Shopping List

Amy Lilwall & Rupert Loydell

Are the unnamed characters who write and respond to these post-it notes flatmates or lovers, friends or acquaintances? Is their relationship as fractious as this prose suggests, or can it be read as indicative of something deeper, a series of signs and indicators, pointing elsewhere? The medium, somewhat outdated in our digital world, suggests fleeting exchanges, ships that pass in the night, all the while signalling shared space, shared responsibilities and shared lives. The story is as complex as the reader wants to make it, as the authors themselves use this brief epistolary form to contemplate the mundanity of relationships, the emotional manoeuvring, assumed subtexts and back-stories of each and every moment or event. The authors are a novelist and a poet, writers each involved in their own relationships, colleagues interested in collaboration and new forms. Who is the third voice (or third and fourth voices) this dialogue has created? The story has led Lilwall and Loydell to writing the unexpected, responding to each other’s prose and shopping items in turn, surprising each other and themselves, before refining and editing the work together.

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*Avocados*

The kitchen's quiet and cold. Early morning is just arriving, and the cat has sloped off, abandoning the bottom of my bed. I can't sleep, have come down to make tea before the girls need lifts to school or work or into town to see their friends, before I drive myself to work. There's an over-ripe avocado in the fruit bowl, next to brown bananas and a shrivelled apple, but already a request for more stuck on the fridge. It's a no-win situation: if I complain about things not being eaten I am told 'don't just buy it for me', if I don't buy more there will be 'nothing to eat'. I pour my tea and go upstairs to read in bed, adding milk to the shopping list.

*Milk*

Épuisée, exhausted, upended and emptied. Milked. It was ‘so sweet, and, so cold,’ I thought whilst pushing the fridge door back against its seal. Britain has a milk lake, or so I learnt at school. Up and down the country, ageing avocados balance bewildered in forgotten fruit bowls, wondering what happened to the sun. Drying lizards from the inside, they are. We should leave them to swell in their trees, to be picked and eaten while their flesh is still warm. The lip of the post-it is sticky, but I will use the bottle-opener magnet anyway. From Cancun. I don’t want it to fall. I want you to know that I can’t really write now, I have to go to work yet I am thinking about food wastage. Were it not for my milk-drinking efforts, the lake would become a sea and we would drown. Or perhaps we’d simply make more cheese? Buy some camembert, please.

*Camembert*

Bloody expensive nonsense. What's wrong with cheddar? I like those little triangles of soft cheese in silver foil too, with the little labels you can peel off. How can people obsess about what to eat? There are more important things to deal with. Like my life. How to get all the things done I don't have time for? All the films to watch, the books to read, the walks to take, the places to see. I settle down for a nice daydream. You have to pace yourself, don't you. With a nice cup of tea. Which reminds me:

*Teabags*

The cat rests on her elbows, head up, nostrils dilating in a mist of lactose stink. My head is bent into lapping foam from a tattered cappuccino cloud, the fridge-corner holds in the cold with rusted persistence. ‘Teabags’ looped and dashed like snake trails in the desert towards that whisker flanked sphinx, upright still, two jagged pyramids atop the head, ‘fleabags’, perhaps filling with steam and sloshing black flecks, low to the left, and white bubbles, high to the right. Then change, as the water bears through. I lap on, wondering at my primitive fridge door, my primitive froth consumption, run a thumbnail around the rim, eyes twitching in the daylight like the rounded cap of a curious capuchin. I drink coffee, not tea. My hands flare and splay as the cat pulls her hind legs onto my knee. Fleabag, she is. I gather her hot, soft belly, stand and lean at the fridge, cross out the snake trail and write ‘Baking soda for the cat’. She flattens her ears and climbs to my shoulder.

*Baking Soda*

As if we ever bake! If only we had time, for by the time we've all arrived we've got to drive to somewhere else. Your dinner's in the oven, help yourself to something else or make a sandwich. I go upstairs to read, with a cup of coffee and a cheese sandwich for consolation. Might treat myself to a pint and bag of crisps later, if I can sneak out without notice. The evenings are drawing in and summers only just arrived. Darkness creeps through the village, triggering streetlights, lighting the way to the pub. I spend too much money? Well buy some beer or wine next time you're at the supermarket. But don't moan if I drink it.

*~~Beer & wine~~. Alcohol.*

Vodka. I got vodka. Some martini and green olives. Sat on the sofa with my laptop. There are black-faced jackdaws at the window today, eyeing each bobbing olive as it eyes them back. They twitch their heads to one side, then the other, like readers, I imagine, reading my novel. I delete another line, swig, re-write it, delete it, swig, rewrite it. By the time it is written my nose will be red, eyes lined and clouding, body and sofa merging, jackdaws still waiting to steal my olives. Cannot go to the shop today as I’ve drunk myself into unproductive; certainly cannot cook as cannot even make it to the fridge. I will send an email ‘bring curry please’, then delete it, swig, rewrite it: ‘bring fish and chips’.

*Fish and Chips*

Like I am some courier or butler. I'm on the way to the bus stop and now I have to go back into the High Street and join the queue at the takeaway. She'll want curry sauce and vinegar, I want chips salty and dry. She'll want cod, I like rock salmon. It will all be cold by the time I've driven home, and she'll probably be asleep on the sofa, with a pile of empty crisp packets or a dish of olive stones by her side. We're so out of sync with each other these days: time was when we'd get drunk together and like the same food. I haven't had a Chinese for years and I'm not so keen on that cheap vodka. I like lemon vodka, straight out of the freezer, sometimes as a chaser for Guinness. Remember that Irish bar in New York, where the barman introduced us to that? Back when New York was still a bit grungy round the edges.

