

Flash! Fiction 5

The background of the cover is a mosaic-style illustration. It features a central figure, a woman with long dark hair, wearing a blue and green dress, holding a red object. She is surrounded by a group of people, some of whom are also holding red objects. The style is reminiscent of a mosaic or a collage, with various colors and textures.

by Peter McMillan
with Adam Mac

Books by the Authors

Flash! Fiction (2012) by Peter McMillan

Flash! Fiction 2 (2013) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 3 (2014) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 4 (2015) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Adam Mac

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Philosophically Speaking

This morning as I was sorting through the wall of books that wraps around my one-room apartment, I re-discovered in an obscure critique of Kant an irregularly folded page of handwritten text. It wasn't dated but it seemed to be in the same hand that had inscribed "George Glover / Knox College, 1923" inside the cover. I remember that the first time I read it I decided I must keep the book if for no other reason than to protect this artifact.

As far as I was able to determine this was George Glover's only achievement in philosophy.

In our highly evolved being we have become objective, remote, and godlike. Having reached our evolutionary apex, we reflect back on ourselves as if looking at something beneath or behind us. While we know ourselves as the being that thinks and feels and desires, we forget that the object of our attention is us. We have become the anthropologist who fills with copious notes his notebooks, memo pads [sic] and miscellaneous scraps of paper. Who sees but is not seen. Who questions but is not questioned. Who judges but is not judged. We have exposed the eclectic superstitions of our primitive selves and replaced them with an incorrigible system of truth. We have removed the nearsighted empathy of the human animal and have substituted for it the omniscient perspective of absolute mind. We have become our own gods.

Many, many years ago I liked that kind of writing. To my then rebellious and unsated mind, it seemed to get beneath the surface tension of everyday life and to grab hold of the large and the eternal.

Now, I just can't stomach the stuff. It comes back up half-chewed, leaving a burning rawness in the back of my throat.

#

The buzzer interrupts my packing. I shout "Fred?" into the intercom, and Fred shouts back "Yeah." I buzz the door open so that Fred can come up. Fred is my friend. He's helping me sell off the contents of my little room. Fred can't read, so I number the boxes. Fred told me once—out of the blue—that he's never had indigestion.

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Fishy

Fishy was a betta—bright, beautiful, and blue. He lived in a little, round fishbowl with a 360-degree view. The water was always clear and clean and every day the food came from above. That was in the beginning.

Only rarely, but then it became more often, the food didn't arrive, and Fishy had to wait. Fishy got to thinking. There would be food several—three, four, even as many as ten or eleven—days in a row, then one day it wouldn't come. There was no pattern. Then there were periods when the food wouldn't show up for days at a time. It was completely random.

Fishy started to pay closer attention to the world outside the fishbowl. He'd become good at judging the passage of time from the changes in lighting. That was how he'd come to count the days in the first place. But then he began to watch for movements. There was the cat, but it didn't matter as long as it kept its paws out of the fishbowl. There was also a person, a shadow that used to stop and look in but now zipped past.

Something had changed. Something about the food. He wondered what had brought about the change and why it had to be that way. He became anxious and sad.

One morning he awoke and looked up to find a pellet on the surface. Starving from a week without food he quickly swam to the top and gobbled it down. He became hopeful again.

The next morning he surveyed the surface from his perch on the bottom but there was no food. He waited anyway. Nothing came. He gave it one more day. Another day. And another. Then one day a morsel appeared.

How to make sense of this. Once the food had been as regular as clockwork. Then it became unpredictable and finally it disappeared altogether. And suddenly, out of the blue it had returned again.

He reset his internal clock so that he could be awake and see when the food came. He woke up earlier and earlier but never could catch the moment when it was dropped into the fishbowl. In the meantime, he tried to enjoy it when it came and not worry about when it would come again.

But that was easier said than done. As soon as he swallowed one piece of food, he started thinking about the next one. The pleasure was fleeting, and even with all the mental energy he could summon, he couldn't prolong it. For days and weeks he lived in anticipation.

Fishy was sad, though on the bright side, he wasn't going hungry as often AND he had begun to acquire knowledge.

First published in Quail Bell Magazine, February 8, 2015.

The Tunnel is Closed

We'd already begun our descent into the tunnel when everything suddenly came to a stop. We were all stopped. Of course, I had to be the one to go through the tunnel. There was absolutely no movement in the traffic. Ahead there were brake lights and behind headlights, three lanes of them. The guy in the scruffy beard and super-sized pickup truck had his window rolled down, head stuck out, yelling at someone or maybe just the situation. The SUV in front was watching a kid's movie. A cabbie in the rear had just gotten out and was standing beside his taxi, arms propped on the roof. Everyone else seemed frozen in their cars, not reacting.

My window was rolled down part way even though the fumes were bad. Someone further down inside the tunnel screamed, then someone else did and others joined in. There was no fire or smoke, no sign of an emergency, but people were getting out of their cars, and they were walking kind of funny, because, as I later realized, they were trudging through knee-deep water. I opened the door of my van and water rushed in as a small wave passed, covering the brake and the accelerator pedals. Instinctively, I reached for my pocket and quickly closed the door. Even though the van was on a fairly steep slant, it was probably still a foot deep at the back of the van where I had to exit. People were splashing past to get to higher ground, leaving their cars stuck and flooding in the tunnel.

