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# 10 BY 10

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FLASH FICTION STORIES



Issue #15  
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*Welcome to Issue #15 of 10 By10 Flash Fiction Stories.* This issue presents you with authors from New Zealand, Canada, Nigeria and the United States. We are pleased to welcome back Foster Trecost, Bryan Vale, Sandra Arnold and Paul Backman. They, plus a group of new authors present stories that will keep you entertained and perhaps inspire you to write and submit your own stories. Whether or not you have been in 10 By 10 before, fresh stories are always welcome. And remember, stories accepted must be 200 to 500 words long, not previously published and submitted with a head & shoulders jpeg photo and bio.

I look forward to personally reading your work!



Sincerely,  
*Zvi A. Sesling*

Editor



**Foster Trecoast** writes stories that are mostly made up. They tend to follow his attention span: sometimes short, sometimes very short. Recent work appears in *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Flash Boulevard*, and *Club Plum*. He lives near New Orleans with his wife and dog.

### **Stepping on Snails**

Mildred Haufnaughten rarely rushed anywhere but to catch sight of her hobbling along in the fast-paced gait of someone in a hurry, it would be easy to think otherwise. But her pace had nothing to do with urgency; the stride had been choreographed for balance, not speed. A storm had passed an hour earlier, and she dashed down the sidewalk as if another were on the way.

She stopped only when necessary because to stop meant to start again. If her thoughts wandered, it was to remind herself where she was going, but when she heard a familiar sound, one she had heard before, they went somewhere else. She rummaged through her dwindling mental inventory and landed in a simpler time; a single sound that lasted less than a second returned her to childhood. She found the memory, dusty as it was, and let it live again.

Rain always brought anticipation, not for the storm itself, thrilling as they were, but for what came next. Millie raced from window to door waiting for the sky to clear and when it did and the sun had shone sufficiently enough, she bolted to the sidewalk. She scanned the cement and hopped from one to the next, scarcely taking a step between jumps. With each landing she lost her balance, then jumped again. Her mother, hearing laughter through an open window, would ask, “What you doing, Millie?” to which she would respond, “I’m stepping on snails, making them pop!” And then she would jump to another.

And so Mildred Haufnaughten lowered her head, not in sorrow for her childhood indulgence, rather in search of another snail. She abandoned her fast-paced gait and proceeded at a snail's pace, seeking them out as she went. "Stepping on snails," she said through a smile. "Making them pop."



**Bryan Vale** is a writer from the San Francisco Bay Area. His fiction and poetry have appeared in several journals, including *Quibble*, *Constellations*, *All Existing Literary Magazine*, and *Boats Against the Current*. His work has been nominated for *The Best of the Net*, and he has read for the memoir journal *Five Minutes*. Learn more at [bryanvalewriter.com](http://bryanvalewriter.com), or follow Bryan on Twitter and Instagram at [@bryanvalewriter](https://twitter.com/bryanvalewriter).

### West Oakland to Embarcadero

Shortly after the train doors closed, a series of cascading bass notes rippled through the car. Crystal, clutching for a spot on the nearest metal pole, felt the beat the way a pond feels ripples from a dropped stone. Lately she seemed to feel loud sounds mostly in her stomach, not her ears. It was rapidly becoming the most attuned and sensitive part of her.

A combination of her quest for a grip and the motion of the train twisted Crystal into the path of a dancing teenager. In piecemeal jeans, broad at the waist, the kid spun himself into pretzels and knots to the rhythm of the song. A yard away, his partner held the cordless speaker that was responsible for all the bass notes.

"Oh!" said Crystal. "Sorry." The kid held up a hand in acknowledgement, then kept dancing. Buskers. They'd be passing a hat in about two minutes, Crystal knew.

The commuters wore shiny shoes or expensive boots — these were the ones who would be entering skyscrapers — or else they wore paint-splattered work boots — these were the ones who would be entering construction sites. Crystal was surrounded by tailored shirts, tasteful skirts, and dull faces pointed at phones. And the train screeched.

Crystal perhaps should have been annoyed by the dancer, but wasn't. She understood the need to make a dollar. She peered around the train car — no seats. Nor did anyone seem inclined to give her one. They were all busy tuning out the dancer.

The train rocked, then slowed as it tilted. It went into a tunnel and under a shipyard. Soon it would be underneath the bay. Crystal adjusted her shoulder bag, sighed, and began making her way through the car. Hand over hand she secured herself to the car's proffered handholds, sneaking between the office workers with an occasional "Excuse me." She received grunts in reply.

