

LITERARY MAGAZINE

TWISTED

Tournament



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CONTENT WARNING

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

BEHIND THE SCENES



We've just wrapped up our very first Tournament of the year—and what a start it was. Truly brilliant!

We experimented with a few new prompts this time around, including some cosy mix-ups in the first round, and western-style events in round three.

The stories that came out of it were surprising, inventive, and clever – everything that makes us love doing this.

Looking ahead, the next tournament is an exciting one. Just when you thought you were getting the hang of Tourneys, think again. We're switching it up and dialling up the challenge another notch. The next Tourney will begin with two micro rounds and end on a 1000-word flash.

The winner will need to perform well across the full spectrum, from a tight 50 words all the way up to 1000. It's going to be thrilling to watch it unfold!

We're also working out something new for midyear—still in the discussion stage, but it's too good not to tease. It's a different kind of contest, designed to spark fresh ideas and push you in new directions. Nothing's set in stone just yet, but an announcement isn't far off... so keep an eye out. This is one you'll want to keep on your radar.

By the time this goes out, the next Tourney will be just a month away, so we'll see you all again soon. Thanks for being part of this with us—we can't wait to see what you create next.

Nick

TWIST CREATOR
NICK SMITH

COVER ART BY
AMEY MANN

EDITED BY
FREYA KING

OVERALL WINNERS

TWISTED TOURNAMENT MARCH 2026

1ST PLACE

STEVE H

R1: 9.31 R2: 9.28 R3: 9.48

1ST PLACE

RMGETSGRUMPY

R1: 9.23 R2: 9.54 R3: 9.24

2ND PLACE

LISA_R

R1: 9.71 R2: 8.87 R3: 8.53

2ND PLACE

LINDA BAYLEY

R1: 9.51 R2: 9.21 R3: 8.98

3RD PLACE

MOLLY B

R1: 8.54 R2: 9.70 R3: 8.68

3RD PLACE

DANI LUCAS

R1: 9.01 R2: 9.52 R3: 9.03

WINNER

[SNAGGLEFANG'S HORDE]

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

It was fantastic to get my first real competition win, and particularly in Twisted Tournament!

Not only is it always stacked with great writers, the Twist in the Tale 1K in 2024 was the first writing competition I entered, and the beta forums and side quests were my first real forays into the writing community.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN DOING TWISTED TOURNAMENTS? HOW WAS THIS ONE DIFFERENT FOR YOU?

I started with the inaugural tournament and have competed in all of them. Even though there were several where I didn't land on any leaderboards, it's been a great way to generate story ideas that I can later expand or use elsewhere. This one was different because coming second in the last tournament had given me that glimmer of hope that I might win one, but also because I was under a lot of time pressure with a crazy work week, so couldn't afford to do my usual agonising about prompts and ideas. I just had to pick an idea and write.



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

The 100, because it's fun to push the limits on how much story and atmosphere I can get into these, although it's definitely possible to go crazy adding or removing commas (or sneaky em-dashes). I feel like I went pretty ambitious in the last tournament with my "consort to a medusa empress" one, and here I wanted to see if I could imply a whole spy thriller in a few sentences.

Read Steve's 100 word story, [Just Business](#), on [page 31](#).

R1: 9.31

A MOTHER'S WORK

R2: 9.28

ABUELITA

R3: 9.48

JUST BUSINESS

•••••
STEVE HUFF

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

I think one of my strengths is establishing a setting and creating an atmosphere/feel in a short space. My weakness is the flip side of that, which is that I often go too far in trying to jam in cool elements, and end up with something either incomprehensible or lacking in emotional impact. My scores tend to reflect how well I manage to toe that line in any given tourney.

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

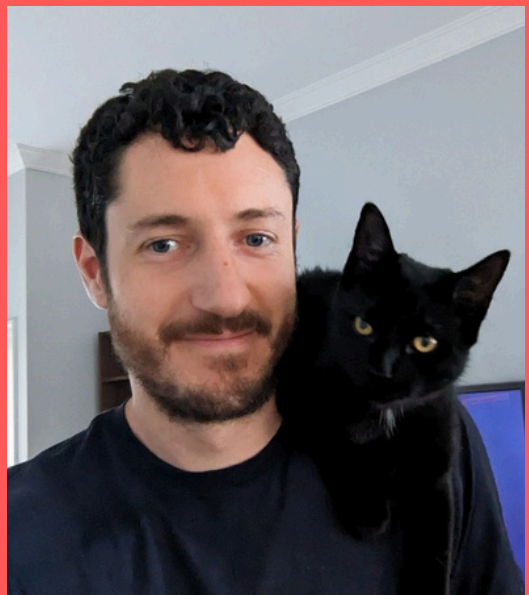
Celebrate your wins, but try not to get too caught up in the scores. There's so much top-notch competition here and there are so many factors that go into how the judges will receive any given story. My scores have been all over the place – from close to a perfect 10 to bottom 30% of scores in the same round in the very next tournament, for example. One of my other stories scored well below the leaderboard and then was published by Crepuscular, so your story's life doesn't necessarily have to end with the tournament.

Read the top scoring stories from previous tournaments if you have access, or past winners at these lengths from other competitions, and try to get a feel for their pacing, how they achieve certain effects etc. If you don't have a group of beta readers, try out the beta forums. I'm still friends with awesome writers I met through the beta forum in the first TT.

Steve lives in Perth, Western Australia, where he buys books at a faster rate than he reads them, provides domestic services to two cats, and writes when given a deadline.

His short fiction has appeared in Crepuscular, Saros Speculative Fiction, Elegant Literature and WestWord.

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



•••••
STEVE HUFF

WINNER

[CHERRYHOOF'S CAVALRY]



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

It feels great. But I'm rather shocked—there are so many great stories in the competition. I'm honored and humbled that fellow writers liked my stories as much as they did.

WHAT HAS TWIST TAUGHT YOU ABOUT YOUR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES AS A WRITER?

