

Fiction, Poetry & Photo Contest Winners

Arizona Attorney would like to thank all the contestants who participated in the 2000 Fiction, Poetry & Photo contest. Be sure to enjoy reading this year's talented winners.

First Place, Poems

Barbara Ann Atwood

Reverie

Sometimes the stones on the granite
marker

Display a new order
The smooth black pebble I carried
home from Italy

near OUR HEARTS one day
below FOREVER the next

sometimes the silk bouquet
has been rearranged
the blood-red geranium now front
facing, the hollyhock behind

a dried eucalyptus sprig
suddenly resting at your feet

small movement of things
on the still surface of the earth
reversals in the wind, a new cast to
the shadows

these define you now,
ripples in the darkening air

one night I visited you
and found a flame burning
above the place where I imagined
your eyes to be

the small white talon of fire
as pure and insistent as a child's soul

but the flame wasn't a flame at all,
only the quivering glint of the moon
on the curve of a seashell someone had
left there

like the pearled nautilus we came
upon
that morning in Kauai

when the ocean was thrilling and new
and the cliffs rose grandly before us,
spired castles with chambers we could
not see

First Place, Photography
Jeff Buchanan





Second Place, Photography
Jay McEwen

Third Place, Poems
Robert K. Reges Jr.

Second Place, Poems
Gary H. Fry

If The Wind Could

If the wind could write music,
 It would not howl with wintry
 sounds. If I could love you,
 I would play pianissimo.
 I would be the wind moving
 softly along the pine,
 touching every branch.

Sunrise on I-10

Hurling through the desert
 the rainbow roof of The Thing
 lures me from the Dragoons
 its billboards promising rattlesnake eggs
 and other wonders.
 As a child, I begged my dad
 "let's stop, see what it is."
 "Just a tourist trap," he muttered
 and we drove past.
 Older,
 you and I
 entered that tomb of the unknown Thing.
 I don't remember much
 I think it was a mummy
 We didn't buy any belt buckles.
 Today, having fulfilled that mission
 having lost that mystery
 my cruise-controlled Buick wings me past
 to Willcox, beer and gasoline.
 There is something cathartic about a road trip,
 even in this seventy-five mile-per-hour machine.
 Gazing at the freight trains
 this windless, rainless, beige-on-brown landscape,
 I see your face
 and miss you terribly
 as you often ask.
 You, caring for our son
 leading the life we have crafted...
 Finding a wayside phone
 I sing you this song of the morning
 to warm you
 as the sun warms me
 in its ascending strength.

Honorable Mentions

Poetry

Kerrie M. Droban

Photography

Jeffrey Rich

Fiction, Poetry & Photo Contest

First Place, Fiction—Guy C. Fimbres

Accompaniment to a Night Sky

Sometimes, usually at the turn of season, when winter either begins or ends, I am driven into the mountains. The time is right when the weather blows cold and clear, there is no moon and a tightness sighs into my chest in the night, waking me and stealing my dreams. I abandon my family to the malls and television and visiting friends, load just enough food and water into the truck, and go. I drive until the road ends, or a locked gate blocks the way. From there, I walk until I find the right spot. Sometimes, it is almost dark before I find what I need to be. The right place is always in the open, high enough so that the cold winds ripples up the ridges and draws, hissing through the sleepless grasses and rattling the forlorn cactus skeletons and ocotillo. Then I wait for the stars.

When I was little, you could see the stars from the street in front of my house. But the city doubled, then

tripled in size, bringing in the lights that washed the stars from the night sky until only the brightest stood out. The lights tamed the great and little bears, watered down the Milky Way, and made the neighbors, Venus and Mars, hard to tell from the falling stars on the wings of Boeings wheeling through the evening and into the airport.

Truthfully, I did not really notice. There was one night in Mexico when I was 17. Drunk, I wandered away from a beach party until the bonfire was buried behind some dunes and the outgoing tide clutched at my ankles and tried to pull the sound out from under my feet. I looked up and was nearly knocked onto my back as the host of stars thundered down into my eyes. Used only to the weak, tame skies over my street, my eyes could not close, and I could almost hear the voices of the stars over the waves. A dark-eyed girl from Oklahoma named

Jennifer had also strayed from the fire and the stars were obscured by other sights, although I never saw her again.

