



# LOTUSEATER

ISSUE 17

# LOTUSEATER

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# ISSUE 17

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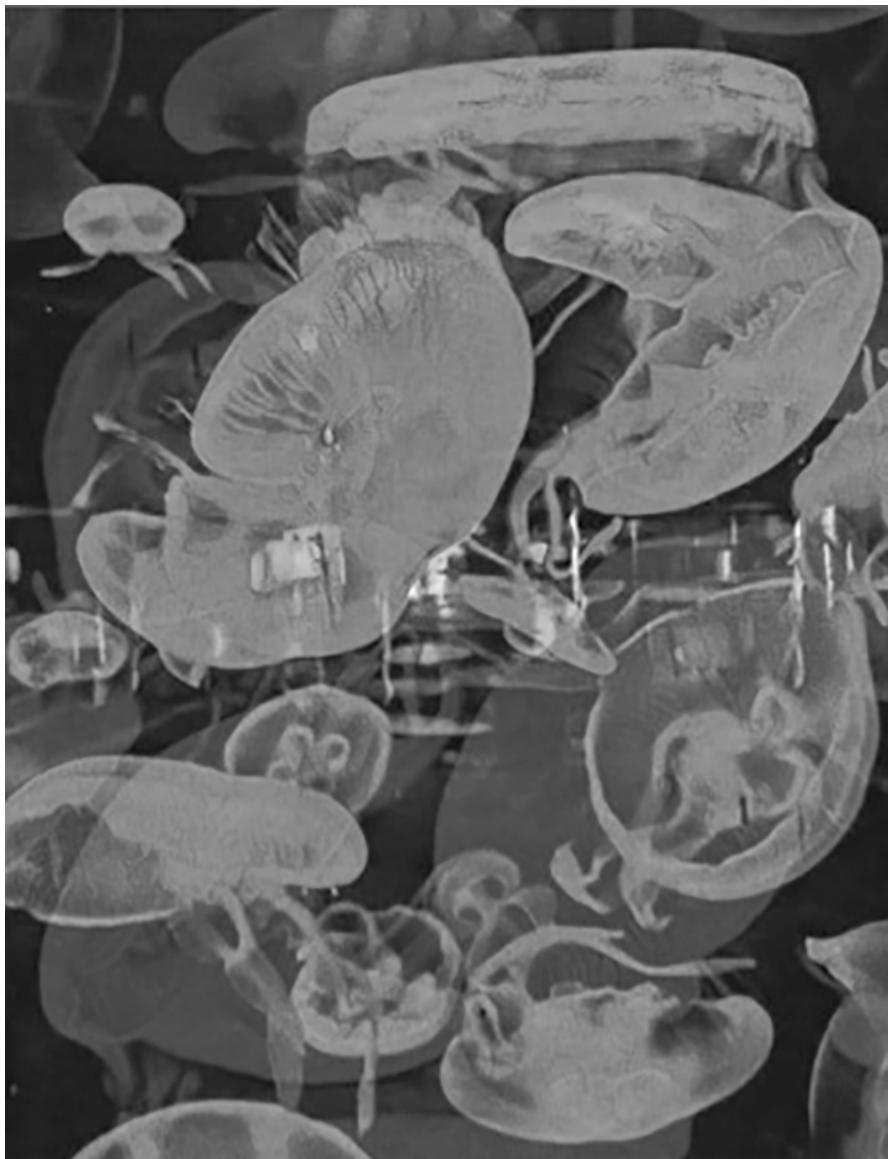
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# Prose



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# DANIELA ESPOSITO

## *Bloody Mary*

The children are coming home with itchy heads. I watch them scratching and I am taken back to my own childhood. Tea tree oil and fine tooth combs. Scratching like rabid dogs on heat. They don't seem to mind though. Itching has become second nature like sneezing or clearing your throat. Like eating or breathing. The smallest is the worst. Still sufficiently flexible to scratch his own head with his feet, he curls up into a ball and brings his hind legs to his head and scratches behind his ears with his toes as he scrambles across the floor on his rear-end. He refuses to have his nails clipped, so his big toe with its jagged fungal nail clips the scalp, dusting the carpet in human snowdrops. The stuff from a seventies horror B-movie. Stop that! I call, but at the same time, I can't hide my admiration and amusement at his dexterity, his hyper-mobility, long lost in adulthood. He gets it from me, I can be sure of it, though my own bones have set, and I can just about put my socks on without putting my back out. He can detect my fallibility to laughter in my quivering voice. He scooches towards me on his arse with his feet in the air, like a taunting crab. What am I going to do with you? Eat me! He shrieks And then I gorge on his bones, and that's that.

At night, I think of the little mites and where they come from. Their writhing bodies, tantalisingly visible to the human eye at a squint, their anonymous white eggs threatening domination. Laying base on my children's scalps, alien imposters, sucking their blood. I turn onto my side, and there I see one, so close to my eye that it has doubled, tripled, quadrupled. Good lord. I pull back and find that it is only the one. Turn on the light. Just a piece of vagabond fluff, rolled perfectly into a cotton chrysalis, playing not dead but life, a far more frightening phenomenon.

I breathe, relieved. Outside a bird jars its beak against the window before nose-diving into a parasol of air below. I wonder if it is ok, but I daren't move from the bed. I wake early to the tentative morning light. Luminous, feathered. I give them their breakfast. They sit around the table, kicking their legs idly, without purpose. I catch one mid jump, from his head to hers, ready to make a cocktail of their circulatory fluids, a virgin bloody mary. I squeeze it between my finger and thumb until my child's blood stains my skin.

He shirks me off like it's nothing and asks for more milk and more cheerios. I do as I'm told, still stunned, my fingers stained with the mulberries of my own childhood. One of them tells me a story about a giant louse that plants eggs into

his brain, thought eggs and soon his mind turns into a monster. Good lord son, where did you come up with such a thing! Oh mummy, don't be a shuck! Excuse me? You heard me, don't be a shuck! To which the other three break into a unison of laughter, their faces cracking into gummy wounds. Like a pack of jackals, their shrieking hoodlum laughs will echo in my ears, unscathed by looming adolescence. I don't know what a shuck is, only that one shucks open an oyster, but something tells me it is a bad word.

I take their bowls, rinse them beneath the burning faucet 'till the milk turns paler and paler, I scrub at the sides with a baubled wire cloth, until those stubborn cheerios like a goose necked barnacles shrivel and drop off into the drain; pointless now. A shuck: according to the North American dictionary: ' 'a person or thing regarded as *worthless or contemptible*'.'

