A ROAD BOOK
Original text by Jimmie Durham

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PREFATORY REMARKS

In this book we pretend to take a (very fast) trip through about one-half of an almost completely unknown continent—North America. For many readers in Europe, and sadly even a few in the U.S., a reminder is necessary that Mexico is part of North America.

We may also need to remind ourselves that from Detroit in the north of the U.S., but at the southern end of the Great Lakes, to Mexico City, in south central Mexico, is not yet one half of the length of North America because the third country (or first, according to where you begin) of North America, Canada, is *really* big.

We might also think that we know North America pretty well when we know Detroit and its poverty, its ruined automobile industry, and the practically endless slums of Mexico City. All of that is an overlay.

In the area where I am from there is a kind of apple that is almost black on the outside and red on the inside. There are turtles with soft shells and very long noses, almost never known by the locals of European descent. Large snakes that pretend to be cobras. If you are not frightened by that ploy they play dead, rolling over with their tongues hanging out. We have giant but harmless wasps and immensely big red and black grasshoppers (the Biblical 'locusts'). In southern Mexico these *animalitos* are smaller but edible.

There is a plant we call Goldthread. A small beautiful gold colored parasitic plant which, if it grows when you put it in your back yard, proves that your love is true. In Mexico this plant (Latin name *Cuscuta*) becomes giant and turns entire trees gold.

Do you know that when you gather the gum from sweet-gum trees in summer there are almost always stretch berries growing close by? If you put two stretch berries in your mouth along with the sweet gum you get bubble gum. And it's purple.

In the U.S., mesquite trees and cedar, which protect the soil from becoming desert, are cut down *en masse* to create temporary "grazing land" for cattle. Mesquite wood is a noble wood, with many uses. In Toronto, New York, Seattle, it is imported "from the Southwest" and wasted as firewood for "authentic" barbecue restaurants.

Where I am from lives the largest magnolia tree. The tallest tree in the world lives in California. The oldest tree lives in Nevada. The largest tree in the world lives in Mexico.

Back home we have two kinds of fish that are still Jurassic: the Bowfin and the Garfish. Local rednecks are forever intent to kill every Garfish. U.S. literature also treats this fish as an evil.

Where I lived in Mexico I counted twelve distinct species of vinegaroons, or 'false scorpions': I suspect most of them may not be categorized.

As I write, some U.S. scientists are pushing for a scheme to bring elephants, lions and other large African animals to new "wilderness" areas of the U.S. An alternative plan with little ecological shock and much aesthetic as well as moral value would be to make a prairie-wide, continent-long bison-run, which would of course have a network of antelope, deer, wolves, bears, pumas, etc. But this should be at the instigation of and under the control of indigenous communities.

In this entire continent, colonized for four hundred years, there is not a single comprehensive dictionary in any indigenous language, much less an etymological dictionary for any. There is not one single comprehensive dictionary between any indigenous language and Spanish, Portuguese, French or English.

Do you know that there are several languages in Mexico in which complex conversations can be whistled?

Osda dunh, na?

Campo San Agostin, Venice, and San Lorenzo, Rome 2008.

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Ok, let's start. Did someone turn the fire off under the beans?

If you need to go to the toilet do it now. Don't forget to put the seat back down, I mean both parts, the seat and the cover. This reminder is for the ladies as well as the gentlemen. The contraption is called a water closet (wc), after all, so the lid should always be shut completely. To leave it open is like an invitation. No one needs such an invitation.

Detroit, the automobile city, is on the southern end of Lake Huron. Bev Koski, a friend of mine, is from Thunder Bay, a city at the northern end. Lake Huron, as you might know, is one of the five Great Lakes. They are so large they should really be called fresh-water seas. Eighty-four per cent of the freshwater in North America is in the Great Lakes. 84%! The French named Lake Huron "*Le Mer Douce*", the sweet water sea. Later they called it "Cariñondi", which means "lake" in the Petan language. I am sorry. I have no knowledge of the Petan. But there is a lake in Guatemala called Peten. (Did you hear about the refugees from Guatemala who went north to "*Guatepeor*"?)

Some French missionaries were going up the Detroit River ("Detroit" is French for "Straits") and came upon a large stone sculpture which they saw as an idol. They destroyed it and threw the pieces into the river. The site became Pontchartrain du Detroit. Remember that Lake Pontchartrain is in New Orleans. Pontchartrain the man was a general or something.

I have collected some of this information from the internet, of course, and so now notice that Detroit is on Lake Michigan and Thunder Bay is on Lake Superior.

When starting on a journey consult your map carefully. The reason we start from Detroit is that I am reading Carlos Fuentes's book, *The Years of Laura Diaz*, which starts in Detroit the same way. I am only on page 20, but already Frida Kahlo has checked into the Henry Ford Clinic (not the Betty Ford Clinic, that is in California). She has, according to Fuentes, lost her baby, but Diego is painting murals in Detroit.

The first book I read by Fuentes was *Where the Air is Clear*, but I can't remember if I read it in the '60s or '70s. I do well remember, however, that when I first went to Mexico City in 1964 the air was still clear.

I wrote two small mistakes but you should trust me from now on: the city of Detroit was officially founded by Monsieur Cadillac. Not so long afterwards an alliance of Indians under Chief Pontiac almost won the area back. Cadillac had set up a fort at the sculpture-destruction site.

