

The Smithsonian's *Stories from Main Street*

"Shapeshifters, ghosts, and red eyed dogs: Spooky Tales and a Rich Heritage"

Joe Perry: This thing had human hands instead of feet. And he knew then that it was a 'shtahullo,' a shapeshifter. He said he could see a figure and it was standing on a branch and it was just watching him, he said, but he could see through it, and it was like, it was glimmering and shining and it didn't move and he didn't move for a long time. Finally, he decided, I might oughta get outta here.

Katie Marquette: welcome to the Smithsonian's *Stories from Main Street*. I'm your host, Katie Marquette. I'm a former public radio producer, current podcast and audio consultant and creator, and lifelong lover of history and stories. We're relaunching this series during an introspective time of year. Jack o' lanterns glowing in the night, kids and adults alike donning masks and costumes, play acting in an ancient game, hearkening back to the bonfires of all Hallow's Eve and the candles of All Saints Day. The eternal universal reckoning with our mortality and what it all means.

It's also a time for telling stories, the kind that keep you looking over your shoulder around the bonfire. Did you hear that? A crunch of leaves, a shadow behind a tree. Suddenly the world is full of questions, mystery, and the unknown.

The chilling, funny, thought provoking stories you're about to hear were collected as part of the Museum on Main Street program. For 30 years, they've been bringing Smithsonian exhibitions to small towns and asking the people in these diverse communities to make the exhibits their own. These stories continue to be collected by volunteers and submitted by everyday people. They're a real, unique window into America, a country as ever-changing, multifaceted, and diverse as the people that make up our towns and cities.

In a time of increasing polarization and tension, it is more important than ever that we remind ourselves of the stories that unite us, and more than that, our deep human need to hear and tell those stories. Our storyteller today is a man named Joe Perry, a member of the Choctaw Nation residing in Poteau, Oklahoma. Joe was born in 1956 and remembers a childhood running wild in the woods and fields of his rural home. He has been recognized by the Choctaw Nation as a First Language Speaker, an award given to tribal members that work to preserve the Choctaw language.

Animals feature heavily in Joe's story. stories, particularly his dogs. But in these first two stories, we encounter some rather strange dogs.

Joe Perry: One of the stories that dad used to, and this was from his personal experience, that he was building a fence one time down around the spring, and he noticed a beagle looking dog coming toward him from off in the distance. And he said, the closer the dog got, he noticed that something wasn't quite right with it.

And it was coming on a straight line toward him down the fence road. And he just quit what he was doing and started watching that dog, and it come closer and closer and it looked up at him. And he said, dogs usually don't do that, especially if they don't know you, they'll just ignore you and go on. He said this thing had human hands instead of feet.

And he knew then that it was a 'shtahullo, and that was a shapeshifter. He said he more or less was stunned. He stood watching it, he watched it walk off. And it just kept going down the fence line until it just walked out of sight.

Me and my best friend had went to the railroad tracks and we sat alongside the hill and we'd been putting pennies on the railroad and letting the train smash them. And there was a black dog that had followed us home. We didn't know who he was, we all like dogs, so we let him stay. We heard my sister, thought it was her saying, "man that's a good looking black dog." And what in the world is she doing in a barn at this time of night? We took a step, we decided we was gonna scare her.

And we took a step, we started sneaking in and we was creeping up through there and we heard a man's voice. That stopped us. Slim looked at me and I looked at Slim, who in the world is this? Let's scare both of them. Slim come up with the idea, I'll go sneak around this side of the barn and go to the south side and we'll meet at the doorway. And when we get there, we'll jump out and holler at them.

Slim had a flashlight and I had a 22. So we crept around there being real quiet and we got to the door and nodded at each other and we jumped in the barn. My sister wasn't there, no man was there, but that dog was sitting there looking at us, he was grinning at us, and his eyes was red, just glowing red. And Slim looked at me and I looked at Slim, and we crossed trails, he went to that side of the barn, I went to that side of the barn, we ran to the back, and both jumped that five strand barbed wire fence.

In the meantime, my sister thought we was at Slim's house, so she had locked up all the doors. And she was up, and I think she was doing dishes. She come through the house to open up the front door. We asked her, said, was you just out in the barn? She said, are you crazy? I ain't going out in that dark thing. And we said, that dog was talking to somebody. She didn't believe us. And the next morning, when we went out, the dog was gone.

