

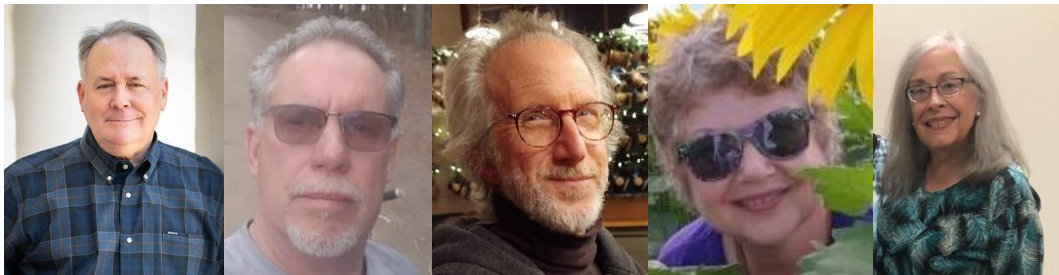


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# 10 BY 10

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**FLASH FICTION STORIES**



**NUMBER 8    APRIL 2023**

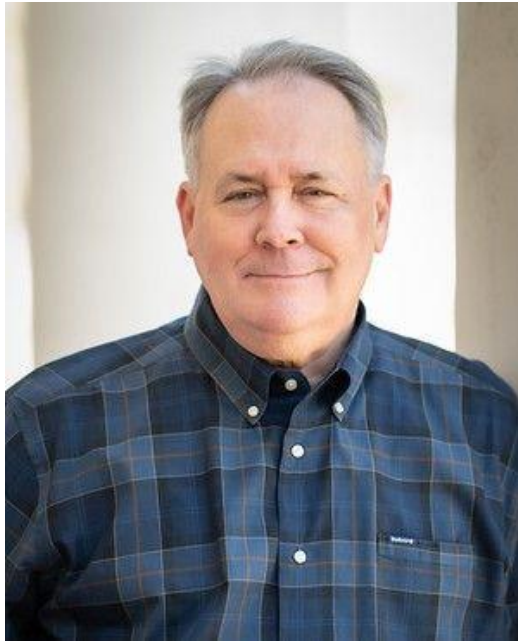
Welcome to Issue #8. Please enjoy the ten excellent writers presented herein.

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 five-time Pushcart Prize nominee. His most recent poetry chapbook is *Simple Game & Ghost of Fenway* (Alien Buddha Press). Sesling recently published *Wheels* (Alien Buddha Press), a flash fiction chapbook. His full volume flash fiction book, *Secret Behind The Gate*, will be published in May 2023 by Cervena Barva Press. He lives in Brookline, MA with his wife Susan J. Dechter.



## **Niles Reddick**

is the author of a novel, two collections and a novella. His work has been featured in over 500 publications including the *Saturday Evening Post*, *PIF*, *New Reader*, *Forth*, *Citron Review*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *Nunum* and *Vestal Review*. He is a three time Pushcart, a two time Best Micro nominee and a two time Best of the Next nominee. His newest flash collection *If Not for You* has recently been released by Big Table Publishing.

### The Mailbox

Nadine got a ride home after her outpatient back surgery. She hoped the procedure repaired a disc and sciatic nerve that half the time ached, and the rest of the time made her leg numb. Though awake, Nadine was groggy and planned to go home and sleep. When she woke three hours later, she didn't recall much about surgery or the ride home, but she craved barbecue.

Nadine knew a shortcut to The Barbecue Pit that meandered through a massive subdivision, and while she often had to dodge kids on bicycles, joggers, and even dogs, she avoided driving on the four-lane highway. A mile into the subdivision maze, Nadine didn't recall if she should turn right, left, or go straight. She turned down a dead-end road and circled back, turned down another side street and damned her late husband Mack out loud for having said all roads were connected for the last forty years they were married.

She wasn't sure if she had turned the air conditioner knob in her Rav4 to high because of a hot flash or if she nodded from the lingering anesthesia, but she hit something hard, noticed her side mirror was missing, and figured the right

front tire was flat or something was caught. She stopped in the middle of the street, noticed landscape lighting highlighting brick and sculpted flower beds, and she realized she'd veered off the road and plowed into the metal mailbox post.

