

Short-short Sequences, Series, Sounds and Visions

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I see short-short's everywhere. Scratched in to walls, printed on posters, between covers, beneath glass cases, in music. After nearly a decade of study, it's not surprising that I have a preoccupation, that I might see a short-short rather than a piece of art, a poem, novel or a song. But what is surprising is that I'm always surprised by where I find them, and when I do find them, they consistently manage to change my understanding of the short-short and its reach, its potential; its definition spreads. What occurs to me now, as my research continues, is that the short-short story is about questions, and may always be about questions. What are the very things, the handful of things, when everything else is washed away, that makes a story? Or, what is it that makes truth/s in a story? Its forms are about questioning borders, and the questions that arise from existing in the margins. But the short-short is slippery, and my answers to these questions will never quite stay still.

On short-shorts

I first read Carolyn Forché's 'The Colonel' in 2004 in a Creative Writing module called Microfiction I at the University of Cardiff. Forché's piece was succinct and it stayed with me long after the words on the page ran out. So it was microfiction, for me, for a time. On trying to reference the piece for an essay I realised the version I had read had come from *Flash Fiction: Very Short Stories*. Fine. So it might be a microfiction then, and also a flash fiction: a very short story. Years later I found it again in an anthology called *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present*. Ok, so it is still prose, still very short, but it exists in that blurry space between prose and poetry, in the space that questions what prose and poetry are – it even has a geographical designation, it is American. Searching for 'The Colonel' online, the first results I get are from poets.org and poetryfoundation.org. There is a YouTube video of Forché performing the piece which she introduces by saying, "This is the poem, 'The Colonel'". So it is a poem then? And the first sentence (or should I say line?) "What you have heard is true" (Forché 16), begs the question: is it even fiction? Forché is certainly regarded as a political writer, often drawing attention to human rights violations in her work, so could 'The Colonel' be interpreted as a lyric essay? And it was written in San Salvador. So could 'The Colonel' be (Latin)-American-flashing-micro-(non)fiction-prosetry?

The short-short is exhilaratingly untidy and inconsistent in its definitions and, in its scrutiny of language, it blurs the boundaries between not only short prose and poetry, but

between fiction and non-fiction as well. The short-short can choose to waylay any categorisation in favour of truths and narrative and each time a short-short is translated into different contexts, its meanings expand; there is no fixed point of understanding because the short-short so readily defies strict definition.

On a number of occasions works that I have been introduced to as short-short stories have appeared elsewhere under different generic designations. 'Women's Novels' in *Murder in the Dark* by Margaret Atwood and Charles Simic's pieces from *The World Doesn't End* were other examples used in the undergraduate modules Microfiction I and Microfiction II. I also rediscovered them in the anthology *Great American Prose Poems*. The editor, David Lehman, discusses in his introduction the definition of prose poetry and in doing so raises more questions about genre and designations. He writes about how the last line of a prose poem "[slows] down the action...making the extraordinary seem somehow routine" (12). The "macabre twist", as he describes it, that I recognise as a staple description of short-short writing, is used by him to define another genre (12). He goes on to discuss how Charles Simic's prose poems could almost be treated as prose fiction, but for him their "extreme brevity, the ambiguous ways they achieve resolution, and their author's unmistakably poetic intent" prevents them from being so (12). Why? Is brevity opposed to prose, fiction or otherwise? Is ambiguous resolution? What if we ignored the author's intent, or were unable to know this – would the pieces fall apart?¹

So what is the difference between poetry and prose, then? In the *SOED* prose (as a noun) is that which is without metrical structure; a story, a narrative. As a verb it describes something straightforward and tedious. I try *dictionary.com*. It gives the same definitions, but includes different origins. I see the word *prosa* meaning straightforward, I see another, *provertere*, meaning to turn forward.²

Turning forward is intriguing; turning forward seems to mean veering whilst still progressing, taking a different, perhaps unknown route, turning and changing, re-turning, always turning towards, not turning away. Turning in writing, any kind of writing, rather than following the most direct route, might create something uncertain, powerful. This is the focus my writing and research takes, but seems indistinguishable at times as a distinct and clearly demarcated genre.