Our trip is not in a Ford, though, nor a Cadillac. We will ride a Dodge. The Chrysler Corporation has recently become German. Mr. Chrysler was originally German, or of German descent, and may have spelled his name "Kreisler", which looks more natural next to Daimler.

The Chrysler Corporation never had a Chrysler family, though, nor a Dodge family. No Henry Chrysler, Henry Plymouth-Dodge, Henry Jeep. But the corporation makes Chryslers, Dodges, Plymouths, and Jeeps.

There was Walter Chrysler, there was a Dodge, but many more guys, too. Chrysler went bust pretty quickly back in the early days, and another guy, who had been working for General Motors (Chevrolet, Buick, Pontiac and Cadillac, I guess) got some money together and bought up several ailing automobile and truck-making companies. This company had a name, something like "General Motors", I guess, and then later became the Chrysler Corporation. I don't write for you this guy's name because he also went bust and a consortium bought all the little companies he had put together. There used to be so many! Horace Dodge and his brother actually started the Detroit automobile industry long before, and much more effectively than Henry Ford did. Unlike Ford, Dodge was not in sympathy with Adolf Hitler. Well he died in 1920, before Hitler's rise, so who's to say what might have been.

The Hudson was a most beautiful car. The Studebaker was really incredible, especially in 1951. The radio played a singing commercial; "Say, Phyllis, won't you take a ride in my aero-Willys?" (a Jeep, even the Cherokee Chief so popular with South American death squads, is a Willys vehicle, and the word "Jeep" comes from WWII—"G.P." (jeep) = "Government Provision".

Nash. Studebakers, La Salle and Nashes lived into the 1960s. De Soto. Kaiser. Packard. Does Chrysler make Oldsmobiles? Oldsmobile had a model "Rocket 88".

We have a Dodge. My father would be pleased. He was loyal to Plymouths, the little brothers of Dodges.

Mr. and Mrs. Chrysler stayed somehow active in the auto business, I don't know in what capacity; but Mrs. Chrysler visited Mexico quite

early in this history. She also collected art, and made a museum, as well as contributing to other museums.

Dodge (Chrysler) was the first car made in Mexico (I think), and the company had the idea to instigate a genuine Mexican auto industry.

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In the early '80s my partner Maria Thereza Alves attended Cooper Union Art School in New York City. It is a small, mostly elite school where students are admitted only on full scholarship—no tuition. Being small and free is what makes it elite; one must have had "the right kind of education" to pass the entrance exams. Cooper himself was an inventor who invented the steam locomotive and got rich and bought property all over New York. The Chrysler Building, that most futuristic-looking edifice, stands on Cooper property, and rent from it finances Cooper Union Art School so that it needs no tuition income.

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ATLATLACATILILI!

Dodge. What a strange name. In English it means to crouch down quickly, like to avoid being hit by a thrown stone.

When I was about ten or eleven years old, maybe thirteen, the school made us boys play dodgeball. Two sides of equal number lined up about four or five meters apart and threw a soccer ball at the other side. The point was to dodge and not be hit by the ball. Last man standing won. That was always me, because I could not tolerate the idea of being hit by that stupid ball. I was no good at any other sport.

(ATLATLALILIZPIALIZTLI)

There was a very rich woman named Mabel Dodge who moved to Santa Fe, married an Indian and invited D.H. Lawrence to come and write books at her hacienda. He wrote *The Plumed Serpent* there.

Texas cowboys drove their stolen Mexican cattle to the market in Dodge City, where Wyatt Earp and Matt Dillon made them walk the line.

NITLAÇAÇACA

I learned to drive kind of late in life, as things normally go in the U.S., at 23 years old. I stopped driving when I was 28, in 1968, and have never driven since.

My first car was a big 4-door Chrysler, from the late 1940s. It cost me 50 dollars, all I could afford. The son of a member of a gang of crooks sold it to me. To get new license plates I gave him money and 2 weeks later the plates arrived in the post, from New Orleans.

On the floorboard just next to the gas pedal there was a screw-cap where one added brake fluid. It had to be kept open and a can of brake fluid open next to it. When a stop was required one poured brake fluid in the hole and pumped the brake pedal like mad.

One day the old battleship started making deep, strange, sad noises. After about five minutes it stopped moving, in the middle of the street. I said goodbye, got out and left it there, since it was an un-traceable car.

My second car was a '54 Dodge with faulty steering rods. It could not make right turns. I paid 25 dollars for it and drove it also to death. Sold it for scrap for the same amount the man charged to take it away.

Gottlieb Daimler probably invented the automobile engine, but like Bell stealing Meucci's invention of the telephone, he may have stolen the invention of Nicolaus Otto.

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(ATLATOLLAMILIZTLI)

We are going to Mexico in a Dodge. Its ancestors include Darts, Valiants, Lancers, Chargers, Challengers, Barracudas, Shadows, Phantoms, and Super Bees, used in the '70s by the Mexican Highway Police. The fastest car in Mexico. Volares, used in the '80s by Mexico City's traffic police. In

the '90s the Magnum became the fastest. Then, of course, the close cousins: the Cherokees, Grand Cherokees, and bulletproof armored Grand Cherokee Chief. The entire family was known as "*Las bien armadas*".

