

10 BY 10

FLASH FICTION STORIES

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Francine Witte



James Clar



Gloria Mindock



Suren Hossein



Kalliopy Paleos



Mitchell Toews



Nasreen Tamaa Zankawah



Mel Fawcett

7



Sarah Robinson



Paul Goodwin

Welcome to Issue 39. It is nice to welcome back Francine Witte from New York City, Gloria Mindock from Somerville, Massachusetts, Kalliopy Paleos with roots in Greece, France and New Jersey and Paul Goodwin from Somerset, England as well as newcomers James Clar from upstate New York and Hawaii, Suren Hossein from Iran, Mitchell Toews from Manitoba, Canada, Nassreen Tamaa Zankawah from Ghana and a student at the University of Alabama (Birmingham), Sara Robinson who writes from Canada and Mel Fawcett from London, England. This truly international issue brings varying stories which I am sure you will enjoy. So, pull up that comfortable recliner or sofa, sit back and read on!

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.



Francine Witte is a flash fiction writer and poet, and the author of the flash collection *RADIO WATER*. Her newest poetry book, *Some Distant Pin of Light*, has just been published by Cervena Barva Press. Her work has been widely published, and she is a recent recipient of a Pushcart Prize. She lives in New York City. Please visit her website francinewitte.com. She can be found on social media @francinewitte.

Marriage Chatter

Harry is sitting on the couch, all disgusto – scraggle beard and ratty robe, tells me he’s watching something on the murder channel.

I say “what?”

He says the Turner channel.

Okay.

I ask Harry what he’d like for dinner, because like any other creature living in my home, I feed him, and he says I want to choke you and stomp on your heart.

I say “what?”

He says artichoke hearts.

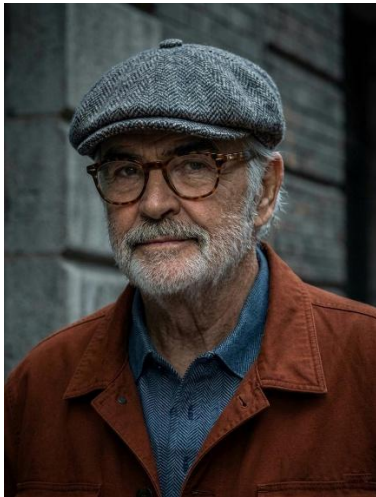
Whew, now I realize things have been stressed between me and Harry. Something about how my mother calls me ten times a day and tells me I could have done so much better. How Harry and I stopped talking months ago. How my ears stopped hearing what he says.

I ask Harry what he’d like for Christmas. I decide this that time I will listen nice and close.

“I don’t want to look at your stupid face anymore,” he says, not even looking away from the TV. “I just want you to leave, leave, leave.”

Oh, I get it. He wants a copy of “Leaves of Grass.” Good idea. Maybe I have been wrong about Harry. Maybe we could learn to sit and read poetry to one another. But still, I say “what?”

Ya heard me, Harry says.



James C. Clar is a writer and retired teacher who divides his time between the wilds of Upstate New York and the (mostly!) more congenial climes of Honolulu, Hawaii. Most recently, his short fiction has appeared in *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *The Arcanist Magazine of Literary Fantasy*, *Flash Digest*, *Sudden Flash Magazine*, *After Thought/Literary Journal*, *The Yard Crime Blog*, *365 Tomorrows*, *Freedom Fiction Journal* and *Antipodean-SF*.

Keeping Costs Down

“Hey, Laurie,” Sheila said to her colleague. “What’s wrong?”

Laurie managed a strained smile, her fingers curled tightly around a chipped faculty lounge mug. “We had Barney ‘put to sleep’ yesterday. He’s been in such pain. Couldn’t stand to see him like that anymore.”

Sheila’s expression softened with immediate empathy. She slid into the chair across from her friend. Other teachers murmured over quiz papers at a table across the room. “I’m sorry. It’s awful at the end, watching them decline like that.”

Laurie nodded. Her gaze remained fixed on the cloudy surface of her coffee. “It wasn’t just the pain. He stopped doing the things he loved. Stopped responding. Somedays he didn’t even know we were there.”

Sheila folded her hands on the table. “The waiting is the worst part, right? You start counting the good days ... hoping. Then, there aren’t any more ‘good’ days.”

