

ART OF THE TALE

AN INTERNATIONAL
ANTHOLOGY OF
SHORT STORIES
1945-1985

EDITED BY DANIEL HALPERN

THE ART OF THE TALE

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of Short Stories
1945-1985*

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Elisabeth Sifton Books

VIKING

for ITALO *and* CHICHITA CALVINO

*Unlike the novel, a short story may be,
for all purposes, essential.*

—JORGE LUIS BORGES

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

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Some aficionados of the short story would date the moment from the publication of Jorge Luis Borges's *Ficciones* or Vladimir Nabokov's first translated stories; others from the impressive volumes of collected stories that began to appear by such writers as Isaac Bashevis Singer, Graham Greene, Eudora Welty, V. S. Pritchett, John Cheever, Jean Stafford, Nadine Gordimer, and Gabriel García Márquez; or in our recognition of the magnitude of Flannery O'Connor's achievement. Still others would locate that moment in the works of Julio Cortázar, Tommaso Landolfi, Juan Rulfo, R. K. Narayan and Italo Calvino, who picked up and extended the agreed-upon qualities of the folktale—fantasy and legend. But regardless of whose pen fired the important moment, there seems to be general agreement that a serious revival of the short story is under way, as if at this particular juncture in the parlous history of our race we especially need its singular purity and magic, its devotion to the crucial—though often eccentric and enigmatic—moments in human life. And yet how fickle we serious readers of fiction must seem to the practitioners: one year we are conned by critics into believing that our story writers have turned to the novel because the market for stories has evaporated; and then, as we peruse our favorite paper of a late Sunday morning over good coffee, we discover the novel has died.

It seems to me, after considering a great deal of short fiction written since World War II, that in any given period since the war both the short story and the novel have not only maintained themselves, but have flourished. The story, when it is written well, is like strong emotion: it is alive, convincing, and difficult to expel from the body's metabolism. The goal of this anthology is to present stories capable of surviving the vagrancies of time and fashion, the fecklessness of our short memory and our impatience. I have selected eighty-two writers, each of whom has already produced a body of work that argues for representation here. The stories in *The Art of the Tale* were all published in English, in book form, after 1945, although some of the stories were actually written before the war. Nabokov's "Spring in Fialta" is one example; it first appeared in the emigre review *Sovremenníe Zapiski* (Paris) in 1938, under the pen name of

V. Sirin, but it did not appear in English, in book form, until *Nine Stories* was published in 1947.

The writers included in these pages inherited the pen that indelibly established the short story in modern terms. A list of precursors to the present volume would certainly include stories by the acknowledged masters of the form: Pushkin (b. 1799); Balzac (b. 1799); Hawthorne (b. 1804); Poe (b. 1809); Gogol (b. 1809)—Turgenev is quoted as saying, "We all came out from under Gogol's 'Overcoat'"; Turgenev (b. 1818)—"*A Sportsman's Notebook*," Frank O'Connor wrote, "may well be the greatest book of short stories ever written"; Flaubert (b. 1821); Dostoevsky (b. 1821); Maupassant (b. 1850); James (b. 1843); Conrad (b. 1857); Chekhov (b. 1860)—the writer most often cited as an influence by the writers in this collection; Gorky (b. 1868); Crane (b. 1871); Mann (b. 1875); Anderson (b. 1876); Joyce (b. 1882); Kafka (b. 1883); Lawrence (b. 1885); Porter (b. 1890); Babel (b. 1894); Faulkner (b. 1897); and Hemingway (b. 1899). With the exception of Isak Dinesen, born in 1885, 1899 is the year the oldest writers in this anthology were born: Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, and Yasunari Kawabata.

No short story anthology could ever be quite large enough to encompass the editorial vision at work in the selection of stories from any given half-century. Naturally, the omissions are a source of sadness and, in some cases, even embarrassment. But space and cost—that is, the finite qualities of our world—must always have a say in the final choice. Randall Jarrell, in addressing the problem of a representative anthology of stories, likened it to starting a zoo in a closet, where the giraffe, the first to arrive, takes up more space than one has for the collection.

