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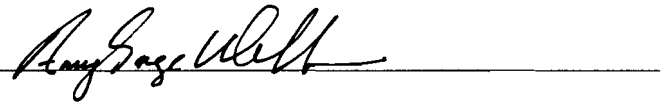
Abstract approved: 

This study includes a three-part critical analysis and an accompanying body of original short-short fiction. The critical analysis traces early innovations in short fiction and examines influences of literary experimentation upon the emerging short-short fiction genre. The analysis examines various attempts to define the genre with the aim of developing a new definition of the short-short story. The new definition is then applied to specific stories. The critical analysis concludes by examining several organizing principles of short-short fiction and discussing examples of published short-short fiction that has influenced this author's writing.

SUCCINCT FICTION: AN EXPLORATION OF THE SHORT-SHORT STORY WITH A COLLECTION OF ORIGINAL SHORT-SHORT STORIES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section I
Developments in Short Fiction

Authors and critics have attempted to define the short story, and although a definitive list of characteristics does not exist for any literary form, many characteristics appear repeatedly when associated with short fiction and thus have become the means by which short fiction is recognized, categorized, and defined. The short story originated in the oral tradition and is related to folklore, fairy tales, fables, and ghost stories. The short story is also related and often compared to other forms of fiction.

One of the first writers to articulate his own theories of short fiction, including his thoughts on appropriate lengths for literary genres, was Edgar Allan Poe. Poe discusses length in short fiction as it pertains to poetry and novels. He defines poetry as a literary form that one can "peruse" within an hour (60). He claims that impression is key when one reads literature and "unity of impression" cannot be "thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal can not be completed at one sitting" (60). Novels, according to Poe, are too long to produce the effect of totality, but poems are too brief to produce an "enduring impression" (61). Poe's argument for the means by which one can best experience literature is through the short story, which he calls a "tale" (61). He also refers to the modern (in his time) short story as the "short prose narrative" and that such a length would take between half an hour and two hours to read. Poe's opinion of the optimum genius in literary standards is that of the short story, or tale, because "[e]xtreme brevity will degenerate into epigrammatism; but the sin of extreme length is even more unpardonable" (61).

Poe stated that ingenious literature is that which leaves an impression, a feat that many forms of literature can accomplish. However, Poe expanded his demands for

successful literature because the impression must be unified; the reader must be able to experience it at one sitting and the impressionistic qualities of the story cause a sustained effect within the piece. Poe, an author of both poetry and fiction, began experimenting with fictional forms and thus paved the way for other authors to expand the realm of fiction even more. He began "playing with ideas, associations, and language itself not only for satirical purposes but also for the pure joy of creative play" (Levine xix). Critics of Poe's work claim the point of many of his stories will escape the reader and many of his stories "can be understood only in the context in which they were written" (Levine xix). Poe probed new methods in his fiction and he often perplexed his reader, but his genius was later recognized and emulated.

Poe first published "The Tell-Tale Heart," a story that exemplifies his experimentation with fiction, in 1843. The narrator's explicit nervousness is an example of Poe's technique of "establishing plausibility and tone through heightened states of consciousness" (Levine 290n). Poe is known for his methods of instilling suspense in his stories, but he experiments with the story form in "The Tell-Tale Heart" because he creates a narrator who communicates with the reader. Poe's narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" speaks to the reader at different moments throughout the story, "[. . .] I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, so that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in!" (260). The moments of communication between narrator and reader cause the reader to become acquainted with the narrator, as if to personalize the situation, "It grew louder, I say, louder every moment! – do you mark me well? I have told you that I am nervous: so I am" (261). Poe continues to involve the reader when the narrator speaks in second person, and this

constant involvement intrigues the reader throughout the story, as in the following example:

> If you still think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs. (261)

Because the reader is more involved in the events within the story through Poe's use of narrative devices, Poe manages to heighten the level of suspense for the reader. Poe's theory of unified sustained effect and proper length for fiction as well as experimentation in his own stories caused him to be one of the innovators of fiction.

Another author who greatly influenced developments in short fiction was Anton Chekhov. Chekhov's work exemplifies late nineteenth century realism, combining the detail of realism with "poetic lyricism of romanticism." Chekhov's work is thus a new hybrid form of fiction that yields characteristics such as: character as mood rather than realistic depiction, story as minimal sketch instead of "elaborately plotted tale," and a basic impressionistic view of reality which functions as perspective and point of view (May 199). Chekhov relied on brief detail and depended on symbolism in his stories, which caused the reader to interpret meaning. He said, "When I write, I reckon entirely upon the reader to add for himself the subjective elements that are lacking in the story" (Chekhov 195). He emphasized that bare essentials are the only necessary elements in the short story and advocated for minimalism, "To make a face from marble means to remove from the slab everything that is not the face" (Chekhov 197). Some critics claim Chekhov's stories, characterized as sketches, or "slices of life," are "lacking every

element which constitutes a really good short story" (May 199). However, other critics praise Chekhov's ability to establish impressionism in his stories as well as his freedom from traditional literary conventions (May 199).

Chekhov's story "The Chameleon" (1884) focuses on a single situation and therefore could be labeled as a sketch, slice of life, or vignette, the latter term used to describe more modern short stories. A police inspector is circling the marketplace and attends to a vocal disturbance in which a goldsmith claims to have been bitten by a dog. A crowd gathers and discussion over whom the dog belongs to ensues. The police inspector, Ochumelov, changes his mind several times throughout the dialogue-based story. He sides with the victim, Hrukin, for a moment until he learns the dog may belong to the General, then he says the dog is not to blame and calls Hrukin a liar. Ochumelov's indecisiveness continues to the point that the reader infers Ochumelov is the title character; he is a chameleon. Finally, the dog is found to belong to the General's brother; therefore the dog is spared and Hrukin is publicly humiliated. Ochumelov goes about his business (Chekhov 85-9).

Chekhov includes very little exposition or character description. The story is predominantly dialogue, but Chekhov artistically uses dialogue to allow the reader to decipher the purpose of the story. He also limits the situation to a point that some might argue becomes void of circumstance; nothing happens and nothing is resolved. Chekhov brilliantly instills an effect that is more rewarding for the reader, albeit more challenging to infer. Chekhov says in short stories, "it is better to say not enough than to say too much" (Chekhov 198).

Chekhov's theories about the short story and his literary empiricism contributed to innovations in fiction. Another great innovator of fiction was the modern writer, Ernest Hemingway. Much of Hemingway's shorter works emulate Chekhov's in that the stories rely on a seemingly simple, limited situation to suggest "emotional complexities beneath it" (May 204). Charles May, author of "Chekhov and the Modern Short Story" writes, "Hemingway's focus on radically realistic events and his minimal description of such events seem obviously influenced by Chekhov" (205). One can associate Hemingway's iceberg theory with previously stated Chekhovian ideas. Hemingway's theory, as printed in Death in the Afternoon, states:

> If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. (192)

Hemingway's iceberg theory advocates for omission and implication just as Chekhov argued for a minimalist story structure.