I didn't learn much about the stars except for what Mike Riordan taught me. When I bounced out of college with a diploma, but without a job, I fell back on what carpentry I had learned from my father and started working with some cabinetmakers who were mostly bikers. I was the only college boy, except for Dan who had left UC-Something or other after one semester in 1967. And Mike Riordan.

Mike was not a college-educated man, but he knew more books and science and philosophy than almost anyone I had met. But, he talked about it rarely. After wiping a day of sweat and sawdust from our hands with the dew of cold cans of beer, the talk never turned to Pascal, or Sufism or entropy.

Riordan was in his 40s, but already starting to take on that wispy appearance that some men do as they approach old age; as if rather than dying, they will simply dry up sufficiently to blow away, take root in some foreign soil, and sprout into some new life form.

Tendrils of steel gray hair wandered from his temples, making him appear the more disheveled in spite of his cleanly bald crown glistening under the sunburn-flecked skin. His beard was going white. Only five and half feet tall and wiry, he was much stronger than he looked. Riordan didn't talk while he worked, and whether he was measuring, sanding or cutting it was always with an exquisite slowness and one eye squinted and his head cocked to one side as if he could hear any unevenness in the

Third Place, Photography—Jeff Buchanan



wood as he shaped and shaved it.

I worked with him for most of the summer before I found out he was a poet. And a convict. One night, after we worked late to fabricate a kitchen island for a dentist's wife, we sat out behind the shop pitching our crushed empties into the trash barrels lined with sawdust and scrap. Everyone else had taken off, and we were left to clean up. It must have been because I was college that he told me about being a poet. The other three in the shop would have been more impressed by prison.

Riordan clanked an empty off the side of the trashcan. "You ever read any poetry?" he asked me.

"Some," I told him. Part of the reason I was still hammer and nails was the lit degree.

"Who ya like?"

"Poe. Yeats. Shakespeare. And this guy Alan Dugan."

"Dugan's a cranky bastard."

"Yeah, but he's right there, from the gut, you know."

"Yeah." Riordan took another swipe at the floor with the broom and opened the last beer. "I taught poetry once."

"No shit."

And so he told me. Poetry was born into Mike Riordan's life in the Massachusetts State Penitentiary in 1964. He was in his third of what ended up being seven years, for manslaughter. As he told it the first time, when he was 18 he threw a guy down an elevator shaft for trying to rape his girlfriend. Later, he told me slightly different versions, but I always preferred this version; there was more nobility to it.

"By then I was 22, and starting to sink into being a hard guy, but I got hepatitis and was quarantined in the hospital ward. The prison chaplain was from Southy too, and started to look in on me 'cause I was from the same old neighborhood. He was a lovely old guy.

"One day the priest left this book of poetry with me. The poet was Richard Lovelace, a cavalier who backed King Charles, before he lost his head

in 1649. For being on the wrong side, see, this Lovelace guy was also locked up.

"I was locked in the infirmary all day, and there was no one to talk to, but Lovelace's poetry struck no chord in me at first. They were just a bunch of hard-to-understand words that rhymed. The kind of crap you think they shove down your throat in school just to piss you off.

"But like I said, I was bored stiff, so I read the notes on Lovelace's life, and they let him out of prison without cuttin' off his head, and I guess he went back to his family. And I started to go through the list of poems to find something, I mean I figured the priest, he had something in mind, right? And then I found it.

"I don't know if it was what the father wanted me to find, but it was what I needed to find; this poem: 'To Althea, from prison. I was missing my girl. She still wrote, and said she was waiting, but I wasn't sure. Three years is a long fuckin' time when you're 20; and seven years might as well be life. And even though I'd turned myself into this ice pick of a guy, I was scared most of the time. And this poem, it touched that last place I was saving, like there was this one candle, and the idea that she would wait, and I would have a real life someday. And that save me."

Riordan crumpled the last can and belched. I was at the door and he hit the lights, leaving only the dull glow of the red "exit" sign over the door. As he walked toward me, barely visible, he recited,

Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage;
Much innocent and quiet take
That for an hermitage;
If I have freedom in my love
And in my soul am free,
Angels alone that soar above,
Enjoy such liberty.

Riordan got his high-school diploma through correspondence, and was admitted to college after his release. The girl didn't wait for him, but waited until a month before he was released to write and say she was

married and had two small children and was moving to Ohio. Riordan said she had given him a gift maybe greater than her love, and that was hope.

