

# Recuerdos Urbanos

Craig Davis Arzac

*Translation by Craig Davis Pinson*

## **Translator's note**

Recuerdos Urbanos is a short text my late father Craig Davis Arzac wrote around 2010, recalling some of his favorite spots as a kid growing up in Mexico City in the '50s and '60s. Even though it had been published, I actually hadn't read it until after his passing. Hearing his voice in the writing was very moving in that context. I approached creating an English translation as a dialogue between him and I, and a tribute to his memory. This conversational method became a necessity after attempting a literal translation, which failed to capture the spirit and intention of his words. I realized my task was to 'improvise' around the outlines of his text in order to summon up the subtle magic and tenderness of his brief memoir. I believe he would approve of this more free approach, and would find enjoyment in seeing how his memories find a new life in another language through my interpretations.

## Recuerdos Urbanos

Craig Davis Arzac

El verano siempre llegaba con lluvia, vivíamos en Calero, una tranquila calle de San Ángel a 30 pasos del ahora Restaurante San Ángel Inn, frente a esa extraordinaria casa fábrica de Diego Rivera. Recuerdo las casas de mis amigos con colores fuertes: amarillo, rosa mexicano, etc.; era como caminar por un sistema de faros, las casas de los conocidos destacaban del caserío gris. Cuando llovía corrían ríos por las calles de piedra que horas después seguían resplandeciendo como si de verdad fueran piedras de río. Recuerdo las crecidas, llegaban siempre de como media hora después de la peor parte de la tormenta, ese retraso encendía mi imaginación, Río San Ángel, ahora calle León Felipe, intermitentemente se convertía en río luego calle, luego río, las cañadas del Desierto de los Leones, al poniente alimentaban esta calle-río. Todos los niños de mi calle salimos a jugar después de la tormenta; construíamos cañas de pescar con cualquier varita y los anzuelos los hacíamos con ganchos de cortina.

En la primavera, me llevaban al parque en Tlacopac, una colonia vecina que estaba en un lomerío, era una zona más pobre que San Ángel, había casas más pequeñas y casas de cartón, algunas calles eran de tierra sin banquetas, nos gustaba el parque en Tlacopac, porque aunque polvoriento, tenía juegos infantiles de leyenda: volantín, trapecios, columpios de gran péndulo, resbaladillas que llegaban al cielo; en la esquina la tiendita del “Güero” una miscelánea pequeñita, repleta de objetos interesantes y coloridos, lo más divertido era comprar sobrecitos de papel, en cada sobre tres estampitas que ibas revelando una por una, con gran ilusión, ilustraciones que tomaban la forma de frutas, autos o aviones del futuro, etc. Entrar en contacto con otro niño significaba comercio “una difícil por 10 fáciles” tapados y volados o simple contemplación colectiva de imágenes impresas.

Tlacopac era la colonia de los papalotes, en esta zona siempre soplaban el viento y con él llegaban los papalotes, al acercarte sabías dónde andabas por los vestigios de papalotes desgarrados enganchados en los cables de la luz.

Cuando yo tenía 8 años, nos mudamos al Pedregal. Éramos los primeros en la calle, todo era un enorme pedregal; el lugar era fantástico, como estar en Marte, las calles tenían nombre de fenómenos naturales, fuego, lluvia, agua, lava (nosotros vivíamos en Brisa). Mis padres eran amigos del arquitecto Antonio Atollini Lack; él diseñó y construyó nuestra hermosa casa sobre una cresta de lava del volcán Xitle. Comencé a ir a la obra desde los 7 años, todo era artesanía de piedra, ruido de sierras y taladros, aserrín en la tierra, olor a madera, a tierra y a concreto. Por otro lado no faltaban los tlacuaches, las ardillas y las víboras de cascabel. Poco tiempo después de mudarnos comencé a ir a la primaria del Simón Bolívar, muy cerca del parque de Picacho, la escuela estaba recién construida también sobre la roca que afloraba como salpicada entre campos deportivos y senderos. A la salida de la escuela siempre caminábamos al parque, allí esperábamos que vinieran por nosotros, mis padres se habían organizado con varios vecinos, cada semana le tocaba a alguna mamá. El parque Picacho ofrecía todo tipo de oportunidades para jugar y divertirse, en la parte plana tenía pasto perfecto para el fut y correr, en otra sección las olas de la lava estaban allí para escalarlas y aventurarse entre las hendiduras, y los espacios e intersticios con tierra apisonada, cerca del enorme pirul y la vegetación nativa, excelentes espacios para jugar canicas, y claro no podía faltar el carrito de los helados y el chemise.

