

Notes From Another Country

Tell me where your country ends and mine begins.

Someone I don't know stops me on the street. She is a stranger, but clearly she knows who I am. She grabs my arm, then lets it go, then tells me she has just finished reading *In Perfect Light*. I smile awkwardly and nod, not really knowing what to say.

"It's beautiful," she says. "Really beautiful. But your books are sad."

"Sad?"

"Yes."

"All of them?"

"Yes," she says.

"But full of hope and expectation," I add.

"Yes," she says, "But why do your characters have to suffer so much?"

"Well," I say, "They live on the border." And then I want to add. "My characters, some of them get saved." But that's not what I say. Instead I reiterate my point. "Well, you see, my characters, they all live on the border."

I see a strange look on her face and suddenly feel inarticulate. I have not given her much of an answer. She is gracious enough to drop the subject. "And your next novel?"

I hesitate. "I'm—" I stop.

"You are working on another."

I nod.

"Do you have a title?"

I don't want to talk about my new novel—but I find myself giving her the title. "A Stone of the Heart."

"A lovely title."

I thank her and nod.

“What does it mean?”

“It’s from a line in a poem by Yeats.”

She waits for me to finish.

“Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart.”

She smiles. “More suffering?” It’s not really a question.

I nod. “The characters, they live on the border.”

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I could say something like this: *I belong to the border*. I examine the statement—and then decide it’s inaccurate. Then I write: *The border has always owned me*. I picture myself wearing a t-shirt that reads: OWNED AND OPERATED BY THE BORDER. And then I think: I would very much like to wear such a t-shirt. *I am owned by the border*. Explaining that harsh and illogical fact *to myself* has become the core of my thinking, the heart of my writing.

This poor piece of earth is a place that is mostly ignored and despised, a place that is impoverished by design and by omission, a place that is utterly misunderstood by residents and outsiders alike.

Despite my ragged and complicated biography, this tough and rainless terrain has steadfastly remained a passion and an obsession. This piece of earth has given me a language, a vision, a psychology, and a politics. I understand that “the border” as metaphor can be turned into something that is intellectually vogue and chic. But the literal border is something else altogether. “Vogue” and “chic” aren’t indigenous words here. But for someone like me, El Paso and Juárez don’t exist merely as ideas or literary tropes. They are, after all, real cities. Real cities filled with real people. And like real cities everywhere on earth, there is some serious suffering going on. (I have always suspected Americans hate that word and Mexicans have made too easy a truce with it).

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When I was younger, I tried to make good my escape from this place. I tried escaping several times, in fact. But my attempts at breaking with the desert and the river and the heat and the people (who were almost as stubborn as the draughts) were always unsuccessful. Maybe it was the storms. I always missed the storms the most, the smell of the air, the wind that could break a giant cottonwood as easily as a hungry coyote ripping up its prey. A storm in the desert can be terrifying. Like looking into the face of an angry God. Anybody who was raised in the desert can attest to the damage a storm can inflict in an instant—just as they can tell you that *water* is another name for *miracle*.

Yes, I missed the summer storms. Their memory was like a leash pulling me back.

The first time I moved away, I was eighteen. I went to college in Denver. I spent four years there and fell in love with the road between Denver and El Paso. I was a young man who liked roads more than I liked cities. There was something about roads, something about the way you could just keep moving, something about the promise of an unseen destination. Destinations were always full of hope.

After Denver, I lived in Belgium for four more years. In Denver, I had discovered the softness and the cruelty of snow. In Belgium I discovered the beauty and monotony of rain. If rain was a miracle in the desert, then sun was a miracle in northern Europe. But I saw a bigger piece of the world—Paris, London, Madrid, Barcelona, Rome, Amsterdam, Dar es Salaam. I lived one summer in a London slum called Kilburn. Another summer, I spent in Moshe, Tanzania. I learned that words were far more beautiful than I had ever suspected. I fell under the seductive spell of the sound of the English language on the tongues of Irishmen living in London. I was mesmerized by the sound of women singing in Swahili. But I also discovered the true violence and ugliness of a word like “colonialism.”

