



A NIGHT OF  
SCREAMS  
LATINO HORROR STORIES

EDITED BY  
RICHARD Z. SANTOS

"Ranging from unsettling to all-out macabre, this anthology delivers more than just the typical jump scare."

—*Publishers Weekly*

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*Dedicated to those reading under a blanket with a flashlight. That noise you heard is probably nothing. Hopefully.*





## Introduction by Richard Z. Santos

Something is happening to horror writing. Over the past few years, a new breed of writers has edged out the established names and tired horror tropes and brought horror into the twenty-first century on a wave of gore, quiet scares and, sometimes, literary respect. Writers of color have played a huge role in the continued evolution of the horror genre.

People have been writing scary stories forever, but the success of Stephen King, Peter Straub, Lisa Tuttle, Clive Barker and others in the 1980s and 1990s announced horror as a viable and profitable genre. This era fully brought scary stories out of pulp magazines and cheap paperbacks into the mainstream. Since then, authors have continued to challenge genre labels and strike out into new territory. Today, you can walk into just about any bookstore and find a range of books pushing the boundaries of what we call horror.

If you want literary horror with only traces of the supernatural, or scary stories about ghosts or demonic possession or slasher books, it's all there and a lot of it is really good. Produced by major publishers, micro presses, self-published books, horror is everywhere and it's not only growing; it is evolving.

Even the works of those four I mentioned at the top—King, Straub, Tuttle and Barker—became less scary, but no less unsettling, as they and their writing matured. Many horror classics from a few decades ago (such as *The October Country* by Ray

Bradbury or *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson) have slipped out of the horror category and are now considered literary fiction or psychological thrillers.

That's why I consider this book more than a collection of horror stories. Today, we have writers who work in horror while combining elements of fantasy, science fiction, magical realism and literary fiction, making their books more weird or unsettling than scary. Of course, there are other writers who just want to make you look over your shoulder, wonder what that noise in the hallway is and regret opening their book when the house is dark, quiet and (hopefully) empty.

This collection includes all of the above. There are horror stories meant to send a shiver down your spine. But there are also quieter stories that want to unsettle you more than scare you. These weird tales present a world that is 9/10<sup>th</sup> the same as ours . . . but that 1/10<sup>th</sup> difference is more than enough.

Latinos have specifically carved out a space for themselves in this new morphing, hybrid market. And honestly, why wouldn't we be good at writing scary stories that challenge traditional narrative structures?

We read Stephen King back when he was trashy. At the same time, we were reading Gabriel García Márquez's tales about flying people, Toni Morrison's ghost stories and Kurt Vonnegut's science fiction—all of which felt more real and true than most of what gets passed off for realism now or then. We were told bedtime stories about kids being drowned in the river near our house—or for you was it a pond, or a drainage ditch, or an arroyo? As we grew up, family movie nights might have evolved from *Godzilla vs Megalon* to the horror films of Santo, to *Ghostbusters*, to *Halloween*, *Santa Sangre*, *Cronos* and *The Orphanage*. Most of us watched *The X Files*, *Buffy* and all their imitators, and lots of us listened to violent music that glamorized criminals, tor-

ture and death—I'll let you decide if I'm referring to gangsta rap or *narcocorridos*.

Take this cultural stew and throw in cartel violence in Mexico, a history of CIA-backed dictatorships in Central and South America, increasingly scary rhetoric from American politicians, decades of institutionalized racism, the demonization of our families on the most popular networks on television, and how could the result be anything other than brilliant, terrifying stories? After all, we are the faceless horde, invading zombies hell bent on upturning the world and replacing it with something foreign, accented and impossibly different.

Many fans and writers of horror feel safer inside these works because they are less scary than what's actually out there. Give me the ghost of a child trapped in a well over a lunatic with a machine gun walking into a school any day of the week.

The original idea for this collection was to showcase new works that explored the notion of hybridity. The experience of Latinx people in the United States is one of hybrid languages, religions, cultures and customs. Even at an institutional level we're straddling worlds.

I taught in high school for many years, and time and again I had to help kids fill out PSAT registration forms or some other bureaucratic nonsense. So many students would get stuck on the demographic questions. I had to explain to them that there's no Latino "race" and they were expected to select white. The confused, offended look in their eyes wouldn't have been much different if I had told them they were secretly a werewolf or a wizard. That is, after all, one of the classic horror situations. You thought you were one thing your whole life . . . and then you learn the truth.

