, producing organic, natural sourdough bread. All products are made on site, in the authentic bakery tradition, using carefully selected ingredients, whenever possible sourced in the Burgundy region.
www.fournilmoulinneuf.com



this page — Mila wears a dress by Mila Burcikova and a sheepskin vest by Future From The Past.
facing page — Céline wears a dress by 11.11 and spiral earrings by STUDIO ÈNA.

