

# MASTHEAD

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# SOMETIMES IT TAKES A PANDEMIC

*“Garp did not write faster than anyone else, or more, he simply always worked with the idea of completion in mind.”*

—*The World According to Garp, John Irving*

It has been 7 years since Our Stories was actively publishing, 5 since we stopped doing workshops and the same amount since I published the last short story. Numbers don't do justice to the time that has passed. One, falls into two which leads you to three and the waves come crashing down and you get 7. You sit on the beach and watch this happen. I can see the last year of the journal, when my marriage fell apart. There's the last year of the workshops, when I needed to find other work. Then the next wave to crash was when the website was shut down because I couldn't keep paying for it.

My life, in the years that have fallen away, have changed dramatically. I got divorced, moved out of the house I was living in. Found another home. Switched careers and began rebuilding. I had neither the energy or the creative zeal to keep it up. I faced rebuilding my life, and a very real depression. New friends. A lot of life happened. I changed my career. I am now a therapist. I reinvented myself. My beard got longer, my hair grew out. Then it got short again. Hell,

my name even changed from Alexis Santi to Lex Enrico Santi. 7 years a lot can happen. My life steadied.

Our Stories became an afterthought to me. It was something I felt quite proud of but that did not comport to my day-to-day life. I began concentrating on sitting with people and letting their stories become my life work. It was the same, it was the different. Quarterly, I would read stories, sometimes hundreds of them, and give them advice. Turns out, being an editor of a literary journal that gave feedback was good training to become a therapist.

Then came CoVid-19 and 2020. I went from seeing 30 people in person to seeing 30 people online. I don't know about you, but having this much time on your hands you begin to reflect on some things. I now sit at the same desk that I worked at designing covers and editing manuscripts. Pixaleted images of my clients appeared on my telehealth screen. They sat in their studies, porches and bedrooms with dogs and cats crashing our sessions. I love my work in the same way that I used to love editing short stories—I get to sit with vulnerability and help their life take form. It's more than that though. I know this work that I do with people matters in a deeply loving way. One day early on in Covid. I'm thinking April/May or so, I began looking at the books that sit in front of me, the ones behind the pixelated faces of my clients. There sat 4 editions of Best of Our Stories. Volumes 1-4 and there was a snag in my heart over the 2 last editions that never made it into print. It stuck in me. While waves upon waves crashed through my life, what remained were files on a hard drive, which moved from computer to another computer. In 2013, Our Stories had an

intern, Rachel Lewis, and they did exceptional work but stopped short of completing Volume 5 & 6.

There was a promise at the time when I published the authors in these two editions, that you would have the chance to have your story in print. I let you down. I now believe I fulfilled that promise. Every day, I saw the 4 editions and I thought—it was time. Then one day, when I picked up the 4th edition, I saw a note card fall out of a book, it was that quote from *The World According to Garp*. That quote always struck me as who I aspired to be in the writing world—someone who got something done. It was then, I knew, it really was time.

With the help of a super-star Danielle Crebbin, our Publishing Director who hails from Austria, we have managed to put together the two final issues. I owe her a debt of gratitude.

The cover of this issue is from a piece of art I did in honor of summer and for lighter days. It was finished around the time when I began coming out of those dark days 7 years ago. When I painted publicly at concerts. It was a hot August night. The sort of event where we danced in crowds and life was much lighter and more free. The music blared and we all remember those days though they seem like something abstract as we enter our 8th month of CoVid-19. Let's get back there someday, altogether now.

It's with this that I close and say, enjoy the show.

—LES

# EDITOR'S CORNER:

## NOTES ON VOLUME 5

It's been a while since I published these short stories, going on three years from the looks of it. I was just arriving in Ithaca at the time or transitioning between living in Saint Louis and moving to Ithaca. When you're a publisher you associate the stories you review with the thoughts of what had happened in your life as you were reading the work. If this isn't a case of how writing is all subjective, I don't know what is. We're always effected by different things happening, work that is piling up or the dishes hitting the wall. The selections that I made at this point reflect that. I will comment, briefly about some of the stories here, from my recollections of first encountering them. I believe and still do believe in each and every one of these stories that we published and being the purveyor of these wares has always been a notable distinction.

I was getting through my last semester of my MSW when we launched the XYZ contest in 2010. For anyone who has ever lost that sense of purpose and is confused about life Margaret LaFleur's short story captures this life in disarray. It was the perfect story to win the XYZ contest as my great sense is that the people from these three generations are all--still--trying to find their way in society, war weary and clamoring to establish their lives.