Many of them, such as the Dodge we are driving, which is called Spirit, were designed and tested for Mexico's difficult conditions. The Spirit was known to be powerful and fast. For that reason it was pressed into nefarious service by various, perhaps nefarious, government agencies. Seeing one with two or three toad-like men inside made normal Mexicans as fearful of bad Spirits as any rabbit on the highway.

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POPOCHTLI

You may be surprised by my confession that I write this not in North America at all, but in the ex-"Most Serene Republic of Venice", where I have been teaching. I would like to be given the U.S. Pavilion of the Venice Biennale. (I mean with no restrictions of course.) I propose a large dead bison on a Grand Cherokee Chief. As the carcass begins to reek maybe the entire area would be anointed with this "Essencia Americana", and art lovers would need gas masks. In the evening bats would help control the flies. We could bring in *zopilotes* from Texas. (P.S. The concept of this project is copyrighted.)

I don't know how to draw so I have asked my friend, Abraham Cruzvillegas to help.

* * *

NOPOTZIN

On the Road

No one wants sad stories, I apologize, but my main man, the Cherokee artist Sequoyah, he who invented the Cherokee alphabet, went with two of his sons and some other guys to Mexico City in the 1840s. They sought permission from the Mexican government for the Cherokees, or at least

those settled in the state of Arkansas (where in my generation Governor Orval Faubus personally stood in front of the university to bar black students from entering), to immigrate to Mexico.

We do not know if he got permission, but maybe so. Attempting to re-enter Texas they were all killed by the Gringos.

The U.S. does not admit this story, so even most Cherokees do not know it now. Much later the U.S. named the giant California redwoods after him. They had cut down, by that time, most of the giant redwoods and continue to do so.

Did Sequoyah have a Spanish phrase book with him? Or was he fluent in Spanish? When they got to Mexico City did they ask a policeman how to find the president? How did they request an audience once they found the presidential palace? Did they stay in a hotel? Or camp out in Chapultepec Park with Paiutes, Kickapoos and others trying to escape genocide in the U.S.? (Seventy years later Geronimo celebrated the fact that he was captured by the U.S. instead of Mexico; you lose some and lose some.)

What I mean is, is it true that Coca-Cola Corporation has bought Mexico as well as Honduras?

This is really true: the kind of sugar used in soft drinks like Coca-Cola is extracted and refined from *maiz*. In this form it is worse than a drug because it makes you fat. It does strange things to your body and makes you fatter than the caloric value would seem to indicate.

As we travel along then, when we stop it will be for *tacos* and *agua de flor de Jamaica*, maybe some *pulque*, not hamburgers and cokes.

Surely this is not the first time you have read that all things are connected, and that one thing leads to another. Even before I first went to Mexico there was a sense of returning. Anthropologists claim that Cherokees came north from the Valley of Mexico. The illustrations you see here are from pre-Colonial Cherokee sites in the south east of the U.S.

The Cherokee language is considered to be part of a large group called "Siouan", and I think, Nahuatl is considered part of a large group called "Azteco-Utan", or "Uto-Aztecan". Nevertheless we can see not-so-vague similarities: "Day" in Cherokee is "tla iga". In Nahuatl it is "Tla huica". "Eagle" in Nahuatl is "Cuautli". In Cherokee it is "Wohali", but Cherokee habitually softens beginnings of words (just as Nahuatl does with words that beginning with "op") so that it should maybe be

spelled "Cuohali", which is similar to "Cuautli". In Sioux (Lakota) this bird is called "Wakpala". "Dog" in Cherokee is "Gitli", "Itzcuintli" in Nahuatl. Cherokee language uses the suffix "co" to denote place, such as "Tennaco", just as does Nahautl, "Texcoco".

* * *

But the Cherokee word for water is "Ama", far from the Nahuatl word. I think it may be Toltecan, because in Nahuatl the place where Quetzalcoatl comes from is "Amatlan" which has no sense in Nahuatl. If we imagine the word as hybrid Toltec/Nahuatl it could mean "Water Place". Maybe Cherokees speak a variant of the language of Cuicuilco, where we are headed.

My traveling companion (Nopotzin) knows the way. He is from Mexico City in the most typical sense; a lost mestizo. A "free Mexican", we might say. Cesar Cervantes. There was a Cervantes with Cortés, and others a few years later. First, though, what exactly are cervantes? Or as Miguel spelled it, "Cerbantes". Miguel and his cousins were "*de* Cerbantes" so is a cervante a kind of tree or perhaps a low rocky hill?

Someone asked the Dalai Lama, "What is the opposite of evil?" After a moment he replied, "Compassion." I do not mean to say that Miguel de Cervantes (he invented the second name; y Saavedra, but then again, why not?) was evil. It is just that he shows so little compassion. He is so callous toward El Quijote and Sr. Panza. But when he as a writer instructs us readers to destroy all our books—it seems too bad. OK, it was a singularly hard time in Europe, and Miguel himself had always been a bit of a fool. He was a contemporary of William Shakespeare, who was also shockingly callous, not to mention stupidly racist.

