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Chuck Taylor
My Border

*This is the way the border transfigures greed,
shapes it into something holy.* —Sheryl Luna,* “Fence on the Border”

And, by my border, I mean the border between Texas and Mexico, the border made by a thin but mighty long river, the Rio Grande, in a place of no name in the desert, about forty miles mostly east and slightly south of El Paso.

We were in Courtney’s Volkswagen headed from El Paso to Indian Hot Springs on a road that runs mostly along the northern border of the river. Before the dark settled in to relieve us from the July sun, we’d seen lovely rock formations and cliffs—nothing to rival the Grande Canyon yet still starkly beautiful in the heat—and a couple of large hawks circling and dipping down in the relentless blue above.

How do they take the direct heat? The wind must cool them.

Later, when the dark settled in and the land started cooling, we slowed down the car. It was a gravel road we were travelling on so our speed had never gotten, in the old Volkswagen, above fifty miles per hour. Now we moved along in a deep dark—no streetlights or gas stations or even signs of habitation by humans in this part of the desert—at about thirty miles an hour.

I came around a curve in the road and the headlights caught a 1970’s model station wagon parked on the road up ahead. I come to a stop about fifteen feet behind the station wagon. The gravel road was narrow but I could probably worry my way around—but what was the hurry? Instead we idled the car and waited.

The year was 1975. Courtney and I are in our early thirties. We were excited—the desert always hones your senses—but we were no way timid about traveling in this remote area at night. The Volkswagen was reliable old clunker. I can speculate now we might have been a bit naïve back there. We were urban souls and didn’t have the sense to carry a few extra blankets and a few gallons water. In 1975 no one dreamed that Juarez would become the great capital of murders that it seems to be now, if one can believe what one reads in the newspapers or sees on television.

We’d driven this road many times before. We had been at Indian Hot Springs and crossed a rocking rope bridge over the Rio Grande into the small Mexican village of Ojo Caliente. We were interested in hot springs and their healing properties, and especially in this little known one—once owned by HL Hunt—that is the largest hot springs in Texas.

Knowing next to no Spanish, we ordered beers at the cantina in Ojo Caliente and sat in the shade of the building on folding chairs looking across the gravel road at the town’s elementary school, wondering what the children were doing for the summer.

Let me tell you, it’s 2010 as I write—thirty-five years later—and I can

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still feel the heat and the breeze on my face, and I can still feel my tennis shoes placing themselves carefully on the rope as it swayed slightly and we crossed the Rio Grande on the rope bridge. I imagine today that no one is allowed to cross the bridge either way, if the bridge is still there. I know that some of the twenty-three or so hot springs at Indian Hot Springs—so named because it was a place of peace for Indians to meet and trade and enjoy the waters—have dried up. I still get a sense of wonder as I recall staring down and down into holes in the earth, some six feet wide at the surface. How far down did the hole go? Not that far I would guess, but far enough for the water to trickle down deep enough to be warmed the by the earth's heated core.

It all seemed a wonder then along the border. It all seemed a miracle. I had grown up in the forties and fifties in the Midwest, contorting my child body under my desk during air raid drills, gripped in the fear of atomic bombs frying us to carbon, and hearing about the "Iron Curtain." I saw maps printed in the Chicago Tribune explaining where the atomic bombs would hit if the Soviet Union launched an attack. My family had no chance of surviving. Yet here was a border gloriously, gorgeously open! Men had been to the moon—no border inspectors in space--and I had crossed a river into another country, another culture, just by walking across a swaying rope bridge.

But anyway, back in our Volkswagen, waiting in 1975 for the car in front of us to begin moving again, I heard sounds of people moving through the tall brush to my right that grew along the Rio, and then I saw two men step onto the road into my car lights. The two men turned and faced the tall brush and I realized they were maneuvering a shinny wheel chair over the rough ground with an elderly man sitting and holding on.

They had brought him across the river under the cover of night. They parked the wheel chair in the road on the far side of the car, lifted the white haired man out of the chair and worked him gingerly into the back-seat. Then they folded the wheelchair up and put it in the trunk. They did not act rushed or appear concerned that we waited behind them. Border patrol agents didn't drive Volkswagens.

The men had moved the older man with such patience, care, and love. I wondered if anyone would do that for me when I got old. All my grandparents had been fortunate, healthy and independent until months before they died.

"They must be bringing him over for medical treatment," I muttered to Courtney.

The helpers then got into the station wagon and the vehicle began moving, and we began moving behind it, following them about ten miles until they turned on a gravel road headed north.

What did I make of what had happened? Well, I was a Yankee, born in Minnesota and raised in the Chicago area. The Anglos I worked with in San Angelo saw me as an outsider and I came to see myself as an outsider, and as an outsider I had taken on the persona of an observer who tried to look with his wits about him, but remained without comment, since I was without much cultural context or knowledge of the region's particular

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history. As a newcomer, a kind of foreigner, I was not ready to offer intelligent comment about what went on around me.

I had been an outsider before, from 1952-1955, when my family had lived in North Carolina, while I was in the third, fourth, and fifth grades. In those years the teachers would line us up for a class photos once a year, and I would always be third from the end, including the boys and the girls. We were lined up that way so the photographer would know who to put in the front, middle, and back of the photograph. Yes, back then I'd been the buck-teethed and short, and was often addressed on the way to and from school as "Fucky Chucky." On good days I was not shoved to the ground and informed to "Save my confederate money. The South will rise again." On bad days I was shoved down, sat on, and pummeled with fists that thankfully, at a young age, lacked the mass to do much damage.

