

THE 2021 ENGH ANNUAL

FLASH FICTION CONTEST



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2021 ENGH ANNUAL FLASH FICTION CONTEST

2021 ENGH ANNUAL FLASH FICTION CONTEST WINNERS

FIRST PLACE

KAREN RILEY SIMMONS

“No Mirrors”

SECOND PLACE

DR. DAVID HOLCOMBE,

“Rock and a Hard Place”

THIRD PLACE

KAREN RILEY SIMMONS,

“Moonbeam and Marigold”

HONORABLE MENTION

ERIC ALAI, “The September
Sun”

FIRST PLACE
KAREN RILEY SIMMONS,
“NO MIRRORS”



Karen Riley Simmons

enjoys a rewarding career as an independent writer, editor, and publications designer. Most recently she has specialized in assisting independent authors to ready their manuscripts for print and e-publication. Though she's designed books and magazines and written articles and columns for a variety of publications over the years, this is her first time entering her own fiction in competition. In past years, many in central Louisiana have enjoyed seeing Ms. Riley Simmons on stage in local productions, or hearing her sing with the Red River Jazz Band. A native of New Orleans, she currently is employed at the Rapides Parish Library.

NO MIRRORS

by Karen Riley Simmons

(Inspired by the song “No Mirrors in My Nana’s House”
by Ysaye M. Barnwell)

There once was a little brown-eyed girl. She never knew her mother, (who’d had the face of an angel, but got her wings for a nickel on a dime). And she never saw her father, (whose mind had been a terrible thing to waste on hard candy and dust). But the little girl grew up in Nana’s house under Nana’s watchful eyes.

Nana’s house was a perfect place for a little brown-eyed girl. There were secret nooks and hideaway crannies, cool under-the-bed gardens, and hot, stuffy hall-closet jungles. Sweet fragrances whispered invitations from the bedroom and warm kitchen aromas opened wide and hugged you ever so persuasively in the hallway. Nana’s own spicy scent swirled like rain-shower air everywhere she passed and made nuzzling in her lap a very special treat.

The little brown-eyed girl (who Nana called “Chile” because she was blameless) spent all her days exploring the wonders of Nana’s house and basking in the love that filled each room. Nana spent her days making sure Chile had everything she could possibly need or want. Nana had a way of making everything seem special and everybody feel beautiful, even a little brown-eyed girl.

At Nana’s house even the most ordinary things were marvels. When Chile showed Nana a crack in the wall, Nana told her to look more closely. She did and instead of a crack, she saw the Great River snaking through immense arid deserts and lush, fertile valleys.

When the clanging radiator pipes woke her, Nana told her of pulsing steel pan melodies riding tropic winds across twin islands in the sea. Then Nana taught her a little dance.

Each night, just as Nana would tuck Chile into bed under the big, lumpy quilt, she'd take the little girl's face into her hands—hands sculpted like continents—and say, “Chile, look deep into my eyes.” And the little brown-eyed girl would dream about all the beautiful things she had seen in Nana's infinite eyes.

Now, Nana didn't have much money. She didn't have enough to buy dolls and video games or even new clothes and shoes for Chile. At night, once Chile's eyes began dancing to the djembe drum beat in her dreams, Nana would carefully wrap her hair in a scarf, gather her walking stick and an old shopping bag, and head into the city. Nana would walk and walk, crossing streets and turning corners, up boulevards and down alleyways, over railroad tracks and under bridges, sifting, sorting, and selecting from the abundance she found tossed and scattered like rubble along her way. By the time she returned home, just before dawn, her sack would be full. She'd place it in a corner in the kitchen, fold her arms on the table and lay her head down, for just a minute. By the time Chile opened her eyes on a brand new day, some of the treasures from Nana's sack would be simmering on the stove.

Nana's dark eyes would light up like summer suns as soon as Chile came running into the kitchen to be gathered into her waiting lap.

“Tell me,” Nana would say.

And Chile would describe all the wonders she'd seen in all the places her dreams had taken her.

In the mornings, Chile loved to gather vegetables for the cook pot from the stoop garden she and Nana planted just behind the house. Nana would say, “Today is Monday, Chile. Every one-body could use a little sweetness on Monday.”

Chile would skip out to the garden and come back with her bowl filled with dusty, orange sweet potatoes.

Or Nana would say, “Respect, Chile. Can’t no one-body make it through a Wednesday without needin’ some respect.”

And Chile’s bowl would come back filled with dark, leathery collard greens.

