

FLASH FICTION WINNER 2017

MAN WALKS INTO A BAR by Rob McInroy

This isn't easy to say.

Schadenfreude.

Bless you.

Haha.

I'm afraid I have some bad news, Mr Orion.

No news is good news.

This is very difficult.

Like trigonometry? That were allus Greek to me too, petal.

We can offer palliative care. It may give a few months extra. I'm sorry.

Close the door, walk away. Good time guy gone for a burton. Never a day sick in my life. Except my wedding night, right enough, sick as a budgie that night. Boom boom.

So here's me. There's that. I'm speechless, numb. It weren't meant to be this way. What's that? A joke? I'll tell you a joke. There's this guy walks into a bar. No, this gorilla walks into a bar, lights up a cigarette. No, sorry, there's a punchline here somewhere. Give me a minute.

A minute? Jesus.

Forty-three years. Is that all I get?

There's this guy driving down the M62 when Laura phones his mobile. 'Jack, be careful. I heard on the news there's someone driving the wrong way down the motorway.'

'Laura,' says Jack, 'it's not just one, there's hundreds of the buggers.'

Did I say my name?

Yes. Jack.

Two elephants walk off a cliff. Boom boom.

What d'you call a fish with no eyes?

A fsh.

What d'you call a man with only months to live?

What?

Skeleton walks into a bar. Says 'bartender, gimme a beer and a mop.'

Sidesplitter, huh?

Blind man walks into a wall.

Okay, tasteless.

Horse walks into a bar. Barman says ‘why the long face?’

Jack Orion walks into a bar.

Barman says ‘why the long face?’

A skeleton, a horse and a Yorkshireman walk into a bar. Barman says ‘what’s this? A fucking joke?’

That’s what I said to the doctor, too.

He weren’t laughing neither.

FLASH FICTION 2ND PLACE 2017

EN SUITE by Kim McMahon

She hears him rinsing his mouth exactly three times in the en suite. From her bed, she can see out through the grey drizzled window into the garden where he’s cut everything down early for the winter.

He comes into the room, his dressing gown gaping, but before he can say ‘You know my blood sugar can’t cope with a late breakfast’ she says “I’m tired”.

“Well, if you’re having one of your ‘days’ I’ll just get on shall I?” He trots downstairs without waiting for a reply.

She’s remembering a time when her morning was like a quiet, open meadow, but the deep tick of his fathers mahogany clock intrudes. She watches the clock’s spidery gold hand creep around its antique face, and then she knows what must be done. She pulls her clothes on without washing. She drags a dusty leather bag out from under the bed and heaves the clock into it. The clock leaves it oblong shadow behind on the shelf.

In the kitchen, he’s wearing a plastic apron and frying bacon.

“Decided to get up, then?” he says over his shoulder.

She grabs her raincoat and walks to the shed at the end of the long garden. The sawdust smell clogs her nostrils – and there hangs the spade, pristine, with its blade sharpened to silver. She takes it down and goes out to stand near the compost heap; she thinks she can hear it making crumbling sounds as the micro- organisms digest.

Here is an empty spot in the border that will do.

The raindrops patter onto her hood as she begins to dig, but the spade bounces off a stone with a clang, jarring her arm. When she lifts the stone out, she finds a thick worm cut into two convulsing pieces. Then the spade hits bramble roots. She kneels in the wet and breaks her nails trying to tear up the tough brown veins but they are attached to a network running through the guts of the garden. Standing, she pounds the spade into the roots until they are severed, and now the blade slices easily through the claggy earth. Sweat itches her scalp. The hole is too small – and she wants it square, so she digs up some grass, and soon it *is* deep and wide enough.

He’s opening the conservatory door, umbrella up and neck out, tortoise-like.

“Have you gone mad?” he shouts, “You’re ruining the lawn!”

She hauls the clock out from the bag, lifts it above her head with a grunt and smashes it down into its grave. The wood splinters and a second later there’s a tinkling avalanche as the fragile inner workings shatter.

Now, he stands beside her staring into the hole as the cold rain begins to seep through his slippers.

FLASH FICTION 3rd PLACE 2017

ALL-NIGHTER by E.Rose

On hearing that yet another obstacle had been placed in my way to a PhD in Creative Writing

And Smale foweles maken melodye

That slepen al the nycht with open yē

(So pricketh hem nature in her corages), - ¹

I’m this polysyllabic squabble of a woman, see, and boink on the nose, there I am fat down and flat out, lying on my back. Again. Tut tut, titty-tit, trying to play with the big boys, eh? And all I’d ex-pected was to ex-press myself in waterslides of mother’s milky verbs, not to be pressed ex- and in-, sub- and supra-...whipped up, slosed about, creamed throughout, and fucked all over. Again.

I'd thought to take a deep breath and hop back into my head, snatching at splinters and shovelling the boners about, switching the synaptic currents back and forth and ravelling them up into a jammy old blob of a dirt-drunk dream. But no, down and out for a one and a two and a ten, counted out by a man. Again.

So I slick a knife underneath myself and scrape myself off the floor.

