

The Story Eater
Flash fiction by Kate F Eaton

From the moment he woke, he knew today would be the day. Through the window of the farmhouse, the sounds were the same, cattle bawling to be fed, guinea hens scratching in the grass, the branches of the oak tree Daddy needed to trim rubbing the shingles off the roof.

He was eager to begin his task, but the air around his head was whispering and crackling with a story and he lay real quiet, trying to capture it. There, he ate it all in a gulp, before it could follow the breeze out the window. It began to simmer and grow inside his gut, crowded up against all the others he had gobbled from the air throughout the school year. Today was the first day of summer and it was time to write them down.

He jumped from his narrow bed and grabbed the box that held old scraps of butcher paper, utility bills with the backs unwritten, blue-lined paper barely used by classmates. And pens, he could not write with pencil and feel the same energy he felt using black Bic pens, ten for two dollars from the grocery store.

With the pressure growing by the minute, he flew through his chores, kissed his mother on the cheek when she offered toast and ran to the creek before the tales burst from his mouth in disjointed babble. For hours, propped against the trunk of an elm in striped tee shirt and too-short, end of school year jeans, he wrote the stories he'd been digesting all these months. They flooded out onto the backs of propane bills, wedding invitation envelopes and notebook paper rescued from the waste bin after school.

He spat them onto the pages, discarding an empty Bic without breaking rhythm, writing down the margins when he had to. The older tales came first, fully-formed from months of incubation, leaving his gut free for new ones requiring more digestion. He did not hear his mother calling him for lunch. Did not respond to the quaking of a belly empty of all but his masterpieces.

Fingers cramped around another Bic, lost in the fruit of his story eating, he did not see his friend until the shout came inches from his ear. "Willy."

Pens flew, tales scattered in the summer grass around him. He felt a phantom twinge of guilt for his neglect. He could not stop for fishing, for running through the corn in search of foxes, for engaging in an epic dirt clod battle. His friend shuffled away down the river trail, vowing to find another summer companion.

For he was lost again, leaned back against the ancient elm, eyes shut and mouth wide open. In time, he snapped it shut, swallowed, swallowed again and began to smile. Grabbed his Bic and a crumpled sheet of paper. "This is going to be a good one."