

# 10 BY 10

FLASH FICTION STORIES



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ISSUE 31

Welcome to Issue #31

The authors in this issue are truly as varied as their stories. There is a college essay coach from China, a retired advertising executive, a ballet teacher and magazine editor, a writer from Maryland and another from Queens, NY. There is a Vietnam born German-based digital forensic analyst, a Korean-American writer-artist from Virginia, an Emmy winner and flash fiction writer from California, a software engineer who is a family mom and a public high school teacher. So, pull up a good comfortable chair and enjoy the ten wonderful stories.

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*. 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 collaborated on a flash fiction book *40 Stories*. His *Selected & New Poetry* will be published this summer by Big Table Publishing Company. Sesling lives in Brookline, MA with his wife Susan J. Dechter.



**Huina Zheng** holds an M.A. with Distinction in English Studies and works as a college essay coach. Her stories have been published in *Baltimore Review*, *Variant Literature*, *Midway Journal*, and other reputed publications. Her work has been nominated thrice for both the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net. She resides in Guangzhou, China with her family.

### **Registered**

When Ling gave birth to her first daughter, she didn't register her. She knew what that meant: no ID, no insurance, no legal existence. But under the iron grip of the Family Planning Office, she had no choice. Her daughter became one of China's ghost children. No one ever said how many. She just knew it was what everyone did.

Four months into her second pregnancy, Ling trembled before the ultrasound screen in a back-alley clinic. "Another girl," the doctor muttered. Her legs went numb. She wanted an abortion, but her mother slammed the table: "I gave birth to six in a mud hut, drinking plain porridge!" (She eventually had a son, conveniently omitting the two daughters who died from neglect.) Her mother's message was clear: conditions had improved, of course she could bear another girl. So the second daughter, too, became a ghost. One was left to her mother, the other to her mother-in-law.

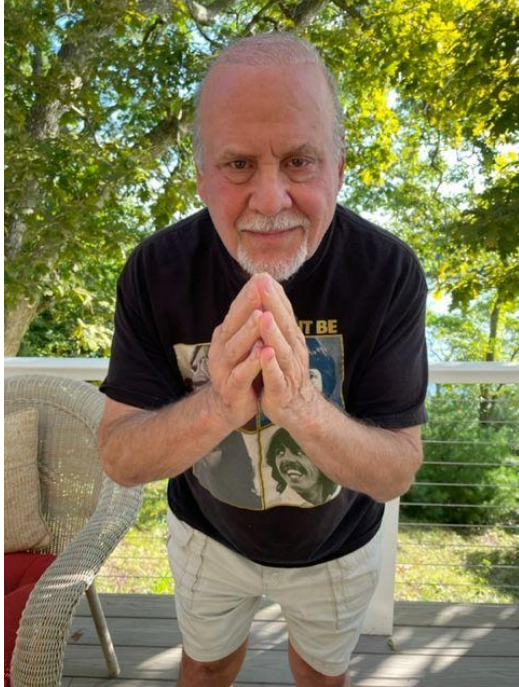
She loathed childbirth. As the eldest daughter herself, she'd been a "little mother" to three younger siblings, and the exhaustion had carved itself into her bones. She didn't even like children. But now, grown, she still had to care for three—hoping the third would be a boy, so the suffering of pregnancy could end. What if the third, or even the fourth, was another girl? Keep going until she produced a son? She didn't want to think about it. No one ever explained why a son was necessary. Her mother simply said, "A family without a son faces a bitter old age." She accepted it: a son was non-negotiable.

The ultrasound said yes. Right after delivery, she rushed to be sterilized. The anaesthesia made her hallucinate. In a daze, she saw three children standing at the delivery room door, two grey shadows holding the hand of a clear little boy. She kept dreaming of that scene. In her dreams, the boy would grow, while the shadows stayed small.

