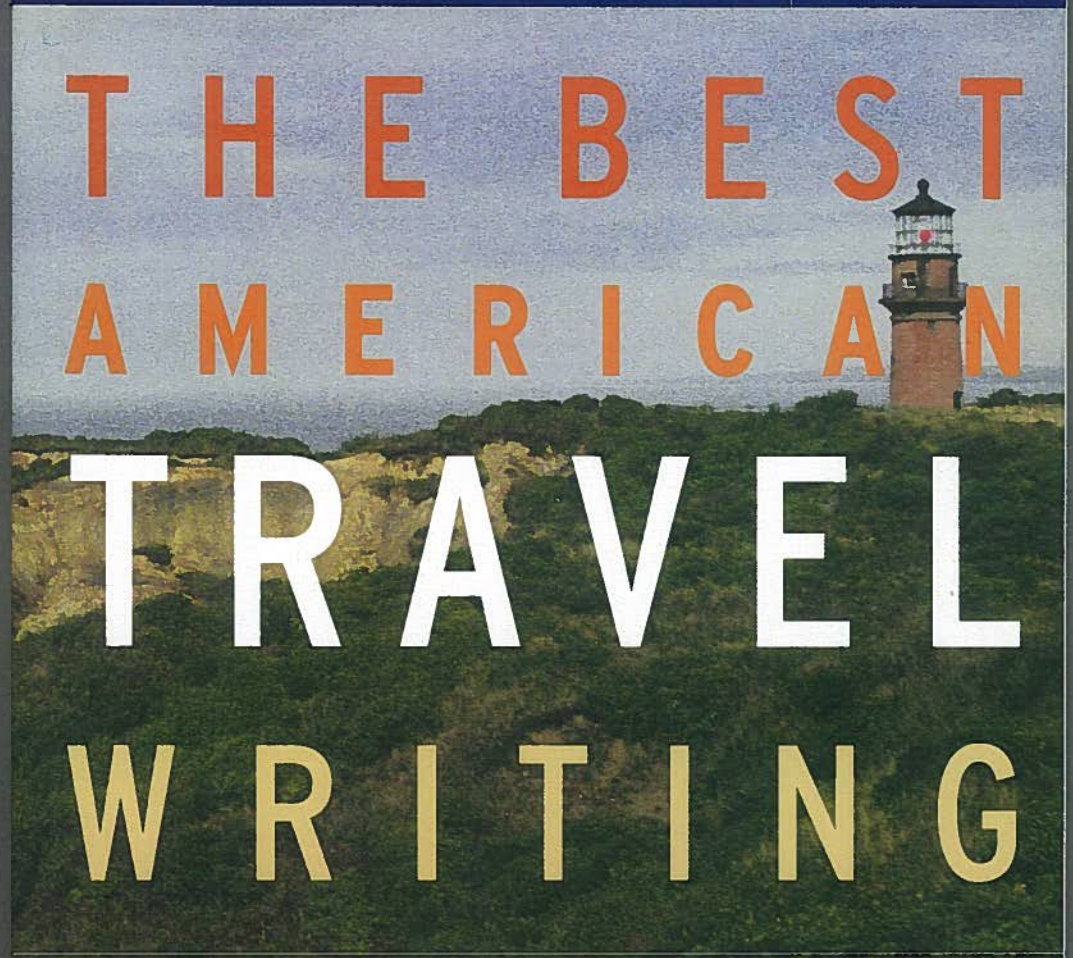
THE BEST AMERICAN SERIES™ 2002



THE BEST AMERICAN TRAVEL WRITING

FRANCES MAYES

EDITOR

JASON WILSON

SERIES EDITOR

ROD DAVIS

A Rio Runs Through It

FROM *The San Antonio Express-News*

1. The Tip of Texas

THE TWO *mexicanos* had come about halfway across the hidden sandbar at the mouth of the Rio Grande to throw their nets, and I was stripping off my jeans and T-shirt as fast as I could to get out and meet them. To their backs the Gulf of Mexico broke so loudly that hailing was a waste of breath. I'd heard of the submerged passage at Boca Chica but hadn't figured on finding it, since few people ever venture out to this isolated and hurricane-scoured place that marks the southern end of the historian Paul Horgan's "great river," and of Texas, and of the United States. And marked the start of a personal sojourn along the 1,250-mile length of a *frontera* that defines two countries and yet is neither. The Texas-Mexico border: volatile, porous, violent, corrupt, greedy, beautiful, seductive, as distinct from its linked nations as the husk of a coconut from the meat inside.

On the Mexican side, maybe a hundred yards away, a few children sought relief in black inner tubes safely upstream from the turbulence that churned at the meeting of the river and the sea. Their mothers and fathers sat on the banks next to Styrofoam coolers, pole-fishing for supper. I was the sole delegate on the U.S. side, and a poor one at that, hastily clad in dirty running shorts and making for the swelling tide.

The present and the past seemed inseparable here. Directly south of me once stood the Mexican port of Bagdad, boomtown cotton outlet for the Confederacy. On my side had been Clarks-

ville. Both were wiped away by the hurricane of 1867. Not far inland, U.S. forces under Zachary Taylor provoked an attack by Mexican troops in 1846, giving President Polk the Tonkin Gulf pretext of his day. Thus began the land-grab war that resulted in the humiliation of Mexico, the jailing of Henry David Thoreau, and the imposition and often violent enforcement of a U.S. border today, here to San Diego, that was once Mexico all the way up to Utah. To my west, toward Brownsville, thick tropical foliage once covered the banks of what Spanish explorers had originally named Rio de las Palmas.

In this century, dams and cities and farms far upstream have depleted the Rio Grande so ruthlessly that the Gulf tides rush in, turning the mouth to salt, the land from here to Brownsville morphed into something Rome might have visited upon Carthage. It is estimated that 98 percent of the river's original natural habitat has been destroyed. The gray-brown waters are so full of DDT, PCBs, sewage, and industrial metals such as mercury, arsenic, and copper that a cleanup will cost at least $8 billion over ten years, if it ever happens. This section, below Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, cities that, like many along the border, draw their drinking water from the river, is the most toxic of all.

There is worse. Sometime this spring, the unprecedented upstream siphoning, combined with runoff and severe clogging from opportunistic hydrilla and water hyacinths, so depleted the "great river" that it couldn't reach its mouth. The lagoons and estuaries along its side to Boca Chica from Brownsville lay arid and sunbaked.

On Memorial Day weekend, the river fell at least one hundred yards short of the Gulf. The city of Matamoros, across from Brownsville, has begun suspending water services. Upstream releases from Falcon Lake, seven days' flow from the west and itself forty-four feet below normal and getting lower, could theoretically raise the level, and dredging might get the river to the culmination of its 1,900-mile search for an outlet. And it could rain torrents. But at least for now, you could walk across what I was about to wade first in 1997 and recently thought to try again. If the river's reach can no longer exceed its grasp — an unspeakable violation — at least I can bear witness to the memory of the generations who knew things to be otherwise.

Ironically, on that day when the imperiled waters ran their natural course, they nearly drowned me. The sandbar was hard to follow and I stepped off into an undertow pulling me slowly but unmistakably into the Gulf. When I broke free, and found footing in a shallow stretch, I was so elated to be alive I tore off my gym trunks and splashed around like a baptismal mutant. Then I realized I had company on the American side. A white pickup with Texas plates had pulled up about twenty yards down from my jeep. A Latino man and woman and several children spilled out, unloading fishing tackle, ice chests, and plastic floats. The gym shorts went back on.

If my new neighbors had seen me, or cared, they didn't show it, so I walked on over and said hello. We spoke in the half Spanish, half English that is the vernacular. They were from Brownsville, taking the afternoon off. I asked the man if he was worried about eating fish from such a polluted river. He said he never thought about it. Seeing me dripping wet, fresh from said river, added what we both realized was authority to his indifference and he went about his preparations.

This time, I saw no one fishing on either side. Only the receding figure of another *mexicano,* this one walking back across the silt and sand to "his" country from "mine," after being dropped off halfway across my vanished sandbar by the U.S. Border Patrol.

As borders go, Texas-Mexico is the edge of edges. At its centerpoint, Laredo has produced the busiest land port in the country. Not so far away, Starr County remains the poorest county in the state. Terrell County is one of the most sparsely inhabited, only .5 people per square mile and a total population of 1,081, down 23 percent from a decade ago. Of the state's four fastest-growing areas, three — Brownsville–Harlingen–San Benito, McAllen-Mission-Edinburg, and Laredo — are on the border. In the Big Bend, the river cuts through the sierra to mark the boundary of a stark and bewitching (and, ironically, polluted) national park that is also a gateway for some of the biggest drug-smuggling operations in the hemisphere. El Paso, Texan in name only, is slowly being swallowed by its twin, Ciudad Juárez, a grim and violent poster child to multinational capitalism.

Almost everywhere along the border zone, 90 to 95 percent of

the local population is of Mexican descent. For the better part of two centuries, U.S. fears of and prejudices toward this population have pitched *la frontera* into wars, violence, and world-class population dislocations. The manifestation of that anxiety, both nationalistic and racist, today can be found in the frustrating pseudo-wars against illegal immigrants and drugs, the complex combination of which may make this the most dangerous era of all. You can sense it all along the border, and you can see it day and night in the sheer blanketing of the region with an unprecedented array of armed agents, from Border Patrol to DEA to Marines to giant Air Force surveillance blimps.