Laurie looked up and spoke quietly. “Yesterday morning he wouldn’t eat. He just lay there breathing like it hurt to keep going.” She hesitated. “I kept thinking ... maybe he just wants it to stop.”

Silence stretched between them. Across the room, someone scraped a chair across linoleum already worn and pitted.

“We went through the same thing with old Rex,” Sheila finally said. “Just last year, in fact. He lasted longer than anyone expected and, then ... it just got worse. Confused, restless and in constant pain. We kept praying he’d turn a corner.” She shook her head mournfully.

Laurie shifted in her chair. “Did you ever wonder if you waited too long? Or, maybe, not long enough?”

“All the time,” Sheila admitted. “After the fact, you second-guess everything. But then I force myself to remember how he looked that last week, then I know. You made the right call. In time, you’ll realize that. Believe me.”

Laurie's grip tightened on her now, half-empty mug. "He looked up at me, right at the end." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I like to think I saw gratitude in his eyes."

"I'm sure you did," Sheila affirmed.

"They told me it was the only humane thing," Laurie continued after a heartbeat. "They were very calm. Efficient."

Sheila gave a sympathetic nod. "They're trained to be that way. "It's easier for everyone."

"Maybe," Laurie said noncommittally as she exhaled. "They kept talking about responsibility."

"Responsibility?" Sheila repeated, confused.

Laurie looked up from her coffee. "About not burdening the system." She paused, as if weighing whether to continue. "About how important it is to set a good example."

"That's strange," Sheila finally replied. If anything, she was more perplexed now than she had been earlier.

Laurie traced a faint crack along the rim of her mug with her thumb. Her voice, when she spoke again was steady but detached. "The doctor explained that I was doing my duty as a good citizen, helping to keep costs down. He reminded me that our kids would be expected to do the same thing with me someday too."



Gloria Mindock is editor of Červená Barva Press. She is an award-winning author of six poetry collections, three chapbooks and two translations into Romanian and Serbian. Her poems have been published and translated into eleven languages and her recent book, *Grief Touched the Sky at Night* (Glass Lyre Press, 2023), won the International Impact Award, the Speak-up Talk Radio International Firebird Award and the Independent Press Award. www.gloriamindock.com

Monster

This path is walked on by many, myself included. It is a shortcut to get home for me. Sometimes I am alone on this path with beautiful trees, plants, a full-fledged woods. I take the route before 5:00PM. It was 4:45PM and I decided to take the shortcut. It would be ok.

A white van was parked off the trail almost hidden by the trees.

Later, in the news, there was a report of a murder on the path at 5:00PM. The whole town was nervous and on guard. At the end of the week, they found another body of a girl north of town. This did not help matters. Everyone was freaking out.

One day, while walking home, a man jumped out of the bushes. He said, "What do you think I'm going to do, murder you? I ran. No one was outside in their yards to ask for help. I cut through a field to get to my house and fell, getting grass stains on my pants. Worried that he would catch up to me, I got up and continued running as fast as I could.

Once home, I locked the door to keep the monster out. The murders were never solved. I moved away knowing it could have been me.



Suren Hossein is a Tehran-based sports writer with nearly three decades of experience in Iranian sports journalism. Over the years, I have also worked as a cartoonist, which you can find on my page @suretoon and I have written short stories and flash fiction.

Survival

He had gone to the usual bar at the usual hour and ordered the usual drink.

The bar's large screen was playing a survival show. Some customers were downing their shots while others chatted animatedly, heads warm with drink.

A pack of wild dogs had managed to trap a deer. The customers were too absorbed in their own affairs to pay attention to the screen.

The woman beside him offered a cigarette. The way she looked at him suggested she was looking for someone to talk to.

All of this was unfolding before the eyes of safari tourists, who were snapping pictures left and right.

The ash on the woman's cigarette grew longer and longer, about to fall onto the counter. He calculated that this was the ninety-ninth day he had come to this café alone.

The wild dogs, heads and mouths bloodied, each tore off a piece of the deer and went on their way.

The man brought his cigarette close to the woman's face to light it. Her perfume mingled with the scent of her skin.

The wild dogs were gone, as if only moments ago a deer had never been grazing in that thicket. "One deer had been removed from all the deer in the world, and yet nothing happened," he thought to himself.

