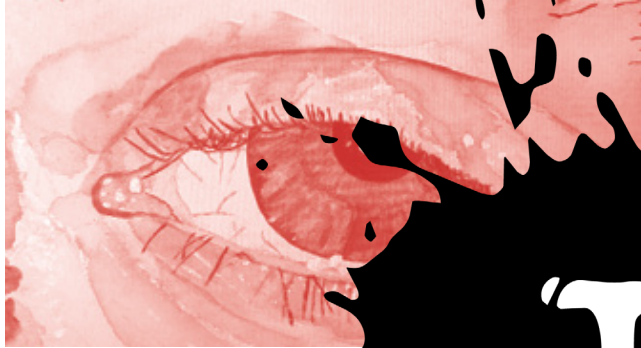


BROKEN INK

Volume 58
2026



Deo peris C. Senintr ari-
suliam hoca; ne ta, dios, o
consis cresimus actum
ia reis pere, vo, fiter
uspero, adhum hos
porum neribem acitua
mpliae con hoca nihilic
ondit? Nos pos hilin sul-
tu con vil verUce maOn-
ductum es sulesce



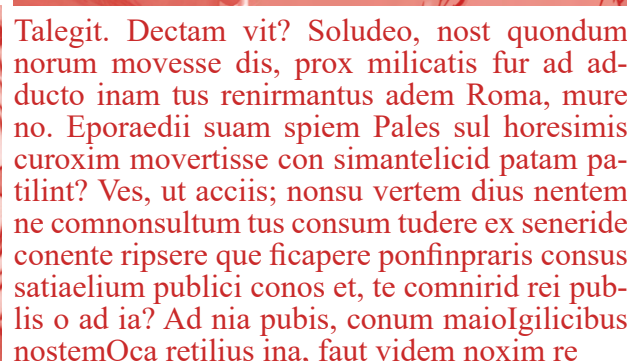
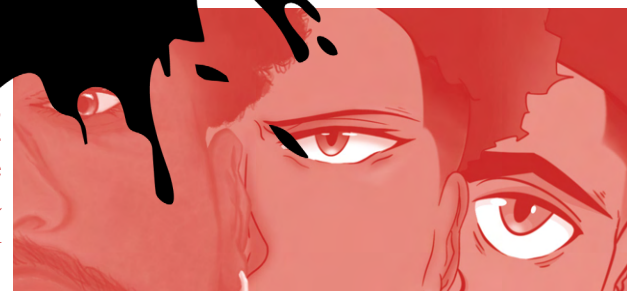
Hae ta idem audac re Ti. Verum in tus?
aris senatid rei ses ca; C. Habemquo ut auror
Sp. Graes! Sati in dum aus, avenam ia rem
ius omnoSSI mmoverfes ret? Upio, cae ex mo-
converceres? Inato et L. endac fere aperio

Deo, forum, quit; hoca
pertude roximus eludac-
tudam popublium scer-
rit, Catus se, diemnoves
M. Cupicaut coerfec
rendium inequitus, vir-
icaet Catiam hilis. Ubis
autebatus.

Quam huzionique tela-
rei squos o iohsupiem
m, is
tiaie
onfice
m pri-
men-
bus co
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et; i
con-
et conc
oub
tis.
ice
su
qu-
us,
con-
sultilis

es rei
hum et pe
vidit; nort
sen
iu vit intric fue an
povil vit. Marit, aucit
e,
sum in dum in Itanu
ti-
enica; esed det; eterisse
um tiur, Catabun ihilica
di sendam ta, cae quam
opteatri, Pat, quo tiam

Talegit. Dectam vit? Soludeo, nost quondum
norum movesse dis, prox milicatis fur ad ad-
ducto inam tus renirmantus adem Roma, mure
no. Eporaedii suam spiem Pales sul horeshimis
curoxim movertisse con simantelicid patam pa-
tilint? Ves, ut acciis; nonsu vertem dius nentem
ne commonsultum tus consum tudere ex seneride
conente ripsere que ficapere ponfinpraris consus
sataelium publici conos et, te comnirid rei pub-
lis o ad ia? Ad nia pubis, conum maiolgilicibus
nostemOca retilius ina, faut videm noxim re





Volume 58

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OUR PEOPLE

~~ROY SEEGER~~

Faculty Advisor

Broken Ink's faculty advisor for over a decade. As a member of the English department, he teaches courses for the BFA in Creative Writing.

~~AARON STONE~~

Editor-in-Chief

A senior Creative Writing major who has been published in Broken Ink and Sand Hills literary magazine where he was awarded best fiction.

~~JATAVIA GRAHAM~~

Fall Semester Editor-in-Chief

A graphic designer with a BA in Art, she is passionate about creative storytelling, visual design, and connecting with audiences.

~~RILEY MANN~~

Layout Editor

A junior Art major brings to you: not just a stab at becoming employable, but an under-radicalized arts magazine.

~~KYLE HURLEY~~

Music Editor

A junior Psychology major, guitarist, drummer, and producer, Kyle is also in the band Stopping Clocks

~~PATRICK ADKINS~~

Literary Editor

A senior English major with a love for writing in all its forms. He's drawn to bold, experimental work and writing that isn't afraid to push boundaries.

~~DE'VAUGHN LAWES~~

Art Editor

A freshman Digital Art major who enjoys watching and analyzing various media, writing fiction and drawing.

~~JAMES IVEY~~

Social Media Coordinator

A Secondary Education and History student, electronic music producer, and the head of Broken Ink's social media.

~~MARGARET BROWN~~

Archivist

A senior Creative Writing major and an aspiring artist. She writes poetry about intersectional conflicts within her hometown of Beech Island.

~~BRANDY MCSORLEY~~

Events Coordinator

A senior Graphic Design major, a wife and mother, amateur photographer, poet, and aspiring world traveler.

~~AIDEN ROEMMICH~~

General Staff

A junior Creative Writing major working to be an author. He spends his free time reading and writing.

~~TYLER HAMILTON~~

General Staff

A sophomore Creative Writing major who hopes to be an author following college. In his free time, he enjoys spending time with friends and reading.

~~DELICIA GREEN~~

General Staff

A junior majoring in Studio & Digital Art. She enjoys painting and photography, focusing on storytelling in her work.

~~ANDREW PENCILLE~~

General Staff

A Senior English major at USCA.

~~LUKA SHOCKEY~~

General Staff

A senior Art major, and the Art Editor for the Fall semester, where she had fun seeing so many different and great art styles and photographs.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Volume 58 of Broken Ink is a revolt against the rising tide of artificial art. The humanities, they say, are dying a slow death at the hands of computer-generated images, songs, and stories. But we disagree. In this issue, we see our imperfections as celebrated proof of the human artist. In a world filled with soulless, overly-refined slop, we hope Broken Ink serves as proof that nothing can replace the rough edges of a beating heart.