Undocumented immigrants, drug smugglers, resident aliens, American citizens — it's so mixed up that anyone at any time is subject to search within twenty-five miles of the river. The Border Patrol runs checkpoints on the highways farther north than that. By the time I got to El Paso, I would variously hear this southern rim of the United States described, without tones of hyperbole, as "the DMZ," "the West Bank," "Somalia," "a police state," and "a Constitution-free zone." It is also politically expendable. This spring, the Texas Legislature voted against sending even a paltry $250 million "Marshall Plan" aid package to help with the region's economic development, and the governor vetoed a health insurance package.

I went to the border because the border is the future.

Downtown Brownsville was just a few blocks away, but in the vacant field where Manny Figueroa slammed the white Ford Explorer to a hard stop and jumped out, we were in mesquite and brush so thick we might as well have been in the backcountry. Less than two minutes ago, Figueroa and Frank Rodriguez, then both senior Border Patrol agents, had been routinely cruising the streets of this southernmost city in Texas, when Rodriguez spotted two men coming up a small residential street not far from the city's hard-bitten central district. It was easy to make the pair for undocumented immigrants: they clutched bulging plastic grocery bags, were walking northward in the "stagger" formation, one a little ahead of the other for better lookout, but most of all they turned south and ran.

Figueroa, a handsome ex-Marine who had just earned his supervisor's gold bars (he has since transferred to El Cajon, California),

turned the truck fast and gunned toward the place he knew the men would be heading, an overgrown field that provided heavy cover and wasn't far from the tall reeds at the river. Speeding through a west side barrio of modest houses, we almost cut them off at a concrete drainage culvert, but they got to the field. Rodriguez, a tough and savvy forty-year-old (since promoted to field operations supervisor), had grown up in the city and could do this in his sleep. He jumped out and loped up the culvert. "Hang on," said Figueroa, and gunned it along a jolting trail surrounding a mesquite thicket till he came to the place where he thought he had the men in a pincer.

Cutting for sign, as agents call tracking, he followed beat-down grass high as my head and footprints in strips of sandy soil. At several places the mesquite opened to clearings littered with plastic bags, tin cans, cast-off gallon water jugs, shards of clothing so torn even the desperately poor, who buy *ropa usada* by the pound, can't wear them. We passed a freshly squashed can of ranch-style beans. "Probably ran over their lunch," he said.

I was trying to keep switches of scrub from slapping my face when I heard Figueroa call out in Spanish. "Who are you? Where are you going? Where are you from?" He indicated some high weeds, and although I heard voices, at first I saw nothing. Then a leg moved; I could see two meek figures lying close to the ground. Rodriguez came up from the rear. Busted.

The men, both small, thin, dark-skinned, dressed in old T-shirts and soiled jeans — so *mojado* they never had a chance — got up almost obediently, without struggle, accepting their innings in the Big Game. They'd just been shopping, one of them said, and were on their way back to Matamoros. Their bags held white bread, canned vegetables and beans, a gallon jug of milk. The milk was the lie. "That's what puzzled me. In this heat you'd have to drink it right away," Rodriguez said. "It's more likely they were just going to hide out here and move north after it gets dark."

Figueroa called one of the collection vans that spends its days taking undocumented immigrants back to the fortresslike central office on the expressway for processing and return to Matamoros. Of course the crossers come right back, if they're not robbed, raped, or murdered by the violent parasites who feed off their plight, until they make it to San Antonio, or Chicago, or Seattle.

Wherever they can make a living, send money orders home to Mexico each payday. That is what they have done since the United States invited "guest workers" here through the bracero program in 1942 and then tried kicking them all out during "Operation Wetback" in 1954. And so on today. They come because chicken costs $2.50 per pound in Matamoros and the minimum wage is $4 per day. They can make $4 in less than an hour in the United States and buy chicken for 85 cents per pound. They come because they are good at math.

To stop them, the Border Patrol, *la migra,* runs its trucks day and night. It runs foot patrols. It runs bike patrols. It uses high-tech motion sensors at high-volume crossings. It uses airplanes and helicopters. Farther west it uses fences. For a time in El Paso, it stationed agents every four hundred yards. Along the entire U.S.-Mexico border, this country is deploying about ten thousand agents on a budget of about $1.4 billion. It caught 1.6 million people last year. This year, officials think there will be fewer arrests. Of course, no one knows how many people aren't caught, and stay; guesses range from 6 million to 9 million now living in the United States without legal immigrant status.

Is all this working? In Brownsville there are places the river is so narrow you can wade across and not get your trousers wet. Steep banks covered with mesquite, reeds, and grass offer camouflage and shade. On the far side of those banks, any hour of the day, you can see Mexicans, men, women, and children, alone or in groups, sitting patiently, waiting. They gather right under the Gateway Bridge downtown, they come in through the golf course, they carry each other piggyback, they float where it's deep. They follow livestock trails under the moon.

After lunch at a Tex-Mex café, the officers were back in the truck, patrolling a levee. So why not just stop the charade? I suggested. Open the borders. Rodriguez turned in his seat to look at me, hard. His badge bore a black band in memory of an agent who had fallen to his death off a cliff while patrolling in El Cajon. "We do that," Rodriguez said to me, "and the next day Matamoros will move across the river to Brownsville. The border will keep heading north. Is that what you want?" Figueroa stopped the truck and picked up his binoculars to study three teenagers making their way down a well-worn path on the opposite bank. "Can you imagine the life?" he said, almost to himself.

That afternoon we got an "officer down" call. An agent was trying to break up a riverside robbery of three undocumented immigrants by two others. In doing so, he'd been bitten badly, the worst injury in the age of AIDS, hepatitis-A, and other contagious diseases. When we arrived, his face betrayed more than the pain of the teeth marks. Nothing for it but to sweat out the blood test.

Across the river, three black SUVs and pickups were parked on the bank. They belonged to Grupo Ebano, an elite Mexican border police unit with a reputation. They watched a little longer, then left.

2. *The Lower Rio Grande Valley*

The real business of the Rio Grande Valley, or the Lower Valley, or more commonly just "the Valley," which stretches from Brownsville to Mission, reaching north to Harlingen, is agriculture: cotton, cantaloupes, onions, milo, sugarcane, watermelons, tomatoes, sorghum, cabbages, citrus. It's a rich list with good soil and, thanks to the Rio Grande, ample water. Flat as the Netherlands, cut through with irrigation canals, dikes, and levees like Asian rice paddies, the Valley has fed America for decades, always better than itself. The high points on the skyline are storage silos and church steeples.

The biggest one of those is the national shrine to La Virgen de San Juan del Valle, in the town of the same name, along four-lane U.S. 83 in Hidalgo County, home of one of the largest concentrations of campesinos in the country and, not coincidentally, the state's largest vegetable crop. The Virgin of San Juan, like Mexico's patron saint, the Virgin of Guadalupe, bears more than religious significance. Both are manifestations of the Virgin Mary, but both are political symbols, too.

In this area, the politics are about struggle and survival. In 1970, something about the shrine so troubled a pilot that he kamikazied his private plane into it, destroying all but the stone tower, which still stands. Damages exceeded $1.5 million. The diocese rebuilt the shrine as a spare and modernist basilica, dedicated in 1980 amid a multiblock church complex as large as some border villages, with a school, housing for the elderly, and social services. More than 20,000 visitors a week come to the shrine to light votive candles, fill their water jugs from the spigots of a holy fountain, and pray for relief.

The one and only campesino organizing center in Texas, or anywhere in the Southwest outside Southern California, is also in San Juan, just down César Chavez Road, a busy strip renamed despite vigorous protests from the Valley's other migrants, the Anglo "snowbirds" who come down each winter and fill RV parks and hookup sites. In the early 1980s, the Valley had two unions: the United Farm Workers and a more radical breakaway, the Texas Farm Workers Union. But as a "right-to-work" state, Texas doesn't like unions, and it doesn't like people who do. Of about 250,000 campesinos in the Valley, no more than 3,000 to 5,000 are organized.

That doesn't mean the area is placid. In the center's main meeting hall, a modest space filled with folding tables and metal chairs, the walls are emblazoned with bold murals in the revolutionary Mexican style depicting workers in decades of *huelgas* and *luchas*. Perhaps the most historic fight was the melon strike of 1966, which started in the Valley, spread spontaneously, and culminated in a march on Austin, famously snubbed by Governor John Connally. A watershed event in the growth of the state's Chicano movement, the strike of '66 radicalized the baby boom generation of Mexican-Americans.

But decades of severe repression by state police, Texas Rangers, county sheriffs, and the Austin-based government, aided in no small part by the selective use of undocumented Mexican workers to glut the American labor pool, have altered at least the short-term goals and tactics of the union, which now concentrates on legal and social services, education, and voter turnout.

As a focal point of the community, the union hall can be one of the busiest places in San Juan. But in the spring or summer, it is often empty. The campesinos are away, following on the migrant path that reaches north into Canada. The idea is to make enough in the spring and summer to get back by September and get the children in school. The idea of school is that the children won't have to remain migrants.

