

## Editorial: Creative Writing and Arts

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Maps are never neutral. With their linearly organized geometries of North and South, East and West, they express historically constructed balances, silently proposing binary world-visions and normalizing scales of values. And so, too, our imagination is never completely innocent. Talking and writing about “the North” necessarily entails a series of clichés. This does not apply merely to the geo-politically and economically leading North as opposed to a poor or “emerging” South, but also to the North of eco-cultural imageries: the Arctic and Polar North, the North of endless winters, obstinate ices, unprecedented postcolonial expansions, painfully melting glaciers, and gleefully spectral auroras. This is the North that defies our ecocritical mind, and this is what has inspired the critical essays and artistic contributions of this *Ecozon@* Autumn issue.

As Werner Bigell remarks in his introduction to the special section on *Northern Nature*, attempts at defining what the North is are easily contradicted by its multifarious natures and elemental narratives, by its interlaced cultures and diverse survival strategies. Often expected to be empty, the North is instead “filled with peoples, stories, animals, and ecosystems.” Moreover, it is “not simple but highly complex,” also in its “material and narrative interaction with the world south of it.” Envisaged as white—or as whiteness per se—the North has instead many colors—colors which house “complex stories contradicting the imagination of simplicity” and which disclose “economic, historical, and ecosystemic interactions” (Bigell, “Introduction”). To say that the North is not empty, or simple, or white, means precisely this: there is not just one North. “North” is rather another site of circumscribed plurality, and it is to this plurality—of presences, of colors, of substances—that the authors of our Creative Writing and Art Section have turned their attention.

The section opens with a series of eight photographs, *Twilight of the North*, by the Icelandic artist Thorvardur Arnason, a filmmaker and photographer, with a background in environmental studies and currently the Director of the Hornafjordur Regional Research Centre (Southeast Iceland). Arnason’s North is a place of wonder and elemental creativity. In these eight stunning pictures (one of which, *Ice Cave*, is our cover image), the northern landscape “testifies like an expansive canvas to the ongoing influence of elemental processes and the forces of weather on earthen minerals” (Macaulay, 20). In fact, here the North is in the elements; not just in their elemental purity, but rather in their pervious density and possibility to interchange and mutually hybridize. And so, we see that fire encounters an icy sky (*Oraefajokull* and *Aurora Corona*) generating auroras, “dancing flames” where magnetism convenes with light in “luminous storms that *beacon*” (Duckert 42); we see that what is per definition above—

the sky, indeed—seems to be at home below ground, in the form of giant subterranean glaciers (*Ice Cave* and *Crystal Cave*). We see Lord Byron’s “blue wilderness of interminable air” provisionally turned into ice blocks, and already melting in the eerie fluidity of our warming planet (*Blue Glacier Front*). Again, we see the almost animal power of vegetation (*Autumn Heather*), spreading onto this land, whose heat is expressed by way of magnetism and colors, flashing fluxes of matter-energy.

When all these elements and forces come together in the form of northern twilight, it is easy to think of this phenomenon as a conversation: a “conversation between the tilted rotating Earth and the Sun” (Morton 273). In the Arctic Circle, this season-long conversation has a revealing power: it is the elemental epiphany of a beauty “that coexists anarchically alongside us, physically before us, and despite us” (279). But, as Arnason writes introducing these photographs, this beauty is “in a constant state of flux,” it is an imperiled beauty. Seen in this perspective, *Twilight of the North*, with his quasi-Nietzschean title, also invites us to consider the ongoing process toward other eco-elemental states, and the sense of loss and bewilderment connected to it. As the artist, again, notes:

I feel drawn to the glaciers in part because of their strange beauty, but also because I have seen and witnessed these changes taking place. [...] The only thing you can be really sure of is that the glacier you saw yesterday will not be the same one you will see tomorrow. Attached to these filmic acts there is both an exuberance—that of being constantly exposed to new forms of beauty—and a growing sadness, caused by experiencing the slow death of this glacial beauty.

Let us turn now to other visions of slowness and beauty, this time expressed in words. Our creative writing segment speaks Italian, but with a northern accent. The author is Luca Bugnone, a young scholar and writer from the Susa Valley, an Alpine site west of Turin which has been for twenty years the theater of grassroots struggles against the environmentally-destructive plan of a high speed railway connecting Italy and France. Author of short stories and a practitioner of eco-narrative scholarship, Bugnone portrays himself as “a mountain wanderer [...] firmly trusting in the revolutionary power of slowness” (maybe in implicit polemics again top-down planned fast trains).

