

Fuel

75 Prize-Winning Flash Fictions
Raising Funds
To Fight Fuel Poverty

edited by

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Contents

Introduction i

How to read this book iv

15-C-47662 • *Patrick Holloway* • 1

A Choice for the Golden Age • *Matthew Castle* • 5

A Girl's Guide to Fly Fishing • *Mary-Jane Holmes* • 11

After the Armourers • *Marissa Hoffmann* • 13

Battle Hymn of the American Republic • *Jeremy Galgut* • 15

Bedlam • *Jo Withers* • 17

Blue Hills Yonder *Joanna Will* • 18

Both On and Off • *Jack Barker-Clark* • 20

Buttercups • *Terry Warren* • 22

Cleft • *Gaynor Jones* • 24

Coffee • *Barbara Kuessner Hughes* • 26

Darling Mummy • *Zoe Barkham* • 29

Double Lives • *Kathryn Aldridge-Morris* • 31

Drought • *David Swann* • 33

Emmylou, Patron Saint of Dirt-Poor Folks • *Sharon Boyle* • 35

Fall River, August 1892 • *Sarah Hilary* • 38

Fever • *Claire Carroll* • 40

Fifth Grade • *Brianna Snow* • 43

Fly • *Rob Walton* • 44

Fly Away Home • *Helen Rye* • 45

For You, I Am • *Alison Woodhouse* • 47

Glass • *Fiona McKay* • 48

Good for Her • *D. Brody Lipton* • 51

Granny Smith, Queene • *Elisabeth IngramWallace* • 53

Groceries • *Tania Hershman* • 56
How Much Rain Can a Cloud Hold? • *Laurie Bolger* • 59
I Found Myself Lost • *Pauline Masurel* • 62
If A Tree Falls • *Rachel O'Cleary* • 66
In The Car • *Bernadette M Smyth* • 69
La Loba • *Vicki Jarrett* • 72
Last, Best Hope in a Shade of Orange • *Taria Karillion* • 77
Lessons in Attachment Parenting • *Sara Hills* • 81
Lost Appetite • *Bean Sawyer* • 84
Morning Routine • *Kim Catanzarite* • 85
Mouse • *Gillian O'Shaughnessy* • 87
Mum Died • *Rowena Warwick* • 89
Mum's The Word • *Valerie O'Riordan* • 91
Never Let Me Go • *Cathy Lennon* • 93
One Of The Girls • *Monica Dickson* • 94
Plum Jam • *Frances Gapper* • 98
Polio • *Nicholas Ruddock* • 99
Press 3 for Random Track • *Dri Chiu Tattersfield* • 101
Recesses • *Brenden Layte* • 106
Scrolling Facebook Memes While Waiting For The
Paediatrician • *Elisabeth Ingram Wallace* • 111
Sea Change • *Sharon Telfer* • 116
Search History • *Iain Rowan* • 118
Self/Less • *Electra Rhodes* • 120
Silent Space • *Jane Roberts* • 126
Sins of the Heart • *Kit de Waal* • 128
Snow Crow • *Doug Ramspeck* • 130
Sometimes There's Compassion in a Punch • *Peter Burns* • 132
Teavarran • *Louise J Jones* • 135

Ten Months With Octopus • *Angela Readman* • 137
The Button Wife • *Dara Yen Elerath* • 142
The Cinders of 2021 • *Kevin Cheeseman* • 144
The Eight Year Hope Of Us • *Lucy Goldring* • 148
The First Man on The Moon • *Rosie Garland* • 150
The Grand Finale • *Tim Craig* • 152
The Hand That Wields the Priest • *Emily Devane* • 154
The Haunted Pan • *Phil Olsen* • 156
The Letter From The Home Office • *Gail Anderson* • 159
The Lighthouse Project • *Vanessa Gebbie* • 161
The Long Wet Grass • *Seamus Scanlon* • 164
The Most Fascinating Woman in the World • *Andrew Boulton* • 166
The Reminder • *Ida Keogh* • 169
The Shop Game • *Sam Payne* • 174
The Wall • *Mandy Wheeler* • 177
Things Left and Found by the Side of the Road • *Jo Gatford* • 181
Things the Fortune Teller Didn't Tell You When She Read
Your Fortune • *Iona Rule* • 183
To Pieces • *Abby Feden* • 186
Treating the Strains and Stains of Marriage • *Sherry Morris* • 191
Twenty-one Species of Fish Called Sardine • *Rosaleen Lyndh* • 194
Undergrowth • *Melissa Bowers* • 198
We Will Go On Ahead and Wait for You • *Michael Logan* • 200
While My Wife is Out Of Town • *Jude Brewer* • 202

Contributor Biographies • 205
Competition Descriptions with Story Titles • 230
Index of First Lines • 242
Acknowledgements • 247

Introduction

The seed that grew into the idea for this book was planted in the summer of 2022, as I listened with distress to the news about increasing electricity, gas and petrol prices in the UK, and heard stories of people already being forced to choose between heating their food and heating their home. I wanted to do something more than just donating money to food banks, to fuel poverty charities. Putting together an anthology of flash stories—which here means short short stories under 1500 words or so, sometimes *much* shorter—I could do easily, I thought. I have all the contacts, and the flash fiction community is such a generous one, I felt sure people would be happy to be involved.