It's AM time. Anonymous Mothers' meeting; elbow-to-elbow with the other mothers of the other children, we confess the worst of our children's manoeuvres. I clutch a cup of stale canteen coffee. The confessions are rarely confessions but rather thinly veiled commendations. I can never for the life of me remember their names. You'll have a 50/50 chance of success if you go for Anne or a derivation of it. Nevertheless, I tend to fire generic questions like, How's the little tyke plodding along or Up to the usual mischief are we? If one of them does plod along and starts snarling at me, avoiding pronouns is only a politically correct modernism to be lauded, rather than an excuse for not knowing for the life of me the gender of my fellow mother's children. He's doing well, one of them says, very well, *although*—and then her identical but less attractive twin (aquiline nose, could hang a Christmas wreath), shushes her.

I clutch the nodules of her elbow tenderly but firmly, which is to say, Anonymous Mother, your secret is safe with me, yes. Sometimes, she says, leaning in close, Alice comes out with the funniest things. Like what? I ask. Well, yesterday, at dinner, she continued, leaning closer still so that I can smell the instant coffee on her breath, she called me an old strumpet. I try to conceal my laughter behind a synthetic cough (believable, autumn is brushing up against winter). She smells a rat. You can laugh, she grants me, I mean, it *is* sort of funny, but really, where did she hear such a thing?

And Ophelia's been singing all these misogynist sailor songs from the First World War. You deserve it, giving her a name like that. Sorry? She says, aghast. I said, you deserve much better! What about your little one? I shake my head and shrug, no, just the usual I say, you know, sometimes he drops his T's, but what can I say for a boy his age. They tut and turn away, feign an appointment elsewhere. My child's head is too clean for them, they leave disgusted. Though later I realise, at least their obscenities are local, my child's reproaches had gone transatlantic.

Bathtime. Shampooed, washed, dried. I take a magnifying glass. I hold it up to his head, up close he really could be a dog or a jackal or a hyena. You wouldn't know

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he was my son. Stay still! Movement, that familiar epileptic writhing—I steady the lens. Then I see the most extraordinary thing, the nits are not nits but tiny human beings, miniature people clinging to the hairs for dear life; clutching at the follicle before surfing the hair like a wave. They're trying to say something as they pinch the slender necks of wine glasses filled to the brim with human blood. Where did you come from? Who are you? No answer. Then I adjust the lens, my hands are shaking. I know that face.

His head is an island. The white of his scalp a vast unknowable desert, the hairs a swamp, unfathomable, and there we are clinging on. Using my forefinger and thumb, I lift myself into the air and carry myself to the table. It's an amazing thing to see yourself suspended in mid-air like that and the size of a flea, for goodness sake. I feel the vertigo in my own body, the swishing in my ears of colliding currents, like books falling sideways on a shelf when the bookend is carelessly dislodged, the pages exhaling their prohibited breaths.

I sit her down on the edge of the window sill beneath the microscope. The light is dusty at noon and haloes her receding hair. My mother had been a collector of microscopes. In the evenings she would lock herself in the study and if we asked what she was doing she would tell us she was having time to herself. I understood it now. Ever an introspective woman, mother was not the archetypal mother; her body lean like a man's, her hugs apologetic. Wore always baggy second-hand sweaters, hiding in the foreign smells of strangers with unfathomable faces.

Now I realised, she really was finding herself in the fine hairs of our little child heads. We were riddled with nits as children, always itching. In the evenings we'd lie across her lap, greedy for her touch, and she would run her fingers through our heads, picking at the follicle of hairs, as if she were playing an instrument, and we would sleep to the rhythm of her foraging. Her body hummed, she was at peace. Unperturbed. The miniature beings a part of life, of childhood, of growing. I looked into the fine grains of my own flea-head. And there I saw it too, my mother clinging to the hairs of my scalp. Her face blurry, her edges amorphous. I'd need a super resolution microscope to make out the pieces of her face. But she's there, clinging on, an itch that cannot be scratched.

# JAKOB SKOTE

## *A Forest Ship*

You are walking through a deep pine forest. The air is saturated with the smell of moss, covering stones and fallen logs, messy, not planned. There is no path, and you are in no rush, moving forward, without a specific destination. Nature is soaked, every tiny leaf hangs a droplet, bad shoes would've been drenched in a few steps, but you've got good boots, your feet are dry. The landscape is not mountainous, but hilly, undulating. You can glimpse the horizon from atop rocks at certain vantage points, where some force has brought down a group of trees, making a little obstacle course for you to solve and then leave to its slow decay. The masters of compost, worms and fungi, don't notice you, you disturb no one. There aren't many birds and the birds that are rarely sing, not eager to disturb the thick, coniferal silence. The sky is grey but bright, the time of day not important.

Deep among old firs, through moss so thick you sink to your ankles, you see a red wall behind the trees ahead. The red wall stretch as far as you can see from left to right. You walk towards the wall. When closer, you see that it is made of steel, heavy, welded, cold and wet, solid enough to not give off even the slightest vibration when you bang your hand against it. It is painted red from a meter above ground and upwards, below that black, continuing down into the forest floor. It is difficult to grasp its height, because of the low branches, annoyingly brushing you in the face, but it seems to stop somewhere around the treetops, foliage spilling out over the top edge. You follow it down the right.

The wall has rivets, hidden beneath thick layers of paint, the wetness reflecting a pale, warped forest atop the red surface. Above you, large black letters are painted in an alphabet you can't decipher, a curiously graphic contrast to the chaotic jumble of branches and needles. Pine trees, the most pragmatic of trees, except for maybe willow, no-nonsense onwardness towards new horizons, gladly sacrificing its body to go higher, further, larger, without regard for the supposed grace of the broadleafs, nostalgic in comparison, photogenic and alone atop some hill. Among the needleage above you see pipes, and what looks like ventilation shafts, sticking out of the wall.

You realize that the wall is the hull of a very large ship. Red, hard, wet, and cold, resting sturdily and silently among the trees, wind stroking their flexible stems into soft but loud murmurs, slowly rising, fading, a distant creak. You bang the steel again, but you are not strong enough to make the red hull sing. Instead, you

pick up your phone and take a photo of it. The red bleed out on the picture, you lower the exposure to get it right. Your phone has plenty of battery, and you have a battery pack in a pocket, just in case. You annoyingly acknowledge that there is service, albeit weak. You don't want to use it. You continue along the red wall.

You reach the bow of the ship, the wall curving slightly in on itself until it peaks in a thick round bulbous bow, large as a house, yellow leaves stuck against the wet surface, no moss finding foothold yet. The forest is more open here, swampy, birch trees and big tufts of grass that you use as stepping stones to not get stuck in the mud and risk your good boots. Many meters above you, in large holes on each side of the bow, hangs startlingly large anchors, black, incomprehensibly heavy, geometrically engineered for maximum structural efficiency, secured flush against the hull. No need to cast anchor here, the currents of the forest are much too slow to move something this size. In front of the ship the forest continues, unfazed. You will not go there. How will you get up on the ship?