Kindness Thursdays would bring field peas and okra, and Comfort Tuesdays would fill a pot full of red beans served over fluffy rice. On Satisfaction Saturdays, Nana would stir together what was left from the entire week and make a big pot of gumbo.

Once, as Chile turned with her garden bowl to go back into the house, big, angry letters painted across the back of the house stung her eyes, slapped her face, and pinched her heart. When Nana saw the letters, she took Chile by the hand and said, “Look close, child.” Through her tears, instead of anger, Chile saw fear. Instead of hate, Chile saw pain. Instead of threat, Chile saw need.

From then on, Nana and Chile set a pot of their Saturday Satisfaction on the stoop of the house across the tracks behind them on Forgiveness Sunday. “Because every one-body needs to give forgiveness to be forgiven,” Nana would say.

After supper, Nana would empty her sack. She would sit on the carved, smooth-worn stool she kept near the stove and place her treasure sack between her legs. Sitting cross-legged on the worn rug in front of her, Chile could barely be still as she waited to see what treasures Nana’s bag would produce. Nana would reach deep into her bag and pull out the most wonderful things—a pair of sneakers, barely worn that still had both shoestrings! A pretty blouse, just Chile’s size, torn only a little bit on the side, with lace and no stains at all. A doll with real hair. A discarded watch. A tattered dress. A coat. A narrow blue ribbon.

“Show me,” Nana would say. And Chile would dance and prance across the floor, clad in her brand new wardrobe and adorned with whatever pretties Nana’s midnight ramble had yielded.

Every now and then, a particular treasure would emerge from Nana's bag, a book with pictures and almost all the pages. Chile's eyes would light up like twinkling stars over the savannah and she would squeal with delight as Nana pulled the tome from her bag. Then, the two would spend the rest of the evening there by the stove, Nana turning pages and spinning stories to the pictures with Chile's head cradled in her fragrant lap.

* * * * *

Years later, when Chile's world had grown large, then small, then large again, and Nana's spicy scent was much more than just a memory, other children explored the cracks and crannies and closets of the old house. The social workers would bring them and Chile would take them all in. And when any one of them would ask why there were no mirrors in the house, Chile would simply smile. Then, gently cupping a tender, brown-eyed face in her hands, she'd whisper, "Child, look deep into my eyes."

SECOND PLACE
DR. DAVID HOLCOMBE, “ROCK AND A
HARD PLACE”



David J. Holcombe

was born in 1949 in San Francisco, California, and raised in the East Bay in Walnut Creek. He passed a tranquil youth and adolescence, riding to school on a bicycle through the pear orchards that still lined the country roads. At Las Lomas High School, their English teacher, introduced the Advanced English class to creative writing, something he pursued at U.C. Davis under the tutelage of Diane Murray-Johnson (author of “Le Divorce” and “Le Mariage.”)

While always attracted to art, writing and dancing, the realities of life forced him to pursue a medical career, a path that led him to the Catholic University of Louvain in Brussels, Belgium. His knowledge of four years of high school French allowed him to excel in medical school despite the rigor of a Belgian education.

SECOND PLACE

DR. DAVID HOLCOMBE, “ROCK AND A HARD PLACE”

Returning to a residency at a Johns-Hopkins affiliated clinic in Baltimore, he and his wife and three sons made it to Central Louisiana in 1986 where their fourth son was born.

There, in the middle of the rural South, he practiced medicine for twenty years while raising a family and resuming both painting and creative writing. After twenty years of internal medicine, he pivoted to public health and became the Regional Administrator/Medical Director of the Louisiana Office of Public Health for Central Louisiana. During his years in Alexandria, Louisiana, he self-published twelve books (all of them commercial flops) and saw a dozen of his short plays produced by Spectral Sisters Productions, a local developmental theatre group.

Science and art have co-existed during his entire life in an uneasy balance. He has been called too artsy to be a good doctor and too scientific to be a good artist. Being torn between these two conflicted poles has provided much of the tension to fuel his artistic output. While his books remain unsold, his art has had some modest success in local-regional exhibits and has found its way into a number of collections, both here and abroad.

ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

by David J. Holcombe

My name is Claudia Gomez-Gonzalez and I come from a small village in the mountains of Guatemala. We lived there, my two children and me, with my abuela, my grandmother on my mother's side. Our village sits on a hillside, surrounded by lush jungle, filled with flowering plants and tropical birds, a real paradise. Nothing, however, masks our grinding poverty. Abuela and I sold tortillas on the plaza, but we even had to give some of that money to the gangs. Our tiny garden helped, and then the hurricanes came and washed everything away.