"I wish the world would be rid of these wild dogs once and for all," the woman said.

The man's eyes drifted back to the screen, but the woman gestured toward a few people at the far end of the bar who were playing billiards noisily, half-drunk and rowdy.



Kalliopy Paleos studied contemporary American poetry at SUNY Brockport. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize as well as Best Microfiction for 2026 and completed her third full-length novel translation from Greek. Poetry and prose publications include *10 by 10 Flash Fiction*, *ERGON Magazine for Greek-American Arts and Letters*, and *Flash Boulevard*. She is currently trying to improve her cooking, but it's not going well. Her favorite place for time travel is the 18th century.

Slow Moon Over ShopRite

No moon yet? Rebecca crosses the parking lot, wondering.

White rivulets stream down the silvery-blue face of the sky. A silvery-blond baby boy floats on his father's shoulders. The mother follows, her threadbare leggings a web of winking silvery elastic. The father lifts the child down deftly as they all reach the glinting glass doors together, Rebecca the stranger trailing behind.

In the store, she hunts and gathers food-like snacks, which are all her daughter will eat to keep her meds down. The silvery foil bags of freeze-dried strawberries crinkle. She stares at the glossy protein shakes, baffled by price per quart versus price per ounce.

Behind her at checkout, an elegant lady in flowing white linen and flashing silver rings sings softly along with the store music. With a shining smile, she asks all about Rebecca's veggie straws. Rebecca wonders whether this doe-eyed woman also jolts awake at night, fearing herself forgotten in some dingy hospital at the end of her life. She hands her the veggie straws for a look. Gently. If they crumble in the bag her daughter won't eat them, won't survive the long school day.

Two checkouts away the baby boy hiccups, drowsing heavily in the silver shopping cart. Though unable to meet her eye, Rebecca manages a cheerful goodbye to the glowing lady who waves back, music falling quietly from her tender mouth.

Cantering past the young family towards the exit, Rebecca sees the baby's faint brows furrow in his pearly face, hears him gulp for air with a sudden hitch in his throat. When they catch up to her, she wonders about venturing a motherly smile, but they stare past her. Rebecca

sees the father's silver cross swinging on its chain as the automatic doors roll open, glimpses the bluish whites of the mother's eyes scattering any nosy shoppers unless they'd like a fight.

Outside, the baby gives a pale moan, then unleashes his first splitting scream.

In the cascading sky, a luminous phantom circle is forming, pocked with lunar mountains, dripping with dry, silver riverbeds. Arms full because she forgets to set her bags down, Rebecca struggles with her driver's side door from the back seat because the handle has long been broken.

The mother and father flick threats at the sobbing baby. Then comes the first, hard slap.

Rebecca sifts the air through her nostrils, arranges her bags carefully for the drive home (must protect the cheddar Goldfish). The immense, swimming moon fills half the sky among pinwheeling clouds. Her keys tumble under the seat with a jingle; she twists to fish them up.

The baby's wailing fills the parking lot. Rebecca hears a second square whack on his cheek.

She shuts herself into the car. Turns the key in the ignition, eyes fixed on the firmament. The hitch in her own throat unlatches. An empty shopping cart bangs into the clothing drop. She pulls away, wondering about ghostly skies. *What is watching us through the light?*



Mitchell Toews is a multiple Pushcart Prize and a Journey Prize nominee. He is the author of *Pinching Zwieback* (At Bay Press, 2023). A second collection and a debut novel are forthcoming in 2026/27. His work has appeared in 157 journals around the world, including *Sky Island Journal*, *Fictive Dream*, *The Corpus Callosum Journal*, and *Chiron Review*.

From Äare to Zyreen

Saturday is the worst day to wake up to an asthma attack — a fit, Oma calls them — because that is the day the workers at the bakery let me haul their pop bottle empties to Economy Store. They are worth two cents each, and a case of six is worth a bag of chips and a big gumball. Mr. Vogel always makes me wash the bottles out because "*da schticky vuns* attract flies" is how he says it. He talks just like Oma, and they knew each other in Fischau, which is far away.