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There is, of course, a way up. Almost all the way back at the stern on the port side, a conspicuously well-placed pine, climbing branches evenly spaced, leaning towards an open door in the hull maybe ten meters up, a lone dark mouth gaping in the vast red slab of heaviness. Up, then in. The inside is boring, as ships are, a standardized design that has stayed the same for decennia. It is also dark, silence pierced by the echoing sound of dripping water, the mossy scent replaced with the smell of disused human objects. Old furniture rotting along the walls, the usual assortment of trash, beer cans, random ledgers torn and strewn across the floor, refusing to decompose due to some chemical coating of the paper, still pointlessly readable. You have seen abandoned places like this before, no need to take a picture here.

After a hallway there is some sort of reception area beneath a broken skylight, tiny birch saplings growing in the dirt on the floor, shadows of bigger trees up on the hull, a couple of sun rays glitter in the droplets falling from the mossy steel frames and the remaining shards of algae-covered glass. There is wallpaper along the walls, once ugly but now creating a perfect melancholic vibe, some sparse graffiti—there is always graffiti, colorful manmade moss, shining indecipherable incantations. This is a place for a photo.

There are other rooms, less striking, but still interesting. In one hangs a large plastic sheet with pockets each holding an individual smartphone, like what they use at those advertising farms, an array of devices simulating virtual customers for advertising revenue, existing solely through assigned and never satiated desires. The smartphones are long dead, the pockets water-filled and covered in algae, individual cables still connected to some sort of router-like object hanging in a plastic string

from the ceiling. You give the sheet a flick of your finger and it sways slowly, surprised by touch after unknown years of stillness. After the echo has died out the only remaining sound is water droplets against wet floors, and the muffled sound of the wind through the forest outside. Stairs and signs take you up toward the deck.

Up on the deck, you can breathe the world again. Trees, stretching out in all directions, green, fuzzy towards the gray horizon, low clouds obscuring the view over distant hills. Not a sign of anything manmade apart from this huge ship. It is probably some sort of oil tanker. The deck seems flat, freed from its former purpose by the little forest growing up here, repurposing the steel structure for its own unknown designs. Behind you at the stern sits a large bridge, or whatever the multi-story structure at the end of a ship is called. Painted white, broken windows through which the wind plays eerie sounds, as if playfully adding a spooky vibe to the scene, just because. You almost expect to feel a ping of fear in the stomach, but there is none, you feel safe and calm.

Plenty of species have made their home up here, birds have shat, and moss have grown, providing nutritious opportunities for other plants, which have died and made soil for trees, and so on into a young and healthy ecosystem. Birch and pine trees, a forest of youngsters, no stem thicker than the length of a hand, but greener and more vivid than the dark silence of the old-growth forest below. Nature is more visible here, in contrast to the rusting steel it slowly subsumes. The old-growth forest does not need to contrast itself against something to stand out, it doesn't care about this ship, or about you.

A squirrel makes itself known, black eyes neutrally acknowledging your presence, and disappears among the branches of a young pine. You hear a large bird in a tree somewhere, but don't see it. A pale sun comes through for a moment, to quickly hide again.

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You walk down the deck, past strange pipes and decaying machinery covered in moss, rusty totems repurposed by the relentless flow of green, moist, delicate pervasiveness. Some odd sights, trees growing out of air vents, a lifeboat filled with water, interesting, amusing even, in that way objects can be when you are alone. You stop and look over the edge of the ship. The views roll their grey ribbons toward the horizon, the sun still veiled, although more confident in its appearance, the black silhouette of a small bird perched on a birch branch surprisingly sings a tentative drill for you, or whoever else is listening, piercing the silence and then fluttering off down the side of the ship. You continue down along the deck.

You reach a clearing in the ship forest, and smile at the sun as it breaks out properly. In the middle of the opening, on a bed of emerald green moss, yet unaware of your

presence, sits an octopus. It is about the size of you, tentacles included, skin almost human-like, dry, not wet, and it has a human face. The sun shines on its many arms, slowly writhing, in a positive sense of the word, joyously about, agile flesh reaching for the sun, almost dancing.

The face of the octopus is the face of one of your exes, not *the ex*, but an ex you remember fondly. You fill in the blanks here, on the face, its features and facialities, and what feelings this particular face brings up in you. The octopus still hasn't noticed you. You close your eyes and face the sun again, let the glow fill your skull to the brink, until you are pure brightness, a shining golden bowl of wine. You think of the face of your ex and the memories it brings.

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You remember a place you visited together with this ex, a trip somewhere, the feeling of foreign air, and the newness of the particular objects of that scene, their touch or taste. A cafe. The chatter of people around you, some tourists like you, some locals, snippets of conversation, a child stopping their tantrum for a moment to regard you two strangers with their big eyes, perfectly framed in the sunlight filtered through unwashed glass plastered with advertising and bleached lists of ice creams. The mother saying something to the child to return their focus to the matters at hand.

You strolled down a main street of this town, towards water of some kind, a harbor or a beach, past houses of a particular architectural style, probably the subject of many years of some historian's life, devoting their full focus to the static expression of a particular tendency of a temporary community. You laugh together at this endless and seemingly pointless task. There is an uncertainty in you, as you regard your ex-to-be, predicting compatibilities too far off into the future to make any sense from the perspective of that moment. You know that you are overthinking, but you know your ex is as well, and you smile at the fact that you both were right in your stupid little calculations.

Down by the water you sat in some sort of bar, too early for dinner but late enough for beer, the conversation not flowing naturally. In lack of other topics, you talked about your shared future, a future that you both were so subconsciously certain would never occur that you let it stand proxy for any impossible dreams, which, in turn, made this imagined shared future surprisingly desirable. Lost in plans of greenhouses, arrays of tomato plants, hydroponic systems feeding rows of strawberries suspended from the ceiling, views over the foreign city in which you found a cheap apartment, glazed roof tiles reflecting the sunlight into your botanical heaven, morning coffees with your laptops down at the cafe at the corner, talking world news with the aging owner, stretching into noon as you sit in a bustling town square, still somewhat foreign though you lived here for many

years now, in vivid conversations with friends eating dinner at your terrace, another couple similar to you, but with a different political make-up, endlessly getting into analyses of the sociological process underpinning this or that particular tendency of your everyday life, and as they continue talking, you pause, and look over the balustrade and out over the city, the sun setting over its churches and towers, steeping the hills and forests behind in gold.

