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Una hora con Héctor Tobar

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The blood of Los Angeles was colorless in the black-and-white light of the tunnel. The blood of Guatemala was crimson under a tropical sun. The blood of Los Angeles might soon begin to fade. The blood of Guatemala was indelible.

Héctor Tobar, *The Tattooed Soldier*

The Central American civil wars, heavily funded by the United States government in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, left us with painful and traumatic memories of bloodshed, genocide, atrocious human rights violations, and a postwar reality of an impossible path to peace. In the postwar period, the inheritance of violence, the Central American states' official will to impunity, and the entrance of the Neoliberal economic order, –added to fragmented family structures–, have in fact exacerbated the social and economic conditions that once gave way to the upheaval of wars. The streets of Central America are today more violent than they were during that tumultuous second half of the 20th century. Resulting from this continued violence and insecurity, more than 3 million Central Americans (in a region of approximately 12 million) have left the region since the 1980s. Thousands continue to flee, escaping hunger, ever-rising unemployment rates, and the daily menace of death. Among the sites of refuge has been Los Angeles, the city now home to the majority of people comprising the Central American diaspora. Far from representing a safe haven however – as *The Tattooed Soldier* so vividly explores–, for many people Los Angeles signifies the continuation of the struggle to survive. A place of multiple *desencuentros* –or failed encounters– with that longed peace, paradoxically and in a parallel, Los Angeles is also a place for fortuitous encounters; it is the place where we have come to share and learn from our collective experiences, it is where we have been able to shatter our silences through the creation of community and

institutional spaces, the city where we rediscovered ourselves in the process of establishing new communities, and also, the place from which we have too, begun to write.

The son of “very practically minded” Guatemalan immigrants, Héctor Tobar is by far one of the most prolific and incisive Central American writers in Los Angeles. Author of two novels, *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998) and *The Barbarian Nurseries* (2011), one non-fiction book, *Translation Nation: Defining a New American Identity in the Spanish-Speaking United States* (2005), countless essays, and hundreds of newspaper stories, Héctor Tobar’s work speaks from the place of both those *desencuentros* and *encuentros* in the city of angels. Two months ago, I had the opportunity to interview him in the midst of one of his many busy days at the *LA Times*, the newspaper for which over a decade he has written a weekly column and where he has also served as a national and foreign correspondent reporting from countries such as Argentina, Iraq, Mexico, Nicaragua, and of course his hometown, Los Angeles. Pulitzer-prize winner for his work covering the 1992 L.A. riots, Héctor shared with me his experiences and struggles at the *Times*, his will to always write from within the margins, the irony of writing in English as a *guatemalteco* impacted by the U.S. imperial wars in Central America, and much more. These are his words.

Hector, you begin to write as an adult. How do you begin to establish yourself as a writer?

I moved back to Los Angeles from the Bay Area in the late 80s, when I started working as an intern in the *LA Times*. I did that for a year. I did very well and eventually I was assigned to be part of the Metro Staff in downtown Los Angeles. There, I established an early reputation writing stories about poverty and about the Latino community. These stories had a strong, sharp voice, in which I used many of the literary tools I had within me; literary tools that I wanted to develop and that made me feel strong as a writer. During that time I wrote a lot of front-page stories, including one which eventually would become the genesis of *The Tattooed Soldier*. This front-page story was about Salvadoran soldiers who were seeking exile here in Los Angeles. I had gone to El Rescate¹ and talked to one of the refugee workers there. I asked her, “Do you see anything different in who is applying for asylum, because I’m looking for story ideas”. She answered: “yes,

to tell you the truth we're seeing a lot of ex-soldiers who are applying for asylum now. And we're seeing a lot of conflict between the former soldiers and the former revolutionaries because now they're meeting up here in Los Angeles". This refugee worker told me she had a client (an ex-*militante* refugee from El Salvador), who had said that he was in MacArthur Park one day and had seen a man who used to be in the Salvadoran army. The client told her that he was going to "take him down", or rather, "*me lo voy a bajar*". She ended up talking her client out of it, of course, telling him that if he killed the man he'd end up in jail and ruin his own life. But this conversation, added to various other conversations I had with many former soldiers who had come to Los Angeles, made up that front-page story, and later on, my first novel (with quite a different ending to that of her client's of course).

