

# RETABLOS

STORIES FROM A LIFE LIVED ALONG THE BORDER

OCTAVIO SOLIS

CITY LIGHTS  
BOOKS

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Octavio Solis



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# CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

## ON MY “RETABLOS”

MEMORY IS ITS OWN MUSE. Every time we recall a specific moment in our past, we remember it differently; we embellish upon it, we turn it into a story or a fable, something that will draw a straighter line between the person we were then and who we are now. Consciously or unconsciously, we trim away the details that seem inconsequential in order to endow the things we remember with greater clarity, with even more weight and significance. And we make connections we weren't capable of noting before, so that each event in our past is seen in the context of other trials and rites and moments of insight. Sometimes, the spark of a single memory will ignite others, things we hadn't recalled until now, like suddenly realizing that the room we thought we knew so well has an extra door we never noticed before. Open that door and there's a new room with new its own store of memories.

This means that every memory has a patina of invention on it. That patina thickens every time we revisit those moments in our past, until they seem more like stories and myths of our formation, more dreamlike and yet more real than what really happened to us. So where is the fact of what actually happened? It's still there, lost inside of and enhanced by fiction.

When my memories of the actual events of my youth began to feel more like something I'd dreamed, I knew I had to write them down. By committing them to words on paper, I was reclaiming them as my own authentic recollections. But as the act of writing is inherently a fictive one, I found that

even the most authentic memory became imbued with the same strange unreality. I wondered if perhaps it wasn't actually my perspective, but something about the place I'd grown up, Texas, the border, *la frontera*, that was surreal. Some years ago, a substantial amount of naturally occurring lithium was discovered in El Paso's drinking water supply. Maybe that's what gives this otherworldly cast to my memories of the city of my origin, but I suggest it's more than that. I feel it's something verging on the divine, though not the divine we are taught to believe in.

That's why I choose to call these stories *retablos*. A *retablo* is a devotional painting, usually laid on a small, thin plate of cheap, repurposed metal, in which a dire event is depicted — an accident, a crime, an illness, a calamity, some terrible rift in a person's life, which they survive thanks to the intercession of the Divine. They are *ex-voto*, that is, "from a vow," commissioned and created as a form of thanks. At once visual and literary, they record the crisis, the divine mediation and the offering of thanks in a single frame, thus forming a kind of flash-fiction account of an electrifying, life-altering event. I imagined the stories of this collection in this same disconnected (and yet thoroughly interconnected) way.

I've found that every time I read one of the stories, the same thing happens. I change it a little, adding another patina, another layer to the memory. But this is what any writer should do in the interest of storytelling. In the end, they're only stories. I'm not interested in autobiography. If this is a memoir, it's a faulty one, because I have given myself leave to invent elements within it. I suppose I am using the poetic voice to convey the authentic. I am more interested in depicting the events of my life as a means to identify and limn the mythology of being brown along the US/Mexico border during a specific period in time, beyond politics, beyond polemics and rhetoric, in order to share those resonances with

others who are my age and others who are experiencing similar things right now.

One thing I have learned from writing these *retablos*: the shit on the border never changes. There will always be those who want to come across, and those who want to keep them where they are. The push and pull, the friction between the tectonic plates that are Mexico and the US will always create mountains of stress, dislocation and upheaval among the people who live there. Maybe this is political, after all, but I think it's really a condition of our culture: it's how we live now, it is our particular mythology, replete with gods and monsters, heroes and fallen angels, troubadours and exiles.