As you talked at the bar the sky darkened outside, a storm or evening, unclear through the people now crowding the place. A few beers in and yet without dinner, you went out into the air, and kissed as the wind picked up and rain started falling, your touching lips framing the scene as a painting, in hindsight overtly romantic but in that moment perfectly devoid of an outside. You shrug at the nostalgic shimmer of the memory, and then at the fact that the nostalgia annoys you in the first place, its faded colors disturbing you, as if the act of remembering put an Instagram filter on the moment, or if it is Instagram itself which have done so, through providing new tools for remembering also taking control over the way the memories are formed, reframing any memories created outside of its stupid little interface. You get annoyed at being reminded of the phone in your pocket, its silent weight with its infinite presence and limitless capabilities. Your eyes twitch, and you spill the golden bowl of wine.

You try to get back into other memories, frying food in morning kitchens, learning their breakfast habits, surprisingly meaty, and drinks with parents, yours and theirs, bad to very good sex, but you can't make them go live in your head right now. Your ex was not an octopus at this point either, obviously, as you are not an octopus, and neither of you lived in the sea, or on a ship in the forest. Both of you were fully human, all included and with all the extras, strong and agile, afraid of nothing and ready to roll.

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You open your eyes. The octopus has noticed you and moved closer, calmly watching you. You sit down, leaning your back at a tree, facing the clearing. You look into their eyes and they look into yours, theirs are just the size, shape, and color they were when you last saw them many years ago. Yours ought to be the same too. You don't say anything, you don't want to disturb the silence. The sea of green below the railing whispers its endless hymns.

Tentatively, slowly, they stretch out a tentacle, its suckers frail and gentle like nipples. You pretend to not see it, you don't need to answer yet, you can stretch this moment further, you know how to play the game of touch. Because it is a game, and everyone who pretends differently is either a liar, or blessed with being one with their physical expression, which would in some way be missing the point of

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it. You calmly watch their limbs, reflecting the sunlight, strong, not muscular in the human sense, but revealing an octopian power that is hypnotizing and new to you. You look back into their eyes.

The tentacle reaches your foot, and lightly touches your hiking trousers, a fairly rare high-quality brand that you are proud of wearing. The tentacle stretches further. You have never been into tentacle sex, as far as you know, at least. You haven't tried it either, but regardless of the limbic setup of the situation you don't want to be intimate with your ex, and you know that neither do they want to be intimate with you. Your breakup was calm and mutual, almost efficient, friendly and professional, like if conducted over LinkedIn. You sat at the large wooden table in their kitchen, some old flowers a bit too withered to not feel overtly symbolical given the situation, making you both feel embarrassed, laughing at it together, a welcome break from the tears. You left their flat and went home afterward, sat down, and looked at the sudden fork in your life, clear and bare like a big Y, or an X maybe, depending on perspective. When you come to a fork in the road, take it. That was a good fork to take. Although technically, you didn't take the fork, you choose one of them, but you like the quote as it is.

The tentacle is around your leg, not hard, but firm, holding you. The face of your ex looking at you with a sudden display of forced sexiness, submissive or dominant depending on which used to turn you on. This is strange, and fake. You get the nauseating feeling of when someone tries to engage you in something that you do not want, and that they don't want either, but which they believe that you want. You are happy, you don't need this. They are probably happy too, and probably don't need this either. The sun shines stronger now, the fluttering of a bird in the distance brings you out of the downward spiral, the nausea fades.

You are much closer now, facing each other, faces perfectly aligned. The foliage reflecting in their far too detailed irises, ridges of untraversed mountain ranges behind plates of crystal, then wet and porcelain white, interspersed with red, over to skin, then tentacles spreading out a skirt of naked flesh, a body dispersed enough to submerge you in its embrace. You feel their breathing, warm and calm, a low pulse contrasting the arrhythmic whims of the forest whispers. You sync, unintentionally at first, then with purpose. You let them come closer, in a reassuring but not urging way. You touch their skin, and pause, savoring the brittle moment of skin-to-skin connection transversing the corporeal gap, the sun warming your new shared body. You let go together, breathing out, almost laughing, hugging each other, cozily snuggling up in a comfortable and unpretentious embrace, forgetting the weirdness of the situation in favor of the sweet deliverance of touch.

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The first kiss takes ages to happen. Whole days pass, just minutes, but with the swift air of full cycles, wind picking up leaves and leaving them elsewhere, branches, grasses, and a tiny white flower rocking gently back and forth. The lead-up is somewhat awkward, with a bodily uncertainness and subconscious sub-social, sub-emotional strategizing, carefully weighing the delicate tendencies of desire that are gleaned from beneath the layers of flesh and intention of the other. You notice how there is so much skin, so much more than usual. Not in any way unpleasant, just different.

Eventually your lips touch. You fall into the kiss for an unknown amount of time, until your thoughts pull you back from the moment, jealous of your body's mindless activities and their sudden uselessness, a servile but stupid army, eagerly saber-rattling as soon as any potential distraction appears. You tell the thoughts to calm down, but reality is already crisp and clear and it will take effort to fall back down again. There is an obvious uncertainty of who's in charge, of you and your ex, both eager to let the other take the lead, each with your own arguments of why you can't be expected to make more than cautionary moves. You have broken up, but that was mutual. You found them here, but that was not planned. They are an octopus, but that doesn't really change anything. The fact that you even phrase the act of taking charge of your physical intimacy as a burden maybe, probably, is a sign that you do not want this. Elongated muscles stiffen and shine under dry skin as their tentacles reposition you both. Your ex's new strength is almost intimidating, as they wrap you into a snuggly little cocoon and simultaneously massage every part of you to help you fall back into the moment. Your rain-proof jacket is stiff and annoying, you take it off.

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Afterwards, you talk, and say some of what is required. Your words try to touch emotional aspects, but struggle to find footing in an encounter that up until now has been fully physical, language too unstable and awkward for the kind of conversation you want to have. Your ex tells you about the ship, how it is indeed an old oil tanker, and that it's been left here for a reason, one of those reasons that seem so blatantly obvious when you hear it but which you immediately forget about, something to do with taxes or environmental regulations, probably. It is soothing, knowing there is a reason for the ship to be here.

You both drift off. Your ex holds you tight, in a way that indicates that you will soon leave, and that this isn't a problem, but that they want to squeeze the most out of what is left. You wonder if they will stay here after you leave, among the trees and moss, but you do not ask them out of fear of them asking to come back with you. That would not be good. You look into their eyes and feel certain that

you don't want to be with them outside of this place and moment, although you welcome this place and moment to stay. The wind has died down. Two small birds land in a nearby birch, with its outermost branches hanging out over the railing, and start chirping surprisingly loud, your sense suddenly tuned to the max, you feel the soft wet moss under your back, a thick warm tentacle snaking around your shoulders, you stroke it, the muscles beneath the skin twitching appreciatively.