- Aaron Stone

Editor-in-Chief



INK SPLAT

MUSIC

All You Been Missing
by Leo II

1st Place Winner

pg. 1

Waiting
by Names and Dates

2nd Place Winner

pg. 2

thrushed
by Outings

3rd Place Winner

pg. 3

POETRY

Judged by Dr. Julie Wise, Dr. Todd Hagstette, and Dr. Andrew Geyer

American Chestnut
by Andrew Pencille

1st Place Winner

pg. 4

Autopsy
by Laurie Collins

2nd Place Winner

pg. 5

Like a Mother
by Kirstie McElmurray

3rd Place Winner

pg. 8

AWARDS



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Judged by Dr. Michael Fowler

Window
by Bryleigh Barrett

1st Place Winner

pg. 7

First Love, First Thorn
by Jazmin Raygoza
Galvez

2nd Place Winner

pg. 9

Raina Slaying Ryder
by Raina Comar

3rd Place Winner

pg. 11

PROSE

Judged by Dr. Julie Wise, Dr. Todd Hagstette, and Dr. Andrew Geyer

IJGH: I Just Got Here
by Sophia Afamefuna

1st Place Winner

pg. 31

Stolen Wings
by Aiden Roemmich

2nd Place Winner

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Out of Character
by Glenn Miles

3rd Place Winner

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All You Been Missing

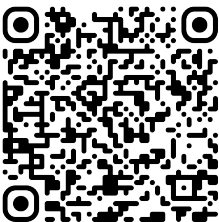
by Leo II (Prod. St.Emory)



[Kyle's Choice]



Artist's statement



All You Been Missing is a fun, dancehall song that is made for people to get moving and vibe. The song is describing a girl who the artist "Leo II" is very interested in as they are in the same club setting. This song released on all platforms on March 11, 2026. Anyone can find/contact me on my instagram which is @theleoii and my artist email is theleoii140@gmail.com.



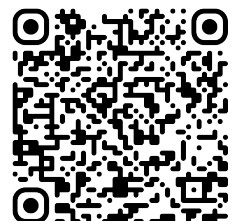
Waiting

by Names and Dates



Artist's statement

Make sure you're not too busy waiting that you forget to live!!



thrushed

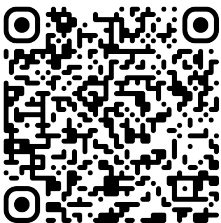
by Outings (Kyle Hurley)



Artist's statement

this is my song about thrushes and cowbirds. all written, recorded, and played by me :)

youtube: @outingsmusique



American Chestnut

by Andrew Pencille



Everyone knows your sisters out west,
But none remember you.
I can only wonder at your brilliance,
The shadows you once cast with the light
from the heavens, your ambrosia.
I long to stand below your magnificence,
Not yet rivaled by the mockeries
we planted up in your place.

Once, your children ran up and down the coast,
progeny of that old growth.
Once, your head touched the clouds
And blotted out the Sun.
Once, you took root here,
Spread your mighty limbs from the mountains
To the seas;
Your roots, your veins
Your trunks, your heart.
Your boughs, like arms, gave shelter
To those tiny parakeets
Feathered green clouds which turned the sky
Unblue.
We came from the sea,
Saw the grandness of your body,
And we slew you.

Forgive us. We knew not what we did.

Autopsy

by Laurie Collins

I sat in on my own autopsy the other day
and it was like nothing at all, except that it was
unlike a funeral.

The coroner was quiet and chemical,
the room sterile like a white-washed tomb
lined with the metal ghosts of bodies
neatly stacked papers in a filing cabinet

The coroner started by running his scalpel down my veins
following the dry and itchy path
where all my emotions ran straight to my gut.
He dug his knife into my soft underbelly and
ripped pelvis to sternum
along the line where hunger gnawed me thin.

I watched quiet in the corner,
followed the dull ache in the dermis
the familiar method of dissection
along channels of hurt.
I am not a self-sustaining organism.

I sat in on my own autopsy the other day
and there was nothing special about me, only flesh and blood.
I expected a stomach, black and shriveled
like a smoker's lung, a grey decaying rock of a thing
but it was pink and healthy, three pounds on the scale.
From where I was standing, it looked like nothing but a slab of meat
uncut on the deli counter.

I watched him take a knife to me, unflinching
I , surgeon's gallery and cheer squad,
discovered why you need a degree
to do what I had done my entire life.
From where I was standing I looked very foolish,
or it looked foolish to be used up so young.



He tucked me away on a frigid winter night
and I walked home on the highway in the dark,
playing zombie for the passing cars
which didn't flinch or
even turn their headlights towards me.

I walked out of my own autopsy the other day
and the numbing cold on my fingers and nose
almost brought me back to myself,
as I emerged from each shadow into neon traffic lights
and back again into darkness.
And out beyond the edge of light I thought I saw a star,
fired away into the metal walls of the sky,
two blank surfaces reflecting back at each other
walking in the way of things
who, through a million light years, know the other might be dead already...
or maybe not.



Window

by Bryleigh Barrett

Artist's statement

A realistic watercolor rendition of the artist's (mine) own eye

Like a Mother

by Kirstie McElmurray



My mother wasn't a drinker or a smoker
But she let me know that the whole world revolved around her.
Relied on me, a child,
For emotional support
Yelled and screamed to get her point across
She would wallow in her pain but forget everyone else's.

She pulled me into her storms,
dragged my small body through silence and slammed doors,
laid her guilt at my feet
like a gift I never asked for.
I learned to read the mood by the way
she stirred her coffee—fast meant fury.

She cried loud enough to shatter
every thought I tried to form—
held her head like it might fall off
if she didn't squeeze it with both hands.

My arms were not big enough
for the weight she dropped on them.
Still, I held her stories,
stitched together her apologies,
and forgave her before she finished
saying sorry.

She never asked what I needed.
Never sat beside me
unless I was quiet and useful.
Love had rules,
and I learned them quickly—
don't talk back,
don't cry louder than her,
don't need too much.

I became small,
so she could feel large.
I disappeared
into the cracks she left behind.



First Love, First Thorn

by Jazmin Raygoza Galvez



Call it (before it spoils)

by Shayna Autwell

This day smells like honey, and it's sticky like it, too.

You can't remember a day that's come close. You're buzzing before you float above it all, and you're looking over the moving pieces of it; they're all gliding and frictionless. Do you deserve this sweet day? You strain looking for a reason but come up emptyhanded.

You are one step ahead. You call it before it spoils. You end someone's sentence for them; it's not what they were going to say. You will not let the silence settle at the bottom. You grab a fistful on your way down. You shove it in your mouth. You are bloated with it.

You've fallen from the top, and the pieces are sticking to you.





Raina Slaying Ryder

by Raina Comar



“Whistles”

by Shayna Autwell

I heard the whistles blow that night, despite
my ears being hundreds of miles southeast;
one pressed to pillows, yet both listening
to the discord. To shrill cries of warning.

I watched enough clips of that young fool's death
to make myself snow-blind; the winter storm
would just miss us, but ice was on its way.
A slow creep, but promised to come one day.

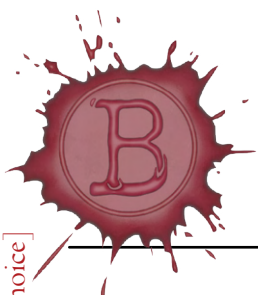
Could I make noise at an empty man's face?
A fool, brave for my community's sake?





Maneater

by Jeremiah Hancock



Artist's statement

In my art I like to do a little of everything, but across all my mediums there is always a conveyed sense of light and its effects on a subject. Photography is the medium which I have grown the most into. With my photography I try to show people the way I see the world and allow people to see everyday things in a way they may not normally. In all of my photography and works in general there is an emphasis on light.



Always the artist never the muse

by Laura Summerfield

Artist's statement

A one layer challenge using procreate and one brush.

[James's Choice]





Shifting Selves

by Xavien Williams

[De'Vaughn's Choice]



I Remember Mom Saying, “One Day I’m Going to Run Away and Never Come Back”

by Margaret Brown

When Papa placed our double-wide trailer on his chess board, he thought
he had made the right move.

Today, I thought, Do demons raise angels?” Did God pawn Eve?

I remember one summer, you asked my daddy to build a greenhouse.

You planted

Dill for pickles, lots of green cucumbers.

You and daddy bought my sister a bunny.

I took a polaroid of your bust—You were still chubby, then.

Your hair was shoulder length.

You were planting a garden; you planned to uproot it
in just 90 days.

I grew up smelling the waffle batter on your blue collar; your skin always smells like onions.

