



LITERARY MAGAZINE

# TWIST

SEPTEMBER 2025 / VOL.01

## *Team's* WRITING

Stories that stitch together community, imagination and the beating heart of humanity.

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### CONTENT WARNING

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

# BEHIND THE SCENES



Here we are, two years in, and this community keeps proving that storytelling thrives when it's given strange constraints and just enough chaos to make sparks fly! Watching you all twist prompts into gold has been the highlight of running this contest. Every day brings new voices, bold risks, and the kind of inventive writing that reminds me why I built this space in the first place.

This year, we tried something new—a contest called Twisted Teams. Could we combine the sense of community and collaboration with competition? The answer was a resounding *yes*. Not only did writers adapt, they thrived: pushing each other, offering support, and creating stories that might otherwise never have been conceived. The results were electric. Some tales were eerie, some hilarious, some heartbreakingly beautiful, but all of them carried the Twisted stamp of imagination.

We're proud to showcase several of those Teams stories in this issue, including the winning story.

As always, it's not just about the words on the page—it's about the writers who dared to take a set of prompts and run with them, about the readers who cheered them on, and about the friendships forged in the margins.

To everyone who has entered, judged, read, and encouraged: thank you. Your energy, your creativity, and your willingness to join in makes this more than a competition—it's a celebration of stories and the people who tell them.

The fun doesn't stop here. There's more Twists to come. More turns. More challenges. See you in the next one!

*Nick*

TWIST CREATOR  
NICK SMITH

COVER ART BY  
AMEY MANN

EDITED BY  
FREYA KING

# TWISTED TEAMS

## WINNERS

1ST PLACE                      BRIAN WHITE                      \$500  
   *TEAM BUS*

2ND PLACE                      JAIME GILL                      \$250  
   *SMALL CREATURES AMONG BIG BEASTS*

3RD PLACE                      MM SCHREIER                      \$150  
   *TREASURES THAT DEATH CANNOT KEEP*

4TH PLACE                      KITTY H                      \$100  
   *THE FRUIT WE ARE GIVEN*

5TH PLACE                      DANI LUCAS                      \$100  
   *SOURCES OF LIGHT*

## HONOURABLE MENTION

DarkandStormyNight ✧ Emorra  
Freya King ✧ GrimJojo ✧ lombroso ✧ Ram.bles  
SamJames ✧ Steve Huff ✧ TarotGlam

## LONG LIST

Alexandria Cook ✧ Charlie Rogers ✧ Chloe Page  
Chris Doty-Dunn ✧ Connor ✧ CStamate ✧ D H Minton  
HollyB ✧ itsjustriley ✧ Joanne ✧ MichaelM ✧ Mims ✧ MollyB  
NatalieB ✧ Probably Someone ✧ RhiaRaye ✧ Tangentt  
Taurenelle ✧ Terri Rose ✧ Victor Cabinta ✧ W.H. Flowers



# TEAM BUS

By Brian White  
Team The Arctic Stanzas

The team bus, all sunflower yellow and gunmetal gray, is humming diesel and waiting. A few of us shuffle about the high school parking lot with helmets already on, itching for the doors to open. Chomping at the bit as Daddy'd say. I grab my helmet and gear from the bed of my truck and join them.

We were born into this. My daddy, like everyone's daddy, played high school football. He'd throw me the ball in our backyard, and laugh when it bounced off my 9-year-old hands. He'd show me how to cup the ball to my chest like "you was catching your baby sister falling out a burning window".

The pneumatic doors open with a woosh and a hiss, and we climb inside. Boxes for the team fill the front seats. When I was little, there were always boxes on the gameday bus. The team mothers stuffed them for us with paper sacks full of turkey sandwiches, orange wedges and snickerdoodle cookies. On the ride to the field, we'd gobble down the sandwiches and goad each other in our toughest little man voices to save the rest for after we win. On the ride home, we'd celebrate with dancing cookie-eating rituals. We'd make orange wedge orangutan lips and try to smile without laughing.

Tonight, the boxes hold canvas bags. Logoed, durable and hard. They're heavier now that I'm getting paid for this. I ain't never seen a cookie in one of these.



I made Varsity when I was just a freshman. By then, playing awkward catch in the backyard had turned into tackling drills with Daddy. As broad as I was tall, he'd line up across from me and blow a whistle to start. Then he'd beat the ever-living shit out of me, pushing my face into the freshly-mowed grass taunting "You gonna cry, pussy?"

