

A Mexican-American Ghost Story

In honor of Idabo's Mexican Consulate's 2016 traveling exhibit, "People Walking in Search of Sunrise," celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Idabo-Jalisco Sister State relationship. The exhibit features yarn paintings by José Benítez Sánchez, and showcases the art of the Huichol Indians, a people living in the remotest part of Western Mexico.

1.

As every child knows, the night is full of boogeymen you can't see—just beyond the puddle of light—just outside your circle of perception. I lie awake scrutinizing the borders of the darkness. Don't come out, I whisper. Just stay under the bed. Stay in that closet. Leave me be. And wouldn't you know it, they do . . . and do . . . do nothing.

2.

Ghosts are trickier to detect. They are a feeling, they are a shiver, an unease. Borders mean nothing to them. And ghosts have no skin. They may have a body. After all, do we even have a body, or just skin? Concealing, opaque skin. Who really knows? Skin, however, gives us away. Black, white, yellow brown. Ghosts have no skin and they travel north and south.

3.

There was an old man who went on a racist rant about how much he hated black people. And when Monique, with braces and cornrow braids, came into the waiting room, he continued his rant. It didn't even register, didn't apply to people he actually knew. It was just something you say, something your parents said, something that's always been said. In this way, words are like our shadow. Our shadow is how we know we have skin.

4.

Sometimes ghosts tell stories about us. It is rare, but when one speaks, it speaks of us. This is why we think ghosts are like us—are descended from us. This is why we are afraid.

5.

Ghosting is my new favorite cure for insomnia. When an owl calls, I answer. Like a child parroting every word just to be obnoxious, like a digital recording capturing none of the rich tones of vinyl. Real ghosts do not play at copy. They sound like mountains, so immeasurable and so ageless that they reject all other opinions in echo. Mountains are true, but lazy. They are wise, but lonely. My ghosting owls is pointless, like counting clouds, and eventually I drift to sleep.

6.

During sex I like to be on bottom. Why does no one say this? You always hear people say that they like to be on top. I suppose it's because only people who like to be on top would brag to strangers about sex. And I suppose only people who like to be on top tell others what they like—like the world really cares. Sex would be easier if there was no top or bottom, if there was no right and wrong, if there were no borders. Sex between ghosts is rampant.

7.

People build walls to keep the darkness out. When they open doors, it is only for a second and when they open windows, they use screens. Some people do not open windows or doors at all, fearing mosquitoes. But still the mosquito finds a way inside, and meanwhile these people are prisoners in their own homes. You cannot fear mosquitoes for a mosquito bite. As ghosts, forced to live outside their own borders, will tell you, the itching is bearable. The itching is preferable.

8.

When darkness falls, this is when we tell ghost stories. We gather around the campfire in the heavy coats in which we will later sleep. We jump. We laugh. We exaggerate our faces with flashlights. We place our hunting rifles nearby and warn of bears coming into the camp late at night. Nosing the tent, ill-mannered paws on the table, huffing, looking for food. Looking to be a rug, my father might say. And when the wind shifts the smoke back to our side of the fire, after we just got up to move, we cannot see it, but move again.

9.

Ghosts between us. You say this to mean immeasurable distance. Like miles. Like we're worlds apart—even as we kiss. It's physics. No matter how small the distance, there will always be ghosts between us.

10.

Lying awake with the blanket tight against my chin, I wonder if there are boogeymen just out of sight—beyond my awareness. I wonder if boogeymen fear the ghosts of other boogeymen. Or the ghosts of boredom. I wonder if the snowy owl ever worries that he sounds as weightless as lint—old, used, blue-gray dust from God-knows-where. I wonder if our house is really haunted. Do places have skin? And when we leave them, we birth ourselves into a new light, but light nonetheless.