She worried she shouldn't be driving, might be arrested, and rather than confess, Nadine panicked and drove away, pieces of her fender skirt, side mirror, and headlights littering the front yard along with the mailbox and its metal pole. Her barbecue craving had passed.

Meanwhile, the neighbor across the street had heard the crash and watched the scene unfold from his garage, dialing 911 to report it. He couldn't read the license plate or see who was driving, but he could tell under the streetlight that it was a silver Rav4 and immediately assumed it was a young driver who had been texting. He told the dispatcher, "So texting, the wreck, and then leaving the scene should be enough to revoke a license."

The officer arrived, made the report, talked with neighbors, and drove the neighborhood to find the Rav4, but didn't, and because of the larger crimes in the community, he wouldn't proactively go to repair shops in advance of the car being brought in for repair.

The next morning, and after a night of guilty tossing and turning, Nadine drove back to the scene of her crime, rang their doorbell, apologized for her behavior, and offered to pay for their damages. She told them she'd become confused in the subdivision maze. The couple accepted her offer and told her they were happy she hadn't been hurt. They were so happy not to pay the high insurance deductible that they forgot all about notifying the nice officer who wrote the report.



## **S. J. Price**

or thirty- two years he was a middle-school teacher and an unpublished writer. In June 2019, he retired and, at the encouragement of former students, who he often wrote stories for, S.J. has dedicated himself to writing. He has been sending out stories since retiring. S.J. Price lives in Calgary, Alberta, Canada with his wife, three adult children and three dogs.

### **The Hiring Process**

The Librarian was not present when the candidate arrived. The retiring assistant, who the young man was applying to replace, opened the door, confirmed the appointment and handed him a hefty book, explaining that he would be given a short time to review its contents before the interview started.

- Follow me.

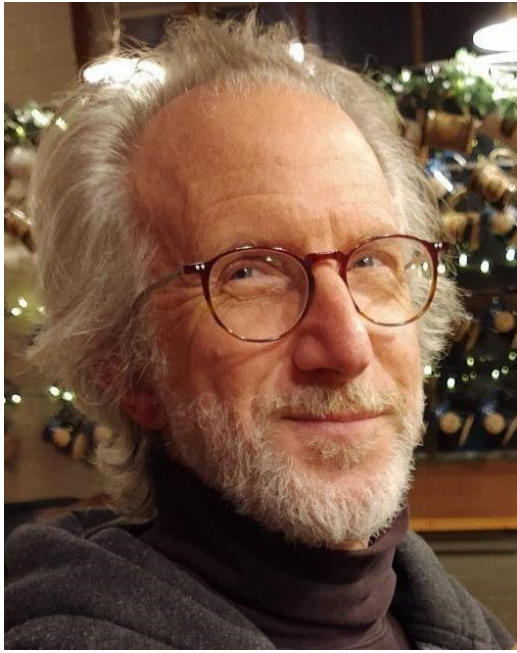
The ancient, limping, curled like a question mark from scoliosis, led him through a series of ill-lit corridors. The young man, keeping the book secured under his arm, followed a step behind, and wondered if the old assistant was going to make it, he looked so frail. But then he became distracted, not understanding how the compact building that stood alone in an isolated cul-de-sac could be so much larger and complex on the inside. It was a maze. He kept close to the listing old man, knowing that if they became separated there would be no finding his way back. After passing several doorways and making many turns, the assistant stopped at a door that opened noiselessly on it own. It revealed a room, similarly lit as the hallway, where there was only a chair set at a table with a desk lamp and box of tissues in the middle. It seemed like an odd place for an interview.

- Read. He will be with you shortly.

The applicant entered and the door eased shut behind him. Eager to be the one chosen as the next guardian of so many of the universe's murkier secrets, the young man was not going to waste any time assessing the surroundings. He needed to prep for the interview. He charged to the table, turned on the lamp, sat down and opened the book. Blood appeared on his fingertips with the first page turned. A paper cut. He grabbed a tissue and continued, grateful that none got on the pages. A second page, another cut. A third, a third cut. No blood stained the book. He began to flip frantically. It was blank, but with each page, a fresh cut appeared. Compulsively, he continued to turn the clean, plain pages. There must be some way to read its contents, he thought, panicking as the interview loomed. Blood leaked from his fingers and pooled on the table, trickled off the edge to gather around the chair. He could not stop himself until he collapsed, drained.

