

10 BY 10

FLASH FICTION STORIES



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Welcome to Issue #25

There are, as usual, some wonderful stories with seven first time in 10 By 10 authors and three writers whom we welcome back. Starting with Louis Kummerer and Alaina Hammond and ending with Gay Degani, the stories are electrifying and emotional. Certainly each story carries its own weight and adds to the diversity of the topics.

So enter these pages, read and enjoy the ten writers in *10 By 10*.

Sincerely,

Zvi A. Sesling

Editor



Zvi A. Sesling, Brookline, MA Poet Laureate (2017-2020), has published numerous poems and flash fiction. He edits *10 By 10 Flash Fiction Stories* and *Muddy River Poetry Review*. Sesling has won international and national poetry prizes. He is a four-time Pushcart Prize poetry nominee. He has also been nominated for a flash fiction Pushcart Prize. Sesling's flash fiction book is, *Secret Behind The Gate* and his flash fiction chapbook is *Wheels*. Sesling and Paul Beckman recently published a flash fiction book *40 Stories..* Sesling lives in Brookline, MA with his wife Susan J. Dechter.



Louis Kummerer is a technical writer working and living in Phoenix, Arizona. His work has been published in *New Delta Review*, *CaféLit*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Bristol Noir*, *The Chamber Magazine*, *Friday Flash Fiction*, and *101 Words*.

At the Phu Loi Laundry, 1968

“Your father would whip you if he saw you dressed like that,” her mother scolds her.

Her father’s angry face briefly flashes before her like a bolt of lightning.

“Father’s dead,” she answers.”

“You dress like a whore, you bring shame on this family.” Her mother’s voice rattles behind her as she walks out the door.

The older Vietnamese women scowl at her short skirt as she climbs into the Lambretta minibus. In the morning sunlight, her bare legs glisten light-gold, slender as bamboo. She sits on the wooden bench between two women and hides in her Vietnamese-English dictionary.

He comes every afternoon to the Dau Tieng laundry at the US Army base where she works. His arrival breathes lightness into her day. He has a kind smile, is not loud like the other soldiers, helps her with her English, makes her

laugh. He shows her pictures of his family and tells her about his home in a town whose name she has difficulty pronouncing.

The news drops on her like a heavy stone. Her mother has made arrangements for her to move to Phu Loi and live with her uncle's family. A transfer has been arranged so that she can work at the American base there.

She writes her uncle's address on a piece of paper and carries it with her to work the next day. She waits all day, and when he finally comes in, she tells him the news and hands him the paper with her uncle's address. She searches his face for some sign, some flicker of light against the darkness inside her. He puts the address in his pocket. Then he leans across the counter and kisses her cheek.

Her uncle is very strict, will not allow her to dress in anything other than a traditional Vietnamese ao dai. But it doesn't matter because a letter from Dau Tieng arrived yesterday. She carries it to work with her and, on her break, opens her dictionary to translate the words she doesn't know. He tells her things no boy has ever said to her before, things that make her blush when she reads them.

With great difficulty, she composes a letter to him written in her best English. She tells him that she will wait for him, tells him that every day she practices saying the name of his hometown.

She sends the letter and waits weeks for a response.

But none comes.

She recognizes the soldier as soon as he enters the Phu Loi laundry, his rifle slung over his shoulder, the war still thick on his boots and fatigues.

"I know you," she says, "You from Dau Tieng."

"Yes," he says flatly.

"Before here, I work Dau Tieng," she explains, "You know Billy Wade?"

Her question floats into the air and bobbles there for several seconds.

"Him dead," the soldier responds, "VC shoot."

An icy wind pierces her thin clothes, freezes the voice in her throat, the air that she is breathing.



Alaina Hammond is a poet, playwright, fiction writer, and visual artist. Her poems, short stories, paintings, drawings and photographs have been published both online and in print. Publications include *Nomad's Choir Poetry Journal*, *The Word's Faire*, *Littoral Magazine*, *Spinozablue*, *Third Wednesday Magazine*, *[Alternate Route]*, *Paddler Press*, *Verse-Virtual*, *Macrame Literary Journal*, *Route 7 Review*, *Sublunary Review*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, *Assignment Literary Magazine*, *Superpresent*, *Jelly Squid*, *redrosethorns*, *Flash Frog*, *Clockwise Cat*, and *Ranger Magazine*. @alainaheidelberger on Instagram.