I missed out on most of the bottles because Arty Farty got there first, and all that was left was one family-size one. It was worth five cents, so not bad. I got my money and picked what I wanted. I was waiting to pay, standing there tapping my nickel on the glass counter, and Mr. Vogel was just talking and talking forever to some lady about grain prices, and I decided to just slip the Fat Emma chocolate bar in my pocket. So I did. And I kept the nickel.

When I opened the door, the little bell jingled and I wanted to run. I remembered about how Mr. Vogel gave us credit for more than a month after my dad fell off the ladder and couldn't paint houses no more. We ate pancakes and eggs and bacon almost every day, which was actually more than what we usually had. My mom teased Dad in German that he should break the other leg yet too.

So, I was thinking about going to the park, but Mom said come straight away home because of my coughing, and then I thought of Oma going to Economy to talk with all the ladies that go there to sit in the chairs by the window. I wondered if Mr. Vogel knew what I did, because I always buy something with my pop bottle money. I leaned on the white picket fence with my hand on the Fat Emma bar in my pocket. It was getting soft. I could have half now and half after my nap.

"*Oba ja*, Diedrich, there you are..." he said when I came back in. He was tall and thin and he wore the same nice suit every day and a white shirt and tie. His nails were clean and he sometimes gave me a few firecrackers to sweep the sidewalk in front of the store.

I put the nickel on the counter in front of him.

"I thought maybe you forgot. I'm *sooo* glad you remembered!" He pushed the coin back to the edge. "Here, keep it for good luck. And next time I'll *schneed* that Mrs. Feeblekorn off before she's gonna tell me every word in the dictionary!"



Nasreen Tamaa Zankawah is a Ghanaian writer, journalist, and literary blogger. Her novel, *The Wild Rose*, was published by Malthouse Press, and her poem, “Fallen Vine,” appeared in *Spillwords*. She is currently pursuing a Master’s degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Sleepless

Titi’s client’s body jerked, slightly shifting the bed sideways. She walked to him, seeing that his eyes were still shut, and touched his arm. His red-rimmed eyes blinked at her as he sat up in his wet shirt.

“I couldn’t go past where I got off the bus, again. I don’t remember anything else from the dream,” the client said.

“Could it be that you are afraid of what you will see once you remember what happened afterwards?” Titi asked. The client shrugged, avoiding her eyes. She suspected he was lying. As a Jungian analyst, most of her clients showed willingness to interpret their dreams but served her a barrel of excuses once she began her analysis of archetypes. She knew better than to push hard because the last time she tried, a client flung a vase of lilies at her head and she was lucky to have ducked in time, so it grazed her ear, and shattered her office window. That memory hovered around her daily, and she wondered if informing a client that her dream represented a possible imprisonment was worth losing her life for.

The guppy fish in her fish tank pressed its lips against the glass, facing her and flicking its tail. It was her favorite and the most restful fish in the tank. By staring at it, she hoped its restfulness would seep into her. She was startled when her door banged, and she assumed her client had grown tired of waiting for her response when he bid her goodbye.

“Hey Titi, I’m heading home. Don’t leave late! I’m beginning to think you’ve snatched the night security guard’s job,” her colleague with the limp, poked his head through the door. Titi laughed and nodded to his caution, tugging at the curls of her hair. She couldn’t tell him that she didn’t care about her home or her bed because she barely slept and didn’t have a family to return to. She did sleep sometimes but yanked awake at the beginning of every dream. She didn’t want any business with her unconscious mind. She was certain that having a dreamless sleep would save her from becoming like her mother.

Her mother’s midnight screams still reverberated in Titi’s mind like thunder and the fire in her eyes whenever she accused Titi’s father of attempting to kill her in her dreams, painted a picture of a woman consumed by hate. Surprisingly, those recurring dreams she claimed to have experienced were incomplete and she always woke up just when Titi’s father gripped a knife.

Titi, on her knees one afternoon, begged her mother to sleep through her dreams to confirm whether her father would really stab her like she claimed. But the response she received was, “Stupid girl! You are conniving with your father to kill me, right?”

She left soon after, plunging Titi’s father into alcoholism until he was admitted into rehab. Since then, the peeling floral wallpaper of Titi’s room became the target of her sleepless gaze.



Mel Fawcett lives in London. More than one hundred of his stories have appeared in various print and online magazines, including *The Pomegranate London*, *Stand*, *Smokebox*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Bright Flash Literary Review* and *Scribes Micro*.

