

EVENT TITLE: Celebrating 30 Years of Flash Anthologies: A Reading from Flash Fiction America

Event Description: Norton's newest flash anthology, Flash Fiction America, features 73 stories, all under 1000 words, that build around the concept of the United States in contemporary times. In a country composed of an incredibly diverse range of people, places, beliefs, and experiences, how do we understand a distinctly American quality in today's flash fiction? Editors and contributors will read from selections and discuss themes and directions in American flash fiction.

EVENT CATEGORY: Fiction Readings

Event Organizer & Moderator

Chauna Craig: Chauna Craig is the author of the story collections Wings and Other Things and The Widow's Guide to Edible Mushrooms. She has edited for the Best Small Fictions series, and her flash fiction has appeared in anthologies, including Flash Fiction America.

Event Participants

Sherrie Flick: Sherrie Flick is the author of a novel and two story collections. She served as series editor for The Best Small Fictions 2018, is a senior editor at SmokeLong Quarterly, and co-editor for Flash Fiction America. She teaches in the MFA and Food Studies programs at Chatham University.

Rion Amilcar Scott: Rion Amilcar Scott is the author of story collections, The World Doesn't Require You and Insurrections, which won the 2017 PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction. He earned an MFA from George Mason University and teaches English at the University of Maryland.

Venita Blackburn: Works by Venita Blackburn have appeared in thenewyorker.com, Harper's, the Paris Review and others. Books include *Black Jesus and Other Superheroes* (2017) winner of the Prairie Schooner Book Prize and *How to Wrestle a Girl* (2021), finalist for a Lambda literary prize. She is an Associate Professor.

Terese Svoboda: Terese Svoboda has published 19 books of poetry, fiction, memoir, translation, and the biography *Anything That Burns You: A Portrait of Lola Ridge, Radical Poet*. This year she's publishing the novel *Dog on Fire*, and next year another novel, *Roxy and Coco*

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

Good morning, and welcome to "Celebrating 30 Years of Flash Fiction Anthologies: A Reading from Flash Fiction America." I'm excited to hear from one of the editors and a few of the many writers featured in this amazing new collection that BookList calls "deeply original" and "a mesmerizing kaleidoscope of experiences."

A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone's use of an accommodation while

at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

[Introduce panelists using bios as listed]

Moderator intro:

I work at a university where one of my colleagues advises students against writing flash fiction, calling it a “trend” that is now “over.” Of course, my mother said the same thing about the tattoo I got in college, though she may have used more dramatic terminology. In the early 1990s, I got my tattoo and I took my first fiction writing class at Montana State where the professor said we’d be turning in a story every week and that it would be no more than two double-spaced pages. I don’t know which intimidated me more: a story a week or that limitation. Two pages? Where was detailed setting, elaborate backstory, the obligatory character describing herself in the mirror? My twenty year old self could not imagine writing anything of substance in two pages. I did not, after all, want to be a poet.

Our professor assigned two books: *Sudden Fiction*, originally published in the mid-80s, and the then brand new *Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories*, both anthologies co-edited by James Thomas. I remember reading Jane Martin’s “Twirler” and writing a story in that voice and style. Likewise, after reading a story written in the form of a questionnaire, I tried one as a resume. The smartest kid in the class said, “This isn’t a story,” to which the professor responded, “It’s the story of the lies and failure of Reaganomics!” Both of those comments horrified me, the latter because, raised evangelical in a red state, I did not want anyone to think I was anti-Reagan. But I was also secretly

thrilled that something that short that wasn't a poem could stir such passion.

Flash forward to my PhD program at Nebraska where I met another fiction writer who wrote tiny pieces that she constantly had to defend as stories, referring to them as "flash fictions." I started to think of them as "flicktions" because that writer was in fact, Sherrie Flick, one of the co-editors of the anthology we are celebrating today. Her work in many ways validated my own return to writing flash fiction, and I had the pleasure of working as her assistant domestic editor for Best Small Fictions 2018.

So here we are, thirty plus years after my tattoo and my first encounter with flash fiction. Some things haven't changed. Lydia Davis appeared in the Sudden Fiction anthology in 1986, and she appears in Flash Fiction America (her name right above mine in the table of contents). Pam Painter, too, spans these anthologies. But many things have changed; this new anthology represents so much more of the diversity of this nation in terms of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and region among its authors and story content. Tattoo parlors are still doing a thriving business, and these little stories have proven to be more than a trend, more than a flash in the pan.