My husband long since left for el norte and disappeared into the vastness of that land without ever reaching out to us. I have an uncle in Chicago who sometimes sends a few dollars to the abuela, but not enough to live on. When I decided to make the trip to el norte myself, abuela refused. She watched her husband and her sons go there and never return. She did not know whether they were alive or death, yet she prayed each night to the Holy Virgin as she recited the rosary. Yet, in the end, even she knew we had no choice, I had to make the trip.

We sold the little land she still possessed and I paid a coyote to get me safely to el norte. In Mexico, we confronted every danger: thieves, kidnappers, rapists, drug gangs and constant heat, thirst and hunger. Sometimes crammed in the back of a stifling truck, I wanted to die. But the dream of el norte and a good job, with the hopes of money to send to my children and the abuela kept me going. Each night, I recited the rosary that abuela gave me before I left and I prayed that the Holy Virgin would see me through to the promised land.

When we finally arrived at the border, the camp on the Mexican side looked and smelled like hell. Men, women and children were crammed together with almost no food, put plenty of garbage and excrement. And always the gangs hanging around to snatch the unwary or unprotected, selling children and women into slavery. Only our coyote kept us safe by paying them a part of the fee, the price to pay for safety.

The night to cross arrived and the coyote gave us each an inner tube and told us just the right moment to get across between patrols. He explained the we were to separate and hide in the bushes to wait until dawn, then only come out when we saw a border agent with a badge.

Vigilantes, who might kill us, also roamed the U.S. side, but an agent would take us in to be processed. If we qualified for asylum and had an address in the U.S., we might be sent there.

After crossing in the dark water, I moved into the dense brush and shivered with cold in my soaking clothes. Snakes and other creatures moved around making it impossible to sleep. When dawn finally came, I heard the rumbling of trucks and voices in English. I peeked out from the bushes and saw a man, a tall white man, in a dark uniform with an American flag on his shoulder. He yelled something in my direction, but I did not understand. I wanted to show myself, but I felt paralyzed with fear. He yelled again. But I stayed still, wanting to go out, but too afraid.

When I saw the black snake near my ankle, I stood up and burst through the shrubbery. My dress got tangled in the bushes and I tried to yank it out. He yelled some more and finally I plunged forward toward him as if he were Christ himself. I only saw the glint of the gun as the bullet struck my head. I remembered hearing that you see your whole life pass in front of you in the seconds before you die. I saw my mama, my abuela, my children as babies and the beautiful green jungle dotted with multi-colored birds and flowers before falling backwards. I looked heavenward as I fell backwards and saw the glorious Holy Virgin, surrounded by flames like Our Lady of Guadalupe and I saw a trace of a smile on her lips as she extended her arms to take to her bosom, far beyond el norte to the real promised land.

MOONBEAM AND MARIGOLD

by Karen Riley Simmons

The late set was just getting started as my date and I reluctantly left the lounge, cognizant of the long drive ahead that would cap off our night. We'd driven in from Alexandria for dinner and lingered for getting-to-know you drinks and conversation at one of the jazz bars. Heady with the kind of first-date-going-well jitters that sharpen all of one's senses, we moved outside, oblivious to the November evening crowd, lost in our own conversation, hearts expansive, eyes greedy for details of each other, and every pore eagerly emitting pheromones.

That's when I saw them. He was gliding along the sidewalk like a ray of moonlight, his eyes beaming with astonishment, his face framed by unruly towheaded curls. He was dressed in gently-used white from head to toe: a vintage brocade vest, clean once-white tuxedo pants, a long-sleeved shirt frayed at the collar and cuffed with moonstone links, well-worn Converse sneakers, a flattened bowler hat set back on his head. She shimmered in white beside him, flowing in a sequined-flecked prairie skirt, her left arm hooked through his right, his hand atop hers, gentle, precious.



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Striding evenly through the late evening crowd, their light brightened each face they passed. Illuminating a group of club-goers at the corner one moment, they were directly in front of us the next.

“I got married!” he gushed, his eyes wide as his luminous grin. Pearly teeth.

I smiled back at him, glad to hear the news, but curious about why he wanted us to know.

“Tonight. Just now!” he said

I glanced at the young woman at his side. Her hair, the color of fertile soil, was adorned with a sprig of white marigolds.

“I got married,” she echoed.

I detected stunned happiness. She also seemed scared to death.

“To each other?” I asked our couple, still fairly bewildered about why we had been chosen for their nuptial announcement.

