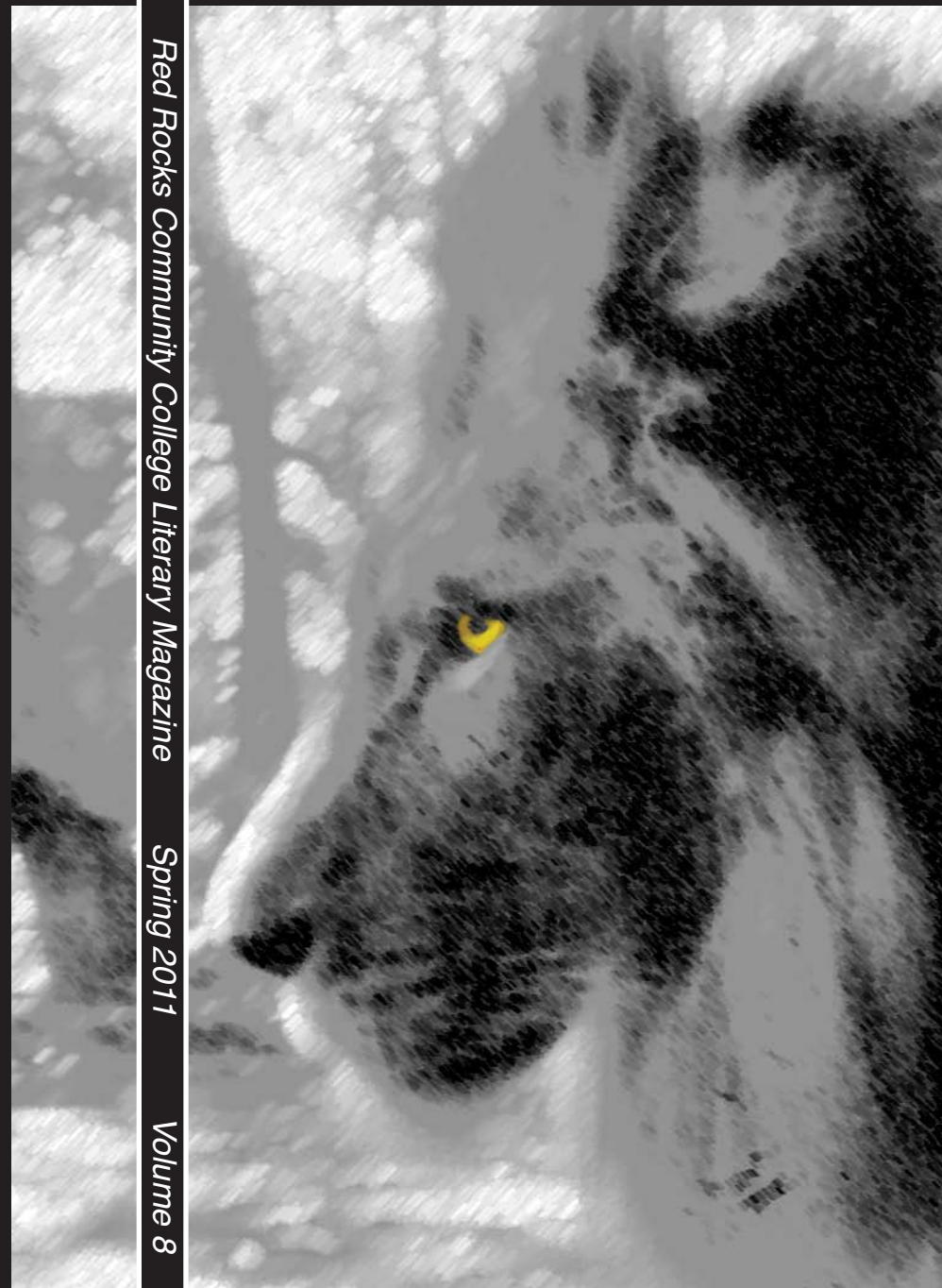


You hold in your hands the 8th edition of *Obscura*, Red Rocks Community College's art and literary magazine. Within its pages, you will find poetry, art, fiction, and creative nonfiction, all of which, including the magazine itself, is the work of Red Rocks students.

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obscura

Cover: *Predator* by Katrina Pawlowski.
Medium: Photograph, Digital.

Obscura

Volume 8

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history

Obscura began its journey into the literary world in 2004 thanks to English faculty Amy Braziller and Paul Gallagher. In the beginning, it was a small student club that made its decisions from a coffee shop. It was printed and hand bound by Student Life. *Obscura* grew from a student club to an actual class in 2008. Now the class is responsible for publishing the entire journal.

Obscura is one of the few student-run art and literary journals in the country published by a community college. Not only is it published by students, its contents are the creation of the student body. Pieces can be submitted to **RRCCObscura@gmail.com** at any time for consideration in the annual Spring issue. The magazine staff accepts **fiction and creative nonfiction up to 5,000 words, poetry up to two pages in length, and art in all media (pdf format). Students can submit up to three pieces per issue.** For more information, please go to:

<http://www.rrcc.edu/obscura>

Thank you for reading, and enjoy!

Contributor's Notes

Sandra Abel (Cityscape, Universe)

Sandra Abel is currently in her final fun-filled semester at Red Rocks. The classic lifetime student, she has also formal training as a chef and massage therapist and is finally pursuing her dream of becoming an eccentric artistic type. A full-time digital photography and graphic design student, she is also a fan of city skylines and anatomy.

Marzouq Alqenai

(Still Life, Bear Creek Trail, Red Rocks Park)

Marzouq Alqenai was born in Kuwait in 1954. In 1974 he joined the Kuwaiti Air Force. In 2008 he retired from the Air Force after 35 years as an Air Force pilot. In 2010 he enrolled at Red Rocks Community College, majoring in art.

Joshua Blonski (Sleepy Winter River)

Joshua Blonski is a student at both Red Rocks Community College and UC Denver. His career path lies in research neuropsychology, but he is an avid fan of the arts as well. In his spare time, he enjoys board games, playing classical music on the cello, reading whatever he can get his hands on, and writing the occasional short story or poem. He moved to Denver from Buffalo, NY, and this work was inspired by some of the scenic memories of his home and life there.

Julie Campbell (Motorcycle Mama)

Julie Campbell recently graduated Red Rocks Community College with an Associate of Arts degree with an emphasis in elementary school education. She is currently enrolled at

Contributor's Notes

Regis University. During the next two years Ms. Campbell hopes to graduate from Regis University with her Bachelor's degree, have her own bathroom and learn to pronounce the word "jalapeño" without producing eye rolling and giggling from her grown daughters. Her current interests still include riding on motorcycles but have expanded to include her grandson and doing grandma-esque things like baking cookies and calling everyone "sonny."

Christopher Coole (I Love You Kara)

Chris never strictly considered himself a poet, rather an artist in all of his ways. He attributes twenty-five years of occult science and dedication to martial arts with the overflow of creative energies that can be unleashed into poetry and writing as a sort of living meditation. Growing up learning outdoorsman ways and shamanism from his father, Chris developed a keen appreciation for mythology, which has infused his every pursuit with stoicism, magic and classic symbolism. He claims to be the architect of his own idiosyncratic pantheon from which he draws unlimited inspiration.

Matthew Espinoza (The One)

Matthew Espinoza started as a Freshman at Red Rocks Community College in the spring of 2011. He moved to Colorado in April 2006, and has loved it ever since. He grew up in a small town in California with his single mother and 5 siblings. He hopes to become a high school English teacher; he is a voracious reader, a writer, and plays video games in his free time. His short-short "The One" was

Contributor's Notes

inspired by an experience he had with his first girlfriend, an experience he has always regretted.

Beatrice Maus (Ghost Kiss)

Beatrice Maus is a third year student at Red Rocks and is quite pleased to be called such. She is studying to become an English teacher in a foreign country and after that she may perhaps become one of those people who set swamps alight in Georgia. You can find her lurking and skulking about campus quite frequently. She thanks Obscura heartily for accepting her story and is most grateful to you, the reader, for taking the time to view her work. Thank you.

Travis McArthur (Programmer's Life)

Travis has been a programmer since the age of 12. He enjoys taking photographs, raising plants, and cooking in his spare time. He dedicates his piece to all the programmers and people who relate.

Kristin Michalski (Water)

Kristin Michalski was born in Northern California and lived in Boston, MA, for six years before moving to Evergreen, CO. She lives with her family including her younger brother and two dogs. Kristin is interested in writing, music, foreign languages, learning about other cultures, and caring for animals (she plans to become a veterinarian). She is currently attending Red Rocks Community College hoping to gain knowledge for when she travels the world. She dreams of one day visiting India and riding elephants!

Contributor's Notes

Cody Oldham (It)

C. D. Ortiz-Oldham is a 31-year-old psychology major at Red Rocks Community College. Ortiz-Oldham proudly identifies as Two-Spirit and is very active in the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Community.

Tori Osendorf (Deliverance from Priesthood)

Tori Osendorf is 18 years of age. She has lived in Colorado her whole life, having been born in Denver and raised in Lakewood, where she currently lives with her family and her two cats. She has a love affair with the arts of writing and filmmaking, and she is pursuing degrees in both fields, beginning with two two-year degrees from Red Rocks Community College. From Red Rocks, she will transfer to a four-year college to pursue further studies in writing and filmmaking.

Katrina Pawlowski (Predator)

Kat is a student at RRCC who loves to read, write, and take photos. She's very glad she's able to share her photography with those who pick up copies of Obscura Magazine. She's looking forward to future copies of Obscura to see what others have to share, and to submit her own works again.

Nicole Richards (I Want a Lumberjack)

Nicole Richards was inspired to write this piece during a Creative Writing class she attended last Fall.

Contributor's Notes

Audrey Schauer (i)

Audrey Schauer was born and raised in Colorado. Art has always been a significant part of her life. She enjoys painting, writing, photography, and acting. In her lifetime, she hopes to be a published novelist, commissioned painter, National Geographic photographer, and Oscar nominee/winner. She would not be who she is or believe in the dreams she pursues if not for the unimaginable love and support of her family and friends. She finds self-expression to be less about sharing yourself and more about discovering yourself, and would encourage anyone to find their instrument and make some music.

Nicholas Stacy (Eyes)

Nicholas Stacy is a forthcoming literary intellectual of 18. He plans to fulfill the dreary societal requirement of a college education, and proceed to then indulge his wanderlust and experience the states through minimalist travel. Once his experiences are completed, his ambitions include opening, closing, and re-opening creatively inclined coffee shops in various locations whilst intermittently becoming a successful novelist.

Julia Super (Heart of Bantam Haunt)

Julia Super is nineteen years old and living in Lakewood. She first became interested in writing when she was fourteen years old, and since then has written two drafts of two novels in a series she still intends to finish...someday, in addition to a few short stories and the beginnings of many unfinished ones. She also enjoys drawing and has completed

Contributor's Notes

several, mediocre comic books. She has lived in Colorado all but three months of her life. She is currently pursuing her Associate of Arts degree at Red Rocks, but after that... well...

Kara Thomas (**Wonderland**)

Kara grew up leaving footprints upon the great crevices and introspective stretches of Moab and lofty paths throughout Summit County. Guided by her father, renowned chef and gem hunter, her creativity manifest along those wilderness trails and today it's no wonder that her spirit reflects the gentler machinations of nature. Kara's peacefulness seems balanced by her adoration of all things pirate and the fantasy novels that fuel her own writer's spark. A poet from birth, she takes every opportunity to celebrate the beauty she sees all around her.