It is an area with mind-numbing problems — paramilitary occupation, drugs, diseases such as cholera, TB, and rabies and severe birth defects thought to be caused by the chemical sewer that is the river. And poverty — two of the lowest-ranking metropolitan

areas in the United States, based on 1999 statistics, were in the Valley: Brownsville and McAllen. Two more were on the border: Laredo and El Paso (the fifth is Las Cruces, New Mexico). There is scant health insurance or coverage for the poor; this year Hidalgo County said it was forced to stop seeing all new indigent patients, and in May, Governor Rick Perry vetoed a plan to help provide new insurance.

It's a hard-knock life times ten, and you'd expect the Valley to be somber and depressing. The contrary is more the case. The pull of land and blood in the Valley is legendary, and there are few Mexican-American families in Texas, if not the nation, in which someone doesn't have an uncle or cousin, brother or grandmother, who lives in one of the string of towns that run together from Brownsville to Mission, or who has worked the fields, and who then in turn has relatives across the river.

Anglos feel the draw, too. In La Feria, a sunburned farmer named Ed Bauer works the same land his father did, and his three sons are doing the same. At San Benito, a second-generation German Lutheran from South Dakota named Roy Kosel, at seventy-two, is still growing citrus and raising cattle more than thirty years after moving to the Valley for his health, marrying a Mexican-American, and raising a family, some of whom also have stayed. In Mercedes, an ex–New Mexico rancher, Trainor Evans, has made a go of a small boot company, Rios of Mercedes, and opened a shoe manufacturing plant across the river in Las Flores.

I liked seeing that optimism and perseverance in the Valley. In a place of great hardship, there is always something more. There must be, or nothing would remain. The essence of the Tejano life in the Valley is that it has endured, and in that endurance is a strength that will easily outlast this century. From what I had heard of the Valley, and what I would see for myself, an unexpected liking began to color my perception. Not rosy — you can't be rosy about the Third World — but a balance. An ability to perceive the importance of the endurance.

If the future of America is the turn toward what the linguist and social critic Noam Chomsky has called the national security state — already well in place right here, right now — the future lies also in a stubborn resilience among the Mexican-American people that matches anything that ever came from the cradle of New England.

And that is precisely what I had been seeking by setting out to explore the border. A secret is to be found in the choices people make about where they settle.

I began to discern this one.

It was gradual. Cruising a palm-lined street in Brownsville after a late-afternoon shower; gouging my forehead on the jeep door while watching a young woman in a cotton dress and high heels straight out of a ZZ Top video filling up a Cadillac at a gas station; walking back across the bridge from Matamoros at night, aware of the violence and dangers but also of the stars overhead; the coolness of the evening; the unquantifiable faith of the people.

And sudden. South of La Feria, passing a small rural cemetery in a field under big shade trees. Every marker was adorned with bright, fresh-cut flowers. Every soul that was buried had another one tending to it. It is like that in cemetery after cemetery in the Valley. I got it: This is a place in which the people take the long view. In the long view, the Rio Grande is just a river. Families endure; the land provides. Thomas Wolfe would have written something else if he'd grown up in the Valley. People come home all the time.

The Valley is hot and flat, its freeways are congested day and night, and in many ways it is a war zone, but it is also a Hemingway's Cuba that might have been. Cheap, full of energy, sensuality, youth. Noble crusades if you have such a bent. The people are friendly, the food good, the women graceful. The light is legendary. The winters are warm, and the summers aren't really any worse than anywhere else in Texas and definitely better than Miami. And Mexico is just across the river.

"Some of my friends said to me, 'You've got your Harvard degree, why come back to the Valley?'" the artist-entrepreneur Noe Hinojosa Jr. told me one day over lunch near downtown McAllen. "I say, 'Isn't it obvious? Everything is to be done here. The whole time I was in Cambridge I always knew I was going to come back.'" He did just that after college and founded *The Mesquite Review,* now a general interest bimonthly, and the Millennium Bookstore Café, where, until it closed a year ago, you could hear live music, get a good sandwich, a decent chess game, and maybe pick up a painting, a music poster, or a comic book. Noe and his wife, Joicie, an

Anglo who also grew up in the Valley, now live in Weslaco with their young son and daughter and are looking into other business projects. They will stay.

Frank Bailey felt the same way and, although he had not been reared in the Valley, he had come "back" to it as surely as if he had been born there. This came to me as we were sitting on wooden barstools on a cracked sidewalk outside a narrow café in Las Flores, Mexico, the last unspoiled border town, Frank said, drinking Carta Blancas and becoming insistent, even strident, that it was impossible to imagine living anywhere else. I never have stopped thinking that.

The sky was just losing its scarlet and the shops were mostly closed, although people were still moving to and fro finishing up the day's business. Across the street someone had built a balcony on the second floor of an apartment and a few people were gathering, as they do in the French Quarter, to observe and unwind. The third floor of the building was unfinished, marked by metal rods poking out of concrete. In Mexico, people build when they have money and stop when the money is gone. Devaluations and corruption make saving useless. Or people from Mexico take their money across the border to buy and invest. Thus, the real estate boom in some areas.

Frank, though, wanted to buy a café in Las Flores. A chef, former food columnist for *Texas Monthly,* and a former expat in Paris, he had been lured back to the Valley in the nineties to start the Rio Grande Grill, a smart continental restaurant in Weslaco. He had done his research. He was well aware that the border was different, that the Valley was a Secret River Kingdom. That without Mexico, Texas is just Oklahoma. That a makeshift sidewalk café in Las Flores isn't all that different from one on the Left Bank.

In effect, Frank is an expat again. He lives near Progreso, about as close to the river as you can get without falling in. Close, also, to the railhead used by Al Capone to ferry Chicagoans to Valley speakeasies during Prohibition. Not unlike the government-created drug gangsters of today, Capone liked the area so much he bought a place here for his mama.

Almost every night, Frank goes over to Las Flores the way Frasier went to Cheers, inventing his own café society, one cantina at a

time. I joined him one evening, driving to the bridge along a U.S.-side levee in the coolness, windows open, Mexican radio louder even than the birds and insects. When we got to the bridge I turned right, paid the toll, and we were in a foreign country. "It's the closest bar to my house," Frank explained. We parked at Arturo's. To call Frank a regular would be an understatement. Sunday mornings he drives over for coffee and *machacado con huevos* and reads the Reynosa paper, because he doesn't like the Valley's papers.

We found ourselves in a small dance hall, called, I believe, The Opera, sharing a table with a thirtyish working man well into his Dos Equis. A conjunto quartet worked the room, the *bajo sexto* and accordion lending a dreamy timelessness. Couples were dancing, and the room was so crowded that a group of three women, workers at a maquiladora, also squeezed in at the table. I wanted to stay forever, and I could see that Frank, who would never tell you he's also the brother of U.S. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas, already had.

"I'm glad you could spend time in my world," he said, sincere beyond the beers, and we waxed on, and I thought about the writer Ambrose Bierce ("The Old Gringo" in the novel by Carlos Fuentes) just turning south at El Paso and never coming back. Then the bar manager gestured to the guitar player and the conjunto group began backing out the door. The younger crowd was coming in, and somebody plugged in the jukebox.

3. Cities Along the Plains

Beyond the Valley, the semitropical greenhouse merges into mostly underpopulated rolling plains. West of the rain line that helps sustain farming, the land devolves into long stretches of chaparral punctuated by a few small towns in counties with populations that wouldn't fill a Texas League ballpark. But you can feel the Valley pushing outward.

Felix Alaniz III — whose father, the affable Felix Jr., runs Felix's Meats, a barbecue and grocery in La Joya — for a time drove from his home in Palmsville, known mostly for being a "snowbird" enclave, to Edinburg, where he and his former wife attended Pan American University, and back to La Joya. Five days a week. Three

days he also went into McAllen to work out at a gym. That figures to a hundred-mile circuit; in two years he put seventy thousand miles on his truck. He's been doing that for years. If you can find a used pickup along the border with low mileage, buy it.

Just west of La Joya, which is in poverty-ridden Hidalgo County, you enter Starr County, the poorest of all 254 counties in Texas. Circumstances here are outright desperate. It is a place of collapsed dreams and parched hope. Clapboard shacks, rusted-out cars, and rib-thin mongrels lie back in the brush as though nightmares seen through a dim haze, or congregate in shared misery along blacktop or gravel roads visited only by *la migra*, preachers, and mail carriers.

All along the border, on both sides, in the squatter communities known as *colonias*, conditions are often as bad. Following a lace of dusty back roads east of Rio Grande City one afternoon, trying without luck to follow an oil-lease road down to the river, I happened upon a small community of decrepit houses. Through the torn screen of one bedroom window I glimpsed an old man, shirtless, panting in the heat like a dog. It is not an image that easily goes away; it is one I wish the governor and every member of the Texas Legislature who voted down aid for the border this past session could witness in person.

Other places in this part of the border seem preserved as if in amber. You can take a road just past La Joya down to the river at Los Ebanos, named after the indigenous shade tree, and find the last hand-drawn ferry on the Rio Grande. When you cross from one brushy, tree-lined bank to the other, three vehicles at a time, it doesn't surprise you to see horses waiting on the other side to come back over. If ten cars are in line ahead of you, you'll wait an hour to embark, but somehow it doesn't matter.

