

THE SIGH PRESS

ISSUE 14 • AUTUMN 2017

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

We're delighted that grapes and olives are finally on the horizon: time for our Autumn Issue, the 14th publication of The Sigh Press journal.

We hope you've had a chance to read our July Ampersand interview with fiction writer Baret Magarian whose debut novel, *The Fabrications*, was published this summer by Pleasure Boat Studios. One critic wrote, "The novel is about the way myth-making and a heavily manipulated script can eclipse reality." This sparked the current issue theme: fiction vs. reality, explored in these pages not only via a vivid excerpt from Magarian's novel, but also visually, by celebrated French street artist Clet Abraham—an icon in Florence making iconic images out of the mundane—whose daring work both challenges and plays with imbedded quotidian signs and symbols, nudging us to consider the familiar from the inside out rather than the outside in. We also hear from poet Salvatore Difalco with two deft, image-packed sonnets. Finally, our Cultural Commentary comes from writer Jonaki Ray, recent fellow at an artists' residency in Chianti. The picturesque landscape she enjoyed was reprieve from dark realities in her native India.

Our next Ampersand interview will appear later this fall with memoirist and journalist Kamin Mohammadi, author of *The Cypress Tree* and the forthcoming *Bella Figura; How to Live Love and Eat The Italian Way* (Bloomsbury). Please visit thesighpress.com for our Winter Issue theme and deadline and our Facebook page where we post at least three times a week.

Lyall Harris & Mundy Walsh

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CLET ABRAHAM





SONNETS: HOT AND COLD

SALVATORE DIFALCO

1

Castles and antiquities of Greek or Arab origin,
black figs and Black Death: this is the dry road
to the volcano. Keep your fava beans down.
The poppies will not blind your bicycle
as you climb the high road into green light.
What grows there? What burns there?
A caper fragrance slows the rhythm, and wild
flowers by the roadside heat up the bees.
They come from all angles, hectoring.
Take time to eat your olives and lemons
of malice, the vendetta is fresh, and envy
is the neighbour's mule, chomping
at the bread of life: the rosary in the piazza,
the tinny church bell and the crucifix.

Shots at night, and ancient crickets hush.
Time passes like a train and then its whistle.
Distant flames and a cold television
while he works the toothpaste around
his teeth. The dentist cottages near here,
came by for beer once, and pizza.
The hockey game went into double OT.
The storm became a blizzard: snowshoes
were in fashion, briefly. But my runny nose,
chattering teeth, and the famous igloo
I failed to build, made the maple leaf
a curse in stilted English. Give me
your ugly sweater, quickly. And kiss
my blue lips before I slip on the glacier.





THE FABRICATIONS

AN EXCERPT BY BARET MAGARIAN

Inside the limousine Rees talked incessantly, telling Oscar it was important for him to be noticed at the party they were going to.

Despite the sound of Rees's voice – rendered less irritating than usual in the sepulchral calm of the limousine – Oscar had an impression of incredible well-being. He could study the occupants of the cars moving alongside them through tinted windows which ensured his own invisibility. He was surprised to find he was thrilled to be riding in the limousine. There was something vaguely illicit about the experience and he abandoned himself to it. The car's motion did not actively impress itself on his senses; rather it was felt subliminally, like a tremor, an imagined sound of thunder.

It was midnight by the time they arrived.

The limousine turned into a private, sumptuous avenue free of cars and full of some of the grandest houses Oscar had ever seen. The predominant impression the street gave was of whiteness. Every exterior looked as if it had just that moment been painted. The limousine stopped outside a house whose stucco facade was magically lit by golden floodlights. It made Oscar think of a gigantic wedding cake, tier upon tier reaching heavenwards.

They walked up to the entrance and were greeted by a footman.

Inside, as Oscar marveled at the grandeur of the hallway, the Bohemian crystal chandeliers and the sumptuous staircase, he was aware of Rees only vaguely as if the latter was locked in a misty bubble from which he emerged from time to time. In the hall a group of Indian men in loincloths was playing sitars and tablas. A few people were scattered about listening, sipping blue, green and pink cocktails. It was sparse, refined music – it did not demand to be listened to but its recurring patterns, its percussive continuities were calming. Rees and Oscar climbed the stairs, brushing against some of the guests coming down in great droves, and came eventually to a gargantuan ballroom with paneled doors and a ceiling crowded with figures who seemed to have stepped out of Renaissance Florence, their gravitas contrasting, as Oscar thought, with the abandon of the people jostling together in an untamed throng. Outside, a stone balcony looked out onto the silent street. There were more guests gathered there, squeezed between spectacular geraniums. Eerie, otherworldly music was playing in the ballroom. At the far end there was a long, sleek table with a brilliantly polished mirror for its surface. A pyramid of cocaine was piled up on it and various men were crushing it up with credit cards and other flat surfaces. They reminded Oscar of dealers, cutting cards at casinos, and had that same air of skill and bravado. All around the table people were snorting the white powder through little gold tubes and rolled up bank notes.

