



Iridescent Insects: Flash Fiction in the United States Insectos Iridiscentes: El microrrelato en Estados Unidos

Microtextualidades
Revista Internacional de
microrrelato y minificción

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ABSTRACT

Despite the great popularity flash fiction has achieved in the United States over the past three decades, few academic efforts have been made to define the specific features of the genre and to adequately study the works of its more notable practitioners. This scholarly neglect is partly a consequence of the common belief among many writers that, due to its extreme brevity, flash fiction is a minor genre and, thus, a deficient vehicle for serious fiction. In their view, to use John Edgar Wideman's words before he discovered the virtues of the genre, flash fiction seems to "rely on gimmicks," and so is little more than "finger exercises, practice for the longer haul." The purpose of this article is twofold. On the one hand, by careful consideration of available literature, it seeks to establish the boundaries and to provide a workable definition of the genre as it is practiced in the United States. On the other, it offers a survey of the more relevant flash fiction produced in the country, from Mark Twain's 1882 *Sketches New and Old* to Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911), Patricia Highsmith's *Little Tales of Misogyny* (1978) and Lydia Davis' *Can't and Won't* (2014).

KEYWORDS: flash fiction, United States, sudden fiction, micro fiction, narrative genres, American fiction.

RESUMEN

Pese a la gran popularidad que el microrrelato ha alcanzado en los Estados Unidos durante las últimas tres décadas, se ha hecho poco por definir el género y estudiar las obras de sus cultivadores más notables. Esta falta de interés académico en la materia se debe en parte a la creencia común entre muchos escritores de que, debido a su extrema brevedad, el microrrelato es un género menor y, por lo tanto, no es un medio apto para crear una narrativa seria. En su opinión, usando las palabras de Edgar John Wideman antes de que descubriera las virtudes del género, el microrrelato parece depender de trucos, no es más que un ejercicio de práctica, un entrenamiento para obras de aliento más largo. El objetivo de este artículo es doble. Por un lado, a través de un cuidadoso examen de la literatura existente, trata de establecer las fronteras y de ofrecer una definición práctica del género en los Estados Unidos. Por otro, proporciona un catálogo de las obras de minificción más importantes escritas en el país, desde *Sketches New and Old*, de Mark Twain (1882), hasta *Can't and Won't*, de Lydia Davis (2014), pasando por *The Devil's Dictionary*, de Ambrose Bierce (1911) y *Little Tales of Misogyny*, de Patricia Highsmith (1978).

PALABRAS CLAVE: microrrelato, Estados Unidos, minificción, microcuento, géneros narrativos, narrativa norteamericana.

Artículo recibido:

Marzo 2017

Artículo aceptado:

Mayo 2017

Número 1 pp. 1-12
ISSN: 2530-8297

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s flash fiction has enjoyed great popularity in the United States. Books dedicated to the genre have sold about a million copies, “not as many as a John Grisham best seller,” estimates flash fiction scholar and anthologist Robert Shapard, “but notable nonetheless” (2012). *Quick Fiction*, a Boston-based magazine featuring stories and narrative prose poems under five hundred words, used to receive one hundred submissions per issue upon its inception in 2002. By 2008 it was receiving an average of fifteen hundred. Today flash fiction is taught in workshops throughout the country, aired on National Public Radio, celebrated by a deluge of competitions, read by TV and movie actors on Broadway. However no one has yet put the finger on what exactly flash fiction is and what distinguishes it from other narrative genres. There is a good reason for that: flash fiction, as will be shown in the following pages, is an elusive literary creature.

2. An attempt at a definition

Whereas in the Spanish-language context the term *microrrelato* seems to have gained general acceptance among critics, authors and readers, no such consent has been reached in the United States. The issue of nomenclature was first addressed by Shapard in the introduction to his and James Thomas’ seminal 1986 anthology *Sudden Fiction: American Short Short Stories*. The works selected were “so new, and sometimes so unlike the modern notion of story,” says Shapard, that it was “by no means clear at the outset what to call” them (xiii). His first proposal was *blasters*, which was readily rejected by most of the authors included in the anthology, pointing out that many of the best works in it “simply didn’t *blast*” (xvi). The name, they agreed, placed too much emphasis on surprise and, as a consequence, did not do justice to the “quieter, more subtle” pieces (xvi). At Robert Kelly’s suggestion, Shapard and Thomas finally decided on the term *sudden*, which most authors liked “not only for the sound of it, but for its representation of the form,” thus ending the debate “for the present” (xvi).

