

TINY RUINS: SHORT PROSE WORKS

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By

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ABSTRACT

Tiny Ruins is a collection of short prose works consisting of flash fiction, prose poetry, and vignettes. The collection examines the everyday experiences of being an urban millennial, including current electronic methods of communication, such as Twitter and text messaging. Short prose forms proved conducive to the millennial experience because they are able to accurately mimic the ways in which we connect in the era of instantaneous communication. The short prose works explore themes of communication, alienation, social anxiety, relationships, and gender. Secondary themes include technology, surveillance, privacy, and dysfunctional social spaces. Many of the pieces depict the everyday experiences of two sisters, Janie and Alana. These experiences don't always have a beginning, middle, and end, but rather illustrate encounters with people and the world that are often fragmentary, fleeting, and inconclusive.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Tiny Ruins started as a collection of flash fiction, but has since diversified into a collection of short prose forms, including flash fiction, prose poetry, vignettes, and a form I'm calling "lyric tweets." The pieces are linked, and they work together to tell the story of two sisters, Janie and Alana, as they navigate through their lives as young girls, and as they begin to find and build upon their identities as young women.

This thesis began as a collection of flash fiction, but evolved when I discovered that what I was writing wasn't primarily plot-driven. I realized I was negotiating with the form, often finding myself struggling to add plot to a piece that resisted a steady plotline. Restricting myself to flash fiction was just that — restrictive. Some pieces in *Tiny Ruins* are whole stories, and some are not. Some emerged as prose poems and vignettes in the form of plot-less scenes, interior monologues, and reflective or contemplative pieces, and in a form which I am calling lyric tweets — for example, "Hunter," which consists of four stanzas, each containing one-hundred and forty characters or less (including spaces — i.e. the length of a tweet on Twitter). Some flash fiction pieces include "Four Flutes" and "Her Oversized Sweater." Prose poems include "Red Velvet Songs" and "Lava Rug River, Wine Mountain," and vignettes include "Lights" and "Inactive." The pieces are critiques of the world focalized through character: typically, a millennial who experiences alienation, a breakdown in communication, and/or social anxiety. The pieces are not all narratives, but they are meant to contribute to the collection as a whole. The lines between flash fiction, prose poetry, and vignettes are blurred as it is, so I decided to blur them even further and make them work together and alongside each other.

Short prose forms seem designed for the twenty-first century, as they are able to accurately mimic the ways in which we connect in the era of instantaneous communication. There is a lot of crossover within these forms, although there are also requirements that each one has individually. The definition of a prose poem is a poem that "appears as prose, but reads like poetry... While it lacks the line breaks associated with poetry, the prose poem maintains a poetic quality, often utilizing techniques common to poetry, such as fragmentation, compression, repetition, and rhyme. The prose poem can range in length from a few lines to several pages long, and it may explore a limitless array of styles and subjects" (Poets.org). Flash fiction, in contrast, doesn't need to possess this poetic quality, but it can, and instead it does need to be a full story in a compacted space, which is a trait that a prose poem could also have. Vignettes crossover with these forms as well, as they can be very scene-like and possess a narrative quality, but they don't have to — their purpose is to be descriptive and evocative, but not necessarily poetic, although they can be.

Flash fiction, also known as microfiction, sudden fiction, postcard fiction, or the short short story, among other terms, refers to stories that range in length from a few words to a few hundred words to a thousand words, though there is no absolute rule in terms of length. Flash fiction is a story marked by brevity, told in a compressed format. Anthologies dedicated to the genre started to appear in the 1980s. James Thomas' anthology, *Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories* (1992), is a landmark text that marks the rise in popularity of flash fiction. More than twenty years later, the form's popularity continues to grow with journals and anthologies devoted to the form, as well as online sites like Flash Fiction Online. The reading public's thirst for flash fiction continues with, for example, the appearance of James Thomas and Robert Shapard's collection, *Flash Fiction International*,

published in 2015 by W.W. Norton. In Canada, John Gould's Giller-nominated book, *Kilter: 55 Fictions* (2005), raised the profile of flash fiction in this country. The fact that CBC offered a literary contest — a flash fiction challenge — in 2010 attests to the continued interest in this form. Flash fiction has yet to have a huge amount of scholarly work published about it; however, as William Nelles put it in 2012, "the popularity of the genre (and the increasing number of college courses devoted to it), combined with the number of distinguished writers who have increasingly come to practice it, justifies further attention" (*Microfiction: What Makes a Very Short Story Very Short?*). It is likely that social media's speed and instantaneous agency through platforms like Twitter (one-hundred and forty characters per tweet) and Vine (six second videos) is conducive to short forms, such as flash fiction.