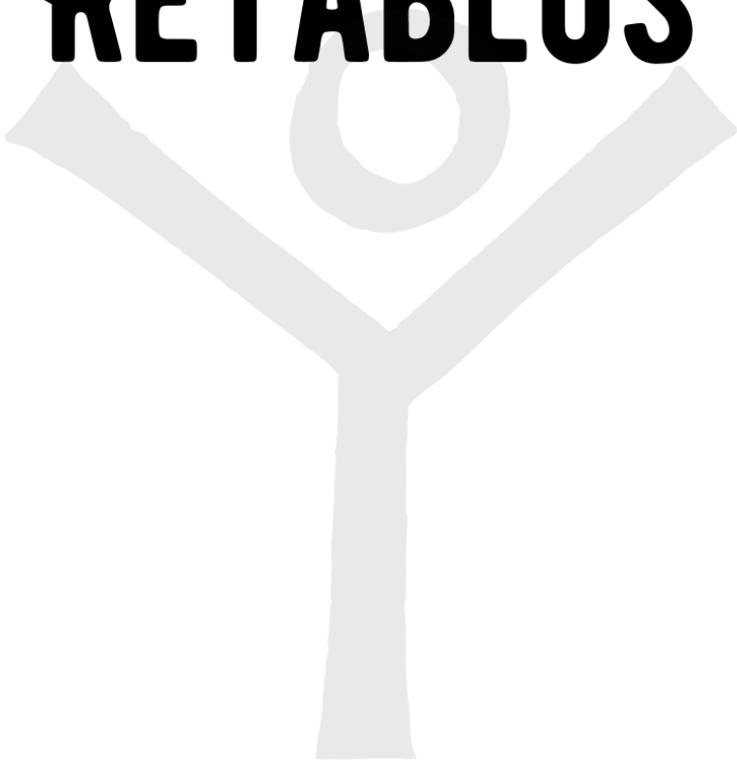
In the end, I'm trying to figure myself out. I'm coming to terms with who I am by looking back at what I was. I wrote *Retablos* to see how that skinny brown kid riding his bike out there in the desert made sense of his complicated, deeply beautiful and troubled world. So that perhaps I might learn to make sense of the one I live in today.

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**RETABLOS**



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## **RETABLOS**

THIS IS ME IN MY old room, unpacking my bags on the bed I slept in more than thirty years ago, hearing my mother titter at something on the TV while my dad is stirring the *caldo de pollo* on the stove. He blurts out something crude in Spanish and now both of them are roaring big as life, filling the house with horsey laughter. Then it hits me. This is how one of them will cry when the other dies.

I look out the window and I'm thirteen all over again, getting ready for school. A polar front blew all the way down from Canada and locked us in an overnight freeze and didn't even have the manners to leave us any snow. Just a chill air and ice on the power lines. But as I come down the hall for my breakfast, I see my sister standing outside the maid's room, snarling something to herself. I ask her what happened and she says, The birds are dead. What? The birds are dead, she says again. I look in the room and I see the maid, this young Mexican girl of twenty we hired to watch the house and cook food for us while my parents are at work, I see her sitting on her bed with her face in her hands. Sobs and the words *perdón, perdón* are slipping through her fingers. While she wipes her snot on her sleeve, I look past her at the cage where my mom's canaries are supposed to be perched. But they're not there. I come closer and find them both balled up and lifeless on the newspaper floor of the cage. They were old, their yellow feathers faded white, inherited from my grandmother when she moved to Fresno, only now they are dead. My sister says the maid left the window open and they froze.

They couldn't take the cold. She should've known. Now look at them, she says. I'm about to ask where Mom and Dad are, but then I hear them laughing in their room. Why would they be laughing? I cross the hall and open the door, which is weird 'cause they hardly ever close the door in the morning once they're up, and there they are, sitting on the bed next to each other, hands on their brows, crying so boisterously it sounds like they're busting at the seams at some practical joke. It's unnerving. I've never seen them wailing like this, bent over and shaking, their mouths contorted, bawling like children. I've seen my mom cry a few times, but never like this, and never my dad, who's not the kind of man inclined to such displays of emotion. For a pair of old birds, no less. There's something ancient about the way their wails change them, even give the room a different light. I think this is a holy moment and close the door and leave them to their searing sacred laughter.

That's how they come, these memories. Like a set of *retablos*, votive images painted on old beaten tin, marked with the mystery of being, with acts of transgression recorded for those who need to remember. That's what revisiting El Paso is like for me. Like walking into a retablo with a rusty surface for a sky, and misremembered family and friends for saints and supplicants and the lost distilled moments of my border past for miracles. They come to me at the strangest times, as if to remind me that I have lived this much because of them.

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## THE WAY OVER

*Tenemos que ir*, she says.

*Aquí es donde vivo. Allá no*, he says.

