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Adorable Monique

Larry O. Dean

Richard Widerkehr

Janelle Rainer

Titus Green

Sediments Literary-Arts Journal

Issue Six

Sediments Literary-Arts Journal dedicates each publication to every new writer and artist scratching the surface of the thick crust that is the literary arts.

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Contents

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- 7 **Presences** | Nels Hanson
- 8 **Sink Storm** | Elizabeth Ribar
- 9 **Rincón de Silencios** | Vivian Calderón Bogoslavsky
- 10 **The Flower Car** | Greg Walklin
- 17 **Passing Through Weiser, Idaho** | John Stupp
- 18 **Abduction I** | Samantha Fortenberry
- 20 **River Road Bump** | Douglas Steele
- 22 **Abduction IV** | Samantha Fortenberry
- 24 **Waiting for your love** | Adorable Monique
- 25 **Actor Portrayal** | Larry O. Dean
- 26 **Bitten** | Richard Widerkehr
- 28 **Ready for Battle** | Janelle Rainer
- 29 **Odyssey of Tears** | Titus Green

Presences

Nels Hanson

I grew up a farmer and everywhere
glowed talismans, ancient vineyard
wagons, harrow and plow, in barns

and sheds harness and horse collars,
two-man saws, double-bladed axes,
scythes, anvil, discarded kerosene

lantern, lamps, wood coffee grinder.
Farmers never throw anything away –
it might be handy. I swung a sledge

hammer, felt the hands that gripped
smooth ash handle. When I walked
vine rows I found iron shoes, pliers,

Belgian's molar white as ivory. All
was alive, a presence, ghost, friend,
cold pump water, leaf, evening star

saying nothing can die or disappear
but always at its heart the spirit it is
remains and that spirit lives forever.

Sink Storm

Elizabeth Ribar

I used to think water wasn't dangerous
that of all earth's elements
he was the purest

Empathy when the veils were thin
a temple to house the inexplicable
depths of our psyche

(Water could fix me)

I boil eggs this morning
let them swim a little too long

(through my tears
when I lived as
mother whales
and feral sharks)

pouring his heat down the drain
the sink swallows him splendidly and burps
with impression a cacophonous wave

(leaking honey and milk
when I was a slutty mermaid
or went to hot yoga)

he eats my hands
showing me he is Poseidon
(more powerful than I ever imagined)

Rincón de Silencios

Vivian Calderón Bogoslavsky



The Flower Car

Greg Walklin

The hospital lobby's hum sounded like a high C. Bertrand sat in the wheelchair in front of her, clutching his oxygen tank in his lap like a child with a stuffed animal. In hopes of sneaking out, Carol had covered the tank with a t-shirt quilt and dressed Bertrand, despite the heat, in a hooded Huskers sweatshirt and matching sweatpants. It was the only thing she could get him into easily. Over the course of the week they'd been in the hospital, Carol had struck up a friendship with the front desk receptionist who, like Carol, was Vietnamese. Chatty, she had quickly revealed that she was a foreign adoption, and they had bonded over their life story similarities. The receptionist, after hearing their plight, quickly agreed to look the other way. In his current state, Bertrand was not yet aware of the plan—though at this point, he wasn't aware of much.

"Where are we going, Carol?" he asked when they were in the parking lot.

"Home," she replied.

The heat wave in Phoenix, reaching unusual temperatures for the late winter, had everyone complaining. Already sweating through her blouse, Carol had managed to get Bertrand out of the wheelchair and into the car without either of them breaking a bone. As she was stepping into the van, she heard the telltale jangle of beeps that comprised her ringtone, a selection their grandson had made the last time he had visited. The call, unsurprisingly, was from the Colonel. For the third time that day, she declined to answer. After informing him of the diagnosis, she had not been able to talk to him again.

"But why are we going?" he asked.

She scanned him to see if he had noticed anything, but he seemed placid and distant. "You wanted to go," she finally said.

"I don't want to go anywhere. I just want to be left alone. What's the point?"

"That's not what you said."

"When the hell did I say that?"

She thought back to the day, their trip three years ago—another era, now, when they were another couple. "When we were in Arlington."

"Well I don't remember that," he said, increasingly cross.

She knew he remembered it quite well, and that his memory and his crossness were half something he couldn't control, and half an act.

Slowly, the van began to cool with the A/C. Sweat lingered on their foreheads.

"We didn't pack, Carol."

"I know, dear."

"I suppose it doesn't really matter."

"We have all the things we'll need in Nebraska," she offered.

"I think I left the fan on in the bathroom."

She knew he hadn't—she had been back home to gather a few things before returning to the hospital to pick him up. Water, for example. A box of cookies. The remaining ripe apples and bananas. Cereal, but with no milk because the milk wouldn't keep in the car. Two cans of soup she expected to drink, cold. Their remaining caffeinated sodas. Lincoln, Nebraska was, even with minimal stops, at least 20 hours from Phoenix. The bed from the hospice center was due to arrive at the same time.

I-17 TOOK THEM NORTH and out of the city, and Phoenix faded away. When Bertrand wasn't sleeping he was dozing, and when he wasn't dozing, the medicine left him mostly hazy—his responses sounded like he had marbles in his mouth.

Unlike other old couples, who passed meals without speaking, this silence was unusual. From their first date, decades ago, they had never stopped having things to say to each other, despite having spent so many waking moments together. For two decades, Bertrand had practiced law, estate planning and will drafting, and she had served as his paralegal. Tired of his practice, Bertrand had sold his share of the practice to his law partner and used the money to buy a bridal shop with Carol, which meant they spent all day together. He had gone from being her boss to her employee. She had taken care of the management, the dresses and the sales, and he did everything she didn't want to do—the books, the taxes, the backroom deals. They had sold the business to a corporate chain and purchased the duplex in Arizona.

"Did I dream that hospital?" he asked. "Or were we at a hospital?"

"We were at a hospital," she said, instantly wishing she had lied. "Now we're going back to Lincoln."

"We don't go back until March, at the earliest," he said, matter-of-factly, like she was a stupid child. "Usual April."

"We're going back earlier this year."

