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# *My Son, the Art Director*

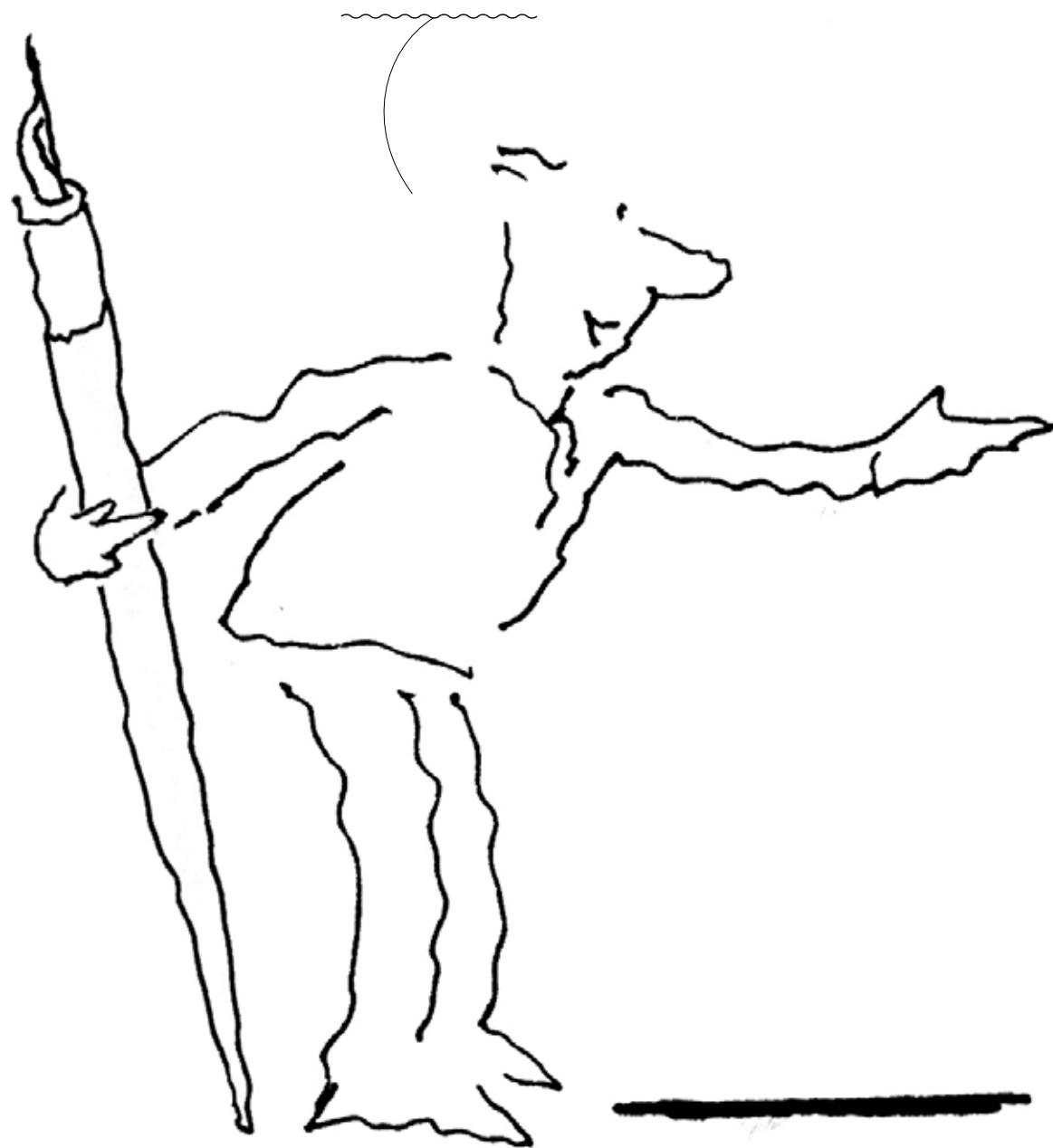


Illustration by R. O. Blechman

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# *My Dad, the Illustrator*

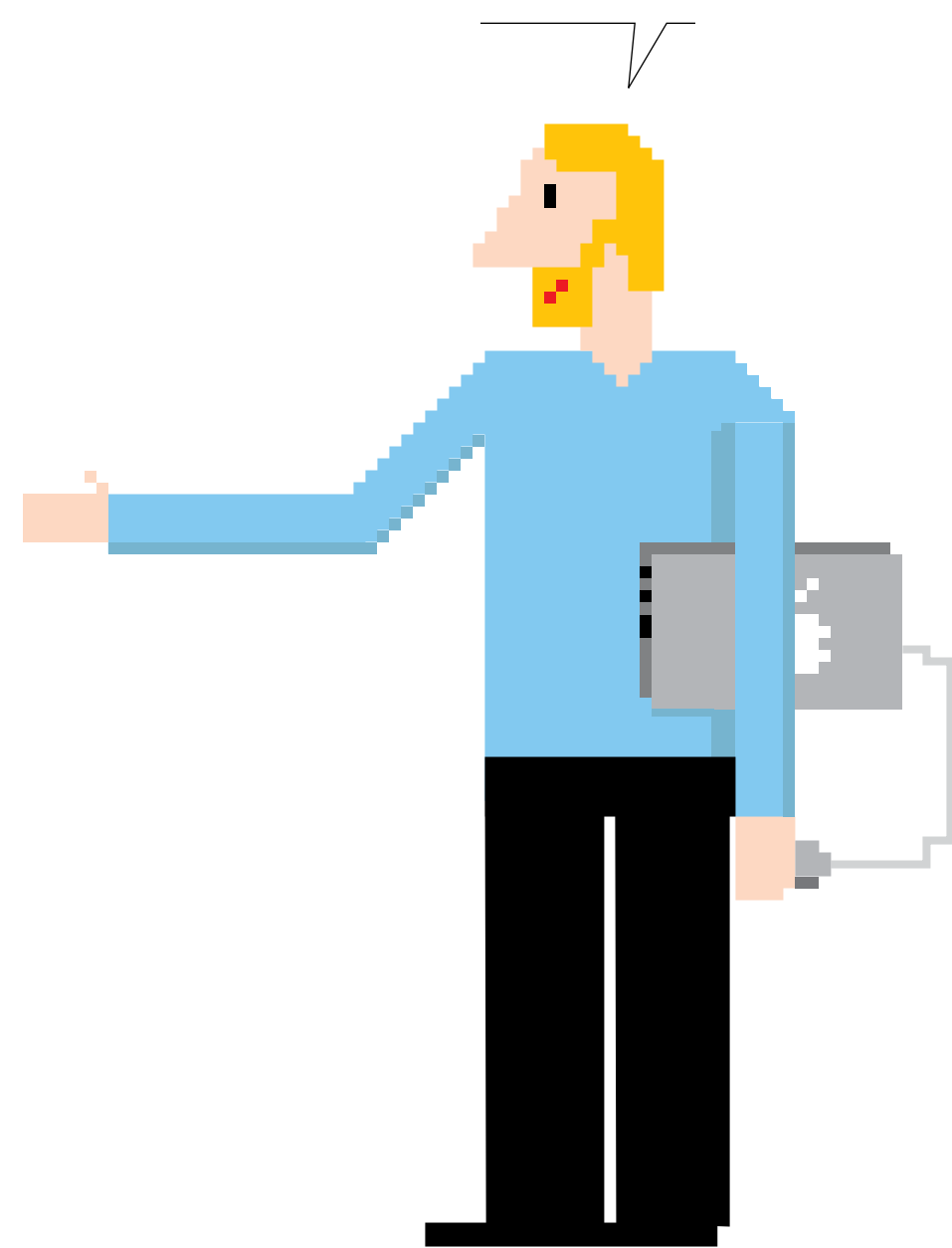


Illustration by Nicholas Blechman

Opposite page, clockwise from bottom left: A spoof of James Whistler's painting of his mother, for the cover of *The New Yorker*; an illustration for the Museum of the City of New York; *Talking Lines*, a 2009 collection of short graphic stories (Drawn & Quarterly); cover illustrations for the magazine *Story*; a 1957 illustration for *Punch* magazine

## Two generations of illustrators reflect on the family business.

By Steven Heller

**T**HERE IS A long-held tradition in certain quarters, dating back to biblical times, that sons (and, to a lesser extent, daughters) naturally follow in their father's footsteps, apprenticing in and then continuing the family business. History offers in nearly equal measure successes (Bobby and Barry Bonds) and failures (King Lear and Oedipus). Over the past 15 years, *The New York Times* has boasted one perfect model of father-son synergy: R. O. Blechman (82), illustrator, cartoonist, and filmmaker, who has freelanced for the newspaper for more than four decades; and his son Nicholas Blechman (45), illustrator, cartoonist, and art director, who has worked at the *Times* since 1997. Not only did Blechman *filis* inherit much of Blechman *père's* talent, but he is in the curious position of assigning work to his dad.