The son was registered. Her husband finally looked at the baby. He hadn't paid attention to either of the girls. Her mother said, "You've given them a son now. Your husband and mother-in-law will treat you well." Ling had fulfilled her role as wife and daughter-in-law. Everyone seemed pleased.

The girls were still too young. But in two years, her eldest would start school. Still no registration. Her mother waved it off: "When the boat reaches the bridge, it'll pass." Ling wanted to say: some friends had sent their ghost children back to the village so the grandparents could raise them and get them into local schools. Others paid sky-high tuition. Some sold everything to afford the astronomical fines. But her mother only said, "If the sky falls, the tall ones will hold it up. Better to make money than waste time worrying."

It made sense to her. So she learned to bury the worry, like an old shirt that no longer fit. With enough money, everything could be fixed. Just like everyone else had done.



**Paul Steven Stone** enjoyed a storied career in Boston advertising, crafting memorable brands, ads and TV commercials for clients such as Fleet Bank, Garelick Farms and W.B. Mason, whose theme “Who But W.B. Mason!” was Stone’s signature brand creation. Stone also wrote newspaper columns for 25 years; his best columns appearing in “How To Train A Rock” and “Stone’s Throw,” both collections available on Amazon. *Or So It Seems*, the first novel in Stone’s *Seekers For Truth* trilogy, is a “rollicking spiritual odyssey” as one reviewer termed it. The second novel in the trilogy, *SOULJOURNER* is a spiritual thriller. Author of two published children’s books—*The Wind’s Tale* and *Cock-A-Doodle-Don’t*, Stone retired from advertising in 2003, and lives in Plymouth, MA, where he has happily completed *How I Made My Fortune*, the final book in his *Seekers For Truth* trilogy. Stone’s novel, *The Snow That Never Fell* was published by Alien Buddha Press in March of 2023.

### **Last Seen Running**

He was last seen on Saturday.

His wife reported him missing. She remembered him waving goodbye as he went out to start his weekend chores.

“He seemed normal to me,” she recalled. “That was after he had driven the kids to their soccer games,” she added.

“That’s not right,” their younger son countered. “The last thing Dad did was to haul the ladder up from the basement, so he could clean out the gutters.”

Their daughter waved aside both reports, commenting, “The ladder was for the storm windows.”

“Really?” his wife exclaimed, “I thought he was going to fertilize the backyard before changing out the storm windows.”

“He was,” the youngest son piped in. “But first he had to clear out the dead wood behind the house.”

“No,” the daughter objected, “that was slated for tomorrow, after Dad cut down the maple.”

The detective interrupted the family to ask, “Can you tell me what he looked like?”

For a moment, silence fell upon the group, till the oldest son answered with uncertainty, “Kind of like a gardener.”

Later, when the detective handed in his report, he told his chief, “Here’s another one for the files. “Man in his 30’s, homeowner and family man.”

“Missing?” his chief asked.

“Escaped,” was the one word response.



**Nina Rubinstein Alonso's** work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Nixes Mate*, *Peacock Journal*, *Broadkill Review*, etc. Her book *This Body* was published by Godine Press, *Riot Wake* by Cervena Barva press, *Distractions En Route* by Ibbetson Street, *Travels With Fernando* by Wilderness House, and her novel *Balancing on One Leg* is due to be published soon. She's also the editor of *Constellations a Journal of Poetry and Fiction*. (constellations-lit.com <<http://constellations-lit.com/>>).

### Fragments of a Story

Grandma Bessie was pushing her grandson's stroller when a car bounced onto the sidewalk, broke her leg. "Glad the baby wasn't hurt," she tells her son David and grand daughter Julia. Hearing a knock she limps to the door, sees a neighbor presenting a cake, "Hope you feel better, Mrs. Roth." Grandma thanks her, shuts the door asking, "Why is that goyishe from down the hall giving me a cake," and won't taste it. Her leg heals, but not her distrust of goyim.