Twisted reminded me that deadlines are a source of stress and strength in my writing. When I'm overwhelmed or stressed (which is quite often), I shut down. I almost didn't do this competition because I worried the quick succession of deadlines would cause me grief. But my husband and my son, who also participated, pressured (shamed) me into doing it. (I'm very glad they did!) Yes, I was stressed during the week of writing, but the quick deadlines also kept me from overthinking (which I also do quite often—like right now I'm overthinking about how I clearly overuse parentheses and em dashes...) and forced me to get to work.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN DOING TWISTED TOURNAMENTS? HOW WAS THIS ONE DIFFERENT FOR YOU?

This was actually my first Twisted Tournament (another reason I was so shocked to win). I really enjoyed the format and the quick turn around and I will participate more in the future!

Read RM Soutar's 500 word story, [Ron's Favorites](#), on [page 12](#).

R1: 9.23
RON'S FAVORITES

R2: 9.54
BACK AND FORTH

R3: 9.24
IF YOU WANT MY BROTHER...

•••••
RM SOUTAR

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

My favorite of my stories—though not the one that performed the best—is Ron's Favorites. It's very personal. I lost my dad, Ron, nearly two years ago. I miss him every day. He didn't own a bookshop, but he loved reading, and books were something we always shared and talked about. Every book mentioned in my story is one my dad and I either read together or discussed.

In my story, the narrator talks about Charlotte's Web and how her father never finished reading it with her, allowing Charlotte to live on forever. That is a twisted version of the truth: I was reading *The Yearling* aloud to my dad during his last weeks. He died before we finished the book. At first, I had a very difficult time with that, and I was furious with myself that I didn't push to finish the book when I knew our time was short. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that in my dad's world, Flag, the yearling will live forever because the book will remain unfinished. It sits on my bookshelf with a bookmark marking the last passage I read to him.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO WRITERS ENTERING A TWISTED TOURNAMENT COMPETITION?

Read. A lot. Widely. Fiction, nonfiction, essays, poetry. Read all you can because everything you read finds a home in your writer's toolbox and you never know when a snippet of something will pop in your head and give you an interesting direction for your current project.

*RM reads and writes literary, horror, and fantasy. Her favorite books include *IT* by Stephen King and *The Wheel of Time* by Robert Jordan, and she is currently wrestling her way through *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon. Beyond the book world, she begs her family to play board games, crochets with more optimism than skill, and practices a form of yoga best described as "sharing the mat with a spoiled rescue dog."*



•••••
RM SOUTAR

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

NATALIE MINAKER

9.85

2ND PLACE

LISA_R

9.71

3RD PLACE

NOT LEBOWSKI

9.37

1ST PLACE

FREYA

9.81

2ND PLACE

CHARTMAN

9.71

3RD PLACE

PAM LONSDALE

9.58



The Winter Den

(cosy body swap)

by Freya King

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

Yelena had just put her aching feet up when the knocking came at the door, sharp and insistent.

She closed her eyes for a second and rubbed her swollen belly. She was so tired. Tired from carrying the twins, tired from long days and nights in a life that never seemed to soften, and she was fed up of a landlord that never left her alone. All she wanted, more than anything, was one safe space in the world.

The rapping continued. With a sigh, she pulled on her parka and went to the door. The moment she opened the door a crack, her landlord pushed his slicked head inside.

“I need to check the bathroom,” he said, shoving his way in. The salmon soup and mead on his breath stung her nostrils.

Yelena didn’t argue. She stepped back, and when he slipped past her, she walked out.

She walked down the stairs and out of town. She kept on walking, over the bridge and into the woods, where winter had settled in. The amber sun cast a gentle golden glow against the bare trees, and the world finally hushed.

Nesting birds fluttered and cooed, a curious deer stared.

And then Yelena saw it – the bear.

A hulking beast with a dense, shaggy fur. It stood in a clearing, tearing into a beehive. Its curved claws cracked the hive, splitting it open like a melon. Bees buzzed around, but the bear paid them no mind.

“I wish I could be like you.” She whispered and then the world went black.



When Yelena woke, something felt wrong. Everything was too big, too solid, too... strong. Her body no longer ached. She looked down at her hands and found broad, furry paws instead. She screamed and a powerful roar echoed through the forest. The woods stopped and listened. Yelena liked it.

The sweet taste of honey lingered on her lips, and the snow began to fall. She found shelter at the roots of a sycamore tree, where the earth opened into a deep, hollow den.

Yelena crawled inside and curled up, safe and snug, wrapped in her thick pelt. Outside, the snow fell heavier. Somewhere in the distance, a stream babbled, a hedgehog trundled by, and there was nothing for Yelena to do but rest.

Her eyes drifted closed, and she slumbered.

She dreamed of spring; lush forests bursting with berries and rivers full of salmon. She dreamed of her babies, splashing in the clear freshwater. And she dreamed of meeting a man and knowing that she must stand tall, show no weakness.

When she finally woke, the world had begun to thaw, and pressed against her side were two small cubs. Yelena beamed, ready to show them their world.



Back in the city, there was an intrusive rapping at her apartment door. Inside, Yelena stirred. Her twins slept beside her, pink-cheeked and perfect in their bassinets.

The pounding came again, loud and insistent, and the bear inside Yelena was woken.



Worlds Apart

(cosy alien abduction)

by Natalie Minaker

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

Today, Cam's eyes are blue. Yesterday they were brown.

"Morning Ava," he says exiting the metal hatch and stepping onto the dawn-damp forest floor. He's two inches taller than yesterday too. Height seems to be difficult for him to keep consistent, but I appreciate the effort.

"Morning," I say from my kneeling position. I've spotted a patch of pincushion moss enveloping a boulder, and I run my finger over the edges, feeling for where I can pry it loose.

"Where are we?" he asks, squatting beside me.

"A forest near my home. I often come here foraging."

"For what?" Cam raises a curious eyebrow, just like I'd taught him.

However, he overshoots, and the eyebrow continues travelling upward, disappearing into his hairline. "You forage for dirt?" he asks, looking at my glass jar half filled with soil.

"Sometimes. Plants too. Interesting rocks when I see them." My fingers find a gap in the moss and a large chunk peels away in one satisfying piece. "But this is my favourite."

"Is *food*?" Cam says the word like he's tasting it; curious, considering his people have no concept of eating.

