

Fewer Mice: A Creative Writing Portfolio

by

Jesslyn Kate Gillespie

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

University Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English
(Honors Associate)

Presented March 3, 2016
Commencement June 2016

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Jesslyn Gillespie for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English presented on March 3, 2016 Title: "Fewer Mice: A Creative Writing Portfolio " .

The creative writing portfolio *Fewer Mice* includes 53 "Liners" (comedic one-liners), four untitled prose poems, two flash-length stories ("Cleanup" and "Battle Creek"), and two short stories ("Pipes" and "Tulips"). The purpose of this portfolio was to explore the craft of writing and determine which techniques are specifically and personally beneficial to poem, flash, and short-story lengths. The method involved writing guide research ["Literature Review"], discussions with professional writers, and an extensive personal editing process. It was found that even though details and extensive dialogue seemed better suited for multiple-scene short stories, brevity, clarity, and ingenuity were helpful to all lengths of my personal writing.

Abstract approved:

Gilad Elbom

Key Words: creative fiction, short story, flash fiction, prose poetry

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Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English project of Jesslyn Kate
Gillespie presented on March 3, 2016

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent
collection of Oregon State University, University Honors
College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to
any reader upon request.

Jesslyn Kate Gillespie, Author

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT..... 3

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... 8

INTRODUCTION..... 11

LINERS..... 17

PROSE POETRY..... 24

Untitled #1..... 25

Untitled #2..... 26

Untitled #3..... 27

Untitled #4..... 28

Untitled #5..... 29

FLASH FICTION..... 30

Battle Creek..... 31

Cleanup..... 33

SHORT STORIES..... 38

Pipes..... 39

Tulips..... 53

CONCLUSION..... 64

WORKS CITED..... 67

INTRODUCTION

"Fewer Mice: A Creative Writing Portfolio" is intended as an undergraduate thesis; therefore, it requires academic analysis in addition to its creative body. I attempted to situate my work into a larger sphere of writing by defining literature as I used it, implementing goals, determining criteria for which pieces should be included, examining how other notable authors have inspired my writing and its processes, and narrowing in on three technical focuses (brevity, clarity, and ingenuity) and two creative focuses (rhythm and humor).

My strategy was to start from a broad perspective: defining literature. Specifically, I examined the false dichotomy that fiction can either be entertainment or art - that is, either "genre" or "literature." (In this project, only the quoted term "literature" refers to prestigious writing that is stereotypically viewed as expert or style-minded.) Two modern journalists that delved into this topic in 2012 were Lev Grossman from *Time Magazine* and Arthur Krystal from *The New Yorker*. They differ foremost in their opinions of what decides entertainment-writing and art-writing. Grossman claims genre fiction is plot-minded whereas "literature" is style-minded.

Krystal understood genre as escapist writing that elevates the reader from the mundanity of his or her life, and "literature" as dedicated to depicting reality in its true form, mundane or otherwise.

One of my goals was to dismantle this segregation and instead view fiction on a spectrum. However, in "Fewer Mice," I was inclined to produce writing that leaned more towards entertaining and commercial fiction, considering that up until this point my academic career has been biased towards the opposite. This decision does not mean I disregarded merit. As Krystal says in reference to a George Orwell essay, there are "good bad books" that does not serve any strict "literary standard." It was my intention, like many authors branching into commercial writing, to retain entertainment while avoiding "bad book" habits.

My titular phrase "Fewer Mice," touches on this debate. In "Prose Poem #1," I conclude that "it's funny how the truth needs an eraser to be believe; or at least, fewer mice" [25]. "Fewer mice" is a symbol for everyday strangeness; it is a rejection of realism as mundane. It represents this project's main claim: that everyday life is odd and strange and rarely as mundane or depressingly complicated as some "literature" depicts. In other words, I wanted to write realistic-yet-improbable fiction. I wanted to concentrate on the odd.

I had four goals:

1. To write for entertainment while retaining merit
2. To edit with a focus on brevity (concision), clarity (precision), rhythm (tone and tempo), ingenuity (originality), and humor (enjoyment)
3. To bring insight into the human experience not through the mundane, but through the imaginative
4. To determine which focuses are specifically and personally beneficial to "liner," prose poem, flash fiction, and short story lengths.

I had two criteria:

1. To include four variations of short-length fiction:
"Liners" (sentence/s), prose poems (paragraph), flash fiction (single-scene, about 1,000 words), and short stories (multiple-scenes, numerous intricate characters, about 3,000 words). Personally, I feel more comfortable and more inclined to longer works, specially novels. A concentration on shorter works was a deliberate step away from my comfort zone.
2. To include only writing written in the past year. I respect writing as an ongoing learning curve and I was

interested in building off of my most recent accomplishments.

My inspirations included:

1. Miranda July (*No One Belongs Here More Than You*. Scribner: 2005)

I enjoyed July's attention to the extremities and excitements of everyday life. She was my direct inspiration for writing realistic-yet-improbable fiction, specifically regarding the "Liners."

2. Tracy Chevalier (*Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Penguin Group: 1999)

Chevalier writes this novel with brevity and style. Her authenticating details are memorable, especially her analogies between character's voices and types of wood. This motif - comparing characters to inanimate objects - directly inspired my short story *Pipes* (39), which compares a dilapidated house with a dysfunctional family.

3. David Benioff (*City of Thieves*. Penguin Group: 2008)

Benioff is a classic commercial fiction writer that has recently progressed into film (head writer for HBO's *Game of Thrones*). His style is cinematic with well-planned

rising and falling tensions. In the novel *City of Thieves*, he does not shy away from an obvious exposition. Writers are typically encouraged to intertwine their backstories seamlessly into the plot so as to not bore readers.

However, Benioff's exposition was obvious, yet brief and helpful in addition to entertaining. I attempted this classic fairy-tale introduction in my short story *Tulips* (53).

4. Gillian Flynn (*Gone Girl*. Crown Publishing Group: 2006)

As a recently discovered commercial fiction writer, Flynn is a fast-learned expert in blending horror and humor in her murder mystery novels. She taught me to keep humor subtle when also confronting heavy themes, such as in *Pipes* (39). Her macabre humor was a direct influence on many of my "Liners," especially #25.

