

# Atone for Joan's Bones

by Edwin Rivera, MFA in Creative Writing, Fiction, NSGS

inspired by Adrian Piper's *Let's Talk*, 1992

2010-2011 First Prize Creative Response

The Plymouth Barracuda tore through the beltway at ninety-five miles an hour and I howled all the way, Hector Lavoe blasting in my ears, letting me know how malo he was, motherfucking candela, and I dipped the barrel of one of my .357's into the bag of coke on the passenger seat and singed my nostrils. Beads of sweat flung from my head like tungsten sparks, my teeth racketed, blood oozed from the gaping wound at my side. Even after I ran out of road I didn't ease up on the gas. The wheel went gonzo in my hands, the tires jumped, my heart frogged. The Barracuda smashed into a tall stack of masonry blocks broad enough to brain a Bunyan. The sound was enormous. The seething chalky dust braced me all around and small scorches brushed over my body. I shut my eyes against the blither of glass. I would have soared through the windshield if I hadn't been strapped in. The steering column sheared up against me and the world went black.

When I came to I was like a newborn puzzling out the light. Stars were shattered on the concrete. Deep-fried sky berserk with smoke. I elbowed open the door and felt the blood pour. A shower of glass patted the stones. The V-8 engine steamed. The air was close and carbolic. I ground my teeth so hard I'm surprised they didn't pop like kernels. My ribs felt tender, probably cracked. It didn't matter. I made sure the .357s were loaded, stuck them in my belt, scanned about. Not a creature stirring. Lucky for them.

Moving was hot agony, a shock of flame in my beaten brain. But I had no choice. Joan was goading me on. My stomach revolved like the cement mixer on a truck. I shoved my snout into the baggie and inhaled and the blood in my head expanded and gushed and my thoughts raced at mach speed. Joan's alive. Had to keep moving. She was depending on me. Fortify. It's a zero-sum game.

I'm rupture-resistant, I'm cauterized, I'm killed steel.

That's better. Much stronger now. Movement in the shadows, scuttling along the rat runs. Warren of buildings opposite the river. Behind that, the patchwork city. Moon so high up it was bound to drop. Traffic soft and muted behind me, like a grieving widow on Christmas. No cops yet. That was good. I wasn't interested in roasted pig. I was saving my bullets for the rats.

I tottered into the dim city, past the ruined mastodon of a bridge. Men crumpled up like camp chairs in the lees. Drunks with secrets that would break your heart. We all have those. Joan was mine.

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She was just a kid when we met, couldn't have been more than seventeen. But she was bigger than that. Tougher. Felt like a saddle horse so she left the bruising family in Milwaukee and hightailed it to New Jersey. Never could figure why she'd picked the Sewer State, but she said she was happy here. Got a job, took care of herself, was working toward her GED. When I met her she was the girl in the ticket booth beneath the marquee. I remember the movie the first night we met, *Bikini Girls in Tompkins Square Park Versus Frankenhooter*. One hell of a flick. One hell of a girl. She looked like something that, once unwrapped, had to be eaten. And believe me I was starving. So I asked her out. At first she said no but I was persistent. I exhausted all the techniques in the book and might have written a few new ones. Finally she said yes.

We had a peaceful life. On Saturdays we'd take the branch-line down to the shore and hole up in this glass-walled fish house overlooking a riprap jetty. We'd tuck into a bait of buttery clams and pot lobster and watch the sunlight over the finning water turn into shot silk. I was never much for yapping but that was all right because she did enough talking for the both of us. She grew to appreciate my silence. She said that that was part of my beauty, which used to make me laugh. She said that the world was already too much noise. So I never had to tell her that I was a gun for hire, and I kept her to myself. I knew the risks. I'd go on a contract for a few days and come back to the apartment to find her perched on the window-seat, sucking on a Virginia Slim, face full of sunlight, and I'd look at the flocked wallpaper, the Tiffany lamps, the davenport and Moroccan rug I put in just for her, and I'd know that I had all I needed in this world.

But there were enemies hungry for the double-cross. The break-back trap was set and I walked right into it like a first-grader. Love can make you stupid. The Detroit contract was a dupe. I gunned down the wrong shylock. But they thought they could rip out my spine. They didn't know me. I gutted two of the galoots sent to mow me down and hopped the red-eye to Jersey.

It was Mata Rata that wrote the papers on me: boss of the east side, face like burnt toast, rumored to have four-year old children imported to his bed.

The man I was on my way to kill. The man who had taken my Joan.