I wanted to. Badly. I did sometimes.

He'd get up, smiling proud. "No tears. No mercy. You knock'm down hard on that first play," he'd say, over and over. "Next play, they thinking about that pain. About that dominance you have on 'em, Son. You own 'em."

You hurt 'em, he meant.

After every whistle. Every time. He'd pick me up and say "I know it hurts, but you gotta come off that pile smiling. You know something that they don't yet. You already won, Son. You the smoke walking out on that field, boy. But when that whistle blows, you gonna be the fire."

Thinking about it, I got the same training for this team. A lotta whistles. Lotta drills. Lotta owning and getting owned.



I push down the bus's narrow aisle and solemnly nod to the others. Each nods back ritualistically. Each knowing what's coming.

Growing up, I would've known each of these boys for years. I would've played wiffle ball in the streets in front of their houses. I might have dated their sister - if they allowed it. Definitely would have spent a Sunday dinner or two at their dining room tables with their families. Getting fed by their mommas. Getting praise from their daddies.

The game feels like life or death now. No more singing chants or telling bathroom jokes. My teammates are strangers. Each of them sits alone in their own heads preparing for the silent drive and the big night before us.



*No tears. No mercy. You knock'm down hard...*

I settle into a seat and into my own thoughts. No lie, my hands are sweaty. My knuckles are bruised, but pale and tight under the bus's running lights. Back during pre-season conditioning, my highschool coach told us to dig our knuckles into the kidneys of the kid we tackled. "When you're under the pile, the refs can't see. That's when you hurt 'em. If you ain't cheating, you ain't trying."

Everyone cheated then. The only honor worth protecting is the honor of victory. Same now.

Coach would shout "On my whistle!" then blow.

We'd react with brainstem memory and fast-twitch muscles. When that whistle blew, we beat the smiles off each other chasing that glory.

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

Daddy's words glow in the dark - *Son. You gotta do better than this. This ain't what I taught you.*

The doubt and shame of that skinny freshman, face pushed into the ground, creeps back in. I'm fine being the smoke. I don't know I want to be the fire.

We pull out of the parking lot. No cheerleaders or proud parents waving us down the road to the rival town. Just quiet time. The crowd of mommas, and daddies, and baby sisters with chants and banners are waiting for us at the stadium.



Dozens of other team buses sit idling as we arrive.

"Gentlemen." The Captain stands in the aisle next to the driver. "We beat the hell out of these folks last week."

Yeah we did.

"But these protestors didn't get the message and they're looking for more. The Ministry has legally defined this week's rally for the opposition candidate as an insurrection."

Helmets strapped, rifles cradled to chests like baby sisters, we share glances in the glare of the stadium lights filtering through the windows.

"That's right, Gentlemen. The official rules of engagement have changed. We have new orders directly from Central Command. There are 20 teams arrayed around the entrances. We're assigned to Gate F."



*Son. You gotta do better than this. This ain't what I taught you.*

"F is for fuck around and find out!" a helmet shouts. Nervous chuckles ripple down the aisle.

"Tonight, you have live rounds." Captain cuts through the chatter. "No more less-lethal ammunition. No more protests. No more protesters. That's the order, Gentlemen. From the top. Lock and load."

Fumbling with the magazines in my tactical bag, I load my weapon.

It takes just a flick of the safety switch and I'm no longer the smoke. I'm the fire.

But if I leave the safety on, I can't kill anyone.

It feels like my life ain't mine to guide anymore.

Captain's whistle blows. Each blast rings in my ears. Taps my spine.

My finger pushes at the safety.

*click*

# THE WINNING EDGE



## What makes a winning story?

There's a seemingly intangible quality to certain pieces of fiction where they become Gestalt stories, greater than the sum of their parts. Perhaps the prose lacks a spark or you've seen tighter plots, but as a whole - for some reason - it just works. In truth, that's down to the skill of the writer knowing when to hold back. Prose and plot can be overwritten - restraint for the story's sake is an often overlooked skill that separates good writers from great ones.

Still, if you held a Chekhov's gun to my head I would say the most important elements of any story are Emotional Connection and Tension. The former so that we care about the events, and the latter so that every single line forces the reader onwards. There should be conflict at every level - in the dialogue, the imagery, the overall arc. Everything should serve these twin goals of making readers care and compelling them forward.

