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## On Very Short Books, Miniatures, and Other Becomings

*I am the woman writer. Don't ask me for impregnable argument. As far as I'm concerned my text is flawed not when it is ambiguous or contradictory, but only when it leaves you no room for stories of your own.*

—Nancy Mairs

### Part I

People are saying it's The Age of the Essay. A Golden Age. People disagree on why:

rampant narcissism;

exponential awareness of our own ephemerality;

the internet and its multitudinous platforms for personal voice;

a period of transition marked by uncertainty, as Theodore Ziolkowski wrote, *when thinkers can no longer write confident summae but, at most, the provisional, preliminary, penultimate 'attempts' with which the skeptical Montaigne—Que sais je?—gave a name to the genre* (295);

Que sais je—both, What do I *know*? and Whadda I know?!;

*a cultural moment*, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis has suggested, *centering on difference, on articulations of specific, local, and topographical being, on the stating of the material meanings of individual choices, practices, options, and needs, on political and social locations for identity taking shape within language* (24).

Ziolkowski interpreting György Lukács: *Only the essay can accommodate the furiously shifting kaleidoscope of modern life* (304).

The popularity of essay-length nonfiction books, what some are calling *really short books*, is a phenomenon important enough to be written about in chic publications such as *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*. Critic Christine Smallwood: *True to its essence, the very short book does not pretend to have more to say than it does. This is as charming as encountering the rare person who knows when to speak and when to be silent.*

Smallwood goes on to argue that very short books, *like very short men*, might take themselves seriously (which she thinks is *dignified*), but maybe they should *try harder*, be more like *Oxford's Very Short Introductions*, *primers on useful topics such as human anatomy, banking or Rastafari*, or more like *the Penguin Great Ideas series*, *abbreviated snippets from the canon—pieces of the infinite night sky chopped up and glimpsed through the bound aperture of a telescope.*

Here, the critic seems to be expressing, albeit cheekily (admittedly, which opinion she is being cheeky about I'm not totally certain), a distaste for incompleteness, for books which are not *useful*. She needs the book to do something specific, such as show off a complete deck of knowledge or at least come to a conclusion.

*Plus*, she writes, *photographs of short books, either on their own or in a stack, can be posted to one's social media account to communicate taste and substance.* She's worried, I think, that these books get used as props, which merely point to *authentic* knowledge, allowing for skimmed, shallow, existence to replace a deeply thought one.

Yes, very short books are slim (a word that forces the lips and tongue into a delicate position), as far as width—slight objects that when placed atop one another create colorful (arguably pleasurable) and photogenic stacks. Stacks of books are comforting. The word *stack* has, for me, a ring of tidiness. Six silver dollar pancakes, for instance, browned and topped with a rectangle of butter—cutting into said stack with the side of a fork, watching the pancakes give and tear, revealing the tight layers, the soft geological

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stratum within. A stack of slim books is architecturally aesthetically modern in that it appears controlled, contained, not excessive. Taking a photograph of one of these stacks and posting it to one's social media account might enable a personal physical and spiritual identification with ideologies of purity, simplicity, and intellect. A sort of paradoxical desire for release from excessive commodity identification through the visual display of relationships with certain commodities.

And yet. What's inside is not necessarily neat. There is a sprawling unruliness, an asymmetry, a becoming other-ness, to the very short essay book that enacts the very praxis of the essay itself, a genre that has been defined over and over again by its inability to be defined.

These very short books are up to something. There is glamour in their tricky intimacy. We lean in, listening hard to the whisper behind a cupped hand. Often they can be read in one sitting. Often they invite the reader to flip back and forth between pages, revisiting textual clues with little narrative risk. Like a poem, they might be read over again within the same week, or returned to in troubled times like an aphorism.

But like miniature worlds, very short books are, as Lia Purpura puts it in her very short essay *On Miniatures, radically self-sufficient. The beings who inhabit fairylands*, writes Purpura, *those elves and sprites, pixies and trolls, don't usually strive to be our pals. They're distant and go about their business. Their smallness is our problem, or intrigue, or desire. They don't need us, and thus we are drawn to them—as any smitten lover might be, to a beloved who remains so close and yet just out of reach.* In both their frivolous/cute (if we consider especially cuteness as the critic Sianne Ngai offers, *as a commodity aesthetic with close ties to the pleasures of easy consumption*) and unapologetic/serious existence, very short books are of a resistance. They are both cute and serious, less and more. Intimate and distant. Cozy and frigid.

