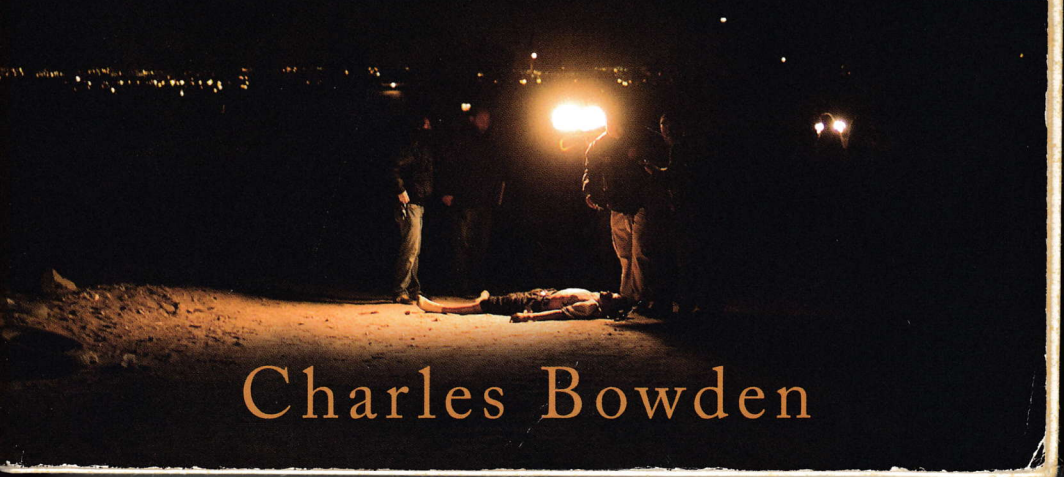
NATIONAL BESTSELLER

"The druglords kill with style and nothing happens to them. Bowden tells of one killing after another with wonderful clarity; he keeps his voice low and comes up with scene-enders that stop you cold." —ELMORE LEONARD

MURDER CITY

CIUDAD JUÁREZ AND THE GLOBAL ECONOMY'S NEW KILLING FIELDS



Charles Bowden

There is a phantom living in Juárez, and his name is on everyone's lips: *la gente*. He is the collective unconsciousness of the city, a hoodoo conjured up out of murder, rape, poverty, corruption, and deceit. Everyone in the city—man, woman, and child, professor and street alcoholic—knows what *la gente* thinks. Just as I have never met or interviewed an American politician who did not know what "the little people" think, nor have I met this army of phantom dwarfs that allegedly dominate my own nation or heard so much as a whisper from another domestic band, the Silent Majority. In the same way, I must listen to drivel about la gente.

In politer circles, la gente gives way to a different phantom, a thing called civil society. Of course, neither la gente nor civil society exists, just as in the United States there are no little people nor a Silent Majority. All these terms are useful for two reasons: They allow people to talk about things they do not know, and they allow people to pretend there is an understanding about life that does not exist. Oh, and there is a final bonus: They allow newspaper

columnists to discuss people they have never met and say knowingly what the people they have never met actually think.

In Juárez, la gente—this collective mind that is wise and knowing—is a necessary crutch because the police are corrupt, the government is corrupt, the army is corrupt, and the economy functions by paying third-world wages and charging first-world prices. The Mexican newspapers dance around truth because, one, corrupt people who are rich and powerful dominate what can be printed and, two, any reporter honest enough to publish the truth dies.

And so we are left, those of us who actually entertain the possibility that facts exist and that facts matter, with rumor and this phantom called la gente. Of course, this means we have no one to talk to and can only console ourselves with the dead, their bodies leaking blood out those neat holes made by machine guns, because the dead are past lying and the dead know one real fact: Someone killed them. They often do not know who killed them. Nor do they know why they were killed. But at least they know they have been killed and are now dead.

This is more than civil society and la gente know because the television news and the newspapers do not always report murders and if they report murders they do not always give the names and if they give the names, they almost never follow up on the murders.

You live.

You die.

You vanish from public records.

And you become the talk of the phantom called la gente.

Juárez is pioneering the future again, and this is a city of achievements. It claims the invention of the margarita, it is the birthplace of the zoot suit, of velvet paintings, of the border factory era, of the most innovative and modern drug cartel, of world-class murder of women and also of men. In the short month of February alone, 1,063 cars are stolen in the city—around 36 a day. Here a vehicle is worth a hundred dollars to a junkie—the price a chop shop pays before the machine is butchered and shipped to China for the metal.