I did it when you cradled your uncley arm around my breast and pinched the want-to-live right out of my eyes, when you knuckled the old brown gown apart and uncurtained me, when you squashed my body between your teeth and drank my blood like the good Christian you professed and protested and pleaded you were and always would be. You soiled me into slashing my self's centre instead of into kicking your balls right up into your throat.

You taught me that women bleed like stuck pigs so we must tamp up and put out...that we write like idiots, pose like angels and draw like shit... that we speak to air so thin it has no ears... that we think like protozoic plasma and reason like all the primal urges gone to hell and back... but holy fuck, I forgot, *I'm* not the one writing with a ballpointed and hairy prick for a pen.

Fucking validate me, man.

But then again, when you want to right me to all your rights and you tell me to rrewrote myself and you re:novate me and you re:voice m and you re:produce me and you re:create me, why then I'll remind you, you stone hinged upon my madness, to go fuck yourself.

¹ Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*. Prologue. Lines 9-11. Trans: And small hens sing/who sleep all night with their eyes open/nature pricks them so in their hearts. I, too, cannot sleep in the dark, because of pricks.

FLASH FICTION 2017
HIGHLY COMMENDED

LIL, ANGRY AS SACK-SHOOK WASPS SOMETIMES

by Douglas Bruton

A wasps' nest once, hanging just inside the door of the shed. A grey crepe paper ball, wasps coming and going through a bit hole in the wall. Her daddy told her to stand underneath ready to catch the wasp byke in a sack that smelled of winter leaves and smoke, and to close the sack quick as cat-snatch when he said. Then her daddy climbed on a chair and with one smack of his old axe the nest was freed and fell like a slow-dropped stone into the dark and fusty of the sack. They were as angry as a thousand slammed doors, those wasps, and as angry as a thousand fingers caught in those doors.

Sometimes Lil feels just like that, all fizz and spite and sting.

Didn't she say to him to take care now? Didn't she say Callum was to come back safe and sound, in one piece, that she'd forever give him the sharp of her tongue in his grave if he didn't?

And he promised. She has his words to heart. It was his last day and he'd stayed over at her mam's. He hadn't known what to do and she hadn't either. It was clumsy is what she remembers, his hands like two ferrets running over her every discovered inch, her nipples pinched and sucked so hard they hurt, and she was slippy-wet between her legs and her heart running fast enough she was breathless in her bed. And Callum was hard and quick, and his kisses could not be counted, his body pressing her into the bed, like her mam putting the bedsheets under the heavy iron.

And after, when the wet between her legs was growing cold and Lil could find the air to speak again, Callum was holding her like he'd never let her go and it felt as though they could spend all their days from then clasping each other in her bed – and Lil said he was to come back to her, and he promised. Through hell and high bloody water, he said.

Then, when the day was just beginning, the new day, the day for leaving, and he had to go, they dressed in the near dark, back to back like they were strangers again. And downstairs in the quiet and still of her mam's kitchen, it felt like he'd already gone, except he came to her once more and he took her gentle in his arms and he sang a song in a small voice, and Lil and Callum danced together – the last dance.

They sent a letter and they said he was brave and a credit to his uniform and there'd be a medal for what he did and she should be proud.

Lil is as mad as sack-shook wasps sometimes and she curses his name, and his hands finding her breasts in the night, and his kisses pressed to her every part, and dancing afterwards in the gathered song-sung dark of her kitchen.

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WORMHOLE by Jez Hodesdon

The woods either side of the field slant in and upwards so the pasture lies like an arrow head between them. They are dark and mysterious in summer. Their lower foliage is eaten by the cattle so the leafy branches start about four foot above the ground, leaving shadows and slashes of sunlight that pierce the gloom.

There is always a wind. Sometimes it moans low and quiet; crooning. At other times it's shrill and persistent, bringing with it the emptiness and loneliness of far off eastern steppes.

There is always a wind. It lifts the swallows, scattering them like paper to twirl and float in the air. It chases through the grasses making them sway and ripple. It bends the trees, parts their foliage like a farmer plunging his hand into the wool of his sheep. It buffets and pushes the traveller, the walker, the horseman as they make a rare trek to the crown of the hill.

The farmer knows the wind. It is an old adversary but they have reached an amicable truce. He doesn't disturb the megaliths of stone on the hill's summit; a tonsure on the wooded slope, its position directly above the arrowhead field. The wind contents itself to sliding round his farmhouse, rattling doors and booming down the chimney.

Think of the wind as a whirlpool of water emptying from a full sink down a drain, for there is a drain at the top of the hill. A partially silted, partially blocked, drain; a wormhole if you will.

A wormhole that lies beneath the collapsed slabs that goes from this time to another. Consider it to be a doorway onto a platform, a wormhole that drops you onto a station platform, an underground station without a time table so each train that arrives is an adventure. You catch it without knowing where it'll take you.

The wind around you is the wind of other places, other times and other worlds which move in close to the platform then pirouette away.

Knowledge can be a dangerous thing. Everything has its place in the world and some things are best left alone.

The wind tugs at your clothes, snatches your breath, makes you shiver.
Time enough explore tomorrow.