



10 BY 10

FLASH FICTION STORIES



First Anniversary Issue



NUMBER 10 JUNE 2023

Welcome to the First Anniversary Issue of 10 By 10 Flash Fiction Stories. It was one year ago this month that the first issue was published online with ten outstanding writers. This issue celebrates that first one by having the ten writers submit new work. Unfortunately one writer could not participate, so one of my favorite flash fiction authors, Gay Degani agreed to step in and her outstanding story is first up. The other nine writers return with their unique takes that once again make you laugh, cry and above all think. So pull up a comfortable chair, sit back, relax and enjoy!

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.



Gay Degani

Gay Degani's many nominations include Pushcart, Best of the Net, and Best Small Fictions. Her work has appeared online as well as in print journals and anthologies. Her story, "Scablands" placed fourth runner-up in the 2023 Saturday Evening Post's Great American Fiction Contest. She's published a chapbook, *Pomegranate*, a full-length collection, *Rattle of Want*, (Pure Slush, 2015) and a suspense novel, *What Came Before* (Truth Serum, 2016).

Shroud

Ann stares at the drapes, her mother's drapes, pinch-pleated at the top, an ivory material called "slub" by those who know their fabrics. But, of course, these are not her mother's curtains.

Her mother's were steeped in years and years of cigarette fumes: Pall Malls, Lucky Strikes, Kents, Kools, and, of course, the one whose slogan exhorted, "More Doctors Smoke Camels than any other cigarette!"

Her mother's favorite brand changed with every new tobacco ad, filtered, unfiltered, flavored.

She still remembers that pall of smoke, its acrid smell, the crinkly sound her mother's cigarettes always made whenever she inhaled, Ann picturing that insidious vapor sidling deep and deeper into her mother's lungs where its insistent poison settled into soft and vulnerable tissue, curdling every cell.

What if she hadn't inhaled? What if she'd only let the smoke crouch inside her mouth, spiraling behind her teeth before releasing its insidious cloud out into their living room with its maple end tables, its fake fireplace, the cut-velvet sofa? Would her mother have died at 67?

Ann reaches out to touch these drapes that aren't her mother's drapes in this living room of someone she barely knows. She rubs the fabric between her thumb and forefinger. It feels like linen, it feels like a shroud. Closing her eyes, she wraps the curtain around and around herself, buries her face deep into its cold dusty smell.



Francine Witte

Francine Witte's flash fiction and poetry have appeared in numerous journals. Most recently, her stories have been in *Best Small Fictions* and *Flash Fiction America*. Her latest flash fiction book is *Just Outside the Tunnel of Love* (Blue Light Press.) Her upcoming collection of poetry, *Some Distant Pin of Light* is forthcoming from Cervena Barva Press. She lives in NYC. Visit her website francinewitte.com.

Just then, a hen

Clucks into the doctor's waiting room. Sets down between me and Charley to lay itself an egg.

"Backed up a bit," the doctor's lady says to the room. Okay by me, the thing we are afraid of is growing inside of Charley.

The other people don't seem to notice the hen. They busy themselves with magazines and dixie cups. One lady is thumbing a *People* from all the way in the millennium. Titanic Leo on the front.

I look around and pretend in my head to know what's wrong with each of them. What is growing so big that it will eat them from the inside out.

Charley, he is getting sicker and sicker by the very minute. And just then, the hen pops up, see! Look at that! I laid myself an egg!

I wonder what kind of egg is growing inside of Charley. But it's high time he birthed it and crushed and move on with things.

The hen jumps up on the reception desk and is clucking and squawking at the doctor's lady, who must surely be tired of everyone blaming her for the doctor's delay.

And who seems to have no other choice but to pick up the hen and put it back out in the hall.

I look at the egg left behind on the carpet. Tiny and so easy to shatter.

I look again at Charley, who I realize at that moment is as eggshell as the rest of us, and I tell him I love him, y'know, just in case.