Yet the fate of this relationship was not etched in stone. There was no plan of succession devised upon Nicholas's birth. R. O. (friends know him as Bob) did not force his will or his passion for art on Nicholas and his brother, Max (who did not become an artist).

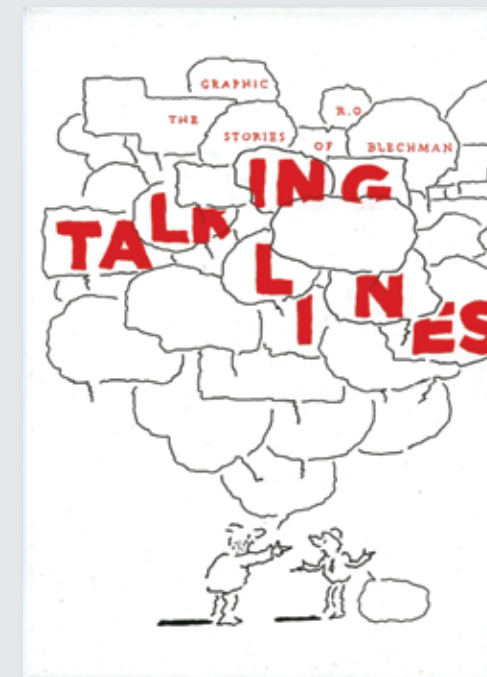
"I tended to work late hours, away from home, and there never was any of my art work in the apartment," R. O. recalls. "So

my not being around Nicholas might have given him the psychological space to become his own artist." And in retrospect, R. O. thinks he probably wasn't terribly encouraging. "It's not the best field. There's too much competition; too much backbiting and jealousy. But if you're fated to be a cartoonist, illustrator, or designer, then you have to ignore the obstacles. In this respect, I think of what Bizet said about opera, 'What a marvelous art form. What a rotten field.' But I suppose you could say this about any creative field."

