

National Flash Fiction Day 2022: Writing Workshop with Anita Goveas & Farhana Khalique

Part 1: Imagery and Description, with Farhana

Opening thoughts/ quotations:

‘As a reader I love [flash] because they can be very quickly read. The best ones stay with you long past their reading. As a writer I love the challenge of creating something interesting, evocative, resonant...’

-Kathy Fish (source: <http://100wordstory.org/kathy-fish-finding-significance-in-the-small-moments-of-life/>)

‘Q: Where do your most unique ideas come from? How do you know if an idea is working?
KF: I don’t love “ideas” in writing. I feel like every clever idea for a story I’ve ever had has failed miserably... I have to start from something very small and lay down some words until something resembling a story is set in motion. Every decent story I’ve written has begun this way. I know a story is “working” if I’m excited as I’m writing it. Really engaged.’

-Kathy Fish (source: <http://newflashfiction.com/kathy-fish/>)

Story 1: ‘Contents of the Dishwasher Twenty Years After Our Arranged Marriage’, by Jo Withers (published in Splonk, Nov. 2021)

Plates with swirling sauce patterns where food has been pushed around in silence.

My teacup.

Floral serving dish from wedding set, faded.

Your beer glass, your wine glass, your whiskey glass.

Assorted bowls and cutlery from room of teenage son we never see.

Ramekins thick with chocolate soufflé which took too long to blend and was flat and bitter anyway.

Steak knife, which I cut myself with accidentally when you slammed the door, and for a moment considered a deeper cut, but instead turned the cold handle and placed it neatly beside its fork pair, two-by-two together, like everything that matters.

(Link: <https://splonk.ie/2021/11/21/contents-of-the-dishwasher-twenty-years-after-our-arranged-marriage-jo-withers/>)

→What do you think? Note the use of specific objects and how they are described

Writing Exercise 1: Objects and images that resonate (5 mins)

Imagine you are a character who lives with a family member or friend. Imagine opening the fridge or a cupboard in this home. Describe some of the objects inside in a way that shows us what their relationship is like. Eg: you can do a list of words and their deeper meanings:

Object	Associated/ deeper meanings
Bottle of skimmed milk	Low fat. Watery. Are they on a diet? I don't think it's working.
Leftover pizza	Congeaed cheese. Deep-pan, the dough is like flesh. Why did they save it? Was it nice? Shall I eat it, or throw it away?
Half of a trifle	Lopsided, the layers already bleeding into each other. What was the occasion? Why was I not invited?

Further reading:

- 'Little Things' by Jessica Daugherty: <https://www.reflex.press/stories/little-things-by-jessica-daugherty/>
- 'Buried' by Regan Puckett: <https://moonparkreview.com/issue-thirteen-fall-2020/buried/>
- 'Meadow Brown' by Hannah Storm: <https://www.reflex.press/stories/meadow-brown-by-hannah-storm/>
- 'Digging Up the Past' by Michael Mcloughlin: <https://www.ellipsiszine.com/digging-up-the-past-by-michael-mcloughlin/>

Story 2: 'The Dunking Pool', by Darlene Eliot (published in Lost Balloon, May 2022)

There are two people in the dunking pool. One doing the dunking and one doing the pretending. I'm the tallest one in line. And I'd rather think of pizza. Pizza with all the toppings. Toppings Mom doesn't like. Onions, bell peppers, sun-dried tomatoes. A dusting of black pepper. Olives. Parmesan. One slice with melted chocolate. I like surprises when I'm alone.

I'll think of that slice when my head goes underwater and the preacher pulls me up like a marionette and water comes out my ears. The crowd will stand. Probably sing. Then I'll crawl up the submerged steps like a salamander and press my face into a snow-white towel, the kind you only see when you're visiting. I'll keep the cursing to myself because you can't make a sound in here unless you're singing. Then I'll head to the front for inspection. Mom will fix my hair and hug me tighter than she ever has before because the shame's been flushed out and she can hold her head up high. Well, not yet.

