**Going Long. Going Short.**

**By**

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I’ve always wanted to go long, as in writing that big behemoth of a saga called the “Great American Novel,” no matter the absurdity of questing after such a holy grail. I thought the best way to understand the endless ribbons of America’s highways, the oozing boundaries of our suburbia and the rhythms of life they induce in us, resided in an ever expansive aesthetic of maximalist comprehensiveness, full of crisscrossing tentacles of story lines and sentences bursting with syntactic curlicues. Our souls sprawl with this land, after all. Think of the labyrinthine universe of David Foster Wallace, the dense weight of William Faulkner’s past (which I share only literarily, not genetically) or Saul Bellow’s overflowing, burbling prose.

Most of my writing life has been a training ground of “more,” so I rarely conceived of less. In the many creative-writing workshops I have attended, I so frequently heard “I want to know more about \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ .” More characterization, more back story, more details — more of everything. Rarely did anyone advise places to cut or condense. And I gave similar feedback, as if being tapped on the knee with a doctor’s rubber hammer.

A few years ago, however, a friend of mine, Paul Strohm, wrote a memoir consisting of 100 100-word stories. He modeled the form after a fixed-lens camera, with the idea that an arbitrary limit inspired compositional creativity.

[Flash fiction](http://www.flash-fiction-world.com/what-is-flash-fiction.html), which is defined as being a story under 1,000 words, goes by the names of “short shorts,” “miniatures,” “sudden fiction” and “postcard fiction,” among many others. There is no asking more, no premise of comprehensiveness, because flash fiction is a form that privileges excision (removal) over agglomeration (crowding/making dense), adhering more than any other narrative form to Hemingway’s famous iceberg dictum: only show the top 10 percent of your story, and leave the other 90 percent below water to be conjured.

This form speaks to the singularity of stray moments by calling attention to the spectral blank spaces around them; it can perfectly capture the disconnections that existentially define us, whether it’s the gulf between a loved one, the natural world or God.

“Flash fiction is about ambiguity,” [writes](http://www.amazon.com/Metal-Press-Field-Writing-Fiction/dp/0978984862#reader_B00BLLIS1U) the flash author Nathan Leslie. My memory, like that of many of us, tends not to follow a narrative trajectory with rising action as in a conventional plot, but is rather a collage smattered with as many small mundane moments as big, dramatic ones. Moods mix with events. The memory of a scent, an illness, a random day at the beach, a slight, can be as piquant and poignant to me as any more dramatic, plot-worthy event.

Such moments invite a different sort of treatment. I learned that each line of a flash story must carry a symbolic weight that moves the story forward. Yet, at the same time, the gaps within and around the story speak as large as the text itself.

Such evocative, fragmentary brevity makes this Twitter and Facebook era perfect for flash fiction. Flash allows literature to be a part of our everyday life, even if we are strange multitasking creatures addled by a world that demands more, more, more.

This process also works for me when I’m writing flash fiction. I’ll let a gush of “more” guide the initial narrative. But then I focus on words that can be carved from sentences and how paragraphs and chapters can move with hints rather than divulgences. I conceive of creating spaces around the chapters of my novel instead of cramming those spaces with skeins of connecting text. I feel a deep, even ecstatic pleasure when I shave entire pages away from a draft, as if I’ve cleaned out a messy closet. As much as I liked watching my word count go up in a first draft, I thrill to see it go down in a second draft.

Our lives are as much about the unspoken as the spoken.

**THE TENDERLOIN, 1997 *BY GRANT FAULKNER***

**The walls slobbered, the ceiling hovered, drooping close to Trevor’s nose. His bedside lamp retched rays of light. Pink window shades, urine-yellow wallpaper. In the flowery dapples of sun on the carpet he tried to see the dance of a girl's smile. Two men spoke Russian in the next room. Funny how when Russians speak, it always sounds like someone is going to get killed. The desk clerk held no religious or medicinal powers. Just a witness of it all. Trevor’s mother couldn’t have guessed he’d sleep with a pistol under his pillow. Everything starts as a game of pretend.**

*For example, I recently wrote a 100-word piece about a man waking up in a tawdry hotel. He feels a pistol under his pillow and thinks how his mother would have never imagined him in a situation like this. “Everything starts as a game of pretend,” the story concludes. I suppose I could have fleshed this out by writing about his close relationship with his mother, how he was a good boy, what had happened to put him there — and, sure, that could make a perfectly good short story or novel — but such back story wouldn’t as effectively evoke this simple, troubling situation: he is alone in unfriendly circumstances, still one part child, disoriented by where his decisions had led him. The story’s indeterminateness serves to invite the reader to infer the back story and conclusion in a more evocative way than I could have created it.*

