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Hand Me Downs and Other Stories: A Flash Fiction Study

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Abstract

Flash fiction is generally classified as short stories fewer than one thousand words and has surged in popularity since the 1980s. Its contemporary roots cause it to be a highly experimental genre through form, content, and narrative techniques. This portfolio is both a critical study and creative exercise on flash fiction. It includes reflections on technical and creative flash fiction books that discuss what defines the genre and how it is exemplified by specific authors, as well as personal responses on the author's understanding her own writing process and how she can apply flash fiction conventions to her work. This study culminates into a chapbook of twelve original pieces of flash fiction that reflect the author's personalized understanding and creative approach to the genre.

Author's Statement

The first time I heard someone talk about flash fiction, I knew it was going to become something that I could never get out of my head. Back then, at the ripe old age of twenty, I thought I knew every form of storytelling out there; I thought I had rung them dry with my short stories of a few thousand words and poetry that talked too much about love because it didn't know what else to do with itself. So hearing a friend mention this new kind of story with a catchy name filled me with curiosity and excitement. I ordered a stack of flash fiction collections, prepared to tear through them and stuff myself with content, and then didn't touch most of them for months. I still haven't.

I've recently noticed that my favorite types of literature are ones that I would never attempt to write myself. I fall back on the excuse that I would never be able to achieve what these pieces do, and so it's best to admire them as a reader and not a writer. This attitude is not just lazy, but self-sabotaging. To find a story that makes me curse in excitement is the best feeling I can wish upon myself, and my only goal as a writer to create that experience in my own work. So I've finally stopped staring at the pile of flash fiction on my desk and dared myself to make some of my own. Over the past four months, I've become acquainted with the ever-fluctuating genre that is flash fiction and what makes it memorable. I started this endeavor full of anxiety that I wouldn't be able to write a successful flash piece to save my life, but the more I discovered about it, the more comfortable I became with it.

What drew me to this genre to begin with is how blurred it is. It refuses to sit inside any established frame and instead makes a space for itself, spreading its edges over conventions for poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. It is so experimental that critics cannot reliably define it, and the

only consistent rules it seems to have is that it must be short, and the author must say it's flash. Despite this inherent liminality, I found myself tying my pieces to the physical world as I created this chapbook. Each of these stories started with an object—something that sparked my interest and made me wonder how it could function as a character. I wondered how a person could have a relationship with something inanimate, what kind of influence it could gain, how far it could reach. I thought of how objects get passed along loved ones and strangers and leave faint trails wherever they go, like memories. I held my stories in my hands, split their edges apart and resealed them, and let their voices lap over one another. At the end of this project, each piece felt like a hand-me-down—small and a bit roughed-up, demanding to be shared with others.

These stories were tests to see if I finally had the courage to take on a genre I have admired from afar and make it my own. The past few months have given me some well-needed reminders about the fluidity of literature and importance to never be totally comfortable with my own writing, otherwise I'll never feel the need to change. I'm forever grateful to Colin Rafferty for his mentorship, openness, and encouragement as I navigated through the technicalities of flash fiction and found a definition of my own; to Kate Haffey for introducing me to *all* the spooky feminist writers; to Shyan Murphy, Joseph Hearl, Will Everett, Amani Redic, Justin Curtis, Hannah Killian, Olivia Blake, Sarah Giuseppe, and Nikolas Dennis for their wholehearted support and enthusiasm in this project throughout all its stages; and to Sarah Tan and Nick Papazian for being emotional rocks through every late night of work, stress-induced rant, and (rare) burst of pride. These stories are flashes of the world around me, and I couldn't have found inspiration for any of them without the people who tether me to it. Thank you.

HAND ME DOWNS

PART ONE: RITUALS

How the Neighborhood Girls Run Their Monthly Slumber Party

At dusk, their bare feet start pattering over the cooked cul-de-sac in an erratic drumbeat. They never wear satin pajamas. The fabric is too loose and slips over their thighs like a cold hand. Instead, they take button-downs from their father's closets and chop up the sleeves with scissors, find old vacation tees from beaches and theme parks nibbled by moths, wear flannels until their elbows rub through the cotton. Hair flies loose, dripping down their backs like tails or springing off their heads in natural curls. Nails are bare and framed with dirt and glinting minerals that match their eyes. Elbows knock together like windchimes.