*Pero allá es donde todos podemos vivir. Tú. Yo. Y el niño.*

*El niño.*

*Tenemos que pensar por el niño.*

BUT THEY ARE *NIÑOS* THEMSELVES. Too young to get married, according to my grandmother Mamá Concha, who despises my sullen young father. Now that her daughter of sixteen is pregnant with me, she hates him even more. She beats him with her fists and kicks him in the shins whenever he comes by. But they're in love and the birth is near. So, what can she do? Mamá Concha gives her blessing, but on the condition that they move to *el Norte*. *Mis nietos* will be American, she says. She is newly married herself and has a room secured for them in the same tenement she lives in. So, in short order, they exchange vows and countries in an old church in El Paso.

Thus begins our America myth: three of us, my mother, father and me, crowded in a dingy tenement room with a hot plate to cook all the food. Mamá Concha and her new man two doors down. Community bath at the end of the hall. My mother and her mother have *pasaportes locales* which make them resident aliens and I'm a born citizen. My father, however, has none of his papers. He works in Juárez in an entry-level job in a bank, where he counts out crisp new bills of Mexican currency. When he moves to El Paso he loses the job but soon gets another selling ad space in Juárez for a radio

station. Every morning he walks across the Santa Fe Bridge to work, then returns in the evening over the same span. Some months later, the officer at the checkpoint remembers him.

I see you come and go every day. What's going on with you?

I live here but I work there, my father says in that gruff voice that makes the facts facts.

Well, you can't do that, says the officer. A man lives where he works. If you want to cross, go ahead, but you won't be coming back in. Make up your mind where you want to live.

My wife is here. My baby is here.

So from now on, here is where you work. That is that.

Now he has to find a job in a city that speaks English. But he can't because he doesn't. With his limited language, he is good only for menial work. He washes dishes in a greasy burger and menudo diner on the worst shift possible, the grim overnight hours before dawn. But the cook likes him, he's good to him and teaches him how to make things on the grill because he needs someone to cover for him on the days when he will be too drunk or hungover to come to work. That's how my father becomes a short-order cook. One of the best in the city. It's what he will do for most of his life. For the sake and welfare of this *niño* and the four more who come later.

My mother. She's close to her Mamá Concha. With shared unspoken troubles, they work together cleaning the houses of rich people. It's hard with the children. One of whom dies. Even I almost lose it when I drink a bottle of turpentine left uncapped in a room being painted. My father runs all the way to the hospital with me turning white in his arms. My mother prays over and over, *Madre Santa*, don't make me bury another. My stomach is pumped, and I live.

Later, Immigration men come to the door. They have reports that an illegal is living in this residence. My mother says, please don't take my husband. I need him to watch my babies while I go to work. The men are embarrassed by their

duty, and one of them gives my mother the name of an official in the INS. See him as soon as you can. He will make your man legal. Then they drive away with my father in their car. My mother rushes to the County Courthouse and finds this official after a long search. He listens to this pleading young mother with two children and one on the way and somehow grants her wish. Her husband will get his papers. This is a different time from now. A time when people know compassion. A time when kindness is haphazardly bestowed.

My father spends five days and nights with other deportees in a dank, joyless pen called *el corralón*. They are the blackest hours of his life. He cannot sleep. The place has a foul odor. Everyone around him looks as shamed as he feels. I'm not like them, he thinks. He wonders if he will be taken back across. Once he wanted that; once he yearned to return to the life he knew. But now he yearns only for his family. His one-room tenement home.

My mother gets him released after showing his proof of employment. They have procedures to perform to make him a resident, procedures that will allow him to live and work and pay taxes in a country that speaks English. In a way, what enables this to happen is me. My parents are legal and living in this country because of my brothers and sister and me. Decades will pass before they take a test and recite the oath of allegiance in English as fluently as anyone in this country, with their hands over their hearts as they become full, incontestable citizens.

I am an anchor baby. Someone coined the term to impugn the motives of immigrants coming to this country. They use it to suggest that for some couples conceiving a child is not an act of love but a ploy to secure the rights of residence. But every baby is an anchor for young parents navigating the stormy waters of daily life; every baby is an anchor for those who are looking for their true north, their purpose, their identity. We give our parents hope when they drift from bad times

to bad times to worse. We give them solace when they consider going back to the little they had before. I anchor them to a place and an ideal worth living for. As they anchor me.

We have to go, *dice ella*.

Here is where I live. Not there, *dice él*.