Julia nibbles a bagel, avoids gefilte fish. Grandpa Sasha turns dials on a radio that looks like a wooden cathedral, finds classical music, gives her the Sunday comics and reads war news. He's a jeweler and for her eighth birthday makes her a locket, gold with a center emerald. She wears it to school photo day, but the delicate chain breaks, and though she searches, can't find it, figures someone picked it up. She cries telling Grandpa, but he blinks his blue eyes, doesn't scold, blames himself for choosing a fragile chain. He gives her a silver pin with an emerald she keeps safe in her jewelry box. Weeks later the school photo of her wearing the lost locket arrives in the mail.



There's a party for cousin Patty's baby girl, pink flowers, happy mood until Aunt Dora asks if Julia knows family history. She's only heard that her grandparents fled Ukraine. Dora describes Cossack soldiers banging on Berthe's cottage door Christmas Eve as they'd heard a Jewish woman was in labor and didn't want a Jew born on Christ's birthday. "They broke in, dragged her bed onto the frozen river where she died, though the newborn was rescued somehow. My mother, your Grandma Bessie, was five years old, hiding in a cupboard, hearing screams, but stayed silent because her mother told her not to make a sound, no matter what she heard." Jenny asks questions, but Dora just shoves her cigarette butt into a pink frosting rose on her plate saying, "Sugar is poison," gives no answers. Julia's glad Grandma Bessie's dozing in a rocker, didn't hear, but glances down, realizes her lower legs are the same shape as Grandma's.

Aunt Frankie tells Julia about the evening Grandma found Grandpa in his car dozing with the engine running, woke him, afraid he was attempting suicide. He said he was tired, resting a few minutes after a day's work. Julia's also heard that her great grandfather wrote poetry, but all his writing was lost. Maybe his books were burned by Cossacks or Nazis, notes jotted in margins deemed worthless, torn up, tossed into the fire.





**Jessica Harman** was born in Montreal in 1974. She holds a B.A. in Creative Writing from Concordia University (Montreal). She attended a session over Zoom, during Covid, at The Writers' Workshop at The University of Iowa. Her poems have appeared in *Arion*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Chiron*, *Nimrod* and *Spare Change News*. She won the Cervena Barva Press Online Chapbook competition in 2008, for her manuscript, *Secrets*. Her full-length collection of poems, *Overflowing Inner Beauty TV* was mentioned by Tupelo Press in the section, "Other Remarkable Work" in their 2012 July Open Reading Period. She has lectured on poetry (and phenomenology in poetry) at adult education centers in the Greater Boston Area. She taught Creative Writing at "Go-Getters," a mental health wellness rehabilitation center in Salisbury, Maryland. She has several books of poetry published: *Dream Catcher* (2013) and *The Landscape Revolving around Us* (2019), both from Adrich Pres (Kelsay Books). Another poetry collection, *Drifting Tomatoes*, was published by Alien Buddha Press in 2024. Her collection of short stories, *In Praise of One of Rebecca's Strongest Traits*, was published by Wilderness House Press in 2020. She has several books of fiction published by Alien Buddha Press, including "A Cup of Truth at The Hard Knock Café" (2021), "Indigestion" (2022), and "Bite the Wax Tadpole" (2024). She lives in Maryland.

### **The Kiss of Gavin**

I was visiting my friend Gavin in Somerville. I can never remember if that town has two “m”s or one. I think I have it right this time. My inner nerd cares.

Unlike me, Gavin is not a dork. He has a refreshing preppy sophistication. I got him some cologne to attract a girlfriend. Then, I decided I could be his girlfriend. We are already best friends.

We sat on a bench in Union Square. The sun was not made of stucco or mud. It was a cooler, New England sun, kind of refreshing, like water, except it was the sun.

Pigeons gathered around us and looked at us with their little orange eyes.

I don’t like to admit I want anyone, but concupiscence rumbled through me.

I wanted a Saltine, but none were readily available.

