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JOSEPH YOUNG

TELL HISS



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L. Press Sess.

Op. Lick Sess.

Walk etc.

L. Press

Hold Still

Walk etc.

Op. Lick

Hold Still

Always Never Speaking: 50 Flash Fictions  
with commentaries by the author



*Written and designed by Joseph Young, 2019.*  
*Cover art by Joseph Young.*

Always Never Speaking: 50 Flash Fictions, *with  
Commentaries by the Author*

Joseph Young

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*Flash fiction is everyone's business.*



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## Forward: A Project

Back turned, he threw a thumb over his shoulder. “Give me that, will you?”

I looked at the sidewalk: half a can of paint, old typewriter, kid’s plastic shoe, paperback of *Crime and Punishment*. “Which?”

He shook his head. “Don’t care.”

I picked up the plastic shoe. “Busted strap on this.”

He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter.”

I picked up the paperback. “This is in translation.”

He coughed. “Not a problem.”

I handed him the half can of paint, sky blue.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Sure.”

It was beautiful work, the best he’d ever done.



## I. Just for One Day



## Some Stages Near the End

The front room of the house was blown off. Like from a bomb, or a collection of gas from the furnace, though not. There was no fire, no flame. He knew it was going to happen, and when it did he was worried, but not surprised.

He came down from his room, out the back door, along the alley, and to the front of his house. Beneath the front porch roof was a large and reddened scar, a fireless, smokeless wound.

“What happened?” said his neighbor. She stood at the front gate sipping coffee from a paper cup.

“Well,” he answered, “I think my heart exploded.”

“Oh, John,” she said, “I’m so sorry.”

He nodded. “I’m not sure why my heart was downstairs while I was up, but it does tend to wander, get misplaced, these days.”

“It’s so sad,” she said. She peered into the frayed skin of his house and finished her coffee with a gulp. “If you need anything, John....”

He went back around the block, along the alley, and inside. For a moment, his pulse quickened, thinking his laptop had been in the room during the explosion. But it was on the couch, just beneath a pillow, as inert and intact as always.

*Mr. Morgan, he wrote, I’m writing to tell you that the front of the house blew up. It’s 80% gone and the cool air is blowing in. I suppose it will need to be repaired. Sorry. I’m a bad tenant these days. My rent check is in the mail.*

He went upstairs and lay down in his bed. His palms sweated

and his blood raced but his heart, gone, was quiet. It was like a sleeping in his chest he hadn't felt for months and months. He too was soon asleep.

The next day the fire marshal arrived, who happened to be his aunt.

"John," she said, "what can you tell me about this?" The orange flame embroidered on her hat was as incongruous to the situation as she was.

"It just burst, my heart. It had filled too much and had to go." She frowned. "Your mother never told me there was trouble at home."

He blushed. "I didn't tell her. I couldn't. She'd be so disappointed."

The fire marshal opened her arms as if to hug him and then dropped them to her sides. "But that's what family is for." Her own disappointment wrapped her voice in gauze.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know that, but I had to carry it myself. I had to wheel it around as it swelled and ached. And then, of course, it blew up."

She wrote her report and had him sign it. It noted that the cause of the explosion was lawful, though imprudent, neglect.

"Call your mother," she said. "When I tell her about this, her own heart will want some explanation."

He told his aunt goodbye and went to sit on the couch. He opened the laptop, the absence in his ribs an echo. *Dear Maggie*, he wrote, *I miss you so much*.

The cool air came through the front of the house, smelling of roses and soot. This day, like the others, was coming to a close.

*Flash fiction is allegory, each sentence a screen on which the world is printed.*





## Found

It was only at night before rolling into the covers that he thought of her, his gray and white tabby. He imagined her in the alley, in the packs of weeds between the houses. He thought of her prowling the night, finding the fence of her home and slipping under, to paw at the back door.

Otherwise he worked. He pounded nails out of boards and leant them into towers. The floor of the garage where he worked was strewn with nails—carpentry nails and silver tacks and screws that had held in wiring.

“Any luck?” his boss—his friend—would ask.

“Not at all. Not one person has called.” He was unreasonable in his sorrow. He was stubborn with it in his heart.

“Maybe put up another set of fliers? Maybe the rain washed the others away?”

“No,” he answered, unreasonable. “Nobody looks at fliers.”

“Alright then.” His boss’s eyes searched out softly the towers of boards. “Good job out here.”

It was only so he could sleep that he thought of her: She carried a mouse in her jaws to somewhere dry. She curled in with other strays and slept the rain away.

In the morning before work he drank his coffee. The sun was out or it rained. He looked into the yard and there in a deep and unloved corner he found red flowers.



*The Buddha says life is suffering. Flash fiction bears the consequence of compassion.*



# Dry

My mom's foot is sticking out from beneath the covers, looking all hard and brown. I take the crow's feather I found in the backyard and tickle it over her toes.

"Son of a bitch!" she says, waking up. Her eyes are wide and wild-like, but saggy too. Then she finds me in the dark. "What the hell I tell you about that, Jordy?"

She's got her uniform on when she comes downstairs. After she pours herself a cup of coffee, I say, "Hey, sweetie, how 'bout a warmer for me?" and jiggle around my eyebrows.

"Not funny," she says. Then her face gets all scrunched. "You grow up like that and I'll cut your head off."

I go back to my Rice Krispies, pushing the dry ones into the milk with my spoon. "I hate them dry," I say.

"You hate what?"

"Them dry. That's total BS."

"Jordy?" she says. She's rolling her head around to get out the cricks. "Do your teachers make any more sense out of the things you say than I do?"

"No."

"What do they say to you then?"

"Usually like, 'That's not appropriate, Jordy.'"

"Yeah? And so what do you answer?"

I shrug. "Just that my mom threatens to chop off my head."

"You do not."

“I do too.”

She stands up to go to work then. “Of all my weird kids,” she says.

“What?” I ask. But I’m pretty sure I know.

*Flash fiction asks of us the loosest questions.*





# Safe

He could fly. He'd have to go out back, behind the garage, where the only ones to see him were the milkweeds and the scrap wood, but he could. He'd lift his arms, pump them once or twice, and there he was.

He had to hide it from his brother most. If George were home, not spending the day with his girlfriend, he couldn't do it, it wouldn't work, his flight would be confounded. But his mother, father, grandmother, or aunt? That was fine, as long as none of them had noticed he'd slipped out the back door.

He loved his brother, loved him most of all. "George," he'd say, "I made us some bread." "George," he'd ask, "Should we go hunting?"

"Sure," George would answer, as long as he wasn't on his way to his girlfriend's. "I love your bread," or, "Let's go get us a deer."

He liked to hover among the branches of the maple tree, the big one over the fence line from their yard. There was plenty of room between its warm, upward arms, 50 feet up. He floated among the leaves, brushed them softly with his feet and hands, surprised the birds with his silence. He wanted to rise above, into the unfettered blue, but he wasn't sure. What would happen should someone see him?

One day in the living room, George said, "Hey, bud, what's up? Getting your goof on?"

"No," he answered. "Just milling around, reading some books." George nodded. "You're the serious one, nose forever at a book."

The two liked the living room the best, where they sat among the dim light and the old furniture. The father, grandmother, aunt, and mother were in the family room, watching TV.

“Hey, George,” he said, “I have something to tell you.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I have a secret.”

“Ah,” George answered, “I see. But don’t,” he said, “don’t tell me. Keep it to yourself, bud. It’s safer that way.”

He looked at his brother, lost in the shadows of the room.

“What do you mean, George?”

“Nothing,” George said. “Just don’t, don’t tell me.”

“Ok,” he said, “I won’t.” He wanted to ask him why, what he meant by it not being safe, but now George wouldn’t look at him. He looked at his hands instead and at the lines of his palm. It was quiet too, in the dark and the shadows, so he said, “Ok, George, I’ll keep it to myself.”

The next day, and the day after, his brother spent his time at his girlfriend’s. So for hours on end, he slipped out back. He floated over the milkweed and scrap wood, across the fence line, among the meadow and the maple tree. The flying was even easier, he barely had to move his arms. He rose amongst the warm branches and into the leaves without any effort at all. It was warm, sunny—but now...what was it? He felt uneasy. Why should it be a secret? What had his brother warned him about?

At the door, his mother caught him coming in. “What’s up, baby?” she said, patting his face, a patch of beard he’d only recently been able to grow.

“Nothing, Mom,” he said.

She brought him close, pressed him to her breast. “You miss your brother, baby?”

“No,” he said. “I don’t.”

“Oh, baby, ok. Come down for dinner soon.”

He went upstairs, into the bathroom, and locked the door. He turned the faucet on and washed his hands. The water was warm, and he felt ok when he washed his hands. He looked in the mirror, at his new beard, the curl of hair on his chin and neck. He didn't like it. He didn't like what he saw.

“Hey,” he said, on the third day, when his brother returned.

“What's up, bud? Getting your goof on?” They sat in the dim light with the fading furniture and piano, George a shadow in the room.

“No,” he said. “Not really.” He watched his brother watching him. “I can do something,” he said. “Out behind the garage.”

George looked away. “Buddy,” he answered. “Don't tell me that.”

“Why?” he asked. “Why not, George?”

George shook his head. “It's not safe.” He could hardly see him. “It's not good to say.”

“But why? What's up?”

He wouldn't say. He wouldn't tell him why he, George, the one he loved the most out of all of them, most confounded his flight.

He sat in the room, the dark room, with his brother. The others—the aunt, mother, father, grandmother—watched TV.

Now his brother was almost never home. He'd see him only in the hallway, leaving to go to his girlfriend's. George would nod at him and open the door. He'd watch his brother leave.