There is a writer here at the *LA Times*, Larry Gordon, who told me when that story came out: "Hector, that story you wrote, that's a novel." I said thank you and thought about it. This was in 1989, and of course during those days I didn't have any idea of how to write fiction. But as I spent more time at the *LA Times*, I had a privileged position and was a privileged witness to many aspects of life in the city of Los Angeles. Better yet, I was being paid what was a lot of money back then to be a storyteller, a scribe. I was being sent into places that were new communities –the *centroamericano* community was young back then–, and I felt that I had a window into those communities, particularly the Central American community.

I was troubled by the depiction of this community as powerless by the media. Being the son of immigrants, and knowing the history of Guatemala, I understood that our people were not just an object of sympathy but that they were also real actors. I wanted my stories to be about people who were like my father, for example, people who come and make decisions, people with free will and ambition. I wanted to capture all those things in my work, and in fact was able to get a lot of those stories in the *LA Times*. That sort of nuance and texture I think made me stand out as a writer at the paper. I applied that ambition to all the stories I wrote.

I wrote a lot of stories in the early 90s that I am very proud of, including an investigation I did on the incarceration of the mentally ill, a story that has nothing to do with the Latino or the Central American community but that showed my curiosity and my understanding for how the city worked. In my experience as a writer for the *Times*, I

was learning lessons about the way the political and criminal justice systems of LA worked; and it was an incredible vision to acquire.

After a while I felt that I was seeing more in my work than what I could ever tell in a piece for the *LA Times*. At the *Times* you gain access to a tremendous amount of readers (at that time our daily circulation was more than one million), but at the same time you pay a price to have access to this huge tribune. The *LA Times* is a very middle class, centrist kind of institution, a very cautious institution. There are things we can't say. I started thinking about writing fiction. At the same time, I met a lot of writers and people with literary interests; we shared books. Back then, I read Don DeLillo for the first time and Martin Amis, two writers who had a tremendous influence on me. I also read Italo Calvino; all these writers *me formaron como escritor*. Reading them was my own advanced degree in literature. I started thinking about writing fiction. Being the son of very practically minded Guatemalan immigrant parents however, I felt I needed training. So I took a workshop at Beyond Baroque, the Venice literary center, and also a UCLA extension course. After that I started thinking about how frustrated I was here in the newspaper because there were very clear limitations to what I could accomplish here and I wanted to have this really powerful voice; I wanted to tell stories, and there was a limit to what I was able to write and do here.

This limitation became very clear to me during the 1992 riots², which are of course the central events at the end of *The Tattooed Soldier*. At that time I was one of the star reporters for the newspaper, and I was already being groomed to be a national or foreign correspondent, which I would eventually be by accident later on. The riots happened during the last days of April, beginnings of May, and at that precise moment I knew why they had happened. I had been covering poverty, I had been covering South Central Los Angeles, and I had been covering black-Latino relations in this city. I expected the riots to happen when they happened. I covered the riots from this very newsroom the night that the riots started. The next day I started somewhere near Florence and Normandie, and I worked my way in the course of eight or nine hours following the riot northward until I ended up in Echo Park. During those hours I filed tons of stuff to the newspaper. In the newspaper sometimes the way big stories are covered is that there is a reporter out on the field and he calls with his notes to a writer who puts it all together. That day I was everywhere

and I saw buildings being burned down, someone get shot, Koreatown burning. I remember I called into the newsroom, “Koreatown is burning, did you know that? Send somebody here!” I had all these experiences that day but I was not allowed to tell the story of why the riots happened. The *Times* assembled a package on why the riots happened, a huge special section. They assigned around ten of us to work on it. I was not allowed to write any of it however, I was assigned to be the reporter and send in my notes, but I was not allowed to be the writer. And that made me very angry. That and the fact too, that there was a lot of literature by non-Latino writers being produced on Latinos in Los Angeles that I found to be shallow and offensive. These things made me very angry and I was since then determined to write literature about my experience, about my city and my community.

