



10 BY 10

FLASH FICTION STORIES

Zvi A. Sesling, Editor



Issue #17

June 2024

Welcome to Issue #17 of *10 By10 Flash Fiction Stories*. Eight of the ten writers in this issue are appearing for the first time. One writer is in the United Kingdom and another resides in Peru. There is also an Australian. One is a student at Emerson College in Boston, MA. I know the stories are entertaining and hope they are to you as well.

Submit your own stories, whether you have been in 10 By 10 before or not. Fresh stories are always welcome. And, remember to be accepted, stories must be 200 to 500 words long not previously published and submitted with a head & shoulders jpeg photo and a bio.

Looking forward to seeing your work!



Sincerely,
Zvi A. Sesling
Editor



Deirdre Fagan is the author of a poetry collection, *Phantom Limbs* (2023), an award-winning memoir, *Find a Place for Me: Embracing Love and Life in the Face of Death* (2022), an award-finalist short story collection, *The Grief Eater* (2020), a chapbook of poetry, *Have Love* (2019), and a reference book, *Critical Companion to Robert Frost* (2007). She is a widow, wife, mother of two, and professor, assistant chair, and coordinator of creative writing at Ferris State University.

About the Dog

“It’s about the dog, Sally.” Sally was busy emptying the commode. She didn’t hear him, not at first. It was a struggle trying to get his voice to project because he was dry, but drinking meant peeing, and peeing was not something he wanted to do every twenty minutes, so he just didn’t drink. Besides, not drinking might expedite this whole damn episode. Why was it the best times go fast and the worst slow? He’d lived a good life, well, at least mostly, except for that scatterbrained, shatting dog Sally brought home just before their first baby was born. Ed was tickled pink over Sally and her growing belly and would agree with anything and do anything she asked during those nine months, even more than he’s always had. But that dumb dog needed more attention than Sally and Ed couldn’t stand for that. Then, Sally’s water broke and Ed rushed her to the hospital where he was sent right back home. In those days, they didn’t let fathers into the

delivery room and they said this was going to be a long, tough labor; Sally was going to need Ed rested and strong on the other side. Ed went home as frustrated as he had ever been in all his life. And when that damn dog pissed on the floor, he calmly took it outside and shot it. That dog was just too much. The moment the nurse placed tiny Lily into his arms two days later, all Ed could see for a moment was that weak, vulnerable dog about to piss itself again when he shot it, and he started bawling and couldn't stop. Sally thought that was one of the most touching moments of their entire lives—the way Ed fell to pieces when Lily was first handed to him. Ed's disease-ridden body now seemed to him a much-deserved pistol aimed at his own stupid head.



Sophie Thompson is a writer and social researcher, originally hailing from Northern Ireland. She currently lives in Essex with her partner, young son and three chickens. She was a finalist in the WOW! Women on Writing Fall Flash Fiction Competition 2023 and the runner up in the Farnham Flash Fiction Competition February 2024. You can find her at www.sophie-thompson.com.

Conversations in front of the vanity.

I was prom queen of the class of '84. I wore a baby pink dress with a matching corsage, a spray of blushing carnations and fluffy dawn skies. I looked glorious. I looked thin. I glowed like a Virgin Mary from some Renaissance canvas. I made sure Daddy took pictures, insisted he had every single one developed. I remember Jason filled out his tux nicely, not like the other boys, who looked like penguins shuffling around the Sahara.

I still get ID'd going to the liquor store, you know. I must admit, not as often as I used to. I used to get ID'd time after time. I was picking up some rosé after signing the divorce papers, when it last happened. I told the boy at the counter "The retinol must be working". I laughed, trilling with the cash register, teeth a disco ball.

I was prom queen of the class of '84. I danced around that gaudy gym to nearly every song. I only stopped to touch up my lipstick, to bestow more candy floss kisses. I could go without and be just as beautiful, Jason said. I thought that

was the most romantic thing I had ever heard. I thought we'd be forever young. I thought I was complete. I had the world at my feet.

I'll be sixty before long, you know. I don't look it, do I?