He flew, like before, better than before. Without effort he sailed, surprising the birds with his silence. It was so easy, to lift among the butterflies and the leaves.

Late that day, he crept into the house, tiptoed toward the stairs.

“Boy,” said his aunt, “Come here.” She got out of her seat, went wobbling toward him. She put her hand on his chest, just above his heart. “Don’t be so sad,” she said.

“I’m not,” he answered.

She kissed his cheek. “You could never lie. We see it in your eyes. Our sad baby blue.”

The final day, when George had been gone so long he couldn’t remember when last he’d seen him, it rained. The roof dripped and the sky was an oyster shell. He was upstairs reading when he heard George come in. He heard his father’s voice and then his brother’s and then some shouting.

He went downstairs and into the living room. George sat amongst the old furniture, barely a shadow among the lack of light. “Hey, bud,” he said.

“Hi, George,” he answered. He took a breath. “I’m going to go,” he said. “I’m going to go do it.”

George sighed. “I wish you wouldn’t. I wish you’d stay inside and read your books.”

“Why?” he asked. “Do you know what I do? Have you always known?”

“No,” he said. “That’s not true, bud.”

“Why do you leave then? Do you do it?”

George shook his head. “No, brother.” In the dim light, he was barely there, a weak ghost in the dark. “It’s not safe,” he said.

He left the room and went behind the garage. The milkweed dripped with the rain, the pods cracked and the white fluff sodden. The old boards lay like always, gray and tired.

He raised his arms, held them in the air. The rain leaked down his wrists and into his coat, through his patch of beard and down his neck. “I don’t understand,” he said. “Why did you leave? Where did you go?” He jumped, palms open to the sky.

*Best when reading flash fiction to leave the heavy lifting to your unconscious.*



# Turpentine

She hung over me as I sat in the driveway. “My brother worked at a turpentine plant, you know. That’s what he did during the summers.”

I glanced over my shoulder and wagged my chin at her. “You mind? The light’s poor as it is.”

“Well,” she said, not moving, “It’s why I like the smell. It smells like...childhood.”

All through the procedure, the bird had kept perfectly still in my hands, allowing me to wipe down its wings. For all I knew, the cure was as bad as the affliction, but it would have to take its chances. It couldn’t fly with the paint gumming its feathers anyway.

“Turpentine’s made from trees. Sap. I guess they squeeze the trees to get it out. Big tree squeezers?”

“Right,” I said. “Big tree squeezers. Maybe you could ask your brother?”

I felt her stiffen behind me, sensed the air between us harden.

“That’s mean,” she said.

“I know.” The bird was mostly clean now, its wings only faintly washed in blue. “Don’t talk about the family convict except in the past tense. And then talk about him incessantly.”

It was quiet as I pressed the bird between my palms and carried him into the kitchen. I ran the water until it was warm and put him under the tap.

“Rob?” she said. She stood just behind me, my elbows in her stomach as I worked.

“What.” The bird was all sudsy now, still so perfectly calm.

“When he gets out, next month?”

“Yeah?” I turned the water off, and the bird stood in the aluminum bowl of the sink, blinking his eyes. He smelled of paint and turpentine and Joy.

She put her chin on my shoulder. “I think we should go away.”

I turned around. “What’s that? Why? You scared of him or something?”

She shrugged. “Yeah. I’m scared he’s different now. Broken. Tough.” Then she narrowed her eyes at me. “Can’t you tell? Don’t you know?”

“I guess.”

I scooped the bird out of the sink and took him back outside. When I set him on the lawn, he tried out his wings, flapped them a few times, and then stood there looking at me.

“Katy?” I called.

She came to the door.

“Where would you want to go?”



*Flash fiction is false memory.*



# Monks

A very tall monk sat on a mountain, eating a bowl of rice and looking at the valley below.

“They’re voting in record numbers,” said a shorter, fatter monk who took a seat beside him.

“I know. Look at the line.” He held out his wooden spoon and traced a zigzag from the door of the polling place, down and along the bank of the green river, into the pines, and out again across the hummocked pasture.

“Will you be voting?” asked the shorter monk, beads in his hands.

“Oh no. It’s against the rules of our order. We can’t become involved in the affairs of society.”

The fat monk sighed, smiling into the sun. “You’re so lucky then, sitting on your mountain and eating rice. Our order requires us to vote. Requires us to work in the town. To buy our own robes. Feed the poor.”

The tall monk watched as an ant traveled the strap of his sandal. He prayed that the ant would find its way to heaven, and then he laughed. “Yes, it is a nice life. It’s very pleasant here on our mountain, eating and praying for the ants and spiders and goats.”

At that, the short monk got to his feet. “I’d kick you,” he said, smiling again into the warm sunshine, “But it’s against our vows.”

“Then I am lucky,” said the other.

He sat and watched as the fat monk picked his way down the mountain, over the mossy boulders and across the streams. He prayed

for the soul of the monk to find its way to heaven. A raven croaked from the top of a tree, and he prayed for its soul as well. He saw the long line of the voters snaking through the valley, and he prayed yet again. Finally, hand on his belly and legs stretched wide, he prayed for himself.

“There,” he said, and closed his eyes. “Everything is done.”

*In flash fiction, everything is always never done.*



## Liked and Similar

They had to move the rock out of the middle of the campsite. That's what he kept thinking, *That rock sits there covered in lichen. It should move.* Of course, there was no way, it was a thousand pounds. He looked at it, the spiders and pill bugs crawling its surface, flakes of it exfoliating into the sun. Though it did seem almost possible, if he could get his palms situated just the right way on the rough belly of it, if they could wedge beneath it a hundred branches in just the right configuration. Across the forest floor, to the bright stream, they would complete it.

She stared into the fire of the camp stove, the flame pale and thin in the vivid morning. She looked with great intensity, as if reading the fire's thoughts. He wondered what she asked of it, To come and cover them over, burn up the words they always never said? She was always never speaking, picking out a day or a weekend to fall into a silence that was supposed to say something. Her eyes as she watched the stove were wet with whatever dream she imagined, the fire that would take her where she wanted to be.

"Would you like to go hike?" he asked. He picked up his canteen and raised it against the sky. With the leaves gone from the trees, the forest floor was fresh and warming.

She smiled. "Sure. Let me change first." She sat on her stone for a moment looking at him, eyes wet and thin, and then she went to the tent. With the sun on its walls, he could see the shadow of her, lifting off her sweatshirt, pulling her legs from the pajama bottoms, rummaging for her jeans and t-shirt. When she re-emerged, it stabbed

at him, the length of her hair on her shoulder, his view of it across her tender neck.

“What?” she said, and he shook his head.

By early afternoon they perched on the side of the mountain, boots hanging into the air. The mountain continued to climb above them another thousand feet, although to him the atmosphere was already weak. She sat and rested, hand on her thigh, the plump of it rounding in his sight.

“We should quit,” she said. “When we get home.”

“Well.”

“We’re forcing it now.”

He looked across the distance between them, lids half shut, the sun bright and she in a blur. “But all of it is forced. Everything. Is there something that’s not?”

“Yeah,” she said, pointing at the wide rolling of the trees.

He shrugged at her and turned away.

They got to their feet and began to climb again. The bare oaks left off and were replaced with the long, waxed leaves of the laurel. A hive of something thoughtless seemed to him to hum in the sky, he felt it soothe the sunny faces of the stones. It felt right to put his boots one in front of the other, make the grade upward. It was an accomplishment, a realization. His feet knew the way, found each hold without effort.

At first she was a pace behind him, then five, then lost around a switchback. He heard her at times, scraping across a boulder, her long breath as she drank from the canteen, but he couldn’t see her. After a while, as the day grew longer, he forgot about her for minutes at a time. She would return to his thoughts with a bump and a tightening of his veins, and then she would fade again into the climb, the sky that was so high.

He reached the top, sat on a ledge and looked at the view, the swell of the mountains between his knees. He closed his eyes and for



just a moment slept. Her hand on his chin was what woke him.

“Hi,” she said.

He smiled at her and reached for her arm. He smelled her hair, the scent of the camp stove and the trees and the stream. There was her heartbeat, which he might have thought he’d forgotten in the day.

“When we get back,” he said, “We should see what happens.”

“Well,” she answered. “We can say that.”

She scooped a beetle from the dirt and held it in her palm. It got to the edge of her thumb, waved its antennae, and opened the carapace that held its wings.

“Anyway, it’s too nice here to care,” she said.

She bent her head to kiss him, touched her teeth to his. She moved against him, he against her.



*Flash fiction is sometimes like sex: dense and coming in waves.  
It's suited to the miasma of desire.*



## Just for One Day

David Bowie couldn't pay his rent. He stood in his kitchen, gazed out the window that overlooked the snowy yard. "We could be heroes," he said, to his hungry cat, but the cat didn't care. She sat by her food dish, waiting for him to provide.

From upstairs he heard the TV. It was only 9 a.m., but Iman had already started her binge watching for the day. Some people on the TV were shouting. Goodness, he thought, by lunch she'll be angry.

He put on his coat, which had turned gray, and he stepped through the door and onto his street, which had turned gray. The snow had just turned to rain.

Since his death, everything had changed, though everything was the same. He was still David Bowie, the rock star, father, husband, lover of large things and small things, but his feet were cold and his assets were frozen.

He needed to go downtown, talk to the bankers. It was all just a mistake, a mix-up, to do with his name, that upon death should have reverted to Jones. But the busses had stopped running, or had changed routes, or no longer existed.

At the next block was the corner shop. The woman behind the counter nodded to him and he headed for the magazines. Prince had died and the tributes were starting to arrive. "I hope," he said aloud, "you've filed your paperwork, Mr. Rogers Nelson. It's quite the drag otherwise."

