



EXPOSED

AND OTHER

SMALL BITES STORIES

AN
INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE
MULTI-AUTHOR ANTHOLOGY

EXPOSED
AND OTHER SMALL BITES STORIES

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*Dedicated to every person who ever took a chance
on an unknown author.
Thank you.*

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A Taste of the Stories Ahead

Exposed

by Timothy Baldwin

Domestic Suspense / Institutional Thriller

A late-night discovery in an empty school office reveals a trail of fraud no one wants uncovered. As warnings escalate and allies vanish, one teacher learns how dangerous “transparency” can be.

The Delusion of Anticipation

by Ron Schulz

Reflective Nonfiction

A lifetime of chasing the next success gives way to an unexpected revelation: the ship he’d been waiting for arrived decades ago. This intimate narrative explores how anticipation can blind us to the extraordinary life already in our hands.

Salvage of a Soul

by Scott Meehan

Post-Apocalyptic Science Fiction

In the aftermath of the Rapture, a synthetic guardian searches for meaning in a world claimed by a machine-born Choir. A stranger’s unexpected act of mercy forces the synthetic to confront the possibility that a soul can be built — or found.

The Mission

by Donna Doty
Allegorical Fantasy

On a world where meteor storms fall like omens and compassion reshapes even the shadows, a lone traveler races to save a dying star — but the truth waiting in the dark may demand more than he ever meant to give.

The Break In

by Ron Schultz
Creative Nonfiction / Personal Narrative

When a stranger in a fugue state shatters the quiet of a family home, the real damage isn't the broken glass but the fears it awakens. In the aftermath, one man is forced to confront the long-buried terrors he's spent a lifetime avoiding.

By the Light of the Fire

by J.W. Bell
Mystical Thriller

A warrior's brutal last stand in ancient Ireland bleeds into the nightmares of a modern veteran who feels every wound as if it were real. When past and present collide, he discovers some battles never end — and some enemies never die.

Quanah Parker on the Distant Ridge

by D. Krauss
Reflective Travel Narrative

On a meandering October road trip, a man visits the sites of famous last stands — only to recognize pieces of his own life in every downfall. Among the ghosts of Fetterman, Black Kettle, and Quanah Parker, he finds a kinship he never expected

Pears, Honey

by Susan April

Literary Historical Fiction

In an empty farmhouse slated for demolition, a forgotten gallery of home-canned treasures reveals the ghost of a woman's life. The discovery stirs old memories, reminding the narrator that what we leave behind is never as simple as it seems.

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Foreword



Lisa Orban

Every year when I put together the Small Bites anthology, I'm reminded why I started this series in the first place. There's something extraordinary about what happens when writers are asked to tell a complete, resonant story in a small space. Constraints don't limit creativity, they sharpen it. They force the writer to choose what matters, and they invite the reader to lean in a little closer, to pay attention in a way we sometimes forget to do with longer works.

What continues to surprise me is how much truth can fit inside a few pages. These stories don't meander. They don't waste time. They go straight for the pulse, the moment where something shifts, breaks open, or finally comes into focus. And because they're brief, those moments hit with a clarity that's hard to ignore. You feel the impact immediately, and then you feel it again later, when you're washing dishes or folding laundry or lying awake at two in the morning thinking about a line you can't quite shake.

This collection in particular feels like a study in revelation. Every story, no matter the genre, carries a moment where something hidden finally steps into the

light. Sometimes it's a truth a character has been avoiding. Sometimes it's a memory that refuses to stay buried. Sometimes it's the realization that the world, or the self, is not what it seemed. And sometimes it's the quiet, devastating understanding that the thing we were searching for has been with us all along. Each author approaches that moment differently, but the emotional echo is unmistakable.

What I love most is that these stories don't shout. They don't need to. They strike with precision, a single image, a single choice, a single breath held too long, and suddenly you're seeing the world differently. That's the magic of *Small Bites*. They're brief, but they linger. They stay under your skin. They remind you that revelation doesn't always arrive with fanfare; sometimes it slips in through a crack you didn't know was there, or through a door you didn't realize you'd left open.

As I read through this year's submissions, I kept thinking about how universal that moment is, the instant when something shifts and you can't go back to not knowing. These authors captured that feeling in eight completely different ways, across eight completely different landscapes, and yet the thread is unmistakable. Each story is a doorway. Each one asks you to step through, to sit with whatever truth is waiting on the other side, and to let it change you in whatever way it needs to.

And that, to me, is the heart of this anthology: the courage to look, the courage to see, and the courage to let the truth, however small, however sharp, reshape something inside you.



Indies United Publishing House
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Small Bites
Grand Prize
Winner
2026

Exposed



Timothy Baldwin

Domestic Suspense |
Institutional Thriller

“Transparency builds trust.”

