

## AMBOS LADOS

Imagine a lovely open desert stretching toward purple mountains, underfoot red, dry, crunchy sand, and overhead a breathless wind blowing circles up into the sky. The scrub desert in front of us is awake and in bloom on this early spring morning. Splashes of fiery-tipped red ocotillo blossoms and blooming palo verde flowers break up the pale landscape. This is the wild edge of the world where, as children, all five of us, grumbling and hot, would be packed into the family car, our dog's ears flapping out the window like a Norman Rockwell painting. Thus embarked, we children would enthusiastically and with blissful disregard to harmony belt out the song, Home On The Range.

Now, look away from this peaceable portrait. The next scene is a landscape of pain and punishment. Shockingly, suddenly, disturbingly, growing into view, scarring the pristine landscape and all its inhabitants, winding up, down, and across sacred mountains, creeping darkly over hills, like a hideous, giant twenty eight-foot-tall brown centipede, is The Wall.

I live near Nogales, Arizona, one of the twin cities that straddle the US and Mexico. Each city shares the same name, Nogales, but that is where the similarities stop.

On the Arizona side, the 28-foot Wall is wrapped in bales of piercing razor-wire that gleam threateningly in the desert sun. The rust-colored Wall cuts across both International Avenue and its Mexican equivalent, Avenida International. On the Nogales, Sonora side, the Wall is punctuated with protest art and small wooden crosses painted white that commemorate those who died trying to cross.

When Covid-19 came along, the pandemic gave our border a new hell to deal with. The ports of entry slammed closed. The once twin cities' mutual symbiotic financial and social survival came to a painful, grinding halt.

Not so long ago, we used to casually say, "Are you going across the line? Te vas al otro lado? Have fun. Diviertete! Have a margarita for me!" That was before The Wall, before border militarization, before Covid. These days the same question has become strangely existential and ambiguous: "See you on the other side!" The once-frequent greeting now sounds darkly ominous, as if eerily whispering, "See you on the other side, in the afterlife; nos vemos al otro lado!"

Who am I in all of this? My otro lado, my life, my mixed languages, and point of views since childhood, have always revolved around ambos lados, both sides of the border.

Now, el demonio de la pandemia, has pushed the lockdown button, apparently, indefinitely.

"Even if you are an essential worker," says Manuel, a US citizen who lives with his family on the Mexican side of Nogales and works weekly as a landscapist in Tucson, "You still need to wait in line horas y horas to cross into the US. Y tambien, you need to be prepared to swallow your pride. Hasta te pueden poner en la Secundaria." Manuel tells me. Being put into Secondary at the border is everyone's idea of purgatory.

The Covid pandemic has not only cast a disproportionately dark shadow across the Mexican side of Nogales, but the virus itself has become yet another looming, threatening, divisive wall.

In Nogales, Sonora, migrants continue to arrive. Most are refugees, fleeing from The Four Horsemen, War, Famine, Pestilence and Death, I would add, corruption, cartels, greed, and global warming.

"We are so hungry sometimes we have only dirt to eat." A Guatemalan woman traveling with her 5-year-old son told me at the migrant shelter.

From one day to the next, border agents drop off dozens of undocumented migrants without warning into Tucson shelters and small Southern Arizona border towns like Yuma and Ajo. These towns have few facilities and are poorly equipped to take care of migrants, especially during the middle of a pandemic.

Irma, who works at the Nogales Safeway bakery, tells me that Covid-19 has become so politicized that you forget the pandemic actually really exists. Irma needs regular medical checkups and diabetes medicine from her doctor in Nogales, Sonora, but now that has become impossible.

My friend Maria and I talk heatedly on the phone about the apparently simple pandemic guidelines the CDC is asking us to follow. You know the drill. Mask up, maintain a six-foot distance and wash your hands frequently.

"Pues es absurdo!" Maria says, raising her voice in irritation, "It's absurd because people in Nogales, Mexico, don't have easy access to water! How can they be told to wash their hands all the time?"

While the US side of Nogales mistakenly considers water a fact of life, across the Wall, in Nogales, Sonora, most potable water is paid for and delivered by trucks, grinding slowly up steep hills with barrels of water that are sold at an ever increasing price.

The Remain In Mexico program implemented by the Trump administration, means more resources are being exhausted in border towns like Nogales, Sonora, where refugees wait indefinitely for asylum.

Migrant travelers arrive with swollen, blistered feet. They sit in the town plaza with their dusty backpacks and an undefeated spirit of hope. In Nogales, Sonora, the shelters fill up fast. There are no shelters on the Nogales, US side, only the ill-equipped detention cages, which migrants call, "Las hieleras," or ICE boxes, because the caged spaces are kept extremely icy cold by the ICE agents.