I still get mistaken for my daughter's sister. I think she takes it as a slight. I think she's being silly. I think she's in denial. I wonder if it's a sore spot for her since Jason's New Woman is practically the same age as her. I always remind my daughter – when I do hear from her – if you want to know how good you'll look when you're older...

I was told by our neighbour – just last week actually – that his friend asked what happened to those two girls living next door. I swear, he told his friend: “Well, one went off to college and the other's her mother!”. I slapped his forearm. I feigned being scandalised. I saw the bubblegum flush on his cheeks. I'm telling you, he's constantly 'round here since the divorce, “just dropping off mail” and the like. I can tell he wants me.

I've clearly still got it, haven't I?

I'm still thin, you know. I haven't had much of an appetite since the divorce; it helps me keep my figure.

I was prom queen of the class of '84. I still have my corsage; Mother dried it. I keep it in an old powder puff box in my dresser drawer, tucked up in tissue paper tinged with shrimp sunsets. I like to look at it sometimes. I used to put it on too, but it started to fall apart, careless whispers as the petals dropped. Still as beautiful as the day I wore it though?



Rose Mary Boehm is a German-born British national living and writing in Lima, Peru, and author of two novels as well as eight poetry collections. Her poetry has been published widely in mostly US poetry reviews (online and print). She was three times nominated for a 'Pushcart' and once for 'Best of Net'. *Do Oceans Have Underwater Borders?* (Kelsay Books, July 2022), *Whistling In The Dark* (Cyberwit, July 2022), and *Saudade* (December 2022) are available on Amazon. Also available on Amazon is a new collection, *Life Stuff*, published by Kelsay Books November 2023. <https://www.rose-mary-boehm-poet.com/>

Being Seven in Germany in 1945

My brother has found a station on the crystal radio he built it in a cigar box. He listens, then puts the headphones over my ears, his finger over his mouth. We both sit very quietly and just look at each other. We are not allowed to listen to foreign stations. Our landlord, the one with the crooked mouth, who loves and slaughters his pigs and my pet rabbit, would report us immediately to the secret police. The music is not like any other. It's as though happy people were skipping along the road, moving in the same direction, but meandering, taking side and byways. One instrument after the other breaks loose. The music rises, falls, winds itself around itself, gets back into the pattern and climbs away again, then all the other instruments meet it somewhere, jealous of its flight, wanting to join, happy to find its path and share it again... I hold my breath fearing that the other instruments might never meet up again with the runaway. My brother calls this music 'be-bop', 'swing', 'jazz' and then says something like 'big bands'. My brother says that the station is called The American Forces Network, and that Germany is losing the war.



Paul Hostovsky is the author of 13 books, most recently, *Pitching for the Apostates* (Kelsay, 2023). He has won a Pushcart Prize, two Best of the Net Awards, the FutureCycle Poetry Book Prize, and has been featured on Poetry Daily, Verse Daily, The Writer's Almanac, and the Best American Poetry blog. Website: paulhostovsky.com)

“Over the River and Through the Woods”

Drove all the way out to my grandmother's house in South Orange the other day, after some business in Brooklyn, just to have a peek—she'd been dead for thirty years and I'd been living up in Boston for longer than that—and though the house looked pretty much the same as I remembered it, there was now a sign out front that said St. Paul's Catholic Outreach. Something possessed me and I walked up the long driveway and rang the bell. A young novice answered the door and I told him my grandmother used to live in this house, that I remembered coming here for Shabbat dinners when I was a kid, and would he mind if I had a look around. He was very gracious about it and introduced me to the priests and other novices who lived and prayed in the house together and helped each other with things like "discernment." Which I misheard as "the sermon." "You help each other with the sermon?" I asked him. And he said, "No, with discernment." And I said I knew the word but wasn't sure how he was using it. And he said it meant helping

each other to discern the voice of God as opposed to your own wistful, wishful thinking. And I didn't know what to say to that, so I said, "Hey look, the mezuzahs are still here in the doorways where my grandfather installed them," which wasn't a total non sequitur. And then they gave me the tour of the house, which basically looked the same as it did all those years ago, because apparently they hadn't done any renovations, maybe because the Church couldn't afford it, or maybe because of the vow of poverty and all that. The bathroom still had the same pink and green tile that I guess was in fashion back in the 1960s. It was a real blast from the past to walk through that old house where I hadn't set foot since I was a kid, and in the front hallway, where there used to be a large ornamental mirror with a gilded frame that me and my cousins used to pull faces in, there was now a simple, unadorned wooden cross. But I was pretty sure I could discern the shadow of that big old mirror, the shape of it, like a picture-frame shadow that's left on the wall after the picture has been removed.

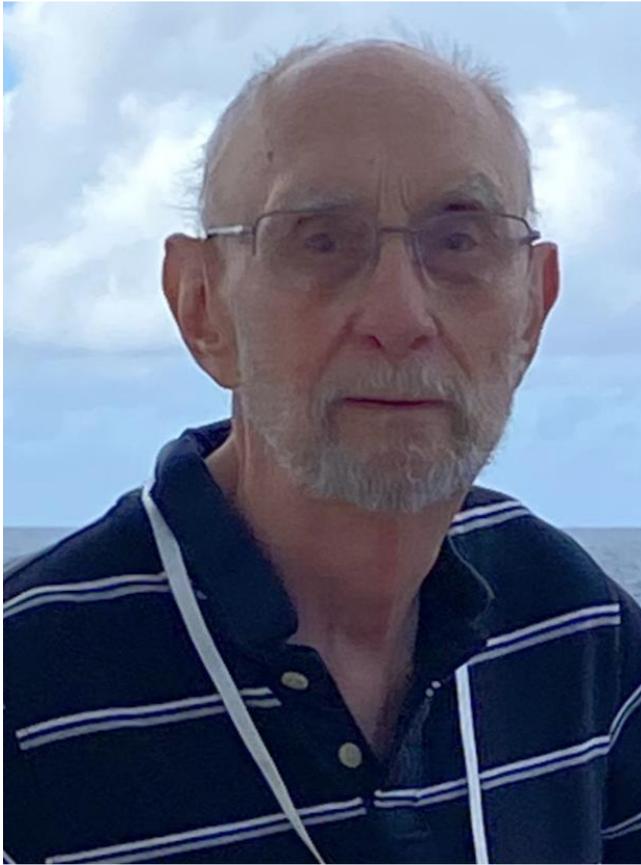


Aubrey McConnell is a senior publishing student at Emerson College expected to graduate in December 2024. She is originally from Tiverton, RI. When she's not writing, she can be found at the rink figure skating. She's been published in *Grim & Gilded* magazine and can be found on Instagram @aubreymadisonnn.

Turnover

A barista hit on me while I ordered an apple turnover. I smiled and laughed because that's how people flirt. I probably blushed even though I wasn't interested and all I wanted was my pastry. He asked me if I wanted my turnover warm and even though I don't like warm turnovers, I said yes, please. When I drive home from work in the summer it is hot even when my car windows are rolled down and the AC is on. It is hot because I wear long sleeves and dress pants and sometimes a blazer in ninety-degree heat. I thought last summer would be my last summer here. When I was in Germany, I thought about telling them I quit but I didn't. I don't speak German and didn't learn any before studying abroad. I thought about learning some because I wanted to show them, I wasn't a lazy American; I studied their language! I was cultured! Once I tried to order a piece of cake and they gave me a bagel. My friend knows German, so she helped me after that. I did pick up on some Dutch and was able to order fish in the Netherlands. *Gebakken vis, bedankt!* I have other friends but only one who knows German. Once, she told me my eyes were like portals. She told me this in English, not German. She said the sunlight made them glow even though they are brown and that made me feel warm.

I have other friends too who I am increasingly scared of losing. Soon, I won't see them every day. Who knows where they'll be? Prague? I worry that because I won't see them every day, I'll forget them because I've been known to do that. Out of sight, out of mind. I didn't know any of these people before my mom dropped me off at college four years ago. I didn't know my best friend whom I lived with for two years and whom I'm finally going to live with again in four months. I've never become friends with someone so fast. The universe pushed us together like automatic doors when it made us roommates in our tiny shoebox of a room. Our friendship solidified in the face of misadventure, getting lost on the streets of Boston where there are a surprising number of oversized statues—giant hockey sticks, giant pears, giant milk bottles just to name a few. When I started college, I didn't know any of the people I know now. I knew other people who I cannot talk to anymore. I can't tell them about all the new people I love or about the new experiences I've had. I can't tell them about the barista who hit on me because of the day my grandparents died, and I ordered a warm apple turnover in their honor.



Tony Tinsley's zany fiction and poetry are reminiscent of Ogden Nash and Shel Silverstein. His work has been published in *10 by 10 Flash Fiction Stories*, *50 Give or Take*, *Down in the Dirt*, and *Academy of the Heart and Mind*, and *It's In The Telling* (*The Inkwell Collective*). He studied with award-winning writers Lex Williford, recipient of the Iowa Short Fiction and the Rose Metal Flash Fiction Chapbook Awards, and Carolyn Alessio, whose fiction is included in the Pushcart Prize Anthology. Tinsley's current projects include a young adult murder mystery, an adult thriller, and two romance novels.

Secret Love

My friendships mean everything to me, but I'm afraid my friends will turn on me if they learn my dark secret. Just thinking about it is agonizing.

For years, my friends and I were devoted to Times New Roman. We weren't exactly a cult, but the elegance of Times New Roman gripped our hearts in a passionate embrace. It was a constant, much-loved companion in newsprint, books, and posters. It was a comforting presence on government buildings, business signs and names, street signs, and more. It was a synonym for print. Everyone felt the same.

We were well into adulthood before the personal computer appeared with an expanded world of alternatives. Oh, sure, the other options were always around.

Still, as work activities gradually shifted from print to digital media, Helvetica Neue gained greater visibility. Call me fickle, but I swooned over its straight, clean lines, shorn of feet and tails. And subtly, Helvetica Neue had replaced my first love in my affection before I knew it.

Hesitantly, I shared my new love with my friends. I admitted that printed text is more readable in Times and still predominates there. Ironically, my digitally semi-literate friends seldom realize they are reading Helvetica Neue or a cousin when they venture online because it is more readable than Times in digital print.

My friends met my confession with snooty, high-brow derision. I sensed a growing coolness in our friendship. I felt like an outsider as they reaffirmed their love for Times New Roman's curved lines and ornamental embellishments. I have not spoken of the issue since.

Yesterday, a lifelong friend showed me a printed copy of an online article and asked about the funny-looking font. "Is that that new-fangled text you were raving about?" he asked. I admitted it was, and I smiled when he said the text would appear more elegant in Times New Roman.

I know. You're thinking I missed a chance to sing the praises of Helvetica Neue, and I concede the point. For deep in my heart is a dark secret I dare not reveal. They would be horrified if I told them about my infatuation with Comic Sans MS.



You'll find **Fred Pierre** performing spoken word at the local, Kent bookstore or hiking way out in the forest. His work has appeared in print and online publications including *Tiny Seed Journal*, *X-RAY*, *Expat*.

Small Talk

I love to listen to you, but right away I start yapping, then I put my foot in my mouth. You've accused me of mansplaining, but my mouth is a hose and the spigot is rusty. Might be ego, but I love to talk. I don't mean to perform and I don't want to lecture, but sometimes it comes out sounding like that. I love to converse. God help me if I preach to the choir!

I'm all about liberation. Your freedom and mine. Think and do what you like. I hope you think of me, I hope you want me, but I can't convince you of anything. You are already perfect. You see flaws in yourself. I see amazing, Kintsugi. We grow, we heal and our flowers are golden. So why don't you share all your feelings with me? What keeps you from baring your soul?

You hate small talk – in fact, your opinion is most talk is worthless. I get it. I'm annoyed at long-talkers. They drone on without breaks for comment. The only

way to escape is to leave while they're talking and that takes implacable will. Long-talkers always try to suck you back in.

Our conversations are magic. You open worlds I can't normally access. Out of small talk, I mine luminescence. Your wisdom is priceless – I'd listen all day, but right now there's dead air. I start to speak, then I pause. I'll give you time to articulate truth, even if your truth's quiet. I like being silent together.

I want to lift you up. If that means shut the hell up, I will. I won't be the inversion layer holding your heat down. Please share your story. You've got so much heart. I want to hear it beat.



Leonie Jarrett lives mostly in Melbourne, Australia with her husband of more than three decades, her four adult children and her two Golden Retrievers. Leonie has variously been a lawyer and a business owner. Now that she is semi-retired, Leonie is loving writing fiction plus about her life and her travels.

The Joys of WFH

“Do you always have to be so annoying?” yelled Emily as she glared at her younger brother, Hugh. “Stop changing the TV channel you little pain.” Emily snatched the TV remote back from Hugh and changed the channel back to the show she was watching.

Emily’s parents were both working from home but neither reacted so Emily shouted, “Muuuummmm. Daaaadddd. Hugh is being a pest and fiddling with the TV again. Can you make him stop?”

Mum called out from the study where she was working, “Hugh, stop fiddling with the TV. Emily, stop shouting. Your Dad is in a meeting.”

Eight year old Hugh looked at twelve year old Emily and smiled at her with the self-satisfied smile of a sibling who has managed to aggravate his older sister. A gappy, self-satisfied smile as he was currently missing his two front teeth. “You’re always hogging the TV Emily. It’s my TV too and your show is boring.”

With that, Hugh snatched the TV remote and changed the channel again. Emily shrieked and snatched the remote back and Hugh retaliated the best way he knew how – he grabbed Emily’s long, brown ponytail and he pulled it. Hard.

“Owwwww,” yelped Emily as tears sprung to her eyes. “You little...”

Emily didn't get a chance to express her choice name for Hugh as their father appeared in the doorway.

He thundered, "What is going on? I am on a work call and all I can hear is you two fighting. I was talking, pitching for new business to a client so I wasn't on mute and then everyone on the call got to hear you two in the background! I've had to excuse myself from the call and I've left the pitch in mid-air. Not the best way to win over a client. You two know times are tough at the moment. I don't need you kyboshing my attempts to win new work."

"Sorry Dad but he pulled my hair. He's a bully." Emily was trying not to cry (she didn't want to give that pleasure to Hugh) but her eyes were moist.

"Hugh," scolded his father. "You can't pull people's hair."

"She never lets me watch the TV Dad. I live here too. She acts like I don't exist."

"Wish you didn't," spat Emily.

"Emily! Don't say that. Go to your room."

"But," spluttered Emily, "I didn't do anything wrong. That little weasel did."

"You should know better Emily. You're older. And don't call Hugh a weasel."

"Now, be quiet the pair of you. I need to go back to the work call. When I finish up, the TV is mine and your Mum's so, Hugh, you have an hour to watch whatever you like *if* you're quiet. Go to your room Emily. Don't interrupt me again."

Emily stomped off towards her room. As she passed her brother, she hissed in his ear, "You'd better sleep with one eye open!"



Becky Parker resides in Tennessee. She is a Pushcart prize nominee whose works are found in *Spirit Fire Review*, *Agape Review*, *Sweetie Cat Press*, *Yellow Mama*, *Appalachia Bare*, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, *the Rye Whiskey Review*, *Pulse*, *the Green Shoe Sanctuary*, *Sequoyah Cherokee River Journal*, *Amaranth Journal*, *Spire Light*, *Avocet*, *Mackenzie's Publication*, *Salvation South*, *Heart of Flesh*, *Mildred Haun Review*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*. She is a Tennessee Mountain Writers' Children's Literature Award winner. She is the founder of Briar Haus Writes, a literary page.

Strut

In the wedding chapel, nestled in the pine scented woods of Oakdale Mountain, "Staying Alive" blared on stereo as the onlookers watched the Peacock, flaunting ebony cowboy boots inlaid with embroidered yellow roses teasing beneath his blue pin striped polyester suit paired with a paisley tie, strut up the aisle proudly swinging his titanium hips, and take his place in front of the minister.

The three score and ten big fish in a very small pond, knew he was quite a catch to be netted by his demure silver haired fiancé, draped in a buttoned to her throat lace concoction, hungry eyes devouring his brilliant plumage.

The Peacock possessed a wallet bulging with Health Savings Account cards, a lifelong membership in the Fruit of the Month club, a full head of hair in various colors in his cedar lined closet, and a vehicle with plush heated seats aided by an electronic navigational system.

The lovebirds would sail on the Emory River in style on his thirty-year-old pontoon boat (the original chick magnet). He had staying power-he wouldn't turn into a vanishing pumpkin at midnight because he usually fell asleep by 8:00

PM in his bevy of sexy boxers embossed with farty slogans such as “Release the Kraken,” and “Wide Load”.

His medicine cabinet was filled to the brim with creams, splints, and pain relievers should the need arise on their three-night honeymoon stay at the famous Chattanooga Choo Choo hotel.

Hopefully, something will rise, the Peacock thought, flicking an imaginary speck of dust off of his lapel.

Circled around his deeply tanned neck, was a diamond studded lanyard containing an identity card with his name, address, blood type, and the 24/7 hotline phone number for his chiropractor.

His fake Rolex which had ticked the doom of his prior three failed marriages, glinted as he reached for his bride’s hand and winked at the maid of honor.



Paul Germano lives in Syracuse, smack dab in the center of New York State. More than 50 of his stories have been published, in print and online magazines in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong and India. He is twice previously published in *10 by 10 Flash* with “Busted” in May 2023 and “A Springer Spaniel Named Jerry” in September 2022.

Palm Sunday Dinner

Stephanie Falconetti, with shoulder-length dark brown hair, trendy eyeglasses and a warm smile, greets Zack Petersen, opening the door before he even has the chance to ring the bell. Zack’s natural blue eyes, color-enhanced with blue-tinted contact lenses, twinkle at the sight of her. “How were my directions?” she asks. “Perfect,” he says. “So, this is where you grew up? Nice! Real nice!” he tells her, giving her hand a tight squeeze as she ushers him inside.

Stephanie and Zack are journalism students at Syracuse University; he, a brawny Midwesterner from Grand Rapids, Michigan; she, a Central New York townie from one of Syracuse’s eastern suburbs. Zack, who will head home to Michigan next week for the Easter weekend, eagerly accepted Stephanie’s invitation to Palm Sunday dinner with her family.

She introduces him as “a good friend” but it’s obvious to Steve and Hillary Falconetti, and to their sons, that their daughter and Zack Petersen are far more than just good friends. Hillary serves a roast pork dinner with mashed potatoes, wax beans, glazed carrots and a Waldorf salad, preceded by appetizers of Bruschetta loaded with Pesto and Mozzarella and a platter of Deviled Eggs which she has arranged like sail boats on a sea of lettuce with sails made of triangle-sliced Provolone cheese. At the dining room table, Zack graciously praises Hillary’s cooking and stresses how grateful he is “to have a home-cooked meal.”

Dinner conversation is polite and energetic. They bounce from topic to topic, talking about their favorite hiking trails, the excitement of March Madness basketball, the polarization of American politics, binge-worthy television shows and the career paths in journalism that Stephanie and Zack hope to pursue after graduation. During dinner, Zack makes subtle revelations that don't go unnoticed by Stephanie's parents who exchange raised-eyebrow glances across the table. It doesn't sit well with Steve and Hillary when Zack snidely refers to the East Coast as the "liberal bubble," nor when he sours his face at the mere mention of the ACLU and, while shaking his head from side to side, quietly expresses his "genuine concern over the erosion of our Second Amendment rights."

After dinner, Steve discreetly gestures to his wife, while briskly ushering his sons and Zack into the living room for coffee and a platter of Ricotta-filled Cannoli. Hillary and Stephanie stay in the dining room for a quick chat. "So Mom, what do you think of Zack?" Stephanie asks, trying to keep her voice completely casual. "Oh honey, he's a real charmer and quite articulate. Plus, he's definitely blessed in the looks department; those bright blue eyes are amazing." Hillary leans in. As obvious as it is, she pretends to be unaware that her daughter and Zack are so much more than just good friends. "If I were you honey," she says in a whisper, while patting Stephanie's hand, "I wouldn't get too close to Zack. He seems nice enough, but sadly, he has some truly alarming Republican tendencies."