“Yes!” It was unanimous.

“She melted my heart,” he said, beaming his smile at her. “She melted my heart and we got married.”

She smiled back at him, utterly surprised that he was speaking about her.

Their lucent joy overflowed like the tributaries of music that streamed from the doors of the Frenchmen Street clubs and coursed down the sidewalk, ferrying the animated suspension of mingling and commingling tourists, locals, and jazz quarter denizens.



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“Congratulations!” I told them. Sincerely, for I still believed completely in the coexistence of marriage and happiness, though my own had dissolved years ago. The marriage. My happiness had stubbornly refused to follow my marriage into oblivion and had been quietly watchful in the ensuing decade. But that discriminating emotion was highly alert this night and intensely interested in the evening’s activities.

My companion, wary of this couple floating on the updraft of their own joy, seemed impatient to move on. In the way of those not bred in the crescent of the Mississippi, he beheld strangers as strangers, particularly these, whose brightness had interrupted the warmth of our own afterglow. We had met through a friend. He had seen me at the theatre, she told me, and wanted to get to know me. He sent me an email. We’d talked for hours by phone and this was our first date. We were completely enraptured with each other through dinner and drinks that night and throughout what would be the six-hour, round trip drive. Months later, wrapped in each other’s arms and basking in a different type of afterglow, my happiness would dare to emerge from its dormancy to peek at our own glimmering light.

But here, beside this gleaming couple, I was ebullient. I had sorely missed New Orleans, having been flooded away two years before by the Storm and forced to abandon my beloved hometown completely in the aftermath of the ensuing devastation. This night, my homesick heart was beating to the rhythm of the city’s familiar



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soundtrack. My nostrils were filled with the fragrance of muddy river water, magnolias, red beans, and beignets. My stomach still savored the long-missed cuisine my date had treated me to at dinner. And my spirit was parading with kindred revelers on this glorious jazz promenade. This couple was everyone I'd ever danced with in the city, strutted with on Mardi Gras, buck-jumped with on second-line Sundays. They were my friends, my neighbors, my son and my daughter, and I loved them at once.

"Are *you* married?" Moonbeam asked us.

The pause lasted only a fraction of a second, both of us surprised by the question and struck equally by an impulse to say, "Not yet." Then, our unanimous "No," accompanied by averted eyes and self-conscious smiles.

For a lingering moment I held the couple in my sight—children as naïve as they were luminous, courageous as they were terrified. "May God bless you with absolute joy and every happiness forever," I intoned, breathing a benediction upon them and willing that theirs would indeed best the odds for a marriage-by-impulse.

I looked at the Moon Bride, whose eyes even now betrayed the fear and uncertainty burrowing in her heart. More deeply, and I knew that I might see the betrayal and confusion she would feel when she discovered that the Moon has no light of its own. Through her gaze she seemed to implore me for some assurance that all of it—the joy and the light—would be more than fleeting. I hugged her with my heart, but only squeezed her hand in mine.

"I will pray for you," I whispered.



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“Please,” she entreated as we began to move on our separate ways, our fingers lingering in the touch until the distance grew too great between us.

For a moment more, I watched their glow recede toward the river, then turned to join my companion. Our own hands touched easily, magnetically, then caught and held with the familiarity of the long espoused, and the hopefulness of just-met lovers. We looked down at our hands then glanced up at each other, grinning.

“How’d that happen?” he asked as we crossed the street to his car.

“I don’t know,” I replied.

“I like it,” he said.

“Me, too,” I said. “Me, too.”



HONORABLE MENTION: ERIC ALAI, “THE SEPTEMBER SUN”



Eric Alai

is an English Instructor at LSUA, where he teaches composition and creative writing; additionally, he is the manager of the annual “Art and Writing Contest” and managing editor of LSUA’s journal, the *Jongleur*. Alai has been writing prolifically and enthusiastically for over fifteen years in the genres of the essay, poetry, and fiction. 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 a poem of his was published in *The Bluffs Literary Journal* in 2016. Currently, he is working on getting a completed biography of his parents, *The Oak and the Cypress*, published and is writing a fantasy novel set in ancient Greece.

THE SEPTEMBER SUN

by Eric Alai

Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name,
Mother of Exiles.
—Emma Lazarus

The September sun was mild as the children ran out to recess at the schoolyard of Jefferson Elementary, a flat and sprawling square on the northern end of the small city of Jackson. Standing on her back porch, Charlotte noticed the boy walk to the corner of the schoolyard that bordered her house and sit down cross-legged, facing the school. His jet-black hair contrasted sharply with his orange hiking jacket.