Hemingway's short story, "Hills Like White Elephants" resembles Chekhov's "The Chameleon." Both stories depend on a single situation described through minimal detail and rely on dialogue to insinuate the complexities of the situation. Hemingway does not even reveal character names in "Hills Like White Elephants." The brief exposition describes just enough to allow the reader to imagine a setting, but details are sparse. The setting is a train station. The man is American and he is with a girl, whom the reader infers is his lover. The body of the story is a discussion between the two

characters and the reader must infer what the man and woman are discussing because Hemingway's use of seemingly trivial dialogue implies a more serious situation.

> "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. "It's not really an operation at all." The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on. "I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in."
>
> The girl did not say anything.
>
> "I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural."
>
> "Then what will we do afterward?"
>
> "We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before."
>
> "What makes you think so?"
>
> "That's the only thing that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy."
>
> The girl looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two of the strings of beads.
>
> "And you think then we'll be all right and be happy."
>
> "I know we will. You don't have to be afraid. I've known lots of people that have done it." (275)

The reader infers the characters are discussing the girl's upcoming abortion, an issue that Hemingway's characters never directly state. Hemingway experiments with literary techniques like reliance on dialogue and sparsely described setting and characters to guide the reader through the story, but at the same time, he avoids explicating the

situation for the reader. Through inference, the reader understands the complex emotional dilemma about which the characters are discussing, but Hemingway leaves much work for the reader.

Authors such as Poe, Chekhov, and Hemingway experimented with the short story form and their innovations caused critics to describe the short story as a work that "conceals more than it reveals and leaves much unsaid" (May 214). Each of these authors contributed changes in short fiction by means of implication and altering conventional story-telling techniques. Poe achieved implication through broken voice narrative; Chekhov implied plot rather than explicating traditional plot, and Hemingway's characters are mere sketches of human beings whose lives imply a greater significance. These authors serve as examples of artists who changed the genre of short fiction, a genre that continues to evolve today.

The short story has developed techniques of implication over time and modernists such as Hemingway have inspired contemporary authors to further experiment with short story style and form. This ongoing experimentation has created a sub-genre called short-short fiction. Raymond Carver is a contemporary author whose work has been labeled as short-short fiction and has been compared to Chekhov's short stories (May 213). Carver's "Popular Mechanics" is a piece of short fiction that serves as an example of how the short story has changed since Poe's time. "Popular Mechanics" is a story comparable to Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" in that Carver gives little expository information, and omits character names and description. The story focuses on a single situation described through recounted, rather than direct, dialogue. The situation is, as is

the issue in "Hills Like White Elephants," one that embodies a deeper complexity than what the words tell the reader:

> I want the baby.
>
> Get out of here!
>
> She turned and tried to hold the baby over in a corner behind the stove.
>
> [. . . . . .]
>
> The baby was red-faced and screaming. In the scuffle they knocked down a flowerpot that hung behind the stove.
>
> He crowded her into the wall then, trying to break her grip. He held on to the baby and pushed with all his weight.
>
> Let go of him, he said.
>
> Don't, she said. You're hurting the baby, she said.
>
> I'm not hurting the baby, he said.
>
> [. . . . .]
>
> She felt her fingers being forced open. She felt the baby going from her.
>
> No! she screamed just as her hands came loose.
>
> She would have it, this baby. She grabbed for the baby's other arm. She caught the baby around the wrist and leaned back.
>
> But he would not let go. He felt the baby slipping out of his hands and he pulled back very hard.
>
> In this manner, the issue was decided. (69)

Just as the reader had to infer the situation in "Hills Like White Elephants," the reader must infer what happens in "Popular Mechanics." Carver ends the story abruptly, yet he

accomplishes a sense of finality. Carver is a contemporary example of an author who has successfully experimented with unconventional story-telling techniques to the point of creating a new form of short fiction.

Another example of a contemporary author who has emulated past examples of story experimentation is Gordon Lish. Lish's short-short story, "The Psoriasis Diet," can be compared to some of Poe's work. In the above example of "The Tell-Tale Heart," Poe uses the second person voice to involve the reader in the story. Lish does the same in "The Psoriasis Diet." The first line of the story speaks directly to the reader, "I don't know about your first lesion, but let me tell you about mine" (94). Lish briefly describes the narrator's first experience with psoriasis, then goes on to discuss his experience with the word itself rather than the condition for which it is a label. However, the discussion about psoriasis presents a metaphor for the narrator's inner struggle with deciphering his own personal cause in life. Many people go through their entire lives without figuring out their respective causes; therefore, this metaphor turns into a reason to empathize with the narrator, and causes the situation to be personalized for the reader. Although Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" is a suspense story, and therefore different than this Lish example, the effect on the reader, through use of second person voice, is similar.

Throughout the brief story, Lish's first person narrator speaks in a conversational tone, which involves the reader in the story to a degree that he otherwise would not be, "They tried everything. I wouldn't want to tell you what they tried. They probably tried it on you too, and it didn't work, did it?" (95). Toward the end of the story, the narrator continues to offer advice to the ambiguous "you," which the reader unknowingly assumes to be him, because if the reader has acknowledged the internal metaphor, he infers Lish's

narrator is speaking directly to him. The advice develops into encouragement, as if the reader suffers the same problem as the narrator, "You can do it. Anybody can when he has to [. . .] What I'm here for is to give you the cure" (96).

Poe's story "The Tell-Tale Heart" is a past example of literary experimentation, a parody of the psychological extreme. Lish's "Psoriasis Diet," can also be described as a parody of an existing form and thus an innovation of fiction. Lish's story is a caricature of the confessional advertising anecdote, and it is an unconventional approach to the fictional story. Other authors, as I will discuss in Section II, have continued to experiment with the short story and the result, short-short fiction, is a fairly new literary form.

Some critics claim there is not room for experimentation and literature has reached a point of limited uniqueness. According to John Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion," literary forms have histories, and the time for certain popular art forms, such as the novel or short story, may expire just like the time for classical tragedy and the sonnet sequence has expired. Barth argues that literature has become redundant and the only way to alleviate this redundancy is to create an original literature, which is literature that "borders upon its own caricature" (277). One could claim that the short-short story is a caricature of short fiction, or even the prose poem, because it retains qualities of both genres. If this claim is accepted, the short-short story refutes Barth's claim that literary history has "exhausted the possibilities of novelty" (277). The above developments in short fiction have allowed for further experimentation in the short story. Such developments refute Barth's argument that literature has been exhausted because a new form has been created from previously established genres.

Mary Louise Pratt, author of "The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It," argues that any attempt to describe or define a genre must refer to other genres (96). Pratt compares short fiction to novels to deduce a theoretical definition of the short story. She claims the narrative structure of short stories relies on a "moment of truth," which may be prevalent through a point of crisis or strong realization that brings change in a character (99). Pratt also proposes that short stories tell a fragment of life, whereas a novel will tell an entire life, and because short stories are formulated to tell only fragments of something larger, they rely heavily on implication, whereas authors of novels use "explicit statement" (101). A short story, according to Pratt, is a sample; it is not a whole text because it is published with other work and thus part of another entity, whereas novels are published as individual works. Brander Matthews claims in "The Philosophy of the Short-Story" that short stories have unity, which is the main difference between them and novels. A short story at its best, argues Matthews, "impresses the reader with the belief that it would be spoiled if it were made larger, or if it were incorporated into a more elaborate work" such as a novel (73).