Collin Ulrich (**When the Water Hits the Sink**)

Born in Rochester Minnesota I moved to Denver when I was six months old. After moving twice I ended up in Arvada Colorado. Middle school is when I started to develop who I am today. Music and a love for life drove my passion for creativity. I started to play and mess around with clay in high school. I attended my freshmen year at A West, then after being expelled, I wound up at Golden High School where my passion for art and music flourished. Two teachers, Chris Cousineau and Scott Hasbrouck, really inspired me to love learning new things and to always pursue things I'm passionate about to the fullest. Senior year is when I discovered writing and I've been writing ever since.

Contributor's Notes

Carolina Vazquez (**Light Flora**)

Carolina is a student, graphic designer, artist, and aspiring physicist/computer scientist. She can be found marveling at anything new to learn while enjoying habanero sauce.

Jhenn Whalen (**Helnwein's Payton 5**)

Intrigued by the vastness of human expression and emotion, Jhenn Whalen finds beauty in the malevolent and benign alike. She works primarily in figurative subjects with an abstract-realistic style. Her work is often ambiguous and simple, but emphasizes subtleties of visual atmosphere and physical form. Whalen's main compositional tools are graphite and paper, though she often enjoys experimenting with various other media. Jhenn Whalen is a current student of RRCC and RMCAD as an Art Education major.



fiction

Beatrice
Maus

ghost kiss

~I wish I could kiss you. ~

There it was; that voice.

Again.

Jacob looked up from his book and peered around his studio apartment which was bathed in afternoon sunlight, but his storm-cloud eyes saw nothing. The presence was like the lingering scent of perfume after the wearer had long ago left the room.

“Who’s there?” he called, but at his voice the presence dissipated. He sighed irritably and ran a hand through his brown hair. Really, why couldn’t he have a normal haunting every once and a while? Sure, he’d been haunted before, but most ghosts had no qualms about making themselves known to him. This hesitant ghost, though something new, was beginning to drive him mad.

Jacob closed his book on different types of paranormal activity and set it on the coffee table as he got to his feet.

“Really, if you want to kiss me so badly, why don’t you just do it?” he challenged wearily, heading for the kitchen to make a snack. The clock on the bookshelf across from his futon chimed five o’clock and he sighed again. He should have been studying for midterms instead of reading. He wasn’t too concerned, though. An all-nighter would work just fine for him.

As he was reaching for the Mayo, five light taps came to his door. He ran a mental checklist of the people who would be visiting a relative unknown like himself. No one had contacted him to let him know they’d be coming over and nobody ever

just showed up at his door unless...

“Oh snap,” he muttered and scurried over to the door to open it and reveal his best friend—Kyla. She looked up at him with her red rimmed eyes over her amber tinted glasses and he stepped aside. She smiled at him with her pale, thin lips and closing her umbrella as she entered. An albino, she shrank instantly away from the sunlight pouring in from the windows even as she leaned her sunflower umbrella against the wall.

She might have been very pretty had her eyes not been a glaring, watery red and her skin the color of paraffin wax. Long hair would have helped her looks, too, he thought, and he had brought this up to Kyla several times before, along with the fact that she was too bony and needed to eat more to get some curves. Whenever he brought it up, however, she’d always just change the subject.

“Were you reading again, boyo?” she queried hoarsely as she fiddled with the strings of the baggy Led Zeppelin hoodie she wore. Her voice was low and slightly strained, barely feminine at all.

“Yeah,” Jacob responded, closing the door behind her. “Were you out there long, Kyla?”

She tilted her head side to side. “I started for here two hours ago, but I snoozed on the bus and missed the stop. I’ve only been at your door for ten minutes or so trying to catch my breath.”

Typical Kyla, he inwardly smirked. Of course she’d have run to get here through the cold autumn sunlight, umbrella or no.

“A travesty, that,” he grinned and continued when she shook her head and rolled her eyes skyward in a very unattractive gesture. “Are you hungry?”

“You’ve no idea, boyo.” Kyla replied and Jacob headed over to the kitchen.

He took down two more pieces of bread and

rummaged through his refrigerator for jam. He heard Kyla head over to his futon and flop down on it. When he stood up straight he could see over the counter that separated the kitchen from the living/bed/dining room. Kyla was sprawled out on her stomach, her arms stretched out.

Though she wore a baggy hoodie with the hood up, baggy pants and sneakers that were too big for her, the position she was in now hinted at her slender curves.

“I know that I have the buns of a god,” she growled into his futon. “But I have enough hungry to swallow you whole, too.”

You didn’t used to be so blunt, his brain whispered. *I liked you better before.*

Nevertheless, Jacob laughed and turned back to making her sandwich. After toasting bread, he took down a plate and placed her toast with jam onto the plate and then finished his own sandwich, which had gone cold.

Kyla rolled over onto her back when he returned and her watery eyes followed him as he brought her the food. She sat up and scooted over on the futon for him to sit down and he handed over her sandwich with a sigh. The plate was snatched away by her nimble fingers and the pieces of bread were gone in the time it took Jacob to sit down and take a bite. Kyla leaned back and patted her stomach.

You’re so unappealing when you do that, he thought and watched as she licked her fingers. *What happened to your small, careful bites?*

“Ah,” she sighed contently. “Boyo, you make the best sandwiches.”

“Bah, bah,” he said, struggling to talk around a bite of food. “Boo shay dat ebeydime boo...”

“What?!” Kyla demanded and sat up straight. “‘Cause I swear upon all that is holy in this world that I didn’t do whatever it is you’re ac-

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cusing me of!”

You never used to shout. The thought came to his head suddenly. *You never used to talk above a murmur. What happened?*

Jacob swallowed and chuckled to push the thought away. “I said: You say that every time you come here; don’t you know how to make your own?”

“Do you take me for a fool?” Kyla bristled, her low voice rising slightly in volume and hoarseness to an almost normal tone. “Of course I have knowledge of such things!”

“You’re just too lazy to make your own, right?” he smirked.

Kyla snorted. “Obviously I don’t have to make my own when I have you to make them for me.”

But you’re so thin. Jacob mentally argued. *You’d look better if you ate more.*

“I’m your slave, then?” he wise-cracked. Kyla chuckled and yanked her hood back before lying on her side on the bed facing him. Her eyes became half-lidded and her lips turned upward into a poor attempt at a seductive face. Her white hair was cut short on her head, still growing out.

You’d look better with long hair. You’re too rough, too sharp.

“You know you’ve been servile to these feminine charms of mine since first we met, boyo.” She murmured huskily.

Jacob stared at her for a long moment and laughed incredulously. “What feminine charms? You’re more of a boy than I am!”

Kyla sat up and punched his arm hard while Jacob laughed.

“Sorry, but I don’t dig violent girls.” He grinned as he rubbed his triceps.

You didn’t used to be violent. Hell, you could barely touch me without blushing.

Kyla looked at him then from behind her glasses. Her expression was unreadable and it unbalanced him. He stopped the last bite of his sandwich half-way to his mouth and stared back at her. He’d never seen such an intense gaze on Kyla’s face before.

“Wh-what’s with that face?” he asked and then Kyla’s lips spread into a grin. Her eyes squinted and Jacob could practically feel the malicious intent coming from her.

“My, my,” Kyla cracked her knuckles as she spoke. “Violent, am I?” She cackled in an unsettling manner.

Jacob thought it an opportune time to set his plate and unfinished sandwich onto the coffee table.

Good thing, too, for Kyla pounced on him and her slim fingers broke through his defenses to find and exploit every ticklish spot on his torso. Soon, Jacob was reduced to a writhing, giggling mass on the floor. Kyla was laughing too, her laugh almost over the top open and boisterous.

You never laughed. You’d giggle, yes, but laughter was as foreign to you as a tan.

For a time his giggles and her cackles mingled in the air of the apartment and then Kyla picked up the book he had been reading off of the coffee table. It was a book investigating different types of paranormal activity. He’d just come to the section describing “astral projection” or something of the sort.

“Ah, the old ‘astral projection can be caused by a strong feeling or desire, but is generally not accepted as abnormal paranormal activity’ bit,” she quoted without opening the cover; Kyla had read this book before, he thought dryly - Kyla had seemingly read every book before. She continued in the same dry voice. “You’re still not done with this, boyo?”

Jacob took in several deep breaths and let them out slowly, trying to regulate his breath-

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ing from the earlier laughing fit. He looked at Kyla to see that she had opened the book to the page he was on and her eyes were quickly scanning the page. He sat up and clambered back up onto his bed and looked around at the few articles of dirty clothing and altogether untidy atmosphere of his home. The mess didn't bother Kyla, and he'd long ago stopped cleaning his apartment just for her. More often than not, she contributed to the mess herself during one of their frequent all night movie and video game binges.

"I like to enjoy what I read, not just absorb it." He muttered in response as he looked at her from the corner of his eyes.

"Pish-posh," Kyla countered quickly, not even looking at him now. "I enjoy what I absorb."

He laughed, but Kyla had turned her full focus onto the book. There was no way she'd hear a word he said now. So, rather than even attempt conversation, he finished his sandwich and then took the plates back to the kitchen. He heard a couple of thuds on his way to the kitchen and he looked over his shoulder to see that Kyla had let her overly large shoes drop to the floor and had flopped onto her back on his bed. She was holding the book straight above her; she always read that way.

He was reminded of when he first encountered her. She'd been lying on her back on a bench in one of the dark hallways of the college, reading. Her reading position had seemed elegant back then, but it hadn't changed much. Jacob had struck up a conversation with her and they got along well. She'd worn skirts and flattering tops every day. She'd been so thin, so very wispy, but very kind and gentle. Her hair was to her shoulders then and framed her face in a lovely manner. She had been so soft, so warm.

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And, face it—you found her extremely attractive.

Jacob had forgotten his lunch at home and

he'd accepted her hesitant proposal to share some of her meager lunch with him; he'd later learn that she had a stomach roughly the size of a walnut and ate no more than what was necessary or else she'd get sick to her stomach.

Jacob had passed top of the exam while Kyla had barely squeezed through. After that, Jacob agreed to tutor her and they had become friends from there. After a month of this, she had mustered up all the courage in her being and asked him to go steady with her. He had flatly refused, as his eyes were set on his now ex-girlfriend. He hadn't been gentle about rejecting her, either, and Kyla had left his apartment on the brink of tears.

I guess that's when she started changing.

After he rejected her, Kyla had cut her hair and had stopped wearing skirts. She became as jagged and sharp as obsidian and acted as crass and boyish as possible. He'd been stunned to see the change, but he'd said nothing. He supposed it was easier for her to accept him as a friend when he didn't see her as a love interest, when he barely saw her as a girl. She'd not called him by his name from that day to this.

Sometimes, he thought, I miss the old Kyla, but I can't say anything to her now. "What's done is done" so they say.

~I wish I could kiss you. ~

"Oh, for pity's sake," he grumbled, looking around. Kyla didn't hear him, but the presence was stronger now. Jacob set to washing the dishes, but the constant pressure of the spirit was maddening.

~ I wish I could kiss you. ~

"Well, then why don't you do it, eh?" he challenged sharply. "I'm right here, aren't I?"

"Did you say something, boyo?" Kyla called from his bed absently. He looked over at her to find that she was still reading the book

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and that she hadn't even turned her head

"No, nothing," he muttered and sighed.

For a time, there was only the sound of Jacob washing a week's worth of dishes.

"-gony." Kyla said, breaking his thoughts, and Jacob looked over his shoulder to see that she had shifted slightly and was now facing him upside down with her head tilted at an odd angle. "Isn't that just an *absolutely delicious* word, boyo?"

"Which word?" he asked dumbly.