He set the magazines and cat food on the counter. "On credit?" he said.

The woman shook her head. "Can't do it."

"Just this last time?" he answered.

The woman looked at him. "Don't you have a coin jar at home? Something under the mattress?"

David shrugged. "Not my style. Or not anymore. There's something...vivid in a jar full of coins, don't you think?" He grinned. "I'm more black and white these days, you know? Gray?"

The woman put the things in a bag and handed it to him. "No," she said, "I don't know. Most of us stay the same. Same people, same name, same colors. Only folks like you can afford otherwise."

He laughed. "Apparently not."

She rolled her eyes at him, and he smiled, and she smiled back. "No more," she said.

Out on the street some little girls were trying to coax a kitten out from under a car. "Here, puss puss," they called, the kitten hunched resolutely dead middle of the undercarriage.

"Can you help us?" they said. "She needs to come home."

David set his bag on the curb and got to his knees. "Here, puss puss," he called. "Come here, darling."

The kitten crawled to him, nudged his hand with her forehead, and let him lift her into the crook of his arm. "Don't scare her now," he told the little girls.

The oldest one took the kitten from him, and she, the cat, and her sister headed home. "Why are you so bad?" said one of them to the kitten.

Back in his kitchen, David fed his own cat and made some tea. He sat at the table, munching on toast, and watched her eat. "Queen Dilly Dilly?" he said. But she paid him no mind, head in her food dish.

*Flash fiction entangles time.*





# Heartbreak

To win, I had to get the five tiny metal balls into the slight depressions in the plastic. Any jiggle would shake them free, even my heart beating too quickly, and I'd have to start again. It took a shit-load of concentration.

"Sir?" said the bank teller. It was her game; there was a little stack of them next to the leashed black pen, for the kids to play.

I raised my hand. "Wait a sec. I'm almost there."

I heard her shuffle some paper, clear her throat. "Sir, if you don't need another—"

"I got it, Maxine." A hand and its five hairy knuckles entered the cone of my vision. It wrapped its long fingers around the game and pulled. "Let's go," I heard.

I looked up into a face run amuck with wrinkles, red pillows of neck emerging from a blue uniform. The eyes among the wrinkles were not kind, were not patient. I could see quite clearly they were not eyes that believed the customer was king. "Come on," he said. "You're holding up the line."

I glanced over my shoulder at four people waiting between the velvet ropes. "Yes," I said. "That's true." I saw how he clutched the game in his giant hand, turned sideways so all the metal balls had collected along one edge.

"Would you mind moving along then?"

I stood there and my heart was beating fast. I could feel it in my eyes, in my shoes.

"Okay," I said.

“All right,” he said.

I heard the scrape of feet, the rustle of money. My heart was whipped before the wind; it rode a stiff cart across a cobbled square.

*Flash fiction is all gain and all loss.*



# Canyonland

We're standing at the rim of a canyon, New Mexico, when she starts to cry. "Ah, shit," she says, and seven or eight green birds leave a bush. "It's going to swallow us."

She's looking into this canyon of course, deep and red, an outrageous silence rising from its throat, but that's not what she means. Not only. She means her dad, his heart like bad cheese, and the war, and a lot of other things.

I pull her against me, meaning to comfort her, but the heat comes right to my hands and belly. It's the kind of place—the warm shale sand, the cacti leaning their paddles against the ground—that always makes me want her.

When she feels this in me, she pulls away. "Goddamn you, Danny."

"Ok," I say. "I know." I take a seat there in the dust. "Wrong time, wrong battle. Wrong guy."

At this, a sudden blue fierceness comes into her eyes. She falls on top of me, clutching. I should stop her, this will have its consequence, but it's been too long. "Danny," she says, and I lean backwards.

Ten minutes later, she's humming, a little song she wrote rattling in her teeth. She's heaving rocks into the canyon, listening for the skittery thud of their landing.

"Carol?" I say.

"What?"

"You didn't have to. I do know what *No* is."

She shakes her head. "You think so? You think you know?"

I get up and start down the trail, into the canyon. In half an hour, I'm at the bottom, a little bent tree pulling water from a trickle. I peel an orange and eat it, sit by the stream for an hour, then two.

The moon's out when I get back to the car, and it's getting cold—bats make watery noises in the sky. She's nowhere I can see, not in the back seat or along the empty road. When I call, her name falls out of the air.

I wake against the front tire of the car a few hours later and know I've made a mistake; I should have tried to find her. The desert sparkles with frost, every bush and cliff face shining.

"Carol!" I shout. "Carol. Hey, damnit, Carol!"

I hear a noise a ways behind me, like a foot falling on the asphalt. I jump up and peer into the darkness. There's a shape, a figure, in the road. It looks like a bear on its hind legs, shambling towards me, its shaggy coat, or maybe it's a woman, wearing all the sweaters in her suitcase. You know the difference, I tell myself, between a bear and your girlfriend, even in the dark, 30 yards away. Which—what is it?

I hear it crying then, a terrible, lost sound. "Danny?" it seems to say.

I reach into my pocket, find a sharp key, and start walking in its direction. I hold out my arm, brandishing the key like a knife. "Help me," it says. "I'm scared."

"Okay," I answer and draw nearer. "Okay." Its face, her face, forms out of the darkness, bobbing and uncertain. Huge and cold, the night shifts, threatening to swallow us all again.

*Flash fiction is the bitter pill.*





# Theory of Composition

My wife stood in the doorway to the study, the baby in her arms, her jacket on. “What are you doing?” she said.

I was in front of the computer, my face aglow with it, my fingers tripping the gray keys. “If you had to guess?” I answered.

She shifted the baby to her other hip, our baby—pink, round, and smelling like milk and spring light. “I’d say you’re probably writing one of those poems,” she said. She shook her yellow hair. “Or one of those sad stories. Something slow and depressing.”

My wife had been asking me to take a walk with her for three hours, the baby and she, out in the keen iris and daffodil, the strong sun that might weaken at any moment. She’d been fussing with the baby—feeding time, bath time, nap time.

“Give me...” I said, and I held up one hand, two, “Ten minutes?”

She leant against the door frame. “Oh, Joel, what is it with you? What is it with those words? All they do is collect dust on our hard drive.”

“Dust on the hard drive? Wow. Gosh. Wow.” I got up and took the baby from her, pulled her into my arms, the two of us standing in the quickly gathering year. I could hardly see for the bright new creatures that swam in my eyes.



*You may be angry at what flash fiction will refuse to do.*



# Conception

I meet a little man with wet eyes and a gold cross around his neck. “*Hola*,” he says.

“Hi,” I answer. He’s standing in the brick doorway of the rest stop bathroom. When I try to walk by, he shuffles to block my way. He says some words in Spanish I don’t know, and then with one hand, draws a hoop in the air in front of his belly. With the other, he points over his shoulder.

I shake my head. “What?”

His eyes have gotten wetter now, and he passes his plaid shirt sleeve across them. He draws the hoop again and then makes as if to hold it with both palms—pregnant.

I walk away and take a seat at one of the picnic tables, wait for my girlfriend to buy her vending machine coffee. In a minute, she joins me. “Ready?” she says.

“No,” I answer and point. A pregnant woman, sick-looking and holding her stomach, comes out of the men’s bathroom. The little man pulls her to him and kisses her on the forehead. They speak in low, troubled voices as he leads her to a van that idles in the parking lot.

“What’s that?” my girlfriend says.

“Don’t know.”

“Hmm. Can we help?”

I shrug. “How could we?”

We watch as the van putters away into the golden Kansas grassland. Then my girlfriend pulls up her shirt to look at her own flat belly. “We’re pretty lucky,” she says, “Aren’t we?”

My heart flames, and I stand up. “Don’t tempt fate!” I say.

The angle of the sun in her face is beautiful, frightening, and mysterious.

*Flash fiction starts in the body.*





## Empty Room

They said it was going to snow last night, and they were right. I got up at 3 in the morning and looked out the window. Oh fuck! what beauty in the world!

Noon the next day, I put on my coat and gloves and went outside. The snow was coming down in that small grain that means we're in for a big one—everything white and gray and the palest blue. My neighbor had his shovel in his hands, but he was just standing there watching it fall. It was quiet, like an empty part of a large room.

“Not much use, is it?” I said. “Shoveling now?”

He didn't hear me, and I was startled when his eyes seemed to give back the empty sky.

“John?”

He reached inside and gathered the scattered pieces. “Sorry, Gail,” he said, smiling. “I was dreaming.” He tossed his shovel onto the white lawn and came around to where I stood on my steps. He smiled again and patted me on the face with his mitten. “Should we go inside?”

Afterwards, he lay on his back looking up at my ceiling, the scar over his heart like a closing eye.

“What were you dreaming about?” I said. “Outside.”

He turned to face me, his oval belly drooping onto the sheet. “Strangely enough, summer. I was thinking of the long days and the heat.”

“Oh,” I said. “That is strange.” I put my hand on his chest,

drew my fingers through the wisps of gray hair. “You seemed scared though.”

“Did I?” he said. “Well, when you’re old, everything scares you.”

“Oh. And you are?”

“Of course I am. I’ve had a heart attack.”

The house rocked with the wind, and I put my head on the pillow. I tried to think of a song to sing to him about the snow. Something warm and protected. Something beautiful. Something sure. But all I could hear was the empty quiet of the room, the flakes bumping with extraordinary tenderness against the curtainless window.

*It's the places between in flash fiction.*



## Falls the Shadow

My new doctor was palpating my left testicle when a look of shock, terror really, flashed across his face. After he squeezed for a second more, though, he smiled in relief.

