

THE SIGH PRESS

ISSUE 1 • SUMMER 2014

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Founded in Florence, Italy, in April 2014, The Sigh Press is a quarterly online literary journal for writers of English in Tuscany and for readers anywhere. We feature fiction and nonfiction, poetry and art. We hope to shine a light on the wealth of talent in Tuscany.

Writers and visual artists are invited to submit work in response to specific themes set for each issue. The theme of our inaugural issue is *A Deliberate Leap*, which we ourselves have taken in starting this journal.

Our contributors explore the theme in a variety of ways, from the existential quandaries of fictional Professor Petrović to what was (mis)understood by real-life Iranians as a temporary return to suppressive cultural codes in exchange for, ultimately, a progressive outcome. The shorter work in this issue takes ‘leaps’ into the past and future, and into the “sharp implements and fire” of the present. The calligraphic artwork functions as “visual communication between cultures,” between East and West represented here, and also serves as a bridge between language and image.

We’ve asked our contributors to tell us about one of their recent deliberate leaps, which you’ll find along with their bios at the end of the journal.

Mundy Walsh & Lyall Harris

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The Sigh Press



A DANCE OF LINE AND SPACE
MONICA DENGO

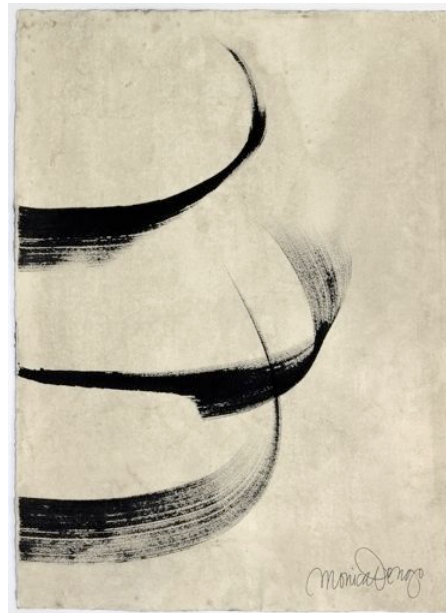


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PRUDENZA

ELIZABETH LOGAN HARRIS

We call her Pru for she is always thinking ahead. Alas, there are dangers she cannot control: traffic, television, ultra violet rays. But today, she brings her children to the cook's house, hands each girl a serious knife. Today, her daughters will learn to manage sharp implements and fire.



!

THE DISAPPEARING OF PROFESSOR PETROVIĆ

DEJAN ATANACKOVIĆ



Professor Petrović likes to walk the path that leads from his house up the hill, all the way to the pine forest. As if obeying a list or a map, he abandons himself to a repetition of acts that, day after day, follow the same, identical order: he inhales the smell of trees, runs his fingers through a rosemary bush, stops by a stone wall to observe distant hills, takes a photo with his camera, puts in his pocket a few curious pebbles. This morning he is himself strangely aware of this regularity, and the thought of it suddenly makes him feel troubled. The street is deserted as far as his gaze can reach, to where the road bends by a high

stone fence. Sometimes on his walk, Petrović would meet some of his neighbors from surrounding homes—nameless passers-by who live behind the walls and closed blinds and swiftly, with scarce, trained grins, busy with their mobile phones, walk their dogs dressed in raincoats—their eyes utterly deprived of any awareness of his presence. And so, for the first time (though we know it's not the first time) in Professor Petrović's mind an idea is formed about the strangeness of their passage. *There, they don't see me again*, he confirms to himself. And to tell the truth, it is not uncommon that someone would almost stumble upon Petrović, run into him, or unkindly freeze and barricade his way. *Perhaps I simply never adapted*, he would then think, and soon forget all about it.

Overnight, the hills were drowned in a deep white sea of clouds. The mist poured out of the warm earth, it crawled down the olive fields and flooded the valley. As you look outside, your last night's dreams are fading. An image fights to form: a house with blue windows, a strange wooden staircase. You inhabit an old photograph, you are a tenant of an old gaze. Inside the white cloud, a world may be gone.

