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Tracing legends

Kimberly VantLeven

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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TRACING LEGENDS

A Thesis

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by

Kimberly VantLeven

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Abstract

Tracing Legends is a body of work involving three large books that hang on the wall as well as two smaller cabinet pieces. The work traces a conversation between my child-self and my adult-self using tales as a medium.

Prologue

Once upon a time...

In a land not so very far away at all...

There lived two girls. The eldest was a blonde-haired, green-eyed sprite. She was loud like the sun. They called her Day. Her sister was dark, both hair and eyes and seldom spoke. They called her Night. They changed their shape at will. Sometimes they were girls, and you would see Day skipping down the drive with Night trudging along behind. Night liked to ignore her sister when Day called laughing comments back. Other times, they were birds, and then it would be the large and raucous Raven surging ahead of the smaller Dove. Contrary to what develops in the average tale, Day, while she was generally sunny and fun to be around, was not all good. And Night, though sullen, was not all bad.

Day was beautiful in the usual way. Her hair was long and her face oval with freckles on her nose. She smiled a lot. Day liked everyone, and everyone liked Day. People frequently learned though, that liking Day was something like liking the sun. She could be very self-centered and didn't allow feelings. She didn't acknowledge her own and didn't understand anyone else's. She had a way of leaving your skin feeling tight and hot when you'd been in conversation for an hour or so.

Night hid behind her hair. She never brushed it. And she never smiled. Not many people knew Night, and fewer still knew if she liked them. Most neither liked nor disliked her; she was just always there. The few that liked her, liked her very, very much. If you could convince her to speak, you would find she had a way of putting the feelings at the edge of your thoughts into words. If you were patient enough for her words to come, they would brush

against your skin, and you might feel dampness and smell moss.

The sisters grew up. They began to mellow into the adults they would become. Neither are all edges now. Day is more like Dawn. She is softer and cooler. She has learned what it is to feel. Night is perhaps Dusk. She speaks more often and at length. She brushes her hair and pulls it back to show her face.

Chapter 1: Night's Tale

The seeds of this work were sown early in my life. My mother used to collect fairy tales, not the sanitized versions of Disney but the originals. They were full of wonder and horror, acts of selfless love along side unimaginable depravity. I read every single one of them before I finished elementary school. My favorite collection was a series from Time-Life Books entitled The Enchanted World. It had amazing illustrations with the stories. I learned to draw by tracing them.

As I grew older, I began to write my own stories based on my life and the things around me. I still tell myself a story every night before I go to bed. This work is a visual distillation of my stories, my own struggle to define good and evil, and my role in both. The characters that populate my stories are born out of a strong ambivalence. I never knew what I wanted to be, so neither do they.

It seems a natural extension that I would create books, my own thought process being so deeply embroiled in narrative. The fact that books, and stories in general, have always been so important to me is reflected in the sheer scale of these works. These are not stories that can be easily shrugged off and dismissed. They are both literally and conceptually larger than the viewer. The characters in the stories walk a tightrope between life and death, hanging on the edge of sanity. The scale lends an additional sense of tension. It is meant to be overwhelming.

As a child, books were my first friends and teachers. Their importance to me is out of proportion with the rest of the world's reality. It is true that our society reveres the information that is in books. Children doing research papers in school assume that all things in books must be correct. That is not necessarily the case, but it is a reflection of a book's almost sacred

presence. The rows of non-fiction books in libraries are large, heavy and pregnant with knowledge. They are also commonly dusty and disused. To me, it is often the book itself, as an object, that is of the utmost importance.

The giant scale of my books is intended to give the viewer an impression of the importance I place on books. They are no longer small, precious objects that you can hold in your hand. Because of that, they are removed from the private sphere, and reading is so very private. These books, by their very scale, are public works. Reading them is a forced intimacy between strangers.

This is an extension of the voyeuristic sensibility that much of my work from the past contains. When I entered graduate school, I had been creating works that seemed like the viewer was on the outside looking into something that they really should not be seeing. Now the viewers are in the position to be voyeurs on one another; locked into an intimate experience side by side. The act of turning the page becomes uncomfortable because the viewers are intensely aware of one another's interest.

Chapter 2: Night and Day Revealed

I cannot take sole credit for the characters that populate my stories. They come from a myriad of sources, including the people around me. My characters carry with them latent symbolism from hundreds of years of art history, and yet I place them in positions that they don't always fit comfortably into.

I used the raven in several of the stories along with the dove, the alligator, and a half-human, half-raven hybrid. I am well aware of their positions in traditional art. The raven is a symbol for death, the dove for peace, the alligator of aggression, the hybrid a monster. They never behave in the ways that we expect from them in these roles.