For the last week, she had been trying to get accustomed to this from Bertrand: going from clarity to confusion and back to clarity again, as if his mind were turning itself on and off.

"I know what you're doing," he said.

"We're just going home."

"I don't want a fuss."

"Nonsense," she said.

"Are you doing this for me?" he asked.

She didn't answer. Only remnants of greater Phoenix remained to pass, little developments cut into the rock and desert, settlement never really seeming to end. Bertrand fell back to sleep. They were halfway to Flagstaff before the desert really began to take hold again.

Nearly as soon as they'd arrived in Phoenix for the season, Bertrand started declining. His left knee began to ache, and the doctors eventually decided on surgery. That left him unable to golf or move around the house much. Then winter brought with it a severe cough he never quite got over. He could not even walk around the house without becoming short of breath. Mornings he woke early with chest pains. They saw a specialist in Tempe, and at the Arizona State Medical Center, received chest x-rays that showed that Bertrand had a metastatic cancer that would leave him only with one month—at best—to live.

To compound Carol's confusion, Bertrand had responded to the news in a manner she did not expect. Surprisingly, he was not at all surprised when the doctor gave him the one-month prognosis.

"I'm ready," he'd said to Dr. Bhatava, barely missing a beat.

"You're ready?" Carol asked him, incredulous.

"Carol," he started in a patronizing tone of voice, "I'm more than ready."

Dr. Bhatava smiled at both of them and excused himself. She tried to read her husband. Besides their business, his other great love had been local theater—Bertrand had also long been a regular for the Nebraska Shakespeare Company: Jaques and Malvolio and even, one season, Claudius and then Macbeth. Was this the kind of effect he had adopted as he waited behind the curtain for Hamlet to kill him or as he spoke of how the tale of life signified nothing?

She had hoped they would be talking on the drive back, really talking like they used to, but over the course of the last few days—only a week had elapsed since the diagnosis—Bertrand had nearly fallen apart; each morning he awoke, he appeared to be a lesser version of himself. Dr. Bhatava had insisted that they keep him around for a final series of tests to see if there were any last-ditch surgical options, but Bertrand didn't want any, and Carol knew they would only likely make things worse. It was days, surely, but it could even only be a matter of hours, of minutes.

They filled up at a small station in a town outside the Petrified Forest National Park, and Carol pumped the gas, something she hadn't done in years. On one trek back from Phoenix, they had stopped at the park, after having passed it so many times. The trees were mostly from the Late Triassic. She remembered the rock banding, the layers that appeared to be painted, as if the rocks were wearing garish make-up; she saw the iron that had dissolved into the wood, leaving patterns around the edges, like sloppy lipstick. During the tour, the guide told them that humans' corpses often lasted longer than their lives. In a coffin, the guide said, it can take decades for even the tissue to decay. Buried in average soil, even without a casket, bones can last hundreds of years.

"Just put me in the backyard and plant a mulberry bush," Bertrand had said to her as they exited the hospital that first day after his diagnosis.

"Cheaper than one of those giant headstones, all that money they charge you to dig a hole. The bush will mark where I'm buried." It was a reversal from everything she understood he wanted.

"Stop it," she'd replied, "it's not funny."

"Can't fertilize anything from a casket."

When she returned to the van, convenience store coffee in hand, he had fallen asleep again. He was so quiet, she checked to ensure that he was still breathing.

They had been to all of the forests—Gila, San Juan, Manti-La Sal—and of course to the Grand Canyon multiple times. This drive skipped all of them.

THE TIME THEY WERE making was even better than she had hoped. Everything past Denver, once the violet Rockies were out of sight and before the yellow cornfields of Nebraska had appeared, was desolate. It was as if the land itself had died. Five a.m., everything faded and fading, and she was desperately trying to stay awake. The sun had not even provided a hint that it might, just like every other morning, rise again.

When the van broke down, they were about a half hour from the Colorado-Nebraska state line, with the sun finally appearing over the horizon. Like Bertrand, she thought bitterly, it had quit without warning: the check engine light, a knock and a puff of charcoal-colored smoke out of the rear exhaust.

After ten minutes, only two cars had passed, and neither had seemed interested in stopping—if they had even seen her in the dark, they weren't going to stop. She could call their son, Sean, but by the time he'd arrive, she now wasn't sure if Bert would still be around: the drive, the hurry, had obviously taken a toll.

Just three years before, they traveled constantly. They had visited D.C., Arlington National Cemetery the first stop on what would become, more or less, a heritage tour, after they had sold the shop and were both retired. They would eventually head to the war sites, to Belgium, Luxembourg, France, and Germany, and to Bertrand's ancestral homes in Wales. This was early June, and the flags from the Memorial Day remembrances at the cemetery were still ubiquitous. They advanced to the Tomb of the Unknowns, on the eastern steps of the gleaming white Amphitheater. Two guards paced in front of the monument.

Looking around the crowded Amphitheater, at the fannypacked tourists and the student groups and the other retirees, Carol knew what everyone was thinking: a Vietnam veteran come to see his buddies' graves, and the woman he'd brought back with him, some sweetheart from Saigon. Carol had indeed been born in Vietnam, and Bertrand was right about the age of most men who had served in the war; but the truth was she only remembered growing up in Nebraska—she was adopted as a two-year-old—and with a 4-F deferment, Bertrand had never held a gun.

They were at the Amphitheater for Bertrand's father. A medic, he had most likely died in the Ardennes. A few months after he failed to return, the Army had eventually declared him KIA when there had been no identified recovery of his remains. Carol hadn't understood the reason Bertrand wanted to go to the Tomb of the Unknowns, but he had insisted on it to an unusual degree. But when they finally stood there, his face betrayed a unique expression, a sort of placid surrender, and it occurred to her that they had visited Arlington—and would be visiting the countries in Europe where his father had served—not just to see these sights, but also to

feel if his father's remains were there, if his father was the Unknown Soldier.

Bertrand's behavior at the monument was the first sign of some re-emerging spirituality; he would try to hide it later, try to explain it away, but she could not forget the authentic moment of faith. He had conducted himself in solemnity—lowering his head and closing his eyes in front of the monument, just as the changing of the guard was beginning. The soldiers, in full uniform, crossed each other and paced in perfect synchronicity, their footsteps a spare hymn.