The Librarian appeared, stepping forth from a dark corner, and lifted the book from where it lay pristine on the table, closed it and fitted it under his arm.

- We'll let you know, he muttered, stepping over the pallid, prone, motionless candidate. The door slid open and the librarian departed.



## **Rob Tyler**

lives in a barn with a cat on 30 acres of scrubby woodland in Upstate New York - land of the Finger Lakes, grape pie, and disease-bearing ticks. He wrote his first short story in fourth grade. It was well received and he rested on his laurels for the next 20 years. He eventually found his way back to writing for fun (short stories, flash fiction, and prose poems) and profit (a long career in marketing and technical writing). The profit part is over, but the fun continues. His writing tends toward the surreal, absurd, and weird, with the occasional nod to themes of love and loss, or vice versa. When he isn't writing, he can be found digging rocks out of the ground and piling them nearby, pulling up knotweed by the roots, running his guts out in the hills of High Tor, or playing pool and drinking beer at the local watering hole. As they say, it's all material.

## **Mourning Dove**

“Do you hear the mourning dove?” my sister asks, eyes closed, tugging at her hospital gown.

“It's pretty, isn't it?” I say.

“God, it's been singing for days make it stop.”

The incessant cooing is coming from the telemetry monitor at the nurse's station outside the door. I've told my sister a dozen times, but she has too much ammonia in her brain to remember.

“It's way up in a tree sis, I can't stop it.”

“What tree?” my son asks.

“Timmy, go get some ice water for your aunt.”

“Sure!” he says, and dashes down the hall. He loves working that machine.

“I can't stand the noise,” she says, her hands roving restlessly across her body like independent creatures. One finds the other and pulls the oxygen sensor from her finger. The device next to the bed starts beeping.

“We need to put that back on, sis, to make the beeping stop.”

“Ok.” She lets me put it back on and immediately pulls it off again.

Timmy returns with a cup of water. I steady it in my sister's hand and guide the straw to her mouth. She turns away.

The beeping stops and I look across the bed. Timmy has put the sensor on his own finger and is watching the monitor with fascination. He takes a huge breath and holds it, his cheeks puffed out, as we wait for the numbers to fall.





### **Linda Chandanais**

lives in Michigan's Upper Peninsula with her husband and two dogs. Her love of storytelling began with 'stories from her head' told to younger siblings. After a decades-long hiatus called adulthood, Linda has renewed her passion for storytelling. Her works have been published in The Drabble, CafeLitMagazine, Entropy Squared-A Story in 100 words, Everyday Fiction and SpillWords.

#### Periwinkle

I come from homely people. Not below average looking or plain as mud fences, but downright homely.

Momma says it's our curse to bear. Grandmother Carpenter says there's nothing Momma loves more than a pity party and besides, what's she complaining about? She got plenty close to at least two men.

It's true, Momma has two daughters, and neither of us has met our fathers. We don't even know their names. That's the only thing Grandma Carpenter is as tight-lipped about as Momma.

To listen to my grandmother being homely is a blessing. She says if folks like you, it's for who you are and not the pretty wrapping paper.

By that logic, couldn't someone dislike you because they don't like your wrapping paper? I mean, I love the color periwinkle, but chartreuse makes me want to puke. Unless it was the only one left, I wouldn't pick it, maybe not even then.

I'm thinking I might be an ugly duckling. There are unknown genes rumbling around in me. It's nice not knowing what my father looks like. It gives me hope for periwinkle. But, my backup plan is brains.



**Katacha Díaz**

is a Peruvian American writer. Wanderlust and love of travel have taken her all over the world to gather material for her stories. Her work appears with *ZiN Daily*, *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Big Windows Review*, *Anak Sastra*, *Visual Verse*, *Shimmer Spring*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *Galway Review*, *Hibiscus*, *Barely South Review*, *Westview*, *Gravel*, *Muddy River Poetry Review*, *Twisted Vine*, *New Mexico Review*, *Foliage Oak*, *The MacGuffin*, *Medical Literary Messenger*, among others. Katacha lives in the Pacific Northwest, near the mouth of the Columbia River.

**Pilgrimage of the Heart and Soul**

*"The mountains are calling and I must go."* -- John Muir

On a stormy night high in the Peruvian Andes, zipped up in a cozy mummy sleeping bag inside a tent, I feel the Earth shake with roaring claps of boom and sizzling, sounds of lightning zipping by across the night sky. So, I was understandably gobsmacked when my hiking partner leaned over and asked, "What are you doing for the rest of your life?"