"*Mahogany.*" She purred the word and then grinned.

"Mahooogaaaanyyy. Ma-ho-ga-ny. Mah-haw-go-nay!"

Jacob felt his face split with his smile as she put different stresses on each part of the word. He wondered if she actually took pleasure from playing with the language or if she did it to get him to laugh.

"I suppose it is." He played along with a light shrug.

Kyla beamed and then burst into a raucous bit of laughter that had Jacob laughing along with the absurdity of it all. He dried his hands and then went out into the living room and sat down on the coffee table opposite the bed. As usual, the table creaked under his weight, but didn't collapse.

"I thought you told me you were completely sane."

He teased.

"No, I didn't." Kyla shot back and then grinned wolfishly. "I remember quite distinctly saying '*sane enough.*' There's a difference."

She paused and looked at him pointedly with a slightly cruel glint in her eyes. "Misogyny, a delightfully descriptive word isn't it, boyo? Remind you of anyone?"

"Shut up!" He laughed, but felt the sting of her insult.

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She's allowed her sharp words, he accepted mentally. I was an ass.

Kyla seemed to note the change in his attitude and tilted her head to the side. Her face was serious now and a flicker of her gentle concern shone from her eyes.

"You don't seem to be yourself. Is it the Harlot again?" she asked hesitantly, referring to Jacob's ex-girlfriend. "I can call her up and tell her to shove off, if you want."

Her voice wasn't always so raspy.

Jacob laughed. "No, no, not her. It seems someone else is trying to encroach upon the epic manliness that is myself."

For a brief moment, Jacob would swear he saw anxiety cross Kyla's features, but she eased anything away with her practiced smirk.

"Epic manliness? I think not, boyo," She declared with only a minor pause. "That honor belongs solely to the mighty Chuck Norris." Her face clouded again to seriousness. "Who is it?"

"A ghost," he stated bluntly. "She keeps telling me that she wants to kiss me." Jacob watched Kyla's face carefully for a reaction. He'd told her before of the ghosts that sometimes trailed him, but recently she had not shown any deeper interest in the subject other than to taunt him. He could see the smile trying to rip her lips open.

He sighed and looked away. "But if you're just going to tease me then forget it."

Kyla tilted her head to the side and grinned toothily. "You tease me, oh please me!"

"Do you even know what that means?!" he demanded, shocked.

Back then, she never would have dared to say something like that.

Kyla laughed and made a dismissive gesture. "I'm saying I wanna hear more about it, boyo. I thought it was a mite bit strange when

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you of all people picked up a book on—what’s it called?—astral projection. I thought you only went for dead people, you necrophiliac, you.”

“I knew it!” he declared and shook his head. “I knew you were going to laugh at me!”

“Come now,” Kyla soothed, a hint of her old voice coming to pain him. “It’s not fair to pique my curiosity and then hold out on me.”

Jacob paused and then sighed heavily. “Promise you won’t laugh?”

Kyla gave him a look. “Depending on the situation I might laugh. I make no qualms about that.”

“Then never mind.” Jacob huffed and stood up.

A sleeved hand grabbed his wrist and he looked down to see what appeared to be apology on Kyla’s face. He was taken aback; the new Kyla had never apologized for anything. The sun coming in through the window had faded and the light was low, so her face was obscured slightly in shadow from his angle, but her eyes were alight with embers.

You’d look better with long hair, Jacob thought. And you should eat more. You’re so ragged.

“Call it a fatal flaw, boyo.” She said softly, so softly Jacob was not sure if he’d heard her or not. “I’m happy, I laugh; I’m sad, I laugh; I’m angry, I laugh.”

You should talk like this more often, it’s nice. However, his next statement didn’t hold the tenderness of his thought.

“What about scared, what then?” he almost snarled.

Kyla bristled and yanked her hand away, but sneered just the same. Her features became sharp again to cover up her softness. “I don’t get scared.”

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“Bold faced lie!” Jacob cried and Kyla laughed bitterly.

“Would I lie to you?” she grinned as she

spoke; her eyes were angry.

Jacob snorted and retorted. “You’re the best liar I know.”

Kyla doffed an imaginary cap toward him and averted her eyes. He swore that he had seen tears in her eyes, but played them off as his imagination.

“True enough, boyo,” she began slowly, grinning and raising defiant eyes to him. “But we balance each other out because you’re the worst liar in the annals of history.”

“Gee,” he bit at her. “Thanks.”

“Shut up; you didn’t let me finish.” Kyla snarled back. “Due to the fact that you are an abomination on all that is liar, I trust your stories more.”

“You’re just buttering me up for eating again, aren’t you?” he asked skeptically; they’d had this conversation before.

“Not this time,” she practically cooed with a faded, pained smile. “So turn on a light, sit your buttocks down and tell me about this thing.”

So he did.

Kyla listened attentively with her head tilted slightly to one side. Jacob had turned only the reading lamp by his bed on as the overhead hurt Kyla’s eyes, and he found the atmosphere to be rather relaxing. That she didn’t interrupt him or make faces while he spoke was extremely helpful and he found himself wishing again for the old Kyla.

“This afternoon, a few minutes before and after you got here, I heard it again. The same thing,” he finished telling his tale.

Kyla hummed in her throat and nodded seriously. “Hm, sounds like trouble, boyo. You’re sure The Harlot hasn’t put a curse on you?”

“I don’t think so.” Jacob said just as seriously. A pause while Kyla gave him a skeptical look. “Janet’s not evil, you know.”

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“What part of the word ‘emasculatation’ do you not find evil, boyo?” Kyla queried dryly, but Jacob bristled.

“She was just going through a tough time; she’s not a saint and she thought I was cheating on her with you!” He defended, “Even though we both know damn well that I don’t swing that way!”

“Excuses!” Kyla snorted, rolling her eyes in an almost angry fashion. “I suppose you’d be offering up yourself willingly if she’d had the decency to wake you up and say please before she did it.”

Kyla threw her voice to an eerie impersonation of his vocal quality. “Oh, I’m *sorry*, sweet-cakes! Here, take my...” Kyla couldn’t seem to get the word out and made an audacious (snip!) gesture with her hand. “... as my apology!”

“Shut up, Kyla!” Jacob cried, torn between anger and laughter.

“I’m just saying, boyo.” Kyla continued wryly; there was a slight edge to it. “If I hadn’t investigated the disappearance of my sewing scissors by a skulking female form, you’d be singing *castrati-soprano* at Sheffield Cathedral during Bach’s *Ascension Oratorio*.”

“Me and the “boys” thank you.” Jacob snarled.

“*Well*,” Kyla huffed, “with *that* tone of voice, I’m now convinced that I shouldn’t have bothered!”

Jacob sighed irritably, but let it go. He was in no mood to debate the honor of his ex-girlfriend, who was now in the asylum; there was no way he’d win. Thankfully, Kyla gave him a disgustedly pitying look and let the subject drop.

She sighed as well and ran a hand over her hair.

“Anyway, if your ghost’s saying that she wishes she could kiss you, does that mean she can’t?”

Jacob shrugged helplessly, glad for the gentler tone Kyla’s voice took. “It sounds that way, doesn’t it?”

“Is it scaring you?” Kyla smirked with a jaunty

tone to her voice.

“Is it scaring *you*?” Jacob shot back and Kyla laughed.

“It’s not fair to answer a question with a question!” she replied with a slightly shriller voice than usual; she ran a hand over her hair and cleared her throat.

“Is it scaring you?” Jacob pressed.

“You bet,” she admitted almost easily. “I’m scared for you, boyo. Who knows how far your ghostie might go in order to fulfill her wish?”

“She’s not a harmful presence,” he murmured softly. “But I can’t figure out how to help her. She’s driving me out of my head.”

Kyla snorted, but kept whatever comment she had to herself. Jacob sighed heavily and Kyla seemed to hesitate before she lifted her arm and wrapped it around his shoulders. For some reason he took comfort from her light touch and she didn’t complain as he relaxed slightly, even though her arm was bent at an ungainly angle and her face was flushed as brightly as a tomato.

She’s adorable, his mind whispered, but he quickly stifled the thought.

“I’ll stay tonight, boyo,” she mumbled awkwardly. It sounded more like a request than a statement. “If ghostie gets uppity then I’ll be here to open up a can of whoop-asterisk...Chuck Norris style.”

He wanted to hug her, and was just about to do that, but she suddenly cleared her throat loudly and let her arm drop. Kyla stood and moved to a closet to retrieve pillows and blankets. Tossing a few to Jacob, she threw the rest into a corner to be made up into a bed later.

You can have the bed, you know. Jacob shoved down the bit of chivalry. Kyla would deny him anyway and he had a feeling that she wouldn’t be gentle about it.

They stayed up late into the night and the voice did not reoccur. Laughter abounded and sleep was not soon in coming. Jacob, at one in the morning closed his eyes while listening to Kyla shuffling around in the corner. Finally, silence and uneasy sleep fell over the apartment.

~I wish I could kiss you. ~

Jacob woke with a weight on his chest and his eyes shot open. There was—something straddling his chest. He thought the form was familiar, though he couldn't see its face. It was like recognizing someone by their gait or silhouette. Jacob glanced at the corner where Kyla was curled up in a tight ball; the blanket covered her all the way up to her ears and she had hidden her mouth with her hand. A street-light's luminescence was shining through the window and gave the room an eerie feeling. He looked back at the spirit, but it had vanished.

The presence was almost overwhelming and Jacob felt something akin to recognition. It was like sitting with his back to the door and being able to distinguish who had just entered the room.

"What's up, boyo?" Jacob nearly jumped out of his skin and his head jerked to face Kyla. She was sitting up and rubbing at her eyes with her palm. He took a few breaths to calm himself. Her voice had been gentle and normal, as if she'd forgotten who she was speaking to.

"Don't do that!" he whispered sharply and then softened his tone. "Did I wake you?"

"Yes." Kyla yawned widely. "Did ghostie pay you a visit?"

"I...saw...her." Jacob murmured haltingly. Kyla's hand froze on her face.

"Wha-?" she asked and let her hand drop. The streetlight caught her eyes and he could see the dim red from across the room.

"I-I felt her." Jacob sputtered, stunned. "She was on top of me and it woke me up, but when I opened my eyes she disappeared."

"Ish she shtill here?" Kyla slurred, her voice gentle.

Jacob shook his head helplessly. "I can feel her presence, but I don't think you can do anything."

Kyla muttered something inaudible and stood up before she shuffled to the bed. She plopped down next to Jacob, much to his surprise, and she looked around the room with glazed eyes, as if she hadn't fully woken up yet. Without her glasses, Jacob could see that her irises were like pearls.

"Hear this, ghostie," Kyla intoned. "If you wanna snog boyo here, you got some nerve to do it while he's out."

"Don't provoke her." Jacob warned softly.

"I can't understand it, boyo," she murmured. "Is ghostie an idiot or a coward?"

"Don't provoke her!" he whispered harshly. He pushed her slightly. She tumbled off the bed, landing unceremoniously spread-eagled. Jacob peered at her splayed out form somewhat amused when suddenly, there was a sound in the kitchen and his head snapped sharply to look to the darkened room. In the low light, Jacob could see the calendar's pages moving.

~I wish I could kiss you. ~

"For pity's sake." Kyla groaned and raised herself to an elbow before shakily regaining her feet. Jacob, who didn't know whether Kyla was referring to the ghost or to the pain from her fall, watched stunned as she drew herself to full height and placed her hands on her hips. She had taken the hoodie off and now stood in a white tank top that showed plainly her toned arms and lithe form.