Prose poetry, on the other hand, has been around for much longer. The form is often credited to French symbolist writers of the nineteenth-century, exemplified by the prose poetry of Baudelaire. Although he wasn't the first to use the form, he first identified the form as poetry (Poetry Foundation). Prose-like segments of poetic texts can also be found in early translations of the Bible, as well as in the *Lyrical Ballads* of William Wordsworth, published in its first edition in the late eighteenth-century. Although there were several earlier appearances, the nineteenth-century rise of the prose poetry form was a reaction to people's dependence on traditional form poetry, and it developed a reputation as a subversive, rebellious form. Some notable prose poets include Arthur Rimbaud, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Simic, and some more recent, notable Canadian writers, such as Michael Crummey and Anne Szumigalski, have left their mark on the form. It has since gained momentum and continues to be a form used very commonly by poets today.

A vignette is a short piece of prose "with little or no plot or narrative structure" (Wheeler). According to *The Oxford Dictionary*, a vignette is "a brief evocative description, account, or episode," or "a small illustration or portrait photograph which fades into its background without a definite border" (Oxford University Press). What I find most appealing about writing vignettes is withholding a definite border. They do not need to have a clear beginning or end, but may be a scene or description, and in the case of *Tiny Ruins* I was able to use this form without having the pieces themselves be predominantly narrative. The best example of a book composed entirely in vignettes is *Safekeeping* by Abigail Thomas. Other writers of vignettes, whether as individual pieces, part of a collection, or part of a longer work of prose, such as a novel, include Annie Dillard and Sandra Cisneros.

Several key works inspired the pieces in *Tiny Ruins*, including the prose poetry of Carolyn Forché — in particular, "The Colonel" from her 1981 collection *The Country Between Us* — and the flash fiction anthology *Open Windows*. Another book that influenced me and played a role in my decision to take on this project, and one that is written entirely in vignettes, is *Safekeeping* by Abigail Thomas. This book is a collection of linked non-fiction pieces. I hadn't really experienced this form used this way before, and had no idea how effective it could be at getting across these "stories from a life" as Thomas calls them. The word "stories" is used in the title of this book, even though vignettes are technically not full stories. As I mentioned previously, vignettes need not have a plotline, nor do they need to be of a particular length. The shortest piece in Thomas' collection, "Drifting Away," is only fourteen words long, but it still contributes to the larger story.

Tiny Ruins examines the everyday experiences of being an urban millennial. The primary sites of the pieces are Canadian cities, Toronto and Saskatoon, as well as some more rural sites, such as an abandoned ski lodge in a mountainous area of Maine. The theme of “ruins” emerged after writing about the deterioration of an abandoned ski lodge in Maine, which is a real place and an obvious site of ruin, and I began to realize that most of the sites and subjects in the pieces are in some state of collapse. Several pieces in *Tiny Ruins* are set in urban back alleys, which are sites of refuse and decay. The broken mug in “Mug” is a ruin of the attachment to a personal object that holds sentimental value and represents a home that no longer exists in the life of the narrator of the story. The murder of the baby bird in “Bird” is a ruin of the childhood dream of two sisters to take responsibility and raise a small creature of their own, and they come to realize that maybe they aren’t as grown up as they thought they were. The Menchie’s stories, set in the shiny and colourful frozen yogurt store, depict a sterile workplace with a problematic boss who objectifies and emotionally abuses his young female workers. The Menchie’s envisioned is a corporate ruin. “Don’t ever leave me” represents the ruin of a relationship as the male character distances himself from the female character in the only way he sees possible, by ignoring her text messages — speaking to the state of communication in the 21st century, so often misguided and broken through endless electronic platforms.

