Heather

> *When you see that happening all the time, where they're making comments about 'the woman' and they're putting themselves in a superior role, that gets instilled into you — that as a female you're less-than.*

I was born out of spite. And throughout my childhood I experienced a lot of abuse and neglect. It shaped my views of myself, and how I went into relationships. My adult life has been a journey of trying to confront and work through those childhood experiences, and learning to love myself.

I don't have a lot of good memories of when I was a child. My memories are dark and full of anxiety. The earliest memories I have are from when I was three. I don't remember being dropped on my head, but I do remember things around it. So, I remember being on the couch with an ice pack, and my head hurting, and my mom telling me on the way to the hospital that she'd never let my dad hurt me like that again.

He dropped me twice, actually. He only stopped, apparently, because he heard a crack. My dad was very aggressive. He blames drugs, but there are also underlying tendencies to be angry and dominating. My dad always took out his emotions on those who were smaller and weaker than him. So that's what my mom, my brother, and I, we all dealt with. He always made it feel like our existence was an inconvenience.

I learned to be silenced, to be afraid to speak up or to stand up for myself, and that my opinions didn't matter. It was only my keeping quiet that kept my dad from getting angry at me, so that is what I learned to do.

When I got out of my dad's house, I ended up in a relationship with a guy just like him. My ex always made me feel like I didn't have a right to say anything. He told me that I should be staying home and catering to him. I even had to walk next to him or behind him, because my being in the lead made him feel emasculated.
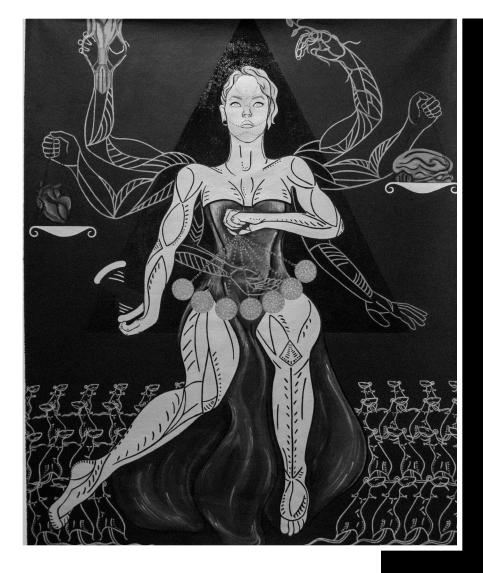
When there was an argument he would belittle me, trap me in the car, or keep my dinner from me until I'd agree with him. My voice, my words, my insights, my feelings – they all didn't matter. He'd tell me I wasn't pretty enough to get angry, and that I was a whore because I hadn't been sexually inhibited before our relationship. But then it was my duty to give him what he wanted and to satisfy him.

He mentally tortured me into submission if I resisted his demands. There was even a point where I was regularly being raped. I didn't realize it at the time, because I had been taught that my feelings didn't matter. In my mind, I accepted what was happening as just the way things were supposed to be. I accepted the love that I thought I deserved, because that was the kind of love I was used to.

"Just get out." That's what they say. But, it's not that easy to leave an abusive relationship. Especially when that type of abuse and oppression has been wired into you, and into the women in your family for generations. I made excuses, like, "oh it's not that bad," or "when it's

good it's good," or "he has his own issues." I would have this sense of guilt and obligation to stay — and that was also a part of the problem, because I was always wanting to nurture and fix and help, because that is what I was taught a woman was supposed to do for a man.

Love hurts, but it's not supposed to hurt that way. Love hurts when you really love somebody because you know that one day you'll lose them. That's the hurt. But nobody should have to tolerate physical, mental, emotional, or verbal abuse in the name of love.

It wasn't until I started taking psychology classes that all of a sudden a light bulb went on and I realized that what I've been going through is a problem in society – the sexism, the misogyny, the patriarchy. It was this amazing moment of like, "Wow, so I wasn't wrong!"

I still struggle at times, thinking I'm not feminine enough, I'm not pretty enough, my voice is too loud. I recently cut off all of my hair, because of the emotional tie it had for me with my femininity as it was ascribed to me for so long. At first I did mourn the loss of a physical characteristic expected of women. But, it ultimately does feel empowering to go against the grain and to not fit that stereotype of what a woman "should be." It reminds me that I have the strength to be myself, and to love myself, and to give myself what was never given to me as a child.

"Creating 'I Am The Rat Queen' is the outcome of searching for myself and struggling for growth and empowerment. Having also fallen in love with my pet rats (that I had too many of) where I experienced repetitive illness and death, I was confronted with my own mortality and suffered from the massive experience of loss, while coming to terms with my own weakness and shortcomings as a human being.

I also connected with the stigmatized rodent, as I too often felt like the pest as a child. I became 'The Rat Queen', as a symbol for those forgotten and left behind, like the rat, rising from the sewers and transcending its place from the abject to the sacred. We all belong here, we all matter, and we are all a part of this universe.

This was one of my first works of art in graduate school that reflected my journey to personal empowerment within the inherent powerlessness of the nature of things."