I have attempted to avoid stories that have been over-anthologized, but I have made exceptions when a story seemed the inevitable and inescapable choice. While I have also tried to represent stories from as many countries as possible, my ending up with many more pages devoted to the English-speaking world was unavoidable. This should not be surprising, given the enormous number of stories available in English from both emerging and established writers. Of course, many non-English writers worthy of inclusion have yet to be translated and thus remained beyond the net of my selection process. And there were other obstacles that made representation difficult to achieve; for example, very few French writers published collections of stories after the war; the same is true for writers in German—Günter Grass, Peter Handke, and Max Frisch, to name but three, have no story collections. On the other hand, there was a profusion of Italian and Latin American writers from whom to choose.

In the past forty years, which is the scope of *The Art of the Tale*, the story has been many things. For Chinua Achebe of Nigeria and R. K. Narayan of India, the story carries on the ancient art of the folktale, the retelling of village banter, superstition, local mythology, and gossip. For Yukio Mishima of Japan, it is the painful enactment of inherited tradition; however, his countryman Yasunari Kawabata's story "One Arm" is very much a brother to Tommaso Landolfi's fanciful "Gogol's Wife." For V. S. Pritchett, the story "resembles a ballad or a sonnet and depends on a spontaneity that conceals its architecture. A story twenty pages long, for example, will have run to at least a hundred of re-

writing." And Peter Taylor writes, "The short story is a dramatic form, closer to plays than to novels." And William Gass: "For me, the short story is not a character sketch, a mouse trap, an epiphany, a slice of suburban life. It is the flowering of a symbol center. It is a poem grafted onto sturdier stock." Today, the various styles of the short story already in existence continue as viable forms; they are inherited by young writers in the same way they were inherited by writers coming of age forty years ago. The entire history of the short story is passed down, generation after generation, like a relay runner's baton, and the art of the story continues.

The conventional story is championed in this anthology by such writers as V. S. Pritchett, William Trevor, John Cheever, William Maxwell, Peter Taylor, Richard Ford, and Paul Bowles who has taken this conventional style of storytelling and added his own exotic English to it. In a more experimental vein, there is the work of Jorge Luis Borges, Guy Davenport, Italo Calvino, William Gass, and Julio Cortázar. The fable has a place here, by way of Abdeslam Boulaich of Morocco in his piece "Cowardice," executed in the oral tradition by tape recorder and translated from the Mogrebi, the Moroccan dialect. And exploring what approaches an allegorical fiction, there is Ilse Aichinger's tale, "The Bound Man." I have also included stories that employ the elusive vehicle of surrealism, as in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "Eyes of a Blue Dog," Wolfgang Hildesheimer's "How I Transformed Myself into a Nightingale," and Luisa Valenzuela's evocative "I'm Your Horse in the Night." The political story, too, is represented: by Tadeusz Borowski, who bore witness to the camps of the Holocaust, and by James Baldwin, whose powerful "Going to Meet the Man" confronts the racial atmosphere of fifties America.

A number of stories are cast against an exotic setting, such as those by Italo Calvino, Albert Camus, Paul Bowles, and Donald Barthelme. Other stories rely on various modes of humor, such as William Maxwell's "A Pilgrimage," Stanley Elkin's "I Look Out for Ed Wolfe," and Tommaso Landolfi's "Gogol's Wife." Still others focus on love's endlessly inventive entanglements and stratagems: stories by Richard Yates, Patrick White, Eudora Welty, Jean Stafford, Joyce Carol Oates, and Samuel Beckett.

In reading the work of more than a hundred story writers, what soon became evident to me is that these stories have brought forth incredibly bountiful worlds; the fictional landscape that is their legacy illustrates with unmistakable clarity the prodigiously imaginative life of story writers around the world. Yet in the midst of this abundance of riches, I have tried to keep in mind Proust's cagey and inarguable dictum, that each reader reads only what is within himself.

DANIEL HALPERN

February 1986

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THE ART OF THE TALE

Chinua Achebe

.....

THE SACRIFICIAL EGG

Julius Obi sat gazing at his typewriter. The fat Chief Clerk, his boss, was snoring at his table. Outside, the gatekeeper in his green uniform was sleeping at his post. You couldn't blame him; no customer had passed through the gate for nearly a week. There was an empty basket on the giant weighing machine. A few palm-kernels lay desolately in the dust around the machine. Only the flies remained in strength.

