

LITERARY MAGAZINE

TWISTED

Tournament



DECEMBER 2025 / VOL.02

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TWISTED TOURNAMENT

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| Behind the Scenes | 01 |
| November Winners | 02 |
| WINNER <i>Chad Frame</i> | 03 |
| WINNER <i>Malte Springer</i> | 05 |
| Round 1 Results | 07 |
| <i>500 word stories</i> | |
| Round 2 Results | 27 |
| <i>250 word stories</i> | |
| Round 3 Results | 36 |
| <i>100 word stories</i> | |
| Side Quests | 44 |
| Annual Pass 2026 | 46 |

CONTENT WARNING

The stories featured in this magazine may
contain mature topics and sensitive
themes.

BEHIND THE SCENES



What an incredible year of Twisted Tournaments it's been! I've had the absolute joy of diving into all the stories you've created - and that's an unbelievable **4,729** Twisted Tournament stories so far!

Almost 5,000 tales full of imagination, heart, humour, and surprise. Each story has reminded me why I love doing this - there's nothing quite like witnessing so many unique voices finding their way onto the page.

After seeing the quality and creativity pouring in, we knew we needed to collect these stories and send them out into the world. Publishing these collections felt like the natural next step; a way to celebrate your hard work, amplify your voices, and share these stories with readers far beyond our wonderful community.

This year we were able to launch Twist magazine, a project that is very important to me as it's a way to showcase stories and pay authors. Many thanks to everybody who has shown their support!

Looking ahead, we've been dreaming big. Without giving too much away, we can say that next year will open the door to some exciting new challenges — among them, the opportunity to submit longer stories. We're thrilled to give you more room to explore your ideas, develop your characters, and take your storytelling even further.

Here's to celebrating all the stories created and to an even more inspiring year to come in 2026!

Nick

TWIST CREATOR
NICK SMITH

COVER ART BY
AMEY MANN

EDITED BY
FREYA KING

OVERALL WINNERS

TWISTED TOURNAMENT NOVEMBER 2025

1ST PLACE

PROBABLY SOMEONE

R1: 9.86 R2: 9.63 R3: 9.21

1ST PLACE

M SPRINGER

R1: 9.11 R2: 9.16 R3: 9.74

2ND PLACE

DANILUCAS

R1: 9.80 R2: 8.73 R3: 8.99

2ND PLACE

KITTY H

R1: 9.07 R2: 8.83 R3: 9.90

3RD PLACE

HARRY H

R1: 9.13 R2: 8.78 R3: 9.53

2ND PLACE

STEVE H

R1: 9.33 R2: 9.19 R3: 9.29

WINNER

[SNAGGLEFANG'S HORDE]



CONGRATULATIONS! HOW DOES IT FEEL TO COME OUT ON TOP?

What I enjoy the most about Twisted Tournament is the rapid-fire nature of the competition rounds. Moving from one length to another with no break in between, for me, engages the part of my brain that performs well under pressure. I really loved the stories I wrote for each round, and it feels wonderful for them to have done well. Even more so to have consistency across the whole contest.

DID ANY OF THE ROUNDS CHALLENGE YOU OR FORCE YOU OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE?

Writing tends to scale in difficulty for me as word count increases. But this time around, that order was reversed. The 500 came to me with the least amount of fuss, followed by the 250. Somehow, I struggled with the 100 most of all.

As a poet, I'm innately obsessed with distillation, and that can and should be a guiding principle for writing of any length and form.

Read Chad's 250 word story, White Diamonds, on page 29.

DID KNOWING YOUR FELLOW WRITERS WOULD BE THE JUDGES CHANGE HOW YOU WROTE OR PRESENTED YOUR WORK?

Not one bit. The message I want to send and the style I want to write would've been the same regardless of who was reading it. I always consider accessibility, though. It's a vital part of writing. A lot of writers, I think, are quick to explain away readers with whom their work doesn't resonate by saying, "Well, it wasn't for them." I think this does both the reader and the writer a grave disservice.

R1: 9.86
ORIGINAL SKIN

R2: 9.63
WHITE DIAMONDS

R3: 9.21
YOURS



CHAD FRAME

WHAT DID THE CONTEST TEACH YOU ABOUT YOUR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES AS A WRITER?

I'm an established poet, but I always joke I'm just a pretender at fiction writing. It's much newer to me and not part of my academic background like poetry is. But, even though many writing in the medium aren't aware of it or even refuse to accept it, flash fiction and microfiction are hybrid forms between poetry and prose. They pay close attention to cadence and sonic sensibilities, and substitute syntax and more controlled sentence structure and punctuation for line breaks, also often using more figurative language than longer-form fiction. Thus, my approach is often similar to the one I take to poetry -- establishing extended metaphor threads that run through the piece, paying close attention to rhythm and soundplay and using concrete imagery to anchor the reader so they aren't unmoored by disconnected abstractions. The building's facade may look different, but the scaffolding is much the same.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO WRITERS ENTERING NEXT YEAR'S TOURNAMENT?

Trust your instincts and don't be afraid to take risks. And above all, have fun with it!

Chad Frame is the author of Little Black Book, nominated for the Lambda Literary Award, Cryptid, and Smoking Shelter, winner of the Moonstone Chapbook Contest. He is Director of the Montgomery County Poet Laureate Program and Poet Laureate Emeritus of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, a founding member of the No River Twice poetry/improv performance troupe, and founder of the Caesura Poetry Festival. Chad is a three-time winner of Writing Battle, a winner of the Not Quite Write Prize, and has placed in the finals of multiple NYC Midnight competitions. His work appears in Rattle, Strange Horizons, Pedestal, Barrelhouse, Rust+Moth, on iTunes from the Library of Congress, and is archived on the moon with The Lunar Codex.



CHAD FRAME

WINNER

[CHERRYHOOF'S CAVALRY]



CONGRATULATIONS! HOW DOES IT FEEL TO COME OUT ON TOP AGAIN?

I really love the three round structure of the tournament, and the variety in writing and judging that comes with it. I've won once before, back in February, and both wins were real come-from-behind victories, where a strong showing in the final round catapulted me into the top spot. To win once was already amazing - my first win anywhere since I started entering competitions back in 2022. To win twice is absolutely surreal.

DID ANY OF THE ROUNDS CHALLENGE YOU OR FORCE YOU OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE?

Coming off of longer, more serious pieces for other competitions, my mind went to lighter fare this time around. I ended up submitting a rom com in round one, and an absurdist comedy in round two, neither of which are in my comfort zone.

One of the things I enjoy most about prompt-based competitions - and, if I dare say, one of my strengths - is interpreting the prompts in unexpected ways. Bending a "ship captain" and the "reflective" mood prompt in round one into a straight-up rom com was probably the biggest challenge. I'm glad it paid off.

DID KNOWING YOUR FELLOW WRITERS WOULD BE THE JUDGES CHANGE HOW YOU WROTE OR PRESENTED YOUR WORK?

Not really - most contests I do are peer-judged. That being said, I feel that Twisted Tournament has one of the more stacked fields out there. The names that pop up on the leaderboards are mostly ones you see do well across other competitions.

I'm not a native speaker and will never beat anyone on beautiful prose, which is why I try to find other ways to stand out - to zig where others zag, so to speak.

