

introduction

It was the late Max Steele, venerable director of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Creative Writing Program from 1966 until his retirement in 1988, who turned me on to the "short-short" story, variously known as "flash," "sudden," "postcard," or "micro" fiction; "storybyte"; or "fictoid." In Japan, short-shorts are known as "palm-of-hand stories." I'd been reading short-shorts all my life without paying much attention to the fact that because of their potent brevity, for contemporary readers and writers, they had gained the niche of a distinct and esteemed subgenre.

So what *is* a "short-short" story besides, well, short? Without sacrificing intricacy, it lacks digression, subplots, ditherings, and ornamentations that traditional longer stories accommodate. Fred Chappell, former poet laureate of North Carolina, has written that the short-short, besides being less than 2,000 words, should be "troubling." He goes on to suggest that "*unease*, whether humorous or sad, is the effect that the short-short aims at." Very short stories frequently give the impression of requiring innovative strategies and unconventional forms, of taking liberties and risks. One expects them, on the whole, to be playful, like puppies off leashes, breaking rules. Which rules? I doubt you could cajole the sixty-five writers assembled between these covers into agreeing unanimously on any single way to write a short-short. The genre is a gleefully opportunistic shape-shifter; its appearance on a writer's blank page can seem serendipitous, a stroke more of luck than of genius. A hybrid like the gryphon, the short-short is grounded in prose, but poetic instincts give it wings.

Although the origins of the short-short are obscure, I'd wager that a snippet of gossip started it all. Storytellers from Aesop to Hemingway provide powerful examples. If you survey the history of the short story, you will find that nearly every master of the form

wrote the occasional short-short. Isaac Babel, Anton Chekhov, and Franz Kafka all wrote them, and more recently, American writers like Steve Almond, Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan, Raymond Carver, Louise Erdrich, Jamaica Kincaid, W. S. Merwin, Mark Strand, and Elizabeth Tallent have found the short-short a compelling way to merge lyric with narrative, to say something provocative and complete with startling compression and without resorting to irony-loaded trick endings.

The successful short-short is neither prose poem nor vignette; it is not a sketch, riff, or bagatelle. Readers expect it to deliver the gratifications of a longer story, except in a microscopic dose. A short-short is scant but not slight; it is simultaneously rich and fat-free. You tend to go, "Ah-ha!" at the end of one. There's a flash of satisfaction and surprising reward, like finding the tiniest and most exquisite key that unlocks the big glittering kingdom of art.

IN 2002, MAX STEELE returned to the UNC campus as a guest lecturer to share his exuberance for the short-short with our creative-writing students and to establish an annual short-short competition we dubbed the "Mini-Max." Max sponsored the first contest and awarded the top prize of 100 silver dollars, which he presented in a purse that had belonged to his friend and fellow writer Alice Adams. An ardent practitioner of the form himself, he visited classes, reading his own stories and the work of others to illustrate the unique virtues of the form. The students sat spellbound; I sat spellbound. We all wanted to try writing one. It looked easy. But trying to fit a camel-sized theme through a needle's-eye plot was hard. Max offered us impressive lessons about how much we could say in the fewest words. He instructed us in the art of leaving out, which, in our information-saturated age, might turn out to be literature's strongest and most durable new directive.

Inspired by Steele's own late-in-life wonder at this Cracker Jack-prize style of narrative, I determined to honor his legacy as mentor and friend to multiple generations of North Carolina writers by inviting submissions of short-shorts from some of our best and brightest literary lights, from the iconic to the emerging talent,

and, in this era of supersizing and hyperbole, challenging writers to advance the cause of the small.

The robust little stories gathered here represent sixty-five contemporary North Carolina writers, admittedly a fraction of the talent thriving throughout our state. The short-shorts are arranged alphabetically by author, for easy reference, with the exception of Max Steele's story, which leads the way. Only writers primarily known for their fiction are included. Every writer in the anthology spent formative years in this state or relocated here. Most still call North Carolina home. Readers will doubtlessly discover that a few significant voices are missing from this book, as are newer writers I've yet to locate. Several authors I solicited declined outright to participate because, as one told me with chagrin, "I don't do short-shorts. I'm a tome person." A few offered "to try" to write something really short ("It will be a challenge!") but got waylaid. One writer trimmed and rewrote his piece diligently but could only squeeze the original draft down to 2,967 words and gave up. I'd mandated a limit of 1,200 words, but as the project gathered steam and amazing submissions in the 1,400–1,500-word range began to arrive, I relaxed my Procrustean standards and caved in to a few sprawlers, and I believe the collection is all the richer for it. Out of the sixty-five entries, more than half are newly minted and have never been published elsewhere. One of the oldest stories, Fred Chappell's "January," was written when he was a graduate student at Duke University. For its small size, it had a monumental influence on Chappell's career. Discussed in a "bootleg writing class" that Reynolds Price put together and that included the young writer Anne Tyler, the story was published in Duke's literary magazine, *The Archive*, and later read by a panel of visiting writers that included Jessie Rehder (who founded the Creative Writing Program at UNC) and an important New York editor, Hiram Haydn. Haydn liked "January," and that "gave me an 'in,'" Chappell reported to me, "when I expanded the one page into my first novel and shipt it to him. And he published it." Imagine a short-short powerful enough to launch a writer's career! Think of Thumbelina as a superhero.