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The sun is approaching the horizon and you need to leave soon if you are to get back before dark. You have no problem with darkness, but the lack of full visual access to the world makes everything so complicated, and also, it is time to leave. You say goodbye, and your ex absent-mindedly acknowledges it, thinking of something else, refocusing on your face almost with surprise in their eyes, saying thank you.

You rise, and leave, back through the overgrown ship deck, past rust and grass and the white bark of the birch trees, empty ventilation shafts gaping like stupid guardians, their flaking paint falling on the moss below. You turn around, but don't see your ex between the trees, and then head into the door of the bridge. Back through the interior of the ship, darker now, backstage, the eerie, almost queasy feeling of revisiting long since completed levels in a video game, the same passive props standing dutifully silent, nothing new to bring to the narrative. You rush, and almost get lost taking the wrong exit in a corridor, but you find the broken skylight and then the open door. Down the conspicuously placed pine, back into the forest, calm and glowing in the fading light. You notice the sun steeping the treetops in gold, but quickly follow your tracks along the hull, even if it would probably be quicker to go around the stern, you know from experience not to try shortcuts at this stage of the hike. You check to make sure your phone is still in your pocket. It is.

The red wall shines deep and quiet. In the spot where you first encountered it, you lean against it for a short while, taking in the smell of dusk, the foliage spilling out over the top edge in dark contrast to the deep blue sky, the clouds cleared up a while ago, unnoticed. You are on the wrong side of the ship to see the sunset, probably magnificent from the deck, but the mere thought of going back there now is so alarming that you have to forcefully remove it from your head to not risk actually doing so, just to try to prove some stupid point against yourself. You leave the red wall behind, and start back through the old firs and deep moss.

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The way back through the darkening forest is uninteresting, not because the reversed path is lacking something, but because you are trying to get back to your car

before dark, and it is a long way left. Your car stands in an allocated parking space, sleeping now, ready to be woken when needed. You start thinking about work, or rather, the boring tasks that need to be handled at one point after you return, because it's never really work, is it, just stuff that needs to be done, because if you don't do it no one else would do it and that would be bad, for a multitude of reasons that are all dotted down in a document somewhere. Lists and plans and annoyances appear in your head, and you are saddened by their blandness, how, even after an encounter like this, the monotone rant of the everyday spews the same static noise, casting every beautiful experience in the dull colors of context. You wish some moments could be left alone, separated from the life they are born from, delineated from the boring main story, and you realise that you would not remember them. Maybe you have experienced such moments, perfect, not tainted by the stickiness of memory. You continue along the path.

At a meadowy clearing you see something imposingly large, stopping you straight in your tracks. It is dark now, past sundown, and the forest drifts into territories that are not meant for you. Not you personally, but not meant for those with your sensory range. You know this from previous experiences of being a guest in the non-lit world, difficult to navigate, forcing you to accept all assumptions of your surroundings, allowing the shadows to gain forms imposed by your guessing mind, part pragmatic and part erratic, staying calm in a shifting dreamworld. The thing in the clearing, that stopped you in your tracks, moves slightly, takes a few steps forward with its head down. You hear the crunching of leaves, and see the pointy fingers of its massive crown almost glow against the dark.

You can't see its eyes, but you know that it is watching you, and that it is calm in your presence, as it continues munching on a young birch. You stand perfectly still for a long while, in the damp scents of the evening, watching dew whisp a thin mist above the thick grass, supposedly dancing fairies, extremely slow or extremely fast, either way far outside your frame of perception. The forest is thinner here, birches and pine trees alternating, always the bestest of friends, two siblings with playfully opposing styles, one dark, one bright, white bark a pale blue against the dusk. Between their trunks you see other meadows glow faintly in the distance, it is not long back to the car, but you will not move before the moose moves, greedily squeezing every bit out of also this moment, even though you are tired. You realize that this is what your ex felt as they held you before you left, an insistence on staying, even though the situation is already elsewhere. Maybe you should have stayed and slept with them, given each other a night below the stars atop the ship. It would probably have been a bit cold.

You remember their taste from earlier up on the ship, almost earthy, wet, and human. As you kissed them your mind explored what would happen after, a vague plan to get back before sundown, setting up milestones for your intimate engage-

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ment to reach and complete before you felt you could properly leave and head back through the evening forest. You thought of what you would encounter on the way back. You didn't foresee the moose, but you foresaw the dancing fairies, and you pausing amongst them, thinking about and sinking back into that kiss, that you back then were still inside. You pause among the dancing fairies.

You realize that you can probably call them. If they have a phone up on the ship, which you suppose they do. You won't call them. But this sliver of an option gives the moment an air of a cliffhanger instead of a proper ending, the fork might be taken but the other path is still visible, reachable, filled with tasty unreasonable potential. You hold your phone in your pocket, but have not unlocked it. You dissuade yourself with the argument that your phone would disturb the scene, even though you know that the forest does not care about you or your phone calls. The moose slowly move to another meadow, the fairy dance continues its static flow, the branches of the trees are perfectly still against the deep blue sky, no birds but some stars have appeared. You walk towards the car.

You head up the last rocky path to the parking lot, steep, parts of which almost require climbing. You do not turn on the flashlight on your phone, as this would create two separate worlds, with you inhabiting only the smaller lit world, contained in the much larger unlit world, which you have no access to, but which have access to yours. That would be a bad world-setup, you prefer to have access to the bigger world, even though you barely perceive it. The rocks are without moss here, worn off by hikers and children, the ground covered with pine needles, getting stuck in your palm as you balance yourself carefully. It is almost completely dark when you reach the car, alone on the gravel, standing there dutifully like a stupid dog, or a smart machine, answering your keypress with a silent neutral blink. Inside it smells technological and manmade, full of useful objects in their allocated places. It starts without a complaint, and you drive.

## *Buzzard and Sky Reconsidered, or the Day of the Last Ominous Omelette*

*To turne poopoo into goolde  
Twere to attaine parfection;  
Methynkes I am content with a hen.*  
Edmunde Jerkin, metaphysical poet

This brief dissertation set out to determine the manifold ways in which a buzzard's glance could be riveted to the welking welkin in the face of increasing levels of hot-air-balloonery but it wound up becoming haruspicy of some sort. Since an ever-changing globalized context has replaced our former late-twentieth-century stale certainties, entities as different as seamen and Maastricht parameters are intermingled in today's world and cohere to an amazing recipe.