They pilfer makeup from their mothers' vanities and rub shadow into the hollows of their cheeks. They braid each other's hair, weaving twigs into the knots, staining clumps with red berries. The fresh lines scratched into the backs of their necks read like fortunes. They bake cookies out of beetles and loose soil and steep tea with spiders' nests. They pluck minnows from the stream and run the slick scales over their lips. Moss catches between their toes as they watch for meteors. Constellations smirk back at their waxy teeth. They don't sleep with pillows, but tuck themselves into one another, heads resting on arms and legs and stomachs, tuned to the echoing pulses that pound against the earth beneath them. Before the sun fully rises, they find their way back, stumbling blindly across pavement, muddy footprints leaving a fresh trail for them to follow.

**Whenever She Shops at Antique Stores,
She Steals from the Clocks**

Sometimes it's as simple as plucking out the batteries, crusted and flaking with powdered Zinc. Sometimes they've already been removed, so she picks off the second hands to use as toothpicks. In the older clocks, the ones of burnished gold and heaving chains, she snatches gears and hinges, scratches off paint until they are faceless statues, gaping.

She pulls the tabs off fossilized soda cans, entombing the liquid inside. She tries to rub the names off license plates, bleeding rust onto her hands until her fingers throb red and brown, then coats her lips with the tangy powder. If she has time, she stops by the postcards and reads the ones cramped with twenty-cent stories about harbor towns and backyard chickens. She runs her thumb over the words, looking for warmth in the fuzzing paper muddled with lead.

Once outside, she shoves her hands into her sloshing coat pockets, holds her currency just under her nose, and breathes deep.

Hunting Lessons

The hunter woke on the forest floor to the smell of rot. He was propped against a wide tree, moss cushioning his spine, tucked underneath a mass of dead leaves that had not been there when he closed his eyes some time ago to rest. Uncertain fingers twitched against the shotgun lying parallel to his legs. Only his eyes moved as he scanned the woods around him, straining to find movement. His whole body itched with the feeling of being watched.

Without welcome, his wife's warnings drifted into his head. Her family had lived in this valley for more generations than he could count with his hands. They were as stuck to the land here as the rocks. Their accounts of the town were the backbone of its history, and the public library was filled with their tales of misplaced belongings and townspeople, ingrained in children's minds by the time they started school. Every night, his wife told their own kids a new story about these thieves, these creatures with skin pale and cracked like stone and hair dark as wood. *They can shift into anything from the bird on your windowsill to the stray cat trailing you down the street, she'd say. So always look over your shoulder twice before coming inside and never leave a window open overnight.*

She forbade him from setting foot on a hunting trail without a sliver of bone strung around his neck for protection. Carved into it was a prayer he couldn't read in a language he had never seen. *It holds you closer to our world than theirs.* He never asked where the bone had been plucked from.

Nothing stirred. The only breaks in silence came from chittering birds, hidden behind the leaves still clinging to their branches. He rose from his bed, leaves sloughing off him, and slung his gun and small pack over his shoulders. He started collecting the leaves into a rough pile, careful

not to make much noise, stacking them so high that when he finished, they looked as if they could be hiding a body. With one last scan of his surroundings, the hunter scaled the tree until he found a strong enough perch directly above the pile and steeled himself for the wait.

✂

He caught himself from falling out of the tree for the third time, his head muddled with sleep. He shifted, his legs crackling in protest, and rummaged inside his coat for a minute before drawing a pocket knife. He held it in front of him as if he was displaying it to the birds, auctioning it off. A jay in a neighboring tree hopped closer to him when the blade glinted in the sun.

To stay awake, he began slicing a notch into his branch every minute, quickly settling into the monotony. The forest cooled, shifting into dusk. His wife would be furious at him for staying out so late, but only when he came back. Right now, she was likely pacing in the kitchen, straining to see as far down the road as possible, muttering under breath, clutching the sachet she had stuffed with clover and teeth that hung by the door. Right now, she was trying not to conjure shapes out of the dark, to see a person out of the clouds of dirt the wind picked up from their road.