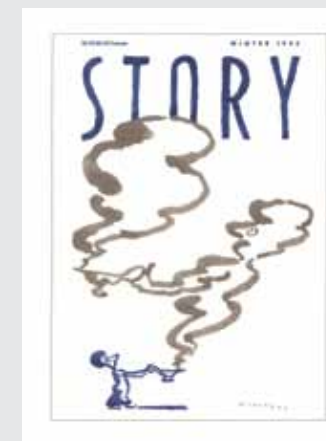
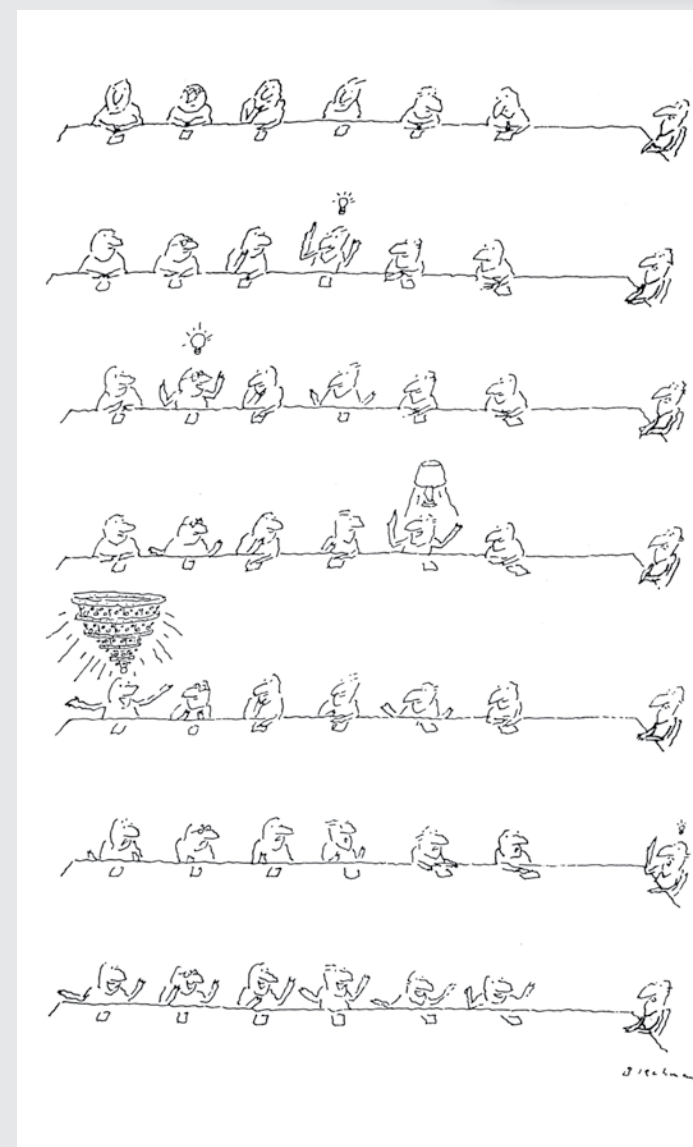
At first, Nicholas was oblivious to the fact that his dad was the R. O. Blechman, artist of the famed Alka-Seltzer talking stomach (which spurred me, as a kid, to try my own hand at cartooning). Then, in 1981, he came across one of his father's *New Yorker* covers at the local supermarket. "It was Halloween, seen from the perspective of a pumpkin, and on prominent display at the checkout counter," Nicholas says. "That's when I knew he had a certain notoriety." Occasionally, he'd also see familiar-looking drawings in the *Times* when the paper was delivered to their home. "I knew he was famous but could not understand why, since his drawings were so wiggly and minimal. At school, kids asked me what my father did, and I'd proudly reply 'cartoonist.' I'd be asked if I meant he did Scooby-Doo or Charlie Brown, and I'd invariably disappoint my buddies by saying, 'He does *New Yorker* covers.'"



R. O.  
Blechman



COURTESY R. O. BLECHMAN



But as it turned out, Nicholas was more interested in the *New Yorker* sensibility than in mainstream comics and cartoons. Moreover, drawing was such a part of his genetic makeup that R. O. didn't even have to encourage him to try his hand at art. As a youngster, Nicholas was always drawing; as a four-year-old he made a picture book about ships. "What impressed me was not that he drew a lot of ships," R. O. says, "but that he made a book of them." Later, Nicholas created comic strips and graphic narratives, at first just for himself. His early drawings—the ones I saw as an art director at the *Times*, when Nicholas, in his early twenties and using the nom de plume Knickerbocker, showed me his portfolio—were funny and rather diminutive, mirroring a bit of his dad's love of detail.

"Bob"—Nicholas calls his father by his first name—"taught me that every drawing needed wit, and that the quality of the idea was as important as its execution. He never sat me down and told me. It was just apparent in his critiques, in the drawings he did, and in the work of his peers, including Topor, Sempé, Tomi Ungerer, Ed Sorel, and Bob Gill, among others."

It isn't easy for a child to share a field with such an accomplished parent. Comparisons are inevitable, and the need to measure up can be paralyzing. But Nicholas insists, "I never would have entered the same field if he had not encouraged me. Which is not to say he wasn't hypercritical. His brutal honesty hurt, but when he praised my work, I'd be walking on a cloud." R. O. made certain to