Charles Baxter describes the short-short in the introduction to *Sudden Fiction International* as "between...the personal and the crowd"(25). Between the singular and the plural. As if we could all be the same person in the crowd, but just for the instant duration of a short-short; that tiny, subjective moments can reveal grander objective realities. The short-short is a capturer of transience, of the fleeting, but also of the eternal. It is contradictory, conflicted by its speedy pace and demand for an ambling consideration from the reader. The experience of brevity, the feeling of fleetingness, is as much a part of the short-short as the subject matter which should linger with the reader, like smoke, like light spots, like a ringing in the ears.

The emphasis on the size of the short-short and, sometimes, the promise of an epiphany, can affect the way in which it is read. The reader can sometimes be tempted to devour it without pausing, but the short-short is also reflective, curious about its own

making and so encourages the reader to take pleasure in the journey, to savour it, repeat it even, and remember it. The length of the short-short should encourage this but equally, with speed comes forgetting. Perhaps our desire to consume prose (differently, sometimes, to how we consume poetry, which often sets different expectations for the consideration of rhythm, sonority and phonetics and so may require different approaches), can overtake the desire to pause, and these slowed down, reflective moments can become lost as we speed past. Contradictions persist with the short-short. Despite the short-short's uncluttered sentences, its simplicity and straight-forwardness, its directness and minimalism, the short-short remains enigmatic. The way in which the short-short distils or sieves away the unnecessary does not necessarily reduce complexities but can draw attention to them as superfluous material is discarded. The micro-scope reveals the relationship between oppositions such as hidden depths and sharp focus, a sense of completeness within a hint of suggestion, of inclusion with exclusion, of speed and slowness. The short-short is aligned with uncertainty, contradictions and questions, and its compatibility with technology seems to compound these characteristics.

Is there a difference between reading a short-short online and reading a short-short in a book? Is reading a short-short online a simulation of reading a short-short in a book? With a Kindle or an iPad it is definitely a simulation, the flick of a finger on the screen recalls the sound and feeling of turning a paper-page. Perhaps it is like the difference between hearing and reading a piece – unrealised nuances, pronunciations, pauses are all part of the aural experience. There is no touchable equivalent. So what of the online short-short, the short-short that exists temporarily, electronically? Does this exacerbate the transience of the form? It seems important to establish because the short-short is content on the internet, popularised in the last ten years by online magazines, journals and blogs that saw the potential (both creatively and administratively – quick to read, easy to deal with, easy to dispose of, not so easy to forget) for a form that could capitalise on the short-sharp bursts of linked information the internet provides. The paratextual flourishes here. There are no page numbers imposing a direction to go in, allowing the reader to move through sites and texts in a non-prescribed order, creating a kind of choice-based progression which alters our experience of a short-short.

On short-short sequences

Geoff Ryman's *253: a novel for the Internet about London Underground in seven cars and a crash* is a hyper-real, hyperlinked simulation of a tube journey in a series of pieces 253 words long (a number chosen because it is the same number of passengers housed on a typical Bakerloo line train) that manipulates the choice-based progression of online information. The reader is guided by tube-like anonymous announcements; fictional advertisements become illustrative distractions. In this place we are privy to internal thoughts, fragments of inner ideas, as each passenger's story moves on to the next, links with the next, disconnects with what came before or after it, like doors closing from station to station:

Igor is drinking gin and tonic. He takes a swig of tonic and trades it with Dimi for the bottle of gin. In his current state makes this him [sic] feel sophisticated. It is several steps up from potato-derived fermentations.

They have been drinking all night. What else is there to do? Igor has a wife whom he loves dearly, and does not want any of the women in the clubs. But he can speak English and chat them up. Dimi is athletic, tiny with a prick as long as his forearm, hates his bitch of wife but can talk to no one, which leaves him in clubs hopping up and down in frustration.