This is exactly what Brian White achieved in the exceptional Team Bus. Well done, Brian.

*Nick*



# SOURCES OF LIGHT

By Dani Lucas

Team The Heroically-Disheveled Keyboard Warriors

At midnight, the power went out, and we were left in darkness.

Over and over, the authorities had dismissed the danger. Much ado about nothing, they said. A molehill, not a mountain. Nothing to see here. They told us what we wanted to hear, and so that's what we heard. It felt easier. It felt safer.

But there were people who tried to warn us. Not many, but enough – enough that we should have known what was coming. The country was too dependent on computers, they said. The code was messy and slapdash and cut too many corners.

Still, it all could have been fine: January 1, 2000 was a few years away, after all.

Then it was a few months.

Then a few days.

And then, as the new year rolled into Kiribati, through Samoa, across New Zealand and Australia, the world, a sliver at a time, began to go dark.

By the time Japan went still, we knew. It would be fourteen hours before it reached us, and that was almost worse than no warning at all. It was too late to do anything that mattered – what could we do, rewrite billions of lines of code? Switch the power plants to “manual”?

So we spent that last half-day numbly stockpiling lentils and dried beans and powdered milk, things we’d never eaten before but that sounded like the things we should be eating at the end of the world. We bought lighters and candles and matches, bundles of festively pine-scented firewood at fifty percent off. We filled our bathtubs with water, waiting with increasing desperation for someone, anyone, to save us. And we watched with dread that grew into terror as the darkness rolled inexorably toward us.

There was no one to save us. And when the darkness came, it swallowed us whole.

We fought it, at first. Those early weeks, when our fear was stronger than our prudence, our fireplaces burned through the night, casting flickering light out onto the snow. We slept clutching flashlights, in case we woke in the night unable to breathe beneath that suffocating dark. And we huddled by our windows, keeping time by our racing hearts, counting the seconds until dawn brought the world back into being, blurry edges emerging from the shadows like a shipwreck from deep water.

For weeks we did nothing but survive. We ate brown bananas and apples past their prime; when fresh fruit was nothing but a memory, we ate syrupy peaches straight from the can, cold SpaghettiOs, untoasted Pop

Tarts. We built nests of blankets in the sunniest corners of our houses. We melted snow, and when the weather grew warmer, we collected rain. We shut our doors against the strange silence of a world we no longer recognized. We didn’t speak. What was there to say?

“

*And when the darkness came, it swallowed us whole.*

The days grew longer, but our supply of light dwindled. The firewood was gone, and the only trees remaining were too large to fell with the tools we had. We turned to books we didn’t intend to read again, furniture we didn’t need, lint we dug out of our dryers. We tried and failed to burn olive oil, peanut butter, Crisco. For a time, we lived in a sickening haze of lavender and vanilla and sandalwood as we burned our way through all the scented candles we’d been given as gifts and never used. We watched as our flashlights flickered and failed, one after another. When the last battery died, we mourned, as though our hopes for something better had died with it.

◇

The next evening, the fireflies came.

The children saw them at dusk, and for the first time in months, the street was filled with laughter. We heard the unfamiliar music, and when we opened our doors, we saw them running, leaping, hands outstretched, surrounded by hundreds of pinpricks of golden light.

We emerged tentatively into the night. Gradually, our shoulders relaxed. Our heartbeats slowed. Some of us lowered ourselves to sit. We found ourselves looking up, marveling at the stars, impossibly bright against the velvety sky. We opened our eyes and discovered the moon.

"It's so pretty, Mama."

A beat of silence. We held our breath. Then, softly:  
"It is, sweet girl."

Our words came haltingly at first, then flowed more easily. We spoke to one another for the first time in months, giving voice to our grief, our exhaustion, our fear. We reached for one another, clasped hands, leaned heads on one another's shoulders, held on.

We remembered what it was to be heard. And we found, to our surprise, that we had things to offer in return.

"...I'll stop over tomorrow with disinfectant..."

"...an easy fix. I'll show you..."

"...don't worry, I can bring it by..."

And sometimes, when there was nothing else to say: "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

As the night wore on, we gathered our children up, their little arms wound around us, legs dangling, faces pressed into our necks. We climbed our porch steps, turned to lock eyes with one another once more.

"Goodnight," we whispered. "Sleep well. See you tomorrow."

