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# 10 BY 10

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FLASH FICTION STORIES



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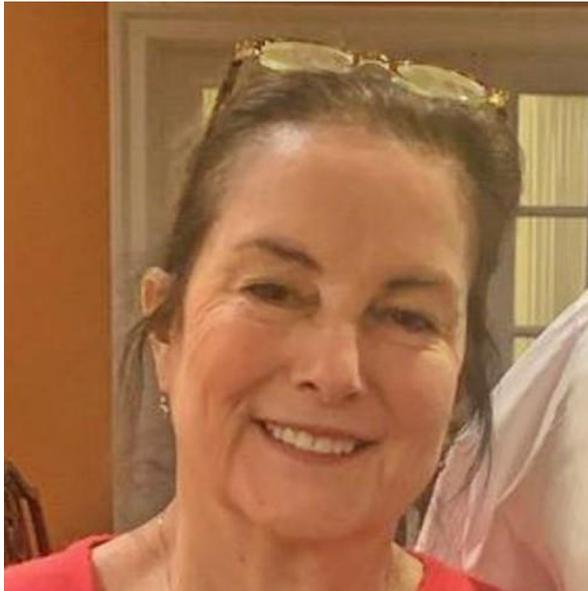
Welcome to Issue #12. Unique stories highlight this issue with, as usual, ten writers who are among the best flash fiction writers around. They bring years of fiction writing to their stories and show their individual style and creativity. Some have appeared in 10 By 10 before and we are fortunate they have chosen to write for us again. So you are sure to enjoy the ten excellent stories written by ten excellent writers.

**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 and a full volume flash fiction book, *Secret Behind The Gate*, (Cervena Barva Press). He lives in Brookline, MA with his wife Susan J. Dechter.



**Andrea Marcusa's** writings have appeared in *The Gettysburg Review*, *River Styx*, *River Teeth*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *Citron Review*, and others. She's received recognition in a range of competitions, including *Smokelong*, *Cleaver*, *Raleigh Review*, *New Letters* and *Southampton Review*. She's a member of the faculty at The Writer's Studio and also a member of the school's Master Class where she studies with Philip Schultz. For more information, visit: [andreamarcusa.com](http://andreamarcusa.com) or see her on Twitter @d\_marcusa.

### **It's Been Going Around**

The green ceramic platter, a wedding gift, lay shattered. It had sat in my hand and then plunged to the floor splitting into shards, like a smashed pumpkin. Its contents—dried dates, hazelnuts, baby pears, grapes, and stinky cheese—adorned the brick floor like scattered seeds.

The dessert plate had always stayed aloft, accommodating a myriad of treats -- cupcakes, cold cuts, sandwiches. Its sudden departure and brokenness caused me to reflect. Should I stay with my husband or succumb to the allure of the woman who had casually entered my life at the tennis courts, upending me. She presumes to know me, she's bold and self-assured, sure we're made for each other. She's oblivious to so much. She's unaware that I hog all the pillows at night, detest conversation before 11:00 A.M., and shun loud noises, television, and absolutely all felines—even kittens. She doesn't know that I travel poorly and crankily, insist upon aisle seats on planes and in theatres and have consumed Eggo Waffles for breakfast for decades. Such quirks can build or break partnerships. Irritants my husband calls them. Ones we both have discovered in each other and accommodated.

Nevertheless, the episode with this woman persists, replaying in my mind with much gusto. She knew exactly where and how to touch and delight me and expressed such pleasure when she saw mine.

Now I'm in my kitchen with a table full of dinner guests in the next room, couples we've shared meals with for decades, and who believe my marriage is solid. My husband is helping to serve and clear and after scraping and then depositing the last dinner plates in the sink, he pressed a kiss on my neck before returning to our guests. He's explored every inch of me, and I've always believed our love life robust. But this woman caught me unaware; it felt novel, thrilling.

Right after my husband returned to his seat, I dropped the platter.

Sharp ceramic shards stare accusingly.

Is this dalliance considered genuine cuckoldry? Does it equate to cheating with another man? Would my husband feel betrayed or aroused? I don't want to know. Gay affairs with married cis women are spreading around our community like this season's flu. I'd heard whispers about them but had failed to grasp their significance. Now this woman has seized my mind. I'm leaping ahead to happily-ever-after domestic bliss with her and my beloved wedding gift is in pieces.

