

Intro To Flash Fiction For Poets

Nov 14th

Tania Hershman

When We Lived Inside the Alligator

by Robert Kloss (*Fractured West issue 2*)

Then I, without regard for the teeth and the humidity, the mist and the blood, the birds clawing and staring and screaming, moved my family into the alligator. We set up our lawn chairs and our cable television. My boy read his books by the bank of stagnant rivers, and here great clots of mosquitoes, black fogs of beetles and wasps, and here, yellow teeth perplexed with the sinew and last thoughts of bison and antelope. My mother-in-law brought her air machine, the ghastly steel device, the bottled gases of life, told me not to smoke near the canisters. I told her to worry over the acids dripping from the ceiling. "This alligator digests a buffalo a day," I warned her. The acids singed our clothes and burned our skulls. Soon we wore hardhats and leather jackets in the house.

My wife put up wallpaper, brown and yellow daffodils; through the days, radio blaring dead noise and static, radio flickering into life for a sparkle of Glenn Miller and then sputtering out, as if the alligator were made of lead. My wife wore her hair in curlers and spread the wallpaper along the alligator's pink flesh walls, while down the river floated husks of murdered bison and antelope.

When the wallpaper wilted for the humidity my wife burst into sobs. I held her and whispered, "There will be new wallpaper." I kissed her brow and wondered if I'd erred in moving us so far into the beast. She nodded absently, told me not to worry. Now my wife, my plucky girl, my cheerleader, my love, now she spent her days watching the television, the static and dead air of the television, from her recliner, as the blue upholstery decayed into brown. Soon, beetles devoured until the recliner became wood and wires, rust and rot, nails and strings.

"It is difficult to keep us all breathing," I almost admitted. "The air is different down here," I almost told them. The belly of a great murderous animal is a blast furnace, of course; geysers of steam.

My boy - we found my boy face down along the banks. His lungs burst for the fumes. My wife held him and called herself "mummy" for the first time for many centuries. My wife begged her boy to live again.

I could only wander the banks and wonder. Not to think. Not to think what I'd done. Not to think if his lungs were stronger, or the house were not living death.

Not to think of the man who moves his family into a crimson house - of the father who drifts his family into an alligator's mouth.

Glazed Sam Ligon

Stan got the doughnuts at six, ate four, and left two for Audrey. She finished her napoleon at ten-fifteen and said, "Don't think about that glazed, Stan."

A fly perched on the doughnut, rubbing its paws together, vomiting.

Stan picked up Metro and studied Saturday's crime.

Audrey brushed the travel section against the doughnut, contaminating it with newsprint. Then she put the paper down and walked to the bathroom. "Don't touch the doughnut," she said.

Her ass was enormous.

Stan took the doughnut from under the newspaper. He ran his tongue over it and put it back on the saucer. It would always come down to this last glazed hardening until evening, when she'd take one bite, declare it stale, and throw it away.

The waste was appalling.

"I'm just saying," Audrey said, "that if Jack and Karen come through we should see them."

She stood over the doughnut.

"What?" Stan said.

"You like Jack," Audrey said. She was rubbing lotion onto her hands that would spoil the glazing.

"Audrey," Stan said. "Nobody likes Jack."

Audrey sat. "We never do anything."

"If you don't eat that doughnut in five seconds," Stan said, "I will."

"Don't touch it," Audrey said.

"Fine," Stan said. "Have the doughnut."

"I will," Audrey said.

He reached for it.

She clamped her hand over his and the doughnut.

"Don't do it," she hissed.

He squeezed the doughnut, cake coming up through his fingers, into her palm.

They looked at each other, at the doughnut in their fists, at each other. Stan kept squeezing.

Audrey flushed. "Jesus, Stan," she said.

"I know," he said. "Come here."

She kept her hand over his and the doughnut smeared between them as she stood and opened her bathrobe. "I mean, is this crazy?"

Maybe it was crazy. But what difference did that make now? On Sunday morning. In broad daylight and everything.

Wilson Point

Stephen Kempster Whelpdale Thomas

Listen, said my mother. We'll be here when you get back.

Listen, said my father. It won't take long.

Listen, said my mother. You have your whole life ahead of you. There's nothing to worry about.

Listen, said my father, then. You're young now but you won't always be, and when you're older, when we're gone, you'll be better off if you learn to take care of yourself while you're young.