There are explanations for all this. A favorite is that it is all because of the drug world, especially a current battle the authorities claim is going on between cartels for control of the crossing into El Paso. Some blame the massive migration of the poor to the city to work in the factories. Others, especially those who focus on the murder of the girls, sense a serial killer is prowling the lonely dark lanes. Finally, some simply see the state as waning here and the violence as a new order supplanting the fading state with criminal organizations.

I am in a tiny minority on this matter. I see no new order emerging but rather a new way of life, one beyond our imagination and the code words we use to protect ourselves from life and violence. In this new way of life, no one is really in charge and we are all in play. The state still exists—there are police, a president, congress, agencies with names studded across the buildings. Still, something has changed, and I feel this change in my bones.

The violence has crossed class lines. The violence is everywhere. The violence is greater. And the violence has no apparent and simple source. It is like the dust in the air, part of life itself.

Government here and in my own country increasingly pretends to be in charge and then calls it a day. The United States beefs up the border, calls in high-tech towers, and tosses up walls, and still, all the drugs arrive on time and all the illegal people make it into the fabled heartland and work themselves into a future.

People tell me there are murders in Detroit, women are raped in Washington, D.C., the cops are on the take in Chicago, drugs are everywhere in Dallas, the government is a flop in New Orleans. And Baghdad is not safe, mortars arc through the desert sky there into the American womb of the Green Zone. People tell me Los Angeles is a jungle of gangs, that we have our own revered mafia. And that drugs flood Mexico and Juárez because of the wicked, vice-ridden ways of the United States. All of these assertions are ways to ignore the deaths on the killing ground.

According to the Mexican government and the DEA, the violence in Juárez results from a battle between various drug cartels. This makes perfect sense,

except that the war fails to kill cartel members. With over two hundred fresh corpses in ninety days, there is hardly a body connected to the cartels. Nor can the Mexican army seem to locate any of the leaders of the cartels, men who have lived in the city for years. The other problem with this cartel war theory is that the Mexican army in Juárez continues to seize tons of marijuana but only a few kilos of cocaine, this in a city with thousands of retail cocaine outlets.

There are two ways to lose your sanity in Juárez. One is to believe that the violence results from a cartel war. The other is to claim to understand what is behind each murder. The only certain thing is that various groups—gangs, the army, the city police, the state police, the federal police—are killing people in Juárez as a part of a war for drug profits. So a person never knows exactly why he or she is killed but is absolutely certain that death comes because of the enormous profits attached to drug sales.

Every time I walk across the pay bridge from downtown El Paso to Juárez, I see a big portrait of Che Guevara on the concrete banks that channel the original flow of the Rio Grande. Sometimes the paint has faded, but when moments get very bad in Juárez, someone magically appears and touches up the portrait. There is also a statement in Spanish that my president is a terrorist and another message that no one is illegal and that Border Patrol are killers, and there are a fistful of revolutionary heroes whose faces scamper across a map of South America and Mexico. Such statements also insist on order because that is the ground where heroes flourish.

Often, down below on the dry soil of the river, there is a crazy man. He shouts in English, "Welcome! Hello America!" And he holds a cup in his hand for catching tossed coins.

When I cross back, often late in the night, he is on the other side of the bridge, but now he begs in Spanish.

Behind the loony, a bunch of crosses were painted on a wall to symbolize the dead girls of Juárez. The simple message in Spanish says they were actually killed by capitalism incubating in the American-owned maquiladoras, the border factories of such renown in the parlors where wine is sipped to toast the global economy.

Every day in Juárez, at least two hundred thousand people get out of bed to pull a shift in the maquilas. The number varies—right now probably twenty thousand jobs have vanished in Juárez as a chill sweeps through the global economy. Within a year, eighty to one hundred thousand jobs will vanish. Just after the millennium, about one hundred thousand maquila jobs left the city for mainland China, because as *Forbes* magazine pointed out, the Mexicans wanted four times the wages of the Chinese. A fair point. The greedy Mexicans were taking home sixty, maybe seventy dollars a week from the plants in a city where the cost of living is essentially 90 percent that of the United States. Turnover in these plants runs from 100 to 200 percent a year. The managers say this is because of the abundant opportunities of the city. Labor is still a bargain here—but so is death. Four years ago, the Chihuahua State Police were doing contract murders. They supplied their own guns and bullets with the full knowledge of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

But we must not talk about such matters. Juárez officially has almost no unemployment. The factories gleam in industrial parks sculpted by the local rich. The city grows. There is talk of even building a new city off to the west, where the giant white horse watches over the desert flats. That is why I like to go there.