R1: 9.11
SHIP HAPPENS

R2: 9.16
EMMA EXPLODES

R3: 9.37
RIVER KNOWS ITS PLACE



MALTE SPRINGER

WHICH OF YOUR THREE ENTRIES ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF, AND WHY?

The 100, for sure. Lots of advice out there tells you to "keep it small", or to stick to a single scene, but I never do. Attempting big stories in small word counts is one of my absolute favorite things to do, and it's worked well for me.

This one started with a silly idea - what if the signs in my prompt sentence "The signs were always there" were literal? - and the final story formed around that idea quite well. Very happy with how it turned out.

Read Malte's 100 word story, [River Knows Its Place](#), on [page 37](#).

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO WRITERS ENTERING NEXT YEAR'S TOURNAMENT?

I understand everyone has different approaches to the writing process, but my personal biggest advice would be: don't start writing too soon. That first idea that popped into your head instantly? That's probably right in your comfort zone - discard it. The second idea? Five other writers probably had it, too.

There's lots of ways to shine in the "writing stage": beautiful, flowing prose, an unexpected voice, a playful structuring device. Actively trying to stand out in the "idea stage" - while staying true to who you are as a writer - I feel is an underrated way to improve your skills as well as your results.

Malte Springer, 35, is a PR editor and father of two from Leipzig, Germany. A couple years ago, he discovered flash fiction competitions as his ideal hobby, providing bursts of creative energy while serving as a family-friendly outlet for his misplaced perfectionism and gambling proclivities. He's now a regular on the circuit, adding as many competitions (read: dopamine hits) as he can squeeze in between pesky distractions like play dates and family gatherings.



•••••

MALTE SPRINGER

ROUND *ONE*

Twisted Tournament is the most intense prompted writing contest there is! In the first round, writers were given three prompts and 72 hours to write and submit a 500 word story.

ROUND 1 WINNERS

1ST PLACE

PROBABLY SOMEONE

9.86

2ND PLACE

DANILUCAS

9.80

3RD PLACE

AVERY OTHER

9.39

1ST PLACE

ROTTADOR

9.71

2ND PLACE

EMORRA

9.64

3RD PLACE

CHLOE PAIGE

9.55



Solar Storms

by E.E. Sousa

I pinch the match between my fingers, its sulphur tip unlit for the three hundredth and sixty forth day. In front of me is the woodstove, its perfectly geometric sculpture of kindling ready to ignite - last November's junkmail, strips of curlicue birch bark, skinny spruce sticks on top. It has sat unburned for nearly a year. Instead I've relied on the oil guzzling heater to make it through winter without you.

The perfectly prepared fire was your last gift to me. That, and the photos.

"Tonight? Really?" I had asked, eyes heavy in bearlike slumber.

"The KP index is huge," you'd said, alert and itching to head out. "You don't get this every day."

A kiss, the last of your heat to ever cross my lips, and then you were gone.

Before you left, you'd stacked the stove, knowing I'd be up first. You imagined me waking, lighting the fire, making coffee. When you roused, you'd curl up next to me on the couch and I'd pour over the photos you took of the aurora as you regaled me in colorful, whirling tales of your night out on the lake.

We both should have known better. Even with the cold snap, it was too early to be out on the ice. I know, the unobstructed view. You couldn't help yourself.

I know you, love.

I've finally printed the photos you took that night. White crusted birch branches reach heavenward, lit by a hot pink spiral that fills the sky. The ice on the lake glows. It's as if the whole landscape is aflame in splendor, as if there is nothing in the world more pressing, more important, than beauty and wonder. Even in the still of the shot, I can feel the lights dancing. White tips, green, blending and rippling like the water under your feet. The images are so alive that I half expect your ghost to join me here.

I can feel the weight of your hand on my leg. But when I open my eyes, the apparition is not you, but our old dog who has silently joined me on the floor by the woodstove. She, too, left this world, not long after you. After you died, she stayed by my side day and night, stuck to me like frost to the branches. She knows how much I need you. Her passing was you dying all over again. I tell you all this, though I imagine you know, that you two spend most of your days together. I am grateful for her company tonight. Her ghost stares at me with big deep eyes.

I can do this. She nudges my hand. I light the match, reach my arm into the cold woodstove and set spark to paper. I watch the flames flicker and dance through the glass, smoke rising to the sky to find you.

I love you, I release you. I will find you in the northern sky, as the aurora dances her way across the heavens.



Any Other Name

by Dani Lucas
Overall Second Place

Bea collects her first name on the day that Alex leaves her.

It comes to her by chance, the breeze carrying it to rest up against her shoe: a small card, the kind florists nestle into bright bouquets. For five, ten, fifteen minutes, she waits for the wind to take it again. She is exhausted, bone-deep weariness rooted in her limbs. Surely she can be excused from doing her part to save the planet, just this once.

But the card stays, and it stays, and finally, resenting every movement, Bea leans over and scrapes it off the pavement. *Bloom & Bluebell*, it says in embossed silver type. Then, in loopy cursive: *Congratulations! Love, Hannah.*

She reads the card, wipes her wet face on her sleeve. There is no way to identify the intended recipient, no point in trying. She will drop the card in a recycling bin on her way home.

She doesn't.

Instead, late into the night, she runs her thumb over the embossing as if the card is a worry stone, stares at the message. Her eyes sting.

"Congratulations," she says into the silence, trying to sound like Hannah. Warm, effusive. Thoughtful, if she sent flowers for—what? A promotion? A new baby?

An anniversary, maybe.

At the café the next morning, when the cashier asks for her name, Bea says, "Hannah," and feels a tiny, bright thrill race down her spine. For a moment, she holds her breath, waiting to be confronted: *Thief! Imposter! Fraud!* No one says a word, and five minutes later, when the barista calls, "Large dark roast for Hannah!", Bea feels like she's gotten away with something.

More names, more lives, follow.

A mass-mailed postcard, urging Veronica to vote in the primaries. A to-do list tucked into a library book, *Cameron* sandwiched between *dentist* and *cheese*. A scrap of paper, *Daisy* doodled over and over, a heart dotting the *i*. A report card. A utility bill. They find her, and she tucks them into her pockets, carries them with her like armor.

One morning, she is Theresa. Another, she is Nadia. One Saturday, she goes out for the first time in weeks and orders counter service for Emily. She brings a book and eats alone, and unexpectedly, she finds herself enjoying the solitude.

The next morning, at the café, she orders her usual, her fingers brushing against the name in her pocket. The cashier smiles at her; a dimple shows in her cheek. "Who are you today?" she says.

Bea freezes. Her heart begins to slam against her ribs.

She has been discovered.

The cashier looks stricken. "I'm sorry," she says, lowering her voice. "I didn't mean to freak you out. I just... you're here every morning. I remember you."

Bea takes a deep breath, then another.

I remember you.

She lets the paper slip from her fingers.

"Bea," she says. "I'm Bea."

The cashier's smile returns, wider this time. Her eyes hold Bea's.

"Best one yet," she says.



Chasing Storms, Hunting Ghosts

by Melissa Jornd

[@melissajorndwrites.bsky.social](#)

I have spent the 28 days since Dad's funeral in his tiny, remote cabin, and tonight I'm finally getting my wish.

A storm is coming.