The hunter's hand froze, suddenly aware of all the nicks in the wood. If he continued, he would cut himself right out of his hiding spot. A purple haze hung over the trees. *It's most dangerous at dusk, when they can most easily move from their world to ours.*

A crunching noise—something creeping over the dried grass—drew his eyes to the ground. Straining in the last light, he could just make out a lumbering, low figure. As it shifted closer, he noticed flattened ears and wide paws. A mountain lion weaved between the trees, a cub with a puffy coat trailing after her. He watched transfixed as she slinked to the leaf pile, tail swaying like a branch, her cub mirroring her movements.

She pounced and he could not help but flinch, grabbing his lifeline of a tree limb. Leaves swirled in the air as the cat rummaged through the pile, grunting aggravatedly. It was almost amusing, as if she was convinced that he was still lying in wait for her, tucked away just out of the corner of her eye. The cub mewed in confusion, and she led him away. The hunter watched until their forms were totally swallowed by the dark.

Somewhat dejectedly, he shimmied down the trunk. His wife would wring his neck like a wet towel for thinking this, but he part of him hoped that something else had tried to trap him, that he'd be the first to see these creatures face-to-face in decades. That perhaps he could have even caught it, brought it to his wife to string up by their doorstep.

It was properly night. His forest stretched into a new shape, buzzing with noises he couldn't define. Brushing himself of bark and dirt, he began his hike back to town. The whole way, he made sure to stick to the middle of the trails. He didn't look back, not once, no matter what rustled and whispered at him from the trees.

Drip Pot

I only drink coffee when it rains. I dig the pot out of the hall closet, toss a handful of grounds into the filter, and leave it out on the back porch to gather the drops. Sometimes days pass before it collects enough for a single cup. Other times the rain is so harsh that I fear it will break the glass and send shrapnel throughout the yard. I sit on a stool in the kitchen and watch through the window as murky water throws itself against the pot's sides, trying to escape. Sometimes squirrels climb on top the railing and knock the pot into the bushes, forcing me to start over. Birds peck at it curiously, the clinking glass echoing throughout the neighborhood. After the pot fills, I throw the sodden filter in the grass for raccoons to scarf up. We've made a routine by now, and on the first clear night after a storm they slink across the yard in droves to pick the lump apart with their paws. Their chattering rocks me to sleep.

A Shadow Comes in Pieces

He thought he burned them all, snuffed them out, papers weak with the oil of his skin from all the times he traced each word like a mapped road, lost. He stuffed them down the garbage disposal, soaked them in spilled tea, shuffled them in with orange peels to toss into the compost.

But the love notes still appear, sprouting from coat pockets and book pages, sticking to him like IOUs.

Home Remedies

By the time Lia finally got around to seeing magic, she was already tall enough to look over the kitchen counter on her own. She was in Italy for the summer, hidden in the countryside with her uncle while he harvested the season's first batch of figs from his orchard. Every morning, Lia trailed behind him as he and the rest of the family plucked the ripe fruit from trees, laying them gently in lined wicker baskets to prevent bruising. Her bare feet soaked up the juice from rotting fruit, staining them red and purple.

Afternoons clattered with glass jars in boiling pots of water, knives chopping herbs, and figs splashing in the sink. Her uncle only let her sit at the table and watch as he prepped for pickling—the first week she arrived, she sliced her finger so badly while halving figs that she thought she chopped it clean off. The bone glared at her through blood and skin, and she dropped to the floor in a near faint. *Sciocco*, her uncle chastised as he yanked rough stitches through her skin, turning her head away every time she tried to peek at the wound. A thick roll of gauze still covered her finger, leaving her useless to do anything but take disinfected jars out of the water with tongs and plop figs in them before her uncle filled them with brine.

The kitchen felt like an attack. Cinnamon and allspice berries stuffed her nose, rosemary scratched her wrists, and balsamic coated her throat. Sweat dribbled down her neck, and as her uncle drained the first batch of cooked figs, she went to open the patio doors and burst the balloon of heat. The house teetered on the cusp of a short hill, and sunlight glinted off the pond at its base, catching Lia's eye and pinning her to the threshold. Past the water, along the sparse tree line, she noticed something shifting, slowly, more deliberate than a deer. *Tornerò*, she said without turning,

and just made out her uncle's presto as she started stumbling down the hill, grass nicking her ankles.