Michael C. Keith

Michael C. Keith is the author or coauthor of more than two dozen groundbreaking books on electronic media, which have resulted in numerous awards. Beyond that, he is the author of an acclaimed memoir, *The Next Better Place* (from Algonquin Books) and over 20 story collections—his latest titles include *Quiet Geography* from Cervena Barva Press, *The Late Epiphany of a Low-Key Oracle* from Scantic Books, and *Bodies in Recline* from Pelekinesis Books. A forthcoming collection: *All the Noise in the Room*, will appear from MadHat Press. Keith has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize several times, a Pen O. Henry Award, and was a finalist for the National Indie Excellence Award for short fiction anthology and a finalist for the International Book Award in the “Fiction Visionary” category. His work has been translated into many languages. He is professor emeritus at Boston College. www.michaelckeith.com

Your Father Will be Back as the Rain

The sudden movement of the tiny cluster of cottonwoods out beyond the barn caught Matthew’s attention. It aroused his curiosity since nothing else moved in any other direction. In fact, the air had been dead for days, with only the occasional dust devil in the paddock stirring the parched western Nebraska soil.

When he moved toward the trees, the wind intensified, causing their limbs to lift and fall as if they were attempting flight. For a split second the smallest of the trees resembled his deceased father's silhouette, and Matthew stopped to focus on it. When he did, its human likeness faded and stillness descended on the scene. "Dad!" he called out. Then the skies opened.

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Timothy Gager

Number One Bestselling Author, Timothy Gager has published 18 books of fiction and poetry, which includes his latest novel, *Joe the Salamander*. 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, 17 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. In 2023, Big Table Publishing published an anthology of twenty years of his selected work, with 150 pages of new material: *The Best of Timothy Gager*. Timothy was the Fiction Editor of The Wilderness House Literary Review, and the founding co-editor of *The Heat City Literary Review*. A graduate of the University of Delaware, Timothy lives in Dedham, Massachusetts.

Dig ‘Em

When Todd read the obituary for the voice-actor of Dig ‘Em the frog, he got up, went to Purity Supreme and bought twenty boxes of Honey Smacks. They had the same ingredients as the previous Sugar Smacks but honey was undoubtably more of a healthy choice.

It seemed that Dig ‘Em was his only credit. Todd had thought because of similar timbre that he may have been Tony the Tiger, but Dig ‘Em was all, so Todd imagined the man at a party in Hollywood losing his credibility more after each and every sentence.

“So, you’re an actor?”

“A voice actor.”

“Do you do car commercials or maybe some Disney films?”

“No.”

“Who do you do that we would know?”

Even if the person in conversation recognized Dig ‘Em the frog it didn’t impress. It was better that they didn’t know who Dig ‘Em was, actually.

“Dig ‘Em,” Todd said to the bowl of cereal, and later when he lost his mind, he would say that a lot, but no one at the Memory Care Unit knew what he was talking about. Slowly, one-by-one Todd had forgotten one piece of every memory, followed by losing the next piece of each. He may have first forgotten the location of a conversation, or who the conversation had been with, or confused it all and thought the entire conversation happened in a dream.

“Dig ‘Em,” he said suddenly, but had long forgotten the frog.



Renuka Raghavan

A Pushcart Prize and Best Small Fictions nominee, Renuka Reghaavan, is an Indian-American author who writes short-form prose and poetry. She is the author of *Out of the Blue* (Big Table Publishing, 2017), *The Face I Desire* (Nixes Mate, 2019), and most recently *Nothing Resplendent Lives Here* (Cervena Barva Press, 2022). Visit her at [www\(dot\)renukaraghavan\(dot\)com](http://www.renukaraghavan.com) for a complete list of all her previous publications. Follow her on Twitter and Instagram @RenukaRag.

Do You Know Where Serendipity Is?

