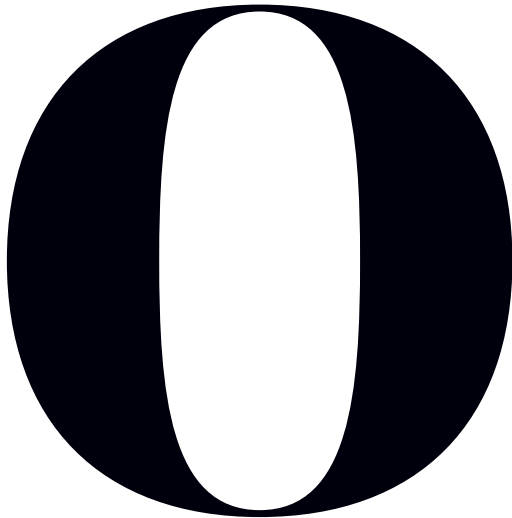




The Desert Reclaims Everything

A son of El Paso returns home a year after the tragedy

By Roberto José Andrade Franco



On the night of the first anniversary of the El Paso massacre, thousands of vehicles formed a line under the full yellow moon. Some drivers wore face masks and waited for more than an hour to enter Ascarate Park. As they slowly entered the park, whose southern border runs parallel to the Rio Grande and the rust-colored border wall demarcating the United States from Mexico, they drove past reminders of that beautiful sunny morning last Aug. 3, that turned dark in an instant.

Past the projected sign shining on a building that proclaimed, “*Juntos recordamos. Juntos sanamos.*” *Together we remember. Together we heal.* Past the volunteers shining their flashlights across the asphalt to direct traffic.

Past the construction site on a triangle-shaped median that will become the Healing Garden memorial, where victims’ names will be emblazoned on a curved wall anchored by waterfalls. Past an “El Paso Strong” sign made of plywood that rests on a large rock. Past all that, deeper into Ascarate, some drivers dimmed their lights.

In the darkness, what seemed like thousands of luminarias glowed, lighting the way around the park. There were 23 floral sculptures placed along that same path. At the center of the park, 23 spotlights aimed toward the night sky. In the darkness, Ascarate Lake’s calm waters reflected some of the lights.

The night felt heavy from the accumulation of the entire day, along with the weight of the past several days and months and year. It all still felt unbelievable. That a killer with the coldest soul drove hundreds of miles to target Mexicans. That 23 innocent lives ended for no other reason than they just lived here. Hard to believe that in the darkness, we were trying to find light.

That’s the paradox of this place: El Paso, the city that’s in the westernmost part of Texas but also feels separate from it. A place where on the night of the first anniversary of the massacre, driving at 5 mph beside a human-made lake where ducks swim—in the desert—I grieved alongside masked strangers with familiar faces. Strangers who, even if we mourned with a distance between us, understood what united us.

I’ve always loved this place. It’s home. Even if I’ve tried to run away from it.

I was 17 years old the first time I left the El Paso–Juárez borderland.

It was a few months after graduating high school and a few weeks after I walked out of a job training to sell knives door to door, which felt like a scam. I walked home, in the middle of the beautiful El Paso desert, trying

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to figure out what I wanted. Trying to figure out how to escape from a place where I felt a subtle but unyielding desperation.

There's a restlessness that comes from living in the middle of the Chihuahuan Desert. Boredom comes with the realization that you're surrounded by nothing. It's seeing the wide-open spaces and imagining what could be there. It's knowing many desert daydreams are just fading mirages. That's why I wanted to leave. It's also why, when I left, no one asked why.

I didn't have to explain to the aunts, uncles, and cousins I'd see every day in El Paso and those I'd see every weekend in Juárez. Those who, regardless of which side of the river they lived on, lamented the lack of opportunities. "Aqui, no hay progreso," they'd say. Nor did I need to explain to my friends, some of whom were so desperate to leave, they joined the military. I didn't have to explain to teachers, some of whom looked like they were also ready to run away. No one asked why I was leaving. I imagined they understood the desire to escape from this place that, at least to me, felt more like Texas' forgotten dead-end street.

I can still see my mother, father, brother, and sister standing in the driveway, in the middle of another long, hot July day, waving goodbye to me. Sitting in the backseat of my cousin's car, I waved back, convinced I'd never return. My cousin and I then drove to Phoenix, where there was plenty of construction work for those who could tolerate the oppressive sun.

That wasn't the last time I left. A few times, I returned and then left again. Each time I returned, I felt disappointed, as if someone had dragged me back to this place I wanted to escape. Each time I left again, I hoped I'd finally gotten away from the place in the middle of the desert.

When I was a teenager, my mother worked for a few months as a seamstress at a factory that manufactured jeans. My aunt and cousin worked at that same factory for years. Before it went out of

business, the manufacturer would give its workers free tickets to an amusement park inside Ascarate. Going there marked the beginning of another sunny summer.