I wanted to find myself. Maybe I'd never felt real. I don't know. I can't remember. And I *did* find a new life. I did. I found a new identity—at least for a quiet, uncomfortable moment. But that's what young men do when they're eighteen—they leave their parents' house, trying to cast off their inherited cultural and genetic identities. I was as predictable as every other eighteen year old male that has ever taken a breath—I believed I was going to find a destiny that was mine alone. I believed I could re-invent myself and be anything I wanted to be. Why not? I lived in America. But not really, no, I've never really felt like I lived in America. I was born and lived on the border. Too much Spanish everywhere. Too much underground Catholicism (where the word suffering was as large and vast as the desert itself). Children, *especially children*, understand the long and impossible chasm that lies between their familial culture and the culture of the center. No, I never really felt like I lived in America. But I wanted to feel like I did.

In the end, the act of re-inventing myself proved a futile and impossible matter. What we inherit is not so easily cast aside. I had been given a name and that name was my poverty and my only source of wealth. Somewhere along the line, I stopped fighting my name. It seems obvious to me now that I remained *always* a son of the border, a boy never quite comfortable in an American skin, and certainly not comfortable in a Mexican one. My entire life, I have lived in a liminal space, and that space has both defined and confined me. That liminal space wrote and invented me. It has been my prison, and it has also been my only piece of sky.

At thirty-seven, I found my way back.

I now live in a house about fifty miles from where I was born and one mile away from Juárez Mexico. I was a prodigal son who had lost himself by trying to live in places that offered me more exile than belonging.

I fell out of love with roads.

Some people return to the place of their genesis because there's nothing left of them. They have fought the world and lost. They return beaten down and defeated.

Some people come back to lick their wound and die.

Me, I came back to live.

I came back to teach at a university. A professor in an English Department—how strange and how beautiful, to be a professor. I was happy, unbelievably happy. A new beginning. It didn't matter that I'd had a few new beginnings already. It was never too late to begin again.

I came back not only to live and to teach, but *to write*. *And not even I would have guessed at how hungry I was to write*. But hungrier, thank God, for the desert and the crooked, intoxicating language of a people who could never quite decide which side they were on.

Even as I drove back to the desert from Northern California, I realized I was coming home to stay. To live.

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I've been back now for fifteen years. A blink of the eye. Fifteen years. A life time. The border is harsher than it has ever been. The drought has stayed a long time, and every year it seems that life is more complicated and crueler for the many. (It has, after all, always been kind to the few.) Like my father, this place that owns me, this place I call home is a difficult, impossible love. This place can be harsh and cruel, but it can be as kind as anything I have ever known. Whatever the border is, it is certainly not a loveless place.

Yes, too many people are poor here. Mexico and the United States and its businessmen have found a thousand ingenious ways to pay people next to nothing for their labor. Across the bridge, in Juárez, over four hundred women have been murdered. Today, there is an endless stream of people wanting and needing to write about those women, needing to transform their broken bodies into "art" into "film." But few of those writers, journalists, screenwriters or filmmakers actually live here. Who would want to do that?

Typically, the border is not seen as a “home” or a place where “normal” people lead “normal” lives. “Normal” is not a word associated with the border. Instead, this region is associated with other words, *savagery*, *cruelty*, *violence*. This entire region is seen as a murderous place that is not only empty of trees, but empty, too, of civilization. Empty of laws. A place empty of salvation. Murderous, murderous Juárez.

“We are a nation of laws,” our president reminds us. Laws and salvation—these words are the exclusive possessions of the United States.

Except that on this side of the bridge—the side I live on—we have our own forms of violence and poverty and cruelty. And our forms of hatred are as plentiful here as anywhere else on earth. There are days that I am filled with disgust, and with an anger that is as terrifying as the storms that rage each Spring. The storms I love.

There is a book of essays floating around in my head, a book that expresses what it is like to live one’s life on the U.S.-Mexico border. I’m not sure why I’ve never gotten around to write that book. I keep writing novels, novels like *Carry Me Like Water* and *In Perfect Light*. Novels that are set on the border. Novels where characters are destroyed or saved because they refuse to renounce their claim on the only piece of America that is theirs. I keep writing these novels. Just as I keep writing books of poetry with titles like *Dreaming the End of War that*, books of poetry that are burdened with the ravaged psychology of a man who no longer has any patience with two countries that are at war with each other and keep pretending that they are the best of friends.

Ten years ago, I was really hungry to finally write that book of essays floating around in my head, that book of essays telling the whole of America of what life is like here, on my border (which, of course, can never be truly mine). Ten years ago, I would have paid more attention to my own sense of moral outrage than to the intractable cruelties and politics that sometimes turn people here into grotesques. It is true, after all, that this part of the world has been used by both the United States and by Mexico as a designated place to store what they do not wish to store in their own centers of culture and power. The border has always existed as a safety valve, a dumping ground for the

most desperate and broken elements of both countries. Because *we* exist, *they* do not explode.

