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# 10 BY 10

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FLASH FICTION STORIES



**NUMBER 23, DECEMBER 2024**

Welcome to Issue #23. Nine of the ten writers herein are new to 10 By 10. While China and Wales are represented, eight states also have writers in this issue. None touch the holidays of Hanukkah, Christmas or New Year's, but they do have entertaining stories to close out the old year. So, back sit in a comfortable chair and enjoy reading this issue.

If you wish to submit to 10 By 10 remember stories should be 200 to 500 words. Also include a bio and a head & shoulders jpeg photo. If possible use 14 pt. Time New Roman. The magazine is open for submissions every day of every month. We do our best to respond as soon as possible.

Have a joyous Hanukkah, a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

*Zvi A. Sesling*

Editor



Zvi A. Sesling, Brookline, MA Poet Laureate (2017-2020), has published numerous poems and flash fiction. He edits *Muddy River Poetry Review* and *10 By 10 Flash Fiction Stories*. Sesling has won international and national poetry prizes He is a four-time Pushcart Prize poetry nominee. His story "Chili Man" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Sesling's poetry books are *King of the Jungle*, *Fire Tongue*, *The Lynching of Leo Frank*, *War Zones* and *Simple Game and Ghosts of Fenway*, *Baseball Poems*. His poetry chapbooks are *Across Stones of Bad Dreams* and *Love Poems From Hell*. Sesling's volume of flash fiction is *Secret Behind the Gate*, and his flash chapbook is *Wheels*. Sesling and Paul Beckman have also published a book of flash fiction titled *40 Stories*. Sesling lives in Brookline, MA with his wife Susan J. Dechter.



**Emily Edwards** is a scientist and technical writer in Atlanta, GA. She is published in several scientific journals including *Neurotherapeutics*, *Scientific Reports*, and the *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*. She enjoys writing fiction, and took several creative writing courses while studying at Emory University. For more information on her work or to connect, visit [emilyedwardswriting.com](http://emilyedwardswriting.com).

### Regulars

We had our first date there, then we became regulars. We always started with the brussels sprouts — they transcended the soggy vegetable stereotype. They were crispy and sweet, walking the fine line between appetizer and dessert.

We usually got cocktails, too. An old fashioned for me. A spicy strawberry margarita for you. The server would mix up our drinks, handing me the dazzling pink glass. You would dramatically take it from me, complaining about the injustices faced by straight men who liked pink drinks.

Sometimes we would stop and pick up ice cream on our way back to your apartment, a pint of Ben & Jerry's from the CVS down the street. Cherry Garcia, your favorite. The first time you picked up the carton, I told you that it was my favorite, too. And your smile got bigger. I never told you that I hate cherries.

Jessica invited me to brunch there this Sunday. She's heard that the brussels sprouts are incredible, but my stomach ached at the thought of sitting in our old booth.

I told her I got sick the last time I went. Food poisoning, probably. I suggested a new spot with bottomless mimosas instead.

And I know I wouldn't actually run into you there — you're 1,000 miles away. But I know I'd see you if I walked in the door again. So I don't go to that restaurant anymore.

But I keep a pint of Cherry Garcia in my freezer.



**Tina Barry** is the author of *I Tell Henrietta* (Aim Higher, Inc., 2024), *Beautiful Raft* and *Mall Flower* (Big Table Publishing, 2019 and 2016). Her poetry and short fiction can be found in *The Best Small Fictions 2020 (spotlighted story)* and 2016, *Bending Genres*, *Unbroken*, *SoFloPoJo*, *Rattle*, *Verse Daily*, *ONE ART: a journal of poetry* and elsewhere. Tina has five Pushcart Prize nominations and several Best of the Net and Best Microfiction nods. She teaches at The Poetry Barn and Writers.com.

### **Mall Girl**

I was the only one in high school who read the *Village Voice*, so I knew all about Andy Warhol, and the cool stuff happening at The Factory. And I was done with all the keg parties, and the beer-swigging stoners who wanted to get into my pants. I had dreams.