Rio Grande City, Starr County's biggest town, bristles with activity. Not all is good. The city has an off-and-on reputation as a drug conduit, and its streets, fast-food stands, and discount-store parking lots are saturated with Border Patrol, Customs, and DEA vehicles. Nor is it uncommon to see expensive new sports cars and lavish homes that seem about as subtle and incongruous amid the poverty as tiger sharks in the desert. But there's something about the place: the older section, north of the highway and up the terraced hills, mixes the historic and the ramshackle; the downtown section

features the old LaBorde House, a favorite B&B among those who travel the region.

To the west lies Roma, the historic settlement perched on a bluff over the river, its old quarter, used as a movie for the film *Viva Zapata,* stubbornly immune to change. But like Rio Grande City, Roma is a strange, almost haunting, city full of the border's contradictions. A busy retail strip down on the highway seems almost unconnected to the old buildings on the hill, and men of questionable occupation use the same streets as hard-working mothers and fathers. From just behind the old Roma City Hall, you can look down at the river to Ciudad Miguel Alemán and watch children from the Mexican side swim in inner tubes. Sometimes they or their friends come all the way across.

I was driving through on the main street in late May when five teenagers burst out of an alley along the busy highway storefronts and ran directly in front of me, heedless of being hit, wild looks in their eyes. They ran as a group and disappeared into the back streets on the other side. They did not appear to be the after-school science club. They appeared to be hunted.

Then there is Laredo.

Revisionist border geography: Rio Grande City is the border. Roma is the border. Eagle Pass, farther on, and Del Rio, last stop before the Big Bend, are the border. Even Big Bend is the border. But Laredo is not the border. Laredo is a toll booth for $85 billion in goods passing through its bridges annually. In 1851, it was the first official port of entry on the U.S.-Mexico border. Today it is the busiest, a traffic jam for NAFTA's $656 billion yearly transcontinental juggernaut and a shopping spree for Mexico.

Day after day, tractor-trailer rigs and bobtails tie themselves up for five miles at a time, bumper to mudflap, waiting, fumes blanketing the heavy and humid air and settling on the river, to get through to the customs bridges. No other town in Texas has so prospered from the "free trade" legislation of 1994 or been so contorted by it. But Laredo — "more connected up and down I-35," as one observer told me, "than to the other towns on the border" — has unhinged itself from its kin on *la frontera* in a way that is jolting even to its longtime residents.

It may not even be a U.S. city anymore. More than 70 percent of its retail sales are to Mexicans, says the Chamber of Commerce, and a behemoth Wal-Mart, an exit away from one of the biggest

H-E-B grocery stores in Texas, caters heavily to Mexican and Mexican-American shoppers. Downtown seems entirely designed for people coming across the river to take things back — nice things. And with 95 percent of the city Mexican-American or Mexican, it's rare to be spoken to in English as the first option, and sometimes there are no options.

"You come in here a white boy and you're going to become Mexican pretty quickly or you're not gonna get a job," said a laughing Alberto Luera, former secretary of La Raza Unida party that briefly terrified Texas Democrats in the early 1970s. "Laredo is the most Mexican city in Texas, if not the entire country. It has always been a center of activism and has produced a lot of Chicano leaders. We don't know how to bow our heads to white people. We have roots going back five, six, ten generations. And there's a steady influx of culture which is continually generating support to the whole idea of being connected to Mexico. We're really the people whites are afraid of. We've been born here. Full-blooded and enfranchised."

Luera, whose thick mustache, spectacles, and preference for T-shirts mark him as clearly different from the middle- and upper-class Mexican-Americans who turned conservative, works with the nonprofit Centro de Servicios Sociales Aztlan, an immigration counseling center in the same east side barrio in which he grew up. He doesn't wonder if the borders should be open or closed, because he thinks the issue is moot. People come over because they have to. "Mexico is extremely poor," he said. "There is no 'trickle down' of anything." Besides that, he says, neither U.S. employers nor Mexican politicians have any interest in bottling up the flow.

I could never get my bearings in Laredo. It's laid out simply enough, but old landmarks, such as the Plaza Hotel, have become banks; familiar cafés are Laundromats; an easy walk to the bridge from La Posada, the new hotel of choice, is like crossing Times Square, only more crowded. Northward, urban growth pushes out into a suburbia that could be mistaken for San Antonio north of Loop 410. But this is what happens. This is not where you go so you can cross over to Nuevo Laredo and have a Ramos gin fizz at the Cadillac Bar, which became the El Dorado. It is a place where you go to make money as fast as you can and the devil take the hindmost. It is ephemeral in the extreme. So maybe I was wrong about Laredo. Maybe it *is* the border.

*

The proof is a negative one, demonstrable a few hours to the south, off Mexico Highway 2, at the bottom of Falcon Lake. These days you can drive down, not dive. What Spanish colonists founded in 1750, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers flooded in 1952, a retreat of the waters resurrected. I visited Guerrero Viejo as I headed out of the Valley heading west, and for a while its connection to Laredo didn't occur to me. But I had been stuck in the present. The cities are linked inseparably, in the only place they can be, where the future has drowned the past.

Engineers knew all along that Falcon Lake, the first of two major reservoirs to control flooding and the historic tendency of the Rio Grande to shift its bed, would inundate Guerrero, so the residents were "relocated." Some stayed in Mexico, but many moved to Texas, settling from near the oilfield town of Zapata all the way to Laredo. But droughts came and the engineers made adjustments and the lake level fell. Guerrero Viejo, so named to distinguish it from Nuevo Guerrero, the dusty roadside eyesore that replaced it, has literally risen from the depths. Its eerie shell protrudes from the northern end of the reservoir like some desecrated Atlantis.

The skies had darkened the afternoon I made my way down the steadily descending and barely passable eight-mile dirt lane, one of the worst of many bad roads I'd taken deliberately or by accident trying to hew as close to the river as possible without getting shot for crossing private land or tailed because my mud-coated jeep looked like a smuggler's vehicle. A deep subsurface crater seemed an ominous place to seek refuge, and I didn't feel any better coming into the village and spotting two tarantulas so large I thought they were turtles. Then discolored sandstone ruins began to appear among what had once been orderly streets and blocks but now seemed a labyrinth of rubble, gnarled trees, and opportunistic grasses. On one side stood the shell of the Iglesia de Nuestra Señora del Refugio, the town's eighteenth-century Franciscan church, overlooking what had once been a plaza.

I half expected a character from *Pedro Paramo,* Juan Rulfo's magical realism classic, to appear in the dusty streets. As if on cue, one did. The old woman wore a loose orange smock and hurried along a flock of thirty to forty goats with her stave. She was the only person I'd seen, except the toothless gatekeeper five miles back whom I was going to have to tip to get out. I pulled the jeep next to a ruin,

caught up to the woman, and asked if she wasn't afraid to live there. She shook her head. Later I found out her name was Julia. The woman who told me, Maria Eugenia Guerra, commutes to Laredo from her family ranch at San Ygnacio, near Zapata, to publish the vibrant monthly *LareDOS.* That's when it hit me. Everyone on the border is connected to everyone else: now, in the past, alive, dead. Laredo, the city of no determinate future, is the living sarcophagus for Guerrero Viejo, the city of a disappeared past.

After Laredo, border-hugging U.S. 83 shifts away from the river, skirting the huge ranches that mark the countryside almost all the way westward to the New Mexico border. Dirt and gravel roads crisscross the ranch country, and I tried following them many times so I could stay as close to the physical border as possible, but frequently I was rebuffed. Sometimes the heavily rutted washboards just went nowhere or stopped at a dry streambed, but more often I encountered the South Texas stop sign: a padlocked gate with a NO TRESPASSING sign. Strictly speaking, this was illegal, but over the years ranchers began to assume the "unimproved" roads were their own and treated them as such. It was never wise to argue the point and mortally foolish to actually cut a lock and go through a gate.

I pushed about forty miles on an austere, four-wheel-drive road through the deep chaparral, which, by the map, went all the way to Del Rio, but in reality was abruptly blocked off by a gate. I had to turn around and drive back to the outskirts of Laredo, where the clerk at a busy truck stop matter-of-factly told me what I'd just spent two hours finding out: The map was right, but you couldn't get through anyway.

Thwarted by private property and natural terrain, I took U.S. 83 northward to Carrizo Springs, where it merges with U.S. 277, which leads back to the border to link Eagle Pass and Del Rio, the last sizable towns before the sparsely populated high country of the trans-Pecos. Somewhat rivalrous, the cities are little alike: Eagle Pass, where John Sayles's *Lone Star* was filmed, is small, poor, and more than 95 percent Hispanic, while Del Rio is of moderate size, comparatively prosperous, and about 30 percent Anglo.

Del Rio has abundant natural springs, Laughlin Air Force Base, a direct highway to San Antonio, Amistad Lake for tourists, a Border

Patrol sector headquarters, a decent winery with its own vineyards, and good schools. It has the grave of Judge Roy Bean, easy access to the notorious pleasures of Ciudad Acuña, and a secure place in broadcast history as the home of the late Dr. John Brinkley. Brinkley, a.k.a. the "goat gland doctor," had an Acuña-based 500,000-watt radio station, XER, which was the most powerful in North America in the 1930s, and its successors launched the career of Wolfman Jack.