All of the people named after these Cervantes are not related very closely. Some in Mexico, for example, are genetically American Indian with no European trace in the DNA. (Conversely, however, I have traced my own ancestry back to the first human beings. I am a direct descendent of Adam and Eve.) (Does that make me Jewish?) (Maybe!).

Cesar claims no knowledge of family ties to Miguel. Yet his Cervantes side still lived in Spain at the beginning of the 20th century. His Mexican side are Tezcucano, from the valley of Mexico. He may be more closely related to me than to the people of the Cervantes. If so,

he is lucky, because as I said, my family have been human beings for at least one million years.

Let us honor Miguel de Cervantes y Saavedra. He wrote the first road book, of which this is a humble descendent. Jack Kerouac (rhymes with black Cadillac) wrote one, also.

Geoffrey Chaucer was an English writer of the fourteenth century A.D., a contemporary of the Italian writer Bocaccio, I think.

In his book, *Canterbury Tales*, a group of pilgrims entertain each other with stories as they travel along.

That's good, isn't it? To tell stories as we travel. So we see that there is an old literary precedent for the story I will now relate.

In 1979 Maria Thereza Alves and I had to spend six months on the run. We had not broken laws nor committed crimes but were fugitives all the same. We did not travel together. We would meet in pre-arranged locations and stay no more than two weeks in any place, up and down and across the U.S.

One of our last hide-outs was an isolated adobe hogan in the Sandia foothills of New Mexico. Daytimes we would spend trying to shoot tin cans and tequila bottles with a .38 revolver. Late one night after more than a week of seeing no one we heard a car pull up, without its headlights on. When I yelled, "Hello" no one responded, so I told Maria Thereza to blow out the lantern flame. Then I went outside to see what was up.

Turns out that it was a friend acting stupid. The two of us entered the hogan and when I re-lit the lantern we saw Maria Thereza against the back wall, pointing the gun at the stupid friend, with a calm and steely expression.

The next year we were back in New York, in Hoboken actually, across the river from Manhattan. Maria Thereza had a small pistol that she had inherited from her Godmother. It was a strange piece, of a caliber I don't know; smaller than a .38, larger than a .22. The metal was etched in a kind of scrollwork filigree pattern. Made for a woman's purse or a gentleman's suit pocket. It was old and in rusty shape. I had taken it apart to clean it and left all the parts lying on the table while we went out for something to eat.

The apartment was on the fifth floor, a walk-up. Just below us lived a guy from Puerto Rico who was drugged-up most of the time.

When we returned that evening the window to the fire-escape ladder was open. Of the little pearl-handled revolver, only the pearl handles and the firing hammer remained. Our neighbor had heard us coming up the stairs and got away quickly.

Since then I have thought to make a piece of jewelry for Maria Thereza from the remains, or a piece of art, but nothing seems right.

The building we lived in was owned by the Mob, which controls much of the area. They were busy gentrifying Hoboken so that artists could move in. Someone set fire to our building and then we were all evicted.

We moved to Mexico in 1987 and stayed until late '94 when we moved to Europe. Except I had to go first to Japan. From Mexico City to Vancouver on Canada's West Coast, to Tokyo.

From Tokyo to London, then Dublin for a show and to meet up with Maria Thereza.

That trip across Eurasia was on JAL first-class, clear weather all the way. Flying over Siberia took hours and hours. Looking down I saw the most amazing river, hugely big and snakey. It seemed to me like a northern Amazon. I thought that I had to visit it some day.

The next year we were living in Brussels. I was invited to do a work in the city of Yakutsk in Siberia on the Lena River. This is the river I had seen from the airplane.

The semi-autonomous Republic of Yakutia is 5 and 1/2 times the size of France yet has no railroad. That means that in the Soviet days it had no prison camps, no Gulag.

It has a main 'highway' from Moscow which is seven hours away by jet airplane.

When one approaches the city from the west, from Moscow, there is a stopping place; no fence or wall, no guard or tollbooth, but a tree. Travellers honor the tree with gifts. Every sort of little thing, currency of all countries, gum, candy, cigarettes, *fotos*, notes, are tied to the tree.

I was there in January and the average daytime temperature was minus 56 degrees Centigrade. But they invited me back in the summer time when the average temperature is above 40 degrees Centigrade. We

would take a boat trip up the Lena to the Arctic Sea. I've not yet had time to return.

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Too bad we don't have a radio, we could listen to music. I can sing. A most beautiful song is from Australia, by an anonymous Irish prisoner exiled there: "I wish I was in Carrickfergus, only for nights in Ballygrand. I would swim over the deepest ocean, only for nights in Ballygrand. But the ocean is wide, and I cannot swim over, and neither have I wings to fly. I wish I had a handsome boatman, to ferry me over, my love to find. And in Kilkenny it is recorded on marble stones there as black as ink, with gold and silver I would support her, but I'll sing no more now, 'till I've had a drink."

The tune is hauntingly beautiful, of course, and many singers add verses. The additional verses, though, detract and take away the power of the song. People add to it because it is so brief, but it would be better to accept the sad frustration.

Recently I watched a film; don't even remember the title or subject, but at the end music came up. It was the song, "Somewhere over the Rainbow" from the film *The Wizard of Oz*. The singer—I thought from his voice that he was a black man—sang the song straight, simple and sweet. Yet it was highly-politicized, just from the fact of a black man singing it.