Igor loves Dimi. Dimi is his only friend, his partner. The gin and the tonic mingle sizzling in his mouth. As long as Dimi can't speak English, he'll need Igor. (Ryman)³

253 becomes a short-short sequence that has no prescribed direction, a front and a back, an ending to head towards, but in-between this, the reader moves through the pieces in a serendipitous way. There are links on each page offering directions to the reader, to another passenger's story, to a map of the journey, to a list of other passenger's sharing a car. These individual pieces are complete in themselves; they come together to create a tension between the independence of each individual part and its interdependence to the work as a whole.⁴ This escape from linearity, to a virtual reality that is informed by the reader's experience of tube-travel, this move away from a grand narrative to 253 narratives, seems to be pushing towards the short-short in new, intriguing directions. But even now 253 has the look and feel of a dated text, without the influence of web 2.0.

There is a moment of silence when the doors close and a crowd, a station, is left behind; this is similar to the moment of silence experienced before translation occurs, the moment before the page is loaded, an intake of breath before the a text is read, the instant before the explosion of multiple meanings. Like the film *Sliding Doors* where two possibilities are played out: one where she catches a tube train; the other when she misses it. This is like reading, but the translation of texts by the reader is multiplied, infinite; the possibilities endless.⁵

On short-short series

Continuing characters or locations as well as themes and patterns create a more tangible link than just themes and patterns, and so would suggest that a text is to be read as a whole as well as for its composited parts. So the reader will recognise the same location used more than once, the same character, the same names, the same problems, and unite the pieces in this way. This linking can occur either as a linear and progressive sequence, or as a return, or series of returns in a cycle. Although the distinction between a cycle and a sequence can be just as reader/writer defined.

But what about the word 'series'? Can it mean something separate, something different to sequence or cycle? J. M. Conte describes a serial poem as "distinguish[ing] itself from the...sequence principally because it forgoes the linear, thematic development of that form...[the serial form] is both discontinuous and capable of recombinations"(20). He continues: "the discontinuity of its [the serial form's] elements – or their resistance to a determinate order – distinguishes the series from the thematic continuity, narrative progression, or meditative insistence that often characterize the sequence"(21). Describing 253, then, as a series rather than a sequence draws attention to certain aspects of the experience of reading it and its tangential links. The reader carries a sense that if its

composed parts were placed in a different order, the reader would still gain a similar understanding of the text as a whole. The reader's understanding of a series of short-shorts is based on their placement, and although this might be part of the author's process, a purposeful and considered act, it is also based on atmospheric links created by the author or chance associations inferred by the reader, or both. Describing Lorine Niedecker's 'Lake Superior' as a series, Conte writes "[Lake Superior's] individual poems deserved a certain degree of autonomy; they were not to be stacked on top of one another as if they were stanzas...she [Niedecker] sought to express not a single chain of cause and effect but an 'awareness of everything influencing everything'"(157). Transferring these ideas to the short-short story, this distinction becomes important to highlight because sequence and cycle implies a prescribed narrative order. Series implies the possibility of movement, implies multiplicity, implies the possibility of scrutinising individual parts and the order in which they appear.

On short-short sounds

The short-short reading and writing experience is often characterised by thresholds. Walking a line between prose, poetry, prose poetry and the short story, readers and writers have worked with the short-short to explore the notions of fiction, form and genre. Because of the inherent size of a short-short, it doesn't just appear in between the covers of books, magazines, or journals. The short-short has forged a presence online and in social media – blogs, tweets and texts all occupy a small, limited space that the short-short can thrive on. But the short-short author's curiosity with thresholds is not confined to text, by text, and has begun to emerge elsewhere drawing attention to issues of the performance of prose.

'Northumbrian Voices' is a performance of music and spoken word inspired by interviews and recordings musician Kathryn Tickell "has done over the years with family members and old shepherd musicians from whom she learnt tunes and songs." (kathryntickell.com). Stories are told about a changing way of life, about an area, a landscape, a people. The words are spoken in sentences, but cooperate with the rhythm of the music that accompanies the words (or perhaps the words accompany the music). Listening to recordings of these pieces online gives rise to the possibility of misunderstandings, mishearing, translations, and an opportunity to work with gulps of breath and the sounds of the words as they're spoken. The listener has to ask questions of it, as it asks questions of us. And if something is lost in the process, something is also gained.

