

*Border Bar, Vista Clara, México, March 27, 1999.*

## PARA DONDE VAS

Thick smoke from hand rolled cigarettes  
wafted out with words from sweet painted  
ladies and the chatter was low and easy.

Bartenders clinked pesos in glasses spread  
out like a dime-a-toss carnival game next  
to the register and the big neon Tecate para mí.

Mariachi from a fifties box dragged a roomful  
of wispy eyes deep through the soul of what  
will always be La Isla Encantada, our México.

Swaying to the music, a couple of drunks were  
huddling over dice in the corner and swallowing  
beer belly shouts about sevens, somebody's sevens.

My fingerprints cut stripes on the sweat of a fresh  
bottle as I ordered two more chilled cervezas para  
llevar y dos quesadillas con chiles habaneros.

It was 10 o'clock in the morning but no one  
knew or cared until the door to the courtyard  
unzipped a blinding white hole in the wall.

"Time to go," said the silhouette as we all  
squinted in his direction, "if you want the bus  
to Oaxaca, Tabasco, Campeche y Quintana Roo."

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We had taken the bait of deception — walked through it  
like rice paper, right on to a moving air conditioned bus.  
It was sleek, bigger than a diesel, and many passengers  
were already aboard, neat rows of various ages  
and ancient faces tinted green by refractions of the sun.

Propelled by a strange rhythm,  
perhaps the pulse of indecision,  
or a god with an unearthly stride,  
we rode on in a collective murmur,  
contemplating our purpose of discovery,  
casting about for a hint of true self, of knowable context  
in this suddenly new but seemingly old lineup of selves  
collected in rare circumstance.

The road was smoothed by a whistling cushion of air.  
We were startled by the changing sensation  
as we began to rise off the ground.

A sense of destiny quickly replaced our sense of destination.  
Even the driver had disappeared. But that did not matter,  
for we knew by then that the bus was being steered  
by our thoughts, by the pictures of México in our minds,  
and that we were traveling faster than the dead.

Enthralled and disoriented on the rim of life,  
part wounded bull, part conquistador,  
my finger traced the northern deserts on a map  
retrieved from the seat pocket in front of me,  
and Sonora, Chihuahua, and Coahuila  
appeared immediately in my window.

Hot land stretched uninterrupted  
from one corner of the eye to the other.

A city in Durango pancaked into a twinkling line  
on the dusty horizon.

Deer and a cactus made footprints on each other.

Glimpses of Tarahumaran poverty. Spanish silver.  
The sun, a gem, a god. Father to fire. Brother to heat.  
Antichrist to water.

A child seated in a pan. Alone.

The bus swerved sharply and we dipped into history.

Below, on the ground to the left, Pancho Villa pointed  
directions to a train of horses, mules, and gun-laden men.

To Villa's west, the exquisite Doña Baja showed  
the apron of surf snugged up to her midsection  
by a long rope of highway punctuated in spots  
by small fishing villages and men with nets in boats.

La Doña Baja had a heavy footprint, a pointed toe,  
dipped in the Pacific. She was crawling with people  
and pisces, traps, and aspirations directed outward,  
to the blowholes in the bay.

Whales still see the land.  
Sometimes they cry for the living, in Spanish.  
On this day they lumbered northward,  
eyeing their calves, singing to the pod  
in patterned clicks and creaks and groans,  
oblivious to shorebound desires.

Villa turned south.  
He saw another soldier of freedom,  
the Indian Emiliano Zapata,  
riding hard on a snorting white stallion,  
leading the prayer trail of beleaguered campesinos.

Eager to palaver, to join forces, and driven by angry  
memories of Spaniards, landlords, foreign bank accounts,

and countless baskets of peasant blood,  
 Zapata and Villa galloped into an uneasy alliance.  
 Gladiators on matched horses,  
 a fiery sword in each hand,  
 righteous victory in their throats,  
 they would ride together against rapacious politicians.

Some time and territory passed, snaking right and left,  
 winding on the map.

Nuevo León, Tamaulipas. San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, Sinaloa.  
 Nayarit — your shellfish bay, rising and falling  
 like the slow, firm, lovebeats of Bucarías.  
 Jalisco, Guanajuato, Hidalgo, and Michoacán.  
 So much to know, so much to remember, so much to forget.

Colima, small and joyous, basked at the foot of the Sierra  
 known as Madre del Sur, La Iglesia de San Felipe de Jesús  
 punctuating the center, spire pointing knowingly to Heaven.  
 Go west and you can reach the beach of contented gulls.  
 You can touch the hand of God if you stay and pray.

