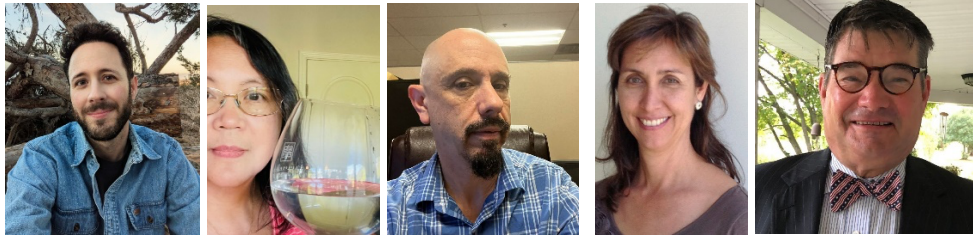


10 BY 10

FLASH FICTION STORIES



Matheiu Cailler * Eileen R. Tabios * Timothy Gager * Vivian Clausing * Michael Gigandet
Tony Press * Phil Temples * Niles Reddick * Cindy Rosmus * Paul Germano

NUMBER 24
JANUARY 2025

Welcome to Issue #24.

Some new and some familiar authors are our featured writers this month. There is everything from humor to murder. As always, chosen stories are those I think all the readers will enjoy as much as I do. It is a simple formula that works and I am proud of those who spend the time reading the *10 By 10* guidelines and then submitting stories that fit perfectly into the magazine.

So enter these pages, read and enjoy the ten writers in *10 By 10*.

Sincerely,

Zvi A. Sesling

Editor



Zvi A. Sesling, Brookline, MA Poet Laureate (2017-2020), has published numerous poems and flash fiction. He edits *10 By 10 Flash Fiction Stories* and *Muddy River Poetry Review*. Sesling has won international and national poetry prizes. He is a four-time Pushcart Prize poetry nominee. He has also been nominated for a flash fiction Pushcart Prize. Sesling's flash fiction book is, *Secret Behind The Gate* and his flash fiction chapbook is *Wheels*. Sesling and Paul Beckman recently published a flash fiction book *40 Stories*.. Sesling lives in Brookline, MA with his wife Susan J. Dechter.



Mathieu Cailler is the author of seven books: a novel, two short story collections, two volumes of poetry, and two children's titles. His stories, poems, and essays have appeared in over one hundred publications, including *Wigleaf*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. He has received many prestigious awards, including a Pushcart Prize; a Readers' Favorite Award; and accolades from the Paris, Los Angeles, and New England Book Festivals. You can connect with him on social media @writesfromla or visit his website at mathieucailler.com.

A Week After I Die

an email lands in my now deserted Yahoo account. The cemetery at Holy Cross wants to know *how did we do? Are you feeling supported during this time? How is the dirt? Hopefully not too dirty. How is the shade of that elm tree working out? Are you pleased with your decision to secure this plot, all those years ago? Are you satisfied with the cemetery workers' performance? Was the lowering safe? Smooth even? Would you recommend us to a friend or loved one?*

Then, four days after I am six feet under moist earth and manicured grass, my abandoned Yahoo account pings once again. The casket company, Great Mother, wants to know *are you comfortable? Are you warm? How is the velvet lining treating you? Would you have preferred satin or even crepe material? Are you pleased with your decision to opt for the protective seal? Do you regret not purchasing a commemorative panel? Is the size to your liking? Would you recommend the ten-gauge steel to a friend? Would you mind taking the time to write a review? Are you at peace? Are you finally getting some quality rest? How would you rate your overall experience? Is there anything at all you would like to change?*



Eileen R. Tabios has released books of poetry, fiction, essays, art and experimental prose from publishers around the world. Recent releases include the novel *The Balikbayan Artist* (Penguin Random House SEA, 2024) and an autobiography, *The Inventor* (Marsh Hawk Press 2023). More information is at <https://eileenrtabios.com>

Laura's Right Hand

My name is Alvara. I am Laura's right-hand person. People like Laura need trusted associates—she has me.

The last one who died prematurely when he met my knife once called me an "Old Soul." That's why, he said, though I'm only 25 I already know to feel my life as "so small, too small" and question if that smallness must continue to be my permanent fate.

I am small because I must remain in backgrounds. When I wish it, I am rarely noticed until it's too late.