Later we discovered that he was a Polynesian from Hawaii. His name was Israel Kamakawiwo'ole, called "Iz". He died young a few years back, leaving us without enough songs.

This way of charging something up politically I had seen before, on stage in London. Two black actors played Caliban and Ariel in Shakespeare's, *The Tempest*. Without changing the dialogue they played against each other, Ariel as colonial puppet, Caliban as oppressed, alienated "field hand". (Max von Sydow orchestrated as Prospero.)

Speaking of frustration, on a trip there often arises ill-feeling between the driver and the passengers. The driver knows very well that you are hungry and thirsty, and he really wants to stop for a break—but not at the wrong place. The place we just passed, which you all looked at

so longingly, was truly not good enough. I think there is a much better place just a little further up the road.

Cesar has been rummaging through the junk in the glove compartment. He's found some poems and a text about Puerto Rico that I wrote in 1985. It is about chickens; appropriate for a short break:

> Now I must tell you of the chickens on the Magic Island of Puerto Rico, where little frogs sing like birds.
>
> In the first place, Puerto Rico's chickens are Paso Fino.
>
> They are small compared to some other chickens, but our sense of them is that they are exactly the right size for themselves and for their place. Their size has an integrity not found in other chickens. The same is true for Puerto Rico's famous little horses, called Paso Fino because they step so fine.
>
> Dancing horses that take grace and exactitude as a standard instead of size or speed. As it turns out, everything on the Magic Island is Paso Fino. The native dog is a marvel to watch, and again, it doesn't look small so much as finely tuned. The wild doves, and even the vultures are exactly *petit*. The Islander's favorite kind of banana is called Lady Finger, and their traditional houses, *bohios*, never intrude but compliment the Paso Fino rivers and streams.

It was there on that Island, whose *Puerto es muy Rico* only for export, a door marked EXIT ONLY, that I learned the Truth about chickens.

In the hills the Puerto Rican chickens are allowed to roam free and do whatever they will. I watched them for days.

We have so many clichés about chickens and their behavior. All of our ideas about chickens come from our knowledge of chickens kept in total captivity, so that their real ways are deformed and degraded. This we take to be the natural ways of chickens, because by now we take as natural that chickens are captives.

The reason I mentioned about Garcia Lorca and New York City just a page ago is that I must reluctantly tell you that it is now the custom of all the big chicken producing companies to cauterize the beaks of the young chickens, so that their beaks will not grow so that they will not

peck each other to death in the confusion of their un-natural lives. The cauterization is done simply, with a red hot iron.

In Puerto Rico each small flock of hens and chicks employs a rooster. The rooster's job is to protect the flock from predators, so that he is very fierce. If a flock had two full-grown roosters they would fight each other, because fighting is the nature of their job. At night all the small flocks come together to roost in one tree; safety in numbers. To facilitate that nightly gathering the roosters of each small flock crow constantly during the day. Each small flock thereby knows the location of the other small flocks as they fan out at sunrise and begin foraging through the forest. If they all stayed together during the day they would find less to eat. During the forage the smallest chicks usually ride on their mother's backs, for safety and to keep up. When the flock finds a good place to stop for awhile, even the smallest chicks may forage, but at the slightest sign of danger all of the chicks of every age hide under the hens, while the rooster struts around the perimeter of the flock.

Their crowing, their "pecking order", their "chicken-heartedness", are all perfectly sensible when chickens are free to be themselves.

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Pizza Azteca

1. Make a crust of *maiz masa*, oil and water. Spread it onto a pizza pan.
2. Make a simple thick *mole* sauce from powdered unsweetened *cacao*, peanut-butter, ground cumin and coriander, ground chilies to taste, blackberry jam, water as needed.
3. Spread *mole* sauce on pizza crust with a wooden spoon.
4. Sprinkle grated cheese and *romeritos* on top, bake in a hot oven for a few minutes.

I have just now invented this pizza, so I have not yet tried it. Where I live in Italy *masa* is not available, but this *maiz* flour from Venezuela, for making *arepas*, is. I might try that with an egg and some buttermilk mixed in to make the crust.

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Snack Bar Variations

Sneak Bear
Snuck Boar
Snake Bare
Snock Beer
Snook Burr
Snick Boor
Snike Byre
Snuck Burr
Sneak Bare
Snake Beer
Snook Boor
Snack Bore
Snack Beer
Snack Bare
Smack Bar
Smack Bare
Smack Bear
Smack Boar
Slack Bear
Slack Beer
Slack Boor
Back Snar
Back Snore
Black Snare
Black Smear
Black Sneer
Or Perhaps
Bacr Snak

2005

* * *

Like a dead Comanche pony
It bites the dust.
Its dry tongue dragging in the sand
And its eyes staring holes in the sky.
The sole is torn, worn from miles
Of work.
Who places these mateless, forlorn
Shoes in deserts?
Who throws single shoes from
Windows of cars to deserted shoulders
Of highways?
In honor of history and its marches let us
Have a closet museum of dropped and discarded
Shoes.

1966

* * *

The White Man's Car

I. A Chant for Deer and Antelope

He shoots them from his car.
He kills them from his car.

He gets out of his car and shoots them.
He hides behind his car to shoot them.