We already had our morning coffee at our favorite café. We were just pausing before we got more coffee at another café. In the evening, we would have *nachos con queso* at our favorite little Mexican place, where they are getting to know us.

At our second café of the day, they also specialize in juices. I like the beet-apple juice.

Cafés are cool, but so is the amusement park of the philosophers.

Did I make Gavin think my heart was a silk blueberry, and the rest of me was a fountain of glittering gauze?

Neither one of us had kissed anyone in ten years. So, on the bench, we kissed, and I am still thinking about it. I have no more words for this, except “waterfall.”

So, we got up and walked to the brick-walled café where you didn’t necessarily need to know the meaning of life.



**Amy Grech** has sold over 100 stories to various anthologies and magazines including: *10 by 10 Flash Fiction Stories*, *Apex Magazine*, *Even in the Grave*, *Gamut Magazine*, *Microverses*, *Punk Noir Magazine*, *Roi Fainéant Press*, *Tales from the Canyons of the Damned*, *Yellow Mama*, and many others. Alien Buddha Press published her poetry chapbook, *A Shadow of Your Former Self*. She is an Active Member of the Horror Writers Association who lives in Forest Hills, Queens. You can connect with her on Bluesky: @amygrech.bsky.social, Medium: <https://crimsonscreams.medium.com>, X: [https://x.com/amy\\_grech](https://x.com/amy_grech), or visit her website: <https://www.crimsonscreams.com>.

### Old Flame

Shelia Kiernan gets ready for bed while her husband of seven years, Robert, hops in the shower. His iPhone's blowing up. She easily guesses his passcode, 052665, his birthday and swipes through his text messages. Her jaw drops at the sight of salacious sexts from his Physician's Assistant, Melanie Montgomery. A wildly successful Cosmetic Surgeon with a Park Avenue office in Manhattan, his day typically starts at 6:00 a.m. and often ends at 10:00 p.m. Looks like he's found a convenient way to ease pent-up tension.

She's wearing an alluring, red teddy, brown curls caress bare shoulders; her husband reclines in bed busy with his iPhone, tucked in, warm and toasty. Shelia reaches under the burgundy comforter, between his legs and finds that she can't hold his attention.

"Can't you see I'm busy?!" Robert, a fiery redhead, roars, grabbing her arm, clamping down with a vice-like grip.

“Oww! That hurts,” she yelps, drops the comforter frozen, like a statue.

“You asked for it!” He grits his teeth.

“Why don’t you make yourself useful and bring me a nightcap? Dewar’s, rocks. Easy on the ice.” Robert scowls.

Shelia storms out, snatching her bottle of Ambien from the bathroom counter en route to the full bar in the living room. She pulls a frosted highball glass from the shelf, grabs ice from the mini-fridge, and plunks the cubes in. She plucks 20 blue pills from the bottle, slams them down on the bar. Raising the glass, as if making a toast, a long-overdue farewell. The highball glass collides with the bar, pulverizing the pills into a baby blue haze. Shelia sweeps the remnants in.

A Hooters matchbook rests on the cold, black marble next to Robert’s precious bottle of Dewar’s. That sparks an insidious idea. She pours Scotch over ice. A quick stir with an orange swizzle stick, also from Hooters, masks this muddled, potent nightcap. Shelia grabs the matchbook and takes a quick detour to the garage for some lighter fluid.

She saunters back into the bedroom and hands him the glass. “Bottoms up!”

“What took you so long?” He grabs it without a shred of gratitude.

Shelia chuckles. “You can’t rush perfection. I wanted your drink to be special...”

“I don’t see what’s so special about it. Looks mediocre,” Robert mutters, then chugs it, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and slams the empty highball glass down on the nightstand next to his phone.

He frowns, suddenly concerned. “What’s that lighter fluid for?”

She smirks. “I know how much you love barbecue! Well, you’re in for a hot time tonight.”

“It’s a little late for a barbecue. I—” His eyelids grow heavy; he collapses in a haphazard heap.