Of course, the debate did go on. Twenty-three years later, in his article “The Short-Short Story: The Problem of Literary Genre” (2009), José Flávio Nogueira, himself partial to the term *short short*, provides a list of the numerous labels the genre has received in the English-language context since the mid 1980s, including: *snapper*, *sketch*, *prose poem*, *prose fiction*, *vignette*, *experimental fiction*, *anecdote*, *enigma*, *flash fiction*, *mini fiction*, *fast fiction*, *skinny fiction*, *quick fiction*, *micro fiction*, *draft*, and *picture text*(2). To these, Juan Armando Epple adds *postcard fiction*, *nanofiction*, and *one minute fiction* (23). Philip F. O’Connor has proposed the term *sto*, “a short form of the word *story*” (Shapard and Thomas 1986, 243). John Edgard Wideman calls his own short short stories *briefs* (1).

The number of names increases when one considers all the genre’s sub- and sub-sub-categories proposed over the years by anthologists and authors. Stories of just one page seem to Shapard and Thomas “different not only in length but in nature” because they focus on one single instant or occurrence, whereas, in their view, a five-page story is closer to the traditional short story. “Calling on the wisdom of Solomon,” they explain in *New Sudden Fiction: Short-Short Stories from America and Beyond*, “we split the child (*sudden fiction*) into two new children. The longer story became “*new*” *sudden fiction*, while the shorter became *flash*, named by James Thomas” (2007, 15). In practical terms, “*new*” *sudden fiction* comprises stories between one to five pages (1,000-2,000 words), whereas the length of a *flash fiction* is anywhere between a third of a page and 750 words, the same length, Nogueira points out, as Hemingway’s classic

“A Very Short Story” (9). *Flash fiction*, in its turn, may be subdivided into several, sometimes overlapping, sub-sub-categories: the *drabble* (consisting of 100 words), the *dribble* (50 words), *hint fiction* (25 words or fewer, as established by Robert Swartwood), the *six-word story* (stemming from Hemingway’s apocryphal story “For sale: baby shoes, never worn”), the *one-sentence story*, and the *140-character story* (also known as *twitterature*).

The variety of names the genre has been given is made clearly visible by the titles of some of the anthologies published during the last thirty-five years, such as: *Short Shorts: An Anthology of the Shortest Stories* (Irving Howe and Ilana Wiener Howe, 1982); *Four Minutes Fiction* (Robley Wilson, 1987); *Micro Fiction: An Anthology of Fifty Really Short Stories* (Jerome Stern, 1996); *Fast Forward: A Collection of Flash Fiction* (K. Scott Forman, Kona Morris, and Nancy Stohlman, 2009); *Hint Fiction: An Anthology of Stories in 25 Words or Fewer* (Robert Swartwood, 2010), and *Sudden Fiction Latino: Short Short Stories from the United States and Latin America* (Robert Shapard, James Thomas, and Ray González, 2010).

Although in recent years the name *flash fiction* has become common currency among readers and authors, a catchall term of sorts for all fiction shorter than traditional short fiction, no truly authoritative denomination has been established as yet. In that sense Nogueira is probably right when he states that, as far as the name of the new narrative genre is concerned, “[p]erhaps there will never be only one but always several” (10).