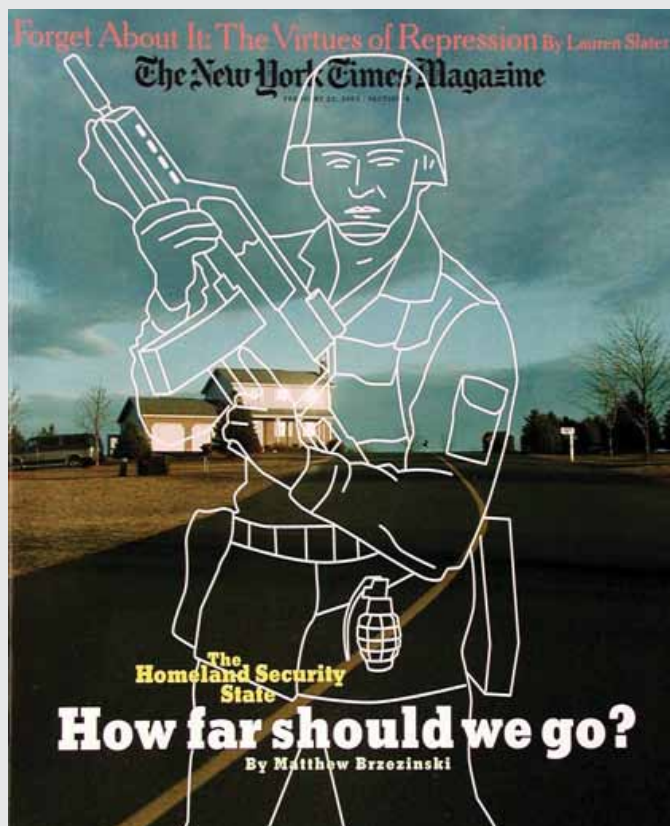
balance his critiques with encomiums: "I loved what he did, as I loved him. The two came together—still do." And in turn, says Nicholas, "I never tried to live up to what he had done. My goal was simply to earn a living doing what I love to do."

Nicholas loved comics and worshipped Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly's *RAW* magazine, which R. O. would bring home whenever an issue came out. *RAW* was the impetus for Nicholas to launch his own publication, *Nozone*, a comics magazine with a satiric bite. "Bob became a contributor," Nicholas says, "but not at the beginning. I needed the first eight issues

to be entirely mine, probably because I needed to define myself against his fame." That was when Nicholas began using the moniker Knickerbocker, to distinguish himself further. "But I have since dropped it," he says, "because there is more integrity in my own name."

Of course, the anxiety can go the other way, for slightly different reasons. Parents will do whatever it takes to help their children succeed, and R. O. was no exception. "I remember that when he went to college—Oberlin, the same one I attended—his art teacher didn't like some of the work he did," Bob says. "I thought the teacher was crazy, and I told Nicholas that. I hate to think what might have happened if he hadn't shown me his college artwork."

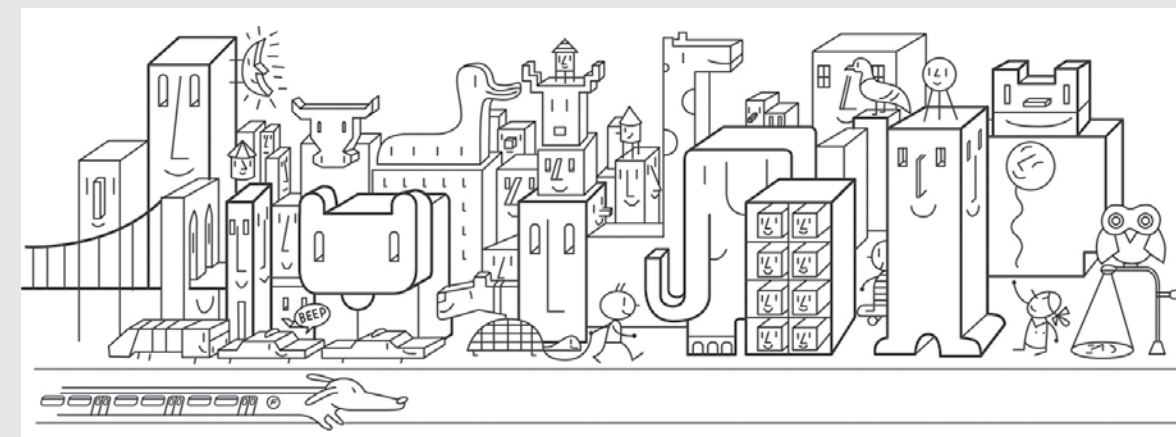
When I met Nicholas in the late 1980s, I had no idea that he and R. O. were related. R. O. (whom I had been commissioning for almost a decade) never asked me to see him. Most of R. O.'s fatherly assistance comes



COURTESY NICHOLAS BLECHMAN



## Nicholas Blechman



from occasional criticism. “That’s the prerogative a loving father can take,” R. O. says. “He may reject my advice—often does—but I think he knows that it’s done out of love and concern.”

