ForeWord Reviews

The Theater of Night
Alberto Rios
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One poem in this collection, titled "The Dreams That Cried," begins: "Things become other things, she said. / It's what's inside them, I guess." The poem's narrator ponders the strangeness of folklore and the stories that people tell each other to explain the world. In "Mesquite Coyotes," the narrator describes the Sonoran Desert as a place where, "In the scruff and scrub, the creosote and dark sand / Everything is something else." The poet's newest compilation is haunted by the ambiguity of things, challenging readers' sensory and cultural experiences of those things.

Ríos locates his observations about the enigmatic quality of nature primarily in the Sonoran Desert on the border between Mexico and the United States, a geography filled with literal shadows, natural secrets, and cultural ambiguity. The title poem of the collection ponders the moment between day and night, "the time in-between, the gray time" when the earth rests but humans turn on their lights. The darkness of the night inevitably wins, and it seems that humans are only baffled by their self-constructed "theater of night."

The book is divided into six parts, and much of it traces the lives of the characters Clemente and Ventura from their first, elated kiss to the pathos of their old age. But the change and loss that accompany age are buttressed throughout the book by the steadiness and dependability of a love that never doubts itself. Finally, readers will care about the story of Clemente and Ventura, because it emerges not from a conventional language of love but from an infatuation with other, seemingly more intimate forms of communication—touch, tears, laughter, sound. Ríos's poetry captures, through language, the myriad other ways that people communicate with each other. For his characters, body language always supplants speech. Ríos writes of Ventura: "What her body spoke / And who needed to hear, heard." Throughout the collection, bodies merge with nature, nature merges with bodies, and bodies merge with each other in an intimacy that is sure even as it celebrates the enigmatic quality of transformation.

The Theater of Night is the ninth book of poetry from this Poet Laureate of Arizona; his 1982 collection, *Whispering to Fool the Wind: Poems*, won the Academy of American Poet's Walt Whitman Award. Ríos was also a 2002 finalist for the National Book Award in Poetry, and he currently teaches at Arizona State University. Like much of his work, this book questions the

way people define reality, offering a challenge, or at least a counterpart, to realism. While it is tempting to compare Ríos's poetry to the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez, there is also a deep-seated and inescapable sense of place in the landscape of his poetry that makes his writing distinctively his own.

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