I went to Lemon Tree. Had my hair blown out bigger than Farrah's. Then I got on the bus to Port Authority, and walked to 47<sup>th</sup> Street.

*Hey, Mr. Muscle*, I said to the bouncer at the door of The Factory. *Andy invited me*. I opened my coat, showed him my rockin' bod. He laughed, waved me in. I wanted to be Ultra Violet. I wanted to be Edie. I wanted my face nine times on canvas, all neon, glowing. Like he painted Marilyn.

*What planet are you from?* Andy said.

*I'm from Planet Jersey.*

*What exit?* he said.

We were pals for a while. He loved my Jersey accent, so I really laid it on: *Here's caw-fee for ya, Ahn-dee*. He made ten silkscreens of me. Edie and Ultra Violet said things like "trailer trash." Not true; more like "garden apartment."

Ultra Violet said I reminded her of a young Sophia Loren, then added, “she has no class either.”

Then Andy got cagey on the phone. Wouldn't let me visit. I cried for a while. But now I just think, Well, no one I know ever hung out with Andy. Or had him paint their picture. One of which, by the way, sold for millions. Not that I saw a red cent from that sale.

I cut the headline out and framed it:

*Sotheby's Sells 'Mall Girl' for Seven Million*

“Multiply her visage in neon fuchsia and throbbing blue, and this ‘Mall Girl,’ she of the enormous shag, becomes a suburban goddess.”

Max Caster, *Art Forum*, 1976



**Robert Nisbet** is a Welsh writer who concentrated on prose in the early part of his career, publishing largely in his native land, apart from stories in the USA in *Webster Review* and *NER/BLQ*. This spell culminated in the publication of *Downtrain* (Parthian, 2004). Thereafter he moved to poetry, publishing widely now in both Britain, where he won the Prole Pamphlet Prize with *Robeson, Fitzgerald and Other Heroes* (2017) and in the USA, where he has had four Pushcart nominations. He is just beginning a return to prose fiction.

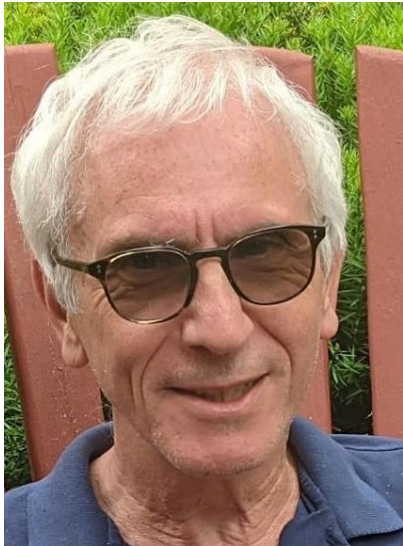
### **Easter Journey**

He looked round him at the motorway services. Such places had often oppressed him in the past, like scenes from some underworld - matchstick people being silently re-fuelled with food and petrol before being returned to the world. Today, waiting for the friend who would be driving him to the West, he just noted the slow tedium of the place.

Much of the journey softened his melancholy. Peter was always good but quiet company, so he was able to enjoy Cheltenham's grace, the way the road from Ross on into Wales climbed above the River Wye. Yet soon, as he knew, he would hit that pain, still tangled around the former cinema and dance hall in a border town. His recollections were still unblurred, nearly two decades on. It had been so obviously, or so apparently, so almost sentimentally, a student summer fling, so that only he alone now could recall the full aura of the time, its hugeness.

That weekend, in the campus seminars in the Welsh coastal town, he blazed, he articulated an anger with injustice (for that was his *métier*, after all, politics and lecturing were what he did). For the Friday evening session and the Saturday afternoon, this felt so good, it was decent, for what he was saying was meant and honest and in such a blaze the sadness could not settle.

On the Sunday mornings, always, on the Easter courses here, he would walk the prom, take the cable car up Constitution Hill, walk in the brightness of the gorse and hedgerows, recall his and Helen's spring, before the border town summer, in a landscape which reminded him more gently of her, reassured him and, in some small part, seemed to redeem him.