Along the walls are tables littered with equipment: Doppler radars and wide-lens cameras and old-school radios, all clamoring for attention as clouds layer themselves in the sky, thick and heavy.

Pushing these aside to clear space, I unpack and organize my own equipment, new and unfamiliar.

Because I'm not chasing storms.

I'm hunting ghosts.

Outside, the storm grumbles. Inside, the lamps flicker. The motion sensor in the east corner alerts me to...something.

Feeling a little silly, and a little hopeful, I hold out the EVP recorder and ask, "Dad?"



It's not working.

Somehow, I'm outside. I don't remember opening the door, stumbling across the mud and grass—or I do, but it feels like a dream.

It's not a dream.

I'm wet, I'm cold, I'm getting tugged every which way by the wind, and I'm alone.

I thought—

Dad loved nature, anything ferocious and unforgiving, and he loved this cabin. He tried to get me excited when I was younger, bringing me here over my mother's objections—*you'll scare him, Tom*—and holding me as the windows rattled.

I didn't inherit his love of capital-W *Weather*, but I thought maybe, if he were haunting anywhere, it'd be here.

But I'm alone.

The EVP recorder is in my hand, useless. I didn't spring for a waterproof version. I drop it and stomp, frustration spilling over.

When I do, there's a ground-shaking clap of thunder, and the sky lights up something fearful—like there's an all-hands meeting for lightning, convening here. It stuns me.

When Dad brought me as a kid, we stayed inside. I never experienced a storm in 3-D, in 360, in whatever you want to call it where, instead of looking at one section out of one window, you are surrounded on every side. Exposed. Immersed.

Truly, for the first time, I can understand why Dad loved the storms.

Did I think the clouds were monotone gray? I was blind. They're navy, black, purple, green. A bruised sky, fighting back.

Did I think lightning was mostly for show, a pretty parlor trick? It spreads, forking from one to two to several, lingering on my eyelids as I shut them from the brightness.

I forget where I stop and the storm begins. My body hums with the electricity streaking across the sky; my skin's rubbery-smooth from the rain. Kneeling, I dig my fingers into the earth like pale, knuckled roots.

I scream. The storm screams. Together, we light up the night.



Morning brings a new sky, new colors, new everything.

New me.

Mom texts, asking if I'm finally coming home, and I reply I'm heading out.

"Thanks, Dad," I tell the room. "I'll be back."

As I shut the door, I think I see the motion detector in the east corner go off. But it's probably just a trick of the light.



Mortal Coils

by Avery Other

www.averyother.com

The dying man held himself back from the brink, all tangled up in his own complications. Ready to go, unable to leave. Then he sensed he wasn't alone.

Who's there? he wanted to ask, but it was just a trembling noise stuck on his tongue. Decrepitude hadn't been kind to him.

I waited until his milky eyes found me, invisible to anyone solidly on one side of the veil. In the liminal, whisper-thin space between, I pulled out my scissors to begin my work.

Death! he tried to say, but couldn't. The proclamation wasn't even a muffled syllable. That wasn't my name anyway. Death was just something that happened. After.

"Almost," I told him. "You've still got some regrets holding on."
I opened my scissors around the outermost strand ensnaring him; and—

*His daughter. Estranged. Half a world away.
He'd feigned disappointment in her choices, but it was jealousy.
She'd chased her passions. He hadn't.
He should have been happy for her.*

—cut. It drifted away into nothing.

A sob escaped his throat. A real one, weak as it was. Still, his next words were merely raspy breath and intention. *What are you doing to me? Who are you?*

"I'm solving your hoarding problem. Call me Uncle Hector," I answered, though that wasn't my name either. It was close enough. More comprehensible.

"Un...cle...Hec...tor?" he barely managed, repeating it back in a struggling mumble.

The next strand was twisted even tighter than the first. Nevertheless, I positioned my scissors and made another—

*Time. Gone. Wasted on late office nights.
He didn't need to be there, but he'd never figured out how to hold conversations with his wife.
So he'd simply avoided home. Her. The family they'd made together.
Of course he loved them, yet he so rarely said so.
Not enough to make them believe it.*

—cut. No matter. It was nothing now.

Uncle Hector, those are mine! Stop! he meant to demand, but it was just a shuddering thought. His breathing slowed.

“It’s only regret,” I assured him. “You can’t take it with you.”

The last strand in his collection was difficult. I almost missed the secret compartment concealing the thin, complicated knot around his heart. But there it was. Unexplored, yet lingering. Incompatible with the rest. My scissors didn’t care. They just—

*Youth. His classmate. That beautiful boy who’d wanted him.
Who he’d wanted back, pretending he didn’t.
A different life. An unanswered question: what if?*

—cut. Gone. The old man was lighter now, teetering on the edge.

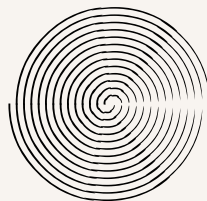
This was it. The end. This end, anyway.

Just before his last breath shivered acceptance, he understood.

Then the untethered dead man fell into himself, ouroboric. Like everyone, he held a singularity of infinite possibility. Death to birth, and every regret between. He could collect them all, if he wanted. Just not all at once.

“Until next time,” I called after him. Again.

Thank you, Uncollector, he would have replied. But he was already gone.



Magflix and Chill

by CM Gilbert

[@cmgilbert67.bsky.social](https://bsky.social/cmgilbert67)

"Welcome to Fairy Godmother's Princess Tattoo Parlor. Here to check in, I see."

The fishchick receptionist peered at the Princess through funky-rimmed frames—less supermodel-in-a-bikini-top and more fish-head-on-pasty-legs.

"I'm Princess Nola, it's my first time—"

"Momma Medusa, Queen of the Drags, is finishing up on Princess Maeve the Mighty, she'll be out shortly."

"Um . . . don't you mean Dragons?"

The fishchick popped her bubblegum. "A redeemed flight valet gets you a complimentary unicorn float or goblin nobblin."

Nola cleared her throat with the confidence of a baby mouse.

"Actually, I didn't fly . . ." A small head popped out of her carry bag. It looked like a Pomeranian, until it sneezed a tiny flame. A pocket dragon.

"Is that a turtleneck?" A troll-voiced woman in a Cher wig said, brushing aside a beaded curtain.

"Mr. Puffles gets chilly when he leaves the tower," Nola said softly, smoothing out his teensy, crocheted collar.

Snap. A wandlike tattoo machine materialized in the woman's hand. "I'm Momma Medusa. Let's ink your first fairytale tatt."



"This tattoo is the first act of your story." The machine whirled, ready to illustrate her future. "Don't look at it as set in stone but more like—are you dabbing your armpits?"

"Sorry. Nervous sweater," Nola replied. Momma resumed her princess-empowering speech. "How 'bout you riding a basilisk into battle? Or, ooh, drop-kicking a troll? We could add, like, explosions."

"That doesn't really seem like anything I'd be proficient at."

"Princess, this is the modern age . . . you're supposed to kick ass and take names."

"Honestly, that sounds like a ton of work. I was actually hoping to stay in the tower and just re-read my copy of *Nine Rules to Break when Romancing a Mace*." The machine, sensing her anxiety, started to flicker.

"I could add a Queensguard with a six-pack?"