"No. A plant," I say. "I build terrariums – tiny gardens in jars."

"Why?"

"For fun I suppose. It's relaxing."

"Relaxing?" Cam says with a smile that has far too many teeth. "Like books? Or movie pictures? Or crime podcasts?"

"Yeah. Just like those."

"All humans do this?"

"No Cam." I give him a smile with the correct number of teeth.

"Ah." He nods. "Is Ava thing. Not human thing."

"Got it."

He runs his fingers over the moss and nods. "I'm relaxing, Ava."

"That's the spirit."

I pull a pair of scissors from my pocket, and trim the edges of the moss before placing it in the jar atop the soil. Cam watches with unblinking concentration as I proceed to collect a handful of sticks and pebbles – mental note: teach Cam about blinking – before I arrange them in the jar, shifting the configuration until I'm satisfied.

I hold up the finished terrarium. Cam squints, then his eyes widen in surprise. "It looks just like forest! But tiny!"

I stare at the metal ceiling high above. Just like this forest: real but not real.

Today, the observation chamber has replicated a small slice of woodland down to the molecular level. Yesterday, it was Times Square; before that, the Sahara.

It's easy to forget that I'm actually light years from Earth, in deep space with a well-intentioned, infinitely curious, shapeshifting alien I've nicknamed Cam.

Cam the chameleon.

So what if it wasn't real. It's close enough.

He taps the jar excitedly. "There is tiny animals inside!"

I peer through the glass; half a dozen white specks, hardly bigger than dust motes, dart amongst the moss.

"Springtails." I smile. "They'll keep the mould under control."

Cam stares at the jar. "Ava... you think springtails are happy in their tiny world?"

"You know Cam," I say, breathing in the cool morning air, "I think they are."

a Dan's Favorites

(cosy haunting)

by RM Soutar



Molly slipped the receipt between pages before pushing the book across the counter.

“Happy reading.” The words—Dad’s words—stung her throat.

The customer smiled. “I know you miss him. We all do.”

Molly nodded toward a nearby shelf. It sat half empty beneath a hand-lettered sign: RON’S FAVORITES. “I’m trying to fill it with books he loved, but I can’t remember them. I thought I knew. And now...” She swallowed. “I can’t ask him.”

The woman squeezed Molly’s hand. “Maybe the shop will tell you. Your dad always said books had a way of finding the right person.”

Once the woman left, Molly turned to the half-empty shelf, tears slipping free. She could still hear Dad praising *Moby-Dick*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Hunt for Red October*. He always had a book in his hands, always another favorite to talk about. Why couldn’t she remember more of them?

Maybe the shop will tell you...

She scrubbed her eyes and turned from the shelf. Moving slowly through the aisles, she let her fingers trail over the books Dad had shelved, waiting for... something.

She flinched when she felt movement under her fingers.

A spider, long-legged and fuzzy, clung to an obscure historical novel about Everest.

She shoed it away and reached for the book.

Memories of Dad talking about lost mountain climbers rushed back.

How could she have forgotten this one?

And... Had the shop shown her?

She shook her head. Coincidence.

She moved the book to RON’S FAVORITES.

The spider reappeared the next day on a battered Zane Grey. Molly blinked back tears.

“Dad?” She whispered into the empty shop.

The spider dropped from the book.

Dad loved westerns, had pressed her to read one. She never did. He’d said that was all right: books were a kind of haunting. What stayed with one person passed clean through another. That was the magic of them.

Grateful for another restored memory, she placed the book on the shelf.

Each morning the spider waited on another book, and each book gave back some forgotten piece of Dad. RON’S FAVORITES filled, and the shop felt less empty.

But when one space remained, the spider stopped appearing.

For days Molly searched, scouring every dark corner, looking under every shelf. She began to wonder if grief had made her imagine the whole thing.

Still, something led her to the memories, if not the spider—

Her mind caught on the word.

Charlotte’s Web.

Dad had read it to her when she was little, but never all the way to the end. He’d said some stories knew where to stop, and some were kinder if you imagined the ending yourself.

Years later, she’d understood he’d wanted to spare her Charlotte’s death.

Wishing real life offered the same mercy, Molly retrieved the book, slid it into the final spot of RON’S FAVORITES.

Something felt wrong.

She hesitated, hand on the spine, then pulled the book out.

Clutching *Charlotte’s Web* to her chest, she left the last spot empty.

Death of a Woodcarver

(cosy funeral)

by J.I. Locatelli

[@sennara.bsky.social](#)

My GPS insists on a barely-there dirt road between a bunch of cacti and tumbleweeds. Behind me, the city shrinks while the setting sun casts the empty desert ahead in a golden glow.

It's not where I'd normally hang after work, but as I changed out of my grease-coated work uniform, the text arrived:

Ur cordially invited to a funeral at sunset. Coordinates tagged below. Be there or be divorced.

Allison's always had a flair for the dramatic.

From a distance, I catch sight of her sitting on the edge of a flatbed truck, face glowing in the light of a nearby bonfire. Something is piled high behind her, and I worry she's hit a deer or maybe a bear. It wouldn't be strange for her to hold a funeral for roadkill.

She leaps to her feet, greeting me the moment I get out of the truck. Not even the endless desert can dampen her boundless enthusiasm. I duck my head around her to see what's on the truck, but it's covered by black tarp.

"Babe." I pray to whoever listens that it's not an actual body. "Pardon my French, but what the fuck?"

"It's a funeral." Allison flings herself at me. I catch and twirl her around, just like I did at our engagement flash-mob. She kisses me and my hands slide low on her skinny-jean clad hips, tugging her close. It's impossible to be even a little annoyed when she's like this.

"For what?"

She escapes to yank away the tarp, revealing a pile of half-finished crafts. "The hobbies abandoned in our spare room."

My barely-used brewing kit is there, along with woodcarving tools, 3-D printing supplies and a typewriter we'd bought when I thought I'd be a serious novelist. I hadn't touched any of it in three years.

"Why?" I tap a key on the typewriter. It gives a satisfying click. "Look at that. It still moved!"