Today, we'll start by having Sherrie Flick read her preface to the anthology and then we'll hear these authors' stories from Flash Fiction America.

PREFACE

Sherrie Flick

When Flash Fiction America was first conceived as an anthology it had a simple premise: to showcase some of the best contemporary flash fiction published in the early twenty-first century. It was to follow

historically in the footsteps of Flash Fiction International (2015), Flash Fiction Forward (2006), and Flash Fiction, the seminal anthology that used the two-word term for the first time in 1992.

But in order to find these great stories and the authors writing them, we also had to face a more philosophical question: What is America? Social and political movements, plagues, floods, earthquakes, and hurricanes have come barreling down in recent years. The aftermath of which has become an opening up to how messed-up and monumentally, historically different we are from each other as we inhabit this country. In “Origin Lessons,” Aimee Bender’s new teacher insists, “We began all at once, everywhere.” As editors we agreed to open up the book of American flash fiction, to lay it flat like the Great Plains, to manipulate it into the coasts and hollows, mountains, cities, and towns—to find the authors and characters living everywhere, harmoniously and not. In “Rhythm,” Joshunda Saunders writes: “we get low low low so we can burst up & out like uncapped hydrants, flow out into these streets until the water seeps in, seeps out & we out.”

There isn’t an easy answer to what America is, but we were intent on digging into it. A Langston Hughes line came to mind: “America never was America to me,” and in some ways that was our guiding principle in compiling this anthology. To find the stories that expand and pursue and challenge the definition of the United States. It’s “the way you look for evidence of belonging . . .” Jasmine Sawers writes in “All Your Fragile History.” We set out to find the evidence. And it was overwhelming. From online journals to print journals, magazines, and books we flipped and scrolled, read and reread, thousands of stories under a thousand words.

What we found was a wide array of flash fiction pushing at the form with nuance, grace, and grit. Stories that kicked aside an America

portrayed with limited scope. Authors who unfolded, unpacked, and clicked a flashlight into the attic of this country. What we found is that flash fiction is alive and well in the twenty-first century, certainly ready, eyes wide open, for another thirty-year run.

In “Monsters,” Sadis Quraeshi Shepard’s narrator asks, “What would it be like, I wondered, to live without fear?” Emma Stough’s Jenny notes, “Everyone has all the same diseases: insomnia, possession, indoctrination, childhood.” Venita Blackburn writes, “They don’t know anything about how we live, love, and die.” These compressed stories take us into knowing as these tightly packed worlds open up. Some we already dwell in, others we try on, dip our toes into for a few pages. “Nobody thinks about the way sound carries across water. Even the water in a swimming pool,” Amy Hempel writes in “Beach Town.” As readers we’re invited to eavesdrop. We like to be privy not only to the secrets but to how they’re contrived, how they’re floated across pools of water. Cassandra of Troy knows all the secrets in Gwen E. Kirby’s “Shit Cassandra Saw . . .” and yet, “Cassandra is done, full the fuck up, soul-weary.”

Flash Fiction America crisscrosses the country, like an epic road trip, east to west, north to south, on Route 9 and Highway 101, by plane, automobile, boat, and train. “Wichita was not what she thought,” Serena laments in “I’m Exaggerating” by Kate Wisel. Chauna Craig’s men drink bourbon on the rocks in Butte, Montana. Meg Pokrass gets to work in Midtown Manhattan. We touch down in New England and the Northeast, Midwest, West, Southwest, and South. Of course, many of the characters are completely lost geographically and otherwise. Like the narrator in “Something Falls in the Night” by Desiree Cooper: “You are fully dressed, but you have forgotten your shoes. You wait shivering at a bus stop. When it arrives in the darkness, it is nearly empty. You board, your feet numb and clumsy.”

The idea of America wouldn't be complete if John Wayne didn't ride into the sunset in Matthew Salesses's "How to Be a Conqueror." If the sun didn't rise on some hungover souls. If birth, life, and death didn't cycle through with joy, pain, comfort, grief, confusion, and resolution. "The summer sun dissolved into golden, vaporish rays in the trees," writes Stuart Dybek in "Bruise." In the end, it's the beauty of language and story that unites this anthology. One glorious, shining sentence after another.