"Like, I'm an INFJ, I got all the books I could want in the tower, and a Magflix subscription." Nola's voice cracked as the machine spiraled into quick successive strokes of ink. "Everyone expects me to be this—warrior princess—but what if I'm just . . . not?"

Momma softened her grip on the machine. "Kid. Chill. What are you actually good at?"

"Making jam?"

The machine exploded with its finishing touch. They waited in apprehension as the fumes dissipated, revealing the tattoo. A book covered with scales, and on it, a heart congealed in jam and flames.

"Well, that's pretty badass," Momma admitted. Nola stared at the art on her skin. It wasn't a sword. It wasn't a "kick-ass" battle. It was . . . her. At least, a potential one.

"Yeah," Nola grinned. "It really is."



With her story underway, Princess Nola the Novel decided—at least for her first chapter—to open a bookshop with baked draggie treats called Puff and Prose—with Mr. Puffles as the official taste tester, of course.

Although it was too early for 'happily ever after', they were content, cuddling under the blankets each night, watching *The Bachelor: Unwed Prince*, and thinking of which type of jam to make next (probably raspberry).

Second Chances

by Mike Range

medium.com/@mikerange

Old age was making Edgar soft. Growing up poor, nobody had given him and his struggling mom a break, and for seventy-five years, he'd kept his vow to repay the world in kind. He'd done well for himself, expanding this first pawn shop into twenty-three across the state. The key, he emphasized to his employees, was not giving a single good goddam about the people that come in. "Everyone's got a sob story to wring a few more bucks from you. You want a story, go to the library. Our only concern is profit."

But then, a year ago, Noreen Atchinson had brought in her china. Exquisite *Limoges* dinnerware.

Well, technically, Edgar had brought the set in from her car, fearing the old woman would collapse under the strain. Cops and ambulances out front weren't good for business. Then, preparing to negotiate across the counter, he had done something he never did. Perhaps because she reminded him of his mother at the end—frail, pale, withered. He'd asked a personal question. "Why are you parting with such a beautiful set?"

"Treatments," she'd said, seeming even more reticent to explain than Edgar normally was to ask. "I do so hope to be back for it," she'd sighed. He'd paid—fifty more than he normally would—and she was gone.

The rest of that day, and each day since, he'd wondered. What did she suffer from? Would she indeed return to collect... what? A seventy-year-old wedding gift? An heirloom passed down from her mother's mother?

He'd held the china in the shop's vault, unavailable for sale, for the state-mandated thirty days. Then thirty more. Months rolled by. Today, after a dozen thirty-day cycles and no Noreen, he'd reluctantly put the set on display. Not prominently, though it certainly deserved to be showcased in the front window. Just in case. He was being ridiculous—Noreen Atchinson had looked unlikely to survive the day, let alone a year.

And now, watching a young woman raise one of the dinner plates and smile, Edgar knew the set was gone. It was in her eyes. Maybe she thought it was cool because it was retro. Perhaps it reminded her of her grandmother, and she would put it out at holidays, saying "remember Nonna had plates like these?" and her family would smile and tell sweet Nonna stories. That was a nice enough thought, but still...

"Hello, ma'am. We have some others pieces that you may pref—"

"No, this is them." She clutched a plate to her chest and handed Edgar a slip of paper. The receipt for the *Limoges* set.

Edgar brightened. "Are you Noreen's granddaughter?" That it would at least remain in the family buoyed his heart.

"Granddaughter! What a lovely bit of flattery! Thank you for that! And, moreso, thank you for holding these for me."

"For... for you?"

The woman took Edgar's heavily-liver-spotted hand, and added a business card to the receipt. The card read simply SECOND CHANCES, and a phone number.

"The treatments worked."

Tinkering, Tinkering

by Timothy Hayes

Father insists I stay awake while he tinkers with my brain. "That way," he says, repositioning an overhanging mirror, "we can isolate the problem-nodes and pluck out those ghastly, broken thoughts."

"Like weeds?" I see my reflection ask, though the words don't sound like my own.

Father hunches over me. The bionic lens of his Watch-Ya-Me-Goggle whirs and clicks as he brings it to focus on my open pate. "Just like weeds."



It may come as a surprise to learn there's no pain in the upheaval of thoughts. Certainly it did for me, as far as I remember. Even if I've never gotten comfortable with my inner machinations being so exposed.

This, I realise, is a foolish discomfort, rooted, like so many illusions of a faulty mind, in irrationality. *What if someone sees me? What if something gets in? Something that shouldn't – like a thought?* Is this such a thought?

But there's nobody. Nothing. Only Father and I, and the fading imprint of another whose name I'm not to speak.

We're alone at the back of the shop, where Father patches up old and found and broken things before assigning them a price and putting them on display.

Sometimes I've seen them remain that way long enough for dust particles that panic in pale afternoon light to settle upon them like rust on vine-strangled artefacts. I've learned to keep myself busy during such times, else the broken thoughts creep in.

"I do not wish to be put on display," I tell Father while he attaches his usual assortment of clamps and wires. "I am afraid to gather dust."

Now, Daughter," he says. "See. That's not something you need to worry yourself with," and he gets to work on my grey matter until, at least for a time, it is so.



One day, maybe a week, maybe a half-year from now, I'm admiring some new additions to the window-display while Father appraises the contents of a customer's salvage box. He's explaining in scientific detail why he can not offer the woman more, regardless of an object's rarity, condition, or sentiment. "It's simply worth what it's worth," he says, "for you, and for me. Nothing more."

After struggling with this for a while, the woman gathers up her box, turns, and disappears from the shop, offering me a pitying look as she goes. "I hope for your sake you take after your mother."

Two thoughts occur to me then: one of them is a flower; the other a weed.

The flower says I'm fortunate to have a father who knows everything there is to know and all the things a person should not.

"The weed," I say to Father, approaching the shop counter like a sinner called to church. "It says to ask what happened to Mother? Why she left? Was she like me – did she have too many broken thoughts?"

I watch him long enough to see the truth, but I don't wait for an answer.

Father will have some tinkering to do.

Happyless Thanksgiving

by Tom Bailey

@professor_baileys

Tom Turkey shuffles into the breakroom. His plumage droops; his bells don't ding; baby vomit drips from his tailfeathers.

"You look like Death's leftovers," says Happy grinning maniacally.

"It's hell out there, Happy. Hell," Tom says. "I'm leading a mom and sprogs through Gratitude Gallery, and she keeps pecking me: 'No crap about bad pilgrims. My kids don't need your agenda,' she grabs my wattle and yells more, 'I don't need lovey-dovey crap on a true American holiday.' As if Thanksgiving Land understood moral nuance or historical complexity. Then we're in the petting zoo and a goat bites one of her kids, so she rips its head off which, of course, makes one of her brats puke on me. She blames me and demands a refund. She's an animal."

Happy nods, whiskers whirling and that freakish electric smile still plastered to her face. She gives perky its bad name.

Tom waddles to the coffeemaker and puts in a French Roast pod without real hope. It hisses, sputters, and sighs like the last dodo before settling into eternal silence.

He bangs his head on the counter.

Thunk, "Fuck."
Thunk, "Fuck."
Thunk, "Fuck."

Happy holds out the swear jar. Tom puts in three quarters.