Short-short stories are not derived from longer short stories, but they do embody some of the same characteristics. Therefore, the two genres, short fiction and short-short fiction can be compared, but they are not to be mistaken for one single form of fiction. The above examples of literary experimentation have allowed contemporary authors to create these new forms called short-short stories, however, the debate over how to define them and what to call them continues.

Section II
Defining the Short-Short Story: Reliance on Inference

The term short-short story is fairly new in the scope of the written word, but its origins date back to the oral tradition. Like the short story, this contemporary short-short form is an "adaptation of many older story techniques" (Shapard xiv). Because the short-short form is an adaptation, many authors and critics have argued over what to label the stories that seem to be categorized as short-shorts, how to define them, and if the form can appropriately be classified as its own genre of fiction.

The term short-short is widely used in reference to the form, but many attempts have been made to replace this label. Quick, flash, and skinny are some adjectives that authors and literary critics have used to label short-short stories and to distinguish them from other short stories. These terms refer primarily to the structure of this new form and insinuate that the structure of short-short stories is bare; it does not fulfill the requirements of story. Other terms such as mini, micro, and minute have also been attributed to this type of fiction. These terms refer more to length than structure; therefore, a discrepancy exists over the name as well as the meaning behind the label that is appropriate for short-short fiction. Since no one can agree on what this form of fiction should be called, the name short-short lives on (Shapard xv).

Regardless of what to call stories that fit into the category of short-short fiction, the stories themselves are refreshing, lively, unique forms that entertain and perplex me. The short-short form is definitely unique and worthy of its own label and category within the genre of fiction, but the task of defining this, or any literary form is a challenge.

It is difficult to begin to define a genre such as short-short fiction without addressing the issue of length, simply because the name that is attributed to the form is an

arbitrary designation of measurement. Not only have authors and critics argued over the name short-short fiction, but they also continue to argue over a reasonable length that qualifies stories as short-shorts. As I believe a definitive list of characteristics does not exist to define any literary genre, I also do not think a minimum or maximum length requirement exists. However, I have difficulty not formulating my own definition of short-short fiction without discussing length to a degree. Length is important for this genre, more so than that of novels or regular short stories.

Length is relative and one can not discuss the shortness of something unless it is compared to the length of another piece. Pratt points out, "[s]mallness and bigness can not be inherent properties of anything, they can only occur relative to something else" (98). It seems logical to compare short-shorts with longer short stories in terms of length, but short-shorts can also be compared to forms of poetry such as a narrative poem. Pratt also advises not to characterize genres of literature by length, but rather by aesthetic properties (95). I advocate for the aesthetic qualities of literature over physical dynamics, but I do not think one can completely ignore the length issue as it pertains to short-short fiction.

The issue of length is an appropriate starting place to formulate a definition for the short-short story, but to define a short-short story by length alone would claim that this genre, as Austin M. Wright states, is only a theoretical genre (47). Wright divides literary genres into two categories: those that are theoretical, meaning those genres that are determined deductively; "established by a congruence of characteristics derived from a system," and those genres that are historical, which are "discovered through induction [. . .] by the observation of an existing body of works or characteristics that are seen to

have recurred together" (47). To define a genre by characteristics such as length is to call that genre a theoretical one, whereas if one describes a genre in terms of examples of works, that genre becomes a historical one. Therefore, genres can be either a cluster of characteristics, or a category of works. I define the short-short story both theoretically and historically, although the short-short story may not be considered a historical genre yet.

A short-short story should be, to relate to Poe's language of time, one that can be read at one sitting. I consider a short-short story to be a few pages at most; if the length is much longer, I view the piece as a regular short story instead. Francois Camoin, a contributor to the anthology, Sudden Fiction, states that a short-short story is no longer than 1,000 words and "its small size should be its glory, not its limitation" (256). Another contributor to Sudden Fiction, Fred Chappell, says one requirement of short-short fiction is not to exceed 2,000 words (227). Discrepancies in not only name, but also length, of these stories are apparent. Glimmer Train magazine holds a contest for the best "very short story" and the editors set the word limit at 2,000 (Glimmer Train Press). I agree that 2,000 words should definitely be the limit for a story to be considered a short-short because 2,000 words is equivalent to about six or seven double-spaced pages in manuscript format. This length is common for many short stories as well, so if a limit for short-short fiction is set, then more distinction can be made between the two genres. However, many of these ditties are much shorter than even 1,000 words, or a few manuscript pages, which I believe is more suitable for the short-short form.

The length of a short-short story is a mere starting point in determining what constitutes a short-short story. Length is not the most important qualification in my

definition, although to be definitive, a short-short story should be one that does not have a minimum word count and does not exceed 2,000 words. The method by which an author tells his story is much more relevant than how many pages the words comprise, a point which leads me to other characteristics of short-short stories that are worthy of inclusion in my definition.

Short-short fiction is impressionistic in its form, a quality Poe praised as literary genius, but authors of such fiction can achieve impression in several ways. All elements within the short-short story work toward implication, but some of the elements are non-existent and therefore the short-short story is akin to impressionistic art. Short-short stories leave much to inference; the words offer hints at an inner meaning or metaphorical significance. When a reader is forced to infer meaning from a text, that text leaves an impression on the reader because he is left to ponder the text long after the act of reading is over. The resulting impression of a short-short story also gives the reader a sense of a larger story beyond the words on the page. The following characteristics of short-short stories cause the reader to infer information outside of the text; thus inference is the key feature of short-short fiction.

The writer of short-short fiction does not guide the reader with description through the entire text. Short-short fiction relies on brief, yet detailed, descriptions. Often the exposition of a short-short story is non-existent or condensed into one or two sentences; therefore, the reader must infer images and meaning from a short-short. Poe, Chekhov, and Hemingway experimented with sparse detail in their short stories. Contemporary short-short story writers have further imitated such techniques and the results are stories that are loosely framed in detail, but just as rewarding for the reader.

For example, Barry Silesky's "The Interview" is a short-short story measuring only one paragraph; less than a page. The narrator is the subject of an interview. Silesky astutely describes the setting:

> The lake spread out the window, rippling in the wind. Thick carpet, stuffed furniture, the wide desk -- of course I love the view. Two men filed in, shook my hand. I sank into the couch facing the chairs. (21)

The story then breaks to the narrator's thoughts and then back to the realistic present, in which the narrator is in another location and time has passed:

> In the back corner of the train, a dark-skinned woman draws the shawl tight around her head, eyes down on the book in her lap. *Warfare Prayers* it's titled. Her lips keep mouthing the words. (21)

Silesky limits the occasion in his stories and tells the reader only what he feels the reader needs to know in order to deduce meaning from the story. Much is left to inference.