Trees

We moved into a council flat last November. All the flats have got balconies that overlook an expanse of grass the size of a football field; but for some reason it's fenced off, so no one can use it. Some of the flats have been sold by the council and are owner-occupied now. Maybe we'll buy ours one day. Our neighbours on the right, Ted and Nora, bought theirs ten years ago and have done very nicely for themselves. Nora told me the old man on our left has been renting since the block was built over fifty years ago.

Imagine my surprise when I caught sight of David, our twelve-year-old, on the old man's balcony! He told me the old man reminds him of Gramps, who died last year. He apparently met him while the old man was struggling up the stairs with a Christmas tree. I suppose there's no harm in it.

Where does the time go? Christmas flew by and the new year almost brought a problem. David knows it's forbidden to go on the grass - never mind planting a Christmas tree there! The old man put him up to it before being taken into hospital. I hope no one knows it was David; I don't want any trouble. A council employee uprooted the tree and threw it in the trash. David said he was glad that at least the old man didn't know that before he died.



Sarah Robinson is an introspective lover of words. A Canadian writer, her work blends insight from her social work career and family life with a deep interest in mindfulness, compassion, and everyday resilience. She writes to explore the interactions and moments that shape both our inner and outer worlds.

L is for Lobby

The building is old, as is the elevator – a “lift”, she thinks it’s called. The metal gate protests as the man in the brown sweater pulls it closed. She shrinks into the back corner, putting space between them, strangers in a small cage. She sighs and pushes her sweaty hands into the pockets of her skirt, wishing she’d worn jeans. He bounces excitedly on the balls of his feet and adjusts his collar, shrugs his shoulders a few times. The ascension is slow, and the cage sways and creaks.

They pass one floor, then another. The party she doesn’t want to attend is on the rooftop. Of course it is, with she afraid of heights. He clears his throat. She waits for him to pull the gate open once they settle to a stop, expecting him to burst forth into the crowd with his festive energy and a joyous whoop. But he just stands there, still, no bouncing or adjusting. It’s awkward suddenly, so she forces herself to step forward. Shoulder to shoulder with him now, she glances curiously from the corner of her eye. His face is sweaty and flushed. He looks petrified and blows air softly from puffed cheeks. She understands instantly, viscerally. Now it’s her turn to play operator, to secure the gate, to press the buttons.



Paul Goodwin lives in Somerset, England, where he writes fiction and non-fiction. His stories have been published in *Literally Stories*, *CommuterLit*, *Five Minutes*, *CafeLit*, *The Phare* and *Marrow* and *LitBreak* magazines, among others. His books include *Forewarned* (Biteback Publications) and *Something Doesn't Add Up* (Profile).

Room Service

The hotel receptionist eyed my paint-splashed overalls with amusement. “I didn’t know we had maintenance work going on,” she said.

“I’m a guest,” I muttered, cursing the agent who’d booked me here. “We’re decorating the offices next door.”

Her grin didn’t fade as she scanned her computer screen. Outside, Rolls and Bentleys made their stately arrival, spilling grey-haired men in suits with extravagantly dressed young women on their arms.

The receptionist held the room key on its edge as if she feared I’d wet her hands with paint. It clattered on the desk, but she didn’t apologise. A porter asked me if I needed help with my bag, but the way he said “Sir” made me feel like something he’d scraped off his shoe.

I took refuge in my room, bored but safe, surfing the channels for the reassuring familiarity of soaps and football.

Then I spent an hour or so lying on the bed, my stomach gurgling. I dared not risk the chic restaurant with its strange-sounding dishes and even odder prices. In the corridor, the silence was broken by heavy hotel doors slamming and by expensively honed voices speaking and laughing too loudly.

A tap on my door woke me from a doze. I leapt up. A raven-haired woman entered, muttering in a language I did not understand. She strutted to the bed, pulled back the covers, smoothed the wrinkled sheets, then turned and smiled with porcelain-white teeth through ruby lips.

I shrank towards the shadows, muting the TV, terrified of what might be itemised on my expense account.

“You enjoy your stay, Sir?” she cooed with a strong accent. Her dark eyes seemed to simmer with temptation.

“I’m the turndown service, Sir,” she exclaimed as I shooed her away, yelling that I was a happily married man.