Perhaps that is why a reader might feel scorned, disregarded, inclined to say something like, *Long essays sometimes masquerade as small books—ideas made of enough words to necessitate spine and binding...even if the entire volume can be read in a single sitting*, as one reviewer wrote of *You, Me, and the Violence*, Catherine Taylor's disturbing and beautifully braided book about puppets and drones (58). The desire to make this distinction hints at the unruliness, the need to take control of the other-ness of very short books. (I'll tell *you* what's happening in here!) But these *masquerades* seem secure with themselves to me, as far as their object-ness goes. Perhaps what ultimately makes a very short book a book, is that it is bound—not folded and fastened with staples or a sewn with a single thread, but bound with a flat spine that announces its title and author, thus giving it the sturdy potentiality of an object with portability, even function. An intimate thing, owned and cared for, *cute* enough to display, but without the preciousness of an art object. Being bound and shelve-able perhaps, is the key, for the formality of that containment magically transforms the brief insides into an immensity—a closed world deserving of careful attention, that also, in being so short, points beyond itself.

While Mark Doty's seventy-page *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, for instance, is inarguably brief in length, the depth or volume, if we imagine the pages like pools, appears fathomless.

*My first resonant, instructive thing?* Doty ponders, after a close and dense examination of Dutch still lifes, contemplating how objects (*those containers of feelings and experience, memory and time*) are *instructive* to our understanding of the world. *Hypnotist's wheel*, he continues, *red swirl blazoned on a hard white candy ground, spinning even when it isn't moving; that's the life of the spiral, it seems to whirl even when it's at rest. Peppermints, each wrapped in a shiny square of cellophane which twists at the ends into little flourishes. They emerge one after the other, endless, pouring out; perhaps they come into being the way matter is said to do, from the collapsed bodies of dead stars, streaming into the world. But the dark from whence they emerge is the unfathomable void of my grandmother's glossy, black pocketbook.* (10)

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This hypnotist's wheel is a brilliant shift, a portal down into to the personal and concrete, still tethered by the grand and heady—imagery that swirls the reader from a museum into a memory, childhood, the backseat of an old car, the depths of a handbag, a tiny, common candy. This sort of move, both light and dense, is something Doty does deftly. And when these collective moves are bound as a whole object, the text takes on a near religious quality. It is a book not in spite of its short length, but because of it.

Purpura: *Miniatures are made to travel. They are portable and light, dense and compressed as diamonds.*

Like the writer who inhabits it, there is no one way for an essay book to be a very short book. Interiors might breathe with white space, with possibility or pause, so that what appears to be 100 pages of text might actually be only half of that. They might inquire about a life or an aesthetic, a way of looking at the world; they might collect scenes or archives, or bits of dialogue and repeated imagery, letting accumulation do its work; they might turn a shard of glass over and over until it refracts light in just the right way, or ways. In T Fleischmann's *Syzygy, Beauty: An Essay*, one paragraph of lyric prose dots the center of each page, interrupted—once the reader has gotten cozy with that familiarity—by several pages of what one might call a list, each line directly addressing a You or several Yous whose presence is one of the many folds (Oppenheim's furry teacup, prettiness, desire, gazelles, a pair of heart-shaped sunglasses, cave walls, the construction of a house, of a body) that help tuck the 109 or so pages into one another like a set of queer Babushka dolls. Sentences are transformed into symbols, doubling back, ringing bells, revealing—sometimes shyly, sometimes boldly—their relatives.

Sarah Manguso's tiny book *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary*, is even shorter (and squatter). Efficient vignettes that circle, bob, and weave the writer's questions and observations about her obsessive record-keeping, motherhood, and memory (*How, then, can I survive forgetting so much?* (85)) rarely fill an entire page,

and it is this briefness that creates tension, propulsion; that draws us close to the writer, her voice, her body; that beg us to return to it. There is an afterword. In it the author explains why she did not include any actual material from her diary in the book about keeping the diary (*I didn't know how to present to an audience a document that been written for no audience, and I knew I couldn't ask my editor to edit an almost-million-word document possessing no goals regarding coherence or form. The only way I could include my diary in this book about my diary, then, was to refer to it and then continue on. Imagine it as dark matter or as one of the sixty-seven confirmed moons of Jupiter or whatever real thing you nonetheless must take faith on* (94-95).)—accounting for a pragmatic reason the book is kept short.

