

# The World in a Grain of Sand: Incorporating Scale in Poetry and Art

Massachusetts Poetry Festival 2016

Workshop led by Meg Winikates

## Defining Scale

- Visual (comparison to human p.o.v.)
- Extra-visual (too extremely small or large for human perception)
- Physical (in relation to your body)
- Constructed (in relationship to your page or canvas)
- Space/Time (durations & infinities)

## Why use scale? Why play with it? Why alter it?

- Impact
- Point of view
- Surprise

## Activity 1: Fit Your Canvas

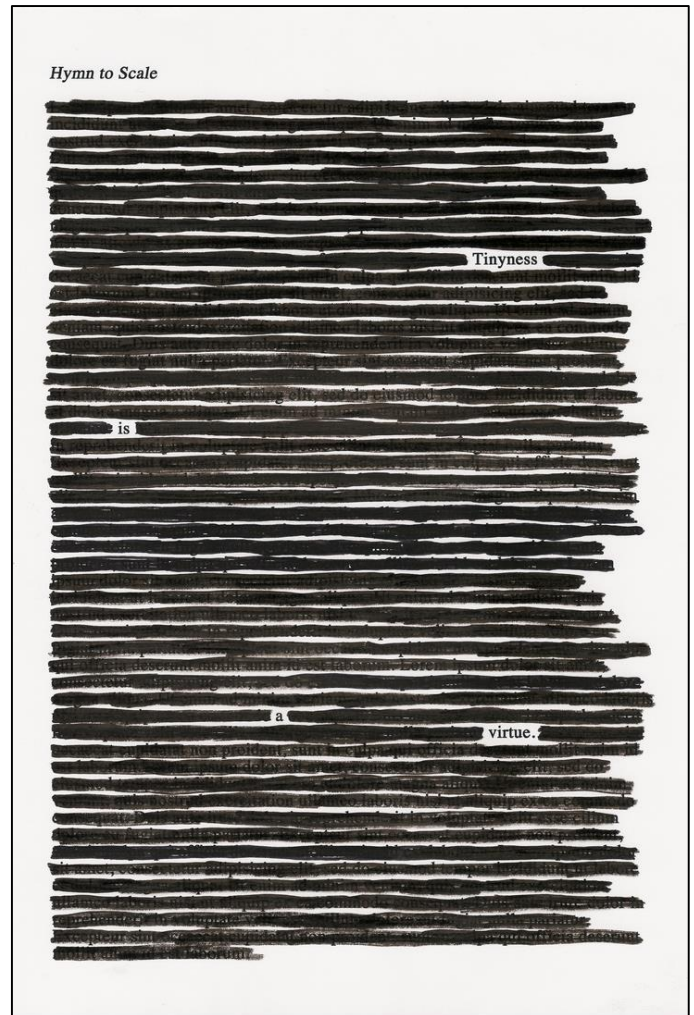
- Pick a paper size that is not your usual notebook (index card, register tape, post-it note)
- Draft a poem where your lines fit the paper – no line breaks too short or long
- Try again with a differently proportioned page. How is your poem altered?

## Activity 2: Change Your Point of View

- Look at your neighborhood, a place you used to live, or a place you want to visit, using Google Earth. How does the aerial view change your perception of that place?
- Find a corner of your back yard, local park, or other favorite spot. Get down on the ground; what do you see? Do you notice things you usually walk past? How do things change looking up from here as well?

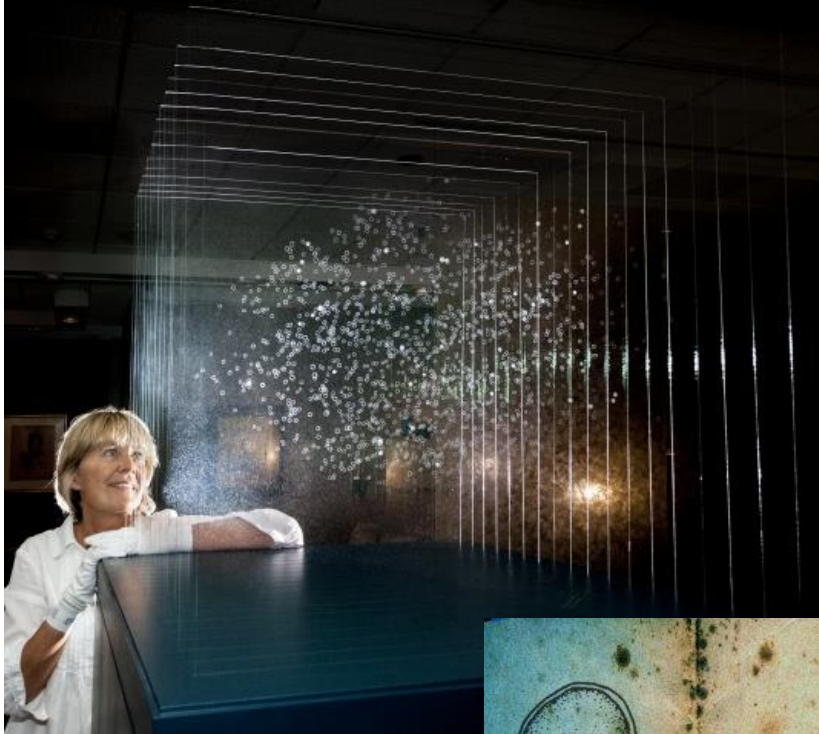
## Activity 3: Get Your Head in the Clouds