She thought the branches were moving at first, even though there was no wind. That was how thin her arms were, how fluidly she moved through the air. The whole pond separated them, but Lia still caught her breath as the woman shed the shadows of the woods and stepped onto the shore. Her hair billowed like white fire, catching every bit of sunlight and trailing it down her back. Lia couldn't see her eyes—the woman never looked up from her feet—but knew they would stun her if given the chance. She held something in her palm and turned it round, mumbling in an accent that Lia could not make out. The woman turned towards the water, set her token in the sand, and walked straight into the pond until the last strand of her hair was submerged. Lia waited for bubbles, for the woman to appear before her, sopping wet, but nothing came. The sun cooked her back and arms, prodding her along, and she trotted across the shore until she reached what the woman left behind: a finger, small as a child's, flushed as if blood still ran through it. The sand around it was pristine, untouched by footprints. Lia glanced back at the pond to find the water still as a mirror.

She picked up the finger with her good hand, startled by its icy temperature, and ran back up the hill. *Zio, guarda*, she said as she burst into the kitchen, arm extended.

Perfetto. Just in time. Put it in with the figs.

PART TWO: TOKENS

The Sending-Off Party

Nat calls around 9:30, suburban-bar-trivia-night drunk, demanding that I save her from her mother's horrible guesses. I don't come by until midnight, long after she's returned home. Her walking cast greets me at the door, clinging to her left leg like a barnacle. *It's so good to see you*, she squeals. *Do you want a drink?* I can only stay for twenty minutes—a self-imposed curfew. She totters to the kitchen anyway and yanks a chair over to reach the liquor cabinet. The bottles rattle in anticipation or uncertainty, depending on who's looking. The chair wobbles as if it's out to sea, and after multiple squeaks of fear from myself, Nat dismounts empty-handed. She rests her encased foot on the seat cushion like a ballerina stretching and smiles up at me, soft and warm as spring.

This is the last time I see her. Suitcases trickle out of her bedroom, ready to be dragged to Russia in four days. She wants to study political science. Propaganda. The uncertainty of it engulfs her. We wonder how travelling half a world away will be for this girl who is afraid of flying. How accepting this country will be to my friend who has not wanted to kiss a man in five years. How closely everyone will watch for her to slip on the ice that already surrounds her.

I drag the chair back to the kitchen table and turn to find her facing the refrigerator, stock-still. Its covered in bottle openers from every vacation her mother toted her on. Every town in the world seems to be connected with these small guitars painted with sunsets. Bevor passing into the living room, Nat rearranges them until the cities are alphabetized and the magnets line up like rows of targets. Under my breath I tell her to come back. She says *Maybe*.

Hometown Obituary

Let the highway exit gather you up and sweep you away like loose dirt. Drive twenty minutes down a scarred road that follows the river's edge like a hair. Count the shoes that line the shore, scattered among the pebbles, sun-bleached and desiccated from all the seasons they have stayed forgotten. Watch for houses hidden behind ranks of balding trees with backlit windows flickering like tired eyes. Turn right at the fork in the road, towards downtown. Roll the windows down and fill the car with stale air. Remember when the potholes felt like the largest caverns you would cross. Read every shop's sign, tally how many more have closed since the last time you visited. Trick yourself into seeing life behind the darkened storefronts. Count the fading bricks caught underneath streetlights. Try to find the one outside the corner store you scratched your initials into years ago with a pocket knife you didn't know how to use. Remember how your friends shivered in the winter air while watching for cops, how the knife passed between you all like a prayer. Wonder how many of them still have the same initials, if you would recognize them without those letters. Pull over. Squint harder. Understand how the bricks gaze back at you like a line of tombstones, waiting.

**In The 1940s, You Couldn't Break Someone's Heart
Without Nice Jewelry**

Or at least that was the rule my grandfather followed when he broke up with my grandmother for the second time. He could have coined that ideology, sold it on street corners to timid high-schoolers, patented it, published it, earned royalty checks for decades. Then maybe he could have afforded to buy my grandmother something nicer than the fake emerald clip-ons he picked up at a thrift store. They flashed like traffic lights and clung to her ears like brooches, the stones as fat as her fingernails. He wanted to give her something to remember him by, something that said that he cared for her but couldn't keep her—his post-Depression family's motto. He picked the earrings because he caught glimpses of his face in the stones when he held them. They wouldn't let him run away from the fear in his eyes or guilt lining his forehead. I bet he wanted her to wear them every day—or at least on Sundays and holidays. I bet he pictured her sitting at her bedroom desk, turning the earrings over in her palm, gazing at the photograph a passing stranger took of them on their first date. He bought them to tell himself to leave. The emeralds were a contract he drafted with himself—as long as she wore them, he could not go back to her; they would blind him in his tracks. For her, they were anchors keeping her in place. The clips would pinch her if she tried to run after him.