And we was riding horses through Keona, down by the granary. And that dog all of a sudden appeared. And Slim told me, he said, "there's your dog." He ain't my dog. We watched, he followed us. His eyes wasn't red no more. He's acting like a normal dog. And there was a truck come over the hill and that dog crossed the road at the time that truck come over and it hit him and it, I might just mangle that dog.

Come back, the dog wasn't in a ditch. And Slim said, "he must not have been as mangled as what we thought." We got back to the house. The dog was in the barn again. Completely well, pulled back together. And he's sitting there looking at us. His eyes wasn't red, but he was grinning at us. And Slim said, "hey, something right with your dog." I said, "he ain't my dog." I said, "you can have him if you want him."

Katie Marquette: There's so many things I love about Joe's storytelling. First, he connects us to a family and a community. Many of the stories you'll hear today are from his father, and they include references to Choctaw mythology and spirituality as well. We also hear a lot about Joe's best friend, Slim. It's easy to imagine these two boys out in the countryside getting into trouble, telling stories, having adventures. It's the sort of childhood that could be hard to come by nowadays.

I also love that he makes us look twice. I have two black dogs myself, so I can imagine being out late at night and thinking I see my dog in the distance, only to look again. Does that dog have human hands? Does that dog have red eyes? Did that dog talk? Things are not always what they seem. In this next story from Joe's dad, we have an unexplained vision on an ordinary day out in the garden.

Joe Perry: But he noticed something in, out of the corner of his eyes and it was in the tree. And when he looked, he said he could see a figure, and it was standing on a branch, and it was just watching him, he said, but he could see through it, and it was like it was glimmering and shining, and it didn't move, and he didn't move for a long time. Finally, he decided, I might oughta get out of here. He backed away a little bit and took off, and he'd look back, and it would still be in that branch. And he watched it for a long time, and finally,

when he looked back, it was gone. He didn't really know if that was a 'shilop,' or a ghost, or he didn't really have no explanations for it.

Katie Marquette: There's a lot we like to think we understand in today's modern world. I mean, we have technology, we have science, we have Google! It can sometimes seem like the world has been robbed of some of its magic. But stories like Joe's make us realize the world is still an enchanted place, a mysterious place, if we only have the eyes to notice it.

The word you heard Joe use for the glimmering figure on the tree was a Choctaw word: 'shilop.' In Choctaw mythology, a 'shilop' is a shadow being, a sort of ghost. Every person has an outside shadow, which follows him all the time, and a 'shilop,' an inside shadow, which after death goes to the land of the ghosts.

It also seems to be a term that covers all sorts of mysterious monsters, soul eaters, dark beings from the underworld. This is a real encounter with mystery that his dad had and it's so powerful to hear Joe reference his Choctaw heritage, stories, and myths, and ideas that have remained a part of his family for generations.

In this next story, Joe is out with Slim and they think they see his dog Stormy coming toward them, a dog that Joe said was short and about 25 pounds. But when it gets closer it becomes clear pretty quickly, this is not Stormy.

Joe Perry: And Slim said, "here comes Stormy." And it looked like Stormy. And it got closer and closer, and we noticed, Stormy ain't nearly this long. That thing was about ten foot long. It was covered with hair, and it come up to Slim and laid its head on his shin down here and looked up at him. And it had alligator teeth and red glowing eyes. And just before that Slim had heard something. So we picked up a rock. We both picked up a rock, and it grabbed Slim's leg and like it had hands and it was hugging him and it was looking straight up in his face and slimmed it down and he hollered.

And I'm still trying to think what could be this long? And Slim hollered, or screamed actually, and he threw his rock and he completely missed his leg in it too. And he said, "it won't let go!" So I had my rock. I threw it. And I hit it right in the head and it started making the awfulest noise, the awfulest sound, gluttural sounds. And for a little, small head, it was, the big teeth, it was making roaring sounds.

But it let go of Slim and started just tying itself in knots like a snake. And my nephew, I forgot about him, but he was with us. He was just a little guy. And so one of us hollered, "run!" Steve took off running. We let him have about three steps and we took off and that thing was trying to uncoil itself.

We didn't know what it was going to grab next. So we took off and Slim was on one side of Steve, I was on the other. We just each grabbed an arm, and we took off. He was running too, but he was about that high off the ground, just getting it. We ran up the hill, and we talked up the hill, and we could still hear it growling and carrying on and stuff, but we couldn't see it anymore, so we ran on to the house and locked the door and told everybody, we just had an experience of some kind, and Dad said, "yeah, it's 'shilop.'" And we found out later that there was an old Indian cemetery at the bottom part of our pasture that I guess they thought it got deconsecrated or something, or disturbed or something. But every once in a while, Dad said something like that would show up.

They hadn't laid the tracks to the railroad yet, or put the highway through. And we'd always had a lot of dogs. And Dad, I guess that's when I still had little dogs, but that was part of our culture that dad had taught us: a little dog can see a spirit and if they walk toward them, a big dog will follow and the spirit would go.

I had surrounded myself with dogs, little ones and big ones. And I had walked down to the lower end of our pasture where the old house stood. And I, I was just goofing around at that shell pit. I was walking back down this railroad bed and it hadn't had the rails laid on it or the ties laid down, just the gravel, the bed.

And my dogs they was all with me. I walked up and I seen this guy in a corner of our pasture and there was some woods there where the old hog pen used to be and it had all grown up and the bushes had got big and there was a guy and a little fire there and I'm like, oh he shouldn't be here and when he raised up, I knew, because I'd seen that face from as a kid, with him coming to visit with Dad at night.

But he raised up, looked over his shoulders, and I said hi. I called him his name, and he said hello. And when he raised up, he had his bottom, bottom part was an animal, and his top part was a man. And when he raised up, he started walking toward me. I jumped the fence, and the dogs I had with me, they didn't know they were supposed to protect me, they ran with me.

And he'd come up and he jumped the fence, and we went down that railroad bed, and we'd crossed a culvert and they just put it in, fresh carted in, and I went

across it and I jumped the last fence and I looked back, and he was still coming and my dogs that were staying at the house, they seen him apparently and they just went by me like the cavalry. I've never been so glad to see anything like that in my life, man, they were full cry. When I look back again, I guess he had gone through that culvert because that's where all the dogs went and even the little ones turned around and they went back then.

And I went to the house, but it was about 12 o'clock, Mom and Dad come rolling in, and I told them what had happened, and they said, they asked me who it was, and I told them, and Dad said, "that's one of the ones I told you not to be messing with." And I said, "I know, Dad. I've learned my lesson."

But anyway, two or three days, I went and took my gun and all my dogs back through there. And I went and looked around to see what sign I could find. And the fire was still, it was burnt out, but it was still there. And I looked under that culvert, and there was a hoof print that's still there today. Even after I was married, I went back and looked, and there was a hoof print of a calf in that culvert, in that tar. I'm thinking, I got proof, but I can't prove that, nothing actually, but that happened.

I try to tell people, if you hang around long enough, you're gonna have an adventure.

Katie Marquette: Wise advice from Joe Perry. Stick around and have an adventure. Thanks for listening to this episode of *Stories from Main Street*.

If you have a story about life or culture in rural America that you'd like to add to the Smithsonian compilation, you can share it by visiting [museum-on-main-street dot org slash stories](http://museum-on-main-street.org/stories). That's [museum-on-main-street dot org slash stories](http://museum-on-main-street.org/stories), or you can use the Be Here Stories website to upload a story directly from your phone. That's the Be Here Stories website. In both places, you can hear a compilation of stories from all over America.

Thanks so much to Joe Perry and to the students in Poteau, Oklahoma, who recorded these amazing stories for a youth project exploring their Choctaw heritage.

Museum on Main Street is an outreach program of the Smithsonian Institute exhibition service and Smithsonian affiliations that engages small town audiences and brings revitalized attention to underserved rural communities. In partnership with state humanities councils, Museum on Main Street brings traveling exhibitions, educational resources, and programming to small towns

across America through their own local museums, historical societies, and other cultural venues.

This episode was produced for the Smithsonian by me, Katie Marquette, and it was edited by Heather Shelton and the Museum on Main Street team. I want to wish you a very happy, spooky, enchanted Halloween. Go tell some great ghost stories around the campfire. Until next time, this is Katie Marquette, signing off.