The fruit, nuts, and cheese remain on the floor while I obsessively relive the feel of her hand when it first rested upon my back as we strolled off the courts and later, how our encounter in the washroom unfolded when her mouth and tongue so urgently found me.

I shake myself back to the present and scramble to swiftly recover and wash what fruit and nuts that I can, and then tidy up the rest before anyone notices the bruised pears and flattened grapes.

Before anyone realizes that I've lost my grip.



Number One Bestselling Author, **Timothy Gager** has published 18 books of fiction and poetry, which includes his third novel, *Joe the Salamander*, and *Big Table Publishing's Anthology, The Best of Timothy Gager*. He hosted the successful Dire Literary Series in Cambridge, MA from 2001 to 2018, and started a weekly virtual series in 2020.

### **Labor Day at the Border Cafe**

The sky opened suddenly as you broke up with me, our nachos becoming tortilla soup. As I sat there, the waitress wrestled with the umbrella failing to stop the water from ruining the meal. You ran off without a raincoat; the sound was a snare drum. She came back and I was the only one left on the patio. “Can I bring you the check or anything else?”

“It’s raining,” I said, my car a long way across the parking lot, empty space to the right of it. There wasn’t much else which could be left at the table. Then a new couple parked, was heard running, and laughing.



**Rob Dinsmoor** grew up in Bloomington, Indiana and graduated from Dartmouth College, where he majored in Literature and Creative Writing, wrote two prize-winning plays, and edited the celebrated humor magazine, *The Dartmouth Jack O’Lantern*. In New York, he became a freelance medical journalist (winning a “Sword of Hope” award from the American Cancer Society) and wrote pieces for *Paper*, *National Lampoon*, *Nickelodeon Magazine*, *Games*, and *American Bystander*. Dozens of his scripts were produced by Nickelodeon and MTV as part of such shows as “Don’t Just Sit There,” “Welcome Freshmen,” and “Global Village News.” Turning back to fiction, he published dozens of short stories in various literary magazines, three of which were nominated for Pushcart Prizes, and many of which were published in his short story collections, *Tales of the Troupe*, *Toxic Cookout*, and *You’ll Never See It Coming*. He now lives on the North Shore of Massachusetts with his rescued dog Jack, a fellow Hoosier. He is very active in Facebook, where he promotes his and other writers’ books, and you can visit his Website at [www.robertdinsmoor.com](http://www.robertdinsmoor.com).

### Staging

Mimi was usually delighted when someone stopped in to view one of her luxury condos, but not this time. The woman in the hideous floppy hat stepped out of a Subaru Outback that looked like it was held together by Band-Aids. At these moments, Mimi often disappeared into one of the upstairs rooms and waited for the visitor to go away, but this woman had already seen her and waved. Mimi forced a smile and waved back.

When the woman stepped in, Mimi asked, “May I *help* you?” in a voice that was designed to intimidate idle sightseers.

The woman pointed to a painting on the wall over the sofa. Mimi considered herself very gifted when it came to “staging,” finding furniture and paintings that brought out the best in the properties she was selling. This painting appeared at first glance to be a run-of-the-mill beach landscape, but something about it had struck a chord. It depicted water draining from sand on a beach as the tide went out, and a hint of pink in the wet sand reflected the pink clouds heralding the onset of dusk. “I was wondering how much you’re asking for the painting.”

“Well, the painting actually comes with the condo. Do you see how the mottled shades of gray match the sofa and how the pink highlights complement the marble of the kitchen counter?”

“Yeah, I get that. I’m not in the market for a condo. Could you please just tell me the price of the painting?”

“Ten thousand,” Mimi boasted, hoping that the price would scare the woman off.

“I can afford five thousand. It’s all the money I have in the bank,” the prospective buyer said, a tear forming on her lower eyelid.

“I’m afraid we can’t come down on the price,” Mimi said.

The woman sighed heavily, dove deep into her purse, pulled out a business card, and handed it to her. “I won’t take up any more of your time right now. Here’s my card if you change your mind. Goodbye.” The woman stepped outside, climbed back into her Suburu, and drove off.

Mimi almost felt sorry for the woman. She obviously had good taste and seemed to want the painting so badly, but it was way out of her league.