“

*We found ourselves  
looking up, marveling  
at the stars,  
impossibly bright  
against the velvety  
sky.*

In the morning, a pot bubbled in the center of the cul-de-sac. Someone knew how to cook lentils, and they weren't bad. Good, in fact. Someone else knew how to make a salad from dandelion greens; the children made a game of plucking the leaves.

Someone else saw the olive oil on that salad, and had another idea.

◇

We're told they're close to restoring the power now, that they expect to succeed any day. We've gotten a few aid shipments, finally – water, rice, bandages. No batteries, no candles, but we don't need them. When dusk falls, we take turns walking the block, stopping before each home. A glass jar, an empty bowl, a coffee can: we check each one and pour in oil where it's needed, careful not to drown the wick. We go from house to house, setting each lamp aflame.

We make our own light.

# HEAT EXCHANGE

By Steve Huff  
Team The Thesaurus-Abusing Wordsmiths

Half of Europe lies in ruins, but clinking glasses and sly remarks fill the Château de Neuchâtel as the victors get down to dividing up what's left. Everyone but me is celebrating or scheming.

Crude, black-clad automatons circulate with trays and carafes, puffing steam. Our Swiss host perhaps making the point to our American allies that we in the Old World don't need slave labour.

I find Count Esterházy, the Habsburg delegate, turning away from a handful of generals. He's a little glassy-eyed, but my programming says seek authority, and he's technically in charge of Jacques, who's in charge of me.

Esterházy perks up at my pretty face, then frowns as he takes in the rest. Below the lifelike mask, my neck is all pistons and gears. Under the gown, steel curves take the place of warm flesh.

"This wine," he begins, "is beastly—"



It takes effort to override programmed deference. “Sir, I’m not the help. I’m EV-2, French Intelligence.”

He flushes with irritation.

“My partner, Jacques, is missing,” I continue. “I believe he’s in danger.”

Raised voices draw our attention to the corner occupied by the Greater American Empire. Its joint leaders—the President of the Confederacy and the Aztec Witch-Queen—have come down in person, off the immense dirigible tethered overhead.

Somewhere out in the dark, our exhausted armies and theirs watch each other warily, sick and sated with death.

We couldn’t have won the war without the Americans, but Jacques said we might as well’ve summoned the Devil to start our campfire. They wouldn’t just quietly hand back the Eastern territories they’d won and fly home. Then he went snooping around the Château last night and didn’t come back.

Esterházy looks back, distracted. “Knowing Monsieur Gage, the only danger your master’s in is the jealous husband kind.”

Authority or not, I’m wasting time—Jacques wasn’t there with his key to wind me up this morning, and I’m losing heat fast.

As Esterházy watches the American retinue depart, I unclip his diplomatic pass, palming it.

He waves his champagne flute. “Look around. It’s peace.”

I’m not designed to take the lead. The compulsion to await instructions is staggering.

Instead, I think of Jacques carefully undoing the back of my dress to access the keyhole in my spine, every morning for six years. Always “pardon the cold hands, little Evie” before he touches steel colder than his hands could ever be.

A quirk of hydraulic neural networks is that my working memory entirely depends on the state of fluids in motion. If I wind down completely, I can be started up, hardcoded instructions intact, but no memory of my short life. Jacques. Our operations.

Everything that makes me... me.

Esterházy’s pass gets me as far as the wing allocated to the Americans. I’m contemplating breaking in, when the suite’s doors swing open. I flatten myself into the shadows as two soldiers emerge.

“...wants our frozen spy on her airship,” one’s saying. “You gonna tell her no?”

“I like my heart on the inside, thanks. They could at least send up some booze though.”

At frozen spy, my coolant runs colder. As they start down the stairs, I follow.

“Think things’ll kick off soon?”

“Believe it. Negotiations aren’t going our way. With the tricks up our sleeve, we’ll roll right over the goulash-eaters. Then Western Europe is ours.”

The other spits. “What I’ve seen, you can keep most’ve it.”



Jacques was right—the Americans had no intention of going home empty-handed. I need to find him, fast.

Down and down again, into the bowels of the Château. Serving-bots coming from the cellars give me an idea, and I snatch a carafe, ejecting a little ocular lubricant into the champagne.

When the soldiers come to a steel door, I wait for one to punch in a code, then step out.

“That’s more like it,” one says, grinning. They snatch the champagne, gulping at it.

