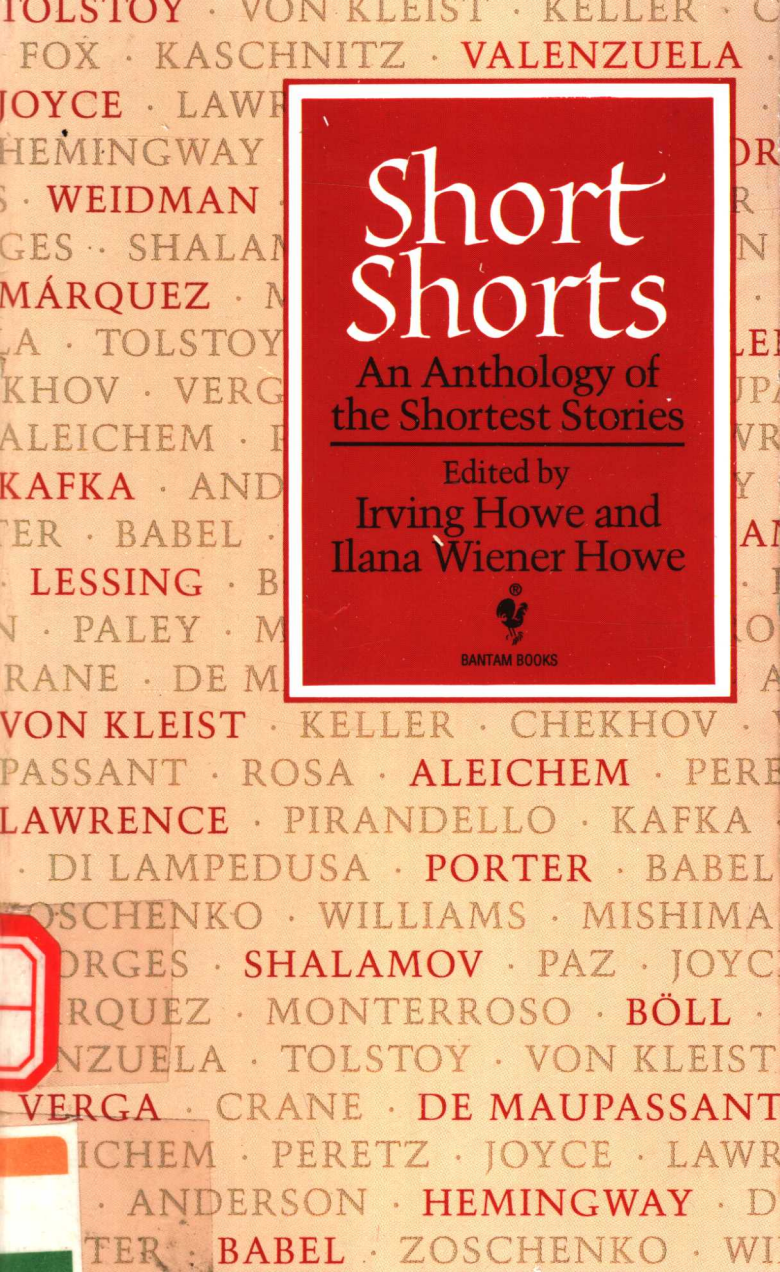
Short Shorts
An Anthology of the Shortest Stories
Edited by
Irving Howe and Ilana Wiener Howe
BANTAM BOOKS

SHORT SHORTS

An Anthology of the Shortest Stories

EDITED BY
IRVING HOWE AND
ILANA WIENER HOWE
with an Introduction by Irving Howe

BANTAM BOOKS
NEW YORK • TORONTO • LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

This edition contains the complete text
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SHORT SHORTS: AN ANTHOLOGY OF THE SHORTEST STORIES
A Bantam Book

PUBLISHING HISTORY
First published in the U.K. in 1982 by Kudos & Godine, Publisher, Ltd.
David R. Godine. Publisher edition published June 1982.
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Bantam edition / December 1983

ISBN 0-553-27440-6

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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SHORT SHORTS

"[The Howes] have devised the most original anthology since Randall Jarrell's *The Anchor Book of Stories* . . . I would give it to anybody."

—Walter Clemons,
Newsweek

"[These stories] are small only in measure. All contain social and psychological resonances that sound long after this remarkable book is closed."

—Stefan Kanfer,
Time

"Writers who do short shorts need to be especially bold. They stake everything on a stroke of inventiveness. Sometimes they have to be prepared to speak out directly, not so much in order to state a theme as to provide a jarring or complicating commentary. The voice of the writer brushes, so to say, against his flash of invention. And then, almost before it begins, the fiction is brought to a stark conclusion—abrupt, bleeding, exhausting. This conclusion need not complete the action, it has only to break off decisively."