5. Francine Prose (*Reading Like a Writer*. Harper Perennial: 2006)

Prose's nonfiction writing guide touches on a variety of techniques, but was most beneficial to me in its discussion of details and dialogue. I learned to use dialogue sparingly, and that it can still be realistic without including all the "filler words" of casual speech.

Her book encouraged me to eliminate much of the dialogue, especially from my flash fiction, for brevity's sake.

6. "For Sale. Baby shoes. Never worn." (Unknown/Hemingway)

I have always enjoyed this flash fiction story and its ability to say so much with so little.

LINERS

1. Time waits for no man. Except Walter, that is, who would never know it, being the punctual sort to begin with.

2. He offered to buy her coffee once a week. She accepted. What he didn't know was that she'd already loved him for years, because of him, just that, nothing added. What he would never know was she would order nonfat milk for years, because of him, just that, nothing added.

3. She didn't have a significant other or even an insignificant other. But what she did have was a good pension, two corgis, and enough oomph to put lightning in your pants.

4. If you pour river water into a lake, is it lake water? If you pour lake water in the ocean, is it seawater? If you pour seawater in your eyes, is it tears? If you cry in your garden, is it rain? If you stand naked in the rain, is it a shower? If your neighbors call the police, should you run or stay indoors?

5. My body is a pet and must be cared for. It whines and sweats and is always on my mind. My mind, at night, must open the door to let it out.

6. She lost five pounds for the occasion. She chose "open" so the entire funeral party could see her slimmed thighs.
7. To the peasant who caught the flu in the time of plague, mistook it for the latter, and killed his family so it would not spread: It happens to the best of us.
8. She loved to watch the little birds sing in their bath before she learned it was mutual.
9. He walked on water even though the park posted signs against it.
10. For her entire life, the woman was told she was half-stupid. She never would know which half.
11. She had a severe, "aw-when-are-you-expecting?" sort of peanut allergy.
12. The morning that the bombs blew and all of humanity burned in the toxic hellfire of their mistakes, a penguin went for a swim.

13. He was just happy that this time when he pulled the hair from the drain, the head wasn't attached.
14. Save the Earth, if not for the children, than for the adults because we've recycled more.
15. She named her triplets "One", "Two", and "Four" just for the free pity.
16. His respect for women matured with time like a sexually repressed Gouda.
17. She bit her tongue and it bit back.
18. They told Judy she could not walk through solid things. They said, stay put, until change arrives. But a wall is an anxious thing: a Do-Not-Or-Else thing that threatens like a sledgehammer without the fist to carry it. And sure enough, Judy walked through that wall, unyielding to the laws of physics, uncaring of the momentum of her miracle, unknowing that the psych warden watched from the third-floor window.
19. She was a good doctor. They said she could shorten a cold to two days, and remove her own moles. They said she could

find a cancer cell in a haystack of scar tissue. They said that, if you closed your eyes and forgot she was in a white coat, you could almost believe she actually, truly cared.

20. There was a time when eternity blanketed a single atom, and a time when this atom burst and life was born. There will be a time when the stars will stop spinning and this atom will collapse once again. There were many times between all of this when Raúl could have not procrastinated, but none of them had seemed just right.

21. She never lost her sense of humor. She kept it safe in her glove box. She told this joke to whomever would listen. She commuted by bike.

22. Why is my self-worth dependent in my ability to produce life? Why do you insist on expensive fertility checks? Why do you search my morals for a reflection of your own? It is my choice, whether to house life. It is my choice, and I choose no, because look how it turned out for you.
Sincerely, Mars.

23. He would say hello. For months, he practiced in his cubicle. Smile, open mouth, say hello. And sure enough,

when she finally did notice him, he smiled, opened his mouth, shrieked like a goose and pulled the fire alarm. It was damn sexy, but she never told him that.

24. "Whoops," said God on February 29th.

25. He called her scatterbrained so she scattered his brains all over the asphalt, and then, for the life of her, could not remember where they'd parked the car.

26. "There's just something about you," girls crooned. "What is it?" he teased back with a kiss. Years later, an appendectomy would reveal the conjoined twin.

27. She felt reality slipping. One day, the buttery thing fell and hit the concrete with a crack. Babies were born from peanut shells. Cats flew.

28. Scientists confirm that croissants have feelings, too. They are puffed-up, delicate creatures. If you press them too hard, they wilt. If you butter them up, they giggle. Ask for directions in English and they'll spit smoke in your face.

29. For years, she watered her plastic garden. There was plastic grass, plastic roses with the tags still on, plastic vegetables from culinary shop displays. Her neighbors mocked her. But she kept watering. The other houses were downhill from her. Their tap water tasted like plastic -- for years.

30. God intended the salmon to evolve to the top of the food chain, but even He underestimated the influence of a good dill rub.

31. The willow whispered a secret to the bush, who relayed it to the cliff, who chuckled it to the morning lark, who told it to the moon, where the secret was kept for eternity because the moon cannot talk.

32. All yogurt is drinkable if you try hard enough.

33. Once upon a time, there was a species of hawk the size of a mosquito and a brilliant bird watcher with backwards binoculars.

34. The hunter carved the deer where it fell in the forest. His knife skated between the ribs, easy and warm. The liver spilled from the body, and the heart slipped out like a river

stone. When dusk fell, the hunter collected his cuts and stood up, but paused. Fireflies made two crowns, one above the stag, and one above his own head. Tears welled. He pressed a palm against the still-warm cheek of the beast and whispered, "loser."

35. Only after she built her throne upon the scorched bones of the male population did she recognize the extent of her daddy issues.

36. "Fungi by any other name still won't smell at all," said Shakespeare's wannabe brother.

37. Recent Discovery: Scientists confirm that victory tastes a little like cod.

38. The sixth stage of grief is death. The seventh is peace.

39. The ballerina didn't stop spinning when her feet blistered, or bled, or when she drilled like a corkscrew into the floor, or into the dirt, or into the rocks and mantle and core and the bowels of hell, where, feeling like she had finally mastered the step, she stopped with a flourish to the standing ovation of demons.

40. When he died and went to heaven, he found a warm, golden place. Five good years, the angels informed and handed him a margarita. Eternity was a common misunderstanding.

41. He had dog-like reflexes. They involved a lot of licking and truthfully, were not all that impressive.

42. Winning terrifies Joanne. Winning has obligations. Obligations for parades and celebrations and humility. Obligations to win again and again. Joanne works hard to lose everything. She loses her job and family and friends. When she wins the lottery, it is by accident, and she celebrates quietly in her closet with a spoon and can of frosting.