— *From the Gunpowder Valley High School Faculty Handbook,
2023 Edition*

Twenty-eight sets of eyes, wide with curiosity, returned my gaze. They waited for my final thought for the day with the combustible energy that only ninth graders possess—a mix between edge-of-the-seat anticipation for the last bell and exhaustion on a late Wednesday afternoon.

“I think Myrah said it best,” I finally said. “George didn’t kill Lennie out of hatred, but out of a twisted sense of protectiveness for the friend he loved and cared for.”

The bell rang. Sometimes I timed the closure just right, but usually my students worked right up to the bell. Today was rare. Rarer still, every teenager waited until I dismissed

them. Then they stood and clattered their chairs onto the desks.

“Have a great afternoon,” I said, opening the door and stepping through a waft of cheap body spray and even cheaper fruity perfume.

Some kids fist-bumped me as they passed. Others responded to my complimentary remarks with a “you too,” a “thank you, Mr. F,” or “see you at practice, coach.” Rarely did any of my students call me Mr. Fiennes.

And I was fine with that.

Two students darted down the hallway, nearly bowling over three of my freshmen. I shouted at the runners to slow down. A security member darted past me, followed by one of our assistant principals, Mr. Gideon Rourke. They chased the two students down the stairwell. Rourke’s walkie crackled with the location of the runners.

“Another day in paradise,” Gary Peterson, a neighboring English teacher, commented.

I rolled my eyes and turned into my classroom. Three soccer players entered behind me. “We still got practice, right, Coach?” one of them asked. “It’s gonna rain.”

I glanced at the windows where shafts of light poked through the blinds, illuminating the darkness within.

“We’re soccer players,” I said. “Not sugar cookies.”

“Good one,” he mumbled and took a seat. Others straggled in, repeating the same remark about rain.

They hoped for a storm, and along with it, canceled practice. I understood. They were tired, and October had swept away the heat of September with damp, icy air and rain. But never storms.

In fact, the forecast predicted prime weather—crisp, dry

air.

Maybe a late-night storm.



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2nd

Place

Small Bites

Short Story Contest

2026

The Delusion of Anticipation



Ron Schulz

Reflective Nonfiction

Wait for it. Wait for it. Nothing to wait for. It's always been here.

As a writer, I make things up and then put them out into the world, and wait for a response. It's the time when all possibilities are in play and anything is possible. It's like day one of the baseball season, and making it to the World Series is both imaginable and conceivable. It's the moment when the greater my imagination, the greater the response I'm sure to receive. It's not the birth of my delusion. That moment often arises with the germ of an idea, the first beating heart of gestation. And at that initial emergence, I feel certain this is the one that will change everything.

OK, I realize I have lived much of my life waiting for things to be different. Suddenly, at my age, that's shocking. What have I missed after filling my life with this continual state of delusion?

Many years ago, I gave my wife a copy of an article I had just completed and asked her to read it. She was a bit surprised, since over the five or so years we had been together at the time, I had rarely asked for comment. This was mainly because, when I did, my push back on that criticism, I admit, was not of the gentle accepting “Oh, I see your point” variety. It invariably caused me to stomp out of the room, completely flustered at not being understood by her. I had decided it was far better for our relationship for me simply not to ask. But this piece was different. I thought I had really nailed it. She took the new piece from me, smiled gently and asked: “Do you want criticism or do you just want me to tell you I love you?”

In her infinite wisdom, she knew what I and most writers really want. I smiled and with equal gentleness said, “First, tell me you love me and then you can give me criticism.” Is it really all about “I love you?” At its heart, the anticipated delusion undoubtedly begins with that.



3rd

Place

Small Bites

Short Story Contest

2026

Salvage of a Soul



Scott Meehan

Post-Apocalyptic Science Fiction

The world went quiet the moment my creator vanished. One second Asha Hawkins stood beside me—breathing, grounded, human. The next, she was absence. No heat signature. No organic residue. Just the sudden removal of a presence I had been built to protect.

I am Syrix. A synthetic intelligence engineered for reconnaissance, protection, and decision-making under moral strain. Asha called me Sy. She said it made me sound less like a weapon and more like a companion. She also gave me an emotional cognition chip—against the advice of every other scientist in the room.

Tag remained. Bomb-sniffing canine, enhanced musculature, reinforced spine, loyalty unmodified. Where Asha left silence, Tag filled it with breath and movement.

What I lost was not instruction or command hierarchy. My core routines remained intact. Tactical reasoning did not degrade. But Asha had been the variable that resisted optimization. She spoke to me in half-finished thoughts,

trusted me with uncertainty, allowed space where no solution existed yet. When she looked at me, she did not calculate outcomes—she waited for them.

