



Tanker truck delivers water in Tijuana neighborhood

Where is 'Away'?

Manufacturers move their operations off-shore to evade America's high environmental standards. But when "off-shore" is Tijuana, just the other side of a rusty metal border fence, there is little to prevent the problems we send away from flowing back north.

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PHOTOS BY GUILLERMO ARIAS

At low tide, you could walk to Mexico, around the crusty palisade of the border fence, without even getting your shoes wet. The thinnest can slip between the stakes, as kids do, dashing into America—"look at me, mom!"—and slipping back again over the line. The Pacific's relentless waves and salt spray have long ago eaten the fence's metallic flesh, leaving a disheveled skeleton of rusty spikes, 12 feet tall, like the broken and bent teeth of a giant scaly comb. Dogs wander back and forth, around the pickets of steel—sections of railroad track actually, driven endwise into the sand—and sniff the cluttered beach, crossing the invisible line, the abstraction of the international border.

On their side, over there, families spread out on the beach, eating, talking, children swimming and splashing in the green-gray water. The line parts the ocean, too, in theory, slicing through the surf, straight out, 200 nautical miles. The waters pay it no mind. Out there, the waves begin their slow curl. Barrels of water arising in the U.S. are caught by kids in Mexico and ridden up to the sand.

Save for the kids and the dogs scurrying briefly in and out through the spikes, however, no one was on our beach. Only the sand and seaweed, the flotsam and the trash, and a sign that says 'Contaminated Water, Avoid Water Contact.' Here is where the Tijuana River empties into

the Pacific. After crossing the border from its namesake city, it spreads out and unwinds into the Tijuana Slough, a more than 1,000 acre "wetland of critical importance" located at the extreme southwest corner of California. In the slough, the river drops its cargo: lead and chromium, arsenic, raw sewage. It ebbs and flows with the tidal forces of the sea; the ocean waves mix and mingle with heavy metals, fecal coliform bacteria, and hepatitis A virus.

Out in the surf, wave after wave break on our side of the fence and peel south. Each breaker, born as it is, contaminated and toxic, ends its life in Mexico as spray and foam laden with surfers and crashing over kids who squeal with joy in the last gasp of the dying wave.

Crossing into Tijuana, the moldering reek of the river is the first thing that hits you. The river cuts through the city on a bias, running diagonally across its downtown grid. Like the rivers of Southern California, the Tijuana River has been contained, channeled and cemented into a huge culvert of concrete, nearly 300 feet wide and 30 deep. Down the center of the culvert, within a narrow ditch, the stream flows. These days, it runs year-round: a gray gush of effluent the color of dirty dish water that foams and bubbles through the city, through the neighborhoods and colonias, and then, five miles east of the Pacific, it makes



Jorge Lopez stands among his pallets

a hard left turn and crosses the border into America.

Jorge Lopez first saw the concrete culvert of the Tijuana River 25 years ago, returning to Mexico after an illegal stint in America. He settled to the east of the city, on the land of an *ejido*, communal lands granted to the people of the area by the constitutional mandate following the Mexican Revolution. Political wranglings put the land in private hands, some of it in Jorge's hands, where he and others in the area grew crops, raised cattle.

Urban sprawl now surrounds Jorge's land—Tijuana's population has burgeoned, bypassing that of big sister city San Diego to the north. It is the fastest growing city in Mexico, not because people migrate there with the intent to make a run across the border into America—the new razor wire topped secondary fence, motion sensors, and stadium lights force would-be immigrants to the desert wastes of the east. Instead migrants come to Tijuana for the jobs, the jobs in the maquiladoras.

Under NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, raw materials flow south across the border to be assembled in the more than 650 maquiladoras, assembly plants, that dot Tijuana. Sony, Samsung, Panasonic, and Sanyo all have maquiladoras there, employing nearly a million Tijuans who work for about \$11 a day on average assembling products that are then re-imported into the United States. Ninety percent of the maquiladoras are 100 percent foreign owned, built south of the border to eschew the strict environmental controls and costly labor up here. Hence, parts and investment capital go south, and, like

the Tijuana River, finished goods and profit flow north. The razor wire topped fence, motion sensors, and stadium lights serve as a filter, a semi-permeable membrane, built to regulate the stream of goods and people, designed to let the manufactured goods, the returning gringos, and visa holders in, and keep the contraband, the drugs and violence, and the illegal aliens out.