Well the biggest change would be the quad bike for the shepherd, it used to be all the shepherds would have a pony, and a lot of farmers would have a pony or a horse. Well you hardly see any shepherds with a horse, that's the biggest change in the shepherding; it'll be the quad bike. It's covering more ground. Plus, nowadays, you've often got one shepherd having to look after two farms, and he's just running around on his bike, and he doesn't see what he used to see. What he used to see when he walked, or rode a pony. You'll never hear a lamb in a drain now, if you're riding a bike. If you're riding a pony, or walking, you could hear a lamb blaring in a drain. Little things like that. Or little lambs getting dropped down a hole. Cause if there's somewhere to get in to, they'll definitely get in to it. But the biggest miss would be having a day at the mart and then going to the pub. Cause it was always worth going

to the pub. Cause they were good nights. Them days, when the pub used to be like, rocking. You know, on a mart day. Whether the trade was good, or bad. You don't go in to many pubs nowadays, when the place is rocking. Plenty people, plenty people laughing plenty people chatting, six deep at the bar. You forget how good them days were. You went to the pub, and there was such a buzz about the place. There was such an atmosphere. (Thomas Scott)

Here, without the context of performance, without the music that builds throughout to illustrate the busy market, the busy pub, without the accent and intonations of the voice speaking it, it is a short-short story. Complete in its incompleteness, the narrative reaches out of its frame in many different, unknown but hinted at directions whilst simultaneously capturing a moment, the feeling of a changing understanding of the past and the present.

This piece began life as an interview, a conversation perhaps, was then adapted for performance and adapted again here, punctuation inserted, inferred by the pauses and pressures placed on the words as they're spoken. This is an act of contextual translation to capture the cadences in the performance. Jonathan Letham associates this kind of act of re-framing with the invention of photography and ecstatic influence. He writes (quoting Walter Benjamin), "framing objects in a lens [revealed] 'hidden details of familiar objects... [and] entirely new structural formulations of the subject'"(Letham). This alteration of the frame creates a "map-turned-to-landscape", moving "beyond enclosure or control"(Letham). The original frame is dissolved, replaced by another frame characterised by instability, confounding the ends and beginnings of the writing, performing, listening and reading process.

Dan Walsh and Amy Mackelden make up *The Copy Room*, a folk music and spoken word microfiction duo combining music and story respectively. Their work is perhaps more recognisable as songs, often following a verse-chorus-verse structure, but their content is self-reflexive in a way. Themes concerning the performance of roles in relationships run through their work, illustrating the form they work with which explores the performance of prose and its possibilities. The piece 'Show's Not Over Yet', includes a chorus and a spoken verse of microfiction provided by Mackelden alongside Walsh's banjo and singing. Mackelden's contributions are as follows:

Every party's the generation game, a conveyor belt parade of people. And you can't match the names to the numbers in your phone and you don't know their faces either. Lydia's laugh is a cereal box scrunch and Heather's sigh is a fridge freezer. And you only know what you did, what you didn't do when you're tagged in the photos later.

What I hear when I listen to this is explicit rhythm, alliteration spat out with a sense of humour and derision. Again I've inserted punctuation to demonstrate where I hear the pauses, the breaths. But there's more to it than commas and full-stops. Trying to translate this with the fonts and effects available to me in Microsoft Word, I find I can make a sort of calculation out of her words that goes some way to representing her performance:

Every party's the generation ^{game} a-con^{ve}yor-belt-parade-of-peop^{le}. And you can't match the names to the numbers in your phone and you don't know their faces eith^{er} (Mackelden)

This is my translation, a subjective interpretation. Trying to capture this in shapes and patterns, in form and design, like musical notations, is like trying to record the shapes of emotions, is like hearing the colours of flowers.⁶ This realisation of Mackelden's words can only come about through a change of context, performance to prose (or performance prose to written prose), to the scribed short-short, from spoken to written. The moment of silence that occurs when a piece is first approached in a different context is a moment of opportunity; to explore different routes of how the text came to be and where it might go. And with translation comes questions.