Undeterred, Allison grabs a half-finished glove from the pile of our old stuff and waves it in my face. "To say goodbye to who we were."

I catch the glove between my teeth, then let go when she tugs.

She tosses it into the fire with the knitting needles still attached. "Goodbye, Knitter Allison!"

I lift what was meant to be a very manly wood-carved unicorn. My hand had slipped, taking out most of its horn and front leg. "Again, why? I like my junk room."

"We need our spare room back." She taps the carving. "Say goodbye."

"Goodbye, Manly Woodcarver Carl!" I chuck the unicorn in the fire. It was broken, anyway. "Seriously, Ally-cat, why do we need space?"

"For our new hobby." Allison presses something into my hand.

"And what's that?" She gestures for me to look. I do.

A positive pregnancy test.

"Hello, Daddy Carl."

I take her hand and squeeze it. My heart melts faster than the knitting needles in the golden fire. "Hello, Mommy Allison."

The World in Color

(cosy cult)

by Kate Dennerly

Crow ruffled her feathers, surveying her nest in the soft sunlight. Three eggs lay safely nestled in a hodgepodge of sticks and straw, bits of cotton fluff and stray feathers. And yet, something felt wrong. Crow had seen the world and knew it to be bright and vividly hued, but her nest was flat, the palette unsuitable. Her chicks deserved to be welcomed to the world by color.

Crow launched from the nest, sailing effortlessly in the gentle updraft as the sun warmed her feathers, circling, searching. There! A large group of children played amongst wooden structures below, their pastel skirts and shirts in matching tones of lavender. Ribbons adorned twin braids on each of the girls; one was bound to come loose. Crow settled in the branch of a blossoming cherry tree to wait, nipping at the sweet fruit, admiring the crimson tones beneath her beak. Beautiful, but impermanent. Ribbons were better.

Laughter permeated the air as a group of adults exited a large building near the tree. They, too, wore lavender, except for one man. He was older, bearded, small, and yet his flock followed him as if he had hatched each of them. His robes were of deep royal purple, more beautiful even than that of the cherries. A thread from his frock for her nest, perhaps? Crow hopped to a lower branch.

The adults called to their children, voices soft but carried by the wind, beckoning them closer. A long table of wood planks worn smooth by use was laden with bowls of fruit, candles in glass jars alight though the flickering flames were nearly invisible in the bright sun. Crow sailed from the branch, alighting on a fence post near the table, eyes caught by a cushion atop a bench. Radiant blue. Not like the blue of the sky, which would greet the chicks itself. Blue like the cool, deep pools of the mountain streams.

A clinking sound interrupted her reverie. Clay cups, painted in vivid hues by unskilled hands, were palmed and passed along the table by helpful hands, large and small. The flock leader moved among them, filling each cup with a liquid the color of late-summer raspberries, dropping small marshmallows atop those for the children, to eruptions of delighted giggles. Mugs filled, the colorful host raised their glasses to the sky with joyful shouts, then drained their cups in unison. Crow watched. Waited. And soon, all was quiet. Peaceful. Still.



Crow ruffled her feathers, surveying her nest in the waning sunlight. Strands of lavender, strings of deep purple, patches of radiant blue. Suitable colors to greet new life.

Call Me Fishmael

(cosy monster)

by Margaret Coulbourn

Call me Fishmael.

Some years ago, I escaped my prejudiced bay for an inclusive refuge in a vast seamount range. "The Oasis," it was called, was guarded by a vortex and run by a nurturing whale of unusual color, Moby.

It was an ethereal cavern lit by bioluminescent plankton and adorned with vibrant coral. Upon arrival, a dolphin presented me with assorted crustaceans, and an eclectic array of species welcomed me. A ninety year old turtle waxed poetic about Moby's selflessness.

You see, he told me, *Moby harbors more creatures than a whale can reside with.*

I was baffled by the goodness required to relegate oneself to homelessness.

Later, they showed me to my bedchamber. The decor was old, but had a homely appeal I found comforting. They said nothing about the length of my stay, but insinuated an indefinite period was expected.

Unbeknownst to me, news of my geographic expertise found its way to Moby, who enlisted my help locating a monster intent on ending a fight which had cost him his leg and Moby his family: Ahab.

I charted a course east, riding within Moby's capacious mouth as he moved with unbelievable speed, sporadically exiting to confer with him.

On the fourth day, we located Ahab, who immediately deployed harpoon laden boats. Being a whale of strong moral character, Moby had no interest in hurting Ahab's crew, but self-preservation required him to disavow the pursuant crafts of their buoyancy. I heard the ghastly screams of Ahab's brethren and smelt the stench of their waste, voided in fear, from within the humid embrace of Moby's mandible.

But, Ahab was undeterred.

I was thrown against Moby's soft palette as he destroyed Ahab's ship, his cushiony gums rendering me unharmed. Moby released a guttural moan that reverberated through me. I pleaded with him to let me assess his injuries, but it was hours before he allowed it, at which point I discovered a harpoon lodged in his hide. The attached line was pulled curiously taut, and following it, I discovered Ahab, tangled amidst his own weapon, unceremoniously destroyed by his hatred.

Victory! I thought, *Harm shall not come to our oceanic savior!* Joyously, I turned to Moby, finding him sullen. *Ahab is gone. You should rejoice*, I said.

Moby stared at me for a long while. *I rejoice in my life, but will not rejoice in the loss of another's.*

But it is a monster we speak of! I insisted.

Is it? What makes one a monster?

A monster cannot be defined, I said, *but is recognized when encountered. Moby was dissatisfied.*

One who kills, I tried, and Moby asked if the crustaceans I fed on did not perish upon consumption.

One who kills for sport, I countered, but Ahab had sought Moby for revenge.

One who gleans pleasure from suffering.

Like celebrating Ahab's death? Moby replied.

At this, I capitulated. *Then tell me, what is a monster?*

Moby's red eyes met mine. *When I know, so shall you*, he said.