“How’d you like—” his companion begins, then vomits noisily down his uniform.

Both are soon on their knees, retching. My tears are a powerful emetic. They’ll be busy voiding bodily fluids for a while.

The steel door radiates cold. As it grinds open, an arctic blast forces me to crank my temperature to keep fluids circulating, burning power I can’t spare.

The chamber beyond is lined with tubes full of frozen monsters. Hulking, long-clawed creatures—American bio-constructs, surely, but like none I’ve seen. A new weapon? In the Château cellars, meaning the Swiss...

Almost simultaneously, I see Jacques suspended in one of the tubes, and an Aztec sorceress emerging from behind, black feathers radiating above her fur-trimmed cloak.

For a moment, we stare, stunned, then she spits two harsh syllables and violet necromantic energy harmlessly crackles over my steel frame.

My almost-human face must’ve saved me. I can’t entirely dodge her next spell. It tears off my left hand as it roars past, spraying steam and coolant.

Before she can vocalise a third, I’m on her. Gripping her cloak, I hold my steam-jetting stump beside her ear.

“Thaw him!” I rasp, counting on her not knowing I can’t kill or maim a human.

Wide-eyed, she mumbles. The ice encasing Jacques glows and begins to run off him.

I hit her twice in the solar plexus, hard. No permanent damage, but all she’ll manage for the next few minutes are desperate gasps.

As I yank open the tube, Jacques staggers into my arms, half-frozen, shivering violently.

By the time he’s functional, the sorceress will be up, maybe the Americans. I hold him tight, and radiate what little heat I have left into him. I wasn’t designed for storage. For permanence.

He stirs, opens his eyes. “E-Evie...?”

“Need to warn...” I manage, slurring.

“Being... betrayed.”

“Evie!”

Too late, he goes for the key. If he lives, gets me restarted, will he tell the new me the same dumb jokes all over again?

I hope so.

The last thing I feel before the cold dark is numb fingers fumbling with the back of my dress.

# ROCK BOTTOM

By Freya King  
Team The Unwritten Quills

For a goldfish swimming endless circles in a tiny glass bowl, Carl was killing it. Every morning, he woke early and got five laps of cardio in before heading down to work at the castle. His recent promotion to Senior Synergy Officer meant he started earlier and shouldered extra pressure, but Carl had work ethic, grit. And at the end of each day, when those sweet, sweet flakes rained down, it was all worth it.

He was valued, respected, and he had quite a substantial treasure chest, which he'd never dipped into yet. Every evening, he stopped to reflect on his shiny gems. Life was good.

Until it wasn't. Without warning, the flakes stopped rolling in. Carl knuckled down, pulled overtime, worked Sundays, but it didn't make any difference. The fluorescent lights shut off and the company seized.

The water grew murky, but Carl believed in Corporate. He trusted them. So, he held on.

By the fifth day, Carl's entire life was a toxic disaster. He couldn't breathe, couldn't move. Panic pulsed inside him. He wasn't sure how much longer he could hang in there.

That's when Carl's world was tipped upside-down.

He was flushed. Canned. Discarded. Dumped like a piece of shit.

Suddenly, Carl was homeless. Flailing in the sewers with the dregs of society. A lawless wasteland where leeches and layabouts eked out their underhanded existence. Carl did not belong here.

All around him things lurked. Shapes shifted in the shadows. Creatures crept and tentacles squirmed out of cracks in the old brickwork walls. Noxious fumes carried the stench of scum.

"Psst." A scarred face emerged from the dark, scratching and jittery. One gold tooth drew attention to the gaping black holes around it. His mangy-looking hair spiked in deranged clumps. "What do you want? I can get anything."

"I need to get home. There's been a terrible mistake, I don't belong here."

The rat squinted at Carl. "Tell you what, kid. I'll get you home, but it'll cost."

"I'm good for it. How much?"

"I like shiny things, y'know what I mean." He winked.

Carl thought of his treasure chest back at home and realised he had no way of paying. He looked around. Nothing was shiny. It was all dull and sludge-covered. He plucked one of his own scales and, without a second thought, handed a piece of himself over.

The lowlife took it and disappeared into the shadows.

"Hey, we had a deal." Carl cried.

"Lesson number one, kid, there's no we in sewers."

Carl opened his mouth to argue, but the mangy fiend was gone.

"There is, actually," he said to himself, splashing a brown puddle in defeat. "Lots of it."