- Listen to sounds off of NASA's free Soundcloud tracks: <https://soundcloud.com/nasa> or listen to the music of the EP 80UA created using those tracks: <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/nasa-space-music-80ua-ep-20141229>
- Write to the soundtrack of space. How can you get those sounds in your writing?



"Hymn to Scale" found poem by Tori J Watson

## Today's Featured Artworks

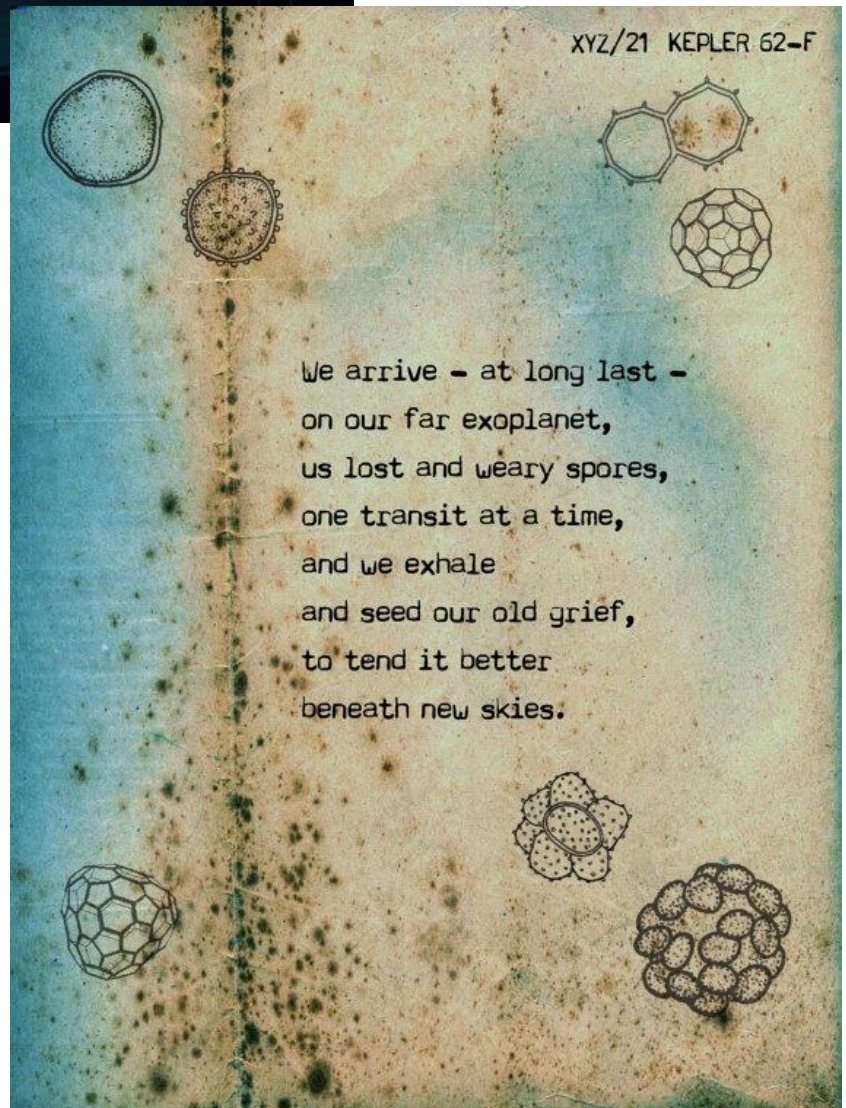


Portrait of artist Angela Palmer during the installation of her *Searching for Goldilocks* sculpture at the National Air and Space Museum.

