

GHOST STORIES

Volume 1

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CONTENTS

Foreword	4
Introduction	6
Stories	8
The Color	
Poltergeist	
Cerberus	
Itzpaplotl	
The Man Amongst The Things	
Carton In The Woods	
Once More	
The Brothers	
The Legend of König Watzmann	
Telling The Bees	
The Tavern Girl	
Where My Ghost Comes From	
Xlyem Phloem	
Ghost	
Girl With A Dead Sister	
Blood Magic	
The Path of Our Unchaining	
Slaughtered Dogs	
Sunshine Bill Heads West	
Little Bones	
The Hagley Woods Mystery	
Black Princesses	
Paradoxical Undressing	
Antique Buyers Beware!	
Baba Yaga	
Nanay's Gift	
The Un-seeable Album	
The Marionette Maker	
A Cat, A Bell, and My Basement	
The Artists	88
Sponsors	96
Thanks	99

FOREWORD

by Will Ferguson

The Anangu people of central Australia represent the world's oldest continuous culture, an unbroken chain stretching back 30,000 years. As a point of comparison, consider the pyramids, at three thousand years – a blink of an eye in terms of the Anangu – where the culture of the pharaohs is long gone. Imagine meeting someone who could still read ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics with the ease that we read English, who knows the lore behind all of the gods, the rites and rituals involved, and you get a sense of how remarkable the Anangu culture is.

I had come to Uluru, in the “red heart” of Australia, sweltering in the arid, fly-infested heat – 40 above and climbing – to see the region's cave art, a palimpsest of images going back thousands of years but very familiar to the guide who took me in. He pointed out wavy lines signifying wind, others representing animals of the dreamtime and stories connected with them, a cluster of “seven sisters” that represented a constellation and so on, though “dreamtime” itself is not accurate translation. It suggests something that isn't entirely real, and the Aborigine *tjukurpa* (dreamtime, as it is commonly known) is very real.

Amid this overlay of images – the oldest artistic tradition still intact in the world – I noticed a small image rendered in red ochre: a circle with eyes and what looked like horns but were in fact ears. It sent a chill down my spine. “What is that?” I asked. “Oh,” he said, “that's the devil dingo dog, Kurpany.” A terrifying creature used both to scare and school young children, Kurpany haunts bedtime stories and provides dire warnings: don't wander out at night, don't break social conventions, check your baser instincts, the devil dingo is waiting for you.

Human storytelling originated around campfires, often as a way to confront and overcome the darkness that was pressing in from all sides, kept at bay by a flicker of light. Ghost stories and mythical monsters are as old as the human imagination. Image and tale are intertwined, and this remarkable collection of art and stories brings this back to the forefront. I commend the artists. As an author, I did however feel that they were trespassing on my turf and so—rather than unleash a devil dingo of my own—I decided to return the favour with an image of my own: ink on paper, 2019, in the “doodle” school of art. It is the haunted look of someone confronted by the art presented in this show at the very moment he realizes that the darkness he is viewing is inside him. We all have a devil dingo within us. The Anangu understood this; so do the artists in this show.





INTRODUCTION

by John Ross & Mathieu Martel

There's a full moon out tonight. Let us tell you a tale. What started as a two man show exploring the concept of loss, nostalgia, and the ghosts haunting our pasts, exploded into a group show of over twenty five incredible artists - a drastic metamorphosis. Change can be a monster that brushes against your feet under the covers.

There's also a chance we'll delete this entire introduction. Such is the nature of storytelling. It must undergo constant and often unforgiving change. So, also, is the nature of art making. There is a power in admitting to yourself your own limitations as a creator and more than that, being brave enough to overcome them. This is a morsel of the challenge that we proposed to the artists of *Ghost Stories* - do something that scares you; change it up and really break out of your comfort zone - look your Artist Statements in the eye...

your Artist Statement looks back, eyes rimmed in white. It's not fear that resides there, but an unnatural determination. The light in the room shrinks, slowly, to a pale blue. Your Artist Statement finally breaks your gaze and turns from you. You can feel its confidence — it thinks it's irreplaceable — and that drives a hot anger up inside your gut. Before you can calculate your next move, you are making it. You pick up the 26lb pinch point crowbar leaning on the wall beside you and drive it deep into the heart of your Statement, it slumps to its knees and thick, black, totally-engaging, non-academic fiction escapes from the wound in its back.