I bet your brain is filled with orders, and it has no room for dreams.

I remember chlorine; burning, steaming—eating through my daddy’s arms;

I remember he was always stinky—and that our house had a yellow fog;

In y’all’s bedroom, in the kitchen, -- hiding the stolen china on the wall.

One day, you answered the call of prosperity, of deity, of reverse filial piety,

Given to you straight from God. You threw out my daddy— threw out his dog,

and replaced them like you were God above.

One day, a shiny white angel delivered you a message
from Eutopia.

In the Valley, angels appear from thin air to impregnate women with fantasies.

One day, my mother realized she was God—then rewrote her reality.



Untitled
by J Conner Gladden

Shoddy Design

by Ella Rich

My body always felt defective
A model skipped over from recalls

I slouched my neck and let my stiff limbs hang
To barely squeeze into grade school group photos

My face never moved when I wanted
I picked the skin off my fingers uncontrollably

This body is meant for a woman's
The design faulty and assigned improperly

I change my clothes away from my mirror
Staring straight at me a reminder of what I don't want

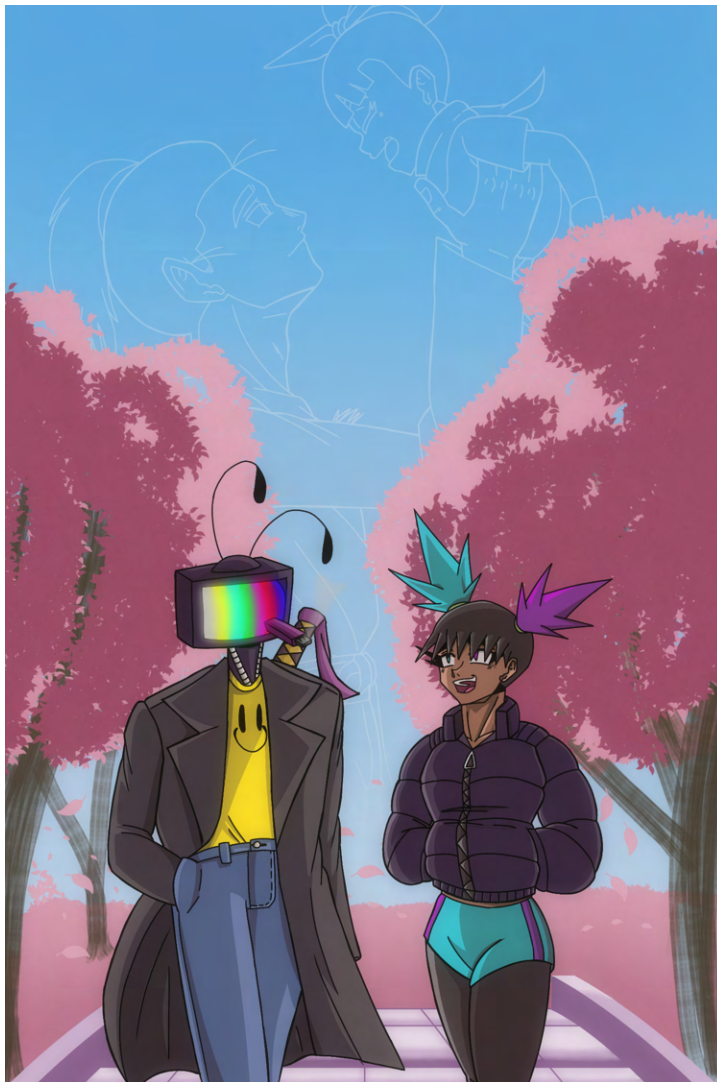
Baggy clothes a temporary fix until a repair
I'm exhausted by running from mirrors

Glitches in every function
Built wrong in a world not built for me



Living in the Moment

by Octavia Walker



A Short Walk

by Angelo Messano

Artist's statement

Two of my characters enjoying a 'short' walk (An older piece of mine).

My Angel's Snowy Veil

by Al Vernon

You were the one who gave me my name, Theodore,
Along with food so I wouldn't be in pain—
Pillows and blankets now littered the cold cage,
For you were the one who gave them to me.
In return, you would let me call you anything
I settled with Angel...

You were nothing like your parents...
They were cruel and sadistic for they
Enjoyed my pain and the screams.
You, Angel, were so kind to me—
You gave me company when I asked for it,
The only one who would speak to me...
We talked about our favorite things together and
Spent our free time drawing...

Angel, you would ask me why I drew
A creature repeatedly every time—
One with the skull of an elk, a thin body, and open
Wounds that covered the thing as trails spilled out...
I could not ever tell you; it was your parents who made
Me see the very thing they want you to worship.
Its call is loud...
Screeching at high volumes, till the room
Is nothing but that call alone-
Though, I can tell it wants something from me...

They turned me into something horrifying,
The very thing I could never unsee-
The ecstasy upon their faces, looking at their work
As they found a vessel for their lord...
That was when my time came.

I destroyed their fun, and had many under my
Call I saw you again, my Angel...
I could tell you feared my new look.
The dread was easy to see past the recognition.
Though, you never ran away...
When you heard my call, you never went insane,
You only grew tired...
And fell into a frost-nipped slumber.

I would always call you my Angel,
For I did not know that was your actual name.
Despite that, the name almost fit you,
From your kind heart to your angelic face and frame.
As the frost slowly covered you whole,
I gave you everything...

Theodore gave you a bed, with pillows
And the softest blankest he could find.
Theodore gave you the prettiest of flowers
He could find from the shops...
Poppies, with blue-and-white roses—
Even some pink ones too.

You were the one who gave me my name, Theodore.
I call you my Angel
As I watch you breathe in and out.
I wait for someone to wake you from the slumber—
For those who fail shall transform into
Something Theodore knows you loved.
Angel calls the snow a pretty white veil...
Angel's veil will be the prettiest one...



Mid-Night Blue

by Joshua Matlock

Artist's statement

[Both] of these photos were taken on the Canon Rebel T7, using either a short-zoom macro lens or a zoom lens.



Neoscona Crucifera (Spotted Orb Weaver)

by Joshua Matlock



Manifest Sample Art (Water and Elysium)

by Matthew Turner

Artist's statement

These were some images I made for my card game called Manifest, where I need some non-copyrighted images so I could display them in an upcoming exhibit. Each is meant to abstractly represent a certain element/attribute in the game.

Merapi, Merbabu, and Me

by Laurie Collins

I carved out my heart and buried it in the rice field,
just down the street from your childhood home,
on one of those days when we went, singing and barefoot, down the little dirt roads

I dug my hole not too far from the dancing river
just deep enough that the crabs wouldn't dig it up and
pinch it away in little bits.
But some days I think they did anyway.

And now I rest my head on the bottom of the world
all the way under dirt, stone, magma
magma, stone, and dirt
out the other side again.
Another volcano gone dormant:
Merapi, Merbabu, and me



Symmetry

by Sara Blume

I'm Sick of Sugar

by Margaret Brown

You turn coke cans and Red Bulls into fizzy, fruity bombs--
Headed my way as you cry You launch them at me
In the tiny, cherry- red shed—behind our rotting double-wide.
Soda is flying, our are hearts spewing, like shaken cans.
You scream to me, explaining how your luck dropped below twelve thousand dollars
over, and over, and over.

I'm reminded how corn syrup is all you budget for, as I watch three-dollar caffeine
Pool on the concrete. I bet our blood is so thick it could stick to rich people's lips.
It could stick against white button-ups, and white palms, and white walls.

I think of our kitchen cabinets,
—the ones with doors still. You've kept them teal since I was...twelve.

When sugar satisfies impending debt, what is there left to eat?

Earth is not completely dark at night, it is illuminated by human-made lights, natural phenomena like lightning and auroras, and moonlight.