"Isn't this an odd question to ask when *Catequil*, a god of thunder and lightning is putting on quite the display for *Pachamama*, Mother Earth?"

"Call me curious," he said. "And just so you know, I've got you under my skin."

“Oh, I love that tune,” I said, smiling, “something to hum *mañana*, trekking along the Inca Trail, while I consider your proposal. Let’s catch a few winks now.”

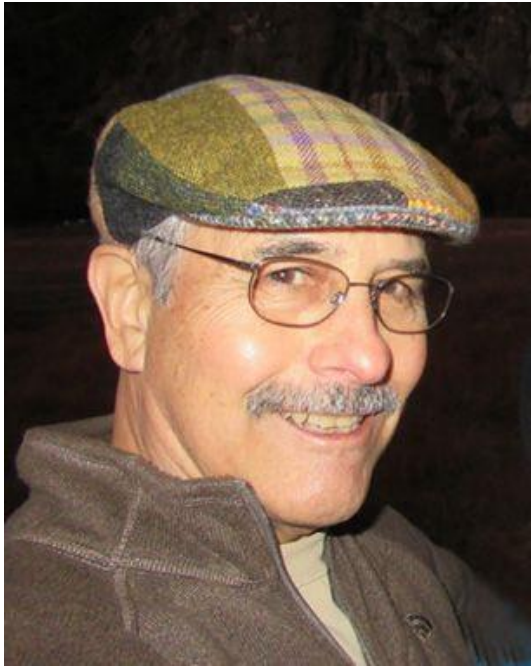
The next morning, with the danger gone, we forged ahead along the 15th century Inca-built pilgrimage path and were treated to the beautiful verdant scenery and wildflowers of the Sacred Valley. The llamas and alpacas grazing Andean grasses dotted the horizon. The nearby *Quechua* families and their animals had suffered no damage from the storm, so the entire extended family gathered outside. Just as their Inca ancestors had done for centuries, a shaman in the village performed a ceremony of sacrificed animal offerings, *coca* leaves, maize, and *chicha* beer to the *Pachamama*, in honor of the thunder god and the majestic sacred mountains.

Trekking into ancient and mysterious Machu Picchu, we were greeted at *Inti Punku*, the sun gate, with a stunning double rainbow arched over the once hidden city of stone. It was surreal and magical to watch a pair of condors gliding effortlessly in the Andean mountain sky while the haunting *quena* music of *El Cóndor Pasa* from a llama herder’s flute filled the air.

We walked down and up narrow flights of uneven stone steps leading to the highest point, the *Intihuatana*, the Hitching Post of the Sun. A shaman offered heartfelt prayers and blessed us. Leaving an offering to *Pachamama*, Mother Earth, the ultimate goddess of love, we embraced.

Savour the sweet memories of this beautiful moment in a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage, I tell myself. Time and distance may get in the way, but we always pick up right where we left off. I wiped a tear in gratitude for our friendship, and took a photo with my dear friend and hiking partner.

*Huayna Picchu* beckons. I forge ahead, joining other hikers to climb up to the top for the ultimate view of ever ancient, ever mysterious Machu Picchu, a fitting end of a spiritual journey that touched my heart and soul.



### **Ed Ferri, Jr.**

lives near where he grew up on a "non profit" farm on the dry side of the Santa Cruz Mountains in California when "Bailing wire, gumption, and spit" were the "apps" of the day. He is a tribal member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation of Shawnee, Oklahoma. His poetry has been published in multiple journals and anthologies including *Muddy River Poetry Review*, *Your Daily Poem*, *Haiku Universe*, *Still Crazy*, *Agave*, *Hobo Camp Review*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Main Street Rag*, *Constellations*, *Illuminations Galerie* and *Monterey Poetry Review*. He is the author of **GLASSY AIR**, *Poems Kindled in the Long Shadow of a Lone Motorcycle* and forthcoming **CAFÉ EDMOVIA**, *Cup of Joe Poetry for Cup of Joe Folks*.

