



LSUA  
ENGH Annual  
Flash Fiction Contest  
2022



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**First Place**  
**Eric Alai**  
“The Scent of Freedom”



Eric Alai was born in Peoria, Illinois in 1966. He earned a BA in English from Illinois State University in 2000, where he won the prestigious “Anne Keaton Award for Promising Writers” and earned an MA in Language and Literature from Western Illinois University in 2003. He was employed at Carl Sandburg College from 2004-11 as an English instructor, teaching composition, creative writing, and literature. In 2007, students and colleagues at Carl Sandburg College named him “Adjunct Instructor of the Year.” He won First Place in the Poetry Category and Third Place in the Adult Short Story Category of “Galesburg Public Library’s Annual Creative Writing Contest 2016” sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, and he was published in “The Bluffs Literary Journal” in 2016. In 2021, he received an Honorable Mention in the Flash Fiction Contest held by the LSUA Department of English and Humanities. Currently, Alai is working on publishing a biography on his parents and writing a fantasy novel.

## The Scent of Freedom

*What thanks to thee when thy verses speed  
From lip to lip, and the song thou hast sung?*

—Hafiz

Zahra walked through the bazaar in the center of Shiraz, the mid-morning sun heating up her black chador, and she inhaled the aroma of gardenia, lilac, peony, cream cup, geranium, hyacinth, and countless roses. Men turned to watch her walk.

She stopped at a tent with periodicals and books. Nodding to the old seller, she perused the literature. The colors and artwork of the covers caused her eyes to widen, and the aroma, a blend of cloth, new paper, binder glue, cardboard, and leather, invigorated her senses. She breathed. Zahra noticed someone else standing at the entrance to the tent, a young man in his twenties. He said, "Salaam" and nodded to Zahra.

As she walked out of the tent, the young man asked her, "Looking for any particular books? May I walk with you?" She ignored him and walked. "My name is Masih. I'm the book man. You want it? I have it or can get it."

"It's illegal, you know, what you do," she replied.

"Ah! You are Zahra. I know Parviz; he told me of you. Any books you want?"

"Not right now. I'm not working."

"Oh. I'll see you. If you ever need books, my place is right over there. It is apartment 20, 1120 Moshir Avenue."

The economic sanctions had hit Iran hard since the Revolution in 1979, and the country still felt the strangle of international isolation; however, a lively illegal market for everything from blue jeans to smartphones exists, flowing up through the country from the southern ports.

Zahra decided to walk to a nearby park and eat lunch. She noticed an elderly man digging with a small hand-hoe. His hands were encrusted with mud and dirt that matched the color of his russet jumpsuit, and a box with various flowers sat on his left side with a carved wooden bowl on the other. "Salaam," said the old man cheerily. "What a lovely day." His voice was thin like an old wooden flute, his eyes glassy and deep.

"Beautiful," she answered. "I've never seen you here. Are you new?"

He chuckled and replied, "No. Actually, I've been here a long time." As she turned to walk, he said, "What thanks to thee?"

"Excuse me?" replied Zahra, but he was not there. She shrugged her shoulders and sat down to eat. The afternoon faded, and the young teacher walked home languidly during the five o'clock rush hour.

Her apartment was furnished with only a twin feather bed, a love seat, a small desk with a chair, several bookcases, and an electric hotplate. A tiny bathroom was the only other room. A chador hung from the bathroom door like a stationary spirit.

A man marched quickly through the narrow streets, carrying a white bag, and shaking his head while mumbling under his breath.

Zahra let in her uncle. "Why are you frowning, Uncle Moghul? Would you like tea?"

"No. I must speak with you. A mother of a student says you have been teaching from unclean books."

"Uncle, I would not..."

"May I look at the books from which you have been teaching?" She remained impassive. "Khanum? Do you fear showing them to me?"

"I would never put anything into the minds of these children that I thought would harm them or cause them to stray!" With the last words, her lips pursed.

He raised his arm and struck her with the bottom of his fist; she fell to the floor. Moghul went directly to her desk and rummaged violently: "We have given you women too much! This is what happens!" Sweat dripped from his forehead onto the desk. Picking up several of the books, he turned to Zahra. In his hands were the Torah, the Abhidhamma Pitaka, The Dawn Breakers, Shakespeare's Plays, along with novels, books of poetry, and others.

"It is true...You have done this."