Maya can hear them all downstairs. Royce was saying goodbye to her mother in the doorway. Then everything goes quiet again, apart from her younger sister turning on the shower across the hall. The smell of sambar simmering on the stove drifts all the way inside her bedroom where she is lying on the bed with a pillow between her knees. She can still feel the wet of his saliva just above her lips, and his fingers. At least he had made an effort to be nice. She tries to forget and turns on the TV.

A local news anchor was talking about a missing girl. They show the picture of a cute seven-year-old cross-eyed girl with long blonde hair and eyeglasses. She hasn't been seen for the past two years but she is just now being

reported as missing. The girl has one of those weird names that Maya's mom believes only white people use. Serendipity. The anchor throws the story to a reporter who is standing outside the house where Serendipity was last seen. The reporter rings the doorbell, and an elderly woman opens the door dressed in a robe. When she spots the camera, she moves to close the door, but the reporter shouts, *Do you know where Serendipity is? She was last seen near here. No,* says the woman.

Maya shuts the TV off. Her sister is bumbling in the hallway, but otherwise the house is still quiet. Royce hasn't texted her yet, though he promised he would. She looks at the photo of him affixed to her dresser mirror. With his artfully tousled brown hair, he is in his lacrosse uniform and never smiles in pictures. Above him, there's a photo of Maya's whole family from their last vacation, all with ear-to-ear grins. Maya can't help but think of Royce and Serendipity.

After they were finished, Maya and Royce had lain under her sheets, her duvet smelling like the washing detergent her mom only bought if there was a coupon. Royce had said it was a shame it had hurt, and Maya wanted to cry but didn't. When Royce said he was leaving, she didn't bother asking him to stay a little longer because she didn't want him there anymore either. She slipped her fingers over her panties where she still felt tender, and she hoped the feeling would soon pass.

She can hear the whole house from her room. Her mother is unloading the dishwasher and setting the table for dinner. Dad is turning up the volume on the television. Still no text. Maya silences her phone and shuts her eyes. She decides Royce is a weird name too.



Jayne Martin

Jayne Martin is the author of *Tender Cuts*, a collection of microfiction from Vine Leaves Press and *The Daddy Chronicles-Memoir of a Fatherless Daughter* from Whiskey Tit Books. She lives in California with her dog, Miss Pickles, her horse, Luna, and a resident Daddy Long Legs spider named Miranda, but dreams of living in Paris. www.jaynemartin-writer.com Twitter: @Jayne_Martin

A Tiny Indulgence

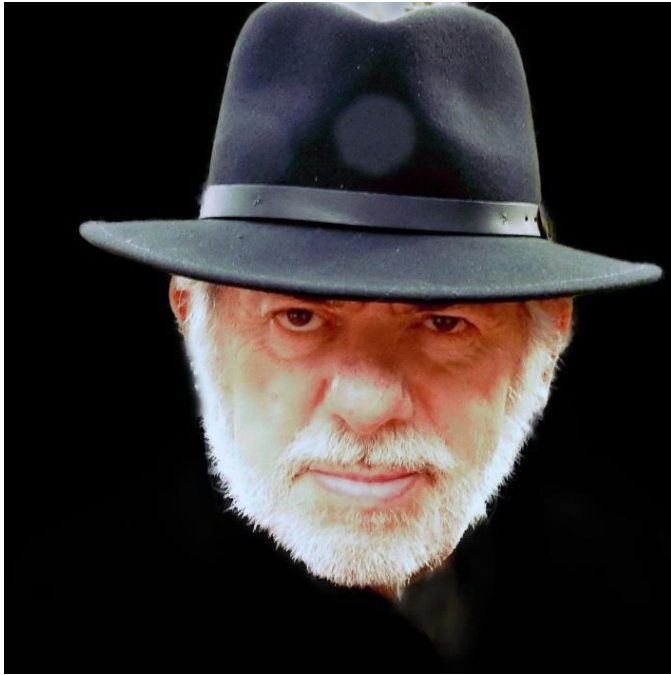
The aisles of The Dollar Store were teeming with deal-seekers, many those like herself, struggling to stretch the last of the month's Social Security check. She'd grown skillful at slicing open toothpaste tubes to scrape what remained stubbornly inside—quite a bit, as it turned out. Bars of soap reduced to slivers could be mashed together to make a new bar, sometimes in the shape of a snail, or a bird if her arthritis wasn't acting up.