Being a star reporter for the *Times*, why didn’t they let you write the story on the riots?

First, I was young, relatively speaking: I was under 30. Second, because these are institutions that have only very recently begun to integrate in terms of race and gender. And even today there are almost no Latinos in the middle-management or upper-management positions; there are very few. I think I was seen as someone who did not have the experience others had. From a purely craft-technical point of view, the editors thought there were more established and experienced writers who were in a better position to tell that story than I was. But what I had was that I was from L.A., that I was angry and I had the passion and I was closer to the lives of the city’s working people. So, I left the *Times*, and decided to get an MFA; I applied to various programs, Iowa, Houston, UC Irvine, and out of all those, I only got into UC Irvine. That was of course, a wonderful, tremendous place to go to. I met so many great people at Irvine, among them Thomas Keneally, the great Australian writer. In *Translation Nation*, I describe all of these people.

So I got to Irvine in 1993, the same year I got married, and the same year I quit the *LA Times*. I sat with my adviser Judith Grossman and she asked me, “What do you plan to do while you’re here?” And I said, “Well I would like to work my way up, write some short stories and eventually write a novel.” She said, “Well, you know Héctor, a novel is much more marketable than short stories, do you have a novel that you would like to write?” I thought about it for maybe 8 or 10

seconds, and I said, “Actually there *is* a novel I would like to write”. I had already written a chapter, a short-story version of *The Tattooed Soldier*. I told her I had this idea about making that story into a novel. That ended up becoming my MFA thesis and my novel, eventually finding its way to getting published, which was a torturous process.

You have written extensively in some of your columns and in *Translation Nation* about your own family history, their migration story from Guatemala and their immigrant experience in the United States. With the Guatemalan experience being part of your parents’ and community’s lived experience, but you growing up and living in the United States, what is your sense of Guatemala and how has it informed your identity?

I grew up with the extremely strong sense that my family had come from a small, but beautiful country that had a tragic history, and where very interesting and magical things happened. That was my sense of what Guatemala was. This sense was strongly reinforced by my visits to Guatemala when I was a kid. Almost every year we went there. My parents had acquired their citizenship by 1972, 1973, so we travelled back to Guatemala all the time. In fact, we once drove there from LA in a Volkswagen, and I would say that a lot of what made me a story teller was going through Guatemala and hearing the stories my uncle would tell. Later on in my life, when I went to college in Santa Cruz, I did education abroad in Mexico City. At one point when I was at the UNAM I took a vacation by myself and went on a bus to Guatemala from Mexico City. By that time, I was already twenty years old. The war was going on. On that trip I took a tape recorder with me, recorded my grandparents and heard a lot of stories about poverty and small town life. Throughout the years, I learned Guatemala was a country filled with people who struggled to get ahead, and it was a place where my parents were from, and the place where my family lived. My grandparents and aunts and uncles never left the country. Almost all of my family stayed. That was my sense of what Guatemala was. My vision of Guatemala was that it was family, a beautiful place.

What are the first thoughts or images that come to you now when you hear “Centroamérica”?

El Palacio Nacional, on which my grandfather worked as an *albañil*. I think too of what I saw as an adult and reporter. I think about the

hondureños that I met crossing the river between Guatemala and Mexico, an experience of which I wrote a story about. I think about Morazán, El Salvador. I think about the trails where the FMLN³ marched, I think about the incredible improvisation of the FMLN and its resistance against the dictatorship. I think about improvisation a lot. I think that *centroamericanos* are the ultimate improvisers, and that is something that is not really appreciated. I think about many things, but those are the things that I think about the most.

