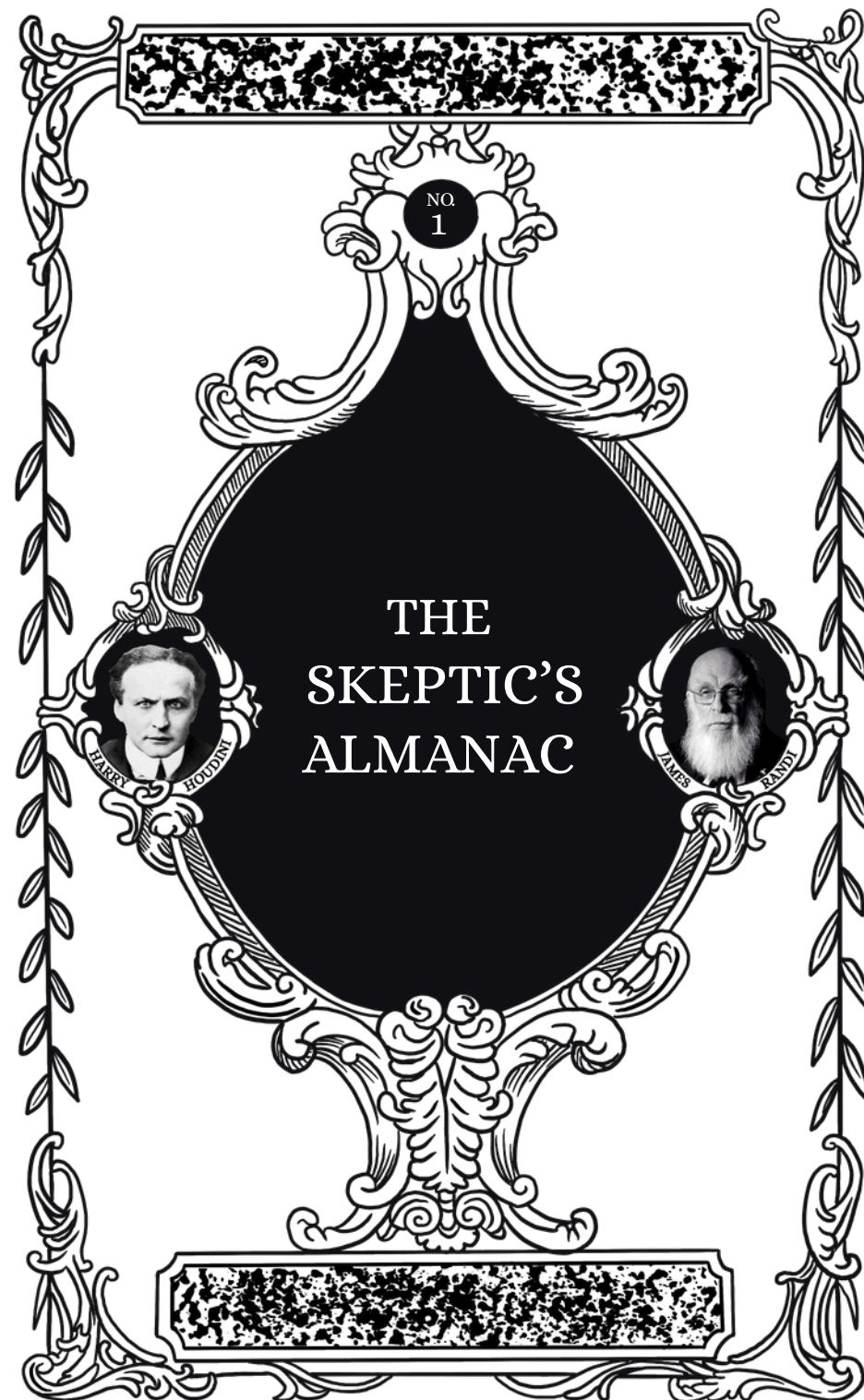


Are ghosts real?