She looked at the card. “Sophia Bukowski, Plein Air Artist.” Where had she heard that name before?

She looked back at the painting. The signature at the bottom was “S. Bukowski.”



**Francine Witte** is the author of ten books of poetry and flash fiction. Her flash fiction collection *Radio Water* is forthcoming from Roadside Press in January 2024. Her poetry collection is forthcoming from Cervena Barva Press in summer, 2024. She is flash fiction editor of *Flash Boulevard* and *South Florida Poetry Journal*. Visit her website at [francinewitte.com](http://francinewitte.com)

### Love, Again

Love is shaking me, waking me. Love has surprisingly strong arms.  
I thought I told you to drop dead, I want to say, and haven't you done enough?  
What I say is "what time is it?"

Love is all burly and hulky. Dark dip of hair that makes it look like the bartender from last night.

Love looks a little different every time. Sometimes it looks like Harry, sometimes it looks like Joe. When I was a kid, it looked like a salamander.

But I look same as always, and so I don't get why Love doesn't seem to know me. Why is Love looking at me like we've never met. I'll admit to my sleep-lidded eyes, I mean I did have a couple of whiskey sours last night, but still.

This couldn't have anything to do with the bartender, right?

Morning is edging through the Venetians like the pain in the ass that it is. Soon I will have to show up for work.

I like the way my life goes now, even if it's not much fun. Work, then home, then work. Simple. Sometimes I'll throw in a Netflix or two. Just because of my subscription.

Love is looking at me now like I'm a TV, just staring at me, or a Yeti. Like any second it's going to photograph me for National Geographic.

Go away, I tell love again, because frankly I can see Love is not very bright. Of course, I don't say this. What I do say is that I only went out last night because my sister begged me. "Because she is trying to forget her "yoga instructor."

Love has stopped looking at me and is walking around the room. Picking up perfume bottles, makeup brushes on my vanity. "I bet you'd look good with red lipstick," Love says. "Pucker your mouth into a juicy, red heart."

"Good lord," I say. "I tried that with Martin and Peter and..."

"Right," Love says. "I thought you looked familiar."

I still don't understand how Love doesn't know me. I'm tired of holding my tongue. And so I sit straight up look Love straight in the face, which really really looks like that bartender from last night. "How can you say you don't know me?" I shout. "Are you really that stupid?"

Love, who has gone full bartender now, sits down at the edge of the bed and says, "are you?"



**Paul Beckman's** flash collection *Kiss Kiss*, (Truth Serum Press) was a finalist for the 2019 Indie Short Story Award competition. Paul was nominated by *Citron Review* for Best Microfiction 2020 and had a micro story selected for the 2018 *Norton Anthology New Micro Exceptionally Short Fiction*. He was one of the winners in the 2016 *The Best Small Fictions* and his story "Mom's Goodbye" was chosen as the winner of the 2016 *Fiction Southeast* Editor's Prize. He's been published in the following magazines among others: *Raleigh Review*, *Litro*, *Playboy*, *Pank*, *X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine*, *Ghost Parachute*, *Matter Press*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Thrice Fiction*, *Spelk*, *Red Fez* and *Literary Orphans*.

### **Balloons Have Replaced My Flip Phone Spam**

They knocked on my door. I turned the sound up on my TV. They rang the bell again and again. I turned my reading lamp off and muted the sound on my TV, but put the football game on closed caption. I snuck over to my bedroom and peeked out the window and saw a half dozen people holding balloons and a large rectangular sign which I couldn't read.

They began chanting my name and calling me a winner. They had to be the same people who've been spamming me since I lost my job a year ago.

The neighbors came out and joined the six balloon holders and chanters. I promised my kids I wouldn't fall for any of these false gimmicks again after they chipped in and bailed me out the last time, telling me in no uncertain terms that this was the last bail out. I was tough on them as they grew up and now, they are turning the toughness on me.

I can't take a chance on losing their support so when the balloon painted van drove on my lawn blowing its horn, I covered my ears. I decided to call my kids, they would know what to do, but there was no answer from the first two

kids' houses and my toughie, Bambi, answered the phone and I asked her what I should do.

She told me all excited that I should open the door and wave to them.