For the artist who is unfamiliar to storytelling, this project is a way back to a tradition of weaving tales and art making that used to be common place. The etchings of Gustave Doré are synonymous with the canticles of Dante's Divine Comedy. The paintings of Leonardo Da Vinci are inseparable from the writings of the Christian faith. Visual art and storytelling have a long and colourful history, a tiny piece of which *Ghost Stories* attempts to recapture.

To the artist who is already familiar with making narrative art it's an opportunity to dive deeper in to the fictions that naturally exist in their work; to find the narrative paydirt they are seeking.

For a long time now, art and storytelling, side by side, seems to have been relegated to a mostly commercial art environment, as in graphic novels and the story-books of children. That environment is generally not on the walls of the world's great art museums. Art and story, presented together, seem to have very little place in the fine art world; a world in which academia has a tendency to suffocate creativity.

Ghost Stories represents an attempt to harken back to a time of hieroglyphics, cave paintings and great literature made whole by the work of a fine artist; to a place where folks paid attention when a tale was being told. It also represents a new environment in which visual art of all kinds can co-exist in a fine art space alongside written fiction that will engage, educate, delight and maybe even spook you!

The telling of stories originated around a campfire, a pit of light to keep the dark at bay. But although we try to keep the darkness from encroaching on us, we have an obsession with telling stories about it. It's an ancient and exciting place from which to weave a tale. Ghost stories, folk tales, and urban legends are some of the oldest forms of teaching and passing on knowledge in an exciting and informative way. It's also a forgiving format for the unseasoned writer. So venture forth, dear reader, into these pages that contain the macabre, the horrific, and the wondrous. Let the words and images keep you up at night, enchanted by a tale of whimsy... or wondering what that was that just brushed the bottom of your foot.



THE COLOR

Art & Story by Gary McMillan

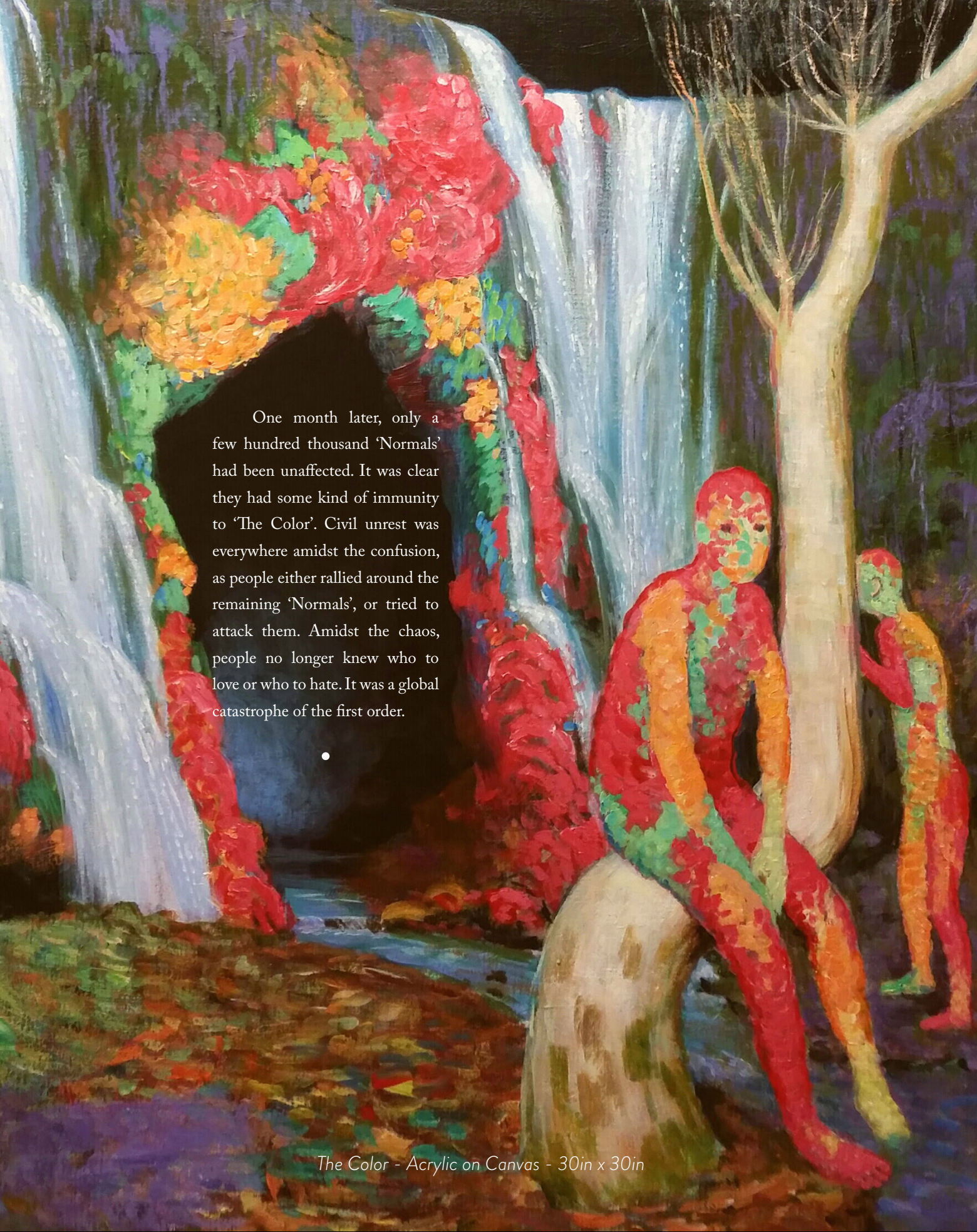
One spore. That's how it happened. Opening the cave entrance was easy enough. The surveyors had bulldozed some rock and soil out of the way and the dark cavern revealed itself. Half a dozen workers went in and a half dozen workers came out. There was nothing remarkable inside, so the crew moved on.

