LITERARY MAGAZINE

TWIST

AUGUST 2026 / VOL.06



Fantastical WRITING

Stories from our August Twisted Tournament

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CONTENT WARNING

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

BEHIND THE SCENES

What a few months it's been for Twisted! Since the August contest ended, the site has had a complete makeover. I won't list everything that's changed, but have a look around and I'm sure you'll spot a few differences. I hope you'll agree they make for a better experience.

The changes have also streamlined a lot of the behind-the-scenes work each contest needs. They did delay this issue, though, and I'm sorry for the wait. I think you'll find it was worth it. Next issue will see the return of stories from Side Quests and more from Story Share.

Our August contest had so many incredible stories, and it's a privilege to publish a handful of them. Round 1 had a 500-word limit, Round 2 had 250, and Round 3 just 100.

Inside, you'll find our overall winners, with interviews where they talk about their wins and what they learned along the way. For the first time, we also had a draw at the very top, so Cherryhoof's Cavalry has two winners: Glen Creed and Melanie York. After that come the stories themselves, round by round: royal weddings that come at a price, homecomings that don't go to plan, a tour group that meets a volcano, and plenty more that surprised the judges. They're all very different, but each one shows what our writers can do with a prompt, a deadline and a tight word count.

Thank you to everyone who entered, judged and cheered each other on. This magazine is as much yours as it is ours.

Nick

TWIST CREATOR
NICK SMITH

OVERALL *WINNERS*

TWISTED TOURNAMENT
AUGUST 2026



SNAGGLEFANG'S HORDE

1. **Christy Hartman** — R1 **9.82** R2 **9.18** R3 **9.60**
2. **KittyH** — R1 **9.26** R2 **9.29** R3 **9.11**
3. **MollyB** — R1 **9.34** R2 **8.92** R3 **9.07**



CHERRYHOOF'S CAVALRY

1. **Glen Creed** TIED — R1 **9.15** R2 **9.48** R3 **8.89**
1. **Melanie York** TIED — R1 **8.96** R2 **9.19** R3 **9.36**
3. **Hannah Andrews** — R1 **9.12** R2 **9.38** R3 **8.98**



WINNER TWISTED TOURNAMENT · AUGUST 2026

CHRISTY HARTMAN

SNAGGLEFANG'S HORDE

Christy Hartman pens short fiction from her home between the ocean and mountains of Vancouver Island Canada. She writes about the morsels of magic in life's quiet moments. Christy has been shortlisted for Bath and Bridport Flash Fiction prizes and is a two-time New York City Midnight winner. She has been published by Sunlight Press, The Good Life Review, Sky Island Journal, and others. www.christyhartmanwriter.com

Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
9.82	**9.18**	**9.60**
Elizabeth's Homecoming	*Wish You Were Here*	*Loose Ends*



EUGENE INTERVIEWS CHRISTY

Notebook out, camera ready, tail going.

Congratulations! How does it feel to come out on top of the 3-round competition?

Winning Twist feels amazing, the level of talent among the other competitors is so high. Having my peers enjoy my work and rate it highly is wonderful.

Which of your three entries are you most proud of, and why?

I am most proud of my 250 - Wish You Were Here. Composing a story that takes place over a few seconds of a characters introspection is one of my favourite ways to write. I love weaving in backstory and characterization through tiny details. When it works I'm able to connect to the readers on a deep emotional level and hopefully they relate to the nuance, and messy characters like the ones in Wish You Were Here.

How long have you been doing Twisted Tournaments?

I've been doing the Tournaments since the first one. In fact I wrote two stories for the first tournament while recovering in hospital from a surgery (those were some decidedly terrible stories!)

What advice would you give to writers entering a Twisted Tournament competition?

Participate in the community. Feedback frenzy is a unique part of this competition and getting anonymous feedback from peers can be scary (and sometimes frustrating) but is invaluable to know the first honest impressions of readers - take what resonates and throw away the rest.

What has Twisted taught you about your strengths and weaknesses as a writer?

The tight writing time frames have taught me to trust my instincts and stick with an idea when it comes to me. I spend A LOT of time editing and playing with every word so when I have limited time for a contest I need to get the first rough draft done as soon as

possible.

Thank you, Christy! That's my notebook full. I'm off for a biscuit.
- Eugene

WISH YOU WERE HERE

by Christy Hartman

It started with a shoe. Clumps of dirt clinging to an old soccer cleat. Years of cheering, cutting oranges, and coaching drills. Those cleats brought my daughter a full-ride scholarship to UNC.

I'd knocked over the box of Catherine's things while searching the cluttered shelves for a trowel. It had been moved to the garden shed years ago—out of sight, out of mind.

Her sketchbook lies on the dusty floor, open to a watercolour ocean. My mother had doodled as well, covering recipe book margins with tiny mountains, meandering rivers, and deserted islands.

My daughter had talent, but that wouldn't pay for her degree.

I straighten the box, removing the sweatshirt I'd bought Catherine the day we dropped her off in North Carolina—along with a new rug, comforter and laptop for her dorm room. At eighteen, I would've given anything for an opportunity like that.

A postcard sticks to the bottom of the box—*Wish You Were Here* over Santa Monica Pier. Catherine hadn't told us about the trip; she'd convinced her grandmother to help.

When the postcard with Catherine's sprawling handwriting arrived, saying she'd be staying, I booked the first flight to California.

"I'm happy here."

"Go back to UNC or no more money—no more me."

"I can't do it anymore."

"Ungrateful—spoiled."

I sink onto the mower and scroll through my phone. Catherine's Facebook is public. Is that for me?

She's Katie now, and her daughter has my eyes.

I pull up her old number.