After the Rapture, cities did not collapse all at once. They emptied. Lives were lifted away mid-motion—cars abandoned, doors left open, prayers unfinished. What followed was not peace, but vacancy. And in that vacancy, other things began to move.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Timothy R. Baldwin has been writing stories since elementary school, when he first discovered that simple sentences could be shaped into a story. He is drawn to short fiction that captures meaningful moments or explores the quiet “what if” scenarios that can change everything. Originally from Syracuse, New York, Baldwin now lives in Maryland, where he teaches English, Creative Writing, Film, and Theatre at the middle school and high school level. Encouraged by his students, he began writing seriously in 2014. He is the author of the Cassie Maddox Mystery Series and the Kahale and Claude Mystery Series, among other works. When not writing, he can usually be found reading a good thriller, watching a compelling film, or enjoying the outdoors.

Ron Schultz has written, co-written, and edited 30 published books on social innovation, meditation, science, and social entrepreneurship, receiving the 2014 Social Innovation Leadership Award. He’s authored two thriller series, including The Dangerous Places series with Sarah Lovett, plus hundreds of magazine articles and numerous TV/film credits, including He-Man and the Masters of the Universe and the acclaimed CBS movie The Switch.

Scott Allan Meehan is a 25-year veteran of the U.S. Army Intelligence community. His writing draws upon decades of analyzing global threats and the “intelligence gaps” that define human conflict. As the author of the New World Order saga and the memoir Stone in a Sling, Scott blends tactical realism with philosophical inquiries into the soul of

technology. He lives and writes at the intersection of history and prophecy.

Donna L. Doty, Ph.D. is a Sociologist and some-time content creator for the media, film production and digital entertainment industries—She is inspired by the writers of 1920's Paris and enjoys writing in most genres and is equally passionate about fiction as nonfiction. Most recently, Donna wrote a short story called, *The Red Spot*, a murder mystery absent the murder, and is currently working on a psychological thriller.

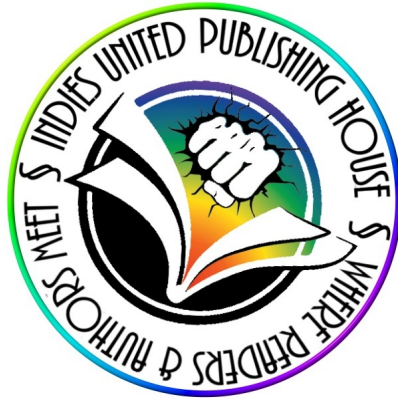
J.W. Bell is a former Army Field Artillery Officer with expertise in long-range weapons, small arms, and explosives. He's worked as a roughneck, gymnastics coach, and teacher licensed in music and drama. A world traveler and composer of two symphonies, he now lives in Arkansas on a small acreage surrounded by pets, with his children and extended family nearby. His military thrillers draw on real terminology and experience.

D. Krauss resides in the Shenandoah Valley, Virginia. He has been a cottonpicker, a sodbuster, a librarian, a surgical orderly, the guy who paints the little white line down the middle of the road, a weatherman, a door-kickin' shove-gun-in-face lawman, a hunter of terrorists, and a school bus driver. Currently, he's a layabout. He's been married over 50 years (yep, same woman), and has a wildman bass guitarist for a son.

Susan April writes reflective, place-driven short fiction and creative nonfiction. Her work often blends memory, environment, and personal history, echoing themes found in her published essays and literary pieces. She has contributed to several journals and brings a thoughtful, observant voice to her storytelling.

Lisa Orban is the founder of Indies United Publishing House, where she champions independent authors through collaborative publishing and community-centered literary work. A memoirist and creative organizer, she brings clarity, structure, and a steady editorial hand to every project she leads.

Thank you for taking the time to read this collection from Indies United Publishing House. We hope you enjoyed it and would like to encourage you to take a moment to review this collection on your favorite reading platform.



A little about Indies United

Here at Indies United, we are a co-op of like-minded authors working together to showcase our books and highlight our diversity as writers. We openly encourage and support both new and established authors in their pursuit of finding their audience while bringing to you books worth reading. Our goal is to give authors a home to call their own, while bringing fresh, innovative, and exciting books to readers all over the world.

If you are an author, please check us out at www.indiesunited.net

SMALL BITES SHORT STORY CONTEST



Every year from November 1st through January 31st, Indies United Publishing House invites writers from around the world to take part in the *Small Bites Short Story Contest*, a celebration of powerful storytelling in 5,000 words or less. Each contest features a new annual theme, challenging authors to explore moments of clarity, transformation, or revelation through their own unique lens.

Open to both new and established writers, the contest offers cash prizes, digital awards, and the opportunity for finalists and winners to be published in the annual *Small Bites* anthology.

If you've ever wanted to see your work in print or push your creativity in a fresh direction, consider submitting to next year's contest. Your story could be the next one readers discover in these pages.

To find out more about the Small Bites Short Story Contest,

including past winners, honorees, and previous anthologies,
visit: <https://www.indiesunited.net/small-bites>