

THE GHOST OF *John Wayne* AND OTHER STORIES

CAMINO DEL SOL

A Latina and Latino Literary Series

Ray Gonzalez

The Ghost of John Wayne

AND OTHER STORIES

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CONTENTS

PART ONE

The Scorpion Eater	3
The Black Pig	8
Cabeza de Vaca	14
The Grandfather Horse	17
Spanish	20
The Legend	23
Postcards	26
Circling the Tortilla Dragon	29
The Jalapeño Contest	31
The Properties of Magic	33
The Chinese Restaurant	35
Spaceship	38
In the Ruins	40
How the Brujo Stole the Moon	43

PART TWO

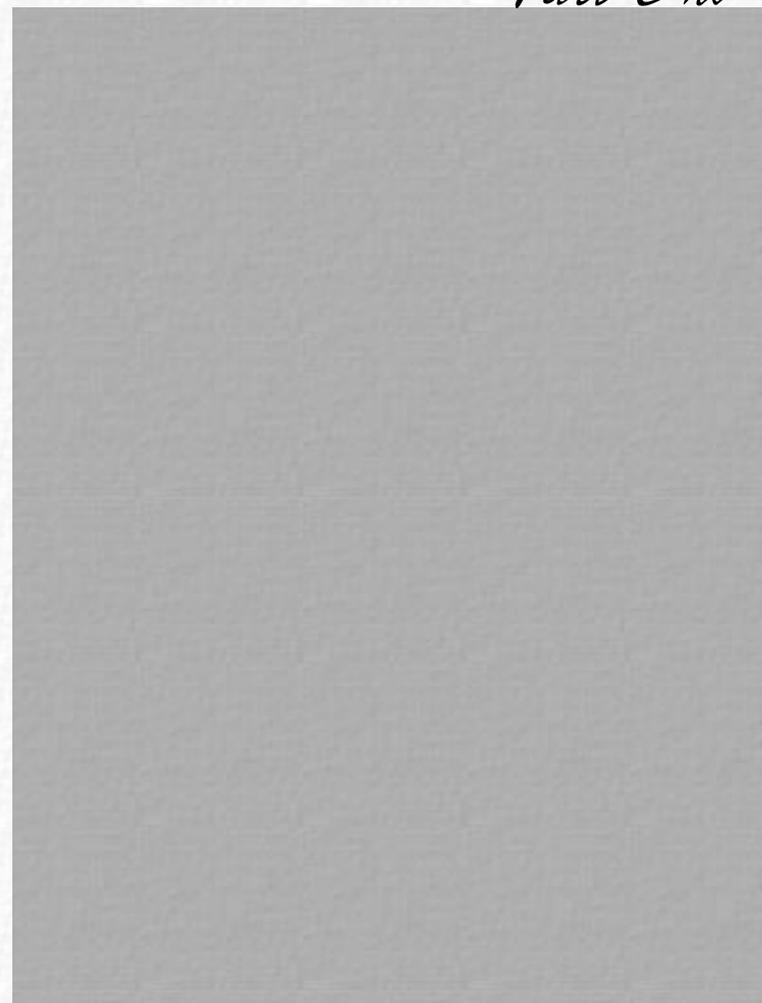
Eduardo	49
Mountain	60
Fishing	70

PART THREE

Train Station	81
The Ghost of John Wayne	86
Away	100

The Apparition	107
Becky	112
Canyon de Kayenta	122
Invisible Country	139
The Garden of Padre Anselmo	155
Acknowledgments	169

Part One



THE SCORPION EATER

He held it up to the candlelight so Miguel could see it glowing in the jar. It twitched and twisted its tail, the flickering light moving through its body like pulses of danger. Miguel watched as the man drew the jar closer and removed the wire screen that served as a lid. The man, who had a black moustache and tied his hair back in a ponytail, nodded. Miguel wondered where his *abuela* had met such a strange person, but he did not ask him any questions, not even his name. He had no choice but to sit and watch the stranger play with the scorpion in the jar.