Del Rio also has one of the most distinctive Mexican-American communities along the border, San Felipe, until recent years segregated by law and/or fact from the Anglo parts of Del Rio. But with its trees and churches and murals, it is the most beautiful part. So strong run the feelings of community that San Felipe's "ex" association of students who went to the district's school before it was merged with Del Rio boasts a membership of some of the city's most important businesspeople, educators, and residents.

What Del Rio doesn't have is the Lucky Eagle Casino. It doesn't have the Kickapoo.

Following the lead of other Indian tribes in the United States, the once wretchedly poor Texas Kickapoo, who for years lived under the international bridge to Piedras Negras, used 123 acres they had been given south of town to tap the apparently endless yearning for quick cash. Theorizing that the state lottery is the legal equivalent of gambling, the Kickapoo, like the Tigua in El Paso, who operate the only other casino in Texas, went into business despite pending lawsuits. The Lucky Eagle Casino opened August 1996 in what looks like an industrial warehouse makeover and almost is, fitted together from truck trailers hollowed out and joined together like Lego blocks. At one edge of the reservation, it's close enough to the river to invite clandestine crossings and is therefore cruised frequently by the ubiquitous *la migra.*

As casinos go, the Lucky Eagle is a far cry from Vegas, or even Biloxi. It's a moderately sinful social club for people who would otherwise be playing church bingo or betting on football on TV. And who have few other outlets. The parking lot is generally filled with sedans, vans, and pickup trucks from the surrounding ranch lands, or from Del Rio or Laredo, and about as many bear plates from the Mexican states of Coahuila, Nuevo León, or Chihuahua. The dress is jeans and gimme caps, not tuxes and slinky low-cuts.

There's a nook for beer, burgers, and nachos. There are hundreds of bingo tables, almost that many "pull-tab" slot machines, blackjack rims, and a glass-enclosed room for some serious poker playing. There's also a caged cash booth that dispenses lottery-type slips instead of coins to finesse the licensing laws.

You could feel the envy of the rest of the town. The casino, which has plans to build on-site hotels and other additions, employs hundreds from the area and makes millions. It's the only really big game in the area, which otherwise relies on agriculture and the oil industry. The literal reversal of fortune has caused some uneasiness, and occasional hostility, between the tribe and the mostly Mexican-American population. But in this case, the change is one that seems likely to stay. The influx of suckers who think they'll hit it big is unlikely to stop. I took a seat at one of the bingo tables and played cards totaling five dollars. I won one dollar. Anyone but gamblers can do the math.

After Del Rio, the country thins out even more than ever, and the spartan beauty that seems to transfix Texans intensifies. Amistad Lake is low, but it is full of fishermen, Jet Skiers, and weekend speedboat freaks. The Pecos River, which provides water to the lake, as does the Rio Grande and Devil's River, cuts through a gorge that catches your breath with its sudden visual power. Except the river below you so far has dwindled to a trickle. Apart from all the other assaults on the rivers of the Southwest, it is dry out here. I pressed on, hoping to make Sanderson, the old railroad repair depot, in all-but-humanless Terrell County, home now to scarcely a thousand souls, by lunch. But I had to turn in at Langtry.

Judge Roy Bean is buried in Del Rio but he famously held court here at the Jersey Lily, and despite his utterly subjective rule of "law," the state, thinking of revenues, has built a tourist center in the old crook's honor. But forget Bean; the center has a superb botanical habitat containing examples of just about all the flora — cactus, maguey, beargrass, cenizo, palo verde, and more — that survive in the region's harsh environment.

Last time I was in Langtry, I spent hours trying to track down the owner of two rusty Morris Minors, the tiny, long-out-of-production English cars, sitting next to a makeshift shack on a rocky hillside. I wanted to ask the obvious question — "Why?" But I never found the man I sought. This time the cars were gone, but I encountered

another mystery. On the highway, I had passed a man pedaling a bike up a steep hill, and now he wheeled into the center. He was from Argentina and was on his way to Alaska, a journey he calculated would take at least eighteen months. He was in his twenties, lean, sunbaked, his hair in dreadlocks below his cap. *"Hace calor,"* he observed of the 101-degree temperature. I nodded. I asked the obvious question.

"It is to help" — he struggled for the words — "bring more peace and love to the continent."

"That would be good," I said.

4. The Trans-Pecos

"When I come out here I feel like the rest of the world is kind of on the other side of the mountains," Butch Hancock was telling me. We were leaning against a hitching post on the porch at sunset outside the Starlight Theater, the evening gathering spot for the two hundred or so pilgrims from progress in the past two decades who've repopulated the old Terlingua ghost town at the western edge of Big Bend National Park.

Thick clouds over the Chisos Mountains, backdrop to the seemingly boundless acres of creosote, mesquite, lechugilla, and yucca and a thousand other kinds of plants in the Chihuahuan Desert in front of us, flashed with lightning and then sparkled with rainbows. I have seen these rainbows several times; for some reason it rains when I pass through the Big Bend. Maybe the spectral arcs across the buttes and canyons and arroyos are sending me a message: Stay.

It's easy to become transfixed by natural beauty here, to feel that you're separated from the world and its ills here, because in many ways you are. The closest big city, El Paso, is five hours away. Even the old ranch-country cluster of Marfa, Marathon, Alpine, and Fort Davis are two hours or more to the north. The Spanish called the region *despoblado,* or unpeopled, and the increasingly inverse proportion of people to land begins west of Del Rio. The head count falls all the way to .5 people per square mile in Terrell County, where the distressed Rio Grande, now at levels too low in many spots for rafting, culminates its "big bend," the hundred-mile diversion around the mountains that started west of Candelaria and south of Van Horn.

Anyone who hasn't been to Terlingua, or nearby Lajitas, since Jerry Jeff Walker released "¡Viva Terlingua!" in the 1970s or when Ted Kaczynski's younger brother, David, lived there in the 1980s, is in for bruised nostalgia. Terlingua isn't exactly a metroplex, but unlike the old days it now has electricity, running water, and a consolidated high school at Study Butte. The chili cook-off, once favored by culinary cultists, is now just as likely to be overrun by beer-swilling bubbas who, as one resident put it, "think that if you're out here you can do anything you want." Lajitas, bought by the Houston magnate Walter Mischer Sr. in the late 1970s and auctioned to Austin's telecom tyro Steve Smith in February 2000 for $3.95 million, is being transformed into what Smith hopes will be a corporate-friendly desert playland, not the money drain it was for its previous visionary. On the planning board: a new hotel, a new golf course, an airstrip, and updates to the faux Old West main street that supplanted its onetime simple trading post. Given the location — perched between Big Bend National Park and Big Bend River Ranch State Park — development is probably inevitable.

But the Big Bend still can feed the soul like few places on earth, and it is filled with good people and small-town closeness. Early one morning along the dusty riverbank between Lajitas and Paso Lajitas, Mexico, I managed to lock myself out of the jeep. In no time, a construction foreman named Bob was driving me around in his pickup looking for someone with a Slim Jim, which actually wouldn't do the trick, and then after making the rounds of various Lajitas shops, a maintenance man referred me to Carlton Hall, who just happened to have driven over for the day to work. He was the only African-American anywhere in the vicinity, as he quickly pointed out. He had come down to the Big Bend area from Detroit in 1972, "following the Buffalo Soldiers," and stayed. Lucky for me, since he was also a locksmith. He worked in the heat and dust for more than an hour and asked twenty-five dollars. I gave him forty. There are people like that all over the place out here. Not all are that way. But enough are.

Even with the slight trendiness of the place, and the early signs of Major Tourist Destination, the Big Bend and Terlingua in particular remain more than getaways for weary urbanites. It is a nexus for free spirits, mavericks, recluses, and artists. It is still a place where Butch, a Lubbock-reared musician with a repertoire of hit songs for

friends such as Joe Ely and Jimmie Dale Gilmore, could move from Austin in the mid-nineties, park his Airstream trailer on a hillside, and sleep outside under the stars every night. "You ask me why I moved here?" Butch grinned that night four years ago, opening his arms to the natural amphitheater of the storm-draped Chisos. "This. This is it. This is the first place I've ever missed when I'm away." He missed it so much that he has now moved his family there and is building a small home in the ghost town, doing most of the work himself. For insulation in the walls, he's using crushed cans — a desert renaissance man with the conscience of an environmentalist and a fearless enthusiasm for life that seems rare. Except here.

Butch also is known for juggling projects, and one was a novel about a man who could live only in the present. We tried to figure out how to do that, but my thoughts that evening drifted to something I'd felt repeatedly on my journey — a kind of unstopping of time, as Kurt Vonnegut might have called it, or a timelessness, as the Zen masters would say, in which I saw places as they had been as well as what they were in that moment. Sounded crazy until I heard what Butch was working on. Then it made more sense.

Indeed, the more I saw of the thin line of nationality spinning out through the ludicrously artificial border with Mexico, then and now, the present offered an insufficient perspective. Time seeped over and sewed up everything; borders are but bores — a drone of dates, legends, and latitudes in history classes. And yet in the present, the borders are condensations of all that a country is, was, and will be. So I had started on a route that truly was chimerical; not just the boundary between nations, but between reality and illusion itself.

