**The Haunting**

Adrianna Sanchez-Lopez

 No spirit haunts like me, I think. I hear a heartbeat, but it’s entangled in darkness, a chasm called me. Swelling, battered tongue—too afraid of sounds. When I part my lips, it’s a thudding, pounding thing.

 I watch the miles distance us, my daughter and me. *You should be crying*. Somehow, I’ve failed her yet again; no tears emerge. Instead, I’m hovering, thudding above body and place. Calculating the days until winter break. Memorizing changing terrain.

 *It’s back, I fear.*

 The distance inhabits me. Cages me. Enrages me. Dust clouds of *shoulds* devour human me. Splotched and blotted into suspended animation, I lose sense and shape.

 I walk into her room, lie on her bed. Tears, but I don’t feel them. Grasping for equilibrium, my hands locate wet patches on her abandoned quilt. From these eyes; this vessel. From this specter animating me.

 There are no boundaries, no borders it seems. *Fluid self*: I don’t know where I begin. I don’t know where I end. I’m flooding and raging over rugged earth of memories. Gushing and rushing, no stopping this fluid me. Uncontrollable, unpredictable fluid thing that I am. Water is destruction when it’s not sustaining, I think.

 Numbness: enticing, growing fingers reach, widen—strangle me. Light shines right through me and all I can think is *it’s back*.

 Yanking me back to *fourteen.*

 *Fourteen.* When one hit leads to one drink leads to one kiss leads to blackness. Like a specter, I awaken to a new self: fluidity I cannot possess. A young girl no longer, for when I look at my body, I see whitecaps rushing, ready to gouge and erode. No one’s safe, not even me.

 Fourteen and levitating: shattered memory. The lick of a flame, of unwanted touch, wondering *how*. How do I know this burn? This harrowing touch touch touch touch? Knowing that my phantom self must be careful. Better to remain silent. *Come now, relic, rest in peace*. Must hide in the shadows. Must avoid *their gaze*: innocent, impervious gaze. My torrential existence floods their mouths with bitterness. *Spit it out*, they chant. Spit at her until she stops haunting the illusions we peddle: *slut slut slut slut slut*.

 Words—heart—brain. They betray me. Pain me. Mummified voice—removed, jarred, preserved. For *protection*, but the protection’s not for me.

 I *remember*. I drag my heart through mud, but when I turn around there’s no impression left by me. *Ghost*, hidden in the cavities of framed narratives.

 Float glass-me—jagged, uncured shards of mythical me. Translucent, transparent, shapeless thing: lacerations of the mind reverberate into my ribcage into my pelvis into my womb. It hurts to stand. To inhale, exhale: breathe.

 Thrust to seventeen, swollen belly exposing me.

 They flinch when I walk by. Some even scream. I am their worst nightmare. No marriage. *No modesty*. Statistics cast, like stones, at me—this phantom girl disrupting their *dreams*. I remain numb, adopting each narrative they hurl at me: gravelly self, I’m stones and rocks and dirt. They tread over me until I no longer haunt them. *Until they haunt me.*

[Isn’t that the secret? The haunted are always the true haunters; they just tell a better story.]

 Drowning in the depths of memory, epiphany: vulnerability is fear is pain is rupture is history. *I don’t want my experiences to be her memory.*

 Someone once told me that all pain comes from the same place*.* It’s a lie. I think about my self-history, cultivated in the lies I’ve internalized. I’ve learned to doubt my own experiences. To misinterpret my own voice. When I became a mother, I trussed my nightmares up with twine, pretended they weren’t waiting to implode.

 No spirit haunts like me, I think. My hands and limbs and feet all vapor. Coursing, raging channels of memory—illimitable nightmare called me.

 Eyes open, I stand. Existing, resisting, I gazeinto the mirror; remind myself of what I see: Mother. Woman. Human that feels. I *remain*.