

PETER PAONE

Used, 2014
Acrylic on Mylar, 40 x 30 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

OCTAVIO SOLIS

Mundo Means World

There I was sitting on the porch taking in the Saturday morning rays in my pajama pants and T-shirt, nursing a cup of Mom's *café con leche* with the light buzz of my doobie taking hold. The grackles with their oil-slick wings scattered as Louie-Louie rolled by in his royal-blue Chevy Impala with the mag wheels and chrome bumpers, like he always did on weekends. Only this time he pulled into the driveway. That sleek machine next to my car reminded me that no matter how I customized it with a cherry-red Earl Scheib paint job and new tires, my Gremlin would always be a Gremlin. There went my buzz.

Louie-Louie sat in his car with his sunglasses on like the Prince of Low and waved me over to him. He never got out of his ride if he could help it. Some people thought it was laziness on his part and rude too, and some even wondered if he had legs at all. But I knew better. That Impala was Louie-Louie's throne and as long as he sat on it, he was king. Why would he abdicate that when there was enough daily shit in this dusty old town to make us all feel provincial? I slipped into my flip-flops and sauntered over all cool and easy.

¿Qué onda, Louie-Louie?

Nada-nada. How about you, bruh?

I'm cool.

Been too long, ese. You high?

Just a hit. Keep it down. My mom, sabes.

I'm hip. How's your sister doin'?

Still married.

I don't see it lasting.

Like a lot of the guys that called themselves my friends, or *camaradas*, in the jargon of my time, Louie-Louie took an undue interest in my sister Mickie. It didn't matter that she was already married and had a four-year-old kid to show for it. He was waiting for the day she'd come to her senses and ride off with him to some romantic getaway like Carlsbad Caverns. Like that day would ever come.

Mundo, I need you to do me a solid.

A what?

A favor, bruh. I need your help.

For what?

Without taking his eyes off me, he reached under the seat and whipped out something wrapped in newspaper.

He laid it in my hand and by the weight of it, I knew it was trouble.

What's this?

Just for a day. Watch it for me.

I peered through a slit in the paper and saw the shiny blow-hole of nasty looking right back at me.

This is a gun, *ese*. What the hell am I gonna do with a gun?

Nothin'. Just put away and forget about it. I'll be back for it tomorrow.

What's going on, *ese*? Is this your *cuete*? What've you done?

Nothin'. Look, Mundo, I'm asking you to fucking do me this solid, and if you don't want to, then fuck it, I'll find someone else. But I thought you were mature enough for this shit. How old are you, twenty-one, twenty-two?

Eighteen.

Eighteen? Fuck it, I'll see you later.

He started to take it back, but I moved my hand away. I didn't realize that I had done that. Something about the heft of it, the blunt unpredictable weight of it, felt good against my abdomen, and that's where I kept it.

Just kidding, *ese*. I'll watch it for you.

He smiled. Like an idiot, I smiled back exactly the same way.

Orale, Mundo. That's my bruh. You my rock-steady bruh. Later.

He turned up the music in his car and shifted it in reverse.

Is it loaded? I asked.

Louie-Louie gave me his over-the-sunglasses look and said, Say hi to Mickie for me, bruh.

* * *

Louie-Louie used to be Luis Gutierrez and he used to work for my Dad's tree surgery business back when he was still married to my Mom. But sometime after Dad left home and later the state, Luis got mixed up with these other people who worked in used car sales, which we all knew were fronts for money-laundering operations, and just like that he's Louie-Louie and his shirts look cheap and he smells of cologne and he's putting a gun in my hand. I didn't like the way he called me bruh neither, like it would endear me to him instead of making me feel like an article of women's

underwear. But the fact that he entrusted this hardware to me, that said something about how the world seemed to gearing up for me.

I closed the door to my room, turned up the music on my stereo, and decided I wouldn't even look at it. I'd put it in the closet under all my old *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazines, leave it there until tomorrow. But before I knew it, I set the package on the bed, on my knees like a supplicant peeled back the newspaper with my hands shaking and readied myself for the sight of it. Suddenly, everything in the room blurred out except for a single revolver, Smith & Wesson .45, stainless steel bur-nished to a matte finish, with a black grip finger-grooved for easy handling. I peered into the cylinder and found a bullet nestled in each chamber. I held it gingerly, shifted it from hand to hand, and nursed that heft in my palm, aimed it at my graduation picture on the wall, at the whole tribe of graduates in my senior class panoramic, feeling the faintest voice whisper right into my fingertips the word yes.