Then he opened his eyes back and looked at her and said, just above a whisper, "He's not here."

Regardless of whatever happened between them, whatever lies they had told each other or lies that arose out of omissions, she wasn't going to see him die freezing on the side of the road, she wasn't going to stick him under a mulberry bush, and nor did she want to call a hospital and let him die in some sterilized room in Colorado. Her parents had likely been left in trenches stacked on top of each other; she had seen photos of what the Viet Cong had done to the Degars. Bertrand's father was lost, as well—forever.

As she stood on the shoulder of the Interstate, she needed someone to come quickly. The solution had been obvious as soon as the van broke down. Seeing the three missed calls, she knew she had no other option than to call the Colonel.

On the phone, he did not hesitate. "What's the nearest exit?" he asked.

THIS YEAR, LEAVING THE Colonel in Nebraska while they wintered in Arizona proved to be somewhat of a relief. But the days passed and the weeks too, and winter—the unusually scorching winter—proved interminable. Then Bert was diagnosed, and she went into a tailspin. As had become his custom, the Colonel spent the winter in his lake house near Lake McConaughy, which, she was now incredibly grateful, put him only an hour from where they were now stuck.

In his Cadillac, the Colonel pulled up with the sun rising, a detail that didn't escape Carol in its significance. As he parked behind them on the shoulder, Bertrand stirred.

"Are we back in Nebraska?"

"No, honey, we're having car trouble. We're stopped but getting some help now."

He turned and looked out of the passenger side window and saw the Colonel approaching.

"Oh," he said. "Jack's here."

Carol was instantly confused. "You know him?"

"Sure," he replied, still a little horse. "He's the man you're seeing."

Heat rushed up from her chest through her face, and her cheeks suddenly felt like they were on fire.

The Colonel, by now, had stepped up to the window, smiling. He looked even tanner than she remembered him, odd for the winter. She opened the door and stepped out to greet him, closing it behind her.

"Hi," he said in his usual singsong way.

She leaned in to whisper. "He knows about us."

The Colonel was many things, but not a dissembler. She could already gauge his reaction.

"You know that he knows," she said.

"He called me," the Colonel replied, "a week ago. After the diagnosis. He overheard us on the phone one day. Then he told me he should be cremated and tossed in a community garden. That's what I was trying to call you about."

The passenger side door opened, and Bertrand, with a big sigh, stepped out of the vehicle. Instantly, Carol hustled over. The Colonel followed, and together the two of them—the Colonel carrying Bertrand's oxygen tank—guided him from the van to the Colonel's sedan.

"It's just an act, you know," she said.

"Really?"

"It's all sound and fury."

The Colonel was analyzing her, she could tell, but if he had a professional opinion on this, Carol didn't want to hear it. While he was technically a colonel, he was actually a doctor. Only Carol called him "the Colonel"—it was an embarrassing sobriquet for him, so he only indulged her. He had only joined the Air Force much later in his medical career, after a stint in private practice and eventually a longer stint in the VA, and so he had not worked his way up from ROTC or attended the academy, but had instead started as a lieutenant colonel.

At first, the Colonel had been so fluid, so easygoing, that to spurn him would have offended the higher power all the pastors discussed. Yet spurn him she did. But she kept seeing him in places, and the Colonel kept asking her to have dinner with him.

With Bertrand in the backseat, like he was their child, they drove on. Although the Colonel was, like her, an inveterate chatter, the circumstances made none of them want to talk. The barrenness of northeastern Colorado gave way to the corn and soybean fields of Nebraska, patches of yellow and green split by the silver irrigation equipment, the land coming back to life, the colors saturated in the morning sun. They were nearly to North Platte when Bertrand spoke up again, this time with even more ire.

"Will you just leave me by the goddamn side of the road? I'm sick of the car. I'm tired of this—of riding and being a burden."

"Nonsense," the Colonel said.

"Jack," Bertrand continued, "I'm going to try to be polite here, especially given what you are doing with my wife. But I'd ask that you shut the hell up." He fell into a series of coughs again. "There's a hospital in North Platte. Just leave me there and go live on together. I'm sure the burial arrangements can be made later."

"But Sean and our grandson—"

"And I've decided that I don't want a funeral. I don't want a giant picture of me and my cold gray face sticking up out of a casket. I don't want the trouble." After more coughs, he resumed. "All this last week: me, me, me. Everybody calls but nobody talks about anything else!"

“We had arrangements—the funeral—”

“I don't want any of that. Shouldn't I have some say?”

Having no funeral—nothing—felt like an additional betrayal. She knew what everyone would think of her, once they found out about the Colonel. Though her adoptive parents' funerals had been tough, they were all important to her; they were large occasions, filled with people she had not met or hadn't seen in years. Her father's had even had a flower car, a Cadillac limo adorned with all of his favorite varieties—snapdragons in a range of oranges and yellows, stargazer lilies, gladioluses, daisies, peach and white roses—varieties that he had so carefully cultivated in their backyard.

After Arlington and Washington, they had flown across the Atlantic into Belgium and stopped in several countries on the continent. From Brussels, they had driven into Liege, and then from there to the Henri-Chapelle Cemetery, the biggest grave site of the American soldiers from the Battle of the Bulge, in a tiny village called Hombourg. A local took them to the battle sites, to memorial markers and tank turrets with plaques, to the locus of the Baugnez Massacre, where Americans taken hostage had been killed. It had all been a pilgrimage. Throughout, Carol had been waiting for some kind of comment, like he had made in Arlington, which finally came on the long flight home: “The worst tragedy is that he has to be so far away.”

THEY ARRIVED, SEVERAL HOURS later, in Lincoln. Sean's car was in the driveway; he had arranged to wait for the delivery of the hospital bed in case they didn't make it on time—as they had not. Sean's wife and son would be arriving later in the evening.

“Park down the block,” she suddenly commanded the Colonel.

“Just park in the driveway,” Bertrand said.

Of course, the Colonel followed the latter instructions, which she found irritating. She was halfway out of the car when Bertrand spoke up.

“A moment with Jack,” he said.