THE
SKEPTIC'S
ALMANAC

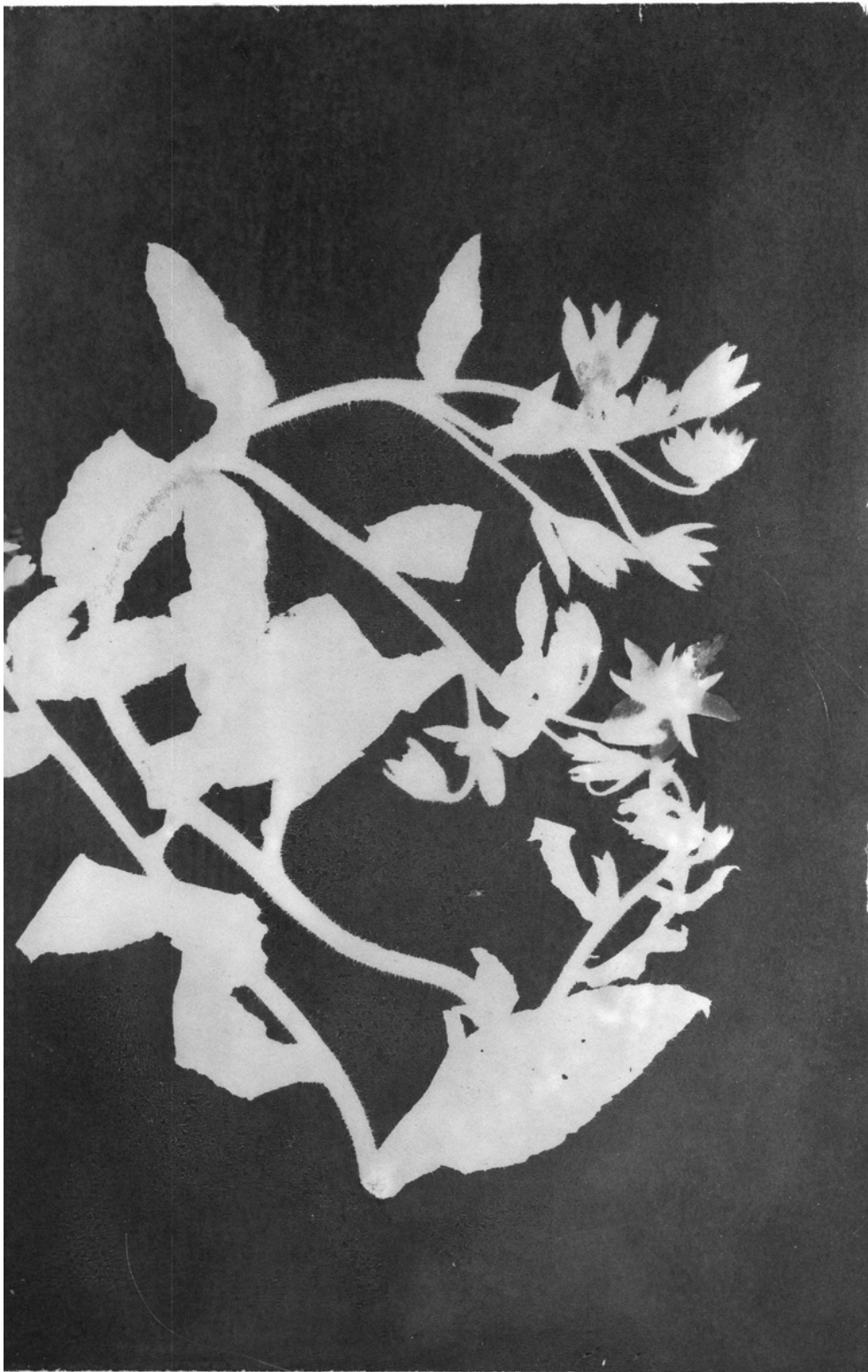
BY MARK HEWITT





The works within this zine were done with respect for the many spiritual, cultural, and ancestral practices that use plants, rituals, and storytelling as sacred tools. Our goal is not to mock or diminish those traditions. Instead, The Skeptic's Almanac looks at modern, often internet-driven reinterpretations of "magic" and ghosts. Contemporary trends cherry-pick spiritual symbolism and practices and often commodify them for profit or aesthetic. I hope you'll consider those appropriations after reading.

Thank you and enjoy the first issue of
The Skeptics Almanac.



Borage

Borago officinalis

Facts

Borage is a prickly annual herb with star shaped blue flowers that is used in home remedies, food, and companion planters. A European herb, it is known in gardens for repelling pests as well as it's cucumber-like flavor.

Rumored Magical Properties

Modern witches see it as a tonic ingredient that can grant courage and quiet bravery. It represents new beginnings, self-compassion, and strength to bloom, and is often used in spells for confidence and recovery.

Notes

I made and drank a warm borage tea in hopes of gaining some bravery to confront an adversary. Not only did I make a warm tea, but I froze some of the borage flowers in water for a sort of cucumber ice-cube kick. I served some to my mother-in-law in a glass of cold water, and she asked me if I was "feeding her icicles from my nasty garden." I do not feel brave, and I do not feel confident.

Investigative Report #12

Why is it that when people often describe ghost sightings, they're describing people who you could easily kick the shit out of if they were alive? Geographically, ghosts vary greatly, and the idea of what a ghost is, is constantly evolving. Not the ancestral protector spirits that you may find in African cultures, but the ones in movies made to scare you. In Japan, the yurei appear as pale, frail women with long black hair. In England, ghosts are often tied to historical tragedies and families, presenting themselves as old homeowners and diplomats. In America there are stories of children that appear with black eyes, or push your car over train tracks if you stop on top of them. If ghosts are real, shouldn't we expect more consistency? This could suggest that ghosts are less of a universal phenomenon and more of society's way of externalizing emotion, guilt, and moral lessons.

The differences in ghosts are vast, but what do they have in common you ask? For starters, they are not physically imposing.

In my every-day life, I am not terribly afraid of small children or frail old women. As apparitions though? They are freaking out the community. That's why I've taken it upon myself to find the largest, most physically intimidating ghost that I can. I'm going to find that ghost, and I'm going to beat it in physical combat.

I've made this decision at no small cost, and not without a lot of thinking. My wife disapproves. She tells me I should be embarrassed, and that I am neglecting our family. She really thinks this fight is my way of avoiding them. Can't she see the look in Penn's eyes when I talk about what I'm going to do to that dirty old apparition? He's going to be the proudest son on the planet after I win this.

The "ghost" in question is that of an old butcher, Joseph Rath. A despicable man in life. Standing at 6'10, he chopped up and ate his own brother. He apparently would have gotten away with it, but he ended up getting very sick from food poisoning. I guess being a butcher isn't gonna help much if the meat is dirty.

Anyhow, posthumously he is said to roam the location of his old butcher shop, which conveniently for me, is now a parking lot. The perfect location for close quarters combat.

Feels like my wife is at the end of her rope. I took out a loan on her SUV to pay for the boxing ring we will be fighting in. She'll forgive me when she sees how this goes.

I'm going to ask the grocery if they'll sponsor. Maybe put their logo in the corner of the squared circle.

I pull up to the location in question and get ready for battle. I stayed up nearly all night sending out my challenge via spirit board. It's possible he is slow to speak and that's why I don't feel the Ouija was really working, but as a backup I've brought an EVP spirit box with me.

In the ring I can barely breathe. Postured in my corner, I feel so much adrenaline I might be hovering. At the same time, I feel nothing, and I'm beginning to understand why fighters can take so much damage and still get up. I'm untouchable.

One of my buddies from bowling league, Ryan, is here. He steps out of his truck with his legendary striped shirt on. He's our referee for the evening.

Ryan stands in the center of the ring giving us his spill about it being a clean fight etc. What a joke. I know the butcher is anything but clean. And as the bell rings, I saunter across with my fists raised to my face.

GIVE ME ALL YOU'VE GOT YOU BROTHER KILLING TRASH CLOWN!

I open my guard. Here it comes... Nothing.

Nothing happens. Is the ghost a coward?

We pull out the spirit board and begin sliding the planchette. It's not easy in boxing gloves but I make do. Feels like an hour has passed, and the board produces nothing. Houdini was right to hate those things — spirit boards in general, but particularly the ones meant to make H*sbro Toys money. Disgusting.

Ryan pulls out the spirit box and cranks the dial. The advertisements said that the apparition can speak through the spirit box, but as we listen, only one thing is clear to us. It's spitting out a car insurance commercial.