I heard my Mom making noise outside my door so I wrapped the *cuete* in its paper and buried it deep between my magazines in the closet, right by the blunt I'd lit earlier. I needed a long steaming shower. Standing there in the tub with the hot soapy water running down my legs, I looked at my sad skinny body and the not-quite-adult machinery of my sex, frail and incomplete. Only then did I realize that my hand was still gripping the gun, even if the gun wasn't there at all.

After I toweled off and combed my hair, I heard voices in the kitchen. I opened the door and called out, Ama! You talking with somebody?

Sí, *mijo*, she bellowed back. Mickie's here. She's gonna watch the house while I'm at work.

Hey, *carnala*! I shouted to her.

Hey, Mundo! Get dressed so you can say hi to Bruno!

Bruno was the aforementioned four-year-old fruit of my sister's loins and my nephew, but his real title was holy fucking terror. This little brat had a mad knack for ferret-ing out whatever meant the most to us and leaving it in a shambles. He once found a set of my great-grandma's diamond earrings and disposed of them in such a fashion that we found one of them deep in the bowels of the wash-ing machine and the other deep in the bowels of Bruno

himself. Needless to say, the shit he got into made us get into it too.

Bruno's here?

Yeah. Isn't he in your room?

I frantically wrapped a towel around and ran to my room and when I opened the door, there he was, hold-ing that stainless steel three-inch barrel in his tiny toddler fingers. He was a striking boy with long lashes and deep green eyes, but his head already bore the scars of too many tumbles down stairs and out of trees. I dropped the towel and his gaze went straight to my groin and that was dis-traction enough. I snapped the gun out of his hands and quickly pushed him out. No way that *pinchi cuete* was staying in the house now.

* * *

To keep it hid, I put on my denim jacket and shoved the hardware barrel-first into my pant's waistband. I flashed past Mom and Mickie with hardly a word and got in my car and drove. I didn't know where I was going, but I hardly cared. I headed down Alameda past the old motels and my old elementary and the many used car lots that were only just sprouting along both sides of the avenue. I was raised along this old highway and connected to its low-rent charm, but now it was starting to turn. Into what, I couldn't say back then.

I stopped at the light and waited for my green with the other cars around me. Los Tigres del Norte from some-one's radio bled into my car and that's when it happened. The same smooth little whisper that had earlier coursed into the whorls of my fingers spoke up a little louder now, saying

Look at him.

I froze. Again I heard it.

Look at him.

I turned to the driver in the pickup next to me. An older guy in a Diablos baseball cap with a cigarette buried in his mustache.

In that brand new *troca*. Fucking music. He thinks he's *el mero mero*.

The guy caught me looking and stared back like he's about to laugh 'cause I'm in a fucking Gremlin. I wanted to turn away but the voice said

Nah, man. You got this.

And I did. Some kind of force hardened my look and the guy blinked and the light changed and he turned away and then he was gone. The car behind me honked and the voice whispered

Take your fucking time. You are the man.

* * *

I stopped at the Sonic and had a burger for breakfast while I thought about where I should go next. El Paso is a big sprawling city with hardly nothin' to do but stay out of the heat. So I cruised around for a few hours, me and Pink Floyd and the .45. I drove through the serious streets of El Segundo Barrio, where no doubt some of the rough *vatos* standing on the corner were anchored with similar heft. When they turned their blunt grackle eyes on me sitting low in the saddle, I gave them the stern look of brother-hood. At first they looked affronted and I could almost see their spines stiffening, but then their hard Indian looks softened as they gave me their cholo salute, that lazy up-ward nod of the chin, and I went on my way at the speed of chill. Out of nowhere I thought I should stop by and see Lisa Morales at her parents' house just for the hell of it and the voice in my waistband said yeah.