With a moment's hesitation, Carol stepped out of the vehicle, her legs creaking with her blood flow's restoration.

Under his own power, Bertrand eventually stepped out of the vehicle, and did so with such vigor, momentarily, that she imagined the diagnosis was somehow mistaken, that there was no way they could actually be so close to the end.

She let him walk away from her, up the front step inside the garage and into the house. She heard Sean's voice in greeting.

“What did he tell you?” she asked the Colonel, who by then was standing in the driveway.

“He mostly just talked about his father, really.”

Kissing the Colonel on the cheek, she followed her husband into the house.

Passing Through Weiser, Idaho

John Stupp

A sunset
in Weiser
is nobody's business
if you can't see it
if you can't see
mountains at dusk
red and orange rocks
spreading like shotgun pellets
if you can't see lights from cars
and flatbed trucks
crossing the Snake River
and it's nobody's business
if a girl you met
takes off your clothes
while you're driving
grinning like a deer coming to a salt lick
and calls you a jack Mormon
and you leave town thirsty for stones
laughing into a hard wind
like a tramp
like a thief
clearing frost from a windshield
with a propane torch in your pants
because it's cold in America
the dry air burns like a banjo
burns like stars flying past a high meadow
doing everything wrong—
fuck it she said
throwing a cigarette out
the window
I'm like a sunburned Italian
fishing all day on a pier in New Jersey—
I'll have to piss in a mailbox



Abduction I

Samantha Fortenberry

River Road Bump

Douglas Steele

In the back seat of Uncle (not really) Moe's
rusty old Packard that smelled like
burlap bags and pickles

Zooming down River Road
to our weekly ceremony
slaying perch and crappies

while Mom & Dad had *them time*
according to Unc

My head out to gobspit on a chasing beagle
we hit a b u m p. UP in the AIR
back seat—me and buddy smitty (just along for the ride)
went...the Shakespere reel n rod between us
bouncing rolling slow-dancing along

Sitting up feeling tug:poke
good God – I hooked MY EAR!
i thought < all the fish I've missed, won cha know I'd catch myself >.

That was close holy crap look at you smitty laughed
I cried and said God Damn it (just like Grandpa)
and fondled my
NOW it HURT acquired appendage

Uncle Moe braked, with a smoke between his lips...
jesus kid, if yad just sit still, ill pull it out!

We thrashed, I dashed
from the picklemobile
mr Shakespere trailing my full gallop
connected all the while,
with Uncle Moe in tow

He caught me by the big oak

next to the park bench
- the one that shoots slivers -
with a gleaming jack knife,
a snip slice n deed done.

Jesus kid, it's always somethin with you –
Smokin Uncle dobbing mecuricome
me blowing my nose
hiding the ouch.

There. Now don't you just look like
the guys and me from the war
though

I came home
and they didn't...

Tough guys don't cry remember that
no bandaid found Uncle heroed duct tape (use #591)
to end the drip drip drip
of my bright red kid blood.

Laid out on the Packard trunk/ coffin
if I die, tell my friends don't be sad, and jerry can keep my skateboard.
by God, but you're a chickenshit laughed freckled smitty,
along for the ride.

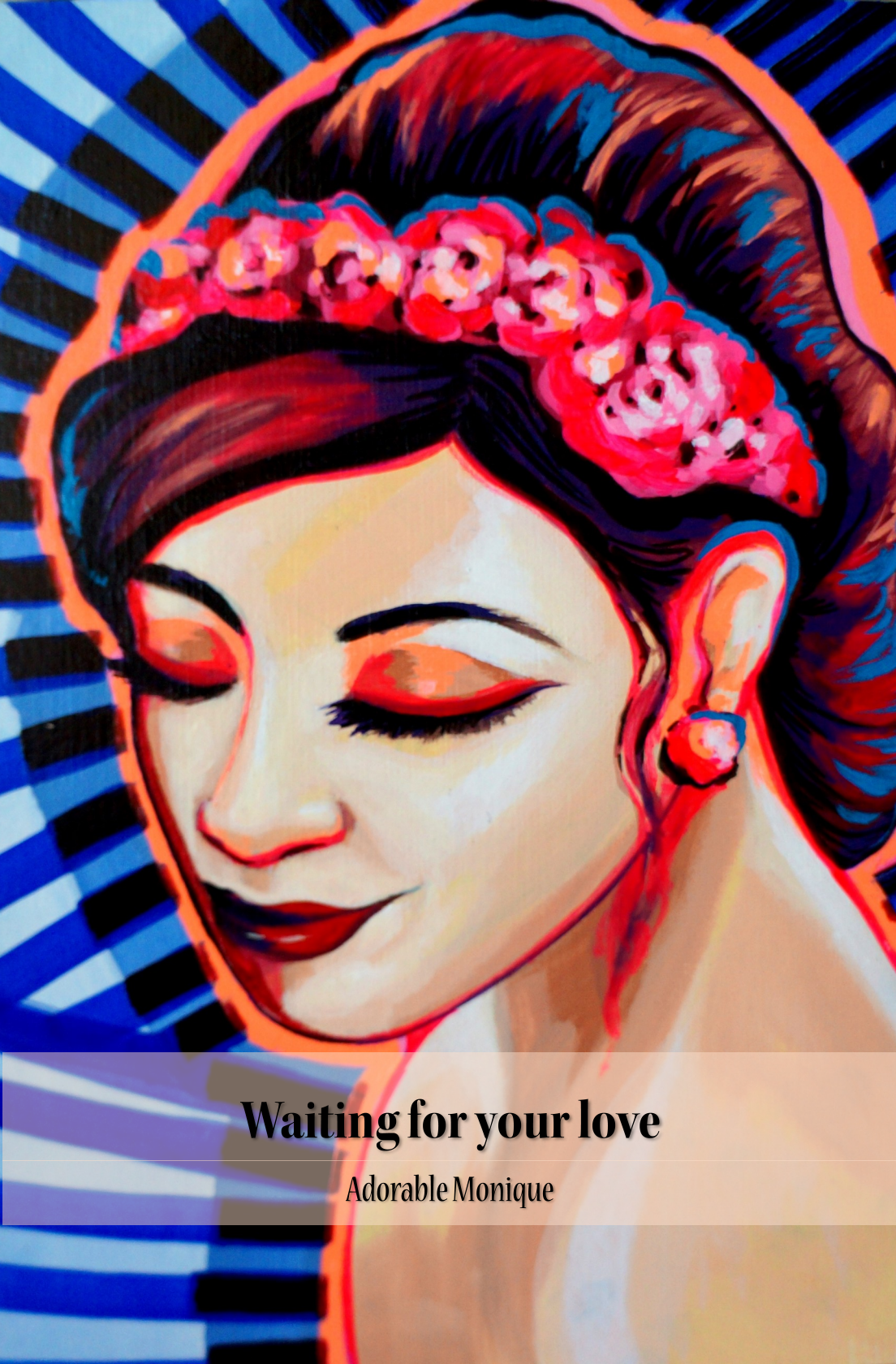
Who wants a sammich the fish are waitin lets go
back in the Packard hook, pole, smitty, Uncle Moe,
my bloody t shirt and me
great adventures left behind