I thanked her and went into the bathroom and combed my hair then opened the door and waved at the balloon people lifted off above the houses, and followed the van down the street, and around the corner away from my house. With my four-foot check flapping in the breeze.

My neighbors rushed over and asked why I didn't open the door sooner, but I couldn't tell them. Then they all yelled and told me the balloon people were there to give me a check for one million dollars.

Go on, I said. That kind of thing doesn't happen to me. One of my neighbors jumped in his car and raced after the balloon people but before he caught up with the van to tell them I was sleeping he got pulled over by a cop for speeding and got a hefty ticket which he handed to me to pay. I knew my kids wouldn't bail me out so I ripped up the ticket and went back to my ball game and turned the closed caption off and the sound up.



**Nina Alonso Hathaway**'s work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, *New Boston Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Writing in a Woman's Voice*, *Bluepepper*, etc. Her book, *This Body*, was published by David Godine Press, her chapbook *Riot Wake* by Cervena Brava Press, and Nina's story collection *Distractions En Route* by Ibbetson Street Press, available on Amazon and Lulu.

### **Subway to Harvard Square**

As the train doors slide open at Park Street, a bunch of kids who've been elbowing each other, grab one boy's arms and hang him over the edge. The station guard notices, walks toward them, pistol on his right hip, billy club on his left, but they get the message, shuffle onto the platform and scatter. The doors clang shut, the train edges slowly out of the tunnel onto the bridge over the Charles River, night water blistered with a scattering of lights, then into the next tunnel.

A woman across the aisle has watery blue eyes, her gaze a map of vagueness, her hand searching the frayed pocket of her gray raincoat, muttering "Lost my keys, left them on the kitn, landlady somewhere playing cards, have to go to the police station."

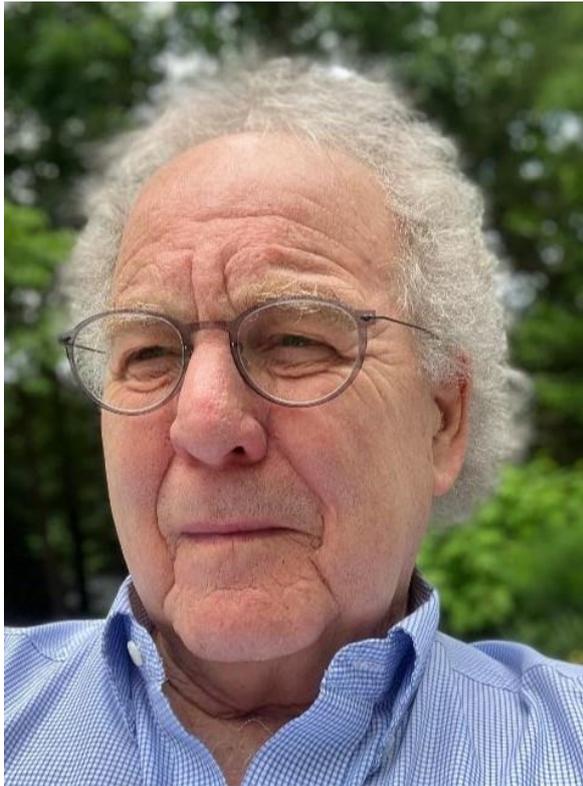
When I was small a policeman we called Big Arthur lived in the apartment upstairs with his wife Ingrid. He had a gun, a billy club, thick-soled shoes and would ask, "How're you today, dearie?" Too shy to talk, I'd grip my mother's hand and he'd smile, keep reading his paper, smoking his pipe. His son Young Arthur had a heavily braced leg from the war.

The lost-key woman says, "When I had fever, my daughter called police for help, heard them knock and I hollered, "Get outta here," delirious, but my daughter's a nurse, let them in. Took me in an ambulance, but I hate doctors and

hospitals, though my daughter says they saved me. Which station?" Jumps up, reads the sign, sits down again. "Kendall. I want Central."

Glad she knows where she's going as I'm not in a helpful mood. It's late, my feet ache from hours teaching ballet, adjusting pointe shoes, arranging costumes, assisting rehearsals. Not sure what's in the fridge for supper, maybe some Jarlsberg, a few crackers, and it's lonely in my attic flat since my cat died.