Do you continue to go to Guatemala now?

I haven't taken my kids to Guatemala because the other thing I think about now when I hear "Central America", is the breakdown of the state and violence. I was in El Salvador a couple of years ago writing about extortions and kidnappings, I also covered Daniel Ortega's return to power in Nicaragua and the last election in Guatemala, and I know too much. I talked to judges and police in Nicaragua, intelligence in El Salvador, and that gave me a different perspective, more of a dark vision of the place. So no, I haven't been there in a while.

Do you consider yourself a writer of the Central American diaspora?

Absolutely. The dedication of *The Tattooed Soldier* is for the Central American diaspora. I am a product of that experience. I identify with it. I feel its emotional contradictions. I am part of the epic arc of that journey. At the same time however, I also consider myself to be an American writer. I write in English, and I write about the American experience and the city that I feel I understand, Los Angeles. I feel connected also to, strange as it may seem, Dred Scott, the African-American slave who in the 1850s sued for his freedom and lost. I feel connected to John Brown. I have internalized a very long multifaceted struggle for democratic values and for economic opportunity that has been fought by Italians and Jews, blacks, and all the people who have made this country what it is. I also understand, and have written about in *Translation Nation*, how the U.S. changes people who arrive here from other countries. Inevitably, you are not the same person. My father and my uncle are two different people, raised in the same womb from the same mother, but whose path in life took a sharp diversion circa 1962 and are now entirely different people. My uncle never lived outside Guatemala. My father, his brother, left Guatemala at age 20 and never returned to live there

even though he always talked about it while I was growing up; he's still a fluent Spanish speaker, still very much Guatemalan, but in many ways he's been *norteamericanizado*.

The work of memory in *The Tattooed Soldier* is particularly strong. You bring the experience of war in Guatemala and all of its contradictions –the violence, the pain, the destruction and the remnants of a love between a revolutionary couple–, to the streets of Los Angeles. How do you describe your intentions of dealing with memory in this novel?

The Tattooed Soldier was in many ways a celebration of the spirit of resistance. A lot of those experiences are in one way or another related to my own family experience and to the experience of people that I know who were involved in the Guatemalan and Salvadoran opposition or the guerrilla movements; and also people who were living in exile in Mexico City when I lived there, or who I met many years later in the United States, when I was a reporter here; and also people I met while being active in the Central American solidarity movements. When I was in my twenties, I had a very strong working-class identity, and I identified strongly with the leftist ideologies of the Guatemalan Revolution. That Revolution, we have to understand, wasn't just about national liberation; it was about social equality and class struggle too. Even though I lived those experiences from afar, I felt them. A lot of the things that are in *The Tattooed Soldier* however, are also things that I saw. When I traveled from Mexico City to Guatemala in 1982, I took a bus through Huehuetenango. The scenes of destruction that are in the book are scenes that I saw. For me those images are almost engrained in me now, they are part of the experience of who we are, of who I am. We are people whose lives have been turned upside down by imperialism. In flesh and blood we saw and lived through people being massacred, having their heads cut off, and all those horrible things that happened during the Central American civil wars. We have journeyed from there to here, ironically, to the capital of the empire. Los Angeles is one of the places where the Pax Americana was most powerful. It's where ballistic missiles were built and the rockets that went to the moon. So this novel is in a way a critique of that lived experience: of having seen a war in the periphery, and having seen a gleaming American city in decay, of seeing homelessness, poverty and abandonment take hold of the center of a U.S.

city. So that is where a lot of the imagery of *The Tattooed Soldier* comes from, that sense of dislocation and of adventure; of being a *centroamericano* who had seen the trauma inflicted on Guatemala and then coming to the country that paid to inflict that trauma. And imagine, becoming a writer in the language of that country! It is a powerful thing to have lived through.