### **Bad Day in Middle Management**

That Friday morning the owner, not my manager, rushes into my office, closes the door behind him and sits down with a serious determined look on his face. "*I need you to do me a favor.*" he blurts out. Shocked by his sudden and unusual visit and request, I as a company "team player", mutter "Sure what's up?"

*"We are having a RIF today, a reduction in work force. I need you to layoff your group, all engineers and drafters, by noon. See Rosie in HR, she has their termination packets ready."*

Holy crap. I just accept this promotion to Mechanical Design Group Leader and now I get to layoff my co-workers? Holy crap. Holy crap. HOLY CRAP!

Then, as my brain begins to gel into an anvil, he continues. “*At 1:00 o’clock sharp this afternoon we’re having a management meeting in the main conference room.*”

“Really?” I think to myself. “Is that when you plan to unveil your new vision and give us a company pep talk? And then try to make us survivors of this sudden RIF feel optimistic about the future of *your* company... and *our* employment?”

And if that’s not enough for me to suddenly swallow, he then adds, “*And also, starting Monday, I need you to start using up your vacation days.*” Whoa... sounds like I might not be a survivor of today’s RIF after my vacation days run out. He then leaves my office in the same manner he came in, sudden and brisk leaving the door open as it was.

Like a zapped zombie, I drag my now stunned anvil head toward HR, but take a slight detour to my manager’s office open door. I peer into the empty fog of his now stripped office. His desk top is cleared off. His framed family and motorcycle racing trophy photos are gone, the rest scattered across the floor. The office walls are bare of his proud awards and patent plaques, only the hanger hooks remain. I guess the owner had dropped him first, delivering his RIF message personally right between the shoulder blades before asking me his favor to do the worst.

Later that afternoon, during the thick gloom of that 1:00 o’clock sharp meeting as the owner displayed his *leaner and meaner* organizational chart where everyone now reports directly to him without any middle management, I thought of my missing “Riffed” manager... it was then that I realized how much I envied him. The next morning, early Saturday, I returned to work and quietly clear out my office. I leave my company keys on the cleared clean desk top. Rosie can mail me my packet and my remaining vacation pay on Monday.



## **Sudha Balagopal**

is honored to have her writing in many fine journals including CRAFT, Split Lip, and Smokelong Quarterly. Her novella-in-flash, Things I Can't Tell Amma, was published by Ad Hoc fiction in 2021. She has stories included in both Best Microfiction and Best Small Fictions, 2022. More at [www.sudhabalagopal.com](http://www.sudhabalagopal.com)

### **Treasured Daughters**

Appa's in the ICU. In the waiting area, I've been on page five of my book for the past half hour. My impatient daughter, Ela, paces.

Last night, to celebrate my birthday, we went to dinner at Mekong—a restaurant offering gooey noodles and hot chili sauce. Appa demurred at first, said he must see a gastroenterologist right away. He complained that his pants wouldn't button over his distended belly, that his swollen legs meant he must shuffle-struggle to walk. He changed his mind. For me.

Ela studies the framed sign on the Hyderabad hospital's wall, right above the radiology department. The lettering shouts: “Ultrasound for medical purposes only. Sex determination and sex selection is banned.” She takes a picture with her phone, types some words. I imagine the picture acquiring velocity, speeding,

spreading through her social network back home in the United States. She's likely receiving round-eyed, open-mouthed emojis.

When the attendant waves to us, I let Ela go in to see her grandfather first. She returns a few minutes later. “He looks better. He's even smiling.” I want to clutch at her statement, hold fast.”

This morning, when I brought Appa to the hospital for a scan, his heartbeats skidded out of control. He told the tech at the lab he could hear his heart hammering in his ears. The male tech let me sink into bewildered fear while he called for a gurney and wheeled Appa away.

I called my sister. “This was supposed to be a regular scan.” She instructed me to speak up; if I didn't demand information I would not receive it.

We grew up in a household of daughters in a culture where a boy child is longed for, prayed for.

The surly attendant at the door of the ICU now gestures to me and I hurry. He asks me to remove my footwear—everyone must, to avoid tracking in infection. I follow him, my feet bare on the cool, sanitized tiles, into the ICU, where my father lies on his back, strapped to so many wires.

Appa's tired eyes light up when he sees me. I put my hands on his, tighten my hold. His mouth lifts in a smile, but his words are melancholy. “Why am I in hospital when you're flying back to the US tonight? I don't want to say goodbye from here.”