“That’s been there since I was a kid,” I said. “That clump.”

“Yes, yes,” he said in his Lebanese accent. “Nothing to be alarmed at.” He passed a handkerchief over his brow and twice around the border of his thin lips.

“But you were. Your expression was like I was already dead.”

He shook his head. “No, of course not. Nothing to be concerned about.”

He left me, and I got dressed. When I was standing at the receptionist’s window filling out my check for the co-pay, he came up and patted me on the shoulder. “Next physical in six months,” he told the nurse. “This one’s healthy as an ox. A healthy ox.” He walked away, humming to himself.

Six months later, it happened again. His face drained of blood and he looked ill, like he could hear the weeping of my loved ones. Then, a moment later, again the smile.

“That’s the second time you did that,” I said. “Last time you thought it was a tumor, too.”

“Did I?” He looked away, at the empty walls, the jar of tongue depressors.

“Yes. Have you ever found a tumor in someone’s testicle?”

He stopped moving about the room, tilted his head. “No, not that I recall.”

When he left, I tore a cotton ball in half and stuck it between my lower teeth and cheek. I waited in the hall until he passed by.

“What do you think this is, Doctor?” I said, pointing at the slight swell in my jaw.

He felt it with his fingertips. “Open your mouth,” he said.

“No, no,” I said, now just wanting to go home, to my family. “Forget about it. It’s nothing.”

He looked at me like I was stupid, like I stood somewhere on the distant shore.

*Flash fiction doesn't know a thing about death.*





## Garden

There is an eggplant growing in my flower bed, dead-purple and alien, among the cosmos and columbine. “Are you sure you didn’t throw seeds in here?” I’m on my hands and knees, studying its green, umbilical stem.

My wife shakes her head. “I told you, it’s from the eggshells in the compost heap.”

“But that’s just insane,” I say. “And silly.”

“You’re insane, Charles. You’re the one.”

Later, we’re at the dinner table, a steaming heap of spaghetti noodles and sausage on my plate. On my wife’s is the tiniest chicken breast I’ve ever seen. The skin is pulled back and the meat gleams like porcelain.

My wife sees me looking and says, “Don’t start, Charles. I’ll eat what I want to eat.”

“I’m not talking. You see me talking?”

“Yes I do. In your head.” She sips her tea. “And you know how I feel about spaghetti.”

“No. How do you feel about it? I forget.”

“It ages the body. It stresses the organs and slows the blood.”

“Yeah? Spaghetti does all that? Well my.”

She ignores me, cubing her chicken and dashing it with pepper. She takes a bite and smiles. “Mmm, that’s good.”

“Glad you like it.”

She eats her supper, one tiny chicken die at a time, chewing and smiling. Then she looks up, the gray of her eyes catching the

chandelier. "You know what?" she says. She clears her throat. "Do you know what?"

I shake my head. "I doubt it."

"We're very lucky, the two of us," she says.

"If you say so."

"We are, Charles. You'd never see it, but we are. Us. And everything." Her fork slowly circles the air, taking in the room.

"You're insane," I say, "Linda. My Linda."

The room's clean, orange light shines on our plates and in our cups.

*The prettiest things come true to flash fiction.*



## The Choice We Take

Eloise brought the toy dump truck to our rented room in two pieces—blue body in left hand and yellow dumper in right. “That’s that,” she said, pinching her lower lip between her teeth.

I didn’t know what to say other than, “You broke it?”

She nodded.

“On purpose?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

Of course, we had to leave. You couldn’t break one of Chris’ antique toys and live under his roof. Next morning, we set the truck on the kitchen table, a *Sorry* note beside it, and hit the street with our suitcases, homeless.

“It’s beautiful!” said Eloise, chin pointed at the fog. “So fresh.”

“You did do it on purpose,” I said. But she only smiled at the squirrels.

We set out walking and by midmorning sat in The Seagull drinking coffee. The walls were ocean blue, while the picture window framed the actual waves in eight shades of gray. Two little men drank blueberry brandy.

“Isn’t this what we’ve been missing?” she said, waving her hand, her eyes like two hazel suns.

“I thought what you’d been missing was me?”

“Well.” She squinted. “I couldn’t see you in that apartment. Chris had turned the air into dark smoke.”

“You didn’t get him,” I said. “He was lonely.”

“Oh! How can you say that? He domineered. He browbeat. Those ridiculous toys!”

I raised my mug. “When you were sleeping, we drank beer.”

We went outside then. The wind blew sand against our legs and rattled in the sea grass. We sat on the beach, and I pulled her close. She lay on top of me like a winter coat and pushed her lips against my neck.

“You can go back,” she said. “You two drank beer together.”

“Right. I knew that’s what this was. The shove off.”

Down the beach, a group of hippies lay around a bonfire, staring thick-lipped into the flames. “Look,” she said. “I think this is lovely.”

But I shook my head. “You’ll go home. You’ll be on a Greyhound by next week.”

“Vroom-vroom,” she said, teeth flashing.

We kissed for a long time and then fell asleep. At the edge of my awareness, the waves turned themselves toward shore—one fall, two fall, three fall. When we woke, just the same.

*When reading flash fiction, try to make few choices.*





# Simple

“I want you,” he said.

She wore a knit cap, pink and red. “Yeah?” Her scarf was tucked into the open throat of her pea coat.

“I do. And all this....” His mitten took in the falling snow, the pine trees. He shrugged, smiling at her. “You know?”

She turned away, tasting the snowflake on her lip. And all this, she thought, the dirt frozen in the roots of a fallen tree, the open ice of the lake.

They stood that way in the quiet, backs to one another. The simple blue of the woods crept toward them.



*Flash fiction is sometimes just the weather.*



# The Christmas Story

First thing, after I picked him up thumbing rides in the snow, he reached into the pockets of his worn blue Dickies. From one pocket he pulled three dollars and set it on the flat spot over the glovebox, and from the other a tin crucifix, setting it next door to the cash.

“Your choice,” he said. “Three bucks for gas, or you can take that cross. Get 10 for it in pawn—it’s real silver.”

I took a glance at him: knotted gray hair, tooth missing in his tired smile, greasy green parka.

“This a test?” I said. “You the Christ come back?”

He laughed. “Shit no. Just trying to help you along.” He shrugged, stuffed the crucifix back in his pants. “You’ll do better with the cash.”

We rode in quiet for 20 miles, until he pointed to a tiny white house set back from the road. It was a real heap—porch falling off, roof like a swayback horse.

“Home sweet,” he said, and got out. He trundled up the icy drive.

“Hey,” I said, rolling down my window. “Wanna sell that cross for three bucks?”

He turned on his heal. “Hell yeah!” he said, grin like a man redeemed.



*Flash fiction is our supplication.*





## Twelfth Night

She patted me on my back. “Take two of these and see me in the morning,” she said.

I stuffed the vial into my pocket, pushing it toward the inseam. “I think I’ll be happy to see you,” I said, fingering the bulge.

It was incredible stuff. All night I watched hammerheads and donkeys, listened to cold jazz blown through conch shells, my blood shook free.

“Well?” she said, the next day. Her cheek was pressed with blanket squares.

“I do believe you cured me. I do believe I love you.”

She smiled. “Just don’t wait so long next time. Love is far too fragile.”

We sat on the steps and drank beer, watched the pigeons strut. I could already feel reason piling dust on my heart.



*In flash fiction, love defines.*



# The Beach

When I buy my hotdogs, two for \$2.22, the clerk looks out the plate glass windows at the cold, white day, bits of ice flinging themselves at the city street.

“Beautiful weather,” he says, no irony in his eyes. His cloudless smile always makes me want to believe he’s a young man, here on some kind of surf holiday from some landlocked place—there’s a seashell on a string around his neck, resting against his Billabong T. But there’s the brush of gray at his temples, the mark of long hours in his brow. And the ocean even here is miles away; he’s in the store, every day.

“Ha,” I say and do my best to conceal my bitterness. I’d come the three blocks from home hunched in my coat, my feet stumbling on the cracks in the walk, wobbled with their sadness.

“No, really,” he answers, finding me in my umbrage. “You see the light?” And his mood sheds light like off the sea.

I stand in front of the counter, a hotdog box in each hand. I’m embarrassed by the number of hotdogs I eat these days, and I want to leave the store, go home, unfound in my bitterness and bad diet. But he waits. And there’s something about him, his blue-water eyes, his question, that makes me think I should answer.

I say, “It’s not that bad out I guess. Tomorrow’s supposed to be warmer.”

“Yes!” he says. “Tomorrow is a great day.”

I laugh, holding it in my teeth. “But this is today, isn’t it? Tomorrow’s tomorrow?”

“Oh no,” he says. “It’s today.” He grins and I’m not sure if he’s being ironic after all.

He’s about to say something more when he puts a finger in the air, tilts his head, the wave of his hair curling away from his ear. “Wait. You hear that?”

From the back of the store, near the bread and bottled water, comes the sound of seagulls. It’s not so loud, the birds don’t scream their scream, but there’s their familiar kind of laugh.

“What is that?” I say, though I know very well: It’s seagulls. Seagulls and the rush of the sea. And it reminds me of something, things from not so long ago, of heat, and summer. And of her, Summer.

“Wait a moment!” he says, and disappears into the back room. He comes out with an old chrome 35mm in his hand. “Will you take a picture,” he says, and thrusts the camera at me.

“Of what?” I say, and he laughs.

“The birds!” he says.

“What?”

He points in the direction of the laughing.

“Go,” he says. “Won’t you?”

I put my hotdog boxes on the counter. But I don’t know what to do. “A picture?” I say.

