



10 BY 10

FLASH FICTION STORIES

Zvi A. Sesling, Editor



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Welcome to Issue 21 of 10 By 10 Flash Fiction Stories. Half of ten authors are new to the publication and include one young woman from Hong Kong. The other five have, of course, appeared before and are extremely entertaining as well. Their stories reflect their diverse backgrounds and personalities. I hope you consider submitting your own stories, whether you have been in 10 By 10 before or not. New stories are always welcome. And please remember, to be accepted stories must be 200 to 500 words long, not previously published or written with AI or ChaptG and submitted with a head & shoulders jpeg photo and a bio. Looking forward to seeing your work!



Sincerely,

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 poetry Pushcart Prize nominee. Sesling's flash fiction is the chapbook, *Wheels*, a full volume *Secret Behind The Gate*, (Cervena Barva Press) and the recently published *40 Stories* (Big Table Publishing) written in collaboration with Paul Beckman. He lives in Brookline, MA with his wife Susan J. Dechter.



Robin Stratton is the author of seven novels, including one which was a National Indie Excellence Book Award finalist (*On Air*, Mustang Press, 2011), three collections of poetry and short fiction, and a writing guide. A four-time Pushcart Prize nominee, she's been published in *Word Riot*, *63 Channels*, *Antithesis Common*, *Lyrical Somerville*, *Poor Richard's Almanac(k)*, *Blink-Ink*, *Pig in a Poke*, *Chick Flicks*, *Up the Staircase*, *Shoots and Vines*, *10 X 10*, and many others. Since 2004 she's been Acquisitions Editor for Big Table Publishing Company, Senior Editor of *Boston Literary Magazine* since 2009, and she was Director of the Newton Writing and Publishing Center until she moved from Boston to San Francisco in 2018. Her latest book, *Three Sister Stories*, won the 2022 Pinnacle Book Achievement Award for Women's Fiction. She'd love to have you visit her at www.robinstratton.com

(Photo by Donald C. Johanson)

In This Day and Age

I couldn't help it, I couldn't stop myself...standing next to him at the bonfire that night, his earthy fragrance so delicious, his shy glances so sweet. I mean, if you could see him, you'd understand. He's not tall, but he's solidly built—barrel chested, muscular arms, long, shaggy hair, soft brown eyes. My sister said *Mom and Dad aren't going to like it one bit!* which I know, I know they won't: old fashioned and still hung up on this idea that the color of skin matters. I mean, come on. In this day and age? It's ridiculous. Personally, I think it's nice to have other options, with someone of a different race. They might not be as smart as us, but as long as they're kind...that's what really matters. I know he would never hurt me.

My hand travels to my tummy. I'm not showing yet, so I can keep my secret a while longer. Who knows, maybe he and I will run off together. I bet our baby will be beautiful. Sometimes you can't even tell that someone is mixed; if our baby has light skin, I can pass it off as one of us. If the baby comes out dark and has his heavy features...well, then everyone will know. But so what, who cares?

I wonder what his parents think, I wonder if he has told them. It seems like they should be happy about it; for them, it's a step up, not something to be ashamed of or embarrassed about, like my parents are. But sometimes they can be resentful of us, that we're, well...let's just say it, superior. I don't mean that in a judging way! It's just the truth. I don't make the rules.

Oh, but I wish we had discussed this. Obviously if you have sex, you'll get pregnant! But he isn't much of a talker.

I have to tell him tonight. I hope he'll be happy. What if he's not? I don't know, I really don't know. But I absolutely have to tell him. I take in a deep breath and let it out slowly and shake my head as I head toward his cave. I'm starting to think that hooking up with a Neanderthal during the late Pleistocene wasn't such a good idea.



William Ogden Haynes is a poet and author of short fiction from Alabama who was born in Michigan. He has published several collections of poetry and many of his poems and short stories have appeared in literary journals and anthologies. <http://www.williamogdenhaynes.com>

Accomplishments

*Today is only one day in all the days that will ever be.
But what happens in all those other days that will ever
come, depends on what you do today.* Ernest Hemingway, 1940.