As suggested by many of the labels listed above, in the United States length stands out as the primary criterion to determine which texts fall under the unifying umbrella of flash fiction and which do not. In order to be considered flash fiction, a text must be, above all else, brief. Yet, from the very emergence of the genre in the mid 1980s, authors, anthologists, and, to a lesser extent, critics –academic interest in flash fiction is a recent phenomenon– have made groping attempts at defining the essential features of the genre and, thus, at setting its boundaries. In the introduction to his anthology, Howe says that flash fiction “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” (ix). The genre’s kinship with poetry is further emphasized by two prominent short fiction writers: Joyce Carol Oates, who in her afterword to Shapard and Thomas’ *Sudden Fiction* argues that “the rhythmic form of the short-short story is often more temperamentally akin to poetry than to conventional prose which generally opens out to dramatize experience and to evoke emotion; in the smallest, tightest spaces, experience can only be suggested” (1986, 247); and Grace Paley, who points out that, when a story is “very very short –1, 2, 2-1/2pages – should be read like a poem. That is slowly. People who like to skip can’t skip in a 3-page story” (Shapard and Thomas 2006, 13).

Many writers, says Ron Wallace in “Writers Try Short Shorts!” seek to define flash fiction by suggesting what it is not: “it’s not a parable, which implies a message; it’s not a tale, which is artless, often just an episodic action narrative; it’s not a sketch, which is fragmentary, static.” According to Russell Banks, flash fiction “is not a diminutive version of anything. It’s its own self, and it’s intrinsically different from the short story and more like the sonnet or ghazal” (Shapard and Thomas 1986, 244). Banks goes as far as to call flash fiction *poes* suggesting their kinship with “prose” and “poesy” and maybe also with Edgar Allan Poe’s shorter works (Wallace). Robert Kelly affirms that the new genre is “neither poetic prose nor prosy verse, but the energy and clarity typical of prose coincident in the scope and rhythm of the poem” (Shapard and

Thomas 1986, 240).

Fred Chappell believes that flash fiction must be “troubling,” and must provide a sense of “unease” (Wallace). John L’Heureux agrees that it should “disturb” us (Wallace). Luisa Valenzuela, an authoritative figure in both the Latino and the American flash fiction spheres, prefers to use metaphors: “I usually compare the novel to a mammal,” she explains, “be it wild as a tiger or tame as a cow; the short story to a bird or a fish; the micro story to an insect (iridescent in the best cases)” (Shapard, Thomas and Rodríguez 2010, 20). Jerome Stern once compared reading flash fiction to entering, on a sunny day, a dark room in which a party was going on:

At first his eyes, unaccustomed to the dark, would see almost nothing, just movement and shape. Gradually, as his eyes adjusted, he would begin to see people, and then details of furnishing and decor. Every time he left the room for a breath of air, and then returned, he would see new things—the party and the contents of the room would in some ways be familiar, but would also have changed. He could go back again and again, and always find something new; it would never be quite the same. Invite him to that party, that room, he said, and he’d be happy. You might even end up with a hundred dollars and a crate of Florida oranges. (Shapard 2012)

To summarize these and other attempts at defining the genre, flash fiction is elliptical by nature, a feature it shares with poetry and, to a lesser extent, with the short story. It requires an active reader, one accustomed to reading between the lines and to seeking hidden meanings. Despite its kinship with poetry, flash fiction is essentially narrative; that is, although there is not enough space in it for character and plot development, it normally tells a story. As to its form, it should be carefully crafted and have no more than two pages. As to its content, it should engage the reader at an emotional or an intellectual level. It achieves that goal by being unpredictable, funny, inspirational, artful, shocking, serious, disgusting, moving, or disquieting. Regardless of the literary techniques employed—some flash fictions have surprising endings, some are metafictional, some recount realistic stories, some fantastic—flash fiction, affirm Shapard and Thomas, must be “memorable” (2006, 13). These notions, the reader will notice, are intuitive rather than objective, which brings to the fore two important facts regarding flash fiction in the United States. Firstly, it is a hybrid, fluid genre that constantly defies definition and tabulation. Secondly, and due precisely to its elusiveness, it is in great need of scholarly attention, which to this date has been enthusiastic but scarce.