- A short-short interview with Amy Mackelden, writer and performer with *The Copy Room*
- Q. Are the microfictions you write for *The Copy Room* created in similar ways to the microfictions you write for publication? What's similar? What's different?
- A. Mostly the same, but the process is longer. Dan [Walsh] and I sit and talk for a really long time, and I make notes, even if he's only talking about ex-girlfriends, new girlfriends, supermarkets he hates...I'm looking for lines, small segments that might fit in amongst songs, rather than a complete story, although they are sometimes that too. The balance is different in each piece - in 'Fanmail', most of the material is mine and the spoken word here is closest to my printed stories, [although] my writing is probably more fragmented.⁷ The topics are also familiar, and our work together can border on creative non-fiction, but I like that no-one can tell the difference anyway. We've created personas in our joint work also, in which we're versions of ourselves and I enjoy fucking with Dan - my character is obsessed with him, so he in turn thinks I am with him, and I play up to this, which probably takes *The Copy Room's* microfictions away from my own writing. They're set in an alternate universe, in which I still watch way too much TV.
- Q. Can you talk to me about your use of rhythm in both *The Copy Room* and your microfictions? Is it more of a focus for you in either form?
- A. Fitting words to music, and making them work alongside Dan's songs, we often have to tweak the writing, make it fit. We write our material separately after initial discussion, but often our ideas blend quite naturally and we find ways of reading which fit the rhythm. There have been a couple of times I've re-written lines to make them fit melodies but, generally, the microfictions fit. In my own writing rhythm seems to be a more natural thing which happens, which can be good and bad [and] I've heard a good poet alters their rhythm, [that] falling into a particular form and meter without recognising it is lazy. I don't think all of my microfictions would work in performance with *The Copy Room*, perhaps it's fifty-percent. Fiction sometimes has too many joining words.
- Q. Are the performances of your microfictions different to your performances of pieces with *The Copy Room*? In what ways? Do you 'speak' them differently?
- A. I'm generally more nervous when I'm not performing with Dan, but I'm working on it. Folk music is very particular, in its intonations, rhythms, so performing my work solo, I'm not bound to anybody else. But there's a lot to be said for structure, and sometimes I worry my work's a little flat without that backing, without the outline of

a song guiding it to its conclusion. And a microfiction has a very definite conclusion (even if it's ambiguous) just like a song.

[Performing my solo-work] my hands shake, sometimes, too much to hold a script. Eye contact with the audience is confident, I think, and when you're reading from memory, you're not really thinking about who you're looking at, you're on auto-pilot. If you learn the piece you learn the rhythm of it too, the way it should be performed. I can only surprise myself if I forget something. And once you've performed something several times you basically know it anyway, and the piece of paper just becomes a barrier...the work I enjoy is conversational, not scripted or read from a book like story-time at school. I'm interested in that connection with the audience. I like making people feel as uncomfortable as I am.

- Q. Do crowds react differently to you when you perform do you think? Are they oblivious to the fact that you might be reading a microfiction rather than a poem?
- A. A lot of people I've met have been surprised I don't identify as a poet, and tell me I definitely am one. And it can only be a positive to perform alongside poets and give yourself a different label; it's tough to stand out...I think microfiction is being recognised - whether they're individual art forms or a subset of poetry, I'm not sure yet.⁸