That albino intrigues me. Her snow body ensures she will always stand out—how can she live like that? She must have developed a powerful psychological armor to ward off the world whose attention can smother. I must get to know her. I should always become intimate with warriors—no, not just warriors but *effective* warriors. She survived something: her right hand bears the scars of having once been mangled.

It's difficult for someone like me to acknowledge someone as my leader because that acknowledgement requires my submission. My own mother often raised a thin but strong branch against my face. But I acknowledge Laura as my leader because she's suffered more than even me. Yet she still knows to take pleasure from chocolate. She still knows to privilege pleasure. I envy her resilience—pleasure is irrelevant to someone like me whose resting posture is defensiveness.

I became a knife expert after a redhead tried to kill me with a knife. She said my blouse was too pretty and, consequently, I didn't deserve it on my body. People with low self-esteem are dangerous—they often prop up their egos by smashing others. I picked up a large stone and managed to deflect her enough to kick her down. Then I smashed the large stone against her head, knocking her out as I observed her blood to match her hair color. Someone held my hand back when I would have hit her head a second time. Enraged, I turned to see Laura.

I didn't punch her when she whispered, "Your very first kill will always have a special significance. She's not worth it."

Anger left my body, I dropped the stone, and I let Laura enfold me into a hug.

Before we left the scene, she picked up the knife of the stranger who'd envied my pretty blouse, held it out to me, and said, "We find weapons where we can. Why don't you learn to use this better than she did?"

I complied. I still comply, even if I question whether I should remain small forever.



Bestselling Author, **Timothy Gager** has published 19 books of fiction and poetry, which includes his third novel, *Joe the Salamander*, and his most recent collection of poetry, *Almost Bluing for X-Tra Whiteness*. He hosted the successful *Dire Literary Series* in Cambridge, MA from 2001 to 2018, and started a weekly virtual series in 2020. He has had over 1000 works of fiction and poetry published, 19 nominated for the Pushcart Prize. His work also has been nominated for a Massachusetts Book Award, The Best of the Web, The Best Small Fictions Anthology and has been read on National Public Radio.

On To the Next Thing

I am sent to fill potholes on the Tobin Bridge a week after the Francis Scott Key went down in Maryland. I can't do anything. I keep looking down waiting for that ship to come in. Not for nothing but everything I wear is too short—my pants, my sleeves, my moods, my life. I pray cars aren't going to stop to tell me, because stopping is a bad idea. Conversations usually are not short.

Then three lines of a Taylor Swift song drive past, and you can bet that the lyrics are about Travis Kelcie. It doesn't sound like he will have to send her a cease-and-desist letter yet, but you can bet on that too. They're just lyrics, they don't mean anything, but you can bet on that (or anything else, as well). Use an app. Many to choose from. You can bet Kelcie will catch a pass in the first quarter. You can bet that Tay and Tra. are finished by the time it takes to read this.

People get so angry at what is talked about that they can't stop talking about it/him/her/them. Then, up from my high perch, I see a blackhole, of a different kind which is so big. I could see where I might land if I fall through it. I can

jump. The fall is quick. A car lays on the horn on the way down. I am in the water before I know it.



Vivian Clausing has directed a program for women transitioning from incarceration, given seated chair massage to the homeless and advocated for youth and the adults who minister to them. A former lawyer, she holds a degree in English from Stanford (1984), a JD from UCLA (1987) and a Master's in Theology and Multi-Cultural Ministry from the Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley. (2008). Her essay *Death into Life: A Spirituality of Lay Ecclesial Ministry* was published in Emerging from the Vineyard in 2014. A graduate of Stanford's OWC writing program, she lives in the Bay Area with her husband and four cats.

Devil's Food

The first time I met the Devil I was in high school. The Devil as in devil foods cake. Drippy chocolate that melts in your mouth and lingers on the tongue. Hostess cupcakes. Oreos. Ice cream. Hot fudge. After everyone was asleep, I ate everything I could find. Only when I'd thrown away the empty wrappers was I satisfied. The only way to keep the Devil away was not to take the first bite in the first place, I decided.

Freshman year in college, my roommate Joan thought I was crazy when I ran from the room as she opened a care package of brownies.

"Want one?"

"Are they good?"

"Delicious."

"Then no."