**SUMMER FICTION SERIES: THE MARGIN** BY CURTIS SITTENFELD

*In 1987, when Jenny Ficker and I were in sixth grade, our goals were to have a double wedding at which we married the McMasterson twins, to trick my sister into drinking a glass of pee and to sneak in the middle of the night to Boland Square and put a bra on the Grecian-woman statue on top of the fountain. Weirdly enough, I did marry Andy McMasterson, but I lost touch with Jenny years ago; whenever I drive by the Boland Square statue, the bronze bosom still hangs there for everyone to see.*

**RAMONA** *BY*[*SARAH GERKENSMEYER*](http://americanshortfiction.org/2014/04/01/ramona/www.SarahGerkensmeyer.com)*| APRIL 1, 2014*

Ramona used to say, “When it’s on the outside I feel self-conscious.”

We did overnights at her house that summer. After finishing the sixth grade, we had stopped calling them sleepovers. Ramona had a full-sized bed, but I still felt scrunched up next to her when we were in it. We didn’t press into each other while we slept, but I think I felt pushed up against her because of what I knew about her heart. About how sometimes it flipped and somersaulted and somehow ended up on the outside of her skin, resting there on the wrong side of her body for a few seconds like a wild bird afraid to fly away but so eager to do it.

“When my family moved here, I was afraid I wouldn’t make a single friend.”

I told Ramona this while we were sitting out on her front steps at dusk, sucking on popsicles and bored out of our minds. We didn’t say it, but we were waiting for something big to happen. We were waiting for a boy to call and ask for one of us. Or better yet: for a boy—two of them!—to pass by Ramona’s house, trying to slouch their shoulders and barely nod while glancing our way. But half of the summer was dead already and neither of those things had happened.

“I thought meeting new people would be hard,” I said, chewing on my splintered popsicle stick. “And then bam, I met you.”

This wasn’t exactly true. I felt the urge to exaggerate things when I was around Ramona. I found myself making up little lies. I was the only person in the entire world who knew about her heart thing. I felt like I owed her something. I had nothing to confess, and so I made things up.

“I’m afraid of being abducted by aliens,” I lied.

“I shoplifted a bag of peanut M&Ms in the checkout line, standing right next to my mom,” I lied.

“Sheila Hastings is stupid. Her bangs are ugly,” I lied. “And I kicked her once in the hallway on the way to lunch.”

That summer, three bad things happened. Matt Gowen’s dad died of cancer. Tracy Turner’s dog Velvet got run over by a minivan. And then, at the beginning of August, Troy Benson’s little brother climbed into the baby pool and started to drown in only a few inches of water. The paramedics had to do CPR, and we all decided he’d be messed up forever after going through something like that.

“I wonder what it would be like if I started jogging,” Ramona said one night while we were sitting on her bed, painting our toenails lime green.

That’s all she said, but I knew exactly what she meant. Some girls our age had started jogging around the neighborhood in packs. It was the girls who had started to develop. They didn’t jog because it was healthy. They jogged so they could wear tight, neon-colored exercise clothes, the sudden swelling on their chests pushing out against bright elastic, tugging them forward along the streets of our neighborhood and into the rest of their lives. I knew that Ramona wanted to jog and see if her heart would push itself out while she was panting and sputtering. She’d have a bulge on her little chest then. Who cares if it was only on one side?  Imagine being with a boy, in a basement or a closet, and then that sudden beating on the outside of your chest. Imagine that he wouldn’t be grossed out at all. Imagine that he’d let out a moan, some unbelievable sound, because of the way your body was being right there in front of him. Ramona never confessed to any daydreams like that, but I knew she had them. I had them for her.

I practically lived at Ramona’s house that summer. Almost every night I was stretched out there on her bed, waiting for sleep and feeling the humidity press into every part of me like a secret I figured someday I might identify and then maybe understand.

“See,” she said the first time she showed me. “It’s like this.”

Ramona pulled her tank top up and there it was: a heart beating on the outside of her chest. I didn’t scream like I thought I would. I didn’t cover my eyes or gag or laugh uncontrollably. I just looked at it. I nodded my head. “Okay,” I said. And then I blinked or glanced at her face, and when I looked again it was already gone. She didn’t have her bra on. We had each bought the same size and the same style at the beginning of the summer, even though neither of us needed one yet. We hardly wore them when it was just the two of us lazing around her house, waiting for the world to happen. Ramona kept her tank top pulled up even after her heart had disappeared. I stared at her chest. It was creamy and bare and ordinary—no trace of the bloody, glistening muscle that had been galloping there only seconds before.

I miss Ramona. It’s a simple kind of missing. It’s the way vague regret and longing pool in your stomach when you shouldn’t be feeling anything at all—while pulling laundry out of the washer, while walking the dog, while reaching for something in the shower with your eyes squeezed shut. The two of us were careless and let whatever we had dissolve into a leftover pang of almost-nostalgia. Who knows where she is now?