43. Letters from her were robbery. Upon their arrival, they rob my attention. Upon their opening, they rob the peace of my thoughts and the silence of my tongue, which clicks and hisses, an angry beetle thing -- and the steadiness of my pen, which must return the favor.

44. The rain sighed and let loose a storm. Pines shed their needles; rocks shed their clay. Rain and sap fell in thick drops, and rivers were born again.

45. The atlas bone is a real bone. It supports the brain, the world of the body. Nine billion bodies, all orbiting each other. Nine billion bodies, and not one in sync.

46. Which are you? Youngest or oldest? Middle, I said, of three girls. How unfortunate, the man replied. You are nowhere until one is gone.

47. Hose the dog, my father said. A clean dog is a good dog. So I did, and the creature twisted against the leash and howled. My father kicked it straight. Good dog, he told the damp thing.

48. He was the adventurous sort. He sailed the world, skydived regularly, and even ate a snake once. Actually, he ate a snake twice, but the second time had been an accident.

49. She loved polka dots since infancy. She decorated her bibs with well-placed stains. In her teenage years, she wore

dotted headbands. As an adult, she hid spotted socks beneath her pantsuits. Glaucoma was a wonderful surprise.

50. The narwhals kissed and the sea turned red.

51. Judith's report card said she went "above" but sometimes fell short of "beyond."

52. I want a man to refuse. A pool boy with his shirt over his shoulder and curls. A stable boy with blue eyes, hay I may pluck from his chest hair, and a hat. But first, of course, I'll need a pool and a horse. So, dear husband, start with that.

53. He never knew he had the world at his feet until he took a step and heard a pop.

PROSE POETRY

UNTITLED #1

They say if you want to paint water, paint layers. The murky rocks, the salty depths, the crown of surface sun. Water is not blue, but green with moss and red with trout and severed hooves. This is what my father taught me. He is a butcher, and throws his scraps in the river. I make sailboats with the bones and send mice downstream. My mother is a painter. She complains we ruin her landscapes. Clients think she paints abstract, she says. It's funny how the truth needs an eraser to be believed; or at least, fewer mice.

UNTITLED #2

On a pink morning a fisherman went to sea without his boat. He walked onto the beach into the surf. Water lapped his ankles, his legs, his shoulders. He walked until he sunk a mile and the ocean warped his spine and bloated his lungs. You should have seen his fish-picked flesh. You should have seen the state of those he left behind.

UNTITLED #3

I remember stories about how my father did not trust the bees, so he pollinated the trees himself using a Q-tip. In the mornings before work, he'd walk to the orchard in his pajamas and transfer pollen from bud to bud. There were twenty trees and thousands of buds. On those spring evenings after work, before he even smelled dinner or greeted his daughters, he would return to the orchard, business shirt un-tucked, Q-Tip in hand. In summertime, we ate apricots and lumpy-but-loved peaches.

UNTITLED #4

Oiled salmon with scrambled eggs and lemon. Pork and peanuts
and sandwiches for lunch. For dessert, there's blueberry tart
with merengue in a curl. Eating with you, there's plenty.
Eating alone, there's never enough.

UNTITLED #5

I wish Hitler were alive so he could be slapped to death. The world would form a line and each would wait their turn. We'd pick deli-counter numbers. Four million three thousand and two. Slap. Four million three thousand and three. Slap. Jews are allowed a closed fist. Germans get an extra for the stained history. The rest revel in our one: because we had to learn about him in school, because his mustache is a Halloween party favor, because his smug salute haunts the immature photo room at Splash Mountain, because of what he started, because of what he left. Slap. The daring ones turn their rings. Slap. Five million and thirty-five has a mean backhand; the crowd applauds. Slap. Stop, Hitler cries, his cheeks swollen peaches. Slap. Someone has to hold him up by the armpits. Slap. I'm sorry, he cries. But the world keeps having babies, and the slaps keep coming.

FLASH FICTION

BATTLE CREEK

Historians now agree that in the battle at Battle Creek, the creek won. The creek was named in retrospect, obviously, being nothing more than a leak in a crevasse between two hills before that clash of 1789. And a clash it was — not one of those pitchfork-and-chopped-finger skirmishes that rarely progresses outside the walls of forgettable straw topped barns — but a war of two towns, of hastily made uniforms and torn guts and spit-screaming men. It was said that the livestock's eyes rolled white and the laundry turned pink from the stained water. It was said that mud caked the wounds of the living and that floods carried the dead to sea. It was said that, by morning, there were no living left.

The memory of Battle Creek, glorious as it was, passed through generations as fervently and uselessly as cream through a sieve because by the time tourists inquired, it was realized that the winner had never been determined. There were no witnesses. The creek swallowed the bones. Both towns had silently assumed victory for years. Blame electricity, sighed the pacifist shepherders, because without the invention of the telephone the two towns may have never talked again beyond the occasional grunt over the fence. But it happened: A whisper between two who-knows-who, but a passive-aggressive whisper

nonetheless, that was cultivated by marketplace gossips until it festered into argumentative tones and full-scale bicker wars between great-granddaughters and great-grandsons and great-grand nieces and great-grand nephews of the dead who had supposedly won at Battle Creek.

The historians had to get involved. A second battle would undoubtedly occur if the situation were left unattended, and they thought the winner should be determined by science since violence was harder to clean up.

The examination took a week, beginning at the creek's mouth and finishing at the tail. The townspeople watched the top hats dig and sift and take their measurements. Everyone agreed the task was difficult considering there was no evidence.

But historians are known for unearthing things so hidden they perhaps never existed at all; and that Sunday it was concluded that, in conjunction with the slipperiness of the freshwater algae and the sharp forty-degree angle of the crevasse banks, no person could survive an evening stroll along that terrain, let alone a battle. The soldiers had most likely slipped and fallen to their deaths. Both towns took it with a groan. Battle Creek was never discussed again. Besides, no one remembered what had started it all.

CLEANUP

Regis was perched on the kitchen countertop, taking his break, twiddling the cold sausage he nicked from the refrigerator. The other two men ignored him. It was easy. The kitchen was already loud enough with the sloshing of wet rags, the squeaks of yellow-plastic HAZMAT suits. It was too uncomfortable for talk. Too cold, too cramped, too greasy. Liquor bottles overflowed the bin; fly-peppered sink water dribbled onto the linoleum, swirling into the blood. It was still untouched – the puddle – stagnant and looming, the edges already separating to a pale yellow.