The Starlight's owner, Angie Dean; the veteran river guide Betty Moore — just two of the strong, independent women who have taken to Terlingua in the last two decades — and some of the town regulars joined us on the porch to watch the lightning show. That's what you do in the Big Bend. You watch nature. All the time. You can't help it. Off toward a high mesa across the river, near Boquillas, someone had started a bonfire. A strange, jumpy man in a scraggly beard that everyone seemed to give wide berth walked up to the railing and explained that the fire was an annual ritual of a regional drug smuggler. From the same direction we could hear

the sharp crack of AK-47 rounds, and what looked like the paths of tracers. It was nearly the Fourth of July.

—

I knew what Butch meant, and the spell of the trans-Pecos is strong. But all of us knew then, and even more so now, that the world wasn't really on the other side of the mountains. Start with the pollution, both in the water and, lately, in the air, blown in from Mexican coal-fired utility plants to the southeast. This year, the National Parks Conservation Association put the Big Bend on its list of the country's ten most endangered parks. On the worst days, even if there were lightning, it could only be seen through a maze of particulates.

And there is the constant policing. On the morning Carlton worked to pry open my door, the foothills across the river were lined with dozens and dozens of Mexican men wondering if they dared risk coming across to work at the miniboom in Lajitas. They normally would have already crossed, but early that morning, agents from the Border Patrol's Alpine sector had swooped down in their SUVs and vans and arrested about fourteen people. All would be driven back north nearly two hours to Alpine for processing, then back down to the border again to be released at Presidio, another hour to the west, a task likely to take most of the day. And mean nothing, since everyone knew the men would be back the next day for work.

There also was the arrest April 29 and subsequent detaining in Ojinaga, Mexico, of the Presidio grocer Jesus Manuel Herrera, or "Junie," on charges of the murder of the Mexican journalist José Luis Ortega Mata. Ortega had been writing stories about the drug trade, but Herrera somehow was fingered for the crime based on an "eyewitness" account. Herrera and his supporters say it's a crooked frame-up and want him released. Meanwhile the entire area is filled with protests and bad cross-border feelings.

If at the bottom of all this there is indeed something about corruption and drugs, it will not be surprising, because most of all what belies the idea that the Big Bend is any kind of sanctuary is the War on Drugs and its almost uncountable disruptive effects. And none of the effects compare to what happened May 20, 1997, near the farming town of Redford, east of Presidio on scenic Texas 170. That was the day Ezequiel Hernandez Jr., an eighteen-year-old

high school student tending a herd of goats, made history when he was ambushed by a team of Marine snipers. When he slowly bled to death, he became the first civilian death attributed to U.S. military forces on an antidrug mission since the War on Drugs started, and more specifically since the 1989 creation of Joint Task Force 6 at Fort Bliss in El Paso. Whether he will be the last remains to be seen. The oppressive truth about the trans-Pecos, from its arbitrary searches and arrests to the sheer abundance of firepower and empowerment of warlords on both sides, is that it is like a powder keg waiting to go off. A University of Texas sociologist, Timothy Dunn, in the influential book *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border,* argues that the area's warlike nature can be traced to application of the Pentagon's LIC — for low-intensity conflict — doctrine.

Developed during the Reagan years and applied in wars in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Grenada, LIC is an extension of the counterinsurgency warfare ops of the Kennedy administration. Plenty of violence is involved, but not as much as in a "high-intensity" conflict, such as Vietnam or the Persian Gulf War. The chief characteristic of an LIC is that U.S. military forces play a limited or advisory role with local police. The secret Marine surveillance team that killed Hernandez had been invited into the area by the sector chief of the Marfa Border Patrol. They were part of a fifty-six-member platoon from Camp Pendleton in California brought in to watch for drug smuggling for two weeks. Nobody in Redford even knew they were there.

The Marines involved, young Hispanics themselves, were subsequently absolved of their actions by military courts. It was ruled that they were acting within their parameters and could plausibly have thought Hernandez was smuggling drugs or shooting at them, or both. The commander at Camp Pendleton, General Carlton Fulford, went so far as to say the shooting was justified. I was in Redford shortly after the incident, and went to look at the site and to talk to those left behind.

"I can't hold the Marines too responsible," said Father Mel LaFollette, a maverick Episcopal priest with a Yale Divinity School degree who moved to Redford in 1984 and helped lead community protests over the slaying. "Their heads have been filled with . . . [ideas] that we're the enemy. The real point is that they shouldn't be here."

Father Mel took me to the place up on the creosote-covered hill where Hernandez had been slain. "A lot of people think Junior was out in the mountains," the priest said as we drove over. "He was practically in town." We parked near an abandoned well where Hernandez had fallen. Out there, among the scrub, the three Marines, wearing camouflage gillie suits, had been hiding when one of them, Corporal Clemente Banuelos, fired a round from his M-16.

It was a clear shot, 135 yards, to the well, perhaps 100 yards from the town's Baptist church. Hit through the side, Hernandez crumpled. For reasons that were never made clear, he was not given first aid, and died before U.S. Border Patrol agents reached him twenty minutes later.

The Marines said Hernandez fired his .22-caliber rifle in their direction, twice. Father Mel pointed out, though, that the angle of the wound indicated the boy had been facing away from the patrol. The people who knew Hernandez say that he always took his rifle, a vintage piece belonging to his grandfather, to shoot at snakes, or rabbits. Even the Border Patrol had encountered the boy tending his goats with the weapon. "None of us believe he ever saw them," Father Mel said.

"Stand here," the priest told me. With one arm he described an arc from the well toward the town. "From here you can see where Junior was standing when he was killed, where the killers were hiding, the house where Junior's family lives, the church where his body was laid out, and the cemetery he's buried in."

In 1998, the boy's family settled a wrongful death suit with the U.S. government for $1.9 million. In 1999, the conjunto artist Santiago Jimenez Jr. recorded the *corrido* "La Trajedia en Redford: La Muerte de Ezequiel Hernandez" (The Tragedy in Redford: The Death of Ezequiel Hernandez). This June, I drove through Redford again. Just before reaching the town, elation from the vistas of the steep and winding roadway down from the mountain gorges out of Lajitas gave way to a knot in my stomach. I realized I was coming back to the little unpaved road that turned up to the well. Except that the yellow crime-scene tape was long gone, the killing ground looked almost unchanged. A simple cross with Junior's name, draped with artificial flowers, had been affixed to the well. If it had eyes, it could, as Father Mel said, see the church off to the

left. Directly to the west: a field of headstones, the grave of a teenager.

5. The Chinati and Sierra Vieja: Remote No More

Because of the Chinati and Sierra Vieja ranges, you can't follow the river closely from the Big Bend to El Paso, but you can get as far as Candelaria before Ranch Road 170, the last state-maintained road, runs itself out. A footbridge at that tiny end-of-the-line hamlet makes it a fair but doable walk on a rutted farm lane between drought-dry fields into San Antonio del Bravo, Mexico. You can drive a little farther west on rough dirt and gravel lanes, but you still can't traverse the mountains. You have to double back.

One option is to return to Presidio, a flat, hellishly hot agricultural center and gateway to Ojinaga, Pancho Villa's old haunt. From there you take U.S. 67 north up to Marfa — a route that may become another NAFTA truck conduit between Mexico and the United States — and pick up U.S. 90 westward. Then past the slightly sci-fi presence of the Air Force tethered aerostat spy balloon at Valentine, and on to Sierra Blanca, a quiet foothills town that, at least for now, has blocked attempts to bury nuclear waste in the nearby scrub plains.

A better way, unless it's raining hard or icy in this northern part of the Chihuahuan Desert, is the Pinto Canyon road. Coming back from Candelaria, you turn north at Ruidosa. The graded roadway is unpaved, but most vehicles probably can take it. Not only does the route cut through classic trans-Pecos ridges and valleys, it links up with Ranch Road 2810 about thirty-two miles before Marfa.

This is one of the immortal two-lanes, sweeping through rolling, well-tended ranch land. If you're like me, the only traffic you'll meet is mule deer hopping the fences and running alongside you. Sort of. After all, this is the border. Just before I got to Marfa, a Border Patrol SUV parked at a ranch gate decided I needed to be followed and tailed me closely all the way into town.

No matter how you get to Marfa, once you make it to Interstate 10, next stop is El Paso. But my map showed a possible alternate trail, starting just south of Sierra Blanca and slicing through Quitman Pass, from the mountains of the same name. On the south side of the pass, the trail seemed to intersect the beginning of

Ranch Road 192 toward El Paso and thus resume the state road system that had stopped at Candelaria. Unlike the Pinto Canyon road, Quitman Pass promised to be trouble, but it was the most direct way back to the river and would keep me off the interstate. So I took off. At the time, I was driving a V-8 four-wheeler with a statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe glued on the dashboard and plenty of water in the back.

I guessed correctly at a couple of dusty, signless forks as the pass road devolved into little more than ruts from previous vehicles, which I reasoned were probably DEA or Border Patrol, meaning the road wouldn't dead-end because it was essential to the drug war. Two deep streambeds almost stopped me, but I pulled enough traction and didn't tip over. When I finally crested a rocky plateau and saw a comparatively easy dirt path winding down to the green irrigated fields along the river I stopped the jeep and got out as if I'd been trapped under the sea. I realized the pain in my crabbed-up fingers was from gripping the steering wheel so tightly.

Although such was not my intent, the Quitman Pass route might also have served as one of numerous ways around the permanent Border Patrol checkpoint on I-10 near Sierra Blanca, where anyone on the eastbound side can be stopped and searched for any reason whatsoever. Had I wanted to elude *la migra,* I could have just reversed my route and gone north instead of south, although one always runs the risk that a patrol car or helicopter might be working the area. But such is life on the border.

