

AGUAS

Reprinted by permission of the author

When a local freezer plant shuts down, and neighbors move out, it reminds us that we owe a lot of our population drift to corporate decisions made a continent away. Just as, when orchards and vineyards begin to climb the slope of Umptanum Ridge, we remember that no other part of the country rides a boom-and-bust economy quite as fiercely as our West, nuestro querido norte, nor with quite as much glee and optimism. The truth is that impersonal fevers of supply and demand - highly contagious, fickle as gods - run through our trailer parks and truck stops, and we wouldn't have it any other way.

Our basin-and-range, high-steppe, big-sky country is in fact a landscape so harsh, so inhospitable that not until post-Civil War corporations, and the millions they could invest, did it yield an income. And then it paid off only in the form of highly mechanized farming and mining and logging operations. Everybody knows the story of how investors got rich. And field hands and miners and loggers? Their livelihood depended on bottom lines calculated at a desk 3000 miles away. As time went on, the nation's iconography came into play, as well as a lot of irony. The landscape that Hollywood forever associated with pioneer independence, with having enough elbow-room to start life all over - this part of the country, in other words - since the railroads arrived, has been a corporate plaything. Massive agricultural and mining projects create interlocking colonies, which are in turn controlled by absentee CEO's, who answer to nameless stockholders.

By now it is almost routine, I mean the occasional operation by agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Fully backed up by a helicopter and thirty-some local law enforcement personnel. After the sort of raid people lived through last January, the whole

parquiadero goes into convulsions, twenty-five or thirty trailers abandoned with homework left on the kitchen table. A four year old con asma turned purple at the sight of those guys' drawn weapons, of her teenage brother handcuffed shirtless in goosebumps in the front yard. Their mother's eyes glaze when she talks about it. Her voice drops, almost in wonder: one ballpoint signature a thousand miles away, y ya estufo, you disappear. Her thinking hesitates. Think of crossing a frozen sidewalk a step at a time. That night, at the jailhouse door, \$5000 worth of lawyer descends, with a shrug, from a Lexus SUV: migod quit whimpering, you aren't the only lady this has ever happened to.

Three months after the raid, the ospreys are back - it is late April - and now they occupy the plywood platform the power company put up on a pole right down the road. They have a twenty-foot length of what looks like twine and feathers, and maybe the orange of hay-bale twine, all knotted and tangled, dangling over one side of the nest. Trashy or raffish? Can't decide. A white head shows above the nest edge. The other adult is a phone pole away, eyeing a field two inches high in timothy. Every April they take up residence in that nest on that platform, having wintered in South America, though of course I don't recognize them as individuals, can't swear these are the same pair as last year's, though ospreys do mate for life.

The migration analogy draws itself. What we call immigration, out here, is nothing more nor less than a few million poor people moving from one place to another in pursuit of hard, monotonous, ill-paid work. No doubt Congress sees it in terms of numbers and well-formed anecdotes, but we live in it: we breathe it from the atmosphere, it greets us at a cash register, or from a neighbor's yard, it approaches with dinner plate or bed pan in hand. And immigration has changed us. We've gotten used to being around terribly vulnerable neighbors, to their wary, deer-like cynicism. The random risk, at any moment, of disappearance and deportation

guarantees that a certain number of us inhabit an openly totalitarian state. And that anxiety flavors everything out here.

But I was talking about the ospreys. Sometimes I try to imagine the perspective it would take to know an individual osprey - intimately, I mean, to know it as well as I know the miniature Alaskan Husky at my heels. Imagine the perspective it would take to observe one single osprey, year by year, while it migrated three thousand miles, the patience to keep watching until you recognized the equivalent in it of playfulness or fear, boredom or anger. Not surprisingly, that perspective is what my neighbors ascribe to God. Call it that business about noting the fall of a sparrow. Call it something imagined into place by calm but desperate men and women, by people at the mercy of forces so capricious, so impersonal, that life itself is mainly nuance.

Meanwhile, on I-82, between anonymous long-haul trailers, and two trailers hauling apple bins, and one venerable pickup - here comes my own 2001 cracked-windshield Camry. An uncomfortable moment transpires when we pass, going the other way, with tinted glass all around it, a huge shiny black bus without a single identifying mark. Nobody says anything. Nobody has to say anything. The sagebrush whizzing by, blue sky and osprey nest, the swell and drop off of ravines, banked curve, tread vibrator, all the familiar images no longer feel so familiar, not with busses like that on the road.

