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BEST OF
OUR STORIES

VOLUME FOUR

{BEST OF OUR STORIES}

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Volume 4- *FOREWARD*

by: Alexis E. Santi

Sometimes you just want to catch your breath. Sometimes you're tired of playing catch up with the issues and the submission system and the website and all the other damn ins and outs that come with running a journal. From the Fall of 2009 till the Summer of 2010 was a period of relative growth and stability for the journal. We kept publishing outstanding work and hired more staff. This issue contains some outstanding short stories and has two original interviews with Dorothy Allison and Karen E. Bender, respectively. For me, it was a year of reflection on where we came from as a journal and it was a good feeling to finally have all the right things in place to keep moving forward as a journal. Volume IV marks a turning point in the journals history—it's time to grow, it's time to keep looking at what's next. Publishing *The Best of Our Stories* is always a momentous occasion and now with this fourth volume we can take a look back.

We published the first two volumes of *Our Stories* during the summer of 2009, we hadn't planned on doing a print run when we first started the journal but we now see the value and possibilities that doing a print run allows. Volume 1 & 2 featured the fine cover art of Colin Michael Shaw (www.shawart.com). Colin is a gem of a human being and was gracious enough to lend us his art for the covers. Volume III featured the photography of Jesse Winter, (www.jessewinter.com) an extremely talented and amazing photographer who I am also lucky to have as a friend. This catches us up. Till now. Bob Reuter, is one of the most intriguing human beings I've met this far in my life. He is, by all accounts, a man of seemingly limitless talent—a musician who has been playing the Saint Louis

scene for the past thirty years, a radio DJ who is also noted for being the host of Bob's Scratchy Records on KDHX FM a local St. Louis station and finally a photographer. You can find more about Bob Reuter at www.bobreuterstl.com. I met Bob a little over a year and a half ago after he agreed to do some promotional photography for my wife, a musician in the local scene, Leslie Sanazaro. On the day that he called and said the pictures were finished he asked us to meet him at an Italian restaurant in the city. Sitting at the bar he stood an imposing figure, about six foot, with a bald head and ashen white goatee. I remember when he brought out the pictures that he took of her—he put this small five by seven box on the bar and said, I got your pictures here. A good looking man in his mid-fifties, hip in a plain-I don't give a fuck, sort of way. There was something unassuming about him, he was boyish and the way he acted seemed not to match his imposing figure or powerful presence. We opened the small box of original Bob Reuter pictures, which he'd developed and printed on Kodak paper, a work in craft and process and we were amazed.

Ever since that day I've been an advocate, fan and supporter of Bob Reuter's work. I am embarrassed to say it took me this long to actually get him into print. This magazine is more or less, his. His work is stark, subtle stares. The pictures seem capture a part of the human soul in their smiles, seductive sexy grace and powerful grainy moments. You could see Bob's work hanging on the side of a building as does Shawna at the Galaxy Basement on page 198, makes me think, "damn, all that's missing from this picture is a damn Budweiser symbol." But this all reminds me that's not the point. Not all artists wind up in fame and fortune—life comes and damn well goes. Bob captures moments, like on page 189 in "Ray Brewer, Drunky See, Drunky Do" about to start swinging in a backyard boxing match—this is not a 1920's match, this was this century, people. Or take, one of my favorites, "Richard Buckner at Vintage Vinyl" on page 178, you see this man in the middle of a record store, singing like his life depends on it. People live their lives in front of us—Bob is paying attention and thank God someone put that camera in his hands. All of these pictures are part of make you understand what St. Louis is about but more important who is this

man—Bob Reuter. Our Stories will continue to support this amazing artist and we have plans for an entire book of Bob's photography in the future.

Now, onward into the issue. In the fall of 2009, we published some amazing stories. Margaret McMullan's story *Saving Instructions* took on a dreamy quality of a dinner party, a bored housewife who winds up with a puff of pot and a young seductive gentlemen. Adam Smith's story, *Finding Perfect*, is an account of a father and son looking for the perfect christmas tree, it's not overly sentimental and plays all the right chords. Some stories capture voice and mood perfectly, Mark Wolsky's story *Winter's Coming* is that story, it is as if Wolsky—observant and wise—sat in a restaurant and simply copied down life going on in a small town. Travis Mills' piece, *Catcher's Say*, reminded me out of something of a really old antique comic whose story you find captivating. Greg Girvan's story, *Leaving* is a rough and tumble story filled with cheating girlfriends, a bar fight and precise descriptions which take you into the life of a character who is ready for things to change in his life. Ira Sukrungruang's piece, *Forecast*, tells the story of teenagers who are struggling to find themselves but aren't old enough to figure it completely out. Finally, Kendra Tuthil conducted a brilliant interview with one of my favorite author's Dorothy Allison, one which I recently approved re-publication in the University Press of Mississippi's book entitled *Conversations with Dorothy Allison*.

In the Winter of 2010 issue, we picked Jesse Goolsby as the winner of our Richard Bausch prize for his story *Touch*. It was a beautiful take on the pressures that our nation's women and men go through coming back to the United States after the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; the story had me in tears by end of it. Onnesha Roychouduri's story *A Simple Migration*, tells the story of a man's last days alive, awash in a world of memories and pain—it is a story of tremendous insight into the human condition. Chellis Ying's piece, *Blue and Maroon*, dredges some of the ugliness of people into its carefully paced piece which leaves you gasping at the end of it. The last story we picked was Louis Wittig's story, *What Snuggle, the Fabric Softener Spokesbear, Says As He Takes the Seat Next to You* on

Continental Flight 3411 to Buffalo (yes that's the entire title) is a piece of absurdist fiction, which is about, well, the title says it all. The piece had me laughing out loud on every page. Finally, Josh Campbell led a 5 star interview with Karen E. Bender and she provided tremendous insights into the craft of writing and teaching.

In the Spring of 2010, we conducted our first flash fiction prize, the Gordon Award. We picked Paula Paige's story Moshiach Is Here. I picked this story as a winner because I believe it accomplishes what all flash fiction intends to do, which is provide a powerful story that embosses the reader in a world of the writers making. Matthew Lang's story, Island Paradise, is poetic story of one man's thoughts--alone--in the world, he renders the story masterfully, crafting a piece of fiction which sticks with you. Connie A Lopez- Hood's story, Sunday Night at Norm's Near Calle Ocho, 02:45AM, is a wonderful piece of flash that gives you great insights into what it means to be Cuban-American. This piece played to my heart strings for many reasons. Finally, Townsend Walker's piece, Slashing the Nets, is a story that has fantastic control of language and a mastery of scene setting. It is my hope that the Gordon Award will continue to publish some of the best flash fiction in the months to come.

In the Summer of 2010 issue we published what I believe to be one of the best issues we've ever published as far as pound for point quality. The issue also stands as some of the eclectic tastes that we have at Our Stories--you know how some journals say, "to get a sense at what we might publish, read our issues!" well, you can know Our Stories by simply reading this issue page to page. Let's begin. Roy Jeffords' story Ozmandias, is pure literary fiction, you read between the lines of this brilliant period piece, post civil war of a kingdom in the south which holds onto its reins of oppression. Daryl Morazzini's piece, When They Come for You, is a reviting story which keeps your eyeballs glued to the page--it is also a good example of what it means to revise and resubmit a story. We'd read the story before and gave Daryl some tips to get the story cleaned up and sure enough, it won second prize in our contest. Next,

Glenda Bailey-Mershon's story is of visions, premonitions and a woman who can see the future, it is something different but Bailey-Mershon handles the subject matter so well that we don't blink the entire story it she carries us along. Elizabeth Boyd wrote her story, Kudzu, in the vein of Borges of a young girl whose world is ever-increasingly closing in around her. I loved this piece and it found it like a glass of cold fresh water. Ed Bull's story, Night Vision, is like Lynchian Hurt Locker—I could say more but you need to read it. Over the years that we've been publishing Our Stories we've had quite a few stories published about the wars and it's always my goal to publish literature that stands for something powerful and explores these worlds in ways which honor the soldiers, honors where we are as a country and seeks to understand the complexity of our lives. Bravo Ed. Let's see, last but not least Kerry Mackel's story, Blurts, is a very mature and hilarious story of a teacher who must deal with the uncomfortable situation of a high school student who asks about the morality of abortion. Told in quick wit and touches of brilliant dialogue we close Volume IV with going back to the school.

I hope you enjoy all of these stories. As I close this opening essay it strikes me as to how in running this thing, I've found a place to call home. I've made my home with these stories and with a staff of careful readers who I am lucky to work with me. I hope you truly enjoy these stories—each and every one of them. And for those of you who we didn't publish—keep writing, keep reading, keep revising. We do this thing in Our Stories for you those we don't publish *just* as much as for those we've published here. Cheers to all and God bless.

-Alexis E. Santi
10/6/2010

EDITOR IN CHIEF

Alexis E. Santi



Photo credit: Bob Reuter

Alexis E. Santi is the editor in chief and founder of Our Stories. He founded the journal in 2006 after deciding that the writing world could use a little bit more love in its submission process. Our Stories remains the only literary journal that provides feedback for every submission. He earned his MFA in Creative Writing from George Mason University and MSW at Washington University in Saint Louis. His own work has been published in the Word Riot, In Posse Review, Dark Sky Magazine, Prick of the Spindle, Cubista Magazine, Revista 22 and The Plum Ruby Review. He writes and raves in the great city of Saint Louis. You can find more about him at www.alexissanti.com.

table of contents

BEST OF OUR STORIES // Volume Four ISSUE ONE

Interview with Dorothy Allison	12
Saving Instructions by Margaret McMullan	27
Finding Perfect by Adam Smith	39
Winter's Coming by Mark Wolsky	43
Catcher's Say by Travis Mills	48
Leaving by Greg Girvan	55
Forecast by Ira Sukrungruang	74
Editor's Corner	86

ISSUE TWO

Interview with Karen E Bender	91
Touch by Jesse Goolsby	106
A Simple Migration by Onnesha Roychoudhuri	114
Blue and Maroon by Chellis Ying	123
What Snuggle, the Fabric Softener Spokesbear, Says As He Takes the Seat Next to You on Continental Flight 3411 to Buffalo by Louis Wittig	141
Editor's Corner	154

FEATURE: Bob Reuter's Photography 159

ISSUE THREE

Moshiach is Here by Paula Spurlin Paige	205
Island Paradise by Matthew Lang	209
sunday night at norm's near cale ocho, 0245 am by connie a. lopez- hood	213
Slashing at the Nets by Townsend Walker	215
Editor's Corner	219

ISSUE FOUR

Ozymandias by Roy Jeffords	222
When They Come for You by Daryl Marrazini	235
Blurts by Rusell Mills Campisi	251
Being Emily by Glenda Bailey-Mershon	272
Kudzu by Elizabeth Boyd	284
NightVision by Ed Bull	291
Editor's Corner	297

VOLUME FOUR

ISSUE ONE
FALL 2009

Interview with a master



DOROTHY ALLISON

An Introduction to the Interview
by Kendra Tuthill, Managing Editor

DOROTHY ALLISON, WRITER-ROCK STAR, CULT ICON, LOVES MUSIC. She listens as she writes, something I might've guessed if I'd had the second to think about it, reading breathily through the crescendo of *Bastard Out of Carolina* and calming down, enveloped and sweaty-palmed inside the denouement. Closing the book, I heard Bone's southern cadence bumping like a dance up my spine. I wanted to have a mama instead of a mother. I wanted to peer out through hard black eyes.

It's not that I really wanted to be Bone, of course, but just as music stitches itself to the air, Bone is nailed to this life and fitted to her body in a way that I can't say is true for my friends or me.

In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Allison designed and populated the set with her focused attention and a practiced imagination that resulted in a fiction that seems truer than reality. Despite Bone's twisted hardships, it would just be so great to be such a real person (who is made out of fiction). When reviewers say her characters are real, they don't mean they're based on real people from Allison's childhood (though that may be true). They also don't have to mean that Allison writes dynamic characters (although that is most certainly true). Her characters in *Bastard out of Carolina*, *Cavedwellers*, and her short stories are alive. They drive, smoke and get drunk, dance, steal and punch, lie, fuck and get carried away by God and music and the melo-

dies of their own profound, spontaneous wisdoms. And when you finish an Allison piece, you don't want them to go away yet.

Dorothy Allison is the sort of writer you tell your friends about. You're glad to have her books on your shelf. *Bastard out of Carolina* is one of those novels like *1984* (only not at all), that explores and justifies a system of thought so tangled it can only be sensed abstractly or understood by reading this book. When you understand Bone's mean masturbation and her mama and Daddy Glen's disturbed relationship, (the white-trash problems we're taught to dismiss as preventable accidents), you pass on the book saying, "It's like *Bastard out of Carolina*. Just read it."

In the following interview, Dorothy Allison elaborates on her life and writing. We learn of the story-telling habits of her childhood, about the importance and difficulty of balancing the work of writing with the teaching of writing, about the music that moves her, and the constant, almost finished state of her current novel.