3. The primordial times

The term “primordial times,” within the context of American flash fiction, was coined by Nogueira to refer to that time in the past when writers wrote stories that were shorter than traditional short stories without an awareness of being cultivating a new genre (11). In general terms, these stories complied with the rules of short fiction; that is, characters were well developed and there was a full Aristotelian plot with a conflict, a climax, and a resolution. Only they were more condensed. Among those primordial flash fictions, Nogueira cites Tennessee Williams’ “Ten Worms” (written in 1945 but first published in 1980), Bernard Malamud’s “A Lost Grave” (1985), and Ernest Hemingway’s “A Very Short Story” (1924). Primordial American flash fiction, however, begins at least four decades earlier than the publication of Hemingway’s story, with Mark Twain’s 1882 *Sketches New and Old*, a compilation of short stories, poems, fables, autobiographical and biographical sketches, travelogues, first- and third-person narratives, burlesques, hoaxes, satires, speeches, and sociopolitical critiques varying in length from the half-page of “Johnny Greer” and the twenty-two pages of “Some

Learned Fables, for Good Old Boys and Girls.” The volume contains good examples of primordial flash fiction, such as “History Repeats Itself,” “A Fashion Item,” and “The Widow’s Protest.”

One of the saddest things that ever came under my notice (said the banker’s clerk) was there in Corning during the war. Dan Murphy enlisted as a private, and fought very bravely. The boys all liked him, and when a wound by and by weakened him down till carrying a musket was too heavy work for him, they clubbed together and fixed him up as a sutler. He made money then, and sent it always to his wife to bank for him. She was a washer and ironer, and knew enough by hard experience to keep money when she got it. She didn’t waste a penny.

On the contrary, she began to get miserly as her bank-account grew. She grieved to part with a cent, poor creature, for twice in her hard-working life she had known what it was to be hungry, cold, friendless, sick, and without a dollar in the world, and she had a haunting dread of suffering so again. Well, at last Dan died; and the boys, in testimony of their esteem and respect for him, telegraphed to Mrs. Murphy to know if she would like to have him embalmed and sent home, when you know the usual custom was to dump a poor devil like him into a shallow hole, and then inform his friends what had become of him. Mrs. Murphy jumped to the conclusion that it would only cost two or three dollars to embalm her dead husband, and so she telegraphed “Yes.” It was at the “wake” that the bill for embalming arrived and was presented to the widow.

She uttered a wild, sad wail that pierced every heart, and said, “Sivinty-foive dollars for stooffin’ Dan, blister their sows! Did thim divils suppose I was goin’ to stairt a Museim, that I’d be dalin’ in such expinsive curiassities!”

The banker’s clerk said there was not a dry eye in the house. (Twain 658-59)

Ambrose Bierce was another early, “unaware” writer of flash fiction. At one time as popular as his contemporary Mark Twain, eventually Bierce fell out of favor with critics due to his peevish and pessimistic humor. “All for economy of words and accuracy,” says Graciela S. Tomassini, he “finds in the synthetic templates of fables, micronarratives and epigrams alternative and proper paths to argue against the culture of his time” (11). Many of his caustic flash fictions appeared in his books *Fantastic Fables* (1899) and *The Devil’s Dictionary* (1911).

Fantastic Fables contains over two hundred parodic stories criticizing the politics, social mores, and religious beliefs prevalent in the United States at the time. “The Conscientious Official” is a good example of Bierce’s style and purpose:

While a Division Superintendent of a railway was attending closely to his business of placing obstructions on the track and tampering with the switches he received word that the President of the road was about to discharge him for incompetency.

“Good Heavens!” he cried; “there are more accidents on my division than on all the rest of the line.”

“The President is very particular”, said the Man who brought him the news; “he thinks the same loss of life might be effected with less damage to the company’s property.”