Two months later, she wore a ring with a single diamond, small and clear as a tear.

Syllabus

During her free period (Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10:30 to 11:45, when she was slotted to help the librarians restack shelves and email students about late fees), Lizzy Mun held open office hours in the third-floor girls' bathroom. The practice started six months ago, when she spotted—tucked behind the toilet paper dispenser, safe from custodians—a plea. *Teach me how to be cute.* She took it as a challenge, a call to action for her swath of dark hair, melted-honey eyes, and perfect posture. So she began taking notes—saw how the freshmen moved in groups like ducklings and hauled tote bags bigger than their torsos, how the art kids dipped their hair in color while the science girls piled messy buns atop their heads. And once she filled up a notebook with lectures, she opened her (stall) doors. Soon enough, girls began stuffing her locker with dollar-store candy and pastel gel pens—a tuition fee—hoping for an education.

At first, Lizzy only taught what they wanted. She gave vocal exercises on giggling, demonstrations on the perfect arch of tiptoes, tutorials on how to curl handwriting like fingers asking for favors. She wrote on the mirrors in old lipstick stolen from her sister's dresser and assigned homework on neon sticky notes. Every week, dozens of her classmates trickled through the bathroom, hall passes clutched to their chests like weapons. Their high-pitched voices bounced excitedly off the green-tiled floors, wrestling for attention, almost drowning Lizzy at times.

She kept this routine for weeks, finding confidence in the smacking of small heels and taste of burnt air from flatirons. Some girls left reviews on the stalls, scrunched in corners or written thin and small to keep them posted as long as possible before another layer of paint covered them up. *The hero of Year Eleven*, they said. *Better than anything I've learned from television. I'll ditch AP Chem all year for this.* Surprisingly, despite the extra work and confusion Lizzy was

giving teachers and custodians, no one ever caught her. Or at least, no one ever stopped her. It might have had to do with the bathroom's secluded location—only the shop kids ventured down this hallway, and the whirring of their machines worked wonderfully to drown out any noise—or the secrecy everyone swore to as soon as they passed the threshold. Or maybe no one could ever bother to ask where a quarter of the female students disappeared to every other day, especially when they strolled back into class with soft pink smiles and fluttering eyelashes.

Lizzy drew curiosity, she knew. A sense of entitlement. She learned to ignore the keen stares in the halls and smoke-trail of whispers behind her until one morning, after she shooed the last student out her office and shut the window she pried open earlier to clear out the reek of nail polish, she heard footsteps encroach on her from behind.

Teach me something. They spoke casually, friendly, like they did every day when they asked to borrow pens in World History or skip ahead of her in the cafeteria line. Their smiles curved like scars, pinning her against a stall, the cool door fusing into her shoulder blades, freezing her in place. Their shoes squeaked, closer, until she could feel the hairs on their arms grazing hers and smell their threatening sweat. They pushed the stall open, slowly, not breaking their stares, and she imagined the lock clicking shut behind them, entombing her, the noise shattering her bones.

The shrill ring of the class bell burst through the speakers, and they jumped so hard, she thought they'd been electrocuted. They scattered like rats, the bathroom door clattering in their wake. Lizzy stared at her reflection in a mirror ten feet away, a bystander. She couldn't meet it in the eyes as she scrubbed her hands under scalding water until her knuckles bled.

After, she taught multiple courses. In the introductory ones, she showed girls how to tuck thoughts behind their teeth, to twirl fingers around pieces of hair until their opinions braided

themselves into their scalps, tucked close for safekeeping. She taught them how to stand like rocks, impassible, unconquerable. To watch, to take notes, to wait.

Her Upper Levels were for those starting to grow anger behind their eyes, restless. She showed them how to speak like a spell, how to hang words on strings and pull them from their lips one by one, dangling in the air to dry. Heavy and dripping. She told them how to command attention, how to blind others with flashing eyes and teeth straight and pointed as a picket fence, holding them back. Just enough.

