

OUR
STORIES

LITERARY
JOURNAL

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Best
of
Our Stories

Volume Three

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VOLUME III

FOREWORD

After you run a literary journal for a little while you stop trying to hold onto it with a kung fu death grip and you start letting yourself relax. You start making a few changes here and there, changes you wouldn't otherwise have thought to do back when you were too scared to move a muscle. Those first two years of volumes preceding this one, I was pretty on edge the entire time, trying to make sure I was doing everything right, giving the proper blessings for the literary Gods out there. I still remember a lot of the comments that I got when I first started this thing, they went sort of like this: "you can't give feedback, it violates editorial policy." Or something like, "what gives you the right to comment on people's stories?" My answers, today, about these two comments are as follows: "whose editorial policy?" and 2) "I got a master's degree and I can't even make a comment about someone's writing? Wow, my degree really is worthless." So this is all to say, that after two years we (no, scratch that I'll speak for myself) I stopped giving a fuck what other people thought. I decided I would run the literary journal how I wanted to, take the chances that I felt we needed to and make artistic stands for who we are and what we aren't. Just as I may have no qualms about using a little profanity in the foreword here as well, I don't care what other journals think of us, whether the establishment ever recognizes what we're doing and I certainly don't expect to get invited to AWP any time soon to tell people about our editorial policy. It's our journal, we work damn hard all year round giving feedback to writers around the world and if we can't do what we want then the world of American letters really is messed

up. So, before I really get caught up and tell you about the four amazing quarters of submission we had from the fall of 2008 till the summer of 2009 I want to thank everyone who we didn't publish. You see, for every story published here there are another two hundred or so stories that didn't get published. We are the only journal in the country that gives a damn about ALL of those other stories out there. We're the only journal in the country that let's you the writer out there know that your story told us something. We're the only journal in the country that not only reads all of your submissions but we tell you how we think the story can be improved. So I've got a message to all the writers that didn't make it into the Best of Our Stories: KEEP WRITING, DAMNIT. Don't give up, don't keep your stories on your laptop in a folder labeled, "to-be-worked-on-at-some-distant-point-in-the-future" don't you dare do that. Revise your work. Read it out loud and work on it. The only stuff that has been worth a grain of salt that has lasted over the years has been massaged into greatness draft after draft. Perfection is not born it is made. Write.

So, let's review what is in the pages that follow this essay. In the fall of 2008 you're going to find a number of great stories. The first one I want to talk about is Tatjana Miloradovic-Lindes' story, "Beware the Moon". Josh Campbell had been working with Tatjana doing a workshop with her through Our Stories and he'd sent me the story with a note asking what I thought. They'd gone through two or three drafts and I thought it was pretty remarkable. Usually we don't publish stories that are being worked on in our workshops but I just couldn't stand to let someone else publish it. That's how Volume III starts, breaking the rules. Paul Dickey wrote a great piece that projected very clearly what it felt like to be in "election" mode in our nation. It reminded me a lot of living in DC in the middle of Adams Morgan, catching the bus on 18th street. Nick Ostdick sent us a story that sent shivers down my spine—it was about two kids holding their breath (without looking at the piece again) and it just scared me enough so that I had to get it in our pages. Elliot Satsky's piece struck me as funny and

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sexy, which is tough to pull off but he did so we picked it up. Adam Schechter's piece begins like this: I am hunching over an old nineteen thirties radio made from challah bread-it is shaped like a human baby and emits the sound of an infant crying. I mean, how can you not publish that? Last but not least we published Lindsay Merbaum's story "Cannibal Love" this story and Adam's won distinction on StorySouth's Notable Story and Cannibal Love was included in Dzanc's Best of the Web 2009 anthology. Why did I like the story along with everyone else? Guess you'll have to read it. To wrap the issue we did an interview with Adam Haslett, a great short story writer and overall great guy. All the staff members chipped in on his interview and it was something worth reading and poring over.

In the winter of 2008, we did this great interview that personally I'm very proud of with Steve Almond. Steve's writing is hilarious and so is his interview. I'm glad he brought it. The stories this quarter were all up for our first ever Richard Bausch Short Story Prize—I'd bounced the idea with Bausch that we would do a prize in his name because he was instrumental in making sure we got off the ground running; without Bausch's support *Our Stories* wouldn't exist. So we chose Thomas Lisenbee's story "Pigs on the Levee" as our winner. Ironically Lisenbee's story was the absolute last story that I read that quarter. It had been nominated by someone else on staff and I read it and just knew. I also knew that Kieth Lord had gotten damn close with his story "The Unreliable Memoirist" and from then on I veiled to always have a 2nd place prize. The other story's were equally easy to pick, Paul Vidich's story takes place one dark night with a guy driving a cab around, Cameron Coursey has to do with a hilarious account of a call center and Meakin Armstrong's story, "Power Ballad," takes place in bar and the prose is just tight and funny. I should point out that Armstrong is also the editor at *Guernica* magazine but I had no clue about that before I chose to publish the story—it's just an example of how at *Our Stories* we care about the writing and don't care about your biography. When I finished the issue and sent out a newsletter announcing the winners I

was blasted in one email as being a chauvinist for only picking men for the issue. Let's clear something up here folks: when we pick winners we don't care what the gender is of the author, we don't even care what their politics, religion, culture or sexuality is—this is writing, and my life in social justice and equality is separate from my artistic life. I do not publish anyone based on what titles they have before or after their name. I like to publish the best writing I can find and gender had zip to do with it and as a good example, the next quarter I published nothing but women, guess what? It just worked out that way.