Silesky is an example of a short-short story author who limits the length of his stories to the bare essentials, yet he does so without cheating the reader because each word counts in a short-short story. Randall Jarrell, in his article, "Stories," says, "[. . .] in fiction, to understand everything is to get nowhere" (13). Authors of short-short stories are actually intriguing the reader when they imply meaning; when they ingeniously insert bits of detail and leave the reader to do the rest of the work. Part of the enjoyment of reading any fiction is to ascertain meaning from the text and when meaning is merely implied the reader is left to assume interpretation. Authors of other forms of fiction may also only imply meaning in their texts, but the ellipses pattern -- the omission of detail, scene, character development, or another element of story -- seems to be characteristic of

short-short stories and this trait adds to their appeal as well as to their impressionistic nature.

The entire body, not just the exposition of a short-short story, may also be condensed to the point of non-existent detail. The story might rely on other characteristics such as juxtaposition between seemingly unrelated events to symbolize a central motif, in which case the reader is still left to infer meaning in the implied motif. Amy Hempel's story, "The Lady Will Have the Slug Louie," relies upon the central motif of food to tie the story elements together:

> My dog – I found him on the dining room table, stepping around the bowl of fruit, licking the beeswax candles.
>
> My cat is another one – eats anything but food. I watch her select a tulip in a vase. When her teeth pierce the petal, I startle her away with sharply clapped hands.
>
> [. . . . . ..]
>
> When my brother and I were young, I mixed dirt with his scramble eggs. My mother let me feed him in his high-chair on the porch. (99)
>
> [. . . . . .]
>
> For years, in seafood places, my brother ordered for me. "The lady will have the Slug Louie," he told the waiter. "And please, if it's no trouble, she would like her roll 'au beurre.'" (100).

Hempel relates the separate events through food references and ties the entire story together in less than 500 words. Hempel's works, for the most part, are only a couple of pages each, but she incorporates various ideas into one thematic metaphor and forces the

reader to determine meaning in the sparse text. Hempel may be one of the best short-short story writers but some critics of Hempel's work claim she omits too much from her stories; that her structure is too bare. One review praises Hempel for her ability to effectively compress ideas, yet criticizes her by saying "Hempel's minimalist approach often makes her stories seem like movie trailers: There's good stuff but not enough to be entertaining or enlightening" (Novak). Another critic praises and abhors Hempel's techniques in a single review, "Hempel works with a sharp wit that sometimes shaves away too ruthlessly at characters, limiting the depth of her sympathy – and ours" (Steinberg). Despite criticism of Hempel's minimalist approach to fiction, I praise authors who are successful at achieving this style because it is challenging for the reader. Robert Shapard, editor of Sudden Fiction advocates for the structure of short-short fiction when he says they "[. . .] can do in a page what a novel does in 200" (xvi). Shapard's point that bare short-short story structure, such as Hempel's, is capable of yielding results similar to other, longer works of fiction.

Authors such as Hempel achieve impression by means of implication and omission of certain elements in their stories. In place of the omitted elements, symbolic metaphoric constructions and unexpected events are often inserted, as in the above example, which cause the reader to infer what the author intended to explain in the story. Contrary to the above critical opinions, Hempel's work embodies depth and concise significance. The reader must ascertain what Hempel's use of symbolism signifies.

When I read a successful short-short story, a piece of Hempel's work, for example, I am not left wondering about anything that is not on the page in front of me because a successful short-short story is self-contained, concise, and attains a compressed

unity. I am only left with the challenge of determining the meaning, or understanding the interwoven metaphor within the story, and my conclusion to this challenge may change each time I read the short-short because imbedded in each word is layers of implied significance. Charles E. May, editor of The New Short Story Theories, claims that the contemporary short story is "thin to the point of disappearing" (214). The bare structure of the short-short does leave more work for the reader. The reader is forced to use his imagination to deduce meaning and that meaning is dangerously personal; ever-changing with one's own adaptations in life. A short-short is successful when it insinuates impression through its bare structure and omitted elements, implied significance through symbolism and metaphorical central motifs, and its unified composition.

Omission of certain story elements such as exposition and character development is a key characteristic of short-short fiction and authors often incorporate a form of symbolism to fill the purposefully excluded element. However, plot is the one story element that is positively omitted from short-shorts and not necessarily replaced with another literary convention. The omission of plot is perhaps the main distinguishing factor between short-short fiction and its predecessor, the short story. Plot has been described as the essential element for a short story. Conventional fictional elements include conflict and defined setting, but established stories are thought to be those identified by plot (Gerlach 75). Matthews claims that a story is nothing without plot; that something must happen (76). This point can not apply to short-short fiction because emphasis is placed on inference rather than plot. Short-short stories adhere to their impressionistic form in terms of plot because deemphasis of action is relevant in this type of fiction (Ferguson 22). A reader infers meaning in short-shorts, and, essentially, he

infers the plot. Just because an element of a story is not conveyed through words on a page, does not mean it does not exist. Something happens in short-shorts, but the reader most often has to infer what that something is; therefore the plot of a short-short story is a metaphorical one.

Silesky's "Interview" serves as an example on this point as well. After the narrator sinks into the couch, at which point the reader infers his interview is about to begin, Silesky inserts the question, "What do I want?" (21). The reader infers this question is asked during the interview, but the descriptions and events that follow are seemingly not related to the interview. The question ties the interview with the narrator's thoughts and the events that follow; therefore, the question relates to a more significant part of the narrator's life than the actual interview. The reader must infer the plot through one question that is abruptly, yet ingeniously, inserted into the story. The narrator is struggling with what he wants from his life; he reflects on past choices and these reflections insinuate character traits of the narrator. The plot is metaphorical because the reader must infer why the question is inserted into the text, what it means, and how it ties the story together.

Plot is not the only conventional element that short-shorts purposefully lack. Character development is most often non-existent, although short-shorts do contain characters. The reader, however, is unable to familiarize himself with the characters to the point he might if he read a conventional short story or certainly a novel. If the characters are not fully developed, most often the author includes a first name only, then conflict will not be as refined as it is in regular short stories. However, conflict is still achieved, but not in the conventional way in which readers are accustomed. Just as plot

is inferred in short-short fiction, these other elements are inferred and speculated on as well. This inference, on the part of the reader, causes indignation or some strong emotion for the reader, which in turn causes story. The reader is much more involved with the short-short as he is with other forms of fiction. John Gerlach, in "The Margins of Narrative: The Very Short Story, the Prose Poem, and the Lyric," says, "a story is an invitation to construct explanation [. . .]" (80). Short-short stories, then, invite the reader to the challenge of deciphering many of the conventional fictional elements on his own. The words that comprise a short-short are clues for the reader, therefore, each word within a short-short story contains significant relevance.

Some critics claim that unexpected endings are emphasized more in short-short stories and this emphasis replaces plot. Alice K. Turner, contributor to Sudden Fiction, states that short-shorts must have a "snapper" at the end. She says "the twist can be funny, [. . .] shocking, or touching, but it must be unexpected" (254). Chappell adds to Turner's point because he claims that the aim of the short-short story is to have an uneasy effect on the reader because there is no simple resolution (227).