I make promises. “I'll call often once I get home. We can do video calls.” A thought snarls, ties a knot of helplessness in my chest. *Technology is only images and sound waves.* Sometimes, treasured daughters must latch onto hope. “You'll be home soon.”

The brusque attendant returns, enunciates, “Your ... time ... is ... up,” as if I am incapable of understanding rules.

On the way out, my daughter stops at the sign to take another photo. She tap-tap-taps on her phone—all the way to my parents' place, all the way to the airport, all the way home.





## **Daniel Loeb**

is a writer based in Amstelveen, The Netherlands.

### **The Other Son**

My father broke his hip 10 years ago. He lost his short-term memory after he came out of the surgery. A side effect of the anaesthesia, according to the doctors. It happens one-sixth of the time with older patients and isn't predictable or preventable. I am an only child. My father stopped recognizing me after his surgery. Every time he saw me he said he had a son just like me. He told me elaborate stories about this other son he remembered: He was so respectful of his parents. He owned an online business and lived in a penthouse in Manhattan. He believed in God and had married a woman of the faith. He liked Republican politics. He played a mean game of tennis.

When we did a video call, my father was surprised to see me and asked my name every time. He told me the same three jokes he knew over and over again. Sometimes he said he would love it if I would meet his son. He thought he could arrange it, that I could learn a lot from him. He had forgotten his son's number. He would try to remember it for next time. Of course, he never did.

I called once a week to see how things were in their life. My mother answered, gave me a medical and mood update, then put the phone in my father's hand so he could see me. My father stared at the screen for a moment, then smiled and asked me if I had ever met his son. After that he rambled on

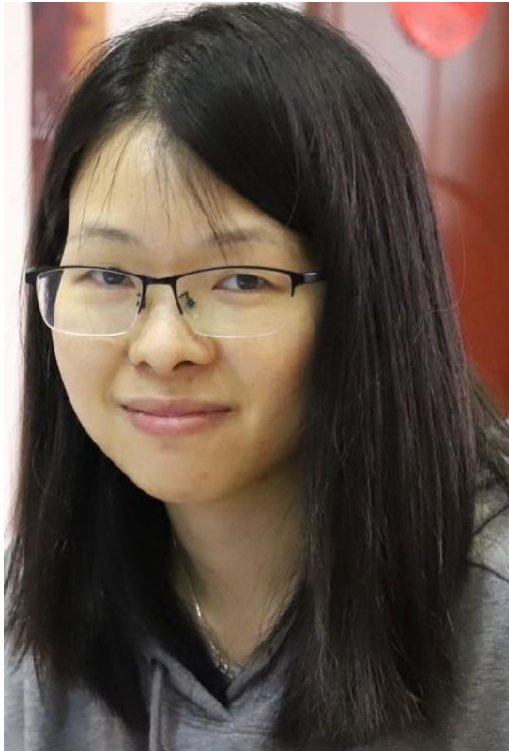


about whatever this other son had done for him and how grateful he was to him. Then he asked me why I had called: Was I a friend of his son's? Did he need something? I never answered him. There was no point in it: whatever I said would be forgotten a second after he heard it.

My father died 6 months ago. He died while taking a nap. My mother was taking a shower. He was alone in the bedroom just long enough for death to take him. I was working in Asia and didn't go to the funeral.

I've started to hear my father's voice when I am cooking, cleaning, or working in the studio. It doesn't matter if I am with other people or alone. I feel his warm breath on the back of my neck. I smell the dry mucus and dirty teeth next to my ears. Whatever I do, he whispers the same question with a taunting note:

Have I ever told you about my son?



## Huina Zheng

holds a M.A. in English Studies degree and has worked as college essay coach. Her stories were published in *Variant Literature*, *Evocations Review*, *The Meadow*, *Ignatian Literary Magazine* and other journals. Her fiction “Ghost Children” was nominated for the 2022 Pushcart Prize. She lives in Guangzhou, China with her husband and a daughter.

### Shameless

At the downstairs of Lan’s apartment, Bin told her, “We aren’t suitable, and I hope you can find someone better.”

“Why?”

“How you acted today was shameless.”

“You blame me for being brave and call it shameless? You invited me out to that stupid park today.”

“I did, but you ran to pick the flowers in the lotus field. You also picked so many leaves.”