**Gerald Yelle** has published poetry and flash fiction in numerous online and print journals. His books include *The Holyoke Diaries*, *Mark My Word and the New World Order*, and *Dreaming Alone and with Others*. His chapbooks include *No Place I Would Rather Be* and *A Box of Rooms*. He lives in Amherst, Massachusetts.

### **My Father Died**

And I never did get the chance to ask about his deaf-mute brother. There had to have been a time in their childhood before he contracted whatever it was that robbed him of his hearing and his voice and eventually his life and I wanted to ask my father what it was like when he could hear and they could talk. I asked my mother about it and she said why not as your aunt. I knew she was being sarcastic. She never had much use for my aunt. When she and my father were dating, she'd been the brat –nosy and spoiled –thinking she was smart and cute when in fact she was neither, and even though decades had passed and my aunt was middle-aged she still thought of her as childish. I said I was pretty sure she was born after my uncle went deaf. But then I remembered being on the mountain. It was really no more than a hill, one we'd climbed many times and knew by heart, like the song I sang with my father. Making the lyrics up as we went along. The same way we had to rediscover the path on our various walks. And sometimes I'd pretend to be my aunt's daughter. And sometimes I was my aunt herself –walking the hills with the brother who'd already gone deaf but it's his voice we're hearing because the fever or meningitis or whatever it was hadn't yet taken his voice –and I wondered why my father wasn't there to hear it.





photo by Colin Douglas Usher

**Elizabeth Rosen's** flash stories have appeared in *North American Review*, *Flash Frog*, *Atticus Review*, *New Flash Fiction*, *Pithead Chapel*, and numerous other fine places. Originally from New Orleans, she now live in small-town Pennsylvania where she misses fried oyster po-boys and telling tall tales on the front porch, but has learned to love snow and colorful scarves.

### **When the Dalai Lama Forgives Your Human Failures as a Best Friend**

It's like biting into a lime thinking about not saying no to your brother, and I'm still sorry. I know that you wouldn't take any pleasure in that. That's the California in you, that generosity, that accepted my first apology years later, like the Dalai Lama accepting the cowed practitioner who says, "I try and I try, but I can't think of Nothing." And it makes me cringe knowing that just because I was twenty pounds overweight with insecurity and forty fathoms deep in neediness that I would refuse to remember what you told me about your brother's obnoxious habit of hitting on your friends, that when he came to sit too close to me on the couch in the dark room where the TV strobed its desire at us, I didn't get up and walk away. At the time, I never thought to wonder where you had gone. When I joined you in your bedroom, you with your back to the door, not saying anything to me about it, never saying anything about it ever, only then did I see how badly I'd messed up. Only then did I understand that you had slipped away as a test to see if I was as true as I claimed. So I won't stop being sorry, no matter how you smile gently at me and lay your hand on mine in forgiveness but no longer tell me your secrets, and it is this that lets me know that I will never master the Zen art of losing things.



**Ellen Graham** is a freelance theater director in the state of Washington. Her writing focuses on the West, and stories of open spaces, both on the land and in the heart. A prize-winner in *Glimmer Train's* Short Story Award for New Writers, she has also been published in *Narrative*, *High Desert Journal*, *Everyday Fiction*, *Concrete Desert Review* and *On The Run*. She is at work on a series of stories about growing up in Salt Lake City.

### **Moonlight On the Curve Of A Dolphin**

I'm sorry that I drank so much I fell and hit the back of my head, cerise blooming on the floor and the bed and the flowery sheets.

My nightshirt and the newspaper I slipped on.

I lied to the ER nurse and said I hadn't been drinking but my sour breath, no time to brush my teeth or put on a bra.

Blood leaking everywhere, so many tiny vessels in the head. I'm sorry I made you late for work and you had to wash my side of the car. You probably wish I'd fallen face down and bashed my face and busted my teeth, my nose, my chin, my eye.

I'm sorry I staggered at the opera, for slurring when I met your parents, for tripping on the stairs.

I'm sorry I can't remember what we watched last night.

