



Congratulations to everyone who submitted an entry into the 2018 Flash Fiction Competition.

Here are the winning stories....

First prize: David Sconce for 'Edgeland'

Edgeland

The bridge across the motorway had always seemed like the gateway to another world. Like if I kept on going I might fall off the edge. Me and my sister would spend eternities in this edgeland when ma and pa needed space for their "grown-up conversations" - watching the solitary marsh harrier patiently flushing out its hopeless prey; shivering into one another until the starlings came to roost, thousands into one. The ethereal 'hsssh' as they nestled into the reeds would take my thoughts far from their troubled trails, way out over the edge into the sublime.

Everything changed the night they blew up the refinery. Even before the light-sleeping blackbirds had begun to issue the gentlest of alarm calls, ma and pa were dragged from their bed for questioning - "just a formality", they tried. My sister is nowhere to be seen, melted into the darkness like the tawny owl, her friends tight-lipped or clueless or both, the police too busy to care beyond filling in the paperwork - "she'll turn up, they always do".

Even the edgeland is changed - where hundreds of cars would have passed under the bridge while I crossed before (I liked to imagine the different places they were going, the people waiting for them), now there are none. Just the burnt toast remains of those ambushed by the 'eco-terrorists', their final act of defiance before they too melted into the night. The marsh harrier is replaced by a raptor with a very different quarry - an army drone equipped with heat-sensitive cameras.

I should be afraid but the edgeland calls me on with the promise of forgetfulness. As I near the reed beds I hear a familiar voice whisper my name. And with it comes the calm assurance of starlings, the murderous menace of the marsh harrier.

Second Prize: Linden Sweeney for 'A Good Night's Sleep'

A good night's sleep

It has been such a long day. I must have driven over six hundred miles up through France. I was so lucky to find a city centre hotel room this late without a booking. Anyway, the room's comfortable enough. It is time to sleep and I've got a long way to go tomorrow.

It's still dark. Why have I woken up? It must be very early; there's no light through the shutters. *Just close your eyes, you need to sleep.* But I can't. I am now aware of a presence in the room. Nothing identifiable like a noise or a movement; just a presence. It is behind me, somewhere in the far corner of the room. Nothing on earth is going to make me turn over to see what is there, behind me. I can only lie here, on my side, facing the window with my heart thumping in my chest. I cannot move. I just know that somewhere, behind me in the dark, there is something even darker. Something cold and evil and I am very frightened. I want to run screaming from the room but I can't, I am too afraid to see what is there.

At last I can see dawn beginning to curl through the slats in the shutters. I feel a lightening in the room and, at last, I am able to turn over. I steel myself to look at the corner of the room. The old armchair is as it was last night when I went to bed. Stupid, fancy frightening myself over nothing.

As I am checking out, waiting for the card machine to go through, the concierge on the desk flicks his eyes up to mine,

"Did you sleep well, sir?" he enquires in exquisite English, with a smile on his lips.

Third Prize: Martin Redman for 'Escape'

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ESCAPE

300 words

It's a day as dark as her future, as grey as the walls of Accident and Emergency, the sky as hard as her husband's fists. A day when the wind twitches the mist like a voyeur at a net curtain. She knows she'll find him there supping his Best Bitter, telling tales in which he is the hero. She hears the crunch of last night's crisps as she walks across the sticky carpet. Sees him at the bar intent on the barmaid's blouse and his whisky chaser. Only half aware of her in her Sunday coat and her Saturday night hair. His attention finally caught by the shotgun she aims at his chest. He dies more shocked to see her there than afraid that she'd shoot never dreaming she'd have the nerve to pull the trigger. She can smell his lead-loosened bowels, the stale beer and cordite. The most exotic cocktail ever mixed at The Royal George.

She sees people back away as she crosses the square to post the letter to her sister in Portadown telling her she was right; it never did work out with her English soldier boy. The witnesses will later agree that she skipped like the teacher's scapegoat let out of school early laughter lines replacing the worried wrinkles around her eyes. As fresh as the morning she walked from the church on his dress uniform arm.

So now she sits beneath the gently turning mobile on the never to be occupied cot wondering if a child might have made the difference but knowing that it wouldn't have. Till his parade ground bark echoes up the stairs demanding dinner and his glass of ale. Forcing her back to reality. Her plan of escape fully detailed but not yet carried out. Just not yet carried out.