If it is true, as Professor Petrović claims, that he spends every morning at the college, it is only because he would barely tolerate a different structure to his habits. That teaching position, after all, is the only reason why he is still here, away from family and childhood friends, and he—as often is the case with those who in the depths of their own convictions quietly anticipate the lack of all meaning—obeys that commitment as his only possible choice. Upon entering the lecture hall he begins his talk exactly where he left off the day before, with no introduction. While talking, he observes the absentminded students come and go and never one whole group seems to hear both the beginning and the end of his lecture. Petrović, however, doesn't seem to find that worthy of disapproval. On the contrary, he readily blames the education system: *that's how it's all deliberately designed, every man for himself, divide and conquer*, he would go on silently accusing. After all, students nowadays

rarely ask any questions. *One day, I could just disappear before their very eyes.* It is quite certain that Professor Petrović most of all fears his students' eyes. When in the midst of a lecture, whether he wants to or not, he meets someone's gaze: there, like a bulging abyss, a gaping void looks back at him, and Petrović then feels as if the ground is slipping away beneath his feet. Now, as he approaches the clearing where he, by habit, leans against a wall covered with moss and stares at the landscape, it is morning, and the sun is low. A white cloud, remnant of the cold night, still rests over the hills, like the stroke of an eraser. *I must prepare that talk about memory. I should put together a slide show. As soon I get back home.*

There's no sign of a breeze. The leaves framed by a window are motionless in the mist. You walk through the silent rooms. Silence eliminates the sense of belonging. In a crumpled note by the bed the words you wrote the night before now have no meaning. Better hide them for now. The words prosper from boredom and grow in oblivion. And one day, when you find them again, they will remind you of the importance to survive.

At home, everything seems unchanged: his tiny house still sits on the hill above town, with its unusually large garden in which one can walk for a long time before completing a full circle. Yet once inside, Professor Petrović can't help feeling that someone else lives there too. There's that strange sensation that as he enters, someone else has just left. And in turn, as he leaves, someone immediately settles in. But in an odd way, that hardly represents a difficulty. For sure, all his belongings are in their place: Petrović's collection of pebbles, his photos of the hills, his books, his morning notes gathered in a special folder, his lecture material... Even the biscuits he keeps for a neighbor's dogs are on the usual shelf. *The dogs see me, no doubt.* And as we all know, dogs do have strange abilities and people are often surprised or frightened at them whining or rejoicing without cause.

In the garden, a few steps away, an unstable world begins. Behind the sage bushes, by an old olive tree, under a tunnel of ivy: ghosts now walk around you as some old friends, those whose faces you would see as a child on old wooden cabinets and stained walls, and you observed them as they would slowly form: an eye? a nose? a mouth? And when you'd turn your gaze away, they would disappear and you could never find them again.

Jovan and Mina, the Kostić couple, are the only two people with whom Professor Petrović shares what he himself calls a meaningful friendship. And even though Jovan, a college fellow, one morning quite noticeably missed a day of work and never came back again, that fact was no longer mentioned. Among them, this particular silence found a comfortable place and no one minded it. Besides, Petrović always shared with the Kostićs that pleasant feeling that the time that passes in their conversations is characterized by an unusual flexibility. Petrović gladly spends that time reading aloud his morning notes to which the Kostićs always have some interesting comments. However, just yesterday, he was disappointed to understand the nature of this companionship. Over coffee, Mina admitted to poisoning Jovan by means of a substance whose effect is measured in seconds, and then to having committed suicide herself. Petrović at first thought she was joking, but Jovan just sat there, blushing and serious, without saying a word, so that Petrović realized, more from this silence than from Mina's story, that it was all true. Petrović, however, did not want to find out the details, and so, casually, he changed the subject. When Petrović was ready to leave, Jovan stayed inside, and Mina accompanied him to the car and stood on the porch for as long as he could see her in his rearview mirror. They, as Petrović, live in a beautiful house. They, like Petrović, genuinely love their house. In return, their houses love them and will never let them go. *After all*, says Petrović to himself, *isn't that what a home should be all about?* Hence they get together from time to time, Petrović and the Kostić couple, and they talk about the fog and the hills, about students, about the silence of their mornings, about childhood, surprised at how few things are still what they used to be.

