

VERVE FLASH
The Short Road to Big Fiction

A multi-genre anthology

Edited by Janet Fix

VERVE FLASH: The Short Road to Big Fiction

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Message from the Editor

VERVE FLASH started as a challenge to our authors and staff to try to write a compelling story in short form. The submissions absolutely blew me away and proved to all of us how we can stretch out of our comfort zones and write great stuff.

This multi-genre collection is the cumulative brain of seventeen writers who contributed anywhere between one to five stories to the anthology. These are flash-fiction stories, under 2000 words. The neat thing about this type of storytelling is not just in the “meat of the matter”—the brevity of story and character development—but also in what is NOT written, leaving readers to participate in the vision in their own ways.

We look forward to your feedback and ideas, which will prepare us for future volumes in a collective format like this one.

VERVE FLASH truly is “the short road to big fiction,” and we hope you enjoy the ride.

~ Janet Fix, publisher, author, editor

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PART 1.

RELATIONSHIPS

THE HOUSE THAT ME BUILT

Angie Gallion

The big brick house in Bushton had been neglected and vacant for nearly a decade. The town children came and played on its front porch, smoking cigarettes, cussing, as children do when their parents are not near, playing at adulthood. At least one child had pooped in the corner, leaving evidence, under the debris of leaves and scattered butts and branches, in preference to going to his or her own home. It had once been a grand place, a showplace, with gleaming floors and polished banisters, but years of transient and careless tenants had taken their toll upon it. It was dilapidated. It was unloved. It was a lonely house.

By the time my father found the house, it had taken on the look of a whipped dog, we could tell even in the photograph he shared.

This morning, we are seeing it for the first time. We arrive in our station wagon and tumble out onto the oil-rocked road, standing with our backs to the wood-paneled sides of the wagon. We stare at the house rising out of the weeds, struggling against the current of grass, trying to prevent itself from going under. The breeze moves through the weeds, serpentine, whispering of secrets held there.

My mother looks weak, as if the sight of the rambling grass makes her faint, and I slip my hand into hers, suddenly fearful of the heaving green that shivers and throbs like a scaled and slithering creature. My dad, the quiet man, talks, and even that feels frightening. He speaks of strong foundations and what good a day with a machete will do to the yard.

His voice is confident and encouraging as the weeds beckon to my brothers. They heed the call, one blond head not breaching the surface, and the other head and shoulders free, arms spread, leaving a wake. My sister and I remain standing with our parents, anxious about what my mother will say.

She does not say a word. My father takes her hand, and he guides her away from the safety of the car and toward the sidewalk, cracked and split by the surging growth beneath it. I hesitate, not wanting to disappear into the dense growth, but my sister puts her arm across my shoulders, and we follow. She parts the grass ahead of us and guides me. My parents reach the steps leading to the porch, and they rise, a submarine rising out of the sea. I no longer hear Dad talking, but can see his lips still moving. My mother looks stunned and unsure.

They press against the murky glass to see into the dining room. The porch is littered with last autumn's fallen leaves and cigarette butts left by the town kids. My sister steps up onto one of the banisters and jumps off into the rushing grass, having brought me safely to my mother's side, and she sets off to find the boys. I stay close, peering through the grimy windows to glimpse the gloom within. Dad is still holding Mom's hand, as if he knows she will run if he lets her go.

He has said more words than I can ever remember, talking and talking and talking. He is managing both sides of the conversations, because Mom, uncharacteristically, has nothing to say. All of his words slide over me, unimportant, lost. His desire is so clear on his face, in the tone of his voice, that even I understand. He wants this house. He has always wanted this house; he just hadn't found it before.

“I think we can make it a grand home. It’s not much now, but I know we can make it good again. Will you help me? Will you help me fix it up?”

“Yes, of course, I’ll help you,” Mom finally says, her tone so quiet. I look up at her in time to see sadness wash across her face. If he sees, he doesn’t say, he just squeezes her shoulders as they stand side by side, peering into the murky room.

Behind the house comes a blood-curdling scream, and my parents and I run from the porch, down the steps into the grass. My sister reaches us at a sprint, followed by my brothers. Her face is white with red blotches, and she is high-stepping out of the grass. My brothers are laughing. My sister steps right past us and scoots into the back seat of the car. We circle around her, the boys hiccupping and coughing.

“Daddy,” my sister says, looking up from her safe place in the wagon, “we cannot live here.” Her voice trembles, and she blinks back tears.

“Why can’t we live here, Sweetie?” Dad asks, waving a hand to quiet the boys.

Her lips tremble, and she gives a glare to the boys for enjoying her misery. “There are snakes. The house is infested with snakes.” The boys bust out again.