But then again, war and trauma are also universal experiences; they are a common theme in the literature of the time that I lived through, not just in the United States but throughout the world. One of the novelists that I read at the time, and that in one way influenced me, was J. M. Coetzee, the South African writer, particularly his novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, a novel about the cost of war in a remote place and the psychological wounds that it inflicts. Diaspora is a universal too. For me, the Holocaust experience was something that I drew on heavily for *The Tattooed Soldier*. I read *The Nazi Doctors* to help create my character Longoria because the writer and psychologist who interviewed the Nazi doctors, Robert Jay Lifton, explored the processes by which people internalize and rationalize ideologies of hate. I think you can be really rooted in your own experience and at the same time understand the things that are common to the human experience in general.

A lot has been written about the processes of disenchantment that occur within postwar Central American literatures. How would you characterize the presence of disenchantment in your own work?

For me the disenchantment is with the American/United States experience. The protagonist of my latest novel, *The Barbarian Nurseries*, lives an experience in California common to immigrant people in the U.S.: when they arrive in the United States, they are brought down a step or two, or three in social status. You can be a doctor in Central America for example, and be a janitor in Los Angeles. That disenchantment is definitely a defining theme in my work, and actually, a significant theme in *The Barbarian Nurseries* (which isn't about a *centroamericana* at all, it is about a *mexicana*, living and with a California family). In relation to this theme, I particularly think of American and world history, a history in which the United States has produced an amazing amount of wealth becoming an engine of economic growth and a world power. But now, in the present, that economic machine is no longer producing the surplus that it used

to; there is a deep process of disaffection occurring in this country now. But I think that we, as *centroamericanos*, from the beginning knew that this economic project was flawed. Because we saw what it brought to our countries: misery, dictatorship, inequality. We could see the contradiction between the values that this country stands for and the reality of what was done abroad in its name. That disenchantment is a theme that is repeated once and again in my work.

Speaking of your next novel, you just finished it. It hasn't been published yet, but word has it that it is already being translated into French, Italian, and even German. Could you tell us something about it?

...Yes, and it will also be published in the United Kingdom and in Canada. In *The Tattooed Soldier*, Antonio is a character very much like me, an intellectual who feels that he has not reached his realization as an intellectual. That's who I am. I've always felt marginal; this is my own psychological problem. Someone who feels marginal to this newspaper for example, maybe not anymore, but for many years I felt as an outsider. So an unrealized intellectual is one of the protagonists in *The Tattooed Soldier*.

In *The Barbarian Nurseries*, the protagonist is Araceli and she is my alter ego. She is someone who works in the house of a family in Orange County, cleaning it. She is also a drop-out from the Colegio Nacional de Bellas Artes in Mexico City because her family did not support her. She is from a working class family in Nezahualcoyotl, or what I like to call the Brooklyn of Mexico City. She comes to Los Angeles, loves art, considers herself an educated person, and yet finds herself folding the clothes and cooking the meals of this family. That is essentially how I see myself: I want to be a great artist, and yet don't feel that I've earned that distinction or been recognized as such. Araceli too is a witness to the upper-middle class life of an American family, which of course, is also my life, especially when I lived abroad, when I lived as a very wealthy American expatriate. So she is both me and sees me in my life. The couple that she works for moreover, has three kids, I have three kids. The only time that she has any resentment towards them is when she goes into the kids' bedroom and she sees they have the most amazing collection of books, and all the toys that they want. She calls their bedroom *el cuarto de las mil maravillas*. It's the one time in her day that she sees and feels everything she did

not get or have growing up, especially as a girl and then a woman in a working class Latin American family, having access to scarce economic resources. Araceli is a frustrated character.