Levi was impressed they hadn't stepped in it already; the kitchen was barely large enough for the men even without the equipment. He had to shove one shoulder against the refrigerator, the other against a power washer, just to keep his feet from drifting into the blood. Wedged beside Levi was Grant, the gray-haired giant spreading fresh paint over the lumpy pink walls. The two men shared a look before Levi returned to the fridge. He cupped a damp rag around the handle, smudging the fingerprints. The refrigerator was one of those vintage types that resembled spaceship more than appliance. Bulbous aluminum edges. Hubcap handles. A girth that commanded a room.

Regis was now microwaving the sausage. The smell of warm meat mixed with the bleach. Levi wiped his nose, and concentrated on worming the hairs out from the refrigerator's rubber seal. Like snaking a drain, he thought. He smiled, reminded of Regis sitting on the counter: hairy legs dangling, with grey-frizz ankles peeking from his jumpsuit.

He wasn't young, Regis, but there was a time when he could fake it better - when they all could. Sitting in a warm van, storytelling about missed classes and cheerleaders and lunchmeats and nothing in particular. And if they were bored with the nothing, they smoked, or drank, or ate, or sneaked into 9-11 support groups to comfort widows and steal enough muffins that they would fall from their pockets as they ran laughing into the dark parking lot. This was before their hair receded; when it had trickled down into crisis sideburns and soul patches. Before Grant went sour. Before the three of them free-fell into old age, one after another, like shot birds.

It was around that time that they started the business. Levi couldn't remember whose idea it was; he could just remember it was a good one. After all, the cops weren't in charge of cleaning up. Someone had to mop the nasty bits. And Boston was a good place for the work, an unfriendly town, especially during the sweltering summers or voting seasons, when people were really on edge.

Grant had a brother in the precinct, so they got their first jobs easy enough. Alleyway overdose. Pit bull fight gone sideways. Two bathtub suicides. Then came the botched knifing. It made the news: five-inch blade caught in a hair braid, paralyzing an Indian man from the chin down. There was some noncommittal nodding on the drive home after that job, and at that Sunday's barbeque, all three men paid Levi's sister to cut their hair.

Once they saw the body. By then they were experienced enough, Levi would tell himself, as if that mattered. Regis - of course Regis would be the one to mess up - he had marked the time wrong, and the men arrived on the scene even before the medical examiner. It wasn't good. You could tell from the cops' faces, half-shadowed in the trees.

Animal attack, a cop had said.

Levi nodded but didn't look away. There was something about a body split, inside made outside and wet all over. What Levi remembered most was the stomach. And purple -- everyone turns purple in the end. Gravity pools the blood into ink-blotted breasts and buttocks and bloated thighs. Purple foreheads, too, if they tried running and landed face down. Pancakes, Regis would call those ones. Flipped wrong.

...

Sunrise peeked through the kitchen window. Levi shook off the cold and used his thumbnail to chip at the last hair crusted in the fridge's rubber hinge. Grant left the paint to dry and was now unclogging the sink. Regis was chewing his snack, dancing a mop about the puddle, jumpsuit squeaking. The men always worked this way: points of a triangle, circling the room in unison. It had been years since they spoke beyond the occasional friendly reminder of *dab, don't rub*.

But there was something different about that morning. Nestled between the ache of kneecaps on linoleum and the itch of bleach bubbles in his sleeves, Levi felt it. A stickiness to the silence.

Twenty-seven Waterside Street had been a man.

The station secretary told Levi when she booked the appointment. The cops never gave more than an address, a time, and a warning if they were in the mood. *Spackle the bullet holes in the east wall. Aortic staining on ceiling. Landlord wants fresh carpet.*

But this time they revealed it was a man.

Levi frowned. He decided the cops were just being nice since the investigation had taken so long and the stains were now set. Soap could only do so much.

He glanced at the mess spiraling under Regis's mop. A single button drowned in the blood, its shiny head rising for a

second before it disappeared once more. The puddle was a small sea. *A large man, then.* And the image flashed in his brain: A large man, with doughnut wrists; who wore vests with shiny buttons that stretched valiantly against his girth; who painted his walls pink. Yes, Levi thought, and wrung his rag. A man worthy of a spaceship refrigerator.

SHORT STORIES

PIPES

It was the mice, Mother said. Mice in the pipes, which meant a lot of mice, considering the mileage of pipes she said was in that house. Hundreds of miles, she guessed. Beneath the stone, above the chandeliers, behind the yellow wallpaper, all groaning and gurgling and diverging and converging like veins and arteries. If the pipes were truly there, they weighed down the house to no purpose. Only the kitchen sink worked.

We couldn't see the mice. The evidence was the scratching. Mother said she heard it the moment we stepped into the entranceway, even before we found the light switch.

"Hear that?" she whisper-asked.

"Oof," Father said from behind a tower of boxes. "Your hats are heavy."

"Hear what?" I asked.

"The scratching," Mother said. She released the trolley; the piano fell to the carpet with a dusty thump. "Someone get the light."

"I said, your hats are heavy," Father whined. "We should ask the neighbors to help."

"There sure is a lot," Mother said, ear to the wall.

"You're telling me. No one needs this many hats."

"I mean the pipes."

"Pipes?"

"Mice," she said.

"Mice?" Father and I asked.

"I'm sure of it. Find the lights."

...

The lights were found. We inspected the new house, together at first, then apart, separated by our own curiosities. I took the upstairs, considering it was my house, and that's the place the new owner always wants to see first. The phrase was a melody, two hums in my chest: *my house*. I had found the advertisement in a corkboard-corner of a coffee shop. *House for Sale*, it read. *Small, old, happy*. My parents cherished old things. Father liked antiques, like glass-bound pens. Mother liked traditions, like holidays and measuring my height on the first of the month, which happened every month that we lived together during my undergraduate years and all the years prior.

We were a university family. Father taught dentistry. Mother taught music theory. My house was a fledge-the-nest symbol, forced by me, begrudgingly gifted by them. It had occurred to me, during my undergraduate graduation, that I was in danger of being too loved by my parents. Too much love makes one's goals slip. In Human Anatomy class, we are taught that goals are the soul's blood. The professor said it more fancy:

Goals are valuable motivators to the human psyche. This sounded a lot like blood to me.