She looks so...delicate. He remembered that he used to find her attractive, even though she was so twig-like. Back when she had longer

hair, when she smiled and blushed at him instead of smirking shamelessly. Her gentle voice brought him back, firm, as if she were scolding a child.

“You listen to me, ghostie,” she groaned almost drunkenly and rocked on her feet. “If you wanna molest him so bad, you shameless hussy, do it already!”

Silence answered Kyla and she folded her arms over her chest and leaned back...a little too far, and began to fall. Jacob lunged from the futon and made to catch her. His fingers brushed her warm arm, but he felt as if he had hit a wall and was repelled again to the bed where he found himself splayed on his back.

Weight settled on top of his chest again and the figure returned to hover over him. Her toned arms held herself above him and forced him to look at her. This time, he could see the long, waxen hair framing her beautiful face, which seemed at once both the pallet and the canvas. Wide grey, red rimmed eyes squinted as if to stem the tears streaming down her porcelain face. These fell from the delicate point of her chin and were as pearls slipping from the shells of her eyes to disappear before they touched him.

Familiarly arched eyebrows were tilted in apology and knitted upwards, creating lines of guilt in her otherwise smooth forehead. Her lips, thin but inviting, were open slightly and trembling with unspoken words. Her strong shoulders heaved with silent gasps and the entity shook its head as if in denial before mouthing the words ‘forgive me’. She leaned forward and Jacob stared in wonder at the face that had earlier been almost leering at him.

Prior to contact, however, Kyla caught her balance and spun to face them. The entity gasped and was flung back into Kyla’s body. Kyla snapped awake and stared at Jacob in disbelief. Her hand came up to cover her mouth and tears began to fall from her eyes.

“I’m...I’m so...” Kyla spun to show her back to Jacob and she curled into herself. “I don’t...what...”

Slowly, ever so slowly, Jacob rose to his feet and took the one step to reach her. He reached out and placed a hand on her trembling shoulder. Her sobs instantly stopped and she stiffened to the point of marble. He turned her to face him, but she wouldn’t look at him. He could see her face, however, due to her short hair and saw her natural face for the first time in months. She’d been working so hard to keep her sharp angles and now those had failed. He wrapped his arms around her.

“I missed you.” He said gently.

Kyla shivered as if taken by an extreme chill, but she nevertheless lifted her face to shyly peer at Jacob after rubbing her eyes dry with her palm. The street lamp caught her eyes and made her skin almost transparent, as if she really were a ghost. There was pain in her look, and he saw the old, gentle Kyla peering at him.

“Please, Jacob,” she was almost begging, “Please... kiss me.”

the heart of bantam haunt

A dusty stream of sunlight floated in through the window, illuminating the surfaces of miscellaneous technology: old monitors, CD's, hard drives, and keyboards that clustered long forgotten on the desk in the corner. Half of it was ruined by a cup of coffee spilled some eight months ago and never cleaned up. The desk, floor, and every flat surface surrounding that desk were covered by this or that; some trash, empty soda can, t-shirt, paper, or electric cord that ran from one unknown source to another. Across the room a fluorescent white screen flickered into the haze. On this screen was a black and white photograph taken outside a Victorian house. A childlike specter lurked just around the side of the house staring at the camera, but it could only be seen with the skeptical eye.

Nearby that screen sat a scrawny man, about early twenties, altogether too thin for his height. In one hand he held a cup of coffee, and in the other, a paddle board just passing the two-hundredth count. He wore a headset where the muffled grievances of some technology-challenged woman halfway across the country resonated into his ear.

He explained to her that it was not her computer that was broken, but the power strip was simply off.

"Turn on the switch, you should see an orange light... is it working? OK, then."

The woman thanked him and hung up the phone.

Before he could resume his search for the specter in the photograph, the phone by the computer rang. Taking up his headset, the man answered, "Bantam computer service hot line Louis speaking, how can I help you?"

At first there was no sound but a faint crackling. "Hello?" Louis repeated.

"Louis," a tiny voice said, barely audible.

"How can I help you?"

"Louis - I'm alone."

Louis paused. It was a *girl* calling him. She was alone. But her voice was so young.

"How old are you?" he demanded. The computer screen flickered, and the specter vanished from the photograph.

"Come an' play wif me," she whispered. "I'm lonely, come an' play wif me."

"You give the phone to your mommy or daddy," Louis said. "You sound way too young to be calling this number."

The phone went dead, replaced by a painfully loud static. Louis tore off his headset and unplugged it, rubbing his temple until the throbbing stopped. "Little brat."

Just as he picked up his coffee to take a sip, a dull low ring echoed in the distance. It was the town bell. It hadn't rung for years, not since he was a little kid. He downed his coffee in two gulps and left his house, pulling on his jacket on the way out. Already, the other townspeople were herding out of their houses and making their way towards Town Hall, where the bell still resounded every three seconds or so.

Bantam was a small town, small enough to fit all the businesses on the main street with the old houses just behind them, encircled in acres and acres of farmland. At one end of the street was Town Hall, a decrepit, brick building with nothing but a meeting room, a bell tower, and a small graveyard behind it. On the opposite end of main street was the beaten-down two-lane road that vanished into the plains on the horizon. The only thing that offset Bantam was what the locals called "The Bantam Haunt." It was a Victorian-style manor

hidden in a slightly forested area behind the graveyard abandoned for over seventy years, and no one in their right mind ventured there except the bored town boys who dared each other to go ring the doorbell. It was built long ago when Bantam served as a sort of plantation.

Going slightly out of his way to step on the crunchy-looking autumn leaves, Louis ambled down Main Street. If they saw Louis coming, the townspeople went slightly out of their way to step away from him. Their snide comments were whispered, followed by laughs.

“Ladies,” Louis said, bowing slightly to the local teenage girls. They all giggled.

As small as it was, Town Hall could accommodate everyone in town with seats to spare. A ring of empty space followed Louis around everywhere he went, and he was left sitting alone. On the stage stood the mayor, a stout middle-aged man in a brown suit, next to a couple in very elegant clothing holding each other close. They both looked nervous and rather pale, and Louis thought they were dressed a little too old-fashioned, even for rich folk.

Louis looked around at the people sitting nearest him and caught sight of a gorgeous mane of brunette curls. It was Christine, the local gorgeous baccalaureate.

“Come here often?” Louis smiled. Christine did not look up. “Christi-ine.”

She sighed, giving him an impatient look.

“Come here often?” He repeated.

“No.”

Louis paused. “Well, you’re looking fabulous.”

The mayor told everyone in town hall to quiet down and introduced the elegant couple on the stage. Their names were Mr. and Mrs. VanDurban.

20 “You must help us!” Mr. VanDurban said. “My wife, daughter, and I came through here vacationing, but we took a wrong turn and wound up

in your town. We stopped to rest a while, when my little girl got out of the car and wandered off. She went into that house. That big manor behind the graveyard.”

A low, successive gasp sounded from the townspeople. Louis looked at Christine and saw genuine concern on her face.

“We tried to get in,” Mr. VanDurban continued. “But the door was locked, so we went to ask for a key...”

“And I told them ‘absolutely not’,” the mayor broke in. “My people know better than to go into that house, much less let complete strangers wander in.”

“But we have to find my daughter!” Mrs. VanDurban insisted.

The mayor gave the townspeople a solemn look. They all knew that someone had to go in and get that little girl out.

“I would go in myself, but I understand that the structure is three stories high,” said Mr. VanDurban. “I have bad knees and my wife has a bad back, so we’re offering a reward. Twenty-thousand dollars, not a penny less.”

At this, the townspeople began murmuring excitedly to each other. Louis immediately decided he wouldn’t be going, and he was certain everyone else had decided the same thing despite how much they wanted that reward money. The Bantam Haunt was not abandoned because the residents moved away. They were old. They never left. No one ever went in to see what had happened to them, not for seventy years.

“Oh no,” Christine said to her friend. Louis looked at her. “That little girl is stuck in there? It doesn’t look like anybody’s going to get her out!”

Louis smiled. He had to decide, now. It was his one chance to impress her, to save that little girl, to get that reward money. He stood up and puffed out his chest.

"I'll do it!" Every head in Town Hall turned to look at him as if he were some kind of madman, which was actually the common sentiment. His proposal was followed by thirty seconds of complete silence. When no one said anything, he repeated, "*I'll do it.*"

Mrs. VanDurban began crying tears of joy.

"You do know it's haunted?" the mayor said solemnly, and Mrs. VanDurban's tears became tears of misery.

"Don't you worry, ma'am, I'll get her out." Louis passed a very suave glance at Christine and felt immense satisfaction at the admiration he saw in her eyes as she beheld him. At that, Louis began to make his way out of Town Hall and for once, the townspeople didn't recoil at the sight of him.

"Wait," Mr. VanDurban called. "Who are you?"

Louis turned and bowed. "My name is Louis Louis, local paranormal investigator at your service."

In a town like Bantam, where even the most scandalous gossip just wasn't enough, such an exciting event was like Christmas had come early. Louis returned to his house and began digging in the pile of miscellaneous technology with the dried coffee spill on them. He pulled out a metal box about the size of a brick, which bore a tiny screen, several buttons, and two antennae to which he hooked up his headset. Additionally, he shoved a flashlight and small tape recorder into his pockets. Taking up his jacket and a cup of coffee, he stepped out into the chill autumn air to find several townspeople walking down the streets with fold-up chairs and coats in their arms. The coffee steam curled into little wisps in the cold.

Louis walked ahead of them, back past Town Hall and through the graveyard, where the red and orange trees began growing thick and shadows cast over the graves. Several of the gravestones sunk down slightly, being so old that the void

where the casket once was had decomposed and the grave collapsed.

Slowly, the Bantam Haunt came into view. It didn't shine through the trees, but rather loomed out of the shadows, dry and empty, and still creaking in the wind. As Louis approached, he noted several townspeople had set up their chairs and brought picnic lunches, setting themselves outside the Bantam Haunt's wrought-iron front gates.

Louis asked Christine what all that was about. She claimed it was to see him heroically emerge from the haunt with the little girl, but Louis saw a grin twitching in the corner of her mouth and knew it was more likely to see him emerge screaming and empty-handed.

"Bless you, Louis Louis," Mrs. VanDurban said, appearing next to him. "My daughter's name is Marie. Please find her." She handed Louis the key, presumably given to her by the mayor.

With a great effort, Louis pushed open the wrought-iron gates, their creak was much louder than anyone anticipated. As he passed Louis noticed the blank, white mailbox just outside the gates. No name.

He pulled the gates closed behind him and took one, final look at the townspeople watching him. Their faces were eager, concentrated, half of them smiling. With a great sigh he began marching up the curved, cobblestone walkway to the manor. Evening was falling, and a red-orange light darkened the shadows creeping up on the manor.

Surrounding him were the autumn trees. Their leaves danced, twirled, stirring up around his feet and tickling his shoulders. He stepped on the ones within range of his step, and they crunched into a thousand pieces, but they always continued to fall. The walk seemed to last for days. Louis never looked back but he felt the stares of the townspeople far behind him, looking for another reason to mock him, to gos-

sip about him; and there was Christine, concerned for little Marie, waiting for someone brave to save her. Anticipation had settled unpleasantly over Louis, but it was too late to change his mind. At first he had been excited for a chance to explore the haunt, but now he felt nauseated. The Bantam Haunt had been abandoned for a reason. Nobody ever went there for a reason. It was haunted; not just haunted, dangerous, with vengeful poltergeists determined to torment anyone who dared go near their resting place. Louis downed his cup of coffee.