Some folks try and find meaning in that sort of interaction. Finding patterns or significance in randomness is called apophenia. Wanting it to be a ghost just might make your local disc jockey sound like an apparition to you. Hand in hand with this, is the idea that our brains must fill in the gaps of what is expected, a form of pareidolia. As time moves forward and the landscape of radio changes, I expect you will hear less DJs coming through your spirit box. Will this mean the end of ghosts? No.

Back to the matter at hand however, Rath has yet to throw a single punch. After 4 long hours of trying to contact, Ryan begins the 10 count. I feel my chest swell up with the calling of each number. Rath the coward, huh? He can't handle me. Or is he even real?

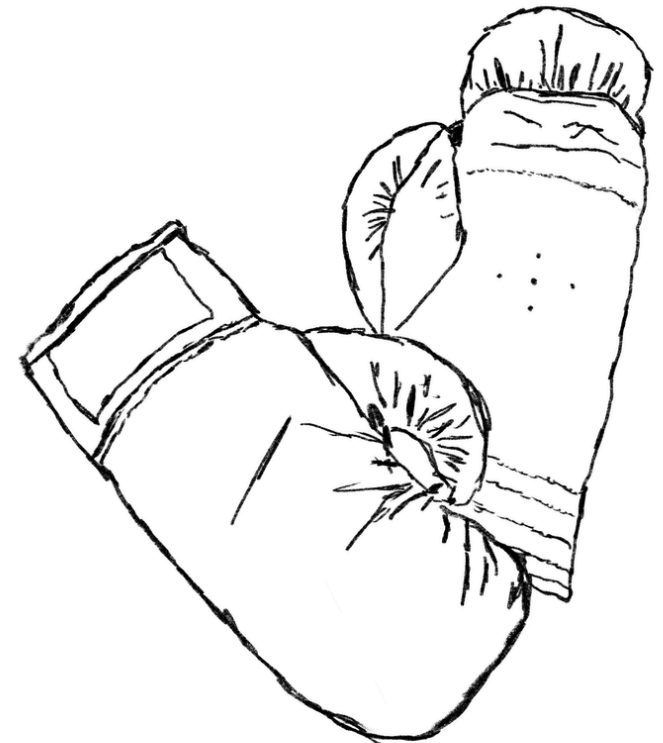
The count reaches 10 and I am victorious!

I feel so much justice. Are ghosts real? I still haven't figured that out. If they are though, Joseph Rath is a coward and backed out of our fight, leaving me as champion. I can't wait to get home to Penn and tell him everything. I've been gone all day and haven't even heard from him yet.

I'm feeling proud, so I enter the house with my hands raised in the air. The champion has arrived baby! I told you all I could do it! Not a scratch on me.

I look around, but... What is going on? My house is empty. Where is Penn? His stuff is gone. Where is my wife?

Are ghosts real?





Mugwort

Artemisia vulgaris

Facts

Mugwort is a perennial herb that has naturalized in North America. Its aromatic leaves are used in skincare and hair products as well as flavoring for beverages. Though common in America now, it has been used as a traditional medicine throughout many cultures and is still used in many products throughout China, Japan, and Korea.

Rumored Magical Uses

When consumed, mugwort can enhance dreams and work as a psychic aid for controlling and navigating visions. It is also used in teas and baths to aid in fertility rituals.

Notes

This one is tricky. Mugwort is known to contain Thujone, which works as a sedative and positively affects REM sleep and function. It's important to note that overconsumption is essentially poison though, and that could also lead to something like visions. If medicine is magic then mugwort is certainly magic.

Investigative Report #14

I pull up to your run-of-the-mill brick house. Nothing is particularly off, outside of a pretty deep mud puddle in the driveway. There's a little girl playing in the garden with an old woman. I can't tell what the kid is saying but it looks like she's screaming her head off. I hope granny's got her ear plugs in. My kid Penn never screams like that. My house has been so quiet lately.

I get out of my car and skip over to the door as fast as I can. Not too soon by the looks of it either, as the kid turns toward me and granny's eyes widen. I make it to the door and inside the house before they get to me though. Close one. I don't have time to babysit right now.

The reports are that the place is haunted. The husband-wife duo who own the house seem to both think so, and they let me know ahead of time they've already run an EMF detector and have been using a spirit board to communicate with the apparitions that haunt the place. They have even claimed that the ghost/ghosts in question scared their dog off. The kid didn't seem too upset about it outside though.

The couple greets me together, Mr. and Mrs. Jeremy. I don't often trust people who have a first name as their last name, but I could really use a win right now so I'm choosing to ignore it. Still makes me sick though so I'll be shortening it moving forward. So, Mrs. J approaches me with the EMF detector in hand. It's already fully lit up, and she's holding it out like it's some sort of Olympic torch and I better start running.

I point out that we're standing in a "smart home" absolutely loaded with tech and gadgets and wiring. Electricity is all around us, and the -Electro Magnetic Field- detector going off is not even a little surprising. Seems Mrs. J still has resolve though. She really thinks the place is haunted.

I ask how the kid is responding to all of this. Mr. J hangs his head as if I've brought up a tragedy. They tell me she hasn't been taking it well and is starting to make things up. Poetic coming from people who tried to convince me their toaster was proof they were being haunted. Mrs. J thinks the dog going missing is the particular event that broke the kid. Poor little girl has since spent the majority of her time outside, talking about making deals with genies and wishing for the dog to come back as a human so they can all be safe and happy together. Grief is terrible, isn't it?

The J's move on to showing me their Ouija escapades. Mrs. J puts on some music, I guess to set the mood. I ask her if the board works blind folded and she tells me yes, so that's what she's going to do.

She sits down with the planchette in hand and begins speaking. "Oh spirit of the realm, of the house. Bring our sweet dog patty back home! Bring the old girl back! Stop haunting us!"

This is feeling a little dramatic, but I get it.

However, as she continues to commune with the spirits (and under disguise of the music) I shift the board 180 degrees without telling her. The spaces she thinks she is sliding into are for the most part, empty, and I watch as Mr. J crumbles to the floor.