As Numb As I Am

My teenage student lies on top of me.

His classmate lies on top of him.

I can feel both sets of breath against my neck.

I never should have told the class I was pregnant. I should be protecting these boys. Rather than lying, helplessly, limply, on my classroom floor.

What kind of adult lets children sacrifice themselves for her?

Whose mother am I?

Not theirs. I don't deserve them. Both honor students, both bound for college.
Risking their futures, for the future inside me.

Or maybe they just love ME that much.

I imagine I feel their hearts. Their chests rise and fall with mine.

I silently tell them, and my baby, to breathe.

I'll model it. Least I can do.

The loudspeaker crackles.

I hear my boss's voice.

"This is Principal Gordon. You're...safe. The shooter is dead. He was the lone fatality."

Pause. Loud, lingering pause. Which pulsates in echo.

And returns.

Pause.

Pause.

"You can move freely."

No one moves. Not freely. Not at all.

Except, as always, for the blood pumping and the breathing.

The boy directly on top of me stirs. This sends the signal to the boy on top of him that he should stand up. The two of them remind me of synapses in a brain.

Me, though. I'm not quite as brave as they.

I worry that my boss was speaking under duress, with a literal gun to her head.

But then I remember she's an honorable woman. And would take a bullet before she lied to us about our safety.

She's as noble as the teenagers, at least one of whom just left dead skin cells upon my body.

And both of whom touched me, forever in flesh. The debt will outlive my life.

Inspired and ashamed, I rise.

All my students are back in their seats. As if nothing had happened in the last ten minutes. As if they hadn't lost anything.

Say something.

My brain spins, and settles on this:

"Well, that sucked."

Three students laugh. Four students cry.

And the rest—including my two would-be saviors—don't react at all.

As numb as I feel.

As numb as I am.



As a book coach and writing teacher for women in Los Angeles, **Jennifer Dickinson** relishes creating safe spaces for women to feel empowered by embracing their vulnerabilities through writing. A graduate of Hollins University in Virginia, her fiction has appeared in *The Florida Review*, *JMWW*, *Maudlin House*, *Isele Magazine*, *Blackbird*, and elsewhere. Her nonfiction has appeared in *The Linden Review* and *Poets & Writers magazine*. She is the recipient of a Hedgebrook residency and a grant from the Barbara Deming Memorial Fund. Her middle grade debut novel will be published in 2026. Connect with Jennifer at jenniferdickinsonwrites.com

I Scream Jolene

Damn it Mama, all I want to do is kidnap the truck and drive it out of this old dusty town, and follow you to Nashville. I picture your drive: Sunflower stalks reach up to the sky. Ducks swim in a river. Cows mow down grass. "I Will Always Love You" plays on the radio and you melt the air with your voice.

When I need a laugh I remember: the one tiny bleached streak in your jet black hair. I think of how you'd flick your hair up when Daddy said: *Get over here, woman*, and I'd see that little streak of yellow and you'd wink at me and it was our secret, forever besties, you and me, your little ten-year-old Emmeline.

I want to be a swan. I want to be an eagle. I want to be a blue jay in the window, peering in at all of us, lost since you left. What do all of these things have in common? Well, that's obvious. They're smarter than everyone in this town who says you should've stayed behind and raised us, a bunch of wriggling kids instead of going to Tennessee to pursue your dreams.

Everyone wants to forget you. So, I scream "Jolene." I scream: "Nine To Five." I swung and missed Jessie's jaw last night when she called you a deadbeat

and she got me right between the eyes. Now my forehead is black and blue and that little rat face is probably still laughing.

Daddy said one day he'll tap dance on your grave and I wanted to get his goat because how dare he say such a thing about MY MOM and HIS WIFE so I watched a Youtube video and now I'm tap dancing all over the house in a pair of tap shoes I made myself with scrap metal from his shop. Because screw him. I'm gonna make a racket until the end of time.

MAMA, I WILL ALWAYS LOVE YOU, and I'm saving my money. So far I've got eight dollars. One day you'll look up and there I'll be: sitting in the front row at the Opry, watching you belt out a hit, twisting my hair up, showing you my own bleached streak.



Emily Dressler is a writer living in Northeast Ohio. She spends her day as a proofreader for a global ad agency.