He reached the front porch. It had an elaborate yet worn look about it with the paint peeling off the ornate pillars, and slivers sticking out of the walls. It was dark under the porch roof. The dry leaves could no longer reach him, and neither could the sun. The oak double doors menaced just before him, the only things that stood between himself and the horror that lurked inside the manor's walls. Even the key to the doors looked frightening; it was a rusty, very old-looking thing.

The wind gave a sorrowful moan.

Shakily, Louis unlocked the doors which gave an echoing click he could hear inside, and replaced the key in his pocket. Already the ghosts would have known he was there. Holding the doorknobs so tight his knuckles whitened, Louis opened them and stepped into the darkness. He pulled the doors shut and was overcome with a silence so thick he could almost feel it pressing against his eardrums. It was dark and quiet; that was all he could discern.

He stood perfectly still for about a minute. Staring, eyes open as wide as they could go he tried to see into the piercing shadows. The only sound was his own suppressed breathing; he could hear nothing of little Marie.

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"Marie!" Louis cried, jumping at the loudness of his own voice. He waited, but his only response was the thick silence.

Gathering his courage Louis stepped further into the foyer. Soon enough he could make out a grand staircase leading to the closed doors upstairs, as well as two sets of heavy eight-foot double doors to his left and right. He lifted up the brick-shaped metal box and turned on one of the switches. On a tiny green screen appeared a slightly swaying pixelated line, like that which measures heart rate. It was barely moving, but when Louis took a step it twitched.

Louis began making his way upstairs. If Marie was as young as she sounded, she was likely to move up to get out rather than somewhere as frightening as a dark basement. With each breath the green line rippled, and with each step it twitched. The stairs creaked, sending chills down Louis' spine. When he reached the top of the stairs he made for the closest door to him and opened it.

There was nothing inside but a few rocking chairs, a bookcase, and a charred fireplace all strewn with cobwebs. Holding his breath, Louis held out the machine into the room and moved it slowly from one side to the other. The line did not move, so he closed the door and moved on to the next room. The next room was a dusty bedroom, but the machine read no movement. None of the rooms did. It was nothing but a houseful of decaying, dust-laden, Victorian furniture. After passing fruitlessly through five more lifeless rooms - two bedrooms, a study, and two bathrooms, Louis proceeded downstairs.

He reached the middle of the foyer and pulled a small tape recorder out of his pocket, clicking on the 'record' button.

"Bantam Haunt, October sixteenth" he said into it. "There seems to be no signs of life on the top floor since the hypersonic detector is not picking anything up. I have also found no sign of the previous residents' bodies. The supposed 'vengeful poltergeists' that I read about have not shown

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themselves, if they were ever here. I am proceeding to investigate the ground floor.”

He turned off the recorder, replaced it in his pocket, and looked down at his other hand which held the detector resting at his side - the line was moving. It was making slight rippling effects every second or so, like a heartbeat. And it was pointing down.

With nerve wrenching at every thread of his composure, Louis tiptoed towards the large wooden doors on the left. They opened into a dining room, where the shanty curtains only allowed in a dim light. He lifted up the tablecloth and peeked under the table.

“Marie?” he whispered. There was nobody there.

Sighing, he pointed the detector’s antennae at the floor. Once again, the line was pulsing. When he pointed it to the side, it stopped. Marie was in the basement.

Louis hastened across the dining room, anticipation building inside him causing the tablecloth to ripple in his wake. Upon reaching the far door he peered, panting, over his shoulder. The tablecloth continued to ripple.

The next door lead into darkness. Louis peered in. It was a stone staircase, leading down into a pitch black void. Cool air drifted up from it. Louis pointed his detector into the darkness and saw the heartbeat ripple.

“Marie?” he called. “Are you down there?”

Silence was his response. He called again.

He heard the tiny echo of a laugh, then silence. Digging into his pockets he pulled out a flashlight and shone it into the darkness. It did little good, the darkness was so thick, but he did catch sight of a pale specter-like figure standing at the bottom of the stairs. It was a little girl in a flowing, white dress standing there with her head down and hiding her face.

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“Marie!” Louis called. “I see you standing there! You come up these stairs, we are leaving

right now!”

Marie raised her head. She had a round, pallid face barely distinguishable in the draping shadows.

“Louis,” she whispered. “Come an’ play wif me.”

Louis stared at her, trembling. The light of his flashlight shook slightly. He pleaded for her to come up the stairs again.

Marie did not comply. She merely lowered her head and crept backwards, vanishing into the darkness behind her. The spectral white of her dress was lost.

Anxious, Louis pulled out his tape recorder.

“The dining room is empty, but I found Marie. She is in the basement and she’s not doing as she’s told. Still no sign of the so-called poltergeists. I am going to proceed into the basement. The hypersonic detector is picking up a heartbeat-like tremor coming from there. I’m assuming it’s Marie.”

Louis replaced the tape recorder and inched down the first few steps, holding out his flashlight. He called for her again, but she did not respond. The heartbeat persisted.

Louis swallowed and stepped further down the stairs into the chill darkness. A hair-prickling sensation was slowly making its way up his spine the further he descended. After what seemed like forever, he reached the bottom step and shone his light into the cold basement. Only faint highlights of the stones were distinguishable. A flicker of Marie’s white dress caught his eye, and he shown his light at a far wall. There were two figures standing there. One was Marie, and one was his own reflection staring back through a very elegant, full-sized mirror on a stand.

Louis carefully approached her, holding the detector in his shaking hand. He pointed it at Marie, and stopped. The line was not pulsing. He pointed it at the mirror, and it began to beat

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again.

“I’m so lonely,” Marie whimpered.

“I - I can see that. You come upstairs. We’re leaving. Now.”

Marie giggled. It sounded so innocent. Louis’ flashlight flickered and burned out. Frantic, Louis began smacking it against his hand, gasping, until the bulb came back on much dimmer than before. Marie was gone; there was only his reflection.

Louis jumped. Marie’s reflection shone in the mirror behind his own. He turned around, but she was not standing behind him. Approaching the mirror he saw her standing there, staring at him. At least he thought she was; he could not see her eyes.

“Come an’ play, Louis.” she smiled. In a split second, her reflection replaced his own. A maniacal grin spanned her face, and she lunged forward. Two claw-like pale hands reached out, passing through the mirror and groping for Louis’ arms.

Louis let out a cry, breaking the thick silence. He seized the mirror and threw it to the floor. It shattered into a thousand pieces, leaving him with the echo of Marie’s giggle following him up the stairs, rippling the tablecloth as he ran with tears streaming down his face.

Not once did he look back. He tore through the house as fast as his legs could carry him, wrenched open the front doors, and sprinted down the pathway, not stopping until he reached the wrought-iron gates which he leaned on to catch his breath. He pushed open the gates and slammed them shut, trying to block out the horrifying visions in his head.

The townspeople were gone, even the Van-Durbans. It was almost as if they were never there.

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Shakily, he pulled out his tape recorder. “I have - left the Bantam Haunt. Something inex-

plicable has just happened, I just - I don’t know what.” He wiped sweat off his forehead. “Marie was not a real little girl. There was this mirror and - her reflection was there, it - tried to pull me in...”

Louis looked back at the manor, standing dead and quiet as it always had. Digging in his pockets, he realized that he no longer had the key. The front doors were closed, although he had not closed them on the way out. His heart was finally slowing down, but the detector still pulsated like a rapid heartbeat. Louis shut it off and threw it over the fence. It smashed into pieces on the cobblestone walkway.

He looked back over at the mailbox. “VanDurban” was painted on it in elegant, black letters.

A calm quiet settled over Bantam. The crunching autumn leaves still fell, dancing onto the ground. The grasses rustled in the gentle wind and the streets emptied as the townspeople settled back into their homes for the night. The sunset was almost gone; the sliver of a moon shone onto the surrounding clouds. Louis walked the streets alone, holding his jacket tight around him, and still trembling.

When he got home, it was completely dark. Disheartened, he threw his belongings onto the floor and sat down. No reward money. No Christine, no praise, no freedom from his reputation as a maniac.

Louis picked up his tape recorder, rewound the tape, pressed ‘play’ and listened. Nothing. Not even a whisper.

An unpleasant ache stabbed the back of his head. Grumbling he stood and swaggered to the bathroom, digging in the medicine cabinet.

“No aspirin,” he groaned. Looking down, he noticed something sitting by the sink. It was the detector, its line pulsating like a heartbeat. He closed the cabinet to look at his pallid reflection in the mirror.

There stood a little girl. A smiling little girl in a flowing, white dress.

29

Deliverance from Priesthood

You find it hard to believe that this young wavy-haired man who stands naked before you now was ever a tree. In fact, you find it damn impossible. A work of Satan.

His eyes, partially hidden by his dark locks, seem to know more than someone his age would ever know. You are certain he is a demon, and when he takes a step closer, you take three back. He tilts his head.

“You don’t believe me.” He smiles warmly, but you don’t buy it. Only dark magic would have turned a tree into a man, and you tell him so.

He laughs in an inviting outburst. He could be your brother, your best friend, your father. His laugh makes you want to laugh, too.

But you don’t. You hold it in. You know that demons and dark creatures will try to play off an act to make you believe they’re your friend. Your hand finds the crucifix that hangs around your neck, and you clutch it while you glare at him.

“Don’t worry,” he says kindly, “I’m not going to hurt you.”

Flatly, you tell him that all demons lie.

He clasps his hands behind his back and leans forward slightly, and looks at you with great amusement. “That might hold true, if only I were a demon.” His tone is mocking, and it annoys you. He grins at your expression, but his eyes are sly.

“My old friends, the pagans, used to worship my comrades and myself.”

black sleeves.

“And you,” he says, moving closer as you back away, “you were underneath me, just two weeks ago, crying.” He moves closer, and your back finds a wall. You think he’s going to keep cornering you, but instead he simply moves around you and moves on, curiosity in his eyes. He enters the door to the church that you left open.

Horror shocks through you when you see an image in your mind of the other priests catching you, up and about in the middle of the night with this demon in the church, naked as a newborn with no shame to accompany it.

You dash after him in a slight hysteria, and you hiss that he is not permitted to be here.

He only laughs at you again. He says, “You’re too young to be a priest. And you miss your family. You told me so.”

Flustered, you clench your fists and you tell him that information was directed at the Lord!

He blinks at you as the words sink in, “Really? I thought you were screaming up at me, the way you threw yourself against my trunk.”

No, you say.

“Good. I hate it when people scream at me.” In a moment of silence, he looks at his own index finger, dips it into the holy water, and smiles like a child down at the ripples. You rush up and smack his hand away. You can feel your face flushing at what this young man knows about you.

He jerks back and looks genuinely hurt for a moment, then he blinks at you and tilts his head again in the other direction.

“I don’t blame you for missing your family. You’re only about six.”

You correct him. Twelve.

“Oh. They’re sort of the same thing when you get to be my age.”

He moves on, and you want to scream at him. He's completely ignoring your demands to leave and not touch anything. You believe he's only hearing about half of what you're trying to get through to him. But it's night time, and the other priests might hear you and wake up if you raise your voice. So you just follow him.

In mid-step, he turns and lunges at you, and he touches his first few fingers to your cheek. In your surprise, you flail your arms to get him away, and you step backward, and you trip over an empty incense pot. The noise echoes all around the church corridors and you flinch. But no one stirs. The other priests are old, and their hearing, shot.

You whip your head up at him and tell him that he's an idiot and a moron. Your cheeks are on fire.

He simply looks at you, fingers still outstretched.

"You've been crying," he states. "Well now. I know why you were sneaking around in the middle of the night like a naughty little priest, braving the night-demons or whatever." He pulls his hand back and looks at it, then back at you.