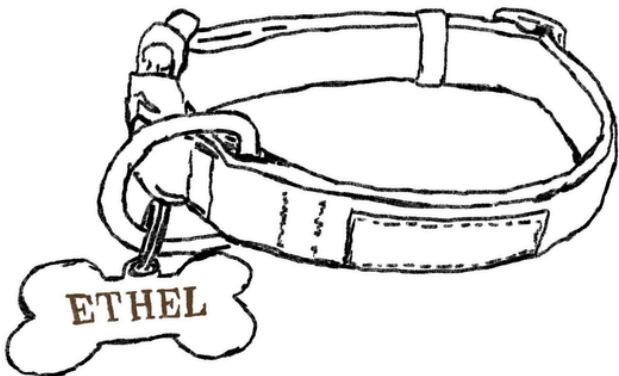
They tell me that it's possible they were being a little pre-emptive. Mrs. J suggests we do an EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomena) test but I let her know that we're too far out in the country to even pick up radio stations for the ghost to "talk" to us through. It's a wash.

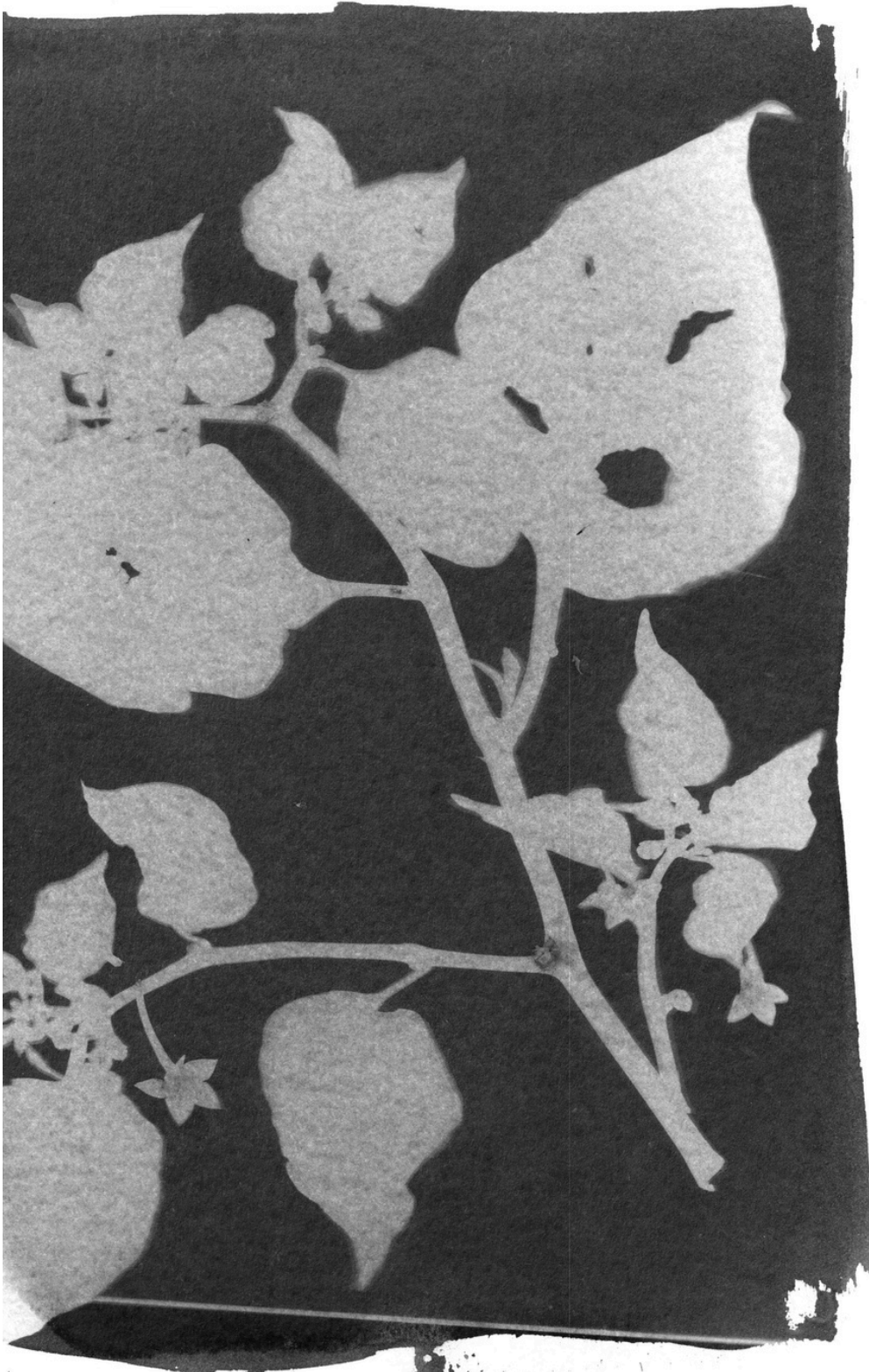
As I head out the door, the kid bolts in front of me. I'm feeling a little disappointed with this investigation myself, so I'm ready to entertain whatever she's about to spit out at me, but instead.. kicks me right in the damn shin. Terrible.

Yeah, this kid doesn't seem affected by the dog a bit. As far as I can see she might even be happy. I want to chase her down but my legs make for my car anyhow.

I look up and she seems to be gone. Ran off to who-knows. Granny is just staring (as the elderly are known to do) so I point, give her a little wink, and tell her to stay safe now. Granny looks back at me and says

"woof"