As a group, we can't even fully decide if we are a group, and, if we are, what to call ourselves. Some of you reading these pages bristled at my use of "Latinx"—so new, so not-Spanish—

two paragraphs ago. Others sighed when I invoked the sexist dinosaur that is “Latino.” Well, this book also contains Latines, Chicanas, Tejanos, Nuyoricans, Hispanics (Gasp!), BIPOCs, writers of color, combinations of the above and more. As a group, we struggle to label ourselves because so much life, history and color can’t fit into five or six letters. How can a writer of Afro-Cuban descent living in New York City agree to the same label as a resident of the Rio Grande Valley whose family has lived there since before the United States and Mexico existed?

We have no label, and I don’t think this particular story will ever end. There’s not going to be a magical combination of letters we all agree on. No spell will bind us into one unit because the words can’t contain us. Even how we use those words differs from person to person. You’ll notice in this anthology that about half the pieces use italicized Spanish and about half do not. We left this choice up to the author.

Even scarier, is there actually an “us”? Can *Latinidad* really include socialists from the Bronx, Trump voters from Laredo, immigrants, immigrant haters, devout Catholics, atheists and every other polar opposite plus all the gradations in between?

Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa famously described the US-Mexico border as “*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (*The Borderlands/La Frontera*.)

Anzaldúa was writing from a very specific perspective as a queer Mexican-American woman in Texas, but the notion of a new border culture extends beyond the literal US-Mexico border all the way across this country and into all the emotional and psychological borderlands. Those open wounds are present

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everywhere the labels don't fit, the language doesn't sound right and we become aware of our differences.

We are here, unnameable, unsettled, at odds with ourselves and with everyone else.

Scary.



## Editor's Note

There's a little bit of everything in here: zombies, ghosts, a *chupacabra* (or two), shadow selves, mysterious portals, cable news hosts, ancient spirits, old magic and new.

While putting this collection together, I posted an open call for submissions. This book includes several pieces that came in from the "slush pile," which is such a scary, slimy name for a place full of so many wonders. I also personally reached out to writers and asked each to submit a piece. This included writers established in the horror genre and those entering these dark waters for the first time.

My goal was to put together a collection that included everything from blood and guts to campfire ghost stories, to subtle works that reveled in language and explored the great mysteries of life and death.

Several stories provide new takes on classic Mexican and Mexican-American folk tales, such as "Dark Lord of the Rainbow", "The Boy Called Chupa" by V. Castro and "A Curious Encounter" by mónica teresa ortíz. These tales are so familiar and almost comforting, yet so new and fresh. "La Llorona Happenings" by Flor Salcedo and "Chola Salvation" by Estella Gonzalez present dazzling new takes on some of the most important women in Latino culture.



Cloud Cardona and Ruben Quesada provided poems that touch on life, death and what comes after. These are two of my favorite writers, and I think their work fits right alongside the bloodier, more direct pieces.

Speaking of blood, there's plenty to be found in Rubén Degollado's zombie story "Migrants," which is Rubén's first horror story. Also new to the genre is Oscar Mancinas, whose story "Cruz and Me" is about the mystery of friendship (and a scary portal to somewhere else). The two best friends in Adrian Ernesto Cepeda's "A Night of Screams in Austin, TX" find themselves someplace they knew they shouldn't have gone. Leticia Urieta's "Detached" is a piece of bloody body horror, and I swear you'll be able to *hear* wet footsteps while reading this one.

Pedro Iniguez's "Purveyors and Puppets" explores the dark side to one of this nation's most frightening inventions: cable news. Haunted artists play a key part in Richie Narvaez's Faustian tale "A Thing with Feathers," and the singer in Lilliam Rivera's "Between Going and Staying" discovers that success can only keep her away from her family for so long.

As in many pieces of Latino literature, the role of family runs throughout nearly all these pieces. "Indian Blood" by Marcos Damián León is not only about the horrors of being broke but also the pressure of our heritage. Ann Dávila Cardinal's "What the Hurricane Took" uses only dialogue to bring the horror of Hurricane María's effect on Puerto Rico to life. Cardinal's story, like others here, focuses on the truly scary part of tragedy—what happens next.

