

Perhaps it's time for a 'Sea Change'

Eighth 'Rusted Radishes' promises to take readers to interesting places

28 Dec 2019 REVIEW By Jim Quilty

BEIRUT: It can take a long time to imagine and execute a piece of art or writing.

Putting aside some of the street art that's gone up since Oct. 17, and a few thawra-themed gallery shows, most of the cultural production being exhibited in Lebanon these days was not imagined with the country's economic meltdown and state-wide civil disobedience campaign in mind.

The same is true of the eighth issue of Beirut's literary and art journal "Rusted Radishes." Its title, "Sea Change," does seem to resonate with the current mood in the country, which one Lebanese writer recently equated to a bipolar speedball of anxiety and ecstasy.

As "RR" editor Rima Rantisi points out in her introduction to "Sea Change," the maritime theme that's guided the selection of works in this issue nods to the seaborne environmental catastrophe that Lebanon and the world are undergoing.

"Sea Change" isn't exactly



Amanj Amin. "Whale," illustration, undated.

art for art's sake – environmental neglect being one of several charges demonstrators have leveled against this country's political class.

Since its founding, "RR" has tended to be a liminal, border-crossing publication, culturally and literally. Most of the international writers and artists represented in "Sea Change" either hail from, or have an interest in, the MENA region. Like the artists themselves, not all their works are situated within this region. "I Don't Like Bars," for instance, the short nonfiction prose piece by Beirutborn Riwa Roukoz, recounts a young traveller's affectionate encounter with a poet in Rajasthan.

Coming in at just under 200 pages, "Sea Change" boasts

reproductions of 30 art works, 26 English-language poems, two pieces each of fiction and nonfiction prose, a play, a graphic narrative and an interview with U.K.-based queer poet, essayist and activist Lisa Luxx.

Though "RR" still speaks English for the most part, issue eight includes an unprecedented 19 "Arabic-language" titles in various genres. Among them is Rabih Alameddine's English-language fiction "Break," in which a transgender narrator ruminates upon her relationship with her brother Mazen. Arabic readers will find the

story in the Arabic section of the volume, immediately after Ala Abdullah's translation of Alameddine's story.

Other works in "Sea Change" more obviously resonate with the collection's theme.

Joy Amina Garnett's memoir-like "The Sea Takes up Residence in All Parts of the City" recounts the female narrator's stay in Alexandria, where she combed through old book shops, searching for traces of the poetry her grandfather had published in the '30s. Her search is accompanied by a man – a researcher, perhaps a lover –

who shared her interests. He is the second-person subject to whom her narrative is addressed but is, like her deceased grandfather, absent from the narrator's present.

Mario Jamal's "The Fishermen" is a hybrid work of short fiction. On one hand it seems to have a documentary interest in the community of fishermen that clusters upon the rocks just beyond Beirut's seaside Corniche. Jamal juxtaposes the mundane veracity of his story's characters with a fantastical element – one shared by films as disparate as Michel Kamoun's "Falafel" and Lord

and Miller's "Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs."

Though Margo Berdeshevsky's fiction "Hunters" has an entirely different narrative sensibility than that of Jamal, both works seem to mingle research with the author's thematic concerns.

One of the hunters of the story's title, Berdeshevsky's third-person narrator relates her experiences on far-flung island leper colonies. Her purpose, the narrator reflects, is to massage the limbs of Hansen's Disease survivors, though she appears to be seeking some-

thing in her charges that's more inexpressible.

"RR" falls into a venerable tradition of English-language literary periodicals that sample concise slices of recent work by a wide and varied range of talent. Assuming their readership is curious, such anthologies offer readers an opportunity to encounter new voices and obsessions (or, in the case of this volume's samples of concrete poetry, say, to revisit once-revolutionary forms).

Breadth and brevity also characterizes the visual

artists represented in "Sea Change." The volume exhibits the work of several wellknown and less known artists, illustrators and designers from this region and beyond.

The work of local heroes like Hatem Imam, Abdul Rahman Katanani and Omar Khoury mingle with that of international artists like Basir Mahmoud, Paris Petrides and Faig Ahmed, among others.

Published images can't match the scale, or impact, of an exhibition. Yet the principal worth of two-page spread of Dala Nasser's mul-



Ieva Saudargaite. "Cirque du Liban," digital photomontage, undated.

timedia work "David Adjaye's Trash," Jason Steel's amusingly fashionconscious illustrations (a-la "Brits Abroad: The Decision"), or Chloe Hojeily's photo work is to expose them to a fresh

public.

As happens in print publications, visual elements are often called upon to illustrate the words printed nearby – indeed, a photo of Joy Amina

Garnett's accompanies her nonfiction prose contribution. On the whole, though, the artworks reproduced here speak with their own voices, and are unlikely be confused with illustrations.

You may not leave "Sea Change" deeply enamored of every poem in it, but this raft of words and images will likely take you to some interesting places.

For more on "Rusted Radishes," you could do worse than consult the website: <http://www.rustedradishes.com/>