“Does he expect me to shoot passengers through the car windows?” exclaimed the indignant official, spiking a loose tie across the rails. “Does he take me for an assassin?” (Bierce 2001, 15)

As Bierce explains in its preface, *The Devil’s Dictionary* was begun in a weekly paper in 1881 and “was continued in a desultory way at long intervals” until 1906, when it was published in book form as *The Cynic’s Word Book*, “a name which the author had no power to reject or happiness to approve” (2014, 1). The dictionary contains a long

list of satirical definitions, anecdotes and phrases, such as the following:

ABORIGINIES, n. Persons of little worth found cumbering the soil of a newly discovered country. They soon cease to cumber; they fertilize. (Bierce 2014, 8)

TECHNICALITY, n. In an English court a man named Home was tried for slander in having accused his neighbor of murder. His exact words were: "Sir Thomas Holt hath taken a cleaver and stricken his cook upon the head, so that one side of the head fell upon one shoulder and the other side upon the other shoulder." The defendant was acquitted by instruction of the court, the learned judges holding that the words did not charge murder, for they did not affirm the death of the cook, that being only an inference. (Bierce 2014, 243)

Ernest Hemingway deserves a special comment in this section, given the momentous impact he had on the birth and subsequent development of flash fiction in the United States and the –at least in part– unsubstantiated reasons supporting that impact. His famous six-word story has been cited as an early example of the genre and, as a consequence, has been discussed in creative writing workshops in America over the past several decades. Supposedly written sometime in the 1920s, the story, it is said, was the result of a ten-dollar bet Hemingway made at lunch –some say at the Algonquin Hotel, some at Luchow’s– with other writers that he could write a novel in six words. After scribbling the story on a napkin, he passed it around the table and collected his winnings. “That’s the popular lore,” says Josh Jones. The truth, as is normally the case, is less colorful.

Different versions of that same story had appeared long before Hemingway even began to write. In 1906 when he was only six, the following piece was published in a newspaper classified section called “Terse Tales of the Town:” “For sale, baby carriage, never been used. Apply at this office” (Jones). Many similar stories abound, including a 1927 comic strip where a seven-word version –“For Sale, A Baby Carriage: Never Used!”– is described as “the greatest short story in the world” (Jones). Hemingway, researchers conclude, did not create that story. He may have stolen it from the papers. After all he was a journalist and, as such, was likely to have come in contact with some version of it. But more importantly, as Frederick A. Wright concludes in “The Short Story Just Got Shorter: Hemingway, Narrative, and the Six-Word Urban Legend” (2012), there is no evidence that the lunch meeting ever took place and, thus, no evidence linking the six-word story with Hemingway. Hemingway, it seems, had nothing to do with the story. Instead, it was a literary agent, Peter Miller, who made the whole thing up out of whole cloth and published it in his 1991 book *Get Published! Get Produced!: A Literary Agent’s Tips on How to Sell Your Writing*. The legend grew from that publicity-seeking fabrication.

Hemingway’s “primordial” contribution to the development of the genre was twofold. On the one hand, his stark, deeply elliptical narrative style, which favored narrative frugality and rejected any form of ornamentation, was naturally conducive to flash fiction. On the other, his classic 750-word story “A Very Short Story” (1924) can be rightly viewed as a precursor to many of the flash fictions written in the United States from the 1980s onwards. The protagonist, an unnamed soldier injured during World War I, falls in love with Luz, the nurse who cares for him in an Italian hospital. After the war ends, he returns home to find employment, so they can get married. The text ends in a paradigmatically oblique manner:

He went to America on a boat from Genoa. Luz went back to Pordonone to open a hospital. It was lonely and rainy there, and there was a battalion of arditi quartered in the town. Living in the muddy, rainy town in the winter, the major of the battalion made love

to Luz, and she had never known Italians before, and finally wrote to the States that theirs had only been a boy and girl affair. She was sorry, and she knew he would probably not be able to understand, but might some day forgive her, and be grateful to her, and she expected, absolutely unexpectedly, to be married in the spring. She loved him as always, but she realized now it was only a boy and girl love. She hoped he would have a great career, and believed in him absolutely. She knew it was for the best.

The major did not marry her in the spring, or any other time. Luz never got an answer to the letter to Chicago about it. A short time after he contracted gonorrhea from a sales girl in a loop department store while riding in a taxicab through Lincoln Park. (Hemingway 134)

Known –like Twain and Bierce– for his masterful use of humor, Fredric Brown wrote numerous brief –one to three pages– science fiction and mystery stories, often featuring sophisticated plotting techniques and surprise endings. *Nightmares and Geezenstacks* (1961) contains forty-seven very short pieces written since the 1940s, thirty-eight of which are vignettes with cruel, ironic climaxes. This collection, plus additional stories, was later published, together with *Honeymoon in Hell* (1958), under the title *And the Gods Laughed* (1961). One of the stories included in that compilation is “Sentry,” commonly considered a paradigmatic sample of the genre:

He was wet and muddy and hungry and cold and he was fifty thousand light-years from home.