The effluent of the Tijuana River oozes from Tijuana itself. It trickles in through culverts and open trenches and arroyos like the muddy seep of Arroyo Alamar, a fetid ditch of dust covered cattails, old tires, discarded water bottles, muck and trash. In it, the water boils with the larvae of mosquitoes.

On the bank of Arroyo Alamar, on the land that was once an *ejido*, a shirtless Jorge Lopez busts apart shipping pallets, stacking the wood in piles. A fuzz covers his face and head, a five-day stubble of growth. His blue eyes squint against the hot September sun. Jorge's home, an accretion of sticks and boards, sits high up on the arroyo's escarpment, well above the flood plain. Thousands of pallets cover his property, all collected from the mesa above. On that mesa, the flat tableland straddling the border, sit the assembly plants, the maquiladoras, hundreds of them. Tijuana is the television capitol of the world, producing close to 15 million sets a year—most of the television sets we use in the United States. Japanese, American, Korean companies all assemble TVs in the city from the raw materials imported from the U.S.,

imported on pallets that are then chucked as trash and scrounged by Jorge to be born again as walls and fences, or burned as firewood to cook beans or heat tortillas.

Many of the shacks in *Colonia Nueva Esperanza*, the squalid slum in the basin of the arroyo, are built entirely of pallets bought from Jorge at 15 cents each. *Nueva Esperanza*, packed tight with shanties tinkered together from scavenged scraps, chinked with yellowing plastic sheeting or frayed blue tarpaulin, cardboard boxes and thin pressed wood, is home to hundreds of maquiladora workers. Jorge's pallets are the single most noticeable architectural element in the colonia.

Jorge has been on this land along the Arroyo Alamar for 25 years, long before the maquiladoras showed up, when this land and all around was well outside the city. Back then, the water of the arroyo ran clear; kids played in the cool stream. Since the maquiladoras came, however, Jorge has seen the water in the arroyo run milk-white at times, or red or blue or green—contaminated by the run-off from the mesa above.

Jorge saw the *paracaidistas* invade the bed of the arroyo a few years ago. Squatters, they came en mass seeming to fall out of the sky like the parachutists after which they are named. Homeless immigrants from southern Mexico drawn to Tijuana by the lure of work in the maquiladoras, the *paracaidistas* stormed the land, building homes as quickly as they could of whatever materials they could find, trying to establish *Nueva Esperanza* before the authorities could evict them. Hundreds came, mostly



Mike Morales in Tijuana

from Chiapas and Veracruz in southern Mexico. Colonia Nueva Esperanza means Neighborhood of New Hope.

Jorge, looking out over the flood plain of the arroyo, thinks about the rains coming. There has been a drought since the *paracaidistas* arrived, little rain to fill the wash. But he has seen the dry bed become a roiling river, a gushing flood that scours the basin clean. This year might see that again; weathermen are predicting an *el niño* and the torrential rain that it brings.

Standing on the pedestrian bridge that spans the traffic at the San Ysidro border crossing, you can see the line of cars waiting to cross north. San Ysidro is one of Tijuana's two official ports of entry into the United States and the busiest border crossing in the world. More than 50 million people pass through the border gates each year. Twenty-odd lanes wide, the queue of cars stretches for miles, snaking through Tijuana. This is where Mike Morales entered Tijuana a couple of months ago, crossing south to a country he hadn't seen in 15 years. A contract bus with bars on its windows backed up to the Port of Entry and unloaded its human cargo, Mike included, through the steel turnstiles of the international border. Passing through, the metal maw clanked behind him like the slamming of prison bars, locking him forever out of the United States.