After all, as a metaphor representing contemporary life itself, this whole business of borders is trite, but accurate. Not that I stay awake thinking about borders. But yes indeed, imaginary lines do separate people. And all borders, viewed up close, are portable. And borders, at least in the U.S., are merely one more way of making money off poor people - all of that is true. And yet, living on land that, during the last century, has been ground zero for two massive

human migrations - that of hillbillies, heading from border states to the West, and that of mexicanos heading to the North, along with the zillions of border mutations each has brought about - all that leaves me little inclined to speculation, and a lot more caught up in the local details of being from somewhere else.

But let me get specific. A century's worth of accumulated human turnover, I have to admit, has a peculiar effect on the way I talk. Friends say that my speech is studded with local expressions, native turns of phrase, but from somewhere else. I love it when a colleague from Texas says that we might could have a meeting next week, or another, from Colombia, instead of adios, says ciao. At least a couple of times a week, by the way - and this is my all-time favorite localism - I hear one mexicano neighbor warn another that a car is coming, or that a ladder is falling, indeed that anything unanticipated is about to occur, by interjecting the word ¡aguas! Literally, it means waters. But popular etymology has this usage originating in Spain, in the centuries before indoor plumbing, when chamber pots were emptied, onto any thoroughfare, out of second story windows. See that thunder mug? ¡Aguas! It has the advantage of recognizing that danger and/or humiliation descend, out of nowhere, on the unwary.

We all know the humiliation and danger that borders generate, especially the more portable ones. Consider the morning of our January raid. Right here -1500 miles north of where maps say the U.S.- Mexico border is - dozens of my neighbors in Millpond Manor are out in the street with their hands flexi-cuffed behind their back. At one trailer after another, uniformed men swarm up the front steps - each holding his right arm down stiff at his side - policia, abran. You hear the sound of wood breaking. Women shriek into cell phones for a cousin or sister-in-law to come for their kids. A teenage girl stands, in piyamas and handcuffs, in a driveway. A guy late for work, car keys in one hand, is ordered back to his trailer at gunpoint. Children, at gunpoint,

watch drawers emptied on a floor, clothing thrown out of closets. With their mother bent over a car hood out front, two little kids run out of a house and off through the snow in underwear and stockings.

No telling what parts of that moment stick in your mind, what smells and noises from it, what remarks about it. One neighbor recalls that, all day, she thought about that flap-flap sound of helicopter blades in the air. What did it remind her of? It was that noise which woke her at 5:30 a.m. It was unearthly, not the hum of propellers, more like the sound of cards slapped on a table, flap flap flap, a noise so thick you felt it on your skin, so heavy you saw faces distort to be heard. That sound ate into her mind – what, what did it recall? Finally she remembered. The sound came from when she was a kid, from the corner tianguis, when a Sra. would toss a throat-cut chicken into a steel drum, flap flap flap, flap.

Time flies sideways. The whole raid took two, maybe three hours, but after a few more hours, people cannot quite tell what they saw from what they heard described. One thing sure, when those patrol cars pulled off into the distance, a terrible quiet took over. A door hung on broken hinges, keys dangled in the ignition of a car. The whole parquiadero lay wide open, like a victim. People picked up their kids at school and fled by noon. A few families, days later, still won't open the door.

We live in a very foreign country, many of my neighbors remind each other. At the downtown funeraria, for example, the guy will cremate you for free, but if your family wants the ashes, he charges \$1500. Although, bueno, la neta, that really may not be true. But thinking that way does align perfectly with one grain of current feeling: that everybody thinks that everyone else thinks that greedy locals take advantage of us, que así son los güeros, así son, metálicos a morir.

Sure, of course, forty-five years ago, it was different. When a few guys would walk across the border at night, each with a bundle of weed on his back, you would hear them, before they left, they would say, Ayúdame, Chuy. They were asking the favor of Jesús Malverde, patron of mexicano smugglers, a fellow who had the bad fortune to be caught and killed in 1909. Today's narcos don't mention him, of course, or I think they don't. Nowadays, it is cocaine that crosses the border, tucked between the inner and outer bed walls of a Chevrolet Avalanche, in the form of hundred-pound bricks, but the stories keep right on coming. Forty-five years ago, you might have thought those guys were asking the aid of Jesucristo, whose nickname also happens to be Chuy, because yes, among mexicanos, even God has a nickname.

It was a neighbor who convinced me that living with wider borders, inhabiting a more varied world, intensifies your feel that you are from one particular part of it. Don't my more widely travelled friends feel different than I do about where we live - feel different, I mean, about this scrap of windy sagebrush we wake in every morning? It calls for a particular kind of humor. Practically until the day she died, my buddy Virginia was laughing at the reaction of Ron Fairly - that wuss announcer for the Mariners, she called him - one afternoon when a tremor swept through the Kingdome. Earthquake! I'm outa here! Followed by camera trained on empty chair. Whenever Virginia would giggle at unexpected moments, at a reading, or in a restaurant, and mutter earthquake I'm outa here, I figured it was how she kept her emphysema, and her Alzheimer's, at arm's length, at the mercy of her laughter.