He hits them with his car;
Runs them down with his car;
Runs over them with his car.

He ties them to the car.
He throws them into the trunk of the car.
He puts them tied in bags in the back seat of the car.

His car is auto-mobile and the shift is auto-matic, but he steers it,
And causes it to chase them or to hit them,
Or he shoots them from his car.

II. A Canto for Senor Cantu

Put your feet on your head and step out of the car!
Get out of the car now with your feet in the air!
Lean against the car! Spread your wings! Empty your pockets!

1982

Note:
Trinidad Cantu was a friend of mine who was killed by the police in Texas for getting out of his car in an incorrect manner.

* * *

While we were in the snack bar (sorry about the chicken tacos) I read in the newspaper that Maria Smith Jones has died. Even with such an exotic name, she was the last living speaker of the Eyack language, of the far north of Alaska. It was a language completely un-related to others in the area. Its only related language is Apache.

That is doubly odd because the Navajo language is closely related to an Alaskan native language. For a long time Apaches and Navajos did not get along with each other. So I wonder, if they lived next to each other in the north 2000 years ago, how did they become neighbors in Mexico?

I mentioned at the beginning, in Detroit, that I was reading Carlos Fuentes. Well, as soon as I wrote that I realized that it was inappropriate to be reading a book about Mexico. I put it aside and began to read instead *The Black Book* by Orhan Pamuk. In that book a character imagines that the Bosporus dries up. (Is the Bosporus the same as the Black Sea?

I know that the word "black" in Turkish is "*kara*", and that "Black Sea" is "Kara Deniz".) This character remembers a time in the 1950s when a famous gangster drove his black Cadillac off the bridge into the sea during a high-speed chase. He imagines the skeletons of the gangster and his sweetheart locked in a lasting embrace in the car.

It reminded me of a song by, I think, Neil Young: "Hey boys, take me back. I want to ride in Geronimo's Cadillac."

* * *

I might say *pahoehoe*. It is a Polynesian word that geologists use to describe lava. Here is a *foto* of a wall of flowing *pahoehoe* about to engulf two automobiles of indeterminate make. (Because I really know next to nothing about makes of cars.)

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TEZONTLE TETLACIÇAUI, TETLACMAUHTILIZTLI!

Cuicuilco 2007

Cesar Cervantes lives in an area of Mexico City only recently occupied. It is rough and rocky because of a terrific occurrence on a day called Ahui-Quiuahuitl in the year 8 Tecpatle, three years before Vesuvius destroyed Pompeii. The volcano named Xitle erupted.

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When Xitle erupted on that Ahui-Quiuahuitl morning, besides an incredible rain of large and small boulders, ash and poison gas, a flow of *pahoehoe* began that deposited more than 10 meters of lava over a very large area.

Some folks had built a city that had a beautiful temple and much else. All destroyed. Gentle readers, please allow me to abjure you: make love whenever you can. Laugh. Encourage each other. Contribute something positive to the future. For surely Nature knows where you live and is headed your way. Nature is as hard as stone. Most of nature is stone.

(Three different times I have had kidney stones! Nature inside.)

Cuicuilco was the city that was destroyed by Xitle. The name means "place of singing and bright dancing", so maybe people in later times told stories that kept some memory of the city.

Our native guide (in the *fotos*, he is the guy with long hair) is Abraham Cruzvillegas. We tried to find some worthwhile evidence.

There was a guard—we were allowed to take fotos but not videos. The guard did not know the reason for this rule. Goethe writes that when he and an artist friend visited Pompeii they were told that it was forbidden to make drawings.

Not so far away is the Azteca Stadium, where Las Aguilas del America try their best. It took seven million man-hours and much cement to make the stadium on the Tezontle left by Xitle. The engineers are never sure that the vents left in the hardened lava as it cooled will not destroy the cement.

* * *

Teotihuacan, 2007

This is mostly a simple *foto* opportunity. We thought it was better than *fotos* of Azteca Stadium.

* * *

TONTOXITLE

* * *

CAN MOCHAN?

Consider, please, that I ask "*Can mochan?*" not only in the normal sense but also in a more poetic sense; I want to try sincerely to explain some of my thoughts about an artwork made of a stone on a car:

We have been taught that art is metaphor for language, that is to say, that a work of art means something in language, is explicable in language. That is one of the reasons (the other reasons may be commer-

cial) why so much art now is simplified gesture. The impulse is to experience art for three seconds until you "get it" and then move on.

Yes, the boulder on an auto is in that family, but my hope is that it is not so easy to "get it".

I do not mind if writers interpret my work. We all have our predilections. More, when one does any work, a poem, a lecture or essay, a painting, one confesses more than one intended to. This means anyone can see, potentially, more than the artist does.

When I put a stone on an auto the violence is humorous cartoon violence. I do not think I am personally being violent. (Must I say that I am not advocating violence?)

Perhaps in some small way this kind of work is metonymic more that metaphoric. Perhaps the auto comes to represent, not "civilization" but culture in general or—us. In that case the stone does indeed stand for "nature". But that is not a translation of the piece. There is no translation of the piece. A piece of instrumental music can have for us strong and complex meaning and still we would not think to "explain" or translate its meanings into language. We can certainly trust visual art the same way.