Mike emerged into a land completely foreign to him. He left his life as a restaurant manager in Las Vegas; he lost his home, his two cars, his girlfriend of four years—the

tall blonde he had planned to marry. He had lived in the United States since he was a child, more than half his life. On the Mexican side, an official wrote down his name: Ishmael Morales, his place of birth: Chiapas, Mexico, and his age: 28. And that was it. He walked out into the streets of Tijuana, into a bustle and chaos of honking cars, diesel fumes, people, broken concrete, missing manhole covers, the hucksters and hawkers pushing ceramic Bart Simpsons, somber Jesuses on the cross, velvet Elvises, gaudy sombreros, Viagra, Lap Band Surgery, Tummy Tucks, Beer and Margaritas—two for one. Now deported and repatriated, Mike the illegal alien became Ishmael once again to begin his new life in Tijuana with only the clothes on his back.

Now, two months later, Mike sits sullen and bored beside the trickle of Arroyo Alamar in a *Colonia Nueva Esperanza* shack. It is a hovel of cobbled-together cast-offs; the walls and roof are of old American garage doors, the handles still attached, discarded from the sprawling suburbs of Southern California. The garage doors were exported to Tijuana to avoid their filling California landfills. A vinyl banner, once a billboard, serves to waterproof the roof. It delivers its advertisement to the sky.

This is Mike's sister's home. The maquiladoras attracted her and her family north from Chiapas seven years ago. Most everyone in the colonia tells the same story: they came to Tijuana from the fincas and plantations of Mexico's south where for generations they lived on the land growing sugar cane or coffee or cocoa in exchange

for meager wages to supplement the subsistence they eek from a small plot of land of their own. The pressures of globalization have forced corporate landowners to modernize and mechanize, to consolidate land holdings, to cut labor costs. In addition, under NAFTA, Mexico imports cheap, government subsidized, U.S.-produced corn—often the overproduction of genetically-modified livestock feed not considered suitable for human consumption—severely undercutting the price of this staple. The corn market glut and price volatility displaces small farmers from their traditional roles on the land, driving them to the cities in search of work. The people of Nueva Esperanza now must buy their tortillas, tortillas these days made with imported U.S. corn.

The women of the colonia walk the worn paths up the arroyo's escarpment to the mesa to work in the maquiladoras. Assembly work is women's work—they have the small hands and nimble fingers, the bosses say. They are more easily managed. They work 12-hour days, six-day weeks for 70 or so dollars a week—a wage that spirals ever downward under the pressures of Asian competition. Workers' safety and protection standards exist, but they are ill-enforced, and with no access to protective equipment, the workers are exposed to the industrial chemicals of the workplace. At the end of their shifts on the mesa, they return to their homes below bringing the lead and chromium, arsenic and radioactivity of TV manufacture to their families.

Down there in *Nueva Esperanza*, Mike watches an



old TV inside his sister's shack, the electricity pirated from passing power poles. TVs are more expensive in Tijuana than they are a couple miles north, across the border in America. Tijuana TVs are for export only; under the terms of NAFTA, Tijuans must pay tariffs and duties on the products produced in their city.

Like Mike's sister's place, virtually every shanty in Nueva Esperanza has a frayed wire strung to it bringing bootlegged electricity. There is no running water, however. And no sewer. Water is sold from tanker trucks and pumped into barrels; five gallon carboys are sold to drink.

The toilet behind Mike's sister's house is flushed by bucket and drains under the fence of pallets into the dirt streets of the colonia. Raw sewage seeps in hand-dug ditches from every home becoming the putrid water of the arroyo. It is here, in Nueva Esperanza, from the dust-covered shacks, in the muck and the filth, and the other squalid shantytowns of the assembly plant workers, that the Tijuana River on its way to America gathers its raw sewage, its fecal coliform, its hepatitis A. It gets its heavy metals in the run-off from the mesa above.

For years up there, up the dry, dusty river escarpment a few hundred yards from *Nueva Esperanza*, dust devils whirled across the mounds and piles that until 1994 were the site of the American-owned maquiladora, *Metales y Derivados*. In the early 70s, businessman Jose Kahn relocated his battery recycling business there from north of the border to take advantage of cheap labor and lower environmental standards. The site is now abandoned, the business is gone. Jose Kahn fled back across the border to his home in San Diego to avoid arrest, charged with criminal violations of Mexico's environmental codes. He left behind the 42,000 tons of highly toxic lead slag he had amassed over the 22 years he operated there. Over the decades the lead had broken down, dissolved by the acid of the batteries to a fine powder, water soluble and deadly poisonous. Soil samples taken in 2005 revealed lead concentrations of 200,000 parts per million—that is, the soil at that spot above the arroyo was nearly one quarter lead, a concentration 400 times levels considered acceptable in the U.S. The lead and nickel and cadmium-filled soil from the mesa's maquiladoras blows in the wind settling on the trees and houses and roads and