Listen, said my mother. We're not going anywhere. We're going to be around for a long, long time to come.

Listen, Nick, said my father. If anyone approaches you, if anyone tries anything... you shout as loud as you can. Can I hear your shout?

Listen, said my mother. No one will try anything. It's a safe part of town and a friend of ours, her name's Christie, is going to meet you very soon, but she has to take a ferry. We'd just feel better if we could hear you scream.

Listen, said my father. Remember what I said about violence?

Okay, listen, said my mother. Here's the address we'll be staying at, and the phone number, and here's Uncle Patrick's phone number, and this is the Davidsons', and this is John and Brenda in Ottawa, and this is Carly, who you can always call, at any time, no matter what, okay?

Goddammit, said my father, and turned and walked a few steps up the path.

Ed, said my mother, then turned back to me and lifted my chin with her hand. He's concerned, Nicky. He's not angry.

Listen, said my father. If anyone says anything to you.

Don't, Ed, said my mother.

If anyone tries anything, said my father.

They won't though, said my mother. Just don't give them any reason to, okay?

Do you or don't you remember what we talked about? my father said. Not everyone is like us. Don't be afraid to knee someone's groin as hard as you can. Do whatever you have to.

Listen, said my mother. I know you don't want to, but we would both feel a lot better leaving you out here if we could hear you scream. Could you do that for us?

As loud as you can, said my father.

Just as loud as you can muster, said my mother.

Don't be afraid, said my father. Look around. No one will hear you.

The Egg Pyramid

by Nuala Ní Chonchúir

There are things you can do when your husband sleeps with your sister. You can sit in your studio and imagine them together, the toad and the mouse. Him moving over her. Her on top of him. You can hear dark skin slap against honey skin; you can hear moans. But he is your toad and she is your mouse – your Diego and your Cristina – so you drown those thoughts because they bring more tears than a blood-letting.

But there are things you can do. You can take the pins from your hair and unweave the plaits. Then you can use a scissors to hack off the lengths. You can scatter the strands on the floor and on your yellow chair, where they lie like snakes. The dogs and monkeys – who still love you – can watch. You can forgo silver rings and turquoise beads. You can dress like a man, in a baggy grey suit and maroon shirt. You can hang your Tijuana dresses in the closet and shut the door on their gaiety.

What else can you do? Well, you can imagine his seed nestling in your sister's womb and blossoming. You can witness a baby – a boy, let's say – making a hard melon of her belly. You have never had a ripe stomach. Three times that might have happened for you; three times you bled your baby out before anyone knew that you too could give life. You can look at your sister's children and ask yourself if they have features that belong to your husband – drooping eyes, full lips, cruelty.

You can count up the seven years you have lived together and you can see that there are plenty of itches to be scratched on both sides. You know that Diego's urge to scratch burns more than yours; his need is eternal. You can leave your house and take a flat in the heart of Mexico, to create a space for your husband to sulk into and for your sister to wonder in. You can fly to New York then hurry home again, because Diego pulls on you the way mother moon pulls on the sea.

Your husband is an accident that happened to you but he is also your north and south. And, because you love him more than your own skin, you can try to accept and you can try to forgive. You can shrug off the pain that pinches like a body brace and throw laughter bombs out into the world to blow up the hurt that remains.

But, when your sister sleeps with your husband, it is like balancing a pyramid of eggs on a glass platter on the top of your head. You dare not move much for fear of what might happen. The best thing that you can do is to take your brush in one hand, your palette in the other, and sit at your easel and paint. Yes, you can paint.

Egg

by Nora Nadjarian (*Staccato Fiction*)

We soft boiled the free range egg, cracked it, and were surprised to find nothing in it. My mother sighed, as if the meaning of life had been snatched away before it was born. I cried because I wanted to own a chick and keep it in my hat. My brother said he wanted to add the shells to his breakfast cereal, just to make it crunchier. My father rushed to get the glue out of the drawer where he keeps all his headless statuettes.

Night-Time Knitting

ny Roz Mascal

A gorilla is living in my cupboard. Every night, he swaggers onto my bed and waits for me to wake-up. I pretend to be asleep but hear his knitting needles clicking together. He is making a very long scarf for me. Squinting at him from under my blanket, I see his huge hairy hands scratch his scalp in disappointment. He looks sad. A pang of guilt hits me. I sit up and he hands me a ball of pink wool. His watery eyes meet my gaze. He is lonely. We lean against each other and knit until sunrise.