Walnuts

It was during their first autumn in the old farmhouse by the tracks that she started to wish she could carve out a divot in the spot right below his rib cage where muscle met muscle. Use her mouth to trace the route starting at the middle of his belt, up two inches and then to the right. Kiss the spot, press her nose and mouth into it and sculpt out a large enough space to burrow in, keep warm, and stay safe when she needed. One time in bed together, he had said that he wished he was 100 years older. “Why?” she asked. “So that I could die without chagrin,” he said, yawning. “Too bad,” she said. “Too bad we can’t just eat each other whole and then die,” she said, pressing her nose into the divot where the skin felt smoother already. He laughed, held her closer. That was when they still heated the whole house with a woodstove, slept with warm bricks in the bed, and spent a lot of time in the dining room where the stove was. It was just the two of them then and it was easier to stay warm. Maybe not actually easier, but they didn’t have the kids to worry about yet. By the time the kids were toddlers, they had put in ductwork. They still used the woodstove, but not as a necessity. She missed it. Missed having the dining room be such a hub of activity because everyone gathered where the warmth was. But at the same time, she enjoyed the easy comfort of a warm bedroom.

One night that first October, after she had spent the day gathering black walnuts to harvest, her fingers were blackened, stained by the walnuts even after her shower. In bed, his smooth, clean skin stood out underneath her blackened fingers. She would be stained nearly that whole autumn and every autumn after that. She was always surprised when she moved her hands away from his skin and he was still clean, not painted by her carelessness and haste.



Paul Beckman's latest flash collections, *Becoming Mirsky* (Cervena Barva Press) and *Kiss Kiss* (Truth Serum Press) were both finalists for the Indie Book Awards. And *Forty Stories* with Zvi A. Sesling. Some of his stories have appeared in *Fiction*, *Litro*, *Pank*, *WINK*, *Jellyfish Review*, *The Wax Paper*, *Monkey* and *Fictive Dream*. He had a story in the *2020 National Flash Fiction Day Anthology* and was nominated for 2021 Best of the Web and was a winner in the 2022 Best Micro Fiction Anthology.

Bingo

My wife thinks I go to the casino to shoot craps, and my friends think the same, but I don't, because I'm addicted to Bingo and drive to churches and Elks Lodges to play my passion. I carry my lucky key rings, one a stuffed Dalmatian and the other a green eyeshade. I walk in with these in my briefcase along with my Bingo stamps and other lucky charms and I carry small bags of Cheetos and Fritos as I play four games at a time, and I try to get the fourth seat in the fourth row and I don't chat. Last week I won the "Fill Your Card" Bingo round for their big prize worth over \$1000. They're going to send the check to my house and there's nothing I can do about it because I have to work, and Elaine will be home when the check comes, and I'll be busted. She'll tell all our friends and make me a laughingstock but when I get home, I'll tell her I didn't feel like driving to the casino and stopped at the church to play Bingo. But how was I to know that she had a Bingo night out with the girls and watched me jumping up and down, fist pumping, standing on my lucky chair yelling Bingo Bingo Bingo?



Gabrielle Grinaway is a poet from the Poconos, Pennsylvania. She is currently pursuing her MFA at Syracuse University in Central New York. Much of her work considers themes of place as home, tourist destination, catalyst, connection, etc. More of her work can be found in magazines such as *Rainy Day*, *Flagship* and *#Ranger*. When she's not reading or writing you can find her perusing antique stores or hanging out at home with her cat Goose.

Two Olives

On slow mornings I watch mice skitter across carpet floors, hurry under restaurant booths, and slip into soup-spoon sized holes in the trim. Today is one of those days. An older man sits at the bar and sips a martini, with two olives.

On one end of the “upscale” restaurant are two fish-tanks with “exotic fish” fitted as a doorway to the main dining room. On the other end, a small wall of floor to ceiling windows. I think about the last time I saw either of them cleaned. The answer is never, but I’ve only been working here a few months. A steady drizzle runs through the city scum. I watch a sucker fish lap algae off the sides of his tank.

The man at the bar hasn’t moved. His sullen cheeks drip; I imagine them splashing into his martini, an olive rolling across the floor. He’d have to ask the bartender for a new one, but, having known the bartender, I know he’d ignore the man and revert to organizing pint glasses with a stern silence.

A younger couple joins the man at the bar and a small mouse scurries around the legs of his stool. He sucks his teeth and I can see an interruption. He knocks back the rest of his martini, pops an olive into his mouth. A push of the

glass across the bar causes it to topple and shatter at the bartender's feet. The man steps up from the bar; his shoe stamps the mouse. I can hear toothpicks break from the other side of the room.



Austin Alexis has published in *Flash Boulevard*, *Home Planet News Online*, *Rattle*, *Hawaii Pacific Review* and elsewhere. His long-awaited second full-length poetry collection, *The Whirlpool Bath*, will be published by Kelsay Books in the late-summer of 2025.

The Lizard

“I don’t know what’s going to happen to him.” Fred was speaking to a fellow instructor about a student who had missed a third of the semester’s classes. The two professors stood on an outdoor railroad platform while waiting for a suburban train to take them safely home--that is: to the city twenty-two miles away. “He’s the worst student I’ve had in five or six years. I hear he’s terrible in all his classes, a real pain in the gazoo.” Fred spotted a lizard on the tracks. A train was chug-chug-chugging in the lizard’s direction. “If this student keeps on this path,” Fred continued, “his life, his fate will be a disaster.” As the train sped closer and closer to the lizard, the creature failed to run. Fred wasn’t sure if it were deaf or blind or stubborn or a daredevil wise guy. “Look!” he said to the other professor. Fred pointed toward the animal. “It’ll be cut in two or just decimated if it doesn’t move,” he said. Fred took a step toward the track. The other professor put a hand on Fred’s shoulder, halting him. “You weren’t really thinking of going down towards the rails, were you?” “No.... Yes.... I don’t know what I was planning to do,” Fred said, closing his eyes. Then panic hauled his lids open. “Shouldn’t we do *something*?” Fred asked, as his hands rounded into fists

at his side. The other professor glanced at Fred with eyes that gave off a sigh: the silent sound of understanding. Then, while Fred craned his head to survey the tracks, the other professor said: “To move or to stay where it is: that’s a decision only *it* can make.”



Edward Ferri, Jr. lives near where he grew up on a "non profit" farm on the dry side of the Santa Cruz Mountains in California when bailing wire, gumption, and spit were the "apps" of the day. He is a tribal member of the **Citizen Potawatomi Nation** of Shawnee, OK and is a believer in the spirit of Boo Radley. His narrative free-verse poetry has been published in multiple journals and anthologies and he is the author of two poetry books: *Glassy Air, Poems Kindled in the Long Shadow of a Lone Motorcycle* and *The Essential CAFÉ EDMOVIA, Cup of Joe Poetry for Cup of Joe Folks*. He first realized the beauty of Denali in the rearview mirror of a gutted Volvo 544 that he used as a mini-camper. He was leaving to meet Carol and has never returned. He now rides a carnival red Triumph motorcycle between stanza breaks

Officer Johnson's Keen Observation

The two frightened 17-year-old boys took refuge in a hot sweat behind the small town police station hoping the gang with baseball bats, brass knuckles and probably a switchblade or two would abandon their bad intentioned chase of them. With five or six against two, the gang liked their odds. Their customary trait.

Knowing the police dept was closed and unmanned after 6:00 pm, the gang circled the empty quiet streets around the station in their lowered 4-door early 50's black Chevy looking to wait the two boys out, or maybe flush them out for another run to catch them... just having "fun".

Then, by what appeared to be pure chance, the one lone Officer Johnson on night patrol in this sleepy three traffic light hick farm and ranch town,

sometimes referred to as “The Gulch”, returned to the station to find these two very frightened boys huddled near the locked police station back entrance wondering what their fate for the evening was going to be.

As Officer Johnson pulled his cherry topped white 1966 Chevy Biscayne patrol car into the small back parking lot, he spotted the boys cowering by the back entrance and pulled up to them as he rolled his window down. He then asked sternly “What can I do for you boys?” One of the boys, who mildly knew Officer Johnson in his small town via an “exhibition of speed” warning ticket issued just a few weeks earlier, stepped to the car window, bent over and asked “What do you do when 5 or 6 guys jump you and try to beat you up?”

Officer Johnson looked at the two boys and noticing that they appeared to be unharmed said “Well you can do one of two things. You can either fight or you can run.” Then, taking another glancing up and down evaluation of the two, he said, “Looks like you boys ran.”



Donna Gum enjoys writing flash fiction in the Appalachian Mountains. Her recent fiction was published in the inaugural issue of *Borderline Tales*, *CafeLit*, *Fifty Give or Take*, and *Flash Phantoms* with upcoming publication in *Freedom Fiction*, *Down in the Dirt*, *The Short Humour Site* and *Academy of the Heart and Mind*.

Lifetime Warranty

"I want some help, and I want it now!" said the older woman.

Mike looked at the toast crumbs littering the blue store counter. More spilled out of an old toaster each time she banged it on the hard surface to emphasize her sharp words. Gray curls sprung loose of their bobby pins with each toss of her head.

"Ma'am, hello, my name is Mike. I'm the manager, and I'd like to help you however I can. May I ask your name?" He readied a pen.

He noticed a man parked in front inside an old blue truck, shielding his face from view with his hand. *That must be her husband.*

"My name is Mrs. Humphries, and I demand a refund or a replacement. That's how you can help me. My husband said to let it be, but not me! This toaster has a lifetime warranty and just look at this dreadful thing!"

She banged the small appliance harder, and an old bread crust fell out of the door on the bottom.

Seeing the rusted metal exterior, Mike said, “Mrs. Humphries, it doesn’t appear you’ve maintained the toaster well.”

“Instead of helping me, you’re going to insult me.” Her words were rising as her face turned redder.

“How long have you had the toaster?” asked Mike in a polite tone. He hoped his attitude would quiet her voice as customers stopped and stared at them.

“I bought this toaster during the grand opening sale of this store. It hasn’t lasted a lifetime.”

Mike felt taken aback. “But, Mrs. Humphries, our store has been open for over twenty-five years. The toaster has done well if it has lasted all those years.”

Mike thought Mrs. Humphries was going to throw the toaster at him.

“I demand a replacement now, and you’ll not take advantage of me!”

Mike noticed Shelley, a clerk, listening while standing behind him pricing goods.

"Mike, do you need help?" asked Shelley.

He turned so Mrs. Humphries couldn’t see him speak.

“Shelley, would you get a new toaster for Mrs. Humphries? I don’t think we carry that brand anymore, but it will make her happy.”

I’ll have to pay for it myself, but I’ve got to get that woman out of here. I never thought I’d buy merchandise for a customer. Shelley hurried down the tile aisle toward housewares to get a new toaster.

“Ma’am, you’re correct. Twenty-five years isn’t a lifetime. We will provide a replacement.”

Mrs. Humphries reached out her hands to accept the smooth box with the shining silver toaster inside.

“You shouldn’t have been reluctant to do the right thing,” she said.

The elderly woman turned and clicked toward the store’s exit.

“Hurry, Shelley, and clean that mess of toast crumbs up,” said Mike throwing the old toaster into the trash with a thump. Mike could smell burnt toast drifting from the waste can.

“All right, everyone, the show’s over. Go on with your shopping.” *There’s no denying they’re amused.*



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

The Secret

Her father had cancer. Renal cancer. So ill it affected his mind. He would rage at her mother. Accuse her of duping him. Lying to him. Making him a cuckold. And she denied it. Of course, she did. Of course she was his daughter. How could he doubt it?

Well, he said, an angry sneer on his lips, her mother *was* a flirt. She jumped into bed with me, she jumped into bed with others.

Her mother shook her head, pulled gently on her daughter's arm.

"It's not true," she whispered.

He hollered after them, "It's true. It's true! I swear it."

They left the medicine smell of his room and sat at the kitchen table with its patterned gray design, like little chips of rock laid out like the edge of a cold lake. Hands around hot mugs of coffee, she swore to the girl that she was his.

Nodding, the girl told her mother she believed her. It was his cancer that made him rage. The girl took her mother's hand, dotted with age spots, her wedding ring tight around her finger, the girl thinking, this explains it, this is why he's been so hard on me, so cold, and why he's always come home from work and immediately gone to bed, ignoring us until dinner, raging at the us, red faced, over the smallest misdeed or misunderstanding.

Her mother cried, and the girl cried, while he lay down the hall in his hospital bed, doubting, muttering, grudging.

And when the two women were done crying, the mother and daughter hugged, and the daughter left to go home feeling a measure of relief that she just might *not* be his.