Alyssa Capo's story, *The River*, struck me as a story crafted carefully and well paced. It left me breathless when I first read it. Charles Hashem's story *A Fine December Day* is a

great peace that shows the bonding of a father and a son. I picked this story to publish definitely thinking of my step-father who passed 6 years ago who was a hunter, plus I'm always trying to find the "good" father stories.

This issue also included the interview with Steven Millhauser who was the most humble and kindest of individuals that I've corresponded with during my time at Our Stories. A deeply touching forward was written by Josh Campbell and our intern at the time Elizabeth Foster.

The third issue of volume 5 was likely the most packed issue we'd ever published. Not only does it include the first ever published-writer-turned-interview-subject, Cara Hoffman but it includes one of her short stories. Cara and I have been pals since she lived in the Central New York area and supporting her work has been one of the great success stories of Our Stories. Next, we have Ana Menendez's wonderful short story *The Poet in His Labyrinth*, a Borgesian dream-like story that tells the story of how Jose Marti arriving at an airport. This gave me great pleasure to publish not only because Ana is one of the most gifted writers of the short story form but because Jose Marti is on the short list of people who I would want to meet living or dead. Finally, the last story I want to mention is the flash fiction contest winner's Guinnote Wise, who was a long time contributor to Our Stories and we finally found the piece that took the cake. *Weeks of Nights, Days of Ice*, a gem of a piece it has movement and fantastic dialogue for the compact flash fiction form.

Rounding out the issue is an interview with Richard Spillman by Justin Nicholes and a slew of fantastic fiction. I

especially enjoyed Gord Grisenthwaite's short story T.H.E KING a great piece invoking the trope of Elvis and Jenny Halper's Cyclone which couldn't be more of a counterpoint to his piece. For everything that Gord's piece is funny and trite, Jenny's is serious and cuts to the bone. Like I said though, they're all great stories.

It was a good hard year of writing and we loved doing this work. Oh, I wrote a lot of essays. They all say the same thing: get to the point, edit your work and make this life count. I think that's good advice.

Without the help of Rachel Lewis neither of these last two issues of Our Stories would have come out and their stories contained would only be available in the fine addresses of the interwebs. Enjoy the issue, it means the world to us that you're reading us.

# LEX ENRICO SANTI



## EDITOR IN CHIEF

Lex Enrico 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.

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.

Our Stories remains the only literary journal that provides feedback for every submission. You can find more about him at [www.alexissanti.com](http://www.alexissanti.com).



# BEST OF OUR STORIES

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# VOLUME 5

ISSUE 1, FALL 2010

# THE BOATHOUSE

BY: ALETHEA BLACK

MOONSTRUCK WAS PLAYING AT THE JANUS AND EVERYWHERE YOU WENT, PEOPLE WERE FALLING IN LOVE. Even the trees were wooing each other, pulling pink blossoms out of their branches like billets-doux. I was in love myself. I'd never been away from home before, and I felt the freedom in my bones and in my breath. Nothing could satiate me. I'd stay up all night talking with new friends in coffee shops, then fill entire notebooks during classes with names like "Chance and Necessity." On weekends there was live music and keg parties and tea at the Housemaster's residence. You could walk up to classmates lounging on the grass, introduce yourself, and ask them their thoughts on the afterlife. You could devote entire afternoons to dreamscapes of your own invention. I'd never realized how full of light the world could be.

A few times a week, I used to eat lunch by the river. I had a favorite bench near the old boathouse. There was a man with a supermarket cart who lived down there. He smelled like bread and sweat and old newspaper. You never know how people end up like that. One day I was planning a picnic for myself, and I decided I'd bring him a sandwich, too. I couldn't decide what to get him. Maybe a warm meatball sub with extra melted parmesan? Or a toasted Reuben with sauerkraut and hot mustard? I settled on a creation called The Works, with pepperoni, salami, turkey, olive loaf, Swiss cheese, lettuce, tomato, mayo, and a fat deli pickle.

I was so happy to be a gift-bearer that I threw the bag away and carried the sandwich in my hands. It was wrapped in white butcher's paper and had a satisfying heft. The day was perfect; the sky was beach-glass blue. A feeling of anticipation skidded across my skin like a current. But when I reached his usual spot beside the abandoned boathouse, the man wasn't there. It's hard to explain how disappointed I felt; instead of the regret of a thwarted whim, it was as if something I'd cherished my whole life had been stolen from me. Before I left, I poked my head inside the boathouse. There he was, slack-jawed on the floor, surrounded by empty cans and bird droppings and napkin dispensers. He was dead.