No one took any notice of Oscar and Rees as they made their way towards the bar and the small plates of food that sat there, unmolested. Rees was talking, babbling but Oscar refused to listen. He wished he

would go away. He needed endless energy to be around him; Rees' every utterance was designed to prove something, to persuade or to sell. The barman poured Oscar a glass of red wine and Rees a Bloody Mary.

"Oscar," said Rees, "make sure that you get around, sample the different characters. Don't be shy."

And with that he strode brazenly into the crowd. Oscar was as surprised as he was delighted.

There was a truly astonishing mix of fashions, faces and characters now claiming his attention. Many of the men looked Latinate and wore their hair slicked back, the lines drawn by the comb still intact. Others were less suave, but were uniformly smart, with their starched shirts, and immaculate trousers. But it was the women who really held his attention, in their kimonos and embroidered negligees, catsuits and saris, with their predatory, ornate, aggressive footwear, their black onyx beads, gaudy rings and searingly patterned stockings. Oscar found himself thinking of these people not merely as strangers, as he would normally, but rather as individual selves, with rich and complex existences. He wondered what their lives were like, the shape of their histories, what it was they did, who they loved, who they hated. It was thrilling to soak everything up, to speculate on the usually hidden layers of people's lives but he was afraid his head would burst like a bubble crammed with too much oxygen.

Tucked away in a quiet corner a girl in torn jeans crouched on a chair. She held onto the arching armrests with gangly arms, while her legs were crossed over each other and planted into the large cushion underneath. She was bending her sinewy hands into the shape of binoculars. She fastened them onto her face and peered around through

this imagined lens, looking this way and that, making sharp movements with her head, like a robot. Then suddenly her head was swaying wildly, following the rhythms of the music. Then it was hanging limply, her hair flopping about, reaching her knees, a cascade of disarray. She was like a crazed marionette. About her there hung a kind of poisoned *joie de vivre*. She was like a kite torn by thorns. She lit a cigarette and took some puffs in quick succession until she was hidden by smoke clouds.

Oscar found her mesmerizing and was intent on speaking to her. He walked up to her. She was peering through her hands again.

“What do you see?” he asked.

“The planets. The stars. Supernovae,” she muttered.

She spoke so quietly that Oscar had to strain to hear her. Her face was close to his and he stared into green eyes whose pupils were abnormally dilated. She was indistinct, as if she could only be perceived through tracing paper.

“The planets. The stars,” she repeated in a colder, shriller voice. “Can you see that far?”

“No, not really. I’d just like to go that far.”

She dissolved into sulfurous laughter, and for a moment it yoked back together the splintered fragments of her psyche, but as it died away she was a lost soul again.

She moved her lips together, as though she had just applied lipstick and was smoothing it over her mouth with a final flourish.

“Do you like the way I look?” she asked.

“You’re beautiful.”

She smiled sweetly and once again for its duration she seemed

fine. Someone catching her smile would have seen an expression of unbridled joy. Then the smile disappeared without trace and her face became a melancholic mask.

“I think I’m going to leave this party. It’s such a bore.”

“Where will you go?” Oscar asked.

“Oh, you; you and your questions! You do nothing but ask questions! Well, now I’m going to ask you one.”

“Go ahead.”

“By the time this party is over the universe will have expanded in all directions by many miles. How many would you say?”

“I really couldn’t.”

“A billion. A billion fucking miles. Did you ever think about that? Once? We’re on this tiny planet spinning away – and we think we’re so important – we think we’re the cats’ pyjamas. Well, we’re not. And I’m never going to see with my own eyes what’s out there. I’m going to die never having seen the edge of other galaxies, never having seen the final moments of a star’s life as it explodes. I’m going to die never having gone through a wormhole or travelled at the speed of light. Instead I have to be happy with all this...” She pointed to the bacchanalian display around her. “It doesn’t interest me – this sludge doesn’t interest me. It’s such a fucking bore.”

She walked away with a motion both agitated and natural.

Then she was gone. When Oscar turned round to find someone else to talk to a woman in a leather skirt and beret was standing nearby, clutching a wine bottle.

“You must be Oscar,” she said.







SOGNI D'ORO

AN EXCERPT BY JONAKI RAY

After another bus ride, I reach Greve, home for the next two weeks, around 8pm. My hosts, an Italian couple, take me to the residency, which is a building next to the oldest church in the area. I fall asleep looking at the moon chasing wolf-like shadows in the sky. The next morning, I wake up to sunshine that can only be described as buttery, clichéd though it may sound. Miles of cypress and olive trees line the pale-green vineyards and I spend the next few days walking around.

My hosts are from Florence and still considered outsiders. Their closest neighbor, a plump lady with six kittens gamboling around her all day, always seems to be angry at the idea of the church being renovated and the building next to it hosting people from different countries. Despite her frowns, I wave at her every day. Mostly, I walk, write, sleep, read, and, slowly, lose the tension of the last few weeks. During informal aperitivo hours, I meet the other artists. We are all different ages and have different backgrounds and nationalities, but each of us is miles away from what we call home. We talk and find common threads through our lives—the violence some of us have faced as women, the dating horrors some of us

have faced as singletons, and even the common travails of traveling in hot weather, with the host Duccio sharing his adventure of a bike rally through the Sahara.