In Agua Prieta, Mexico, Sister Judy, an activist nun, said that migrants are given new clothing, but because there is no place in town for them to change, the refugees are obliged to undress in the town square.

Among some migrants, hope is perpetuated one stitch at a time. I spoke with Valarie Lee James, whom I first met while volunteering at Casa Alitas, a migrant shelter in Tucson. Valarie talked about a group she started in 2019 named "Artisans Without Borders." The idea behind her program is to sew hope, one stitch at a time. Valarie and a dedicated group of volunteers provide

migrant women and sometimes men in Nogales, Sonora, with sewing kits and cotton cloths called *mantas* to embroider.

The refugees say sewing eases their stress. It is a portable way of calming anxious minds while waiting for a distant chance to be, "processed," into the US. Valarie tells me that those who have never sewn learn from the more-experienced, many of them from countries where embroidery is a cultural tradition.

Aside from the therapy of sewing, a big perk is that the embroiderers are paid for their work through a business called "Bordando Esperanza."

The small white cotton panels, called *mantas*, are embroidered with prayers of thanks, representations of the Virgen de Guadalupe, or festooned with flowers and prayers to Jesus. The devotional manta cloth is easy to carry, pressed against the heart like a message to Heaven.

Francisco Olachea Martin is another hero on both sides of the Mexican border. Panchito, as he is endearingly called, works in collaboration with humanitarian groups, including Voices From The Border. A paramedic and EMT, Pancho seems to be everywhere at the same time. He tends to the sick, helps migrants reach their sponsors, fills out documents for asylum seekers, and even helps the embroiderers connect with their distributors across the line. Now that everything is shut down due to the pandemic, Pancho makes it possible for migrants to stay connected and keep their spirits up via exchanges on social media.

Making art during a worldwide pandemic is a big intake and exhale of collective breath. The breathing in of new inspiration is what artists on both sides of the border seem to

have been doing during the pandemic. New ideas are bursting into life, seeds born from our collective solitude.

"The Bridge" series at The Hilltop Gallery, in Nogales, Arizona, is an example of new beginnings. The Bridge event is a first in a sequence of collaborations between the Hilltop Gallery and The Borderlands Theater.

This is my first public outing after the second vax. The sun is setting. Out on the gallery patio, a band is playing. Over on the next hill is Mexico. Time and space have opened up. I am blinded by the light.

"This event represents a bridge between the visual arts and the performing arts," says Elizabeth Weatherbie, vice president of the Hilltop Gallery. Forming that collective bridge is the artistic director of Borderlands Theater, Marc- Pinate, who sat down and talked with me. Since 2014, Borderlands Theater has been seeking to preserve the narrative and oral history of border Mexicans and their origins, creating theatre in site-specific areas.

When I asked Marc how the pandemic had affected him he was quick to reply. "A sequel of our Barrio stories was to take place in Nogales, Arizona, in April 2020, but because of the pandemic, we had to cancel our site-specific event and pivot to digital. Expanding into digital helped our profile." Marc explained that the pandemic put the theater group on the map by going digital and producing such short films as "Antigone at The Border" and the Desmadre series.

The opening at The Hilltop Gallery is an art exhibit called, "La Generacion 50's, 60's, 70's." The show features the art, sculpture and music of veteran Nogales artist, Sonny Peters. Today is the Spring Equinox and Sonny's new pandemic paintings are a blazing, splashy, burst of Spring.

"I just got bored," Sonny told me during a private interview in the gallery's small pantry. "So I just started experimenting," he said, "I went outside, hung up some canvases on the clothesline and started throwing guerrilla glue at 'em." The results of Sonny's work are more fine-tuned and beautiful than one would expect from his gorilla glue descriptions.

Another Nogales artist, Ricardo Santos Hernandez, the new president of The Hilltop Gallery, also had his pandemic creations on display. In this new version of his work on repurposed paper, Santos Hernandez has deftly cut, meticulously shredded and magically breathed spiritual life into his art. Contemplating the delicate cutout figures in, "The Deer Dancer" and "Shaman Is Going To Dance A Song," I can almost see the sacred beings come floating into life, almost smell the sage and hear the shamanic, rhythmic incantations.

Later that evening, from a high perch outside the Hilltop Gallery, looking out at the ripe papaya-colored sunset over the hilltops of Mexico, my mind and soul grew again with so much new life and art.

More art and innovation is also to be found in downtown, Nogales, Arizona. On an empty street, long devoid of business due to the Wall and the pandemic, steps away from the border, I discovered La Linea, an art gallery and studio space.

My friend Kevin Bustamante, a musician and videographer from both Nogales, arranged for me to meet Aissa Huerta at the gallery where she oversees and curates the exhibits. During early years before the pandemic, La Linea was an empty storefront among the many in both towns that lost their business due to the pandemic. The space gradually became a place where

artists from both sides of the border could gather, talk, create and exhibit their work. Now, once again, it seems things may come back to life.