"You California people are weird."

I left it at that.

But I couldn't avoid the Devil for long. Soon, it was finals week. Chocolate materialized everywhere. Hot Cocoa at study hall. Chocolate donuts at lab. Chocolate mint candy canes in stockings hung on dorm room doors. When Joan unwrapped Death by Chocolate cupcakes, I knew I was done.

"Promise me you won't tell anyone. No matter what happens."

"Did I tell you how weird you are?"

"Always."

I took a bite of a Death by Chocolate cupcake. It was amazing. I could feel my blood sugar spiking and a rush of energy ran through my body. I ate more. And more. I didn't try to resist. As chocolate coated my fingers and my mouth, I swallowed, leaning into the sweetness. Ahhhh.

"Don't you think you should stop?"

"Why? To the death!"

"It's not good for you. Give me the box. Now."

That night I learned that the Devil is no match for kindness from another. Joan threw the cupcake box into the dumpster and shut the lid. The Devil departed.

"Want some chips?" asked Joan.



Michael Gigandet is a retired lawyer in Tennessee. His stories have appeared in *Bending Genres*, *Quarencia Press*, *Great Weather for Media*, *Palm Sized Press*, *Pure Slush* and *The Hong Kong Literary Journal*. His published stories are available here <http://michaelgigandet.com>. He administers a music page on Twitter/X at @motobec810.

The Last Campaign

Mayor Pirtle heaved his 300 pounds out of the air-conditioned limousine and onto a sidewalk baked hot as a Waffle House griddle by a summer sun bright enough to burn x-rays. *This heat is as much a botheration as that blockhead the chamber of commerce paid to run against me*, he thought. *Good God A’Mighty!*

Johnny’s lemonade stand occupied the only shade just a few feet beyond the sidewalk where its proprietor sat in a lawn chair wearing a straw hat. Mayor Pirtle’s suit began wilting, and he gasped as the heat seared the lining of his lungs into shoe leather. *After 40 years in this game, I think I know a good photograph when I see one.*

Recently, he’d overheard one of the reporters in his entourage refer to him as “His Rotundancy”, a jibe not only ridiculing his weight but mocking his 20-year “reign” as mayor. *You don’t get elected 5 times without knowing a thing or two*, he told himself. *I’ve paved ever’ road in this town three times whether it needed it nor not.*

Dragging his finger around his collar, Mayor Pirtle lumbered toward the lemonade stand and the hand drawn sign which read: “Lemonade 25 cents” in crude lettering over a unicorn with a balloon issuing from its mouth and lassoing the words: “No freebies! No riff raff!” The unicorn had an eyepatch like a pirate.

“This lemonade is so good,” Mayor Pirtle said, smacking his lips. “I’m going to pay you \$20!” He said this loud, held the \$20 bill high and gripped Johnny’s shoulder, pulling him closer while the cameras clicked.

Johnny smiled. What a sale!

“I’ve always supported business and our entrepreneurs!” Mayor Pirtle announced, envisioning the headlines and photographs just as they were swept away by an electrical seizure. His eyes bulged, his face turned fire engine red and his hand shot to his chest, clutching his shirt into a wad. “Aaargghh!”

He fell onto Johnny’s card table, crushing it to the ground.

Johnny froze, speechless. So did the reporters who would soon write memorial pieces about the mayor, using words like “robust enthusiasm” and “visionary.”

Mayor Pirtle stared face to face with the unicorn. “No ... this ...,” he said though no one heard him.

In his hand, the \$20 bill fluttered in a sudden breeze like a trapped butterfly as a distant siren began to cry.



Tony Press tries to pay attention and sometimes he does. His story collection, *Crossing the Lines*, was published by *Big Table*. He loves walking the streets of Brisbane (the one in California, USA), cherishes hot chocolate, and thinks often of Bristol, England, and Oaxaca, Mexico. He claims several writing award nominations, a dozen years in the same high school classroom, and, yes, twenty-five criminal trials.

Outside English Class

“I love that bit, “apples, peaches, pumpkin pie, you’re in love and so am I’, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do, In fact, I think every part of The House on Mango Street is perfect, really. Sandra Cisneros is my favorite *righter*.”

“You said that weird, do you mean ‘writer’ or not?”