Your eyes narrow as you stand. You demand to know why he was spying on you.

"It's so strange that humans can leak water from their eyes. I suppose I can do it now, too."

This is what you mean. In one ear, out the other. Right over his head. You repeat yourself.

"Hm? Oh, I wouldn't say spying so much as searching."

You ask, why?

"To ask you why you left this on me," He indicates a deep-cut design on his outer calf. It's a healed a bit, but still, it's so prominent you're amazed you missed it.

32

The word *Family* is etched there, with an angry scribble over it. You carved that on a tree a few weeks ago.

He chuckles at your awestruck expression, "Do you believe me yet?"

You stagger with your pronunciation of the word "*How...*", but even so, he understands your question immediately.

"A crone. An old pagan woman. The kind you're supposed to hate. I knew her when she was a maiden. She must have taken a few courses in magic in her years."

You feel your face darken with your thoughts.

He takes note of it. "Funny, how hateful you all can be with one another, even though you're all human, and you all bleed, and you can all be killed in the exact same ways." He gives you a winning smile, but it fades when your own expression doesn't change.

"You are aware that you all share the same Earth, yes? We all do. I've seen people try to wipe each other out completely, while completely ignoring this fact."

You can't help yourself when you ask him exactly how old he is and you are immediately angry at yourself for being curious about ungodly things.

"Old enough," he answers, and he turns away from you.

That's not good enough, and you're about to tell him so, but you are cut off when you are caught across the back with a sudden, breath-expelling pain. You gasp in shock and stumble forward, and you are struck again. This time, you feel your skin split, and you cry out as the young man turns around. His eyes immediately widen.

Another strike. You feel blood dribbling down your backside skin. You look at the tree helplessly. His face darkens.

He lunges and tackles your abuser. You limp-turn and see old Father McMinn on the floor, beneath the tree, a long thin cane on the floor that has fallen from his hand.

33

You wince and you watch, but you make no effort to help the old priest. You dislike Father McMinn most of all, even if it is a sin.

Besides, even if you wanted to help him, you are now too incapacitated to do so. No doubt, you were being punished for talking to a naked stranger in the middle of the night in his church.

You don't even feel motivated to help when the tree's powerful hand curls into a fist, and he breaks the father's nose.

He loses a cry as blood rushes over his face. The combined ruckus is waking up the other priests. You hear their dorm doors open, their voices.

The tree grabs you and runs for the door, practically dragging you behind him. You yell out incoherently as your fresh wound protests the sudden movement.

Out the door, through the woods. Stumbling, staggering, trying to retain your footing, tripping, being yanked up again. Where is he taking you? You know you should care about being dragged along by a creature of dark magic, but you don't. You've never been to this part of the woods.

When you stop running, and he lets you drop to the ground, you're both on the peak of a treeless hill. You groan.

"Rest," he commands gently. You obey. He crouches and gathers up your black robe, and presses down on your back with it. You grit your teeth. He holds it there until the bleeding stops.

"There," he nods, satisfied, and he smiles. You don't share his attitude; your back is throbbing sharply. "Just stay down," he adds, as if you're planning on going anywhere.

He turns and moves off to the forest behind the two of you, over to one of the trees. He whispers to it.

For a little while, you watch him. He is whis-

pering, stopping to listen, and occasionally he chuckles or laughs. Then you see light, and you feel the warmth of the sun. You turn your head to look.

When was the last time you watched a sunrise?

Perhaps, you think, perhaps this dark magic creature is really some kind of angel.

Maybe.

The warmth kisses your forehead, your cheeks, your nose, and you close your eyes.

You smile.

When you open your eyes again, you feel a slight panic and turn your head to search for Tree. He hasn't moved far, over by some other trees further down the line. He looks back at you and smiles as he stands among his comrades.

Relief. Somehow, you know he won't leave you.

It's right then that you realize you care for him. For a few moments, you wonder how anyone could rank an abstract god whom they've never met over a warm, smiling creature like him. The way your family did to you.

You close your eyes again and laugh to yourself at the welcomed blasphemy.

poetry

Joshua
Blonski

Sleepy Winter River

The gentle snow fell 'round us there
within the peaceful wood,
and while snow melted 'gainst her hair,
my thoughts she understood.
With her I knew that I belonged
and all my love I'd give her.
So hand in hand we walked along
the sleepy winter river.

We watched from warmth of hearth and home
beyond youth's fastened door.
Out in the frost but not alone
were two ducks at the shore.
Would that I could slow time's accord
and still the candle's shiver.
I held her near as we looked toward
the sleepy winter river.

Some three years passed and candle's flame
had faded, low and withered.
Upon the flow, a mirror same,
a lone duck sat and quivered.
Toward home I walked against the wind,
forever lost without her.
In dream, in spirit, we'll prescind
our sleepy winter river.

Christopher
Coole

I love You Kara

I love you so much Kara, your beautiful spirit and ways,
You are the smiling rainbow upside down above my days.
When first we met up mountain swept moon blotted out by
sun -
That bowman beads and Eros leads 'fore Thanatos be
done.

With wings so coal and horns of black my id did hoof the
track
Down through the years to find you dear and I shall not
look back.
Like dragons, with your heart of gold, I hoard it like a trea-
sure -
And of my love for you sweet dew may lap it without mea-
sure.

Were you a lonely choir girl and I a hound of hell
I'd tiptoe in with fang'ed grin and ring that churches bell,
For from the pauper's loitered lawn to Parthenon they
pine -

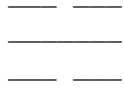
All gods and devils on their levels know that you are mine.

Were I an angel on the rise in cloudless skies with favor
And you a lonely poet without someone's kiss to savor,
I would sin and fall again and leave said heights for birds -
To walk once more along the shore and love you with my
words.

And if some harm by some stray arm should ever come
your way
My blood turn black, that arm would crack, I'd blast their
bones to lay:
Mistress War is at the door, a temptress you must weather -
The wolf you lick is Hermes quick and never on a tether

Sweetest girl, the nymphs that twirl hold nothing to your fire.
We were alone but finding home we trance, entrance each
other higher!
Hard to express, I do my best, this chemistry is new -
I'll never know just why we go, together, me and you.

Kristin
Michalski



the tai chi Symbol of Water

It is best to be soft and weak,
To follow the path in which you seek.
Let those around you bend, shape and mold,
But always maintain the essence that you hold.
Be calm and patient in what you know,
Always seek new directions to flow.

You can be both good and bad.
You can make both happy and sad.
You are needed by all that lives!
Born from a planet that always gives!

You are the river that flows today.
You are the path, the Tao, the way.

Jesse
Miller

the sea

Dancing,
as to music,
with a dip and a sway
moonlight swirls across indigo
waves, twinkling with radiant brilliance
over gentle swells, lapping tenderly against
hardened hulls, echoing melodious
rhythms, its steadying cadence
beautifully monstrous
in shimmering
glory.

Cody
Oldham

It.

White skin, Brown heart

Female body, Boy soul

Childlike smile, Jaded quintessence

Lover, Fighter

Gay, Straight, Everything-in-Betweener

Spiritual, Non-Believer

Fiercely unique, Painfully ordinary

Passionately Apathetic.

Two Spirits, One Body

Sacred, yet Meaningless

Fitting everywhere, Belonging nowhere

Everything, Nothing

Never existing in Black, White, or Technicolor

Only gray.

Never home, Always visiting

Concrete Contradiction.

It.

42

Trish
Payne

Ode au Penchant

Games and faces, mustard and fools

Are items observed while renting these stools

Laughter and quarters, cutthroat for cash

I'm dizzy, I'm rambling and where do we ash?

The bar, the pub, the tavern, the lounge

Is catering to every sad soul it can scrounge

A wallet, a wall, let's make it a tall

In absolute numb, my favorite of all

We've all come so far, still all seems the same

An ode to a bar, no particular name

To subterfuge, dialogues, embraces and fights

To whimsically dangerous places at night

To brutes, to witches, rock lobsters with gills

Who left me in stitches and picked up the bills

To shutting it down, to flattery and jest

To all the raised glasses, and all of the rest

A hurried farewell, a parting of faces

I would miss you more, if it weren't for such places

43

Nicole
Richards

I Want a Lumberjack

an aroma of fine mahogany drips
into my nose and tells me he is home.
a display of burly plaid in harmony with
a thick gruffly beard has become my
home. steel-toed shoes sound off
the thunder of our untamed storm.
Zeus reels his lightning and
sparks a fire that consumes, that
devours, that inhales everything.
the heat, the smolder, the blaze
are unbearable for some, but
I long to be destroyed all day.

Audrey
Schauer

i

I am the saboteur.
I am the fiend I fight. I am the light
shining on my eyes while I try to sleep.
Just trying to sleep.
I am the pupil writing the lesson. I create this world and I am
a puppet. But aren't we all?
The first time I was born I was warned
to stay away from the shadows. I ran to the shadows
and became those
wild eyes that ignite in the headlights passing by.
Just passing by.
The first time I was killed I swallowed pills.
Self-seduced, self-sedated. I was everything I hated.
But as I lay among the bones of love I could laugh
about the pain.
Just about the pain.
I am the architect rebuilding the rubble. I broke things and I
am
so sorry. But aren't we all?
I am the ailment. I am the patient. I am the medication.
I am the crime and restitution.
I am a revolution.
But still,
the saboteur.
But aren't we all?

Nicholas
Stacy

Eyes

I've wondered why,
so simple and plain,
those glassy eyes on every head
can stir so much in someone's soul
when gazing into them.

To love them for being blue or green
Seems anything but fair
to the grass or the trees or the wide day sky
proudly wearing those very hues.

I've heard some say that they are deep
as an ocean or a well
I couldn't say the same myself
they are hardly one inch wide.

Yet as life would have it
I've come to see
the truth these phrases hold,
because when you see the eyes you love,
their color, shape and size
bow to the prize
of the bond of souls that ties
between two people's eyes

Collin
Ulrich

When the Water Hits the Sink

My tied tongue trips as I try to ensnare the words that cascade
from my lips.

