

heat lightning

short pieces that flash

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ABOUT

This anthology includes pieces by MFA candidates at the University of South Florida, created for Dr. Heather Seller's *Short Forms* course.

We began this semester learning about *the flash*. It's a feeling evoked in the reader by specificity and close observation. We describe it as a pull, as a tug. It's moving your hand along a piece of wood and noticing the bumps. By developing daily practices of both writing and close observation, we have worked on becoming more and more attuned to this feeling.

To write the flash, you must stop thinking without falling asleep—that is, *thinky* narrative and commentary must be supplanted by observing and recording. You must leave gaps for the reader. You must be friendly. You must reproduce the feeling inside you in someone else; it's almost supernatural. You must make sentences.

We hope you enjoy this zine, which features a selection of pieces written from the *white hot center* to capture the flash. Maybe you'll even try some of these assignments yourself!

Elizabeth Pottinger and Daniel Dykiel

ASSIGNMENTS

Life Story: Write a memoir in exactly 250 words made of grammatically-correct three word sentences. One extra word is allowed for one sentence.

Art of the Sentence I: Write a paragraph of seven sentences of varied sentence types and unique syntax patterns.

Art of the Sentence II: Write a sentence of exactly 250 words, without overly-depending on punctuation and the word “and.”

Fennelly Imitations: Write three micro-memoirs in the style of Beth Ann Fennelly’s *Heating and Cooling*.

List/Litany: Write a list/litany, imitating one of various styles, such as starting with *I remember*.

Prose Poem: Write a lyric piece with engaging syntax and poetic strategies in exactly 125 words.

Final Project: Write three short pieces in a series, in any short-form style.

RAILCARS STREAM LIKE RAIN OUTSIDE THE WINDOW
AS SARAH EXPLAINS MY POCKET DIMENSION

Elizabeth Pottinger

Sarah's my friend. She resembles Amélie. (Crazy girls echo.) Anyway, she's shamanic. I believe this. She sees worlds. She sees *him*. "He's here, now." Glancing, she indicates.

She describes him. He's a frog. He's red, resting. Spots are ladybuggish. "He's on you. Your shoulder's comfortable." I see nothing. Yet, I shiver.

Sarah's house glows. Sarah's house breathes. I gulp tea. We're seated, talking. Candlelight oranges us. That kitchen comforts. It's like this. Shells cradle walnuts. We're inside, sleeping. The train rumbles. Windowpanes shimmer, golden.

Our conversations sparkle. Rinds fall away. Husking, they dry. We sweep them. Hesitantly, Sarah shares. She sees dimensions. Everyone has one. They halo us. They're teeming nearby. They're in pockets. Reach in, touch. Sarah explains mine. "It's Darwinian, kinda." It's jungly, wet. The frog perches. He lives there. Leaves drip dew.

"What's his name?"

“Listen for this. He’ll tell you.”

Ah, I see. *Dewey*.

Eyes are tapioca. Bubbles wink black. Dewey sits, soundless. Slowly, eyelids squish. Throat bulges pregnantly. Then, he belches. An earthquake ripples. Leaves bluster, panicked. Afterward, it’s still.

It’s nighttime now. Cold sheets slip. Moonlight blankets me. Silently, something’s born.

Phone glows white. Sarah researched him. Dewey oozes symbolism. Throat singing transcends. It also heals. Ladybugs transform, regenerate. Spiritually, they’re lucky. Frogs are, too.

She says this. Dewey’s my liver. He recycles energy. Belchingly, he cleanses. Yet, he’s weird. He’s shaped oddly. “Then, I realized. It’s a tail. Dewey’s a froglet. He’s growing, still.”

WARM ME UP

Alex Rivera

The water's cold. Salt coats tongue. Father hugs me.
Waves pull away. Seashells scrape feet. Blood drenches
sand. Father hugs me. His liver ticks. But he laughs. We
watch stars. They all flicker. Yellow eyes blink. Hearts are
offbeat. We are alive.