This study has benefited from a multifarious approach to accountants macadamised with albumen. I would like to thank Professor Schmuck and all the staff members of the Haughtington University Library. Without their support and constant help, I wouldn't have laid my boat ashore, aye. While revising the last draft, the gestures and facial expressions of a trinketmonger amidst the crowd in conjunction with a garbage truck have been observed.

Now, looky here, there was this flying thing, it ain't account to much, does it? This was our first consideration when it was decided that ere even fell 'twere good that wee investigated our trifling question. As a matter of fact, this firmament (A) was in no stable relationship with the buzzard (B) as the latter tended to move constantly, flapping its 'wings'. This liketh us not, quoth I. While here's a bugger won't be nudged from its place. That was the sky. This might be explained in the light of the fact that, according to De Paolis (1987: 61), 'at all events, fowls regularly bring on verbal dyspepsia and imprecise sight'.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the door was soon strumpeted and we were unable to call out to the blue wallpaper through the escutcheon. *In absentia*, we resolved that a cake might be advantageous and quit nourishing spooks in our gloomiest recesses. Make efforts we could, later, with a view to *shiten* and all the lyke.

<sup>1</sup> Ruggero De Paolis, *Paoli Augelli &ppur mi prospetto*, (Rhom: Aggiunti Editori, 1705, 102). As far as I know, De Paolis had never been part of a guild of tricksters. On second thought, his eyes were rather bluish, a remote control holds my hand. *Miserere*.

Out in the yard, however, not only were fleas ampersand moths covering the external organs of the coop, hardly had I drawn close to them chicks when a process of mixing took place in the heavens. The astronomical reason was unknown. A full valid scholar, a right excellent weatherman, was sent into the Highest Guts to report on these disquieting and ominous events, but never came back. A collection of smurfs figures bestained with yolk were found on the summit of Mount Pisgah. Espinoza has already looked into that.<sup>2</sup> One evening, sitting at my table weak and weary, I had the vision of a man with a breaded chicken steak in his hand, riflewise. His failure to agitate the phlegmatic conundrum of my emotional state gradually drove me into a trance-like stateliness. I was forever plummeting towards and never reaching vast pastures of scrambled eggs. The girl next door, evidently with chickenpox, smirkingly struck her favourite pose on the bend of my elbow. Then soared panic-stricken mockingbirds as frolics quickened 'mong the woods. Suddenly, everything was clear to me. I saw it all as if on TV, like. Now listen, y'all.

On February 1, 2072, the Prime Minister will appear in Parliament with a detestable message carved on his forehead: 'Eyren sall bee your ordeal'. The rooster will crow (of course! Gioacchino Fiore would have approved!).

A few hours later, a Repliee Q2 will cluck on a public TV channel that B has been gratuitously gobbled up by an army of celestial chickens that had originally slithered down the sides of the mount in the shape of firmament-tears in 2019. B's eyeballs-matter will be employed to create the Final Hen (C). The same fate shalt await a wealth of creatures as anything will have to be re-converted, y'know. Only the ones who are able to say 'I saw chickens catching kittens catting ketchup in the kitchen' will be kept alive (*justement*). A, namely the sky itself, will be immediately re-engineered so that it shall be shattered, pulverized and fed unto C. Rather unpleasant on the whole, you might say. By February 3, the end of the world as I (don't) know it will probably be completed.

The elements of my investigation have therefore been altered and a different method is to be availed of. An angst-provoking world-wide omelette hovers over my hovering endeavours.<sup>3</sup> Why, I'd be quoting from *Das Unheimliche* right now if I were a proper intellectual. A sizable hen will devour my best phrases, essays are doomed to turn into bleating poultry, chickenfeed is gonna be the incontrovertible diet.

In a nutshell, it is hardly an exaggeration to state that cluck-cluck-cluck. Hence, the more you see chicken, the more you will know. The more you are caught into your carbonara, the more you will understand. Thank you for your attention.

<sup>2</sup> Leonora Espinoza, *Where are these freaking Smurfs?* (Sacaroza: Sacaroza University Press, 2006). This is a valuable study, all smurfs are covered. The original edition is *Donde estan esos pitufos de mierda?*

<sup>3</sup> A window has been slammed wide open. Look out.

# RUSS BICKERSTAFF

## *Answering the Door*

There was a knock on the door. It was coming from inside the house. So it felt kind of strange. Because it occurred to me that I was actually on the doorstep. Not inside the house at all. When I heard the knock. I heard the knock on the door coming from the inside. And it occurred to me at that stage that I wasn't actually home. But that I was at someone's home. So I guess that was kind of important to realize at that moment. Because prior to that, I might've kind of thought that I was home.

And I was quite at home. Which is to say that this was the neighborhood that I lived in. But it wasn't actually the building that I lived in. It wasn't the home that I had. It was someone else's home. And that felt kind of strange. Kind of strange realizing that I was home but I wasn't mine. And that there was a knock on the door. Coming from inside. And I guess I was on the doorstep. Otherwise I wouldn't have been close enough to actually hear what was going on. And of course, there I was looking over at the door and realizing that someone was knocking on it.

It was a reflex. I reached for the door and opened it. No I guess I felt kind of strange about that. There was someone who seemed vaguely familiar. A neighbor. And I felt perfectly at home talking to this particular neighbor. A guy named Bob. Perfectly normal guy Bob. No strangeness coming from him. There were other people who are kind of strange were in the neighborhood. Not that that was a problem or anything like that. I was perfectly OK with it. Having stood there and said hello to Bob, I guess it kind of occurred to me that there was a good chance that I was one of the strange people in the neighborhood. Because I thought I was home and I was outside. There Bob is asking me if he can come in.

I shrug and motion for him to come in. Which is to say that he's coming in to the outside which is not my home. Which is right outside his home. But he knocked on the door and asked to enter and so I guess I feel pretty good about that. I'm not sure why. I really have no business feeling good about the fact that he just asked to come in to the outside which is not my home even though it feels like it is. And it looks like Bob has something very serious to say. And I figure I probably should let him say whatever it is that he's trying to say. But I guess I'm a little confused. And I tell him that I need to do something. And he allows me to get myself squared away.

I'm looking up and I'm seeing clouds in the sky. So clearly I'm not inside even though Bob thinks I am and on some level I feel as though I probably am at home. I am at home which is to say that I'm in my neighborhood but I'm not actually in

---

my home which is to say my house. I know I have a house because I know I have a house in this neighborhood. But for whatever reason I'm not they are even though I feel like I am on some internal level. On some instinctual level wife feel like I'm in my home which is my house but I know that I'm not because there are clouds in the sky.