My wobbled feet won’t move. There’s a flood of sadness on me. I’m remembering—summer, and Summer. And I don’t want to, to remember. And anyways, is any of this real?

“Please hurry,” he says. “Sometimes it’s today.”

“What’s today?”

He’s smiling at me, urging me with his eyes. The watered light pours through the plate glass windows.

*With flash fiction, don't worry about what's wrong.*





# Cat

After 4 years of doing not much more than sitting on the front porch, napping, and eating crickets out of the azalea bushes, our cat Poe decided he needed to cross the busy street.

“Monsters!” Lydia cried. “These cars. Nothing but fucking death monsters!”

She sold her Honda, which only ran when I pushed it down the road and she popped the clutch, and then we were car-less. She also went around and took photographs of flattened squirrels and birds with their brains oozing out. She made a website and posted the photos there.

Meanwhile, I was turning mean. “I miss going to the beach, Lydia. I miss sex in the car. I miss moving more than 3 goddamn miles an hour.”

“Shallow,” she mumbled, cutting up carrots, running a bath. “Heartless.” She was a woman on a mission; I was just a boyfriend.

The day came when I was in the driveway, forcing my boxes of records and torn suitcases into the trunk of a rental. “An animal,” I said, waving my arms at the empty window. “I miss him too, but you’re not going to turn back the course of civilization for an animal.”

It wasn’t until a year later that I saw Lydia again, dragging a dachshund through the park. The dog gagged as it pulled against its collar, eyes bulging and glassy, while Lydia cursed.

“Goddamn you, Arthur,” she said. “Fucking wiener.”

She stopped when she saw me. “Oh.... Hello, Paul.”

“Hey, Lydia,” I said. “New pet?”

“Yeah.” She looked at the dog in disgust, but managed to force out a smile. “It’s my boyfriend’s.” We watched as it threw up a tiny glob of bluish spittle.

“Cute.”

She shook her head. “So how are you?”

“Oh, fine. I’m doing good. I’m an airport shuttle driver now.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” I pantomimed driving, looking back to grin at my passengers. “That okay? I mean, you know?”

“Ha!” she said, tossing her hair. “Of course it is.” I followed her eyes as she looked out over the park lawn, bright with hundreds of dandelions. The clouds running overhead threw patterns of warm, deep light onto the ground. Then she turned back to me and smiled. “Hi, Paulie,” she said.

*Flash fiction says, just come to a lovely end.*



## II. Ice Cream Man



## A Curse

He was a well loved man. He went to the café and the faces looked up, blue glow and caffeine, and they loved him. They loved him.

He was shot in the street. A word! the shooter said, full of hate. Two ugly words!

He had a funeral to which no sons or daughters came. He didn't have them and his parents had disowned him. They loved and disowned, unable to own such a man.

On the other coast his mother looked at the boats. The dinghies bobbed and the sails swayed. A pod of dolphins shot for the sky.

Arthur, she said, I wish we'd had a son. I wish we'd had a boat.

Yes, he sighed. I wish we'd had the time.

The funeral was a party of hats and champagne. They loved the man, this gentle man. The man who'd cursed God so.





*Probably, to be heard, don't write flash fiction.*



## Denominations

He was told he had to pass math. Math, said his math teacher, either you're part of the problem, or part of the solution.

After class, he took his textbook out under a tree. There were the most beautiful berries in the tree—exact globes of red and blue that took up the blue afternoon light—and the most beautiful birds that ate them.

What do you think? he said to the numbers in his book. Do you see these wonders? Do you hear these songs?

The numbers arranged themselves into columns and forms. The numbers equaled themselves in abstraction.

That's what I thought, he said.

At the edge of the campus was a lake. The lake was human made, with a wall of dazzling geometry that held it in and shaped it.

Here, he said, gently, to his textbook, and he threw the book upon the lake. I was never going to pass: in any case.

The book drifted smoothly to the bottom, solving all questions, ears stopped with water to the world.



*In flash fiction, start with almost anything.*



# Ice Cream Man

The ice cream man turned her jingle on and her truck sang down the street: *I came to the river and I couldn't get across, so I paid five dollars for a big bay hoss.*

The sky was in its purple phase and on this street was a man she knew. There he was, tucked into the shadow of a sycamore, the dollar in his hand.

What'll I get you?

The man pointed to the strawberry shortcake bar pictured on the side of the truck.

As always? she said.

The man nodded.

Not for a dollar. She ducked inside the truck and came back with a bomb pop. As always, she said.

The man shrugged. Sometimes your prices are different. Sometimes the strawberry shortcake is a dollar.

Never, she said. That's the other ice cream man.

The man shrugged. He held the bomb pop by its stick, the paper wrapping intact.

The ice cream man sighed. I got a lot more on my route, Dan.

He held the bomb pop out to her, the paper wrapping in red and white and blue.

She took the bomb pop and ducked into the truck, came back with a strawberry shortcake. That's the other ice cream man, she said.

No, he answered, all your prices should be the same. Same company, same prices.

I got a lot more on my route, Dan.

He unwrapped his strawberry shortcake, took a bite, and then handed her the dollar. The sky was in its black phase, the streetlight full of bugs.

The ice cream man is my favorite part of summer, he said.

I know, she sighed and closed her sliding window.

She got into her seat and started down the road: *Went out to milk and I didn't know how, milked the dog instead of the cow.*



*Flash fiction changes where you were.*



# Lost Seas

The guys sat on the porch. That was where they had all the beer. Hey, they crowded, out onto the walk, Oh hey!

Soon as she got home she wanted a shower. She swam in her skin and it was like oil and salt. Why? she thought. And why?

Her boyfriend got home at midnight and they watched the movie about dancing. The woman wore a yellow dress that fit like film. The camera liked to see her work.

This is good, her boyfriend said, about the movie, or about the salt he licked from his popcorn hands.

Why? she asked, about either one.

She had a dream about her brother who wore a Navy suit. He looked at his magazine as the water frothed beside him. Oh man, he said at the magazine, Oh *man*.

She woke with the covers to her neck, as her boyfriend watched the ceiling.

You cried, he said, out loud, and then he turned to rock her.



*Flash fiction separates action from thought.*



## New March

It was spring, and that meant it was near the season to stop going outside. Spring was when the neighbors—the neighboring neighborhood—stretched its muscles. When the flowers came up, that's when they wanted to hit you.

She was a painter. Flowers, yes, and grass and the dogs. She didn't paint people but she smiled at them as they sat on the park benches. She hadn't decided, if this year she liked people.

Be careful, one of them on the benches told her. Now is when the ambushes go up.

Oh, she said. It's awful, isn't it? She looked about her, and though she was worried she couldn't tell, Which were the ambushers and which weren't? She wasn't the kind to say, That's the ones, or, there they are.

Well goodbye then, she said, I'll see you when it's not so bad. Petals from the tree had dropped to her acquaintance's lap, on the scarf that covered her hair.

She went home and started a drawing, a beautiful, big dog that stood—wide-jawed and dappled—to guard the park. There were flowers, yes, and the wind and new soil.

She looked at her lovely picture, hung it on the wall, and at that started to cry. Oh my, she said, what to do—this life, this world. Later, she told herself, much later, she would march straight out her door.





*Flash fiction is always ekphratic.*



# Pain

It was so small, on the bottom of his foot, like the stain of a berry. He could see it if he shined a bright light into the mirror, outfitting his foot with a golden halo.

It hurts that much? the doctor said. She too had to squint, use her silver penlight, to see. I mean, it's barely there.

But he was certain. Of course, he said. It's bothered me for years.

The doctor sent him home with a bottle of pills. He took two and went straight to the Internet. Yes, it said, they were the kinds of tablets that doctors gave to junkies, crazies, those with their fearful tribulations.

Ouch, he said. Tears came to his eyes—real and sorry tears.

He went outside and limped down the street, looking into the windows of the shops and houses. When he came to the tarot reader, she, as always, beckoned him to come inside. He'd never seen anyone inside.

You're here! said the reader, a look of relief in her eyes.

Yes? he said.

Yes! she said. Good, very good. She gestured to a yellow couch draped in a purple runner. When he sat, she sat next to him in a velvet chair.

You've never stopped here before, she said.

No, he said.

And you want a reading? A telling?

Yes, he said. I want to know about my foot.

She looked at the floor, where his feet rested. Your foot?

Yes, he said. It's ached for years. He lifted the foot into his lap. Years and years.

She frowned. So long?

Yes, he said.

She studied the foot in his lap, then looked to the window, from where she beckoned her customers. Ok, she said. She put her hand to the tongue of his shoe, her copper ring that took up the light. I'll tell you about your foot.

Yes, he said. He could feel the berry ache, like heat and pain and sorrow. Tell me, he said.

Ok, she answered. I will. She looked to him with worry. She looked to him with relief.

*Flash fiction is affinity.*



# Magnificent Miles

There wasn't any chance she'd be the right fit. It might have been her hair. Or it might have been her teeth. Or her degree.

It was cold out. Her coat was wool and very good but with the wind between the buttons she had to wrap tight against her middle, her hips. It was Chicago and it was snowing.

Hey, Lady, the man in the newsstand said. He held out a pair of gloves. These are better than those you have.

She stopped her walking and squinting against the snow. She pulled up short. The man in the newsstand was handsome, there was a something about his eyes.

She looked at the gloves. I don't have a job, she told him. They didn't want me.

The man frowned at that. He was taken aback by this. Well that doesn't make sense.

Maybe, she said. Perhaps. And thank you. She felt a something toward this stranger. Then she looked at the gloves again, a very nice pair. By which I mean, I can't afford those.

The man shook his head. It's street prices, Lady. It's five dollars.