Boundaries and separations – she liked to insist - are what make the local news different from the national, the domestic product different from the import. Neighbors, for her, were the people you see out your window. And that makes sense. Check the genetics of that word neighbor. The neigh- part of it is cousin to the words near and nigh and next, while the -bor –

apparently unrelated to borough and burrow and burg - is cousin to the word bower, and more distantly related to what Wikipedia calls that most common, and most irregular, verb in Modern English, to be. Neighbors, in short, are those who live nearby, global village arguments notwithstanding. You can leave family and Facebook behind, to be sure, but who your neighbors are says worlds about you.

And what were the immediate effects of our local ICE raid? Everybody has a trigger image, a driveway or a cottonwood bough, a basketball hoop nailed to a phone pole, an empty dog collar chained to a cinderblock. That is how memory wrings grief and glee and terror out of the ordinary objects people have lived among for years, out of a lot of hyper-cheesy stuff that, overnight, looks different. The objects look posed, even rehearsed, like a front-page photo after fifteen years. Life tips back and forth up here, till you get nabbed one night, and next afternoon in Tacoma sign the voluntary, and feel like a soap bubble. You acquire a slippery existence. Later it emerges that sixteen of those taken are charged with the crime of using forged documents - they were working, i.e., under a social security number assigned to somebody else - while fifteen of them enjoy an otherworldly existence brought about by committing what is known as an administrative violation - which is not an arrest, and therefore doesn't oblige the officer who detains you to permit you so much as a phone call to a lawyer or family member. Take a deep breath. You're under arrest for existing on the wrong side of an imaginary line.

Welcome to the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma. In morning rain. A squat, tan building of two stories, covering what looks like a whole city block and, surrounded by wire-mesh fencing eight feet high, it wears GEO logos. Our goal, says their brochure, is to help our clients serve those assigned to their care through a wide range of design, construction and financing of state and federal prisons, immigration and detention centers, community re-entry

facilities, mental health and residential treatment centers and other special needs institutions. Pick up Visitor Tag at the front desk, leave wallet and jacket and cell phone in a locker, and ascend, with drivers license in one pocket, to an upstairs waiting room with twelve chairs bolted to the floor, eighteen people, a few sitting on the floor, mexicanos but for a salvadoreño and two guys from the Gambia speaking what turns out to be Mandingo. Chill, chill, sit on the floor and, finally, on a chair from two till six, for ten minutes of paperwork, then wait till eight in the van out front. Compare bonds that vary from five thousand to twenty-five thousand, hence the wad of bills my neighbor carried into the bank in a plastic bread wrapper and turned into two cashiers checks for \$5,000 each. Wait out front in the van. Eight busses pull up at the gate, get buzzed through, and unload people. By 8:15, two sisters walk out in tears and climb in the van. On the way back, here is a third sister, relieved, joking, recalling her reaction in the first moments of the raid: remember when Hurricane Paulina hit Acapulco? Well, that was the night I learned not to sleep in the nude. So this time, I hear the commotion outside and look out the window, and run out in pajamas with my hair all greñado and without a bra and.... Wait a minute, somebody wonders aloud, who traumatized who?

The short-term effect on the neighborhood is obvious. No one will ever feel the same about these porches, this highway, these trees. From now on, filed away in dozens of people's collective memory, behind long pauses, tucked among a lot of piñatas and quinceañera bands, baptisms, funerals, graduations and weddings, there now exists that one morning of gray sky and helicopter noises. Words like shame and humiliation didn't come until much later. At first it was only the shock on the faces of people from work and church and the supermarket, people looking at you like you were naked.

And the long-term effects? That is where shame and humiliation come in. You started to feel like the person you were was a joke. What was your neighborhood - for fifteen years, after all! - vanished at a knock on the door. Look around you. See those front steps? Remember that dreadful, awkward, panicky moment with eight or ten guys tilting the casket of doña Élide to ease it in the front door? Remember her weeping older brother, the one she thought, in her delirium, was a devil? Remember the oak church pews brought to the front yard to sit in. The younger daughter on a pew by the driveway weeping so hard she vomited, and the older boy disdainful, a convert to whatever faith it was that Rev. Woody Martínez was wringing outa Holy Writ every Sunday morning in that converted farmhouse. Remember? Well, none of it happened.