And went back on down River Road to our spot
my ear never fell off and
that beagle never
caught us

A photograph of a gravel path winding through a cornfield at night. The path is illuminated by a bright light source in the distance, creating a strong lens flare and illuminating the surrounding corn plants. The sky is dark with some light clouds, and the overall atmosphere is mysterious and suspenseful.

Abduction IV

Samantha Fortenberry



Waiting for your love

Adorable Monique

Actor Portrayal

Larry O. Dean

I am not a heartburn sufferer.
I do not stay at La Quinta®.
My name is not Flo. I am
not a talking lizard, concerned doctor,
alcoholic attorney, proud parent,
or umpire with low testosterone.
I haven't fallen, and I can get up.
I am not having a torrid affair
with DA Jessica's daughter
while helping her cover up
the cliffhanger murder-for-hire
of her former husband, a cruel astronaut.
Do not assume I can rappel down
skyscrapers, outrun fireballs, parkour
eel-like through open windows, squeeze off
round after round of assault weapon fire
while sliding on my knees across
rain-slicked pavement.
I am not now nor have I ever been
the kooky sidekick. If you punch me,
I will cry. Underneath all this CGI,
I have two-pack abs. I never once saved
the city from any colorful villains.
I am not the roguish bachelor with a tastefully
decorated Toronto penthouse (standing
in for Manhattan) and you
are not the unbelievably unattached
twentysomething reporter I will meet
cute at the DMV; hilarious hijinks ensue
because we both coincidentally share
the same name! Bumping heads!
At the counter! A wisecracking Paul Giamatti
as Clark the clerk stifles a dour smirk,
sipping product-placement Starbucks®
while we don't playfully banter
for the thirty-fifth consecutive take.

Bitten

Richard Widerkehr

at Akumal, Mexico

“There are two ways to die in the desert,”
says a barmaid with almond eyes.
“The first is to let a coral snake wrap itself
around a knot in your spine.”

It seems I’ve been bitten.
I try to tie off the bite
with Linda’s green scarf, but can’t reach
the small of my back.

The snake says, “Each to his own.”
In heaven, it’s twilight, and the new arrivals
amble up the stone path to a glimmering buffet.
“Don’t go back,” says a man who tilts his glasses

up on his head. Wind rattles
in the palm leaves, an incarnation
of some other song.
“Thanks for coming,” says my mother.

A thin man offers a mint from a tin box
marked Last Supper Dinner Mints.
“I’m Jewish,” I say. The slim-hipped barmaid
offers me a blue quilt. She reminds me

of the girl who played I’ll-show-you-mine-
if-you’ll-show-me-yours, when we were kids.
Even though I’m in heaven, I remember
the snake and the man who sic’ed the snake

on me, after I tried to save him from drowning.
How was he drowning in a desert?
Was that how I died? Must I forgive him?
Just this morning, I climbed the stairs,

walked through a valley with no stones,
but there are stones in my mouth
when I sing the *Shema*, “*Hear, O Israel...*”
There’s a sea of aqua and lime-green.

Girls in string bikinis lip-synch Broadway songs.
Frigate birds with narrow, V-shaped wings
soar in the upper echelons,
surely more blessed.

The light on the sea
has turned to diamonds struck
into a million pieces,
sun like a burning wind.

I’m in a gray terminal, a train station,
near a sign that says *Retorno*.
Another sign on the second floor
says, *Salle de Espero*.

“Is that the Room of Hope?” I ask.
“No,” says a black-haired woman,
who sounds familiar. “It’s the waiting room.
Most people don’t want to go back.”



Ready for Battle

Janelle Rainer

Odyssey of Tears

Titus Green

We move forward, dragging our punished, callous-covered feet in the vague direction of a hypothetical salvation. It is freezing cold, and this spiteful European wind spits rain into our faces. The storm strengthens, and the droplets turn to hail stones, which sting our cheeks like the words of the people who line the roads to curse us as our pathetic procession shuffles through their towns. “Stay Out!” and “We Don’t Want Your Problems!” scream the placards. “Stay Away Terrorists!” reads another forceful imperative. I look at the scholarly looking woman in wire-framed spectacles holding the sign and wonder if I should stop and offer her advice in how to recognise real jihadists, since she’s clearly a novice.

The wind howls, and I pull Abdullah closer to my chest and try to transfer my body heat through the thin polyester skin of my cagoule, which was given to me by a Red Cross worker in Skopje, Macedonia. Perhaps it was financed by a member of the public in the West persuaded by a television appeal in the advertisement breaks between instalments of a sitcom or Netflix-supplied Walt Disney movie. Somebody in front of a high-definition television would be more likely to sympathize with their wallet after a good meal and a DVD filtered in jolly yellow colours with a pop idol soundtrack and a beautiful couple who find happily ever after. Although I am grateful to the nameless stranger far away whose five-dollar sacrifice has given Abdullah and I something to stay dry with, I curse the presumptuous, fork-tongued foreign big-shots whose idiotic crusade for my ‘democracy and human rights’ has burned my country, and destroyed my family.