I felt as if I should do something, but I didn't know what. Maybe go back to my dorm room and call the police. But I still had his sandwich. I wanted to give it to him, as an offering. In my philosophy class I'd read about someone who left a pork pie on Wittgenstein's grave, and leaving this man The Works seemed fitting somehow. I stepped closer, delicately, as if I were trespassing, and lifted his hand. He sat bolt upright and grabbed my wrist.

"What is it?" he said.

I jumped; I almost screamed. "It's nothing," I said. "It's me."

The afternoon light filtered dimly through the slats in the walls, but nonetheless, he seemed to recognize me. He sat blinking at my face, still clutching my wrist.

"The girl," he said.

"I brought you a sandwich," I said, holding it out. Up close, he was younger than I'd expected; his beard was reddish-brown, and his forehead was smooth. I had a feeling he was harmless; I suppose he'd seemed harmless to me all along, or I wouldn't have come. A grimy cooler sat in the corner, and it smelled as if he might have been using it as a toilet.

He ignored the sandwich and looked away. "I'm not really like this," he said, letting go of my arm.

I smiled. "I know you're not," I said.

Upon hearing this, he examined me more carefully. His eyes were small and deep-set; they looked like the kind of eyes that should have had glasses in front of them. I saw something in them then that was so familiar yet so out of place in that squalid shack that I didn't recognize it at first. It was a look I was accustomed to seeing in the eyes of the soccer player from Hawthorne, Kentucky, at the Bow & Arrow at three in the morning; it was an expression that used to enliven the features of the math major from Lowell House after I let him beat me at pool.

"Love me," the man said.

I laughed. "I'm not sure that's what you need."

"Please," he said, his voice quiet. "I haven't loved someone in so long."

I believed him. I thought of myself as liberated, and open-minded, and I had been with different kinds of people. That was part of my freedom, my awakening. I had

learned to use my body as a gift. But there was a line I wouldn't cross, and it was miles away from that boathouse. Which he must have known.

"Then just let me look at you," he said, and I thought, well, what would be the harm in that? It was dark in the boathouse, cooler than it had been outside. In a way, it was like being underwater. I remember thinking to myself: This isn't my real life.

I began to unbutton my shirt. The man's gaze was grateful, humble. It wasn't greedy. Perhaps he didn't know what to do; while I undid my button-fly, he continued to stare at my face. I wished I'd been wearing some nice lingerie, the green silk set or the pretty beige bra with red roses on it. Instead I had on a plain, utilitarian bra—my everyday bra. I unhooked it, feeling as insubstantial as air. I stood before him in my white cotton underwear, my arms at my sides. That's the thing, oddly, that I remember most: the feeling of my arms just hanging there. Beneath us, above us, I could hear the faint murmuring of the river. The river was all around us; we were enwombed.

I knew something was wrong before it registered what it was. The man's chest was heaving. I panicked and grabbed my shirt—I was worried he was having some sort of attack. Then I realized. He was crying.

"Because I was different, I thought maybe I was from another world," he said. His face was contorted with tears. He covered it with his hand, his fingers splayed, sobbing.

"Maybe you are," I said. "Maybe we all are."

I put my clothes back on quickly, slipping my feet into my jeans, catching a toe on the rip in one knee. My philosophy class would be starting in ten minutes. My friends and I considered ourselves to be rookie intellectuals. We wanted to figure things out for ourselves, to be daring and adventurous, not to live by anyone else's rules or morals. But I knew, even then, that I would never tell anyone what I'd done.

The semester wound down uneventfully. I declared a major, then switched, then switched again. I didn't know what I wanted; I couldn't tell what life was really about—deep down, under the cerulean surface. Looking back, I see that year as the calm before the storm. The following year would bring the massacre in Tiananmen Square, and the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the end of Apartheid. The genuine acts of courage and defiance were yet to come. For the rest of that semester, I stared out a lot of windows, and read books on the damp grass, and played Ultimate Frisbee with my friends.

I spent a lot of time outdoors. But I never ate lunch by the boathouse again. Yet I never forgot the man. I thought of him every time I saw the first broken buds of spring, or smelled old newspaper, or heard the plaintive song of the river rise up from the banks, through the gated courtyard, under the door, and into my room.