The sky is turning clear after days of rain. Sun enters the windows, illuminating air full of invisible particles. Long shadows dance on a terracotta floor. Dogs are sleeping in the bedroom, enjoying their world of the everlasting present. You wonder about their dreams. Their fantasy, you think, must be unimaginable. Your dreams are plain and explainable. In your dreams, you walk and walk through endless rooms. Inside the rooms there are voices: "How ugly the happiness you desire, how beautiful the sadness you live." Once, when you wake up, those rooms will wake up with you. And besides those rooms, there will be nothing else.

Professor Petrović has now reached the end of the road. Beneath his feet the asphalt meets a dirt trail that leads through the pines into a deep, dense forest. In all these years he has never stepped over that line.



PRENUPTIAL
LINDA FALCONE

Endless,
she vows.
Unless
something happens
unexpected.

Of course,
he agrees.
Unless
we go
off course.



SELFIES

GEORGETTE JUPE

When I first heard that the ‘term’ selfie was Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year for 2013, I couldn’t help but be a little taken aback. A word that I envision in a florescent club bathroom, between a couple of slightly tipsy girls snapping photo after photo of themselves, one arm extended to best capture those highlights and 20 euro Lancôme lip gloss. On second thought, selfies aren’t limited to the young and restless, but even loved by politicians and celebrities. Who could possibly forget President Obama’s own entrance into this phenomenon at Nelson Mandela’s memorial, or that Oscar selfie gone viral with Ellen DeGeneres and other top A-list names. That wasn’t any ordinary selfie but one that was estimated to be worth between \$800 million and \$1 billion and seen by 37 million people worldwide. Which makes me wonder, why do we love taking pictures of ourselves so much? Is it just a simple proverbial moment of self-glory and control, in the privacy of our bathrooms or cars? Or is it decidedly more than that? Certainly no selfie of mine will ever be worth even close to \$800 million, but as I say that, snap goes the camera phone: another day—another selfie.



THE CYPRESS TREE: A LOVE AFFAIR WITH IRAN (excerpt)

KAMIN MOHAMMADI



IRAN, 1978

Women had fared well under the shah. Although Iran was still a deeply patriarchal society and sharia-governed family relations meaning that a man could have four wives and a woman needed her husband's permission to travel outside the country, women in Iran had the same rights as men when it came to education, employment, the protection of the law and political participation; they could hold property, vote and work as they wished.

The culture was more advanced than the laws in most cases, and in practice it was unknown for men to take more than one wife. In 1975 the Family Protection Law had made it mandatory for a husband to get written permission from his original wife if he wanted to get married again, had raised the marriage age for women to eighteen and given them crucial equal rights in the divorce courts and when it came to the custody of children—the most progressive such law in the Middle East. Now these politicised, educated, working women were also clamouring for change from the shah's repressive

regime, some even donning a headscarf or more elaborate Islamic *hejab* in order to reject what they saw as the Western objectification of women. Forty years after Reza Shah's dress reforms had forced them out from under the veil, Iran's women were now themselves politicising the Islamic *hejab*.

Mehry would phone us in Ahvaz to report to us on the protests in Tehran, telling us of the scores of *chador*-clad women who were now fronting the marches, protecting the men from the gunshots, of the new chants that could be heard: '*Esteghlal, azadi, jomhooriy-e Eslami*'—Independence, Freedom and an Islamic Republic. She was astonished by those of her peers who had taken to wearing headscarves, their faces suddenly clean of make-up, their shoes flat, those radical feminists who were now making this innocent scrap of fabric a political issue. But she told herself, as so many others did, that this was all for the overthrow of the shah, that what was important was the common goal they shared. Afterwards reason would prevail again, but in this moment, whether in miniskirts and false eyelashes or scrub-faced in *chadors*, the women of Iran banded together to join their voices to the demand for the end of the monarchy and the removal of the shah.

At Khomeini's behest, workers all over the country had been holding strikes and in October the oil workers went on strike for over a month, paralysing the national industry. Bagher, who had been promoted to a director of the oil company in January of that year, saw it as his duty to continue working and management, for all the concessions made and wage increases offered, could not prevail on the revolutionaries.