Miguel's parents were dead and his *abuela* was lost in the cantina, and this man came to visit him often. He told him he was a friend of his *abuela*. He usually brought Miguel a piece of fruit or a large bottle of soda, sometimes a whole plate of delicious *enchiladas* from the cantina. Miguel thought the man with the long hair worked in the cantina, a place where his *abuela* spent most of her time. Tonight was different because the stranger brought the large scorpion in the jar. He sat at the kitchen table and motioned to the boy to join him. At first, Miguel wanted to run when he saw what was in the jar, thinking this man might want to set the scorpion loose on him.

"Don't worry, Miguel," the man said. "Your *abuela* knows I am with you tonight. She told me to watch over you. She gave me this as a gift. This is her jar, and the scorpion belongs to her. She told me this is the kind of magic we have because she and I love

anyone there. In the distance, the Sandia Mountains were red in the early morning light. Eduardo wondered if anyone had seen him leave the neighborhood so early in the day. He stepped up to the passenger side of the metal frame and looked through the shattered window. Grass grew through holes in the floorboards. He pulled on the door, but it wouldn't open.

Loco startled him when he barked and leaped out of the back of the car, pieces of seat stuffing clinging to his dirty white fur. The dog had spotted a jackrabbit and had chased it across the field, disappearing into an abandoned house at the other end of the field. The adobe structure had one wall completely down and the door hanging by one hinge. Eduardo and Loco had passed this way before, but this was the first time the dog had gone into the ruins. Eduardo gazed at the four huge cottonwood trees that rose in the yard. Their enormous gray trunks defied the thick wall of tumbleweeds clustering around them as they surrounded the shattered house. As he neared the place, he noticed the rope and wooden swing that hung from the farthest tree. The small piece of wood that served as the seat leaned crookedly in the air, too high for a small boy to climb on.

He spotted a strange sight on the tree closest to him and moved into the shadows of the branches to get a better look. The high wall of tumbleweeds prevented him from standing directly under the tree. He squinted into the early sun and studied the wooden birdcage that hung from one of the branches. It swayed in the breeze with the tiny door open, and he wondered what kind of bird would be attracted to such an ugly cage. His thoughts were broken by Loco's barks from inside the house. Eduardo climbed over old car tires, rusted tin cans, and enormous ant hills to reach the broken porch. He looked behind him again because Loco's bark had brought back the feeling of being watched.

Again, there was no one behind him. He stepped carefully on

the rotting boards and paused in the open doorway of the dark, damp room. It was empty except for a wooden shelf standing against the far wall. Dust hung in the air and reflected off sharp beams of sunlight breaking through holes in the ceiling. Some of the floorboards had fallen through. Thick grass grew through the cracks, and tumbleweeds piled themselves in the corners. The lone window was a diamond-shaped cut in the wall, the glass broken long ago. The cut held an intricately designed wooden frame.

Eduardo went to the shelf and found an object of a kind he had never seen, a small barrel about eight inches deep, carved out of heavy wood with colored symbols painted on its sides. He lifted it off the shelf and looked inside. It was empty except for a few spider webs and dirt at the bottom. He turned it gently in his hands as Loco ran out the door. Eduardo lost interest in chasing the dog as he studied the symbols. They were painted red, blue, and green.



He clutched the object to his chest for a few seconds, then placed it gently on the shelf. He wanted to keep the thing but felt chills on his arms and face. Taking it would be wrong. Eduardo had never stolen anything from anyone. The various pieces of junk he brought home—old car parts, pieces of glass and wood, and odd-shaped bottles—were all picked up from abandoned places. If he took this wonderful thing home, his mother would ask where he'd gotten it. With her superstitions against the unknown, Eduardo knew she would not let him keep it. Those strange markings on the barrel could not sit in her house alongside religious calendars, votive candles, and statues of many saints. As Eduardo thought about his mother and her crucifixes and rosaries, the feeling of doing something wrong went away.

help him, in charge, unlocked the back gate to his property, closed it behind him, and found a comfortable spot in the camouflaged area. There, he sat on one of the logs and gazed across the rapidly flowing water. Most nights, there was nothing to see. Across the river, rolling hills led west into the desert. Sometimes, things happened to change the deceptively peaceful atmosphere. Each day, Border Patrol vehicles drove along the opposite bank but rarely stopped. A Border Patrol van was the last thing he usually saw before returning to his store. A half hour of gazing was all he needed. Then he was calm enough to help Neto clean up for the nine p.m. closing. He rarely missed his nightly escape to the river.