Charlotte wore a lofty white gardening hat, a gray pony-tail emerging, and a long patina-colored shirt. She carried a basket with gardening tools and books to her small vegetable garden. Darius pretended not to notice her, and she began examining her quaint crop for ripe vegetables. Charlotte lowered herself and loosened the dirt around a few carrots. She walked over to the corner of the fence and said in a soft voice, “Hello there, young man.”

He replied with a quick glance and what sounded to her like a soft “Hey.” He squinted back at her to see rays of sun blazoning from her hat brim, her left arm around her gardening books, and her right hand clipping a stray branch from an apple tree. Sunlight flashed off her pruning shears. She saw that he had a dark face and big eyes. A proud face, she thought, for such a young man. “What a beautiful day, huh?”

He nodded and continued to write. She couldn't think of anything to say, so Charlotte continued to dig around the carrots gently. After pulling out a few, she inquired, "Do you like to write stories?" For the first time, he stopped writing, turned his head, looked directly at her, and said plainly, "Well, it's something to do."

"Don't you like the jungle gyms, or the swings, or that game where the boys chase after the one with the ball? What do they call that?"

"Kill the Pill," he said and began to write again.

"Kill the Pill.' That's a funny name. Boys come up with such funny names!"

"It just means tackle the guy with the ball."

"Why don't you want to play with the other children? They seem nice."

"It's not that," he said, "I use to, but I don't anymore. See that kid in the brown coat, the one with the ball? That's Lance. We were friends."

"What happened?"

As though he were trying to find a trinket he had lost, the boy took a slow survey around the grass in front of him. Charlotte walked over to a cluster of plump fire truck red tomatoes that she noticed hiding underneath a vine. Feeling like she had just brought up a sore topic, she redirected the exchange: "I wrote a little when I was younger. My favorite was poetry. I could read and write poems all day!"

"Yeah, I like some kinds of poems, but I like monster stories and superhero stuff better..." The pack of nine boys ran by ten feet in front of where he sat.

"...I have comic books and graphic novels."

"Graphic novels?"

Darius explained, "Graphic novels are just longer comic books than regular ones."

“I used to love horror movies like Dracula.”

“Me too. The Mummy, The Creature from the Black Lagoon. I love The Wolfman. I want hair like his. I think, of the black-and-white ones, the movies with Bela Lugosi are the best.”

“Well, don’t you know a lot?!” She saw a grin on his face. Charlotte paused, wondering why he sat alone every day at recess.

He asked, “Did you ever like superheroes like Batman or Spiderman?”

“Oh yes, but just on TV. I wasn’t a big comic book reader. Superman was a popular TV show back in my day.”

“I love comic books; that’s what I’ve been writing lately. I’m trying to make up my own superheroes, but they always seem goofy after a while.”

“I guess it’s getting close to lunchtime for you, huh? Boy, what a nice harvest I have this year!”

“Yeah.” He looked at her with a blank expression.

She asked, “What’s your...”

All nine boys crashed into Darius at full speed. Charlotte lost her breath at the rolling thuds and smacks their bodies, the earth, and the fence made in concert. The tumult landed in a tangled heap in the corner of the two fences. Some began crying aloud yet struggling to breathe at the same time, their heaved groans rolling over the flat schoolyard like moaning ghosts. She looked over her fence to see Darius on his back and unconscious, his notebook crumpled up on his chest.

Charlotte went to visit him at St. Jerome Medical Center. “Here’s a little something for you. I just felt so bad that you got hurt.”

“Why? It wasn’t your fault.”

“Well, if we weren’t talking, you might have seen them coming. How bad is it?”

“Not too bad. Those guys got hurt too. Lance broke his ribs.” He looked at the silent TV for a moment and then turned back to her.

“Unwrap your present.”

He grinned at the box and began to open it. Inside were comic books. “Wow! Look at all these. Thanks!” His big white teeth were stark in the gray and white setting. “The comic strip I was working on at the playground is called Radarman.”

“Radarman?”

“Yeah, Radarman. He has this radar system in his brain; a laboratory experiment made him that way, and he can tell anytime someone’s in trouble... if there is something wrong...”

The October leaves rolled and tumbled across the playground as Darius walked to the corner, sat down facing Charlotte, opened his notebook and said with vigor, “Okay, here’s what I have so far...”

Charlotte clipped a stray branch as she listened, the sun glaring off of her shears.

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