The First Two Pages of "El Armero" by Mario Acevedo

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An Essay by Mario Acevedo

It pays to be nice to people so that when an opportunity comes around, as when Cynthia Swanson got the okay from Akashic Books for a *Denver Noir* anthology, she thought of me. In picking a specific neighborhood for my story, where else but Globeville? After all, what other community in Denver is named after a smelter? Sure, east Colfax and Five Points have accumulated their share of dead bodies, but they don't post warnings about violent crime *and* deadly environmental hazards.

As a writer, the guiding light for my work is this quote from Kurt Vonnegut: "Pity the reader." Which to me means making the writing as accessible as possible. It doesn't mean dumbing down your work, either. It means crafting your prose to be smooth and compelling and to eliminate "speed bumps" that knock the reader out of the story.

In choosing "El Armero" for the title, I do two things. First, it's in Spanish, which is a clue that the story involves Denver's Chicano community. Second, the word translates into gunsmith, and in keeping with Anton Chekov's writing dictum "If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise, don't put it there." I showed you the gun and trust me, it will be used. A good title should foreshadow the direction of the story, and I think I've done that.

Now where to start the narrative? Beginning with backstory helps orient the reader about the who and why, but an info-dump lacks drama and makes the action drag. However, lunging straight ahead in media res—in the middle of things—risks not giving the reader enough of "why," as in why should I care? It's the perpetual tug-of-war between show and tell, also known as reveal and exposition, that a writer must learn how to finesse.

Let's dissect the opening line.

> I exit the Number 12 bus at the corner of 45th Avenue and Camino de Frida Kahlo.

When the narrator—later identified as Rafael—exits the bus, you know he's a bus person, meaning he can't afford a car or a ride-share, which reveals his socio-economic status. By mentioning the Number 12 bus, he's assuming you're familiar with the public transportation schedule, meaning that you the reader are also a bus person, making you one of the cast in this tale.

45th Avenue is a geographical clue, the southern boundary between Globeville and north Denver. At this point in the story, "Camino de Frida Kahlo" is a mystery but when I disclose that we're in the near future, you figure out that it's Washington Boulevard. Renaming the street is my nod to the current trend of erasing our history and who better to replace the Father of Our Country than with the pop-culture icon Mexican artist and protege of Joseph Stalin.

The paragraph continues with theme-based imagery that both describes the place and provides visceral details of what's it like to live there.

> Traffic rumbles above me. I'm under the Mousetrap, an immense concrete confusion straddling Globeville, where Interstates 25 and 70 intersect north of downtown Denver. I take a moment to catch my breath. The air carries a metallic tang and tastes of grit filtering from the rush of trucks and cars on the overpass.

In the next paragraph I present a detour sign, a metaphorical warning that the narrator's path in life is about to take an unexpected turn. Tires marks on the sidewalk add to the noir ambience, and the immense pit signifies where things are buried, more foreshadowing. The year—2027—confirms we're in a time where the narrative is yet to happen. The last sentence shares more about Rafael's character, that while near the bottom of the economic scale, he's well aware of the political undercurrents in his community.

> My path is blocked by yellow tape and a battered metal placard: *Detour Desvio*. Tire marks from construction equipment crisscross the sidewalk. To my left extends an immense pit where the highway will be broadened. Es el año de Nuestro Señor, 2027, and time for the politicians to pay back favors by diverting public money into more "infrastructure."

The next paragraph gives more details about the construction site which turn out to be relevant to the story's bloody conclusion. Also, Rafael's dismissive thoughts will come back to haunt him in the worst possible way.

> I take note of the arrangement of square holes beneath the overpass where the footings for a new foundation will be poured. My gaze continues to the existing interchange. Street legend has it a lot of problems were solved

> when that part of the highway was built. Snitches and witnesses disappeared, buried beneath thick layers of concrete.
>
> I shrug. Not my concern what happened. Nor what might happen.

In the next passage we're introduced to the story's other main character, the gangster jefe. In naming him "Toro" I reinforce the Latino theme and foreshadow what kind of a person he is so that at no time do you question why he's called "Bull" in Spanish. When Rafael muses about why Toro had summoned him, this alerts us about a subtext to their relationship. Rafael's breathing problems set him up as a weakened, diminished character, and his medical condition is also a metaphor for what's ailing Globeville. The description of the cannabis and liquor stores are based on a recent visit to the neighborhood and juxtapose the moneyed interlopers with the down-and-out locals. "Bolillo" is a roll of crusty white bread and is Chicano slang for gringo. The graffiti and knocked over streetlamps are true-to-life.

> In that mysterious way that rumors circulate through the barrio, I got word that Toro needs me, which is why I'm here. I want to hope I know why he summons me, but I know I'm wrong.
>
> I amble north, taking it easy. If I walk too fast, the left side of my chest hitches, constricting my breath.
>
> I pass the parking lot where bolillos queue up to take advantage of today's specials at Sweet Buds Cannabis. Round the corner, cars, pickups, bums on bicycles wait their turn at the take-out window of Pato's Liquor Drive-Thru. While the weed store looks as neat and slick as a Starbucks, Pato's is a cinderblock shack flanked by walls of particle board, the surfaces coated by flaking house paint and tattered posters advertising cheap beer and whiskey. There's little in my surroundings that isn't tagged with graffiti. The posts of streetlamps litter the sidewalk like fallen timbers, mowed down by bad drivers.

The final paragraphs in the opening amplify Rafael's cynicism as he sees with open eyes a neighborhood suffering from political neglect, graft disguised as community empowerment, lives discarded by the establishment.

> Across the street stands the city's latest attempt at solving the area's crime problem. An electronic billboard cycles through a red X cancelling a pistol, bullets transforming into doves, and the message: *Stop the shooting! Love one another!* The mayor says this billboard is a peace memorial to the victims of gun violence. She calls it "a compelling symbol of hope triumphing over despair, of virtue over lawlessness."
>
> But ask me and I'll tell you we have enough symbols.
>
> Every time it rains, this stretch of real estate, from here to Elyria-Swansea, floods like a motherfucker, the way it's done for years, but the government never gets around to fixing that mess. Dolores Huerta Vocational closed due to lack of funding, which cut short both my GED studies and my chance for a certificate in applied electronics. Drug abatement and rehab counseling also got axed. Fiscal restraint and all that. Yet city hall managed to cough up two and a half million dollars to shower on the media relations firm that designed this "symbol."

Again, the reference to gun violence is more foreshadowing, and by the end of the story, I bring all the plot elements together—the construction pit, the gun, Toro's real motive for summoning Rafael, and that this detour in life can never be reversed.

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Mario Acevedo is the author of the national bestselling Felix Gomez detective-vampire series, most recently *Steampunk Banditos: Sex Slaves of Shark Island,* and the graphic novel from IDW, *Killing the Cobra*. He has also authored the YA humor thriller, *University of Doom,* and co-authored the Western novel, *Luther, Wyoming*. His work has won an International Latino Book Award, a Colorado Book Award, and has appeared in numerous anthologies to include *Denver Noir, ¡El Porvenir, Ya!, Shadow Atlas: Dark Landscapes of the Americas, A Fistful of Dinosaurs, Straight Outta Deadwood, Psi-Wars,* and *It Came From The Multiplex*. Mario was a faculty member of the Regis University Mile-High MFA program and Lighthouse Writers Workshops.