I'm older and more cynical now. Paradoxically, I'm also softer. I no longer consider writing about the border and the million stories it continues to spew out as "an opportunity" to exhibit my critical and literary skills. As a writer and as a human being, I once had to struggle with the demon of ambition. Now, I have to struggle with the demon of despair. I sense that demon hovering over the surface of almost everything I write. I fight that demon daily, and hope to God I beat it back surely as Saint Michael beat the devil down, his foot squarely on his cursed neck.

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I now accept the fact that I will always write about the border in way or another. I will continue to write about this place for as long as I have a mind that works and heart that pumps blood. Maybe I will never write a book of essays. Maybe I'll just continue to write novels and poems that are containers for my translations of the wars going on around me.

I need to put words out into more open spaces. My mind is too full, too cluttered, too claustrophobic. I need to toss all those words out of me. I am more than a little afraid that I will fail to say what most needs to be said, for on this border, this separate country, there are too many stories, too many conflicts, too many hearts and passions, too many tongues, too many conflicts, too many differences and interpretations, too many hatreds and betrayals and allegiances.

There are ideologies and politics and national agendas to be examined. And all these lives, all these ideologies, all these clashes between nations on the ground where I and millions of others live, they all matter. One of the most overwhelming problems with living on the border is that the rest of the nation refuses to believe that very much happens here and nothing much really matters. We live, after all, on the margins of the

page that is America. But those of us who call the border our home learned a long time ago that the opposite is true—almost *everything* that happens on the border matters. Almost *everything* that happens here points an accusing finger at America and what it claims to be. *So much matters on the border*. It matters more than most of us who live here can bear. And it enrages us that we remain so stubbornly invisible in the eyes of our political and cultural “centers.”

Here we sit, on a piece of ground that is literally at the crossroads of the Americas *and we remain invisible*. Even now, when we are at the center of the eye of the hurricane we call “Illegal immigration,” we remain invisible. There are senators from the South and even from Wisconsin that have more say about how we should live and what we should do than those of us who have lived our entire lives breathing and working and living here.

We still do not matter. Maybe we never will matter.

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Today, all the talk is about the border. Immigration, Immigration, Immigration. So much of the national discourse at the present moment enrages me. It enrages me because our discussion is so hateful, shallow and dishonest. We speak of a “national character” and a “national language” but refuse to speak of the wealth that a cheap labor force creates. We refuse to speak of who profits. We take our bible literally but not the part that reads, “Blessed are the poor.” Too much of the debate is *in fact* xenophobic and racist. We believe that Mexicans are changing the fabric of our lives, changing our national character, deforming this country. *They are ruining us, those illegal Mexicans. How dare they march on our streets—half a million in Dallas! In Dallas!*

In our collective and political imagination, we envision the United States as a freer and more enlightened version of Europe. As a nation, we know who *is* and who *is not* entitled to citizenship. Asians and Mexicans are problematic. Mercifully, we don’t share

a border with China. The ugly truth is this: we are fighting a war against Mexicans. The Mexicans which even Mexico has thrown away. Those Mexicans. Which is another way of saying we are fighting a war against some of the poorest people in the world. Hating and blaming the poor is such a predictable disease—such an unimaginative addiction.

Well, maybe we didn't win in Vietnam.

Maybe the war in Iraq isn't going so well.

But, damnit to hell, we can win the war against the Mexicans.

Send in the National Guard.

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Four years ago, I wrote a poem which became a section of my most recent collection of poetry, *Dreaming the End of War*. Given the world I am living in today, I might have written that poem yesterday:

War (in the City in Which I Live)

All my life—let me say this so you understand—*all my life*
I have heard stories of the river and how people were willing
To die to cross it. To die just to get to other side. The other
Side was the side I lived on. “And people die to get here?”
My mother nodded at my question in that way that told me
She was too busy to discuss the matter and went back
To her ritual of rolling out tortillas for her seven children, some
Of whom asked questions she had no answers for. We were
Poor as a summer without rain, an outhouse and a pipe
Bringing in cold water from a well that was unreliable
As the white man's treaties with the Indians, unreliable
As my drunk uncles, unreliable as my father's Studebaker
Truck. I was six. It was impossible for me to fathom
Why anyone would risk death for the chance to live like us.