"Central," the woman gets up, makes her way out the door. No one says anything, though they've heard as much as I have. A girl with frizzy blond hair and narrow dark eyes takes the lost-key lady's seat. Her boyfriend leans close, strokes her cheek, his hand cupping the side of her face with such tenderness, like nothing else on this subway, all the way to Harvard Square.



**Brad Rose** was born and raised in Los Angeles, and lives in Boston. He is the author of five collections of poetry and flash fiction: [\*Lucky Animals\*](#), [\*No. Wait. I Can Explain\*](#), [\*Pink X-Ray\*](#), [\*de/tonations\*](#), and [\*Momentary Turbulence\*](#). His poetry collection *WordInEdgeWise*, is forthcoming in later 2023. Seven times nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and three times nominated for the Best of the Net Anthology, Brad's poetry and fiction have appeared in, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Baltimore Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *10 x 10*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Clockhouse*, *Folio*, *Best Microfiction (2019)*, and other journals and anthologies. His website is [www.bradrosepoetry.com](http://www.bradrosepoetry.com) His blog is <https://bradrosepoetry.com/blog/>

### **Little Hoodlums**

Saturday night, I was wearing my skivvies and self-aggrandizing on the internet. You'd be surprised how beautiful you can look with the right avatar and the proper background filter, almost like God. I love jujubes, especially the green ones, although I advise against chewing too many at once. Those things are like cement. I wish they'd pick on someone their own size. Anyway, I'd just noticed that my latest stitches had dissolved and my head wounds were nearly healed, when Craig called to say it was almost time to start planning next year's Bunny Parade. I made a little joke and said, *I'll hop right on it, Craigie*. Last year's extravaganza drew a big crowd, although some folks didn't even bring their own hunting rifles and we had to lend them ours. The whole town seemed to love the

exploding-bunny fireworks and how we managed to work in a grand finale at the old swimming hole. Of course, I took the credit, but to tell you the truth, the finale was as easy a shooting fish in a pickle barrel, even though the gunfire seemed to scare a bunch of the kids. I think the police should have cut the little ones some slack. There's nothing sadder than the sorry sight of elementary school kids in handcuffs, especially when they've been falsely accused and lined up against a row of police cruisers. The cops could have at least read them their rights and let them call their lawyers. Next year, me and Cragie are planning to distribute lucky rabbit's feet to all Bunny Parade attendees under the age of eleven. That should go a long way toward preventing future juvenile delinquency. I don't know about you, but I can't wait.



**Phil Temples** resides in Watertown, Massachusetts. He's published five mystery-thriller novels, a novella, and four story anthologies in addition to over 220 online short stories online in: *The London Independent Story Prize*; *Wilderness House Literary Review*; *Blink-Ink*, *Boston Literary Magazine*; and *Ariel Chart* to name but a few. Phil also 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>.

### **Of Apples and Wildebeests**

Jeremy Strong was a world-renowned sharpshooter who could blast an apple or other object off the head of a person at a hundred paces with ease. Unfortunately for Jeremy, his unblemished record came to an abrupt end at last year's Marion County Fair when his friend (and target) Saul experienced an involuntary hiccup. It was even more unfortunate for Saul Abrams, whose life also came to an abrupt end. Consequently, new volunteers for Jeremy's act became exceedingly hard to recruit. Jeremy eventually returned to his previous stock and trade: helping wealthy clients bag wildebeests on the plains of the Serengeti.



**Huina Zheng** holds a M.A. in English Studies degree (Distinction) and works as college essay coach. She serves as an Associate Editor for *Bewildering Stories*. Her stories were published in *Baltimore Review*, *Variant Literature*, *Midway Journal*, *Tint Journal*, and other journals. Her fiction “Ghost Children” was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She lives in Guangzhou, China with her husband and daughter.

### Regret

Ming regretted making comments when his wife Lan was helping their son Sen with his homework last week.

When he heard Lan banging the desk and yelling, *why can't you understand such a simple question*, he walked into his son's room and said, “Sen is only a second grader. Be patient.”

Lan rolled her eyes and said, “Well, I'll leave it to you to help with Sen's homework.”

A week had passed. Tutoring Sen every night frustrated him. He had to constantly suppress his urge to throw a tantrum; tutoring was draining.

Tonight, he tutored his son in writing a story according to the pictures.