Habanero

Capsicum chinense

Facts

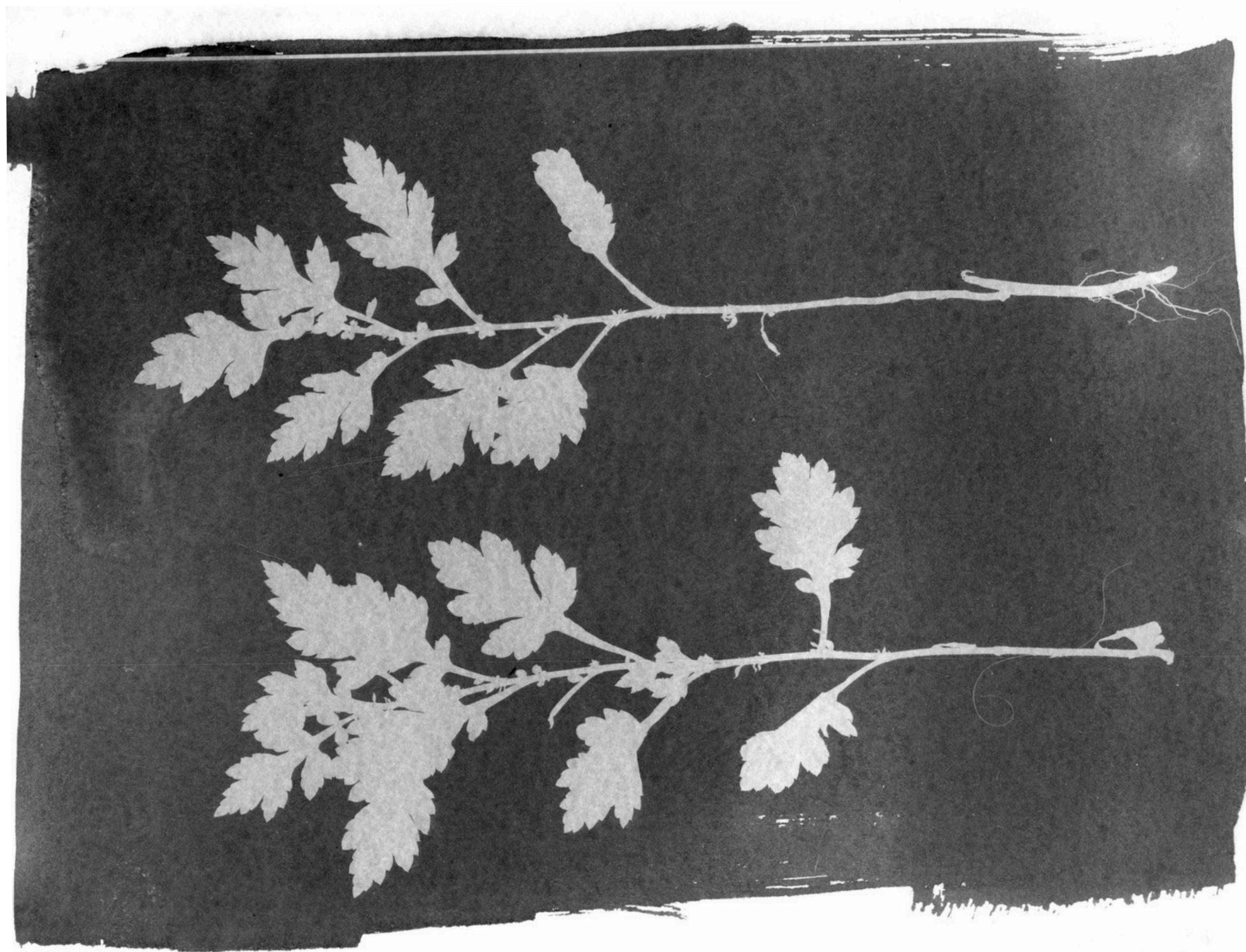
Habanero is a very hot chili pepper measuring between 100,000 and 350,000 on the Scoville scale. Its heat and flavor make it a key ingredient in many hot sauces and foods. It originated in the Amazon before making its way through Mexico and becoming the staple that it is today.

Rumored Magical Properties

We all know the taste of habanero is magical, but outside of food, habaneros can be placed into a cloth pouch with other choice spices and placed near doors to ward off jealousy, gossip, and peer fatigue. Its fiery properties not only protect the space but can also boost confidence should you choose to take it with you when you leave.

Notes

I did the cloth pouch thing to keep people from gossiping about me. I told my supervisor this and he said that it must be working because “no one talks about me at all.”



Investigative Report #18

I arrived on the scene around 9:17PM. The reports said there was a naked man hanging dong through Perry Park, in and out of the buildings. Not sure why something like that fell into my jurisdiction, but since my wife and son are gone I was already out on the town and figured I might as well stop by and see what was going on.

Didn't take long for me to figure out why I'm the one who got the call: the guy fancies himself a werewolf. At least, that's the reason he was tearing his clothes off in the middle of the busiest block of downtown. I wish I could say it was more spectacular like a Wolf Man movie, but honestly he was as calm as they come. Guy was a total shit when it came to ripping his precious "Benny Fring" pants though.

I tried getting him to at least hide his Johnson, since as far as I could tell, there wasn't any underwear involved, but he kept going on about how "it's legal here now." To be honest, I don't really know if that's true or not. I do remember the PTA had a topless run last year so I'm not going to argue.

At this point, a crowd was forming and it wasn't warming up outside, so I decide there was only one option. I take the guy to Pillman's Department Store and buy him a set of clothes he wouldn't have to worry about ripping, transformation or no.

His precious Benny Fring pants can live on.

How did our hairy (he's practically bald) friend thank me, you ask? Did he say anything at all?

Oh, yes. Downright grateful even.

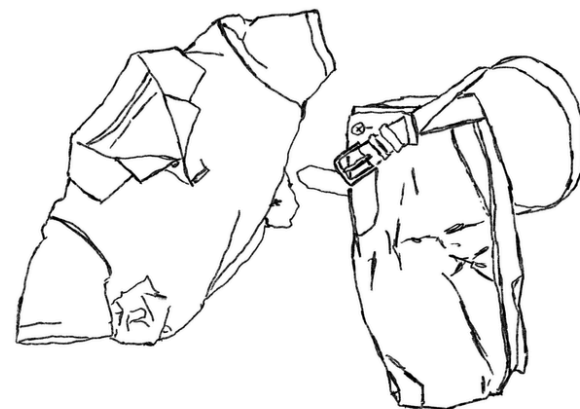
Told me it was his new favorite outfit, and said the idea of it tearing during a transformation was just too much to bear. So what does he do? Well, packs the clothes I just bought away and puts back on the good ol' Benny Fring pants of course, walking off with a whistle.