*

I have heard people laugh when
They see the Río Grande for the first time. *That is the river?*
But that river has claimed a thousand lives, Mexicans caught
In its currents mistaking the river as something tame, and in
One second devouring them whole. The survivors
Have handed down this lesson: Nothing in the desert is
Tame. Not the people, not the sand, not the winds, not
The sun, not even the river that resembles a large ditch
And laughed at by visitors and locals alike. Nothing
In the desert has ever had anything resembling mercy
On Mexicans attempting to leave their land, to become
Something they weren't meant to be.

*

People are still crossing. People are still dying. Some have
Died suffocating in box cars. Some have drowned. Some
Have been killed by vigilantes who protect us in the name
Of all that is white. Some have died in a desert larger than
their dreams. Some were found, no hint of their names
On their remains. In the city that is my home, Border Patrol
Vans are as ubiquitous as taxi cabs in New York. Green Vans
Are a part of my landscape, a part of my imagination, no less
Than the sky or the river or the ocotillos blooming in spring.
The West is made of things that make you bleed. I no longer
Hang images of summer clouds or Indians carrying pots on their
Talented heads or Mexican peasants working the land with magic
Hands. On my walls, I no longer hang paintings of the Holy Poor.

*

We have been fighting a war on this border
For hundreds of years. We have been fighting the war so long
That the war has become as invisible as the desert sands we
Trample on.

I do not know how long all this will continue. Peace
Is like the horizon. We can see it in the distance
But it is always far and we can never touch it.

*

Every day

In what passes for a newspaper in the city in which
I live, someone writes a letter ranting against the use
Of the Spanish language because this is America and I can
Taste the hate in the letter, can almost feel the spit
In the letter writer's mouth and I know we could not
Ever speak about this without one of us wanting to hurt
The other in the city in which I live.

*

I will tell you a sad story: White people are moving away
From this city that has claimed my heart. They are running away
From my people. They are running away from all that keeps
Us poor. I want them to stay and fight. I want them
To stay and live with my people. *We have chased them
Away.* I want them to love the people who make the food
They love. *We have chased them away—are you happy? Are you
Happy?* And there are people waiting in line, spending
Their fortunes just for a chance to enter, waiting, just blocks
Away from where I sit, waiting to come over, waiting in Juárez
Just to cross the river, from China and India and all the nations
Of Africa and Central America and Asia. No poet, no engineer, no
Politician, no philosopher no artist, no novelist has ever
Dreamed a solution. I am tired of living in exile. I am tired
Of chasing others off the land.

Let me say this again. Again. Again.
I want, I want this war to end. To end.

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All I have ever done is spill out fragments of life on the border. I have always
attempted to make those fragments into something that resembles art. For me, writing

has become one of the ways I am able to examine and make sense of the cruelties of the world I live in. To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir I was not born a writer, I became one. I was not born with an immense and inevitable talent. I did not become a writer because it was my destiny. I became a poet by training and by discipline. I became a novelist through work and through desire. I am neither a journalist, nor a historian nor a detective nor an archeologist. I am neither a philosopher nor a theologian and my body is not a repository of truth. To write, for me, is a way of seriously engaging with the world I have inherited and embraced.

As I've aged, I've noticed changes in my face, in my body, in the way I look and the way I look at things. My hair was once dark brown—it is now becoming white as a summer cloud. Whatever I was, I am no longer. *I am becoming. I am always becoming.* I have become accustomed to this act of becoming. Perhaps becoming is my great addiction. Someday, I tell myself, I will become a real Mexican. Someday, I will become a real American. In the meantime, I write as someone who is a permanent immigrant. Perhaps America does not belong to me. Perhaps it never will. But to whom does it belong? To whom? Who is the rightful heir to America? I will always write as someone who has only one foot in the garden. The rest of me is standing outside—looking in—standing somewhere east of Eden in an exile I have perhaps fallen too much in love with.

Let me say this so you understand. I do not merely write novels and poetry about the border—I live on the border. I breathe on the border. I love on the border. I suffer on the border. I weep and pray and hope and wake every day—on the border. Let me say this so you understand. The people of Mexico are not my enemies—they are my neighbors. Do you mind very much if I love my neighbors?

Let me say this so you understand. I write from another country.

When you read anything I write, if you understand anything at all, understand this: I write from another country.

Tell me, you who are so in love with nations and with boundaries and with lines that divide us into nations. Tell me, where does my country end? Where does yours begin?

“War in the City in Which I Live,” is taken from *Dreaming the End of War* (Copper Canyon Press, 2004). Used by permission of Copper Canyon Press, copyright 2006.