To Broad and Be Bath

(cosy vampire)

by Avery Other

[@averyother.bsky.social](https://www.bsky.social/averyother)

Nina's favorite color was black now—no, *dark* black, she decided. The blackest black, just like her soul, maybe... probably. Fuck it, definitely! She wasn't a little girl anymore, so she wouldn't partake of prissy pinks or Barbie doll nonsense. She'd read poetry, obituaries, Anne Rice. She'd listen to My Chemical Romance and shop at Hot Topic, and that was that.

So she did. Nina left behind childish things and began this new "phase." (*Not* a phase, Mom!)

The just-turned-thirteen-year-old lounged on her bedroom floor, brooding. She'd gotten quite good at brooding. The trick was to pick a spot on the wall to stare at, then let her mind wander into song lyrics.

If I could find you now, things would get better...

Nina sighed. Intermittent sighs were important. So was the occasional hair flip, as long as her washable marker-streaked locks landed appropriately back where they came from, covering half her face. They did. She'd practiced. Damn, she was so fucking deep.

Clop clop clop clop.

She jolted upright. Stood. Nina knew that sound, but it couldn't be—it'd been so long since she'd summoned her friend, and she'd never done it accidentally before.

Clop clop clop. Pause.

It wasn't real. Nina knew that. And yet...

A single knock.

"M-Mister Glittermane?" Nina tentatively called out the name of her childhood imaginary unicorn, the wisest, truest, *pinkest* friend she'd ever had.

Something answered from the other side of her closet door—a low resonating timbre, far less playful than she remembered. But it was still familiar. Still him.

"Sup Bitch. Can I come in?"

She thought it was odd he asked for permission. Before, he'd let himself into her bedroom as soon as she called. But they were closer before, and now there was modesty to consider. She wore *bras* now.

"I'm decent," Nina announced. "Come in."

She expected her closet door to burst wide with an explosion of glitter and cartoon melodies, but it slowly creaked open. Low fog billowed ominously, and she swore she could hear the haunting intro to AFI's "Miss Murder."

This is what I brought you, this you can keep...

Her unicorn. Resplendent in pink with a freshly-dyed jet black mane and scarlet eyeshadow, his horn triple-pierced. He smiled at her with equine vampire fangs as he crossed into her bedroom. Mister. Fucking. Glittermane.

"You've changed, but I dig it," he assessed, magicing a bottle of nail polish to float from her dresser and uncap itself. "Shall I paint your nails like the old days? But black?"

"Mister Glittermane—"

"Vlad Von Glittermane," he corrected. "I've changed too."

Nina's eyes were suddenly wet, and she realized they were tears of joy—not complicated emo sadness.

"Ah, there," nickered Vlad. "You've figured it out yourself."

She had. She could be melancholy *and* happy. Hers was the sort of mind that conjured unicorn vampires named Vlad Von Glittermane. Nina contained multitudes.

"Yes. Let's paint my nails black, except..." She extended her middle finger, smiling. "Make this one pink."

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

MOLLY B

9.70

1ST PLACE

RMGETSGRUMPY

9.54

2ND PLACE

JEREMIAH WELLS

9.60

2ND PLACE

DANI LUCAS

9.52

3RD PLACE

TEEHI

9.50

3RD PLACE

LE XKUR43

9.46



THE YOUNGEST MAGICIAN

by Molly Blunden

Standing before the mirror, Jaime smoothed the black satin cape, handsewn by his mother. Spit-licking his cowlick flat, he noted the mottled green bruises along his jawline were now hidden by an angry rash of tween acne.

“A magician's greatest trick lies in misdirection,” he informed his reflection. Sage advice printed in large yellow letters on his magic set's cardboard box, last year's birthday gift.

He posed Dracula-style—a pre-performance confidence boost—before heading to his standing gig in the living room.

Jaime's mother perched upon the floral loveseat in anxious anticipation. Stepfather Hank lounged beside her, fat fingers dangling three Budweisers by their plastic yoke. Glaring, he belched, blowing the foul air towards Jaime.

From behind the sheet-shrouded TV tray, Jaime performed. Vanishing coins, cut rope, disappearing ball under cup.

Lately, his arsenal of props had dwindled. Hank had smashed trick handcuffs, punched through the top hat's secret compartment and snapped his wand-to-bouquet in half.

Just last week, bored Hank bound his stepson's hands with the never-ending handkerchief. Despite his wife's pleas, he'd refused to loosen the painful silk ligature—instead mocking the boy for bobbling forkfuls of peas at supper.

Tonight, Jaime coaxed Hank to pick a card from the deck.

“Wrong, dipshit. Three of spades!” sneered Hank. “Your boy's got no talent, Betty,” he said smugly, patting her knee.

But Hank hadn't perceived the true illusion.

Although Jaime couldn't make his stepfather disappear, he'd already mastered the art of misdirection.

That man's anger was no longer targeted at his mom.

GHOSTS IN GRAY AND SCARLET

by Jeremiah Wells
[@jeremiahwells.bsky.social](https://www.bsky.social/@jeremiahwells.bsky.social)



My first art exhibition was called *Catharsis*. In the main gallery, champagne-sweet patrons strained to extract meaning from random whorls and splattered acrylic. I excused myself and slinked off to a quiet back hallway, red wine in hand.

Here hung three paintings. My origin story. Unlike the abstracts in the main hall.

The first—as viewed from a second story window, an amorphous figure in gray approaching a house on a sidewalk.

“Just the man I’m looking for,” said a short, white-haired man, appearing at my side.

“Sorry. I needed a moment. Attention makes me uncomfortable,” I explained.

“I can relate.” His forgettable face smiled imperceptibly. “Been following your work.”

The second—looking out from under a bed, only black shoes and gray pants visible in a doorway. Searching. Hesitant. Paint blended heavily at the edges of the canvas, fading like a dream or...

“Memories,” the man said.

“Indeed.” I took a sip of wine. My memories. The last moments before my parents were murdered.

The final piece—blurred impressions of a man and woman lying in a vivid pool of scarlet.

“I remember it like it was yesterday,” the man said.

I stiffened.

The police had found zero evidence. With no family and the only witness a small child, they were ghosts. Spooks, like their killer.

I swallowed, wine thick and acidic.

“Don’t worry, kid. I’m retired.”

A fat padded envelope tapped my arm. I flinched.

“I’ll take the lot.”

“Why?” I managed to croak, the word straddling universes.

“Catharsis.”



A FARE WARNING

by Trina High

Nikolas tapped his foot and checked his phone again. Where was that driver?! He selected the gradient black-and-pink icon, when a little red Fordvette pulled up, and a woman stuck her head out.

“You Nikolas?” She popped her gum— *pop!*

“Yeah...Tammy with UbrLyfft?” He lowered his voice. “4 Heist?”

“Yeah. Tha's right.”

Nikolas lyfted one of the bags overflowing with gold ingots, but Tammy raised a hand.

“First I gotta give ya’ the ridin’ rules.”

“Riding rules?” Sweat broke out on the robber's forehead. He'd relieved the bank of their tangibles several minutes ago. He needed to get away!

“Yeah—”*pop!*“—Rule #1: Wipe off yer shoes ‘fore gettin’ in.”

Nikolas wiped his Reeboks on the concrete.

“Rule #2: No playin' loud music.”

Nikolas nodded.

“Rule #3: Don't—”

“How many rules are there?” Nikolas asked as alarms grew louder inside First Central behind him.

“Baker's Dozen...Now, don't—”

“*Thirteen?! Can't you give them as you're, you know, driving? Away?!*”

pop! “Nah. There's a order to these thangs.”

“Oh, God.”

“Don't take *His* name in vain— Number 3. An’ #4 is don't interrupt the driver! Again.”

Police sirens sounded nearby.

“Okay, okay!” Nikolas snapped. “Let's get on with it!”

Tammy chomped her gum. “You in a hurry er somethin’?”

“Ye-e-eah!”

“Rule #5—”*pop!*“—Never ever—”

Police sirens drew closer.

“Please, can we just go, Tammy?! Cops are on the way and—”

“I said no interruptin’! I'm cancelin’ yer ride.”

Tammy tore off in a cloud of dust and smoke, leaving Nikolas on the corner, bag-in-hand.

SAW IT COMIN'

by Caralin Fleet

Jed didn't much like other people, but it turned out being right's less fun when there's no one to tell about it.

He still tried, of course, from his bunker as it rained fireballs: "Told yas!"

Later, sifting through ashes in his homemade hazmat suit: "Who's crazy now?"

Much later still, reclining on his lawn chair in the neon haze: "Saw it comin'."

But as the days droned, the shine of victory tarnished. He finally had to admit he missed conversation.

"My, what a *lovely* yellow sky," he trilled, falsetto. He curtsied in his coveralls as he collected water from his still. "Rightly is, Miss Delilah." He deepened his voice to sound extra manly. "Won't you have some tea and pecan pie?" He stuck his pinky in the air as he drained the cup. "Ooooooh, Jed, simply maaaaarvelous tea. And you said there's pie?" He sauntered to his compost garden and plucked a scrawny squash. "Help yourself, ma'am." He chomped a bite. "My stars, Jed, that's the best pie this side of Dixie," he proclaimed, spittle flying. "Why, thank you, ma'am, I..." He froze, mid-chew, mouth dangling.

From across the clearing, a woman was staring. She held an empty trap in one hand, an only-slightly-mutated rabbit in the other, and a look of concern on her face.

"...You okay?"

Jed swallowed, blushing. "Oh, um... I was just... uh, pretendin'..."

"Ah." Relieved, she lifted her catch. "...Miss Delilah like rabbit pie, too?"

Jed grinned. "I just bet she does."

THE OTHER SIDE OF MAGIC

by Piper Odelin

<https://twistintheale.com/author/sunflower-sonnets>

As *Magnificent Magic Marcus* straightened his tie, his reflection in the antique mirror blurred. Tomorrow was the big day: his first paid gig.

He shuffled the cards and fanned them out. "Pick a card," Marcus practiced, his smile slipping into doubt. "Who am I kidding? I'm not ready."

As Marcus touched the dresser's worn wood, whispers swirled. The mirror's surface turned black, eyes stared, watching him with intensity. Curiosity lured Marcus in, his breath misting the glass as he pressed his nose against the cool surface.

The presence inside the mirror was a shadow, its darkness seeping from the glass. Marcus jerked back as the silhouette stepped into view. They stood face to face, their heartbeats drumming to the same rhythm.

"Who are you?" Marcus gasped.

The shadow grabbed an Ace of Spades card from the deck, flicking it from finger to finger, a trick Marcus could never quite master, placing it inside his coat pocket, responding, "*I'm the Magnificent Magic Marcus.*"

"Wait!" Marcus shouted. Weightless as a body underwater, he was sucked inside the mirror. His screams, muffled, were waves rolled silently across the glass, swallowed by its depths.

The doppelganger placed Marcus's top hat on his head. His features were now uniform, flawless; easily mistaken for the one and only *Magnificent Magic Marcus*.

He tipped his hat, pulling the Joker card from underneath the brim. With a wink towards Marcus, he tossed the card into the mirror; his eyes gleamed as it vanished with a spark of light.

THE RED STRING

by Megan Astraus

www.meganastraus.com/

He finds a note: *UNLOCK DOOR.*

The notes, the strings—he knows what these are. His wife of fifty-five years, Martha, died and left him clues to the truth.

The government has eyes everywhere, and Martha was smart enough not to leave the truth in plain sight. Now he has to be smart enough to find it.

He unlocks the door to an office with a desk and a worn leather chair. He didn't know she had an office.

A red string connects the doorknob to the desk drawer. There's a photograph on the desk of a beautiful woman with silver hair. Below it, in red letters, it reads: MARTHA.

He opens the drawer. There's a note written in red ink. He loves receiving notes; his mother used to tuck them into his lunchbox before school.

He reads the note.

IF YOU DO NOT KNOW THE WOMAN IN THE PICTURE,
FOLLOW THE STRING TO THE BATHROOM.
TAKE YOUR RED PILL.

He does not know the woman, though she's beautiful. He folds the note, shuts the drawer, and follows the red string into the hallway.

His pocket rings. It's a familiar sound. It hurts his ears and he does not like it. The noise soon stops.

He looks down and he's holding a red string. Red is his least favorite color. Red reminds him of the day his wife of fifty-five years died. Her name was Martha.

He drops the string and turns around. He finds a note: *UNLOCK DOOR.*

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

JO JUMBLES

9.59

2ND PLACE

STEVE H

9.48

3RD PLACE

NARA

9.39

1ST PLACE

SEANYBOIII

10.00

2ND PLACE

CORRIE

9.70

3RD PLACE

DEANK

9.41

10



A PEARLY WHITE HANGING

by Seany Allsop-Pukahi

[@seanyboyallsop](#)

"Oh no, they got canine, huh?" the molar asked the incisor.

They watched helplessly as fingers tied a noose around the baby tooth.

"It's not the end, buddy!" the molar shouted.

"The fairy goddess will come for you. Be brave."

A booming voice echoed through the mouth. "Three!"

"I hope it's quick," the molar whispered.

"Two!"

"I can't watch," the incisor shuddered.

"One!"

"I go to her!" cried canine.

The pull came fast.

And then he was gone, leaving only the bitter taste of blood behind.

"May he swiftly find her," they prayed, hoping someday they would too.

JUST BUSINESS

by Steve Huff

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



I've done everything in this business—espionage, blackmail, wet-work.

Graverobbing is a first.

But I've spent a lifetime chasing—and evading—Magda Allazov. I have to know.

The corpse is decomposed, unrecognisable, but for a silver-backed topaz earring. Those earrings shimmered above me once, as we tore frenziedly at each other on a speeding train—clothes, knives and guns abandoned within arm's reach.

So, she's gone.

The memory's so intense I can smell it over the stench. Unfiltered makhorka tobacco.

I look up.

Magda, framed by moonlight, exhales smoke. Shakes her still-beautiful head.

“Sorry, Max.”

The silencer's dark mouth opens up and swallows me.

LEADERBOARD

FIRST AND LAST

by Anne Author

It should have been easy, my first assignment for the service.

Board the train, identify target, administer the cyanide and retrieve the case before arriving in Constantinople. Just leave no evidence.

Yet here I sit, the first beams of daylight piercing the darkness of my cell, whilst I wait for the priest.

Ironically, for a convicted poisoner, it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth to be abandoned here. Plausible deniability they call it. Unwilling to cause an international incident, my government refuse to acknowledge my existence. Quite literally, left hanging.

If only I hadn't touched that damn luggage tag...

HOUSE RULES

by Corrie Haldane

corriehaldane.com



Zelda lays down her cards. “Pair of tens.”

“Full house,” I say. “I win.”

She gestures to her discarded clothes. “I’ve already taken everything off.”

“Not *everything*.”

She sighs, reaches under her hair. “Help me? Zipper’s broken.”

With effort, the zip slides freely. Then I tug, peeling away Zelda’s human skin, exposing a brilliant gelatinous green. Her true form causes something inside me to uncoil.

Behind the glass, our prisoner’s screams mingle with faint strains of the music we play to soothe him between experiments.

Humans. Such sensitive creatures.

I reach for my own zipper. “Don’t look,” I tell him.

LEADERBOARD

FATE AWAITS YOU AT THE BOTTOM OF THE HILL

by S.A. McNaughton

<https://linktr.ee/writermcnaughton>

Alex read the fortune cookie slip. “*Something lost is found.*” He tried a pocket he’d already searched, and retrieved the glove he’d sought.

Blake read, “*You’ll receive an important call.*” His cellphone rang and Blake said, “It’s the British man who wanted to sell me his car repair business!”

Connor left the restaurant, his unread fortune in his pocket. A chill ran up his spine and curiosity overtook him. He stopped to read it and didn’t see the runaway stroller coming.

The fortune read, “*First comes glove, then comes garage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage.*”

HIS LAST LESSON

by John Knight

I mount the scaffold, hands bound.
It's a cloudy Tuesday in Eidertown,
the briny air thick as tears.
My boy buries his face in Elise's black coat,
his paper crown skewed against her hip.
No.
Watch.
Learn.

The bailiff reads a sentence for
thieving from Lord Thomas.

A calliope tune trills from the distant boardwalk.
My boy turns away from his mum, the crown forgotten.
His soft brown eyes harden, meeting mine.
The boy nods.
He holds his mum's hand, patting it comfortingly.

Yes, my son.
Be a good man.
The burlap hood plunges me into eternal dark.

A PUBLIC HANGING

by Cheryl King

[@cherylking_author](#)

I was used to being stared at, but when Peter Petrosky hung me by my hoodie on the basketball hoop backboard for the entire sixth grade to see, that was next-level humiliation. Especially since my gym shorts were too big. The more I kicked my legs, the further down they fell, until they dangled from my hand-me-down sneakers.

To make matters worse, something was stuck in my contact lens, making my right eye water up and tears spill out like a fountain. I emerged from that public hanging with a new name: Cryin' Bryan.

But, hey, at least I emerged.

JUSTICE FOR SLOW-SEPH

by Tracy Lindstrom

[@tracylindstrom_author](#)

“Sir, we know you have a sloth in your pants.”

Ted tugged his shirt down, covering his groin. “I don’t know what you mean.”

He didn’t plan on stealing the baby sloth when he visited the zoo that day. However, the constant TikToks of Slow-seph being bullied by the other sloths and finding the enclosure door conveniently left open—Ted couldn’t help himself.

Tackled by security after attempting to run, the guards yanked at his zipper, getting it stuck.

“Gah!” Ted screamed.

Observing the scuffle, the zookeeper sighed. “How many sloth-napping attempts is that now?”

“Seven,” said the guard.

“Fucking TikTok.”

THE OLD MAN AND THE TEA

by Ian Grogan

[@ianismehere](#)

The withered hibiscus perched on the windowsill displaced a few leaves as Greg grasped them from the vase. The last of the bunch Jillian had gathered in the fall before she departed. A once brilliant remembrance now lain barren and dry.

Grinding and grinding, he choked the flowers, smothering them with orange peels and tears.

The aroma filled his nostrils as it brewed; she flooded his memories.

Sitting on the porch, he lamented, watching rain weep from the branches of the knotted oak.

