



10 BY 10

FLASH FICTION STORIES



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Welcome to Issue 36. Eight of the ten flash fiction writers are appearing for the first time, including Xan Grant who has her first story in print. All their stories along with the two returning authors, Paul Beckman and Khoi Pham present unique voices and entertaining tales. Pull up a comfortable chair, sip on an ice tea and some chips and enjoy these stories.

Zvi A. Sesling

Editor



Zvi A. Sesling, Brookline, MA Poet Laureate (2017-2020), has published numerous poems and flash fiction. He edited *Muddy River Poetry Review* and now edits *10 By 10 Flash Fiction Stories*. Sesling has won international and national poetry prizes. He is a five-time Pushcart Prize nominee. His most recent poetry chapbook is *Simple Game & Ghost of Fenway*. Sesling recently published *Wheels*, a flash fiction chapbook. His full volume flash fiction book is *Secret Behind The Gate*. His most recent flash fiction book is *40 Stories* co-authored with Paul Beckman. His forthcoming books are *Selected and New Poetry* and a flash fiction book titled *Infidelities*. He lives in Brookline, MA with his wife Susan J. Dechter.



Xan Grant received their BFA from Full Sail University. Their writing usually explores themes of family dynamics, human moments, and identity. This would be their first published work.

Through the Window

We argue outside our apartment complex. We live on the 2nd floor but the apartment below us always has their curtain open. I've never seen who lives there. I only know them by the way their lights stay on long after ours have turned out, by the way they drink from a Brita while we use the tap, by the way their sink is always free from dirty dishes while our own seem endless. While we're tearing each other apart on the concrete sidewalk, they're living in a stable home.

Nothing stands out to me more than the blue glass mug always drying on the counter by the window. I start to look for it without meaning to. It's become the only reliable thing in my life. Bills threaten to put me in ruin, our relationship is falling apart, but that blue glass mug stays where it is. Where it has always been.

The end of the week arrives. You're late to arrive home. I'm left with nothing but my thoughts and our everlasting mess of a home. I start to clean. It's better than thinking.

As I wash the dishes, my thoughts drift to that blue glass mug downstairs. Maybe, I think, maybe it's the stability I need tonight. With trash bag in hand, I leave my apartment and step into the night. I throw the bag into the dumpster with more force than needed.

I return to the front of my apartment building and that's when I notice. The blue glass mug has a thin crack along its side, hairline but undeniable. It catches the light from the kitchen in a jagged line. Something inside me cracks too.

Days pass. Today I wonder if they can hear us shouting above them, our stomps like drums echoing across a battlefield before war. War comes. You shoot another insult over your shoulder and it's just another bullet in a long line, but this one finally kills us.

You race down the stairs, and I am three steps behind you. The night air brushes my skin, offering no comfort. I beg you to stay, but you don't surrender this time. Your car door slams shut. I stay standing on the sidewalk.

You're gone, and this time I'm sure you're not coming back. My eyes dart with uncertainty to look for the blue glass mug in our downstairs neighbor's window. It too is gone.



Calla Smith lives and writes in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She enjoys continuing to discover all the forgotten corners of the city she has come to call home. She has published a collection of flash fiction, *What Doesn't Kill You*. Her work can also be found in several literary journals.

Always Bring Your Best Friend

Lea had tried to put distance between her and the house. But inevitably, in the sun-tinged dawn, she would find herself awake and remembering all those nights long ago as her parents were off being the life of someone else's party.

She often worried that they had left her forever in the deafening silence of the void. Had she heard them whispering that they were going to Mexico? Wherever it was, Lea was sure it was better than there, where they would only fight, their voices raised to drown out the howling of the coyotes outside.

She needed to talk to someone, and so the wooden mermaid that hung above her bathroom became like a sister to her, and they shared every childhood hurt and joy. For a time,

Lea had a schoolgirl crush on a large teddy bear she got for Christmas, but that was soon replaced by the action figure of the Golden Amazon. Could an action figure count as her first love? Of course it could. Some things were so beautiful that they didn't need to speak. Suddenly, the Golden Amazon became the one thing that was always with her. She brought it to school and to sleepovers.

The Golden Amazon and the mermaid were the only things that she could count on, even as childhood gave way to her teenage years and high school. She knew she had to keep them a secret, and tried to make friends and go on dates, but she always found herself back at home alone talking to things that couldn't talk back. She couldn't live the rest of her life like that. She had to leave.