“Turn your stomach inside out,” she said one night.

I was almost asleep. I opened my eyes up to the dark.

“What?”

“I mean, for real,” she said. There was that mean, annoyed flip that sometimes came out at the ends of her sentences.

“Like this,” she said. She turned on the little lamp next to her bed, and her heart was there again, beating and wet against the delicate V of her unbuttoned nightgown. The openings and valves and the whole mess of it sucked at the air like an angry, stranded fish.

I think about that heart late at night, my husband pressed here in bed next to me. I try to reach back into my childhood and pin lanky, eleven-year-old Ramona with eating disorders and depression and the hungry, open mouth of loneliness. But really, it was just that thing with her heart. That’s all. And I’m jealous. I still do it—lie here in bed and try to push things outside of myself. I’m jealous of any woman who has ever given birth. Think of it—something being forced out like that, gravity or fate or whatever it is pulling away at you like a stubborn, certain thing.

Reactions:

SORRY DAN, BUT IT’S NO LONGER NECESSARY FOR A HUMAN TO SERVE AS CEO OF THIS COMPANY.

BY [ERIK COFER](http://www.mcsweeneys.net/authors/erik-cofer)

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I like you, Dan, I really do. You’ve been the face of this company for many years, overseeing a period of unprecedented net growth. And on a more personal level, you’ve become a dear friend. Heck, our wives attend spin class together twice a week! But unfortunately, friendship only means so much in today’s cutthroat business environment. We—that is, the board and I—have poured over every possible budgetary alteration, and we just can’t conceive of a scenario in which retaining your services makes logistical sense. All the research we’ve conducted behind your back over the last three years suggests that the position of chief executive officer for our multi-billion dollar corporation can be more efficiently performed by a robot.

Effective immediately, you have been relieved of your duties.ROB-X164, seated to your left, will be sworn in as your replacement, with a formal announcement coming this afternoon. While we’re sure this is quite a shock to you right now, we do believe that in time you will accept that this decision is in the best interest of the company.

In your present state of fury, you’re probably wondering, “What makes ROB so special?” The short answer? Everything. We see in ROB a more personable, less error-prone version of you. In our trial runs, he’s performed admirably, demonstrating unparalleled adeptness in strategizing, team-building, allocating, internally storing frozen foods, and launching fastballs in excess of 200 miles per hour. What we’re talking about here is someone who can guide this company to unscaled heights, not to mention its first corporate league softball championship in thirteen years.

ROB has proven himself to be quite the workaholic. It’s a never-ending cycle of productivity with this guy—there’s no taking off for sick days, vacation, or even sleep. There’s also no division of commitment to worry about. No wife, no kids, no embarrassing coke problem. In other words, he’s not burdened with the distractions that plague sentient beings.

He completes tasks at astounding rates—rates you simply can’t compete with. Let’s say he wanted to make love to your wife, which he most certainly does not, as he’s completely devoid of sexual desire, but if he did, he could do so in one quarter of the time it takes you, with half the effort and twice the vigor, eliciting sixty-four times the sexual satisfaction. Factoring in your age, heart rate, and penis size, as well as that new Facebook pic of your wife in compression shorts, ROB arrived at these figures in 3.7 seconds, or, approximately the amount of time it takes you to react to the most vanilla softball pitch imaginable.

If you’re still not convinced of ROB’s utter superiority in every conceivable facet, take a gander at these visual aids:

* Here’s a photo of ROB shaking hands with a prominent shareholder. What a grip!
* Here’s a chart of our projected earnings over the next five years. Notice the sharp upward spike at the chart’s left extreme. That signifies the moment you exit the building, which should occur within the next seven minutes.
* Observe the accompanying GIF: a smiling baby perpetually surfing through waves and waves of cash. We expect the company’s future to closely resemble this image.
* And here’s my favorite. As you can see, it’s an oil painting of ROB embracing me in his arms, lifting me up to the heavens as I triumphantly hoist the corporate softball league championship trophy. You may have noticed that the year engraved on the trophy is outdated. Unfortunately, ROB was still in beta testing last season.

Look, Dan, this is a tough break for you, no doubt. It’s not every day you’re told that your job—for which your entire sense of self-worth hinges upon—can be better managed by a series of interconnected chips and wires concealed beneath a shiny, metallic exterior. In fact, it’s really only one day that this happens, and that day is today, so things can’t get much worse for you going forward. Take comfort in that.

Please be sure to hand your office keys over to HR on your way out. And Dan, lest you suspect that this is some sort of calculated, vindictive act on my part, trust me when I say that this decision has nothing to do with you hitting into a game-ending double play with the bases loaded in the championship game four years ago. Absolutely nothing to do with it at all.

Reactions: