

M I C R O F I C T I O N

**An Anthology of
Really Short Stories**

EDITED BY JEROME STERN

W. W. Norton & Company
New York London



Wrong Channel

Roberto Fernandez

Barbarita waited impatiently for her ride as beads of sweat dripped from her eyebrows into her third cup of cold syrupy espresso. She was headed for the toilet when she heard the knocking sounds of Mima's old Impala. "About time you got here," yelled Barbarita from the Florida room.

"It wouldn't start this morning."

Barbarita got in, tilted the rearview mirror, and applied enough rouge to her face for a healthier look. She wanted to make a good impression on the doctor who would approve her medical records for her green card. On the way to Jackson Memorial, Mima talked about her grandchildren.

Barbarita knocked down all the Bibles and *Reader's Digests* on the table when the nurse finally called her name.

"Sorry, ma'am, but you can't come in," the nurse said to Mima.

"I'm her interpreter," replied the polyglot.

"*No bueno*," said the doctor grimly as he walked in with Barbarita's X-rays. He told Mima, "Ask her if she had TB."

Mima turned to Barbarita. "He says, if you have a television?"

"Tell him yes, but in Havana. Not in Miami. But my daughter has a television here."

Mima told the doctor, "She says she had TV in Cuba, not in Miami, but her daughter has TV here."

"In that case we need to test her daughter for TB too."

Mima translated, "He says he needs to test your daughter's television to make sure it works, otherwise you cannot get your green card."

"Why the television?" asked a puzzled Barbarita.

"How many times did I tell you you needed to buy one? Don't you know, Barbarita? This is America."

20/20

Linda Brewer

By the time they reached Indiana, Bill realized that Ruthie, his driving companion, was incapable of theoretical debate. She drove okay, she went halves on gas, etc., but she refused to argue. She didn't seem to know how. Bill was used to East Coast women who disputed everything he said, every step of the way. Ruthie stuck to simple observation, like "Look, cows." He chalked it up to the fact that she was from rural Ohio and thrilled to death to be anywhere else.

She didn't mind driving into the setting sun. The third evening out, Bill rested his eyes while she cruised along making the occasional announcement.

"Indian paintbrush. A golden eagle."

Miles later he frowned. There was no Indian paintbrush, that he knew of, near Chicago.

The next evening, driving, Ruthie said, "I never thought I'd see a Bigfoot in real life." Bill turned and looked at the side of the road streaming innocently out behind them. Two red spots winked back—reflectors nailed to a tree stump.

"Ruthie, I'll drive," he said. She stopped the car and they changed places in the light of the evening star.

"I'm so glad I got to come with you," Ruthie said. Her eyes were big, blue, and capable of seeing wonderful sights. A white buffalo near Fargo. A UFO above Twin Falls. A handsome genius in the person of Bill himself. This last vision came to her in Spokane and Bill decided to let it ride.

*Wanting to Fly***Stephen Dunning****1990 WINNER**

At the State Fair a man in silver tights and handlebar mustache—some name like The Great Zambini—blasts from a cannon. Driving home, Father calls me “Goosey Zamboosi” and “Flying Weenie.” But later, when I spray my BVDs with Ma’s birdcage paint, he paddles me good.

Again.

For my ninth birthday, Ma gives me a silver-gray T-shirt with Halley’s Comet flashing across. I can fly in that

shirt—arms stiff, tilting. Then Mrs. McKissup catches us on the kindergarten slide. “You boys! Let the children use it.”

In two minutes Duncan and me’re in Beaver’s office.

“Childish,” Mr. Beaver says. “Selfish.” Duncan giggles. “What would you do, you’re trying to run a decent school?” We both giggle.

Father uses the hairbrush.

Duncan and me nail a refrigerator carton to the Frenzels’ porch roof. Duncan falls awful hard, grabbing his ankle. “It’s broke,” he hollers. I run for his ma. Next rain the Frenzels’ roof sprinkles like a watering can.

My last beating ever.

Wallace’s Carnival hires me to assemble rides—dollar a day, food, sleep anywhere I can. We head for Toledo, Willie Farley driving the ferris-wheel truck. It’s Willie teaches me cannon-flying. I get pretty famous.

Then of course Father and me get along. I’m home from Cole Brothers when Father drowns, ice-fishing with Arn Bower. Before they hook him, I see his face—mouth open and lopsided, a giant perch.

Arn Bower starts keeping Ma company, and that’s good. There’s women wherever I fly.

*All This***Joanne Avallon**

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Your arm and hand cock back instinctively, although they have never moved like this before, because your firstborn has taken a piece of your thigh between her two-year-old, sharp and white incisors, and it surprises you to find your arm in this position, you who dress her naked dolls so they won't look cold, but her teeth take deeper hold and drive everything out of your head except, oddly, your own father saying "silly bitch" when you were five and left your bike out in the rain and also the

sound, so compelling, of skin hitting skin and, even more oddly, something your aunt told you about your grandfather boxing your father's ear so bad it bled rough red stuff from the eardrum—all this, even the love you feel for both these men, rushes through you so fast you understand for the first time—as your hand descends—the phrase "seeing red" and the only thing between your hand and your child is your puny intellect scared shitless in some corner, so that just before your hand hits the tender part of her thigh, the part you had kissed just twenty minutes ago when changing her diaper and before she screams, your daughter looks at you first in disbelief and then in complete comprehension, as though, perhaps, she knew these stories all along, and you wonder, with terror, as you've never wondered before, if this is the history you've been trying to write.

Worry

Ron Wallace

She worried about people; he worried about things. And between them, that about covered it.

"What would you think of our daughter sleeping around?" she said.

"The porch steps are rotting," he replied. "Someone's going to fall through."

They were lying in bed together, talking. They had been lying in bed together talking these twenty-five years. First about whether to have children, he wanted to (although the roof was going fast); she didn't (Down's syndrome, leukemia, microcephaly, mumps). Then, after their daughter was born, a healthy seven pounds eleven

ounces ("She's not eating enough"; "The furnace is failing"), they talked about family matters, mostly ("Her friends are hoodlums, her room is a disaster"; "There's something about the brakes, the water heater's rusting out").

Worry grew between them like a son, with his own small insidencies and then more pressing demands. They stroked and coddled him; they set a place for him at the table; they sent him to kindergarten, private school, and college. Because he failed at nearly everything and always returned home, they loved him. After all, he was their son.

"I've been reading her diary. She does drugs. She sleeps around."

"I just don't think I can fix them myself. Where will we find a carpenter?"

Their daughter married her high school sweetheart, had a family, and started a health food store in a distant town. Although she recalled her childhood as fondly as anyone—how good her parents had been and how they worried for her, how old and infirm they must be growing, their house going to ruin—she rarely called or visited. She had worries of her own.

This Is How I Remember It

Betsy Kemper

Watching Joey pop the red berries into his mouth like Ju-Ju Bees and Mags only licking them at first, then chewing, so both of their smiles look bloody and I laugh though I don't eat even one . . . then suddenly our moms are all around us (although mine doesn't panic till she looks at the others, then screams along with them things like *God dammit did you eat these?* and shakes me so my "No" sounds like "oh-oh-oh") and then we're being yanked toward the house, me for once not resisting as

my mother scoops me into her arms, and inside the moms shove medicine, thick and purple, down our throats in the bathroom; Joey in the toilet, Mags in the sink, me staring at the hair in the tub drain as my mom pushes my head down, and there is red vomit everywhere, splashing on the mirror and powder-blue rugs, everywhere except the tub where mine is coming out yellow, the color of corn muffins from lunch, not a speck of red, *I told you*, I want to scream, and then it is over and I turn to my mother for a touch or a stroke on the head like the other moms (but she has moved to the doorway and lights a cigarette, pushes hair out of her eyes) and there is only her smeared lips saying, *This will teach you anyway*.

*The Mayor of the Sister City
Speaks to the Chamber of Commerce
in Klamath Falls, Oregon, on a
Night in December in 1976*

Michael Martone

1986 WINNER

"It was after the raid on Tokyo. We children were told to collect scraps of cloth. Anything we could find. We picked over the countryside; we stripped the scarecrows. I remember this remnant from my sister's obi. Red silk suns bounced like balls. And these patches were quilted together by the women in the prefecture. The seams were waxed as if to make the stitches rainproof. Instead they held air, gases, and the rags billowed out into balloons, the heavy heads of chrysanthemums. The balloons bobbed as

the soldiers attached the bombs. And then they rose up to the high wind, so many, like planets, heading into the rising sun and America. . . ."

I had stopped translating before he reached this point. I let his words fly away. It was a luncheon meeting. I looked down at the tables. The white napkins looked like mountain peaks of a range hung with clouds. We were high above them on the stage. I am yonsei, the fourth American generation. Four is an unlucky number in Japan. The old man, the mayor, was trying to say that the world was knit together with threads we could not see, that the wind was a bridge between people. It was a hot day. I told these beat businessmen about children long ago releasing the bright balloons, how they disappeared ages and ages ago. And all of them looked up as if to catch the first sight of the balloons returning to earth, a bright scrap of joy.

*A Gentleman's C***Padgett Powell**

My father, trying to finally graduate from college at sixty-two, came, by curious circumstance, to be enrolled in an English class I taught, and I was, perhaps, a bit tougher on him than I was on the others. Hadn't he been tougher on me than on other people's kids growing up? I gave him a hard, honest, low C. About what I felt he'd always given me.

We had a death in the family, and my mother and I traveled to the funeral. My father stayed put to complete

his exams—it was his final term. On the way home we learned that he had received his grades, which were low enough in the aggregate to prevent him from graduating, and reading this news on the dowdy sofa inside the front door, he leaned over as if to rest and had a heart attack and died.

For years I had thought the old man's passing away would not affect me, but it did.

*We Eat Our Peas for the
Souls in Purgatory*

Annette McPeters

1988 WINNER

Rob laid some gum on the counter. Mr. Freed asked was that all, and Rob's voice vanished. As Mr. Freed reached over and pulled the candy bars from Rob's jacket pocket, Rob's legs ached to run, like the boy in his nightmares who flailed in a choking sea.

"You think your father needs more trouble?"

Mr. Freed's words pumped along Rob's limbs as he passed the schoolyard. Sister Therese was sweeping leaves. Rob bent his face to the asphalt. He didn't want to think

about the nuns coming to pick him up, with their lies about starting diets tomorrow. He didn't want to sit jammed between them again, their haunches seeping from somber habits to the crevice of the car seat as they drove to Pelham, D'Angelo's, for pizza they couldn't resist from the bar they wouldn't enter.

The nuns never waited to eat. Yeasty fog filled the wagon; their cheeks bulged as they blessed Rob goodbye.

Down at the water he walked a rock jetty out over the Sound. The nuns said his mother was in heaven, another lie. Across the Sound, a stone angel spread her arms before miles of mown slopes. Rob's mother had accepted the angel's invitation.

The masts of moored boats chimed, off-key, as dusk came on. Rob took the other candy bars from his rear pocket, threw them on the water. Some dark flavor filled his mouth, regardless.

*Morning News***Jerome Stern**

I get bad news in the morning and faint. Lying on tile, I think about death and see the tombstone my wife and I saw twenty years ago in the hilly colonial cemetery in North Carolina: *Peace at last*. I wonder, where is fear? The doctor, embarrassed, picks me up off the floor and I stagger to my car. What do people do next?

I pick up my wife. I look at my wife. I think how much harder it would be for me if she were this sick. I remember the folk tale that once seemed so strange to

me, of the peasant wife beating her dying husband for abandoning her. For years, people have speculated on what they would do if they only had a week, a month a year to live. Feast or fast? I feel a failure of imagination. I should want something fantastic—a final meal atop the Eiffel Tower. Maybe I missed something not being brought up in a religion that would haunt me now with an operatic final confrontation between good and evil—I try to imagine myself a Puritan fearful of damnation, a saint awaiting glory.

But I have never been able to take seriously my earnestly mystical students, their belief that they were heading to join the ringing of the eternal spheres. So my wife and I drive to the giant discount warehouse. We sit on the floor like children and, in five minutes, pick out a 60-inch television, the largest set in the whole God damn store.

*Wallet***Allen Woodman**

Tired of losing his wallet to pickpockets, my father, at seventy, makes a phony one. He stuffs the phony wallet with expired food coupons and losing Florida Lottery tickets and a fortune cookie fortune that reads, "Life is the same old story told over and over."

In a full-length mirror, he tries the wallet in the back pocket of his pants. It hangs out fat with desire. "All oyster," he says to me, "no pearl."

We drive to the mall where he says he lost the last

one. I am the wheelman, left behind in the car, while my father cases a department store.

He is an old man trying to act feeble and childlike, and he overdoes it like stage makeup on a community-theater actor. He has even brought a walking stick for special effect. Packages of stretch socks clumsily slip from his fingers. He bends over farther than he has bent in years to retrieve them, allowing the false billfold to rise like a dark wish and be grappled by the passing shadow of a hand.

Then the unexpected happens. The thief is chased by an attentive salesclerk. Others join in. The thief subdued, the clerk holds up the reclaimed item. "Your wallet, sir. Your wallet." As she begins opening it, searching for identification, my father runs toward an exit. The worthless articles float to the floor.

Now my father is in the car, shouting for me to drive away. There will be time enough for silence and rest. We are both stupid with smiles and he is shouting, "Drive fast, drive fast."

MICRO FICTION

An Anthology of Really Short Stories

Ten years ago, Jerome Stern, director of the writing program at Florida State, initiated the World's Best Short Short Story Contest. Stories were to be about 250 words long; first prize was a check and a crate of oranges.

Two to three thousand stories began to show up annually, and National Public Radio regularly broadcast the winner. This anthology presents a decade of contest winners and selected finalists. In addition, Stern commissioned Micros, persuading a roster of writers to accept the challenge of completing a story in one page.

How *short* can a Micro be, you wonder. Look up Amy Hempel's contribution, and you'll see.

JEROME STERN, a professor of English and popular culture, was also the author of an acclaimed book on writing, *Making Shapely Fiction*. His incisive monologues, which he called "Radios," were heard regularly on National Public Radio. He died in 1996, but was able to make the final selection for this anthology.



*photo of Jerome Stern with Bear
by Pamela Ball*

Cover design by Paulin + Morris

www.wwnorton.com

W. W. NORTON

NEW YORK LONDON

\$9.95 USA
\$13.99 CAN.

ISBN 0-393-31432-4



9 780393 314328



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edited and introduced by
Jerome Stern

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