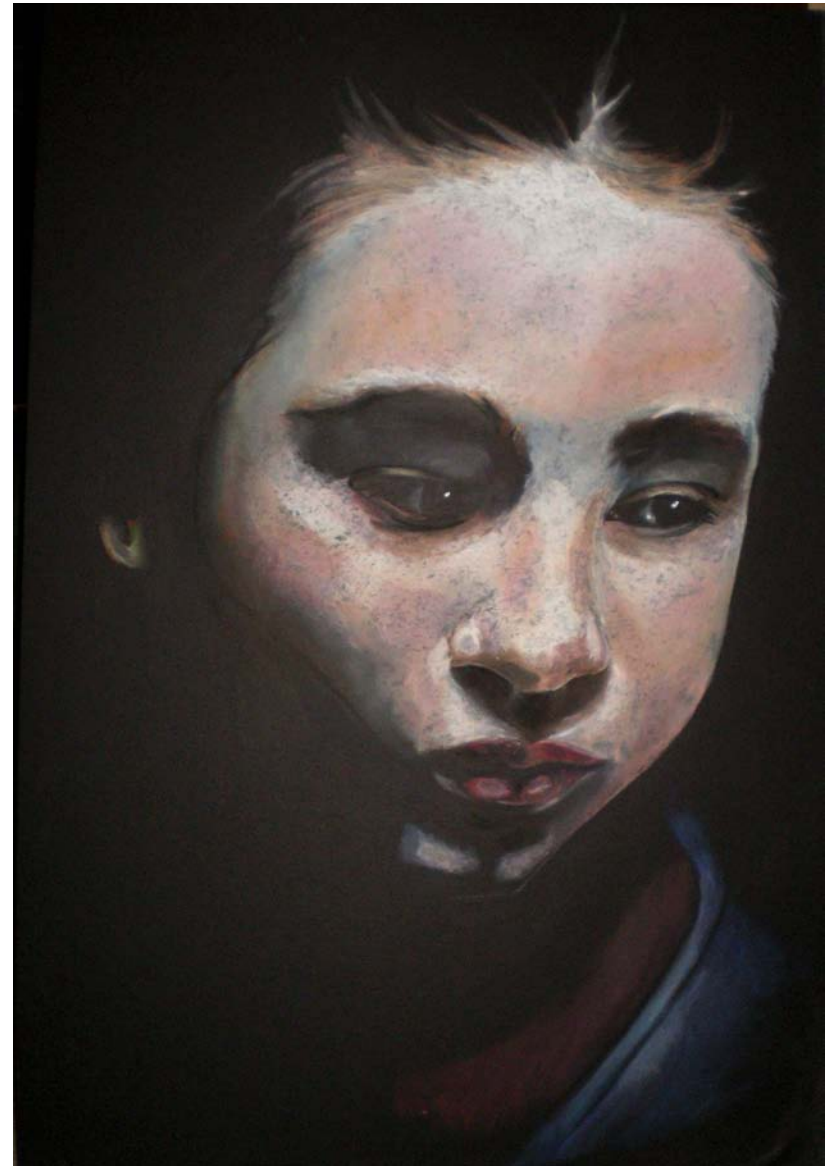
My apathy fills the air as the air the demeanor on her face
adapts, to the pain in her eyes

Fleeting words , from a filterless mind , endanger a gorgeous
soul

She turns away as I try to explain, but I see that see is listening.
She knows I can't help myself , my brain leaks like a broken
facet,

As my words drip, drip, drip into a sink of open ears
That I know, knows what I really mean,
When the water hits the sink.

arl



Helnwein's Payton 5

Jhenn Whalen.
Medium: Oil Pastel



Wonderland

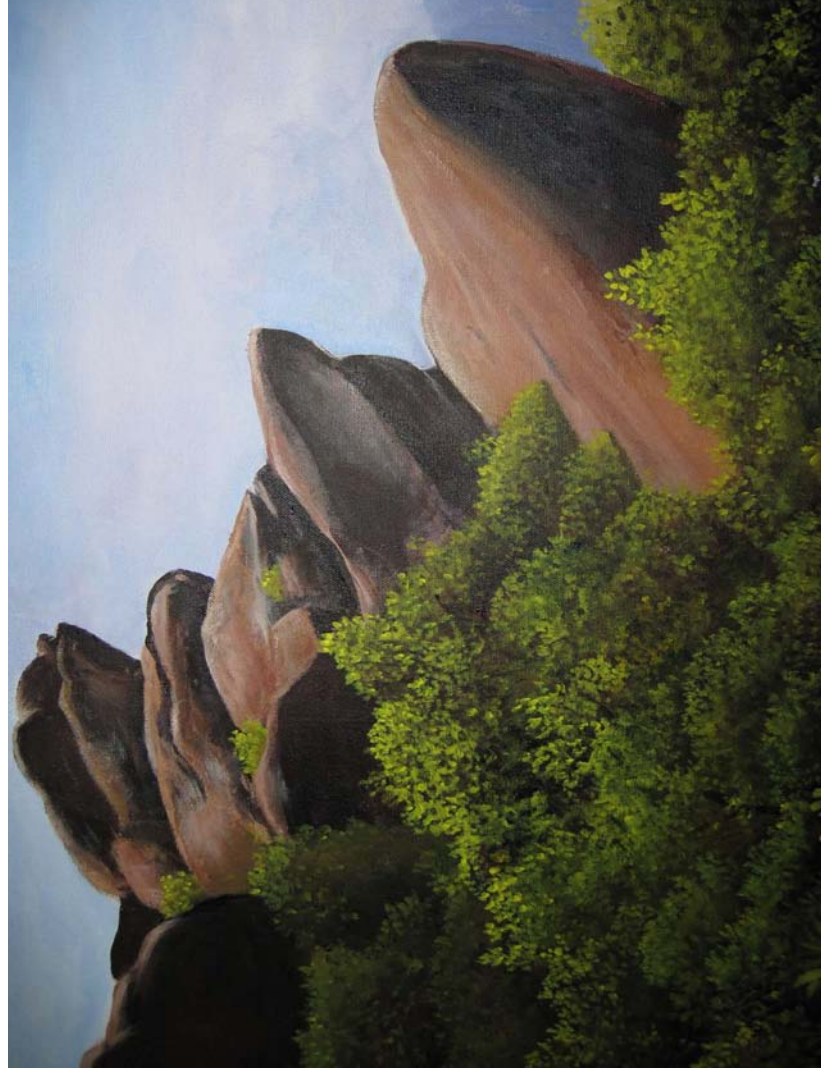
Kara Thomas.
Medium: Photograph, Digital



Sandra Abel. Medium: Photograph

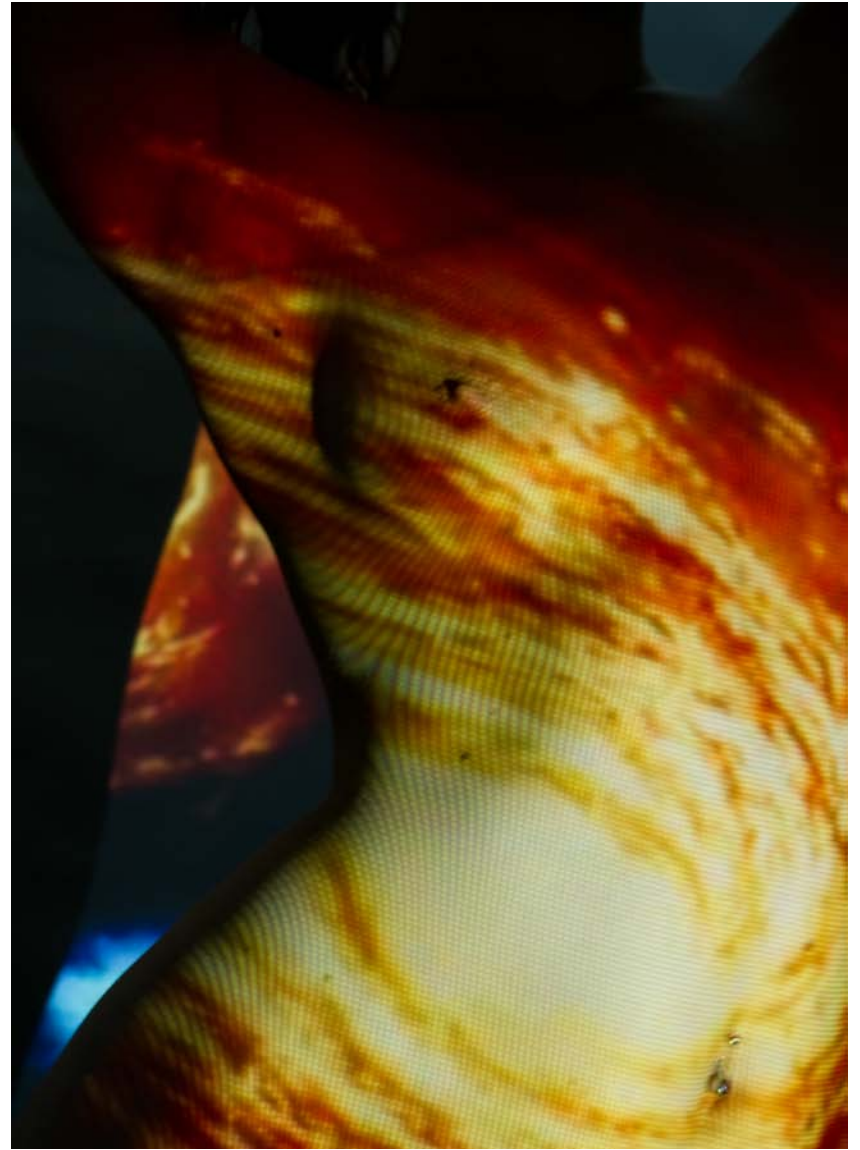
Cityscape





Light Flora

Carolina Vazquez. Medium: Digital Painting



Universe

*Sandra Abel.
Medium: Photograph*



Predator

Katrina Pawlowski.
Medium: Photograph, Digital



nonfiction

Motorcycle Mama

The wind is hopelessly tangling my hair as the motor buzzes pleasantly in my ears. I see the individual blades of grass and can smell the aroma of distant wild flowers. I have no agenda. I am free to just be.

When I was a little girl, I had many dreams about what I would be when I grew up. Three reoccurring themes seemed to always pop up:

1. Have babies
2. Be a wife
3. Be a teacher

Two of those dreams came true and without much trouble, at least at first. Becoming a wife was a piece of cake. I just went to the courthouse with my future husband and got a marriage license. We had small ceremony in my sister-in-law's living room and that was it; I was married! Now staying married was an altogether different prospect and a bit more complicated than I had anticipated. I did discover, however, that I was good at becoming a mother. It was not only easy; it was fun; so fun, in fact that I became a mother four times in four years. Okay, maybe I'm oversimplifying when I say it was always fun. Let me break it down for you:

1. Making a baby = fun and easy
2. Giving birth = not so fun
3. Having a newborn = like getting Christmas presents every morning

It is dark and the highway markers flash by my line of vision. I can see the moon rising over the edge of the rolling hills. I catch a glimpse of the shining eyes of a deer grazing by the side of the

highway. Turned out I was great at making babies, giving birth to babies, and taking care of babies. I was very young, though. I gave birth to my fourth child at the tender age of twenty-two. My husband, a professional musician, was also twenty-two and apparently not ready to settle down and be a family man. Things didn't go so well for our little family. I prefer not to go into the ugly details, so here is the abbreviated version:

One young professional musician + multiple bar gigs and drunken groupies = One broken marriage.

After less than a year I jumped back into the marriage game with husband #2. This was a very different experience. Though it started out similarly:

1. Go to court house for license
2. Get married in aunt's living room
3. Continue on to wedded bliss

The second time around was incredibly smooth. I'm lying. It really was tough, but the work paid off. I began to not only do well in my role as a wife but was enjoying it, too. It helped that my new husband was as committed to domesticity as I was. We soon welcomed a new baby into the world and I had a very busy life.

No one is calling me. No one needs me. I can yell over the noise of the engine and I might be heard but I prefer to remain silent. I lean back my head and stare at the black sky and twinkling stars.

I figured this kind of success had to be unprecedented - five children in five years and two marriages in six years. I had not only reached my first two goals, but had accomplished them in record time. I might even be tempted to call myself an overachiever, but I would probably be the only one. There was so much to do and I must have been out of my mind, but I needed more. My six-year-old son said to me one day as we ning out of babies, mama." Hmmm, running

out of babies, indeed. That was my problem; I needed more babies. I brought the subject up to my husband but he grasped his chest, turned an interesting shade of pale green, and stumbled out of the room without saying a word. Okay, maybe I didn't need more babies. I knew there was more I could do to feel content.

I am not worried about anything. The speed and wind have blown my concerns away. I feel unhindered. Like I am flying.