A strange blue sun gave light, and gravity, twice what he was used to, made every movement difficult.

But in tens of thousands of years this part of war hadn't changed. The flyboys were fine with their sleek spaceships and their fancy weapons. When the chips are down, though, it was still the foot soldier, the infantry, that had to take the ground and hold it, foot by bloody foot. Like this damned planet of a star he's never heard of until they'd landed him there. And now it was sacred ground because the aliens were there too. The aliens, the only other intelligent race in the Galaxy... cruel, hideous and repulsive monsters.

Contact had been made with them near the center of the Galaxy, after the slow, difficult colonization of a dozen thousand planets; and it had been war at sight; they'd shot without even trying to negotiate, or to make peace.

Now, planet by bitter planet, it was being fought out.

He was wet and muddy and hungry and cold, and the day was raw with a high wind that hurt his eyes. But the aliens were trying to infiltrate and every sentry post was vital.

He stayed alert, gun ready. Fifty thousand light-years from home, fighting on a strange world and wondering if he'd ever live to see home again.

And then he saw one of them crawling toward him. He drew a bead and fired. The alien made that strange horrible sound they all make, then lay still.

He shuddered at the sound and sight of the alien lying there. One ought to be able to get used to them after a while, but he'd never been able to. Such repulsive creatures they were, with only two arms and two legs, ghastly white skins and no scales. (Brown 168)

Patricia Highsmith's *Little Tales of Misogyny* (originally published in German in 1975 and first published in English in 1978) is an anthology of very brief macabre stories (some, like “The Hand,” “Oona, the Holy Cave Woman,” or “The Coquette,” are just one and a half pages long) whose main characters are women who, by upholding the values prevalent in their social environment, end up destroying themselves and others. It is interesting to note how, as it was the case with Twain and Bierce, Highsmith

uses flash fiction, in combination with a downbeat brand of humor, to excoriate the common beliefs and norms of behavior of her time.

Also noteworthy is Sam Shepard's cult book *Motel Chronicles* (1982), a deeply personal mélange of poems, autobiographical reveries, photographs and untitled short short stories such as this one:

In Rapid City, South Dakota, my mother gave me ice cubes wrapped in napkins to suck on. I was teething then and the ice numbed my gums.

That night we crossed the Badlands. I rode in the shelf behind the back seat of the Plymouth and stared out at the stars. The glass of the window was freezing cold if you touched it.

We stopped on the prairie at a place with huge white plaster dinosaurs standing around in a circle. There was no town. Just these dinosaurs with lights shining up at them from the ground.

My mother carried me around in a brown Army blanket humming a slow tune. I think it was "Peg a' My Heart." She hummed it very softly to herself. Like her thoughts were far away.

We weaved slowly in and out through the dinosaurs. Through their legs. Under their bellies. Circling the Brontosaurus. Staring up at the teeth of Tyranosaurus Rex. They all had these little blue lights for eyes.

There were no people around. Just us and the dinosaurs.

9/1/80

Homestead Valley, Ca. (Shepard 9)

Further examples of early American flash fiction can be found in Ray Bradbury's "I See You Never" (1947), Kurt Vonnegut's "Next Door" (1955), Langston Hughes' "Thank You, M'am" (1958), John Cheever's "Reunion" (1962), Donald Barthelme's "The King of Jazz" (1978), Raymond Carver's "Popular Mechanics" (1978), John Updike's "Pygmalion" (1981), H. E. Francis' "Sitting" (1983), Gordon Lish's "The Merry Chase" (1985), Tobias Wolff's "Say Yes" (1985), Grace Paley's "Mother" (1985), and some of the short pieces by science fiction writers Philip K. Dick and Robert Sheckley.