Julius went to the window that overlooked the great market on the bank of the River Niger. This market, though still called Nkwo, had long spilled over into Eke, Oye, and Afo with the coming of civilization and the growth of the town into a big palm-oil port. In spite of this encroachment, however, it was still busiest on its original Nkwo day, because the deity who had presided over it from antiquity still cast her spell only on her own day—let men in their greed spill over themselves. It was said that she appeared in the form of an old woman in the centre of the market just before cock-crow and waved her magic fan in the four directions of the earth—in front of her, behind her, to the right and to the left—to draw to the market men and women from distant places. And they came bringing the produce of their lands—palm-oil and kernels, kola nuts, cassava, mats, baskets and earthenware pots; and took home many-coloured cloths, smoked fish, iron pots and plates. These were the forest peoples. The other half of the world who lived by the great rivers came down also—by canoe, bringing yams and fish. Sometimes it was a big canoe with a dozen or more people in it; sometimes it was a lone fisherman and his wife in a small vessel from the swift-flowing Anambara. They moored their canoe on the bank and sold their fish, after much haggling. The woman then walked up the steep banks of the river to the heart of the market to buy salt and oil and, if the sales had been very good, even a length of cloth. And for her children at home she bought bean cakes and mai-mai which the Igara women cooked. As evening approached, they took up their paddles again and paddled away, the water shimmering in the sunset and their canoe becoming smaller and smaller in the distance until it was just a dark crescent on the water's face and two dark bodies swaying forwards and backwards in it. Umuru then was the meeting place of the forest people who were

called Igbo and the alien riverain folk whom the Igbo called Olu and beyond whom the world stretched in indefiniteness.

Julius Obi was not a native of Umuru. He had come like countless others from some bush village inland. Having passed his Standard Six in a mission school he had come to Umuru to work as a clerk in the offices of the all-powerful European trading company which bought palm-kernels at its own price and sold cloth and metalware, also at its own price. The offices were situated beside the famous market so that in his first two or three weeks Julius had to learn to work within its huge enveloping hum. Sometimes when the Chief Clerk was away he walked to the window and looked down on the vast anthill activity. Most of these people were not there yesterday, he thought, and yet the market had been just as full. There must be many, many people in the world to be able to fill the market day after day like this. Of course they say not all who came to the great market were real people. Janet's mother, Ma, had said so.

"Some of the beautiful young women you see squeezing through the crowds are not people like you or me but mammy-wota who have their town in the depths of the river," she said. "You can always tell them, because they are beautiful with a beauty that is too perfect and too cold. You catch a glimpse of her with the tail of your eye, then you blink and look properly, but she has already vanished in the crowd."

Julius thought about these things as he now stood at the window looking down on the silent, empty market. Who would have believed that the great boisterous market could ever be quenched like this? But such was the strength of Kitikpa, the incarnate power of smallpox. Only he could drive away all those people and leave the market to the flies.

When Umuru was a little village, there was an age-grade who swept its market-square every Nkwo day. But progress had turned it into a busy, sprawling, crowded and dirty river port, a no-man's-land where strangers outnumbered by far the sons of the soil, who could do nothing about it except shake their heads at this gross perversion of their prayer. For indeed they had prayed—who will blame them—for their town to grow and prosper. And it had grown. But there is good growth and there is bad growth. The belly does not bulge out only with food and drink; it might be the abominable disease which would end by sending its sufferer out of the house even before he was fully dead.

The strangers who came to Umuru came for trade and money, not in search of duties to perform, for they had those in plenty back home in their village which was real home.

And as if this did not suffice, the young sons and daughters of Umuru soil, encouraged by schools and churches were behaving no better than the strangers. They neglected all their old tasks and kept only the revelries.

Such was the state of the town when Kitikpa came to see it and to demand the sacrifice the inhabitants owed the gods of the soil. He came in confident knowledge of the terror he held over the people. He was an evil deity, and boasted it. Lest he be offended those he killed were not killed but decorated, and no one dared weep for them. He put an end to the coming and going between neighbours and between villages. They said, "Kitikpa is in that village," and immediately it was cut off by its neighbours.