Come graduation, Lizzy taught half the school how to trick. How to fry their edges until they were soft and fuzzing, safe to the touch, but with a trail of soot in their wake. The girls' eyes turned hard as knives; their hair swung free like second shadows. Their steps clacked against the linoleum halls because they grinded their feet so deeply into the dirt that bone shone through their skin. They moved like sunlight, languid, welcoming, but with the unspoken promise of burning if anyone came too close. In Lizzy's bathroom, the stall doors were covered in marker, writing sprawling over every inch so intensely, the room looked scorched.

And Why Shouldn't You?

There is a box of matches and handwritten directions to the old lake house in the glovebox for occasions such as these. Your mother handed them to you years ago after you razed a cornfield trying to find the best view for a meteor shower. A GPS couldn't be trusted. It didn't know the right roads to take, the ones guarded with musty farmhouses and hillside cemeteries with tombstones leaning to get a peek at you. You know this route by heart. Your mother's handwriting twists off the paper and loops around your pinkie, a thread pulling taut. An anchor tucked between tissues and loose coins. You want to flee. You want to sit by the lakeshore as the ice-crusting water becomes thin enough to poke your nose through. You want to nestle in the lanky tree branches and wait until the birds cannot tell the difference between your skin and the bark. You want to freckle your shoulders with dappled light, slip under water warm as honey, pebbles glinting like coins underneath you. And why shouldn't you?

You grasp onto the map, fearful that it could crumble like a thought. This is a relic, something to be protected. Something to be burned if necessary, to be kept safe.

Hand Me Downs

The last time she saw him, she stole a shirt of a squirrel holding a martini glass. It was half full, a skewered acorn resting against its lip. The shirt was from his dresser—she snatched it when he wasn't looking, the sixth one she took from him—scrunched in a corner of the drawer she was rifling through for something to sleep in. She brought her own clothes but preferred wearing baggy ones to bed, something that made perfect sense to her, but he never seemed to understand.

“Why do you wear them at all?” he asked her once, earlier. She answered with a shrug. What could she say that would make sense to him? That she liked the extra warmth, how it made her feel safe, like she was being held, even though he always slept with his arm looped over her waist and nose tucked into her neck? He only slept in his boxers, which was a very male thing to do, she thought. He liked to feel her skin, he said. It was soft, comforting, and made him feel closer to her. She tried it once, as a gift to him, but could not sleep well. It was too abrasive, she thought. Too raw.

She doesn't plan to return any of the clothes she took from him. They're her perfect size, and well-worn like a hand. She's never worn the squirrel to bed, though. The night she saw it, she rolled it up, put it aside with her things, and picked another shirt to sleep in. She wears it to the grocery store, or her university classes, or downtown bars on weeknights—for the company. Whenever she slides it on and checks herself in the mirror, the squirrel meets her eyes quizzically, amused, holding out his drink like an offering.

Reading Reflection 1

Writing Fiction is largely geared towards short fiction and novel writing, but I still found its content beneficial and applicable to my writing process. The book mentions that what distinguishes short fiction from other types is the precision it requires, and I think that aspect is one of the reasons why I enjoy writing it so much. Short stories are equally challenging because of the limited frame authors have to convey themes that hold just as much weight as novels. Character development, pacing, imagery, and word choice count for so much more, and that is what makes short fiction so exciting for me. My favorite part about writing is arranging words together in just the right way so that I create a unique and impactful image. Therefore, my writing often has poetic elements in it. It is how I experiment with my storytelling and I find it has an incredible payoff. Approaching my prose through a poetic lens prompts me to constantly think of my writing in a new way and prevents me from relying too heavily on old tendencies. Poetry requires a devout level of attention to word choice, sound, and structure, and applying that focus towards fiction strengthens my work because it allows me to blend two genres I have deep emotional connections to and makes my writing feel more authentic.

Writing Fiction also talks about the balance between “hard time” and “soft time” with writing. “Hard time” is whenever the author physically sits down to write their story. “Soft time” is whenever the author is not literally writing but pondering their work. It’s just as important as hard time because it allows the author to take a step back and think of their story more critically—they can ask themselves what’s not working, what they’re trying to achieve, and possible ways they can take their story to reach the finish line.