[Sherrie introduces/hands microphone to each panelist]

Boxing Day

Rion Amilcar Scott

Daddy's pissed. I can tell 'cause I can hear his gloved fists slapping the punching bag downstairs. It's a flat plapping noise. The louder the sound, the more pissed he's become. He says every day he punches the bag is boxing day, but today actually is Boxing Day.

I would stay out of the basement, away from my punch-drunk father and every delusion he's used to sew himself together, but my mother's sent me to descend into his Hades to deliver a message.

He notices me and begins to speak as he punches the bag, breathing hard between phrases.

My father, he says, used to always tell me about the day after Christmas. How he and Grandma and Grandpappy and all the kids would head out to the beach. Can you believe that?

He stops to catch his heavy breath and then starts punching and talking again.

We suffering in arctic weather—the goddamn river’s frozen and shit—and I bet your grandfather is swimming with tropical fish right now. When I was a kid all he did was tell me about it. Look, kid, the days before you got here was the best, and now all we do is watch our breath steam. Now he’s back where he wants to be. Happy fucking Boxing Day!

Daddy is in one of his moods, that steady persistent low-level blue. Every word is a bomb filled with cynicism. I’m always surprised by the burn of his napalm.

That morning I woke early to catch some cartoons in the basement. My father says I’m too old for cartoons, so I didn’t want him to see me slink downstairs. As I rounded the corner and approached the stairhead, I saw Daddy with his gloves hanging about his neck from a set of black strings.

Stay up here, kid, he said. I’m about to beat that thing till it cries. Yep, gonna be down there awhile.

He doesn’t need to say, I don’t want you around. His shrug, the curt dance of his eyes, they speak for him.

Daddy’s blue moods never care about anyone. Every minute when he’s like this I’m in a four-dimensional world made of endless time: hours laid next to hours, hours stacked atop hours into the sky. This broken man, reeling from daily compromise. Sarcasm and boxing the only things keeping him together. As for me, I’m one of many chains round his neck that hold him in a cold, tiny basement of mediocrity.

My father is shirtless and slick with sweat, swaying before the punching bag. He leans into his maroon opponent, clinging to the thing like he needs it in order to stand. Ref, he shouts. Ref! This moth- erfucker tried to bite my ear.

Dad.

Say hello to Tyson, kid.

Dad, Mom said there is not enough tofu for all of us, and it's your turn to cook and wash the dishes.

I'm the heavyweight champion of the goddamn world and that woman wants me to eat bean sprouts? I need some red meat. A steak or something. I'll eat your children.

He bares his teeth and shakes his head and lays rapid-fire blows into the punching bag.

It's vegetarian day, Dad.

Seriously, kid, go tell your mother to jump in a lake.

I can't tell my mother to jump in a lake. When I'm back upstairs, I tell her he's on his way.

Later when my mother sends me back down into the dim, cold basement, Daddy is Muhammad Ali standing over Sonny Liston. He's Mike Tyson coming into the ring like a vicious animal. Then he's Tyson whimpering after losing to Buster Douglas.

His whimpering stops being a joke and crosses over into real tears, his face a rain-slicked street at midnight. He leans into the bag like Tyson leaned into Don King after his loss to Douglas. I rarely saw my dad embrace my mother the way he's hugging that bag. I don't know whether to turn and tiptoe back upstairs or to go to him, hug him in the way he says men are not to hug.

Dad, I say.

When our eyes meet, he squares his slumped shoulders and throws a weak set of punches at the bag.

Tyson in '90, he says. Good impression, huh? He wipes his tears with his forearm and punches the bag again and again and again.

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Seconds

Terese Svoboda

Seconds, or cranberry surprise? She's his sister-in-law, she can baby him.

Of course, Dad says. Both.

More gravy appears, potatoes, peas and carrots, the surprise.

She says she doesn't know what's keeping him, he hates cold food.

Dad moves the gravy around so it floods his plate. It's a warm Thanksgiving, he says, as if that has something to do with his brother being an hour late.

She fills his glass with red until he says he had white. Then she doles out so much whipped cream he actually spoons it back.

Her daughter-in-law leaves the table to tend the baby on the living room floor.

The second cousin, really just somebody they scrounged up to make light talk, says in all the eating of seconds and drinking of thirds and the spooning of dessert, How has his treatment been going?