Just like music, visual art always has a home address, a milieu. That is why art is in the "art system"—where else could it be? It often seems overly incestuous or referential to a small circle, but then so does any group of music (aren't you sick of rap after thirty years of repetition!) or poetry. Or films.

Quite a bit of my work these days tries to speak within the "art system". If you do not share a common language, how do you communicate?

When I put a stone on a car it is really specific in every sense. It is also within the "art system" as much as I can make it. The "art system" has such a strong commercial side that what Gabriel Orozco calls "thrilling art" gets always the first prize. Second prize goes to what I call "monumental art"; that connected to architecture, belief, and all things edifying. To participate in this system I may not join it, only speak within it in a vocabulary as clear and un-concise as I can make it.

To the point that a member of the family Xitle, maybe *Sr.* Xitle himself, in the miniature of old age, makes immobile the "Spirit" of certain elements of society, it is asked by me to represent 'nature'. I want it to do that not only in Mexico City.

When I paint a silly, nondescript face on stone-as-nature I want to give our mother her true face. Nature does not care. If there be gods they are not witnessed as caring, even though the professionals of religions assure us that the gods do care.

It does not follow as a moral, this next statement, but is my personal note in case you think I am cynical: It is we who must care, and develop more intellect.

* * *

TETEXCALHUIANI, TETEXCALHUILIZTLI

San Angel, 2007

We are at Cesar's house on Calle Xitle. Let's go inside for a *jamaica*. Because, tragically (tragedy comes in many sizes and dimensions, doesn't it?), I can no longer tolerate tequila. Over too many foolish years I have damaged my esophagus with too many cigarettes and too much tequila.

Gentle readers, I apologize for any perceived corniness and/or repetitions. Forget it, please. Here in front of the house is parked an importantly black, ominously black, officially black, anonymously black Dodge Spirit. It was assembled in 1992, so has Valiantly fulfilled its duty or destiny or whatever. We will not destroy it; we will make it eternal. In approximately two hundred and forty-seven years it will take its place in the pantheon next to the giant white man carved by Michelangelo. (Michelangelo was trying to carve a statue of a little Jewish Shepherd, but the piece looks more like Goliath than David.)

TETLALLOTIANI

In Tokyo there are stones set in strategic places all over the city. These stones are special far beyond their semblance, and they are usually wearing clothes provided by the locals. They are usually not very noticeable. Their job is to prevent earthquakes.

TETLAMATATAQUILIZTICA

The Nahuatl word of this heading means, "with *ardor*". One of the best gifts in the world is a Nahuatl-Spanish dictionary, almost as good as a Purepecha-Spanish dictionary.

I am old and well-traveled. Among the peoples I have encountered, the Mexicans and the Japanese are the most ingenious.

Our stone was brought in by truck from a place close to my old home in Iztapalapa, and put on the street called Xitle. Cesar found some guys with a machine no bigger than the stone itself. Centimeter by centimeter, encouraging the machine like it was an over-loaded donkey, they edged the stone towards the dark Spirit. With the insouciant grace of experts they convinced their little machine towards heroism.

The stone weighs about 8 tons. It rests well and safely on the Dodge Spirit.

* * *

ÇA IC NITLA TZONQUIXTIA (ATLATOLLAMILIZTLI)

Isn't it usually true that when someone says "ça ic nitla tzonquixtia" we suspect that it is not quite the case?

Last night I watched Tarantino's new film, *Death Proof*. There was already much that I dislike about Tarantino; specially his continued use of the term "nigger". Black people can call black people "nigger" because they attempt a celebratory freedom through joking. But their white friends trying to be hip especially cannot.

As you may know, the film is a "road movie", starring a Dodge Challenger. It is really a bad film, and reminded me of Bertolucci in that sense. Bertolucci made great films. Then something happened. *Stealing Beauty*, with Liv Tyler is terrible, as were other later films by him.

Maria Thereza Alves has a theory that these guys get in to a predicament of having too many "Yes men" (or in Tarantino's example, "Yes women") around. These people say what they think the boss wants to hear, and the boss thinks they are telling him what they want him to hear. Getting stupider day by day, the boss thinks he is getting smarter.

* * *

The Voyage
Or, Poetry has Probably Lost its Past Power

Before we got into this predicament.
Perhaps a classical poetic notion,
But not the words; know, knot the unpoetic
English words.

This business language so far from poetry
Yet Percy Shelly and that guy who
Wrote about a wasp chill'd with cold, and
Larkin—[Robert Herrick?]

What predicament? Who are "we"?
Any appropriate shore bird can say,
"Hu-ar-wee-Hu-ar-wee."

Maria Thereza and me, so strangely
Out of money? So dependent upon
Money? We cannot fish nor forage,
No food without money, no shelter, no
Shirts on our backs, what a predicament!

Or maybe American Indians hung on casinos.
I am going to Sami country in the north, ok,
They've lived there a long time, but now who knows,
Maybe they want to maintain their old ways
On some sunny southern shore?

I mean only that everyone used to be so specific
Out of harsh necessity, and modern mobility
Takes us away from that predicament.
At least allows a cessation of certain
Patterns of repetition.

Perhaps only a cheap poetic device;
That "we" means me and the paper.
The paper fights to remain white,
Ok, a passive fight, like Gandhi against
My bad English.