Bret Lott's short-short story "Night" offers an example of an emphasized ending. A father wakes during the night because he hears his child breathing. He moves toward the child's room in the dark. Once he gets to the room, he turns on the light and Lott briefly describes the room. He turns off the light and listens. This time he does not hear the child breathing. The final line of the story insinuates prior events, "This happened each night, like a dream, but not" (Lott 62). From the description of the room, and the final line of the story, the reader infers that the child has died and the father awakens each night to a nightmare of the child's breathing.

Elizabeth Tallent's vignette, "No One's a Mystery" offers another example of an emphasized ending. The young female narrator is riding in a pick-up truck with her older lover, Jack. He pushes her to the floor of the truck because they spot Jack's wife's car up the road and do not want her to see them together. After some description of the truck's interior, Jack's feelings about his wife, and the song playing on the radio, conversation between Jack and the narrator centers around what the girl will write in the diary he gave her for her birthday. They have different viewpoints on their respective futures, hers is more fantastic, and his is more realistic. She imagines them staying together, getting married, and having a family. He tells her they will most likely drift apart and she will find better things to do with her life than ride around with him. She ignores his prediction (48). Three years from now, she tells Jack, she will be nursing their daughter, Eliza Rosamund. " 'Her breath smells like vanilla and her eyes are just Jack's color of blue'," she tells Jack this is what she will write in her diary (49). She asks him which fantasy he likes and he tells her he likes hers but he believes his version. Their conversation ends:

> "It doesn't matter. I believe mine."
>
> "Not in you heart of hearts, you don't."
>
> "You're wrong."
>
> "I'm not wrong," he said. "And her breath would smell like your milk, and it's kind of a bittersweet smell, if you want to know the truth." (49)

As typical with the short-short form, Tallent avoids backstory, explanation of events that have happened prior to the focused event, but the reader can infer from the ending that Jack has had children before, presumably with his wife and he knows the smell of breast

milk. Tallent uses the adjective bittersweet to describe the milk, but this word also refers to the relationship between Jack and the narrator. In just one sentence at the end, Tallent successfully brings multiple lives together and the reader can infer more about the relationships within the story than what Tallent actually describes.

Story endings that seem out of place, surprising, or perplexing to the reader, or that seem to hold significant, multiple meanings, are characteristic of short-short stories. Endings such as these cause inference for the reader, which is the key quality of short-shorts, but what is inferred from the story may depend on the ending itself. An emphasized ending, one that is unexpected, or seems out of place with the rest of the story, directs the reader's attention to an implied past. Both "Night" and "No One's a Mystery" end in such ways. The reader's mind immediately begins assuming events that must have happened prior to the first word on the page and from this assumption, the reader derives meaning from the text and the story is complete. A de-emphasized ending is more likely to direct the reader to an implied future. Silesky's "Interview" offers such an example. The story ends with the narrator on the train and his observation of a stranger. Because the ending is not emphatic, the reader's mind jumps to the future and assumes what the narrator will do after he gets off the train. However, the story structure is still contained, despite assumptions into non-existent text. A de-emphasized ending leads the reader's attention to implied futuristic events, just as the reader's attention is guided into the implied past through use of emphasized endings. The result of both types of endings is inference by means of implication. Implication allows the reader to infer either backstory or future events and this resulting inference allows the story to remain self-contained and complete.

It might be impossible to clearly define a genre of literature, but theoretically, a short-short story is one that contains most, if not all, of the following characteristics. This is not a definitive list, as one does not exist for any literary form, but these characteristics are those that I have noticed in many examples and they best illustrate a difference between the short-short form and that of the short story. A short-short story is less than 2,000 words; it relies on implication to leave impression on the reader; its structure is bare, yet complete, self-contained, and concise; it exudes intensity through strong voice and expressive word choice, it is void of conventional plot, and it often has a sharp, unexpected ending. A short-short story might, but not necessarily, be structured around a central motif and contain symbolism and metaphors to extend meaning and to replace conventional story elements. Inference is key for short-short fiction, and authors of this form may employ different strategies or a combination of the above literary traits to achieve it. Short-short fiction implies a larger world in its self-containment (Chappell 227) because its structure is one that concentrates on a limited occasion or event, yet the reader can hypothesize grander explanations than what is on the page. I must refer to William Peden's analogy that a short-short story is a "click of a camera, the opening or closing of a window, or moment of insight" (233). Peden suggests short-shorts are a slice of life such as vignettes, but within a single short-short, an author can include multiple moments, or multiple "click[s] of a camera." Because earlier authors such as Poe, Chekhov, and Hemingway, to name a few, theorized about and experimented with the short story, these newer forms called short-shorts are continuously intriguing readers and authors alike.

Short-short fiction is clearly unique, yet it is an evolving form. This form is beneficial to authors because it offers a "testing ground" for any thoughts, theories, or interests they might have, yet are unable to formulate into a traditional story or novel (Targan 249). I have attempted to define this genre in theoretical terms because the genre may very well not be a historical genre as of yet. Short-shorts currently exist between these two definitions of genre on the literary spectrum. Brian Evenson, author of "The Short-Short Story," claims that short-short fiction is in fact a space between genres, although this form creates links between genres and "potentially destroy[s] the authority that notions of genre imply" (9). Evenson's point is valid, although I believe short-short fiction is in the process of becoming its own historical genre. Short-short fiction is presently a theoretical genre, one composed of a cluster of characteristics, and it retains qualities of true literary art.

Section III
Organizing Principles of Short-Short Fiction

Short-short stories are fictional forms that are organized by specific principles such as: the motif, the scene, and the voice-driven narrative. A short-short that relies on metaphor is likely to "create structure from interwoven motifs" (Baldeshwiler 240). Short-shorts that are organized by motif are episodic in construction, meaning they alternate between scenes or moods, although they feature a repeating central theme, or dilemma by means of symbolism and/or metaphor (Baldeshwiler 232-4). In Amy Hempel's "The Lady Will Have the Slug Louie," food serves as the connecting image to relate seemingly unrelated thoughts and images throughout the story. I created a story titled "Four Dollar Water" that was heavily inspired by Amy Hempel's "The Lady Will Have the Slug Louie." I attempted to create an interwoven motif to connect images and events within the story "Four Dollar Water." My purpose was to insert water references throughout the text to connect seemingly unrelated images such as a near drowning experience, a cat, an old man's discussion with his friend, and service of water at restaurants. If the motif is strong enough, the reader should be able to infer the connection without the author having to explain too much. The multiple references to water should tie these images together and I hope the reader infers the aqua vitae metaphor, that water equals life.

Other short-shorts are organized by scene and are labeled vignettes, which focus on a single situation or life event to imply a larger story. Vignettes imply events outside the single situation on which they focus, whereas the motif method of organization allows the reader to infer within the story itself. For example, Mary Robison's "Yours" is a story involving a married couple, Allison and Clark. Clark is twice Allison's age. The

story describes a single scene, interspersed with narrative, when Allison and Clark spend one evening carving pumpkins for a children's day-care center. The greater story is insinuated through sharp, brief detail. Allison is dying, presumably of cancer, "Don't look at me if my wig comes off," she tells Clark (277). The jack-o-lanterns they create represent life. They briefly argue over which looks better. Allison advocates for Clark's talented carving skills but he insists hers is better. The omniscient narrator tells the reader that Clark wants to assure Allison "that she had missed nothing" (277). This line relates to their discussion about whose jack-o-lantern is better because Clark is actually telling his wife that her life is better when he comments on her carved pumpkin. She disagrees with his opinion on the pumpkins. "You're wrong. You'll see when they're lit," Allison said (277). Robison's use of sparse, direct dialogue insinuates the larger picture. Allison tells Clark before they go to bed, "Don't blow out the candles. I'll put in new ones tomorrow" (277). When Allison says she will put in new lights the following day, Robison implies a greater story beyond this scene, the presumption that Allison will in fact live to awake the next day.

Although "Yours" is a story that focuses on a simple situation such as carving pumpkins, a greater story is inferred, that of Allison's illness and its effects on her and Clark. Vignettes are self-contained because the reader does not wonder about a story that is not on the page. All the necessary details allow the reader to infer meaning from the text, but not wonder what happens to the characters or how the situation ends.

My story "Cast" is a vignette that describes, in third person limited omniscient point of view, an early evening fishing episode in the Smoky Mountains. The main character, Sean, is the fisherman and potential dinner provider for his fiance, Anna, and

two friends, Katie and Lucas, all of whom are resting by the campfire. The act of fishing is therapeutic for Sean because while casting for fish, he remembers and imagines significant events in his life spent with Anna. He also is disturbed by intermittent thoughts about his ex-lover, Katie, although I merely imply such thoughts throughout the story. My intention is for the reader to infer the underlying relationship issues between Sean, and Katie. I intend the last line of the story to add a twist and to serve as an emphasized ending that allows the reader to infer past events. I hope this ending ties the act of fishing to Sean's distracting thoughts about Katie, the fish for whom he is not trawling.

Although "Cast" is organized as a vignette, I struggle to achieve implication through scene and I still seem to rely on the motif of fishing as the implying factor. However, my story "Dog Beach" is better organized through scene. In this piece, the first person narrator is a mother who is spending the day with her daughter, Quinn who turns six years old. They ride a bike to the beach and Quinn plays with the dogs. The narrator recalls memories of Chris, whom the reader infers was the narrator's husband. The reader must also infer that he has died. The reader can infer that the husband is no longer with them because I use past tense to describe the situations involving Chris, while the rest of the story is in present tense. Quinn's final question in the story should add to this inference that he is no longer living with them, not because he chose to leave, but because he died. Clues in the story, such as "the first five years," and "I [. . .] open the cabinet to make sure there's six candles left," should indicate that Chris has died less than a year earlier. I want the reader to infer not only that Chris has died, but that he brought an overwhelming sense of protection to the family, something that the narrator is working to

emulate but feels she is not succeeding. I attempt to achieve this inference through images such as tightening the seat belt across Quinn's lap and the daughter's reaction to tighten it more, when the narrator remembers she did not put sunscreen on Quinn, and the fact that they still do not have a dog. I hope these clues are enough to guide the reader to the above inference about protection.

Another organizing strategy for the short-short story is narrative voice. These short-shorts are written in either first or second person and accentuate the narrator's voice through strong language, which results in inference of a larger story through what is not said as much as through what is. Robison's "I Am Twenty-One" is a voice driven narrative told in the first person point of view. The narrator is a college student dealing with the stresses of student life, but more importantly, she is struggling and angered over her parents' death. The narrator's voice is fervent when she expresses her thoughts:

> I preferred a pencil because it couldn't dry up or leak. But this was a Number 2 graphite and gushy-gummy and I was writing the thing away. The eraser was just a blackened nub. Why hadn't I brought a damn *box* of pencils? (156)
>
> [.....]
>
> I used to drive out to the site of their accident all the time – a willow tree on Route 987. The last time I went the tree was still healing.
>
> [.....]
>
> The great tree and the land around – flat as a griddle for miles and miles – didn't seem as fitting as I had once thought, not such a poetic place for two good lives to have stopped. (158)

Voice-driven narratives such as "I Am Twenty-One" also leave much to inference. The reader can easily infer the narrator's struggle over her parents' death, but Robison drops clues along the way to indicate the narrator's anger over their demise. The pencil wearing down as she is taking an exam, for example, represents loss. The narrator explicitly states that she does not like pens because they run out of ink, a clue that she is dealing with a loss in her life.

Another example of a voice-driven narrative, this one written in second person, is Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl." This short-short resembles a rant, a style in which the author strings together a series of thoughts, in this case, commands, to formulate a story structure. Kincaid's speaker employs imperatives to give advice and orders to an assumed subject:

> Be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don't squat down to play marbles – you are not a boy, you know; don't pick people's flowers – you might catch something; don't throw stones at blackbirds; because it might not be a blackbird at all; this is how to make bread pudding [. . .]. (124)

Kincaid's ranting style is evident throughout the story. The entire story is comprised of second person commands, except where Kincaid inserts italic font. The reader assumes the subject, or title character, to which the commands are directed, speaks the italic printed remarks:

> Always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh; *but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread? (125)

Inference is key to this example as well. The reader must infer who the speaker is, the situation, and the subject. The speaker, whom one can infer to be the girl's mother, wants the girl to grow up a certain way and the chain of directives are woven together to create a voice-driven story.

The short-short stories I have written thus far are not organized by the narrative voice principle. The organizational tendency I favor when creating my own works is motif. Although I have attempted to create vignettes or single scene short-shorts, I still notice a central motif in these stories. I am fascinated with the motif structure of short-shorts because, as an author, the task of juxtaposing unrelated images or events through one common element or idea is challenging, yet exciting, and as a reader, the task of deciphering the motif is challenging as well.

I have noticed the underlying theme in my stories is water imagery, although I incorporate water in different ways in each of my works. In "Four Dollar Water" and "Wake," water is the motif that serves as the organizing principle for the stories, whereas in "Cast," water merely allows for setting in the story; the motif is actually the act of fishing. However, water is associated with and necessary for fishing so water serves as an implied motif. In "Dog Beach," water serves a similar function as it does in "Cast." I use the beach as a backdrop for the story. Although the motif in "Dog Beach" is protection, water is an element from which we may need protected, therefore the water imagery is connected to the central motif. In "Whisper," I only include one water image early in the story, however, I hope the image of the narrator watching the rain with her autistic son is strong enough to contrast with the fire images that are more prevalent throughout the story. Fire is the motif in "Whisper," because the mother is unable to get

too close to her son. Water is the necessary element to extinguish fire, and the most peaceful time the narrator spends with her son is when they watch the rain fall.

Although the water imagery represents different meaning in each story, a pattern is beginning to emerge among the stories, which insinuates possibility for a collection. Water is something from which one must be protected because too much of it can be fatal; yet water is also a life sustaining substance. This paradox intrigues me and I hope to insert water imagery in more of my stories until the theme is clear and the paradox is somewhat defined. In order to define the paradox, to bring the negative and positive aspects of water together, a common denominator must be introduced. I see woman as this necessary connector. The female body is symbolic of life, as is water, and both woman and water represent a cyclical pattern. These similarities yield a thematic approach for story. Two stories in this thesis, "Whisper" and "Dog Beach" focus on motherly tendencies, observations, and a specific experience between mother and child. My intention is to produce more stories to ensure an obvious connection between water and mother imagery and a collection of stories will be the result.

Although short-shorts do not contain the traditional story elements, the fact that they differ in their organizing principles, yet all achieve a self-contained, complete structure, adds to their quality as art forms. Whether the organizing principle of a short-short story is characterized as motif, scene, or narrative voice, all short-short stories rely on inference as their unique quality. Despite its relatively recent developments, the short-short story has become an innovation in fiction, one I hope to continue to study and master.

Four Dollar Water

I almost drowned when I was young, but I love the water.

I am Noah's wife, unnamed.

My cat sits in earnest on the toilet seat. She watches as I brush my teeth, awaits her chance to swipe at the stream flowing from the faucet. Sometimes she pounces in the shower when I'm in it.

I have a habit of twirling ice cubes in my glass. I enjoy the clicking sounds they make against each other and against the clear, curved highball. I often wish they would not melt.

In restaurants when the waitress returns to refill our water, I think of all the people who never drink it. Some restaurants have relinquished such service; some charge $4.00 for the decorative bottle.

When I go to dinner with my grandfather, he speaks to an old pal from who-knows-where. They discuss Bob's funeral, Fred's cancer, Louie's bowel disfunctions. I continue to twirl ice cubes, wishing they were melting in something stronger than water.

Today, it's George's heart. His is the fourth death they've discussed.

I wonder why the elderly always insist on conversing about death, near death, or the illnesses of their acquaintances as a means of small talk.

When I turn off the shower, my cat sits beneath the faucet. She bites the drips until she catches one.

"Waitress," I beckon, "more water."

Cast

For ten long hours, Sean had been unable to fool any fish but he continued to cast in the same pool of calm, clear water, balancing himself on the moss-covered rocks. The sun, setting beneath the Smoky Mountains, the temperature quickly dropping. The October chill rested on his fingers, his cheeks, his nose. He wanted to be near the fire, but not until he felt the familiar force beneath the surface and saw his rod bend, not until he reeled in a feast. It was that moment, when he conquered the water's bounty, that he could stand firmly on the mossy rocks beneath him, without hesitation, without clumsiness, and free from guilty thoughts.

Sean could not help but look up at camp, though he knew what he would see: the only two girls he had slept with more than once. Katie and Anna stoked the fire. He thought about the way Anna's long, brown curls wrapped around his hands, groping tendrils that guided his touch. He thought about her easy smile and long legs, the way she clicked her tongue when she thought no one was around. The numbing sensation intensified in his arms and legs. Sean continued to cast.

Laughter from the camp above. Anna's boisterous laugh echoed. He cast his line in a different pool of water.

"Yes… yes." She said on that sultry July evening after take-out Chinese dinner and three empty bottles of wine. Her brown eyes rarely showed signed of tears. "It's perfect!" She gazed at the simple platinum band and how it hugged her long, thin finger. Next spring he will vow to cherish her forever.

. . .

In a field by their favorite lake, not in a church with artificial ornaments and stained glass, they embrace. The daffodils are in bloom. The grass has just been cut, each blade thick and clean. They dip their naked toes into the cold lake water, join their left hands and admire the symbols that unite them for life. "Let's never leave this place," Anna whispers.

"We have to fish the world's waters," Sean reminds her.

"But this place feels like home. We need to make a home."

Sean plays with the tiny beads that line the bodice of her strapless, ivory dress. His hands move to the daisy pinned in her curls. He starts picking off the petals. Anna's voice becomes husky when she laughs, she tilts her head back, her thin throat vibrates.

"You already got your answer to that silly game."

. . .

Sean saw Katie turn to Lucas. They moved closer to the fire. "Why aren't you still out there?" Katie's voice seemed to raise when she asked the question. She waved to Sean as she playfully ruffled Lucas' dark blond hair.

He hunted for nourishment, for consolation, explanation in the rippling water that splashed over the rocks.

Lucas must have replied in his customarily witty way to change the subject because they laughed and Anna laughed with them. Sean continued to raise and lower his rod. The hunt would soon be over. As much as he longed to balance himself against the current, to smell the foliage on the riverbank, to hear the consoling, constant ripple, he wanted the warm light, comforting hands to rub his sore shoulders, familiar moist lips on his neck.

Sean cast once more and thought of the platinum ring. Anna called to him. "C'mon and get warm. Forget the fish. We can have peanut butter."

Sean walked up the ravine, put his barren rod next to a leaning pine. He felt the warmth and inhaled the smoky scent.

He recalled Katie's naked scent, her soft, straight hair, the dark freckle just below her navel, adjacent to her small tattoo of three connected fish.

Wake

I am convinced that I am becoming nocturnal. Two hours of sleep in six days.

The red numbers on the alarm clock are blurry neon digits that grow larger the longer I look at them, until they burst into one red, permanent flame, etched into my retina.

Last month I got a red dachshund to keep me company during the night. I call her Ripa.

I sit up to drink the stale water that sits on my nightstand. Sweat drips between my breasts. I rub my thin, faded T-shirt along my sternum to soak up the moisture.

The unbalanced ceiling fan clicks in the silence. The shadowed blades move slowly, circling the same plane again and again. If you focus on one blade long enough, it seems as if all of the blades try to reverse, to escape the monotony of their imaginary turntable.

I massage Ripa's soft, floppy ears. She falls asleep.

The red numbers are clear for a moment but soon they become blurry again.

My friend told me to buy an aquarium. "The sound of water is relaxing," he said. After a week all of the fish died, but the illuminated blue water still pumps through the tank.

I walk to the bathroom, sit on the edge of the clawed, porcelain tub and listen to the rushing water. The jar of turquoise bath salts is empty in the medicine cabinet, a few are stuck to the bottom.

The round clock on the wall does not have red numbers. The black hands both rest on the number two.

The water fills the basin, steam rises to fog the mirror.

I concentrate to hear the clicking fan, Ripa's snoring.

I become sleepy, submerged in the soothing warmth. The thought of sleep excites me. My toes peek out of the water and dance along the empty faucet. Slowly, they slide back beneath the surface.

The last thing I remember, or think I remember, is the sound of splashing water.

Whisper

Autumn, and everything is dying, but it is my favorite time. Crisp, colored leaves crunch under my feet. Clean, brisk air whispers in my ears. I tilt my head back to inhale the sharp breeze and smell the faint burning of pastures in the distance. I imagine the crawling orange flames creeping across the black, burnt soil. Michael says, "In heaven, it's spring all year round." Michael prefers the rain. Sometimes we sit on the porch, listening to the peaceful trickle, watching the drops kiss the pavement.

We join hands and walk through the park, making our way back to the place I must leave him until a man in white permits me to visit again. Kids play tag in the park and I wonder why Michael cannot be a kid who runs, swings, and laughs with the rest of them. Meshing my fingers into his small palms, I memorize this moment – this good day. Michael and I walk, hand in hand, mother and son. We are smiling; I am sharing my love and he is letting me. I can almost hear the crackle of fire in the distance.

Most days are not so good. Michael stares blankly at his four confining walls, rocking himself to stay calm. I walked into his room last week. He was fixated on his favorite deck of playing cards, the ones with ten flaming candles on the back of each card. "Do you remember when I gave those to you, sweetie?" I approached his bed, slowly as I was told to do. Michael looked at me blankly, the fluorescent light buzzing above us. I continued to smile and asked if I could play cards with him. "You didn't give me these cards. My mother did." He started dealing out the cards for a game of gin rummy.

I look down at him now and imagine someday we will laugh and play all day long, we will sing and dance to his favorite Frank Sinatra record, and then we will make heaping ice cream sundaes and cover the cold mounds with fudge, caramel, and butterscotch.

Running from my grip, Michael suddenly starts a yelling fit. Hands to his ears, he screams. He stomps and jumps and the other kids stare. "Stop!" I yell. I quickly realize my mistake. I am not supposed to be the one yelling. Trying a different approach, I walk up to my son slowly and softly cradle his head to my chest, "Tell mamma what's wrong." Voices in the park replace the whispering breeze in my ears, but I ignore them. I gently pat his back, wrap his favorite blanket around his shoulders. He calms down slowly and the strangers in the park finally turn their backs. I embrace my only child because he lets me.

On the way home I see the pastures burning, bright orange to match the evening horizon. Smoke rises to the sky. The burnt smell is stronger, but comforting; the destructive flames, beautiful.

Dog Beach

Chris was the one to explain birthdays to Quinn, the first five years. He always picked out the brightest colored candles. Before he put them in the spongy dessert, he held each candle next to Quinn's spread out, short, stubby fingers and counted out loud. She would always giggle. He lit the candles after he placed them in the cake and repeated this comparison. "It teaches her how to count," he'd say, "And not to get too close to the fire."

I strap Quinn in the black plastic seat attached to my mountain bike. I put the small helmet over her fine, blond hair. She tugs at the belt across her lap until it tightens slightly. Two water bottles in the front basket perspire in the humid, salty heat. I offer Quinn a drink, she rolls the bottle next to her flushed skin. It will feel good to be closer to the ocean breeze.

We ride down Front Street, turn right on Alberta. All we have to do is keep moving, to alleviate the heat. I think of Chris, hugging Quinn to his chest, walking along the shoreline on Sunday afternoons. His narrow, blue eyes squinted when he smiled at his daughter and sometimes I could no longer see his iris -- the clear blue resembled the sea.

We ride past Kermit's key lime pie shop and the local deli until we reach Dog Beach. Quinn likes to watch the dogs play fetch with their owners. She also likes to run in the surf. "Can we get a dog like that one?" She points to a pug wearing a life jacket. It struggles to keep up with the labrador retrievers.

I had wanted to get a dog when I was pregnant with Quinn. "We have to wait until she gets old enough, " Chris rubbed my belly. "I don't want a puppy around the baby. They can play too rough."

"We'll be careful," I argued. "It will be fun to have a dog around. We can go to Dog Beach."

"Not 'til she's five," he said. "We can go to Green Beach instead."

Quinn was making friends with the pug dog in the life jacket. I sit down to rest, bury my feet in the warm, moist sand. The chipped red polish on my toenails peeks through the white grains. I enjoy the sunny warmth on my exposed skin and quickly drain one of the water bottles.

I remember that I forgot to put sunscreen on Quinn today. I walk to the water, rinse the sand from my feet. Quinn has given up on the pug. She runs out further than normal, following one of the labs.

"It's time to go," I motion to Quinn. She pretends to be interested in the washed up brown seaweed. I call to her again. She runs in my direction, stops to pick up a remnant of sealife. Her white blond hair blows to cover her face.

I strap her back into the bike seat and she hands me a flat, broken, white shell. I pretend it's a precious jewel and tighten her seat belt. This time she does not tighten it more.

I lick the vanilla frosting off my fingers and open the cabinet to make sure there's six candles left -- bright pink, yellow, and green ones.

"Mommy," Quinn calls from the dining room, "Do they have death day in heaven?"

Baptism

She stands in the kitchen, cramped between a humming olive colored refrigerator on her left and a rusty stove on her right, peeling a head of lettuce on the small square of brown Formica. When she is satisfied that all the inedible parts are lying in a heap on the counter, she moves two steps to the sink and washes the pale green vegetable.

"Why do you wash it after you peel it?" he sits across the room on an orange striped sofa.

"To get all the dirt off," she says.

"You've already peeled off the dirty part."

"You still have to wash it."

"I think it should be clean if you peel off the outside."

"But how do you really know if it's clean?"

"Well, the inner part is never exposed to anything, is it?"

She shakes the lettuce until the head stops dripping, moves back to the counter. "I guess not."

"See? Then why wash it?"

"I just like to know it's clean."

"I hate wet lettuce."

"At least you know it's clean. Besides, you know I shake the water off."

"Not enough. It's always too wet."

"Would you rather eat wilted, dirty lettuce?"

"It gets wilty when you wash it too."

"But it's not dirty."

He shrugs. "Do I have time to shower before dinner?"

"No, it'll be ready in a couple minutes."

"I can shower in a couple minutes."

"Let's just eat. I'm hungry. You can shower later."

"I like to feel clean before I eat."

"But you're okay with eating dirty lettuce?"

Thirst

I often wake to the sound of a dripping faucet. I can not sleep until it stops. I walk towards the kitchen and the drops seem to quicken, beckoning me to come closer.

My cat licks the wet shower tile, grazing the smooth surface with her rough tongue. After her drink, she'll spend hours bathing.

At a party I search to quench my thirst. I pass by the wine and fruit juice and press the dispenser on the large, orange water cooler. Liquid leaks from the nozzle, soaking my sandals and staining the cedar beneath my feet. The owner's dog rushes to lick up the mess, his tongue a sponge for the waterfall.

A robin red breast crosses my path when I walk in the park. I dodge a small turquoise shell, empty on the cracked sidewalk.

I refill my cat's water dish. She stares at the ripples and paws at the water before she drinks it, spilling some onto the white linoleum. She'll walk through the puddle to cool her padded feet.

In the summertime kids swim in the shallow pool at the park. I watch as many of them choke on the water, yet earnestly dive back under for more. The condensation from my plastic bottle cools my face. As I drain the bottle, I hear a mixture of coughing and laughing amidst the splashing waves.

She was born on a Saturday, the summer solstice. I remember her lying on my belly, wet and wrinkled. Before her first meal, she cried and screamed as if to say "put me back."

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