“I thought I could make your favorite lotus leaf rice.”

“It was wrong to do so.”

“You said nothing.”

“I didn’t want to hurt your feeling. A man who guarded the field sat not far away. You should have known it.”

“He should put a note board if we couldn’t pick leaves. It was his fault.”

“He shouted, ‘Stop it!’ But you ignored him.”

“I thought he was yelling at others.”

“He was furious. He only wanted us to pay 100 yuan, but you still fought with him.”

“100 yuan for a few lotus leaves! You looked weak, so he believed we were easy to bully.”

“You could reason with him, but you swore and cursed.”

“I did try to reason with him. I must be so furious that I used words I shouldn’t, but you should understand; otherwise, the scoundrel would think I was a pushover. He threatened to call the police. His trick worked on you. You looked scared and told me to pay and leave there.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Of course, I wouldn’t let him blackmail us.”

“You approached him and screamed, ‘He struck me! Help!’ And then you lay on the ground, closed your eyes, and pretended to be in a coma.”

“I decided to deal with the scoundrel as he dealt with us.”

“The police arrived. People surrounded us, pointing and murmuring. I was so embarrassed that I wanted to dig a hole in the ground and hide there.”

“The scoundrel couldn’t explain to the police why I fainted. The police questioned you. If you thought what I did was wrong, why didn’t you answer the police?”

“I was still in shock. You knew what I was thinking? I asked myself, ‘What would it be like to spend the rest of your life with someone like her?’ That question woke me, so I pulled you up.”

“You looked extremely grave, like an unquenchable rage raging within you, so I remained silent.”

“I was mad at myself for not knowing who you were. I gave money to the man, signed the paper for the police, and dragged you away.”

“You let that scoundrel bully us and you blame me. If we didn’t teach him a lesson, he would bully other visitors.”

“You still don’t get it. What you did was shameless.”

“You are a coward, a liar, and a narcissist. I am breaking up with you and you will remain single for the rest of your life. You will be lonely and sick, and no one—”

Bin walked toward his car and drove away. Lan was still cursing behind him.



## **Bryan Vale**

is a writer based in the San Francisco Bay Area. He writes fiction, poetry, and educational articles about technology. His fiction and poetry have been published in several journals, including *Quibble Lit*, *Streetcake Magazine*, *The Viridian Door* and *Spirits Magazine*. Learn more at [bryanvalewriter.com](http://bryanvalewriter.com), or follow Bryan on Twitter and Instagram: @bryanvalewriter

### **The Stairway**

The wind howled through the trash-strewn Oakland streets beside the freeway on-ramp. Streetlights burned against the dark but could not eliminate it. Dakota downshifted for the last time and pulled the growling empty truck onto the lot. He eased into the vacant spot next to the small office, killed the engine, and clambered out. The wind caught his hat and nearly took it off; he held onto it with one hand until the gust was spent.

A figure awaited at the top of the short stairway that led to the back of the office. Silhouetted in the light from the open door, the figure, impassive, nodded once at Dakota. Then the figure put up a hand.

"Got a mask?"

Dakota paused on the stairs. "Right," he said. He groped within his sheepskin jacket and produced one. It was a sad mask, drooping from over-usage. He put it on and inhaled the smell of dried sweat, and continued up the stairs.

The figure's hand remained high. "Six feet."

Dakota felt fatigue course through his body. "Oh, yeah." He stopped at the appropriate distance. Also from within his jacket, he procured a folded piece of yellow paper. "I need this signed, and then I can head home," he said. "I'll follow you in."

A shake of the head. "You can't come inside."

"What?"

"It's the coronavirus regulations. From the company."

"Oh." Dakota's features twisted in confusion. "Even with the mask?"

"Even with the mask."

Dakota shrugged. "Okay." He stretched out the hand that held the paper, trying to traverse the last two steps and as much of six feet as he could with one arm. The paper fluttered in the wind, waist-high to the figure at the top of the stairs. "Can I get this signed out here then?"

The figure bent slowly down to grasp it, and Dakota, straining, released it — an instant too soon. The wind rose and took the yellow scrap up into itself, up over the roof of the office, out into the dark unswept Oakland night. Signature-free, it would come down somewhere, no doubt — perhaps against a chain link fence, perhaps in the middle of Interstate 880 South, perhaps disappearing into the cold waters of the bay.