Visitábamos el parque México muy seguido, teníamos unos amigos que vivían en la zona, la rotonda del parque siempre apareció en mi imaginación como una misteriosa ruina de oriente, la bici no podía faltar, trazábamos pistas en el concreto quebrado del piso y pasábamos horas jugando a las carreras de carritos. Un día que visitamos el parque, caminábamos por Insurgentes y entre tranvías y el tráfico cotidiano, vimos una multitud que se había juntado en Sears, en la esquina había un gran alboroto, nos acercamos y entre la gente alcancé a ver dentro de la vitrina una televisión que transmitía el primer programa a color; la primera tele a colores en México! Fue grandioso, en ese momento pensé que todo era posible.

## Urban Memories

Craig Davis Arzac (*translation Craig Davis Pinson*)

Summer always arrived with the rain. We lived on Calero, a calm San Ángel street some thirty steps away from what is now the San Ángel Inn Restaurant, across the way from Diego Rivera's extraordinary factory-house. I remember my friends' houses in bright colors: yellow, *rosa mexicano*, etc.; a walk around the block was a stroll among a constellation of beacons, well-known façades emerging from the gray. Rivulets ran through the streets when it rained, the cobblestones glimmering hours after the downpour, as if they were pebbles in a stream. I remember the rainwater surges, reliably swelling about half an hour after storm's peak. That delayed time interval set my imagination off: Río San Ángel (now León Felipe avenue) turned river, then street, then river. Westerly water from Desierto de los Leones fed the currents of our beloved canal-street. After the rainfall, every kid on the block came out to play; we improvised fishing rods from scavenged sticks and hooks stolen from our mothers' curtains.

Springtime for us meant visits to Tlacopac, a less well-off neighborhood than San Ángel. Its hilltops were encrusted with makeshift houses and unpaved dirt roads. We liked the park in Tlacopac, dusty as it was. It had the trappings of playground legend: roundabouts, trapeze rings, pendulous swings, sky-scraping slides. "El Güero's" corner store was stocked to the brim with curious and colorful trinkets. Most coveted were small paper envelopes sold there, holding three stamps each. Upon getting our hands on them, we'd reveal the illustrations one by one with great anticipation, uncovering depictions of fruits, futuristic cars and airplanes, etc. Coin flips, barbers ("a rare stamp for ten common ones"), and various games of chance were common occurrences. Other times, we simply gazed together at the collective spoils of the day.

Tlacopac was known for its kites. The wind there was always blowing, and with its currents came the colorful contraptions. The neighborhood's tell-tale sign was the abundance of ripped paper vestiges, smattered on its roofs and wrapped around its exposed electrical wires.

When we moved to Pedregal, the neighborhood was being built over the lava fields of the Xitle volcano. Streets were named after natural phenomena – fire, rain, water, lava. Being first on our block at Brisa Avenue, everything around us was volcanic rock. At eight years old, I felt I was among the fantastical craters of a Martian landscape. Sitting on a crest of petrified magma, our house was designed and built by Antonio Attolini Lack, architect and family friend. Stopping by the construction site was a common occurrence during the year it was built. My senses were saturated by the sights of stone craftwork and sawdust on the ground, the clamoring of drills, and the smell of wood, earth, and concrete. Pedregal was a project aimed at integrating natural landscape and architecture, and as such, possums, squirrels, and rattlesnakes also made themselves known amongst the construction racket.

Simón Bolívar Primary was also built within the folds of cooled magma, basalt splattered among its man-made footpaths and children's playing fields. I started school there soon after moving in at Brisa, which brought the added perk of close proximity to Picacho Park. We would walk to the park every day after school and wait to be picked up there. My parents had an arrangement with other families on our block, each week one of our moms had driving duties. Picacho left nothing to be desired when it came to possibilities for enjoyment and play, and we became quite familiar with them. Waves of hardened lava tempted our instinct for exploration with their many ridges and crevices, ideal for climbing. There were also open spaces built on rammed earth, lending themselves to running, impromptu soccer matches, and

countless games of marbles. Among the plentiful native flora there was a colossal *pirul* pepper tree to visit and admire. And of course, no park worth its salt would have gone without the dependable presence of an ice cream and *chemise* popsicle cart.

A recurring vision of the rotunda at Parque México, cast as an esoteric ruin, had made its home in my imagination upon our frequent visits. The park's circular pathways had become familiar; we'd trace patterns with our bikes on the cracked concrete and pit our race car toys against each other for hours on end. One such day, a crowd gathered on the way to Parque México, among the street traffic and trolley cars of Insurgentes Avenue. There was great commotion on the corner at the Sears store. As we weaved closer to the source, I began to catch glimpses, between shoulders and heads, of a television set in the display window. The first broadcast in full color was in transmission; the first color T.V. in Mexico! It was a great wonder, and in that moment, I felt that anything was possible.