Shelia douses her husband with lighter fluid before striking the match; it hisses to life, reeks faintly of sulfur. she tosses it in Robert’s lap. As bright yellow flames hungrily engulf him, Robert regains consciousness, shrieks, flailing furiously; a charbroiled Irish bastard getting his just deserts.



**Khoi Pham** is a Vietnam-born and now Germany-based digital forensic analyst. Despite training and working in the technical sector throughout his professional career, he has enjoyed reading and writing since early childhood. What began as a way to relax outside of work eventually became a means of reflecting on his most hidden feelings about the world. This is one of his first stories written in English. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Bewildering Stories*, *101 Words*, *Academy of the Heart and Mind*, and *Literary Yard*.

### **Last Night, Lucerne**

At ten, she caught a taxi to Zurich airport. She rolled down the window to take in Lucerne one last time. It was windy, the crescent moon hid in the cloudy mist, the streetlights dyed the river in bright golden dust. She narrowed her eyes and saw shimmering light reflected on the river surface like thousands of fireflies. She remembered a few days ago when he messaged:

"I've heard you're back in Switzerland, Di."

"Yes?"

"Can I call?"

"Maybe later, I'm very tired right now."

Near the bridge, in the pale light that made everything look dreamlike, she felt eighteen again. She was thirty-one now. She was thirty-two now in Vietnamese age. She had dreamt of Lucerne when she was in Taipei, in Saigon, and finally in Vancouver. She remembered the blue lake surrounded by green and white

mountains. The sea of drowning love, as he once told her when they were in the Bernese Alps.

"I'm in Grindelwald. Perhaps I'm going for a hike tomorrow."

"Is it cold there?"

"Without you, definitely."

"Axel!"

"I was looking out of my cabin window. There was a couple out there. She looked angry at him. They fought, he said sorry, and they kissed. Then they left, and it started raining. The sky got all blurry."

"How cliché."

"Perhaps. Now that you're here, I might drop it and return to Lucerne. How long will you stay?"

"Tomorrow I fly back to Vancouver."

"What a shame."

The river wind soothed her into a sleepy, empty state. What did science call the trace of things that disappeared? He told her once. She didn't remember. She missed him. She missed watching him work. She adored him when they met in art school. She was eighteen. He was twenty-seven. Each summer he took her to live with him in Nidwalden. She didn't remember how he treated her. She believed that one day he would see through her like water.

She hated him. She didn't want to see him. She missed him.

The wind became chillingly cold. She pulled the window up and shivered.

"I miss your voice."

"I thought we agreed not to talk like this."

"I say this because this might be the last chance I see you in person. Tell me something."

"No."

"Please."

"No."

"I swear I won't appear in your life again."

"Damn you."

"I'm sorry."

"Damn you, damn you, damn you."

She arrived at the airport. He came to greet her. They locked eyes. He gave her a sketch. She was perhaps in her early twenties. Her hair was tied up high. She was standing near the edge of the cliff, above the dark blue water. She looked pitiful and adored.

She thought that was the best anyone had drawn her. He promised he would never draw her again.

When the plane set off, she gazed through the window. The city lights flickered before darkness swallowed everything. She closed her eyes. She didn't see Lucerne and the mountains anymore in her dream.





**Hope K. Martin** is an emerging Korean-American author, poet, and artist from Virginia. Her short story “Dead” was featured in *Flash Fiction Magazine* as the Third place winner in their contest. She enjoys boxing, crocheting, playing bass, and she hopes to publish a collection of poetry and short stories.

### **Albatross Flight**

Henry’s going on about the food medieval peasants ate (some dish called Makke I think?), but I’m not listening. I’m staring off toward the bar, swirling my cocktail with two of those little black straws— the ones the bartender has been touching with his bare hands all evening and I mean the part your mouth goes over. Not to mention, the booth we’re in doesn’t have any cushions and we’ve been sitting here for an hour so I want to tell Henry we should settle up.