For my part, I had from the start decided never to provoke the small army of occupation in the border zone. I was as polite to the uniforms as possible, no matter how many times they went through my luggage or book boxes, no matter how many times they didn't believe I hadn't bought anything in Mexico, no matter how many times my license plates were scanned by the computers.

And I gave the guards the benefit — even Will Rogers would turn paranoid checking thousands of cars a day. When a bored and officious customs officer confiscated the sack of prize grapefruit Roy Kosel had given me back at San Benito and dumped it in the trash, practically daring me to object, I chalked it up to the vagaries of international travel. Only once did I worry: the afternoon I was returning to Presidio from Ojinaga, and U.S. Customs closed the

bridge gates behind me, trapping me and ten other cars amid a phalanx of agents and drug-sniffing German shepherds. Me and ten other cars and the blonde in the seat next to me.

Mimi Webb-Miller had come with me from Terlingua to show me Ojinaga, where her ex-boyfriend had lived. "Ex" as in dead. In 1986, Mexican federal police using U.S. helicopters had bottled up Pablo Acosta, once the drug kingpin of northern Mexico, at the village of Santa Elena, just across the Rio Grande from Big Bend National Park. They shot the town to hell and him with it. Mimi, an art dealer, entrepreneur, and a niece of the late Senator John Tower, was one of the women who showed up to claim Acosta's body.

Two customs agents moved down my side of the line with questions and dogs. Then they did it again. I may not have mentioned that Mimi had also dated the former head of the U.S. Customs antinarcotics unit at Presidio. At the same time she saw Acosta. She liked them both so much she introduced them to each other at her Mexican spread, Rancho El Milagro, between Paso Lajitas and San Carlos.

I figured someone had recognized Mimi either on crossing into Mexico or while dining at one of the late Pablo's favorite restaurants. All kinds of knowing looks as we walked around. I have to admit it was a rush. For a few years after Acosta's slaying, she had gone into federal protection, fearing retaliation in the turf wars that followed.

But she loves the Big Bend and moved back, fixing up a flagstone miner's shack in Terlingua, commuting to her TV commercial casting business in Los Angeles. She maintains active business interests in Mexico and hopes to open a small hotel in Paso Lajitas soon, although she'll have to compete with the juggernaut of Austin's Steve Smith.

Mimi thought the gate sealing was just a coincidence, that customs officials had received a tip that someone was moving something across and were just searching everyone.

She was probably right. I had no drugs or contraband, not even any fresh fruit anymore, and they let us through without incident. Who knows? No one ever tells you why you've been stopped, why you've been released, and it's not a good idea to ask. Along the border today, you get used to that being normal.

*

Earlier in the week, while still based in the Big Bend, I spent a night not far from Ojinaga-Presidio at a place that could not have been more tied to the Southwest's great ranching past, nor more overwhelmed by its paramilitary present and future. The Chambers ranch was a grueling ten-mile, two-hour drive up rugged mountain flanks overlooking Candelaria. It's so wearing that when Johnnye Chambers, the matriarch of the family, and her daughter, Theresa, whose grit and beauty inspired some to call her "the queen of the trans-Pecos," taught in the one-room schoolhouse, they spent weeknights in town rather than face the tire-eating and teeth-rattling trip into the rimrock each day.

Now the Candelaria school is closed, its passing noted by a poignant, sun-bleached sign near an abandoned church: "Give us this day our daily school." Johnnye, now retired, lives in Ruidosa; Theresa has moved to Presidio, teaching there. Boyd Chambers, seventy-six, still works the ranch he leases with help from his son, John.

To me, the Chamberses were and are the stuff of John Ford movies, people of great courage and tenacity who worked hard in a hard land and mostly wanted to be left alone.

But being left alone is not the way of the border. I was at the ranch for a day and night and saw two B-1 bombers passing five hundred feet overhead on routine training flights from Holloman Air Force Base near Alamagordo, New Mexico. Twice as many as I'd ever seen in person in my life. At ground level, the Army Corps of Engineers has graded and scraped the main ranch road, as it has at ranches throughout the state, to make better routes for troops and government agents. The Marines for a time tried to build a road to make access to the region easier, but gave up and have decamped, leaving behind a Quonset hut.

As with the population of any DMZ, the intrusions of war have grown ever more personal. For years, the Chambers family was stalked, stopped, or intimidated by government agents — once while Johnnye and Theresa were taking Christmas packages to the children of San Antonio del Bravo, the village across the river from Candelaria. Boyd is pretty sure some of his cattle were shot from helicopters.

In the early nineties, another son, Robert Chambers, handsome and charismatic, was convicted, along with Presidio County's sher-

iff, Rick Thompson, for moving horse trailers full of cocaine across the river. They went deep into federal prison. Robert's world is trying to get a cell that's smoke-free and wondering how things will be when he's released, in seven years or so.

It could be that the Chamberses are on permanent surveillance, since rumors persist that Robert stashed drug money somewhere and might come back for it.

And it's easy to be judgmental about Robert — whom, I may not have mentioned, Mimi Webb-Miller also once dated. But he grew up in a war zone, adopted the macho and often sadistic ways of the region, learned the meaning of its perverted economy. The writer Richard West recalls the first time he met the tall, blond young man, now a graying inmate: "He drove up in a pickup truck, wearing only blue jeans, shirtless so you could see his muscles. But mostly what I remember was that he had a puma chained to the truck bed." Robert spoke Spanish like a Mexican and knew the country across the river as well as his own. He didn't have to drift into the drug mafia, but it was there, and he was there.

Theresa avoided discussing her brother as we forded the Rio Grande — technically an illegal crossing since there's no customs port — in her old pickup one afternoon at the same spot just west of Candelaria where the bust had gone down. We were taking supplies across to her wonderful little *posada,* Casa de los Santos. The road into the village along the Mexican side was even more tortuous than the one we had negotiated on the Texas side, and badly cleft where occasional floods had eaten away the packed dirt. Usually it was easier to drive supplies up to the footbridge in Candelaria, carry them across, and put them in another truck to take into San Antonio del Bravo. But sometimes this was the only way.

As much as for axle-breaking drops, Theresa kept looking through the cracked windshield for Mexican soldiers garrisoned in the area. The foliage was thick in spots and offered easy cover to the military or anyone else. She had been stopped often, at gunpoint. But she didn't scare anymore. None of them did.

"The Border Patrol drove up here one time and told me since I was within twenty-five miles of the border they can come in my house when they want to," Boyd had told me up at the old ranch house — a real one, simple, functional, not one of those weekend

affectations of the wealthy. He had been taking a break from the noon heat while Johnnye cooked pan-roasted chicken and plump water biscuits for lunch. "I told them that's not in the Constitution. It's not right. They can't have different laws for people on the border."

Johnnye walked over to refill my glass of sweet tea. "I was down in Guatemala one time," she said, "and some soldiers came out of the jungle and stopped us. One of the people in the group with me asked if I was afraid. I said, 'No, I'm from Presidio County. We can be stopped anytime.'"

6. El Paso, America

The westering Texas border ends at El Paso not unlike it begins in the Valley, its long, meandering middle stoppered up with a semi-isolated city-state bearing the brunt of international upheaval. The difference is that the Valley has accepted its changed role and demographics, and El Paso is still working on it.

Coming out of the mountains of the trans-Pecos, you begin to approach perhaps the most distinctive of Texas cities at what here is called its own "Lower Valley," the stretch of historic Spanish mission and market towns, now poor to lower-middle-class communities or barrios — San Elizario, Socorro, and Ysleta — that hug the river. Most of the way from Quitman Pass the land is heavily diked and canalized, surrealistically verdant and lush with cash crops. Scattered everywhere is the mishmash of substandard *colonias* poor workers have built and hang on to with great determination. The reason is simple. Living in a *colonia* is better than paying rent to live in a dilapidated apartment or nowhere at all. Politicians and professional advocates who occasionally seek to close the *colonias* sometimes forget the power of this Hobson's choice.

The northeast side of El Paso is a mix of barrios, middle-class suburbs, retail strips, the airport, and military bases, the largest of which is Fort Bliss, where the drug war's controversial Joint Task Force 6 was created. The city then wraps itself around the Franklin Mountains, known for a tram and scenic views, to the prosperous and mall-friendly west side, home to the University of Texas–El Paso and most of the city's Anglo population, now shrunk to perhaps one third of the three-quarter million residents.

To the south are the dry, brown hills of much-maligned Ciudad Juárez, aglow each evening in yellowish electricity. More than 2 million souls, mostly drawn from the horrendous poverty of the interior, often find themselves in even worse straits — cardboard boxes or streets serving as home in a city polluted and pressed in just about every way possible. Juárez and Tijuana have the highest concentration of the U.S.-Mexico border's estimated 3,500 maquiladoras, the manufacturing plants created in 1965 through binational agreement that pay a fraction of the U.S. minimum wage. That gives more jobs to Mexicans, but effectively stifles industrial development in El Paso and elsewhere on the American side. Replete with drug mobsters, Juárez is also the murder capital of Mexico. As with about one third of Mexican border cities, there is no public sewer system. Except the river.