So I asked my parents if I could live elsewhere. They ignored me. At family breakfasts, I complained our current arrangement was too cramped. *Pass the sugar,* was their response. Only when I littered their newspapers and dentistry catalogues with real estate flyers did they finally groan, set down their coffees, and agree to pick a house.

My house was a tiny blue-brick thing nestled between two shrubberies and the ocean. The wood floors were dusted with sand. The wallpaper bubbled from the salty air. It wasn't exactly beachfront, but a hundred meters from a crab-studded cliff, which was another hundred meters from the water itself. From upstairs, I heard the distant orchestra. Waves on rocks, a harsh cymbal strike; the stirring winds, deep as horns; the churning of pebbles and shelled things, the belly-beats of plucked stings.

The song never ended. My house, too, was perpetually halfway, being in-between contractors. The heaters were on back-order, the insulation forgotten, the electricity spotty. Bathrooms outnumbered bedrooms and bedrooms outnumbered outlets, except in the three nurseries, each of which had seven surrounding a painted rocker. No one was sure if the plumbing was functioning. For the time being, my sink was the neighbor's

hose, my bathroom the outhouse left by the construction crew. My parents demanded that they stay until the construction order was confirmed. Just a few days, they said.

In any case, my house needed a cure. I loved it.

...

The mice were the real malady. In the first lecture of *Cognitive Psychology*, we learned the worst maladies are the ones that start in the mind. The mind rots and the body goes bad. The professor said this more proper, of course, with words like *stress disorder* and *paranoia* and *self-fulfilling prophecy*. It sounded like rotting to me.

Father wasn't sure, but Mother swore that the mice weren't in her head, that she'd truly heard them behind the walls. I didn't know what to think; as a music professor, her ears were arguably her most trustworthy feature.

While Father was carrying in the bags, I found her sitting on the kitchen floor, eyes closed. The linoleum was littered with moving boxes and refrigerator magnets shaped like letters of the alphabets. She quieted me before I could speak. I sat beside her and tried to listen in the way she taught me, not with the ears but with the bones. But my bones just heard the ocean and our breathing. For a moment, I thought maybe I did hear something, maybe mice, but Mother interrupted with a sigh and said, "They're babies."

"Babies?"

"Baby mice. I used magnets." She nodded to the alphabet magnets scattered on the floor. "I held them to the walls, but they all fell. There's no magnetism in the walls. The pipes must be small. Therefore, the mice must be small."

"There might not be pipes yet."

"I can hear the babies."

"You're only saying that because there are so many nurseries."

"No, no. I know it."

"They can't all be babies," I said. "Reproduction takes two adults of sexual maturity."

But she just held my hand and hummed a lullaby.

...

That evening, the new contractor called to promise that everything was on schedule. My parents still stayed the night. They didn't want to leave me alone with the mice.

"Mice bite," Father said, who now pretended to believe in their existence because Mother believed it more strongly with every minute, and since they were married, they must be of one mindset.

"They carry disease and discord," Mother added with a squeeze of my palm.

I wanted to say, there's no proof, not yet. I wanted to say, you're causing more discord than any rodent. But they dragged a couch into one of the nurseries and, even amongst the supposed sounds of tiny claws, slept well.

...

In the morning, Father left for class, but Mother stayed to make breakfast. She was softening me up for something. Sure enough, she heaped eggs on to my plate and casually mentioned she would love to manage the refurbishment of my house, and that her neighbor was available to feed her fish the whole week, so she had no pressing obligations.

"And now," she said, "I can protect you from the mice."

I excused myself from the table, nicked the newspaper, hurried to my bedroom, locked the door, and dialed the number of an exterminator.

"Extermination or relocation," a woman answered.

"Which is quicker?"

"Extermination."

"Extermination then," I said, and added, "The mice, I mean. There are mice in my house."

She mentioned a time and price, and hung up.

...

The exterminator arrived that evening in a white van with a cockroach cartoon painted on the side. She was a large girl

with sneakers and a tight ponytail, and introduced herself as an entomology graduate student moonlighting as a private exterminator. Her jumpsuit nametag read Beatrice, and for some reason my first thought was she must have gorgeous handwriting. I imagined her in kindergarten, carving a stern *B* on the dotted line, and the gentle slopes of the *e* and the *a*, the slicing cursive of *trice*.

Beatrice shook our hands. It was Mother who kept her arms crossed and Father who reminded everyone that my house cost him his retirement account, so she better remove her shoes before stepping inside. Beatrice reassured them that she was careful, and they grumbled off to their office hours, leaving the two of us alone.

It didn't take long to see that Beatrice was more than her name. There was an appealing confidence in the way she carried her flashlight and inspected all my nooks and crannies. A female killer is an exotic thing, after all, only surpassed by female plumbers and female presidents. I followed her as she silently inspected the upstairs, the halls stirring with sea breeze and something entirely new.

Our first conversation took place in the kitchen.

"Did you just move in?" she asked from beneath the sink.

I nodded at her boots; they were the only things I could see. "It's my house. My parents live by the docks."

"Can you see the ocean?"

"I can hear it."

"I live not too far from here, but can't hear the ocean myself," she said. "I can't hear anything really. Not even rain on the roof. I cemented everything, you see. The walls, the ceiling. Keeps the termites out."

She emerged from the cupboard. I thought she had the most graceful way of wiping sweat from her forehead.

"You don't have any termites," she said.

I handed her a mug of tea. "That's good."

"No mice, either."

"What's in the pipes then?"

She frowned, took a long beautiful sip, and said, "There's only one sink. There are no other pipes."

...

I didn't listen in Human Anatomy that afternoon. The lecture was about sensory organs. The professor didn't mention about how lips are the mood rings of the body. Everyone knows lips go blue when you're sick or sad, and red when you're happy. It has to do with blood flow. Instead, the professor taught us that skin cancer is more deadly on the lower lip than the upper lip. When we studied cells under a microscope, I saw Beatrice's mouth, ruby-red and nonmalignant.

...

My parents stayed the weekend. I told them there were no pipes.
I told them there were no mice.

I told them on Friday when they moved from their couch into
my bedroom.

I told them on Saturday after they accidentally dyed my
laundry yellow.