The water is at my waist. And the preacher rallies the crowd, one hand in the air, the other on my back. I think about chocolate and sun-dried tomatoes, the time my first boyfriend showed up with a Chocolate Jesus and wine and told me my prayers had been answered.

The water covers my face. And it's over in an instant. I wipe my eyes and Mom's face lights up like a jack-o-lantern. She's in the front row—her face as bright and polished as a candy corn—smiling for the first time since I was a baby. Making me wish I had done this when I was red-lipped and red-eyed and wanting to run but too scared to try. It would have been easier then, like falling onto a bed of cotton. Or cottontails. Lined up straight and docile. Face down. One dunking could have stopped the lamentations, her fear of unwashed solitude. Destruction of family legacy. A future with no pretty babies. Or a future with unwashed, pretty babies. But now everything's changed. I'm a vision everyone can see.

I follow the other visions to the front. The crowd walks by, single file, shaking our hands, hugging us, saying it's never too late. Not even for me. I glance at the short ones, their eyes bright, shoulders straight, nodding at everything the crowd says. I wonder if they believe it. Or just want to go home in peace, grab food, retreat to their rooms and their music, bide their time before they start to disappoint. Or maybe they're ahead of me, listening to transgressions in the quiet of their rooms, listening to songs about chocolate deities, knowing nothing soothes the soul like a bite of blasphemy without reprisal or remorse. If they don't already know it, they'll find out very soon.

(Link: <https://lost-balloon.com/2022/05/18/the-dunking-pool-darlene-eliot/>)

→What do you think? What imagery stands out? Do you notice any other techniques, such as similes, metaphors, or interesting verbs?

Writing Exercise 2: Techniques that add further texture and depth (7 mins)

Write a paragraph using the words that you wrote earlier. This time, go for more unusual associations, similes, metaphors and verbs, and a different setting. Eg the fridge/cupboard is on a shuttle hurtling through outer space, or in a cabin on a beach, or in a dressing room backstage behind a circus arena, or somewhere you've been on holiday or seen on TV...

Further reading:

- 'The sky between us' by Bronwen Griffiths: <https://atlasandalice.com/2021/04/05/fictions-from-bronwen-griffiths/>
- 'To the ringmaster' by Monica Brashears: <https://splitlipthemag.com/flash/0321/monica-brashears>
- 'The nomenclature of flight' by Stella Lei: <https://fracturedlit.com/the-nomenclature-of-flight/>
- 'The sharks took the rest' by Dana Diehl: <https://xraylitmag.com/the-sharks-took-the-rest-by-dana-diehl/fiction/>

Part 2: Flash moments and Structures, with Anita

(1) Flash moments

What makes a flash versus a short story?

Flash gives you the chance to create a memorable image/character/setting/dialogue that lingers because of what the reader brings

- Make the white space work for you, trust the reader
- Think about how the central image/setting can bring deeper meaning to the subject of your piece

For example, a ceramic elephant bookend (cool, smooth, carved, heavy, one of a pair)

What would you describe if it's the central image/symbol for a new relationship? Or, that of a relationship that's broken down?

Writing Exercise 1 (5 mins) :

Think about a trip to a beach or a road/place you know well with two people, what do you dwell on if it's

- A new relationship? Then,
- If they've become strangers, who now recognise something significant about each other?

(2) Structures

List Flash

- these use something recognisable and common to tell a story
- we often make lists for typical everyday tasks, e.g. grocery shopping, and for more unusual tasks, e.g. planning a wedding
- this already creates a 'white space' of reader expectations

Consider again Jo Withers's story, 'Contents of the Dishwasher Twenty Years After Our Arranged Marriage':

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(Link: <https://splonk.ie/2021/11/21/contents-of-the-dishwasher-twenty-years-after-our-arranged-marriage-jo-withers/>)

Writing Exercise 2 (5 mins) :

Think of one of your characters from the beach/walk story

-Write a list of the last five things they wanted to say to somebody, but didn't (or unsent texts/emails, or a diary entry)

Helix flash

Like a segmented flash (more information about these, here: <https://kathy-fish.com/reimagined/?p=1039>)