She looked at the winsome man. He had frost at the temple and was younger than she. You wouldn't be conning me? she said.

No, he said, now not taken aback. He smiled. It's five dollars. Five for you. And anyone, he added with his smile.

She looked at her hands, unraveled in the wind. He is

precarious, she told herself. She wasn't the right fit, not with her hair or teeth. Maybe, she told the man. Her face was set in the Chicago of his eyes.



*When the words won't fit anywhere else, write flash fiction.*



## Rainbow Joke

He was funny. But not funny enough. Clearly more funny than most but still, What's that in this world?

What's orange and red and blue all over? he asked.

They turned away. Don't even try, they said. Some of them even winced. A few of them were concerned for his reputation.

Oh, c'mon!

He stopped going out, stayed at home with the cats. He figured, the wind would blow the other direction soon enough. Then he'd be ok—again.

What's orange and red and blue all over? he asked his wife.

A sad rainbow?

Ha! he said, that's better than mine. It wasn't but his wife tried so hard. She was less humorous than most.

He sat on the porch and watched the people go by. Such a big place, he said, such a funny world.



*Large spaces frighten flash fiction.*



## Red

He wondered what it was like for sociopaths. They didn't have consciences, right? Did that mean they didn't vote?

He wandered up the street. The sidewalk seemed like it was full of voters. Hey, Paul, one of them said to him. Going to vote?

He'd voted once, and then he went and got drunk. That's when he lived in the bad neighborhood and he was afraid to walk to the polling place. Kids sold him drugs and beat him with a pipe, or rather they wanted to. Or rather he thought they wanted to. He was so shaken that afterwards he headed to the bar, just around the corner. It was a dangerous bar and that made little sense.

Voting made little sense. That's what he thought. He walked up the street and saw all the voters. It was a nice day out. The sun was making its yellow rounds and the birds were making their feathered way. What did they care?

Hey, Paul, said a passing voter. Going to vote?

At the bar in the bad neighborhood some guys wanted to know why he was there. He pointed to the *I Voted!* sticker on his shirt. They asked who he voted for and they seemed happy with his choice.

Hey, Paul, what's up? Going to vote?

The sun was hot in its rounds. He felt it on his arms and neck, burning its way upon his skin—red, red. Was he going to vote? He hadn't yet decided. He was on his way, but wasn't sure he'd get there.

He'd drank some sweet, cheap liqueur that the bartender recommended. It tasted like lemon and cherry, or was supposed to. He

had three of them and then he felt like he dangled on his barstool.  
After three, he felt like he might not be afraid.

Hey, friend. Headed to the polls?

I guess so, he answered.

There they were ahead—the polls—and it seemed like his feet  
were on their way.



*Flash fiction makes the clear opaque.*



# Represent

*The firm*, said its ad, *represents lawyers, teachers, actors, musicians, and people from all walks of life*. The background was a deep, rich red and the text in lemon yellow. It hovered above a game of three-card solitaire.

She closed her computer. What a relentless night, she thought, I'm so glad it's done. What she meant was her thesis, of course, *Pov-erty on the North End*, and not the countless games of cards she'd played—a case study, then a game.

She went to the kitchen and stood at the sink, the window that overlooked her yard. A cat crouched behind a weed, orange tail a-flicker. Two birds fluttered in a patch of dust.

Hey, she called, and rapped on the window. The cat didn't hear, or didn't care, went on with its dreaming of the birds.

Story of my life, she thought, then felt silly for it. As if *I've* got something to complain about. *LOL*.

She got undressed and stood in front of her mirror. Yep, she said. Her face looked healthy and the very last of her tan still showed against her bikini line. It was late April and soon the summer would begin.

Without getting into the shower—or getting dressed—she sat on her bed and opened her computer. *We put your best foot forward*, said the ad. *PR is for everyone!*

Her thesis was good, very good. City Hall would have to pay attention—now. She put her mouse over the ad. *You're the best brand we have*, it said. To which she answered, Yes we are.



*You can have a good time with flash fiction.*



## Some Unobserved

She put her hat in the middle of the sidewalk and took the bench. For half an hour, the people stepped around it. It was a big hat and red.

At home she asked her son what he was doing. He was dressed in black and his fingernails blue.

He put his chin on the top of her head. I don't know, he said, I'm sad.

My love, she answered. My great one.

He drifted through the door, her true-loved ghost of hair and clothes.

On Saturday they went to the park, husband, ghost, and she.

You two are quiet, the husband said. Through his bottle the bright sun shone.

Yeah, she said, I guess we are. She missed her hat, her sad, unreasonable hat.





*Flash fiction's white space is full of ghosts.*



# The Fortunes

He'd be cold dead in two days. That's what the angry lady on the subway told him. She seemed crazy.

Two days later he was doing his taxes. No matter how he fiddled with the numbers, he still ended up owing. What the shit? he thought.

He went out to the living room. Bastards are going to crush me, he said, his wife watching a soap opera. It wasn't the one with the hospital, it was newer, and more hip.

You deduct everything?

Uh, *yeah*.

Ok, she said, ok. You deduct your parents' plots?

He looked at the pretty woman kissing a pretty man on the television, both scrubbed pink and suited in plaid. I can deduct those? That doesn't seem right.

She shrugged. I don't know. But just do it, let them tell you that you can't.

Alright, he answered. But if I end up in jail....

He left the living room, went back to their bedroom, the light in the curtains coming in red. He sat on the bed and lifted the computer into his lap, it and its sprawl of hopeless numbers.

Jesus, he said, hands on his head. He did feel bad. He should have let the tired lady on the subway sit.



*If the details concern you, don't read flash fiction.*



## The Innocent

He looked up at the wasp nest, hung from a branch in the walnut tree. Give you 50 bucks if you hit it with this, the boy had said. In his small hand was a walnut.

The boy and his friends stood around the corner of the house, sniggering and peeking out.

He eyed the nest, a-sway in the breeze and lazily orbited by its makers. They were yellow-green and shone. They floated 'round and around.

He was an old man. He'd forgotten what it was like to lose his job, to be broken hearted, to face his uncertainties. He had so much—and the wasps were little soldiers in toy coats.

Do it, the boy shouted. Go ahead if you want the 50. The boys looked at each other with doddering heads and in imitation of the old man's grin.

He brought his arm back and threw. With all the experience of his lifetime he hit the nest square on, the walnut bursting the paper shell to disappear inside.

Oh! the boys said and covered their mouths. Oh, he actually did it!

The man turned to them, even as the wasps found his neck and arms, even as the boys gaped. You see, he said, standing in the sun. You see what you can become?

The boys ran to their homes, shut their doors, never again to undo what they'll make.





*Flash fiction wants you to change your point of view.*



## Wet

A small boy laughed at him as he stumbled from the barroom steps. Manuel! the father scolded, and the boy skipped on down the street.

It'd been like that all morning, these small boys and their names. It'd been like that all year.

He took in the mail at his front steps. *Mr. Smith: You're in danger of repossession. Mr. Smith: Vote for me. Mr. Smith: Your time is near.*

He stumbled to the top of the basement steps. Maude, he shouted, bring up some beer! But she was working—her day at the plant—and the steps were steep.

He got a Coke and sat on the couch. The weather said it'd rain by noon. It said it like that, and then like this: *que va a llover al mediodia.*

He stumbled down his short front steps. The sky was wild and dark. The dust was brown and wet. He'd too be lashed, before he made the bar.



*Don't forget the headlines in flash fiction.*



# The War

He did a drug that made his head feel like coral reef. Until that time, he'd never been happy. In fact, the back bay that'd been his mind was now alive with stars, and starfish.

Naturally, the policewoman wrote him a ticket. My hands are tied, she said.

For two months, his paycheck went to pay it off. After he did, he went to the policewoman.

My debts are yours, he told her.

She frowned. Are you high right now? I can't understand you.

He looked at the bones of her face, her jaw and the ridge of her nose. No, he said, just confused.

Let me get you a coffee, she answered.

But no, he thought, she seemed like a siren to drown him.





*Love stories are best told through flash fiction.*



# Square

He threw the potato across the square. It took a high arc over the thin crowd and hit a boy in the head.

Shit, said the boy and held a red blotch on his brow.

His father turned to reprimand him, hand up, though without real violence. Oh, he answered, when he saw the mark. What's that?

Another man and his daughter pointed to the potato that had ricocheted off the boy. It was clearly a cooked potato—it had split and steam rose from its insides.

It's a tomato, said the boy, peering into the short distance. I mean, potato. He looked to his dad for confirmation.

The man neither confirmed nor denied. Shit, he said. At that, a woman spun about, her face stern then softening when she took in the scene.

Potato? she said.

Somebody threw it, said her husband. I saw it sail through the sky.

The six people looked up. The sky was pale and blue. That hurt, said the boy.

By now a small commotion had begun about the man who threw the potato. An older man was raising his hand at him, with a degree of violence.

What was that for? he asked the thrower.

The thrower's face and hair were red. He looked as if he were sunburnt, or perhaps embarrassed.

It was hot, said the thrower.

What? said the older man. What was hot? He looked at the sky. It was stupid was what it was.

By now the boy and his father, as well as the father with his little girl, had made their way over.

Is this yours? said the father. He held half the potato in his fist. He didn't know it, but he moved it in an arc against the sky. At the end of its arc, he didn't realize he waved it in the thrower's face.

No, said the thrower. It isn't mine.

At this, a woman laughed, her own cheeks red and fair. No it isn't? It isn't yours?

*Too many characters, or not enough, excites flash fiction.*



# Perdon

Back a long time ago, he said, there weren't all these holidays. There was just one day a year when everything happened.