On and on we march through the fecund landscape. I see a ghostly copse of ash trees, with branches creaking in the wind, lurking behind the misty rain. They watch us with suspicion, like wooden proxies of the people from this region making sure we don’t stop, linger, and ‘destroy their way of life.’ We are entering a valley of lush grass and cottages, but we are not permitted to knock on their doors, and we would not want to anyway. I sigh when I see the cosy-looking barns and inviting hay bales. Sheltering in this peaceful, pastoral countryside would be the greatest miracle of mercy right now, but I must discard my idiot fantasies of raising Abdullah in a place like this and concentrate on walking.

Howling, whistling wind. Rain lashing into us. Visibility of the line ahead and behind is diminishing. Swarthy, bearded men with agitated eyes

dressed in Parka jackets clutch their infants like me. Perhaps the donation and the remote saviour also crosses their minds, or perhaps not. African women in headscarves and bundles balanced on their heads laugh and joke in tribal tongues with the companions in their cliques. Underneath their jovial exteriors is an inspirational determination as solid as steel. I find the African ladies good company, even though we have no mutual language.

There are other Arab women huddled together, with their soaked headscarves clinging to their heads. There are gangs of feral youths from the Persian Gulf with gaunt faces and shifting smiles you need to look out for. They frequently ask me for water, but I am wary because what they really want usually has an uncomfortable subtext. There are Palestinians bombed out of their hovels seeking better alternatives, and Nepalese displaced by earthquakes. There are destitute Pakistani cobblers who have spent all their euros. There are African women with buried husbands back home but without dowries joining me on this brutal journey. Our multinational caravan is a vast centipede of tragedy crawling across a treacherous world. We are hungry for shelter, thirsty for help, and bleeding desperation.

The centipede is tens of thousands of people long. People at the very front and back are miles away. They are the opposite poles of a different Earth. The procession is a mystery, because nobody knows exactly where it started or in which conflict zone or godforsaken cesspit of misery it was born. Some Chinese whispers that pass down the line suggest it started in Africa. Others swear Central Asia, but its origin is of no interest to me. I only know and care that it is on this breathing, sweating, vomiting river of life that Abdullah and I will eventually float to sanctuary.

People merge with the line, joining it from other pathways of need that intersect on the terrain. There is a faltering solidarity, and people you can speak to mostly stay strong and positive. There is camaraderie, and sometimes kindness. If you stumble, fellow refuge seekers will steady you. Some will encourage you when the comets of despair strike and send you reeling. Others shut you out or become supercilious and contemptuous of your presence if you so much as try to walk beside them or chat. They won't give you the time of day. It's as if they are projecting some futile hubris to guard the grave of their murdered dignity in these circumstances. There is the sense that they were once wealthy and influential in their hometowns. Pride seems to be the only thing comforting them now that their homes are incinerated and their security obliterated. Perhaps they were once government officers, or people with 'wasta' and Middle Eastern influence. Perhaps they were from Baghdad, or Fallujah, and had gotten salaries from the Americans in return for translating orders. *Adios, good times.*

DAYS LATER, AND IT'S another punishing trek along train tracks beckoning us towards the border with Slovakia. Our minds have suspended all other tasks superfluous to the job of getting to the border. It's just a visualizing exercise. See the gate and prepare for the jostling, and the mayhem, and the degradation. Our eyes stare blankly ahead as the

horizon maintains its hypnotic hold on our attention. We all have money—currency tucked away in out-of-bounds places—but distance and ground covered is more valuable than anything. Malnutrition has reduced our faces to pallid moons with craters in our cheeks. Our mouths hang half open craving sustenance. We look, as young people in stable countries accustomed to parties and drugs would say, *wasted*. However, we are wasted in a purer and crueller sense. Our unwashed bodies reek as badly as abandoned corpses would, and our rotting teeth belong in the mouths of ghouls. Who knows? Perhaps we can band together and put ourselves on YouTube as one of those 'zombie walks' the youth of today are so crazy about staging. However, we'll go one better. We are the real thing! Maybe that could be the path to our salvation: the touring Flash Mob Freak Show of the Bombed, Raped, Murdered, and Displaced. *Come and like our Facebook page.*

Abdullah wails and beats his mittens into my chest in protest of the start in life he's receiving. I absorb his angry blows and must humbly receive his three-year-old fury, as I am his parent and responsible for burdening him with this appalling version of life. I try to stop myself from imagining the deadening pain in his belly—God please understand I've given him every scrap of rations and water doled out by the relief agencies and the kindly locals who offer us food. I turn my head and hide my tears. I want to tell him how sorry I am for this travesty of a childhood, this beastly farce of an upbringing. I reach into my knapsack and find a muffin that was donated by a ruddy Balkan lady at least forty kilometres back, and Abdullah takes it in his hands and nibbles it like a squirrel. Hunger isn't the only source of pain however, because although he is tiny, his nascent senses can feel. He is grieving for Sarah.

"Hey! What's up?"

It's Mimi, from the same Aleppo suburb. We grew up and went to school within five hundred yards of each other, but we never met, not even in the weekend souks. Yet here we are, finally brought together on this hideous highway. She was a biology teacher, and her husband, Bilal, was a journalist. They fled, just as we did, when the smelly psychopaths with black flags driving sports utility vehicles entered our city. They managed to escape with their sons, Ayam and Sayeed, and spent two weeks at a camp in Turkey. She witnessed things there she is not able to describe. I have been travelling close to them for a while, sometimes losing track of them for days after I stop with Abdullah to sleep next to roadside ditches reeking of human excrement. Then I catch up with them later, when they have slowed their pace. When the soles of her shoes wore through, Bilal gave her his own and has been walking in socks ever since and joking stoically about the agony.

"Word is there's a hospital treating refugees here," she says pointing to an unpronounceable place on her phone's map app. It reads Brezice. Being a mother, she is thinking of my Abdullah's malnourishment and his worsening diarrhea.

"Will you be taking Ayam and Sayeed? Maybe we can go together," I suggest, thinking of safety in numbers, moral support, and the practical utility of Mimi's more fluent and persuasive English. Yes, please, I would

say to a sympathetic face with a doctorate in medicine looking at my Abdullah.