I'm sorry I like that first taste of gin: how it makes me feel like I am looking over the water.

When we lived in St.Pete you'd match me drink for drink, it was our fun time, our cozy time, the time we waded into the Gulf in our underwear and swam during red tide and you said You are on the positive side of crazy and I said Let's see how long we can float without using our arms and you said You're nuts and we laughed at all the dead fish floating and I said, look the dolphins are swimming home

and we got out and walked around and around and around the strip mall until we were sober then we went to the sushi bar and drank sake and vodka and had to walk home, humidity thick as a wall, smell of tar and palms, I'm sorry you're not that guy anymore, moonlight on the curve of the dolphin.



**Skye Rozario Steinhagen** is a Puertorriqueña poet from Iowa, who earned her MA in Theological Studies from the Harvard Divinity School in 2021. Her passions intertwine among English, Humanities, the Study of Religion, and Creative Writing. She joined the Writer's Workout as a reader/editor in 2024. Her writing has appeared in *The Acentos Review*, *The Green Shoe Sanctuary*, *Humana Obscura*, and elsewhere.

### **A Time of Frost**

The frost is lace on the windshield. The lace is frost on the glass. The glass is quartz in the sunlight. All she had to do was ask.

*You do not know who I am.*

*You are not willing.*

Streaks of light strike cold in the wind. Tips of the grass flash opaque. Frozen rain coats the branches of dogwood trees. The winter wood so gentle, with a glance it could break.

*I am not defined by perception.*

*I cannot define myself.*

The fence is black iron against the bark. The iron is separation of field and wood. To hop the fence is to disobey. To escape is to decide her own way forward.

*I know if I leave I will be found and returned.*

*I climb and run.*

The air pierces with December's chill. Dry brambles and bushes snap and crunch. Brittle burs tangle up coat with pants. Her heaving chest from panic is not enough to keep warm.

*I will return to the place I know.*

*Even though my parents were never parents to me.*

Leafless branches leave the forest bare. She is vulnerable in the cover of the trees. She has been vulnerable since her childhood. Some situations are too anguished to believe in fate over chance.

*You see a troubled youth.*

*You do not know what made me.*

It seems the pines will never thin. The span of nature spans forever. The fence into the forest is another world. They search for her in her search for safe peace.

*You take my body from the woods.*

*But I am still there.*

The frost is a maze of ‘how’ and ‘why’ for the questions of her life. The heaters of the car melt the ice. For her body to be warm, the frost must melt. She stares from the glass into the frozen wood and breaks it with a glance.

*I will have my chance.*

*I will run again.*

*Until I understand what I’ve suffered through no fault of my own.*

*Until I receive love, until I trust.*

*Until I am seen through the frost lace  
clearly.*

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*Author’s Note: Every year, hundreds of teens across Iowa are filtered through the Department of Human Services to alternative school programs such as Four Oaks, Ellipsis, and state detention centers. Most of these teens suffered considerable neglect and physical, emotional, mental, and/or sexual abuse throughout their childhoods from the very adults who were supposed to protect, nurture, and love them. These residential treatment programs use trauma-based approaches to learning, living, and functioning in order to help teens toward paths to a meaningful future. Many times, we only see the surface level effects of a teen’s behavior and call them ‘troubled teens’ without recognizing their victimhood of being born under circumstances beyond their control. These programs and the staff that run them are critical pieces in the complex puzzle of healing for these children.*



**M.D. Smith** lives in Huntsville, AL, and has written over 150 non-fiction short stories for *Old Huntsville Magazine* in the past eighteen years and over 300 short fiction stories in the past seven years. Nationally published in *Good Old Days* and *Reminisce* print magazines, *Like Sunshine After Rain* short story anthology, and digitally in *Frontier Times*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, [101words.org](http://101words.org), [Bewilderingstories.com](http://Bewilderingstories.com), and more. He's published three romance novels and three flash fiction collections. His hobby is Ham Radio and talking to the world on voice and digital modes. Website: <https://mdsmithiv.com/> Email: [mdsmith@hiwaay.net](mailto:mdsmith@hiwaay.net)

## An Excellent Memory

“Good morning, Mrs. Barrett. How’re you? I’m Jenny, coming on duty for the day.”