On a straight stretch the car was steady enough for Crystal to let go of her handholds and force the rear doors open. The unfiltered screech of the train and a duplicate set of doors greeted her; she forced these doors too. Then the train unbalanced her with a jolt, but she kept herself upright by grabbing the top of the first seat.

The seats at this end of the next car were open. Crystal soon discovered why. A man in a raincoat slumped across two seats puffing happily on a foul-smelling blunt. Crystal quickly made her way through the smoke. She couldn't hear the buskers' music anymore; maybe they were already passing the hat.

With the smoker at this end, everyone in the car had clustered down at the other end. Crystal had no hope in that direction. And she had little energy left.

She slumped into the open seat furthest away from the source of the smoke, patted her unborn child through her cardigan, glared at the smoker, and held her breath. Soon the train would reach Embarcadero, and she could get off safely.





**Sarah Tabbert** is mother and engineer from Edmonton, Canada. After attending Queen's University and gaining Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Engineering, she moved back to her hometown where she spends her days working and writing.

### **The Toboggan**

Every step I took created a satisfying crunch as my boots broke through the snow beneath my feet. The hill was untouched, covered lovingly with a blanket of fresh snow. Behind me trailed my battered toboggan, miraculously still intact despite years of abuse.

The string in my hand that I used to tow it was fraying where it rested in the palm of my mitten. There were multiple knots added to the string, repairing the spots where the fibers had finally fallen apart, exhausted from strenuous work.

I reached the top of the hill. My heart pounded in my ears from taking the ascent quicker than my lungs could swallow oxygen, hindered by the thin air. It was bitterly cold. I should have known by the clear sky and bright sun, a telltale sign that it was freezing during the winter. Still, the view from my window had been too inviting not to venture out into the world.

Surveying the scene from my vantage point, I savored the beauty created from the sprinkle of snowflakes that made the world new. In a few hours the whole hill would be torn up by others drawn to the promise of glittering snowflakes and smooth runs.

I positioned my toboggan so that it pointed downwards. Excitement coursed through my body as I lowered myself down to the wooden bottom and shimmied into place. There was a loose slat that I needed to hold down with my heel. My legs lowered so they were plastered straight against the bottom when I was sure that my heel was in place. The toboggan was a perfect length. I didn't want to think

about the possibility that I might grow too much to use it next year. That was a concern for another day.

Using my arms to pull the toboggan forward, I inched to the edge of the hill. The front started to tip. I grabbed hold of the string and leaned forward, giving the extra shift of weight that was needed to get the toboggan moving.

It started slow. The wood scratched against the snow and threatened to stop my progress. I dipped one hand into the powder and pushed forward. That was all I needed.

The toboggan rapidly picked up speed as it raced down the hill. My face tingled from the wind rushing by the whole world a blur to my unfocused eyes. A smile spread across my face, and I leaned into the fall.

All too soon I reached the bottom. The toboggan slid a few extra feet and then stopped.

I rolled out of my seat and into the snow. It cushioned me, hugging every part of my body with its cold embrace.

I only stayed there for a second before I got to my feet. Turning around, I started back up the hill, eager to experience it all again.





**Renee Coloman** is an emerging writer and author of *Roxy's Not My Girl*, a collection of thirteen short stories available on Amazon. Renee resides in Southern California and works in Corporate Communication. Borrowing books from the local library is one of her favorite joys in life, along with kayaking, dancing at music festivals, and hiking with her two cuddly pugs. She recently completed the first draft of her 75,000-word manuscript—a coming-of-age thriller.

### **Henry didn't have a chance.**

His two-year-old body didn't prepare for this.

Burns. Bruises. Across multiple areas. Arms and legs, limp. Unresponsive when medics arrived beneath a bright blue sky. Beside Alpine trees that grew tall, here and there. Trees that swayed, breathed, waved hello to passersby. To children like Henry. Unlike Henry. Filled with years of life. Decades of sunlight that Henry would never see. Ever again.

His mother had a history. The kind of past that destroys a boy like Henry. Maybe he shouldn't have played too much. Smiled too much. Asked too many questions that a curious child often mumbled when poking a finger at the grass. &seeing a cluster of ants. &watching a Monarch butterfly glide away, up and up into the promising sky.

Maybe Henry should have been the kind of boy his mother could box and shelve and tuck inside the closet when she didn't want to play. When stress and frustration overwhelmed her, forcing her to close the curtains and lie down on the bed and shut, shut her eyes. At night, the woods can be a very lonely place.

Maybe Henry's mother was a child herself, needing a crib. A woman naive about love and companionship and all the ways to be kind and nurturing. Maybe somebody left her here. Alone. Abandoned in these woods. Someone who didn't bother to return.

The medics wrapped Henry in a death bag. Zipped. Top to bottom. Doing their job. They bit down hard. Sealed their mouths. Stifled their hearts. They have children, too.. Older than Henry. A few in elementary school. A few already in high school. Like the Alpine trees. Children alive, reaching for the sky.

At ground zero, Henry didn't have that same chance. Henry fell cold. Beneath the sun. Beside all the Alpine trees that swayed in sorrow. Beside the medics who knew from the start, from seeing his mother, distraught and disoriented, that two-year old Henry didn't have a chance.



**Busisiwe Ngwenya** is the author of three short story books, *Triumph of a Deserving Person*, *Waiting For Me* and *Hitting Fifty in Style*, which are available on Amazon Kindle and in hard copies from the Author. Some of her stories have been published by Zoba's Facilities, Fundza Literacy, 320 Days of Sunshine Anthology and Publish'D Afrika Magazine Spoiling the Broth Anthology. She is also a Co-Founder at LeeBeeCrock Media, a film production and development company. She is also a presenter and facilitator on empowerment issues and consults on B-BBEE.

Little Sophia tugged gently on her grandfather's hand, nudging him to keep moving. He had been rooted to the same spot for a while now and Sophia was eager to try the new ride before the carnival got congested. She didn't like the shoving and screaming that came with the bigger crowds and the affections between the teenagers glad to have escaped their parents eagle eyes. Her granddad cast excited eyes towards her direction and was slightly disappointed by the young one's impatient stance.

"Did you not enjoy the clown's antics? I found them hilarious and thought you would too as you usually enjoy that type of thing." The clearly puzzled granddad ventured to ask as Sophia's tugging grew frantic. Well, perhaps she had outgrown clowns. He thought sadly but her response floored him.

"Where did you see them grandpa? The carnival is practically empty. I can't believe that I missed them."

"No, it's okay. Let's move along." Surely, she couldn't have missed them. How was it possible when they were right in front of them a couple of minutes ago. They proceeded towards the rides as he pondered this mystery. A swirl of unexpected wind danced around them. He could barely keep his balance as he did his utmost best to hold on to Sophia scared that she might be blown away.

“Ouch. Grandpa you are squeezing too tight.”

“Sorry my dear. I was trying to protect you from the wind lest you it takes you away.”

“What wind grandpa?” A concerned Sophia wondered whether this was the onslaught of dementia that her mom prayed about daily, asking the Lord to spare grandad from the ravages of the illness which had seen grandma committed to a healthcare facility five years ago.

Perhaps coming to the carnival had not been a great idea but grandad had never shown any signs of illness until this moment.

“Grandpa let’s go home. We can do the fair at another time.” The disappointment on his face conflicted Sophia. A part of her wanted to stay but she couldn’t shake the worry about his state of mind.

“You came for the dragon ride and that’s where we are headed Sophia.” He bought their tickets for the ride and guided her determinedly towards the coaches where there were already four people on-board. Leaving three empty coaches to choose from. She chose the middle seat but was quickly pulled back by grandad.

“There is not enough room for all of us in here dear. One seat is already occupied.”

Odd, thought Sophia as she stared at the empty coach. She silently followed him to the next unoccupied coach and kept quiet until the ride was finished.

Grandpa, what’s happening?”

No response, instead he stared at a spot in wonder and smiled exuberantly.

“Guess who showed up?” He informed her that his mom was with them to keep a promise made years back when money was scarce, and fairs were a luxury. Sophia was floored. *Definitely dementia.*



**Salvatore Difalco** lives in Toronto, Canada. Recent work appears in *Cafe Irreal*, *Third Wednesday* and *Everday Fiction*.

### Otoemaki

I wanted to sleep. I wanted to curl up in a fetal position and sleep. First I slipped on the pale blue nightdress my mother had worn on the last few days before she died. Then I spread out a bamboo mat. It came from Kyoto. My ex brought it back from a trip there. She lives in Kyoto now. It smells nice. Like it was made near waterfalls. Then I slide a record on the turntable: Waterfalls Symphony by Fumio Miyashita. My ex brought it back from her first trip to Japan. Her favourite record. She said it was like an otoemaki, or a scroll painting of music. I don't think she knows I have it. I drop down and curl up on my right side. I rest my hands under my chin. I use my notebook as a pillow. In addition to random notes to myself and the usual lamentations of the forlorn, on its pages I have drawn little flowers and faces, a pastime. I shut my eyes and sleep. At least I think I am sleeping. But in addition to the music, I hear people chatting from nearby balconies. Their voices are not unpleasant, but I cannot make out anything they are saying. Am I really sleeping? I wonder. When I try to rise, I can't. So I must be sleeping. In my dream state, my mother chides me for wearing her nightdress, then laughs, her blue eyes sparkling. I can feel my face smiling or trying to smile. The voices continue. But they are not voices after all. A small water fall is flowing and plashing just within earshot. No. It's not a waterfall.



**Sandra Arnold** is an award-winning writer with seven published books. Her new flash fiction collection *Below Ground* will be published in the UK in mid 2024. Her short fiction has been published and anthologised internationally and has received nominations for The Best Small Fictions, Best Microfictions and The Pushcart Prize. She has held writing residencies in The Robert Lord Cottage, Dunedin and the Seresin/Landfall/ University of Otago Press, Waterfall Bay. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from Central Queensland University, Australia. She lives in New Zealand. <https://www.sandraarnold.co.nz>

### **The Gory Story of Rory McNory**

For the past two years Rory has been feeding the birds. He knows they trust him because they never fly away when he works in the garden. He covers the new seedlings, but makes sure the birds have enough to eat.

Today, as soon as he opens the front door to his house and sees who is sitting in the most comfortable armchair, he understands why his mother stopped singing after a phone call last week. Her face is pale and she's talking too fast. 'Your dad was let out early. Nice surprise, eh?'

Rory looks at his father. More grey and wrinkled than the last time he saw him. His father stares back. 'You've grown lad. About bloody time.'

Next day Rory sees his mother's arms covered with the once familiar bruises. Before he can react he hears a series of bangs. He runs into the garden and sees twelve birds lying on the grass in a tangle of bloodied feathers. His father is aiming a gun at six more sitting on the top of a tree.

Rory picks up a stone and yells, 'No!'

His father swings around. 'They're butcher birds, you bloody poofter! They feed on dead meat!'

'Yes, they do,' Rory says as his stone hits its mark.

He watches the remaining birds swoop down into the garden.

He digs a deep hole near the plum tree.

He knows that next Spring the tree will be full of plums.

He knows his mother will sing again.





**Ian R. Villmore** is a teacher living in southern Maine. He is a graduate of both Lesley University and Emerson College. His work has previously appeared at *Ariel Chart*, *MSU Roadrunner Review*, and *101 Words*. If he's not in the classroom, he can be found hiking Maine's many mountains. He can be found on X @IVillmore.

### Same as the Movie

As Tom stepped off the train, a wave of panic seized him. He spun around as the train doors slammed shut. Through the scratched, streaked plexiglass window he spied his tattered copy of *Gone With the Wind* on the seat next to a woman drinking a disturbingly large bottle of coconut water. The train eased forward.

*Twenty-five pages left*, he thought.

Like a tool, he ran down the platform as if he were in a movie. What's worse, he screamed "stop that train!", as if some softhearted engineer would hear and pull the brake. Instead, the train's red lights disappeared into the tunnel's gloom.

Turning, Tom trudged back towards the turnstiles.

"What'd ya leave behind, kid?" said a voice full of gravel.

Tom tracked the voice to a large panhandler sitting on a bench, holding a Dunks' cup full of scuzzy dollar bills.

Tom gestured toward the black tunnel. "Book. I had only 25 pages to go."

"Which book," the man asked.

When Tom told him the panhandler's eyes widened. "I haven't read that in thirty somethin' years. Wanna know how it ends?"

Tom shrugged. "Sure."

"Jus' like the movie, right down to the final line."

Tom smirked. "So you're saying I shouldn't give a damn," he drawled.

The panhandler broke into a sandpaper laugh and reached out with a big paw, which Tom shook.

"After all," the panhandler quoted, "tomorrow's another day."

Oblivious to the joke, Tom smiled, placed a five dollar bill in the man's cup, and walked towards the street.



Born in Chicago, Illinois **Mel Goldberg** earned his MA, taught literature and writing in California, Illinois, Arizona, and at Stanground College in Cambridgeshire, England. For seven years, he and his wife lived in a small motor home, traveling the US, Canada, and Mexico. Although Goldberg writes primarily in English, he lived in Mexico for 15 years. He has published three novels and a book of short stories.

### The Cowboy

To help her aging mother who had Parkinson's disease, Clarissa, recently divorced at age 40, returned to Cheyenne, Wyoming. She had quit her job as a librarian in Los Angeles and had been hired part-time at the Laramie County Public Library on Pioneer Street. She lived rent-free in her mother's house, and although living in Cheyenne was less expensive than Los Angeles, her pay was considerably less than she had earned in Los Angeles. Trying to preserve her dignity, she had almost depleted her meagre savings when she joined the Women's Civic League for the social contact.

Early one evening, sitting at a the Cool River Wine and Spirits bar on Yellowstone Road with five unmarried women friends, all in their forties and fifties, they noticed a young man in his thirties enter. Clearly a cowboy, he wore well-worn Levis, a black and red flannel shirt, and a Stetson. His boots clacked on the wooden floor as he walked to the bar and ordered a beer.

All the women watched him as he took his beer to a small table in the back. “He’s a looker,” said one of the women. “Too bad I’m not twenty years younger.

“Too young for my taste,” said another.

Clarissa smiled. “Not for me. Any bets?”

All the women laughed.

“You’re on,” said the woman next to Clarissa. “Fifty bucks says he turns you down cold.”

In a moment two hundred dollars were on the table under a half-filled wine glass.

Clarissa rose, pulled the neck of her sweater down a bit and sauntered toward where the cowboy sat. She stood next to his table as a few words were exchanged. He nodded.

He finished his beer, stood, and took Clarissa’s hand. She led the young cowboy over to the table where her friends sat.

“Afternoon, ladies,” he said with a slight bow as he touched his hat. “Clarissa won’t be needing a ride home this evening.”

Clarissa scooped up the money and departed with the young man’s arm over her shoulder.

Seated in his truck, Clarissa folded the bills and put them into her purse. “Thanks, Roy. I really needed this.”

“Any time, Sis,” he replied.



**Paul Beckman's** current book is *Becoming Mirsky*, a flash fiction memoir. Prior to this he had *Kiss Kiss* (Pure Slush Pub) which was a runner up in the Indie Book short story collection category, *Peek* (Big Table Pub) and a handful of chapbooks. In 2023 Paul passed his 800<sup>th</sup> published story mark. He's thrilled to be back working with Robin again.

### Farmer's Market

He stood out from the crowd in Chester's Saturday farm market, not because he was 6'4" with a basketball sized belly but was the hairiest man that most people had ever seen and the only things he was wearing were a large white diaper, and a pair of yellow Crocs He stood in front of a portable mic wearing a Leonard Cohen hat and on the ground in mid-town next to him he had another Leonard Cohen hat turned upside down with a red sign that said **\$\$Thank you\$\$**.

He stood next to three upright stands holding a ukulele, an electric guitar, and a fiddle. He took turns tuning his instruments and at exactly 10 a.m. the vendors opened for business and the diapered man began to play his most requested song, *Hallelujah*.

The crowd gathered around him and the pizza truck and while others took the opportunity to buy local produce, fruit, and relish, jams, jellies, pickles, and peanut butter in pint and quart mason jars.

Then it happened. The man's Velcro bands split open, and his diaper fell to the ground. All the while the crowd was applauding, he grabbed the electric guitar covered up his front and yelled out, "Slice of pepperoni pizza, please."

When it was delivered on a paper plate he said, "Put it on my tab".

For his next song he changed hats and wore a Bob Dylan fisherman's cap and sang a melody of folk songs, only stopping to speak loudly into his microphone, "a butter brickle in a waffle cone." The scooper girl who delivered it said, "No tabs." So, he pointed to the hat and directed her to take it out of there. Then he whispered in her ear, and she handed him his waffle cone with the butter brickle, and she picked up his hat and strolled the crowd collecting tips until the police showed up. They were two middle aged detectives, a man and a woman, in plain clothes and large black SUV with heavily tinted windows pulled up and the butter brickle girl and Leonard Cohen got in the back and were driven out to the parking lot behind the stores where they were given tickets for busking without a license and collecting money without a charity certificate. They were handcuffed and the SUV drove around to pick up their instruments to the boos of the crowd.

The cops pulled around to mid-circle where Leonard Cohen was playing and sat in the car for a bit and then turned on the speakers so Hallelujah was blasting and then another black SUV with tinted windows pulled up and two younger cops got out wearing diapers and he was playing an air guitar and she was holding out his hat and collecting money from the crowd which they used to buy slices of truck pizza and waffle cones of ice cream and then they drove off and let Leonard and butter brickle girl out to walk back and take their bows.