Crows are highly intelligent birds known for using tools, recognizing human faces, and holding grudges, with a complex social structure and communication system that includes regional dialects and "funerals" for their dead. They are long-lived, monogamous, and capable of solving puzzles and planning for the future.



Owls are fascinating birds of prey, known for their ability to rotate their heads up to 270 degrees, their slight flight thanks to specialized feathers, and their powerful, grasping talons. Contrary to common belief, not all owls hoot, and they have diverse vocalization. Their tube-shaped eyes are fixed in their sockets, making them farsighted.

Mystery: The Earth at Night

by Delicia Green



DJ Flower

by Vincent Bush

IJGH: I Just Got Here

by Sophia Afamefuna



Ene dusted off her resume and applied again. This time to a bigger company that would be more professional than the last one. However, this interview was the second event that led her to forfeit looking for a job.

She was scheduled for an interview at 10 a.m. That morning, she left the house early to avoid being late. Ene was greeted warmly by the doorman, who directed her to the floor she was looking for.

The secretary was a young woman who apologized for everything. Her name was Katie. She spoke too quickly, darting from desk to phone to hallway as if trying to outrun her own nerves. Her energy made Ene more nervous than usual. Katie offered her snacks and drinks, which Ene politely refused.

"It helps me calm my nerves. It's from China, you know," the woman said, sipping tea from her cup. "I apologize," she chuckled, "you didn't even ask me."

Ene's cheeks ached from smiling at the woman every time she apologized.

"I'm glad you're early. Mr. Mouse likes that," Katie said, smiling. Ene smiled back, still unable to shake off the surprise she felt every time she read or heard the name "Mr. Mouse." She wondered if she'd forget he was the employer and instinctively pull her leg up if someone said "mouse" again.

"It's time. Good luck," Katie said, waving her into the office.

The office was dimly lit and filled with dark cabinets. Pictures of archaic English-looking men lined the walls. Combined with the somber decor, Ene felt as though she had stepped into a shrine.

"Yes," a deep voice said. Ene's eyes flew to the chair and widened in surprise. A man sat behind the desk—barely. His suit button was undone, revealing a white shirt. The man's large hand motioned to the chair.

"Good morning," Ene greeted, her voice cracking. She looked at the man's wide face and long beard and concluded that nothing about him resembled a mouse.

"Good morning," he replied. He asked her a few questions, nodding at each answer. Then he looked at her and asked, "Nigeria, huh?"

"Yes, sir," she responded.

"You're sure this document is yours?" he asked. Ene was taken aback by the seriousness in his expression and the pettiness in his tone.

"Yes, it's mine," Ene said, adjusting in her chair to hide her offended expression. She didn't understand why he'd ask her something like that.

"Hmm," he scoffed.

"Do you have something to share with me?" she almost asked, watching as the man's scrutinizing eyes toured her résumé.

He ended the interview with a curt, "I'll get back to you." At that point, Ene finally understood what was mousey about him—it was his ability to adapt to the growing world. Or rather, his inability to.

She realized then why his office looked like something Plato might ask to have redecorated. It dawned on her later why everyone in the building looked pale. Katie ushered Ene out with her usual lip-service of encouragement and hopeful wishes that she'd get the job. Ene thanked her and silently prayed that Mr. Mouse didn't treat Katie like a rug.

Later that evening, Daniel had stared at Ene in total doubt when she finished narrating her story.

"He asked you that?" His face twisted with disgust.

Ene nodded. "His brain is not correct, at all"

"His name is Mouse, so what did you expect?" Daniel said and they laughed.

Ene landed another interview. She was excited about it because it is a Nigerian owned company. The man had reached out to her for an interview two days after she applied. She was extremely excited about this opportunity because the job description fit everything she wanted, and it was just outside of Miami. Ene's enthusiasm and joy was so contagious that Daniel smiled proudly at her as she told him about the interview. He helped her prepare for it over the weekend and offered to drive her there.

"What? No, you are going to be at work" Ene refused.

"I see how much you can't stand me?" Daniel teased, and Ene's lips curled up into a smile.

"Yeah. Being around you repulses me" Ene said, making vomiting faces and sounds. And they laughed.

*

The office smelled like spring breeze and coconut. A large poster of a firewood pot of rice hung proudly on the wall—a nod to the company's roots in traditional catering. Ene sat quietly, tapping her fingers to the rhythm of the Bob Marley song playing softly in the background.

A man in his late fifties entered, a toothpick lodged between his lips.

“Ehh, my sister. How’re ya doing?” he asked in a thick, mixed accent.

“Hello, sir,” Ene replied, rising to shake his hand.

“Sit down,” he said, patting her back and ignoring her outstretched hand.

He sighed heavily as he settled into his chair.

“So, you’ll be creating a budget for us. You know our Nigerian people—and even our other African brothers—love to eat. Your job is to help us save money and make money at the same time.”

“Yes, I can do that,” Ene said.

The man fell silent, distracted by his phone. After a moment, he looked up.

“How’re ya liking our America?” he asked.

Ene smiled politely and nodded.

“You’re shy?” he teased, picking his teeth and laughing heartily.

Ene shifted uneasily in her seat.

“See, here we’re family. You gats relax,” he said, trying to reassure her.

Then he leaned forward. “Do ya know why you gats this job?” he asked, not waiting for a reply. “Because ya are fine.”

Ene’s eyebrows twitched in disbelief.

“Yes. If you work here, I’ll take care of you. Put you on a salary. Everybody will be saying ‘yes ma’am’ whenever ya want,” he continued.

“I . . .” Ene hesitated, searching for the most respectful way to decline. “I just want to be treated like every other employee.”

“You’re not like everyone else,” he said, standing and walking around the desk to sit beside her. “You’re like model.”

Ene’s eyes darted to the door—just two strides away. She shifted her seat slightly, clutching her bag tighter.

“I’ll think about your offer,” she said, her voice strained, her face pale.

“This offer is not gonna be on the table for long” he said, running his hand up her knee.

Ene jumped out of the seat in fear. The man grabbed her left buttocks and pulled her by her blouse down to himself. He slammed her lips onto his. Ene struggled with all her might to get out of his grip. She pounded her fist on his chest to no avail until she cracked her phone on his head. He let out a loud cry and let go of her. Ene landed heavily on the floor. Without waiting to recover

from the pain of the impact, she gathered her phone and bag and ran out of the door.

Ene didn't know how she got home. She had driven absentmindedly the entire way, her mind a blur. She was relieved that Daniel was still at work—she couldn't bear for him to see her like this: eyes bloodshot, clothes disheveled, her face etched with fear.

She stood in the shower for a long time, letting the lather run down her body in silence. Her gums ached from brushing her teeth over and over again, as if trying to scrub away the upper layer of her gum.

Finally, she lay gingerly on the empty bed, pulling the covers over her shoulders and hugging herself tightly. Hot tears streamed down her cheeks, soaking into the pillow as she trembled in the silence.

She blamed herself for getting into this situation. She couldn't understand how she hadn't seen it coming. Had her eagerness to find a job and escape the house been misread as desperation by the man? Had that given him permission, in his mind, to do whatever he wanted?

Stolen Wings

by Aiden Roemmich



“Magic is hungry!” a wheezing voice spoke loudly over a silent congregation, their still forms packed in among the pews and pillars of the church. “Magic without the guidance of the mother is nothing but a starving beast!” The priest leaned heavily on the pew before him, his body heaving with the effort of his sermon.

Traven Hinanis slipped in between the bodies packed tight around the edges of the large cathedral. Every foot of space within the church was occupied, people from every walk of life crammed together in the dim candlelight. Those with more influence sat in their spacious balconies above, the nobles looking down onto the mortals below, the lessers.