*Sleeping — leave me alone.* “I’m fine, dear. You’re new, aren’t you? I get so many different nurses.”

She writes Jenny on the whiteboard. “Actually, this is the third day I’ve been your nurse this week. I know it’s easy to forget.”

“I’ll remember,” I tell her. “I have an excellent memory. Straight A’s through college. I remember the war years as a child. Young people have no idea.”

“You’re right,” she says.

Breakfast arrives. The server raises my back. The cover removed reveals scrambled eggs, bacon, and hash browns. There’s a bowl of fruit, a biscuit with butter and jelly, a carton of milk, and a cup of coffee.

“Yuck, the same breakfast as yesterday, young man.”

He says *no*, but I'm right. Doesn't really matter. Food's gotten worse — always feel stuffed. I nibble here and there, sip coffee, then push the table aside and turn on the TV. These morning talk shows at low volume help me nap.

"Hello."

I open my eyes. It's eight-fifty. A twenty-something smiling girl dressed in warm street clothes walks over. "I'm here to visit, Grandmother Maddy." She removes her plaid coat.

*Grandmother?* "I don't know you, young lady. So, I can't be your grandmother."

"Of course you are. I'm Erin. My mother, Lily, was your daughter before she and Daddy died in the car wreck years ago. I've been living with you since I was fifteen. You took care of me, and recently, I've been taking care of you until you moved here full-time. Remember? I was here yesterday."

Perplexed, I recall Lily dying long ago — the rest — foggy.

"Yes. I'm sorry. My memory gets clouded." I'm just making that up, but it makes the girl happy, and she leans over to hug me.

Sitting in the chair by my bed, she chats about a man she's met at work in the insurance building. I listen but don't care.

It's mid-December. She recalls the Christmas she drove me around town to see the Christmas lights. She tells me the gifts we gave each other, but I have no recollection of anything she says. Ellie's quite mistaken.

Since I am not responding, she gets up. "Maddy, I may not come as often since you don't seem to remember me, your only grandchild living with you all these years. I'll return, just not as often. See you on Christmas with your present." She leaves with a wave and closes the door.

Erica seems nice, but it makes me mad to insult my memory. I have an excellent memory. I recall buying that '*made from jellyfish*' stuff a while back, and I still take it — I think.

I glance over at the whiteboard again and notice somebody's name at the bottom, *Madelyn Barrett*, and, just after it, a single word: *Alzheimer's*. I wonder who that is and what it means? No matter. Wonder what's for breakfast today?



**Yash Seyedbagheri** is a graduate of Colorado State University's MFA fiction program. His stories, "Soon," "How To Be A Good Episcopalian," "Tales From A Communion Line," and "Community Time," have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes. His work has been published in *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, and *Ariel Chart*, among others. He lives in Garden Valley, Idaho.

### **Nobody Wants to Be Dictated To**

They tell me nobody wants to work anymore.

I try to explain. I try to tell them the stories of teachers like my sister, who grapples with abuse because she's too funny, because she doesn't color inside the lines. I try to talk of the people who work, or I should say, worked, under my father at his real estate company where he's fired them. Or put them on warning for the slightest tardiness, the slightest ounce of sarcasm, or for not adhering to his philosophy of selective truths.

I'm a freelance editor. I like to write, as well mind you. But there's something almost soothing in working behind the scenes. In smoothing metaphors, finding missing Oxford commas, helping authors mold words, wrinkled like old shirts, into something fresh. And most importantly, I don't have a boss lingering behind me. I can work beneath the sunshine-colored walls at Mama Lily's Coffee shop or even at my friend Cockroach's bar, Good Times. I can drift like a happy ghost from space to space, without the blowback. Without being a direct target.

"You just stare at the computer," they say. My neighbor, Jerry, my father, my other neighbor, Buford. "That's not work."



“It requires mental acuity,” I say. “I get that it isn’t heavy lifting; but it’s still good, honest work.”