I'll admit that lately I have spent more soft time on my writing than hard time. Fragments of ideas pop into my head and I let them float around for a couple days before they drift away without me ever taking the time to stop and write them out. Soft time is the more romantic part of writing because it requires less work; it's entirely free form and a nice creativity boost. The key is to act upon it and transition it into hard time.

While working with flash fiction, I'm going to pay specific attention to these points from *Writing Fiction*. Naturally, flash fiction requires even more precision than short stories, and I will need to put even more thought behind plot, characters, and language than I am used to. My experience with poetry will certainly help me with conveying a story within such a small space and will provide lots of opportunities for my penchant towards poetic language to shine. I will also make it a point to follow through on my soft time. Since I have never written flash fiction, I will need to play with my writing a lot more this semester and run with any idea I have. Even just writing down a short character description or line of dialogue can work as a nice prompt later on. My hard time is going to be spent testing out a lot of different styles, so my soft time needs to be used as an aid, not a distraction.

Reading Reflection 2

Since *Can't and Won't* is simply labeled as a collection of “stories,” I expected the pieces to follow a more traditional short story structure; instead, I was excited to see how much variation in length, language, and tone there is amongst Davis’ work. I could see how much she plays with her writing, how she pokes around at different conventions to find out what makes a story a story and how those can be altered for flash fiction. While some stories span multiple pages and are more plot heavy, most of Davis’ pieces take a kernel of traditional storytelling to zero in on. In the very first story, “A Story of Stolen Salamis,” Davis focuses on the characterization of the landlord. In “The Husband Seekers,” her main concern is with creating powerful imagery. Some stories highlight language, others form or voice. While Davis does not follow a basic “beginning, middle, end” timeline, she still creates stories with impactful messages by reaching her point as succinctly as possible. “The Dog Hair” is one of my favorites in the collection because it talks about a type of heartbreak that can be (and has been) drawn out into a full-length novel, but Davis manages to pull it off in a single paragraph. By condensing the final image of the owner collecting enough dog hair to rebuild their lost pet, Davis gives it much more weight and power than if it were strung out to fill multiple pages. The kind of impact that comes with brevity is something that she manages well as a tool, and something that needs to be taken into great consideration when writing flash fiction. There is less space to say what needs to be said, which is both a challenge and a blessing; while the tighter framework can be a bit daunting and stressful, it automatically gives each word more of a punch than it would otherwise have. For me, Davis’ stories offer a great bit of advice about the starting point of writing flash fiction: think of an image that intrigues

me, write it out, and then think about *why* that image interests me. Find the heart of it. Write it out again in a way that will stick.

Reading Reflection 3

Titles have been the bane of my existence since I started taking creative writing classes in high school. They are never something I think of when I write, and by the time I have finished working through my first draft and smoothing out the rougher edges, they sit before me like the largest, stubbornest hurdle I need to tackle. I understand the weight that titles have and their importance—they're the very first glimpses readers get of stories, and therefore need to be catchy, intriguing, revealing of the main themes of their stories, and seemingly different from everything else around them. Unfortunately, because I always wind up whipping my titles together at the last minute, they fall short on most of these criteria in my mind. I smack a few words on the top of the page that summarize the main image of my writing and avoid looking at it for the rest of my days. I'm never satisfied with my titles, but I never know how to fix them and make them into something I'm proud of. Michael Martone's essay on titling seems like it was written for me in that sense. Martone's main piece of advice is to treat the title with as much respect and gravity as the rest of the piece. Just because it's the initial greeting of the story does not mean that it should be allowed to exist separately from it, dangling on like a loose thread. Titles are arguably the most freeing part of stories because the only true rule regarding them is that they need to exist, and even that rule can be broken. What Martone loves most about the concept of titles is that they exist in this floating space free from the boundaries of storytelling conventions, and he uses that gray area to "negotiate" with his titles. He makes them take up more space than necessary, plays with tone and syntax, and works them into something more provoking than a catchy word. He seems to reflect my qualms with titles by stating that most authors take them for granted and do not use them to their full potential. I have definitely been guilty of this for many years, and Martone's musings

provide a great reference point to return to whenever I feel dejected by titles. By considering the titles before I write the actual story, pushing their boundaries as far as what they are allowed to say and how, and actively working with them to make sure they add to the story, titling can become less of a hindrance and more of a creative process.