There were three pictures in the exercise book. The first picture was a bunny looking at a pumpkin. The second picture was a panda riding a bicycle passing by, and the bunny thought about a rolling wheel. The third picture was the bunny rolling the pumpkin.

“Tell me the story,” Ming said.

“One sunny day, a bunny went out to play. She walked to her garden and found a big pumpkin. Just when she was about to go out, she met a panda riding a bicycle. The bunny thought: it would be great if I also had a bicycle like this! She thought of the big pumpkin. She told herself: If I give this pumpkin to the panda, he will give me the bicycle. So, she happily went to find the panda.”

Ming pointed at the pictures with a pencil and said, “Look at the first picture. You said it was in the garden of the bunny’s house. I don’t think so. It doesn’t feel like home here. I feel like it is on a farmer’s farm.”

Sen’s eyes widened, let out a breath of air, and showed a suspicious expression. Ming stared at him and said, “Look at the second picture.” He pointed at the picture with a pencil and said, “What the bunny wants is not a bicycle. She is thinking of a rolling tire.”

Sen pointed at the picture and wanted to speak, but Ming stopped him and said, “Hold on. Look at the third picture. The rolling pumpkin echoes the rolling wheel that comes to the bunny’s mind in the second picture. See the bunny pushing the pumpkin? She wanted to move the pumpkin, but it was too heavy, so when she saw the panda’s bicycle, she was inspired to roll the pumpkin and take it home.”

Sen glanced at his father and said, “You haven’t thought about it. The bunny thinks the tire is beautiful and wants a bicycle. And the pumpkin belongs to the farmer, so the farm must be locked. How can the bunny get in? You said the bunny was taking the pumpkin home. You called it ‘taking,’ but it is stealing!”

Ming stared at Sen, speechless. It was all his fault. He shouldn’t have questioned Lan’s tutoring methods. It was like picking up a stone and dropping it on his feet.



**Hilary Ayshford** is a former science journalist and editor living in rural Kent with her unruly, elderly Labrador. She writes mainly micro and flash fiction and short stories, and is working intermittently on a historical novella-in-flash.

### **Over the Top**

It is a long way to fall. Surveying the cliff from the bottom – the fractured rockface, the narrow ledges, the scrubby vegetation –had made him dizzy. Now at the top, as he stands on the edge, the sweat collects, cold and clammy in the folds of his neck, trickles down his spine. A sudden gust of wind ruffles the grass, and he sways, not from the force of the breeze, but because fear has squeezed his bones into paste.

Now he must step into the void, into the nothingness. He walks backwards until his heels hang over the edge. The earth is fragile, frangible. His weight dislodges a small rock; he imagines it smashing against the unforgiving cliff face, imagines sharp slivers of stone flying off as it tumbles end over end, imagines it being whittled down until there is nothing left. He listens but doesn't hear it reach the ground.

He can't back out. He promised.

He owes it to Luke, who is waiting for his superhero dad at the bottom, hopping from one foot to the other with excitement. His son who is 10 years old and believes in happy-ever-after endings, who can't imagine what happens when

a 15-stone object hits the ground at 60 miles an hour. His son who lives in a cartoon world where Wily E. Coyote walks away from a collapsing cliff with a sticking plaster on his snout and a halo of stars encircling his head. Luke, who is one of the survivors, one of the medical miracles, one of the few who will have a happy-ever-after ending.

Measured against the value of his son's life the money he has raised is paltry, but it is the one thing, the only thing, he can do.

The flimsy harness bites into his thighs and constricts his groin. Relax, the instructor tells him, lean back, let the rope take your weight. He tries but his body refuses to obey his brain's instructions.

Without allowing himself to think, to hesitate, he steps back and feels the earth drop away from him. His feet scabble for purchase and his knee bangs painfully against the rock before he regains his footing. He takes a tentative step, pays out the rope a few inches, a few inches more, then a foot, then a yard. He kicks off from the cliff and he is falling, falling, falling. No, not falling. He is flying, air rushing past him, exhilaration expelling fear. He tap-dances his way down, laughing with manic joy.

He lands in a flurry of gravel, an avalanche of small stones, a cloud of white dust, a burst of applause. He opens his arms to receive Luke – his warm, living, breathing son.