On Sunday, while they decorated my living room with autumn
vases and potpourri, I did not tell them, but screamed it from
the upstairs balcony.

"You're disturbing the wreaths," Mother shouted back,
rearranging the limp display. "Oh, and the neighbors forgot to
feed the fish," she added to Father, who was arranging the
hearth. "It died peacefully in the night."

"Poor thing," he said.

Mother scratched her head. "I think I may be allergic to
the lilacs. My scalp is tender."

"Me too," Father said with a pat of his bald spot.

"Did you hear me?" I said, shaking the balcony railing.
"Beatrice said there are no mice. She said there weren't even
pipes."

"I don't trust Beatrice," Mother snapped up at me. "She
had a very untrustworthy bone structure. Those cheekbones are
too high, almost villainous."

"Her bone structure is perfect," I snapped back. "Besides, she's visiting for dinner."

This wasn't true, not yet. I said it just to see Mother drop the flowers. Even Father's mouth tightened a little.

"Well," Mother sputtered, picking up the lilacs. "Well, well."

...

To save me from the lie, I called Beatrice. She said she could swing by after she finished scraping a larval outbreak from a dorm room. I thanked her, and hung up the phone.

...

Mother set the table with her best handiwork: wide white plates, the napkins embroidered with my initials that she gave me for graduation. The table was two moving boxes stacked on each other, considering a real table would be ruined by the leaky ceiling, but the effort was there. I knew she didn't do it for Beatrice, or even for me. She did it for Father, who told her to. He believed in the mice, so she had to set the table.

Beatrice arrived on time wearing high-waisted black pants that made me dizzy. All through dinner, Father and I smiled. If I didn't, it would be obvious that Mother wasn't. She didn't speak at all until dessert, lemon pie with toasted merengue.

"So Bernadette -"

"Beatrice," I said.

"Yes," Mother said, more to her plate. "So Beatrice, how long have you been killing hundreds of small creatures?"

"Nineteen months," Beatrice said with a sip of her wine.

"And I've killed thousands, not hundreds."

"You enjoy killing?"

"I enjoy fresh starts."

"And fresh teeth," Father said, pointing her fork at her mouth. "Your canines are divine."

We paused, hearing heavy vans crunch up the driveway. A moment later, construction hummed from the front yard, and everyone chewed to the rhythm of saws.

Mother downed her wine. "You know, I honestly believe I could never kill," she told us all, pink-cheeked. "Not even an ant. Even ants have families, did you know that?"

"I hear every ant on the West Coast is in the same colony," Father said.

"It's true," Beatrice said. "You can pluck any ant from Mexico, ship it to Washington, and it will treat its new colony like long-lost cousins."

"I hear animals' legs can kick for two minutes after death," Mother said. She looked like she wanted to say something else, but I spoke first.

"How do you exterminate ants, Beatrice?"

My chest swelled when she turned to me and said, "Poison."

"How about termites?"

"Repellents."

"Swallows?" "Brooms."

"Raccoons?"

"Guns."

"Mice?" Father asked. Mother kicked the box-table into place. Beatrice took a moment to press her blouse flat before responding. "Mice can be trapped. Or you could use predators."

"Predators?" we asked.

"Cats. Terriers. I've heard snakes can work for narrow spaces." Her laugh shook the boxes, but before we could join in, Mother whisked our plates into the kitchen.

...

Beatrice promised to return on Tuesday for lunch. That night, my parents slept close beside me. We lay together, the air too dark, me too happy, them too sad, the salty air throbbing with silence. Every so often, one of us would scratch our itchy head. It was a chorus of scratches.

"I can't sleep," Mother whispered when she thought I was asleep. "My hair is falling out."

"Stop being so stressed," Father whispered back.

"The mice are nibbling at my roots when I sleep."

"I thought you couldn't sleep?"

"Stop reminding me."

"We could leave."

A pause, then, "I can't. I just can't."

Hours later, I whispered, please leave by Tuesday, but it was too soft to be heard. When I did sleep, I dreamed I heard a thousand tiny feet. In the dream, Beatrice slayed the beasts in my walls with a crack of her whip, and burned down the house just to be sure.

...

I woke to a scream and the screech of a drill. It startled me awake, and I saw the room was empty. For a moment, I thought they had gone home. But the scream was my Mother's.

I found them in the kitchen. My mother was standing on the counter, still screaming, quivering in her robe. Father was tearing holes in the walls with a molar drill. The wallpaper was gone; the wood had been stripped down to nails. Three open cardboard boxes were by his feet, the pet store type, with breathing slits in the sides.

"Snakes!" Mother squealed, stomping the counter as if it weren't already flat. Her fingernails tore at her scalp. "He's putting snakes in the walls! Snakes, I say!"

I watched from the doorway. Sure enough, Father pulled fistfuls of live yellow snakes from the boxes and pushed them through the holes in my kitchen walls. I heard their fat bodies

rubbing against each other. I heard the slippery pop of my windpipe opening before I heard my voice.

"My walls! My HOUSE! GET OUT!"

Father unplugged the drill. Before I spoke again, he spackled the hole shut, and carried Mother out the front door.

...

There were twenty-three snakes in my walls. I felt them if I pressed my palm against the plaster. The chandelier rattled when they got tangled in the wires. I heard them when I slept. I heard them with my bones.

Beatrice didn't know what to say. She arrived Tuesday as promised, sandwiches in hand. We ate fast because she wanted to take care of the snakes. She had never worked with pythons before. I saw the flush in her cheeks as she hacked at the cabinets and yanked out their buttery bodies. This time, I opted for relocation, not extermination, since they weren't imaginary. Beatrice warned me relocation might take longer. I said that was fine, and invited her for lunch every day that week, except for Friday, when I promised to drive my parents to the doctor's. Father had called that evening. We had lice.

TULIPS

The blind woman was a feature of the Tulip Exhibit. In spring, when the flowers swelled with fragrance, she was surrounded with candy-colored blooms. In summer, when only the greens remained, her gnarled body browned alongside the rose brambles. In autumn, orange-rimmed petals blew over the wall from the Japanese Garden and squirrels pawed at her feet. And in winter, when only the candytufts sprouted in icy pink clumps, and the perennials were just shrunken heads in the dirt, and the gardens were slumped from its burden of frost, the woman remained seated on the fountain wall, ankles tucked beneath wool coats.