Zahra wept. Tears blurred her vision. Dark veils covered her mind, slithering and skating down her being. She moaned softly. As he stuffed his bag with her books, she appealed to him: "After all this time, you think I am capable of hurting a single soul?"

"Then why do you have these? What benefit would children get from these?!" he boomed.

"They wanted to learn. How could I refuse their curiosity? How is learning about the world wrong, evil? They are fields: their minds, their souls."

"What?"

"The children; they are like fields that need care: water, food, and sunlight. We should cultivate their minds..."

"Quiet! No more words!"

Zahra stood up tall and straight as he headed for the door. Louder than her voice had been since childhood, she yelled, "No! No! I will say what I think!"

Moghul froze. He looked away from her, and as he walked out, he looked back quickly with a blank glance.

The sun rose as Zahra lay there the next morning with the short misty films of memory playing through her mind. She gazed at the ceiling of her small apartment. Her hair was pulled to one side and flowed down the bedside like a shiny black waterfall. She thought of her students; she thought of her parents who died in the chaos of the Revolution...

"The authorities will come for me soon." She closed the door behind her and began to walk towards Moshir Avenue.

"Are you all right?" Masih asked after he opened the door.

"Yes, I am fine."

He saw her bruised jaw. "Please, sit down."

She sat at his kitchen table that was covered with books. The apartment's dimensions were much like her place, but the décor was different. He had a stuffed toy panda on his bed, prints of Salvador Dali paintings on the wall, a pizza box on the counter, and jazz

playing on his small stereo. On the table were the books he sold: The Nun, The Sand Child, The Prophet, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, Confessions, Nabil's Narratives, Twenty Years of Rolling Stone, The Satanic Verses, On the Road, Funny in Farsi, among others. "Do you mind that I came here?"

"No, not at all. What happened to you?"

"My uncle became upset with me because a parent complained that I was teaching from The Forbidden Books. He punched me."

"Hm. Would you like some ice for that?"

"Yes, thanks."

"You know how they are; they do not want people to learn. If people learn, they lose their power."

"I know you do not know me, but could you help?"

He handed her a bag of ice. "With what?"

"I want to leave the city, leave Iran."

"Really? Where do you want to go?"

"I do not know, but they will come to get me, and I need to leave soon."

"I'll try but I have a quick errand to run first. You can stay here."

He grabbed two books from the large pile, put them in a brown paper bag, and left. She listened to him walk down the hall and then heard a shuffle. She heard Masih's voice: "Eh! What are you doing?" She heard a crash.

Zahra froze.

"He's the one!"

"What? I didn't do anything!"

"His room is just down the hall, and she might be there."

"He has the books!" It was her uncle.

A voice, an elderly voice, rose above the shuffle: "Verses speed. Verses speed." It was the gardener's voice. Quickly, Zahra took two large paper bags and shoved most of the books on the table into them. Her heart pounded, her breath was quick, and her vision was a dream-like tunnel. She opened the window and jumped out. She ran.

After dusk, a shadow moved across the yard of her uncle's residence and crept down the cellar steps quietly.

Later that night, a knock came at Uncle Moghul's door. Ten officers and a captain entered. "M. Moghul," the captain declared, "We are going to search your premises." Moghul, enraged, demanded to know why they were intruding. The captain ignored him. One of the officers said, "Here, I found some." He poured books out of brown paper bags. Another officer in another part of the house found a white bag: "Here too." The captain directed one of the officers, "Handcuff him. We got him."

The following week, a passenger ship left the port of Qeshm. It sailed out of the Strait of Hormuz through the Gulf of Oman and into the Arabian Sea. The ship horn bellowed out across the ocean like an alien knell. Zahra sat in her room aboard the ship, drinking strong coffee and examining an old book. She opened it, put her nose close to the fold, and smelled the pages.

**Second Place**

**J.C.G. Goelz**

“I Don't Know, But I've Been Told”



Dr. J.C.G. Goelz is a polymath living in Pineville, LA. Scientist, educator, mathematician, actor, director, playwright, and writer of short stories and novels. He earned a certification to teach in secondary education from LSUA.

He hopes his story made you feel something. Goelz writes: “One morning, drifting between sleep and consciousness, a short, creepy verse kept playing in my brain. When I fully woke, I wrote down the verse.

I had to figure out what story it belonged in. Enter a young girl with a painful history and a squeaky voice to sing the verse.