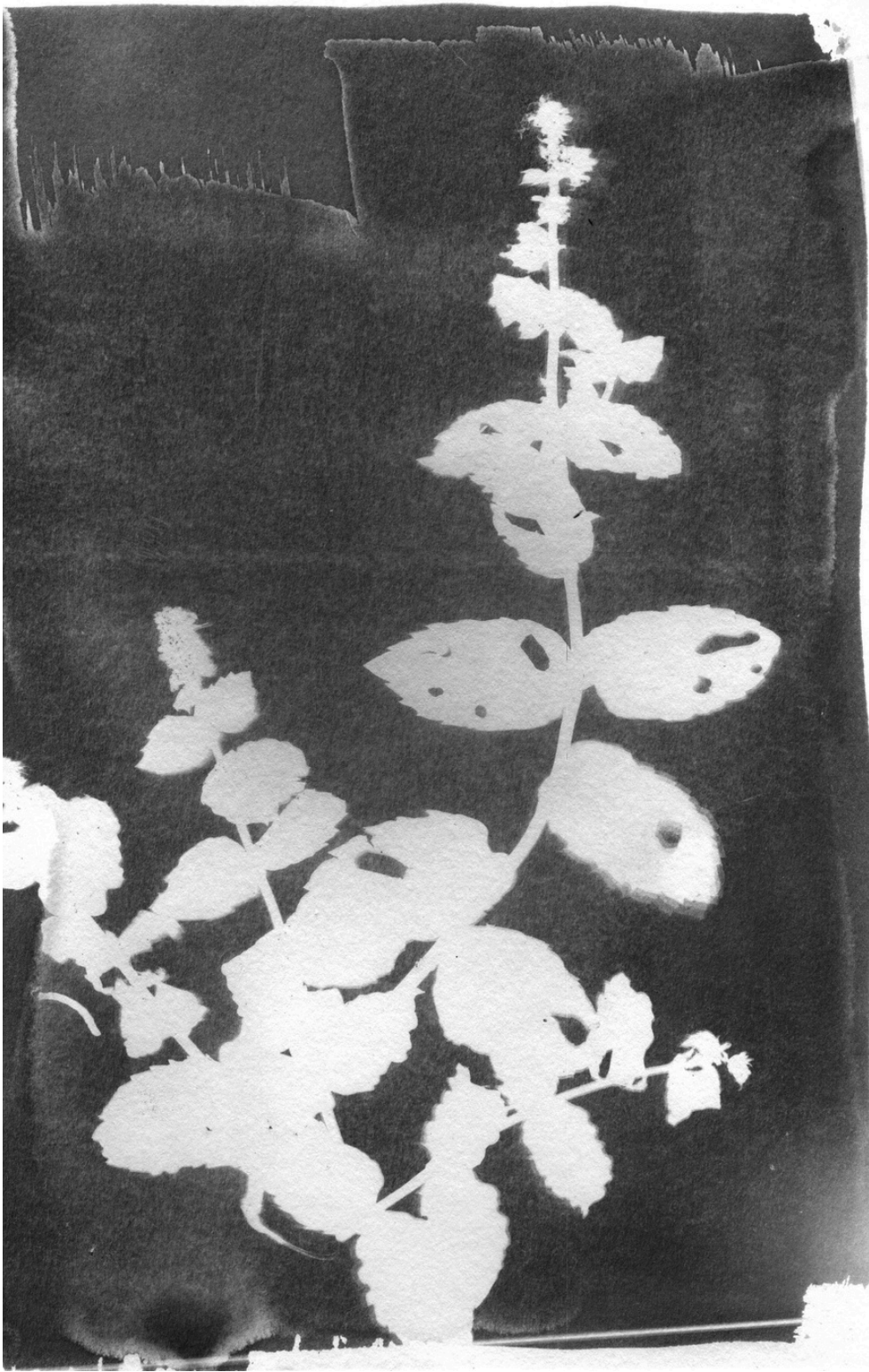
There's no known biological mechanism for lycanthropes. Mr. Naked doesn't have claws or extra hair. I touched him with my silver ring (not there, don't worry), and he didn't even flinch.

Just like in European folklore of old, people still lean into werewolf stories or things like witch hunts when they're really just trying to make sense of their own fears. Outsiders, mental illness, crime, whatever's convenient to them at the time.

What could make a person think that they themselves are the werewolf, however? That would also have to be something that is not supernatural. Something that is still above my pay grade.

There are, of course, subcultures of people who harmlessly claim to be werewolves and live lives quite like what you would expect from one. If we talk about them we have to discuss vampires though. Don't get me started on vampires.





Mint

Mentha

Facts

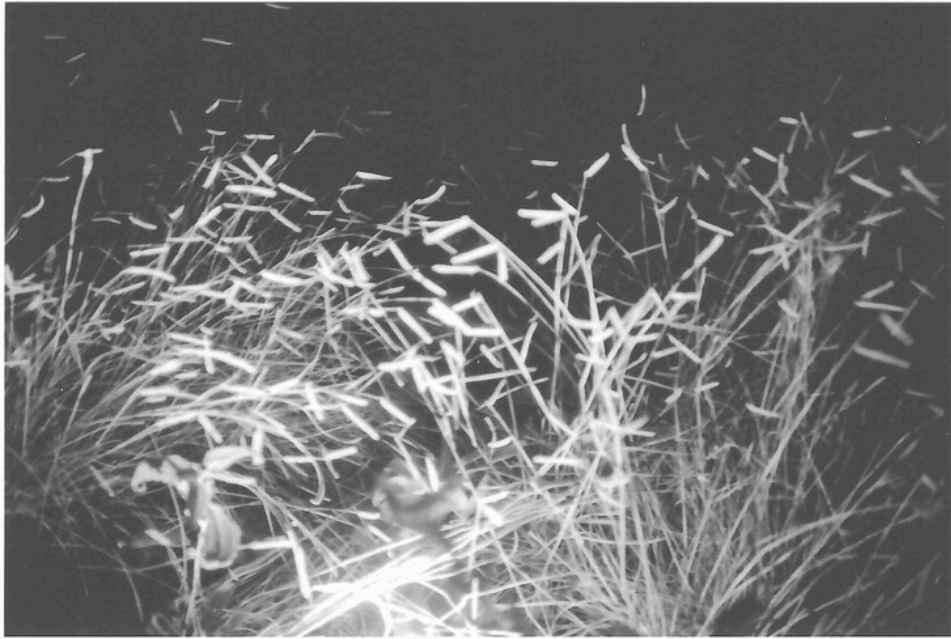
Mint, particularly spearmint in this case, is an aromatic plant native to temperate regions. It is often used in culinary herbs and as a flavoring for drinks and candy. It is one of the most well-known herbs and is often hardy (even called invasive by some.)

Rumored Magical Properties

Some believe that mint enhances mental powers and can boost memory, clarity, and psychic awareness when consumed. Outside of consumption, it is often used in money-drawing spells or charm bags for attracting prosperity, luck, and money.