By the time he was released, Riordan had started a biannual poetry review at the prison, and one of his poems got published in a magazine; it was about grass in the prison yard. He worked, he wrote, he got accepted to a graduate program in California. His life, he thought, had changed.

But the mean little ice pick that he had given birth in prison still lived inside him. One night in Oakland in 1975 after being fired as a cook, a fight with his wife and nine hours of drinking, the ice pick escaped and took a pool cue to the head of a 200-pound longshoreman in a bar. Mike shattered both the longshoreman's hands, jellied one eye and permanently slurred the man's speech.

A judge who looked long at the manslaughter conviction, but who had never read a poem sentenced a remorseful Mike Riordan to 12 years. His wife left him; she felt it was kinder to know she would not wait. Riordan read. Riordan wrote. Riordan was rejected by hundreds of magazines and serious journals. Some submissions returned unopened; the return address of Chino was enough. Riordan began an appeal, using the prison law library, but never finished it. He organized another literary journal; this one a quarterly. Eventually, a professor at Berkeley noticed. Riordan got published again. Riordan participated by mail in symposia on poetry. He once appeared in a documentary. Academics and writers wrote letters to the parole board, to the governor, for his release.

After six years, spring and hope arrived in this way. Riordan was up for parole. Another poem was due for publication. There was a teaching offer from a community college. At his parole hearing he would have the chance to touch a woman, another poet with whom he'd been corresponding, for the first time without a

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First-Place Fiction

(Continued from page 21)

sheet of steel mesh between their skins.

A loud, fat guard named Levon came into Riordan's cell the day before the hearing and began to search. And taunt. He burned one of Riordan's poems. He smacked Riordan across the face. His cheeks burned, his fists clenched, Riordan said nothing. Levon found a letter from Riordan's poetress. Levon began to read it aloud. Levon insulted her, talked about what a woman like that really needed. Riordan said, and did, nothing. Levon flicked the striker wheel on his Ronson once more. Indidious flames hissed and crackled up from the corner of her letter. Levon laughed.

Riordan held the ice pick in check, but not enough. Riordan crushed out the flame in the palm of Levon's hand, burning them both. Levon yelped, and clubbed Riordan to the ground. Some Vaseline and a bandage was all Levon needed to fix him up. Riordan took 11 stitches. And he got no parole the next day. He served three more years.

After his release, Riordan did teach as part-time faculty. But he moved from school to school. He never touched the hand or face of his poetress. She had stopped writing to him. The drinking slowly worsened, and it was too easy to drink and teach. The only time he could stay off, Riordan once said, was when he had his eye on perfection. He could only do it with the words of a poem in his head or with wood and tools in his hands.

He told his story in small pieces: at the end of days, over six- and 12-packs, or at lunch over brown-bag sandwiches. But the nights we locked up late, especially as the days got shorter, belonged to the stars.

Riordan, in his internal journey toward freedom, had become intimate with the night sky. He could point directly to stars or systems we couldn't even see in the neon crowded sky above the Pizza Hut sign next door. Sometimes he would revise, saying something like, "Wait, it's August,

so it would be a little up and over to the right."

Riordan knew the names of the stars, and the stories of gods and heroes for whom they were named. He knew which constellation formed a Greek goddess, and which stars were the eyes of a giant, thrown there by the Norse god who killed him. I stood there and listened to Riordan, blinking up into the dull black sky, amazed by stars and planets I could not see, but which I could feel precisely, because Riordan saw them so clearly, whether from memory, or from some other place deep inside.

Late in September, Riordan missed three days. When he came back he didn't talk about where he'd been. Didn't say much at all. It went that way for a week. At the end of the day, he just swept up and left. No beer, no talk about the sky or anything else.

On Friday, as he got the broom, I handed him a beer. He handed it back to me.

"You doing alright?" I asked.

"Pretty much."

"You sure?"

"Any of your business?"

"Just trying to help."

"Thanks, but it's nothing you can do." He swept briskly. I went back to putting tools away and locking cupboards. Riordan stayed quiet for the next month or so, although he slowly started acting more like himself. He wasn't drinking, but he was talkative at times.