The process that Mackelden describes here doesn't define her; it will change as she changes, develops, adapts and discovers. But her answers provide an interesting insight in to the process and performance of short-shorts. The notion of the use of personas as part of the writing process suggests that it isn't simply the context that defines a short-short, it is the moment of writing in an author's life, which can never quite be re-captured as our understanding of the author is subject to constant change, as is the authors' understanding of her/his self. The single short-short written to be printed does not often get the opportunity to be re-written; its context may change from a collection, to an anthology, to a journal, affecting its meaning, and our changing understanding of the author affects our interpretation and reading of a piece, but the words will probably stay the same. However, the endless opportunities for nuance in the performance of a spoken word short-short by the author means the first pressing, first performance, first recording captures one instance of the writer-performer persona. Every new performance of the same piece will be different not only because the context will be different and our understanding of the writer-performer may be different, but the performance by the writer-performer persona will be different too, the sound of the piece unique each time it is spoken. This suggests that the nature of a piece can be determined by the writer, the performer, the audience or the context (space, place and time). The opportunity for interpretation presented by the single, written short-short is stretched and pulled and explored in many other different directions by the performed short-short.

On short-short visions

Galleries on the continent always feel colder than the galleries at home, but this is probably because the weather is fifteen degrees warmer. In a gallery in Lisbon in 2011 the air-conditioning is a relief for ten minutes, and then I wish I was wearing trousers like the locals. It's fresh and cool in here like an airport and I'm looking forward to the blast of hot air I'll feel on my ankles and in my hair when we step outside again. We're here because the

guide book recommends it, not because we know what to expect; I like the experience of not knowing what we'll find here. As it turns out we are viewing João Penalva's *Works with Images and Texts*, an exhibition of his photos, films and installations. The piece which strikes me almost immediately is called 'Sumiko'. A large, framed black-and-white photo of the back of a woman's head, underneath it is a caption:

Sumiko worked in the Ginza, in the office of her aunt's modelling agency. She had resigned herself to the fact that she could never be a model, but her aunt thought otherwise. She sent her out one day with Miss Ouchi, the hairdresser, on a hair assignment to Mr Enbutsu's photographic studio in Akasaka. She had made it clear to him that Sumiko was exclusively a hair model and only to be photographed from the back or her left profile. She had a beautiful face, though ruined by a scar off-centre on her chin, thin like a strand of hair curling back on itself. After months of working together, Mr Enbutsu told Sumiko that he would like to do a portrait of her from the front, to show her how he could paint out her scar. As she took the retouched portrait home she wished that life, like photography, had such simple tricks to set things right. (Penalva)

The words are in a small type-face, over-shadowed by the portrait of the woman whose hair is tied up and waved and rolled around the nape of her neck in a way I cannot understand: so many pins, so much hairspray needed. I wouldn't know where to start. The tiniest fraction of her face is visible, her cheekbone, maybe her ear – it's hard to tell. It's her hair modelling we see first, but we only imagine this is a picture from her hair modelling after we've read the tiny story which accompanies it. We scan this long piece from top to bottom, and then back up again under the influence of the narrative created to frame this photo. It's a fascinating thing: why do we see her perfect hair and not her perfected face? What came first, the photo or the story? Is it fiction? Is it real? We create the answers wandering down the paths created by the combination of this photo and story. But here, minus the photo, the piece becomes a short-short, or a palm-of-the-hand story, as they're called in Japan. Its narrative fingers stretch out, inferring detail, suggesting emotions, hinting at relationships. There are other pieces like 'Sumiko' in *Works with Texts and Images*, photos with accompanying stories, large text displayed on walls. These pieces become connected by themes but it is up to us how we move around them. The spaces in-between pieces create disconnection and connections, the viewer moves through the spaces between like water flowing over rocks – there are many paths. And everything influences everything else.

Penalva's text in combination with photos and films plays with forms of narratives throughout *Works with Images and Texts*. Stories unfold, stories are viewed, stories are read as we walk amongst his work. 'The Hair of Mr Ruskin' is displayed in a narrow room, one wall presenting a framed lock of John Ruskin's hair and seven forgeries by the artist (the real one is not identified), the other wall a one-sided epistolary correspondence discussing the theft of one of these frames when on exhibition loan to the Courtauld Institute in London, the insurance details and eventual recovery and return of one of the locks of hair. The letters from the Courtauld Institute and the police (Penalva's responses are absent) are in both English and Portuguese, both sets typed on headed, water-marked paper. It is a thrilling experience; so much room for interpretation, for questions, for creating a story out of one half of the events. Which lock of hair is real? Which is fake? What is real? What is fake?