“Sorry, sister,” she says in a downcast tone. “We have to meet somebody when we get through the border.” Her eyes dive into my soul to kneel before it and plead forgiveness for the closed, secretive act of family survival Abdullah and I cannot be part of. ‘Meet somebody’ of course means a negotiation with stone-hearted profiteers of misery. Those bastards bussing people to Berlin, Paris, Stockholm, or for the premium price, over the Channel to England. Sealed holds, suffocation, stink, danger, and a paid-for ‘as is’ no guarantee of passage in return for your life savings. I don’t ask or even speculate how much they are paying to chance for the possible fast-track to asylum. They have been my on and off companions for nearly three weeks, and I know they are sorry that they cannot include me in this hazardous stage of the odyssey. We hug, and make surreal pledges to find each other on social media when this unbelievable ordeal is over and our lives, god willing, are situated in a more human and livable future. “You must come over and try my mashi. Your family would be welcome!” I squeal with feeling. We hug each other and weep briefly, and with Abdullah’s plaintive wailing, we achieve a sorrowful harmony.

“Buses to Austria. They’ll be buses to Austria!”

I hear the announcement in the distance coming through the bullhorn of one of the volunteer messengers. A murmur of optimism passes down the line as people crowd around the competent English speakers for translations and the scene imitates life in the Tower of Babel. Here we are, either citizens with hard-luck passports, or those hunted by armed criminals with twisted beliefs sponsored by super-rich shadow governments treating our lives as though we are digital ciphers in a computer game who can be displaced, massacred, and beaten for their amusement. People who think the Olympians were merely figments of the whimsical imagination of ancient Greek mythologists should think again.

It is the worst border crossing so far. Soldiers in face masks and quarantine suits—do they assume Ebola or SARS comes automatically bundled as value-added misery for us?—prod us like cowed cattle towards the fifty-metre-wide barbed-wire mouth of Slovakia, which does not look equipped for the task of swallowing and excreting us smoothly. There is a battalion of police in full riot kit, and when a stampede starts to get through quickly to the volunteer food tents on the other side, volleys of pepper spray are fired from behind the rows of shields that resemble a ‘testudo’ of the twenty-first century. There is an almighty crush when the crowd surges back in the retreat, and the screams of the elderly, frail, and female trampled and killed under the surface of the river of shoes are long and apocalyptic. The flashes of Reuters and AP photographers standing at the periphery of the mayhem go off, and the documenters of our misery conduct their work with an attentive intensity. They wait for the tsunami of anger and fear to recede before closing in to get their face-flattened horror shots and images of infants pressed into the mud with contorted limbs. They need fresh fuel for c-list celebrities invited onto British and American talk-shows to rev up the engines of their proper moral

indignation. They will quarrel and emote to audience applause while we starve. Outlandishly, they propose ‘diplomatic solutions’ for my country’s salvation when they can’t point to my nation on an atlas in a quiz, or even correctly identify our president.

There is no chance to take Abdullah to any hospital. It is, as so many things have been over the past year, out of my reach. I hear terrible reports of lines a kilometre long there anyhow. A group of fifty of us are corralled by police into an enclosure. We are fed quickly then herded onto a rickety bus and driven up a highway for about ten miles. The driver sits behind a protective metal mesh—like those for taxi drivers in New York City—and says nothing and answers no questions. After ten miles, the bus reaches a police roadblock, and the officials order us off, turn the bus around, and tell us to walk to Austria.

LET ME INVITE YOU into the lounge of my former life, which was full of laughter and sweetness. Those were the days when tomorrows were cherished and not dreaded. There was stability, pride, community, and family love. Each of these things flourished and prospered like fruit-bearing trees in my own Garden of Paradise. There were family discussions with crusty old uncles holding court in the cool shade of our home’s courtyard. There was salah. There were the soothing adaans rousing us from sleep. There were holidays, and parties, and celebrations galore. There was Ramadan, and there were the iftar meals that brought us together.

I was the head teacher of a girls’ secondary school. I nurtured my girls and tried to inspire them with confidence. I told them that as Syrians, they could face all challenges in life with courage, and they could achieve anything they wanted. Now I am crushed by a hundred tons of shame at my glib, careless, and catastrophic words. Did my words irritate God and cause him to bring this on us just to contradict me or punish my complacency?

My husband, Ayam, was a government engineer working in Palmyra when those invaders encircled the city. How will I ever forget the despair in his voice during that phone call from his hotel balcony when he described the actions of those animals? One week later, I saw my husband’s face on one of their propaganda websites. It seemed to be dozing peacefully, without a care in the world, hovering supernaturally on top of an iron railing next to other men with similar expressions whose bodies were also missing. In front of the decapitated heads, there was a stocky man in a robe with a massive beard and stern, foreboding face holding up his forefinger. This foreign trespasser organised the slaughter of my husband. He shouted instructions to dim-witted, uneducated thugs living out their barbaric computer game programming while shrieking jihad. Did they actually know the meaning of this word when they butchered the love of my life, or think in their tragic ignorance that Saladin was a kind of pizza topping?

My grieving time was limited because the mercenaries closed in on Homs. With some neighbours, I took Sarah and Abdullah and what money we had, and we crossed the border into Turkey. We joined the exodus, snaking its way through valleys, and arrived at a camp that was filthy and terrifying. The foreigners handed out food, shouting at us like unruly

children to get back in line. Once they had done their charity, they disappeared, and demons more evil than the most terrible jinns entered the unguarded camp at night. Savage men arrived and kidnapped girls who just disappeared into the vast, swelling totality of Syrian victims. Their screams reverberated in the humid night air. Gangs high on khat grabbed orphans and held sex-slave auctions using the headlights of their sports utility vehicles and gyrated to rap music. Others intimidated mothers into selling their daughters for 'one-hour marriages.' I was gang-raped twice, surrendering my body on condition that my children were spared. I lay motionless in agony for days, unable to stir myself as the wails and exhortations for early deliverance from life carried through the canvas of the tents. A former nurse from Aleppo tended to Sarah and Abdullah as I recovered. Outside, United Nations workers floated around on their little magic carpets of self-importance trying to choose the happiest looking refugees to interview for public relations purposes or to stand with when giving interviews for cable television channels.