Eight days later, one of the half-dozen showed up at a clinic presenting a pea-sized colorful inflorescence on his cheek. That's what the doctor on staff called it; a colorful inflorescence. He had it removed. Over the next few days, the other crew members showed up at the clinic with similar small growths and had them removed. The first patient returned with seven more lesions of various colors scattered about his body. He was put under observation in the hospital because the doctors didn't know what else to do. He seemed to be suffering no ill effects as the inflorescence spread. The other crew members, along with their now infected families, returned and were quarantined. The doctors watched helplessly as the colorful growths enveloped their bodies. Hospital staff were showing growths. The hospitals across the city were soon filling up with people showing similar growths. There was panic. Systems were strained.

Within one month, the inflorescence was global. It was unstoppable, incurable and apart from the multicolored appearance of its victims, it was totally harmless. In fact, it had the beneficial effect of optimizing metabolic function. Overly thin people gained weight and overly heavy people lost it. More oddly, external gender characteristics disappeared under the veil of 'The Color', as people now called it. Fully transformed people also found clothing intensely irritating to the new skin and refused to wear it. Luckily, the new skin completely protected the wearer from every extreme of weather and made issues of modesty irrelevant.

The hospitals had emptied out, since the beneficial effects of 'The Color' had cured victims of all disease conditions. Despite the panic of such an upheaval, people were trying to get back to their lives and put things back in order. Half of the global population were now completely colored, and the remaining 'Normals' were well on their way. Yet systems continued to break down because a new panic had arisen. Race, along with every other visible measure of difference was disappearing. People were watching their cherished identities vanish into a wave of color. Now, no one could be trusted. All the 'Coloreds' were given special ID bracelets to indicate their racial and gender origins. Yet it was hopeless, since the number of new 'Coloreds' multiplied each day. In any case, people would lie about their former appearances in order to change their status in discriminatory cultures.





One month later, only a few hundred thousand 'Normals' had been unaffected. It was clear they had some kind of immunity to 'The Color'. Civil unrest was everywhere amidst the confusion, as people either rallied around the remaining 'Normals', or tried to attack them. Amidst the chaos, people no longer knew who to love or who to hate. It was a global catastrophe of the first order.

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The Color - Acrylic on Canvas - 30in x 30in

POLTERGEIST

Art & Story by Bruce Watson

Here we go again, you prick. More books sent flying from the shelf. Yesterday, a toppled chair and today a broken wine glass (Five bucks for six at Ikea: choke on the whole half dozen, you peevish spook!)