And Carl lay down right there and surrendered. He flopped, belly-up, and let the underworld drag him into the depths of its hellscape.



## *Lesson number one, kid, there's no we in sewers.*

Hours passed, dripping water echoed in the tunnels and snaked away into the night. Carl had grown quite cosy where he lay in his warm puddle. When he opened his eyes, they'd adjusted to the dark and he could see. A gleaming ring-pull. Glistening glass. A snapped gold chain slithering into the silt. Clustered in the recess beside him, a family of slugs—there was no better way to describe them, all with the same green-tinged bloat and the same hungry eyes—chomped on scavenged scraps.

They tucked in with such gusto that it made Carl drool. The smallest one saw Carl, belly up and overly dramatic, and nudged some slop towards him. Carl dragged himself upright and scoffed like it was the best thing he'd ever eaten. No, he realised, it was the best thing he'd ever eaten.



All those years slaving for the man and all they'd ever given him was flakes. For the first time he doubted Corporate; perhaps they didn't want him to taste what was out here.

He set to work collecting the valuables. He tucked them inside an old cigarette packet to keep them safe. One day, he thought, looking at his riches, they would buy his way out of here.

Carl's new routine developed quickly. Early morning cardio lengths up and down the waterways. For breakfast, something delicious always floated along. Then he explored for treasure. Each day brought new gifts. Carl stopped considering their value, only their beauty. Soon he'd added a broken marble, some pieces of tile, various keys and a matchbox car to his collection. Each shiny find gave him a buzz of excitement, relief, and an insatiable drive to find the next one.

With all the freedom, exercise and food, Carl had grown. While out scavenging, he caught his reflection in a piece of cracked mirror and gasped in shock. He barely recognised himself. He was at least five times bigger, swollen and lumpy. A fungal infection had eaten away patches of his skin, and his eyes googled madly. He looked... monstrous.

But he couldn't stay to bask in his bath of self-loathing. He sensed the rat-bastard's return long before he arrived. Sure enough, the gold tooth shimmered, sniffing at Carl's treasure, and Carl's despair turned to fury.

"Hey, rat-face." Carl didn't give a stringy shit anymore.

“

*All those years  
slaving for the man  
and all they'd ever  
given him was  
flakes.*

The rogue recoiled in fear, squinting at Carl and trying to place him.

"You ripped me off."

"Oh! Small fry, it's... you? I'll deliver." He stuttered and stalled, desperately trying to recall their deal. "Home!" He snapped his fingers. "That's what you want? Right? To find home."

Carl looked at his shitty surroundings; the rat shit and roaches; the box of broken junk he treasured. And he thought about himself and how much he'd changed.

"No," he said with a grim smile, "I couldn't go back now, even if I wanted to."

The rat sensed Carl's resignation and sat down, stretching his legs.

"You're one of us now, huh."

"I guess so." Carl mused. "But you still owe me."

"Sure, sure." He pulled out a baggie of tiny shiny rocks. "How about this?"

They sparkled like tiny crystals, and Carl liked shiny things.

# THE PLAYHOUSE ON HOLLY LANE

By Taurenelle  
Team The Eloquent Caffeine Vessels

She waltzed with the devil and wagered her soul—when the stage was young and her feet were nimble. But now maiden roles were a distant dream, and the mothers she played were grand only in name. For Liza had been a crone for far too long; every prop was a cane, every set had a chair, and choreographers questioned her every move.

This would be her final role, she decided. One last run in a theater as run down as she was.

The Playhouse on Holly Lane was the country's oldest theater—only missing Shakespeare by half a century—yet Liza had never even seen a matinee in the landmark, let alone performed in it. Not that its caretakers bothered to take much care: the carpets were tattered, the box office infested, and the air was so dry that coughing was a fire hazard.

But the stage. The stage was magnificent.

Crimson curtains entrapped a thousand ovations within their velvet grasp. Its proscenium arch curved around reality so fervently that glimpses of neverborn lands could be seen around its edges. And the floors. The floors were warm to the touch, making her body forget all the fancy words the podiatrists and oncologists had diagnosed her with; melting aches and age like ice.

Before she could question where the music was coming from, she was dancing. She was dancing with a man half the age she looked and twice the age she felt. He was handsome and strong and laughed in a baritone that shook the world when she accidentally stepped on his toes.

“Who do you play?” Liza asked as she twirled beneath the midnight silk of his well-tailored suit.