Gary Saul Morson: *The aphorism, like the god's sign, does not contain but points beyond itself, step by potentially endless step. It is a mystery.*

## Part II

Confession one: It's true that part of my own tendency towards brevity in writing derives from a fear of criticism, an anxiety that I'll say too much when I should have remained silent. That in saying too much I will be outed for having had nothing to say in the first place.

Poet Diana Hamilton: *It's anti-intellectual to presume self-doubt means one hasn't thought hard enough; —everyone who's ever been smart at all—just like anyone who has ever really had faith, in God or in Love—is completely plagued by doubt.*

*But still.*

But still. I worry. More usually looks bigger, even if it's less.

It's also true that this tendency derives, for me, from a fear of sentimentality (in graduate school a professor assigned everyone a theme to encourage us to write against ourselves—mine was *tender*). A fear

that more room, more words, will let in, or let out, an overwrought neediness, gushing, wild gesturing, illogical arguments. Brevity then can be seen as a symptom of adherence to restraint, a habit widely practiced by those who have learned that small and quiet, means protection, to be taken seriously within a particular and narrow role, and safety—safety from things like barbaric asylums and forced hysterectomies, from rape, from conversion therapies, from fists.

I'd like to consider the term feminine here as DuPlessis has defined it—not as a position that lacks maleness, but as veiling a concept of rhetorical multiplicity, intellectual analysis, (perhaps) gender-or-sexual hybridity that names a suggestive site...for agency beyond oppressions, sexual plurality, political change, cultural struggle (36). From her definition, it feels necessary to call upon any move that comes from a place of trying to say something precisely the way I want and need to say it, feminine. The essay can claim a feminized space, she continues, in various ways: through interruption, through beginning again and again, through fragmentation and discontinuities, but most of all through its distrust of system, its playful skepticism about generalization. And interest in the small, the odd, the quirky, the by-the-side, the thing changeable, the viewer changeable, too (34).

Attention to smallness and the intimacy it allows; an affinity for short sentences, for aphorism and fragments and lists; a habit of condensing, of absence and slippery juxtaposition, and an attraction to reading and writing very short books, is at once a highly regulated aesthetic practice and also a freewheeling one—part of a distrust of systems that exclude certain works, certain voices, and thus, I would argue, part of a *poetics of femininity*. Virginia Woolf, too, as Nancy Mairs observed, notes *some possible qualities of a woman's book—brevity, broken sentences and sequences* (85).

Confession two: When I first discovered that writing about the self—excavating personal experience in order to make meaning—was a thing one could do, I began writing stories from memory exclusively in the voice of a very young child, a dually narrow and keen perspective offered, say, from a body in a bathtub of

increasingly tepid water; or from a splayed body, counting pennies on the laminate kitchen floor; or from an overheated body strapped into the backseat of a teal minivan; or a body crouched at the top of the stairs in the middle of the night; not precisely at the location of the conversation, but just above it, beneath, beside; listening, watching, leaning in to understand the world—the adults who I both feared and adored—a form of lived essaying. As a teenager I became obsessed with recording my life in brief, saturated encounters—the smells, the sounds, what was said and how, the exact color of a deflating balloon, of my own spilled blood. Meaning, mostly, how things felt. Whittling away to uncover the potent details, employing the least to illuminate the most meaning.

*The cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world, wrote Gaston Bachelard, the better I possess it (150).*

In high school we read Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*. The slideshow archive of Esperanza's associated memories made more sense to me than any unbroken, chrononormative novel. Childhood memories came in slivers, in slices, and fragments. I didn't think twice about ending where I had begun, about distancing or discerning inner thoughts from spoken words. *Thank you and goodbye and be careful of the evil eye. Come back again on Thursday when the stars are stronger. And may the Virgin bless you. And shuts the door (64).*