I'm not impressed, and you're not very good at this. My three-year-old is more destructive, though usually less malicious. In the scheme of things that go bump in the night, you rank with the wee-hours *catarrh* of my refrigerator. No matter, I'm sure you'll get better with practice.

I don't get why you're here. I've done nothing to warrant haunting, or is this your way of saying 'hello': just a lonely spirit with a creepy handshake? You know, SnapChat is pretty fun, so why you gotta make the walls bleed? They're a bitch to clean.

Well then, let's be friends even if you are smeared out across two worlds, one foot in the Abyss, the other rattling the cutlery in my kitchen.... Ah, but you don't have feet, and maybe that's your problem. Disembodied, incorporeal; no body, no corpse. Now here you are, a ghost with no machine and feeling sorry for yourself.

If it's any comfort, embodiment was never such a great trick: we're all just borrowed energy, aren't we? However complex the mechanism, ours is just a brief tour through cogs and linkages doing who-knows-what work for who-knows-what reason before we bleed back into the universe.

It could be worse: what about a machine without a ghost! A contraption, a simulacrum, a string attached to somebody's toe under a salon table, a trick to rob the gullible of sleep and money.

It doesn't matter either way. Company is company.

At least your ghoulish game of nicky-nicky-nine-door gets you noticed:

Knock knock.

Who's there?

Nobody!

Annoying, but effective.

It's all proof of life. A sudden cold patch in the living room, a flickering light, a trail of ectoplasmic goo. What about an Instagram of breakfast? A family portrait on Facebook? Even a sculpture in an art show. Whatever works, I say.

So come on in. Help yourself. Break some stuff. We noisy nobodies will get along just fine.



Poltergeist - Wenge, Brass & Glass - 12in x 9in x 20in

CERBERUS

Art by Chris Flodberg, Story by Brandon Ostrom

On the outskirts of town down a long winding road and through an old forest is a house no one remembers anyone ever living in.

It is a rotting hulk. Its walls are sagging and bloated, parts of the roof have collapsed. In many places the stone facade, slick with sickly looking yellow-green moss, has fallen in. But no one has ever died there. Many have gotten lost exploring its moldering, labyrinthine halls. Trapped behind a suddenly immovable door while hunting out treasures lost by time. But panicked phone calls are made and friends and family always come and with flashlights and crowbars they are freed. And everyone returns home safe. Until they dream of the dog.

He is never the same between two people. To some he is an old greyhound, gentle and stooped with age. To others an enormous bull-mastiff or a cocker-spanial with strangely human eyes.

In the dream he guides them around the property of that long abandoned place, showing them how it was countless years ago when it was whole. Stately and elegant. A model of Victorian craftsmanship. Not a home but a seat of power. Countries were once governed from such places. Within its innumerable rooms where whispers and secrets once lived, perhaps entire continents.

And when they have taken it all in with all its splendor, he tells them that they must sit and wait for the master of the house to return. The dog waits with them, his cold loveless eyes boring into them as the centuries pass out there on the lawn like so many seconds. As the sun dims and blackens and all light slowly drains out of the world until they wake up screaming. And those that dream of him, dream of nothing else for the rest of their lives.



Cerberus - Oil on Canvas - 72in x 54in

ITZPAPALOTL

Art & Story by Anita Harris

High up in the cold, inky darkness of the heavens, violent female star daemons, the Tzitzimimeh, raged and screamed circling the Sun. They threw their spears and shot their arrows into the blazing, fiery centre causing it to darken and dim so that grey shadows spread and lengthened to cover the land and earth below.

The Leader of the Tzitzimimeh descended from her sky domain and stepped gracefully onto the dry, dusty ground of this earthly plain. She stood tall and lithe, calm but powerful with dark ageless eyes bright against her dusky skin. The lower half of her face was streaked stark white and deep red. Around her neck lay a gold neck plate embedded with gems and holding back her thick black hair was a magnificent gold and obsidian headdress edged with long, silky feathers that proclaimed her eminence. The Sun's dimming light glinted off her adornments and a warm, gentle breeze ruffled her short cotton skirt.