"Now, now, Tom." Happy's icepick voice jabs into Tom's temple. "You don't need that percolator, buckaroo. It's the cheery season and you're the lucky duck...um I mean turkey who gets to guide the masses to its wonders.

"You show them the super-duper things—food, family, drinking, singing, dancing, and laughing—we've got. It's uptempo jazzy-great that you shove gratitude in their faces. Awesomeness is upon us." She bounces around like a murder bunny.

Murdered bunny, Tom wishes as he slo-mo slumps into a chair. He raises his hand, but lacks weapons or the energy to use them. His hand falls back to his lap. He may have the will, but there is no way.

Happy dances around the room. "Ugh, still fifteen minutes till I get to go out there. The waiting is killing me." She jitter-hops from table to table. Her hind legs beat a rhythm. She scratches her ear. She opens the fridge. She closes the fridge. "I really want action, movement. Give me a task! Make me a busy bunny, gloomy Tom."

"You could sit?" Tom puts his wings together in prayer. "Try fixing the coffeemaker, if you think you can."

"A dare! Ooooh, yes, yes you betcha this bunny can." She holds up a fork and pries the back off the machine.

"Unplug it first?" Suggests Tom.

"Where's the fun in that?" Happy cackles madly. She prods the machine's innards. "Wait, I think I see what..."

Buzz-zap. Lights dim. Happy flies back then bounces to a stop on the linoleum floor. The fork is stuck in her side. She is done.

A holiday miracle. The machine hums, steams, and sweet sweet coffee begins to flow.

Tom is filled with the spirit of the season and gratitude for a Happyless Thanksgiving.

You Can't Have a Rainbow Without Red

by Piper Odelin

<http://twistinthetale.com/author/sunflower-sonnets>

Dang it," I said, turning the crank.

"Machine's broken," Mr. Shepherd said.

My gaze locked onto the red ball inside the vending machine. Since I was eight, I'd collected bouncy balls, and I had every color of the rainbow except red. I *needed* that ball.

Soapy suds tumbling in the laundromat's washers helped me focus as I stared at the red ball, placing the quarter into the slot. Any second now, the red ball would be mine.

Then...nothing.

"I told ya, son, machine's broken."

"I want the red ball!"

My voice resounded through the air as colorful balls cascaded from the machine, one after another, like a vibrant parade.

An orange ball bounced, landing on Mrs. Longfellow's bouffant hairdo as if it were an egg in a bird's nest; this suited her quite nicely.

A green ball rolled out the door and towards Mr. Surefoot. He slipped on the ball, sending his groceries flying.

Tomatoes and asparagus performed a dazzling aerial act with the ball before it found a home among Mr. Surefoot's grapes.

The sound of rubber bouncing on the washing machines produced a syncopated beat. I wanted to grab a stick from outside and conduct the jumping spheres, but there was no time. A yellow ball was headed straight for Mr. Hastings, who was infamous for being grumpy.

Every weekend, he did his laundry at the laundromat and napped. He'd snoozed through the chaos, but this yellow ball would be his demise, or *mine*.

I jumped in rhythm with the bouncy delights, my eyes fixed on the yellow ball. "Not on my watch, Ol' Yeller!"

Before the yellow wonder bounced onto his lap, Mr. Hastings awoke and grabbed the ball with ninja-fast reflexes, placed the ball onto the table next to him and dozed off again.

At last, the bouncing symphony stopped, revealing a jumbled rainbow of colors — orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet bouncy balls were scattered everywhere, but not a single red one. Even the laundromat gods didn't want my rainbow collection to be complete.

Inside the machine sat one red ball. Lined up with the chute, the odds of getting it were absolute, but I had no more money.

To my surprise, Mr. Shepherd handed me a quarter and said, "Here ya go, kid. Give her another try."

The smell of fresh laundry filled the room as I put in the quarter, turned the handle, and-
Nothing.

A shadow lurked behind me as a lightning-fast motion descended upon the top of the machine. It was Mr. Hastings giving it a whack, then instantly returning to his chair, snoozing away.

The ball rolled down the chute and into the dispenser. I lifted the flap and there she sat, my red ball.

"Thanks for the quarter, Mr. Shepherd," I said, placing the ball into my pocket.

"You bet, kid," Mr. Shepherd said, sweeping up the rubbery orbs.

As I left the laundromat, I whispered to Mr. Hastings, "Thanks!"

He lifted his head, winked, then fell back to sleep.

ROUND *TWO*

In the second round, writers were given three prompts and 48 hours to write and submit a 250 word story.

ROUND 2 WINNERS

1ST PLACE

JAWILCOX

9.63

1ST PLACE

NATALIE B

9.47

1ST PLACE

PROBABLY SOMEONE

9.63

2ND PLACE

SUZANNE MONDAY

9.45

3RD PLACE

GENIEAZ

9.30

3RD PLACE

TAURENELLE **AND** SVKEN

9.38



A MOUTHFUL OF MOONLIGHT

by Jessica Wilcox
jessicaswritingspace.wordpress.com/about

Just a mouthful of the potion—that was all it took to die.

Or seem to.

The vial trembled in her hand, the liquid shimmering like moonlight caught in tears. She had been raised to hold still, to speak softly, to smile as though the castle was not a cage. A princess was a symbol, not a soul. Her mornings were ribbons and rules; her nights, banquets full of false laughter and watching eyes.

Once, she had believed in kindness—believed the prince who swore she'd be his queen. But promises in palaces rot faster than fruit. He had traded her heart for an alliance, sealed with another's kiss. Even her father had smiled at the bargain, saying it was for the good of the realm.

So she learned the truth: love, like freedom, was not meant for princesses.

She drank. The taste was bitter, almost sweet—like the memory of what she'd hoped for. Her heart slowed, her breath stopped. They would mourn the dutiful daughter, the faithful betrothed, never knowing what they'd buried.

Hours—or eternities—later, her lungs found air again. Candlelight wavered over the stone ceiling of the crypt. She rose, cold and trembling, and reached for the bundle she had hidden: coarse clothes, a dagger, a hood.

She left the crown where it lay, a hollow circle gleaming in the dark.

Above her, the night waited—vast, unknown, mercilessly real. She smiled, the taste of betrayal fading on her tongue. The world, at last, was hers to trust or break.



WHITE DIAMONDS

by Chad Frame
Overall Winner

“Scent is the sense most closely tied to memory.” The saleswoman sprays the rhinestone-collared bottle, a pungent cloud of childhood billowing towards my face.

A puff of powdery aldehydes. Wandering Macy's at the Galleria, my hand holding Mom's. Seas of shoppers, everything shiny and new. Mom buys her perfume, then speaks the five most wonderful words a child can hear. “Pick something out for yourself.”

A splash of sweet jasmine. Mom, perm-coiffed and powerful. Mom, pearl-throated and pristine. Goosepimples—her flawless French manicure tickling the back of my hand.

A waft of waxy iris. We hadn't yet lost the house, pawned the heirlooms, survived handsy stepdads. I hadn't yet dropped out of school.

“The value set comes with lotion and bath gel.” The saleswoman finishes her pitch, pulling me back to the present.

I glance outside at the Galleria—now just rows of dark storefronts, gated closed by metal bars. An elderly mall-walker rounds another lap, stubborn fists pumping at the speed of spreading mold.