Interview questions prepared and conducted by Kendra Tuthill.

You are known for being a life-long storyteller, like Bone. Could you share a story with us that you told as a child?

I had two younger sisters and more cousins than seems reasonable. My mama often left us with our aunt Dot who had seven children, two sets of twins, and very often any number of other cousins who would be staying with her. I wound up as the babysitter/storyteller because the oldest cousins would take off and there I would be with the youngest trying to keep them from being too wild. I retold stories a lot—things I had read or seen, quite a few horror movies—things I had seen on creature features—vampires, werewolves and witches who ate body parts (yum, yum). I found that scaring the cousins was the best way to keep them distracted. Monsters always worked. Still do I think—though we have different notions of monsters these days.

I did get in trouble for my stories—though I think some of that was due to the cousins retelling the really nasty parts and adding more detail. But then when I was around eleven, I made up my version of a scary car wreck story—telling all about the legendary imaginary cousin who walked home after going through the windshield of

his daddy's truck. He of course did not realize he was dying, holding onto his bloody neck as he walked, making it all the way up the front steps to the porch before collapsing, letting go of his grip on his neck and the head rolling forward into the doorway to turn and stare up at his mama. I have this vague memory of details about the eyes and the sound of the head on the wooden steps. It did not matter that it was impossible. My cousins believed every word that came out of my mouth. There is a wonderful intoxication in being listened to so fiercely.

But that story was pretty much the end of my being the involuntary babysitter for Aunt Dot—specially after one of the cousins woke up yelling”The head, the head.”

To write stories is certainly different from telling them. How did story telling help you become the writer you are today? What challenges did you face as you took the oral form to the written form?

You can be pretty sloppy as a storyteller, but you have to be terribly exacting on the page. It was only as a youngster that I was a storyteller. Once I became a teenager I became the usual withdrawn sullen eyes-of-god creature that all teenagers manifest at some point. I just watched and swore to remember. And I started writing stories, dreaming that the act of making stories might actually accomplish something.

In some ways I became a writer due to two things—sleeplessness and wanting to make sense out of what did not make sense. My family did not make sense; the world did not make sense. There was so much injustice and grief that I could not sort out. I knew that my mama was a good Christian and that she worked incredibly hard. But I also knew that no matter how hard she worked, it never seemed to make any difference in the material conditions of our daily live. We were barely managing to survive, and how could that be right?

It seems to me I spent an enormous amount of time lying awake telling stories in my head—writing novels on the ceiling was how I thought of it. AND it was writing, not telling. I thought those stories in sentences, paragraphs, and pages. I would rewrite them in my head—seeing the words shape up above me. Trying different ways of telling the story and then starting over, literally drafting and revising, and playing with words until I would get a sentence that would

give me a shudder of excitement. That's good, I would think, and keep that sentence. I literally memorized some of the stories I later wrote out.

That is absolutely different from telling stories, or even thinking through telling stories. I prepare readings by making an edited version of what is on the page. That version is designed for sound, for breathing and pacing. Reading a story out loud helps you edit it, clean it up and revise it, but the read-aloud version has to be tighter in some ways than the version on the page. You can seduce with the eye or the voice—it is in the pacing that the difference shows most strongly.

We love your books, stories, poetry and essays and admire your writerly well roundedness. What projects are you working on right now? Where are you in the process? Could you share your present difficulties and delights?

I am in the middle of half a dozen short stories—some almost finished but not ready for me to let go of them, some only fragments working toward a draft. I actually think this is going to be a book of stories, almost all of which are set in western Sonoma county in California. This is a place where I have lived for almost two decades, and I started writing about the people and the community when we first moved there. It's an outlaw community, in the sense that there are a lot of people who are old hippies, ex-drug dealers, former musicians or artists, many of whom live 'off the grid' and make their living in interesting ways about which they never say much. People refer to 'river trash' and there are a substantial number of displaced southerners living back up in the hills and hollows along the Russian River. It's just a world of story and I started drafting all kinds of pieces that focused on these astonishing characters. I did not think about publishing them, but I would occasionally read a draft. One of them we worked up as a theater piece when I was at Emory last year. That was when I realized that some of the scary people in the story were no longer alive to embarrass or to get mad. I've published one now—Jason who will be famous—in the summer issue of Tin House, and I am thinking about letting go of some of the others.

I am also finishing a novel—again not ready to let go of it because it does not seem right to me. I might be the slowest novelist