Read more about planets in the “Goldilocks” zone here:  
<http://insider.si.edu/2015/01/eight-new-planets-found-goldilocks-zone/>

“Kepler 62-F” by xYz (Joanna Tilsley), from her ‘quantum poetry’ project, *30 Days*:

<https://www.etsy.com/uk/shop/QuantumPress>





## The Scale of Things

by Margaret Tait

There's a whole country at the foot of the  
stone  
If you care to look  
These are the stones we have instead of trees  
In the north.  
Our trees all got lost,  
Blown over or cut down  
Long long ago, and some of them lie there  
still in the  
    peat moss  
Or fossilized in limestone.  
At the shady foot of trees  
Certain things grow,  
But at the foot of stone grow the sun-loving  
    wind-resisting short plants  
With very small bright flowers  
And compact, precise leaves.  
The wind whips the tight stems into a  
vibration,  
But they don't break.  
The full light of the sun reaches right down  
to the  
    ground,  
And reflects obliquely and sideways in among  
and

    under the snug leaves,  
And settles on the stone too,  
Makes a glow there,  
A sufficient warmth and clarified light.  
The stunning frequencies seem to get  
absorbed  
And if you stare closely at the stone  
It's a calm light, not too blue,  
Precisely indicating its variegated surface.  
The great stone stands,  
On a different scale, in a way, from the  
minute plants  
    at its base.  
A proliferating green lichen  
Grows on it  
As well as round golden coin-patches of  
another  
    common lichen,  
And only in the earth right up to the very  
stone but  
    not on it  
Grow the crisp grass  
And all the tiny plants and flowers  
Which, together interlaced and inter-related,  
Make the fine springing turf which people  
and animals  
    walk on.



Metropolis, 2012 by Vaughn Bell

<http://www.vaughnbell.net>

## Poems Featuring Scale

Emily Dickinson, Complete Poems

CXXVI

THE BRAIN is wider than the sky,  
For, put them side by side,  
The one the other will include  
With ease, and you beside.

The brain is deeper than the sea,  
For, hold them, blue to blue,  
The one the other will absorb,  
As sponges, buckets do.

The brain is just the weight of God,  
For, lift them, pound for pound,  
And they will differ, if they do,  
As syllable from sound.

\* \* \*

CXXXV

The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants -  
At Evening, it is not  
At Morning, in a Truffled Hut  
It stop opon a Spot

As if it tarried always  
And yet it's whole Career  
Is shorter than a Snake's Delay -  
And fleeter than a Tare -

'Tis Vegetation's Juggler -  
The Germ of Alibi -  
Doth like a Bubble antedate  
And like a Bubble, hie -

I feel as if the Grass was pleased  
To have it intermit -  
This surreptitious Scion  
Of Summer's circumspect.

Had Nature any supple Face  
Or could she one contemn -  
Had Nature an Apostate -  
That Mushroom - it is Him!

Wings by Miroslav Holub

*We have  
a microscopic anatomy  
of the whale  
this  
gives  
Man  
assurance  
William Carlos Williams*

We have  
a map of the universe  
for microbes,  
we have  
a map of a microbe  
for the universe.

we have  
a Grand Master of chess  
made of electronic circuits.

But above all  
we have  
the ability  
to sort peas,  
to cup water in our hands,  
to seek  
the right screw  
under the sofa  
for hours

This  
gives us  
wings.

*Gravity* by John Frederick Nims

Mildest of all the powers of earth: no lightnings  
For her—maniacal in the clouds. No need for  
Signs with their skull and crossbones, chain-link  
gates:

Danger! Keep Out! High Gravity! she's friendlier.  
Won't nurse—unlike the magnetic powers—  
repugnance;  
Would reconcile, draw close: her passion's love.

No terrors lurking in her depths, like those  
Bound in that buzzing strongbox of the atom,  
Terrors that, lossened, turn the hills vesuvian,  
Trace in cremation where the cities were.

No, she's our quiet mother, sensible.  
But therefore down-to-earth, not suffering  
Fools who play fast and loose among the  
mountains,  
Who fly in her face, or, drunken, clown on  
cornices.

She taught our ways of walking. Her affection  
Adjusted the morning grass, the sands of summer  
Until our soles fit snug in each, walk easy.  
Holding her hand, we're safe. Should that hand  
fail,  
The atmosphere we breathe would turn hysterical,  
Hiss with tornadoes, spinning us from earth  
Into the cold unbreathable desolations.