Then I had another thought: what if I did something that hadn't been done before? What if this was not just a fundraising book that people would buy to help a cause but a book that both celebrates dozens of brilliant flash stories that had won first prize in competitions around the world and, at the same time, explodes the myth that there is any kind of “formula” for a winning story—by showcasing everything a winning story might be?

As I had hoped, the flash community—both the competition organisers and the authors of the winning stories—were incredibly generous in helping me and donating their stories. And, even if I say so myself, I do think the book you hold in your hands is fantastic. Here are 75 flash fictions that have all

won first prize in a competition—the earliest from 2006, the newest just last year—and look at the range of lengths, styles, forms, voices, genres! Look at the myriad different ways to tell stories to appeal to all manner of readers, from the more linear and “conventional” stories to the experimental, the minimalist, the all-one-sentence-with-no-full-stops story, the bullet point story, the story as play, as email chain, as letter.

At a certain point, and with a little reluctance, I decided to include one of my own winning flash stories; I realised as I was compiling the anthology that a number of the stories put forward by competition organisers were ones that I myself had picked as the winner when I had the honour of judging their competitions. This would be a good chance, I thought, to explode *another* myth: that a judge must be drawn to the kind of stories they write themselves. Take a look, if you like, at my story, Groceries (p56) and then have a read of the stories I chose as winners of various competitions (Good For Her (p51); Granny Smith, Queene (p52); Morning Routine (p85) Mum’s the Word (p91); One of the Girls (p94); Sins of the Heart (p128); While My Wife is Out of Town (p202)), and see what you think.

I hope that you will find this book both entertaining and useful, that it will introduce you to new favourite writers and to competitions to send your own work to if you are a writer. Most of all, I hope that the incredible range of stories here will give you permission to write the story you want to write in the way

you want to write it, however long or short that story needs to be.

Thank you so much for buying this book and helping support fuel poverty charities—may this book outlive the need for the assistance these charities offer to those who are struggling.

Happy reading!

Tania Hershman
Manchester
February 2023

How To Read This Book

There are many ways to enjoy a book of very short flash fictions by many authors, which are presented here in alphabetical order by title. You might cast your eye down the contents page and see which title demands that you read it! (As a competition judge, titles are very important.) You might leaf through and read stories at random. You might look for the shortest stories first, or the longest.

If you'd like to read all the stories that have won a particular competition, you can turn to the Competition Descriptions section at the back of the book (p230), where you will find a list below each competition's bio.

Another thing that will grab a judge's attention is the first line of a story, so I thought I'd include at the very back of this book an Index of First Lines (p242). Head over there and see which one whets your appetite—and take a moment to marvel over the enormous range of different ways to begin a story!

Sins of the Heart

ROMANS Chapter 1 verse 29

Kit de Waal, winner, 2014 Bridport Flash Fiction Prize

She needs bread.

“I’ll be five minutes,” she sings and her heartbeat drums her across the road, around the corner, down the hill. She wears slippers and carries a tea towel, clean, unused. She has neighbours, her journey needs the props of innocence. But he is not there tending his front garden. His neat and slender house is shadowy and locked.

“We need milk,” she chimes, and fastens her baby in the pushchair as restraint. She sees him waiting and his smile is worth her shame.

One Sunday the minister points to close print on rice paper and speaks of sins imagined, words unsaid. He traces footsteps from her husband’s bed all the way across the road, around the corner, down the hill and she has weeks to wait before God looks away.

She has a list and calls us inside.

“Do we have to?”

“Yes, you have to,” she mutters and foists cold coins in my sister’s hand. We cross the road, around the corner, down

the hill. A man as tall as my father leans on an open gate like he knows us. Dark soil escapes from his trowel.

We carry her bag home one handle each, potatoes, flour, unnecessary things and, as we pass, he tips his hat and says hello. He has sweets, dusty, pink and everlasting.

“Did you see anyone?” she asks.

We spill her change and our adventure on the kitchen table and she slips away.

“Forgot the sugar,” she whispers, “forgot the eggs.”

Snow Crow

*Doug Ramspeck, winner, Bath Flash Fiction Award,
October 2021*

And the days were made of auguries. And the cricket calls arrived disembodied from the field. And a dead mole lay on its back by the garage, gathering its thin blanket of ants. And wasps hummed outside the boy's window like primitive wraiths. And one morning, he found a dead crow in the woods and carried it back to the house, hiding it at the back of his closet like a reliquary. And sometimes he imagined the creature calling to him in the night, calling to him in his dreams, and the boy would rise, pull the string for the closet light, and open the cardboard box. And there was the crow: its dark wings motionless, its dark and lacquered eyes gazing up at him. And sometimes in the mornings, the boy stepped into the backyard and gazed at the sun with its raw, sepulchral eye. And at breakfast, now and then, he asked about his father. And his mother would cross her arms over her chest or set his plate so forcefully on the table that the boy would look away. And some afternoons, he sat in his closet and imagined the crow lifting itself on the dark oars of its wings, rowing high

above the trees. Or the boy imagined a crow call fissuring the air, a crow call that was both corporeal and incorporeal at once. And the smell in the boy's closet was like something secretive congealing on the surface of a pond. And on the evening when a first light snow of the season came dropping toward the land, the boy carried the crow back into the woods and tossed it as high as he could manage into the air.