That evening, he had not seen the man drown, but witnessing the Border Patrol agents pulling him out was the most disturbing thing he'd seen in all of his years of watching the river. Where did they take dead illegal aliens? He was about to return to his store when he saw one of the officers through a gap in the cattails on the opposite bank. The man drew his gun from his holster and looked down at the ground. The gunshot echoed across the water. A cloud of blue smoke rose around the officer, who holstered his gun and disappeared.

Mario had seen them dump the body into the back of the van, so what was the officer shooting at? He rose ten minutes later and went to help Neto close. Rounding the corner of the building, he heard car motors in the distance.

SEVERAL DAYS PASSED. Mario thought about the incident constantly. He was fifty-four years old, and things like this troubled him deeply. He had a hard time sleeping. He wanted to tell someone what he had seen. Who or what had the officer shot? He searched the newspaper for a story about a drowning but found nothing. Several days after it happened, he almost called Roberto, the local sheriff, but replaced the receiver on the telephone with-

out dialing. He had known Roberto for a long time, but something kept Mario from calling him. He knew that Border Patrol agents did wrong things from time to time. Friends of his had been harassed, questioned by aggressive officers about their nationality. Some had been accused of being wetbacks. A few had been falsely arrested as illegals, then released without apology when they proved they were U.S. citizens. These things happened along the border all the time.

One week after the incident, a Border Patrol agent walked into Mario's store. It was early in the afternoon. The place was empty. Neto was cleaning the small freezers in the back of the store. Mario was doing the bookkeeping in the ledgers he kept behind the counter that served as his desk.

The officer strolled slowly toward him. He looked at Mario, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses.

"Do you work here?" the officer asked him in a quiet, even tone.

"I am the owner of this store," Mario answered. He closed the ledger and set it aside.

"How long have you been in business?" the officer asked. His hidden eyes roamed the shelves of canned goods, bread, and soda cans.

"I have been here twenty-five years," Mario answered. He felt his chest tightening, but he was surprising himself with his ability to talk to this man.

"That's a long time," the officer said as he turned back to look at him directly. He removed his sunglasses and set them gently on the glass counter. "You must see many things going on in this town."

"What do you mean?" Mario asked. The doorbell rang, and Leo, one of the many unemployed men in town and one of Mario's closest friends, strolled in. Leo came in to chat around this time

Francisco, but he was not going to be the boy whose father tore the small platform apart and threw it into the river. His father screamed at him never to build a raft again because he did not want his sons to be mistaken for “mojados.” He said only “mojados” would think of building such a thing to get across, especially when the river was deep and they couldn’t wade into America. Mario stood behind his wall of junk, crouched lower in the evening light of a peaceful and passable river and dreamed he came out from behind the barrier to wave to his father on the other side. He dreamed his father stopped hating the river, turning from the opposite bank instead. He pointed to let Mario know which direction to go to find the nearest bridge to his side. When he found the bridge, Mario joined his father in a dry crossing over water that did not need to be disturbed.

THE GARDEN OF PADRE ANSELMO

a true story

Before her *padrino*, Don Benito, died, Leti went to church every Sunday with him. Her godfather made the painful effort, hobbling through the village to early morning mass. Leti was sixteen and the past two years she loved the old man who’d helped baptize her as a baby. Don Benito and Felipe, her father, had been brothers. After Felipe was killed by a robber two years ago, Don Benito spent as much time as he could with Leti. She was the one who had found her father in a pool of blood in the family grocery store.

In recent weeks Don Benito’s health had deteriorated. When she appeared at his door an hour before the seven o’clock mass, the early light of the sun was outlining the village. He was waiting for her in his chair, dressed in his cheap black suit. Though his tiny house was only a few streets from the church, the walk took him nearly an hour. His face was gray with pain, and his back bent forward as he hobbled on his cane. The villagers were accustomed to seeing the young girl and her padrino coming slowly up the street. “Buenos días,” they said, admiring the girl with the brown hair in the black *rebozo* that covered her head and shoulders.

That Sunday, as every Sunday, Padre Anselmo, the priest in Golondrina for twenty years, stood at the church door greeting his parishioners.