In our apartment I found tracks of blood. And a message scrawled on the window glass: LETS HAVE A TALK. I didn't need a psychic to tell me who it was. I ransacked the apartment, looking for clues, praying that she was still alive. That was when the bantamweight crept out of the closet.

My throat was constricted with speakerwire, my head snapped back, my eyes began to bulge. Fiery pain surged along my side and a chill moistness slugged to my hip.

I knew that'd I'd been stuck and the blood was flowing. I couldn't breathe. Lucky for me the bantamweight screwed up. Tale of the tape: a guy his size should have known better. He should have bore up against a hard surface, something to keep him propped. I made sure he paid for his mistake. Before the waves of black could pattern over my skull, I used a sideboard for leverage and jolted back with my elbow. We crashed against a wall and hit the floor, the speakerwire got loose, I rolled. Before he could shunt aside I shot out with my heel and his nose burst like a Jersey tomato. He screamed hoarsely, capturing the gush between cupped hands, and I trundled behind the davenport and shucked out my gun and without looking I fired through the upholstery. There was a pocking sound, a bursting grunt, and I slumped against the davenport with one hand at my throat and the other pressed against my side. When I could steady my breathing I crawled over to the bantamweight like a marine slogging beneath enemy wires. But he wasn't a threat. He was bleeding so heavily I knew he was never going to leave this place again unless it was in a covered gurney. *He* knew it because I told him as much. But after what I did to him to get the answers that I needed, I know that he'd wished that he'd died sooner. I had some fun using the same knife on him that he had used on me. I even learned something about gross anatomy.

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Mata Rata had considered using me as muscle. That's why he left the message. He'd heard about my skills. Joan was supposed to be a bargaining chip. But then he had other ideas. He figured that eventually I'd want revenge. Mata Rata was right. Only he should have sent a hundred guys after me instead of one. Because once I'm on the hunt nothing can stop me short of a nuclear storm.

The night had been fat with rain so everything was shiny and slick. The clouds looked complicated, like snails on a circuit board. The city quivered beneath the plane-shaking sky. Sleeved tenements, crumbling buildings, SRO slops. I pushed off a stanchion, almost blind with pain. I punched myself in the face to keep from passing out. Don't give in. Get tough.

I'm strontium, I'm barium. I'm flame-sprayed. I'm more gangsta than Godzilla.

Ready to move. A pickled barfly snoozed it off against a lamppost. I saw two goons dressed in evening black guarding the front of the greystone building: Mata Rata's lair. In a stride I plucked the homburg off the barfly's head and pushed it down over my eyes. I made like a man who's had eight too many. I was so woozy it was easier than you'd think.

The chill gleam of a Ferris wheel loomed beyond the turreted building, casting fretwork shadows. I danced in between the lattices, to the goons' amusement. When I got too close they decided to get cute. They slued me about and sent me off with a kick. I pretended to fall. They had a good laugh. I don't think anyone heard the chatter of gunfire, not even

them. They fell into each other sidewise, heads crashing before kissing the concrete. Lazy smoke drifted out of both barrels. I let the guns cool a bit and watched the goons bleed. I believe they had a good skull session.

I opened the sheet-steel door. Reggaeton rushed out of the house speakers. Dark and bony men in teardrop hats crowded the plank bar. Safelights clung to the rafters like bad teeth from worse gums. The room smelled like a pay toilet in a Queens of Salsa concert. Two gray lumps played jiggly on the bar. Applying the same passion to their movements as I did when I shook the last droplets of piss from my dick.

A waitress with a two-ton ass approached me. She looked as if she'd been yanked out of the wash and worn wet. She started when she saw me. I got suspicious. She led me through a narrow aisle, down three railed steps, past tables on which smoldered ashtrays montezumaed with cigars and cigarette butts. I looked behind me to see if there was any more blood but the floors were all shadow. I scraped the L-chair away from the roughcast wall, growled for a bottle of Quisqueya. She gave me a look I couldn't read. There were bruises on her face, hard to notice in the ox-blood light.

My mind was restless, white with pain. Focus. Don't fade out. Fortify.

I pretended to eyeball the scratch n'sniff pussy. Mata Rata was somewhere in the building. I needed to know where. I heard a voice that sounded as if it was half-past orgasm. The waitress slid the bottle of beer toward me. There was a message in her eyes. She turned her back. The beer went down like cold slurry. The label peeled off in my hands. I could barely make out the scrawl.

#### RIGHT OF BATH ROOM DOOR

I silently thanked her for putting her life on the line. She must have been a border refugee. There were a lot of those, left to rot in some motel stash house then put to work slinging booze or riding cock. Learn the hard way that America is just a lie. Strip away the varnish and all you find is dumbshow.