Overall, the pieces in *Tiny Ruins* explore themes of communication, social anxiety, relationships, and gender. Secondary themes include technology, surveillance, privacy, and dysfunctional social spaces. I use social media and text messaging to explore some of these themes, as in the lyric tweet poems, as silence plays a large role in this project and these modes of communication sometimes make silence seem a whole lot louder. I find short prose forms particularly conducive to my exploration of female characters because the brief textual spaces enable me to focus on short snippets of their lives, little windows into their realities. Not all everyday experiences have a beginning, middle, and end, but rather depict encounters with people and the world around them, with anxiety, dysfunction and ruin. These little windows into millennial life can be shown effectively through short, relatively ordinary moments. Through these brief ordinary experiences I was able to examine gender, as well, and how we navigate the world as young women. I was able to use two sisters in some pieces to show how a young woman might handle experiencing sexism when she doesn’t know what to do about it, and so might wordlessly acknowledge the moment in her head but not take any action, as in “Hiring.” I was also able to use Alana, the younger and slightly more outspoken of the two sisters, to illustrate how another young woman might handle a situation like this — through speaking up and sometimes being acknowledged, but sometimes being shut down, as in “Away from Me.” My goal was to examine and critique the sexism in everyday situations by presenting these lives and moments.

Finally, segmenting the pieces to create an overall structure, while challenging, resulted in a movement in the mood of the pieces. The collection is bookended with lyric tweet poems, beginning with “Hunter” and ending with “Small Turtles,” to signal to the reader right from the start that the pieces will include this approach, and will utilize the concentrated way in which information is relayed in tweets, as well as the discontinuity of the constrained stanzas, the gaps, the quick shifts, and the information that comes through in these gaps. It forces them to read between the lines, and to wonder what’s not being said, as in a text message that may not include everything that the sender is thinking or feeling,

or in a tweet where the character count does not allow it. Creating an order for this collection involved printing and cutting out the titles of all of the pieces, scattering them across the living room floor, and finding an arrangement that flowed well thematically, that did not clump too many closely related pieces together, such as the Menchie's pieces or the Maine pieces, or the Michael Ondaatje pieces, and that allowed me to demonstrate some kind of growth in the main characters. While arranging the pieces, I aimed to create a cohesive flow of theme and tension, while making sure the pieces weren't chronological or grouped by genre or series. For example, I did not want long stretches of just flash fiction or just prose poems, but instead I wanted to mix them up to keep the reader immersed in the mixture of forms. I chose to avoid making the reader feel comfortable reading one form of writing in the collection and have unintentionally jarring jumps after each form, but instead I wanted to create that jump after just about every piece. Some pieces fell together naturally, and with some, it took the cut-up arranging process and finally seeing the pieces one after the other on the page and reading them together, to realize that they should come earlier or later in the collection. I knew that "nudes," "Four Flutes," and "Unsettle me" should appear early in the collection, because they all include conflicts that don't thoroughly get dealt with, and also because they are three of my favourites and I thought they would be strongest appearing earlier in the collection. I wanted to have "Her Oversized Sweater," "Fourteen" and "Sad Eyes Sometimes" near the end, because I also felt that they were strong pieces, but they both feature a narrator who has learned more about herself and how to deal with conflicts and situations that they may not have previously been able to handle in such a way. The pieces are not chronological, though some of the more closely connected pieces are chronological — such as the Menchie's pieces, and the pieces that include Janie and Charlie (for example, "Four Flutes," which is when we first meet Charlie, appears early in the collection, whereas "Climbing Trees," where the two characters are seen holding their instruments, appears much later). Segmenting the pieces to create an overall structure, while challenging, resulted in a movement in the mood of the pieces from the girls experiencing things at various points in their lives that make them angry or uncomfortable and not really knowing how best to handle the situation, to gaining a little bit more of an understanding of the world, as Alana does when she stands up to the prying man in "Somewhere to Land," which contrasts with her unfortunate interaction with her partner in "Away from Me" earlier in the collection, where she tries to stand up for herself but her point doesn't exactly get across. Janie shows growth as well in the final piece, "Small Turtles," where she allows herself to open herself up to adventure and the possibilities ahead, which contrasts with her also unfortunate interaction with her boss in "Hiring," earlier in the collection, where she is unable to voice the way she feels about his horrible reaction to a female applicant, ending the collection with the door wide open for the both of them. They gain a better understanding of themselves throughout the collection, knowing better what they want and how to react, while still stumbling through life on occasion, which is, of course, inevitable.

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DEDICATION

For Danielle, and all of my sisters.

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