The Botanical Gardens were a popular tourist destination. State-funded but privately managed, they were vast fields of flowers, shrubs, and trees with black-dirt trails and handcrafted landscaping: roses, daisies, persimmons, Hawaiian greenhouses, Indonesian and Japanese gardens with waterfalls and bamboos forests, salamander ponds, rock gardens, lavender hills, ruby orchids, lady slippers, buzz-cut lawns so green they were almost blue, and on and on. Gardeners worked by moonlight so that in the mornings there was neither stray leaf nor mushroom blemish to upset the visitors.

What upset the visitors was the blind woman. She was a sunken thing with ragged wool clothing. They photographed her spotted hands and great nose, which carried neither grace nor apology. Her pale eyes suggested she was blind; whether this blindness was a birth defect, an accident, or even, as one visitor suggested, the product of seeing her own reflection in the fountain water, it did not matter. It was clear that she had a heightened sense of smell to replace her lack of sight and speech. Her nose was a huntress -- twitching at cologne, recoiling at the unbathed, flaring at coughers and those who dumped their tea dregs in the soil.

"A guest should not be dumping dregs to begin with," one man said. That is, he *would say*, if he were more than a simple tea brewer at the World Rose Garden Tea Shop or, as he passionately put it, a steeper of cinnamon and rose petals and lemon so sharp it watered the eyes. In his four years at the Tea Shop, this man never complained out loud because, being young, he still thought people were good and, being foreign, he didn't feel he had the right to complain anyway. His manners rarely slipped. But manners are buttery things to begin with; and indeed, his slipped one November afternoon when the throng of tea-sippers parted so he could see out the shop window, through which, if he tiptoed his vision above the stone wall, he

could see the corner of the wool coat worn by the blind woman who sat, always sat, on the tulip fountain.

He watched a child walk by this woman, blowing a gum bubble. The woman's nose caught the sweet scent and curled.

To judge the scents of people as if they were flavors to sample! The tea man had seen her nose curl at visitors before and the instance with the child made him angry enough to drop a saucer on Mrs. Pritchett's shoe. He cleaned it up, of course, thinking the whole time about the blind woman's cruelty. A man could look in a mirror to see himself as others see him, perhaps a little fatter or more weathered, but the image was never far from the truth. But a person could not smell himself. Scents are dulled from proximity. Even if this person asked a friend, *Do I smell?*, the friend would respond, *Never*, because that friend would also be numbed. Anyone distant enough would lie.

It irked the man that a stranger felt it was her responsibility to destroy that lie. The tea man frowned and watched the boy walk out of the garden, gum tight in his fist.

The tea man and the woman remained distant through the autumn months. But one dull, windy Sunday, the World Rose Garden garden was in quarantine (a gopher was spotted), so he took his lunch with the tulips.

It was just the blind woman and him. He sat on the fountain, opposite to her, and ate his sandwiches in silence.

It was only as he rolled up his bag to leave that he saw it: the rabbit-twitch of that monstrous nose.

Quietly, the tea man disposed of the soiled, smelly lunch bag; but her nose twitched again, and for the rest of that afternoon he wondered, *Do I smell?*

That next morning, he asked his wife during breakfast. As a new couple in an arranged marriage, the man and his wife spent little time together outside of meals, and he doubted she was numbed to his odor. In any case, as a woman, she was sensitive. As a wife, she was savagely honest. It was a question he would have preferred she never considered, but he had to know and she would answer.

"Do I smell?"

His wife pushed pastries across the table. "You are my rose, and smell like my rose," she said in their language as she laid yesterday's newspaper across her lap. The apartment was cold and, once again, she had forgotten her pink sweater on the bus. She had never adjusted to the weather.

"Ah, of course you couldn't know," the man said, eating. "Yesterday, a woman curled her nose at me. It means nothing."

His wife's head snapped up from her own plate. "You do not smell," she said, mouth tight. "I would know these things. You are my husband. Did you forget?"

"No."

"Do you think they would allow an odorous man to manage the Tea Shop?"

"I am not the manager."

"Not yet. And what is an old woman doing so far from home?"

"Probably the same as us."

The wife grunted and clawed margarine into her rye. Through the cracks in the wall, the man heard the neighbor frying eggs and his mouth filled with the flavor. "Besides," his wife said, "we are no longer teenagers, and too old to smell. Your woman friend says this because she is prejudiced."

"She is not my friend."

"She is prejudiced."

The tea man abandoned his spoon along with the conversation, and left for work.

He thought his wife had forgotten the conversation, too. But at noon, he saw the flash of her pink sweater through the Tea Shop window. She was bearing left at the forked path, towards the

tulips, even though it was nearing winter and the flowers were sleeping.

"Is that your wife?" grinned the busboy. Family was not supposed to visit during work hours, especially the week the new manager was to be chosen.

Silently, the tea man cleaned his hands on his apron, and excused himself for lunch. He carried two tea mugs into the Tulip Exhibit. There were three American visitors wandering with their cameras. The blind woman was on the fountain.

He found his wife sitting where he had eaten lunch yesterday. When she beckoned him over, he stepped lightly to not awaken the attention of the blind woman.

"I asked the ticket office attendant," she said, taking one of the warm mugs. "They pointed me here. Is that woman who says you smell?"

"No—"

"No?"

"She did not say it," the man corrected, watching the woman across the green fountain water. He wondered if her ears were as sharp as her nose. "She simply... shifted her nose when I passed."

"She doesn't know you are bound for management or she would show more respect."

"She's just a blind woman."

"And you're a blind man if you think she cannot see." The tea man blinked at her, and she explained: "I threw pebbles before you arrived. Two of them. Both crossed within inches of her face. She flinched at the second stone. She must have seen it."

"You threw stones at a blind woman?"

His question was too loud; an American glanced their direction. The tea man's wife stood and dumped her dregs onto the frosted dirt. "If I am not by your side, you will falter like a child. That woman is faking her blindness so she has an excuse to hate. She wiggles her nose, but it is her prejudice that pollutes the air. Prove that she can see and confront her."

"Whether she can see or not is none of my business," the tea man wanted to say, but his wife was already walking away without even a glance at the woman with the empty eyes.

