
The River of Doubt

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Terri Kirby Erickson is the author of five collections of poetry. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *American Life in Poetry*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *JAMA*, *The Ofi Press*, *The Sun Magazine*, *The Writer's Almanac*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, and many others. Awards include the Joy Harjo Poetry Prize, Atlanta Review Publication Prize, and a Nautilus Silver Book Award. She lives in North Carolina, USA.

"Die if you must, but never kill." — Candido Rondon, explorer

From our hand-hewn dugouts, we hear the screaming pihás, the calls of the red-eyed, blue-faced hoatzin birds, the chirps, trills, and buzzes of the yellow banded dart frogs trolling for mates. And though cicadas' hollow abdomens amplify their songs, our empty bellies clench with hunger and we are silent.

With supplies low in the Roosevelt-Rondon Expedition, we navigate the mysterious River of Doubt as it twists and winds through uncharted rainforest, its waters rife with piranha, pit vipers, bull sharks, and anacondas. And flying through the moist air, swarms of sulfur butterflies covet our salty tears,

and disease-carrying mosquitoes bite. Survival is the goal for camaradas, so we paddle and pray, our dreams when we can sleep, filled with monsters. But our Colonel, Candido Rondon, is focused and unafraid, facing jaguars, caimans, rapids, and starvation, unwavering in his resolve to complete the mission.

Courageous, though sick and injured, Roosevelt insists we leave him behind to save his son as well as ourselves, but we push on, with native peoples, the Cinta Larga, watching from the jungle. The Colonel speaks of them with admiration, even tenderness, leaves them presents by the river. Their dark eyes

remind me of minha esposa, my children, who I may never see again. But the light of a good man's spirit is brighter than the breast of the black-faced hawk, so perhaps Rondon will be the one to save us. His will, alone, might be strong enough, (though our party remains in constant peril), to keep us safe and alive.