—Irving Howe,
from the Introduction

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IRVING HOWE

Introduction

LIKE OTHER GREAT EVENTS in history, this collection of short short stories (hereafter called short shorts) has its origin in family talk around the kitchen table.

One editor was reading "Swaddling Clothes," a marvelous story by the Japanese writer Mishima, and naturally enough urged the other editor also to read it. Which the other editor did and, of course, agreed: yes, a superb piece of work. There soon followed a conversation in which the two editors found themselves noticing that Mishima's story seemed different from the usual kind of short story. How so? It is fiercely condensed, almost like a lyric poem; it explodes in a burst of revelation or illumination; it confines itself to a single, overpowering incident; it bears symbolic weight. Struggling to define this story's distinctiveness, the two editors began to wonder: Were they talking about a separate literary genre, or subgenre, which might be called the short short? And if there is some good reason for talking about the short short, are there perhaps others, not as great as Mishima's but still worth gathering, that might be put together in "a little book"?

They set out to look; they found; and here is the little book. It's a book to be read for pleasure, first and foremost; and if you don't think that finally there is much difference between short stories and these short shorts, well, the editors won't burst

into tears. But since they do maintain that there are significant differences, let's glance at these in the next few pages.

The one thing we can be sure of is that the short short is shorter than the short story. As an outer limit for the short short we'd suggest twenty-five hundred words. As the norm, fifteen hundred words. Who decreed this? No one; it's only a suggestion. But we think it makes sense. Our short shorts are indeed like most ordinary short stories, *only more so*—but that's just the point, *only more so* makes for important differences:

In the ordinary short story—say, between three and eight thousand words—there isn't much opportunity for the writer to develop character through an extensive action or in psychological depth. There isn't the space in which to show the changes, whether toward growth or decline, that occur in human beings across a span of time. Still, it's at least possible to *present* a character in the ordinary short story. We know quite a bit, for example, concerning O.E. Parker in Flannery O'Connor's "Parker's Back" and even more about Gabriel Conroy in James Joyce's longer story, "The Dead."

There can't be much development of action or theme in such stories, but at least there is some. By contrast, in the short short the very idea of character seems to lose its significance, seems in fact to drop out of sight. We see human figures in a momentary flash. We see them in fleeting profile. We see them in archetypal climaxes which define their mode of existence. Situation tends to replace character, representative condition to replace individuality.

Consider Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." What do we know, or need to know, about the man who sits in the café piling up saucers? Next to nothing about his past, very little about his future. What we do know, unforgettably, is the wracking loneliness and lostness of his life in the present.

Or consider Octavio Paz's "The Blue Bouquet." We know almost nothing about the man threatened with the loss of his eyes, since the crux of the story is not biography but confrontation—that moment of danger in which the man finds himself, a moment such as any of us could experience. Faced with that danger, he loses whatever fragment of individuality he may have for us, and all that matters is the color of his eyes.

In both Hemingway's and Paz's miniature masterpieces, circumstance eclipses character, fate crowds out individuality, an extreme condition serves as emblem of the universal.

The usual short story cannot have a complex plot, but it often has a simple one resembling a chain with two or three links. The short short, however, doesn't as a rule have even that much—you don't speak of a chain when there's only one link. In Isaac Babel's "The Death of Dolgushov," Luigi Pirandello's "The Soft Touch of Grass," Varlam Shalamov's "In the Night" (to cite only three examples) there is the barest, briefest incident. And that's all—a flick of the eye, a quick response, from which we have to draw whatever pleasure or insight that we can.

Sometimes, as in Sholom Aleichem's "A Yom Kippur Scandal" and Grace Paley's "Wants," the short short appears to rest on nothing more than a fragile anecdote which the writer has managed to drape with a quantity of suggestion. A single incident, a mere anecdote—these form the spine of the short short.

Everything depends on intensity, one sweeping blow of perception. In the short short the writer gets no second chance. Either he strikes through at once or he's lost. And because it depends so heavily on this one sweeping blow, the short short often approaches the condition of a fable. When you read the two pieces by Tolstoy in this book, or I. L. Peretz's "If Not Higher," or Franz Kafka's "The

Hunter Gracchus," you feel these writers are intent upon "making a point"—but obliquely, not through mere statement. What they project is not the sort of impression of life we expect in most fiction, but something else: an impression of an *idea* of life. Or: a flicker in darkness, a slight cut of being. The shorter the piece of writing, the more abstract it may seem to us. In reading Paz's brilliant short short we feel we have brushed dangerously against the sheer arbitrariness of existence; in reading Peretz's, that we have been brought up against a moral reflection on the nature of goodness, though a reflection hard merely to state.