Notes

Mint has antimicrobial properties like menthol and menthone that cool and have a soothing effect in a lot of scenarios, many of which could be called magical, but probably just enhance alertness. I tried planting some to attract some prosperity, but I ended up overwatering and attracting subterranean termites that have done thousands of dollars in structural damage to my house.





Lamb's Ear

Stachys byzantina

Facts

Lamb's-ear is a soft, fuzzy perennial with silver leaves that resemble a lamb's ear. It is an easy to grow ground coverage plant with a unique texture and color that is attractive to many gardeners.

Rumored Magical Properties

Lamb's-ear is said to ground and connect one to the earth. Its soft texture and silver hue can evoke lunar energy, and its ear shape can invoke listening and clarity. It is often used in spells as symbolism for comfort, nurturing, and healing.

Notes

Culturally, lamb's-ear has long been used as a natural bandage because of its soft, antibacterial leaves. So, to hear that a plant with antibacterial properties can inspire symbolic healing is not very surprising. And have you ever felt lamb's-ear? Woo!

I dried some leaves on my windowsill and put them into a dream sachet that I put under my pillow to promote peaceful dreams. Now I can't sleep, but I'm starting to grow fond of the crunching sound when I roll my head.



Investigative Report #21

As the days get colder, it is said that the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead become thinner. Many tales describe “cold spots” with temperatures dropping drastically at the presence of a spirit. Cold nights bring loneliness. The perfect companion for an apparition.

In truth, our brains are probably just interpreting sensations like temperature drops as supernatural when it's more than likely a building resettling (also triggered by temperature) or winds kicking through tired old vents. That's not even mentioning the suggestibility of darkness itself, right?

This dickhead at the bureau keeps telling me about thermal imaging and how it can catch cold spots using surface temperature readings. I don't have the heart to tell him that we're looking for air temperature and not surface. Not tracking lizards here.

When it's dark and cold, I feel my senses heighten. I am the animal I was born to be.

Is my brain filling in missing information with scary interpretations, or does the fog really invite unspeakable things?

Before I go any further, I decide to consult a few outside witnesses. Musicians.

Musicians, spending their nights in dimly lit basements, dark bars, abandoned buildings... I don't really know what they're doing every night, but I do know how to ask questions.

The following are their testimonies:



Interviews



Kamila Glowacki / Nectar

Champaign, IL

**Have you ever had an experience with ghosts or the occult?
If not, what are your thoughts on them?**

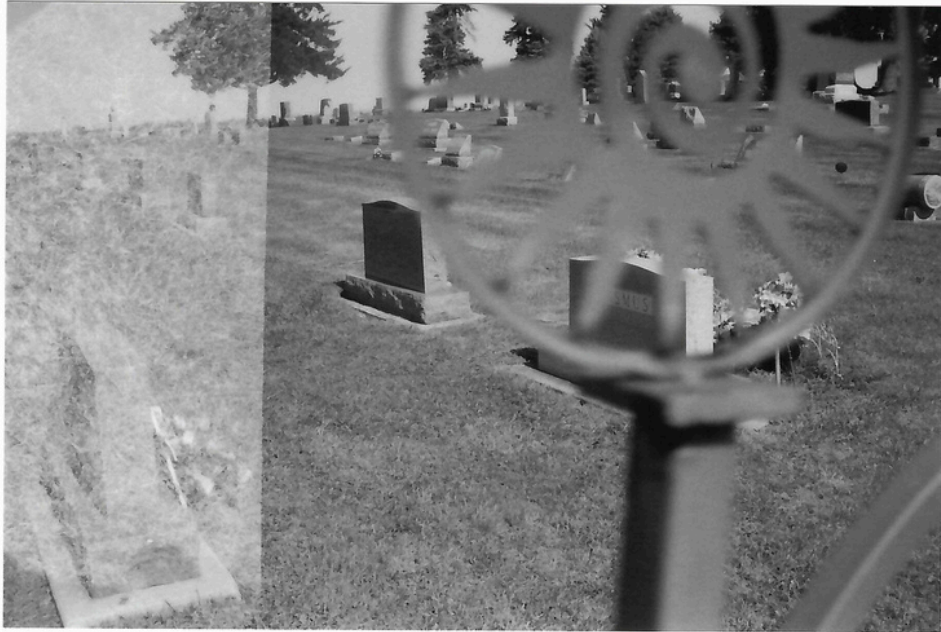
I haven't had any experiences myself, but I have heard lots of stories from friends. I believe in some kind of spirituality and connection between living things and the universe, but I think those feelings might not be related to ghosts necessarily. I've had a lot of fun adventures exploring cemeteries back in the day.

Are there any haunted locations from your home or where you hail from?

There are some great locations in central Illinois! One that comes to mind is the St. Omer's Cemetery Witch Grave in Ashmore, Illinois. The lore is that a witch is buried there and her grave is marked with a date that never happened: February 31, 1882. The impossible date is said to be a preventative measure: the witch would rise again on her death date, but if her death date never came she wouldn't reappear. The sphere on her tombstone is shaped like a crystal ball. I have had friends visit, but I've never been!

Do you have any songs or references to ghosts or the occult in your music?

I play and write music for an indie punk band called Nectar. I have a song called "Unlucky Buddy" that is about being down on your luck and has many playful references to things like black cats, graveyards, and Friday the 13th! A lot of my songs deal with loss or longing, which I think can resonate with many of the feelings related to ghosts.



Interviews



Adam Lerma / Sleepy Knights

Abilene, TX

**Have you ever had an experience with ghosts or the occult?
If not, what are your thoughts on them?**

Well, I grew up in a mixed ethnicity household — so on my father's side, they were Mexican-Americans. I would describe our culture as just Texan or maybe Tex-Mex, and incidentally I don't know the Brown side's ancestry very well. But presumably they and therefore I, came from Mexican or Tejano Mestizo ancestry. So when I was little, everyone was very, like, superstitious — in a way that I would only later find out isn't that far from like, Native American belief systems. I have a good friend who is sort of an expert, in the sense that he's an ethnographer of American Indian culture. And he indirectly helped me sort of piece together what I had forgotten. Anyway, I didn't realize that I was loosely part of this semi-assimilated post-colonial culture of like, taking spirits and demons and stuff for granted. Not full blown animism but like way closer to that than you would expect to find in Texas. For some people, everything is alive and has a spirit and a sort of personhood.