I couldn't see it from where I was but I imagined that the electronic billboard at the entrance to the tunnel now simply and cryptically read "The Tunnel is Closed." It wouldn't say why because of the panic that would cause, although it had to be increasingly obvious as more people escaped and related what they'd seen that an enormous disaster was developing under

the river. Judging by the huge cracks forming in the walls of the tunnel and the ceiling at the edge of the tunnel, it was going to get a whole lot worse. I only saw 40 or 50 people from cars in front of me get out and get to safety—the cars around me were already empty—and I knew there had to be lots more still inside. After all, the tunnel is a mile long.

It couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes, but it seemed a lot longer for help to arrive. Several divers went straightaway into the tunnel, disappearing into the flickering light. I imagined a Godzilla from one of those old Japanese science fiction movies wading through the river and stepping on the tunnel and crushing it. It would have immediately filled with water, and up here, some 50 feet higher, there would have been a small wave like the one I saw when I opened my van door.

It was slowly starting to sink in that I was a handicapped man caught square in the middle of a major urban disaster. How ironic. I'd finally caught a break and now this. I knew I could get out, as long as the electrical system in the van worked and the ramp lowered. But I didn't know whether I could steady my wheelchair and navigate it through the water for 100 yards. I figured people would stop to help if they saw me, but it was chaos. Would they notice? I had to keep the wheelchair from toppling over into the water or I'd certainly be missed.

And if someone did stop to help, they don't get why I can be so stubborn. It has nothing to do with them and their good intentions. It's strictly about me. I'm not a lump and I won't be treated that way. Besides, I really don't like being touched. Period.

Once out of the tunnel I would have different worries. Most people have trouble touching us. Paramedics, on the other hand, don't care. Nothing's off limits for their prying hands. As I'm in good health, as long as they stick to checking my vitals, everything should be fine. Since I'm conscious and in no distress there's no need for them to pat me down and go through my pockets (for meds and identification) and find that little cloth bag with the stones. I'm so glad I told the other guys to split up, because if any one of us had got stuck in the tunnel, we'd all be done for. I just wish I hadn't offered to take the tunnel.

First published in Down in the Dirt, November/December 2015, vol. 133.

A Fly On The Wall by Adam Mac

I had lived a sheltered life. Windows always open, wholesome fragrances everywhere, and I buzzed in and out of the house at will. Best were the apple pies that cooled on the kitchen table. The madam playfully swatted at me and chased me around knowing full well she'd never get me in a room with 10-foot ceilings.

Then one day, horror struck. I found my family strung up on one of those sticky strips, stuck there unmoving in gruesome, contorted positions. I'd never noticed it before, but my younger brother had seven legs.

I hopped the first outsider who was going far away—I hoped. Turns out, he only made it to the first stop on the interstate before he had to relieve himself. I was tired and disoriented, so I just buzzed around his cap, but when he made to leave I was prevented by a strong downdraft of air at the door. We parted ways and I got to know my new surroundings.

People, always men, came in waves. When it was slack, young boys would come in and horse around. "I can hit it from way back here," one would say, and the other would wager a small bet. Most of the time, men would stand as far apart as possible, but sometimes you'd get a guy who'd come a little too close. I watched and listened.

It took getting used to what I thought was my punishment for having survived. (I'd learned all about guilt in Sunday School.) The smells weren't like momma's apple pie, but they were strangely attractive in a primal sort of way, and I felt a side of me emerge which might have frightened me once. Towards dark—the crickets told me—a large fellow in a black Lynyrd

Skynyrd t-shirt barreled into a stall. I followed. I didn't come out for hours. If this was purgatory, I could skip heaven.

First published in Garden Gnome Publications: Flim-Flam Games, May 18, 2015.

Nucleosaur of the Frigid Lace by Adam Mac

A long way away—1.185185 quadrillion light years, give or take a billion or two—on an asteroid belt nicknamed the Frigid Lace, the world was populated by nucleosaurs and electrosaur. [NB: Protosaurs are a strictly human construct as proved by Poodlesky. Ed.]

One such nucleosaur was Stanley Nucleosaurus, Esq. As a nucleosaur, Stanley had a following, so to speak—in his orbit, so to speak again. They were called electrosaur, or *electrosaurus cum minimus negativus*, and basically they were servants, but for Stanley they were primarily snacks.

Stanley constantly snacked on his electrosaur. This had the predictable consequence of Stanley often turning himself into something else. After a couple of electrosaur, he'd take on the properties of, say, *Strontium saurus* or *Plutonium saurus* or something more exotic. A dozen once transformed him into a flatugenic facsimile of himself and a double double turned him inside out into *Defecatorium saurus*.

You'd think this would all come to a quick end what with Stanley's infinite appetite and his finite number of electrosaur, but it didn't. So far, we've only mentioned his internal consumption, but for every electrosaur he gobbled he consumed two nucleosaurs. This raised Stanley's electrosaur count to dangerously high levels and challenged scientists to scramble for names, like *Ican'tbelievelatethewholethingium* or *Yikeslthinklgotabandoneonium*.

All this took its toll on the Frigid Lace. Stanley munched his way from one end of the asteroid belt to the other, devouring everything in sight and leaving behind great clumps of antimatter and

clouds of noxious quasar gas. So much had Stanley grown—*Giganticus Infinitus Pacmanicus*—that astronomers could track his movements as he galumphed across the asteroids as if they were stones in a stream.

Eventually, as the external supply of consumables was depleted, Stanley had to turn exclusively to consuming his own electrosaurs. Long predicted by dark-cloud scientists, Stanley then achieved the first documented interstellar case of absolute subjective annihilation. *Id est*, he ate himself up.

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