“No, I mean ‘*righter*,’ because she makes everything better with her words.”

Jane was like that, smartest kid in Freshman English but sometimes acted like she was still eight. Goofy, and proud of it. We’d been best friends since the middle of second grade, when she and her mom moved in to the apartment next door with barely a suitcase.

“I don’t know why I’m thinking of this now,” I said, “but when you guys came to town, what was the big hurry? I mean, if you want to say.”

“No big deal,” she replied. “We had to leave Kentucky ‘cuz it turned out my dad was a professional kiter, and got locked up, big-time.”

“A kiter? He got arrested for flying kites?”

“No, silly, no. A kiter is someone who writes bad checks, but does it really well.”

“Holy, holy,” I mumbled. “I had no idea.”

“Yeah, mom told me to say nothing, so I didn’t, but I’m pretty sure we’ve passed the statue of limitations by now.”

“The what?”

“That statue of limitations, you know. It’s in a museum, somewhere, I’m pretty sure. It’s almost as famous as the Pistachio of Liberty.”

“Jane! You are flat-out nuts.”

She hugged me, saying: “Nuts of a feather”



Phil Temples is a product of the Midwest, but he's lived in the greater Boston area for over forty years. Phil has published six novels, a novella, and three story anthologies in addition to over 240 online short stories. Phil also likes to dabble in mobile photography. He is a member of the Bagel Bards and O'Hara's writers groups. You can learn more about Phil Temples by visiting his website at <https://temples.com>.

The Love of the Game

Francis McGillicuddy teed off just as an intense thunderstorm struck. Although it was pouring buckets, neither McGillicuddy nor his long-time foe, Tomas O'Leary, would be deterred. Despite the two having a €2000 wager, the match was personal. Many years prior, Tomas stole away the love of Francis' life, Siobhán.

McGillicuddy led O'Leary after the fifth hole. The weather was deteriorating by the minute. Both of the caddies—young lads with no beef to pick—looked piteously at their employers to no avail. They knew it was best to keep their mouths shut and suffer getting soaked to the bone, lest they anger the men and not receive their wages.

"I do believe you hooked it there, McGillicuddy," shouted O'Leary above the rain's din.

"Go to hell, O'Leary!"

"What's that you say, McGillicuddy?!"

McGillicuddy flipped him an outward-facing "V" sign in response.

O'Leary laughed.

When the party arrived at the next hole, it was apparent that McGillicuddy had, indeed, sliced it into the rough. The ball was invisible in the grass; in fact, the four could barely see twenty feet ahead of them in the downpour.

“Sirs, perhaps we should postpone it for tomorrow,” one of the young caddies opined.

“*Dún do chlab!*” “Keep your trap shut, kid. You’re not being paid to dispense advice,” replied O’Leary.

McGillicuddy selected a short iron and proceeded to walk into the grass in search of his ball. It was then McGillicuddy realized he had stepped into a peat bog. McGillicuddy was new to this golf course, while O’Leary had played it before. Tomas was aware of the hazards in the form of the peat patches that lined the greens of the crude course. He certainly wasn’t about to say anything to McGillicuddy beforehand. In fact, Tomas had actually hoped that this situation might occur.

Ha! Serves the ol’ bastard right!

“Help! Help!” cried McGillicuddy as he quickly sank waist-deep into the muck.

“Oh, I’ll help ya’, you *mac soith*,” replied O’Leary. He doubled over with laughter.

After composing himself, O’Leary fetched his longest golf club from the bag, walked carefully over to the bog and stretched his club toward McGillicuddy. Tomas held on firmly to the club while sporting a grin.

Tomas O’Leary was totally unprepared for what happened next.

McGillicuddy yanked on the club with all his might and pulled O’Leary into the bog alongside him. The two boys witnessed the spectacle and glanced at one another in horror for a split second. Then they ran away.

“Why in blazes did you do that, McGillicuddy?” he yelled. “*Tá muid araon suas creek!*” “Now we’re both up the creek!”

“I’ll have the pleasure of killing you by my own hand. For Siobhán!”

Francis grabbed Tomas and landed a few punches. Tomas counterpunched. Francis dragged him down. Cursing and swearing, the two quickly disappeared into the muck, never to be seen again.