With Araceli, I wanted to subvert the stereotype of the Latin American nanny –I wanted to blow it apart. She is an intellectual; she is not a powerless person. She is very strong-willed and not particularly nice, but she is a great cook and great housekeeper, which is why the family tolerates her. What eventually happens is that the family that she is working for goes through financial problems and they let all the other Latinos that work for them go; Araceli is the last one left. The family continues to have economic problems. The wife eventually leaves with the baby girl but leaves her two boys behind at the house, thinking that the husband is there; but the husband also leaves, so the two children are left with the maid, Araceli. So Araceli takes them on this journey in search of their grandfather who is a *mexicano*, (the two little boys are “one quarter Mexican,” I would never use such a term but in my book some of the characters do). So she goes to Central Los Angeles, in search for him and a whole series of misunderstandings arise. Suddenly she is charged with a crime, kidnapping, and blamed for taking the children, when in fact she has been taking care of them. It becomes a little bit like the novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, but with an undocumented person at the center of the story. The novel shows how easy it is for these people to be stripped of their human rights. A lot of it too is about the American family. It is a big book in terms of the themes that it attacks.

You develop your characters profoundly. It is for this reason that it is so easy to not hate a character like Guillermo Longoria for example. You made him so human despite his lack of humanity, when he earned a living by killing for the Guatemalan army during the war. Out of all of the characters that you have created, which one has been the most difficult for you to develop?

Antonio, from *Tattooed Soldier*, was very difficult to create. I don't feel I was very successful with him because he is a weak person (perhaps not at the end of the novel); but I definitely had a lot of trouble writing him. I am still not very satisfied with him. I feel that if I had read, and this will sound very weird, but I feel that if I had read more Shakespeare before creating Antonio, he would be a better character. If I had actually studied *Hamlet* before Antonio, he would have been

a stronger character. I think of *Hamlet* as a work that's about feeling powerless in the face of evil, and that's what Antonio feels for much of my book. Antonio shrinks before Guillermo Longoria, the ex-soldier in *The Tattooed Soldier*; Longoria was easy to write because he is the killer, the arrogant bastard, and I have an arrogant bastard inside me too.

Favorite character in your novels: Araceli.

A book or novel that you wish you would have written: Saramago's *Blindness*.

Favorite food in Los Angeles: Enchiladas.

Favorite drink: Margaritas.

Your favorite thing to do in Los Angeles: Walking.

If there is one thing you could change about the history of Guatemala, what would that be? I would have let Arbenz finish his term.

One thing or concept that always inspires you to write: Ambition.

Favorite place to write: My dining room table.

Historical figure that you despise: Hitler.

Historical figure that you respect: Lincoln. He was the son of a very poor family, almost entirely self-educated, and rose to become the defining personality of American public life.

A place in this world where you are happy: Watching my children read.

Anything you would like to add?

Yes. I am the son of a working class, immigrant family who has now written three books. I think I owe a lot to my mother and father, to my father for his ambition and for making me a driven person, and to my mother for her sense of romance in life, and her sense of wonder. I feel extremely fortunate, a little lucky. I think I've learned that people succeed not because they are the brightest, but just because they are loved and because they have passion for creating things. I had the good fortune to be raised by two *guatemaltecos* who led me to believe I could create or do anything I wanted, and to have met, in this U.S.

city, so many people who've seen that passion in me and helped me cultivate it.

Notes

1. Founded in 1981 by member of the Santana Chirino Amaya Refugee Committee, and the Southern California Ecumenical Council, El Rescate was the first agency in the United States to offer free legal and social services to refugees fleeing the Salvadoran Civil War. To this day, El Rescate continues providing social and legal assistance to the Central American community of Los Angeles.

2. Refers to the 1992 Los Angeles riots. The riots were sparked by the acquittal of four white police officers from the beating of black motorist Rodney King. The riots lasted six days, and resulted in the death of 53 people, thousands of people injured, and roughly 1 billion US dollars in property damages.

3. Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN). Formed in 1980, the FMLN was the umbrella group for the left wing guerrilla organizations of El Salvador during the Salvadoran civil war. These organizations were: the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí (FPL), the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP), the Resistencia Nacional (RN), the Partido Comunista Salvadoreño (PCS) and the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos (PRTC).