I'm sorry

Message not delivered

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WINNER TWISTED TOURNAMENT · AUGUST 2026

GLEN CREED

CHERRYHOOF'S CAVALRY

Glen Creed writes fiction and poetry from Colorado. His work has appeared in SmokeLong Quarterly, multiple anthologies from both Parsec Ink and Black Hare Press, and is forthcoming in the HWA Poetry Showcase XIII, a Nightingale Press anthology, and a drabble anthology edited by Kai Delmas. Instagram: @theglencreed

Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
9.15	**9.48**	**8.89**
Beginner's Luck	*Some People*	*Postmortem Reflex*



EUGENE INTERVIEWS GLEN

I sniffed out the best answers. This one smelled like a winner.

Congratulations! How does it feel to come out on top of the 3-round competition?

Mostly like relief.

The top three of us finished within three hundredths of a point. Melanie York and I tied with the same number. If a single judge had stacked one of my stories slightly lower, you'd be interviewing somebody else, and it would be just as deserved.

So it feels good, but it doesn't feel like I beat anybody. More like I managed not to fall over for three rounds while a lot of great writers had one round where they did. That's most of what winning Twisted seems to be.

Which of your three entries are you most proud of, and why?

Round 2 - "Some People"

Strangely, after looking at the prompts, the title phrase came to mind almost immediately. That led me to two people on a night shift, one of them new, standing at a vending machine, and the other says something about somebody who isn't in the room. 'Some people.' You can shut a person down with those two words.

I wanted to write the guy who says it, and I didn't want him to be a villain. More someone who's just filling the time. He thinks he's being friendly, and in his way he is.

That was the feeling I was after. The cheaper thing underneath the casual cruelty, where somebody else's worst year turns into a story that's shared to keep a conversation going.

What hit me after was how little effort it took to write him. It seems I know how to talk like that. I think most of what many of us think we know about people we've never met was likely handed to us in a break room or over coffee, and we took it and passed it on without ever knowing more.

The story isn't intended to scold anyone. I hope it doesn't. I mainly wanted to highlight the moment where it costs something to have said the hurtful thing.

How long have you been doing Twisted Tournaments?

This was my third.

In an earlier one, I won one round outright and then finished sixth overall, which turned out to be the most useful thing that's happened to me in the competition. It reorganized how I think about the format.

What advice would you give to writers entering a Twisted Tournament competition?

Play for three decent rounds instead of one great one.

I went back through the last couple of tournaments out of curiosity, and as far as I can tell, the winners tended to lean toward consistency in the top 15 or so rather than one stellar score. So the useful question about a draft is whether anything in it could lose a round.

What raises the chances for a story feels unglamorous to me. Give the reader something concrete to hold, and let it carry the feeling instead of explaining it. Take the prompts somewhere they weren't obviously pointing, since everybody is working from the same list and the obvious version will likely show up more than once. Oh, and write it so it's clear on the first read-through. I have a bad habit of writing for the second read, which most judges won't give you the time for.

What has Twisted taught you about your strengths and weaknesses as a writer?

That I'm better the less room I have. My strongest round this time was the 250, and in an earlier tournament my best score came at 50 words. Something about compression brings out my best.

My weakness is that I still have no idea which of my stories will land. My round three was the one I was surest of going in, and it scored lowest of the three. A while back, I wrote a hundred words about Southern church ladies and their casseroles, which I thought was the funniest thing I'd done, and it turns out that is an extremely regional experience. It sank badly. I still like it, but the gap between what I think is working and what reaches a reader is something I'm still trying to figure out.

Thanks, Glen! I wrote it all down. Some of it is drool, but most of it is words.
- Eugene



SOME PEOPLE

by Glen Creed

Something had been living inside it.

That was the rumor. A blue Civic behind the loading dock, garbage bags taped over the windows, six weeks of tickets under the wiper.

Roz had just moved to night shift. She kept her coat on in the vending room. Everybody does at first.

She was a dollar short. I gave her one of mine, then I gave her the rumor, because you have to give people something.

"Tow guy opens it up," I said, "and there's blankets, a camp stove, clothes—whole apartment."

The machine spat the dollar out. Roz flattened it against her thigh and fed it again.

Usually people ask who.

She studied the chips.

"And a cat," I added. That got her eyes on me.

"A cat?"

"Mean little thing. Nate said it nearly took his hand off."

"Nate said that."

"Everybody says it."

The machine swallowed the dollar. Crackers fell. "Funny part was, cat looked healthier than the woman."

Roz tucked the crackers into an inside pocket. "Must've been cold," she said.

"January." I shook my head. "Shelters right there, and she's living in a car. Some people."

"There wasn't a cat."

I smiled. "Rumors change."

"No." She rubbed one sleeve between two fingers. "There wasn't."

I still didn't understand.

"I never had a cat."

I'd told the story to everybody. I looked at my shoes.

The machine buzzed between us.

"Anyway," she said. "Supervisor wants me shadowing you on rounds."

She held the door open.

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WINNER TWISTED TOURNAMENT · AUGUST 2026

MELANIE YORK

CHERRYHOOF'S CAVALRY

Mel York is a hobbyist writer and master's student living in Cologne, Germany. Her short stories have appeared in publications such as The Failing Writers Podcast, Elegant Literature, and One More Short Story. To see more of her work, you can check out her Instagram: @mel.yod

Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
8.96	**9.19**	**9.36**
Top Secret Boy Stuff	*Buttoned Up*	*Confessing That I'm Deeply In Love With You: A Checklist*



EUGENE INTERVIEWS MELANIE

I asked the questions. I also asked for a biscuit. Only one got an answer.

Congratulations! How does it feel to come out on top of the 3-round competition?

It feels amazing, especially because there were two Cherryhoof winners! I was so excited when I saw both Glen and I at the top. This is my first writing competition victory, too. It's a big milestone for me!