I receive news about the latest in a series of hate crimes in India. This one is against a young Muslim boy in India who is lynched to death on a train by a mob. I find comfort in talking about it to the other artists in the residency. Perhaps it is the shared feeling of being away from what is familiar, or perhaps it is the magic of the simple suppers of Tuscan bread, cheese, and tomatoes, washed down with wine accompanied by the music of the crickets and panting of the family dog, Ugo. The simplicity of my life here makes me think of this place as a haven from the madness that the world has become.

At the same time, I realize that this is a temporary refuge—changeable and mercurial. Having got used to landmarks—the statue dedicated to the poet Belli near my B&B in Rome, the terracotta Madonna shrine near my residency in Greve—I know that I have to move on, eventually. A part of me—the nesting part—has unpacked and left markers all around the house with cosmetics and clothes strewn around—to stave off the inevitable truth that nothing stays constant, and home is always an impermanent concept—a chimera in itself.

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Is the road not taken really a different road?



CONTRIBUTORS

BIOS & TSP QUESTION

TO OUR CONTRIBUTORS: Tell The Sigh Press about a time when something real was stranger than fiction.

*

CLET ABRAHAM was born in Brittany in 1966. He studied at the School of Fine Art in Rennes. With a strong sense of craft and special interest in drawing, Clet moved to Rome, where he worked as a restorer of antique furniture, but without giving up on painting. In 2005 he moved to Florence, to the district of San Niccolò, where he once stayed in his youth. He then rented a studio in Via dell'Olmo; he still operates there today.

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WITH THE ADDITION of poetic or philosophical elements on an original subject that is as totally uncompromising as traffic regulations, I would like to give a concrete example of a possible reconciliation between two extremes that are usually in tension: authority and freedom. I am always seeking dialogue, I never hide, because if it's true that vandalism destroys, it is also true that art creates. What I do is add new meaning, poetry, humor, at least I try to.

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SALVATORE DIFALCO lives in Toronto. His poems and short stories have appeared in print and online.

I MUST ADMIT that watching the US elections last year, and the three-ring circus that ensued before and after, I find the Trump presidency too surreal, too absurd and too monstrous—and yet in some way logical given what America has truly been and become—to fully comprehend.

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BARET MAGARIAN'S fiction has been published in *World Literature Today*, *Panurge*, *Darker Times*, *Voyages*, *El Ghibli*, *Sagarana*, the White Fly Press anthology *HOTell* and *Journal of Italian Translation*, and his poetry has appeared in *Collectivo R*, *Semicerchio*, *Contrapasso*, *Iris News*, and *Stanza 251*. His monologue "The Pain Tapestry" will be staged in autumn 2017 at Torino's Espace, in a piece of total theatre that utilises live music, paintings and film. Baret is also a composer of piano music in the vein of Alkan and Jarrett. His collection of short stories *Melting Point* was recently published in Italian translation by Quarup.

BARETMAGARIAN.COM

[HTTPS://WWW.AMAZON.COM/FABRICATIONS-BARET-MAGARIAN/DP/0912887478](https://www.amazon.com/Fabrications-Baret-Magarian/dp/0912887478)

I WAS WALKING HOME to my mother's house in Ealing one night. All at once I could discern in the misty sky three points of light moving, or rather, slowly

gyrating. I stopped in my tracks, puzzled. I watched the sky more intently. The lights moved as searchlights might have moved. They cast no illuminating pathway onto the ground. The lights were without source. I could glimpse no aircraft, no point of origin. I could find no visual trajectory linking the lights to an earthly point of origin. To this day this three point matrix of mobile luminescence, whatever it was, remains a total mystery.

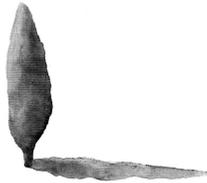
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JONAKI RAY studied in India (IIT Kanpur) and the USA (UIUC), and is a poet, writer, and editor based in New Delhi. Her poetry, fiction, and nonfiction have appeared in newspapers, literary journals, and magazines in India, UK, Italy, the US, and Singapore. Her poetry was shortlisted at the 2016 Oxford Brookes University International Poetry contest, and an excerpt from an ongoing work of fiction was long-listed at the 2016 Writer's HQ International Fiction Contest. She was a Writer in Residence at Joya:Air, in Spain (spring 2016); and La Macina di San Cresci, in Italy (summer 2017).

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IN MARCH 2016, I fell down the stairs at a subway station in New Delhi. This was exactly a week before I was scheduled to leave for a residency in Spain. An X-ray showed a fracture in the left palm and to stabilize my hand, it was put in a plaster cast from the palm to elbow. I had just emerged from a devastating relationship, and a strange madness invaded me. Over the next two weeks, I traveled alone, with one functional hand and one bag, from New Delhi to Madrid, then Seville, Granada, Velez Rubio, and finally, Barcelona. My last stop on the way back to India was in Istanbul for three

days; my hotel was very close to Orhan Pamuk's Museum of Innocence where one of the exhibits was entitled *An Anatomical Chart of Love Pains*.



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