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 center-point, 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.