It all flowed naturally after that.”

## I Don't Know, But I've Been Told

I don't know,  
But I've been told,  
To just shut up,  
Or not grow old.

Lily sang as she sat on the toilet. The melody was a little like Barney's "I Love You" song. Her thin squeak of a voice barely got past the locked bathroom door. She repeated her verse. The face in the mirror didn't look like her. It had all the major parts, but it wasn't the same.

She drew a serrated chef's knife across her upper thigh, just letting the weight of the blade create three thin, dashed, red lines with a few small droplets of blood. The small blade was hers, the one she sometimes used to help her mother make dinner.

She sighed before repeating the verse. She'd been waiting to poop. She had to poop—she knew it—but nothing was happening. She looked down between her legs and saw only water, slightly rippling as a result of her swinging legs.

Poop didn't come like it used to, in the morning or after eating. Now it could be days between poops. Or when it came, it might rush out in a spray, splattering the toilet bowl. She should tell Mom.

She should tell Mom so many things.

At least she had some control over the poops. She'd been wetting the bed now, something she hadn't done since she was four. She didn't have to tell mom about that. When her mom woke her and found the wet bed, Lily had to sit on the toilet while Mom stripped the bedding and threw it into the washing machine, yelling the whole time. Why did she have to sit on the toilet if she'd already peed? Maybe she shouldn't tell Mom.

I don't know,  
But I've been told,  
To just shut up,  
Or not grow old.

She kept singing even after she heard someone outside the bathroom door.

"Honey," said her dad, "are you all right?"  
Her chest squeezed her heart. She panted and gripped the fabric of her dress in her small hands. "Yes, Daddy. I gotta poop."

"What's that you're singing?"

"Oh nothing. Something I heard in school." But it wasn't. It was her song, and she was proud of it. She sang it faster.

Idon'tknow, ButI'vebeentold, Tojustshutup, Ornotgrowold.

He jiggled the door. She gasped. "I gotta poop!"

"C'mon, honey. Unlock the door."

"Privacy, please."

Her father took the "key"—a straight piece of flat metal—off the hook next to the door. She sang even faster.

Idon'tknow, ButI'vebeentold, Tojustshutup, Ornotgrowold.

He started trying to unlock the door, but it was a tricky thing. It would take a little while. She slid off the toilet, pulled up her underpants, and patted down her dress.

She picked up the chef's knife and clutched it in both hands. She stood just far enough away from the door that it wouldn't hit her when it swung open.

The lock clicked. She could have tried to push the button again to lock the door, but the one time she did that ended with a beating, after her father finally opened it. "I'm coming in, honey. Don't be afraid. You know I'd never hurt you."

Idon'tknow, ButI'vebeentold, Tojustshutup, Ornotgrowold.

The door eased open and her father stepped into the gap. She lunged and stabbed her knife two-handed. The serrated blade ripped the fabric of his pants and pierced his thigh halfway to the handle.

She stepped back as her father fell backward into the hall, onto his bottom. He yanked the knife out and a jet of blood shot up like a fountain. He tried to press down on the wound, screaming, but soon he slumped to the floor, a puddle of blood spreading across the hall.

Idon'tknow, ButI'vebeentold, Tojustshutup, Ornotgrowold.

*Third Place*

**William Suboski**

“In the Shade of the Tyburn Tree”



Bill is an aspiring fiction writer with a background in computer programming.

He is still trying to decide what he wants to be when he grows up.

Born in Indiana, Bill is a transplanted Hoosier living as a Buckeye by way of Canada and the Netherlands.

Contact Bill at [WSuboski@yahoo.com](mailto:WSuboski@yahoo.com)

## In the Shade of the Tyburn Tree

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? Who will watch the watchmen?

Walter Wilmott sat on the park bench eating. He had only ten minutes. The sandwich was overpriced and mediocre but he had no time for more or better. But the day was golden, perhaps the last real day of summer, warm and pleasant. Walter was too preoccupied to notice. He lived by the clock. He stood and quickly brushed bread crumbs from his suit jacket. He smoothed his clothing and began walking back to the sidewalk beside the road.

He had covered perhaps forty feet when the Law Enforcement Commandos converged upon him. The newly elected government, only three days old, was wasting no time delivering on promises of law and order. The commandos seemingly materialized out of the air; the encouragement loops had fallen onto Wilmott and in only a few seconds he had been dragged back to the bench.