4. The 1980s and after

The chronological line dividing the primordial times of American flash fiction from its "modern" era can be drawn in 1986, when Shapard and Thomas' first anthology of short short stories was published¹. This groping compilation – "*What are these things? [...] Why are we seeing so many of them now?*" wonders Shapard in the introduction (xiii)– was pivotal to the development of the genre in three ways. Firstly, through a careful selection of works, it enthusiastically showcased, for the benefit of both readers and writers, the expressive virtues of very short fiction. Secondly, as

¹Irving Howe and Ilana Wiener Howe's anthology was published four years earlier, but its scope was international. Only nine out of the thirty-five authors represented are American.

evidenced by the book's afterwords, where writers are asked to share their ideas on very short fiction—about which, observes Shapard, “[a]lmost nothing has been said [...] yet by literary critics” (xiii)—it helped create an awareness that very short fiction might not be a compressed version of short fiction, but a new narrative form altogether. That is, it gave readers, writers and critics the first intimation that a new narrative genre might have emerged in the United States. In this sense, most of the numerous anthologies published in the following decades follow Shapard and Thomas' lead. Thirdly, by including the work of well-known writers—such as Hemingway, Cheever, Updike, Hughes, Carver, Wolff, Tennessee Williams, Malamud, Joyce Carol Oates, or Robert Coover, who contributed an introductory piece appropriately called “A Sudden Story”—it established a respectable genealogy of very short fiction writers and provided the genre with “serious” literary credentials.

From that point onwards, writers of flash fiction fall mostly into two categories. First there are those who, like many of the primordial authors mentioned above, write “traditional” fiction—be it novels, novellas, or short stories—on occasion producing extra short pieces that are naturally—and more often than not unintentionally—compliant with the requirements of the genre. This is the case of Tim O'Brien's “Enemies”—included in *The Things They Carried* (1990)—David Foster Wallace's powerful “Incarnations of Burned Children”—included in *Oblivion* (2004)—Amy Hempel's “In the Animal Shelter,” “Memoir,” and “The Man in Bogotá”—included in *The Collected Stories* (2007)—George Saunders' “Sticks”—included in *Tenth of December* (2013)—or Lucia Berlin's “Macadam”—included in *A Manual for Cleaning Women* (2016)—which reads as follows:

When fresh it looks like caviar, sounds like broken glass, like someone chewing ice.

I'd chew ice when the lemonade was finished, swaying with my grandmother on the porch swing. We gazed down upon the chain gang paving Upson Street. A foreman poured the macadam; the convicts stomped it down with a heavy rhythmic beat. The chains rang; the macadam made the sound of applause.

The three of us said the word often. My mother because she hated where we lived, in squalor, and at least now we would have a macadam street. My grandmother just so wanted things clean—it would hold down the dust. Red Texan dust that blew in with gray tailings from the smelter, sifting into dunes on the polished hall floor, onto her mahogany table.

I used to say *macadam* out loud, to myself, because it sounded like the name for a friend. (Berlin 210)

More relevant to the purpose of this study, however, are those writers who, since the “official” emergence of flash fiction in the 1980s, have taken up the genre as their primary vehicle for narrative expression. Lydia Davis, the author of seven collections of flash fiction to date, including *Break It Down* (1986), *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* (2002), *Varieties of Disturbance* (2007), and *Can't and Won't* (2014), is probably the most representative author in this category. Two facts concerning her literary career illustrate the level of prestige to which she has raised the genre. In 2013 she was awarded the Booker International Prize. It is interesting to note that in the announcement speech, Booker judge Professor Sir Christopher Ricks, almost thirty years after the inception of the genre, still dwelled upon the difficulty to label it. How can we “categorize” Davis' stories? he wonders:

Should we simply concur with the official title and dub them stories? Or perhaps miniatures? Anecdotes? Essays? Jokes? Parables? Fables? Texts? Aphorisms, or even apophthegms? Prayers, or perhaps wisdom literature? Or might we settle for

observations? (Sherwin)

In 2015 *The Guardian* included Davis' book *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (2009) in a list of quintessential American fiction books, together with, among other American classics, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, William Faulkner's *Light in August* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*.