Once the decision was made, she didn't care anymore if her parents had been at work or with friends or simply avoiding being together at home. The only thing that mattered was that she had her backpack and had started packing. She treasured her ticket to the other side of the world. Lea left a few days after her 18th birthday, without saying goodbye.

But once she arrived, she missed the Golden Amazon with a dull ache that wouldn't subside. Nothing was the same without her. She tried to move on, find a job, move into an apartment, but there was something dull and empty about her life that she thought would be fixed by the move. After an endless parade of sleepless mornings, she told herself that was why she picked up the phone after so long. But when she called, she only heard the echoing of each ring in the house that had been more of a mausoleum, and a click as the answering machine

told her to leave a message. No one was home, now that she was gone. She could imagine the Golden Amazon sitting where she had left her, straining to hear her voice while she left a message, seeking consolation from the mermaid. She couldn't stop the tears flowing down her cheeks.



OFFICE

Paul Beckman's latest flash collection is *Becoming Mirsky* (Cervana Press), a fictional memoir in flash that was a finalist for the 2024 Indie Book Awards. His stories have appeared in *Fiction*, *Fictive Dream*. He started the FBomb flash fiction series in NY's KGB and curated it for nine years.

Dr. Sheldon Berkowitz DMD, JD, DPM, MFA and PA

The receptionist led me into the dental operatory. "Sheldon Berkowitz DMD, JD, DPM, MFA and PA will be right in," she said.

My dentist chipped my tooth when he sneezed. He had both hands in my mouth. It was my right front upper tooth that I use for opening bags of candy and the like. He told me I needed a crown, and I told him I didn't need a crown when I walked into his office and it was his fault, not mine. He then said he'd give me a break and only charge me fifty percent which came out to \$1500 dollars, and he'd eat the other half.

Dr. Berkowitz DMD, JD, DPM, MFA, and PA got up from his stool, walked slowly over to his sink, ran the water, picked up the dental floss and began flossing his teeth while studying himself in the mirror.

Don't you take responsibility for mistakes that you make? I asked.

If the tooth was stronger this never would have happened, he said.

Listen, I said, my ripper tooth was in good condition when I walked into your office. I expect you to make a crown and take the impression right now while I'm sitting in your chair.

Dr. Sheldon Berkowitz DMD, JD, DPM, MFA, and PA hemmed, and hawed all the while flossing non-stop.

Being in sales I knew the first person to talk during a negotiation loses so I remained silent while Dr. Sheldon Berkowitz DMD, JD, DPM, MFA, and PA hummed as he flossed.



Jillian Schedneck has published a memoir with PanMacmillan. Her stories and essays have been published in *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Brevity*, *Redivider* and elsewhere. Her work has been chosen as a notable essay in the Best American Essays series and won multiple Solas Awards for Travel Writing. She lives in Canberra, Australia, with her partner and two children. Her website is jillianschedneck.com.

The Mirror Between Us

We're sitting on the curb when Taylor lifts the dirty water bottle to my mouth and trickles the drops past my lips. The rim of the bottle smells like old socks and a faint tang of sweat. When he's tipped the last drops, he hurls the bottle into the vast, empty lot. It bangs against the white strip of concrete that marks where cars should park, but there haven't been any cars here for years, maybe decades.

Taylor brushes my overgrown bangs out of my eyes and I let him, even though I like half seeing the world.

“We've gotta get you a haircut.”

I follow his gaze to the salon in the middle of the strip mall behind us. Taylor gets on his knees, pulls an old towel from his dirt-crusted backpack, and drapes it around my shoulders. He's kneeling behind me, and it's as if I'm in a salon chair. I can feel him tying the ends at the back of my neck with his own hair tie, shaking his brown strands loose.

“Close your eyes,” he says.

I do. I hear him make a soft, rhythmic sound with his tongue, like he's shushing my hair into submission. His fingers graze my scalp as he mimes cutting, combing, arranging. I picture the hair falling around me, sliding into the dusty concrete. When I open my eyes, nothing has changed except the air between us.

He steps back, pretending to study his work.

“Better,” he says. I nod, feeling the word differently now—not just better, but lighter.

He tosses the towel aside, and the wind catches it, spinning it across the parking lot like something alive. Taylor laughs, small and bright, and I can't help but laugh too.