“It’s just beans and fried onions, but it sounds pretty good,” he says, shovelling a spoonful of molten cake into his mouth. This is our last dinner, I think. He’s trying really hard to salvage our marriage, taking me out like this, buying my love, or what’s left of it anyway. But, the truth is, I don’t like Henry anymore. I’ll say it. And I don’t like when Henry talks. I’m not interested in medieval cuisine. Now, I don’t tell him that, of course. I just zone out these days, which I actually think is worse. But, Henry never says anything about it when I do that. Instead, he brings up new topics, like which way is up for

a Pollock or how foreign accent syndrome works, because I know it would be too hard for him to say just about anything else.

Our waiter sets down the bill and that's when Henry brings up Dunedin.

"Remember that, Nik?" he asks, hopeful.

Henry and I spent a day in Dunedin at the Royal Albatross Centre in the summer of 2008 with the Canon he bought me for my birthday. He told me to take the photos. He said I had a better eye for composition because I went to art school. He was right, but I felt pressured. *Get good pictures of the birds*, I thought. We'd arrived at three for the tour and Henry and I, along with the rest of the group, approached the centre's large windows to see these bright white bodies beaming in the sun, their wingspans eight feet wide— gargantuan and terrifying, but beautiful.

"They're one of the largest flying birds with incredible soaring capabilities," our guide said.

I looked over at Henry and he winked at me as he outstretched his arms like he was pretending to fly. I took a photo of him just like that. "Nik?" Henry says, staring at me with wet eyes.

"Yeah," I say. "I remember."

Yes, I remember. I remember we'd just gotten married. I remember he asked a woman nearby to take our photo in front of the windows, and when we looked at them together on the tiny screen, he asked if I thought albatrosses mate for life. I remember saying I didn't know. I remember Henry saying he hoped they did, just like us, and one day, like them, we'd soar.



**Marc Littman**, a former journalist and Emmy winner for public broadcasting, now is a prolific writer of flash fiction. He's also a playwright member of historic Theatre West in Los Angeles.

### **Corn Flakes**

Sixty years after the accident I still can't stomach corn flakes. So much changed that day. My mother had taken my two young sisters and I on a tour of the Kellogg's factory in Battle Creek Michigan to mask her painful escape from my father's melancholy. A free bird, she had to fly the coop, and she loved to drive. She loved life.

I guess Mom figured by evening Dad would notice his brood had split or he'd get hungry and couldn't fend for himself. Either way maybe he'd finally appreciate her. Mom planned to return to Detroit the next day and reconcile on her terms; she didn't plan on an electrical storm.

My sisters and I were sated on Coco Pops as we piled happily into our Rambler car. A lead foot, Mom quickly found the fast lane on the Expressway. I doubt she slowed much as darkening clouds wrung themselves dry and flooded the road and lightning flashes tore the seams of the sky. The Oldsmobile behind us didn't slow, either, not even when Mom suddenly braked as rubber cones that had cordoned off a lane for striping blew into our path. The Rambler disintegrated.

Shockingly, we all survived relatively intact, but not my mother. She sat mute all the way home, the four of us packed into a tow truck for a two hour dark, rainy drive. By the time we embraced our anxious father and embellished our tragic adventure for him, my fun-loving mother died. A mirthless shell of the

woman went through the motion of raising a family for decades, but she rarely laughed or drove and when she did, she fearfully gripped the steering wheel and lumbered along slower than Jumbo the circus elephant.

Dad didn't help. He seized on her fears to seize more control. She became more dependent on him and morphed into a homebody. When the family did venture out together, Mom insisted she walk behind us lest fate finish the job. And, like me, she never ate Corn Flakes again.



Irena Pasvinter divides her time between software engineering, taking care of her family, and writing poetry and fiction. Her stories and poems have appeared in online and print magazines *Gyroscope Review*, *Every Day Fiction*, *CommuterLit*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Fiction on the Web* and many others. Her poem "Psalm 3.14159..." has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She is currently looking for a publisher for her first novel and working on her second one. Visit Irena at <https://sites.google.com/site/ipscribblings>.