Walter Wilmott felt more puzzled and inconvenienced than threatened. This was a mistake. He was a law-abiding citizen. That was why he had voted for the Grays, the party that advocated the night-watchman state. Without law and order, even attempting to discuss a viable society was absurd. Wilmott and other honest citizens needed protection from criminals and only then would ANY social policy be possible.

Walter had especially agreed with policy details enunciated by the Grays. Proportional and progressive punishment had failed to curtail crime. Only with massively disproportionate and extreme punishment would criminals be dissuaded from their antisocial ways. Not many such severe punishments would be needed before criminals got the idea. Yes, that sounded right to Walter.

The Captain of the team was pointing at the sandwich wrapper on the ground. Walter was embarrassed, and gave a nervous little laugh as he bent to pick it up. But the encouragement loops tightened. Electricity coursed through them. Walter was both paralyzed and painfully shocked.

"Walter Wilmott, you are charged with first degree felony littering. How do you plead?"

Walter laughed even more nervously.

"I apologize, it's only a sandwich wrapper. I'll pick it up right now -"

"Nonresponsive. How do you plead?"

The electricity flowed again. The voltage had been increased. Walter screamed but he was paralyzed and no sound came forth.

"Not guilty." He gasped. "I'm not guilty. It's only a piece of paper."

The Captain turned to his Second and said, "Interesting that he acknowledges the evidence yet pleads not guilty." He turned back to Walter.

"The standard defense has been entered. Here is the verdict:"

He began to read aloud from a handheld tablet.

"Insanity defense: rejected. Criminal acknowledges evidence. Amelioration defense: rejected, similar reasons. The claim that the offense is small is an existential affirmation of the crime. Ignorance defense: rejected for same reasons. Mitigation defense: rejected. Lack of contrition and an externalizing of responsibility nullify any mitigation. Verdict is guilty."

"No," Walter said, his face ashen. "There is no judge here. There is no jury, no justice."

"The judge is remote yet epistemologically present. Judges have decided cases all through history. A jury is irrelevant."

The Captain gave Walter a weak smile.

"The sentence should come through any moment. I apologize for the delay."

Walter looked at the cop's embarrassed face and finally understood. He was a bored and overworked civil servant. A few days ago the new government had changed all the rules as new governments do. This late middle-aged man was simply struggling to keep up.

"I'll pick it up. I'll pick it up. I will never do anything like this again." "I understand, Mr. Wilmott. I do. But this isn't really about the paper on the ground. It never was. You have failed to be a good citizen, Sir, and that makes you a criminal."

"Please – let me go." Walter felt tears on his face. "That isn't possible, Mr. Wilmott. The verdict has been entered. If I allowed you to go free, the entry would be incomplete. You would simply be captured again by another team. And I would join you. So, in summary, your appeal has been rejected."

The tablet made a small dinging sound.

"Ah, here we go. The sentence is death, to be carried out immediately."

One of the other team members, with a shoulder mounted camera, stepped forward.

"Any last words? A final message to your family, perhaps?"

"This is insane! Why are you doing this? I'm not a criminal! Please!

What's happening? Please!"

The Captain made a cutting motion in the air and the cameraman stepped back.

Walter tried to lunge forward but the encouragement loops held him fast. He started to shout but then the nova hot pain of the electricity hit him again. In a moment of ultimate horror he realized that they weren't even going to let him speak again. It would soon be over.

The gallows automatically deployed from a long pipe on the ground. One end of the pipe parted into three pieces, righting the pipe in the process, to where it stood on three legs. From the other end, now five meters in the air, an arm swung up. From the end of the arm a cable emerged, ending in an encouragement loop. Officers dragged Walter toward the gallows while another pulled the noose toward Walter. Only when the noose dropped over his neck were the other restraints removed.

And then Walter was flying. He was lifted off the ground. He couldn't breathe but he was free. He was flying, free, the commandos were far below. He was free... until the cable ran loose, the ground rushed up, the cable stopped his fall and broke his neck and instantly killed him.

"And in crime news, a wanton criminal met his deserved end this morning in Bradbury Park. Walter Wilmott, a serial litterer, was arrested, tried and sentenced. The offence occurred at 11.33 am and justice was served by 11.41. The corpse is viewable in the park for the next four days. Turning to other news..."



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