“Well, that towel had it coming,” he teases.

I reach up and touch my hair—still heavy, still tangled—but I feel him there, steady and present. He brushes an invisible strand from my face, and for a moment the world shrinks

to just us, the empty lot, and the warmth in the space between.

“Okay,” he says, eyes twinkling, “now we can conquer the world—or at least the next block.”

I smile, letting the empty lot fade around us. It doesn’t matter that nothing else has changed. For now, this is enough.



Barbara Kivowitz started writing when she discovered journaling quieted her chronic pain. Her book, *Love in the Time of Chronic Illness*, for patients/caregivers, led to articles in popular and clinical publications. She has published poetry, fiction, and memoir in *Passager Journal*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *the Writers Journal*, *Instant Noodles*, *Dread Literary Review*. One of her pieces was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She spends half her time in San Francisco advocating for patients and caregivers. The other half she spends in the Sierra Foothills hiking and watching out for mountain lions.

Cherry Garcia

Jane had a clear purpose. In and out. Grab the pint of cherry gacia, the ice cream not the yogurt, get back home, and climb into her cat pajamas and bunny slippers. Slide the special tiny spoon she used for ice cream into the cold, hard sweetness and try to convince herself, again, that the size of the spoon lowered the calories.

She knew Johnny's Corner Market would be pretty empty at midnight, the hour of her nightly longing, except for the derelicts reaching grubby fingers into grimy pockets and pulling out the dollars they had begged that day to buy a bottle of the cheapest bourbon.

Jane opened the freezer door and felt the cool air flow up her sleeve as she reached for her pint. She heard a fierce shout and Johnny's tremulous response, "Take what you want. Just don't shoot."

Jane dropped to the floor, getting as small and low as she could. She felt the bits of shoe grit and trash push into her cheek. She heard more smashing, more shouting, more pleading. Then suddenly blue and red swirling lights reflected back into the room from the open freezer door. More shouting. "Down on the floor, arms behind your head." She heard Johnny quietly crying.

Jane grabbed her pint of cherry gacia, put it under her coat flap and ran out the door. Tonight, she thought, she had really earned all those calories.



Khoi Pham is a Vietnam-born and now Germany-based software engineer. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *10 By 10 Flash, Flash Fiction Magazine, Bewildering Stories, 101 Words and Academy of the Heart and Mind*.

Ālā qù chīfān

They met each other in Marseilles after her flight was delayed three hours in Algiers. It was mid-December, one o'clock at night. She found his name while searching for a two-hour ride on a ride-hailing app. She saw him standing next to his black Renault Clio, buying a parking ticket. He was thirty-five at most, with curly hair and olive skin that reminded her of the southern seas.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“Shanghai.”

“I’m half French, but my French isn’t very good. Désolé, mon français n’est pas très bon.” The winter rain grew heavier on the windshield and made every color blur together.

“I was in Shanghai.”

“When was that?”

“That was the year they organized a Grand Prix final there. I saw it on television. I was an engineer on our ship, Glaros.”

“Glaros?”

“Oh, it means ‘seagull.’”

“Oh, nice.”

“What does your name mean in Chinese?”

“It means ‘Magnolia.’”

“My name means ‘little king.’”

The rain had stopped. Thick clouds had made way for the dark sky and a star that lit up the patch of sky ahead of them. She saw millions of dots of light from a city far away. In her sleepiness and the hazy light, he looked like a figure in a Joaquin Sorolla painting.

“Ālā qù chīfān.”

“I don’t get it.”

“It’s Shanghainese,” he laughed. “It means ‘Shall we have a meal together?’”

“Okay.”

“A woman in Shanghai taught me that.”

“You had a relationship with a woman there?”

“Just a casual hook-up. She worked in a bar.”

“And then?”

“Then the contract was off. I went back to Thessaloniki.”

The road became narrower, rockier, as they got onto the rural road that led to Digne.

“Why did you move to France?” she asked.

“My dad wanted to take me here.”

“So he was French.”

“He was a sailor. He met my mom when he visited my hometown, and they married.”

“And then?”

“Then they divorced and never saw each other again.”

A moment passed.

“I don’t think you were an engineer in Shanghai.”

“Why do you think so?”

“The last Grand Prix there was two decades ago. You don’t look forty-ish.”

“Oh dear, oh dear, aren’t you curious?” he burst out laughing.