Could we say that the short short is to other kinds of fiction somewhat as the lyric is to other kinds of poetry? The lyric does not seek meaning through extension, it accepts the enigmas of confinement. It strives for a rapid unity of impression, an experience rendered in its wink of immediacy. And so too with the short short. Even in those, like Tolstoy's "Alyosha the Pot" and Giovanni Verga's "The Wolf," which cover a stretch of time in the lives of the portrayed figures, there is finally a strong impression of timelessness—as if to say, we don't need detail or extension, the whole thing comes to us in a flash, the fatality of Alyosha and the compulsiveness of "the Wolf."

Writers who do short shorts need to be especially bold. They stake everything on a stroke of inventiveness. Sometimes they have to be prepared to speak out directly, not so much in order to state a theme as to provide a jarring or complicating commentary. The voice of the writer brushes, so to say, against his flash of invention. And then, almost before it begins, the fiction is brought to a stark conclusion—abrupt, bleeding, exhausting. This conclusion need not complete the action; it has only to break it off decisively.

Here are a few examples of the writer speaking out directly. Paz: "The universe is a vast system of

signs." Kafka in "First Sorrow": The trapeze artist's "social life was somewhat limited." Paula Fox: "We are starving here in our village. At last, we are at the center." Babel's cossack cries out, "You people with glasses have about as much pity for our kind as a cat for a mouse." Such sentences serve as devices of economy, oblique cues. Cryptic and enigmatic, they sometimes replace action, dialogue and commentary, for none of which, as it happens, the short short has much room.

There's often a brilliant overfocussing.

No one reading Jerome Weidman's masterful "My Father Sits in the Dark" is likely to forget its solitary image: the old man sitting there, alone in the kitchen, seemingly content to ruminate about his life or perhaps just stare into unresponsive space. It pierces the heart. It speaks to the human condition in some profound way. Yet we would have a hard time saying precisely in which way, for there is something mysterious about this image, communicating more than we can say about it. And much the same is true with regard to another of our short shorts, also dealing with a withdrawn father, João Guimaraes Rosa's "The Third Bank of the River," which yields an image equally haunting and inexhaustible. We might say, this wonderful short short has to do with the human need both to be away and keep in sight; but we know that barely begins to describe it.

Let's press ahead a little further by sketching out a few variations among short shorts:

ONE THRUST OF INCIDENT. (Examples: Paz, Mishima, Shalamov, Babel, W.C. Williams.) In these short shorts the time span is extremely brief, a few hours, maybe even a few minutes: Life is grasped in symbolic compression. One might say that these short shorts constitute epiphanies (climactic moments of high grace or realization) that have been torn out of their contexts. You have to supply the contexts

yourself, since if the contexts were there, they'd no longer be short shorts.

LIFE ROLLED UP. (Examples: Tolstoy's "Alyosha the Pot," Verga's "The Wolf," D. H. Lawrence's "A Sick Collier.") In these you get the illusion of sustained narrative, since they deal with lives over an extended period of time; but actually these lives are so compressed into typicality and paradigm, the result seems very much like a single incident. Verga's "Wolf" cannot but repeat her passions, Tolstoy's Alyosha his passivity. Themes of obsession work especially well in this kind of short short.

SNAP-SHOT OR SINGLE FRAME. (Examples: García Márquez, Böll, Katherine Anne Porter.) In these we have no depicted event or incident, only an interior monologue or flow of memory. A voice speaks, as it were, into the air. A mind is revealed in cross-section—and the cut is rapid. One would guess that this is the hardest kind of short short to write: There are many pitfalls such as tiresome repetition, being locked into a single voice, etc.

LIKE A FABLE. (Examples: Kafka, Keller, von Kleist, Tolstoy's "Three Hermits.") Through its very concision, this kind of short short moves past realism. We are prodded into the fabulous, the strange, the spooky. To write this kind of fable-like short short, the writer needs a supreme self-confidence: The net of illusion can be cast only once.

When we read such fable-like miniatures, we are prompted to speculate about significance, teased into shadowy parallels or semi-allegories. There are also, however, some fables so beautifully complete (for instance Kafka's "First Sorrow") that we find ourselves entirely content with the portrayed surface and may even take a certain pleasure in refusing interpretation.

Enough. I leave to the reader to decide whether these remarks have established the claim that there are significant differences between short stories and short shorts. Divisions of genre serve a purpose

somewhat like a scaffolding: useful as preliminaries but in the end to be discarded. And meanwhile, not another word—for what could be more absurd than a long long introduction to a book of short shorts?

IRVING HOWE

Short Shorts

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Part One