What did it mean? "What is Confederate money?" I asked my father. He came back from a conference trip and gave me a cellophane bag full of imitation Confederate bills. They looked aged and real. I carried them to school and gave them away to my classmates. For a few weeks they became kinder, until my confederate counterfeit dollars ran out.

Anglo ranchers I'd met around San Angelo on my first job had explained how important Mexican labor was to their ability to farm, ranch, or raise sheep in the semi-arid land around the city. Of course, as an "educated" adult, I knew that Texas had been a part of Mexico, as had all of the Southwest states, including California.

From my little knowledge I concluded that people who owned property when the border suddenly switched would continue to live their lives where their families dwelled and worked and they owned property. I was impressed. Look how these two countries got along, in spite of their history of war, in spite of the death and wounds and the theft of half of Mexico's territory. Would you look at this border! It's barely protected.

Would you look at this man coming to be treated for a medical condition maybe – or maybe coming to visit people he loves! He proves the border here is like the border between Canada and the United States up north. It's porous. There's no iron curtain. I'd visited, a few times, Canada before I'd come to Texas. I'd bought a couple of Havana cigars in Windsor and smuggled them across the bridge into Detroit. I'd learned in high school that the young United States had attacked Canada, lost its battles and retreated. Still the Canadians and Americans got along. We are, after all, all Americans, all citizens of the Americas, this continent.

The next story I'm going to tell happened along the same gravel road along the US/Mexican border, on one of our innumerable trips between the remote but historically important Indian Hot springs and major city El Paso, a town at the far western edge of Texas. This time we're heading east to El Paso and it is 1976. We were driving the same old rattling Volkswagen and have not, as yet, worked out all the details of our relationship. This car belonged to Courtney. She had it before we got married. I therefore had not taken on the traditional male role of car maintenance, like checking the tires, the oil gauge, or for water in the radiator. Courtney

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seemed a strong, confident, self-reliant woman. It was her car, so she must have known what she was doing. I was not a great whiz at car maintenance anyway. (Later, much to my surprise, she burned the Volkswagen's engine out—an easy thing to do with its air-cooled engine in the desert, but in this case caused mostly by failing to add oil.)

We were making our way along in the dark when the front tire, driver's side, blew out and we started to weave and had to come to a quick stop. We got out and opened the trunk at the front of the Volkswagen, got out the spare and the tire iron, and popped off the hubcap. Yet no matter how hard we struggled, no matter how many times we both jumped on the tire iron, we were not able to loosen the lug nuts.

Some mechanic had powered them down too tight. Once again we were travelling sans provisions—no food, no water, no blankets. We left the car lights on—aware that it will eventually wear down the battery—so that no one would plow into our rear end. We'd reached the point of considering pushing the car off the road, when we spotted a pickup truck hurrying down the remote desert road from the west. The pickup driver caught sight of us. He stopped in front of us and two gentlemen got out.

They spoke Spanish. We spoke English. I pointed to the tire and shrugged my shoulders. They quickly sized up the situation, smiled, and went to a metal tool chest in the back of their pickup, coming back with a five-foot length of pipe. The pipe had a large diameter, and they were able to slip it over the tire iron, and then by leaning on the pipe's end, popped the lug nuts loose, easily, one by one.

I'd never thought of that. The power of leverage! I was charmed. Why didn't I think of that? I remembered reading the newspaper column, "Hints from Heloise," on an easy way to get a stuck jar open. Just turn the jar upside down and slam it gently on the floor.

Strangers who spoke another language had rescued us. They were all smiles and the energy between us was friendly.

They laughed. We laughed.

I said "Gracias."

They said, "You're welcome."

They did not linger long. I sensed that I should not be offering money—that might be an insult. They got back in their vehicle, after they helped us put on the tire and lower down the jack, and pulled around us, driving on into the night. Later I would learn about the special manners of those who live in the country, the obligation to stop and help each other out when breakdowns occur. What a wonderful tradition! Has it died with the advent of cell phones?

I guess I lived, back then, a charmed life. I guess I lived—back in the seventies—in gentler times.

Was I an innocent?

Why, leaving my office located a half-mile from the border in El Paso, I would sometimes pick up men who had crossed the river and were

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hitching a ride. I would take them away from the border up I-10 and let them off where I turned back and went up Mesa to our home. One night I picked up a man and he slept in our living room on the couch and had breakfast with us the next morning.

I took him back to the freeway on my way to work that morning.

I'd probably be breaking the law if I practiced such natural human kindness now. Was I then?

Don't get me wrong. I'm not an old man wishing to live in the past. Much of the present I find better than the past. I like typing on my tap top computer better than punching on a manual typewriter. Still I never bought into the progressive myth that ALL THINGS get better all the time. In some ways things improve; in some ways they do not. Can you imagine, in a pop song today, lines like "He's not heavy, he's my brother," or "Let's get together and love one another right now?"

My family was not big on churchgoing, but from a young age I'd learned the parable of the Good Samaritan.

SHERYL LUNA, born and raised in El Paso, teaches at Metropolitan State College in Denver, Colorado. The lines from the poem "Fence on the Border" appear in her book, *Pity the Drowned Horses* (2005). I thank her for permission to print them above. I discovered the poem two minutes after I finished writing my short piece in the library of UT/San Antonio, in the anthology edited by novelist Dagoberto Gilb called *Hecho en Tejas* (2006).