One night around nine the phone rang. Riordan was asking for a ride. In the months I'd know him, I'd never heard him ask for anything. And I had no idea he knew my phone number. My girlfriend, another dark-eyed girl named Louise, told me by whispers and semaphore not to go. I told Mike I'd be right there. He was at 7-Eleven. As I searched for keys and socks, she was zipping her leather jacket. I looked up from the bed. "I'm going with you," she said. She'd never met Mike, and I guess she hadn't heard most of what I told her about him. From the tightness in her mouth and the stark flips of her head as she ran a

brush through her hair though, I knew she had caught the part about Riordan being an ex-con.

When we pulled into the 7-Eleven parking lot, I could see Riordan through the window. He was browsing the dime shopper ads. From the car, I could see his face was redder than I'd seen it before. I left Lu in the car and went in. The first thing he did was ask if I had some cash. I did, so he asked if he could buy some things. I could see Lu making angry eyebrow faces at me from the car, and I just wanted to get out of there, so I said sure. He fetched a court of Gatorade from the cooler and went to the front counter where he asked for a pint of vodka. I paid, he scooped up the bag and we went out to the car.

He introduced himself to Lu as he slid into the back seat. He started giving directions. We drove south, past the freeway, until he told us to take a left at a Stop-n-Go. The bag rustled as the car lurched onto the dark side street. "Man," Riordan said from the back seat, "Antabuse is a bitch." Lu glanced over angrily at me.

Mike guided us to the single-wide he shared with his girlfriend. From the back seat he urged us to come in. With Lu's nails lightly digging at my arm, we tried to say no. He insisted, over and over. Rather than get him excited, we finally gave in. His girlfriend was not home. As he turned on the light, I could see the vodka bottle was empty, and the Gatorade bottle he'd dumped it into was half empty too. His face was ruddy from the drink. The place was strewn with books and papers. He scooped up Melville, Neruda and Jacqueline Susann to clear a place for us to sit. Lu kept me between Mike and herself.

Mike started talking about his girlfriend, and the fight they had. She was mad at him for getting in trouble, he said. He'd walked the dog to the Stop-n-Go for milk and smokes. On the way out some kids sharing forties had been bunched around the phones. As Mike crossed the parking lot a rock sailed from the clump of punks, provoking a yelp from his dog. "I know it

was dumb, but it made me mad.” He turned and walked up to the boys. Two backed up a step. Two just watched him come. One puffed up and took a half-step forward. Prison had taught Mike more about animal behavior than zoologists get in 50 years of watching. He stepped to the puffed up kid. He saw the rock in the kid’s hand as he tried to hide it behind his leg, where it could still come out swinging.

Mike and the kid had words. About six of them. Mike was close enough to smell the malt liquor that came out with the kid’s “F--- you.” The kid’s eyes swiveled in their sockets, checking to see if he was backed. His off shoulder rolled forward. Mike knew the rock in the other hand was coming up. He grabbed the kid by the shirt, butted him in the face and shoved him back. The kid fell back, arm still swinging. The two who’d backed off backed up further. They weren’t going to play. The other two were thinking about it. The kid with the rock was getting his balance. Mike’s work knife came out. It only had a two-inch blade, but at least it was something. Mike had seen what a rock or the fists and feet of three men can do. Stone boy gathered to charge, the rock raised in his hand. Mike stepped forward and planted the blade of the knife into the meaty part of the kid’s thigh. He shrieked and fell to the green painted sidewalk. Mike held onto the knife, and held its bloodied blade before the other two, who were still blinking. They decided to help their friend stop the bleeding. The whole thing was over in less than 15 seconds. Mike walked his dog home through the dirt lot and the neighboring trailer park.

He waited for the police all week. They didn’t come. He was still waiting. It was only a matter of time, he said. The clerk at the store knew him, knew he lived in the area. A third assault, and he still had the last six months of parole hanging over him. It would be a long prison sentence, maybe the rest of his life. Men over 40 did badly in prison. He stopped talking and stared into the nearly

empty bottle of green stuff.

His head jerked up. Lu jumped an inch. "Did you hear that?" I listened for voices or scuffling feet; anything associated with the police. I was getting worried myself. "They're back." He was up and putting his jacket back on. "There's this family of coyotes out across the road. They're hunting. Come on."