Ascarate is one of the largest parks in El Paso County. Each year, the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department stocks Ascarate's 45-acre lake with bluegill, largemouth bass, catfish, and rainbow trout. Ascarate has a golf course, playgrounds, and picnic facilities. But until 1937, the park didn't exist.

The place that's now Ascarate Park was once a river loop within the Rio Grande, which divides El Paso from Juárez today. That division didn't exist until 1848, when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican War. Mexico lost just over half its territory to the United States, and the river that ran through what was once El Paso del Norte became the border that split the community.

Rivers aren't stable borders. They flood and shift, dry, evaporate, and all but disappear. When the Rio Grande did just that, for about a century, the U.S. and Mexico disputed land around El Paso and Juárez. In 1934, in an attempt to control flooding, the International Boundary Commission began a project to straighten the Rio Grande. In a boundary treaty between the U.S. and Mexico, El Paso was given 354 acres belonging to its southern neighbor. That land later became the start of Ascarate Park.

In May 1938, laborers from the Civilian Conservation Corps began constructing the park in the middle of the Chihuahuan Desert. They planted 7,000 trees and laid 160,000 adobe bricks. They removed more than 1 million cubic yards of sand—careful not to dig too deep or else their machinery would sink in quicksand. They then lined the bottom of that hole with clay. Ascarate Lake was born. Not even two years later, county officials were scrambling to find water to keep the trees from dying and the lake from drying.

The trees and lake survived. Ascarate Park thrived. On the eastern side of the lake, an amusement park, Western Playland, opened in 1960. "We plan to operate a first-class park," said Leo Hines,

president of Western Playland, to the *El Paso Herald-Post* in March 1960. “Later on, we hope to expand and make Western Playland one of the nicest, if not the best, in this part of the country.”

For decades, Western Playland’s roller coasters, bumper cars, and water rides illuminated the dark desert sky along the Rio Grande. Laughter and carnival music carried well into the night. It was one of the few things to do in the desert without getting into trouble. And then, in 2005, Western Playland left.

“This is another El Paso thing that is being taken away from us,” Rosa V. Martinez, a Western Playland enthusiast, told the *El Paso Times* in September 2005.

In June 2007, Western Playland owner Pat Thompson gave a statement to the same newspaper, claiming the county had never been fair to him, remarking they “stabbed me in the back at every opportunity.” The county said Thompson

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breached their agreement, and the closure was his fault.

Thompson took Western Playland and placed it in front of a casino about 15 miles northwest of Ascarate, across the Texas-New Mexico border. There, he saw the potential for growth, envisioning a

hotel and entertainment center. Thompson considered Western Playland key to what could be “the entertainment spot for Southern New Mexico and El Paso.”

Back in Ascarate, trash, broken buildings, dismantled rides, and toxic chemicals were the only reminders that an amusement park was once there. Weeds grew from the asphalt track where go-karts once raced. The sun, heat, wind, and dirt ate away at the abandoned signs once full of color.

Given enough time, the desert reclaims everything.

I was 25 years old when I met her, during the summer when it rained so much, so fast, the Rio Grande flooded.

On the Mexican side, where the river’s called Río Bravo, the levee broke in multiple places. On the United States’ side, the levee gates couldn’t be closed.



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They'd stopped functioning after years of ignored maintenance under the harsh desert sun. The front page of the *El Paso Times* called it a historic flood. The Texas Army National Guard evacuated Segundo Barrio, where my grandparents lived.

I met her that summer, in 2006, and told her I wanted to leave this place. Years later, when I said it again, she said she'd leave, too, even though she never felt the need to escape. So, we left.

I was 33 years old when we moved to Dallas, all trees, water, and grass. It might as well have been a different world. Together, we saw things we'd never imagined, had experiences we'll never forget. And each time we tried something new in this different world, we shared a look rooted in the unsaid feeling of *Oh my God, we got away*.

Ironically, this was around the time I began making peace with El Paso and Juárez. Living in Dallas after growing up in

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El Paso, I saw the Texas experience wasn't the same for all its residents. Texas—a Platonic ideal stereotyped by cowboys, barbecue, and Willie Nelson—has always been exclusionary. A place where even the most Mexican of names—Mexia, Refugio, and Guadalupe—lost their pronunciation coming off a white person's tongue.

Once the fascination of living in a

different world fades away, it's easy to feel like an outsider. A sense that even if it's full of wonder, this different world isn't home. And there weren't enough restaurants and parks and tall, shiny buildings in Dallas to make me forget what I'd left behind in El Paso. Not enough distractions to help me ignore the existential concern that if I put too much distance between myself and my roots, I'd struggle to find my way back. Spend too much time here, I worried, and perhaps I'd lose the urge to correct those who ignored the last vowel of my first name.

Not wanting to abandon those roots, we visited El Paso as often as we could. I returned married to the woman I met during the summer when the river flooded. The next time, we arrived with a daughter in tow. Our trips to El Paso became the best part of each summer and Christmas. I came back and found a sense of peace that, at times, allowed me to



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appreciate the desert's cool summer sunrise and colorful sunsets. Both helped me contemplate the idea of home.