We had returned from our long European trip to a different world. Although my parents tried to protect us from what was going on, the power cuts caused by the strikes and the rushing back from evening visits to beat the curfew had their effect and the violence that had taken the streets burst into the Company compound when three senior managers were shot on their way to work. Soon the many foreign expats working for the consortium were ordered by their respective countries to leave and the *farangis*, our friends, neighbours and parents of our playmates, left literally overnight for Kuwait, their houses abandoned, still filled with all their possessions.

Every day more of our friends would be missing—spirited away by their parents to Paris, LA, London—and after school, we would find ourselves increasingly restricted to playing indoors or in our own garden, the rooftops and streets we had roamed so freely now out of bounds. Our parents told us nothing but we watched the shah addressing us all on television and, unbeknown to me, my beloved younger uncles and Kurdish cousins were all in the revolutionary movement, either as socialist activists or Kurdish separatists who had also been co-opted by Khomeini's promises of more Kurdish autonomy. My *daiey* Pardis was a member—some even said a leader—of the *Komiteh* that was now policing Ahvaz, the revolutionary committees that had sprung up and were taking power, inspired by the way the French Revolution had organised itself so many centuries before.

On the dark, candlelit nights, I would pore over the latest book I was reading, as compelled by Oscar Wilde and Charlie Brown by torchlight as I was by events outside the compound and the wild scenes I saw on the television every night. After school, the neighbourhood kids would gather on the street corner and exchange whatever information we had managed to glean from the adults, who were trying so hard to shelter us from the storm. We heard from the Company staff who worked for our families, tended our gardens and cleaned our houses, that soon they wouldn't have to come to work at all, that Khomeini had said that there would be oil wells sprouting black gold in their back yards. I asked my mother about this, thinking she would answer or laugh but instead she grew tense and hushed me, telling me not to talk in front of the staff about anything. What 'anything' meant I didn't know—the people who worked for us were part of our lives and our Arab guards, the driver and couple who cooked and gardened for us were too much enmeshed in our daily life for me to suddenly freeze them out. And so I started to become quietly divorced from the impetuosity of my gregarious personality, started watching what I said and to whom I said it. It was the end of spontaneity and the start of the watchfulness that was to become second nature to me.

,

ALMA MATER

ELISA BIAGINI

In the time-carriage where I sit
a clothes hanger wavers:
memory rattling
to jolts of language,
from its earthy sleep
now pressing.

(New Brunswick, October 2013)

?

What can the disintegrating caterpillar know of the coming changes?



CONTRIBUTORS

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MONICA DENGGO has been working in calligraphy since the 1990s, having studied both independently and institutionally with calligraphers and artists Gaynor Goffe, Ewan Clayton, Thomas Ingmire and Eleanor Dickinson. Teaching and exhibiting her work around the world, Monica has ventured away from tradition and towards an investigation of innovative approaches to lettering, calligraphy and handwriting. In our opening notes, it was Monica who said, “[Forms] of handwriting become a vehicle for visual communication between cultures.” *A Dance of Line and Space* won the Sharjah Calligraphy Biennial 2014 Contemporary Calligraphy Award.

WWW.MONICADENGO.COM

WWW.FREEHANDWRITING.NET

WWW.SCRITTURACORSIVA.IT

THIS PAST FALL I received an invitation to participate in the Sharjah Calligraphy Biennale in the United Arab Emirates. I had declined this invitation in the past, but this time I saw it as a challenging intercultural communication opportunity, and accepted. My deliberate leaps have always been somehow irrational and even a bit foolish. I go by feelings and in most cases, it has worked out beautifully and developed in ways I could never have imagined.

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ELIZABETH LOGAN HARRIS' work has appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *New England Review*, and *WebConjunctions* among other journals. Her essay “Black & White TV,” published in *Colorado Review*, was named a notable essay in *Best American Essays, 2008*. She co-wrote and co-produced the 2010 documentary “The Bungalows of Rockaway.”

WWW.CONJUNCTIONS.COM/WEBCON/HARRIS09.HTM

WWW.THEBUNGALOWSOFFROCKAWAY.COM

I SIGNED UP, READ UP, attended a writing workshop. Opening session: the instructors were ill-prepared, smug. I deliberated, then withdrew. Had second, third thoughts until I spied a fox approaching at dusk. It circled once, twice, scoped me out before darting away. Decided I was right to protect my tale.