Lisa lived in this quiet residential neighborhood where everyone keeps their grass trim but the summer burns it yellow. All the Mexicans there think of themselves as up-per-middle class and look down on us in the Lower Valley, but I know for a fact they got all their fine imported furni-ture at haggled prices from the Mercado in Juarez. Lisa's family were very cool, though, they weren't into throwing airs and shit. Every time I went, her mother regaled me with her good home cooking.

¡Qué surprise, Mundo! Come in, *ya acabamos* break-fast but we got some bacon and *pan dulce* left over.

Está bien, señora. I just had a bite.

Lisa! Raymundo's here! *Andale*, sit down.

I settled into her father's La-Z-Boy with the worn arm-rests, which out of respect I'd never done before. It wasn't lost on Lisa. When she appeared in her shorts and tank top looking real fine, fingering her shag-cut hair, she stopped and smirked at me.

What are you doing? That's my dad's chair.

I know.

Her mother brought me a plate of ground chorizo and

tortilla anyway, then Lisa and me talked in the living room about the high- and lowlights of the previous night. Lisa had gone to a wedding dance with some guy who tried to force himself on her. He'd unzipped his pants in the car and tried to push her face down into him. I told her she deserved a better class of dude. I told her I'd bust his ass for her. She just laughed. I really liked Lisa Morales, but she didn't think of me as boyfriend material. She tells me everything that goes on in her life, the likes, dislikes, the secrets that claw at her young-girl heart, the dark yearnings that run through every teenager who's tired of the burden of being chaste. It was easy for her to share those thoughts with someone who was afraid to admit that he was growing tired of the burden too. Only now there was this other burden, an even deeper secret, digging into my crotch like a finger.

Wanna walk to the park with me? she asked with those kissable lips.

The gun whispered in my pants, fuck yeah.

Sure, I said.

* * *

In that oppressive border heat that turns the sky almost white, we made our way down the block to the small park with the playground. All along the path, we talked, fell silent, then talked some more. Sometimes as we walked side by side, my hand would brush against hers light as a web and that was enough for me.

Not this time, it whispered.

We sat in the swings while we talked about our plans for after high school. She was looking into a nursing career and I told her she'd be good at it. She asked me what I wanted to do after graduation, and I said, college, I guess, but I didn't really know what that meant or whether it was even possible. I didn't want to think that far ahead. I couldn't think of anything except those long brown legs of Lisa's and that way she had of saying nu-uh, like it was a jingle for her own show or something.

Then while she was looking at some little kids playing soccer with a Wiffle ball in the scrappy grass and weeds, the gun whispered trouble into me.

Turn around and kiss her. She wants it.

I swiveled sideways in my swing and faced her. What, she said.

Nothing.

No, Mundo. Tell me.

I just know you can do better.

So can you, the gun said.

I will, she said.

You will too, the gun said.

I got all the time in the world, she said.

World? That's you, *loco*. *Mundo* means world. *El Mundo*. You are her world, said the gun.

And when the right dude comes, I'll know it, she said.

See? She wants it.

I was about to say how every song in the radio lately seemed to be about her and how I couldn't keep my mind on my Algebra II homework and how I really needed to kiss her on the mouth, but she abruptly interjected.

Check it out.

We looked in the direction of the parking lot and saw a car pulling up. It was the guy with the zipper, tall and built like a biker, his curly hair teased into an Afro. He was all smiles, coming right for us. Lisa didn't look too pleased.

Sangrón. Wait here, Mundo. I'll handle this.

She knew I wasn't the type of guy to make a scene, which is to say she knew I was a coward. They stood far off in the stumpy withered grass saying stuff I couldn't make out, except something about dropping over to say hi and something about another chance. I sat in the swing making circles in the sand with my foot, trying not to look, but sometimes I would and I'd see him taking her hand and her pulling it away. Some grandma sitting on the bench watching her kids going up and down the slide squinted once in my direction and turned away. I thought for a minute it was 'cause she heard the gun laughing.

Almost without knowing it, I got up and strode right up to Lisa's side and stood there. For a second, the guy glared at me from under his Afro, then smiled all conceited and shit.

What it is.

What it is is you, said the gun and me.

Lisa tensed up when she saw how I was acting. Mundo, she said, this is—

I know who this is, we said. This is the guy who can't keep his pants zipped up.