His piece *Elska* is a lyrical and eco-philosophical travel narrative set in Iceland. In Bugnone’s description this piece entails “a love letter” and a comparative reflection about the different Norths he experienced: Iceland and the Alps, an ancient world and a young one, the lithic and the human. In fact, we find in *Elska* a series of human/inhuman stories: stories of stones, plus stories of encounters, silences, bodies, and of intriguing elemental sensuality. We might call all this *geophilia*, a “love of stone” that Jeffrey Cohen has depicted as “often unrequited,” a challenge both for “human exceptionalism and lithic indifference,” threatened by the awareness that “to contemplate rocks [...] is to entertain the possibility of being crushed by them,” as Bachelard said (148). This love is not impossible, though, and Bugnone’s piece delves into this elemental confidence, somehow echoing David Abram’s statement: “Rocks alive? Yeah, right!” (43). Indeed, this piece of creative writing should be read against the voices of the philosophers and eco-thinkers that resonate in it: Cohen and Abram. For Bugnone, like for Cohen, rock is “a

strangely sympathetic companion, a source of knowledge and narrative, an invitation to an ethics of scale” (Cohen n. p.). For him, too, like for Abram, “The stillness, the quietude of this rock is its very activity, the steady gesture by which it enters and alters your life” (Abram 56). But there is also something other than this, since *Elska* adds to their mental-elemental wilderness the softness of the Mediterranean experience. And so, the stone stories the author recounts are meditations about the forms the North takes when embodied in mountains and solitary natures, be it in Iceland or in the Mediterranean Alps. *Mater materia, pater petrosus*, rock becomes here alluring and severe, motherly and unfamiliar, an alien root and a radically other, both a repository of memory and a fate of geological oblivion. As Bugnone writes in a passage, here translated from the original Italian:

The mother, I ponder, is an alterity tempered in time, an alterity we internalize, and love, and slowly mingle with, in mutual belonging. It is an alterity that becomes itself incorporated, crisscrossed with other alterities in the course of our existence. I think of the two-thousand-million-year-old Mt. Sinai’s dust, of the nineteen-million-year-old Iceland, and the ninety-million-year-old Alps. Ever-climbed and shelter-seeking, the Alpine rock is grey, hoary. Each stone, be it carved, cracked or sculpted, leads back to another stone. Each one is a memory. In Iceland, you cannot carve stones; pumices are moved by a wind gust. Rocks are mirrors in black, pink, ochre, and the mountains are low, pointed and green. In Iceland the earth simmers, billows, melts. It is full of gods.

My mountains, too, the Alps, are North: the Mediterranean North. Europe’s white heart, in their labyrinth they harbor orchards and vineyards, woods of deciduous trees and conifers, prairies, nivals, screes, and glaciers. This is a vertical world striving downward: after having seen diving leviathans and climbing wolves and ibexes, in millions of years this will be a desert. This means that, in a remote future, our memories will fade, too. (My translation)

In the poetry section, northern natures are voiced by two poets, Paola Loreto and Jacob G. Price. A bilingual poet, awarded numerous prizes and author of four collections of verses, Paola Loreto is also a translator and a scholar, elegant interpreter of Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost and Derek Walcott. And the echo of a conversation with these important voices can be recognized in this original, inspired triptych devoted to the Orobic Pre-Alps, the author’s “home.” This Alpine home is physical as well as emotional: besides being a poet, Loreto is also a hiker, and therefore her verses come from the very concreteness of her bodily encounters with these rugged natures, a topic that she has also explored elsewhere in her books (see for example, *In quota* or *La memoria del corpo*). As she writes in her introductory note, the three poems published in this *Ecozon@* issue “were inspired by [...] keenly receptive observation,” and express “the profound sense of an unavoidable and pacifying belonging to a world of even, objective, and multiple relations.” Like Bugnone’s *Elska*, Loreto’s *Cedevole al tatto* / “To be in any form” is thus a tribute to another North, the North of the Italian Alps. In so doing, these poems signal, again, that there is not one North, and that Northern natures are ascending—and rarely condescending—natures: natures of hawks, trails, rock waves, and clouds. These presences are alive in a body-mind continuum to which the poet gives—more by accident than by necessity—voice.

The bilingual poem *Space Junk/Basura espacial* by Jacob G. Price completes this section. A graduate student in Hispanic Literature at the University of Kansas, Price

explores in his poetic research the American “Millennial” generation’s attitude toward environmental issues, both in political and imaginative terms. Although concealed, there is North, here, too. Compared to the previous contributions, however, *Space Junk/Basura espacial* shifts us even further up: in the outer space, ideally (and maybe dysfunctionally) reconnecting the (illusion of) purity of Arctic landscapes with that of the silent universe, a place in which trash travels along with electromagnetic waves, becoming, again, elemental and erratic. Ironic and vaguely surrealist, the poem is a story of oneiric encounters between an upward-striving earth and a downward-falling galactic space. Recounting the hypnotic meeting between nature’s sheltering presence and the alien proximity of ghostly futures, Price discloses our look toward a “Northern nature” in which terrestrial intimacies and spatial threats come together.

Finally, by closing my first editorial, I would like thank Carmen Flys Junquera, Axel Goodbody and the entire editorial board of *Ecozon@* for warmly welcoming me as Arts section editor and (maybe daringly) trusting me able to carry out this role. To Isabel Hoving, who paved this way, my heartfelt gratitude.

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