At the word “snakes,” I run into the road, climbing into the car from the other side.

The rest of the family follows us into the car, my father last of all. My mother is not hopeful that a passel of snakes would change my dad’s love of the house. She looks at the house, through the window, a single tear slipping over her lashes to slice a river down her cheek.

My dad begins to whistle as we pull away from the big brick house.

A PENNY AND A PERSON

Phil Emmert

I once found a penny on the concrete in an outside assembly area of the local high school. There was nothing remarkable about this penny, except it was beat up, nicked in a place or two, and old Abe was slightly disfigured. The penny had obviously lain in this place for some time. Many feet had stepped on it and kicked it around.

I am sure that I was not the only person to have seen it lying on the concrete. Nevertheless, I was the only one who stopped to pick it up. Why would I pick up a lowly penny? It takes an effort to stoop and snatch it up.

I had been raised in a poor household and had been taught not to waste. Now, I was completely aware that this penny would not purchase anything by itself. However, when combined with ninety-nine more, it would buy a soda for some thirsty person. Nine hundred ninety-nine more would buy a hungry soul a meal.

As I turned the penny over in the palm of my hand and rubbed the grime off of it with my fingers, I thought how alike a human being and a penny are. Individually, we may be of little value to many people—fit perhaps to only be trampled underfoot. To be stepped on, scarred, and disfigured. Yet, each one of us has value. It just takes the right person to pick us up and put us in the right place. When we find our calling, we can be a great benefit to our fellow man, not necessarily on our own but alongside others as well.

Step on the penny and kick it around. Stop and pick it up. The choice is ours.

ROSES, WINE, AND TIME

Susan “Sue” Kotchman

“Cripes . . . stop the madness, Gram!” I could smell the booze all the way from the living room to the front porch. I was thinking of ways I could convince my grandmother to kick the bum out as the clock struck noon, sending goose bumps crawling up my arm. Even the hair on my neck stood tall.

“Nice to see you, dear. Would you like to see our roses?”

I reflected the numerous times I’d entered the old house after school, watching my grandmother clean the puke-ridden couch and hastily searching for empty bottles. “Okay, Gram, let’s have a look.” And we did.

“Yours look so beautiful, and mine look sick,” I said. “I suppose the horticulture classes and plant shows I visited taught me nothing. I even tried talking to mine.”

“Now, dear, just be patient, and the beauty will bloom when least expected.” Carefully adjusting her straw hat and sunglasses, she dug her manicured hands into the moist soil, humming. How anyone could put up with my brother for six years, not paying rent and drinking his life away as Gram cleaned and kept house was beyond my reasoning, and she was forever joyful! With my cap and sunglasses securely in place, I began to prune my dead rose bushes. The sun was painfully hot, but if Gram could do it, so could I.

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The drive home was lovely; listening to music calmed my nerves. *I’ve got to do something about that toxic home life.* Then, it happened—my phone rang, changing my life forever.

One could never explain the hopelessness of losing someone you love, especially unexpectedly, leaving a hole in your heart as vast as the Grand Canyon. Streaming tears stung my eyes as I recalled the significance of Gram’s roses.

Fifty-five years ago, Grandpa arrived in New York City from Sicily, Italy, with five hundred dollars stashed in his sock. Prior to living in the United States, he’d spent the first required thirty days quarantined on Ellis Island until the proper health checks and paperwork were complete. Being sea sick was a way of life as the boat sailed the open sea for many weeks. He was cold and alone, but he was a visionary. He would come to America, open a floral shop and raise his family. Five years later, he learned English, made several trips to the Old Country for his relatives, and opened a floral shop in the city. Every year, on the anniversary, he bought my gram a bottle of red wine and a rose. I found a pressed rose in a dictionary she kept next to her favorite book—the Bible. Whenever I questioned her about it, the story flowed from her lips. That was the day I realized the importance of her rose garden, which took her to a happy place.

The funeral was uplifting. We were surrounded by friends and family speaking about the special person my Gram was. My brother had decided to enter an alcoholic support group, at least for the time being. The parlor was filled with every color of rose available, and soft music played in the background. My brother huddled in a corner, pressing his lips together and wiping his eyes dry. He seemed solemn and meek to me, disappointed in himself. At some point, I would try to understand him, but not that day.

Interrupted by the noon clock chimes, I left the porch swing and put off cloud-gazing for another time. Twelve months had passed; tomorrow would be Gram’s eighty-second birthday. I

slapped on her straw hat, secured my sunglasses, and grabbed the garden hose. Beauty will bloom when least expected. Happy Birthday, Gram.