Flash Fiction Competition 2014

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Fortunes of the Sexes by Zoe Coutts

Small sword, small you-know-what-they-say. Begun by Adam and Eve, the war of the sexes rages on in the Garden. Man has ruled for as long as anyone can remember. The reign of Woman has come.

The wheel is turning; those at the bottom have reached the top. The tools Man has used to protect his reign are in the hands of his counterpart. Scripture is, of course, utterly phallocentric. According to Man, Eve was an afterthought. Now Woman has possession of the text and presents her own reading. Eve was a refinement.

Under the Feminist flag, Woman gives her view in all areas where her view was previously dismissed. Language? Gender-biased. Art? Laced with symbolism. Those trees on the left are clearly phalluses. Don’t even get me started on the right-hand rock.

You see, not only does Woman’s body give life, she is strong and intelligent. She can outwit Man. Her new power? Emasculation. She can do Man’s job better, so why shouldn’t she? These are her words: oppression, chauvinist.

Woman’s rise began with the phrase: ‘ladies first’. Man opened the door and Woman stopped to think. This courtesy, she thinks, is reinforcing my belief that I am weak and inferior. This is not so. I can open my own doors.

She has drafted new laws to bind Man: laws for sexual harassment and hostile work environments. These laws are said to protect the vulnerable, though anyone who sees Woman will know she is anything but. Her slogan is equality, but this translucent word is understood to be a cover. Man knows authentic equality is impossible.

Now Man is under constant threat. Woman seductively reveals the cloth that clings to her waist and dares Man to become aroused. She dares him to assault her with suggestions. Man knows that his instincts make him a lesser human: a primate. He is ashamed of himself, as he should be.

It is a new era for Woman, but in her scramble to the throne she has cut off circulation in the legs of Man. She stands tall and proud, higher than ever before. This is her right. At night, she tells herself she can’t hear the groans. She tells these stories, but you can see the truth in the lines on her face. The wheel is turning and it is all she can do to keep her balance atop the squirming creature beneath.
Beware of the Woman by Hollie Duncan

‘Baby’
Baby, baby baby. I guess it was my little pet name. That knocks me out. Every beck, every call, I’d be there. Every time, I knew I shouldn’t be there at all. Nevertheless, I did what was expected of me. Ha, a little slave girl, that’s what I really was. How stupid was I to think I was his lover?

‘Baby’. As if.

I was only thirty. A beauty, with glowing skin and pearl teeth. My lips little pink petals of a pale rose, that I’d take the time to paint every single morning. But not red, no, he didn’t like red on me. He said it was too ‘daring’, too ‘bold’. Red was my favourite, the same shade as my hair. The colour of life, power and fury. Strong. But a woman should never be bold... I did this all for him, to please him. I thought maybe he’d love me more if I behaved well, dressed and acted like a little lady - his smiling woman. I thought his love was the greatest gift I’d ever get. I’ll read my book, laugh when I’m supposed to, speak when spoken to. What do they call it? Etiquette? Whatever. I’d cover my ankles and tie my hair, I’m his baby, all for him.

Oh, it was all for the big strip tease. Ladies, Gentlemen, welcome to the show. Was I nothing more? Flesh and bone. There is nothing else. Just a woman, unwrapped. Reduced to nothing more than the teeth and jewels I leave behind. A wedding ring, or a gold filling. But there was a charge, oh, a very large charge... for each of my losses, I gained.

Maybe I’m scaring you now. I am the unexpected. All these years, all the pretty little breaths, deaths I have died. I am not the same woman. Each time, I’d come back to the same man, as you poked and stirred, you never knew what I was capable of. Tell me, do I terrify?