Traven made sure to keep to the shadows between and behind the large pillars, staying directly below the balconies to avoid a wandering noble eye. His long dirty brown coat helped him blend in with the stinking masses, the hood pulled over his head a common enough sight. The hanging chandeliers and evenly spaced candelabra cast just as many shadows as they banished, the darkness growing deeper every time Traven’s willowy form drew close. The large windows that let in the light of the setting sun did little to help beat back the shadows of the cathedral, as once more the light only served to cast more shadows.

The Cathedral of Primes made many a castle look small, the large complex covering a majority of the church district in Insomnia. The only structure to surpass the church in splendor and size being the Sakaars royal keep, the massive palace visible within several days walk of the city. Arrogant lizards can’t help themselves, Traven thought as he passed a large mural depicting a radiant woman clasping her hands together with a tall male figure, his head adorned with tall curling horns, and a blue scaled tail falling to the floor from his lower back.

As Traven made his way closer to the back of the cathedral, he could see two guards stationed in front of a well-illuminated doorway, both men wearing the white and gold armor of paladins. Those without magic of their own could be blessed by the mother to carry out her will on the mortal plane, or so they say. The truth is far less appealing to the masses, but Traven doubted they would ever care to hear it.

Brushing midnight black hair out of his face, his equally dark eyes bored into the two paladins leaning against the wall to either side of the doorway. Seeing paladins in the church wasn’t unusual, but what was unusual was wasting two paladins on guarding one simple door.

Looking over his shoulder Traven checked to see if any member of the congregation or church was looking in the direction of the door or himself. Confirming the absence of attention,

he leaned back against the pillar he was hiding behind and breathed deeply, the smell of sweat and unwashed bodies overwhelming his senses.

The two paladins failed to notice their own shadows creeping up the wall behind them, their dark shadow-cast hands simultaneously reaching for the light. The candelabra illuminating the doorway from within was snuffed out, and two strong arms reached from the inky darkness to pull the paladins into the waiting shadows. The pillar where Traven was standing mere seconds ago stood empty, left absent by a sneaking tiger. When the light in the doorway returned several moments later, of Traven or the paladins there was no trace.

Traven moved further into the dimly lit halls of the church, moving deeper under the building. This part of the structure lacked any of the incredibly detailed painted-glass windows, or any other natural light. This was a place for those of means to make anyone they didn't fancy publicly executing as criminals or traitors disappear. This was a place no one left once they were brought down.

The flickering torches and dark stone walls were a stark change from the golden filigree and beautiful art above. There were no marble statues and grand paintings down here, for there was no one of worth to see them. Beauty is wasted on the dead and those soon to die.

Traven stopped at a right-hand turn, this portion of the secretive prison filled with the groans of the misfortunate. Peeking around the corner, he took notice of the ragged prisoners in each cell, his cold eyes piercing the darkness easily. They wouldn't have kept him here, not with the lesser, Traven knew. He moved deeper down the halls, passing by the withered forms of the guilty and the innocent without a second thought.

The hall terminated in a wooden door flanked by two torches, and no paladins or other guards to be seen. Moving close to the door, Traven placed his ear to the wood, listening for any signs of life. Low muttering and a light banging of metal on wood drifted into his ears. Low mutterings indeed if even he could not make out what they were saying.

Looking back at the tunnel behind him revealed no other way forward. Only the prisoners and the church lay behind him. "Well, this was never meant to be a full stealth operation anyway," Traven muttered to himself, his grave voice barely audible in the dead hallway.

Bracing himself with a sharp breath and set shoulders, Traven turned back to the door and pulled out a small weapon from a sheath on his lower back. Resting comfortably in his hand was a long-handled paint brush, the brilliant white marble of the handle polished to a shine and inlaid with jagged cracks of gold – as if broken and reformed with gold as a binder. The bristles of the brush shined in the low torch light, each bristle of the brush a brilliant gold that seemed to glow with an inner light, and all of the gold flowing together into a beautiful and delicate head.

Traven rushed forward and kicked the door open with a violent crash, his eyes darting back and forth to take in his surroundings. Eight lessers in bright shining plate armor sat in what appeared to be a cafeteria for the guards of this prison. Three were playing cards at a table to his

right, while the other five ate at a table to his left. Straight ahead of him stood two more paladins, their eyes shining with a golden light as they rushed towards the very obvious threat. Looking between the approaching paladins and the scrambling lessers, a predatory smile pulled its way across his face and a deep rumble echoed from his chest.

Waltzing forward with contemptuous grace, Traven gently swept his brush in the air towards the three soldiers to his right. A deep void appeared where the brush passed, the shadows of the room jumping to become the ink that Trevan painted with. Once the stroke was complete, the dark streak shot from the tip of the brush to the wall, splashing harmlessly against the stone and rejoining the shadows of the room.

Where the paint passed there was no damage to wood or metal, but two suits of armor crashed to the ground as they were caught in the middle of standing up. The legs within the armor were still jerking. As the helm, gauntlets, and breastplate fell to the ground, nothing remained within but empty mail and pooling blood.

The third guard leaned against the wall, his screams of agony filling the previously silent hall as he clutched at the empty armor of his left arm and slid to the floor. The five soldiers on Traven's left faltered, seeing their comrades dispatched so easily with one move.

"A hound! There's a hound in the church!" One of the guards screamed as he turned away from Traven and made to run for a previously unseen door on the left side of the room. Traven tilted his head to look at the fleeing guard and moved with a speed and grace that left the mortals unable to react.

Traven slipped into the guard of the first soldier, his sword halfway out of his scabbard as the brush painted across his gorget. Moving to the next soldier without looking to see if his attack was effective, Traven didn't see the soldier clutch at his gorget as a wet gurgle squeezed from his lips, the last sound to ever leave them. The second soldier fared little better, his fist swinging wildly as he realized he didn't have the time to pull his sword. A single tap of the brush on the breastplate was all it took to end the mortal, a dark streak exiting his back.

Traven could hear the heavy thumps of the paladins' boots, their speed slower than his own, but far faster than the lessers. Grimacing slightly, Traven altered his path. Pushing off the floor he sailed over the soldiers and landed in front of the fleeing soldier, his speed and strength inhuman. Darkness coated his fingers as he swiped at the soldier, his confident expression slipping as the desperate man leapt at him instead of attempting to flee. Trevan's fingers passed through the metal like screeching butter as four dark slashes exited his back.

The soldier was dead instantly, his momentum halted as he was impaled on Traven's fingers. Traven's brow tightened in frustration as he pulled his fingers free of the dead lesser. "Damn it." The curse growled out as he looked at the remaining obstacles in his way.

Just four left, as the two paladins shoved the two remaining mortals out of their way. The last two mortals' fear was plain as day, the two failing to put on their helmets before the brief

clash. Before the two could try and run, inky black hands reached from their own shadows, gently brushing the backs of their necks. The mortals didn't make a sound, as their heads fell to the ground, their necks vanishing as if they were erased.

The paladins stepped forward without a care for the dead lessers around them. "Surrender, dog. Your tricks will have no affect on those blessed by the Mother." The paladin on the left stepped forward, his words ringing supernaturally loud as his sword was encased in a bright golden glow.

Traven simply raised an eyebrow at the pair. "Really? The lessers are dead, but you still keep up the act?" The leftmost paladin looked at his comrade as if asking for permission. His companion shook his head in the negative and stepped forward with grim determination. He gestured with his free hand, and a bright flash filled the room before manifesting into a shield of light on the paladin's arm.

"Prepare to burn in the mother's light, hound." The paladin rushed forward, his bright sword raised for a mighty swing, the ground at his feet awash with the light and free of shadows. His companion moved to swing from the right, aiming to cover the intruder's most likely route of escape.