The car entered a stone-paved street with grey, dilapidated buildings. He opened the door for her.

“Will we hear from each other?”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“Ālā qù chīfān?”

She smiled. “I really have to get some sleep first.”

After her silhouette finally vanished into the stairway, he lit a cigarette and picked up his ringing phone.

“Honey, you’re still awake?”

“When will you be home?”

“Before sunrise.”

“You really should stop driving at this hour.”

“I should. The last customer was nice, fortunately. It’s easy to stay awake when the passenger keeps the story going.”

For a moment, while a wisp of cigarette smoke drifted and blended into the black sky, he tried to remember what her name was. Then he drove away, and it was all silence.



TG Smith is a retired IT guy turned fiction writer who likes Science Fiction and History told in the first person. He lives in Tennessee with his wife, Margaret, and enjoys traveling, trading stocks, reading about space travel and playing with his granddaughter. See other stories at everydayfiction.com and SpanktheCarp.com and listen for an upcoming reading of “Old Ben” on the Kaidanki Podcast.

The Hawaiian Special

Trevor heard that the aliens had opened a new tanning salon in town and were running a promotion called the Hawaiian Special. He entered the salon, paid the attendant and was ushered into a tanning cubicle with a plaque that read “Luau Room”. He laid down on the tanning bed and pulled down the lid. Immediately he saw and felt a blue glow all around him. The room went into motion as his bed began to rotate. The operator watched his console until the light labeled “Copy Completed” came on. Trevor left the shop, delighted with his all over tan.

The tanning salon supervisor grinned at the operator. “They have no idea, do they?”

“None.” Acknowledged the operator.

“Where is this one headed?” asked the supervisor.

“The zoo on Acbatek, I think.”

“Really?” said the supervisor. “Not a very unique specimen in my opinion.”

“Breeding stock.” Said the operator. “They’re starting a conservation program on Acbatek. It’s a compatible environment for this species. You know how the bleeding hearts are when a planet is marked for environmental reconstruction.”

“We’ll need more than one. It takes two on this planet, you know?” said the supervisor.

“I already have a few females. This was our first male.”

“Yeah. Okay. Box’em up and I’ll prepare the paperwork.”

“Got it boss.”



Lesley Brown is a New York City-based writer and educator. She writes flash and short fiction about adolescence, memory, and queer coming-of-age. Her work has appeared in *Short-Story.me*.

Little Foxes

It was a Saturday in December and I was in Greenwich Village. I was fifteen and with my friend Karina after our weekly acting class. I was guiltily in love with her and she had invited me to get something to eat. We went to Ray's Original Pizza on Sixth and Eleventh. She explained there were knockoffs of it all over Manhattan but this location was really the original. One of my favorite things about Karina was that she was from the city but unassuming in how much she knew about it.

"You did a great job today, by the way," she said. We stood at the counter, carefully eating our steaming slices. "I meant to tell you that before."

I blushed. I seldom received compliments and never knew how to accept them. "You don't have to say that."

"I know," she said smiling. "Which is why I did." Karina put her slice down and looked at me. She had a way of looking at you like you were the only person in the world. "You should really consider acting after school. Have you thought about a BFA?" She was always thinking ahead the way my old friends in Brooklyn did. We lived there until fifth grade when my dad got a job in Connecticut.

"I don't know," I lied. The truth was I'd thought about it quite a bit, but the idea of an audition was too overwhelming. "You?"

She shook her head. "I'm not interested in a conservatory. I'd rather study Russian Lit or Art History." I envisioned her walking on a picturesque campus with a stack of dense texts. An attractive boy offering to carry them. I did not like the image.

"Anyway, consider it," she reiterated and looked at her watch. It was clunky and would have looked absurd on anyone else, but it looked great on her because everything looked great

on her. "I have to meet my mom now," she said apologetically. "But, before I forget," she dug into her weathered saddle bag, "I found this at a book stand the other day."

She handed me a worn-out paperback of *The Little Foxes*. I froze, staring at it incredulously. It was my favorite play and I'd recently lost my copy. I'd forgotten I told her that. I eventually stammered a thank you and she hugged me goodbye. Through the window I watched her walk into the cold, surrounded by tall buildings with Christmas lights on fire escapes.

I wanted her to turn back and wave goodbye, but I was just as happy that she didn't.