Her name was known to all in this land: Itzpapalotl, The Obsidian Butterfly, and she was equally worshipped and feared. She was the Goddess of infant mortality and women who die in childbirth; protector of expectant mothers; deity of fertility; warrior leader of the Tzitzimimeh; ruler of the paradise domain of Tamoanchan; Goddess of the 13th level of the heavens. And she was hungry.

Her keen eyes surveyed her surroundings. Before her lay Tenochtitlan, the greatest city of the Aztec Empire. She scanned the ornate pyramids, sculpted architecture and glittering riches this capital boasted, and she smiled. The two hundred thousand dwellers were nowhere to be seen, as she expected, but she could sense their presence, knew they were hiding and praying, silently watching and hoping. She licked her lips. It had been years since the last solar eclipse. She didn't have long. Her daemon sisters could only attack the Sun for a short while, but the darkness provided would be all the time she would need.

She stepped forward advancing toward the heart of the city to begin her search. Located in the central core, rising above all other buildings lay Templo Mayor, the Great Central Pyramid. Moving closer she could hear rhythmic chanting arising from the High Priests that lined its majestic edges. There, standing in the square courtyard at the base of the temple's steep steps were twenty elite male warriors; warriors who had competed and fought for this highest of honours. Each were attired in ritual, reinforced cotton-based war armour; each watched her approach with an alert, battle seasoned gaze and each of them tested their grips on their chosen weaponry: lethal spears, sturdy bows, vicious Macahuitl (razor sharp obsidian sword clubs), and atlatl (deadly dart throwers).

She halted her approach at the far end of the temple square, opposite the poised warriors, assessing their readiness and preparations. Her eyes flicked upward towards the High Priests. With the smallest inclination of her head she acknowledged them and their offering. Fluidly, she dipped to the ground and crouched. Her human form shimmered and began to transform. Her skin, already



dark and swarthy, deepened to ebony black. Thick, yellow scales formed on her calves and feet; her toes elongated, and the nails lengthened into the wicked curved talons of an eagle. Her once slender hands and fingers thickened, the nails sharpening into the claws of a jaguar and from her back, edged with glittering obsidian knives, spread wings shaped like a giant black butterfly. Her once striking human face shrank back revealing the bone white skull beneath with its chilling rictus grin.

As one, the warriors roared out their war cry and charged. The chant of the priests raised in volume and tempo, their voices dipping and climbing, melding and blending, the rising crescendo matching the adrenaline and wild frenzy of the warriors' combat below. Then all at once the chanting abruptly stilled, all sound ceased, and silence descended upon the square. Small clouds of dust stirred around her ankles and the warm breeze once more ruffled her skirt. Her chest rose and fell rapidly with each hurried, hot breath; her arms hung by her sides whilst small crimson droplets fell from her claws and gently spattered the hard-packed earth on which she stood. An eagle screamed in the distance, its piercing echo reverberating from the giant pyramid before her. Itzpapalotl licked blood from her fingers and wiped her mouth. Arrayed around her feet lay the remains of the 20 elite warriors. Lifeless, twisted bodies scattered the ground, chests torn open, hearts devoured. Shredded forms, broken limbs, decapitated heads with frozen, wild expressions and wide, staring eyes, all framed by dark, drying blood that was being quickly absorbed into the thirsty earth. Itzpapalotl returned to her human form, once more inclined her head toward the silent priests who in turn bowed low in reverence.

She walked quietly from the city. The eyes of the inhabitants watched her leave, their mouths and lips noiselessly offering prayers and worship.

There at the edge of the city, shadowy, shimmering figures of women, babies and infants waited patiently. Their ghostly, transparent forms wavered, swaying forward silently and gently. The goddess called them to her, welcoming them and lovingly gathered them to her. As the sun regained its intensity and radiance, as warmth and light returned to the mortal world, Itzpapalotl, the Obsidian Butterfly, Skeletal Warrior Goddess of the Aztecs, looked to the sky and ascended once more to Tamoanchan, safely guiding the departed souls of those she cared for to her heavenly home. There they would regenerate and gain the strength needed for reincarnation. And she, she would rest until the next solar eclipse.





Itzpapalotl - Recycled Doll & Mixed Media - 15in x 11in x 7in