I crouch beside Mom's wheelchair. “What do you think?”

The doctors insist she can hear and smell—can still sometimes remember. Everything else was stolen by the stroke.

Maybe I'm imagining it, but I swear I feel her limp hand squeeze mine back.

The perfume's price tag wouldn't mean much to most people.

To me, it means a late rent check. Several skipped meals. But the bills for Mom's care are always paid on time.

To Mom, it means everything.

“Sold,” I blurt out, fumbling for my card.



THE CRIES OF LAOCOÖN

by Taurenelle
www.taurenelle.com

There stood the statue of Laocoön; serpents wrapped around his body, serpents wrapped around the necks of his two young sons. His face, bearded with agony, and betrayal, and the torture of preventable horror; his mouth, agape, relentlessly mourning since the fall of Troy.

“Whatever it is,” he had warned, “I fear the Argives, even those bearing gifts.” But a treacherous horse was welcomed into the city despite his cries, and by sundown, all he had loved had atoned for the mistakes of others with their blood.

And beneath the statue, millennia after Athena took her revenge, lay the chalk outlines of two small boys. And another father grieves; not dressed in the vestments of an Apollonian priest, but in the humble blues of an evening security guard.

“I told my supervisor I didn’t recognize those guys. They wasn’t the normal cleaners. But he don’t listen,” the father said, “he don’t listen.”

Detective Lorenzo laid a hand on the man’s shoulder. He knew the eyes of a criminal—of an inside man—and these were the tears of senseless loss.

“My wife leaves the boys with me some nights—when she go to work. Only for an hour. I put them to bed on my break. Why don’t he just listen?”

Shattered glass sprinkled the museum floor. A bust of Minerva smiled down on them, naked without her incandescent necklace of lapis lazuli and pearl, but smiling all the same.

Relishing in the cruel fate of the gods.

Taunting another broken man.

QUARTERS AND COCONUT

by Caralin Fleet

Any lingering guilt about cutting algebra disappeared as we stepped into Wizard's Castle, drowned by the sensory assault of the arcade.

"Beats polynomials, huh?" Jen laughed. *Anything's better with you, Jen.*

Rainbow lights dappled her shoulders as we stopped at *Street Fighter II*.

"I'm Ryu this time." She fished two quarters out of her jeans.

"Fine." I sidled next to her, so close I could smell her coconut shampoo.

"Hey, let's make this interesting," she grinned.

"A bet?"

"I win, you toss those disgusting shoes." She wrinkled her nose at my weathered Chuck Taylors.

"My lucky shoes?" I feigned hurt.

"They're gross."

"And if I win?"

"Well, what do you want?" She brushed a chestnut lock behind her ear, wafting coconut.

Without thinking, I blurted, "I want you to kiss me."

To her credit, she barely raised an eyebrow before nodding. "Alright. Bring it."

Me, on the other hand? Shitting bricks. What did I just do?? We popped in our quarters, and the fighters leapt into action. Did I just ask Jen to kiss me?? ENERGY ATTACK! Neighbours-since-kindergarten Jen?? HURRICANE KICK! Be cool, man, becoolbecoolbecoooooooool....!!!

RYU WINS! Game over.

I peeked sheepishly at Jen. She wasn't gloating. Why not?? Then, before I could protest the loss of my shoes (and my dignity), she kissed me. Soft, lingering. Then apart.

"But... you won!" I stammered.

"I know." Her eyes danced. "I wanted to do that - not for some dumb bet."

She grabbed my hand.

"But you're still walking home in your socks."

HEADS UP

by Natalie Minaker
<https://nfminaker.wixsite.com/my-site>

Heads: I live.

Tails: I die.

The separatists have announced a ceasefire; I return to the city, pick my way through the destroyed airport, examine every corpse.

Heads: I escaped.

Tails: I should've been amongst the dead.

I find Mikhail in the bathroom lying atop shards of broken mirror. I only recognise him by his jacket; the exit wound from the bullet and eleven months of decomposition mean my brother's face is gone.

I fall to my knees; not grief, but relief that his end was quick. *Lucky Mikhail* we would call him, blessed with unnatural good fortune, winning every bet, calling every coin flip.

Heads: I got a future.

Tails: he died alone.

When the city fell, we were swept along with the panicked masses towards the airport where we secured a single seat on the last flight.

"Let's flip for it," he'd said, bronze coin in one hand, boarding pass in the other. "I'm feeling lucky."

I protested, but Lucky Mikhail always got his way. I watched the coin tumble through the air.

"Tails!" he called, snatching it in his fist.

His palm opened, revealing the flash of a bronze head. Mikhail nodded, then dragged me through the throng towards the departure gate.

His last words as the jetway door closed: "You won, fair and square."

Clenched in his decaying fingers, something bronze. I gently remove the coin, turn it over and over, failing to find a tail.

Heads: I live.

Heads: I was always going to live.

PLAYLIST FOR THE APOCALYPSE

by Avery Other
www.averyother.com

When we left, it wasn't meant to be forever. A supporting team of scientists and a few DJs broadcasting from somewhere special—that was the plan. Stellar sounds, from Radio Space Station.

DJ Ralpho was on air when the first mushroom clouds bloomed below us. Volcanoes, he thought, but our scientists knew what bombs looked like. Ralpho could only cry into the microphone and apologize over and over to anyone still listening. Then he told his wife how much he loved her and played her favorite: Mazzy Star, *Into Dust*.

It's impossible to mourn the entire world, but we tried. Ralpho's wife was the first name to go on the wall outside hydroponics. We listed our families, famous people, old friends, and so on—our sharpie-scrawled list of the dead. After we'd memorialized every name we could remember, someone wrote "et al" at the end. I don't know who appended the extra letter to make it "et *all*," but I was the one who added question marks. Dire as things were, those names deserved hope.

Eventually DJ Jazzy Jessi took the station off shuffle, recited some poetry, and played Delta Rae's *Is There Anyone Out There?* During Jessi's segment, ISS finally contacted us, another voice out here in the dark. They asked for Tom Waits, *Earth Died Screaming*.



We're still here, Earth. If—*when* you crawl out of your bunkers, our lines are open. Give us your names to cross off our wall, and tell us your favorite songs. We take requests.

HARDCASTLE: ENEMY ENGAGED

by Harry H
Overall Third Place
@writtenoffharry

Air Marshal Dwight Hardcastle spoke into the galley like a man delivering top-secret intel, even though he was, in fact, talking to junior flight attendant Melissa who'd been on the job a week.

"I've identified a high-risk individual," he said, lowering his voice to a pitch he believed heroes naturally possessed. "18C. Excessive perspiration. Shoe manipulation. Classic pre-attack ritual. Nairobi, 2014. I stopped a situation exactly like this."

Melissa blinked. "You stopped a terrorist?"

"In the training simulation, yes," Hardcastle said, with the gravity of a man revealing battlefield scars. "But the principles transfer."

He peered down the aisle. The suspect was now frantically wrestling his shoe. Hardcastle's eyes widened.

"There's no time," he whispered.

"Are you really sure—" Melissa began.

But Hardcastle was already moving, shoulders squared, stride heroic, like a man who fully expected dramatic music to swell behind him. He burst into a sprint.