The shortest story in this anthology is Carrie Knowles's "My

Family,” a crystalline 95 words. The longest story, “Nero,” belongs to Michael Malone and weighs in at a lighthearted 1,678 words. With the exception of a few pieces well under 500 words (stories by Amy Knox Brown, Clyde Edgerton, Margaret Maron, Deborah Seabrooke, Melanie Sumner, and myself), the majority of stories are shorter than 1,200 words. The longest can be read, even savored, in less than ten minutes. Read aloud, they make great bedtime stories for drowsy adults.

From comic surprises in stories by Wendy Brenner, Sarah Dessen, John Kessel, Doug Marlette, Shelia Moses, Lawrence Nauhoff, Peggy Payne, Bland Simpson, Lee Smith, Daniel Wallace, and Lynn York to lyrical musings in narratives by Kelly Cherry, Philip Gerard, and Heather Ross Miller, we are reminded *why* we read: to laugh, to learn, to feel, to recognize, to be shaken out of the comfortable and familiar and taken elsewhere, to make connections with the world outside our own skins. Stories like David Rowell’s “An Afternoon, No Wind” and Elizabeth Spencer’s “The Everlasting Light” are so charming that we nearly forget the vulnerabilities of characters who can’t quite articulate their epiphanies. Highlighting the sorrows, joys, revelations, and pratfalls of childhood are Daphne Athas’s “Games,” Elizabeth Cox’s “A Way in a Manger,” Quinn Dalton’s “Small,” Telisha Moore Leigg’s “Keening . . . 1 Mile,” Jenny Offill’s “August,” and John Rowell’s “The Teachers’ Lounge.” Doris Betts’s “The Girl Who Wanted to Be a Horse” and Angela Davis-Gardner’s “The True Daughter” cover decades of estrangement between parents and children in the briefest pages. In contributions by Jill McCorkle and Max Steele, we stand in the long, discomfiting shadow of divorce.

Fans of the fantastical and absurd as well as literature that depicts alternate realities will enjoy imaginative offerings by Orson Scott Card, Jim Grimsley, Philip McFee, and Joe Ashby Porter. Poignant stories by Russell Banks, Pam Durban, and Ruth Moose focus on aging, disenfranchisement, and loss. In her tour de force monologue, “hey brother,” Bekah Brunstetter speculates on the personal cost of a sister facing her serviceman brother’s imminent departure for Iraq. Yearning and betrayal haunt characters in

Tracie Fellers's "Reverb," Virginia Holman's "Contempt," Randall Kenan's "Where She Sits," and Courtney Jones Mitchell's "How to Roll." Anthony S. Abbott, Ben Fountain, Haven Kimmel, and Peter Makuck write dead-on portraits of adolescent bungling and cruelty, while John McNally and Michael Parker depict boyhood enthrallments with drive-in movies and miniature golf.

Gail Godwin's provocative tale is about the nature of storytelling itself; Wilton Barnhardt, Pamela Duncan, and Denise Rickman write touching portraits of people reckoning with noisy truths about their quiet lives. Will Blythe's extensive obituary, "The End," is both unsettling and grimly funny, somehow taking the measure of human pretense and lame intentions. Settings of stories differ widely, from a zoo in Lydia Millet's "Walking Bird" to a jail cell in Dave Shaw's "The Assistant D.A."; from a hardscrabble mountain community in Robert Morgan's "The Pounding" to a banal, slow-moving grocery line in Elizabeth Oliver's "Line." Cars as symbols of a marriage devolving are at the heart of June Spence's meditative story, glimpses of the ruined American dream are found in the rubble of a car wreck in Luke Whisnant's sobering story, and beautiful music provokes both love and murder in Katherine Min's little gem.

Putting together this anthology of short-shorts, I often felt more like a wedding or reunion planner than an editor. Any reunion is filled with surprises and a shared sense of history and community. And everybody knows that weddings bring out the best and the most outrageous in folks. Some days it felt as if I was having too much fun to be working on a book—these writers are spirited company, both on and off the page!

As I bring this project to a conclusion, I am amazed by the variety and power of these stories, grateful to the authors for their generosity and goodwill, and proud to be living and writing in a state where great storytellers have always thrived, from Sir Walter Raleigh to Thomas Wolfe to contemporary artists of national stature like Russell Banks, Gail Godwin, and Elizabeth Spencer to emerging talents like Denise Rickman, the youngest contributor in this book. From quill pen to word processor, the beat goes on.

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I hope that readers not only enjoy the short-shorts gathered here but also feel inspired to look for short-shorts in everyday life, caged in other pages or roaming wild. They seem to be everywhere, whether by design or happenstance: flashes of grace, moments of reckoning, fierce and marvelous.