(National Flash Fiction Day Comp winner)

From FUEL anthology of prize-winning flash fiction

Fifth Grade

Brianna Snow

winner, 2017 National Flash Fiction Day Microfiction Competition

We learn that there are tubes inside of us with sleeping babies. One day, boys will wake them up. The babies will grow, open our bodies, and fall out. Until then, we'll bleed—a baby's death each month. Ms. Miller sits at her desk in the back of the room while the video plays. We turn to her to see if this is true. She's holding her stomach with both hands. We look down and do the same.

Married to a Carrot

by Frances Gapper (from *Into the Wild Wood*)

Married to a Carrot

Quite by mistake she'd thrown her wedding ring on the compost heap with some vegetable peelings and it turned up sixteen years later, encircling a fresh young carrot. How wonderful, cried her neighbours and the world's media. From the carrot's point of view, however, things seemed less great. It had considered itself bound in marriage, but now it turned out the woman already had a husband. Also it disliked the flashing cameras, the harsh daylight, the stupid laughter. Depressed, it wilted and withered. Thrown on the compost heap, it lay meditating on love and loss, and making up little poems.

Tania's Flash Fiction FAQs 2023

Places to read/find flash fiction and short stories and submit your work to:

- twitter.com/shortStopsUK/ **ShortStops** Twitter account - List of lit mags, competitions and live events calling for short stories & flash fiction around the UK & Ireland (run by Tania - not updating the website anymore, just on Twitter).
- **FlashFiction.net** for articles, discussions & resources.
- **FUEL** flash anthology of 75 prize-winning flash stories from authors around the world raising money for fuel poverty charities, published by Tania in Feb 2023, only available here: <https://www.fuelflash.net/>
- **National Flash Fiction Day** <http://nationalflashfictionday.co.uk/> - annual competition & anthology as well as live events
- **Flash Fiction Festivals** in person and online - from Bath Flash Award <https://www.flashfictionfestival.com/> and Retreat West <https://www.retreatwest.co.uk/online-flash-fest/>
- www.Duotrope.com is great (paid) resource, a searchable online database of writers' markets (for a fee). Searching for "flash fiction" (under 1000 words) gives **977 matches!** And HUNDREDS more that publish flash alongside longer stories, poetry etc.

Some of my favourites are: *Smokelong Quarterly* (<https://www.smokelong.com/>), *Wigleaf* (<https://wigleaf.com/>) - they have an annual Top 50 flash stories that's a great list to start from to read more flash. There's also the annual Best Microfiction <http://www.bestmicrofiction.com/>. A few more:

Flash! magazine (print, Chester), *Flash Frontier* (New Zealand, online), *PANK* (online), *Cease, Cows* (online), *Flashback Fiction* (online; historical flash fiction), *Visual Verse* (monthly image prompt, open to prose & poetry; online) - and the Dribble Drabble Review for dribbles and drabbles <https://www.thedribbledrabblereview.com/> !

Competitions for flash fiction worldwide, a few examples:

Bath Flash Fiction award <http://bathflashfictionaward.com/> _

Bridport Prize - <https://www.bridportprize.org.uk>

Cranked Anvil - <https://crankedanvil.co.uk>

Fish prize - poetry, short stories, flash fiction, memoir... www.fishpublishing.com

Flash 500 contest http://www.flash500.com/index_files/flashfiction.html

Gigantic Sequins contest <http://www.giganticsequins.com/contests.html>

Mslexia annual flash fiction competition (women only)

<https://mslexia.co.uk/competitions/>

NYC Midnight Flash Fiction Challenge

<http://www.nycmidnight.com/Competitions/FFC/Challenge.htm>

National Flash Fiction Day comp

<https://nationalflashfictionday.co.uk/index.php/competition/>

A few flash fiction and short story anthologies: Series of anthologies: *Sudden Fiction*, *Sudden Fiction (continued)*, *Sudden Fiction International*, *Flash Fiction Forward*, *Flash Fiction International* all edited by Robert Shapard, James Thomas. *Freedom: Short Stories Celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Amnesty).

Further Reading:

Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction edited by Tara L Masih

Writing Short Stories by Tania Hershman & Courttia Newland