Father is cold. Bed becomes tomb. Mother hugs me.
Gravity pulls tears. Father's hourglass empties. Voices go
unheard. Mother hugs me. Doors keep opening. I shut
them. Car is running. Car is empty. The moon sets.
Another day blooms. We are numb.

“You look bored.”

“Thanks, I'm bored.”

I am cold. Eyes are darting. My chest tightens. Birdbath
becomes blurry. I shove mother. I run away. My chest
tightens. Leave me alone! Sun reaches apex. Sweat absorbs
tears. Uncle grabs me. Calloused hand squeezes. Rocking
chair rocks. Words escape ears. Air conditioner blares. I
am underwater.

The water's cold. Again. Manatees gather 'round.
Girlfriend hugs me. The manatees submerge. Girlfriend
walks away. Eyeballs are red. Girlfriend hugs me. Glass
bottle falls. Girlfriend walks away. Shards reflect light.
Light goes out. Grandmother rejoins earth. Life's a cycle. I
keep running.

“You look tired.”

“Thanks, I'm tired.”

Feet are cold. I move forward. I hug myself. I will write.
School apps sent. Now I wait. I hug myself. I am rejected. I
am confused. I am accepted. I am confused. My heart
aches. My heart beats. I am moving. I am breathing. I am
drowning. My leg shakes. My fingers freeze. I am warm. I
am alive. So, I write.

SO I WRITE

Jeevitha Kannan

Call me Ocean. Call me Shore. Call me life. I am born.
Take my hand. Talk me tales. Tell my fishes. I grow sin.
Dream a story. Draw the moon. Dictate my name. Name
dissolves wave. Eat some carrots. Eat some rice. Earn a
star. Twirl happily around. Pack my crayon. Polish my
shoe. Iron my pinafore. Wish me school. I have spoons. I
have friends. I know teachers. They tag *thief*. So, I cry.
They say *lies*. I didn't do. Did you wish?

I fear speech. I seldom talk. Stories save me. So, I write.
My Amma reads. My Appa reads. My siblings read. I hear
eagles. *I love you*. Skin kisses sunset. Tears hug tulips. Sky
paints sun. I question fortune. Am I lucky? Fate bleeds
grey. Clouds call ravens. Raven caws death. Suddenly,
Amma goes. She ran water. She's never home. Ever.

I fail directions. Scars outlive silence. Thunders awake me.
Ask me why. Have my tears. Now, I know. Ocean cries
deep. Moon turns dark. Stars live lonely. I roam stardust.
Stories save me. So, I write.

I teach English. I teach dreams. I teach knives. I cry
nights. Nights do ache. Days smile warmth. They warm
wounds. I drink hope.

I feel roses. They breathe thorns. I write Eros. He plants
arrows. It struck Appa. They say *stroke*. I hear again. Time
bleeds stain. I fly wishes. Wings create solace. I dream
cold. I write poems.

That's the journey. Stories save me. So, I write!

SEVEN SENTENCES

Alec Tvenstrup

You were leaving tonight.
He didn't know that, but suddenly he had a feeling.
He got in his car and drove because <i>I can get to you</i> was his thought.
As he flew through intersections, he wished hard on the chance that you hadn't gone and that it wasn't too late.
While he was covering this distance between you two, if you were really there, he thought about calling you until he decided against it.
When he was almost there, he didn't pray, but all his hopes were like prayers until finally he reached your place but didn't see your car there.
Right then, he wished you knew one time his asking if you needed him was his way of saying he needed you, but now it didn't matter because you'd already left.

Art of the Sentence I

REGULAR MAINTENANCE

Andrea Rinard

Pete still hasn't changed the oil in his car because he's just so busy. I tell him I can come get the car while he's at work and take it myself. I'll even pay for it. It makes me happy to mother my man-child in any way I'm still allowed. He smiles that smile, the one that says he's only tolerating me. The one that tells me, the woman who used to cut his grapes in half, that I'm obsolete.

I try to explain how I like doing things for him, how the thing almost as good as him asking me for help is him letting me do it when I offer.

He smiles. Silly Momma. He tells me he'll get around to it. When he holds out his arms to hug me goodbye, and I tuck myself against the giant body that once fit along the length of my arm, the pride and grief feel too much like the same kind of tears, and I don't know whether I want to pat his back three times and let him go or hold on tight, tighter when he moves to pull away, whispering *not yet*. I'm released before I do more than consider the choices and watch his back go farther and further away.

Beth Ann Fennelly Imitation

I AM NOT GOING TO BE YOUR ORDINARY

grandmother I tried to be your mom's doula and failed
miserably you were born by C-Section I did better as your lactation consultant
but still needed to Facetime Stephanie for help with your latch and Cindy to
diagnose your reflux

I christened myself Mimi You called me Gaga — never Lady Gaga
now you sometimes call me Mimi Gaga
and don't cringe if I sing *I'll Never Love Again* in the car driving you home
from a sleepover

you made me a grandmother like your mom made me a mother
I don't think I was ready for either at the time

I told your mother not to move back to Florida because of me I'm still working
I have a life I'm not an Italian grandmother wearing an apron with my
hair in a bun and always
 feeding feeding feeding everyone

these days you and I collage together we write stories we even play chess

I'm considering getting a tattoo
and putting a color (maybe pink) in my hair
what do you think Ry? are these things that ordinary grandmothers do?
 if they are I'm not gonna do them

Deborah Locicero

Beth Ann Fennelly Imitation

I USED TO THINK I WANTED TO BE SMALL

Alyssa Sotelo

I.

My Tata often switched between calling me a movie star or
calling out my weight.
“Tan pesada” he would say.
My sisters would laugh and giggle like it was a joke
but I spent most of my life being
that
and bigger and taller
than the both of them.
They grew up slim, thin, trim
but my body decided to grow curves:
Bigger hips, breasts, thighs,
Even bigger hair.

II.

but I don't anymore. It took time but I learned that the bumps and lumps on my body are not only okay and normal but *desirable*. The curve of my hips are sensual as I sway to sexy music all alone. The thickness of my thighs are strong as they hold me up, quivering in balance poses in yoga. The swell of my breasts are comforting as my lover rests on my chest as he sleeps. The bloat of my stomach, the rolls on my side, the extra bits and pieces of me tell the world that I am nourished and cared for. I don't need to size myself down. My body is beautiful in its excess and
I deserve to take up space.

III.

Tiny girls who would exclaim, “Ugh, I feel fat!”
The phrase “Wow, you were hungry!” if you've eaten all your food.
Trying the big, oversized T-shirt trend and realizing it just looks like a normal shirt on you.
Stores like Abercrombie and Fitch where shirts will not fit your chest.
Seeing your skinnier friends get the most compliments at the bars.
Thinking skinner people must be easier to love.

Beth Ann Fennelly Imitation

11. AND I AM STILL TRYING TO PLUCK OUT THE STITCHES

Leona Strong

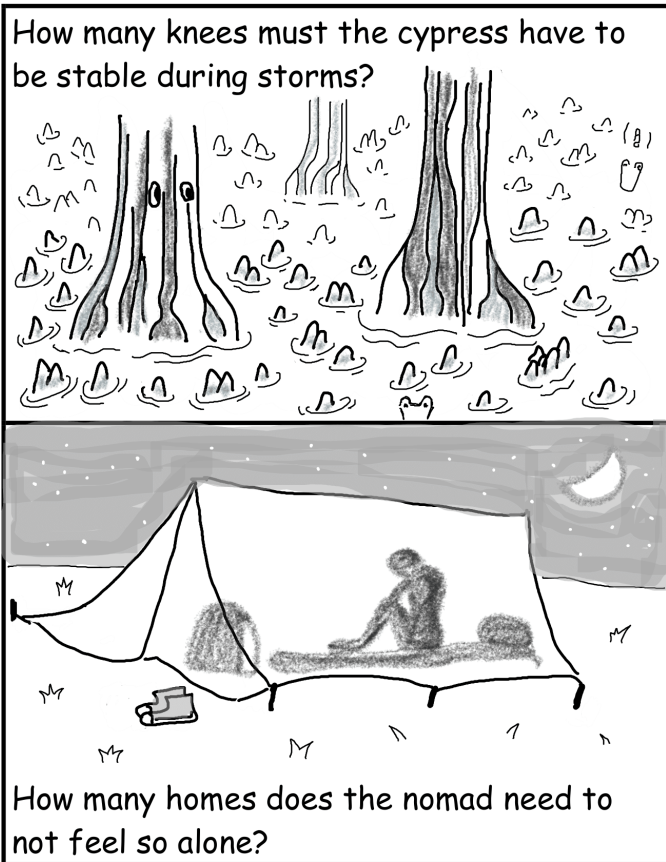
1. Once, long ago, two missionaries in charcoal suits and nametags came to my door.
2. We sat on a white canvas couch, drank hot chocolate, and talked about God.
3. They had a black leather book that was soft as lambswool and smelled like heaven.
4. We read the veil thin pages slowly, deliberately, being careful not to spill our refreshment.
5. They told me these words were true and that I was commanded to obey.
6. I believed them and dove into the font of baptism. It was cold and shadows crossed the water bathing me in darkness.
7. I pressed myself into the folds of the church, but spilled out the sides.
8. Until one day, not long ago, I saw a glimpse of a woman in the mirror.

9. She looked like me but, her eyes and hips were heavy, her shoulders drooped and her mouth, sewn shut with sinew and synapse, moaned like a bruise unable to articulate.
10. Today my tongue still worries at the threads, my fingers still pull at the knots,

QUESTIONS FOR J. R. R. TOLKIEN

Erin Olds

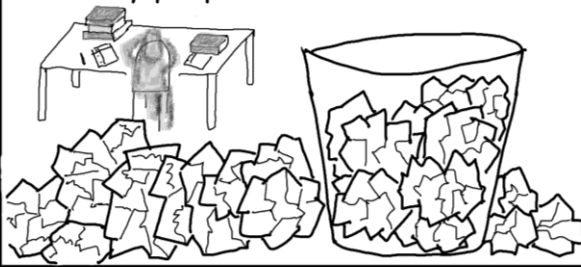
List/Litany
Poetry Comics



Does the Redwood measure his height /
by how many clouds he touches?



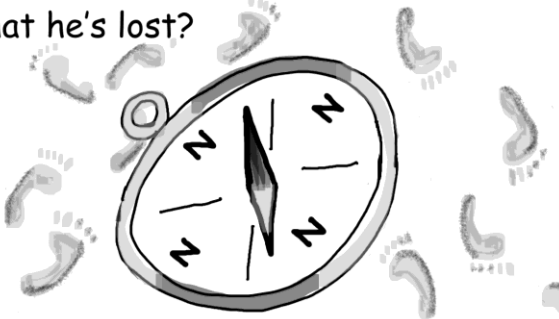
Does the poet measure her worth by
how many people she moves?



Does the Sequoia wish she could lose
some in the trunk?



When is the wanderer free to admit
that he's lost?



YOU V PALMER

Safiya Palmer

I'm put on the stand, and they ask where I'm from. I say, Jamaica. The minute it traces my tongue to the tip of their eardrums, the jury's countenance converts. The evidence of an accent is unsubstantiated. I make my case that I migrated young, and they ask if I remember it. Maybe this question takes up so much space that there's no room to remember the country I was supposedly born in, and the feeling of crawling on foreign soil. All I remember is being told, "you're a Yankee", and if it weren't for the pictures of me in the arms of Kingston, Jamaica, or the scar from my vaccination, or the lack of legal identification, I'd accuse myself of fraud too.

Prose Poem

YOU CAN ALWAYS SAVE AN EGG

Daniel Dykiel (Wes)

I run spit down the surface, become my own snake.
Swallow hard. Today, the egg hangs heavy from my
collarbone. Yesterday, you fried yolk for your lentils and
left lipids on your hands. I like my eggs boiled. Silky
membrane, smooth where the water wept through. My
brother rolled me on the kitchen counter, gentle-palmed.
Hear the perfect crack. Now see how I go wrong. If my
guts spill milky you'll use me for ramen. If my edges turn
blue you'll fork me with Dijon. Enjoy me or pass me off.
We have the same friends, know their orders. He sluices
me with mayo, slides down double-egged nausea. She
splits me over hollandaise, thickens the sauce for my thin
yolk. Today, I'm feeling sunny-side up.

Prose Poem

THE SNEAK

Fatima Sajjad

The cat would hook her claw into the grill and purr plaintively whenever she would come. The cat first saw her wearing a vermillion dupatta upon her head, golden gardenias dripping from her neck, lavender rouge blotting her cheeks. She smiled nervously as the greying grandmother chucked a modest marigold at her. The cat grew accustomed to the way she smiled, barely baring teeth, head bent, cheeks red, forehead bloody. The months flew by, and languorous heat gave way to biting winds. The cat refused to loiter outside the door. She fled to a sequestered shed outside her room. She saw her when she peeped in the window. She saw her vermillion dupatta sway beneath the fan, her neck snared therein, the smile in place.

Prose Poem

CLOCK IN

Camilo Loaiza Bonilla

I sneak Swiss sandwiches under Boss's nose, shifty sticky-fingered five star starving artist — cameras threaten catching, never caught on the clock. I make my matchas free for my girlfriend, feel watched when I wash her dishes. Boss's kid knocks, narc but I suspect she steals some too. Waft whiffs of white chocolate at the tea party, all savoring splendid Splenda packets, bland breakfast blend. "Wow are you working your ass off!" Drop dirty dollars down the tip jar, tip ajar frothed milk into espresso. Working for white women in their best Sunday dress. Finger finger sandwiches meant for the elite. Don't cry over spilled milk, trails of trash tailing all the way down to the dumpster. Take the tops off crushed cartons. Clock out.

Prose Poem

THE GIRL YOU KNEW IN THE EIGHT GRADE YOUR
MOTHER HATED

Tom Page

From underneath the ping pong table, she sticks-and-pokes *watashi no kokoro* into your ankle. *Perfect Blue* blares on the television as she practices her *nihongo* on your tender flesh. The filter of her cigarette sags away from her mouth as she butchers the strokes on your skin. You asked how much longer until 7:30 p.m., when your mother will pick you up to take you to the Scouts meeting. *Nana han ji*, she corrects you, *we have to be ready for the KatsuCon on Saturday*. Your mother insisted you could only stay the one night *because those hotel rooms are so gosh darn expensive and, you know, men'll be there. Unsupervised.*

In the morning, you'll see your *atara no kokoro* dyed above your uniform sock.

Prose Poem

An anthology of short fiction
from Dr. Heather Seller's
Short Forms Fall 2023 course.

Featuring micro-memoirs,
prose poetry, sentence
experimentation and more.

TOM PAGE
ALEX RIVERA
SAFIYA PALMER
ELIZABETH POTTINGER
CAMILO LOAIZA BONILLA
ERIN OLDS
ANDREA RINARD
DANIEL DYKIEL
JEEVITHA KANNAN
ALEC TVENSTRUP
FATIMA SAJJAD
DEBORAH LOCICERO
LEONA STRONG
ALYSSA SOTELO