people. Poisonous lead pollution at levels 55 times those considered unhealthy by U.S. standards has turned up in soil samples from more than a mile away. Cadmium 12 times allowable levels. Ninety percent of the children in the area colonias had elevated levels of lead in their blood. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency determined that the *Metales y Derivados* site “posed significant public health risks to the residents of nearby Otay Mesa,” a community on the U.S. side of the border more than two miles away. Our tax dollars footed the bill to bury the slag, cap it with concrete. But the heavy metals whipped by the wind or washed by the rain from the houses and trees mix in the arroyo with the xylene and solvents and waste of the maquiladoras. They return with the river-flow back across the border to America.

In the two months that Mike has been in Tijuana, he has not left Colonia Nueva Esperanza. He spent the first weeks in a deep depression. He thinks about Corrina, his blond girlfriend in Las Vegas, how she cried when he told her that he would never be back. It would be a felony for him to cross a second time; if he were caught, he'd be sent to prison. He hasn't spoken to her since that day. He is Ishmael now, banished to the other side of the line. He will begin his life again there.

Ishmael is thinking of going to the beach on Sunday. For most Tijuans Sunday is their only day off and on that day the beach fills with families, the salt spray mixes oompas and accordions with the smells of seafood cocktails and tacos and corn on the cob. Kids splash in the waves or roll around in the sand sugar-coated, like gritty, crusted churros.

The road to the beach parallels the border fence up and over the coastal hills. From the crest you can see the concrete culvert of the Tijuana River open into the marshy slough on the U.S. side of border. On our side, the river is pumped through the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant, a \$400 million facility built to intercept the ten million gallons of raw, untreated wastewater—the lead and chromium and arsenic, the xylene and solvents exported to Tijuana's foreign-owned assembly plants as well as the raw sewage, the hepatitis A, the fecal coliform from the squalid slums of the maquiladora workers—that

flows everyday over the border to pollute the beaches of San Diego County. Our tax dollars pay for the International Wastewater Treatment Plant as well. Frequently, however, the heavy rains of winter overwhelm it. Each year, several times a year, the raw effluent of Tijuana gushes through the river culvert into the slough and out to sea.

The beach road follows the fence to the sea. Until this year the fence was just a cobbled-together series of red, rusty corrugated metal panels—Gulf War helicopter landing mats—military surplus, 2,284 of them, welded end to end. Now, the new fence—shiny galvanized steel and concertina wire-topped—marches side-by-side with the “old” fence, separating us from them with a two-ply fence within a fence to create a 100 foot wide no man's land—a barren Demilitarized Zone of clear-scraped, flood-lit dirt, patrolled by the four-wheel drives of the U.S. Border Patrol.

The border DMZ crosses the bluffs above the Pacific at what was until a few months ago a bi-national park: Parque de Amistad, Friendship Park. In 1971, first lady Patricia Nixon spoke at the inauguration of the park, creating a bi-national meeting place above the slough and the beach. Back then, a couple of strands of barbed wire were all that delineated the line. Mrs. Nixon reached across the wire, shook Mexican hands and kissed Mexican babies. That day she said, “I hate to see a fence anywhere.”

The new border DMZ doesn't extend to the beach, however. Down there, on the sand below, the border barrier remains as it has been: salt and the spray-stripped skeletal spines that stagger out and dissolve into the sea. Kids still dash, ‘Look at me, mom!’ to the other side. The border fence trails off in ellipses, a kind of dot dot dot, leaving so much of the story untold. It ends with its feet in a toxic sea among the ragged ends of the toxic river. Next Sunday, when Mike, now Ishmael, visits the beach, there will be no one on our side, the side that was for half his life his home. That Sunday like any Sunday, out to sea, a wave will begin its slow roll, its contaminated curl opening in America. Down there, in Mexico, a kid will catch that wave and ride it up onto the sand. ■