A week later, I used up nearly all of our money paying a weasel on the Turkish coast to take us, along with a hundred others, to the island of Lesbos. The invigorating sea air did battle with the odours of vomit and sewage to dominate our sense of smell, and I had to make one bottle of water last for three days. Despite my best motherly efforts and instincts, and the help of other passengers, my one-year-old, Sarah, died of dehydration during the voyage. I buried her near the beach of Lesbos, and my Greek tragedy was complete.

WE ARE CURLED UP in a sleeping bag by the side of a major road. The cold is piercing. There is fragile security being close to other resting refugees; since we are stateless, we are also powerless. We are at the mercy of anybody unscrupulous or brutal, but I am thankful that the zombies haven't broken into this country—just yet. Where are we? Why are we here? Where are we going? What will tomorrow bring, apart from yet another move in this tiring, soul-destroying game of survival gambit? In my prayers, I have asked God to reverse all this, or simply make sure it has all been a dreadful mistake in the cosmic software of destiny. This wasn't supposed to happen to us, surely. Abdullah is getting weaker and paler.

I look up into a clear night sky and am comforted by the brilliant stars, which seem to have aligned into a new constellation. There is the dotted outline of a water bearer light years above me. This is celestial Aquarius, no question, but what changes will this cipher of humanity bring? Whatever they are, they better be quick.



Contributors

Nels Hanson grew up on a small farm in the San Joaquin Valley of California and has worked as a farmer, teacher, and contract writer/editor. His fiction received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award and Pushcart nominations in 2010, 2012, and 2014. His poems appeared in *Word Riot*, *Oklahoma Review*, *Pacific Review*, and other magazines and received a 2014 Pushcart nomination, Sharkpack Review's 2014 Prospero Prize, and 2015 and 2016 Best of the Net nominations.

Elizabeth Ribar is a tabby cat collector and tea leaf reader wannabe. She lives in NYC and can be found tweeting @elizabethribar.

Vivian Calderón Bogoslavsky is a Colombia native born to Argentinian parents. She holds a Bachelor's in Anthropology with a minor in History and a postgraduate degree in Journalism from the University of Los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia. She has studied art for over 13 years with a well know Argentinian art master. She has also studied art in Florence, Italy, and Fine Arts & Design in the United States. Today she is in Madrid, Spain exploring her art.

Greg Walklin is an attorney and writer living in Lincoln, Nebraska. His fiction has appeared in *Palooka*, *Midwestern Gothic*, and *Pulp Literature*, among other publications. His reviews and essays have appeared in *Necessary Fiction*, *The Millions*, and *Ploughshares*, and he is a regular book critic for the *Lincoln Journal-Star*. He and his wife, Tiffany, spoil their feisty Yorkshire Terrier, Mocha.

John Stupp is the author of the 2007 Main Street Rag chapbook, *The Blue Pacific*, and the 2015 full-length collection, *Advice from the Bed of a Friend* (also by Main Street Rag). Recent poetry has appeared or will be appearing in *Houseguest*, *Timberline*, *The New Guard*, *Slippery Elm*, *Eye Contact*, *The Pittsburgh City Paper*, *Long Dumb Voices*, *Wraparound South*, *The Mackinac*, *Birds We Piled Loosley*, *Inklette*, and *Uppagus*. He has lived and worked in various states as a jazz musician, university instructor, taxi driver, radio news writer, waiter, auto factory laborer, and paralegal.

Samantha Fortenberry is a photographer from a small town in Northern Alabama. She currently studies at the Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia. Ever since high school, she's taken a passion to photography and photographs various subjects, from surreal landscapes to fine art nudes and everything in between.

Douglas Steele is an author, longtime media personality, and broadcaster. Doug's current chapbook, *Rivers, Streams, and Dreams*, is available online. He is a member of the Academy of American Poets, and is founder and sole contributor to the poetic blog, *Sunset in Cheeseland*, at sunsetincheeseland2.blogspot.com

Adorable Monique is a U.S. based artist brought up abroad. She received art instruction in Fine Arts. She has received merit awards and had the opportunity to exhibit in various venues. She has had the good fortune to be mentored by a renown Central American artist who has helped enrich her artistic vision. Growing up surrounded by different cultures has broadened her overall view of life. She is continuously pursuing success in personal, professional, and artistic endeavors, as well in the artistic experience itself.

Larry O. Dean was born and raised in Flint, Michigan. His numerous books include *Brief Nudity* (2013), *Basic Cable Couplets* (2012), *abbrev* (2011), *About the Author* (2011), and *I Am Spam* (2004). He is also an acclaimed singer-songwriter whose latest solo album is *Good Grief* (2015). The sophomore album from his band, The Injured Parties, is forthcoming in 2016. For more info, go to larryodean.com.

Richard Widerkehr received his M.A. from Columbia University. He has two book-length collections of poems: *The Way Home* (Plain View Press) and *Her Story of Fire* (Egress Studio Press), and two chapbooks. Tarragon Books published his novel, *Sedimental Journey*, about a geologist in love with a fictional character. Recent work has appeared in *Rattle*, *Floating Bridge Review*, *Cirque*, *Penumbra*, *Clover*, and *Salt River Review*.

Janelle Rainer is a poet, painter, and teacher living in the Pacific Northwest. Janelle worked as a soda fountain waitress, peach orchard laborer, and shoe salesman before earning her B.A. in English from Whitworth University, followed by her M.F.A. in Poetry from Pacific University. Janelle's poetry has been published in numerous journals, including *Harpur Palate* and *The Louisville Review*, and her paintings have been featured in venues in and around Spokane, Washington. To see more of her artwork, visit janellerainerart.com. Her debut poetry collection, *Two Cups of Tomatoes*, was released in October, 2015.

Titus Green was born in Vancouver, Canada but grew up in the United Kingdom. He has lived and worked around the world as an English language teacher and currently resides in China. His work has appeared in *Empty Sink Publishing*, *Beyond Imagination*, and *Fear of Monkeys*. His influences include Johnathan Swift, Joseph Conrad, Jorge Louis Borghes, Edgar Allen Poe, Frederic Prokosch, Brett Easton Ellis, and Juvenal.



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