Mundo!

The guy chuckled like it was the funniest thing he'd heard that day.

Pos, guess what? You can't treat my friend like that.

Like what?

Like some tramp. You can't do that, *ese*. Lisa's class and you got no business with her.

Mundo, stop.

How would you know, *puto*, he said.

'Cause I know Lisa like you don't, *puto*.

I'll kick your ass.

Try it, fuckhead.

Mundo! I mean it!

And he pushed me with three fingers, just three fingers and I reeled back and almost fell. I took a shallow breath and like another heart pumping all kinds of courage and rashness and heat into me, filling me up with the here and now, blurring my vision of everything but the clarity of the time, the gun howled me right back into his face.

Push me again, I said. Go ahead. Push me again ... *bruh*.

I don't know what it is, how some people know. Maybe they got an instinct for it, maybe they got a scent for gun-metal the way some mutts smell the meanness on another dog. Maybe he saw my fingers already wrapped around that invisible grooved handle and sensed my power to make it real. The guy looked intently into my eyes and snarled, fuck you. Then he backed off and threw her a look.

Some buddy you got here, Lisa. By the grace of God he ain't dead. See you tonight?

Lisa could barely speak.

Yeah. Sure. Ten.

Right on. Then to me as he walked back to his car: grace of God, *puto*, grace of God.

I was stupefied, not so much by my crazy newfound nerve, but by this instant pact between Lisa and the guy.

You're going with him?

Lisa, red in the face and burning with tears, shoved me as hard as she could screaming, what the hell are you doing? Idiot! Fool! I told you I got this!

But are you going back out with—

YES! What do you care, shithead? Who made you sheriff all of a sudden?

She shook her head in disgust and stomped off back to her house. The kids and their grandma at the playground

were staring at me. I stood there, throbbing with unspent purpose, feeling like I was gonna shoot my jizz right through the barrel of Louie-Louie's gun.

I did, it said. I made you sheriff.

* * *

It's a poor man's therapy for us to drive blind all over town, burning off gas while we let our minds churn and drift and reel along to the music on the radio. Steering around from red light to red, we feel like we're in control of something when we don't even know where the fuck we're going. We look for counsel in the faces of strangers and in the chance graffiti on the walls, the scrambled layers of gang tags, symbols of devotion, and fading mercantile signage. They seem like portents, or maybe encrypted formulas for fixing the shit that has us by the throat. We want out of this dullness, the heavy dullness of this life, but when we find it, when we feel a trace of the sting of living fully, some of us retreat into our droning cars and ride the mazes of our making. Like I was doing in my little cherry-red Gremlin.

All afternoon, I was thinking about Lisa and how she kept ten paces ahead of me all the way back, her long shadow just out of reach of my shoes. I was thinking how she might never let me come over again and how the rest of the school year would be ruined by that. I was thinking about how I almost told her right before she went inside that I had a gun, and how that might have changed anything at all. But mostly I was thinking about the gun. And how it spoke to me. How it goaded me toward this other stronger Mundo, a Mundo less afraid. This was the ballast that kept all of us unstrung *vatos* from being swept away by the gales of change. Lisa would hate me from now on, but she'd tell her *camaradas* all about how I stepped up to this guy and how he backed down and they would know it too, and that made me smile. I was somebody to respect. I glanced at the passenger seat and saw the gleaming steel barrel flare its own dirty smile back at me.

I stopped to tank up my car and get a Slurpee and then at the last minute, I didn't get the Slurpee, but a six-pack of beer and I didn't get carded. That was my experiment. Could I command the respect of the world with Smith & Wesson at my side? And the answer, my friends, was fuck yes.

I drove up to Scenic Drive on the mountain, stopped

at the overlook and drank my beer there. Looking down at the divide between Juarez and El Paso, marked by the concrete channel that used to be a great river, hemmed in for its own good, I took in the dimensions of this new Mundo. There wasn't anyone around, so I walked to the crags at the edge with my brew and in the waning red of sunset, took out the gun and aimed it directly at the point where I thought my house was. Somewhere out there, an invisible bullet was streaking through the window and into the heart of a dope who still saved all his monster fan magazines.