Davis' stories do away with conventional narrative and character development in favor of astringent wit and aphoristic wisdom. Ranging in length from one sentence to several pages, they feature an innovative blend of poetry, philosophy and fiction.

A Woman, Thirty

A woman, thirty, does not want to leave her childhood home.

Why should I leave home? These are my parents. They love me. Why should I go marry some man who will argue and shout at me?

Still, the woman likes to undress in front of the window. She wishes some man would at least look at her. (Davis 62)

Like many of his contemporaries, for many years novelist John Edgar Wideman felt "suspicious" of flash fiction because it seemed to "rely on gimmicks, or a tricky plot, or a surprise ending that stopped the reader in his tracks. That gets old fast." He also dismissed the genre as "finger exercises, practice for the longer haul" (Diffily). His opinion of the genre changed when *O: The Oprah Magazine* commissioned him a story of less than five hundred words for its July, 2006 issue. To his surprise, Wideman enjoyed the exercise so much that he ended up embracing flash fiction and creating a book of microstories appropriately entitled *Briefs: Stories for the Palm of the Mind* (2010). "Witness" is the first piece of this collection:

Six floors up on my little balcony when I heard shots and saw them boys running. My eyes went straight to the lot beside Mason's bar, and I saw something black not moving in the weeds and knew a body was lying there and knew it was dead. A 15-year-old boy, the papers said. Whole bunch of sirens and cops and spinning lights the night I'm talking about. I watched till after they rolled him away and then everything got quiet again as it ever gets round here, so I'm sure the boy's people not out there that night. Didn't see them till next morning. I'm looking down at those weeds. A couple's coming slow on Frankstown with a girl by the hand, had to be the boy's baby sister. They pass terrible Mason's and stop exactly next to the spot the boy died. How did they know. Then they commence to swaying, bowing, hugging, waving their arms about. Forgive me, Jesus, but look like they grief dancing, like the sidewalk too cold or too hot they had to jump around not to burn up. How'd his people find the spot. Could they hear my old mind working to guide them, lead them like I would if I could get up out this damn wheelchair and take them by the hand. (Wideman 2)

Other relevant contemporary writers using flash fiction as one of their primary means of expression are Bruce Holland Rogers –author of two collections of flash fiction: *Wind Over Heaven and Other Dark Tales* (2002) and *Thirteen Ways to Water and Other Stories* (2004)–, Steve Almond –author of the flash fiction collection *The Evil B. B. Chow and Other Stories* (2006)–, Robert Scotellaro –his work has appeared in such magazines as *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*, *Blink Ink*, and the *New Flash Fiction Review*, and he is the author of *Measuring the Distance: Flash Fiction* (2012)– and Grant Faulkner, cofounder of the online literary journal *100 Word*

Story and author of a collection of one-hundred-word stories called *Fissures* (2015).

Teju Cole, Jennifer Egan, and David Mitchell have successfully experimented with the 140-character story. Don Shea's work, including his celebrated story "Jumper Down" (2006), has appeared in the Norton anthologies *Flash Fiction* (1992) and *Flash Fiction Forward* (2006). Nancy Stohlman, coeditor of the three *Fast Forward* anthologies—*Volume 1* (2008), *A Collection of Flash Fiction: Volume 2* (2009), and *The Mix Tape: A Collection of Flash Fiction. Volume 3* (2010)—has published one collection of flash fiction—*The Vixen Screams and Other Bible Stories* (2014)—and two flash novels—*The Monster Opera* (2013) and *Searching for Suzi: A Flash Novel* (2009)—. Her flash fiction has been included in numerous anthologies, such as *Fast Forward: The Mix Tape* (2010), *The Incredible Shrinking Story* (2011), *What's Nature Got To Do With Me?* (2011), *Flash 101: Surviving the Fiction Apocalypse* (2012), and *Flash Fiction Funny* (2013).

David Galef is not only a gifted flash fiction writer, as proven by his 2011 collection *My Date With Neanderthal Woman*, but has also published a flash fiction handbook called *Brevity* (2016).

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