Associative, nonlinear thinking has always been more beautiful, more potent, to me. Isn't this how the world exists for us before we learn, as Lacan argued, that I am an I and you are a you? Before we learn to see our selves as visible, separate objects, alone and named, rather than part of an ocean of consciousness. Before we are so tightly contained within our bodies. Before borders. Before binaries. Before everything gets fucked up. Perhaps it is true, as Mairs offered, this *concept of textual femininity—of all that can never be said lying between and beneath the words on the page (73).*



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Confession three: As a child I coveted most miniature things. Dollhouse foods made of colorful clay, silver heart-shaped lockets, acorn caps, tiny porcelain tea sets, the painted lead soldiers my father brought back from England, neon pencil erasers shaped like fruits, hotel sewing kits, and the half-sized shopping carts at the co-op where my mother bought bulk granola—scarce and precious, claiming one was like finding a blue eggshell in the backyard; only there for those who really look. Purpura: *There is much to miss if we don't look hard at spaces, crevices, crannies.*

Scholars speculate that we're attracted to miniatures because they allow us to experience perspectives not otherwise achievable, to suspend reality, to inhabit parallel worlds outside space and time, where eternity and ephemerality seem to meet. *To contemplate a miniature*, writes Ben Grant in his book *The Aphorism and Other Short Forms, is to be drawn into an entire universe, a parallel universe* (4). We are invited to pause, to look hard and with uncertainty. To pay attention is to be reverent and then somehow outside the body. Less alone, less contained within our selves. A woman in Japan who etches comics onto a strand of human hair. A man in Russia who sculpts golden shoes for fleas, who welds camels and guns into the eye of a needle, on the cross section of an apple seed. He can only work, he says, between heartbeats.

The word miniature comes from the Latin for a red pigment, *minium*, used to illustrate or illuminate handprinted European texts before the era of the printing press. There was black ink and then there was beautiful, holy, dank minium. The name of the pigment itself became the word for decorating manuscripts, *miniare*, and the noun form, *miniatura*, became the word for the art of illuminating. During the Renaissance, *aphoristic discourse* (14), as Grant calls it, was literally a marginalized form. A small-sized discourse that existed in the margins of grand, lengthy, illuminated texts. A tiny link between past and future readers and writers, these margins became sites of new conversations, notes, glosses, commentaries, letters—to the reader, to the text, to the world. Sites of becoming. Tiny worlds of endless possibility.

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Illumination upon illumination. A new kind of writing and seeing and experiencing, right there in the space between the words and the edge of the page.

This is all to explain how very short books, in both their tactile exterior and their brief and inconsistent contents, might offer something like the experience of a miniature, something similar to how Grant describes aphorisms, as both *a world in a grain of sand and a magnifying glass with which to view the infinite variety of the world*. (5) Writer Kyle Chayka says that *the short book demonstrates ways in which to live, but rather than self-help's prescriptive explanations, it is content to evoke possibilities*. These possibilities also extend to the very existence of short books themselves; Kristen Dombek's tricky little book *The Selfishness of Others: An Essay on the Fear of Narcissism*, Edwidge Danticat's moving memoir and exploration *The Art of Death*, Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's aesthetic guide *In Praise of Shadows*, Eula Biss' first book *The Balloonists*, Maggie Nelson's petite *Bluets*, Shawn Wen's poetic biography *A Twenty Minute Silence Followed by Applause...* Considering what DuPlessis wrote about essays, how *collection/ dissemination, on-going comment, teasing responses, are letters to a world that is also writing letters* (21), I can't help but wonder what kinds of letters might correlate with the popularity of the very short book, published and sold in a neat, slim package for \$16.95.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard discusses the *inversion of perspective* that miniatures allow. As an example he quotes a French fairytale about a boy who finds himself inside a fairy house, *hidden beneath a tuft of grass, and realizes an experience of topophilia; that is, once inside the miniature house, he sees its vast number of rooms; from the interior perspective he discovers interior beauty* (149).

What is the dream that has returned to both my mother and I so often? The one, she's told me, where she finds bright, cavernous rooms in the old house on the Hudson River where I grew up; sinks to her knees inside their echoing beauty and weeps with relief, whispering, Thank you, thank you. I've had similar

dreams, have reached deep inside the chilly guest room closet of that same old house and pried away wooden paneling to crawl through a brick portal into an undiscovered room, or find myself stumbling out at the edge of a meadow with a vast domed ceiling, a condensed world inflating like a wetted popup sponge.