Which of your three entries are you most proud of, and why?

Although it's not my favorite of the three, I'm most proud of my Round 2 story. One of the prompts was a pre-assigned first line. After burning through all my re-rolls, mine was "Something knocked twice." I'm a huge "pantser," as some people call it (writing by the seat of your pants with no plan). For me, a good first line steers the rest of the story. So, I struggled with being unable to pick that direction myself.

Eventually, I interpreted it in a way I liked: "something" is actually a "someone" -- a ghost named Josie -- and the narrator objectifies her in the first line because she is "being a real shit." That gave me inspiration, and I pantsed from there. I'm proud of myself for moving past my doom-and-gloom roadblock of "oh, this isn't my typical writing process, this sucks" and submitting anything for that round, period.

How long have you been doing Twisted Tournaments?

My first Twisted Tournament was in August 2025, and I've done every tournament since! It's easily one of my favorite writing competitions.

What advice would you give to writers entering a Twisted Tournament competition?

This is so cliché, I know, but try to have fun. It's impossible to predict a story's result in a peer-based competition. So write whatever you want and have zero expectations.

What has Twisted taught you about your strengths and weaknesses as a writer?

Twisted makes it easy to clock patterns in my writing. For example, (I think) I have a good instinct for rhythm -- when I should switch out of dialogue and into prose, when I have too many long sentences in a row, etc. -- and so while I'm writing, I don't necessarily "focus" on it. I care about it, obviously, but it's a craft element that sort of goes on autopilot. And after a tournament's finished (and I can read everything with fresh eyes), I notice my batch of stories all (usually) have good flow.

However, I use a LOT of generic descriptions without realizing it. I know this because in Twisted, I'll often instinctually reach for the same phrase (i.e. "my stomach dropped") in three different stories with three different characters. Not good -- and also something I could've easily overlooked, had I not been reviewing stories back-to-back.

Thank you, Melanie! Best interview I've ever done. I say that every time, but I mean it.
- Eugene

BUTTONED UP

by Melanie York

Something knocked twice.

"Something" had an actual name—Josie Jacobs, age 16. Died of tuberculosis in 1935, and haunted the local Macy's ever since. But at that moment, objectification felt appropriate. Josie was being a real shit.

"*Really*?" I twirled once more. "I dunno, Jo. It's kinda cute."

Again—two knocks on the dressing room door. That meant NO.

I smoothed the pink, ridiculously frilly prom dress. Inadequate, apparently, just like the countless others.

"Look..." I sighed. "I know these dresses aren't cool. But Collin wants me to wear something 'buttoned up.' We're supposed to match, ya know?"

Something knocked in frantic succession. The overhead lights flickered.

"Okay, okay! Jesus."

I pulled the Ouija board from my backpack, balancing it atop a mountain of failed dresses. The planchette slid across the letters, spelling out:

R-A-C-H I-N-S-T-A

I unlocked my phone and tapped on Rachel's Instagram story. She'd posted a mirror selfie three hours ago, in this Macy's dressing room, wearing the same pink, frilly dress as me.

"So?"

B-O-T-T-O-M

I looked at the bottom of the photo. My heart dropped. "Is that...?"

There it was. Collin's jacket, folded on the dressing room chair.

"He said he was at Pete's... he..."

It hit me.

"Oh my God." I looked up. "Is Collin cheating on me with *fucking Rachel*?"

A-N-D R-A-C-H K-N-O-W-S 2

I gasped.

R-O-T-T-E-N W-E-N-C-H

"Oh, rotten, alright. Both of them." I tapped 'Block' on Rachel's profile. "Screw 'buttoned up.' Wanna help me pick a revenge dress?"

One knock—loud as hell. YES.

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ROUND *ONE*

In round 1, writers were given their prompts and wrote and submitted a 500 word story.

ROUND 1 WINNERS



SNAGGLEFANG'S HORDE

1. **Christy Hartman**
   9.82
   Elizabeth's Homecoming
2. **HollyB**
   9.81
   A World Never Content
3. **Sandra Stratan**
   9.50
   Higher Ground



CHERRYHOOF'S CAVALRY

1. **Sam Kingsbury**
   9.60
   The Branded Queen
2. **Tommy Baker**
   9.58
   Little Trout
3. **Kiwiclogs**
   9.51
   The Next Apocalypse

The Branded Queen



by Sam Kingsbury

I take you as my husband from this day until death separates us. I will cherish you and protect you from harm through fair weather or foul, through prosperity or poverty, in health or infirmity. This I swear.

~

Long ago and far away, a human prince married a fairy princess. They married at noon on the seventh day of the seventh month, and a great feast followed. The prince's men wallowed in wine and women while the princess sat beside her husband with bitterness and rage in her heart, bound by the bargain she had made.

Learn the names of all my siblings, and we will wed. For each year you fail, your harvests will feed my kingdom.

She had thought it a great sport, but her arrogance was her undoing. The prince had come to her, sword stained with blood, and declared that she no longer had siblings and so the challenge was met. *Lies and iron,* she thought now, *that is all humans bring.* Precious Willow had been only twelve...

When the moon and mood were at their zenith, the prince went to the great fireplace, raising his arms to quiet the clamouring, drunken crowd. The princess watched warily, fear chilling her rage as she contemplated what horrors her wedding night might hold.

"Bring her here," the prince called. His men dragged her from her chair, her slippered feet fighting uselessly against flagstone while onlookers snickered. They pushed her to her knees on the hearthstone, where the prince bore a branding iron, glowing with heat. Once her eyes found it, they could not look away. As he brought it near, the iron's brutal corrosion grated ruthlessly against her Fae spirit.