But there is where we can all live. You. Me. And the child.

The child.

We have to think of the child.



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## IN THE SHIMMER

IN THE CLOUDED WINDOW OF my early childhood, I see my grandmother. Mamá Concha we call her. She's undoing hair rollers and applying bright red lipstick before the bathroom mirror. I see her short stocky legs in their saggy hose slip into her shoes with the blocky heels. Her purse is redolent with the fragrance of Wrigley's Chewing Gum and scented tissues that seem to burst from inside every time she unclasps it. She gives me half a stick of spearmint, slipping the other half in her mouth. She dresses me up in my best shirt and pants and combs my hair till it's waxed down like Alfalfa's from the *Our Gang* serials. Then we're outside.

She's sitting beside me on the city bus noisily taking us downtown. I watch her nervous hands smooth the pinstripes of her blue cotton dress over and over while she smacks the gum in her mouth and stares straight ahead like a lover on her way to an assignation. The bus driver asks her something in Spanish and she answers in the old country manner.

*Ay.*

I catch his gaze through the mirror over his head, how his eyes probe and ponder over us during the whole length of the ride. She takes a tissue from her purse and with a little spit on it wipes the scuff off my shoes, which dangle just off the seat, and she tightens my laces till my feet throb. I hear the gassy exhalation of the bus heaving to a stop and the door swishing open to *La Placita de los Lagartos*, which is teeming with more people than I've ever seen in my life. The sun is high and bright. The tightness of her grip on my hand turns my fingers

red as she guides us to the central fountain in the tree-lined plaza, where she lifts me up with her firm arms to her bosom and shows me the alligators basking in the radiant heat. One of them is dozing in its pond, and one has its jaws wide open, a soft-serve ice cream cone melting on its back. I count the cigarette butts and candy wrappers floating in the pond all around them. Is this what we came to see? No, not this.

More people gather in the plaza and in the windows of the buildings around us for a view of something to come. Is it a parade? Are we here for a parade? Above me the sky is a brilliant, unsullied blue so wide and cloudless and perfect, I could fall into it. My grandmother clamps my hand in hers and pushes through the murmuring mass of people. She's smaller than most of them, but with her purse she clears a path toward the street. Some give her the stink-eye, some jab their elbows back and sneer at me, but she doggedly charges on.

Then I lose her. Somehow, our knotted fingers come undone and I am set loose in the tangled forest of legs, shoes and handbags and even a little weenie dog on a leash, panting with fear and heat and congestion, and I think I must have the same look as I call out for her. Mamá Concha! Mamá Concha! I feel the crowd surge in one direction and knock me down and some lady's heel stamps on my hand and I start to cry. The sound of several cars coming to a stop somewhere nearby sets off a riotous noise that drowns out my cries. Shifting bodies pressed hard against each other toss me about like a *piñata*. I look straight up for even a fragment of that blue sky but now it's a swarm of balloons and millions of tiny shreds of colored paper flitting and falling like snowflakes on everyone. This clamor of the crowd, the yelling and whistling, I feel it in my teeth, my bones, all the way down to my feet, till the ground is howling against the weight of all the stomping, pounding, jerking feet. The storm of people is so consuming and suffocating, and it moves with such a single anarchic mind, that I think I'll drown in it, I think I'll die. I scream with

all my strength, MAMÁ CONCHA! But I can't hear myself. I can't hear anything but this crazed thunder of voices.

Through a seam in the wall of bodies, the hands of my grandmother emerge and take me by the ribs and lift me up, up above the throng, aiming me in the direction of the Hotel Cortez across the street. I'm blinded by the glare of the sun's reflection in the windows, rectangles of glass flashing in my eyes. Then, for just a second, through the bursts of white sunlight and a thousand hands raised in some kind of jubilation, I see a man's epic smile under a head of blazing red hair, all teeth and red-orange hair and his hand running through it before it waves at the crowd, waves distinctly at me, too, this man with fire in his hair and eyes of Olympian blue and a smile that envelops everyone appears for just a glimpse before I lose him again in the shimmer, but I'm above the tumult now, tears glistening on my flushed cheeks, pale and hot, numb and blind, bounced along to the chants of *iViva Kennedy! iViva Kennedy! iViva Kennedy!*

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