*Purpura: Freedom, space, shift in perspective, and familiarity. Miniatures compel us to transcend spatial norms, issue invitations to their realm, and suggest we forget or disregard our size.*

I was ten when my parents broke up, and for many years afterwards my mother lived in an apartment at the south end of town. I remember once, during a terrible snowstorm, she and I walked two miles to the house that now belonged only to my father, to shovel his driveway. He was away and my mother worried his car would freeze. He was gone often, working in Los Angeles, and she took me along to do things like this all the time. Mow his lawn, sweep the kitchen, feed the two or three cats. Though she was the one to leave, my mother, I think, she wanted to remain a part of the house's inner workings. In an effort to keep up some sense of normalcy (for me and my brother or for her and my father, I'm still not certain) there were many Christmas Eves when she would sleep over in the guest room, the room that she'd used as her own in the liminal months during their first trial separation. I'd lie awake, thinking not about presents, but about her, tucked into her own once-house. Did it soothe her? Wreck her?

Then my younger brother and I moved away and my mother finally moved on from our nuclear unit, from the town where we had lived as the chopped-up-pasted-together family that we were, into her new, queer life—the bohemian urban flat she may have always wanted to return to, and the female partner who keeps her safe in a way my father never could. And perhaps, children gone, into a different form of containment, a new kind of miniaturization within her control. I still wonder what she must have thought, waking up in

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that old house all those years before she left for good—as a resident, then as a sort of guest. I have often wondered about our similar dreams, the hidden rooms that appeared, at once familiar and new, revealing secret airy worlds—worlds that would never have fit inside our actual home. How they meant something different to her than to me. And yet, perhaps, how these large/small spaces illuminated our separate and shared longings.

Susan Stewart: *For the miniature, in its exaggeration of interiority and its relation to the space and time of the individual perceiving the subject, threatens the infinity of description without hierarchization, a world whose anteriority is always absolute, and whose profound interiority is therefore always unrecoverable. Hence for us the miniature appears as a metaphor for all books and all bodies* (44).

### Part III

If essays are *letters to a world that is also writing letters*, then perhaps the world's letters say something like *we are running out of time*. Or perhaps they ask about the death of certain kinds of structures, certain kinds of power. Or about a kind of resistance, and a recognition of that resistance, that is at once familiar and new. Perhaps very short books are like postcards—*wish you were here*, they say in their mini way, but also, *I am here with or without you*.

Perhaps the letters ask more, finally, about the miniature/gigantic rooms we forgot we even wanted.

Rooms we did not know we could fit our bodies, our selves, our languages, inside of. Spaces for language that don't make sense in the old house.

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Confession four: When a person is explaining something, and another person says, *I don't entirely understand*, does this mean then that there are things which they do entirely understand? The more I think about it there is exactly nothing that I entirely understand. Or maybe I mean that the things I do entirely understand are made visible by something that is not there, by the space around them, which illuminates, and defines. Something like what DuPlessis says of how and where *the modern essay occurs: at the seam between sociality and textuality* (23). Or as Elizabeth Grosz says of painting and music, *rendering the invisible in visible form...each the expression and exploration of the unrepresentable* (22).

I recently tweeted that sentiment in sincerity (*the more I think about it there is exactly nothing that I entirely understand*) and a woman whom I don't know responded directly to the tweet with this: *I entirely understand what my cat means when he sings the song of his people outside my bedroom door at 5:30 am every day.*

At the Toronto International Film Festival a few years ago, director Jill Soloway spoke about a female gaze—what it might look like, feel like, and how those thoughts affect her work, moving bodies and stories around in front of a camera. She called this mode a *way of feeling seeing*, an aim and a desire: *held by something that is invested in my feeling in my body*. Is this what I know, what I understand? My body? Somewhere in between the words, the form, the content, is a letter back to the world that leaves room for a reply. Maybe I too understand the cat. Or at least I understand the woman's description of her own understanding. Is this a letter of feeling seeing, between the three of us?

In the afterword of *Body Forms: Queerness and the Essay*, poet Tisa Bryant asks, *How you be writing being everything you are? To make us feel it? Do you practice with your body? What is the meat of your life? Where does it belong?* (49)

If this is the letter from the world, then I might reply: I hope it belongs in a very short book.

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