He had a chocolate rabbit in his hand. With a snap, off came the ears and with another they had three unequal pieces between them.

I don't think that's even remotely true, she answered. She took a bite off the feet, let it melt in her cheek. Where would you get such an idea?

He shrugged. I don't know. It sounded good in my mind, but like most things it doesn't stand the light of day.

She stood up and kissed the top of his head. She looked for a scrim of chocolate on his scalp but it was clean and pink, like the most wan camellia petal. No problem, Dad, she said. You always did make things up.

She left her father's apartment and went into the spring sun and the parking lot. A bunch of kids shouted at each other in a variety of languages as they kicked a ball through the grass. Speku! one of them seemed to say. Speku, speku!

She got in her car and turned the ignition. She'd pocketed the bunny's feet and left the ears and body to her dad. I hope he doesn't repeat that at the coffee shop, she told herself.

As she sat musing, the ball curved in the sky and landed with a whunk on her windshield. Perdon, one of the kids seemed to say, dancing on her toes in front of the car. My bad!

She waved to them and made a little dip with her forehead, in the way men might do as they pass each other in the street. No problem, she said, I don't care, I don't care.

The Easter light shined, the day bending on. All the kids were laughing at her, dipping their foreheads, shouting I don't care, I don't care!



*Flash fiction is small theater.*



## Edgar Atkins Teagarden

He left his yard, closed his gate, opened his neighbors'. He headed for the garden, there planted with a score of tropicals: banana, ginger, palm, and bird of paradise. By its base, he pulled a canna from its soil, bright red in bloom.

I don't care, he told his wife. They've got plenty.

It's theft, she answered, down and dirty theft.

Ha, he said. Where do you think they got them from? He already knew: whenever they went home they brought them back, stolen from the ground they claimed to love so well.

For Jesus sake, Ed. They didn't bring heavy plants on an airplane. They got them from a catalogue, same as everyone else.

He took his canna into the back yard. If he placed it against the wooden fence he shared with the Nguyens, they'd never know. With his trowel, he dug a hole and planted his new procurement, there next to the taro he'd acquired next door as well.

It's beautiful, he said, admiring his work. It's Vietnam in Virginia.

That night, he had a dream. He was a pianist and the Nguyens came to hear him play. He played Bach and Chopin, he played Jelly Roll and Joplin.

Thank you for coming, he told his audience. I'm very proud. I'm proud to be here.

One of the Nguyens—a son or brother—got to his feet. Go home! he said. Go home right now!

He looked around him, surprised to see that the concert hall of

all his life was a desert of strange and wonderful cacti. The new moon of New Year's was invisible in the sky.

I am home, he said.

At this, the audience laughed.

I'm always home, he said.

The audience bowed their heads.

I'm not?

The audience was silent so he looked up for the missing moon. It was a disk of black in the black sky and for a moment he trembled.

It's ok, said a Nguyen brother or son. But go home. Go home to your wife.

He felt dizzy. The cacti in their desert reached out their arms. The world and its creatures was as wide as the sea.

*Half of flash fiction is the absurd.*



## Art

She entered the contest. It was to color one page of a coloring book. The entry was 3 dollars, more money than she'd ever had.

She stole the crayons from Walgreens. She put them up her colorful shirt. Thanks, ma'am, said the guard on her way out. Thanks, she said. Good luck, she thought she heard him say.

The crayons would make the page so well, a different shade for every section. It was a mountain, an eagle, a Native American in a headdress. The caption said Our Noble Warrior.

She went to the library to do the coloring. What's that? said a little boy. His eyes went to the feathers and the swoops of variant snow.

It's my picture, she said. Do you want to help with a section? Yes.

Get your parents to give you 50 cents, she answered.

It was beautiful, the colors, the eagle, the sections by her and the kids. It was a happiness for the eyes.

She never thought this would be something to make. She never thought this would be something to win. She thought now was something to win.





*What age is flash fiction?*



## Deniers

I can see the water rising, she said. The tiny waves were stroking the dock.

That's the tide, Maggie. You already know that.

She set her cold coffee down and went outside. The grass at the edge of the bay went white, like earthworms struggling to stay land-side in the mud.

She took off her shoes and socks, stepped in. Might as well, she told herself. It's coming.

The water was warm, a tiny red crab skittered across her foot. Mark? she called, toward the house. Hey, love? But he'd retreated to the sun room, now to read the news.



*Flash fiction is my own metaphor.*



## Amore!

In the end it was death all 'round, death and tragedy and so much swagger. But he'd been such a happy boy!

His mother remembers him laughing, that most. He and his hobby horse, he and his short pants, his cod, his boyhood crush. Oh Rose oh Rose! he'd exclaimed, there in the garden, there by the pool he loved to gaze. Such a pretty one, such a pretty me!

Later, she said, he'd studied to strut and murder. Boys will be boys. He fell in love, a full man's love, and with the crossed curse of stars. Oh rut and cruelty, poison gash, oh immeasurability.

He snuck off to her porch, that's what his mother knew. To she whose moon was round and full with blood. She the sun, the red fount, the spells of maidenhead. She for whom the baby was banished and all the nurses wept.

I'm thrown upon these rocks, his mother cried, fallen from my balconies. Mine's a mother's grief and hers is just a toy—some lip-gloss potion of two and forty hours.

Girls and boys—such pretty boys—make such stupid men. Boys, she said, all fall upon their daggers.





*Flash fiction loves the star-crossed lovers.*



## Fourth Hag

She tries the cold water because that works with the wine on your linen slacks. But no, she says in her sleep, that won't do it, it won't come out.

Still asleep, she goes to the front door and looks out. The hills fall away on every side, some toward the tossing sea and some toward the tangled woods. From the woods comes the sawed sound of her murders.

Ouch, she says, burning her hand on the candle stub she carries. It burns fast into her fist and the sweet of it stirs her dream. Hers is in ermine and whalebone and sperm, and laid before her is the king, succession-dead, and his blood-stunted boys. On his knees, her stained and humiliated husband.

Fetch me my scepter, he'd said, staring only at the spirits. Break me my fast, he shouted, My cock crows. Make me the man I'm supposed to be.

Yes, she says, in her living sleep, his ambition spilled on the sand. Yes, she says, never to bear him. Yes, my liege, my prick, the name that's never spoken.

Then she's on the moor, astride of her dream. There's her sword, and the stain on her hand is not shame, or sorrow. I'm free, says the death on her gown. There's no meaning to the woods, no drive for the sea, the soldiers and their semen blots.



*Flash fiction loves the Scottish Play.*



# The Day's Surge

There was a boat in the basement. The girl had made the wooden ribs in shop class, soaking them in water to make them pliable, bent to connect the vertebrae which shaped out the hull. At home, she and the boy stretched it taut with canvas and painted it in an amber shellac.

When the storm—the leftovers of the hurricane—came, their boat lifted from the dirt floor and bobbed about on a foot and a half of water. It and their mother's books, boxes of sweaters, their paternal grandfather's blue Navy trunk.

She, their mother, stood at the second stair up as he, their father, shouted from upstairs.

What good will you be dead? he said. You'll be floating down there yourself.

She paid him no mind and stepped into the water that filled her pants to the knees. She waded through, pushing aside the drifting and mostly empty cans of paint, her forgotten recipe cards loosened from their box, and eyed the rafters for mice escaping the flood.

Ahead were the breakers, the flipped switch for the sump pump. It occurred to her she might have her husband throw down the rubber dishwashing gloves, but she was determined now to show him that his fears were silly, misplaced.

Electrocution hurts, he shouted. It doesn't let go.

She opened the metal door and eyed the flipped breaker, black and resolutely off. With one finger she pulled the switch and yanked

back her hand. There was a thrill, a jolt, in her heart, and the sump pump began its grind.

Are you dead? her husband shouted. The girl and boy stood at his hips, eyes trained to the cellar dark.

She caught the boat by its bow and guided it to the wall. To a water pipe she tied its rope. She looked at the lake her basement had become, dark water lapping at a standing lamp and an old chair.

I'm coming up, she said. The kids and her husband were quiet; the blood in her head pushed strong.



*With flash fiction, always double down.*



# The Epistle

Each morning he fell from bed and looked into the full-length mirror. A good-looking man, the red-glowing letter five inches across his chest.

The letter kept him warm. Even when he tumbled into the drift, snow to his chin, the glow inside his coat kept his heart hot with oxygen. He saw into the sky as the sinking flakes put stars in his eyes. Lord, he said aloud to no one, are we beautiful.

It had been glowing and growing since he was a child. At times—when his puppy died, when he was jumped and beaten outside the Rite Aid—the letter burned blue and bittersweet, flames of pity. And again when the barista gazed across her bare shoulder and smiled at him it went a vehement yellow. Though of course he mostly wore it red, in the enormous night, throughout a purple day.

He loved the letter. He gave it ointment and baby oil. It was shame and fearlessness and the sweetest regret.

That's some condition, said the oncologist.

Must it be removed? he asked.

That or die.

He went home and built his casket of cherry wood. He lined it with red damask. He and his letter fell in, falling through sleep.



*In flash fiction, allusion makes you uncomfortable.*



# The Miracle

Christmas is coming, he said.  
His cat shrugged, stretching her back.  
You don't care?  
The cat looked out the window.  
Won't you be able to talk then? Midnight, Christmas Eve?  
The cat wagged her head.  
No?  
Her ears flattened.  
Is that your mites bothering you?  
His cat shrugged, stretching again.  
Well, I'm looking forward to it, you talking.  
The cat said nothing.  
Although I've heard sometimes that when the animals talk  
they foretell their master's death.  
His cat sneezed.  
The flu? I'll die of the flu?  
The cat lay down.  
If it's the flu, meow.  
His cat said nothing.  
I've also heard that when the animals get to talking, they end  
up bickering among themselves. Happy homes get broken.  
The cat stared at an empty spot on the wall.  
Well, right, there aren't any other animals here. You're an  
only-pet.  
The cat said nothing.