Night fell and I was still on the crag. All the beer was drunk and the air suddenly cold. And still nobody there. I wanted to talk to someone, to demonstrate my deft handling of this firearm, to declare to *la gente* what a badass *cabrón* I had been in the park. I needed them to see how different I was now. But nobody came. Occasionally, headlights would approach, then ease on past. I sat on the hood of my Gremlin crunching up the beer cans and getting pissed. I tried to listen to the radio but the songs weren't about her anymore. I took a whiz on a rock and slung Spanish curses at the lights of the cities below and the black monolith mountain behind. Then I put that cold *pinchi cuete* right up against my cheek and cried. I cried at the injustice of Lisa Morales. How could she go back to that guy? How could she be mad at me after all we'd shared? Doesn't she see that it's me she wants? Then in the pitch blackness, I heard

She don't.

What?

She don't see it.

No, huh?

You have make her see it.

Should I?

About time, Mundo.

I wiped the snot off my face and got in my car. My hands shivering on the wheel. My teeth rattling. The whole time the gun was humming some song. I don't know what song. It was pretty, though, and sad. When I got to Lisa's house, the gun said to park it around the block. So I did. Then I walked all casual up to her house and almost knocked, but the gun said not to. It said to go around the side to her window, or don't I know which room is hers? I said I did and I went. I looked in her window and there

was Lisa, sitting on the floor talking on the phone to a friend. Or maybe the guy, said the gun.

Yeah, maybe him.

Bet he's got his zipper down.

Probably does.

She's gonna see him soon.

Yeah. At ten.

You can put a stop to that.

I should too.

So what are you waiting for?

How?

You know how, *loco*.

You mean, this?

You got it.

I looked down at the gun and it felt so light now. All that weightiness of before was gone. It almost billowed in my hand. I raised it gently in the air till my arm made a straight line between my right eye and hers. My heart was stamping in my chest.

Mundo means world, I said.

That's right.

I am the world.

The whole world.

All the time in the world. That's what she said.

Yes she did, murmured the gun.

I nodded and slowly lowered my arm. I stepped back from the window and let my weak legs carry me back to the car. I put the gun in the glove box and drove home. Somewhere along the way, I threw up all over myself but I stayed focused on the sudden vividness of everything. The oil refinery along Trowbridge lit up at night shimmered like a crystal palace through my tears. I came home to a dark and quiet house, took a shower, and lay awake in bed for hours after, deaf to everything but the long wail of the Southern Pacific rolling in. That and the comforting snores of my Mom sleeping.

* * *

Next morning Louie-Louie pulled up and found me cleaning out my Gremlin. He didn't even shut off the engine. He sat in his car with those sunglasses on and summoned me with his smile. I threw the rag in the pail and popped open the glove box, took out his .45 wrapped in crisp newsprint, and put it right in his waiting hands.

PETER PAONE

Swing, 2014

Watercolor on paper, 30 x 22 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

What you washing that piece of shit for? You selling it?
Nah, I like my Gremlin.
No shit, he chuckled. Well, you ever wanna trade it in,
I'll get you a good deal, *ese*.
I'll keep that in mind.
Thanks for the solid. It wasn't no trouble, was it?
I shook my head. I told him about how Bruno got his
hands on it, and we had a good laugh about that.
I owe you one, he said, 'cause if you knew the reason
I had to unload it on you— But I raised my hands and cut
him off.
Honestly, dude, I don't wanna know. Just take it away.
Louie-Louie gave me the sidelong gaze of the Prince
of Super Low and slipped the gun from its swaddling. It
looked like a cannon in his small childlike hands.
Mundo, I'm serious, bruh, he said. When are you
gonna figure out the Life According to Gun?
I shrugged like an eighteen-year-old is supposed to and
said, Bruh, I got all the time in the world.

Octavio Solis's plays have been mounted across the country. His drama, fiction and poetry have been published in the *Arroyo Literary Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Catamaran Literary Reader* and the *Chicago Quarterly Review*. His anthology *The River Plays* is published by NoPassport Press. He has received the 2014 Pen Center USA Literary Award for Drama for *Se Llama Cristina*.

PETER PAONE

Toy Plane, 2014
Watercolor on paper, 21 x 26 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST