

Lia Purpura

## ON MINIATURES

*Why are miniature things so compelling?*

First off, I don't mean the cute or the precious, those debased and easily dismissed forms of the miniature whose size compels our pity or protection; I mean workable things on very small scales. I'd like to offer some thoughts on shortness in prose by looking at miniatures in different forms and coming up with some characteristics that define them.

*The miniature is mysterious.* We wonder how all those parts work when they're so small. We wonder "are they real?" (A question never asked, of course, of giant things which are all too real.) It's why we linger over an infant's fingers and toes, those astonishing replicas: we can't quite *believe* they work. Chihuahuas work. Birds and bonsai trees work. Girl gymnasts work. Miniatures are the familiar, reduced to unfamiliarity. Miniatures are improbable, unlikely. Causes to marvel. Surprises. Feats of engineering. Products of an obsessive detailer.

*Miniatures offer changes of scale by which we measure ourselves anew.* On one hand, miniatures posit an omniscient onlooker, able to take in the whole at once. Consider your *self* in relation to dollhouses, snow globes, Fabergé eggs, sugar Easter eggs with sugary scenes inside, reliquaries, flies in amber, frog spawn, terrariums, aquariums, souvenir key chains you look through to see a picture of the very spot you're visiting,

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stilled. You are large enough to hold such things fully in hand. You obtain all the space around it. On the other hand, miniatures compel us to transcend spatial norms, issue invitations to their realm, and suggest we forget or disregard our size. In dollhouse land, you can walk through the kitchen, living room, bedroom with your three-inch-high friend, and, face pressed to the window, feel the cushions of the thumbnail love-seat hold you. In the presence of miniatures we can renounce our sense of omniscience. And in this realm, fit inside the miniature, we experience certain states of being or belief: worlds in a grain of sand; eternities in wildflowers. Regions beyond our normal-sized perception. Whether we are, in relation to them, omniscient or companionably small beings, miniatures invite us to leave our known selves and perspectives behind.

*The miniature is unto itself*, not a mere part of a whole, like a fetish or an excerpt. Certainly smaller, component parts make up an epic—I'm thinking of paintings like Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*; Bruegel's *Children's Games*, and of Alexander Calder's *Circus*—in which all the individual parts are certainly compelling. But the miniature begins and ends in itself. One rank, Boschian egg-shaped, half-human/half-bird hacking another with a sword is thrilling, but it is not a whole painting unto itself. It's a snippet.

*Miniatures are ambitious.* Charles Simic once called Franz Wright "a miniaturist whose secret ambition is to write an epic on the inside of a matchbook cover." When you pair the words "ambition" and "matchbook cover" a tension develops. Gaston Bachelard notes in *The Poetics of Space* that "when descriptions tell things in tiny detail, they are automatically verbose." In other words, in a miniature, everything is significant. Everything "counts." In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart uses the example of a miniature railroad to show the relationship between a reduction of scale and a corresponding increase in detail and significance. I recently saw a particularly outrageous example of this "increase in detail": a Fabergé egg, commemorating the Trans-Siberian Railway, which contained a seven-car train—and indeed it was the *detail* that fascinated. The headlights were diamonds, the taillights were rubies, great pains were taken with other jewels, and all was set in motion with a pea-sized golden key. I could imagine a little czarina kept busy for hours unloading boxcars full of jeweled fruit.



*Miniatures are practical.* Like mementos they can be carried out of a burning house or by immigrants to the New World; they can be held under the tongue like contraband and smuggled past border guards. Miniatures are made to travel. They are portable and light, dense and compressed as diamonds. Italo Calvino chose to call his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. In the introductory note to the collection, his wife writes that Calvino was “delighted by the word ‘memos’ and dismissed grander titles such as ‘Some Literary Values’ and ‘Six Literary Legacies.’” Instead he titled his memos “lightness,” “quickness,” “exactitude,” “visibility,” “multiplicity,” and “consistency.” The whole book is only 120 pages or so long. And while I’m recommending, there’s Lawrence Sutin’s *A Postcard Memoir*, a collection of essays, each of which is made to fit on a postcard, and each sketching out in part an era in the author’s life and family’s history. Such brevity “serves as a refuge for greatness” or brevity gives greatness (the historical, the philosophical) a practical form in which to travel.

*Miniatures encourage attention*—in the way whispering requires a listener to quiet down and incline toward the speaker. Sometimes we need binoculars, microscopes, View-Masters, stereopticons to assist our looking, but mediated or not, miniatures suggest there is more there than meets the eye easily. They suggest there is much to miss if we don’t look hard at spaces, crevices, crannies.

*Miniatures are intimate.* Chopin’s *Preludes* were written to be played in parlors, those small, bounded rooms built for private talk, small gatherings, or other miniaturized forms of entertainment like *tableaux vivants*, charades, and flirting.

*Time, in miniature form, like a gas compressed, gets hotter.* I’ll paraphrase here an experiment conducted at the School of Architecture at The University of Tennessee and explored in depth by Stewart in *On Longing*. In this experiment, researchers had subjects play with scale-model rooms 1/6th, 1/12th, and 1/24th the size of full-size scale models. The subjects were asked to imagine themselves at that scale, roaming around the model rooms. Then they were asked to tell researchers when they felt they had been involved with each model for 30 minutes. Researchers found that scale radically altered perception of time, and in

direct proportion to scale. For example: 30 minutes was experienced in 5 minutes at 1/12th scale but in 2.5 minutes at 1/24th scale. Stewart calls the compressed time experienced by the subject “private time.” *Miniature* time transcends the experience of *everyday time and space* by offering a special way to encounter and measure duration.

The miniature, a working, functioning complete world unto itself, is not merely a “small” or “brief” thing, or a “shortened” form of something larger. Miniatures transcend their size, like small-but-vicious dogs, dense chunks of fudge, espresso, a drop of mercury, parasites. Miniatures do nothing less than alter our sense of, and relation to time and space. Finally, and most strangely to me, miniatures are radically self-sufficient. The beings who inhabit fairylands, those elves and sprites, pixies and trolls, don’t usually strive to be our pals. They’re distant and go about their business. They don’t need us. Their smallness is our problem, or intrigue, or desire. They don’t need us, and thus we are drawn to them—as any smitten lover might be, to a beloved who remains so close and yet just out of reach.

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## A FLASH NONFICTION EXERCISE

The old-fashioned letter provided a space for communion between friends. Upon receiving a letter, one would repair to a place of solitude to read it, to allow the essence of the distant friend to fill up the space. A letter cordoned off a sanctioned area of mind, too, and allowed the lucky recipient to spend a bit of deep time conjuring up the feel of being with a friend. Letters, of course, are miniature forms of being, a whole sense of a person compressed.

I have found it clarifying to read my essays-in-progress in environments that are wholly different than the environment in which they were initially drafted. In this way, I reconstitute the sense of essay-as-letter, even if it’s addressed only to myself and is in its infancy. Take an essay you’ve been working on and read it aloud to yourself in a fresh place. Reading in the car at a red light allows for an urgency of hearing, and a close, fast, focused, intensified