The brew hung on his lips like her last kiss.

A haunting taste; bitter and everlasting.

AMERICANS: AN ALLEGORY

by Ryan "Rev" McLean

substack.basnotheatha.com

Lemmy grunted like a pregnant heifer as he plopped his double-kegged ass into the tortured La-Z-Boy. His dumpy roommate, Turk, was already crushing the recliner's twin nearby. Both were avatars of sweat and Cheeto dust.

"Bathroom's clogged again," mumbled Lemmy.

"Mm." Turk found a mini corndog in his folds and swallowed it.

Lemmy wheezed. "Shit. Left the hall light on."

"So?"

"Gotta save electricity."

Turk hacked. "True, I'll get it."

"Not if I do first, ya chode."

Both men cocked custom .44 Magnum Desert Eagles.

BLAM. Missed. Splinters flew everywhere.

BLAM. Missed again.

BLAM. Glass shattered.

"Got it," burped Lemmy.

Darkness.

LIMITED PARKING

by Llyon Blake

The intermission theme filtered through the atrium doors. I'd already missed the introductory bouts. Parking was... limited. I hurry towards the ticket booth, fumbling with my smartphone to pull up the digital receipt. If I was lucky, I'd be able to find a seat before I missed the real matches.

Head down, tapping at the screen, I collide with something solid, my phone skittering to the ground, "move it or lose it." I snarl,

A leather glove strikes me across the face. Stunned, I look up, and dread sinks in.

"I challenge you, sir." The world champion duelist sneers back.

HANGING WITH MR. FUN AND THINKING ABOUT GLORY DAYS

by MF Wills

Mikey planned a legendary entrance. He bribed a drunk security guard to let him use the closed-for-the-night zip line. It would drop him spectacularly into the middle of the reunion's luau. He strapped in, launched, gained speed—then jerked to a dead stop.

Dangling high above the trees, he spotted the party's distant bonfire and heard faint strains of Lionel Richie.

"...all night long..."

He shifted and winced. I hope my balls make it all night long.

His shouts for help were useless. Still, he smiled.

Tomorrow, Mikey—aka Mr. Fun—would be the talk of the Class of '96. Again.

THE RINGMASTER'S RESIGNATION

by Alex K.

The day shall end in disarray, Madame Zelena had warned.

Cyclops Sarah's music blared from the tent, right on time. Except Sarah was not making her grand entrance. Instead, she stumbled through the fairgrounds, trampling patrons and performers alike.

"My contact! Anybody seen it?!"

"Hard to miss a lens of that size, m'lady," Magnificent Mike said, coaxing his rabbit from the contortionist's box.

Juggle-O dropped a flaming torch, igniting the edge of the hightop tent.

"Is that it?" The Bearded Lady pointed to a ketchup-covered toddler, wearing a translucent, bowl-shaped hat as a space helmet.

I sighed. "Freaks."

SIDE QUESTS

Twist's free weekly writing challenge

SEARCH: TWIST

by Dean K

Challenge: The Wikipedia Spiral

'Twist' (disambiguation) may refer to:

- Oliver Twist, 1838 novel by Charles Dickens, and a lonely orphan just like you
- Twister, game you played with your crush (Angie) at that party that time
- "The Twist" (song), 1960 hit by Chubby Checker – 'Chubby' was also your nickname, remember?
- French twist (hairstyle), also known as a French roll. Also how Angie wore it, so fancy
- Aerial twist, acrobatics move not dissimilar to yours when Angie brushed past on the way to 'left-hand green'
- "Twist and Shout" (song), what Angie's boyfriend Chad did when he saw the way you looked at her
- Jack Twist, character in Annie Proulx's 1997 short story Brokeback Mountain, portrayed by Jake Gyllenhaal in the 2005 film
- Twist ending, an unexpected conclusion to a piece of fiction. For example, it turns out Chad had more in common with the cowboys from the previous bullet point
- Twist in the Tale, great short-fiction website, with fun weekly challenges

EN PASSANT

by Keith Charles

@indoorkeith

Challenge: Character Micro

"—teaching her the Sicilian Defense," his son says, beaming over the phone, "and the little shit already used it on me—"

He didn't think much of it at the time. Teaching his boy on a foldout board how knights moved in L's or what castling meant. He only knew the basics, but his son devoured every lesson.

He glances at the time, letting his son's words pour through his fingers like sand.

"—did you wanna play? Like old times?"

"I'd love to." He checks his empty mental calendar. "Maybe later? Early day tomorrow."

"Oh, sure thing." Words buried in sand. "Maybe later."

SIDE QUESTS

Twist's free weekly writing challenge

VOLUPTUOUS

by Author Allister

Challenge: Aisle of Desire

My eyes run up and down her curves appreciatively as I think about what we might do tonight, which sends a tingle of excitement roiling through my stomach.

I imagine her taste, a delight I can explore and savor. And her sultry bouquet as I dip my nose tantalizing closer to her juices. Will she feel velvety on my tongue?

I lick my lips, then run a finger delicately along her slender neck. How did I ever get so lucky to find perfection in such a beautiful package?

I let my imagination run wild. I'll prop her on the kitchen table and open her up while listening to Marvin Gaye, gently working my way inside before pulling out with a splash.

She's bold, she's Italian, and she's coming home with me tonight. At just \$34.99, I can afford to splurge just this once. I gently set the bottle of Pelissero Barbaresco Nubiola next to the two rotisserie chickens already in the cart, and I strut toward the checkout line. God I love Costco!

LOW TIDE

by K.A. Vargas

[@kearstonsthoughts](#)

Challenge: Character Micro

With a hard shove, I send Thadius sailing over the cliff's edge. I know he can't swim, which is perfect for me and too bad for him.

"Oh no," I whisper-shout. Looking around to make sure there were no witnesses.

Thadius flails like a wet noodle. I laugh at his stupidity.

His body lands with a wet crunch before I hear the splash, and that's when I finally call for help.

"Guards," I shriek. "The King! He's fallen."

Heavy footsteps sound as I sink to the earth.

Painting the perfect picture of grief as I wail.

Long live the Queen.

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