

Ghosts

I open the old album, searching for Abuelita's photo

The album is filled with stained yellowing pictures that smell of dust and decay

The book's transparent sleeves are flimsy and torn

The adhesive paper, dried up like a parched desert

Faces leap out of the worn-out pages, photographs falling like autumn leaves, dangling like loose
teeth

Frozen images of aunts and uncles, parents and grandparents, cousins and siblings, and a few
strangers too—some who are still alive, some who are now deceased

I am searching for my grandmother, lost within this album that creaks like an old wooden door
with every flip of the page

I find the photo I am looking for—a Polaroid

Abuelita is hunched over, amidst a backdrop of colorful flowers and
evergreen plants

Behind her stands a tall robust hedge, its crimson leaves neatly trimmed

Abuelita sits sideways on an orange plastic chair, too small for her

She wears a print floral dress and matching navy-blue cardigan sweater

A brown and purple paper crown adorns her head

Abuelita looks directly into the camera, her expression filled with wonder
and surprise, patience and resignation

“Ay, muchachos malcriados,” I seem to hear her say in a raspy voice
followed by a chuckle

But in opening the album, I unknowingly release the ghosts

“Unknowingly? *Unknowingly?* Hmph!” they scoff, yawning and stretching
Unharnessed, the ghosts sway and expand, a hushed chattering among them

I try to listen, very carefully

Yes, I can hear them

I type furiously on my keyboard

“What *are* you doing?” they demand to know

“A class project,” I say dryly

With every tap of the keys

The ghosts grow impatient, restless

I’ll accept, I bear some responsibility

Their eyes closed and arms crossed, the ghosts nod in agreement

I’ll admit, it was my idea—not theirs—

To write the poem, create the slideshow

Pry into the album, searching

Pluck images from the internet, adding words, infusing them with story

The ghosts hover over my workspace, crowding my computer

Like heavy rebozos, they drape around my shoulders

The ghosts frown and shake their heads, suck their teeth

“No, no, no, that’s not how the story goes,” they interrupt

I try to listen, very carefully

Yes, I can hear them

And then

at that very

moment, as if the
ghosts have
telecommunicated
across the state,
as if I am watching an episode of
The Twilight Zone

A message arrives, a notification from 23 and Me

“Hi there...I was wondering if the name Liborio G. rings a bell? He was my grandpa. From Durango. I am trying to learn more about him. I met him once when I was seven. My grandmother’s name was Clemencia Q. Both are passed now...”

I stare at the screen, read over the lines again and again

My mouth hangs like an elongated papaya, the shape of Munch’s scream

I study every detail of my newly found cousin’s DNA chart

“Liborio? Yes, he was my grandfather’s brother,” I type

Stories flash through my mind, stories I do not dare to share

How can I write

How can I explain that Liborio abducted Clemencia after she refused his advances, how he put a knife to her throat, dragged her away, forced her to submit to him against her will, how Clemencia shrieked, kicked and screamed, pleaded for clemency, how her eyes shone wild with terror in the dead of the night...

She was a teenager, a girl

The ghosts twist and twirl, they narrow their eyes

My cousin asks, “Who were your grandparents?”

I look over my shoulder before I reply, “Pánfilo G. and Candelaria S.”

Stories flash through my mind, stories I do not dare to share

How can I write

How can I explain that Pánfilo beat Candelaria, smashed a log over her head, blood oozing out of her ear, how he called her an India pata rajada, made her kiss his feet as if he were God, slapped her with a hard calloused hand for not warming his food just right, flung their two-week baby across the room because the infant wailed too loud...

The ghosts draw near, now hanging precariously like a tightened scarf around my neck

“It’s not nice to disturb the dead,” they whisper, interrupted by my relative, who chirps,

“Maybe someday we can meet up? I live in Modesto. Where do you live?”

“Yeah, that would be great. I live in Watsonville,” I say

We share a few more pleasantries and tidbits of family history, my cousin and I, before saying
goodnight

Now the ghosts rise up like blue tongues of fire

Now they are ruffled and roused

They shout, they argue, they bicker, they curse

I mouth a prayer and ask for forgiveness, which calms them some

I finish my project, silence my computer

I gather up the loose photos like piles of dry leaves

I open the album, search for the empty spaces, filling in the gaps

I press the photos against the book’s rippled pages, smooth the protective covers over my aunts
and uncles, parents and grandparents, cousins and siblings, and a few strangers too

Gently, I close the album, place it back into the cardboard box inside the hallway closet

Gently, I say goodbye—except to my grandma

Adorned in a picture frame, Abuelita Candelaria stays close to me

Tía Clemencia I display on my altar of memory

I light a candle for the women, which calms them some

I burn sage and copal for the men, which calms them some

Black and grey plumes of smoke spiral in the air—cleansing, protecting, forgiving