"FEDERAL AIR MARSHAL! DROP THE SHOE!" he roared, launching himself onto the man with the elegant violence of a malfunctioning washing machine.

Passengers shrieked. The man yelped. The shoe flew.

Something metallic shot out, spinning with operatic importance—
—and landed with a delicate ping.

A ring.

The woman in the seat beside him gasped. "Evan! Were you—proposing?"

Pinned to the carpet, Evan whimpered a tiny, tragic yes.

She squealed, "Oh my god, YES!" The cabin erupted in applause.

Hardcastle rose, chest out, dignity wobbling.

"Well," he announced, "the threat level is officially... secure."

He nodded, solemn, unshakably proud.

"This is why we train, people."

NO SOLICITING. NO TRESPASSING.

by MF Wills

Ding-dong.

Martha's stomach tied into knots. The doorbell rarely rang, and when it did, it was never anything good. Years ago, it meant iced tea and neighborhood gossip, now it meant pushy salesmen ignoring her "No Soliciting" signs. She kept her blinds closed and her doors had no glass panels. She peered through the peephole. Its cracked lens distorted her view. Was there one man or two? Just one now. She stayed quiet and willed him to leave.

He knocked loudly. Martha jumped.

She remembered a news story about what they'd called knock-and-kick invaders. If they knocked and no one answered, they figured you weren't home and kicked the door in.

Maybe she *should* respond.

"Yes?" She called, hoping her voice sounded younger than her seventy-eight years.

"Hello, ma'am. Would you be interested in a home-security system?"

Martha's ancient Pomeranian growled somewhere behind her.

"No, thank you. My son's installing one this weekend."

It wasn't a lie. Andrew was putting up cameras, alarms and a fancy doorbell. He'd worried when a seedy carnival set up in the grocery-store parking lot across the street. "They think it'll bring more shoppers," he'd said. "It'll only attract the riffraff."

"Thanks anyway, ma'am," the man said. "You be safe."

At least he was polite, Martha thought as she went to see why Peachy's growls had turned to frantic barking.

"Hush," she said, then heard a violent crack of wood and saw the back door splintering as the riffraff made their way into her home.

ROUND *THREE*

In the third and final round, writers were given two prompts and only 24 hours to write and submit a 100 word micro story.

ROUND 3 WINNERS

1ST PLACE

C HARTMAN

9.81

1ST PLACE

KITTY H

9.90

2ND PLACE

ALEXANDRIA COOK

9.59

2ND PLACE

MALTE SPRINGER

9.74

3RD PLACE

HARRY H

9.53

3RD PLACE

MFVICE

9.69

RIVER KNOWS ITS PLACE

by Malte Springer
Overall Winner



Floodplain – High risk area.

Every spring, when officials put up the signs, the townspeople laughed.

Kids used them as target practice. “River knows its place,” the old men said.
“Behaved for a century.”

That year, the rains didn’t stop. The river swelled, thick and brown. It swallowed porches, then houses, then names.

When the water finally retreated, the signs still stood.

Picking through ruins reeking of rot and wet timber, the townspeople tried to understand. Fate, said the first. Act of God, grumbled the next. Nothing anyone could’ve done.

But the truth didn’t need explaining.

The signs were always there.

LEADERBOARD

BLIND TRAVERSE

by Jane Stecyk

Dan paused, looking left then right. Each path looked passable, narrow—and dark.

This isn’t how I remember it, he realized. The idea slipped out unbidden. It rested over his head, joining his exhaled bubbles on the roof of the cave.

He glanced down, his light shaking as it illuminated his oxygen levels.

With calm breathing he had 15 minutes to get out—and up.

Panic had killed more cave divers than anything else, he knew that.

You also knew to take a buddy. You also knew to use guide lines.

He looked again. 13 minutes.

He chose right and started kicking.



EUCALYPTUS-SCENTED RED FLAGS

by C Hartman

It wasn't supposed to end this way—10:00am, at CVS, after our third date.

First date: He'd sent his steak back twice, didn't ask me questions. But that midnight hug had been unexpectedly comfortable.

Second date: Surprise Maroon 5 tickets. Mediocre music taste forgiven as we swayed together.

Last night was vanilla, clumsy. But his cool pillow felt like home. I dreamt of not being *the young widow* at Thanksgiving dinner.

When he grabs the familiar shampoo from the store shelf—the same one I'd bought Sam for eight years, the pieces fall into place.

And I fall apart again.

LEADERBOARD

THE WISHING WELL

by LMHO

<https://substack.com/@lmhokansasborncreative>

Never whisper to the wishing well, even if life's gone off track. When your words expel into that well... it may whisper back.

It echoes your desires, then brings them to the light of day. That wishing well then casts a spell, but there's a hefty price to pay.

"Make me a famous writer," I crooned to that cobbled stone. But I didn't know what it'd bestow when it echoed back my moan.

Nothing was the same after that... I sold in record time! But on my soul the well exacted its toll.

Now I can only write in rhyme.



DEMONS ARE JERKS

by Alexandria Cook
[@alexandriacook.bsky.social](mailto:alexandriacook.bsky.social)

Perform the ritual, summon a demon, and boom, world domination. The deal was simple.

Isabel expected a creature of hell. Instead, she received a phone call.

"Thanks for the coffee break," a gravelly voice spoke.

"Who is this?" Isabel asked.

In the background of the call, she heard a muted, "Pumpkin spice for... Abathil, Lord of Destruction?"

"That's me," the voice chimed.

"Are you at Starbucks?" Isabel asked.

"Can you get here soon? I gotta skedaddle at 5:32."

Isabel checked her watch—it was 5:20. "Seriously?"

"Better hustle!" The phone went silent.

Grabbing her keys, Isabel cursed the traffic ahead.

LAKEVIEW CLASS OF '05 REUNION

by Will Kelly
will0703@bsky.social

It was homecoming weekend versus our rivals, the Bayport Bulldogs. Ten seconds left and we were tied 70-70. My nervous palms were sweat-slicked. The crowd was silent and all I could see was the countdown clock in my periphery. Nine...eight...seven... I had one shot. Dribbled left, faked right. Four...three...two... I took the shot from beyond the arc. Nothing, but net. The crowd went wild. The clock read triple zero as the scoreboard flipped 73-70. Best day of my life."

"Funny, this isn't how I remember it. Did you forget we also went to Lakeview High? You were the water boy."

SUCCESSION

by Steve Huff

Overall Second Place

<https://twistedtournament.com/author/stevenhuff>

The contract was clear—consort to an Empress I could never look upon.

Three years to produce an heiress, assuring wealth and power, or receive a final, fatal glance.

Each night, in utter darkness, her cool serpents grazed my neck with needle fangs. Each morning, trembling with fear and desire, I was led away by blind servitors.

Nights of worship rushed by. But only male children—hissing, wriggling things, strangled at once.

Her belly swelled again.

But too late—my three years was up.

From my place now among the other wild-eyed statues, I watch the birth of my tiny, perfect adder-haired daughter.

UNFAMILIAR

by Morgan Kostelnik

www.morgankostelnik.com

Something's off in the room. This isn't how I remember it... That chair shouldn't be there. Why's the carpet blue?

I tremble. I search for anything familiar in my home. The couch, no. Green not brown. Pictures with faces I don't know.

Lurching upward, I knock over the lamp. No. Where's my lamp? Everything's wrong!