But that, of course, isn’t good enough.

“And what does real mental acuity involve? It involves schmoozing people,” my father says.

“It means digging away at construction sites in the winter,” Jerry says.

“It means building some muscle and discipline,” Buford says.

“How do you work without supervision?” my father asks.

Jerry says the foreman always kicked his butt, and he’s a better man for it. He gave him direction. Buford offers his assent and says “you people are too demanding. In our day, we accepted what they paid us. You showed respect. You respected your boss. It was structure; it worked.”

And that’s just the point. They think that I have to have a boss. I have to have validation. I could argue, but what’s the point? I spent years arguing with my father as he deemed me too sensitive, too weak, not organized enough. I drained so many tears waiting for him to say, “good job” or “I’m proud of you.” I spent years working in coffee shops, burger joints, bookstores, collecting paychecks and realizing that I couldn’t fit in. That I couldn’t express myself fully. But it’s all good. So many of them are used to the era of bosses and the shibboleths of construction sites and offices and water coolers, and the clickety-clack of heels, and desktop computers that hummed. And I respect that.

It’s just not my way.

“Nobody wants to be dictated to anymore,” I say, and I smile and dive back into a word of words, beautiful and shapely, while their protests blur into the clickety-clack of keys and fixes.



**Huina Zheng**, a Distinction M.A. in English Studies holder, works as a college essay coach. She's also an editor at *Bewildering Stories*. Her stories have been published in *Baltimore Review*, *Variant Literature*, *Midway Journal*, and others. Her work has received nominations twice for the Pushcart Prize and three times for the Best of the Net. She resides in Guangzhou, China with her husband and daughter.

### **Clouds**

When Lan was still a little girl, she often sat on the balcony with her father, gazing up at the sky, searching for the ever-changing shapes of the clouds. Her father could always spot patterns in ordinary or shapeless clouds and weave them into captivating stories.

He would point to a fluffy cloud and say it was the legendary dragon, winding across the sky, preparing to bring a much-needed rain. In her father's vivid narration, Lan could see the dragon soaring among the clouds, summoning wind and rain with its majestic and mysterious presence. Other times, he would point to thin, wispy strands of clouds and say they were the celestial weaver girl by the Milky Way, weaving her fabric as she awaited her reunion with the cowherd on the Qixi Festival. Lan would picture the graceful weaver girl, crafting the most dazzling cloud tapestries under the starry sky.

Sometimes, he'd point to the layered, overlapping clouds, saying they were left behind by the Eight Immortals as they crossed the sea. Lan could envision these immortals, each showcasing their unique powers, navigating the raging water.

Whenever her father told these tales, his lips would curve into an involuntary smile, and his eyes would sparkle with childlike excitement. Lan would smile, and the entire world was filled with magic and wonder. To them, the sky was not

just a vast expanse of blue; it was a giant canvas waiting for them to paint it with stories.

Years after her parents' divorce, her father became a faint shadow in her life, like a faded photograph tucked away in an old album. Her days were full with new routines, yet occasionally, when she looked up at the sky, whether under a clear blue expanse or a shroud of dark clouds, a twinge of loneliness would sweep through her heart. The sky simply hung there in silence.

When they reunited years later at the end of a nursing home corridor, his mind had grown hazy, like smoke scattered by the wind. His gaze held a trace of confusion when he looked at her.

"See the white snake over there?" His voice, though weak, carried a spark of excitement. His trembling hand pointed toward the sky outside the corridor window, tracing the outline of a winding snake in the puffy clouds. The glow still sparkled in his eyes.

She raised her head in the direction of his finger. Through the soft layers of clouds, she too saw it—a massive white snake gliding in the sky.

"That's the white snake spirit. She's cultivating her powers," she whispered.

In that moment, she realized that these stories were more than mere memories; they were a precious legacy her father had left her, an invisible bond connecting them. These stories, like the drifting clouds in the sky, anchored them to a shared past. No matter how time's winds might blow, those memories would continue to float in the vast expanse of the sky, never fading, never disappearing.