The spring 2009 issue includes a story that I think is one of the best we've ever published. Jo Page's story "AAA" progresses so slowly, so painfully, with such an elaborate and fear inducing movement that I couldn't put it down. We nominated Page's story for the Best American Short Story anthology and I picked it to be represent Our Stories in TJ Forrester's amazing Five Star Literary Stories blog. Karen Best wrote this beautiful, what I'll just call a "short story homage" to HP Lovecraft and while I don't have a clue about Lovecraft's work I knew I was reading some serious talent. I then picked up Renee Simms piece, which combines African American popisms with magic realism, somehow she completely pulls it off. Next, we had Paula Hari's piece called "Lane Change" which is about a battered woman moving on with her life. It's told in the second person and I just am still moved by this piece re-reading it today. It's short, qualifying for flash and all but there's just something touching about it that made me know that what was being written was real—that it was coming from her heart. Finally, last but not least, we have Kristiana Colón's piece "ex-libris" which has gone on to be published in the Dzanc Best of the Web anthology 2010, which means for three straight years Our Stories has had work selected by this prestigious anthollogy. Colón's piece is sexy and smart and leaves you breathless. We closed the issue with an interview by the novelist Alan Cheuse (and my old professor) whose recent novel "To Catch the Lightening" is just simply beautiful in its prose.

We close Volume III with the 2009 Emerging Writer Awards. This was our third annual prize and with that the contest continues to gather greater competition every year. We picked Shane Kraus' piece "Negotiating with Truth" for its bipolar love affair set in San Francisco, which personally couldn't be done any other way. Certain stories have an environment or a feeling to them that allows the reader to just sit down comfortably inside of them and relax—Shane's story does that and I know you'll agree. Our second place story reminded me a little bit of the opening scene of *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* and since I loved the gentleness of that movie I found the story to be a distant cousin to it. Two other stories round out our selections: Erik Hoel's story was found by staff member Justin Nicholes and after reading it once I saw a story that is timeless and should be taught in schools today. Then Kendra Tuthil fell in love with Cynthia Hawkins' story "Hope Before 3:15" which has a beautifully wild and funny voice in narration.

Finally, a couple more things. First off, this issue was designed and pored over by an amazing intern Jessica Cheng. Jessica will be attending graduate school in the spring in New York City (fingers crossed) and I've ordered our OS crew to take care of her while she's in Gotham. Next, like I said, we did things differently this year so I saw it fit to also make an editorial change with showing off some amazing photography. Jesse Winter is one of my oldest friends. I mean a really old friend. We grew up together in Ithaca, NY and we've kept in touch ever since. I find his work to be highly skilled, at times funny and with a smart-alecky wit. Each picture seems to tell a different story and reveals something not only about his subjects, but also his astute observation of the human condition. It is fitting that Winter is included in our pages, he is a damn fine story teller through his pictures. Inside you'll find some of his amazing photography and you can find more at www.jessewinter.com.

I think that's it for now. It's a real pleasure running Our Stories, it is one of the true joys of my life. Thank you for sticking with us.

Alexis E. Santí

7/29/2010

EDITOR BIO:

ALEXIS E SANTI



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
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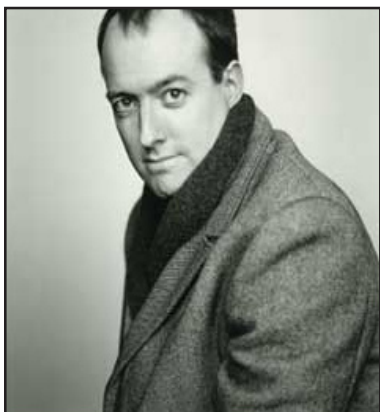
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cover page photograph: 'Bo-Kaap' 2009 ' Capetown S.A. by Jesse Winter

FALL 2008

Volume Three
ISSUE ONE

INTERVIEW.....



with a master

Adam Haslett

Introduction to the Interview

by Ashley Farmer, Fiction Reader

HOW DO YOU BECOME A FINALIST FOR BOTH THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD AND PULITZER PRIZE WITH YOUR DEBUT COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES? You write nine tales that explore the fractured and often desperate lives of people we know (but don't know that we know). You render them with compassion and humility, and convey reverence for human relationships in all their complexity. You remind us how brutal it is to be young and how fragile we can become when we're older. You give ordinary moments grace, imbue struggle with hope, and disarm us with humor where we least expect to find it. You, finally and permanently, dispel the rumor that people don't read short fiction anymore. You up the ante on Keats' theory of negative capability. Then law school. A novel. And "extraordinary" appended to your name.

*Every time I read *You Are Not a Stranger Here*, I find myself followed around by one of Adam Haslett's stories. Or a character. Or a halting moment of near-connection between two people. Or a simple line of dialogue, no more than a word or two, that flickers seemingly from nowhere. I'm revisited by the book when I least expect it, my subconscious conjuring his words as I walk my neighborhood or sit next to a stranger on an airplane or (often) work on a story of my own. Maybe this is what people*

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And while I have to believe there's an element of magic in crafting unforgettable literature, Adam Haslett was generous enough to reveal a few other secrets. Among them: where worthwhile material may come from, the surprise of making meaning from "the history of your own efforts," and about getting in as many good days as you can.

Interview conducted by Ashley Farmer via email

First off, thanks so much for taking the time to speak with us.

I wondered if you could begin by catching us up. I know that you received the tremendous attention and accolades for *You Are Not a Stranger Here* when you were in law school. I understand that you've both taught and worked as a legal consultant since that time. Sounds like you've