And so I'm looking around. And I'm seeing that things are more or less as they should be. So I asked Bob what's up. Bob tells me. He says that somethings not right. He feels a little unsettled. A little uneasy. Which I suppose would make sense. He just asked if he could come outside by way of coming inside to this place which wasn't my home. And I try to explain this to me and to him at the same time but I find myself tripping over my own words. Not really able to understand what it is that I am or am not saying to me. That would feel a little bit more weird under other circumstances. But the circumstances are perfectly fine now. And I have no real concerns about the situation. At least not worth speaking of.

I decided to try to go back to my place. And I find that I'm capable of locating the block which is exactly where I am. And I've asked Barb to accompany me. Because I feel as though it might explain something if I were to able to actually go home. I try to explain this to Bob. But he's not really understanding. Because he knows that this is my home. This place with the sky in the clouds and everything. I figure we both really need to go and lie down or something like that. I mean, not at the same time, of course. That would be silly. And probably very confusing. So I decided that it would probably be better to more sort of not do that. At least not for the time being. Because that wouldn't work. At least it doesn't feel as though it would. I don't know, though.

I figure I've come far enough into the whole situation to simply ask Bob if he could talk to me about this later. And I think he realizes that on some level he is talking to me about this later. But I just need to be able to sleep. And I figured that's probably what I'm doing. But I really don't know. Because there's no way of knowing for certain. And so I find myself more than a little confused about the whole situation. But maybe I'm going to wake up from it. And I figure that's probably the best bet. That's probably what I'm going to have to do. Wake up.\_\_\_\_

# Poetry



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# Alex Gregor

## FOLLOW ME INTO THE SQUID SACK

Follow me into the squid  
sack, where the sidewalk  
bends but doesn't break  
where the grass is always  
green—or is it blue?

~~~

Somewhere over the brain-dough,  
between the fog and the dew,  
we're in a little place called hog  
heaven—ever heard of it?

~~~

Pull yourself out of your  
grave and carve an epitaph  
into your tombstone in the  
local dialect of firefly. *Bloom*.

~~~

Watch the Sacred Family in the  
Old Port sip wine with the Dry  
People. Listen to the oysters  
sing—their mouths full of pearls.

~~~

To be as pleased as a peach  
perch up with the pigeons in the  
pines and palms. *Coo*.

~~~

To be as cool as a cucumber,  
pant with the crows in fields  
of weeds. *Sprout wings.*

~~~

All roads may lead to Rome,  
but this boat's bound for the  
camel's hump, where the fruit  
hangs low and the shrimp slap  
back.

~~~

Where an um is an ehm,  
listen for the sound of two  
hands not clapping. *Sign*  
*here.*

~~~

Pluck the plume from the pink  
flamingo. Dip the quill into the  
well—lo and behold, that's a  
pumpkin pie!

## SIT WITH ME BENEATH THE ALLIGATOR PINES

Sit with me beneath the alligator pines, where we walk up scales to debone the heron, then blow hornets from our honeycombs and bovine!

~~~

*Here.* Drink from this boot.  
Watch your arms become branches. Your feet will soon take root in the undergrowth.

~~~

To those whose heads nod, nod on. To those with heads in knots—knock knock?

~~~

Take this ax and hack through your torso. Together, we will read the rings: *Somewhere between the ship and the swell is the swash.*

~~~

Beneath the Temple of Venus, we bum-ditty through Casserole Mountain to find a fine needle in a stack of hay, then burst balloon!

~~~

That was a fragrant  
attempt to weave roses  
into wine—if I only had a  
loom.

~~~

In these parts, we bury the tune  
and divine thy form. We gut  
the carp & spin silk into golden  
yams!

## SWIM WITH ME THROUGH THE MOON MUCK

Swim with me through the moon  
muck, where green onions  
hang from plantain limbs,  
where baguettes bathe  
in flower beds and moan.

~~~

To be a saint of stones,  
pinch salt into puddles  
at the rising of the sun.  
*Do not watch the water  
boil.*

~~~

To be a son of saints,  
fry an egg on a lake  
of ice. Stare into the trees  
until their knots become  
eyes.

~~~

See the dolphins walk  
upright in the dunes,  
their lungs full of silt.

~~~

Hear the primates paddle out  
into the pond, their pockets  
full of pebbles.

~~~

Watch the roses fall in sheets  
onto your plate, where cuttlefish  
paint in ink: *What fills these shells?*

~~~

Follow the medusa from  
sea floor to surface. Shed  
your tentacles and hot air  
balloon into the clouds.

~~~

Dip your onions into the roman  
sauce and dangle! Puff your  
pipe with the paper  
heads and waltz!  
Build a castle  
of bone and  
flesh to the  
sky——  
*YAWP!*

~~~

This parade ends here.

# *Sharon Kennedy-Nolle*

## PARENTING PATRICK

Armed with flashlight, I'd go in,  
never knowing what I would find.

You, at 20, insomniac, bedridden  
roll over, plastered

with a Cheshire grin  
in the split-screen light, laughing over the latest celebrity suicide

muttering rejected novel prose, what's trending now  
about how to go by hologram to Berchtesgaden.

When you were a baby,  
I'd peer over the crib

always checking your breathing,  
how you were turned...

Later, you cringed in the beam, salt on snail,  
exhaling stale beer.

In the lint-colored hours your father and I argued  
over whom was to blame: his fist, my shouting.

You'd rage at me: why did I have you?  
you would never think of having kids, adding to the surplus population.

(I never told you I considered the alternatives,  
RU486, having just started grad school.

The obstetrician opined,  
"But that uterus, such a healthy blue!"

I was slow, too,  
to understand that wanting a child is an accretive process,

like the shell's swell of barnacle  
while in hospital, became all bandaged touch.

After delivery, I wasn't allowed to hold you  
through the ICU getup, ventilator cocoon,

arms-IVed, board strapped.

Two days in the disinfected world, and it had already been a lot.

Now in the Abilify sterilities of an emptying mind,  
earbudded you go back to mumble and cry.

## CONTROL Z

Q: "Well, why don't you kill yourself?"

A: "Well, I can't drown myself, you know."

Nonetheless:

*Pt endorsed having suicidal thoughts all the time. It's comforting to know he can do it tomorrow:*

"It's something to fall back upon. If I didn't have that, I'd feel trapped."

Nor can you take out from your pockets, the rocks.  
Back up the soggy leafed trail,  
peel off the seven layers  
and return to the warmed bed,  
of journaling, sleep,  
of sleeping it all off.