Yet there—in fields of space—is where she shines,  
Ring-mistress of the circus of the stars,  
Their prancing carousels, their ferris wheels  
Lit brilliant in celebration. Thanks to her  
All's gala in the galaxy.

Down here she  
Walks us just right, not like the jokey moon  
Burlesquing our human stride to kangaroo hops;  
Not like vast planets, whose unbearable mass  
Would crush us in a bear hug to their surface  
And into the surface, flattened. No: deals fairly.  
Makes happy each with each: the willow bend  
Just so, the acrobat land true, the keystone

Nestle in place for bridge and for cathedral.  
Let us pick up—or mostly—what we need:  
Rake, bucket, stone to build with, logs for  
warmth,  
The fallen fruit, the fallen child . . . ourselves.

Instructs us too in honesty: our jointed  
Limbs move awry and crisscross, gawky, thwart;  
She's all directness and makes that a grace,  
All downright passion for the core of things,  
For rectitude, the very ground of being:  
Those eyes are leveled where the heart is set.

See, on the tennis court this August day:  
How, beyond human error, she's the one  
Whose will the bright balls cherish and obey  
—As if in love. She's tireless in her courtesies  
To even the klutz (knees, elbows all a-tangle),  
Allowing his poky serve Euclidean whimsies,  
The looniest lob its joy: serene parabolas.

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*Figure* by Josephine Miles

A poem I keep forgetting to write  
Is about the stars,  
How I see them in their order  
Even without the chair and bear and the sisters,  
In their astronomic presence of great space,  
And how beyond and behind my eyes they are  
moving,  
Exploding to spirals under extremest pressure.  
Having not mathematics, my head  
Bursts with anguish of not understanding.

The poem I forget to write is bursting fragments  
Of a tortured victim, far from me  
In his galaxy of minds bent upon him,  
In the oblivion of his headline status  
Crumpled and exploding as incomparable  
As a star, yet present in its light.  
I forget to write.

*Zoom!* by Simon Armitage

It begins as a house, an end terrace  
in this case  
but it will not stop there. Soon it is  
an avenue  
which cambers arrogantly past the Mechanics'  
Institute,  
turns left  
at the main road without even looking  
and quickly it is  
a town with all four major clearing banks,  
a daily paper  
and a football team pushing for promotion.

On it goes, oblivious of the Planning Acts,  
the green belts,  
and before we know it it is out of our hands:  
city, nation,  
hemisphere, universe, hammering out in all  
directions  
until suddenly,  
mercifully, it is drawn aside through the eye  
of a black hole  
and bulleted into a neighbouring galaxy,  
emerging  
smaller and smoother  
than a billiard ball but weighing more than  
Saturn.

People stop me in the street, badger me  
in the check-out queue  
and ask "What is this, this that is so small  
and so very smooth  
but whose mass is greater than the ringed  
planet?"  
It's just words

I assure them. But they will not have it.  
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*Tomes* by Billy Collins

There is a section in my library for death  
and another for Irish history,  
a few shelves for the poetry of China and Japan,  
and in the center a row of imperturbable  
reference books,

the ones you can turn to anytime,  
when the night is going wrong  
or when the day is full of empty promise.

I have nothing against  
the thin monograph, the odd query,  
a note on the identity of Chekhov's dentist,  
but what I prefer on days like these  
is to get up from the couch,  
pull down *The History of the World*,  
and hold in my hands a book  
containing nearly everything  
and weighing no more than a sack of potatoes,  
eleven pounds, I discovered one day when I  
placed it  
on the black, iron scale  
my mother used to keep in her kitchen,  
the device on which she would place  
a certain amount of flour,  
a certain amount of fish.

Open flat on my lap  
under a halo of lamplight,  
a book like this always has a way  
of soothing the nerves,  
quieting the riotous surf of information  
that foams around my waist  
even though it never mentions  
the silent labors of the poor,  
the daydreams of grocers and tailors,  
or the faces of men and women alone in single  
rooms-

even though it never mentions my mother,  
now that I think of her again,  
who only last year rolled off the edge of the earth  
in her electric bed,  
in her smooth pink nightgown  
the bones of her fingers interlocked,  
her sunken eyes staring upward  
beyond all knowledge,  
beyond the tiny figures of history,  
some in uniform, some not,  
marching onto the pages of this incredibly heavy  
book.