Walking into the gallery off the grey, bleak, empty street, I felt as if I was entering into an alternative, vibrant, upside down world. Currently on display are the witty, brainy, brave, surreal paintings of Paula Wittner. Her one-person exhibition is aptly called, Both Sides Now, because Wittner's work is simultaneously being featured at the elegant mid-century modern Museo de Nogales, less than a mile away across the border.

It appears that when humans and animals can't cross the border, at least art has somehow made its persistent way.

As her two-year-old daughter prances around the gallery in sparkling blue slippers, Aissa and I sit down and chat. She tells me that because the studio is community-based, it has been difficult to keep things going during the pandemic. However, due to help from various local organizations and individuals, Aissa is hopeful. She anticipates La Linea will continue growing as part of a community, cross border exchange.

With regards, to the empty storefronts all along Morley Avenue, Aissa says, "The downtown used to be all retail but now is a pivotal time, an opportunity to promote community revitalization, a platform and place for artists and creative thinkers." As I left the gallery, various people of all ages were arriving, still masked, but like me, with eyes wide open to art and a brand new pulse to Nogales, USA.

In Guadalupe, Serrano's gripping new public art installation on the Nogales, Mexico, section of the border Wall, are a stunning array of plaster-cast, life-sized, human-face death

masks. Most of the faces are painted red and they all express various degrees of human emotion. Serrano created the death masks in memory of those who have died attempting to cross into the United States.

Life, death, art, and history are palpable at the Nogales, Mexico border. On June 17th of 2021, an opening exhibit called, "Mirando El Pasado para Enriquecer el Futuro" ( Looking at the Past to Enrich the Future ), will be on display by Sonoran artist, Oscar Monroy. After the exhibition that takes place at El Museo de La Ciudad de Nogales, Monroy is donating his many decades of photographs to the City of Nogales in what he calls, "Un legado a mi ciudad." A legacy to his home town. Art endures, makes history, and leaves a perennial impact.

I dreamily envision a utopian world without division. In Nogales, Morley Avenue could become a vibrant welcoming new street. There could be a coffee shop, bookstore, maybe a second-hand store, game shop and even a migrant-operated restaurant serving regional dishes from the countries that the refugees have fled from. Oh! Home, cooking! How hard it must be to leave home even when your home is killing you.

My friend Chico Macmurtrie is an artist and creator of amazing inventive robotics. On an eventful day, near his home in Naco, Arizona, Chico is preparing to launch the first of the long awaited Border Crosser robots. In a gesture of peace and good will between nations, the two robots will embrace each other in unity across the border Wall. Chico has been working on this cross border performance project for over five years. The next performance will be in October, 2021 at the Mexican border in Texas, utilizing six Border Crosser robots. For now, the thought of

watching the two tall robots unfurl and rise up from delicately automated folds, is an anticipated event. In this small border town it seems the only excitement lately has been the news that after the pandemic, a Dunkin' Doughnut is to open in the next town.

Amorphic Robot Works is Chico's interdisciplinary Collective. I have seen The Border Crosser robots progress from the drawing board to this first performance. Describing his amorphic vision Macmurtrie says, "I came to see the US-Mexico border as the Theater of the Real, a realm shaped by representations as much as physical conditions and processes." At first sight, the robots looked to me like so many weird, white trash bags scrunched up on a computerized dolly. It was a strange sight. Sci-fi on the Sonoran desert.

Communities on both sides of the border gradually gathered at the Wall for the festive occasion. The hot desert air was permeated with a welcome celebratory feeling. Masks were finally mostly gone, camaraderie and human exchange ultimately breaking through our long, lonely lockdown. Chico, was standing only a few feet away from me in Mexico, and I, only two steps from him in the USA. We squeezed our hands hello awkwardly through the four inches between the steel bollards of the Wall. Chico and his wife Louise had procured permits and ordinances and negotiated across international lines for the long-planned amorphic robot event. A segment of the razor wire was even removed from the Wall so that the robots' fragile tensile fabric would not be damaged during the performance.

Once their slow metamorphosis began, Macmurtrie's tall, translucent, undulating robot sculptures reminded me of the delicate Japanese birds we used to make fly out of carefully folded paper.

Each segment of the robots gradually, gracefully, inflated into life and expanded in real time.

Chico Macmurtrie describes the experience: "The sculptures have dramatically morphed into two arches of light that straddle the border. They symbolize the enduring cultural, ecological and interpersonal connections across the border."

What politics cannot achieve art makes possible.

Finally, the much anticipated robotic crescendo. After fits and starts befitting the current political tension on the US-Mexico border, the two robots slowly sprung upwards like pale phantom sunflowers, unfurling their tendrils and eventually reaching out to each other, across the forbidding Wall.

Susana Sedgwick