What is original? What is translated? The silence that hangs in the air in response to these rhetorical questions is like the sound left behind closing doors, like the sounds of the tube doors closing at each stop of the journey in 253. This sound implies multiplicity, the infinity of meanings/translations. The letters create a short-short sequence about forgery and originality in a form that attempts to break down the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. Displaying only one half of the letter-correspondence disrupts the climax of the piece by creating many climaxes, allowing for interpretation and questions. The reader inserts themselves in to the process to complete the conversation, to speculate on the unknown aspects of this story.

Artist Mary Kelly's piece 'Filia' comprises of stories printed inside wall-mounted, metal book covers, each with a letter from the title of the piece on the front. Stories exist within these metal book covers, one-page pieces like the following:

Five small but clear diamonds in a plain gold mounting. Her mother's wedding ring. She must have been eighteen then when she married him, a plain man with strong arms and small, clear eyes. They lived in the same town all their lives. Her inheritance, she held it tightly, pressing the gold in to the soft mounting of her palm, carving out an unthinkable absence. Her mother was gone, she could not say...lump in the throat, hot tears, predictable throb, could not say...she was losing control, there, in that public place, a woman of her age, her education, her demurity ... could not say "dead". She opened her hand and stared at the ring, five diamonds, her mother's small fingers mounted on the white of the hospital sheet, not plain or strong, but fine and slender, like her own. She hadn't noticed, had insisted on their difference. No nonsense, salt-of-the-earth, not like the ivory-tower daughter who had not noticed the elegant forehead, the cheekbones and the playful lips, mocking the nurse who asked, "Will this be a home death?" Yes, a homely death, plain, not costly, small and clear, mounted in strong gold. She slid the ring slowly over the end of her own slender finger, elegant nail, fine cheekbone, unbearable pain, over the playful tip of her knuckle, and it fit. Perhaps too tightly, but that way, she wouldn't lose it. (Kelly)

Again the short-short is present: complete and incomplete, a whole and a part of something else, one piece of a sequence, or perhaps, a series. The experience of the shift between viewing and reading, reading and viewing is like a digital camera trying to simultaneously focus on the foreground and background; the lens shifts and zooms, blurring the vision as it attempts to establish a good focus for what's in the frame. It is an odd, uneasy feeling being overwhelmed by the sight of a story, for it to loom in a room, surround you, to be suddenly aware that patterns are words and words are patterns.

If conceptual art exists as a relationship between minds (an idea presented by the artist and interpreted by the viewer), viewers consider what they see and the artist hopes they will have a reaction to it, some kind of genuine response perhaps. This reaction might be a simulation created by what is around them, but (hopefully) it is genuine none-the-less. The short-short as conceptual art then, creates questions about truth and fiction. If a piece contains an element of truth for us, then our reaction to the piece is genuine, heartfelt; it is real. Because of the mutual relationship inherent with the conceptual, this realness, this

response created by the truth of the piece, is refracted back on to the piece; our understanding of the piece helps the piece to exist, to be, and to be real. So the story of Sumiko, of a lock of Mr Ruskin's hair, of 'Filia' become real, whether they are made-up or not.

Adrian Wanner writes, "the quite arbitrary decision of lifting a text or text fragment from a diary or notebook and declaring it a piece of literature has far-reaching consequences for its reception...it is the 'frame' rather than any intrinsic quality that places the text into a different aesthetic category"(143). Is the frame that which decides any categorisation, aesthetic or otherwise? If a collection or anthology has 'poems' or 'stories' anywhere on its front cover, then our reading of the contents is immediately swayed before the first page has even been read. So the author's intention is part of the construction of this frame, the writing impetus being poetic or prosaic, for instance, and this will also have an effect on the frame. The frame influences the reception of a text, but a frame can also be constructed by a reader/viewer/listener or writer/performer/artist. The words themselves exist, ultimately, as translatable, which happens constantly as meaning turns and changes. But a frame, especially the blurry frame that exists around the short-short, is not immovable, is not concrete, which is why writing, performances and art are never static. So as they appear here, minus their context, these poetic, musical and visual extracts become short-short stories, demonstrating the potential for short-shorts to not only question and explore written forms, and the aural and visual aspects of story, but the truth of fiction and the fiction of truth.