He was happy enough checking out his new ranch yesterday, says his son. Won a bet from me on how long it would take me to learn the new irrigation system.

They drink, they eat.

Can't say we didn't wait, says the wife, showing them a blackened sweet potato.

They file from the table to the TV, the dishes stay on the table. Don't do them, says Dad. It'll make him feel bad.

I don't mind, she says, not sitting down on the couch, veering back to the sink. You can do them later.

Dad likes that, the joke of him washing up. He asks the baby if she wants her toes eaten, and pulls at each digit to make her laugh. Her mother gathers her back when she kicks but she writhes out of her arms for her daddy, who's searching the stations for football or a parade.

Dad slow-foots it to the lounge. There's gravy on his white shirt and darkness across his face. He scratches the side of his nose after he's settled and points at the cabinet on the wall. Wasn't there something in there?

The son sees the gap, the one empty rack. Sometimes he cleans it, he says.

His mother's in the kitchen, washing the pans, but listening. Water still running, she comes to the door.

Where? says her son, pointing at the rack.

She has no idea. The child cries and no one picks her up.

Dad says, Try the long barn.

The child hiccups her crying while the cousin says surely he's just driving around for air, a ride to calm him down for all the holiday celebrating or to see if a gate is shut—everything everyone's said twice already. Why that barn?

I don't know, says Dad. But don't you check, he says to the son when he goes for the coat closet. Call Pete to go with you.

The son is shaking now, a big-frame shake that usually with him is a sign of anger but not now. You call Pete, he says, I'm going. He puts the keys in his pocket, skips the closet for the door.

No, says his mother, into the room in two steps. No, you don't.

Shit, says the son. It's Thanksgiving. He's supposed to—

Wait, says Dad. I hear something.

They listen to what? The car door of a neighbor, a little too much booze in the slam? Nothing. But in the interim Dad whips out his phone, he 911s.

As if such a call could solve something, the others listen. Of course 911 isn't local, no Pete they can get reassurance from, just a recital of regulations: Missing persons aren't missing for at least a day. No help at all.

She punches in the numbers on her own phone. Her daughter-in-law passes her with the baby on the way to the kitchen, the baby tapping her arm, a comfort motion.

Pete says he'll come over, she says, he says he hasn't had enough turkey.

We won't see Pete for another hour, says the son still at the front door. Pete has money on the game.

I said it's important, says the wife.

You don't want to go, says Dad in a voice that says he doesn't either.

You stay here, says his mother. His wife agrees, the baby sucking at her bottle, she forbids him.

Did he take his pills today? the son asks. Now plaid-coated, he's the image of his father, just about as wrinkled, and just as stubborn.

Of course, says his mother.

But did he swallow them?

How can I tell? She turns to face the kitchen door, she just turns. Dad closes his eyes. Wait, he says.

It's about two minutes later that Pete's car pulls up and Dad pumps the lounge upright. Of course they all hope it's not Pete. That would mean what they sense could be true. The son runs to the door and out to where the two of them, Pete and the son, talk and then leave without a hello or anything to anybody else.

Dad plays with the baby, a peekaboo that she likes, then cries about, Dad's peek is too shrill and her mother too desperate for calm. She should take the baby home but she can't.

The dishes are done.

A car parks in the drive just ten minutes later, and all of them inside are out on the carport coatless. The son says Pete's called the coroner, the son says he didn't go in but when he enters the living room, dropping the keys while trying to repocket them, his face isn't his father's anymore, it's bent, it's creased and drained. He's seen what he's seen.

Mom, says the son. Mom.

She has backed up back into the house and is crossing one arm over her chest, then the next, and the sound she makes wakes up the baby. If you'd only—sooner.

He shakes his head. After holding his mother and then holding his wife, he says to Dad, How did you know?

Dad says he guessed. He liked that long barn. Sooner or later, he says. He had it in him.

The baby reaches for her father and he takes her just as his wife moves away. Together they almost drop her.