"With this brand," the prince said, "I bind your magic. You will use it only to serve this kingdom, for as long as you live."

Feverish with victory, he pressed the searing metal to her breast. Her world froze in brilliant, crystalline agony, and the words of their marriage vows echoed...

I will cherish you and protect you from harm

...and broke.

She drew harsh breaths through the pain, the scent of burning flesh choking her, but her smile glittered like splintered glass. The vow that chained her had snapped apart, undone by the harm he had brought her.

She stood as the sycophants cheered, calling green power to grip the prince in thorn and briar. His eyes spit wild panic, and the cheering turned to terror.

"As you so bound me, I serve your kingdom," she said. "They will fare better without such a man as their ruler. I send you to nourish the earth, which is the best use of your hateful life." She sent him to suffocate in the ground, her brand throbbing with savage satisfaction.

Each year, on the seventh day of the seventh month, The Branded Queen visits the overgrown ruins of the castle. There, she pays homage; a sapling for each sibling, planted in the fertile ground.

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LEADERBOARD

A Moonlit Wish

by Brynn Cullen

"Gather 'round the Prince and Princess for the Wishing Ritual!"

Fairy lanterns blinked in time to the pealing bells. It was midnight in the enchanted market square, and my fate hung in the balance of magic and moonlight.

On the platform, the Prince grinned and covered his bride's eyes. She laughed, lace-clad arms outstretched toward the wooden bowl brimming with mismatched spoons. "Pick mine! Pick mine!" the crowd chanted, giddy with wine and music. The bride plunged her hands into the sturdy stew of utensils; metal, bone, and wood rattled.

My heart was numb, the air in my lungs frozen, eyes fixed on the only thing that mattered. I made one final, silent entreaty. *Pick mine*.

She searched. The guests watched. The fairy-light illuminated her surprised features—something caught her interest. The woman I fell in love with dug, determined, then extracted her sought prize: a delicate pewter spoon, dripping with glass bleeding-heart charms.

The Prince dropped his hands from his wife's eyes, and everyone cooed in hushed admiration. *My* spoon. The metal I hammered with *my* despair. The glass I blew with *my* aching breath. The spell I cast with *my* tears.

The newly-crowned Princess searched the crowd for my face. "Will the guest who brought this beautiful spoon come share their wish?" she called. I stepped forward, skirts in hand. As I reached the stairs, a servant appeared with the wedding cake. He scooped a morsel onto my spoon and placed it in the Prince's hand. His subjects roared with excitement.

The Princess and I, close enough to touch, stood transfixed, eyes locked. I gathered myself. "I wish that Gwyn—" A gasp from the crowd. I stammered. "I—wish for the *Princess*..." The Prince nodded, spoonful of cake poised. "...to spend all of her days with the love of her life."

The Prince beamed. The guests cheered with such revelry that the Prince didn't hear his wife.

"Wait!" she cried, mouth moving just as the spoon crossed her lips. A blue light enveloped the spoon, then the Prince's hand. The ethereal glow spread across the entire platform, then the square, consuming everything as far as I could see—except for Gwyn and me.

The rewinding Prince walked backward, returned the spoon to the servant, who left with the cake. The azure scene around us sped up, the guests departed in reverse; the moon retreated, workers disassembled the wedding canopy. Eventually the sun disappeared and the clock struck

midnight. Wedding eve. The market square was empty, save us—as it was so many nights we'd met. As it was the night she told me she loved him enough to marry him. She had convinced herself. She almost convinced me.

"Gwyn—" I found her hands with mine.

"When I heard your wish... I wasn't sure what would happen." Tears of relief spilled down her face.

"Neither was I," I wiped her cheeks. "But I had to try."

She leaned her forehead against mine, then kissed me.

"*I'm glad I picked yours*," she whispered.

LEADERBOARD

The Blacktongued Blacksmith

by Daniel Clark-Mudge

The blood moon cuts a deep crimson through blackest night.

The Sisters convene, their hooded robes shrouding dark eyes.

The seals around the grove are broken by fervent, rhyming whispers.

A circle they form, a chanting they begin.

In the middle–a tome bound in leather. Upon its front, a title emblazoned in silver leaf.

The Blacktongued Blacksmith.

Elodie steps forth into the circle. 'Sisters.' She spreads her arms. 'I trust we have all read until chapter thirty-eight?'

The Sisters murmur their assent.

Elodie nods. 'I thought we might start by exploring the characterisation of-'

The circle breaks, and a Sister, Hari, falls to her knees in the center, hood thrown back, blonde hair cascading across a pale face aflush in red. 'Sisters,' she exclaims, breathless. 'I beseech you listen.'

'This is most improper,' snaps Elodie.

Hari continues. 'I cannot quell this desire any longer, Sisters. In my madness, I made it not past chapter thirty-two.'

There are gasps, and another Sister joins Hari. 'I too stopped there,' she confesses. 'I could not go further beyond the scene in which the protagonist and the Blacksmith were locked in the forge until morning.' She gasps and sobs. 'I was too overcome.'

The Sisters, in their stunned silence, find solidarity.

Elodie, slowly, speaks up. 'I too was felled by this passion.'

Hari raises her head. 'The Blacksmith,' she breathes. 'His strength, his kindness, his chiseled jaw...'

'The firmness of his abdominal area,' offers another Sister.

Hari stands. 'We must harness the power of this tome. The magic that resides within these pages.'

‘You jest, Hari,’ Elodie says. ‘It is dark magic. Forbidden.’

Sister Vera removes her hood. ‘Are we not witches of the dark?’

Silent nods bob in chorus. Elodie sighs and kneels, tracing her finger along the ground. From the earth, she conjures a violin of dark wood. From air, she pulls a birchwood bow. Pulls it across the strings. ‘Begin the summoning.’