But now autumn was upon her. Darkness crept into her tiny apartment earlier and earlier each day stealing the light and warmth of the sun. Windows kept tightly shut against the cold, trapped odors of her neighbors' cooking grease and cigarette smoke, the bodies of decomposing mice.

And so when she came upon the bin filled with red votive candles soaked in the scent of cinnamon, "Ten 4 A Dollar," she did not fault herself for ceding to her desire. As she inhaled, her memory came alive with scenes of days gone

by: Her home filled with the bouquet of fresh sweet rolls steaming from her oven, children with sticky hands and faces to be wiped, begging for just one more.

In the coming evenings, she will sit by her phone waiting for them to call as each tiny flickering flame releases its gift.



Paul Beckman

Paul Beckman's latest flash collection, *Kiss Kiss* (Truth Serum Press) was a finalist for the 2019 Indie Book Awards. Some of his stories appeared in *Spelk*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Litro*, *Pank*, *Playboy*, *WINK*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Fictive Dream*, *The Wax Paper*, *Monkey* and *The Lost Balloon*. He had a story selected for the 2020 National Flash Fiction Day Anthology Lineup and was shortlisted in the Strands International Flash Fiction Competition. He was nominated for 2021 Best of the Web and had a story selected for Best Microfiction 2022.

Chill In Chill Out Chill In

She felt a loss coming on, yet just a few minutes ago Sharon was giggling with her friends, swapping gossip, and telling funny stories. As she waited at the bus stop, the rain started and the wind began blowing. She wrapped her coat tighter.

A car pulled up to the bus stop, window lowered, and the driver asked Sharon if she'd like a ride home.

Sharon, freezing to the bone, nodded and opened the passenger door. She got in and with chattering teeth attempted to thank the father of one her friends she'd been partying with.

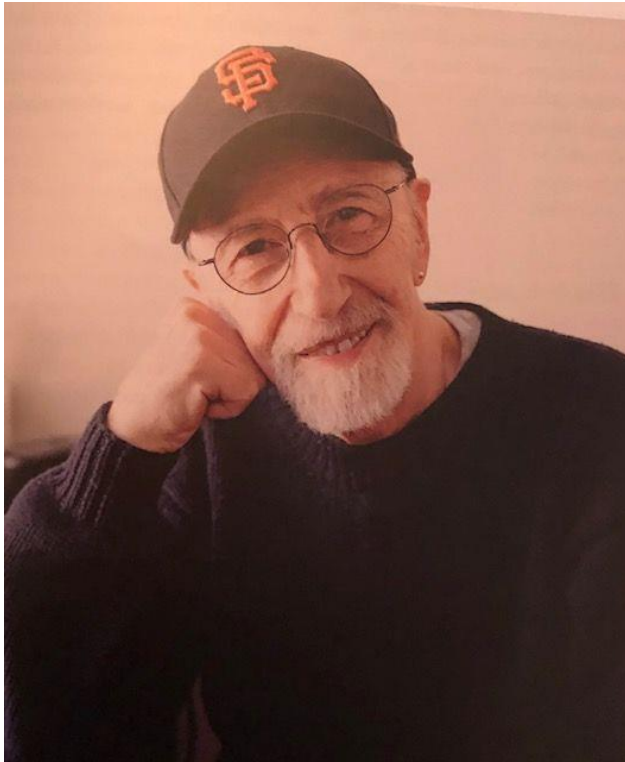
“Open your coat and I'll show you a trick to get warm in two minutes.”