There was that last item on my list: be a teacher. I had put it off for so many years, I figured that dream was no longer an option, but the thought of going back to school and having a career that paid an actual salary nagged at my mind. I had blocks of time in which I began to fill with numerous trips to the refrigerator and watching "I Love Lucy" episodes. My laundry piles were shrinking and my waistline began to expand. I was getting to be... I couldn't think of the word, what was it...bored? Could it actually be I didn't have enough to do? I came to the realization that I was becoming fat and stupid, as well. So at the age of thirty-nine I decided to go back to school.

The rain starts to fall. "Uh Oh," I hear the faint words from my husband's mouth carried back on the current of air. "Not my problem," I think. I enjoy the rain as it kisses my cheeks.

It was a strange feeling to go to classes with people half my age and, although I felt sometimes like my brain wasn't quite as quick as some, I had picked up a few valuable skills raising kids:

1. I knew how to work hard
2. I understood how to play the quiet game
3. I was a genius at list making

Getting married and having children fulfilled a certain part of me, but going to school and dis-

covering that I was smart brought a whole new dimension to who I was:

1. Self confidence
2. Lots of new knowledge with which to bore my husband
3. A new perspective of my place in the world

After two years of my head buried in a book, I finally reached the halfway point to my goal. I had my associate's degree and had been accepted to a four-year college. I had nicely settled into my role as student.

Most of my kids had been gently nudged and, in some cases, pushed out of my nest. I was beginning to think I had it all. I would have been content for things to stay just the way they were if it had not been for that significant and pesky other person in my life who also had a list. The top of his list: Buy a motorcycle. My husband pined away the days longing for a Harley Davidson Motorcycle. I blame all those ads with the word "freedom" subtly thrown in. The prospect of hitting the open road on his very own "hog" was more seductive than all the drunken groupies that broke up my first marriage. This was not my dream. I was more like a nightmare. I would not even allow the "M" word to be spoken in my house. I had heard too many horror stories about mangled limbs and brain damage. I had become rather fond of my husband and his various limbs and wished to hold onto them for at least a few more years. Finally, after constant nagging, I relented. "Life is short, if you want to make yours shorter, who am I to stand in your way?" He was in hog heaven. After the Harley showed up in our garage, my husband began his new campaign; he actually wanted me to ride his death machine with him. *Not on the list! Not on the list!* I resisted for a couple of weeks, but when he would come home after a ride and parade around fetchingly in his leather chaps and sexy doo-rag tan across his forehead, I could feel the

fight in me beginning to subside. “All your friends are doing it,” he said.

I take a look back at our friends, riding behind us. She leans in and says something to her husband and they both laugh. He turns up their stereo and she starts to sing at the top of her lungs.

“I have no friends,” I pouted.

“There is something about believing you could die at any moment that makes it fun.”

I couldn't argue with logic like that and before I knew it, I found myself staring at the back of his head with my arms around his waist and bugs in my teeth. I wore the only leather accessory I had, my leather high heeled boots. After burning the heel of them on his chrome pipes, I thought he might faint. It was time for my own gear:

1. Helmet
2. Real motorcycle boots
3. Leather jacket
4. Leather Chaps

What else? I had come to the end of my lists. There was nothing left to accomplish, nothing left to do but ride. I didn't want to like it, I really didn't, but I had discovered the fountain of youth on the back of that Harley.

Risking my life had become fun and kind of addictive. I had spent most of my life wearing my seatbelt and drinking skim milk. This was not like me at all. The riskiest hobby that I had up till then was knitting (those needles are very pointy). This new activity required turning of my sense of self-preservation off. I had no choice but to let it all go. I could see what I was; I could see what I wanted; I could see how things were. On the back of that bike, the world became black and white and crisp.

spot a long, brick building surrounded by a parking lot filled with trucks and motorcycles. We pull in and hear the sound of a live band. Locking up our bikes, we go inside, sit down and order drinks. I have a Long Island Ice Tea. The sweet citrus with tequila and rum tickle my throat. A warm, distant feeling overwhelms me and I sit back in my chair and cross my legs. A man sits down on the bar stool next to me and starts to flirt. I look over at my husband and he gives me a wink. It's time to go home and I reluctantly get up, pulling on my soft leather jacket and putting on my glasses. The four of us leave, laughing, joking, and feeling like a group of teenagers rather than two middle age couples. We get on our bikes and ride into the night. The lights of the city are now coming back into view. I whisper something obscene into my mate's ear and kiss the back of his damp neck. “You are a bad girl,” he says and I smile to myself. I do feel like a girl.

The One

The light hit my face as the sun rose over the mountains and shone its beams through my window. I rolled over trying to escape its bright gaze, and my arm's course was stopped by a body. I inched my eyelids open slowly, letting my eyes adjust to the light, and then sighed when the blurriness subsided.

"What are you doing here?"

Elisa. Just the night before I'd broken up with her. I didn't have a good reason for it. My friends were telling me that I didn't love her anymore. That I wasn't happy with her. I didn't agree, but I figured they could see the situation better. They were removed, unbiased.

"I wanted to be here with you when you woke up."

Her voice was bright and cheery. As if she hadn't run crying from this very room less than 24 hours before. Her hand brushed through my hair and she leaned down and kissed my cheek. I sighed again then looked up into her eyes.

I pulled her down into my arms and covered her lips with mine. I pulled her under the blankets and held her fully clothed, lithe body against my mostly naked one. I spared the barest of glances at the door, making sure it was closed before I took her fully. Both physically and verbally, I apologized for the horrible mistake I had made. I begged her to take me back, to forget it had ever happened.

She happily did so, smiling that intoxicating smile that made me fall in love with her in the first place.

66 *We spent the rest of the day together, our bodies intertwined, unwilling to part. We forgot those*

hours of loneliness, the hours that seemed to stretch on forever and ever. We basked in each other's love, each other's embrace. We were one again.

"Please leave."

My tone was mean, flat, unfair. I saw the tears alight once more on those smooth cheeks, for just a moment, before she turned away and ran from my room again. She wouldn't come back. I silently cursed the morning sun and drew my curtains closed, curling up under my blankets again. I didn't understand the burning, empty hole in my chest and the tears that welled in my eyes.

Programmer's Life

In my building, there are about 30 of us – the rest are support staff, quality assurance analysts, and managers. Each person plays an important part in the process, but at the bottom and the top are the programmers. We play the role of being arbiter of everything that occurs.

Few really understand programmers, most see us as boring ghosts, ghouls that are to be mocked for not being artistic or creative enough, but that isn't how it works. My past...

Sucks. I hate middle school. The only control I have is programming. Why can't I spend all of my time doing this? Why do people think artists are so talented – they put paint on a canvas, I've dedicated countless hours to understanding how to instruct a computer to accomplish my goals. If art is what people say is art – why isn't this art? Why isn't this truth? Why can't I find meaning in this? Why am I forced to do so much that makes so little sense to me? I hate my life, I hate my parents, hate my friends, hate my peers. I wish I could just die. This is my only fucking thread of sanity, and they never stop trying to take it away. Why should I care about music or art? It gives me nothing but more pretentious assholes belittling me. Fuck this shit.

...was never very easy. Programming represented my only escape from the world around me, the only place I had control.

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Unlike some of my peers, I learned to interact with others and stand up for myself – program-

mers are not inherently anti-social by nature – they are that way for the same reason abused kids often become bullies, their environment shaped them. Some of my peers are so hurt inside I wish I could help, but often the damage was done so long ago that it's too late. Too late to explain that people just don't understand, and that not everyone is like that. But to this day, I encounter this sentiment, so perhaps I shouldn't bother explaining something I'm not even sure is true.

People call us nerds, geeks, losers, every other word in the book. People think because we work in such a technical field that what we do is just fun and games, that we are not put under stress, that what we do requires no creativity. This is a lie. Most people in this country have encountered one piece of software or another that I've worked on – but few would realize, or care about this because they just don't take the time to care.

For these reasons, the world of programmers is a closed one – xenophobic and cautious of any outsiders that meddle. Getting in...

Was very hard. They didn't trust me, they were mean to me, even hostile. Those that were too anti-social just ignored me, or laughed behind my back; the others were immediately cruel to me and called me stupid. Slowly I earned respect – I learned everything. When they were mad, I'd look at what they said and understood why they thought I was stupid. I took the insults, I took everyone's shit. I took the abuse of my code – no more easier than an artist having someone use their work as toilet paper – but every step of the way I prepared for the day where I'd be on the other side, when I'd be one of the leaders. I spent long nights studying, not for a class, for

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myself. I spent long nights writing code. I skipped family events, I ignored my friends, I did what was necessary to understand, to feel even more in control. Even now, in high school I may be able to defend myself, but that control is still necessary. To be one of the best is hard. It takes a lot of effort. To be on top means being better than those before you, not just technically, but socially. It means learning to interact with the outsiders, learning to scare them away like they tried to scare me away. Learning to be mean and nice, with equal measure of strength, and knowing when the situation calls for each. I must learn.

...to the culture is very complicated and requires a high price. You lose friends, you lose your own sanity sometimes. It's easy to take a few computer classes and think you understand – you don't. I don't need to know what you took – you don't get it and probably never will. The culture is as much about sacrifice as anything. Computer science requires just as much sacrifice as art, and sometimes more. With art, you can say subjectively that it is nice at least – with programming you cannot. If your code sucks, it sucks. There is no sympathy.

The world is one of meritocracy – those who are the best receive praise and affection from those around them. Most importantly, though, the best receive respect; and respect is the currency of this world. There was a time when I could get no help from anyone when I first started. You have to show you have the skills that deserve others time. People who have been treated like shit for so long forget why they should have sympathy for others – after all, no one had sympathy for them – so until you show them that you're worth their time, no one cares.

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The cream rises to the top, the rest falls to the bottom, fast.

This fact is reflected even in the curriculum of computer science programs, many of which institutionalize this sort of feeling. There are specific courses in these programs meant to destroy those not worthy of the program – meant to force 60% to move to a new major. Once these classes get over, the cream remains and everything else is thrown out to fall where they will. This is perhaps part of why programmers feel so disdainful of related business professions – they know that is where the failures often end up, and they can't ever respect those people.

Once you have that respect, once you've proven yourself, the community supports you. You are an ant and an individual – anything that happens you immediately know you have people to back you up. These relationships extend to personal lives more often than not...

Why did Ben want to kill himself? Shit, I met him doing this CGI project that I run and now we're best friends after working together for so long. His code is awesome – unless he's drunk, then it's hardly readable, but, shit, who can complain? I can't believe his wife left him. I'm here for him though, I'll be here all night if that's what it takes – he was there for me when I lost it all my junior year of high school, so I'll stand for him, as well. We'll code until 4 am and until we feel like keeping on living again – and to hell with tomorrow. The code will give us strength, the code will give us the feeling of control we need, and most of all, the code will give us peace again.

...because those you code with you, you must trust – as your code is part of you just as much as art, so those you work with become your brothers and sisters. I made friends programming that have been the strongest relationships to this day. If I were to call up my co-worker to this day, he would smile as soon as I said "It's that time..." and we'd laugh

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over the terrible project we had to make work together.

Programming is an inherently social activity, so the culture matters more than one might ever imagine, and that culture often is very mixed and different. Programmers come from all cliques and may hide in every “stereotype” imaginable – anime freaks, jocks, nerds, geeks, Goths, emo kids, anything. But above all else – we are programmers. This culture is what binds us together, gives us strength, and, for many of us, makes our lives livable. I am proud to be a programmer, I am proud to share in this brother and sisterhood. I’m proud to stand up and say that we deserve respect. And in the end, regardless of what anyone says or thinks, when you get married, when you get divorced, when you get a speeding ticket, use a stoplight, use a television, visit a grocery store, or do nearly any activity in this world – you respect us quietly as well, by using that which we have forged.

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