The blood moon turns deeper red.

The sisters chant. The book lifts from the ground. The violin plays at a steady hum.

‘Let his silhouette blot out vision,’ Hari chants.

Vera joins. ‘Let his jaw be sharp enough to cause incision.’

The air around them heats. The music quickens.

Sister Bode stands. ‘Let his voice be gruff and hoarse.’

Sister Yolanda throws back her head. ‘Let his exploits rival that of a horse.’

The sisters cackle. The music reaches a climax. The tome flies open.

‘Let him come to us,’ they chant. ‘Let him choose. Let him loose.’

The Sisters howl, and the strings snap. The pages erupt in flame and smoke.

The Blacksmith emerges, muscles rippling. Steam rising from the heat of his skin.

The Sisters hold their breath. The Blacksmith smiles, teeth white. ‘Wow,’ he says in a perfectly gruff voice. ‘Are you telling me you ladies did this all by yourself?’ he laughs. ‘Where’s the wizard?’

‘Oh for fuck sakes,’ says Elodie. ‘Does any Sister know how to reverse the summoning?’

LEADERBOARD

Sharp Response

by pedrothefish

There’s a potted cactus on the bench. *Pachycereus marginatus*-the Mexican Fencepost. The pot has a red bow stuck on it. *A gift, but for who? From whom?* Interesting.

The slowly rotating ceiling fan struggles to disperse the smoke under the low ceiling. The dull glow of a forty-watt globe diffuses through the amber lightshade and the haze, casting the room in sepia. I open my trenchcoat, taking my seat next to the ancient woman sitting against the wall.

“Hats off at the table, Jason,” declares Mom.

I place the battered fedora next to my placemat. Grandma gives me a wink.

Mom dishes up *intensely* cooked chops and vegetables. Nothing out of the ordinary there. She’s a dame of unlimited ambition and limited talents. A tense woman who does most of the talking and little of the listening. Could she have bought the cactus? No. We’d be hearing about her new horticultural project by now. Similarly, she’s not mentioning it as a gift. As she leans across, I catch the nicotine her mints don’t hide. *She’s smoking again, stressed…*

Dad’s cuff is wrinkled and *almost* dry of saliva. Chewing on it is a habit he can’t break, can’t hide. The schmuck’s been at the ponies and lost in close finishes. His tie is crooked and loosened. A bender as well. He’s button-lipped, not his usual wise-cracking persona. Mom will cancel the museum trip next; they can’t afford it.

So, no chance the cactus came from, or is going to Dad.

A *tink, tink* breaks my focus. Grandma is chasing a pea around her plate. I nudge my hat against the edge of her plate and she traps the elusive vegetable with a Neptunic flourish. She grins toothlessly. Mom's dying to ship her off to the big house (Silver Oaks Retirement Village), and Gran knows I'm on her side. (She does supply me with Grandad's old coats and hats, after all.) I doubt she even knows there's a perennial succulent on the benchtop, let alone be part of the jig.

Mom mutters something about rethinking the museum trip.

Only the painted hussy remains, and it's risky to look at Jess too long. Inevitably I do, and get a quick rubber coated kick to the shin. Wait, sneakers? But her top half's dressed for the late curtain at the talkies-which starts real soon-so she's not worried about getting there late, not wearing heels, and that makeup…? Even for her it's garish, rushed and…is she a little…sad?

And I finally get it.

Jess bought the cactus, but not out of affection. Her new boyfriend's either cheated on her or pulled some other unforgivable sleight. She plans to meet him after lights down-place the Mexican Fencepole on his seat and then take a powder. Subtle as a sledgehammer, my sister.

I grab a brown paper bag and carefully slide it over the cactus so she doesn't give the game away too early.

"Go get that prick," I whisper.

"Thanks *gumball*," she whispers back.

LEADERBOARD

The Ventriloquist's Wife

by Chris Doty-Dunn

I spend that day locked in my box in my parent's basement. When my partner finally lets me out, all the things Mom and Dad collected—antique furniture, paintings, vases—have gone to strangers' homes.

In the dining room, a card table fails to fill the space, sporting a thick stack of papers and an ice cream sundae. He sits in the single chair, positioning me on his lap. He puts his hand on my back and a pen in my hand. I sign every line he points to, looking anywhere but the sundae.

He's slipping the documents into an envelope when the doorbell rings. He knocks me to the floor when he stands. I lay still, waiting for his direction.

"Marissa!" he shouts after a moment. "You should answer it."

I pick myself up, straightening the sweatshirt I wear. I transform as I walk, putting on the persona he's given me. In the foyer, he's peering through the narrow window next to the door. He places his hand on my back again.

I hide my fear under a wooden face as I open the door. "Evening, officers. How can we help?"

"I'm Detective Wallace, this is Detective Mallory. We have some new information about your parents…"

I cock my head. "Mmm?" It's best not to speak unless I know exactly what he wants to say.

"Can we come in?" Wallace asks.

"Oh, it's such a mess." My partner's lips don't move, but his words come out of my mouth all the same. "And we sold all the furniture today." I gesture to the empty foyer with a smile.

I can feel the approval through his hand on my back.

"Bit early to be selling off assets..." Mallory says.

The hand tenses.

When I don't reply, Mallory clears he throat. "You're sure there's no one who wanted to hurt your parents?"

"My word, no!" His hand taps my back, and my own hand, perfectly choreographed through years of practice, goes to my chest. "Everyone loved them."

"Coroner's report came back," Wallace says, eyes locked on my partner. "Your parents had lethal levels of ethylene glycol—anti-freeze—in their systems. It's sugary, easy to hide in food. Did they have a special dessert before they died? "

The hand at my back is as cold as a sundae. But the panic I feel is invisible through my veneer.

"No, I... Detectives, we're exhausted. Do you have a card? Maybe we could talk tomorrow?"

Wallace's eyes are still locked on my partner, but he hands me the card. "Call us first thing."

A smile gouges my face before I close the door.

Back in the dining room, his hand is loose on my back as he spoons sickly sweet ice cream into my mouth. "You've played your role so well."

Wallace's card is in my pocket. If I want to improvise, I'll have to do it soon.

Because if he puts me back in my box, I don't think he'll get me out again.

✦ FIND CHRIS DOTY-DUNN ONLINE

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ROUND *TWO*

In round 2, writers were given their prompts and wrote and submitted a 250 word story.

ROUND 2 WINNERS



SNAGGLEFANG'S HORDE

1 **Freya King** TIED
9.52
Rooted

1 **elaina.bedio@gmail.com** TIED
9.52
The First and Last Stand of Greg

3 **Zurolda**
9.50
Top Shelf



CHERRYHOOF'S CAVALRY

1 **Brian White**
9.60
La Estrella

2 **Glen Creed**
9.48
Some People

3 **Twisted Tracy**
9.46
Cheeky's Ink

ROOTED

by Freya King

It started with a shoe.

Penn had left her sneakers beside the fern in the front room. She distinctly remembered seeing *both* sneakers when she came downstairs. But then she heard a ruckus and a loud belch, and when she turned back, nobody was there. Just the fern, rustling—and one shoe.

Her friends had warned her. *You start with one fiddle-leaf fig, before you know it you'll be consumed.* But Penn had always been a little 'all-in' with her hobbies, so she'd laughed, and brought home Fern.

Now, she'd lost one shoe, the television remote, the iron, and her work laptop. And Fern had grown. She was dense, with fronds that reached out like tiny claws.

Penn was bingeing Greenthumbs when Minurrrva started meowing. Louder and louder and then —silence. Penn peeked into the front room. Fern ruffled like a proud rooster. Penn swore she heard a gurgle and Minurrrva's collar bell faintly chime. Her eyes narrowed. Fern seemed to straighten up.

"No way!" she snapped, and dragged Fern out the front door, down the path, and into the garden shed, locking it behind her.

🌿

Months passed, Minurrrva never returned, and Penn moved on to mosaic.

Until one morning, when Penn noticed the pattern on her teacup would make a lovely frame. She hurried to the shed for a hammer, unlocked the door and stepped inside, before remembering.

"Mmmm," grunted Fern, her overgrown foliage looming to the ceiling.

Fern's fearsome fronds gripped Penn and pulled her all the way in.

✦ FIND FREYA KING ONLINE

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WEBSITE midnightwriters.bsky.social

LA ESTRELLA

by Brian White

Nobody wanted to open the envelope. Not Angela. Definitely not Ciela. As the oldest, I knew it would be on me.

"Open it, Luna! *Apúrate!*" Angela said in the princess tone only Papa let her get away with.

I ignored her.

The needle man rolled his stool next to me, snapping on black latex gloves. His shaved head glistened with images of sugar skulls; of roses. LA Dodgers logos. The word *Righteous* looped in classic Cadillac script across his neck.

"*Una estrella*," I told him. *A star*. I gestured to my sisters sitting in the other tattoo chairs. "*Para todas*."

"Where you getting yours?" Angela whined.

Ciela, ever vast, ever quiet, pointed to her chest above her heart.

I touched the soft spot behind my ear.

"Fool, Papa's gonna kill you! Why you getting it there?"

"Because I'm badass," I said.

Really, though, because I wanted to always hear her.

The sting of the needle and buzz of the gun against my skin circled each other until they began that dance of pain and permanence. I eased into the numbing of their rhythm.

She'd scribbled "open when you're all together" across the envelope. I opened it.

I'm sorry I lied about my headaches. Mama knew but didn't want to worry you. I think she just didn't want to face it.

You're gonna do something stupid, aren't you?

Something that'll piss off Papa, I bet.

Something to remember me with.

I love it. I love you bitches.

Hermanas para siempre.

- Estrella

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LEADERBOARD

MAGMANINOUS

by S.P.Q.M.

"The tour guide has vanished."

Dear Next-of-kin,

The management of Eco-Adventure Tours recognizes these are the last words our valued guests hoped to hear at the summit of Mount Danger. Along with our apologies and condolences, we'd like to pass on assurance that this outcome is highly irregular. Your loved ones—liability waivers in hand—sought the famed Lava Yeti. Given that the search was technically successful, we are unable to offer refunds at this time.

Guide Ferris' confiscation of mobile devices is standard Eco-Adventure protocol. It may have hampered search-and-rescue operations, but the Lava Yeti is easily frightened by digital beeps. Adventurers' phones were secured in a rugged Protecto-box. So well-secured, and insulated, that they survived the extreme heat and are available for pickup at your convenience.

Guide Ferris believes in experiential authenticity, and his high-altitude abandonment of the July 2026 excursion was intended only to *simulate* a disaster. He couldn't have known he'd get lost, nor could he have predicted the precise moment of eruption. As a courtesy and recognition of your recent loss, Guide Ferris is offering free enrolment for his online workshop, "Better Them than You —Getting over Survivor's Guilt".

We may never know the cause of the tour group's untimely demise—immolation in the hot flow of molten lava, the monstrous beast attracted by the Yeti-mating call played on loudspeaker, or starvation in the post-volcanic hellscape—but whatever the reason, we hope that you'll still consider leaving a five-star review.

Warm regards,

Gavin Ferris Sr.

CEO, Eco-Adventure Tours

BAIT

by L. L. Keyes

The lights went out on cue. The vending machine room was completely dark, except for the white light that backlit the appliance's product display case. With too many bodies packed in tightly, the room was uncomfortably warm, filled only with the sound of breathing and occasional throat-clearing.