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DEJAN ATANACKOVIĆ was born in 1969 in Belgrade. Since 1994, he has presented solo exhibitions, video and audio installations, interventions in public spaces, as well as curatorial projects. His work has been exhibited in personal and collective shows in Italy, Serbia, Canada, USA, Slovenia, Bosnia, Albania, Germany, Mexico. He teaches multimedia and installation art at the university programs SACI and Studio Marangoni in Florence and at the Siena Art Institute.

WWW.DEJANATANACKOVIC.COM

WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/DEJAN.ATANACKOVIC.9

I FIND THE IDEA of a *leap* directly related to the idea of vanishing. Things fall into themselves and disappear. The theme of *happiness*, so present in current economic theories, is an expression of the concern for too many things of 'importance' that vanish without trace. If I tried to define *the body of our time*, it would be *the body that vanishes*.

—

LINDA FALCONE'S books include *Italians Dance and I'm a Wallflower, If They Are Roses* and *Moving Days*. No one has ever succeeded in overturning her conviction that every page of prose secretly wishes to become poetry one day.

ALL MY LEAPS ARE deliberately infrequent and religiously last-minute. Then it happens: I realize there's the brink of an avalanche under my feet. Alas, the

time has come to jump off the ledge and break all my bones. It usually takes about four years to recover. This is where the phrase 'leap year' comes from.

~

GEORGETTE JUPE is an American social media strategist, copywriter, blogger and a certifiable 'Tuscan Texan' living and breathing all things Florence. Social inside and out, she lives in the moment and eats way too much pasta. She blogs about life in Italy, food, travel around Europe and the world.

GIRLINFLORENCE.COM

[TWITTER.COM/GGNITALY84](https://twitter.com/GGNITALY84)

[INSTAGRAM.COM/GIRLINFLORENCE](https://www.instagram.com/girlinflorence)

THIS ENTIRE LAST YEAR was one giant deliberate leap—from changing my entire life, my career, even moving to the center of Florence—one day I woke up and decided to follow my passions while I still could: writing, blogging, and most of all learning to trust myself and my decisions.

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KAMIN MOHAMMADI is a writer, editor, journalist and broadcaster. Since being exiled from Iran to London in 1979, Kamin has found it hard to have less than two homes: currently they are located in Tuscany and London. Her book, *The Cypress Tree*, is published by Bloomsbury in the UK and as *Mille farfalle nel sole* by Piemme in Italy.

WWW.KAMIN.CO.OK

IT'S HARD TO FIND just one—I am a confirmed 'deliberate leaper'! Six years ago I moved to Florence not knowing a soul, and five years ago I moved to the deepest Tuscan countryside although I am a city girl. The next leap is going away by myself for a couple of months to get deeply into my new book, another

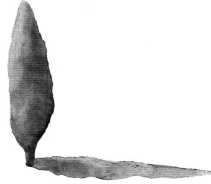
'intentional exile' which makes me both terribly nervous and excited at the same time.

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ELISA BIAGINI (Ph.D. Rutgers University) is a poet, translator and teacher in Florence, Italy. Her poems have appeared in Italian and American reviews and anthologies; her sixth book of poetry, *Da una crepa*, was published in 2014 (Einaudi). She has been invited to poetry festivals across the globe and her poems have been widely translated; notably, *The Guest in the Wood* (Chelsea editions, 2013) won the 2014 Best Translated Book Award.

WWW.ELISABIAGINI.IT

AFTER LEAVING THE US for good in 2012, I intended to visit NY every other year, but I never went back to Rutgers, the university where I got my Ph.D. I had wanted to, but things always got in the way and, deep down, I feared facing the old buildings and street layered with memories of those years. Then, my American poetry collection came out last year and my first thought was: I have to go back to New Brunswick. Here is where I wrote some of the poems in the book and where I had experiences that ended up feeding other poems later on. It was a leap I had to take. The boarding of the train itself was quite emotional: the old Elisa woke up and started to write.



ISSUE 2 • FALL 2014 will be published September 5. The issue theme borrows a line from Charles Simic: Three mismatched shoes at the entrance of a dark alley.

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