Every morning, he sleeps until noon, to manufacture the excuse that it's too late to accomplish anything productive, except making breakfast at midday. He takes his plate to the back porch to eat bacon and eggs with a side of wheat toast and coffee. The last time he was offered a job, it was mowing lawns, which wasn't for him. Gazing at his own weedy, unmown grass, he can see that the morning dew has long since evaporated as the sun has done its work. And now, as the sunlight warms the galvanized garbage can by the porch, it emits the faint smell of rotten food inside, reminding him that he missed the trash pickup yesterday morning as he slept. He wonders if it would be worth it to get dressed and take the bus to the unemployment office. But every time he goes there, he feels like someone who shows up too late for a parade, all the good jobs marching off without him. So, he takes his empty plate inside and dumps the frying pan and dishes into the already full sink. The plastic Motorola radio on the shelf catches his eye, and he slowly turns the tuner until he hears the noise of a cheering crowd. Eerily, almost as if it was coming from outer space, he hears his favorite Yankees announcer Phil Rizzuto scream, "Holy cow, he

did it! Sixty-one for Maris!” as he sets the home run record in 1961. And with that, all thoughts of busses, jobs, lawns, garbage and dirty dishes disappear, as he sits in his pajamas at one o’clock in the afternoon. He’s a great admirer of accomplishments, and he honors Maris, by listening to the rest of the game on this record-setting day.



Paul Hostovsky is the author of 13 books of poetry, 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. He makes his living in Boston as a sign language interpreter

Tassel of Wheat

That art teacher back in 7th grade, what was his name, Mr. Pessolano, I was thinking about him recently because I had the radio on and that Hall and Oates song "Sara Smile" came on, which is a great song, and I was singing along with it and then I was remembering this girl named Sara who was in my art class with Mr. Pessolano in the 7th grade, or maybe she was in 8th grade because I think she was a year or two older than me, but this was in junior high back when it was called junior high and 7th, 8th, and 9th graders were together in one school and Sara—I can't remember her last name—was pretty and a little goofy and she could draw Goofy as good as Disney and she never wore a bra, unlike the other older girls, and she was a really good artist, I mean she was talented, I mean she could draw people and animals and cars in this cartoon character way that was really impressive and I wondered whatever happened to her and then I remembered this pen-and-ink drawing I did in that class—it took me weeks, months—of a tassel of wheat, very detailed, all the florets, like hundreds of them on a single tassel of wheat and Mr. Pessalano said to take my time and draw each one, give each floret its own time and attention with that pen he let me use, which

was a special kind of pen, a pen-and-ink pen, and I did exactly as he said and it turned out pretty damn good if I did say so myself—a tassel of wheat contains pollen grains which are the male genetic material that fertilizes the ovary of a kernel and we learned about that in science class that same year, all about anthers and ovaries and I knew enough to know that Sara had ovaries and of course she had breasts that you could almost kind of see behind the cloth of her stretchy shirts because she never wore a bra and I couldn't look at them and I couldn't stop looking at them and then I was thinking you know I may still have it somewhere in an old box in the garage, that drawing I did in the 7th grade, which was pretty damn good, hell it was great, and then I was thinking how all children are great artists, how I was a great artist myself once and how sad it is to grow up and grow out of greatness and I wondered if Sara was making a living somewhere maybe as a cartoonist, because she was great, and I tried googling her but without a last name the key words Sara, great, cartoonist, goofy, Millburn Junior High, braless didn't bring anything up.



Phil Temples is a product of the Midwest, but he's lived in the greater Boston area for over forty years. Phil has published six novels, a novella, and three story anthologies in addition to over 240 online short stories. Phil also likes to dabble in mobile photography. He is a member of the Bagel Bards and O'Hara's writers groups. You can learn more about Phil by visiting his website at <https://temples.com>.

Life, Death, and Annoyances In-between

I'm trying my best not to move, but I'm close to fidgeting on the table. It's hard to remain completely still for twenty minutes. I force my breathing to be slow and measured. Occasionally, I open my eyes and stare back at the robotic device occupying the room with me. I've named him "Darwin."

Darwin is constantly in motion, hovering above, below, and on both sides of my lower abdomen, bombarding my prostate with high-intensity gamma radiation. It's better than having the surgical procedure done, I tell myself. On the other hand, cutting the damn thing out would have shortened considerably the time required to cure my cancer, not to mention avoiding the hot flashes I will suffer as a side effect of the drugs.

Darwin retreats off to the side.

Good. Almost done for the day.

But my hopes are dashed when Darwin springs back to life and closes in for another pass at my innards. Now I'm getting annoyed.

I realize that my annoyance isn't actually with Darwin. He's just doing his job. Instead, it is the music being piped into the room. It's *off* somehow. The selections

are seventies classics; all are well known to me. Then it hits me—the songs are performed by cover bands.



Dan Shiffman is a high school English teacher at the International School of Hamburg and a student in the MFA program at Lindenwood University. His creative work has appeared in such places as *New World Writing*, *Hobart* and *X-R-A-Y Literary*. You can read more of his work at danshiffman.com.

I Give Up

is what just slipped out of your mouth and what you now have to figure out how to unsay—or hope your students will ignore so that you all can just move on. Ill-chosen words have heckled your resolve to be unflappable before this class of somewhat depressed post-Covid tenth graders who are non-responsive to the quote memorization game on Euripides' *Bacchae*—a highly relevant play, you've insisted, that you thought of while ruminating awake last night.

You're right up to that pedagogical edge of reckless red-faced fury, on the verge of tearing away this facade of relentless, crushing patience and howling that sleep-deprived, Peter, whose cell phone lies not-so-stealthily flashing on his thigh in the back row of desks and who hasn't had his book in days, is an entitled doofus and beyond rude, when more likely he just finds his cell phone more interesting than you, even though he is not proud of that and would genuinely like to do better in your class. You tell him to put the phone away.

It's all of your accumulating failings: not being clear enough about what you are actually trying to teach, forfeiting to the chorus of exasperated colleagues who believe that firm consequences will fix students forever, demonizing administrators

en masse when there are at least one or two who don't deserve it; not being nice enough, not being tough enough, not aligning your curriculum.

Peter is talking to studious Aurelia who currently sits next to him. You changed the class seating plan three times but it doesn't matter, Peter can and will distract and amuse anyone. He's making that very clear to you right now. Your colleague in the history department wants to refer Peter to special ed, but that's probably missing the point. You'll be meeting with Peter and his parents next week. Their questions about how they can help him succeed is a performance that Peter is not buying. You're still avoiding grading Peter's probably AI-generated paper that sits on the top of the disordered pile you left on your kitchen table this morning.

"I give up" is forgetting that peace and quiet is not a sustainable life goal. It's the retirement magazine you stole from your seventy-year-old dentist featuring spotless houses next to immaculate golf courses (you don't play golf). It's why you turn your eyes away from Peter, who is showing smiling Aurelia something on her phone that she must have pulled from her pocket. And it's why you gaze longingly past your "Essential Classroom Agreements" poster ("our class will be respectful, kind, inclusive and focused on learning") to the door but do not flee through it.



Paul Beckman's *Becoming Mirsky*, (Cervena Barva Press), is a memoir in a Flash Chapbook. It was a finalist for the 2024 Indi Book Award for collection. *Kiss Kiss* (Truth Serum Press) was a finalist for the 2019 Indie Book Awards. His eighth collection will be out in three months. Some of his stories have appeared in *Spelk*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Bending Genres*, *The Odd Magazine*, *Monkey*, *Fictive Dream*, *X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine*, and he was long listed for the Wigleaf Top 150. He had a story selected for the 2020 National Flash Fiction Day. Paul teaches Flash & Micro Fiction at high schools and local libraries. He finished his 9th year of curating and hosting a monthly Global Fbomb flash fiction reading series via Zoom, which began in NY's KGB Bar prior to Covid. His latest collection is *Forty Stories* (Big Table Publishing) that he collaborated with Zvi A. Sesling on.

When I Want You, All I Have to Do Is Dream

I've been having dreams where I have friends dying with every dream.

Close friends? Good friends?

They used to be my best friends, really close friends, social, party, the whole ball of wax friends.

What happened?

Then Trump entered the picture, and I didn't see them for a bit, and when I did see them, we were more mangled than friendly.

I said I had to leave, I was anxious to go to sleep and see which red hat died off that night.

These people . . .

You mean your friends?

Yes, I mean my one-time good friends, who were slowly moving far away in the winter, somewhere in Florida or somewhere warmer in Europe. I didn't care just so there was a good death, as long as . . .

They never came back home upright.

Once we were the closest of friends, inseparable, but now I ignore them if I see them unless it's at their funeral, then I'll pull up a chair next to their casket and talk to them softly, and all the time I'll be making fun of their death.

I know my remaining friends wouldn't appreciate my wishing death on people whom I used to vacation with, party with, so I kept my dream thoughts to myself and that didn't bother me. If there was no pain or no dying in their family, it was not a good dream.

That's a terrible way to live. I agree but I wasn't wishing for a terrible life on them.



Lavina Blossom is a visual artist as well as a writer. She grew up in rural Michigan and now lives in Southern California. Her poems have appeared in various journals, including *3Elements Review*, *Gyroscope*, *Poemeleon*, *The Paris Review*, *Verse Virtual*, *Common Ground Review*, and *Ekphrastic Review*.

Sweets

“So you weren’t that serious about him,” I said to Haley after we’d ordered and carried our coffee and our sweets—mine, a scone, a bear claw, and a cruller—to a booth with red upholstery. Three tasty indulgences each, our usual, and the coffee hot. We would sit and talk for an hour before people glared at us.

“Serious enough,” she said, “But now, when I move, it won’t be that hard.” She shook back her long red hair, checked out the other people seated nearby.

“Not so hard for him? He might be sorry he left his wife. And he’ll ask me about you. I’m not sure what to say.”

Haley took a bite of her maple scone, not looking at me.

I said, “It *was* settled before, though, that they’d divorce.”

Haley didn’t answer, but I hadn’t asked a question. I took a sip of coffee, loving the instant buzz. “He’d probably follow you. But you aren’t going to tell him where you’re going, right? Not saying will be a big message.”

“He does what he wants. I do what I like.” Haley smiled, defiant. She had often asserted her right to live without attachments.

She was spontaneous, beautiful, my best friend. I wasn’t sure what she wanted from me before she met Greg. Then that possible rift between us was avoided--not

that I was altogether sure what I would have done or said to her if she wanted more. The thought of it felt like a ball of yarn in my gut.

She claimed she'd be happier in a city where she knew not one other person. I thought that proud and naive. More than once she said, "Fresh starts," then hunched up her shoulders and opened her eyes wide as if excited. It made me laugh at first. Later, I smiled to be courteous.

I wasn't that unhappy when she gifted me her cat and moved out of Greg's life as well as mine. I knew what he didn't--that she wasn't going to call and she wouldn't write.



Chris Himsl is a retired engineer who spends his time writing and pondering all stuff that is not engineering. He has had publications in *Our Canada* magazine, the *Gator Springs Gazette* and an op-ed piece for the *Calgary Herald*. He has also read and recorded an essay for CBC Radio.

Shep

With the fiery red sun settling in between the mountain peaks, there we sat, me and my dog, Shep. After several hours of hiking to the clearing, setting up camp, and chopping firewood, we had just enough time to relax and enjoy the evening show. As I wiped a drop of Jack Daniel's from my mouth, I scratched his golden head and said, "Pretty nice sunset, eh, Shep?"

Looking up at me after I pulled my hand away, he asked, "What the hell is a Shep, anyway?" Wide-eyed, I gazed back at him while choking on another pull from the bottle. During the four years I knew him, he never said a word.

Curiously, I asked, wondering if I was hearing things, "Pardon?"

"Shep, what is it?"

As a few seconds passed, the sincerity of his question settled in and my astonishment waned. "Well, it's your name."

"No, I understand that, but what exactly is it? What is a Shep?"

With each panting breath, his hanging tongue twitched, and he stared at me while I struggled to find an answer. "I think Shep was one of the Three Stooges."

He tucked his tongue away and swallowed. "No, that was Shemp."

Throwing my head back at his reply, I realized he was correct. Recognizing my own stupidity, I searched for an excuse and eventually blurted out, “You know I never named you, right?”

Slowly turning, he peered out over the canyon. “Yeah, I just never liked the name much.”

As the evening grew chilly, my Jack Daniels lost its bite, and I shivered slightly while Shep sat in silence and the last ribbons of sunlight disappeared behind the mountains. Standing up, I broke the silence and asked, “Well, Shep, what name do you like?”

“I kind of like Gordon,” he said.

While staggering back towards the tent, I kicked the empty bottle into the bushes. “Well, Gordon, it’s time we got some sleep.”



Mario Moussa is a writer living in Philadelphia. His work has appeared in such varied publications as *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Surely Magazine*, *Litbreak*, *Fortune*, *Entrepreneur* and elsewhere.

The Finals

Should get a trophy just for getting here, the finals. Mario Lanza Park Pickleball Invitational. Been a long road—can I get credit for stamina? ShopRite is a big comedown from the UPS job. Need the work. Wife, family. Kid on the other side of the net—full head of hair, all muscle—he has no idea. Like the other clowns I cart around the city, every night. Everybody else at home. Focus on the next point. That’s a win—deserves to be noticed. Step to the line. Rub my scalp. Bald and shiny, love it. Pull up the sleeves of my track suit, belly hanging out. Take a breath. The bougainvillea bushes smell good. Thoughts . . . bust my butt to make a few bucks, pep talks before starting up the Nissan—dusty, dented, depressing cement grey—turn on the app, driving an Uber at fifty-eight, then look at the screen, head out for the night . . . put those thoughts in a box. Square my feet, take the paddle back. The way the pros do it on YouTube. Up 12-11—one more point, take home that trophy. Silver gleams in the sun. Will that trophy make me a winner? I serve. *Thwop!* Kid lunges, grunts. Ball rockets back. Joe Tatu, that crazy fuck, decides to lose it. Why now? “Pow! Crack! All day!” Tatu yells. Standing on the sidewalk, overcoat, wool cap. I really don’t need this. Shout at Tatu: *Go away!* Shift my feet, turn my shoulders. Ball flies past me. I’m hoping . . . but no question, ball is good. Another disappointment. “Pressure is a privilege,” says Tatu. Wags his finger. Remembers that phrase from

when I got canned at UPS. Sat here in this park and told Tatu. He was old and wrinkled even then. Crouches like the wrestler he used to be. Roman Catholic High. City-wide championship, then the regionals. Kid serves. I slap at the ball. Plops back on my side. Can see where this is going. Kid steps to the line. Need to put my thoughts back in the box. Bozo I picked up last night. Saw my name on the app. "Hey Tony!" Like we're friends. Because he's Italian and I'm Italian. Mister Romeo. Listen to his exploits at the bar. Romeo says she was hot. Check the screen. How long will this nobody will be part of my life? Tell him to piss off but my rating matters. Ball sails back. Pull my belly around the court along with my memories. Can see where this is going. Kid's up by one point. How did that happen? One more point, he takes the trophy home. He's hardly sweating. I'm soaked. He looks like a winner. Tatu's nuts but he used to be a winner. Me? Never been a winner. Ease the car out of the parking spot tonight, head toward the bars on South Street. That's where this is going.



Amanda Chan is a poet and singer-songwriter from Hong Kong. She loves writing poetry, novels, and songs on love, sadness, and mental health. She is currently pursuing her master's degree in English Literary Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She has self-published six collections of poetry including *Skin & Thoughts*, her first poetry collection.

I am a piano.

People like to play with me when they're trying to learn something new, touch me when they're bored, and feel me up, thinking my colors will inspire them.

Like most people, I don't like to be touched by strangers. Some people don't seem to be aware of personal space. They poke and prod, looking for something special in me. Nobody is ever satisfied with my worth by looking at or talking to me. They must interact with my body and spend time getting to know me. I would love to do the same to them and ask them how they feel. It makes me sad, and angry. But I am so used to it now that emptiness overwhelms the melancholy. Nobody has ever been so considerate of me, nobody until Yvette.

Yvette is my current favorite person. She treats me like a close friend. I believe she understands my soul sometimes. When she sits in front of me, a gentle smile forms on her face, and when she touches me I am not a mere instrument in society. I am her dearest companion, the one she whispers her fears and dark secrets. And I speak of my sorrows to her too. It's like she's the only one who understands me, even though she cannot hear my words.

Earlier today, Yvette met me at five in the evening as usual. She was crying, her tears falling onto me. She was upset about her parents and her shoulders shook as she cried.

“I don’t know why dad would say that to mom. I thought they loved each other!”

Yvette sniffed, bright green snot sticking to the corners of her nose.

I have never wished to touch people the way they touch me. Today I felt an urge to comfort Yvette, even though nobody has ever comforted me.

Yvette is not a neat child, but she is bright and intelligent. She talks to me about science and matter, art and languages. She complains about how much she has to do at school and how her mother always nags her at the worst moments. Her favorite subject is art. She loves drawing trees and animals. She has two best friends Tina and Rhiannon.

Before Yvette, there was Tommy. Before Tommy, there was Jane. And so on.

I am a piano.

One day, Yvette will leave me. She will look at me for the last time and the lid will cover my body and she’ll be gone.

They never stay for long.

So today I did what I do best, I closed my eyes the way she did, and let Yvette use me.