For a moment, I thought Lu might be right to be frightened. Then I heard it too. First one yip, then another, answering. He was at the open door. "Come on." Lu was rooted to her chair, a tuft of my pant leg clutched in her hand. I took it and pulled her up. I told her it was alright. By the time I managed to get out the door, Mike was already disappearing into the darkness surrounding the small pool of porch light.

I followed. Lu tried to hold me back, but missed her grab at my sleeve. As I stepped into the moonless night, she nearly ran into me. I lost sight of Mike, and as I stepped forward, I

could barely see the path between dark clumps of bushes. I went slow, thinking of cactus, and grateful that it was too cold for snakes. I could feel Lu behind me, staying close out of fear, but kept back by her anger at me. But something stronger pulled me further into the dark.

I almost fell once. I caught a glimpse of something moving ahead. As I kept going, I opened my mouth to call to Mike and get him to wait up. Before I could make a sound, I realized he was standing next to me. I heard him shush me, as quietly as breathing, and saw his raised hand, palm open. As I froze, I heard it; the yips of the coyotes. One was fairly close. The other yips were distant and seemed to move over the next few minutes.

I heard Lu make a shiver sound behind me. I joined her. Mike pointed up to the sky. "Orion," he said, "is right there, just to the left." He took in a deep breath. "And over there, is Cassiopeia. You should never pass up

a sky like this. In the city, you almost never see the sky. That's one thing about this neighborhood; it's pretty lousy, but it doesn't have any stinkin' streetlights." As he pointed to the stars and told the stories behind their names, I forgot the cold, and I even felt Louise relax a little. We stood quietly for a few minutes. Even the coyotes had stopped. Mike exhaled deeply. "You never see the stars in prison."

We stood a few minutes, but Mike was restless now and shifted his feet. He apologized to Louise for dragging us out into the cold. "It's O.K.," she lied. He apologized twice more before we got back to the trailer. Before Mike could go back in, Louise said, "It's late. We should really let you get to bed." Mike looked into the empty trailer, as if he no longer wanted to go in.

"Yeah, well, thanks for coming to get me, and for the ride home." He shook my hand up and down five or six times, and reached out to shake Lu's, but she was already on her way

to the car.

"See you at work," I said.

"Yeah. Hey, thanks for letting me drag you around in the dark. I'm really sorry if it's gonna cause you trouble with your girl."

"It's not the first time. Don't worry about it."

"Well, tell her I said she's alright."

Louise and I drove home in silence. We barely spoke getting ready for bed. When I woke up the next morning, she was already gone to work. When I got to work, Mike wasn't there. He wasn't there the next day. After a week he was fired, even though no one talked to him to tell him. The next week Ace came in and said he'd gotten a call from Mike. Ace was a biker who'd done a couple years for auto theft in the 70s. Mike had called him collect and asked if he'd wire a few dollars to a Western Union in Wyoming. Ace took up a collection from us and later that morning snuck off to wire \$127.85 to Laramie.

I never heard anything more of

Mike Riordan. I lost touch with Louise long ago. I like to think Mike is somewhere in Wyoming still, with big, dark skies full of stars, and coyotes running free through the dark to sing him to sleep. It's unlikely; life doesn't work that way. When I think about it, I doubt he is still alive. Only other people's poems still lived in him when I knew him. Drink and the kind of meanness buried deep in him don't let people live for long, if it's all they have left.

So I try not to think of what probably happened to him. I think of what he taught me about the stars. They are still there. And so are the coyotes, if you go far enough from the city. I know that some have gone suburban and live off of golf courses and cemeteries, pirating garbage and pets. But they don't sing to each other, they just quietly pad through the concrete margins of our world. Like most people, I live there too. I work with paper instead of wood now, and have a house and family.

That's why, once in a while I leave my house, the concrete, the city. To find myself looking up at the stars as if they were new. As if I were new. And as if the world worked like it was supposed to. This year my son will be nine. When it turns cold this year, I will take him with me so he can feel the sharp wind in the dark, hear the singing of coyotes carried on it and see the stars for the first time. 🐾

Second Place, Fiction

Mark Siegel, "Job Hunt"

Third Place, Fiction

Richard A. Winkler, "Bears"

Editor's Note: Due to space constraints, the second- and third-place fiction winners' stories are not included in this issue. However, they can be read on the electronic version of Arizona Attorney on the State Bar's Web site at azbar.org.