Now, we'd wait.

Thirty employees had fallen into inexplicable comas, and for months, rumors had run wild. Theories ranged from wild speculation to far-fetched lunacy. It wasn't management. The algorithm cared too much about productivity. Not the vending company either; we'd fired one already. We'd fumigated. Brought in climate engineers. And still it hadn't stopped.

I had a different idea: it had to be the food in the machine. Every single coma case had eaten from it.

We were writers for the top-rated *Tattletale*. It wasn't like we handled state secrets. Well, not unless you count the lab rat scandal we broke last year. Rodents engineered to think and talk. Then it got buried under an injunction. News like ours wasn't always popular, but we weren't on hit lists either.

At least until now.

The movement inside the machine was slight, but I caught it.

"Look!" I whispered. "In the corner!"

A long, slender needle pierced an apple and depressed. Then another, into a bag of chips. Everyone in the room held their breath. Slowly, a small rodent peeked out from a package.

A thin, reedy voice came from the machine. "Now who's the vermin?"

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ETERNAL INKING

by S L Jones

Nobody wanted to open the envelope. Not Lenny, who passed it to Ray, who handed it to Mike, and back again. The three tattooists were responsible for marking each new arrival's greatest sin on their forehead.

Guido Rossi had sat in Hell's anteroom for three days, awaiting his eternal inking.

Guido seemed an unlikely candidate. A humble greengrocer, he'd worked hard, loved his family and couldn't have knowingly harmed anyone. But the rumour within Hell's halls was that Guido Rossi had Mafia connections.

On the fourth day, Lucifer ordered the trio to process Guido. The envelope's contents declared:

GUIDO ROSSI
SIN: GREED

Below was a long list of crimes. Money laundering. Extortion. Smuggling. Bribery. Alleged murder.

"Great Lucifer," whispered Ray. "You don't seem the type."

Guido paled. "That isn't me."

"Sorry, mate. Orders." Ray's needle began the first sweeping curve of the G.

"Wait!" said Mike, checking Guido's file. "This says Giulio Rossi. Different date of birth, different address."

"Different person," Lenny agreed. Ray lifted his needle from Guido's sweating skin.

A distant bell rang. Along the corridor, the gates of Heaven opened.

Guido looked up. "For me?"

"Apparently."

Heaven's harried clerk Darryl beckoned Guido forward. "Sorry about the mix-up."

Guido touched his forehead with shaking fingers. The tattooist had completed the G's curve.

Darryl smiled. "Leave it." He added a second curve, closing the circle, and stepped back.

Guido walked through Heaven's gates beneath his brand-new halo.

Behind him, Ray opened another envelope. "Next!"

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WEBSITE sljoneswriter.bsky.social

FANG: PEDIATRIC DENTISTRY

by Mandy Bova

Nobody wanted to open the envelope. An odd, rust-colored splotch sat in the center of the thick, yellowed paper, right where the envelope bulged. The receptionists had all shied away from the bloodied paper, moving it around the welcome desk with a pair of tongs as if it was toxic waste.

Vladimir paced the waiting room of Fang: Pediatric Dentistry. This might have seemed like an odd place for a 507-year-old vampire to spend his afternoon, but when a vampire child's canine got knocked out, you made an emergency dentist visit.

Anya peered at the envelope curiously. "Is that mine?"

"They said we needed to bring it in if we wanted it put back." Vladimir plucked the envelope out of the tongs, shooting a withering glance at the receptionist. “How long until the dentist finishes filling that werewolf’s cavity?”

Anya's wail interrupted the receptionist’s response. “Will the tooth fairy still come if we put my tooth back in?”

Vladimir hesitated a fraction of a second. "Of course. She's very understanding."

It wasn't remotely true—the tooth fairy was a terrifying creature that would never gift a coin to a child that didn’t offer their tooth as sacrifice.

The delight on her face made the lie feel like the easiest thing he'd done all century.

"Anya Draculescu?" the dental hygienist called.

Vladimir followed his daughter through the door, passing the envelope to the dentist. He was already planning which coin to use tonight.



THE FIRST AND LAST STAND OF GREG

by Lana

Nobody had signed up for this. No one was dumb enough to volunteer. Except Greg, of course. He always did this. When the uncomfortable thing had to be done and no one stepped forward, it was always Greg who eventually capitulated under the gaze of the hive, the pressure of the group. “Which one of us will give the presentation?” “Who’s going to be the designated driver?” “Who’s going to put the entire dinner on their card and we’ll, like, settle up later?”

Fuckin’ Greg, that’s who!

He despised this about himself. Every time, he vowed it was the last time. But in the end, the people-pleasing compulsion was simply too deep. He was powerless to change it. It’s who he was.

He reflected on this presently, as the group of strangers huddled inside the Blockbuster Video—deciding. Who would it be? Who was going to run across the parking lot, through those...unnatural, reptilian things that were ripping everyone who crossed their path limb from limb? Who would risk a gory death dashing through an apocalyptic hellscape, to get to the phone booth to call for help and warn the neighboring towns?

You guessed it. It was Greg.

But you know what? This time it *would* be different. He was done letting people take advantage of him. He smiled to himself, triumphant.

Oh, yeah.

He was going to call collect.

ROUND *THREE*

In round 3, writers were given their prompts and wrote and submitted a 100 word story.