The image of that snout muddled the tea man's mind all afternoon. His sweet teas rang sour and he brought margarine to a man who demanded marmalade. The busboy whistled at his mistakes, but the tea man was too busy with his thoughts to care. That time a customer leaned under the table to feed her dog - was she avoiding his smell? That January when everyone ordered strong mint blends - were they attending to their

sinuses because of the dry weather, or because his water ran brown that year?

And why did that woman sit by the tulips? If she retired to the gardens for the pleasure of smell, the World Roses or the sultry-aired Tea Shop were better-smelling places. But the thought of her so close to his workspace twisted his stomach. Yes, something would have to be done.

At home that evening, his wife was stitching other women's dresses on the kitchen table. The starry fabrics dripped onto the linoleum.

"How was the Shop? Did you find out the truth?"

The tea man hung his apron on the coat hook and did not look at his wife when he asked, "Who?"

"The prejudiced woman. Did you prove that she could see?"

"I think she is truly blind. Her eyes are pale."

"Everyone's eyes are pale here," his wife said, yanking stitches loose. "We cannot afford to live here without the promotion. The supervisors will recognize your weakness unless you address it. A stupid woman says you smell. Confront her, and show us you are strong."

The tea man rubbed his thumb across the silk of an emerald dress. He should have nodded. Instead he said, rather quietly,

but out-loud nonetheless, "I cannot be strong when you make my decisions."

His wife paused her needlework. "You are my rose," she said, surprising him with a soft tone. "It is our job to tend to each other. If you cannot tend to me, I must return to my parents. We each do our jobs."

...

That night the tea man slept poorly, and in the morning, he staggered to work with a numb leg and a spinning head. He was already imagining the lemon and pinch of cocoa he would add to pots, ready to be warmed in an empty Tea Shop kitchen.

But his restless night had woken him too early, and when he arrived at the gardens, the ticket boxes were closed. Eager to work, he climbed the vines and wiggled his way through the back lawns, and he emerged, not at the shop's back entrance as intended, but at a very familiar fork in the road.

Morning light illuminated the right path, where roses and tea waited. The left was still in shadow, leading to the Tulip Exhibit; through the sparse brush, he saw the lip of the stone fountain. He heard the silence, too. It sounded like wool on stone, like a half-hushed insult, and it pushed him down that left path.

He found her sitting on the fountain. It was strange, he thought, that the blind woman managed her entrance at such an

early hour. Her body was the sort of large old thing that pooled about the hips; it was not the kind to climb fences. He wondered if she slept in the gardens like the owls.

He was sure she couldn't hear him. A pink-breasted robin fluttered by, reminding him of his wife sweater and the pink in her cheeks when she called him *her rose*, and calmness soothed him. He turned to leave—

But there! The nose!

A breeze had washed through the gardens and the woman's nose had flared the tiniest of twitches, more with the left nostril than the right, but a full-term twitch nonetheless. Frustration clawed at his chest. Was his body rotting from its very core? He noticed a naked tulip bulb already ticking at the earth. It was an overeager thing, too soon for its green efforts, but he plucked it as if it would ripen in his shaking hands.

...

It was an unfortunate thing that the busboy was also early to work that day. It was a dreadful thing that he happened to be looking out the Tea Shop window just as the fleshy bulb burst in the blind woman's face. It was rational that the busboy would tell the supervisors of the incident, and it was therefore not shocking that it was he that received the promotion instead of the tea man. And when she heard, his wife left for her parents'

house that same evening, proud of her husband for the first time.

CONCLUSION

Experimenting with different lengths of short-fiction was an educational experience. Through my research and mentored discussions, I have determined that brevity, clarity, ingenuity, rhythm, and humor are essential to all lengths of my writing. However, they are helpful to different degrees. "Liners" benefitted a core focus of humor, supported by attention to clarity and brevity. My prose poems benefitted from a core focus on rhythm, specifically minimalistic punctuation and oscillating sentence lengths. My flash fiction benefitted from brevity because, being longer than a poem, it required a certain sharpness to retain a reader's attention; this was attempted primarily through the limitation of dialogue. My short stories - *Pipes* and *Tulips* - required a core focus to clarity because, involving multiple scenes and various characters, it was essential for me and my reader's to know what I was trying to accomplish, specifically in regard to external and internal conflicts, rising actions, and any concluding resolutions.

Before this thesis experience, I worked more on a sentence level, crafting phrases even if they were unnecessary to the plot. But good writing must not obstruct plot, especially when that plot intends to entertain. I would like to believe that I now write from a broader perspective. This does not mean a

disregard of detail. Instead, I edit with a heavier hand - the shorter the piece, the heavier the hand.

To exemplify my learnings:

Firstly, analogies survived only if they pertained to a theme or tone (anatomy and infrastructure in "Pipes"; stunted plants and emerging adulthood in "Tulips"; food and corpses in "Cleanup").

Secondly, I tried to only include comedy if it served another purpose beside humor, and didn't just exist to be "cutesy" (or, obvious). This was especially apparent in the construction of "Liners" and "Prose Poems," in which I tried to implement relevancy to counteract any superficiality or lightheartedness (for example, the Mars-fertility Liner [#22] comments on the human reproductive rights, and the Hitler-themed poem's [Untitled #5] absurdity is grounded in real historical wounds). It was also a main edit in *Pipes*, where any frivolous humor rather seemed to dilute the seriousness of my themes.

Thirdly, I found that dialogue and exposition work better in my longer, multiple-scene stories. For example, dialogue conversations tried to authenticate the short stories by mirroring a natural conversation style, while the dialogue "Liners" was sparse and artificially crafted without the garnishes of pauses or "filler" words to produce a more punchline feel. In regard to exposition, I faltered in my first

drafts; the original first-half of "Pipes" was entirely exposition, describing the house in too much detail. With my mentor's guidance, I abandoned the unnecessary and subtracted 8 pages, which I feel ultimately increases the urgency of the plot.

Even though, post-thesis, I now feel less sentimentality for redundancy or clichés or bloated expositions, I still retain my passion for writing. It feels more like a craft or a puzzle now than a creative, chaotic outpouring. My thesis provided valuable insight to the revising process - something I hadn't experienced in my regular university coursework. I did not expect to learn so much about long-fiction writing through my experiment with short-fiction, but most, if not all, of my five focuses translate to the former. In summary, I find that heavy editing and a roaming eye for brevity, clarity, ingenuity, rhythm, and humor helps me write more confidently and efficiently in general, not in regard to specific length, all without losing any fun in the process

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