I was 34 years old when I realized I could never escape the psyche born from living between two worlds, two countries, two cultures. A place where for every sign, car decal, and T-shirt reading "El Paso Strong," there's another claiming "El Paso Más Fuerte."

The borderland. Where for every person who called it the Rio Grande, another called it the Rio Bravo. For every person who called it a massacre, another called it a *matanza*.

The processional at Ascarate Park was only one of many ways the 23 slain have been honored.

A few hours after the shooting, people gathered near the Cielo Vista Walmart, where the massacre occurred. Next to U.S., Texas, and Mexico flags, they left stuffed animals, flowers, handmade bilingual signs, and their tears and prayers.

El Paso city officials eventually collected some of the mementos. The El Paso Museum of History will display them in an exhibit, *Resilience*, which will open to the public after the pandemic. The rest of the makeshift memorial got moved to nearby Ponder Park. Even today, people stop to pay their respects in front of signs whose colors have faded from the harsh climate. One read, in gender-neutral Spanish, *Espero que sepas lo amadx que eres*, or "I hope you know you are loved."

The Cielo Vista Walmart reopened about three months after the massacre. Nine days later, the store unveiled the Grand Candela memorial, a 30-foot high, gold-colored votive in front of the store.

On the night of the first anniversary, a nine-person mariachi sang "Amor Eterno" there. In the hours and days and weeks after the massacre, it became the defining song of the *matanza*. "Yo he sufrido tanto por tu ausencia," the mariachis sang. *I've suffered much in your absence*. Behind them, Grand Candela helped illuminate the night. "Desde ese día hasta

hoy, no soy feliz." *From that day until now, I haven't been happy*.

On the day of the anniversary, mourners gathered at Ponder Park, and on the growing makeshift memorial they placed orange ribbons—the color for victims and survivors of gun violence.

That night, the Star on the Mountain—an orientation point on the south side of the Franklin Mountains that for 80 years has symbolized hope, unity, and home—flashed 23 times.

I was 38 years old and visiting El Paso when the coldest, darkest summer came.

Months passed before I could sleep at night after an unthinkable evil person drove more than 10 hours from a Dallas suburb to El Paso, intent on killing as many Mexicans as possible. During those sleepless nights, I'd stare at my phone and read the citywide emergency text message from that day.

"Active shooter in Cielo Vista area. All El Paso City/County residents are asked to shelter." Sent at 11:56 a.m. on Aug. 3, 2019, about 75 minutes after a 911 operator answered the first call asking for help. The operator heard a woman crying as gunfire exploded in the background.

Some days, as I stared at that message—hours before the sun rose to offer relief from the night—I thought about deleting the text.

I thought about how, a few days after the massacre, when we left El Paso and drove back to North Texas, the goodbye hugs from my aging parents felt stronger than usual. They felt tighter, lasted longer. "Tengan cuidado," they told us—*be careful*. With bloodshot eyes, they stared at my then 2-year-old daughter.

At that point, I wanted to stay in El Paso. There was no place else I would have rather been. I felt like I needed to explain why I was leaving. I wanted to tell them I was sorry for once wanting to leave and never come back. Tell them I was old enough, at last, to know whatever I had tried to escape from had nothing to do with their home or even El Paso. Tell my mother I was sorry for all the times I

had left and made her cry.

I never erased the text message warning of danger. It's still there. But because it's on an old phone, I don't stare at it anymore during sleepless nights. Now, during those nights—awake in a different world—I think of how the large star on the Franklin Mountains has become the light I walk toward. Because no matter how lost or confused I've felt in my life, I always returned to the El Paso-Juárez borderland.

It's where things make the most sense. Where it's easy to love, even if it's difficult to live. It's home, even if I still struggle against that instinct to escape.

On the day of the first anniversary of the El Paso massacre, my morning somberness lasted into the night.

I didn't expect to fight back tears driving through the path of luminarias. I thought I'd already cried enough. I thought I was fine, until I remembered the *matanza*.

The killer with the monstrous soul came and changed everything about how El Pasoans see ourselves in this world and at home. That's why the tragedy hurt so much. Why some still can't talk about it without their voices cracking even though whatever hurt we feel can never match the pain of those who lost someone they loved.

Despite the scars that not even the desert can bury, I miss El Paso. I miss Juárez, too. I spent the warmest and most loving summers of my life there. I now realize there's no place I'd rather live. No other culture in which I'd rather raise my daughter. But sometimes, to understand what home is, one has to leave.

So, I left, only to stare back at the middle of the desert and, from a different perspective, see its peerlessness.

See that the Rio Grande can flood the entire city and it still wouldn't be enough to wash away the blood from one of our saddest days.

See that there isn't a machine or man who can dig a lake deep enough in the desert to drown who we are. To drown that love. 🐱