I spoke to the architecture students.
"Writing", I lectured, "Began in the first city,
The first architecture, made by Gilgamesh
The King and Son of God.

Writing and architecture", the hopeful students were told,
"Replaced memory with law and the sepulcher,
Placed us all against the wall."
(Hu-ar-wee, Hu-ar-wee)

I write aboard a ship headed north
To Sami country. Two weeks ago I was south;
South as far as Australia, a land called South.
Aboriginals marginal after more that forty
Thousand years of normality such as no one
Else has known.

One year the English came south
And made the Australians aboriginal.
The English made their own Irish prisoners Australian.
(Hu-ar-wee, Hu-ar-wee)

Before we got into this predicament.
Maybe like "Before the Christian era", B.C.E.
B.W.G.I.T.P.[1] Before petroleum, perhaps,
Before iron, before fire.

1. Before we got into this predicament.

For if comfort is found in universals
"Globalization" is worthy of this classification
"Predicament"; Isn't it?
(Hu-ar-wee, Hu-ar-wee)

Well it could be art, couldn't it? Or poetry.
Before we got into this predicament art
Happened almost everyday probably,
And poetry tumbled lightly off—
Off English words, *peut etre*.

Well, it could be fire, aboard ship I've begun
To read *Soul Mountain* by Gao Xingjian.
The character seems to search the "out back"
For more authentic situations, and someone
Prays to a cook stove.

Poet's Note:
A few years ago I was in the Republic of Yakutia in Siberia, which, without a railroad or highway system, and therefore no Russian Gulag, had become the richest part of the ex-Soviet Union. They had all become scientists. By this method they could freely stay at home or travel to work in other places and Yakutsk culture was neither threatened nor a burden.

Then came along this *hijo de puta* (Ras) Putin. I've read that up here (as I write we are close to Russia and to the North Pole) the old Tsar moved some communities of Nenets here next to Finland. Then they had to be resettled about seventy-five years later because of nuclear testing.

What I mean is, by whose authority were those people "Nenets"? On their own, couldn't they have been just as important as anyone else, even if they spoke Nenet? I bet they also spoke Russian, and even Finnish for awhile. If only vulgar guns and power decide who's who, humanity is seriously degraded. If those with money have privilege and poor people have few rights, where is humanity? (Hu-ar-wee, Hu-are-wee)

Before we got into this predicament,
Before vulgar power shot from guns,
Before "Skallo", the Nordic tax collector.

Aboard this ship I have stopped reading Gao
And now read Austerlitz by the dead Sebald;
The predicament might be only a dream
Just as sleep ends, abruptly to the sound
Of freight offloaded.

Any corrupt language which contains
Such beauty as the word "abruptly" is
Perhaps structurally appropriate.

2004
Coast of Norway
Courtesy Arve Opdahl, El Pescador

* * *

Like the Orinoco, Amazon, or Xingu Morena

"What are you thinking about?"
She asked that on the street
As she touched my hand and put my hand against her leg,
The way she does, and talked to me with her body, her hands.

"I am thinking about you touching me."
We were talking in bed and I was touching her breasts
Solid and quick like the moon.
Look, her shoulders are tree broad, and solid.
Her hips flow broad like a quick river.

I think she is like river,
And she said as we took off her clothes,

"I don't have much self-control."
I thought, well, no, rivers have no need for such limits.

From Brazil she brought me coffee and cachaça
And a book about the Indians of Brazil
By the brothers Villas Boas.
I said bring me a parrot feather
And touched her belly clear as the sky.

Her eyes are like those that stare from photos
Of Indians of Brazil, "or like Japanese eyes", she says.
Or like Jaguar's eyes. I kiss her eyes and say
Looking into your eyes is like looking into a forest.
Her eyes go opaque like a river she has no need
For romantic nonsense.

Rivers need no limits no romance about rivers.
Men call names to rivers
Only from fear of drowning or of being carried to the ocean.
I touch the shore of her oceans.
I feel the power of her tides.

In the book I read that the Xingu, called Morena
By the Indians, overflows into the forest,
And fish with mysterious names swim among the trees
Eating fruit. Men try to guard their orchards
But Morena comes solid like the sky
And takes what she wants.

The Villas Boas also report an Indian story:
The first Indian woman was going to marry the jaguar
But she stopped and made love to the wolf.
Her first sons were the sun and the moon.
I think about wolf, my clan grandmother.

She talks about small town gossip in Brazil, and the fascists.
But she says there is a beautiful young girl

Who rides a horse to school, and two boys who run
As fast and as long as horses.

I said "I like you" and she said "Of course you do".
And touched me with lightning in her hand.
Earlier she had asked: "Do you love me?".

The Indians of Brazil say that at first the duck
Was afraid of the river, and had a canoe made of clay.
But when the canoe was dissolved and he found
Himself in the river, he discovered he loved it.

* * *

AFTERWORDS

As I write most of the volcanos of Mexico are at rest. When I started writing the Chrysler Dodge Corporation had already been divorced by Daimler Corporation, but now the future looks bright; Chrysler will merge with the Italian Fiat; and perhaps with Opal. I love Opal; especially Mexican Fire Opal. I also love the trans-substantial idea of an automobile company merging with a semi-precious stone.

* * *