More reason to make Mata Rata suffer.

The door was where she said it would be, painted the same color as the panelling. I pushed it open, into new darkness. The bar noises clapped out. Deep silence. Another form of beauty. I followed a tight stairway, waisted about with chaser lights. Cool, smelled like coppery water. My footsteps rang hollow. I began to hear the distant throb of drums, faint whistling, like something wrung out of a pipe. I'd heard rumors that Mata Rata was a voodoo man. Devoured the flesh of the children he claimed to love.

I clopped down a corridor. The light here began to resolve itself, streaky with smoke. I led with my guns. A loud stamping joined the piping music, tam-tam drums.

An iron door brimming with light. Ajar. The boils of smoke made me squint. I stepped through, into the light.

The music was almost deafening. Well-dressed people with their backs to me, pumping their fists, roaring. I hid my guns, moved in closer. Barefoot men with bowed legs faced each other down in a sandy canvass ring. They were dressed in some kind of ceremonial clothing, sashes tied about their waist. There was fresh blood on their shirts. The men crabbed toward each other, measured to the piped music, stamping with the tam-tam drums, striking out with their fists and snapping their jaws at each other like animals. Raising dust and startling back the crowd.

One man stood out. Savile Row suit, impeccable shoes, a gentleman's hat. Only the face didn't belong, rough and ridden like aggregate sand.

Mata Rata.

Leave it to a rat to think that he was safe in his lair. Now was my chance.

I sidled along, easing past the galvanized crowd. Getting closer. I could see the pachuco cross dangling from his throat. Jaw in a frenzy.

The battling men locked together in a strange spasm. They skimmed the dust with a swerve of the leg, chopping at the air with the flats of their hands. One of the men darted and seized the other by his throat and jerked with his teeth and the wounded man batted him away. Blood spurted through his fingers, dousing a woman in furs.

The crowd exploded.

I saw three men grappling toward me, pushing through the crowd. Gun barrels facing the ceiling. Had to hurry.

I tapped Mata Rata on the shoulder. He turned with a question on his lips.

When he saw me the words paused at his tongue like a fat hairy spider. I lit the match that would turn it to ash. A bloom of fire spat out of the barrel and his face disintegrated. I shot him again and a pulpy weltering mess crouched between his shoulders.

The crowd stampeded, bearing the three men with guns away. I heeled close to the walls. Then I slumped.

Lost too much blood. I tried to stand and I couldn't. The man whose throat had been

ripped watched me with glazed eyes. I sympathized. It's like my father used to say:  
Empesaste en Guatelmala, y acabaste en Guatalpeor.

I'm sorry Joan. I did my best.

The noise was receding, but not the light. All was transformed into silence. I saw my Joan sitting by a window, framed within the heartshaped light. She smiled and all was silence.

My beauty, my only beauty.

There is an absoluteness in silence. There is virtue in shut-the-fuck up. Joan was right.

We are the noise.

# Pressure Drop

by Lenea Grace, MFA in Creative Writing, Poetry, NSGS

Inspired by *Frames and Ellipses*, Robert Mangold, 1988

2010-2011 Second Prize Creative Response (tie)

Take a glass milk bottle  
and drop a lit match down  
the windowed shaft.  
Take a hardboiled man,  
peel him, and balance  
him upon the mouth-  
piece.

His pelvis will meet  
the opening, torso  
and limbs shoot  
east and west. Tap  
his left foot and he will spin,  
smoldered rod and flesh  
and glass.

He is no weathervane,  
caught unawares by the high  
pressure system that circles wrists,  
grazes buttocks and spine.  
No match for the match,  
burnt and low, feverish.

You cannot adjust  
these temperatures, outside  
and inside. You cannot stop  
reverse ignition. You will not  
tell him to jump. You will  
not watch. When it happens,  
you will not watch.

And it will happen.  
The bottle will strangle  
his size, distort  
his body: a muscled parabola,  
sucking down and down,  
snapping vertebrae, folding,  
palms touching palms,

necks and shoulders.  
Shoulders and necks  
and shoulders will catch  
the necks and the necks  
will catch the shoulders.  
Pop and release.

# Bird's Eye

by Tikva Hecht, MA in Philosophy  
Inspired by Whitfield Lovell, "Uncle", 1990  
2010-2011 Second Prize Creative Response (tie)

She called him the disappearing man.