Sometimes, the roles are reversed. R. O. is often art directed by Nicholas, who in 1997 became the art director of the *Times*’s Op-Ed page and is now in the same role for the newspaper’s *Book Review*. It is a delicate working relationship, as R. O. explains in a circuitous way. “I don’t often show my work to others, even my wife or son. That may make me sound like a very secure artist and person, but I’m neither. But I think

**“I think my very insecurity—that trembling line, that identification with the underdog—makes my work mine.” A squabble has yet to arise, but Nicholas says it requires a certain fortitude to be both son and art director. Still, he relishes working together: “Because we are related, we are both more honest in our criticism of each other. He doesn’t hold back from telling me what he thinks, and I tend to overdirect him in return. I think this produces better results in the end.”**

It is not unusual for children to inherit traits, physical and otherwise, from their parents. What about work? R. O. says that “obviously the look is very different. And Nicholas does more graphic work, more computer-oriented work, than I do. Although I prefer his hand-drawn artwork, and have told him that.” Nicholas more or less concurs: “He draws wiggly, I draw straight. He uses a pen, I use a mouse. I

don’t think we should be compared. We are different people, with different styles. I think precisely *because* his style is so unique, I never compared myself to him. But we have similar handwriting, and I’m really good at forging his signature.”

Despite his need to remain distinctive, Nicholas continues to rely on his father’s advice: “I once asked Paul Rand to do an Op-Ed piece on the National Endowment of the Arts. His solution was to tear up the letters *N.E.A.* Unsure of this idea, I asked my dad what he thought. His advice was, ‘Just make sure Paul Rand signs it.’ The signature made all the difference. It called

attention to the fact that this was not any designer tearing type, but the legendary Paul Rand.”

Now 82, R. O. no longer keeps a large studio, preferring to work from his farmhouse in upstate New York. He hasn’t retired—he says he’s racing the clock. After a slew of commercials and short films, he recently started on a storyboard for his first feature film (which

will be both animated and live-action). At 45, Nicholas is speeding up. He has two children’s books coming out in 2013, is working on another issue of *Nozone*, and continues as the art director of the *Book Review*. With editorial illustration venues drying up, he sees an opportunity for illustrators to produce their own work, as authors and entrepreneurs. Beyond that, he says, “I’d also like to build a boat.” Asked how they felt about each other’s accomplishments, father and son answered in unison: “Damn proud.” ■

COURTESY R. O. AND NICHOLAS BLECHMAN



Essay | Steven Millhauser

## The Ambition of the Short Story

**T**HE short story — how modest in bearing! How unassuming in manner! It sits there quietly, eyes lowered, almost as if trying not to be noticed. And if it should somehow attract your attention, it says quickly, in a brave little self-deprecating voice alive to all the possibilities of disappointment: “I’m not a novel, you know. Not even a short one. If that’s what you’re looking for, you don’t want me.” Rarely has one form so dominated another. And we understand, we nod our heads knowingly: here in America, size is power. The novel is the Wal-Mart, the Incredible Hulk, the jumbo jet of literature. The novel is insatiable — it wants to devour the world. What’s left for the poor short story to do? It can cultivate its garden, practice meditation, water the geraniums in the window box. It can take a course in creative nonfiction. It can do whatever it likes, so long as it doesn’t forget its place — so long as it keeps quiet and stays out of the way. “Hoo ha!” cries the novel. “Here

*There are virtues associated with smallness. It is the realm of elegance and grace. It’s also the realm of perfection.*

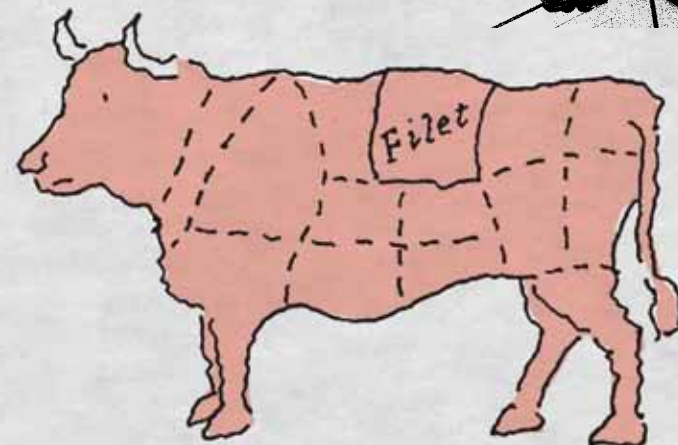
ah come!” The short story is always ducking for cover. The novel buys up the land, cuts down the trees, puts up the condos. The short story scampers across a lawn, squeezes under a fence.