Sharon untied her coat and the man cranked up the heat and told Sharon to hold the coat around the heating duct and the chill receded, and then came on again when she felt the man's hand on her thigh.

"How's that?" He asked.

Wonderful, just wonderful, she said to herself, leaning back keeping her eyes closed. She clamped her thighs together trapping the man's hand and felt yet another chill while his hand moved.

"This is as far as I'm going," he said pulling his car over, and Sharon, who continued leaning back with her eyes scrunched tight, pulled his hand off her leg, opened her car door and said into the wind, "You bet your ass it is."



Robert Scotellaro

Robert Scotellaro is the author of seven flash fiction collections, including *Ways to Read the World* (Scantic Books, 2022) and *God in a Can* (Bamboo Dart Press, 2022), and five collections of poetry. He has, along with James Thomas, co-edited *New Micro: Exceptionally Short Fiction*, published by W.W. Norton & Co. His work has appeared widely and is included in Norton's *Flash Fiction International* and *Flash Fiction America*, as well as five *Best Small Fictions and Best Best Microfiction* award anthologies. He is the winner of *Zone 3's* Rainmaker Prize in Poetry and the Blue Light Book Award for his fiction. Robert lives in San Francisco.

Visit him at: www.robertscotellaro.com

The Verbose People of Llama

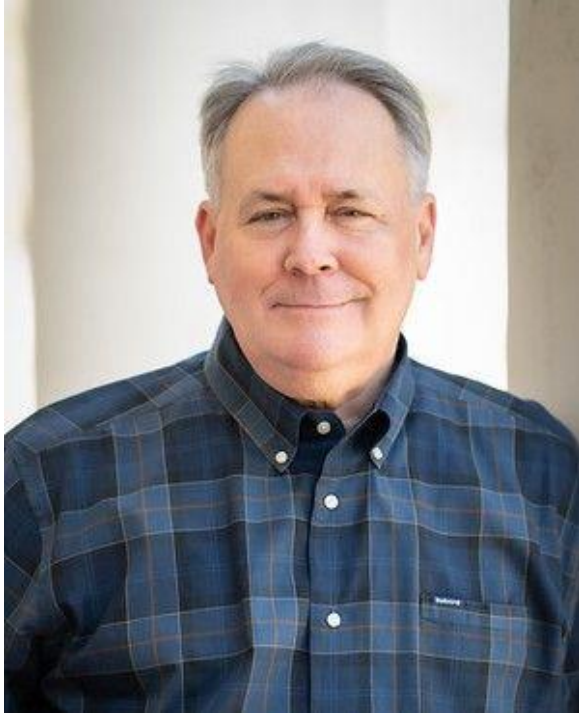
They are a hardy bunch that dwell in a remote Peruvian mountain village. I've been allowed in. The only outsider who has. Perhaps it is the confections I bring in the shapes of exotic animals they've never seen, in combination with my long blond hair they delight in running hands through. "Lla," they say, which can mean: glorious, precarious, gregarious, flatulent... According to the way it is

accented. The way the mouth wraps around each articulation, the way the face is in concert with what is spoken along with hand gestures. For there is only one word comprising their entire language. The word: Llama. They use every combination of its letters to great effect and are exceptional conversationalists. The poets there can wring your soul to tears with the power of their imagery and metaphors, their intimacy with the ineffable.

I have a lover there. Her name is Ama. During lovemaking she cries out, “*L-l-l—lll---l!*” I echo it back. It is a standard lustful reaction the villagers have here. Later, she recites poetry that moves me in indefinably profound ways. There are beats of silence in their language between the words/the letters. It is precise. Two seconds of silence instead of three can change the meaning, in some cases, disastrously. I said *ma---la* once with an inadequate amount of pauses and nearly lost my head.