"Everyday, something else about you goes," she'd laugh, picking a stray hair from his shoulder or an eyelash from the side of his nose. She liked something about his disappearing. It meant he was still there, not like the others who left without notice. Only one had actually left her like that, maybe two. "But that's all it takes," she would tell you if you called her on it, laughing again. "I am the regurgitating woman," she might add, not sure if that was what she meant. She meant she stayed put, popping up again and again just where she was asked last to be. She didn't mean to be boring, laughing still while she explained, she just was as she was and she couldn't see the point of being any different. Her imagination though was not without its skill, laying out just how a man or a woman, yes even him, no not her, could leave just because. It made it easier then that he didn't offer false promises. He was disappearing clear as day, and she accepted it after some time, knew she would eventually be alone, just as she knew he wasn't quite gone as long as he was fading.

He, on the other hand, had reservations about his condition. He didn't share them liberally, considering it silly to complain over what was obvious and seemingly beyond anyone's control. Still, it seemed strange. He would have liked to know at least where it was he was disappearing to. Why he, specifically, was struck with this odd happenstance - that question for the most part he avoided even in his own mind. He did not like thinking he, meaning the parts of himself he did not share with humanity as a whole, had anything to do with his body's alteration. As a teenager he had indulged in fantasies that he was special. They embarrassed him still to think about, especially how he might to this day enjoy them if he let himself. But he had learnt in good time, as most men must he guessed, taking only a generic sort of pride in his ability to relate well with reality, that he was in all significant ways just as most men are.

"The formality of the human condition," he'd say, referring to ideas he garnered from the right crowd of contemporary thinkers, "is beautiful, each of us filled in by circumstance and scratches history leaves behind, but nonetheless, all at base a similar form."

"And that is all that is necessary," he'd internally add, reassuring himself that love and happiness were themselves a sort of human formality, guaranteed to some and not others coincidentally. "But we're all the same when it comes to capacity," he concluded, meaning the capacity to grab for something or be satisfied. This sentiment was the reason for his

reliability. Lives, he knew, were all variations of the same, so he might as well continue with the one he had started. And he would have, if only he did not begin to disappear.

The first symptom, the shedding hair, was actually a comfort. He was not a suave man by his own evaluation, not one for too much excitement. He still had his fantasies, as he had had all his life, but he only blushed over that young one in which he imagined the others coming true. What he really wanted, as he told the world, was to be as he was: a one woman man, just lucky enough there was one woman foolish enough to want him. Unfortunately, with a head of auburn waves among other good features, he was unusually attractive and women's willingness called his bluff, leaving him disheveled and afraid. But a receding hairline, though she called it sophisticated, gave him just the anchor for his insecurity. It let him walk away, not afraid just defeated, the way most men are time and again. Now when he said all he had was all he needed -just her, a good woman used to her flawed man, victims of time as are we all, and he was used to her - his consolation had authenticity to it. They could be simple people now, loving each other for what was on the inside. If this was the only toll disappearing took, it hardly would have mattered but the disappearing didn't stop.

Generally adept on his feet and not particularly clumsy, not more so than most, he began to find himself scraping his elbow or banging his toes against almost any corner, stair or doorpost he needed to pass. His fingers too became accident prone, finding themselves daily too close to the edge of a knife or just inside a heavy door. The thought crossed his mind first metaphorically during an inner rant brought on by disgust with the situation: "It is as though the ends of my limbs have gone missing!" At one time he might have been amused with such a creative phrase, sharing it with her because she liked words and he liked how she laughed at the things she liked. But this thought gave him an eery sensation of knowing too much and too little all at once, and he didn't think he would like her laughing at it.

Of course, after some time - as it often is, he vaguely acknowledged, for most men with most things - he grew accustomed to the fading away of the thinnest edges of his skin, the ones most apt at getting caught in crossfires, and when he finally mentioned to her what he suspected was the problem, he could say it without calling for any exclamation mark. He simply said it and heard his voice go about it in an entirely efficient manner. It made him think, he didn't know why, of how he liked to watch the delivery men outside the grocery move boxes of apples onto a conveyer belt that brought them from the truck into the store to be placed in bins and eventually, for a few of these fruits, to end in his bag. His body was disappearing he told her, but it was just a body doing something slightly unusual, and in each delivery there were among those many apples ones that fell to the floor.

She did not believe him, not at first, and not fully for a while. Mainly because she had known men who left and they always took their bodies with them. Her good imagination for the unknown faltered when it came to taking what was already heavy with precedent and flipping it sideways. No, she was quite certain, men did not really disappear. Sure his hair made it's way to his shoulders as often as she flicked them clean, and sure sometimes, well, sometimes he looked

strangely gaunt, and, but this must have been in bad light, his nose or ear or pinky finger, would sometimes look, look, as though it weren't there at all. But men, in a bodily sense, speaking strictly of the facts, did not disappear.