The sci-fi tragedy "Tamales" by José Alaniz is one of the most unsettling pieces in this book, and I don't know how else to describe it other than saying: Mars, tamales, a *cohete* and a storm. The main character in Sydney Macias's "It Said 'Bellevue'" has found a family of sorts among the mistakes, mira-

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cles and demons kept hidden underneath that famous hospital. There are several found families in Toni Margarita Plummer's "Night Shifts," which features a very old character dealing with modern versions of timeless problems.

Ivelisse Rodriguez closes the collection with a story that brings many strands of Latino culture, history and spirituality together and miraculously leaves the door open for a way to undo so many horrors.

Thank you to everyone who submitted, to those who suggested writers for me to reach out to and to those who encouraged this project.

I think the people I have given the biggest nightmares to are Dr. Nicolás Kanellos, Marina Tristán, Gabi Baeza Ventura and the rest of the Arte Público crew who had to deal with my delays, uncertainties and bad organizational skills. Thank you for your patience and seeing this through.

And, of course, thank you for being the kind of person who reads every intro, author's note, bio and more. We need more people like you out there.



# Dark Lord of the Rainbow

Monique Quintana

---

When you're nine, your grandmother tells you the story about the Rainbow Ballroom to scare you. She tells you the story while making you a Shirley Temple right before bedtime. She uses a tiny glass jam jar instead of a cup. The way the story goes, she says, there was a teenage girl who met a beautiful man in the ballroom, and he asked her to go on a moonlit drive. Your grandmother tells you this is where she goes wrong. She should have stayed there with her friends. She's lucky she got to go out in the first place. Your grandmother drops a cherry in your soda, and you watch the fizz come up the jar like an amoeba. That should have been enough fun for her, your grandmother tells you.

The girl looks down and sees the man has hooves where his feet should be. No one ever sees the girl again. You ask your grandmother how she or anyone, for that matter, could know the man had hooved feet if the girl had disappeared? Your grandmother doesn't answer your question. She shakes her way out of the kitchen and into her garden.

Your grandmother will take you to visit your aunt's house in Parkside. While your grandmother's talking to her sister in

the kitchen, your cousin invites you to her bedroom, and under her canopy, puffy, like clouds, you sit on her bed and tell her about the beautiful man with hooved feet. Your cousin is seven years older and has Spaniard skin and hair blacker than your own. Yes, she tells you. She sticks her finger in the dimple on her face. There was such a man with hooves where his feet should be. Everyone knows the story because the girl danced all night with him. She came home with the rain in her hair and blisters on her feet, and tequila in her mouth, and then your cousin taps your throat with her fingertips, and they burn there like three sticks of copal.

The girl has curly hair like you and is as dark as you. She irons her hair before she goes out, the way you do now. There is a disco ball with green and yellow lights. The woman wears a red polyester dress that feels like silk in your hands. You wrap the dress around her breasts and ribs and her empty womb. You tie the dress in ribbons at her thighs. The beautiful man finds her and asks her to dance. He smells like pricy cologne and leather, and his hair is slicked black over his ear lobes, and the sun has scorched his skin the way you like it. He speaks to her in Spanish. You don't know how to speak Spanish, so the girl hears his words in reverse, and she reads his intentions on his fingertips as they run up her back. The girl leaves with the man in his Chevy Malibu. The air is warm and slow bleeding with rain. Fingers fall on the skin. The buildings go by in pitch and blue and trees and dust. She looks down at the gas pedal. She looks down to where his feet should be. She knows—the moon tips over his hooves and sighs.

# Migrants

Rubén Degollado

---

As the day was ending, Esteban decided to check the trap on the easternmost end of Rancho Altamira, where his family had lived for generations. His grandfather Esequiel Barajas had built the ranch decades before the world changed, and Esteban was glad he had gone to San Pedro's gates in heaven before all this. The trap was empty with no feral hog or javelina, and the trail of corn leading to the cage was uneaten. Where the feral hogs had been a nuisance across the border land, and ranchers and farmers had paid hunters to bag them, they were now scarce, hunted out by the living or devoured by roving droves of the dead. If the other trap to the south was also empty, he'd have to eat what was left of the javelina stew he'd made, which would only be good for another day or so. Esteban checked the cage for its functioning. It had a large opening big enough for an adult hog, where they were enticed to enter for the corn and figs he'd laid in the trough. On the ground, near the feeder, there was a steel plate attached to a taut wire. When the animal stepped on this, it would pull a pin wedged between the bottom of the door and the top of the cage. He stuck the muzzle of his cuerno through the bars

and tapped the plate. The door came screeching down to the ground. Gracias a Dios, it was still working and at least there was that. He checked the trough. The figs and corn were still there, untouched, other than scores of flies which were ever present. He reset the trap and walked away.

Esteban walked out of the brush and back onto the sendero. There were no deer or javelina tracks or the skip dragging parallel foot tracks of los muertos. He stopped to listen, and at first all he could hear was the chicharras and a little breeze stirring in the mesquite trees. It was when he held his breath that he heard groaning in the wind, and he knew the trap to the south of the house needed attending to.

He came to the last deer blind before the road leading up to the house, and he still hadn't found any tracks, except for the zigzag lines of a rattler and the tiny stars of roadrunners. This blind was hardly more than a plywood box painted green. It was at the intersection of two paths, which gave anyone inside two angles to shoot from. When his family had leased out the land, and the deer were plentiful and hunting was a sport and not a necessity, it had been the second-best blind. The favorite had been the tower, a twenty-foot-high steel blind that had vantage across the entire ranch. He opened the blind door and searched for scorpions and black widows on the dirty carpet floor. There were none, so he grabbed the milk jug filled with water he had left for the migrants passing through. He opened it, sniffed at it and drank anyway, regardless of how stale it smelled. With the family's well and the windmill to run it, clean water was still plentiful, at least on his ranch. There were milk jugs like this across their acreage laid out for the caravans of living people passing through, on their way to a better life and security beyond the wall. Years ago, his grandfather had dug a hundred feet down past the water table, and the aquifer

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beneath their land was plentiful. Esteban had enough to be generous. He traded the water for gun powder, lead from wheel weights for casting bullets and shell casings; he was able to reload in the popular calibers of 9mm, 5.56 and 7.62x39, and trade the Golfos for canned food and alcohol. This exchange also provided Esteban the protection of Chuy and his men from other cartels who might try to come in and steal whatever Esteban had. It was an uneasy alliance, sure, but Chuy had been a friend to the Barajas family, and the other soldiers respected the generational arrangement. They had even given him the cuerno, a Romanian-made AKM he kept running with his own reloads, lubricated with liquefied pig fat, and he only used it on deer and the dead.

The Golfos had done their business on his land when mostly what used to go north was product and what came south was cash. But now it was people, and even that had slowed as they had either given up because of the border wall or had settled in where they were, resigned that they would just have to make a go of it. Fight the living for food and water and the dead for the safety of their own bodies, such as they were.

The javelina he used to attract muertos was safe in the cage next to the corral trap, even as a dead one crouched on the ground and snapped at it, breaking its teeth on the hog panel, ripping the flesh of its face away. It was a migrant or coyote who had made it this far but would make it no further. Esteban whistled at it, and its dead eyes flicked in his direction. It was penned in the corral a living person could have easily scaled, but once life had left them, they lost the sense or coordination to do the simplest things. He could have ended it without noise, but needed to test his recent batch of reloads, and so he leveled the cuerno and lowered the heavy safety. The shot dropped it easily. Esteban was thankful he had



not missed. One shot from the cuerno was good, but a second shot would give a location to other muertos where they would come seeking dinner.

And it was then that living people came out of brush and tried to run away from him. It was a risk to make more noise, but he yelled at them to stop.

There were about fifteen of them—men, women and teens—all migrants fixing masks to their faces, not a coyote in sight and no one stepping forward as the leader. Esteban kept the rifle on them and yelled in Spanish for them to all stop. They had set up a camp there, waiting for night to make the crossing to avoid the patrols guarding the river. From the fresh scrape marks on the trap door's padlock, it was obvious they had also tried to get to the bait javelina, in competition with the muerto in the corral.

They complied and were still and seemed relieved he hadn't killed them.

They ignored the question and said, "We are looking for food and water, and were wondering if you had anything before heading on."

"Let me ask again. Where is your coyote? Who is leading you across?"

Despite the cuerno pointing their way, they stepped forward and told him they were hungry. "Por favor," they said.

Esteban raised the rifle higher. He said, "Where. Is. Your. Coyote?"

A man in the front pointed to the corral. "He is there. That was him. We got separated from him earlier, and there he is now."

If it was him, it was one of Chuy's men whom Esteban didn't recognize. Without the coyote on Chuy's payroll, these migrants would never make it to the other side.