A woman! Just a woman. Well, who knew? ‘She’s a piece of work’ they’d say. And they were right. I am your opus, your work, your doing. My life, a constant battle. Crushed and beaten, I’d pick myself from the ashes. Gathering up the little smashed parts of myself, the shards of my soul, the soul of every girl, lost in the rubble. I may be just a woman, but like a phoenix, I’d rise. Each time I’d return stronger, with another shining ruby in a crown made of pure gold. A miracle! I’d do it to survive. Turning and burning and rising, again and again with my red hair, the plumes of my feathers, burning but my face featureless, eating men like air.
Medieval Suffragettes by Carol Page

The Queen cornered the King in the great hall and announced, “I’ve always been a fan of Boadicea and have commissioned the court carpenter to mount her chariot wheels on a frame. I’m thinking of starting a female movement. Dames rule OK. This wooden monument will give me inspiration.” The King groaned, suspecting another fad of the Queen taking root. “Aren’t there any scullions for you to impart your infinite wisdom to my dear?” Wishing she would leave him alone to polish his favourite sword.

“No, they made good use of the Maundy money I gave them and set up their own businesses.” She replied regally.

She continued, “I’ve been discussing with the court jester the psychology of the merits of the left hand path which represents the sword and the right hand path representing the pen. Unfortunately he can’t always hear what I am saying because of his jingling bells.” “I expect he is suffering from selective deafness,” said the King. “He mentioned that he would like to push the damn sculptor over the edge of the cliff.” “If women are to triumph we shouldn’t need men to tell us what to do.” She opined.

“A chance to get a word in edgeways would be good.” Thought the King.

“I’ve written a book on the subject, have you read it yet?” she asked. “What’s it about?” the King inquired nervously. “How to rule a kingdom in twenty easy lessons.” She informed him proudly. “Lesson number one is that the pen is mightier than the sword.” “Indeed, I agree,” the King replied, “If everybody spent their time reading your poetry they would sink into a deep depression and lose the will to live, let alone fight.” She gave him a withering look. “There is no doubt that if we fought with swords you would win, but if we fought with words I would be victorious.” The King groaned and sank to his knees in subjugation. “OK, you win dear one. Life is too short to argue.” “Indeed sire, you are correct in your observation. In our time the average life span is only forty years.” “Well I feel old before my time that is for sure, and I’m only thirty, dearest.” For some reason the Queen took that as a compliment.

“Would you like to know of the other nineteen lessons?” “Will it take long? Only I have the army to organise and a war to fight and gold to count.” “Oh there will be plenty of time for all that.” She replied breezily. “Ahem,” the Queen cleared her throat. “Are you sitting comfortably? Then I shall begin.” “Chapter One, The Emancipation of Damsels.” ......................
A long time ago there were two mighty orders. The order of the Moonlight Knights fought for the liberation of humanity and the destruction of evil. The Netherworld Army fought for control of the world. The two orders fought many battles, each more violent then the last but there was one battle that would be remembered forever on both sides. The arrows and boulders darkened the sky and the blood turned the great plains of Armala red forever. The battle lasted three days. In one last desperate attempt the Moonlight Knights amassed, pushed through the enemy lines and killed the Netherworld Army's leader Thane, the Violent. When the Netherworld Army saw their leader fall they fled and were not seen since.

300 years later

The Moonlight Knights had returned to their former glory and were now the most powerful empire in the world. The Netherworld Army had not been heard from since their defeat on the plains of Armala but recently the Moonlight Knights have been loosing key forts. But there was never any proof that the Army had returned. After three years the Army suddenly appeared again and started to takeover the world. After 100 years of war and destruction the Army defeated the Knights and conquered the world, enslaved and ruled by the Army's leader Lord Melltong. The Knights were not gone completely. A small band of survivors were hiding, including Arthur Redcloack, former leader of the Knights, George Blackhide, a Moonlight general and Miranda Whitestone, a legendary arch mage. Together they tried to find three mythical weapons of ancient origin.

