

The Art of Flash Prose: Write Like Lightning

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The flash form in both fiction and memoir is a thriving literary genre focused on highly concise stories that flash like lightning in a reader's mind. The flash form is also a great way to improve your writing skills as you work toward longer work – full-length stories, or your novel or book-length memoir. You might use flash writing as a daily exercise, like a pianist working to stay nimble, or a painter experimenting with color and light.

Flash is also a great form for experimentation and artistic growth. As Samuel Beckett once said, "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better."

Flash is for writers willing to try anything once, those who learn from their mistakes, and those who like to "fail better" until they have something on the page that makes them proud.

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ON THE FLASH FORM

by Dinty W. Moore

Many will initially assume a flash piece is an excerpt from a longer work, and yes, sometimes a significant moment out of a chapter or a story can stand alone, but the best flash work could never work in the longer form because the energy of the piece hinges on the rapid-fire sharing of information. The urgency of having to fit the story into an abbreviated frame is what makes it powerful.

Here is a metaphor:

Imagine there is a fire burning deep in the forest.

In prose of conventional length, the reader begins at the forest's edge, and is taken on a hike, perhaps a meandering stroll, into those woods, in search of that fire. The further in the reader goes, with each page that turns, the more the reader begins to sense smoke in the air, or maybe heat, or just an awareness that something ahead is smoldering.

In flash prose, however, the reader is not a hiker but a smoke jumper, one of those brave firefighters who jump out of planes and land thirty yards from where the forest fire is burning. The writer starts the reader right at that spot, at the edge of the fire, or as close as one can get without touching the actual flame. There is no time to walk in.

The flash essay or story, in other words, needs to be hot from the first sentence, and the heat must remain the entire time.

My fire metaphor, please note, does not refer to incendiary subject matter.

The heat might come from language, from image, from voice or point-of-view, from revelation or suspense, but there must – in my opinion – always be a burning urgency of some sort, translated through each sentence, starting with the first.

"There ought to be an explosion of recognition, a burst of self-awareness that gives my reader the understanding that these few words she's read have had hidden within them a realm far larger than any she could have imagined." ~ Bret Lott

Lott's definition is really a definition of all excellent art. A painting is taken in through the eyes, but can magically blossom, in the viewer's brain, into words and sounds and aroma. A ballet is just movement of a dancer's arms and legs and torso but can be translated, in our minds, into a universe of feelings and associations. Brief prose tells a story, provides information, but that is only the surface of what is possible. The author is trying to create, through language, image, metaphor, the possibility for that "burst of self-awareness" that the term "flash" implies.

It doesn't just go by in a flash: it illuminates, like a flash gun.

Witness

By John Edgar Wideman (fiction)

Sitting here six floors up on my little balcony when I heard shots and saw them boys running. My eyes went straight to the lot beside Mason's bar, and I saw something black not moving in the weeds and knew a body was lying there and knew it was dead. A 15-year-old boy, the papers said. Whole bunch of sirens and cops and spinning lights the night I'm talking about. I watched till after they rolled him away and then everything got quiet again as it ever gets round here, so I'm sure the boy's people not out there that night. Didn't see them till next morning. I'm looking down at those weeds. A couple's coming slow on Frankstown with a girl by the hand, had to be the boy's baby sister. They pass terrible Mason's and stop exactly next to the spot the boy died. How did they know. Then they commence to swaying, bowing, hugging, waving their arms about. Forgive me, Jesus, but look like they grief dancing, like the sidewalk too cold or too hot they had to jump around not to burn up. How'd his people find the spot. Could they hear my old mind working to guide them, lead them like I would if I could get up out this damn wheelchair and take them by the hand.

Vista di Mare

By Stuart Dybek (fiction)

In Genoa, as she packs to leave, he tells her that he doesn't want it to end, and she replies that if he really knew what he wanted, she wouldn't be leaving.

Alone, he continues on along the coast toward Rome, but at a station where a field of sunflowers overlooks the sea, he impulsively gets off the train. Not far from shore, he can see two fishermen employing their nets.

He sets off on a trail climbing through olive and lemon groves and steeply terraced vineyards. In Genoa he'd reduced his belongings to what fit in a backpack. He sweats under its straps and imagines this is how it would have felt to tour Europe when he was young. In college he had a girlfriend who wanted to travel together. He'd have liked to go but was afraid it would seem like more of a commitment than he was ready for, and he took a job instead.

Along a rocky cliff, he stops to watch the gulls ride the updrafts and wonders if he's ever known what he's most wanted. Then it comes to him with a force like tears that for once, at least, he does know: He wants this, to be here now, this moment looking out to sea.

The town, carved from the mountainside, is terraced like the vineyards—streets of cobbled steps. He wants to stay here where he's had his revelation, where nothing seems out of sight of the sea, but the only pension is closed due to a death. At a restaurant, he orders a bottle of mineral water and figs with prosciutto. The waiter speaks a little English and tells him about an apartment for rent, but it might not be a place the man would want to stay.

"Why not?" he asks.

"No *vista di mare*." All Americans, the waiter says knowingly, want a *vista di mare*. "That's why it is so inexpensive."

"What does it look out on?" he asks the waiter.

"Mountains."

Swerve

by BRENDA MILLER (Nonfiction)

I'm sorry about that time I ran over a piece of wood in the road. A pound of marijuana in the trunk and a faulty brake light—any minute the cops might have pulled us over, so you were edgy already, and then I ran over that piece of stray lumber without even slowing down. Thunk, thunk, and then the wood spun behind us on the road. Your dark face dimmed even darker, and you didn't yell at first, only turned to look out the window, and I made the second mistake: What's wrong? That's when you exploded. You're so careless, you don't even think, what if there had been a nail in that damn thing, you yelled, your face so twisted now, and ugly. And I'm always the one that has to fix it whenever something breaks.

I'm sorry, I said, and I said it again, and we continued on our way through the desert, in the dark of night, with the contraband you had put in our trunk, with the brake light you hadn't fixed blinking on and off, me driving because you were too drunk, or too tired, or too depressed, and we traveled for miles into our future, where eventually I would apologize for the eggs being overcooked, and for the price of light bulbs, and for the way the sun blared through our trailer windows and made everything too bright, and I would apologize when I had the music on and when I had it off, I'd say sorry for being in the bathroom, and sorry for crying, and sorry for laughing, I would apologize, finally, for simply being alive, and even now I'm sorry I didn't swerve, I didn't get out of the way.

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Where to Publish Flash Fiction

<https://thejohnfox.com/flash-fiction-submissions/>

Where to Publish Flash Nonfiction

<http://brevitymag.com/where-to-publish-flash/>