Niles Reddick is author of a novel, four short fiction collections, and two novellas. His work has appeared in over five hundred publications including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *New Reader Magazine*, *Cheap Pop*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Citron Review*, *Hong Kong Review*, and *Vestal Review*.

Active Shooter Training

The police department scheduled an active shooter training after school at the elementary school in town, hoping it would never become a reality even though it had many times across the country. They wanted to be prepared and asked the principal if any staff or teachers wanted to stay after school and play victim. By the time the last school bus left the parking lot, most of the staff and teachers had left. They'd had enough playing victim throughout their day to last them until the next day given the incessant talking, fighting, relationship drama, lies about homework, chewing gum spit out on desks or on carpet squares, theft, practical jokes gone wrong, and basically the worst of a childhood microcosm of society that predicted an extremely bleak future.

When the police stormed the building, the Humanities teacher Tom Thatcher hadn't heard them because his headphones blared Beethoven's Fifth. Thatcher was going to illustrate to his students how historical classics impact modern culture, comparing it to Murphy's disco rendition of Beethoven's Fifth on the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack.

Thatcher also hadn't read the email the principal sent earlier in the day, so when the door slammed against the wall, and two police officers stormed his classroom in full riot gear complete with helmets and bullet proof vests, they

pointed their guns and shot pepper ball bullets at him that exploded and scared him to death. The pepper bullets hit his chest with each swelling octave of strong notes in Beethoven's fifth and created clouds of irritants. They slammed him to the floor and cuffed him, pulled him to his feet, and escorted him outside to meet the police chief who was proud of their work. Mr. Thatcher was sore, blinked tears from his eyes, knew he would have bruises where the pepper ball bullets hit him, and his new J. Crew blazer was ruined.

"What the hell? Get these handcuffs off me. I'm Tom Thatcher, the Humanities teacher."

"The principal said no one would stay and play victim, but he didn't tell me we'd have someone play suspect," the chief responded.

"I'm not playing shit. I don't know anything about this."

"Didn't you get the email?"

"I'm too busy grading and preparing classes to read emails. Will I get reimbursed for my new blazer?"

"You'll have to ask your principal."



Cindy Rosmus originally hails from the Ironbound section of Newark, NJ, once voted the “unfriendliest city on the planet.” She talks like Anybodys from *West Side Story* and everybody from *Saturday Night Fever*. Her noir/horror/bizarro stories have been published in places like *Shotgun Honey*, *Megazine*, *Dark Dossier*, *Danse Macabre*, *The Rye Whiskey Review*, *Under the Bleachers*, *Punk Noir* and *Rock and a Hard Place*. She is the editor/art director of *Yellow Mama* and has published seven collections of short stories. Cindy is a Gemini, a Christian, and an animal rights advocate.

A-lo-ha!

At the corner, I stopped dead. Waving from his truck was Mikey, my old friend-with benefits. “Aloha!” I ran over.

His favorite toast. Like we were on a Maui beach, instead of a dive Jersey bar.

“Mikey!” He looked bad. Totally drained. “How are you?”

“Hop in.”

Inside, I smelled coffee in his travel mug. Still five sugars, I bet. And scrambled eggs, from the warm bag, near my feet. I hated eggs. The stench made me feel sick.

“Aw, Sandy,” he said.

“She’s back?” I guessed.

When he nodded, something tightened inside of me. Jacklyn, his ex-but-not-really. Junkie mom of Ashley. And thief, who’d snatched my purse years back. My whole paycheck had been in it, with ten hours overtime.

“Jacklyn wouldn’t steal your purse,” Mikey had said. “She only takes wallets.” Like that was OK.

“She’s sick,” he said now. “And still using. Ashley...” His eyes looked wet. “She’s hooked, too.”

Way back, Little Ashley perched on his lap, at the bar. The smell of beer made her wrinkle her cute, little nose. Same nose as Jacklyn’s.

Picturing coke getting sucked up that nose killed me. “Can’t you help her?”

As he gulped his coffee, some spilled on him. “I take her—and her boyfriend—to outpatient. We’re going today.” He wiped his eyes. “If I didn’t, they wouldn’t go.”

Enabler, I thought.

“And now, with *her* back . . .”

That made me madder. I gripped the handle, ready to jump out at the next light.

“I better call.”