Of course there are virtues associated with smallness. Even the novel will grant as much. Large things tend to be unwieldy, clumsy, crude; smallness is the realm of elegance and grace. It’s also the realm of perfection. The novel is exhaustive by nature; but the world is inexhaustible; therefore the novel, that Faustian striver, can never attain its desire. The short story by contrast is inherently selective. By excluding almost everything, it can give perfect shape to what remains. And the short story can even lay claim to a kind of completeness that eludes the novel — after the initial act of radical exclusion, it can include all of the little that’s left. The novel, when it remembers the short story at all, is pleased to be generous. “I admire you,” it says, placing its big rough hand over its heart. “No kidding. You’re so — you’re so —” So pretty! So svelte! So high class! And smart, too. The novel can hardly contain itself. After all, what difference does it make? It’s nothing but talk. What the novel cares about is vastness, is power. Deep in its heart, it disdains the short story, which makes do with so little. It has no use for the short story’s austerity, its suppression of appetite, its refusals and renunciations. The novel wants things. It wants territory. It wants the whole world. Perfection is the consolation of those who have nothing else.

So much for the short story. Modest in its pretensions, shyly proud of its petite virtues, a trifle anxious in relation to its brash rival, it contents itself with sitting back and letting the novel take on the big world. And yet, and yet. That modest pose — am I mistaken, or is it a little overdone? Those glancing-away looks — do they contain a touch of slyness? Can it be that the

Steven Millhauser’s most recent book is “*Dangerous Laughter: Thirteen Stories.*”

ILLUSTRATION BY R. O. BLECHMAN



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little short story dares to have ambitions of its own? If so, it will never admit them openly, because of a sharp instinct for self-protection, a long habit of secrecy bred by oppression. In a world ruled by swaggering novels, smallness has learned to make its way cautiously. We will have to intuit its secret. I imagine the short story harboring a wish. I imagine the short story saying to the novel: You can have everything — everything — all I ask is a single grain of sand. The novel, with a careless shrug, a shrug both cheerful and contemptuous, grants the wish.

But that grain of sand is the story’s way out. That grain of sand is the story’s salvation. I take my cue from William Blake: “All the world in a grain of sand.” Think of it: the world in a grain of sand; which is to say, every part of the world, however small, contains the world entirely. Or to put it another way: if you concentrate your attention on some apparently insignificant portion of the world, you will find, deep within it, nothing less than the world itself. In that single grain of sand lies the beach that contains the grain of sand. In that single grain of sand lies the ocean that dashes against the beach, the ship that sails the ocean, the sun that shines down on the ship, the interstellar winds, a teaspoon in Kansas, the structure of the universe. And there you have the ambition of the short story, the terrible ambition that lies behind its fraudulent modesty: to body forth the whole world. The short story believes in transformation. It believes in hidden powers. The novel prefers things in plain

view. It has no patience with individual grains of sand, which glitter but are difficult to see. The novel wants to sweep everything into its mighty embrace — shores, mountains, continents. But it can never succeed, because the world is vaster than a novel, the world rushes away at every point. The novel leaps restlessly from place to place, always hungry, always dissatisfied, always fearful of coming to an end — because when it stops, exhausted but never at peace, the world will have escaped it. The short story concentrates on its grain of sand, in the fierce belief that there — right there, in the palm of its hand — lies the universe. It seeks to know that grain of sand the way a lover seeks to know the face of the beloved. It looks for the moment when the grain of sand reveals its true nature. In that moment of mystic expansion, when the macrocosmic flower bursts from the microcosmic seed, the short story feels its power. It becomes bigger than itself. It becomes bigger than the novel. It becomes as big as the universe. Therein lies the immodesty of the short story, its secret aggression. Its method is revelation. Its littleness is the agency of its power. The ponderous mass of the novel strikes it as the laughable image of weakness. The short story apologizes for nothing. It exults in its shortness. It wants to be shorter still. It wants to be a single word. If it could find that word, if it could utter that syllable, the entire universe would blaze out of it with a roar. That is the outrageous ambition of the short story, that is its deepest faith, that is the greatness of its smallness. □

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