“I play many roles, my dear. None of them are any good, I’m afraid.”

“There are no small parts.” She told him, as she had often told herself before her fate had changed.

“They’re all small parts. People just like to convince themselves otherwise.” His smile was ominous and omnipotent all at once. “Let me show you backstage.”

Liza grasped his hand as they swam through the curtain and flew down the wing, beyond the crafted sunsets and painted ruins, past a sea of dresses and a mountain of wigs. She dodged an avalanche of scripts and eluded a cavalcade of seamstresses, each donning clothes older than the ones they were sewing.

At last, she reached the elevator. Its wrought iron bars were half-deliquesced, and its mechanical hum sang loud and out of tune.

“

## *She waltzed with the devil and wagered her soul*

“After you, my lady,” her dance partner insisted, ushering her in with a chivalrous nudge.

“But there’s only room for one.” The gate closed, and the cacophony of hums and needles faded away, taking with it all the light and her acquaintance’s broken smile.

Beneath the stage, or so it felt, the contraption released her.

She had quit smoking in her sixties, but now she regretted not having a flame to reveal what lay ahead. “I have no hips left to break,” she muttered. Though her usual shuffle gave way to a brisk march as she followed the sound of a young girl singing. The tone was inconsistent and the pitch was wanting, not unlike her own as a child. ‘Good enough for church but not for Broadway,’ as her mother would say.

But somewhere between God and fame was regional theater, where Liza spent her career.

“Why are you rehearsing in the dark?” she asked the disembodied voice. But it did not answer, it merely glided past her like the waning cries of a speeding bat, gentle vocals descending into the abyss.

Far, far ahead, a dying scone waved its incandescent hand—a trifle of a beacon, but a beacon nonetheless. As its tawny rays and amber shadows christened her path, she saw the

fiery silhouette of a dancer. She was tall and slim, with auburn hair spouting forth from a once pristine bun, and red tears escaping her tired eyes.

Rejection. Liza grew nostalgic for it, like longing for an old friend.

"It takes more than talent alone, darling," Liza offered.

The woman turned, but not toward her. A second figure, whom the light refused to touch, reached out a hand and asked the slender beauty to waltz. He whispered heavily in her ear. Liza couldn't make out the words, but she knew them all the same.

"How far are you willing to go? How much are you willing to lose?" The voice asked in her memory as it did in the dark halls of the Playhouse. "I cannot grant you talent, but I can grant you luck." The elegant creature with the baritone voice unraveled a long scroll. "All you have to do is sign."

Mediocrity never tasted so sweet. And at twenty-six, forever seemed so far away.

Reddened hands shook in agreement as her blood fell softly upon the parchment.

Again, there was darkness.

Again, there was music.

Liza followed the sounds of laughter and cheer through a blackened stairwell. Sweat dripped down her brow with each flight, and her skin burned from the rays of an unseen sun. And as the erupting audience swallowed her ears, the well-dressed man led her through the darkness and onto the stage.

He waved a sinister arm across the sea of patrons, more than could fill even the largest of theaters. She recognized them all. She recognized him. And she remembered what she sold.



*How far are you  
willing to go? How  
much are you  
willing to lose?*

"Every audience. From every show. Everything you ever wanted," he stated hollowly. "Take a bow. As if it was all worth it."

When Liza curtsied before the throngs of yesteryear, the walls began to crumble, and an old memory came crashing down. She was protesting the demolition of The Playhouse on Holly Lane. "The last thing this city needs is another hospital," her twenty-year-old self shouted through a megaphone.

She watched as the nurses pulled the sheet over her body. The world went black again as the curtains closed behind her.

And she waltzed with the devil one last time.



# SIDE QUESTS

## *Twist's free weekly writing challenge*



### **Mother Superior**

**by Jonathan Tolstedt**

Challenge: MC we love to hate

Sister Agatha watched the girls on the playground from her second-story window, dealing labels like Tarot cards, predicting their futures. Drug dealer. Fornicator. Glutton. Lesbian. Evil girls, each of them.