On the phone, he was as sickly-sweet as that spilled coffee. “I got breakfast sandwiches!” Like Ashley was still a toddler. “Go wake up Mommy.”

Mommy.

Who had snatched my purse.

“Tell her,” Mikey’s voice got higher. “I got sunny-side up, for her.”

Bullshit, I thought. At a fast-food joint?

A week after she robbed me, I was behind her at the bus stop, outside Shop Rite. She didn’t see me. Like an expert waitress, she’d balanced six cartons of eggs on her left shoulder. Something clearly held them together, but I couldn’t see what.

I just saw red.

As the bus approached, I thought how if I shoved hard enough, she and all the eggs would go flying. The bus would smash all the eggs, plus every bone in her body. Yolks, shells, blood, and brains, gloriously mixed together.

“What do you mean?” Mikey said now. “She won’t wake up?”

He’d stopped the truck. Around us, people honked, impatiently. But we just sat there.

Then . . . “Call 9-1-1,” he said, calmly.

Horns still going, cars circled and passed us. Somebody yelled. Still, we just sat there.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Mikey turned and looked through me.

I wanted to hold him, make it not real. I hadn’t wanted her dead, thief, or not. I would never have pushed her, that time.

With a shaky hand, he held up his coffee.

“Aloha,” I said for him.



Paul Germano lives in Syracuse, smack dab in the center of New York State. More than 60 of his stories have been published, in print and online magazines in the United States, Canada, England, Scotland, Hong Kong and India. Three times previously his work has appeared in *10 by 10* with “Palm Sunday Dinner” in June 2024,” Busted” in May 2023 and “A Springer Spaniel Named Jerry” in September 2022.

UMBRELLA ON THE PORCH

She lingers at the kitchen table on a rainy Saturday afternoon, sipping on a Diet Pepsi, munching on Fritos and scrolling through Facebook. From the corner of her eye, she sees her husband fussing with his umbrella. “Don’t open that inside, it’s bad luck!” she shrieks, rushing out of the kitchen.

“I’m not inside, I’m on the damn porch!” he shouts.

“Screened-in, still counts!”

Jerry, their Springer Spaniel, lounging near the couch, perks up his ears. He trots over to the doorway to see what his Mommy and Daddy are yelling about. They are face to face now at the doorway, she in the living room, he on the porch, with the mesh of the screen door between them. “You’re so ridiculously superstitious,” he says in a snit.

“Suit yourself,” she says harshly, throwing her hands in the air. “But just you remember, I tried to warn you!” Jerry gazes up at his Mommy. “Oh honey, I’m not yelling at you,” she tells the dog, bending down and kissing his forehead. She straightens up and turns to face her husband. “You know we’ve got to talk sweet in front of the dog, we don’t want to upset him.”

“You’re the one yelling, honeybunch,” he says pleasantly.

“No, I’m not, deary,” she says in a sugary voice. She turns her back to her husband, again throws her hands in the air and heads for the kitchen, her cherub face full of disdain.

Jerry nudges open the screen door and trots onto the porch. The dog eyes his Daddy who places the unopened umbrella against the little table where potted geraniums are thriving and at the moment, benefiting from the rainy mist filtering through the porch’s screen windows. The dog sniffs at the damp air blowing in from outside, his tail wagging. His Daddy squats down, getting his long legs situated so he is face to face with Jerry. “Your Mommy is crazy with her superstitions,” he tells the dog. Jerry averts his Daddy’s gaze, unwilling to take sides.

“Okay Jerry buddy, be a good boy. Daddy will be back soon.” He gives the dog’s ears a fatherly tussle, then stands up, arches his back and reaches for the umbrella. Still inside the porch, with a smirk on his face, he gingerly opens the umbrella, immediately getting his finger caught in the mechanism. “Dammit,” he says through gritted teeth. “Took out a chunk of skin, hurts like hell.”

“What? his wife calls from the kitchen. “Nothing,” he grumbles, “I’m talking to the dog.” He leans down. “This’ll be our little secret,” he whispers, giving the Springer Spaniel’s ears another fatherly tussle. He swings open the outside door, leaning forward and rushing down the few steps, going headfirst into the drizzling rain with his fully-opened umbrella firmly grasped in his good hand. He vigorously rubs the pinched finger of his other hand against his overcoat, trying his best to alleviate the throbbing pain.