So, a Helix flash has two strands, like a segmented flash, and the stories are intertwined. However, unlike segmented flash, Helix flashes don't mesh and aren't cohesive, so something is not being said, something is created in the space between the strands

-So, it's a good way to tell a story about a difficult subject

Lidia Yuknavitch talks about helix stories, with examples, at this link:

<https://vimeo.com/401743442>

Example & Reading: 'Mongoose', by Anita Goveas (published in (mac)ro(mic), Sept. 2020) :

I should have written before. Papa sent me the boondi ladoos you like, and I knew I should try to explain. You've been waiting so patiently. He's doing that more often now, sending treats but mixing up people's favourites, sometimes their names. He addressed the package to Gunjita. I kept the wrapping with her name, put it in the box with that bookmark she embroidered and her memorial card. Papa's the only one who thought we looked alike. Sisters often don't.

The story goes like this, a farmer and his wife finally had a baby boy after many years of trying. They knew there'd never be siblings, so they find a mongoose to keep him company. The mongoose watches over the baby, brings him presents of dead frogs and grasshoppers which the wife sweeps away. The couple are called to an emergency, the mongoose is left as guard. The farmer's idea, the wife is... less sure. They return to a mongoose with a mouth crimson with blood and no sign of the baby. The wife is distraught, tears her hair, rends her clothes, throws a cooking pot at the animal. Only to discover her boy peacefully sleeping under the stove, next to a headless snake. The brave mongoose, though, is dead. Sacrificed.

I've been trying to keep track of everything. The accommodation, my text books, signing up to classes. Gunjita would have loved it. It's family legend that she drew her wedding in 5th Standard, right down to how she would wear her hair and the embroidery on her crimson sari. Had you asked her then? She planned it for February too, although you probably told each other those kinds of secrets. Papa always said you'd fit in the family. I liked reading about frogs and snakes, liked catching dragonflies in the fields. Marriage was for other people.

The other version, the origin story, is that the wife, tired and heartsore from many, many lost children, makes a bargain with Nature itself. Give her a baby and she'll pay any price. When the mongoose arrives uninvited, she thinks, this is the Reckoning. She never bargained how long she could keep the baby. Nature is known to be cruel. She doesn't sleep, she barely eats. The rage that floods her when she kills the animal, the knowing that she has that ultimate power doesn't strike her as the penance until much, much later. Her name wasn't written down but she lives on as a warning. Emotions tear into you from the inside, sharper than teeth or claw.

I supposed I wanted to see whether I'd fit in with these people, whether the grey feelings would stay at home. It was never about running away, or that you remind me of her. It doesn't matter that you asked her first, I promise. I know you're not the only one waiting for me to say yes. I think you always knew what I would say.

(Link: <https://macromic.org/2020/09/27/mongoose-by-anita-goveas/>)

Writing Exercise 3 (7 mins)

Take your beach story and your text story (or one of your earlier drafts from Farhana's exercises) and mix them together - see what happens!

Author bios:

Anita Goveas is British-Asian and based in London. She's on the editorial team at *Flashback Fiction*, an editor at *Mythic Picnic's* twitter zine, and she's an editor for the *Flash Flood*. She is one of the teachers on Dahlia Publishing's 'A Brief Pause' writer development programme and she's taught workshops with The Crow Collective and the 'Stay at Home Lit Fest'. Her debut flash collection *Families and Other Natural Disasters* was published by Reflex Press in Sept 2020. Find her at @coffeeandpaneer and <https://coffeeandpaneer.wordpress.com/>
Families and Other Natural Disasters (Reflex Press, 2020) link: <https://www.reflex.press/product/families-and-other-natural-disasters/>

Farhana Khalique is a writer, voiceover artist and teacher from south-west London. Her writing has appeared in *Best Small Fictions 2022*, *100 Voices*, *This is Our Place*, and more. She has been shortlisted for *The Asian Writer Short Story Prize* and she is a former Word Factory Apprentice. Farhana is also an editor at *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Litro* and *Desi Reads*, and she has taught workshops with Dahlia Publishing, The Crow Collective and other organisations. Find Farhana @HanaKhalique and www.farhanakhalique.com