### **Bake Me a Heart**

**by C.M.Gilbert**

Challenge: Recipes

A dash of kindness.  
*No, too sweet.*  
A sprinkle of confidence.  
*Too controlling.*  
A plethora of great hair and charm.  
*So self-centered.*  
Fold in common interests.  
*Need something fresh.*  
An ounce of baggage.  
*Jealous and mean.*  
A touch of sensitivity.  
*Not a real man.*  
Mix in some bad boy.  
*No future.*  
Sizzle in the romance.  
*Fun while it lasted.*  
A bit of lust, hmm maybe more than a bit.  
*We're going too fast.*  
Nothing works; it won't rise.  
*You'll never get it perfect silly.*  
She takes my hand, and we whisk it just right.

### **Mangrove Dreaming**

**by S L Jones**

Challenge: 100 words, swamp

You thought yourself apart, but the mangrove remembers. Mist twines around grey salt-crusted bark and feathery ferns, where spirits watch with mud-slick eyes. Figures rise from the water daubed in ochre; eyes star bright.

A black snake threads through the reeds, its scales whispering your name. "One child strayed from the path," says the tallest figure, voice woven from those before. Goannas blink from the shadows, tongues tasting air.

Your toes curl into mud as your shadow leans toward the water, where the serpent waits in your reflection. The land hums your name.

Waiting. Not a call. A return.

# TWISTED TOURNAMENT

Twisted Tournament is the most intense prompted writing contest there is! Three back-to-back rounds challenge the most creative of writers, and when the story generation is complete, competitors read and rank peers and award trophies.

## AUGUST WINNERS

1ST PLACE

HEATHER52384

R1: 9.75 R2: 9.39 R3: 8.68

1ST PLACE

KIM MAKI

R1: 9.14 R2: 9.46 R3: 9.29

2ND PLACE

DANILUCAS

R1: 9.42 R2: 9.18 R3: 9.16

2ND PLACE

CFULWELL

R1: 9.06 R2: 9.41 R3: 8.99

3RD PLACE

TEASHANK

R1: 8.44 R2: 9.37 R3: 9.65

3RD PLACE

JFFCURRIER

R1: 9.34 R2: 8.37 R3: 9.52



# CONTRIBUTORS



## BRIAN WHITE

Brian White fancies himself a writer of interesting and funny stories, but his professional career is much more stuffy. Brian writes just about every day and has published works in scholarly journals to show for it. His real passion, though, is writing fiction, poetry, and social commentary. He lives in North San Diego County, California with his wife, daughter, cat and a couple of mooching horses.

<https://tubberfecktattler.com/writers-page/>



## STEVE HUFF

Steve lives in Perth, Western Australia, where he buys too many books, provides domestic services to two cats, and writes when chartered accountancy doesn't interfere. His short fiction has appeared in *Crepuscular*, *Saros Speculative Fiction*, *Elegant Literature* and *WestWord Lit Mag*.

His author's page can be found here:

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



## FREYA KING

Freya loves to have fun with language, chasing rhythm that flows and sparkling prose. She has won various awards for her short stories.

When she isn't writing, she can be found at the beach with her kids, collecting sunshine, seashells and stories.

Her author's page can be found here:

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



## TAURENELLE

Taurenelle is a Pushcart Prize-nominated author and prosimetrist based in New York City. A trained classicist, Taurenelle's narrative voice embodies the Roman and Ancient Greek poets of old, with a style that is simultaneously archaic and contemporary.

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# CONTRIBUTORS



## DANI LUCAS

Dani Lucas is a writer, former library shelve, current library patron, semicolon aficionado, and cat person. She lives in the American Midwest with her husband, their daughter, and the spirit of their beloved cat.



## JONATHAN TOLSTEDT

Jonathan Tolstedt is a patent agent by day and an evolving author by night. He has published a number of short stories in genres including horror, science fiction, and (surprisingly) romance. He has also published numerous micros and Drabbles, and has placed first in the weekly Side Quest for Twist in the Tale three times. Jonathan lives in Minnesota with his wife and son and a sometimes lovable, sometimes evil dog named Rosie.



## C.M. GILBERT

C.M. Gilbert is an engineer whose passion for storytelling, music, and art is fueled by a love for the strange and extraordinary. He crafts worlds with a technical edge and draws inspiration from his Appalachian roots. He lives there with his wife and two dogs, and enjoys treasure hunting.



## S L JONES

S L Jones lives in Sydney, Australia and currently works in the public health sector. She re-commenced writing in 2023 after a long hiatus, dipping her toes into flash fiction competitions and short stories. She enjoys reading, classic film noir & spending time with her family. She recently won the Specul8 Flash Fiction Challenge.

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