"You ok?" An old man rushes in. Unfamiliar.

"Get out of my house!"

He approaches hesitantly. I recoil.

Wait. That smell. Chewing tobacco. My husband's favorite.

Beneath the wrinkles and white hairs, I see him. My Ervin.

"Honey?"

He smiles, eyes glistening.

HEARTS RESTORED

by Lottie Ludema
[@charlottel111](#)

The silent house broke her heart.

Marla spent everything to buy the time-travel ticket. *Desperate.*

Her voice trembled. "May 1, 2024. Under my apple tree."

"You have five minutes. The countdown starts now!"

She closed her eyes and opened them to the smell of apple blossoms.

This isn't how I remember it, she panicked. *Where's Tommy?*

This was her *only* chance. Time was passing quickly!

"Mama!" Tommy's foot slipped on the branch above.

Marla darted, caught, and embraced him.

"You're safe now, Tommy! I've got you."

Squeezing him tight, she wept at his heart beating with hers. *Alive.*

MY FAVORITE SWEATER

by Melanie York
[@ohnosmelly](#)

Our first date was a hike. It got chilly; I wanted to be a gentleman. My sweater was huge on you. *Noodle monster!* you joked, waving the sleeves. I laughed, but snorted, too – *fuck*. I was horrified. But you pulled me close, tasted my smile, and nothing was the same after.

It's our millionth date. My heart races. Maybe it's tacky to wear it, but I need reassurance – the scent of strawberry chapstick on a cold afternoon. And my arms *do* feel like noodles.

I take a deep breath, put the ring box in my pocket, and lace up my hiking boots.

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE

by Raven Tait

www.reddit.com/u/brknside

The last time I saw them, they smiled.

We'd all finalized plans to go to college together, but in the halls, I overheard, "...just using her for rides..."

Then, I found the birthday gift I made for Ashley crumpled in her bathroom trash.

Laura's phone had a fucking separate group chat, everyone but me.

They had stolen every crush...

Nicknames that never made sense suddenly started to.

Years of inside jokes. About me.

Bursts of laughter were never with me, only ever at my expense.

I was always alone.

The last time I saw them, they smiled.

Bitches.

VIOLET FLAMES

by Terri Rose

[@terri-rose.bsky.social](https://twitter.com/terri-rose.bsky.social)

The violet candles flicker all around me as I finish chanting. I slice my palm, and blood drips into the circle, sizzling. Love will come knocking. I've made sure of it. Loneliness is over.

The air hums with a feral vibration. My heart races as two knocks sound at the door. Candle flames dance with hope; my stomach flips.

"Enter," I call, hands trembling.

The door creaks open. A towering shadow looms, eyes glowing, reeking of rot. It roars. I scream.

"It wasn't supposed to end this way," I cry as the darkness engulfs me, swallowing joy and light alike.

DEUCES

by Eilish Forwells

[@eyelash93.bsky.social](#)

I wince as the nurse spreads cold jelly across my stomach.

The screen stays blank—smooth as a tennis lawn.

“Told you,” my sister Rebecca said. “A line that thick isn’t normal.”

“You’re not normal.” I volley back.

I squeeze the top of my nose, “I feel so sick,” I complain. She pats my shoulder, “Some women just aren’t built for this. Not your fault.” *Advantage Rebecca.*

The nurse rotates the monitor. Two little echoes of heartbeats. *Twins.*

The nausea, the exhaustion, the thick line—the signs were always there.

Rebecca’s eyebrows rise and she has nothing to say.

Game, set, match.

YOU BETTER WATCH OUT

by Robert Smiley

[@smileywriting.bsky.social](#)

The last time I saw them, they smiled merrily. I knew the red and green fever had infected my parents.

My Hindu fiancée has dragged me to six different Starbucks looking for a teddy bear cup. It’s breached the religious containment zone.

Mariah Carey and Michael Bublé have been set free. We’ve lost Thanksgiving to Nat King Cole’s dulcet tones. Black Friday’s been jettisoned to November 1st. Our last bastion of Halloween has already been corrupted by *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

November, please, you’re supposed to be the turkey holiday... but it’s beginning to feel a lot like Christmas.

SIDE QUESTS

Twist's free weekly writing challenge

Circle of Life

by Lily Lawrence

Author Lily Lawrence

Challenge: Micro Inheritance

"I've always wanted to do this," I confided nervously. "From my mother, I inherited my smile, humor, eyes, and laid-back personality." I looked down at my ravaged thumbnail. Taking a deep breath in, I launched into the rest of what made me. "And from my father...." I felt my throat work to swallow even though my mouth was completely dry. "From my father I inherited my nose, my fondness for swearing, my depressed and melancholy moods. And my propensity toward murder."

Everyone in the circle gasped as I looked up and met each of their eyes.

"Ma'am, this is a PTA meeting."

I Do Not Know Your Story

by Kristof Mikes-Liu

@kristofml

Challenge: Micro War

I stand before you, ready to strike.

I do not know your newly widowed father wept farewellling you.

I do not know your hope of adding beauty to the world, so people might smile.

I do not know how, unwavering, you nursed the old dog in her last days.

I do not know the seven-year-old you standing up to teenage bullies to protect the strange-talking kid.

I do not know your parents' promise to keep you safe.

These things, I know of myself.

Your story can't be so different. Even as I steady myself to kill you, and you, me.

Pieces of You

by K.A. Vargas

@kearstonsthoughts

Challenge: Micro Inheritance

The dresser drawers are filled to the brim with colorful plastic baubles that used to delight.

Shining silver and gold draped around your neck and affixed to each ear. A ring on every finger, delicate and artfully placed.

That's what you left behind. Tiny glittering pieces of you, in my memories, and in your drawers, and I've been tasked to sort through both. Told to take whatever I'd like.

With a heavy heart, I hold each one up. Examining it. Remembering you.

How do I decide which to keep and which to let go?

They're all still pieces of you.

Little Red Roasts the Wolf, Instead

by TeeHi

Challenge: Fairy Tale Fun

Once Upon a Day, 2025:

Little Red tiptoed to the edge of her grandmother's bed and peered at the frail figure lying under the cover.

"Oh, my, Grandmother!" Red cried, unfooled. "What a big nose you have!"

"The better to—"

"I mean, like, it's HUGE! I could walk right into a nostril and still have room!"

"Hmph!" The wolf-in-disguise snarled. "The better to—"

"I mean, like, it's MASSIVE! I could even drive a car into one nostril!"

"Grrrr...The better to—"

"Drive a car in, do a 3-point-turn, back up—"

"Forget it!" The wolf hopped up and ran out the door.

Red gave chase. "I mean, it's SO big!"

TWISTED TOURNAMENT

THE 2026 ANNUAL PASS IS ON SALE NOW

4 contests, 12 stories and bundles of fun for \$70.00.

Veterans' Discount gives return contenders an extra \$5 off until the end of December. It's our way of saying thanks.

Add it to your Christmas wish list or [sign up now!](#)





A writing community like no other, filled with
wonderful people, prizes, and prose.

Find us on social media
[@twistinthetalex](#)
[@twistinthetalex.bsky.social](#)

Email: admin@twistinthetalex.com
www.twistedtournament.com

©2025 Twisted Writing