Guerrero, we fly by your margins.  
 You remembered Zapata in 1974,  
 even as we remember you now.  
 Godspeed your trip to harmony,  
 your war for peace.

In the middle was Mexico City.  
 Aztecs in stone and bone everywhere.  
 Ancient sacrifice of dripping hearts.  
 Modern sacrifice of broken hearts.  
 Díaz Ordáz and his political orgies.  
 Shadow of the corpse of Porfirio Díaz,  
 still leaking oppression. El Presidente Portillo,  
 today marking a cash flow to somewhere unknown,  
 in invisible ink.

Canals of mercury that run slow with poison,  
 dripping, ironclad irony. Dead birds.

Puebla. Wrapped in Popocatépetl, Iztaccíhuatl,  
 Pico de Orizaba, La Malinche. Volcano gods.  
 They taught you how to cook clay, how to slay the French.  
 Zaragoza remembered Zapata on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May.  
 Signs of the streets and the calendar.  
 Cinco de Mayo, forever.

The love of brothers, and the smell of napalm  
 in the morning.

Vera Cruz. Land colors were invented here,  
 then painted with the first flower colors,  
 which were lifted one at a time  
 from the deep color boxes of the seas,  
 with their rolling white and azure lids.

Your easel moistens our souls.

Oaxaca, clean, like your Virgin of stone.  
 Zapotecs and Mixtecs, marginalized by your prosperity.  
 Memories of Aztecs, Olmecs, Totonacs, and Mayans.  
 Miseries of Spain. Dominican conquests.

Chiapas. Bandanas on Indians, more guns and tears.  
 The green pounding sounds of mother jungle.  
 The curanderos and brujas will help you.  
 Seek peace through the stone wisdom at Palenque,  
 under the shrouds at Bonampak and Yaxchilán.  
 Read the water. Read your heart.  
 All the magic is hidden at Catemaco.  
 Chango macaques can read the trees.

Tabasco, Campeche, Quintana Roo, the road east.  
 Talking flowers, birds.

Into Yucatán. No one can resist your splendor.  
 Your mystery. Mérida, Spanish city, Mayan burials.  
 Voices thin and distant, drowned by commerce.

A woman bathes her baby in a creek.  
 Another nearby whispers into folded palms,

“You stopped our river of tears and were ambushed  
 on the banks of your own, Emiliano. In the morning market,  
 in the embrace of the setting sun, in the kiss of the sleeping Jesus,  
 we will remember you, and we will ask the Blessed Mother  
 to carry us to Truth, to bind us with Freedom in this hour  
 of our challenge, this drought of hope.”

Tears marbled in the dust of lonely roads,  
 signatures on the parchment of the poor.

Land of contrasts, it said in the brochure.  
 Ancient priests were there,  
 spilling blood to keep the universe going.  
 Spaniards were there,  
 immortalizing themselves with quill and ink and sword  
 as the pyramids of the dead repainted themselves red.  
 Benito Juárez, who knew and drew the blood of the law,  
 was in there too.

No mention of enshrining love or music drawn  
 from the marrow of universal life, the charred labyrinth  
 of indomitable spirits and periodic agony, the fountains  
 of soul-fed perseverance, or the handmaidens of hope  
 inscribed on temple walls, announced in temple prayers.

Even the Day of the Dead has promise.

This land, México, the pulse of our loins,  
 the magnificence of our past, alternately conceals  
 and reveals beauty beyond imagination.

Peoples deep in time, rich in spirit,  
 glowing cenotes of emotion, intoxicated with God,  
 bearing heartbreak and hardship, casting kinships of help,  
 like nets with flashing eyes, wherever despair darkens  
 the children of the sun, this golden seed of the circle of life.

Archaeological and political ruins. Blended strength.

What will be your future? What will be your history?,  
I asked.

And they all began to sing

*¿Adónde vas, querida?*  
*¿Adónde vas, mi vida?*  
*¿Adónde vas? ¿Adónde?*  
*¿Adónde, México mío?*

*Remember Zapata.*  
*Remember Villanito,*  
*Tepoztlán, Xochicalco,*  
*and the life of Benito.*

*¿Adónde, México mío?*  
*¿Adónde vas, adónde?*

The bus rolled on, upwards, toward the white hot wheel  
of the sun, to a black spot (a door?) at the intersection  
of Flint Knife Tecpatl, the Serpent Coatl, the Monkey  
Ozomatli, and Xochitl the Flower, entrusted this day  
to the plans and desires of the Death's Head Miquiztli.

I opened my last bottle and thought of the little girl  
bathing in the pan. Alone.

Pesos and oil.

Obsidian butterflies.

And jaguars with emerald teeth.