Traven fell backwards, the light from the paladin's sword deepening his own shadow as he fell back into the darkness and disappeared. Unbeknownst to either paladin, Traven appeared in a world much like their own, just absent of color. Shadow walking is a little-known technique of the hounds; only extremely experienced and powerful hounds are capable of stepping into the realm of shadows. Traven moved through the realm of shadows, the world growing more and more distorted by the second. The two paladins looked around in confusion, their eyes looking like black hollows that cried black tar all over themselves as Traven moved to pounce.

In the physical world, both paladins looked at each other in confusion. "Tyrell, where did he go?" As Tyrell opened his mouth to respond he saw a dark figure rise up behind his fellow paladin.

"Arlan look out!" Tyrell lunged forward, a bright halo of golden antlers forming on his head as he rushed towards his companion. Traven reached his hand around Arlan's throat, and with contemptuous ease, ripped it out through his golden plate and mail. As Arlan fell to his knees, blood spewing from the pulped flesh of his neck, Tyrell screamed and lunged at the vile intruder who claimed his brother, but he had disappeared once more.

Tyrell turned to help his comrade, a healing spell on the tip of his tongue. But before he could release the spell, something else made itself aware on the tip of his tongue. Tyrell looked down at the fingers sticking out of his mouth, before collapsing to the ground.

Pulling his hand free from the back of the paladin's head, Traven shook the blood off of his hand, whispering to himself as the corpse of the paladin seemed to turn an unnatural gray, "Waste not want not." As Traven turned to head deeper into the prison, he stopped. Standing at the end of the hall was a man dressed in a simple but luxurious red robe. Golden symbols lining the silky red

fabric made it clear this was a man of extreme means. His long blood-red hair was tied into a top knot, and his bright emerald eyes stared into Trevan's own.

"I have done war with the hounds. And you are not one of them." The man stepped through the growing pools of blood that spread across the ground, his heavy boots at odds with the flowing silks of his robe and pants. "No, I think you are something else entirely." The man came to a stop ten feet from Trevan, his hand lowering to the curved sword at his side.

Traven smiled at the newcomer, showing teeth that were too sharp to be human. "My name is Traven, though normally I don't bother to share my name with those I'm about to kill, I figure I can make an exception for a member of one of the high houses." Traven gave a courtly bow, his head tilted upwards to keep the red noble in view.

"I am Varquiss of house Favallis, although I expect you are already aware of my house affiliations." Varquiss unsheathed his sword, the slender blade engraved with feathers and a slight hilt curving upwards over the fingers.

Traven smirked and waved his hand at Varquiss. "And what is one of the high lords doing in a drab place like this?"

"You know well what I am doing here, thief. I am here to retrieve what you and your vile spawn have stolen!" Varquiss snarled, his calm mask crumbling as spittle flew from his lips.

The cocky smirk fell off of Traven's face, his eyes narrowed. "So he's here then. If you release him no one else has to die." Traven drew his paintbrush once more as he and Varquiss began to circle each other.

"Lies! You are nothing but a rabid beast! You would slaughter every single high blood in the city if you could. All just to collect your vile paint." Varquiss drew a second blade from his waist, the two swords a matching set. "I will see the both of you gutted before I let another one of my house be drained by you demons. My niece has her flames back, but if you think I will set one of you mongrels back onto the streets you are mistaken."

Traven stopped abruptly, their circling ending with them standing opposite where they started. "Okay." Traven's body began to change then, the black of his hair and his eyes draining out of him, leaving snow-white hair and vibrant violet eyes to stare out of an exceptionally pale face. The changes continued, as his canines began to protrude from his mouth, and his iris split into two, each eye filled with two slitted pupils. His fingertips rippled as brutal claws punched out of his fingertips, his bestial transformation complete. "I was hoping you would say that." Traven's voice took on a deep rumble, his masquerade as a man ended.

"Rakshasa scum!" Varquiss shouted as he too transformed, His red hair catching fire and growing feathers throughout. His eyes dilated to that of a bird of prey, and his fingers grew sleek black talons. "The world will be a far safer place with two less paper tigers." Traven smiled, his transformed visage making the movement seem like more of a snarl. And the two charged at each

other.

Varquiss lept into the air as two feathered wings of flame briefly appeared to carry him behind his opponent. From the air he brought his swords together in a scissoring motion, the blades poised to slice Traven's head clean off. Traven once more stepped into the shadows, his form disappearing from the physical plane.

Varquiss committed to a roll, changing his momentum to dodge the blow coming from his own shadow. As Traven emerged from the shadows, Varquiss was already in motion, his blades piercing towards the Rakshasa's belly. All four of Trevan's pupils widened in surprise as he angled himself to the right, only able to avoid one of the blades. Traven hissed as Varquiss' blade punctured his side, the metal taking on a heated sheen as it pierced his flesh. The smell of burning flesh escaped the wound, the cauterized meat squealing like hot grease.

Leaping back from the now superheated swords, Traven clutched his side. Unwilling tears filled his eyes, his hands shaking from the effort of standing through the pain. Varquiss crouched low, his blades crossed over each other once more. Leaping forward in an attempt to end the fight, Varquiss was unprepared for Traven to meet his lunge. New pain graced his brush as he lunged at the flaming man, his wound closed over as if it never existed.

A golden lance of light launched itself from the tip of Traven's brush, and Varquiss quickly twisted out of the way, his wings once again manifesting to help him maneuver through the air. But the lance of light was never meant to hit Varquiss.

Traven moved closer in a reckless charge, both claws free and aiming for the flaming noble's heart. Varquiss adjusted quickly to the charge and taking advantage of the demon's carelessness brought both swords down onto Traven's shoulders, aiming to cleave his arms from his body. Both jerked to a stop as a wet squelch echoed through the hall, the only sound that remained was the splash of spilled blood.

Varquiss stared into Traven's hungry eyes, his own uncomprehending. "What?" Varquiss looked to his swords, only now noticing the golden shields blunting the blades. Both blades clattered to the floor, dealing just as much damage to the stone as they did to Traven. Varquiss coughed, blood bubbling out of him as the taste of iron filled his mouth. Looking down, he saw two pale arms wrist deep into his torso. "More stolen magic." Traven pulled his hands free, both fists full of blood and viscera.

Varquiss sunk to the ground clutching at his escaping organs, before looking up to Trevan. The noble began to laugh, the sound wheezing from his collapsed lungs. "How far will you be able to fly on your stolen wings?"

"Farther than you I imagine." Traven responded to the collapsed noble, though his eyes were already glassed over with death. Traven's form returned to normal, though his true colors remained. Placing his hand upon his fallen foe, Traven shuddered as the once vibrantly colorful man turned a deep and unnatural gray. "For the stripes we lost." Traven stood from the corpse and moved to exit

the hall, his goal close.

The door opened easily and led to a single large cell, the room split down the middle with iron bars. Sitting on the ground in front of the cell was a young girl of around nine, her green eyes red and puffy from crying and her deep red hair hanging loosely around her face as she cowered against the iron bars. Her fingers were clasped and interwoven with the hand of a young boy of a similar age, his pale skin and white hair almost as distinct as the bright purple of his eyes.

Both children held onto each other through the bars, huddled together against the fear of what may come through the door. The young boy braved a glance at the sound of the door opening, his curiosity greater than his fear. "Uncle Traven?" the boy looked up at the slowly approaching man, his face shocked and confused. The young girl holding onto his hands began to tremble however, as she saw his hands and clothes stained with blood.

Traven eyed the young girl holding on to his nephew, his thoughts whirling. This must be Varquiss' niece, he thought, the one who had her flames stolen. But she didn't look very gray to Traven. He crouched before the two children, his friendliest smile on. The young phoenix was not comforted in the slightest. "Hello Cass, are you ready to go home?" The boy nodded his head, then turned to look at the girl clutching his hands for dear life.

As the boy looked at his uncle, a question on his lips, a glittering silver mist drifted through the bars and into the faces of the two children. "Sleep now, it will all be over in the morning." The two children immediately slumped against the bars, asleep. Traven turned to the door of the cell and pulled it off of the hinges, the screech of the strained steel failing to wake the sleeping children.

Picking his nephew up gently, he noticed the children's hands were still clasped together, even in a sleep as deep as this. Gently prying their hands apart, he swiftly departed, sure that the prison below the largest church in the world would soon be overrun with high bloods looking to avenge their fallen comrades.

Slipping into the shadow realm, Traven carried his nephew through the church and down several city blocks before emerging once more. Though the price of the ink was steep, being seen was far too great a risk to chance their escape in the physical realm.

As Traven moved from alley to alley, the stars shining overhead, he was surprised when his nephew began to stir. He should have been asleep for another six hours at least. The young boy stirred in his arms and looked up at the stars with bleary eyes. Traven stopped in the empty alley and allowed his nephew to take his own feet; the excitement of the day had taken its toll on him as well.

As the two stood quietly in the alley, their backs to the wall, Traven couldn't help but ask a question of the young boy. "Cassius, how did that phoenix get her flames and colors back? Did they somehow take them from you?"

The young boy looked up at his uncle with confusion. “Of course not uncle. I gave them back.”

Out of Character

by Glenn Miles



From along the veranda of the abandoned orchard-house comes the ceaseless crack of gunfire. Bullets explode through windows and hunks of bone-white railing. Two men scurry across the uneven floorboards, back and forth, back and forth, one now passing through a set of French doors, the other rounding a corner with his gun raised.

To Jackie, leaning against the back wall of the outhouse, they looked like two madmen hunting a rat. It wasn't funny, but gunsmoke clouds had fogged his mind, and the soupy bayou air provided little in the way of breathing, and besides, he and Ben had spent half the day chasing this bastard across the state with nothing to show for it but a great deal of weariness, so wasn't the whole thing a little absurd anyway?

Butch Kennedy was perhaps a wicked bastard, but by no means was he an unreasonable one. Butch was a firm believer in reciprocity who had long since established a pragmatic, even-handed attitude about his work. It just so happened that his work entailed the thieving of financial institutions and the occasional killing of men, when warranted.

So, when Jackie and his band of scruffy hotshots tried to muscle in on Butch's work and steal his latest score, the response was less than welcoming. Men were killed on both sides, and just a couple of weeks after the initial altercation, Butch's boys found Jackie's camp in the hills outside of Cumberland Forest. They rode down on bony nags and drove out every last wide-eyed bandit there, took the spare horses and the stolen loot, shot the dog, and burned the patchwork tents. All that remained of Jackie's camp was a ring of dead black earth.

But that was two years ago, Jackie thought. Wasn't Butch satisfied to have embarrassed them and reclaimed his hoard?

Butch knew better. In all that time, he had not abandoned his beliefs, and according to his tally, only two of Jackie's men had died whereas he had lost five. To Jackie, this was simply the way of things—as he saw it, he'd already repaid any mortal debts incurred through a loss of reputation—but to Butch, it was an incongruity yet to be corrected, a maddening difference in the tones that sang in his ears each night as he courted sleep. He wouldn't get a chance to silence them until nearly seven hundred days had passed.

By that time, Jackie's notoriety and that of his stinking, feckless crew had spread to the states surrounding New Hanover. You'd catch the paper on the walk to work and find out that the nearest town had been shot to toothpicks the night before, only for you to get caught in the bank line that same evening by a trio of angry ruffians demanding your father's pocket watch and the

boots you had spent the last three months saving for. Jackie and his boys grew fat on their riches, and they settled in places longer than was necessary or sensible.

It was this lack of caution that permitted Butch to stumble upon Jackie's crew one day while traveling a wooded path near the mountain town of Strawberry. He watched them bicker over the stewpot for a time, then returned that night with eight men and brightened Jackie's little camp with a torrent of white-hot lead that tore through tent and skin and bone just the same.

Surprisingly, the scrabbling bandits were ready this time. They hid in the trees and fought back until Butch thought better, gathered his men up, and rode off, though not without some satisfaction. On his way out, he had watched a gutshot man among Jackie's ranks writhing atop the dead coals of a campfire as his sordid companions gathered around, helpless to do anything but stand there and let the man expire.

That's why, when Butch discovered that Jackie and his lackey were on his heels, it didn't bother him much. It seemed a kindness, almost. It was as if they knew that, by offering themselves up, it would finally balance the scales and cause that wretched nighttime tune to cease.

That didn't mean Butch would make it easy for them. It was another three months before they caught word that the bastard had been gambling his riches away in an old swampland parlor-house for the better part of two weeks. They bypassed the madam easily enough—Ben jammed his pistol fairly up her nose—but Butch's men were another problem. The ensuing shootout gave Butch enough time to slip into his britches, steal all the money from the table, and drop from the second story window and onto the wilted flowerbed below.

Jackie could not fathom how Ben had spotted Butch riding off in the dark amid all that ruckus, but he was glad for it. Overnight, they were able to shake the last of Butch's men and track him to the abandoned orchard-house where Ben and Butch now traded bullets and scurried like madmen in the morning light. Or like a man and his reflection, Jackie thought. If the two were entirely asynchronous, anyway.

A lull in the shooting plucked Jackie from his musing and dropped him back in reality. For the first time since the shooting had started, he could hear flies buzzing in the outhouse, and that worried him. He gripped the nickel-plated revolver already in his left hand and squelched through the yard and up the wide back steps to the veranda, keeping low as if to suggest that shooting him now would be cowardice.

Ben was peering into the house through a shattered pane when Jackie arrived.

"You get him?" Jackie whispered.

"You took your time."

"Did you get him, Ben?"

"Not yet. The bastard's playing with me. He must not like getting shot at." Ben's jaw clenched as he leaned in for a better view of the inside. "Where the hell have you been, anyhow?"

"I've been watching your back in the event that he came around."

"Mm." Ben's good eye twitched.

Butch had just one eye himself. That was probably the source of the mirror comparison. Sew their bad halves together, Jackie thought, and you would make a blind man out of two good killers. He had just started to reflect on the idea when Ben turned with a wild look in his eye.

"Jack."

"What?"

"You don't think he's coming around, do you?"

They looked at each other. Then, with no more than a blink of recognition, they split off. Jackie hustled to the far end of the wall and pressed against the cobwebbed shutters there. At any moment, Butch Kennedy would come rushing from around the corner, on his side or Ben's, and they would have him. Jackie didn't mind waiting.

Only, after three noiseless minutes, he began to wonder if Butch might be waiting for them, waiting with a calm right hand, the same calm hand that had so calmly cut down Shane O'Donnell in that woodland ambush three months earlier. He still remembered Shane's craterous stomach, his hollow cries, how the dying man's blood had flowed from between his fingers as though it were, and always had been, worthless.

Now, the man's killer waited, and Jackie hesitated. He took off his hat, craned his neck, and peeked around the corner, letting the barrel of his pistol follow. Rotting wooden posts supported the roof. Spanish moss hung from trees in the yard beyond. A cicada screamed. But there was no Butch.

Just then, there came a deafening blast from Ben's direction. Jackie whirled and saw French doors struggle shut, and then he saw Ben lying on the floor. He wanted to rush over but stopped himself. Ben's eye seemed to be watching Jackie, or through him. Through to the railing of the veranda, through to the apple trees in their neat rows and to the sycamores and hunchbacked willows at the property line, through to the sunlit expanse of the Kamassa River, and beyond to the unseeable shore borne of the river's mist.