They say some things are best kept buried, best left undisturbed

But I wonder if that is a grave mistake

A faint rattle echoes somewhere across the hallway

Then

Everything grows quiet

I Don't Mean to Be Rude, But

Refined people listen to Chopin, Beethoven, Mozart

We listen to banda, norteñas, oldies, hip hop, and rap

Refined people use words like “nosh” or “subterfuge” when they speak and write—even when they post on social media

Refined people use phrases like “to all and sundry” or “apropos of nothing” when they speak and write—especially when they send work emails

Refined people write poems about vases and flowers, mountains and rivers

We write poems about racism and struggle—and sometimes vases and flowers, mountains and rivers—but mostly about racism and struggle

Refined people send their kids to private schools, pay for piano and tennis lessons, open 529 accounts

Refined people take their children on college tours, years before they graduate high school

Refined people travel to places like France or England

—Europe is so wonderful, they say

They visit the Eiffel Tower, snap photos of Buckingham Palace

Some go native, loosen their hair,
explore the Amazon jungles of
Brazil, get married in Costa Rica,
and have babies named Maya or
Quetzal

Refined people throw lavish dinner parties, prepare seared ahi tuna steaks, served with risotto and arugula salad dressed in raspberry vinaigrette

They open expensive bottles of chardonnay, drink dirty martinis, maybe scotch on the rocks

They drape cloth napkins across their laps, arrange their cutlery just right, keep their elbows away from the table, chew their meals softly—no slurping or smacking

We eat tacos with rice and beans, have large parties overflowing with relatives:
abuelitxs, mothers, fathers, siblings, nieces, nephews, grandkids, aunts, uncles,
babies, neighbors, and a few stragglers

We shout across the table, eat at different intervals, spill into garages and driveways because our homes are too small

We take second and third helpings of food, use paper napkins, eat with fingers or plastic forks, pour heaping spoonfuls of salsa and crema onto our plates, smack our lips, lick our fingers, gulp Modelo beer, gossip and tell jokes, laugh until our bellies ache

Yeah, I know

You eat tacos and drink Modelo beer too

I see you standing in line in front of the La Super-Rica Taqueria on Milpas Street, venturing into the lower East Side, wearing your khaki shorts and leather sandals, beige sweaters draped around your shoulders

I see your tanned manicured fingers, pecking away at your shiny cell phones that glitter in the blinding sunlight while you wait for your tacos, your classy BMW's parked across my broken street

I don't mean to be rude, but—

Ya'll tired AF

To be clear, there's nothing wrong with listening to Chopin or vacationing in England or noshing on seared ahi tuna or sipping dirty martinis or driving BMW's

To be honest, I've never done any of these things, but heck—maybe someday I will?

Why not

But taken together, in combination

Well

It's just that

The conjunction makes a difference

I don't mean to be rude, but—

Ya'll tired AF

But

Wait

Let me tell you something

It doesn't have to be that way—

You don't have to be tired AF (unless you want to)

Here's my advice:

The next time you eat at a taqueria, maybe you can try the habanero sauce instead of the mild green salsa

Maybe you can travel to your city's backyard, send your kids to public schools, step outside of your safe communities, volunteer at a homeless shelter, donate to immigrant rights organizations, read Jamaica Kincaid

Maybe you can write to your legislators, demand an end to police brutality, vote for progressive candidates, attend social justice rallies, and stop patting yourself on the back because your friend or coworker is brown or black

Maybe you can hold back, bite your tongue, and let your brown and black colleagues speak for a change, maybe you can take the time to listen instead of criticizing them, thinking you already know everything, thinking you're already doing your part, so why are they always complaining?

—I marched at a BLM rally! you say

—I've been to Guatemala! you shout

Maybe you can shut up for once and stop thinking you're so brilliant, so special, so un-tiring

Maybe you can restore the murals inside the walls of your mind because

You were taught to reject them, wash over them, erase them because

The art was too colorful, the painted faces too dark and ugly—not refined or aesthetic

There used to be a mural of a large Olmec head right across the Super-Rica Taqueria

—on the corner of Milpas and Alphonse

I remember it well, walked past it every day after school, on my way home

One day, the building was sold, and the new proprietor painted over the Olmec head

In its place, he erected a lattice wooden panel and planted a prickly shrub with white flowers

Few people remember the mural because it was effectively erased

—This poem is vulgar! you say

—This poem is ugly! you shout

You love the Louvre in France

You crowd around the Mona Lisa, snap dozens of photos of her

—Now that's fine art, you say, gazing lovingly at the famed, overrated painting

So I'll say it again:

I don't mean to be rude, but—

Ya'll tired AF

But

Just remember:

It doesn't have to be that way—

You don't have to be tired AF (unless you want to)

