

Tuxpan

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David Musgrove

I

At 4 A.M. in Tuxpan
we arrive by bus
and the town is quiet in its darkness.
The ever-present Mexican dogs
watch us
white men like monsters
packs on our backs.
The only human I see
a retching drunk
leads us to a clean, cheap hotel
and, as if having then fulfilled his purpose
staggers away
trying to find home.
The man asleep on a sofa in the lobby
grudgingly awakens
and we are soon asleep.

Tuxpan was once a pirate town
and Fidel Castro once lived here
and one spring
on my way north back to Texas
I passed through.
There is no dust in the streets of Tuxpan.
There are palm trees
and a green river
and fog every morning
that blows in from the sea
and burns away each afternoon.
At night along the green river

cut by ferry wakes
and the thin lines of hand fisherman
who crouch among the rocks
like hunched pelicans,
the women of Tuxpan are beautiful.
By morning they awaken
naked and ugly in hotel rooms
and my friends,
half dead from drinking,
awaken and laugh
at the naked brown thing in my bed
and watch me, expectantly
as if there were not another person in the room
but some thing, possession
that I have picked up, brought along
and am now responsible for.
I wait for her to leave
hating her for still being there
hating that she does not disappear
with the moon and the stars
at the onset of day,
hating her
all women, all people
myself.

II

There is one white man in town.
He is sixty-five
his girlfriends are all fifteen
and his name is Charlie
but he speaks English
and helps pay for the beer.
In the concrete house
where we drink that night
the roof is tin
the doors are curtains
the shower is a garden hose in a back room
and the roach
as big as a rat

is brave
as he crosses the floor
considering the hungry chickens
and drunken humans.
He does not make it
and when the young, knife-scarred Carlos
picks up the crushed beetle
and tosses it to the rooster in the living room,
I realize that
through the fighting and the whiskey,
the women and the police,
and most of all
my own madness
I,
I will never finish my own brave journey.
Later that night
outside a bar
I watch Mexican boys
half my size and age
beat Charlie with a belt
and kick him in the face
until broken and bleeding
the old man can no longer rise.
I reach for the knife in my pocket
but although my travelling companions are gone, somewhere
my Mexican friends are there
and I will not be harmed
I do not owe anyone a ride
Marijuana, money, anything.

III

Down the high, wide, concrete sidewalk
that borders the river
two policemen with machine guns stroll by
but I am assured by the girls
it is not necessary to hide my Corona
and I remember that public drinking
like so much else

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is allowed here in Mexico.
Her friend will tattoo my arm for free
but I decline
still unsure if I want one or not.
Rodriguez shows off his,
one is a Tasmanian Devil,
the other a naked woman
and the word, Monica.
He makes it clear
that Monica is his love
but later that night
that is not the name
of the girl underneath him
I am sure.
Franco and I talk all night
with exaggerated gestures.
I know ten words in Spanish
he knows one in English--goddamnit
and we never understand
each other's desperate, drunken speeches.
There is no bottle opener
and the Mexicans
open their bottles
and mine
with their teeth.
I drink lots of whiskey with my beer
but no tequila
because I cannot stand the way it smells.

IV

On a corner of the town square
is an open-air restaurant.
The walls are hung with fishnets
and seashells are embedded by the hundreds
in the concrete walls.
The shrimp here are the best I've ever eaten
and I smoke a cigarette after the meal
and hope we are not recognized

because after two days in town
I already know too many people.

On the peseros
that rattle down the road
that hugs the river
and links the beach to the town,
I peer out the cracked windows
at bridges and boats
thatch huts and tin roofs
and an occasional huge freighter
pulled up to a crumbling river dock
like a whole other town
come to visit.

The schoolgirls in their clean, pressed uniforms
with their smooth, brown skin
dark hair and eyes
sit next to me on the little bus
and watch me out of the corner of their eyes
and look at me as they get on or off
but they do not speak to me
and I say nothing to them
because I am not drunk.

V

On the beach we buy huge coconuts
because we cannot climb palms
and do not have a machete.
The white meat is good
and I carry around chunks in my pocket
but the milk is watery
and sucked through a straw
tastes like nothing.
Out on the horizon
loom ships like distant islands
and closer in are shrimp boats.
The surf is green and low
and I find tiny shells
deep in the underwater sand

with my toes.

In Tuxpan they drive their cars on the beach
and every other one
that leaves the road for the sand
buries itself
and the driver, who has lived here all his life,
has not learned to avoid this
in the hundreds of times it has happened
and looks out his window, helplessly.
There is a man who sits on the beach all day
in an old wooden chair
near the end of the road.
He has a shovel
and each time a car gets stuck
he rises, slowly, and approaches it.
The driver will give the old man a few pesos
and the car will soon be freed.
There is another man who stays at the beach all day.
He tries to sell us hats made from woven palm fronds
but we do not buy them,
saving our pesos for beer,
but we listen to his stories
in broken English
of surfing in Hawaii, Puerto Rico.

Where the river empties into the Gulf
there are long rock jetties on either side.
Men stand on rocks hidden beneath
the water's calm surface
and throw their cast nets
watching them sink, then pulling them in.
Other men don masks and slip underwater
down among the rocks
with spearguns.
A small boy crouches near the end of the jetty
with a fishing line
and a piece of bark to wrap it around.

VI

On the beach in Tuxpan
we eat plates of swordfish and rice
and cheap as it is
the beer is cheaper.
The shrimp is good too
and the ever-present Mexican dogs
appreciate the huge fried heads I throw them.
At night when I sling my hammock
between weathered poles
of what was once a thatch hut
I am not alarmed
when black-clad men
with machine guns for arms
awaken me and ask for my papers.
I did not see the Mexican naval base
hidden in the palms and cedars
that crowd the beach
where the green Tuxpan River
flows into the Gulf.
They let me go back to sleep
and do not care
as no one seems to care
in Mexico.

The night before we leave
the mosquitoes are bad
and I wrap myself in a sheet
and sleep at the edge of the surf
and dream of sharks
with eyes like bottomless wells.
I am awakened before dawn
by men hauling in nets
and dogs snapping up stray fish
and sniffing my bare feet and ears
to see if I am dead yet
and can be consumed.

The night we leave Tuxpan
I sit at the back of the bus
near the cooler of Cokes

and when we stop in Tampico
I eat as many aspirin as I can
and sleep then,
no longer feeling the sunburn,
the days of drinking.

There is a lighthouse on the beach at Tuxpan.

At night it flashes
constant, brilliant
beams of light,
the huge, glowing, mirrored bulb
swinging in arcs
like a comet spinning in place.
It shows the ships
where the mouth of the river is,
the ships that are so far out to sea,
where I want to go,
far out to sea
to the lands across
to the seas beyond
past any guiding light
that might show me the way home.