ROUND 3 WINNERS



SNAGGLEFANG'S HORDE

1. **DaniLucas**
   9.77
   Civil Disobedience
2. **LincolnH**
   9.75
   When Wanda Met Lizzy
3. **Lunau**
   9.64
   The Recipe



CHERRYHOOF'S CAVALRY

1. **Jessica Rutland**
   9.51
   My Contrarian
2. **moira**
   9.49
   To My Daughter, Whenever I Find You
3. **Hightower**
   9.45
   Better Late

MY CONTRARIAN

by Jessica Rutland

When you first told him you didn't like *The Shining*, he laughed and tickled you to the floor.

"My contrarian."

You told him the book was better. In the book, Jack Torrance fought the hotel. For a moment, Jack broke free and cried for his son Danny to run away because there's a love so deep nothing can touch it.

His eyes glistened, and you knew how much he wanted something you might not ever be ready for.

Tonight, you say, "In the book—"

He sighs. "You gonna talk through the whole thing?"

His eyes fall on your belly. Empty.

LEADERBOARD

MAYBE ONE PERSON CAN'T BE ON THE FRONT LINES AND BE A MEDIC TOO.

by Alyson Tait

I had settled for being at war with myself when you invaded the space between my borders.

Backup never showed up to re-isolate me, only ghosts flaunting the suicides of ex-best-friends and drug-fueled drives home and addict ex-boyfriends.

You came like a summer thunderstorm to the desert. Violent with warm light. Holy with hunger. Your mouth claimed mine and lust became the salvation of a person I'd forgotten how to be. Laying next to you taught me that survival isn't the opposite of death because somewhere out there past the haze of my own thoughts is the shape of peace.

✦ FIND ALYSON TAIT ONLINE

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BLUESKY @rudexvirus

INFLECTION MATTERS

by Monique Danielle Nelson

There are seven of us and only one of him and still, none of us want to go first.

We're dying to relax, warm up, swap some gossip. But there **he** sits.

Maybe it'll be fine. Maybe he'll mind his own business.

But if he doesn't...

There's only one way to find out.

I step in, cautious.

He cracks an eye.

"Hot bikini," he croaks. Oh, no.

Then he waves his hand, the 'just a sec' finger up.

Clearing his throat, he repeats, "Hawt bikini, gurrlll!"

And, with the flick of a wrist, the hot tub is a safe space.

ANOTHER DAY MORE

by Dulce Mer

I was their Teacher. But the most important lessons I taught were not arithmetic or history. When they came to me broken, I taught compassion and kindness. Things with the power to heal. Power enough to keep them moving through another day. And another day more.

When I grew old, no one came. I waited another day. And another day more. Until I was no longer there to come to.

Through the mist I watched them come to sit beside my breathless body. They cried and spoke words that could have kept me for another day. And another day more.

THE OUTER HOUSE

by Caralin Fleet

The cubicle pulsed, strange odors and otherworldly light spilling from its seams. The side was emblazoned "*Portal Potty*".

"Who signed for this?" Simmons snatched the clipboard. "We ordered a Port-a-Potty!"

Workers shifted uncomfortably, fearful of reprisal and of emptying their bursting bladders into another dimension.

Simmons squinted at the scrawl. "Williams? Finally, I can sack that useless turd. Where is he?"

No one spoke. All eyes flicked to the toilet.

"Shit." Simmons scowled, thought a moment, then grinned. "Hey, saves paperwork! And speaking of..."

He dialed his phone. "Jerry? Still got that garbage pile? I've just found the perfect solution."



WHEN WANDA MET LIZZY

by Lincoln Hayes

For her blind date with Lizzy at the Gateau Chateau, Wanda wove spells of beauty and charm.

For witches like her, wartiness—and proclivity for baking children in pies—rendered romance rather awkward.

It went swimmingly: Lizzy, a witty, auburn beauty, seemed smitten.

Head spinning, Wanda could barely breathe. Was this love?

When she leaned in for a kiss, she was met with a cackle of sulphuric breath. Opening her eyes, in shock, she beheld Lizzy's true, green-hued, visage.

Lizzy, too, recoiled.

"You're … a witch?" They screeched simultaneously.

Both fled on their broomsticks.

Their second date was a spell-free affair.

COMING UP

Fancy seeing your name in the next issue? Here's what's on the way.



STARTS 22 MARCH 2027 · 3 ROUNDS

Twisted Tournament 2027 – March Micro

Participants are split into two groups for three rounds of writing and peer judging. Round 1 is a 500-word story written over three days. Round 2 shortens to two days, and Round 3 is a 24-hour micro challenge. Features over...



STARTS 17 MAY 2027 · 3 ROUNDS

Twisted Tournament 2027 – May Flash/Micro

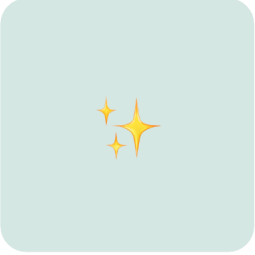
Participants are split into two groups for three rounds of writing and peer judging. Each round gets tighter: 600 words in three days, 300 words in two, then a frantic 150-word final round with just one day to write. Features...



STARTS 16 AUGUST 2027 · 3 ROUNDS

Twisted Tournament 2027 – August Micro

Participants are split into two groups for three rounds of writing and peer judging. Round 1 is a 500-word story written over three days. Round 2 shortens to two days, and Round 3 is a 24-hour micro fiction challenge. Features...



STARTS 25 OCTOBER 2027 · 3 ROUNDS

Twisted Tournament 2027 – November Flash/Micro

Participants are split into two groups for three rounds of writing and peer judging. Each round gets tighter: 600 words in three days, 300 words in two, then a frantic 150-word final round with just one day to write. Features...

Sign up at twistedtournament.com

THANK YOU

for reading



Thank you for reading this issue of Twist, and a huge thank you to every writer who entered, judged, cheered and gave feedback. None of this happens without you.

Keep writing, and we'll see you in the next one.

Nick

twistedtournament.com