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Chew

Venita Blackburn

We chew in our family. It's our God-given freedom to chew what and when we want. I chewed the legs off my grandmother's piano. It keeled over and crushed her thirteen-year-old Bichon Frise, Gingersnap. My granddaddy laughed his ass off. Me and my brothers used to chew shapes into things all the time. We turned straws into palm trees. I made a lily out of a milk carton for my brother's girlfriend. I had to be careful around the seams and not use too much saliva or it would've turned to oatmeal. He busted my lip for that one. My boy is just like us, can't keep his teeth off things. He chewed a plastic coin into a funny shape and supposedly threw it at some girl. They suspended him for two days for a plastic coin. I had to sit in front of the superintendent with his blood-red hangnails while he read off a statement from a teacher. "Because of the zero tolerance policy, suspension was warranted after the disruption caused by the object. The student chewed a coin made of plastic until it resembled a bullet and threw it" yada yada "while yelling bang, bang" blah blah "repeatedly until the situation escalated" or some garbage. I had to sit there for thirty-nine minutes looking at that shitstorm of a desk. It was metal and the color of every dull memory I ever had, just covered in papers, papers, papers. He held his palms above the papers and patted the air as if disgusted,

as if afraid to touch anything because he knew it all linked to him somehow. One wrong move would topple it, and he'd be late for some god-awful appointment or something. I told him to let's just get right down to it. He sighed like he'd heard the story a few too many times, from the teacher, from the principal, from that big-haired news anchor, and his own bosses probably. Still he needed to hear the story right from my boy. So that's what happened. My boy told the truth of it. I told my boy to be out with it, and he stayed quiet because kids don't know what to say without a question. What happened? I asked. "I chewed a shape the teacher thought was bad. She made me go to the principal, then she brought all my stuff and called you, Dad, to come get me." That's what he said. The superintendent dared to look at me like I coached him, like my boy is just so acutely aware of my breathing and knew every inhale and internal body gurgle and could tell the good from the bad. How is he supposed to know what gesture meant certain doom and which meant good job, son? But he said it right anyhow, "I never threw it at no one." My boy told me about that crooked-eared girl who teased him all the time about his dirty cuffs. I told him never wash your cuffs for a girl. If she can't love your grease and grit, she can't love you. Well, he washed his damn cuffs and got more teasing for the trouble. That's when he chewed that shape into the coin and supposedly threw it. I knew he wasn't trying to make a bullet and pretend to kill that girl. That's crazy. I told him to tell that pudgy superintendent what he was really trying to chew into that fake money, "I was trying to make a rocket. I chew rocket ships and I like guns and tanks and I was just trying to draw a rocket but it turned out to look more small like a bullet than like a rocket, and the teacher just thought it was a bullet." The teacher just thought it was a bullet. Boys that age chew all kinds of things. I must've chewed a cock into the side of a cereal box a hundred times before I knew what it was for. Boys just

celebrate themselves, you know. It's human. But the superintendent didn't get it. He just sat there on his secretary's wide wood chair thinking, "Your boy is an unholy wretch that will grow up to hurt people. The world is going to have to kill him someday. He'll embarrass you and drive you indoors for good. You are an enabler. You think you're helping, but you're reinforcing terrible behavior. There are volumes of books written, studies done, talk shows even, about you and your boy. There will be nowhere safe to drive to except hills with no life on them." The superintendent blinked. He looked at the stacks of pink and yellows papers, folded and crinkled, some thin as spit, and blinked. What right did he or anybody have to judge me and mine? They call it enabling. I'm enabling my son to keep on with his bad behavior. They just don't understand our lives. Maybe he did chew a bullet on purpose, and throw it, and push her down, and kick her until she cried. We all chew to survive in this world. My granddaddy chewed, up until his last days on this earth, a little foil applesauce lid. He made a teacup for my grandmother. I heard she told him to swallow it for being such a mean bastard all his life, but that's just how they loved each other. Everybody else can't know what it's like to put something in your mouth and have something different come out, what it means, the power. They just want to take it from us, keep us docile like starved dogs. They don't know anything about how we live, love, and die. My boy is innocent. My boy is gifted.

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High on the Divide

Chauna Craig

The men are descended from hard-rock miners, their lungs gone to granite, their hearts chunks of ore. "On the rocks," they say when they order their bourbon. The bar is O'Sullivan's. The city is Butte. They call

me Angel of Mercy because they're Catholic and can never remember my name, not when their eyes mist with memory. Not when they cry. You can cry at O'Sullivan's. In a city where the Bulldogs are Double-A wrestling champs year after year and the jail fills on St. Paddy's by noon, there are still places where grown men can cry.

