

HAYDEN'S FERRY

R E V I E W



Joel Brouwer Ron Carlson Christopher Chambers
Claudia Keelan Kathleen Robbins Christian Widmer

SPECIAL SECTION—FLASH FICTION

Special Section—Flash Fiction

When we decided to include a special section devoted to Flash Fiction, we were not entirely certain of what we would get. Can a story of 750 words be complete? Can it be written in a traditional narrative, or must it assume another form? And perhaps, most importantly, if the author had been allotted an additional 1,000 or 2,000 words, would it have been better? Is this a case of “the bigger, the better”? or “less is more”?

In determining what exactly Flash Fiction is and what exactly constitutes good Flash Fiction, we soon discovered the stories themselves would tell us. After all, a truly good story is neither long nor short; rather, it is the exact length it needs to be.

Once the stories were chosen, we could not resist asking each contributing author to define Flash Fiction and to do so, if possible, in forty words or less. The responses are as diverse and engaging as the stories themselves:

“Flash fiction lives in the shadowy part of town between prose and poetry, possessing a luminous quality not found in ordinary fiction, having stolen from poets compression of language that gestures toward something greater than what appears to the naked eye.” —Christopher Chambers

“Flash fiction stems from the fear of sudden death. The writer frets he won’t finish writing it or that the reader won’t finish reading it. Either could be hit by a bus. The shorter the story, the greater the odds of completion.” —Steve Price

“Flash fiction is a storypoem with three sharp turns in a labyrinth leading to a precipice and a mirror and a reflection, half beast and half human, and the only weapon, the only way out: a magic ball of twine.” —Lex Williford

“Bambi Versus Godzilla, George W. Bush’s hollow skull cracking open to sprout a white rose of peace, God stuffing the nuclear genie back into its Diet Pepsi bottle, the woman you’ve waited for your whole sorry life whispering ‘Yes.’” —Steve Heller

“These fictions are viral. Microscopic. Designed to infect. Borges: ‘Dreams that infect reality.’ Get under the skin. Re-work DNA. Inhale! They appear where one doesn’t expect. Newspapers. Footnotes. Marginalia. Indexes. A blurb. A burp. A tick waiting for anything warm-blooded.” —Michael Martone

The stories which follow approach Flash Fiction in a variety of ways, yet each reminds us of what we love about fiction: how completely we become immersed in the world the author creates; how simple moments are transformed into powerful stories; and how one word or phrase, carefully chosen and constructed, conveys so much meaning.

A Rose for Sister Carmel

All the other kids on the St. Jude's playground knew the news before we did, keeping their distance during recess, staring at Hanna and Nate and Maddie and me like we all had some slow, terrible disease.

"Your brother's dead," Randy Duncan told Maddie as she sat on the church curb, picking her nose. I'd been watching her and Nate and Hanna all recess like my mother'd asked me to, her voice hoarse the night before over the Baylor Hospital phone, but Nat Jenniges had just hit the tetherball hard past me.

"He's not either!" Maddie was shouting into Randy's face. "He's in the hospital!"

"He *died* in the hospital." Randy laughed. "Last night."

Maddie punched Randy in the nose and he put his hands over his face and Maddie struck his knuckles covering his blood.

"Sister Mary Joseph!" Randy shouted. Then he hit Maddie hard in the stomach.

The tetherball spun past me just as Maddie doubled over, the concrete-filled tire holding up the steel tether pole wobbling on the asphalt like a sewer cover. Then I was running across the playground, jumping onto Randy Duncan's back, knuckle-popping his skull, wrestling him to the concrete and turning him over to sit on his stomach and kneel on his wrists and hit him as hard as I could in the face.

I shook out my tooth-cut knuckles. "What'd he hit you for, Maddie? Piece of shit."

"Said Jesse's dead," Maddie said, holding her stomach and wheezing. I sucked at my scraped fist, Randy's eyes fluttering as he flinched.

"Sandy Macy told me on the bus," he said, sputtering bubbles of blood. "I swear to God!"

"Liar!" I hauled back to hit him again, but Sister Carmel soft-palmed my wrists and lifted me off him, weightless as an astronaut in space.

"All right, everybody, it's over!" Sister Mary Joseph shouted, a giant black and white domino teetering into the circle of kids, throwing up her hands and waving them off like grackles scattering in the rectory garden. She jerked my wrist to wrestle me away from Sister Carmel. "All right, Mr. Truitt, that's it. I'm calling your father again."

She pulled me hard at my wrist, but Sister Carmel held fast. "You

take Duncan to the infirmary," the old nun told her. "I'll take care of *this one*."

"No, Sister. Please. You don't understand. No one's *told* them yet." The younger nun nodded to Randy. "Least not till this here one opened his big mouth."

"Is that true?" Sister Mary Joseph shouted at her favorite.

Randy looked down at his Hush Puppies and she pressed her yellow fingernails into his neck. "You're coming with me." She started toward the infirmary, then turned back. "I haven't forgotten about you, Travis. I'm calling your father right now."

Sister Carmel took Maddie and Nate's hands on either side and she led us all into the chapel and down the aisle and sat us in the front row, where days later we'd sit with our parents for the funeral.

Somehow the news had gotten out from one of the kids' parents, the young nun explained, and when the news had spread all across St. Jude's she'd tried her best to keep it from us till our parents could tell us that night. She was sorry, she said, her blue eyes wet as robins' eggs in rain.

"He's dead," I said, staring at the suffering Christ hanging over the altar, seeing my little brother hanging there, guilty and glad that my long, terrible suffering was over.

"No," Maddie said and sneezed.

Hanna pulled a long strand of her auburn hair from behind an ear and held it out in front of her face, sniffing at it, while Nate made a tent of missals from the pew holder, talking to himself like he did with his G. I. Joe in our bedroom closet.

"You can pray now if you want," Sister Carmel said. Then she stood from the pew and genuflected, crossing herself and turning back to the chapel door.

Two days later, I sat shifting on bruised bones in the hard pew during the funeral sermon—sickly sweet incense and chrysanthemums and roses scenting the air—and I carried a single tight-budded rose from Jesse's coffin down the aisle through the crowd of mourners leaving their seats, and I reached across Sister Mary Joseph's lap and held out the rose to Sister Carmel quietly crying next to her, a thorn pressing blood from my thumb.

"A Rose for Sister Carmel," *Hayden's Ferry Review*,
Special Section—Flash Fiction, 2003: 43, 48-49.

No reproduction without permission, for education purposes only.
If you wish to request permission to reproduce, please [email lex@utep.edu](mailto:lex@utep.edu).