Notes

¹ Pamelyn Casto's 'Flashes on the Meridian: Dazzled by Flash Fiction,' Ashley Chantler's 'Notes Towards the Definition of the Short-Short Story,' Holly Howitt's thesis *Desk and a Series of Microfiction: The Question of Genre, Meanings and Incompleteness in Microfiction and the Novella* and *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*, to name a few, create histories of the short-short, finding sources for the short-short first in East Asian forms such as Chinese creation myths, then in Western parables, aphorisms, anecdotes and fables, aligning its characteristics with prose poetry, poetry and the novella. Bruce Holland Rogers in the article 'You'll Know it When You See It', pin-points the creation of the modern short-short at the moment Collier's magazine began publishing "a story that would be printed in its entirety on one single page of the magazine"(flashfictiononline.com). This is interesting because it suggests that from its beginnings, the short-short's editorial definition was as valid as its artistic definition.

² "Origin: 1300–50; ME < MF < L *prōsa* (*ōrātiō*) lit., straightforward (speech), fem. of *prōsus*, for *prōrsus*, contr. of *prōversus*, ptp. of *prōvertere* to turn forward, equiv. to *prō*- *pro*-1 + *vertere* to turn" (dictionary.com).

³ The underlined sentence in this quote indicates a hyperlink from 'Passenger 59 Mr Igor Klimov' to the section 'End of the line, Car 2'.

⁴ In 'Notes Towards the Definition of the Short-Short Story', Ashley Chantler 'wonders if it's possible that the short-short collection is "a gestalt", or that short-short's in a collection "are not short-short's but 'chapters' in what might now be termed a 'postmodern novel'", citing 253 as an example (48). I wonder if it's possible to retain the individual elements in this example, as well as the whole they create.

⁵ For more possible examples of short-short story sequences see Alan Lightman's *Einstein's Dreams* (1993) which contains short-short chapters titled by dates from April 1905 to June 1905. *Coming Through Slaughter* (1984) by Michael Ondaatje contains a continuous use of very short paragraphs which often do not follow (in a temporal way) what has preceded it. Mary Robison's *One D.O.A One on the Way* (2009) and *Why Did I Ever* (2001) are comprised of numbered, extremely short paragraphs. Although *Why Did I Ever* is subtitled 'A Novel'

(just to keep everyone calm), some of these paragraphs have titles, suggesting even further the sequential characteristic of the text. These titled pieces can be considered alone, as whole, complete.

⁶ Janelle Monae's lyrics describe the relationship between the creator and the created in 'Oh Maker'. Her descriptions of synaesthesia draw attention to the ways we experience sound and its translatability.

⁷ The first verse of 'Fanmail' performed by Mackelden is as follows: "Dear Jack last night I bought your CD I liked it you signed it you didn't put a kiss or spell my name right but I figure that will come or that's good like when Terry Pratchett spelled my dad's name with a z changed the s in Chas for the end of the alphabet and it made it more final more official or something so you spelling me spelling Amy with an i-e takes me part way to French makes me translatable into languages I don't know and didn't know you did perhaps you're learning and I should because it's cosmopolitan to because a honeymoon in Vegas is fine but one in Paris or Haiti or Monaco is better I wasn't sure about track four but one and five and ten were perfectly formed like shop-bought pancakes or waffles like getting your nails painted by someone that's trained to do that so your songs are like a pedicure I'll get better with the complements the longer you're here the longer we have still Jack I've got off track your songs are good you were last night good luck and peace out a-m-y".

⁸ Questions composed by Laura Tansley and posed to Amy Mackelden via email in April 2012.

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