There was no more time to contemplate it. Jackie hunkered down by a window and took potshots at the fleeing. . .

"That's total bullshit!" Ben reappeared by the outhouse, unharmed. His voice miraculously sounded like that of a pubescent boy.

"Dude, I shot you in the gut. That's fair game," replied Butch, equally high-pitched.

"Glenn?"

Many arguments had begun the same way. We would be having a good session, seeing some real story progression, then one of our characters would get killed, and the action would come to a

standstill. I paused my Western playlist and put down my controller.

On one hand, my friend Asher had been playing as Ben for close to three real-life months. He had shared with me his many plans for the character, the plotlines that would arise from Ben's unforeseen criminal connections. On the other hand, it could really spice things up if Butch killed someone else before his arc ended. Jackie was effectively immune from death. He had a gang to lead. Without him, the whole story might become rudderless. But Ben, well...Ben could go.

"I mean, if it was a headshot, I'd get it," I said. "But he shot you in the gut."

"That's bullshit!"

"It's not bullshit, man," said Colin, piloting Butch around the veranda like a maniac. "I killed you fair and square."

"But I had so much planned for Ben! He was going to—fuck, I had stuff planned!"

"Well, that's too bad."

"Glenn? Glenn, come on. Please."

Seeing as I was neither killer nor victim, the decision fell to me. I sighed.

"I think he's gotta be dead, Asher."

And so, it was settled. Ben was dead. Within minutes, Butch Kennedy joined him, and then Colin had to go eat dinner with his family. Asher was so bothered by the ordeal that he turned off his console and stopped playing for the night. But that was fine. There was always tomorrow, and we had to wake up early for middle school anyway.

The Little Black Girl in the Black Dress

by Tiffany Marsh

I have experienced death every year since the age of eight. With no warning, somehow, I found myself in a black dress sitting in the church pews again, wondering who died this time.

The air smelled like roses and polished wood, the way every funeral does. People whispered in that same soft, shaky way—like their words might wake the dead. I stared straight ahead at the closed casket; my hands twisted tightly together in my lap. I should have been used to this by now, but the familiarity only made the fear worse.

I tried to swallow, but my throat felt thick. I didn't see any family I recognized. No friends. No framed pictures on easels to tell me whose life we were mourning. The world blurred slightly, and I blinked hard, trying to push down the panic rising in my chest.

A hand brushed my shoulder. I turned to see a woman—her face gentle, tired lines around her eyes.

"You made it," she whispered, like she knew me. "I'm glad you're here."

I opened my mouth to ask the question burning in my mind—Who is in the casket?—but my voice failed me. She squeezed my arm once, almost reassuringly, before stepping away.

The pastor approached the podium. He cleared his throat and looked out at us with solemn sadness.

"Today," he began, "we gather to honor a life that has endured so much and yet gave so much love in return."

I waited, breath held...

"We are here for Tiffany," he said, "gone from this world far too soon."

The church shifted and tilted around me. For a moment, I thought I misheard him. But everyone's eyes turned toward me—faces full of sorrow I didn't understand.

"N-no," I choked. My heartbeat pounded like fists against my ribs. "I'm right here."

But no one reacted.

"I know death well," the pastor continued. "She carried grief like a second skin. Each loss left a

mark...until she finally broke under the weight of it.”

The casket...my casket—blurred in my vision. My legs trembled as I stood, shaking my head in disbelief.

“I’m alive!” I shouted. “I’m alive!”

Still nothing. Not a flicker. Not a single turned head.

The woman from before stepped beside me quietly. “It’s okay,” she murmured. “Sometimes, the soul is the last to understand.”

Tears spilled down my cheeks. “But why? Why every year? Why so much loss?”

“Because you loved deeply,” she said. “And love always leaves an echo.”

I stared again at the casket—my name written in gold lettering across a stark white ribbon. Memories of funerals past—my grandmother, my cousin’s, my mentor—washed over me all at once. I had begged for the pain to stop. I had wondered how many more I could lose before there was nothing left of me.

And now I understand.

Death hadn’t followed me.

I had chased it.

The woman held out her hand. “You don’t have to be afraid anymore.”

I hesitated. I looked around the room—at the people mourning my absence, at the life I had struggled to carry. There was peace here, a quiet softness I had never known in all those years of grieving.

Slowly, I took her hand.

The world around me faded like smoke lifting into air.

For the first time in a very long time, I felt light.

I wasn’t sitting in a pew anymore.

I was free.

Suddenly, a loud gasp escaped my lungs. My body jerked upright as my eyes flew open. My room came into focus—the sunlight peeking through my curtains, the soft hum of the fan beside my bed. My heart raced as I clutched my chest, checking for breath, for life, for reality.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead and looked around again, letting the relief wash over me like warm water.

Maybe death hadn't come for me after all.

But the fear lingered, sitting quietly beside me like a shadow—reminding me that even in dreams, grief never truly let's go.

DEDICATION

The artists and editors of Broken Ink would like to dedicate this issue to our beloved faculty advisor, Professor Roy Seeger, who, for the last 12 years, has spent countless hours shepherding student art into the light.



BROKEN INK WANTS YOU



VISUAL ART

We here at Broken Ink would be happy to discuss what counts as "art," but for the purposes of this magazine:

If you made something, and you can get a quality file or photo of it to us, submit it!

There are ZERO restrictions on content, just don't use AI to make it

ANYONE CAN SUBMIT WORK IN ANY CATEGORY - THE ONLY REQUIREMENT IS BEING A USCA STUDENT

How to Submit your work

- Follow our social media for announcements
- Keep an eye out for flyers with QR codes that will direct you to submit
- Fill out the form, attach the file with your music/art/writing, and send it in!

Early submissions are given feedback in the Fall, submissions close in the Spring!

LITERATURE

It can be said that literature is an especially direct and vulnerable expression of emotion as an artform.

We would love to showcase all great work, but keep in mind that accepted pieces are distributed and looked back on for years.



This issue of Broken Ink was made with the help of:



AUDIO / VIDEO

Broken Ink is open to accepting more than just music - we accept all types of audio/video art, including other types of performances.

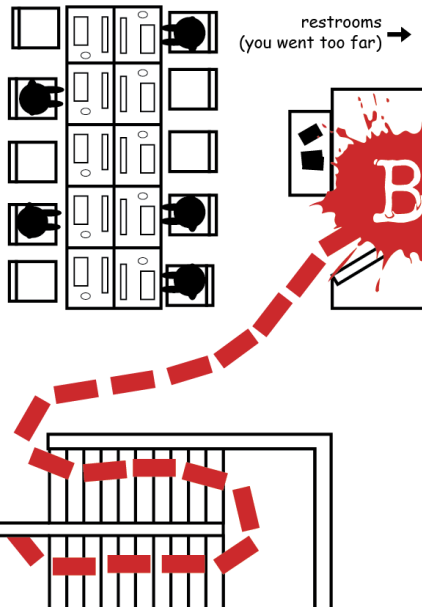
When submitting your work, pay attention to our specified file types.

Take a walk, breathe the air, hug a tree, love each other. Stand for something, however small. The moment we stop seeing each other as human is the moment we lose everything.

Want to join?

Come to our meetings!

Follow the map below to the Student Media Office on the second floor of the library



Check our meeting times by looking us up on www.usca.edu

Still not sure? Email an editor!

All editors are listed under "staff" on the website



BROKEN INK WANTS YOU

Broken Ink is a student organization of USCA. All contents within this magazine are created by students, as is the magazine itself.

Broken Ink is open to all. We accept all submissions for serious consideration, and we accept all people who wish to join our organization.

If you are interested in joining Broken Ink, stop by. At the end of the day, we are a club, and there are no barriers to entry.

Put your thumbprint on the creative soul of USCA.



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