### Going in Circles

"Hi Sis! Heard the news?"

"You won't catch me this year, Al. I wish you could."

"Don't tell me you haven't heard about the aliens!"

"Nope. But I've heard about April 1st. It's today."

"I'm dead serious. There might be real aliens, only 120 light-years away! There's this exoplanet with dimethyl disulfide—"

"Dead serious is a cruel joke, Al, coming from you."

"All right, Sis. I'll behave. So, what's up? What are you doing there?"  
Writing a dialogue story, for a contest."

"What's a dialogue story?"

"Has to be pure dialogue, nothing else."

"I see. Alice would have appreciated."

“Alice?”

“ ‘*And what is the use of a book,*’ thought Alice, ‘*without pictures or conversation?*’ ”

“I always envied your memory.”

“So, how’s it going? What’s it about?”

“About a writer who’s writing a dialogue story for a contest about a writer who’s writing a dialogue story for—”

“A bit repetitive, isn’t it? And not particularly original? What’s the title — Going in Circles?”

“And she’s also talking to her dead brother. Crazy, right?”

“You remember I hated it when you put me into your stories, Sis, do you?”

“Yes, Al. And now you can’t even be mad at me when—”

“Why? Because I live in your head now? A tame imaginary version of your big brother? Nonsense. Don’t you dare mentioning me! See, I still can be mad. Now go wipe your eyes and write. Talk to you soon, Sis.”



**Zebulon Huset** is a public high school teacher, writer and photographer. He won the Gulf Stream 2020 Summer Poetry Contest and his writing has appeared in *Best New Poets*, *Meridian*, *Smartish Pace*, *The Southern Review*, *Fence* and others. He edits the prompt-based *Sparked Literary Magazine*, back from hiatus this winter.

### **Soccer Ball to Dominoes**

Jack had spent hours setting up this parental distraction. His old train set was busted free from its box beneath his bed for the occasion, Legos and even dominoes. Each time the train passed his carefully stacked homework it edged closer to the metal garbage can holding his old marbles and jacks.

Three times a small noise would remind his parents he was still up in his room but not so loud that they would check on him. At ten the soccer ball would be triggered into dominoes, dropping old shoes as a rector set switched off his room light. It was perfect.

They'd bought dollar store red plastic cups that were more brick than stoplight and Jack stared at his cup of PBR that tasted off because someone had splashed shot or so of plastic-bottle vodka in it on the way from keg to Jack's hand.

Jack didn't call anyone there a friend, but at school that day his friends told him he had to go when an invitation was floated to a lab group he was a part of. A rite of passage.



As Jack didn't speak to anyone and stared into his cup on the corner cushion of the couch in the basement he imagined his distraction back home.

It was pure Rube Goldbergian, so good he almost wanted to get caught. His dad might appreciate the engineering.

After an hour he poured the beer-tini into the closest place to the back of his throat that he could and gagged—but, he didn't spit-take. It tasted like nail polish remover and apple juice that had been left in the sun in a plastic container for a week. But he swallowed. Then breathed. Then breathed. He forced the rest down like medicine in one more swig and tried the backyard for one more shot at social redemption.

Two minutes later he succumbed to puking in the rose bushes three houses down from his—better than making it all the way to his mom's garden, he thought.

Climbing onto the garage from the low-limbed oak tree he practiced his speech for when his parents confronted him in his bedroom, ruse of time-lapsed noises foiled by some trip up of happenstance.

His room was dark.

His parents asleep.

The soccer ball hadn't fallen. No one had noticed. He had been out all night. No one had noticed. He had been at the party over three hours but no one had noticed. The soccer ball had not fallen. So many things depended on the soccer ball falling, but he was the only one that noticed which made the failure all the worse.