But that's normal for a lot of Latinos in Texas I guess. Like take La Chusa. which i guess is an human-owl hybrid that predicts a death? I don't actually know the story! In my family it was just like a mystical bad omen whenever you heard an owl hoot. On top of that kind of thing, my dad would casually say that he would dream about people and they would die, like they would visit him, metaphorically saying goodbye. He also got into new age-y meditation astral projection shit, but he picked that up in prison. So he like basically ran the full gamut of the occult except just like...being really casual about it? Profane matters always won the day I guess, except when something scary happened or he wanted to sound cool.

Even my very white mother from Appalachia embraced this kind of thing. My estranged mother swore me to secrecy, and said years after the fact, she got a message from a sort of skeletal impression, like a vision, that told her "DON'T TOUCH THE CAR" – that car being the car in which my grandmother would soon after suffer a fatal crash. That's just one, there are a couple more such reports.

I don't believe she had a premonition. Did I have contact with ghosts or the occult? Only when I was very little. Back when you could still talk to animals, you know? When I got older, much like a horror movie that relies on domestic disorder for plot, when my parents divorced I hated my dad and my mom worked at night. So what happened was, instead of being haunted when I began to be left alone overnight at age 9 or 10 (grandmother next door type of thing) I had to get over all kinds of fears. And with my family's chaos and violence I learned very early on that humans you trust can be more scary than anything. So I forced myself to grow up very fast and later would become a staunch atheist. Because the threat of believing would have been too much to bear. Now I am more "open" I would say, and see some of it like connecting to my roots. To me, believing that animals or trees can curse us or haunt us, or that our ancestors are literally with us, is way cooler than the Christianity I was exposed to. But I always still retain a really harsh skepticism that doesn't allow me to believe in the supernatural. My indigenous ancestors believed what they believed in the context of a legitimate relationship with nonhuman nature. I think that people in America mostly believe in the supernatural now to avoid painful emotions about what is natural.

Are there any haunted locations from your hometown that you remember?

I can't remember anywhere particularly haunted. I know there were tons of places that people said were haunted but I stopped believing them very early so I never cared. The Merkel, Texas

cemetery was seen as spooky to the youth I guess! Maybe the dilapidated cotton gin next to it? Or even when I was a little kid in the barrio, they would just say stuff about like, you could literally summon The Devil by speaking about him. But the biggest attractions were like a few towns over. The Grace in Abilene I think. Or the Stamford motel. I didn't go on ghost adventures because I thought they were stupid and lame!

Do you have any songs or references to ghosts or the occult in your music?

In most of my music no, but for things like my dungeon synth project, it's super fantasy inspired and kind of embraces magic lore in all kinds of ways. The basis of the story of the sleepy knights is that these knights are set to duel to the death, but they keep getting interrupted by duty and circumstance! And then a mystical forest spirit explains that they must not fight to the death, they must become knights of rest and joy. So indirectly it's about more of a fictional druidic animal god of peace and love. Like a ghost but more powerful! No matter how fake ghosts are, it's still fun to invoke the supernatural!



Interviews



Adrian Crookston / The Sultry Swines

Moscow, ID

**Have you ever had an experience with ghosts or the occult?
If not, what are your thoughts on them?**

I'm not really a believer, but I've seen some weird things and possibly a ghost.

I used to live in an old hotel that was converted into apartments. As I was leaving my apartment one day about a month after moving in I thought I saw a big tall guy in a puffy jacket down at the end of the hallway. About a split second later he was gone. As I was walking down the stairs a big tall guy rounded the corner coming up from the bottom floor and I was pretty startled. I said, "Sorry dude I think I just saw a ghost, so I'm kind of jumpy."

A few months later I ran into my neighbor who lived in the apartment down the hall and asked her how she liked living in the building. She said she loved the building but had asked our landlord to change rooms. I asked her why and she said that she felt that her apartment was haunted. I asked her for more details and she said that she felt there was a presence of a male roommate there who didn't want her there even though she lived alone.

I told her what I saw and she said that for sure that the puffy jacket dude was the ghost that was living in her apartment.

I'm not really sure I believe in ghosts still, but this happened.

Are there any haunted locations from your home or where you hail from?

A few: McConnell mansion and a few famous old bordellos up in Wallace, Idaho.

Do you have any songs or references to ghosts or the occult in your music?

I wrote a piece called *El Baile Macabre De Les Brujes*, “The Witches Dance Macabre,” for double reed ensemble last year. It was loosely based on a theme I wrote for a tv show project about 10 years ago.

Excerpts from *El Baile Macabre De Les Brujes*:

Excerpt A, Allegretto, measures 11-20. The score is for a double reed ensemble. The instruments listed are Oboe 1, Oboe 2, Oboe 3, Oboe 4, English Horn, Bassoon 1, Bassoon 2, Bassoon 3, Bassoon 4, and Contrabassoon. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The English Horn part features a rubato section with a crescendo (cresc.) and a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The Bassoon 1 part has a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The Oboe 4 part has a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The Contrabassoon part has a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic.

Excerpt B, measures 21-30. The score is for a double reed ensemble. The instruments listed are Oboe 1, Oboe 2, Oboe 3, Oboe 4, English Horn, Bassoon 1, Bassoon 2, Bassoon 3, Bassoon 4, and Contrabassoon. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The Oboe 1 part has a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The Oboe 2 part has a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The Oboe 3 part has a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The Oboe 4 part has a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The English Horn part has a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The Bassoon 1 part has a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The Bassoon 2 part has a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The Bassoon 3 part has a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The Bassoon 4 part has a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The Contrabassoon part has a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic.

Excerpt C, measures 31-40. The score is for a double reed ensemble. The instruments listed are Oboe 1, Oboe 2, Oboe 3, Oboe 4, English Horn, Bassoon 1, Bassoon 2, Bassoon 3, Bassoon 4, and Contrabassoon. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The Oboe 1 part has a forte (f) dynamic. The Oboe 2 part has a forte (f) dynamic. The Oboe 3 part has a forte (f) dynamic. The Oboe 4 part has a forte (f) dynamic. The English Horn part has a forte (f) dynamic. The Bassoon 1 part has a forte (f) dynamic. The Bassoon 2 part has a forte (f) dynamic. The Bassoon 3 part has a forte (f) dynamic. The Bassoon 4 part has a forte (f) dynamic. The Contrabassoon part has a forte (f) dynamic.



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