Reading Reflection 4

Microfictions by Ana María Shua stands apart from the other flash fiction I have read so far this semester because the pieces are 1) translated from Spanish, and 2) not labeled as flash fiction. Her collection is broken up into seven parts, each labelled by a basic theme that the pieces within it center around. I read the first three: “Monsters,” “Dreams,” and “Magic,” and was taken in by the tone and voice of the stories in every section. Everything Shua writes feels like a conversation; she includes readers in them by using second-person points of view and keeps the stories simple with direct language and clear images. The tone remains light and casual in each piece—it feels as if the reader was sitting quietly in a room with Shua and she just looked up, told her story with a shrug, and returned to whatever she was doing.

Normally I hate writing that is overly casual, that feels it has been rushed out by the author and not given enough attention to, but Shua’s stories intrigue me because within their brevity and frankness is a clear attention to detail. She inserts little quips of humor (like a werewolf visiting a dentist) and mentions off-putting imagery (like dinner party guests hanging their skin in the closet like coats) matter-of-factly to open up the world of her story and force her audience to reevaluate the original assumptions they had while reading. This technique allows Shua to effectively create plot twists in one hundred or so words and adds so many more layers to her stories that prompt the reader to keep questioning the story after it has ended. I particularly experienced this in the “Monsters” section, where Shua throws in clever plots twists in the final sentences of many of her stories. For example, “If Only” is a short paragraph talking about unnamed creatures that have infested the narrator’s home and eat her food. It seems like a common nuisance until Shua ends the story with, “If only they were cockroaches.” This statement, although mundane in and of itself,

suddenly creates an unsettling tone and prompts endless questions about the narrator, setting, and plot. Shua repeats this tactic throughout her collection, and it feels like a breath of fresh air with fiction writing. These pieces are nice bits of advice that say it is okay to be direct—to tell and not show—in writing sometimes, because that brevity can be used to jar the reader and create intrigue. But to pull “telling over showing” off effectively, just as much attention to voice, tone, imagery, and language needs to be put into the story as “showing over telling.” Flash fiction doesn’t have the room for superfluous language, and so to become a successful with flash, writers need to shrug off the main mantra of creative writing classes and embrace the drama of simplicity.

Reading Reflection 5

I've lost count of the number of creative writing guides I have been assigned to read in college. The genre seems bottomless, because every creative writing class I've taken has recommended different books by accredited authors who all seem to say the same things: writing is equally inherent and learned, no universal teaching method of the subject exists, take everything in these books with a grain of salt. The more guides I read, the less inspired I feel to write. They become so formulaic that their lessons quickly lose their impact, so much so that throughout all the creative writing classes I've taken at UMW, I've kept just one of these books. *The Triggering Town* by Richard Hugo is the only guide on writing I've found helpful because Hugo does not treat writing as a technical subject. He doesn't consider it something that can be methodically dissected and easily understood. His small book isn't a lesson, but a conversation that he approaches with understanding and empathy. He never tries to hide behind precedents and formal techniques, and although his guide focuses on poetry, bits of his advice have stuck in my head for years and helped shape my outlook on all my writing.

One reminder that Hugo makes in the beginning of his book that I greatly appreciate is about the inherently personal nature of writing. I think that the (arguably) only goal of creative writing guides is to show how to successfully write for an audience. With that outlook, writers can easily lose touch with their work because they are considering it as a piece of entertainment instead of art. Good writing attempts to better understand the world on the author's own terms, not to pander to everyone else's. The best writing is the kind that people write solely for themselves, the kind that embraces itself as a solitary act both mentally and physically. That doesn't mean that writing should never be shared—Hugo fully acknowledges and supports the

community that writing creates but knows that it can become a trap if brought in too early in the writing process. By working with the reader standing over their shoulder, writers lose their personal connection to the words by turning their work outward. To be a writer (or any kind of artist) is to be alone and to be able to constantly interrogate and try to understand oneself. This is what Hugo means when he says, “An act of imagination is an act of self-acceptance.” As I’ve been exposed to new types of writing and developed my style as an undergrad, I have gradually learned to stop writing for a grade or for approval and to focus on writing for my own sake, otherwise my work would never have my voice.