Jan English Leary is the author of three books: *Town and Gown*, *Skating on the Vertical*, and *Thicker Than Blood* (Fomite Press). Her short fiction has appeared in such journals as *Pleiades*, *Carve*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Inkfish*, and others. She received an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts and she lives in Chicago.

Misophonia

The smoke detector battery woke me, beeping somewhere in the house. I found it in the kitchen, dragged a stepladder over, ripping it off the ceiling, slamming it to the floor. Back in bed, too angry to sleep between the dripping faucet and my husband's snoring, I shoved him onto his side. I dozed off but woke to the earworm stuck in my head for the past week.

At breakfast, my husband's teeth clicked while eating his hard-boiled egg, and he scraped his spoon in his yogurt bowl, clearing his throat like a faltering car starter. It was all I could do not to sweep the dishes onto the floor. *Enough!*

On the El, the woman near me popped her gum and I itched to slap it out of her mouth. The child across the aisle snuffled and wheezed, so I threw a packet of tissues at him. The mother glared. "Teach your kid some manners."

In the cafe with my tea and book, all around me—humming, smacking, clinking, slurping, cackling. Escaping outside, just as fighter jets screeched and zoomed overhead, practicing for the Air and Water Show, I covered my head to ward off an attack and ran the last two blocks home, the sound rattling my body.

In the basement, earplugs stuffed in my ears, pillow over my head, struggling to breathe, waiting for the attacks to end.



Marc Watson is an author, educator, and father of two residing in Michigan. He spent most of his years in Texas before making a dramatic, life-changing move to Hawaii. There, he taught at an elementary school while simultaneously finding a passion for writing on secluded beaches and in the thick of tropical forests. He became a father and moved once more to Michigan with his growing family, where he now writes under the canopy of maple trees. When his two young children allow him to, of course. His prose has appeared *Café Lit*, *Bewildering Stories* and *Piker Press*.

Yucky Bones

“Hun, can you help me figure out what Charlie is talking about? My parents are almost here, and I still have to check on the ham plus three more sides to prepare.” Seeing his wife completely frazzled, he immediately agrees. “Yeah. No problem, hun. What’s he saying?” She closes her eyes and takes a long breath, calming her nerves. “He keeps talking about how he doesn’t want to eat the yucky bones.” “The bones?” “Yeah. I have no idea.”

The man finds his son lying across his bed, scrolling on a tablet. “Hey, Charlie. Mom said you were telling her you don’t want to eat bones?” Without looking up, the boy responded. “Blech. I am not eating it. If you make me do it, I’m reporting you guys for child abuse. It’s gross!” The man stared at his son, bewildered. “Bud, no one is going to make you eat bones.” Charlie clearly appeared victorious.

The father heard cheerful voices indicating his in-laws’ arrival. “Hey, Charlie. Let’s get off that thing and go say hi to your grandparents.” The boy dropped his head. “Ugh. Do I have to? Grand-mama always squeezes me too tight and says something dumb about me growing up too fast. Gramp’s cool. Yesterday we talked about how different stuff is made, but he did get our team killed in Corp Combat.” Charlie’s dad scoffed. “Get your butt up and go say hi.”

Reluctantly, and with a show of exasperated grandeur, Charlie got up and walked to the door. His father followed in tow, shaking his head with a warm smile. Nearing the end of the hall, Charlie had to be nudged forward. The moment he came into view of his grandparents, his grandmother threw her hands in the air with joy. “Well, there he is! Wow, I

know it hasn't been that long since I saw you last, but you are growing like it has been a couple of years! You'd better stop growing so fast for your mom's sake."

Charlie's grandma gave him a hug that he swore was squeezing the life out of him. His grandpa came up to him next and gave him a half hug. "Sorry about the match yesterday. I know I got carried away and didn't even see him coming." Charlie smiled. "It's okay. It was still fun, though, and wasn't a point match, anyway." His mom came up and rubbed Charlie's shoulder. "Is everyone ready to eat?" Charlie spun to look his mom in the eyes. "But no yucky bones! You can't make me."

Charlie's mom looked up and smirked with a shrug. "I have no idea. He has been saying it all morning." Grandpa gave a hearty laugh. "That's my fault. Yesterday I told him about how brown gravy was made, and when I told him about the bone broth, he swore to never eat it again." They all had a great laugh, but Charlie got his way and didn't have to eat the yucky bones.