Anyway, it'll be a miracle. Snow falling, wind howling, time  
nearly standing still. And you'll talk.

His cat closed her eyes.

I won't be alone.

The cat fell asleep, paws twitching.



*You'll miss flash fiction when it's gone.*



## When It Was Last Fourth

He wished he'd been a rum runner, boats across the lake to Detroit, gun in his pants. He wished he'd been a salesman of bees. He thought a curled mustache with wax and oil might have suited him.

Rather, he lay beneath the basketball hoop, trickle of drool on his shoulder. C'mon, she said. On her legs he made it to the couch. On her lap he dreamed the red tales of drunken sailors.

That was something, he said, next morning.

We missed the fireworks, she said. Again. She sat in the chair beside him, pretty dress around her knees.

Did you want to go?

You know I did, she said. You know what it meant.

I'm sorry?

For a week she didn't speak to him. His companion was his guitar—he plucked out songs of strike breakers and jungle revolutions from somewhere in the past.

I'll make it up to you, he told her, finally. We'll go bottle hunting in the woods.

I guess, she said.

Behind the stones, in the muck of a dooryard midden, they pulled blue shards of glass and pieces of teacups. She found a pair of rusted shears and a black snake sunning itself.

Look at him! she shouted. He's the color of oil.

The snake flicked its tongue, tasting the air. Its coils were dangerous and soft.

We should get a drink, he said. We need a black whisky.

She sat on a stone, pant cuffs around her pretty ankles. Not this time, she said. Her eyes were on her future scenes, outward on some future sun.

I'm sorry, he said.

Me too, she said.

He wished he'd been an ancient ark of animals, asleep on the stream.

*The argument of flash fiction is long.*



## Million Miles

The pipes dripped, collecting humidity from the air, constructing puddles on the art gallery floor. Here and there an artwork edged dangerously close to the drips, the gestured hand from a clay woman and the oversized frame holding back a stenciled elephant's trunk.

An artist stood before her piece, or rather to one side to avoid the steady drip. Do you even *have* insurance? she said, to no one but her husband. The gallery owners gathered outside in the blaze of sun to smoke.

They're amateurs, he answered. And they're broke. They're goddamned art students.

Ok, she said. But do they even *have* air conditioning?

The owners, two young women and a younger man, returned from their nicotine. The young man was sheepish in the artist's glare though the women were poised in their beautiful shirts.

What do you think? one of the women asked, she in her Frida Kahlo shirt.

Seems kind of fucked, said the artist.

The owner in Klein blue tossed her hand. We can move it. We can give it back. What we can't do is stop the weather.

The husband sized up the young man. What year are you? he asked.

Twenty-four, he said. Oh, wait, in school? A junior. He was melted in the husband's regard. Are you a professor? Or something?

I'm a dermatologist, he said.

The artist sighed. It's *ok*, she said. But it's fucked. You know?

The woman in blue stepped toward the artist. She put out her palm and gently slapped the artist's cheek. It's ok, she softly said. And fucked.

The husband laughed, the young man coughed. The artist, put back on her heels, was wide in the eyes. Do you even have some water? she said. Her voice was sandy and low.

Sure, said the woman in Kahlo. Would you like it now?

Yes, the artist said. Right now. The drips, or her heart, ran their million miles.



*Remember, in flash fiction dialogue sows confusion.*



## Ash Wednesday

They'd landed on the Fourth Moon in time for the fireworks. The upper atmosphere being mostly methane, they'd only have to shoot a flare above them to get flames of orange, red, and green in bloom across the sky.

He held her hand. The new gloves were touch sensitive and he could feel the sweat of her palm and nervous wriggle in her fingers. Are you afraid? he wanted to ask her. He was afraid.

After the show, they walked into the dark. The air was clogged with night and only 20 feet from the platform they could hardly see, but for the reflections from their suits.

I want to take my helmet off, she said. I want to kiss you again. She'd been saying so for weeks, since they'd fled the solar system and any oxygen. She put her hands to the shoulder buckles and pulled them up a quarter inch.

Darling! he said. He grasped her wrists and yanked them toward him. Don't be foolish.

Foolish, she answered, the dust of disgust in her throat. I'm always the foolish one in this opera. Always the girl.

His heart stopped, started, his veins contracting with the pressure. I only meant you wouldn't get the chance. You'd be dead in the instant.

No kidding? She raised her hands and showed her palms to the excessive sky. She brought them to the buckles again. Apologize or I will.

I'm sorry!

If you hadn't been such a coward we could have stayed and fought. We could have kissed before they shot us in the heart.

He made to spit on the ground, but of course he couldn't. You're just a girl, he said. And foolish.

She looked toward the platform and the bright lights flickering like dim stars. Her wastewater recycling had started in her suit and it swooshed in her ears.

I just want to kiss you, she said. And I hate you.

I'm sorry, he said again. He loved her but her heart was gone. She was like the Sun, the dandelion, they'd watched from the window vanish. Just one more day and we'll do it. We'll take them off.

You won't, she said, and then you'll be alone. Soot was blowing through the sky, remnants, perhaps, of their planets. You'll have to give me up, she said. I'm your girl.

*Yes, flash fiction is genre.*



## Simple Tales

He'd been a millionaire for about four days. That's how it worked—one story in and then comes the money.

It was a story about another man who killed a woman. Those were the ones that made the money. Turn it around and you wouldn't get a dime.

The man killed the woman because she was so beautiful. She was tall, shaped like love, and he ached for her. Yes, he ached for her. He killed her because of all that love.

The story was plain-to-speak. Love like that always is. The writer wrote a noun and then a verb, and then another like that, again. The money like death came rolling in. Death in its hands holds the diamond.

The dialogue came quickly. You are the shape of the sun, the written man said. You are the blood on the red-spoiled ground. The dialogue and then the violence and this man running for his life toward the sea.

For four days the writer was a wealthy man. Four days, and then like that was the ruin of him. Death comes quickly and is gone. Fame like death spills out on the ground.





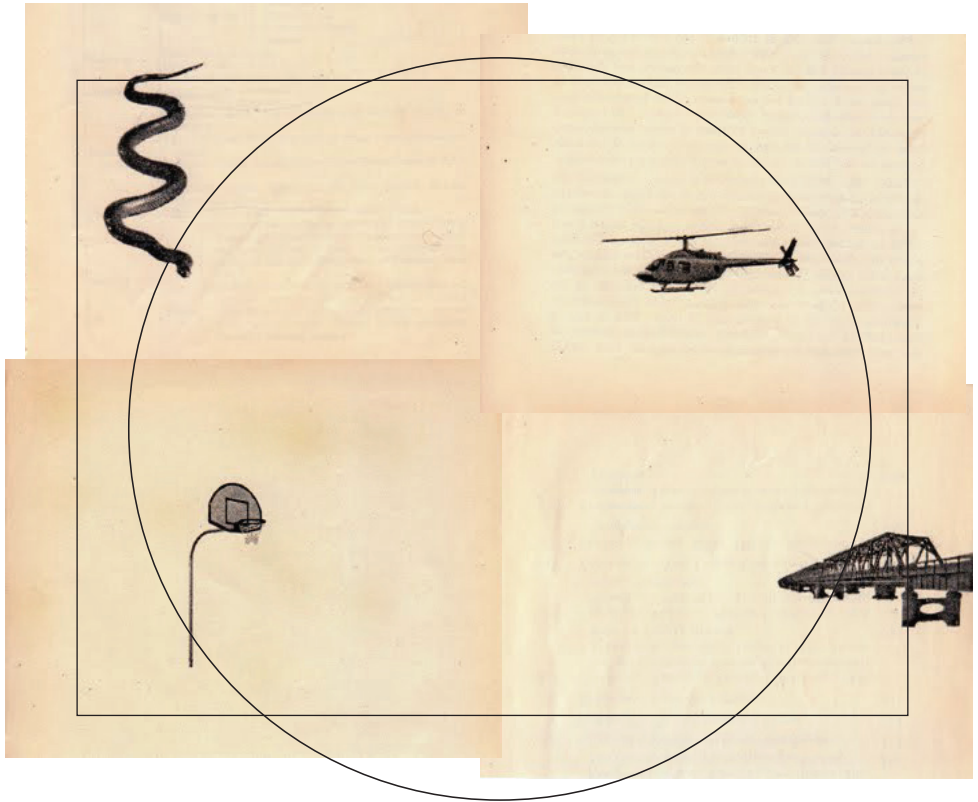
*Always laugh at flash fiction.*

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## Biography

Joseph Young lives in Baltimore, MD, where he writes, makes art, and looks at things. His book of microfiction, *Easter Rabbit*, was released by Publishing Genius in 2009. He self-published the novel *NAME*, dubbed vampire realism, in 2010. In 2018, he created MicroFiction RowHouse, a project for which he installed text throughout his home—on walls, windows, ceilings, and many other surfaces—to tell the story of a fictional family who might have once lived in the home. Details on these projects and others can be found at [josephyoung.net](http://josephyoung.net). Joseph Young is/is not real.



## SPYGLASS

I wanted a new way, so I asked my friends, Who do I most resemble?

Shakespeare, said one, because of the earring.

FDR, said another, because of the wheelchair.

Caesar, said a third, because of the way holds his hands.

Picasso, said the last, because of his fame.

I took these with me and went to the ocean. All around was the sand, the  
ten thousand miles of never changing sand.