*Fly Swat*

There’s one above the patio doors. Been there since Tuesday. Not a fat, bewinged raisin. Not a milkweed seed, bobbing without direction. It is more like a blob that dances in negative behind closed eyes. I have tried to herd it out with scatter cushions, one in each hand. I have tried to cup my hands around it when it sits on the glass doors, my hands like walls advancing. It is Indiana Jones, dodging though the gaps in my fingers. I imagine all of its eyes rotating and I try to surprise it from behind. Its time is lengthened, so that it might extract a piece from a second and use it to rev its wings, while I lumber low and slow behind. I open a tin of peaches underneath it, cloud sugar particles around it, pour the syrup into a saucer, ready myself with an upturned bowl while it sits bored on the edge of my coffee cup. It has outsmarted me. I can’t think of one reason why it would want to be there rather than to show me who’s superior. He is now my housemate. I have named him Jerome. The thought of bringing a fly-swat into this house makes him sad. And me. I do, however, need some more tinned peaches.

*Tinned Peaches*

A hand grenade for the tongue, that's what my Dad called tinned peaches. Some old memory of throwing explosives getting confused with what used to be a luxury after the war. Not that you could taste them once they'd been flooded with *Carnation* evaporated milk, just clagging milky sweetness. Ugh. How come we're still buying tinned peaches when every supermarket and grocers has them fresh? Old habits die hard I guess, like the flies you insist on killing one by one, along with the wasps, not understanding if you just ignore them they will go away. Or, if we eat outside, one of those scented candles will do the trick.

*Citronella Candle*

Life sputters and spits. Spirit smoke keeps the wasps and flies at bay as sunshine fades and I sup beer from my special glass. The heat envelops and calms, even as dusk descends. The neighbours are having another barbecue, the girls have the TV on too loud, small children are pursing each other around the close and through the alleys. I close my book and stare into the evening haze, spot the cat curled up in one of her leafy nests. Streetlights slowly click on, houselights flicker then fade as curtains are pulled. I'm out of time, out of sunshine and summer. Autumn will soon arrive.

*Handwash Liquid (for my sweaters)*

Boots are out again by the front door, too tall to put in the shoe rack where sandals hug, shoved to the back. A crow caws from its TV aerial perch. The balcony chairs, folded into their winter pose, hibernate sadly. The air is grey. I will work from home today rather than feel that grey swill about my face. I will watch the orchid petal edges curl and brown as I rest my eyes from the screen, watch coffee steam particles herded and channelled by the unfriendly indoor air. There is a hand-wash setting on the washing machine; at least its slow sloshing won’t bother the downstairs neighbours. Toes shudder, asking for socks. Blue tries to puff holes through the clouds. Roof-top tiles stiffen, braced as they wait under the last of the birdsong. I would like those birds to stick around, I think, and sing on well after autumn’s abundance has been eaten, preserved or left to rot.

*Fat Balls (for the robins)*

The robins are fine, all the birds are fine. Why do we encourage nature's dependency on us? Especially with the cat ready to pounce and kill, if it can be bothered. She stretches out in one of the shallow dens she creates in the flowerbed and yawns. Obviously, as I hang the food out now, top up the birdfeeders with mixed bird food and make sure the birdbaths are full, she is disinterested. She will wait for the dawn, then pad from our bed and become a wild beast, queen of the garden for an hour or two. Last night the ducks were flying in formation as it got dark; soon they will make a vee and head from here to somewhere else. I wish that we could, too.

*New Socks*

Cotton floats in wisps and settles, gathers like a shoal of idling minnows about the edge of crusting place-mats. The result of this unceremonious ecdysis. I blow at them. They disperse. I wince at the warm sock in my hand as it tries to hold the shape of my foot. There are always holes where the toenail slices and a pink heel breaching the fibrous weave. They become hair doughnuts, dust cloths, ties for the balcony table when we break it into bunches of cold poles before winter. They are knotted into pouches containing nails or nuts or washers. They are stuffed with tights and attached to strong string and twitched before the cat, who squashes her belly into the carpet and dances her backside, fixes her eyes. They hold Mary and Baby Jesus, one wrapped around another, and wait in the loft for Christmas. They warm up a huddle of marbles or conkers or beach-smelling pebbles before being swung above a head, flung at a sister. Never again will they be socks. I would like to write this down and attach it to the fridge. I scrawl it on the back of an envelope.

*Post-its (pink ones)*

If you stopped writing on them we wouldn't need any more. If you stopped sticking things to the fridge the kitchen would look lovelier. If the kitchen looked lovelier we might spend more time together. If we spent time together we could talk and not have to leave notes. If you took any notice of me you'd buy yellow post-its, you know I can't stand pink. There is a time and a place for pink and it is not here or there. A fridge should be ordered and tidy, blue and white, glass shelves holding a week's menu at a time. How many times do I have to tell you that lemons go black in the fridge and that a spoon in the prosecco is a myth: it doesn't keep the bubbles in, that's just a result of the chill. And by the way, we're out of avocados.

**CONTRIBUTOR’S DETAILS**

After studying at the University of Kent, Amy Lilwall was awarded her PhD in The Contemporary Novel: Practice as Research. She teaches Creative Writing at Falmouth University, Cornwall. *The Biggerers* (Point Blank) is her first novel.

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