Their shaman is a willowy fellow who uses his eyebrows and lip gestures when he speaks, so flexibly/so expressively, he is considered their scholar. His teachings are scripture. Ama has tutored me in properly addressing him as *La-ma---la*. The beats of silence, in this instance, are critical. He looks at me sometimes suspiciously, but he cured my “Frog’s thigh” as it translates in their language. A nasty bit of fungus that, thank heavens, doesn’t travel higher.

Occasionally I take the long journey down the mountain into town for supplies and have more specialized confections made. I’ve got a lover there too. Her name is Abigail. It’s refreshing not to be so careful with language and facial gestures. To lie there afterwards and talk freely. And, indeed, the conversations are adequate enough. But, *Ml-a-mama—lamm!* I sure do miss the poetry.



Niles Reddick

Niles Reddick is 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 nominee, a two time Best Micro nominee and a two time Best of the Net nominee. His newest flash collection *If Not for You* was recently released by Big Table Publishing.

Show and Tell

We were instructed to bring something to school for show and tell in the second grade. The afternoon before, I was playing with a Tonka dump truck, and I jumped back when I saw the small oak snake coiled in the bed. I found the mesh cricket tube we used for fishing, the truck dumped him in, and I snapped the tin lid shut. I sat it outside on the stoop and shared with my mom who said, “You aren’t going to take a snake to school.”

“Why not?”

“How do you know it’s not a venomous snake?”

“I didn’t hear it rattle.”

“Rattlesnakes aren’t the only venomous snakes around here. Dump it out and figure out what else you can take.”

“Okay,” I said but decided to watch *Batman* instead—the original one with Adam West.

The next morning, my snake was still in the cricket container, and I carried it by the lid’s rope. I put the cricket container behind my books under my desk

and didn't tell anyone. When it was my turn, and the teacher asked what I brought, I pulled the cricket container and walked to the front of the room.

"Looks like you have a fish bait container."

"That's right, and I have a snake trapped in here."

The class oohed and aahed as I shook it, and they saw the outstretched snake trying to slither its way through the metal mesh. I walked over to the front row where Becky sat and shook it at her. She screamed and began to cry.

"Okay, thank you. That's enough. Let's take this to the principal's office." The teacher said something to the principal and then went back to the class.

"Now, let's see. What've you got here?" Principal Becker asked.

"I found him in my Tonka truck bed."

"You know, oak snakes eat all sorts of varmints. Let's take him out and let him go in the woods. He's probably hungry."

When I opened the lid, the snake struck me in the palm of my hand. "Ow!" I said. The snake then slithered and disappeared into the leaves and straw at the edge of the school's mowed property.

"You'll be okay. Let's wipe it with some alcohol, paint some mercurochrome on it, and put a bandage on there. I'll call your mom and let her know. Does it hurt?"

"No," I said. "I guess he didn't appreciate being trapped."

Mr. Becker was very kind, patted my head, and said, "I'll bet your classmates will talk about how cool your show and tell was."

If he'd called my mom, she never said anything about it. Maybe he comforted her in the call, told her I was fine, just being a boy.



Phil Temples

Phil Temples is a product of the Midwest but he's lived in the greater Boston area for the past forty years. Phil has published five mystery-thriller novels, a novella, and three story anthologies in addition to over 220 online short stories. Phil likes to dabble in mobile photography. He is a member of GrubStreet and the Bagel Bards. You can learn more about Phil by visiting his website at <https://temples.com>.

Pariah

Missy feels lonely and isolated after moving from the big city to a small town of five thousand people. Being blind makes it all the more difficult for her to cultivate new friends and become involved in social activities. Every day, she taps her cane along the three blocks of sidewalk to a neighborhood coffee shop. She sits and enjoys a fresh cup of coffee and a pastry, catching snippets of conversation and other peoples' lives and basks in the ambience. On her way home, she dutifully discards her coffee cup and any remaining contents in a nearby trash receptacle. Unfortunately, Missy had earned a reputation of a pariah because she dumps her coffee cups in the United States Postal Service mailbox.