I refill their glasses and leave extra napkins, and they whisper, "You're the Angel of Mercy. Sent by the Lord." Sometimes, when it's someone with a sense of humor—Dylan Downey or Old Man McClure—I say, "I was hired by Liam, and he's not the Lord."

"Yes, Angel, we know that. But who will tell Liam and break his old heart?"

"You can't break his heart," says another. "It's stone."

And they all fall to silence, labored breathing, alcoholic fumes I could light. Sometimes I imagine flicking a lighter and blasting another hole in this scarred mountain. New veins to explore, new work for this town.

The men, when they're sober, say go back to school. "Girl, that's the future. A college degree." And though none of their wives—first, second, third—had degrees, they want more for me, this future whose fingers they can touch.

When they're drunk, they say, "Angel. Don't leave. Take us into the next world. Angel. Mercy."

I've nowhere to go, so I stay their saint, serving up spirits, mopping those broken circles they leave under their drinks. Sometimes I imagine flicking that lighter and starting to smoke. My pink lungs will seize up, and I'll cough when I need to inhale. Sometimes I touch my wrists to remember the pulse. Michael Rourke sobbed one night—a sound like choking—because he couldn't find his pulse. He wept that he'd died and, since that one pope erased purgatory, he was surely in hell.

“So, I’m a demon, am I, Mikey?”

“Mercy, no,” he said when he could breathe again. “I know I’m in hell because I can’t touch you. You’re miles away, up in the sky, holding Our Lord’s punctured hand.

I clutched his thin wrist, pressed his finger to the groove below his thumb, and I counted with him. One, two, three, four. You’re not pounding on death’s door.

That night Liam couldn’t drive him, so I walked him home, counting his heartbeats aloud on the steep mountain streets. One, two, three, four, Mikey’s heart ain’t made of ore.

“Unless it’s gold,” he whispered, stumbling at the threshold of his small, dark house. I wavered there in the doorway, unsure. Tuck him in? But I wasn’t his mother, and I wasn’t a saint. I shut the door on his cave, sealing him in. Fool’s gold, I thought I heard him say, but the door was metal and warped and it could have been whose gold or too cold or so many other things.

One night the cowboy comes in, and I feel for my pulse. Thumping, thumping for escape. I think of that lighter under the bar, this place sky-high in a shower of flame, my blood rushing out of me, my heart set free. I crouch low to the bar, swish my hair in my face, and Danny Riordan says, “Angel, you okay?” And one by one, these men still on their bourbons but ready for Coke walk to me. Wobbly as toddlers. “Is she sick?” “Is the hiding?” “Is her heart broke?”

Silence. Then someone, not me, says, “An angel’s heart can’t break.”

And someone else, the cowboy, says, “No, it just flies away.”

No one here entertains strangers, so none of them like how he steps through their words. They grumble as if they are young men with strong hearts, strong lungs, strong fists.

No stranger to me, this cowboy. He's held to my finger a circle so perfect that I fled all my dreams of riding over the plains into the setting sun. I came back to this place high on the Divide where whole generations believe the sun is lit on the end of a wick a mile underground.

The men cluster tight like they can save me. But they're the ones drowning in bourbon and rum, in memory shafts they've cut with too little air.

"You could cry here," I say. "You could pour out a bottle and, depending on which side of this mountain you chose, it might join the Pacific. Or head to the Gulf."

The cowboy knows. He studies the men, how they clutch their drinks and stare. Later, he will say stony stares.

That night I think of gold. Golden rings, golden plains, his bare golden arms, those golden sunsets melting through our golden years.

I let the lighter decide. Flame on the first try mean "yes." And it lights like a tiny sun. I inhale this air soaked with bourbon and the sour breath of old men. Nothing explodes. I flick the lighter again, and it glows in the dark bar. Circles of light on every man's glass. Extinguished as soon as I raise my thumb.

I flick it again and again, but that night the lighter is constant. The cowboy waits just beyond the glow.

So I leave these men descended from miners. Without mercy. I unlace my angel wings, reckless as I abandon what they know of copper, what they've taught me of gold. Broken rock, all that broken rock.

Ask for questions and comments from the audience. Planned moderator question, if needed:

How do you explain the continuing fascination with flash fiction among writers and readers all these years later? And what do each of you particularly enjoy about writing flash?

Thank you all very much for coming today. Norton will be having a book signing of this anthology with these authors and others today at 10:30, if you'd like to come by Booth 1034.