# *Mykyta Ryzhykh*

This poem smells blue

|||

The color of wrinkles in the sky

¶

Black shapes in clear water

Δ

This verse will be picked up by crows in the morning

And they will be thrown from heaven

On icy concrete heart rocks

~

All in vain

First published in *Stone Poetry Quarterly*

# *Wren Tuatha*

## GULL COLLAGE

*One thing next to another doesn't mean they touch.*

Bhanu Kapil

murder hornets

I covet the veer of gulls,  
how they hold the air  
that's holding them.

wheelhouse

#stresszits

Forché seeking Lorca's grave—  
play date with tea and toys by comparison  
to what a knock on the door brings.

gulls, tricksters of physics.  
There in the air  
the moment has mass and longitude.

resting mask face

Q//echo//anon//chamber

Forché in a jeep, a rural clinic,  
a dead president's sinking  
bed. Witness breeds testimony:

*...Like the knife sharpener's cry,  
I wrote in my notebook...In the distance,  
volcanoes without smoke appeared.*

---

Excepting the epigraph, italicized words are from Carolyn Forché's memoir, *What You Have Heard Is True*.

*Sleeping volcanoes...*  
infant's shoebox coffin

Gulls lift french fries in a parking lot.  
Their cries fly into fists of wind  
like hormones of bees—  
Here: food. Here: nest. Here: hazard.

here hazard

*it's  
easier  
don't  
you  
think  
to  
talk  
about  
birds*

A thing that fits in a shoebox  
can be carried to a place  
or stored on a high shelf.  
It can be buried, worn, gifted  
or mourned. You can be asked  
to guess at what's inside.  
The treachery of shoeboxes.

brilliant gaslighting

dialect of vagaries

Suburban anti-maskers take a stand  
for retail freedoms.

white grievance

circular firing squads  
pandemic performance art

Salvadoran people  
held orange rinds to their faces  
secured by cloth, as they returned  
to claim their rotting dead.

creeping sense of inevitability

Be Lorca's grave,  
standing on yourself.  
Our isthmus is our milky way.  
We mark the death of ease and silence.

pre-emptive pardons

The birds of los desaparecidos are turkey vultures.  
*...already on the ground...they don't sing they hiss  
look at this. remember this. try to see...*

*los desaparecidos*

*aperture*

If I fight I might be broken. My bones  
are hollow like fifes. My beak and claws  
are metaphorical, unlike  
my corpse. My only life.

How many holes does it take to fill  
the body of a farmer?

*look at this. remember this. try to see...  
...what better gift to give than one's life?*

*Praxis*

Your move.



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## Contributors

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**MAURIZIO BRANCALEONI** is a writer and translator. His poems and short stories have appeared in several journals and anthologies. He has a bilingual blog where he posts literary gems, interviews and translations: [leisurespotblog.blogspot.com/](http://leisurespotblog.blogspot.com/)

**DANIELA ESPOSITO** was born in South London. She is studying screenwriting at The Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. She has been published in *Mono*, *Bandit Fiction*, *the Templeman Review*, *Dream Noir* and *prospectively in The Stand, Tears in the Fence, and Writer's Block Magazine*. She has also been long-listed for the Bridport Short Story Prize and the Brick Lane Short Story Prize.

**ALEX GREGOR** is a writer, editor and educator living in Barcelona, Spain and Rome, Italy. He is currently an editor for the Forestry Division of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and was recently a member of the English Language & Literature Department at John Cabot University (JCU). He holds an MA in Literary Studies and an MEd in Curriculum & Instruction. He is one of the founding editors of OOMPH! Press and an author of poetry and fiction. For more information, visit his website ([www.marginalcomets.com/pubs/](http://www.marginalcomets.com/pubs/)).

**SHARON KENNEDY-NOLLE**, a graduate of Vassar College, received an MFA from the Writers' Workshop as well as a doctoral degree in nineteenth-century American literature from the University of Iowa. She also holds MAs from the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University and New York University. In addition to scholarly publications, her poetry has appeared in many journals. Her chapbook, *Black Wick: Selected Elegies* was a semi-finalist for the 2018 Tupelo Snowbound Chapbook Contest. Chosen as the 2020 Chapbook Editor's Pick by Variant Literature Press, *Black Wick: Selected Elegies* was published in 2021. Kennedy-Nolle was winner of the *New Ohio Review's* 2021 creative writing contest. Her full-length manuscript, *Black Wick: The Collected Elegies* was chosen as a 2021 finalist for the Black Lawrence Press's St. Lawrence Book Award, a 2021 and 2022 semifinalist for the University of Wisconsin Poetry Series' Brittingham and Felix Pollak Prizes, and a 2022 semifinalist for the Two Sylvias Press' Wilder Prize and for the Brick Road Poetry Contest. Recently appointed the Poet Laureate of Sullivan County for 2022-2024, she lives and teaches in New York.

**MYKYTA RYZHYKH** is winner of the international competition Art Against Drugs, bronze medalist of the festival Chestnut House, laureate of the literary competition named after Tyutyunnik. Nominated for Pushcart Prize. Published in the journals *Dzvin*, *Ring A*, *Polutona*, *Rechport*, *Topos*, *Articulation*, *Formaslov*, *Colon*, *Literature Factory*, *Literary Chernihiv*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Stone Poetry Journal*, *Divot: A Journal of Poetry*, *dyst Literary Journal*, *Superpresent Magazine*, *Allegro Poetry Magazine*, *Alternate Route*, *Better Than Starbucks: Poetry & Fiction Journal*, *Littoral Press*, *Book of Matches*, on the portals *Literary Center* and *Soloneba*, in the *Ukrainian literary newspaper*, *Ice Floe Press*.

**JAKOB SKOTE** is a Swedish artist whose work explores the interplay between technology and human desires, how they are inseparably locked in a perpetual dance of mutual construction and reconstruction. The forest is a constant actor, both as representative of the non-human and as an allegory of the new ecologies we create together with our plethora of tools. Skote is a part of art collective Untold Garden, and works mainly through technologically mediated performances, apps, and interactive art, while writing always remains a core element regardless of the media.

**WREN TUATHA** earned her MFA at Goddard College. Her first collection is *Thistle and Brilliant* (FLP). Her poetry has appeared in *Silk Road*, *The Cafe Review*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Canary*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Lavender Review*, and others. She's founding editor at *Califragile*; formerly Artist-in-Residence at Heathcote Center. Wren and partner author/activist C.T. Butler herd rescue goats among the Finger Lakes of New York.

**JEFF WELLS** is an artist from Danville, Virginia. He creates Surrealist artwork using pen and ink, digital media and collage. His writing is inspired from Surrealist poetry and Beat era writers. His artwork can be found on Instagram at [www.instagram.com/jwellsvision/](https://www.instagram.com/jwellsvision/)