The tired, the poor, and the huddled masses are pretty much massing right here. Feelings of nationality, even between Mexican-Americans and Mexicans, seem to run higher than anywhere else along the border. In 1993, Mexico raised a flag the size of Montana over its Chamizal territory, a little patch of land ceded by the United States after a shift in the riverbed. You can see the flag from miles away, a giant flapping source of pride not coincidentally an up-yours to the offspring of Uncle Sam. Every Fourth of July, El Paso gets payback. A local bank traditionally drapes lights in the shape of the American flag along the side of its multistory downtown headquarters. The two symbols duel in the night, one waving, one electrified; textile and technology, them and us. You don't know whether to salute or laugh.

Some people don't like to go to Juárez these days, given its penchant for violence, but plenty still do anyway. My visit started indirectly, with a dinner with Malcolm McGregor, the flamboyant attorney whose clients include the reclusive author Cormac McCarthy, at the Camino Real Hotel in the heart of downtown El Paso. Next to the convention center and bus station, and a short walk from the international bridge, the Camino Real is the meeting place of choice in the city. As if in proof, someone tapped me on the shoulder just as dessert arrived. I turned to see Butch Hancock. He'd driven over from Terlingua for a birthday party for Terry Allen, the eccentric and underrated Lubbock songwriter and artist. A couple dozen of Allen's friends, mostly artists and musicians such as Butch

and the blues guitarist Charlie Sexton, were whooping it up in the hotel's bar, and next thing I knew we were walking across the bridge to have dinner at Nuevo Martino in Juárez. It was a good time, but I wanted to get back out into the streets and slipped away early.

Despite a steady drizzle, Juárez Avenue was spiked curb to corner with swarms of people and an edgy ambience of latent anything goes.

Everyone seemed dramatically young. More than half the population in Mexico is younger than twenty-five, and the border reflects that. Short-haired soldiers from Fort Bliss jostled past me on the way back from the red-light district or en route to the endless string of bars. El Paso teenagers escaping Texas drinking laws hooted down the sidewalks whacked on tequila shots. Mexican counterparts spilled out of discos as though from a strip in L.A. Cars streamed through, honking, radios blaring. Sometimes I couldn't move forward the sidewalk was so jammed.

Returning, I stopped halfway along the bridge to look down at the water. But the wire barricades made it impossible to see, and if you didn't keep moving, the beggars and hustlers would give you no peace. Back in the States, the customs agent wanted to know where I'd been and if I was a citizen. "Yes," I said. He looked at me a very long fifteen seconds and couldn't leave it at that. "Of what country?" I gave him the answer we both knew to be true and then walked up to the lower end of El Paso Street. It had been taken over by the homeless — men, women, and children — stretching out on the sidewalks and in the doorways to sleep. I got to the hotel and stopped at the bar for a nightcap, but something unpleasant had settled in my mind and I went up to my room, sat awhile staring out the tenth-floor window at the sweep of the two cities, and finally fell asleep.

At five-forty-five the next morning I met Malcolm for chorizo tacos at his favorite breakfast spot, a Whataburger on the far west side. A burly, white-haired Renaissance man known not only for his law practice and his stints as a state legislator, but for his living room. It's an airplane hangar: two biplanes on the floor, another suspended from the ceiling. What he flies is the two-seat Super Cub. After he pushed it out and gassed it up, no small feat for an older

man, we taxied down the runway that lies in the middle of the Cielo Dorado estates, just across the New Mexico state line. All the residents have private planes, though usually not parked behind the TV. Some of the residents aren't there anymore. On the way back to his house from breakfast, McGregor had pointed out several homes in the estate which had been confiscated by the DEA or whose owners had been arrested for smuggling.

"It's hard to know where it starts and stops," he said. He's handled drug cases but doesn't like to anymore. He doesn't even want to talk about it much. "In federal court these days," he said without smiling, "about all you can do is plead guilty and inform on all your friends."

From the air, the division between El Paso and Juárez is stark and evident. "There's the First World," McGregor said through the headset, pointing to an enclave of six-figure homes with tennis courts and swimming pools below us. Then we banked toward the drab-looking foothills of Juárez. "And there's the Third."

The encroachment seems unstoppable. "It's like being on the backside of a monster dam. The country with one of the highest birthrates in the world, just waiting to jump over. That's what got Sylvestre Reyes elected [as a U.S. congressman], you know. When he was head of the Border Patrol here he set up Border Patrol cars every four hundred yards." Malcolm turned back northwest, toward the United States. "Periodically you can see it [the fear] like a bamboo wall going up. The Mexican Revolution got 'em all excited over here. Dope has got 'em excited again."

Like many border residents, Anglo or Mexican-American, and maybe like the government itself, McGregor doesn't know what to do about the changes he thinks really began to affect the city in the mid-fifties and now make it a place he sometimes barely recognizes. "What should we do? Open borders completely or become Fortress America?" The plane made a slow turn near the statue of Christ atop Sierra del Cristo Rey's peak, which marks the intersection of Juárez, El Paso, and New Mexico. Until the Mexican War split the border in two, everything functioned as El Paso del Norte, one city.

Not far below, near the Anapra sector of Juárez, I could see the slow grade on the railroad tracks said to be favored by train robbers. Everywhere I looked along the concrete channels that held

the river as it passed between the cities were high fences topped with barbed wire. From the backseat, I pressed my microphone button with my delayed answer. "I don't know," I said.

I was pretty sure he'd heard that before.

I am in El Paso and I have just had enchiladas verdes at the L & J Café, "the old place by the graveyard." I am driving crosstown back to the Mission Trail in the Lower Valley to visit the historic presidio chapel at San Elizario, so pristine amid streets so aching with poverty. But I am not here, really.

In my mind I'm back in the Big Bend, a few years ago, pushing my jeep through the quicksand-like lava-silt, steep-banked streambeds, hairpin turns, and axle-swallowing ruts of the treacherous fifty-one-mile River Road, which traces the southern curve of the national park. In the passenger seat is Betty Moore, a raft guide and old friend from Austin, well known for her monitoring of peregrine falcons and the open-air bathtub outside her self-improved miner's shack. She had, with only moderate arm-twisting, agreed to join me for what everyone in Terlingua but me knew was a nasty, brutish four-hour trek, albeit a great way to see the Chihuahuan Desert floor.

The outside temperature fluctuated between 113 and 120, and a few forays into that outback-style heat, plus the general ride through hell, made us thirsty. The closest place was Santa Elena.

Fortunately the old *chalupero* was still working, and he rowed his aluminum skiff, or *chalupa,* across, angling hard upstream until the swift current vectored him down to the American side, landing at just the right spot. He took us across, then sat under a shade tree and returned to a six-pack of Tecate. Betty and I walked up the steep dirt bank to the small town where Pablo Acosta had been shot a decade ago.

Maria Elena's Café was open, so we sat at a metal folding table under a string of multicolored lights on a screen porch and had a couple of *cervezas,* practicing Spanish on the young waitress.

When we returned to the river, the *chalupero* was feeling no pain. On the way back, I asked him how old he was. *"Soy viejo,"* he beamed. He was sixty-four.

I reached over and touched his arm, which was as thick as my leg. *"Pero muy fuerte,"* I said. On the other hand, I had all my teeth.

I told him I was *viejo,* too, but not as *viejo* as he was, and both of us were more *viejo* than Betty, and we argued about who was *más viejo.* At the other side he pulled up the skiff and boarded his oars and asked for four dollars.

I knew that was high and said so, but he shrugged, because, of course, there was nothing he could do about these things. I was nearly out of cash but began counting out what I had into his palm, coins and all, until we came up with what seemed like five dollars.

Then we counted it again, English and Spanish, maybe even Latin, until we were laughing too much to care. No doubt he got one over on me, but if I'd had fifty dollars I probably would have given it to him. I think he had the best job on the border. He made it go away.

MICHAEL FINKEL

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Void

FROM *National Geographic Adventure*

"HELL," says Mousaka. He raises a forefinger and circles it in the air, to indicate that he is referring to the whole of the void. I am sitting on Mousaka's lap. Mousaka is sitting on Osiman's lap. Osiman is sitting on someone else's lap. And so on — everyone sitting on another's lap. We are on a truck, crossing the void. The truck looks like a dump truck, though it doesn't dump. It is twenty feet long and six feet wide, diesel-powered, painted white. One hundred and ninety passengers are aboard, tossed atop one another like a pile of laundry. People are on the roof of the cab, and straddling the rail of the bed, and pressed into the bed itself. There is no room for carry-on bags; water jugs and other belongings must be tied to the truck's rail and hung over the sides. Fistfights have broken out over half an inch of contested space. Beyond the truck, the void encompasses 154,440 square miles, at last count, and is virtually uninhabited.

Like many of the people on board, Mousaka makes his living by harvesting crops — oranges or potatoes or dates. His facial scars, patterned like whiskers, indicate that he is a member of the Hausa culture, from southern Niger. Mousaka has two wives and four children and no way to provide for them, except to get on a truck. Also on the truck are Tuareg and Songhai and Zerma and Fulani and Kanuri and Wodaabe. Everyone is headed to Libya, where the drought that has gripped much of North Africa has been less severe and there are still crops to pick. Libya has become the new promised land. Mousaka plans to stay through the harvest season, January to July, and then return to his family. To get to Libya from the south, though, one must first cross the void.