Present

Arthur, George and Miranda were walking through the wood when Arthur suddenly stopped. ‘Hide!’ he whispered. They quickly dove into the bushes. No sooner were they hidden, massive wolves with horns and spikes on their backs came charging by. Arthur, George and Miranda waited for a bit before they climbed out. ‘At this rate we will never reach Moonlight Mountain!’ hissed George. ‘True, we must make hast’ said Miranda calmly. ‘I am just trying to keep us safe’ protested Arthur, ‘We need make hast or shall be caught.’ ‘We can defend ourselves! I am not a coward’, George shouted and charged off leaving a bewildered Arthur and a disappointed Miranda. ‘He used to be such a nice man, he changed so much since the war’, she said. Arthur only nodded. Soon the three travellers reached Moonlight Mountain and found two large stone statues, a knight wielding a greatsword and a mage wielding a staff. ‘Why is there a mage? This is a Temple of Knights’ asked George angrily, not noticing Miranda's hurt look. Inside they found a hallway leading to a room with three pedestals. A bow, a greatsword and a staff were the ancient mythical weapons. Arthur picked up the bow, George the greatsword and Miranda the staff. Their sacred moment of reference was disrupted by a loud bang, quickly followed by another and another. Behind them the sealed door crumbled...
Caterina by Anne M Smith

Sister Athanasias would be proud of her, recognising St Catherine from her symbols: the spiked wheel which failed to annihilate her; the massive broadsword which did.

With long, languorous strokes she smoothed her fiery hair, so like her namesake saint. It fell to a cascade which curled suggestively around her full breasts: not the ascetic, anorexic figure of the saint. Deeper cleavage since Juanita. One consolation. She smiled at her reflection in the mirror and reviewed the working clothes, red, clinging lace. Turning, she approved the tantalisingly high leg of the easy-access teddy. It accentuated her rump. Men liked rumps. It was Juan’s word. It was his loss. Miguel hadn’t been her fault, whatever he’d said.

The painted image visible over her left shoulder showed the saint, halo twinkling, triumphant above the spurned king who martyred her. Victor thought he was a king; the cabriolet, the Cavalli suit, the trendy converted convent hotel for tonight’s assignation. He was livid room service had finished by the time they arrived. Not her fault. She had waited hours in the square.

A click. The door swung open. He was bearing gifts: a dazzling smile, Moet on ice, Manchego and crackers, linen napkins. And pears with their bone-handled knife.

“Amazing what you can do if you put your mind to it!” he said. Quite.

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With clinical precision she administered a bed bath, then turned his dead weight to and fro to strip the bed of the top sheet and soft waterproof undercover she had added while he foraged. They joined the champagne glass in her holdall, swiftly followed by the vinyl gloves which had expertly swept the dressing table, taps and door knobs of any potentially hazardous traces. The ring was 22 carat, the stud a diamond, the Rolex real, an unusual bonus. The ultra-slim aluminium laptop was neat. She would have taken any computer, even checked his home if he hadn’t brought one: Juan had told her his officers were good at checking browsing history. Best no links.

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For the first time she understood rape: the thrusting control of another: the power. After the slower satisfaction of previous clients – sedated by drink, finished by purloined insulin or potassium injections- the pear knife had been a primeval climax. It went into the holdall, wrapped in the napkin.

She glanced up at St Catherine, incongruously positioned above the lusty bed. How wrong did she have it, the misguided 4th century princess? The Emperor would have taken her alive if she hadn’t preached Christian virtue. Stupid cow. There was no eternal salvation for pious chastity. Far better to take your pleasure on your terms, make them pay for it. Then wreak revenge. Sweet

The DO NOT DISTURB sign she left on the door. It would give her more time to disappear into the carnival crowds. Shame she couldn’t take the cabriolet, too conspicuous. But the three thousand dollars from his briefcase should ensure smooth passage to another life.

Without the halo.
A Woman’s Lot by Gillian Shearer

Another dawn and Catherine is at prayer. Her words, inaudible to the guards, offer a brief benediction - a pithy for the King. Silently she crosses herself, and rises from the floor. She looks out the window of her cell to the courtyard below. It is empty of people. But near the small well, she spies the instrument of her death. Though a light breeze lifts the King’s Colours into the sky, the wheel does not turn. Its spokes, inches apart, are as unwavering as her spirit. Catherine knows that the King would have her plead for clemency, but no man, let alone a King, knows the power of her convictions.

So she waits.

The days are long and the nights are filled with the horrors of torture. Men cower like beasts - their bodies broken from the rack, their souls without God. Each night fear walks abroad: a fear borne of ignorance and old religion.

Looking out of her solitary chamber she prays to God for her salvation. She ignores the taunts and jibes of her gaolers as they lead her through the narrow passageways of the tower. As she passes by, other prisoners cry out, as if possessed by demons.

“Christian Harlot!”

Words full of venom and fear.

Yet others come seeking redemption. The King’s wife, Valeria – a dark beauty with cheeks like plump damsons – dares to enter. Sweet, seductive Valeria clasps Catherine’s hands to her breast and prays for God’s mercy. And Valeria, sweet and ignorant feels the warm rush of yearning fill her soul. Yet even as she prays, she knows her fate is sealed.

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Centuries pass. A muddy field in central France and a young woman prepares to die. Her hair, cropped like a boy’s burns copper in the morning light. Her bodice of white steel catches the sun and glows quicksilver - ethereal.

As she kneels in prayer the cries of English warriors echo her own. Their foreign tongues are harsh and formidable: consonants click like steel swords. The river gurgles its own sweet refrain and trees, blown by a mistral wind bend and snap. Yet out of this melee comes a voice so sweet and merciful that it could be God Himself.

Jeanne thinks of happier times. When playing in her father’s garden, surrounded by the scents and blossoms of a northern childhood, she recalls a dream. A woman - her virgin’s gown of crimson hidden beneath a cloak of peacock blue – smiles beatifically. Behind her a wheel stands motionless. Her head is a crown of light. And at her feet - a King - made inglorious by defeat.

Tomorrow comes. And Jeanne rides out on a white horse to defeat an English king.

And in her hand, a sword - held forth like a silver chalice.
Into the Wild by Christian Ah-See

The delicate touch of soft grass. The gentle breath of a cool breeze. My eyes lost in an eternal expanse of blue above. I sit up. The azure sky softens, easing into faint maroon as my gaze descends to the horizon, where the Sun now lingers. Shadows stretch through her last amber light in the valley far below, and I watch as she slips away through the imperceptible boundary between Earth and Heaven. My hands rest still on the grass, quivering blades caressing my fingers, and my eyes close. Disruption! My own thoughts unsettle me; those same words, though I have rejected them countless times, continue to haunt my mind:
"Fool! Out there, death is all you will find."
Fool? The words are a poisonous fume, thick with treachery and fear. "Safety and comfort" they say. "Confinement and deprivation!" I reply. Their words at last lose their hold on me; their strength gone, worthless, exposed. I lie back. The mingling light envelopes me warmly again, and I drift into serenity.
Rustling. The Sun's subdued light has gone; now a thousand white stars survey me from the nothingness. I get up and inspect my surroundings. Nothing. The trees and rocks around are as quiet as before.
And yet...
I perceive something. A shapeless form in the dark, invisible, undetectable, yet real. Rustling again! Closer now. My eyes attempt in vain to penetrate the darkness. Silence. Suddenly, something brushes by my hand. Startled, I spin around...
And I see her.
An elegant woman before me, occupying a slender dress, a long gown draped over her shoulders. Under the stars she radiates a golden light as if she were the Sun, undimmed, pure. Her pale unblemished face inches away from mine, I feel her sweet breath like an embrace. Oh, how beautiful she is! I am lost in her glimmering eyes, her immaculate cheeks, her soft lips, I lean closer, engulfed in her fragrance, our noses almost touch...a chill wind separates us! I stagger back in a moment’s shock, but she is unmoved. I approach; she is further away but I will soon reach her. The gap is closing, the void separating us; what wonders await at its end? My steps are no longer driven by me but by her; she is drawing me in. So close. Her face is even more beautiful than before; she smiles now and I smile too. I vaguely notice a shape at her feet, but her eyes fix my gaze. Fool! Something pulls me back. Fool! I overcome it but it pulls harder. Death... She is disappearing into the distance. Her smile fading. NO! I break free, stumbling towards her, joy filling me with each step. I am so close to her; her delicate lips, smooth cheeks...burning eyes!
Horror!
I twist my head away, and see, at last...the ground strewn with the broken bodies of a hundred men. Reeling. Paralysed.
Darkness.
The Push door by Benn Brown

It wasn’t as cold as she had always dreamed it would be, but the air moved more, it ran its fingers through Abbey Rose’s prize, untamed hair, long amber and natural. She wore her favourite red dress like a comfort blanket on a new born child, her faded blue jacket. The wood of the push door though hard against her back was actually quite comfy in its firmness, and oddly enough even though it would never, ever open again her nerves had levelled when she had got this close to her old life. Abbey was rendered eternally isolated and unique, perfectly mirroring in reality how she had always been in imagination, but the metaphor fell dead at her feet, like all words to all people now, she knew the definition without knowing what it meant. Tingly fingers pushed her out of step heartbeat through a book, green and aged which she pulled against her chest like someone she didn’t love but had to hold. This place, so odd, wooden pillars contorted and huge jutted out of a weird, wet, green carpet, brittle and soft. Vast, semi solid looking white cliffs hovered thousands of miles above where she stood, and light like nothing she’d ever seen engulfed, its source too bright even to look at with open eyes but comparably small to the white giants. Her fear almost tangible, her regret a symphony she cursed the reason she’d left safety, she had honoured her fathers memory her search for what he, a historian had called a library had success. Due to the heating up of the planet and the unheeded cry of Sir Arthur C Clarke, in the “City And The Stars”, humanity had done what it always did best; sheltered itself from the rain it caused. The Establishment was one solid structure spanning almost the whole of Britain, heated and perfectly lit all year round without the aid of any windows, the promise of everyone living in one eco friendly, communal house had been well marketed, an end to homelessness, but soon as always the posters and billboards faded and a wall was erected between Old Scotland, and New England. Ray Bradbury was unheeded too and books were done away with, since The Connection everyone had the Internet upload into they’re minds, everyone knew everything and nothing, knowledge treated like fashion. The door to leave was a simple push door.

Suddenly, she realised in all this she hadn’t even thought of her only companion her eyes traced its tittle “The Republic of Plato”

By the time she came to a close and pressed her palm against the back cover as if hopping to find its pulse, the day was getting old and in front of her the sun painted her shadow crisper than she had before seen. Propping the book up against the push door Abbey walked off into the world with eyes fixed, no longer in fear but in wonder at the white cliffs.
SPECIAL COMMENDATION

The Queen is taking a holiday by Leila Eadie

I am not amused. You may have noticed, husband dear. This is the final straw.

I always behave myself admirably. The royal receptions; the endless greeting of foreign dignitaries; the interminable dinners. Sometimes I enjoy those, but you must have realised that ensuring I am seated next to someone intriguing is my only interest in these events.

I endure the ladies-in-waiting, the banal chatter about heirs and hairstyles, pregnancies and the latest fashion, the scandalous news straight off the boats from the coast. Gossip. Giggling. Girlishness.

I have resigned myself to a life where I must always smile sweetly – except when solemnity is more fitting, of course. I am a perfect example of Queenhood.

Am I not?

I had dreams when I was younger. My father blamed my books; I think he genuinely regretted my learning to read. He had very definite ideas about women, their place, their role.

He liked you.

But he had to concede that if I was to be considered suitable for marriage to a king, I had to have skills; a certain amount of learning. One cannot very well entertain the nobility by discussing how the rosy tint of a babe’s cheek is the exact colour of this season’s most fashionable dresses.

Books were my escape, portals to new lives and other worlds. ‘Fostering unrealistic expectations’, my father said. What was unrealistic about wanting to travel, to seek out those monsters illustrated on the map’s blank spots? To find them and vanquish them – or perhaps talk to them, learn about the life of a monster. Together we could compare it with the life of a girl groomed to be Queen.

Once, I persuaded a guardsman to lend me his sword. A few patronising lessons, humouring the funny child, and then the paternalism gave way to surprise; apparently I have an aptitude for this sort of thing. I’m quick and agile, and soon grew strong enough to wield a good length of blade with skill and precision. Of course, Father put a stop to that as well, as soon as he found out.

When you’re Queen, many things fall within your reach again. It isn’t all bad.

Did you really think your birthday gift would inspire boundless joy? No, it was a hint, wasn’t it? I should stay in my rooms like a good little wife and spin colourful silks with the other women. It was to put me in my place.

See how well that worked, husband?

You can take your spinning wheel, the finest in the land or not, and you can—

Don’t even think of twitching that sword. Haven’t you seen enough of what I can do? Do you want another lesson?

Save your spluttering outrage. I will give you time to calm yourself and appreciate all I do for you. I’m going to go travelling, a low-key royal birthday tour to the farthest reaches of our kingdom. I may slay a dragon. Or bring it home and invite it to dinner.
Spinning through time by Ellen McBride

Dreary mid December and clouds hang heavy. The street draws out to a distant glow, where the window of a gallery frames strange objects and obscure pictures. Kathy stops for a moment to look at an image of intense colours and bizarre subject matter. A lady, queen or saint stands on a man. He wears a crown. She holds a sword and book. A wheel features to the right. Is this a domestic row? Or has she conquered foe? Did the guy mess with the spinning wheel? Kathy thinks of her spinning wheel, ages old and motionless.

Turning to the street, where buses heave with people dressed in black and down to the train station, weaving among commuters also dressed in black. A daily sombre tide of mourning for days not freely spent, thought Kathy as the chill wind of austerity pushed her homewards away from the shops and bright lights. She turns the key and closes the door, moving through rooms pale, angular and flat. Not quite empty, there is still furniture. Places to sit and put down a mug, but these float within a void of what was there before. The spinning wheel remains, funny old fashioned thing she thinks and gives the wheel a gentle nudge.

Three months have passed since Kathy banked her redundancy, put her house up for sale and cleared out stuff as she looked for work and waited for life to restart. Gazing out at next doors tabby cat eyeing the fish in her pond, she thinks back to when a visitor came to school to show them how to use a spinning wheel. It was of little interest at the time, just light relief from the usual class. Walking to the domestic science block, the teenagers had threaded their way through porta-cabins plonked down as substitutes for bricks and mortar. There had been a fight. Two girls enclosed within their own intense space, fizzing with spite. Thin air and a teacher had pounced. His stride and speed giving no chance of escape and he hauled the girls towards the head masters office. The class wondered what trouble further down the line and in muted tones shuffled on and into a room airy and bright. Against the walls were small kitchens. Chairs were pulled into the centre. The class settled to wait. The lady with the spinning wheel smiled and spoke of windy hill tops, sheep in fields, barbed wire and thorn bushes snagged with wisps of wool waiting to be spun. The wooden wheel turned and she pulled out a long thread of neatly twisted grey wool. As the wheel spun round, the yarn was wound onto a spindle. Drawn out and wound on. Drawn out and wound on. Not unlike the lives that had glowed ahead of us thought Kathy, waiting to be pulled out with success neatly winding round us. So what had happened to all that promise and planning, or were we really just passing through, spinning through time?