In "Raven's Choice" the raven becomes the nurturer, although it is known as an aggressor and possibly a foreshadowing of destruction. It is unclear if the alligator has any culpability in the disappearance of the dove, but because of its nature, it is suspect. In "Deirdre and Naoise," it is the male dove who is the aggressor. Indeed, there is no peace to be found in this work. My characters slough off their traditional roles. They exist in strange combinations, which may lead the viewer to suspect that they are more than what they seem.

Their secret lies in the fact that Night and Day could change their forms at will. These characters are people. They have entire histories and personalities. When they act in ways not in keeping with their traditional symbolism, they jump out of the realm of tradition and become wholly themselves. But it is more than that, they are also pieces of my personality—fragmented and simplified. I am the raven, the alligator, and occasionally even the dove (although she is mostly my sister, at times I desperately want to become her). Mostly though, I am the raven.

The story in which I reveal the most of my personality, that is in which I am more or less

whole, is “Brokedown Palace,” where I appear as the half-human half-raven hybrid. She wants to float away, let the water consume her. In the end though, she is incapable of letting go.

Chapter 3: Out of Silence

I have a very strange relationship to words. Other people's words I crave like oxygen. I am a voracious reader and love to spend hours listening to people talk. It really doesn't matter who is speaking to me, or even if they're speaking to me. I will listen intently for hours: to my friends or complete strangers, the news, talk radio—it doesn't matter. My own words, however, I have little use for.

The importance I place on words is obvious. They turn up in almost all of my work. But usually they are cut up, or unfocused—completely unreadable. I have even been known to write pages in gibberish. I tend to excuse this as the words themselves being unimportant, and text being just another funny sort of texture. But that isn't the truth. The truth is that, like little Night in my prologue, I seldom commit my thoughts to words in this manner. The words are extremely important, but they only come with patience.

My work rewards the patient. In these works, I have taken out the words wherever possible and those that are left are hidden or imbedded in the images. Sometimes they are cut into the page, other times they are in mirror image or even partially obscured by other words. The image is the most important part of these works, but the words are a gift and a trust. Most people will not bother to read what I have written. I take this as a given.

Those who do take the time to read the hidden text, the stories behind the stories, may find that the words are damp and smell of moss.

Chapter 4: Mirror, Mirror

My characters have an incredible desire to become real, to bridge the gap between their world and ours. They began their lives as fragments spun out of my personality, but more and more, they take on lives of their own. Today, they pound at the back of my eyes and demand exit—a place of their own. Each of their personal stories is conceived from some of the oldest stories I know: myths, legends and fairy tales. Some are family tales, some born out of our ancestor's first dreaming. Woven into them are everyday objects, things that grab my imagination; but solid and real, always. It might be an egg, a piece of string, a beautiful box, a mirror.

“Cabinet for Curiosity” is the piece that most reflects this solidity. It is a work created out of a card catalogue, telling a story through objects. It is both the foil of and the starting place for the larger books. Each drawer of the cabinet contains an object or multiple objects relating to the description on the card. I hope that by placing these objects around the books in drawers that one opens as if turning a page, the viewer can begin to construct their own story.

The other cabinet is more specific to me. It is titled “Self-portrait as a Book-Case.” Because of the carving it begins to mirror some of the other two-dimensional works in the show, but it also contains drawers full of objects. The drawers are locked, so the viewer must work harder to discover the truth. This work allows the characters to exist in our world. It creates the realm that the creatures inhabit.

Chapter 5: Reflections...

The books trace a conversation between my child-self and my adult-self using the tales as a medium. I tried to strike a balance between the happily ever after I longed for as a child, and the adult reality that happily ever after is not possible—nor would I want it if it were. The characters spun out of my child-self and altered as my adult-self drew them. They give voice to my anxieties from every stage of my life—from Night to Dusk.

This work is largely autobiographical. In order to create it, I had to go back and face my own history and come to terms with my past. Sometimes, in the creation, I was not certain if I was talking about my mother, my sister, or myself. I had to forget the fairy tale childhood I wrote for myself and face the places where the horror of the story I was telling resonated with the horror of my own soul. I have long needed to understand where my longing for these fairy tales comes from and why I keep coming back to them, again and again.

The tales and I endured a strained relationship to one another in order to get to this point. For a long time, I sought to keep them out of my work. I thought they were silly and would distract me. They kept coming back and intruding when I least expected it. This work is the first time we've gotten along since they comforted me when I was a child.

Vita

Kimberly VantLeven was born and raised in Simpsonville, South Carolina, where she was sometimes known as Night. She read a lot, and spoke a little. She attended Southside High School's International Baccalaureate Program and was later offered a scholarship to attend the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. It was there that she fell in love with printmaking and bookmaking. Her professors taught her to fly, and were not too surprised when she flew the coop to go south. It was a very long winter, but she has finally made peace with her stories.