So she called him the disappearing man and laughed, meaning mostly something that had nothing to do with what was happening to him. In fact what she suspected was that slowly slowly his body would be all she'd be left with. She watched him work diligently to procure just the bout of simple happiness normally recognized for being good at keeping men away from mourning lost expectations, such as the ones he assumed most men, now and again, do fall lazily and soberly into desiring, as even he, more so when he was younger, did occasionally desire and mourn. She liked watching him grow used to this happiness and used to her, liked knowing her body, also not going anywhere, if anything, just making more claims to the space allotted it, excited him only so much, feeling him touch it only so firmly. And if at times he asked for something out of the routine, getting creative as men do during play, what he came up with was never very taxing, never more than any woman could give. Desire is what separates us, she knew, because a man had left her once when he desired something different. But the disappearing man let his desire disappear and so his body would stay with her. There was something she liked about this. It felt nice to think maybe then she could disappear too and still not have to be alone.

So she called him the disappearing man and laughed. She liked to laugh, it made her feel loose, like she could be distant even from her own self and nothing bad would come of it. It made her feel that maybe there was nothing to all this pleasure and pain she ran after or away from, nothing much to expect and nothing much to regret. He liked how she laughed too, thinking often she laughed enough for the both of them, thinking time and again it was good she laughed for him, at him, or he would be concerned and think something was terribly wrong, and he would desire to be ordinary and his desire would separate him from everyone. But she laughed at his disappearance so spaciouly it made him think maybe it was just what happens to some men. "Probably men disappear all the time," he thought, "so often we just don't talk about it."

However, when his torso would not materialize for a week near the end of March they decided it was time to seek medical assistance. It was nearly summer after all and they enjoyed days at the beach as much as anyone. A man without a middle would get them talked about though, as would false modesty so there was no way to cover it up. The doctors did not know what to do. One said he did not see the problem, equally not noticing his patients did not enjoy the pun. They laughed afterwards though at his coffee stained bark of a laugh. Doctors do not know everything they said, continuing to go to one after another since they were not going to the beach anyway.

"Maybe some men just disappear," he said. She told him she didn't know that that wasn't the case but that she did miss putting her arms around his waist. "Well," he said, "just sling them around my neck for now." Which worked until that disappeared too. The neck, the elbows, one thigh, all the toes, both earlobes and the lips all invisible one breezy summer day.

After that, they touched much less often and talked almost never. He wondered if things would be different if he at least still had his wavy hair. She assured him that had nothing to do with it. It's just difficult, they learnt, to keep up commitment to an inside that had so little outside to overlook. One day he came back from the office and all there was to him was his suit. "If you leave that suit," she told him, "it'll mean you've left me." He left it on. Not only for her, but because he did not know where enough of his body was to undress it and worried even if he managed that, he would not be able to find himself again to put the suit back on. He imagined how the suit would lie then inanimate on the floor hovered over by a dizzy emptiness unrecognizable even to itself. He was an it now, everything as much as nothing. "It is maybe something of an accomplishment," he thought, "to be so indiscreet, so universal." But no one else was quite as common and it left him a little alone. He fantasized, if only his skin would come back, they could be ordinary in their own private way, like everyone else again.

It was useless though to pretend forever. The suit became worn and she grew afraid if he moved around too much it would tear. She asked him to stand still and suggested the backyard, explaining that this way he could watch the birds. He had liked, she remembered him mentioning, watching birds when he was young. Compared to other desires, it was the sort she would laugh at ordinarily, but she didn't think to compare him anymore.

So he, it, watched the birds and thought about flying, feeling sometimes as though he were flying himself. Or floating perhaps was the better word. The truth was, his thoughts relied less and less on words as his mouth more and more could not support them. Sensations instead waved through him, or what he took for himself, which was the space around the suit, a space spreading daily so that soon it reached the top of the trees and deep into where the earth breathed heavily, moist and dark brown.

"I'm expanding, like the universe," he thought just before words made no more sense to him at all. She would have laughed at that he knew, missing her laughter that was now indistinguishable from a hodgepodge of noises he traced back to the house, or was it the house behind. Noises, like colors, tastes and touches seemed not to know anymore where to enter him or when to pass him by. One or two snagged on the suit, but so many more got through they soon covered him and then slipped right into him so he was not covered by anything and could not sense his own beginning. It was not long until only this single strong sensation of being nothing and nowhere told him he was still something, still somewhere, just as much as everyone is. He was in the suit, wasn't he? Yes, of course, an unexceptional man in an old suit whose face the birds flew right by, taking his expressions into the air on their wings.