I sit on the sand in the desert under the giant white horse by the place of the crazy people and I think of Miss Sinaloa.

She understands. And soon I think I will if I am given enough time on the killing ground.

I insist on getting out of the truck even though I know everyone in the narco neighborhood is watching me. I suck in the dusty air, feel the warmth of the sun. Across the street, a large German shepherd barks through the iron fence. He stares me down and does his work of guarding a world where only large, angry dogs go about unarmed.

There are a few basic rules about the Mexican army. If you see them, flee, because they famously disappear people. If you are part of them, desert, because

they famously pay little. In the 1990s, President Ernesto Zedillo formed a new, pure force to fight drugs and had them trained by the United States. They were paid a pittance—a friend of mine in the DEA grew close to them because his agency instantly put them on the payroll and he was their paymaster. By 2000, the special antidrug force had joined the Gulf cartel and became known as the Zetas, U.S.-trained military killers with discipline and skill with weapons. The original Zetas are mainly dead, but their style—decapitations, military precision in attacks—spread and now they are the model for killers in many cartels. They are also an inspiration and a constant lure for Mexican soldiers who desert for the cartels—over a hundred thousand troops fled the army and joined criminal organizations in the first decade of the new century. The pay is better and so is the sense of power.

In 2000, the election of Vicente Fox ended the seventy-year reign of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI. The drug industry ceased to be controlled by the central government, many independents entered the business, domestic drug use skyrocketed, and federal control of the nation grew ever more feeble. The razor-thin election of Felipe Calderón in 2006 brought the very legitimacy of the president into question. He responded by unleashing the army against the drug industry ten days after his election as a show of force. And that is when the killing began to spiral to previously unimagined levels. First, he sent twenty thousand troops to his home state of Michoacan. Then, the military mission grew to thirty thousand nationally, and eventually forty-five to fifty thousand. With each escalation, the number of murdered Mexicans exploded. At about the same time, the United States began mumbling about Plan Mexico, a billion and a half dollars to help our neighbors to the south fight the good fight, with the lion's share going to the army. Put simply, the United States took a Mexican institution with long ties to the drug industry—the army was a partner in the huge marijuana plantation in Chihuahua, Rancho Bufalo, of the mid-1980s, and it was a Mexican general who became the drug czar in 1997 until it was discovered he worked for the Juárez cartel—and bankrolled it to fight the drug industry.

And so in Juárez tonight, the army does the killing, the United States gloats over a battle against the cartels, the president of Mexico beams as Plan

Mexico comes close to his grasp. And the street soldiers of the drug industry either duck down or die—the kills in Juárez are largely of nobodies or of their local cop allies. And the Zetas, the thousands they have trained, and their imitators get friskier. They have training camps in northern Mexico—they killed four cops from Nuevo Laredo in such a camp and then burned them in barrels. They have heavy arms, grenades, rockets, good morale, and high pay. Desertion is not an option.

By the late 1990s, the cartel in Juárez was said to have rockets. And was hiring former Green Berets to make sure its communications systems were up to snuff. But as the bodies mount in Juárez, the capos are not the ones with bullet holes. In fact, there is no evidence they are even concerned by this military exercise. It is a mystery.

During this season of gore, Francisco Rafael Arellano Felix, the former head of the Tijuana cartel, was released in El Paso in early March after doing about ten years in Mexican and U.S. prisons. He crossed the bridge into what the DEA claims is enemy territory, the turf of the Juárez cartel. By all reports, he expressed no concern as he made his way to the airport.

I sit on the patio drinking wine in a barrio named after Emiliano Zapata. The city has a statue of the murdered revolutionary hero, and he looks spindly as he holds an extended rifle with one hand. Originally, Zapata pointed his weapon toward neighboring El Paso, but then one mayor thought this impolite and turned the dead hero around. About a hundred and fifty yards away runs the drainage canal for floods in the city, a conduit that also doubles as a kind of freeway into the poor barrios that coat this hillside.

At around noon on March 10, Juán Carlos Rocha, thirty-eight, stands on an island in this freeway peddling *P.M.*, the afternoon tabloid that features murders and sells to working-class people. Two men approach and shoot him in the head. No one sees anything except that they are armed, wear masks, and move like commandos. They walk away from the killing. A city cop lives facing the murder site.

A crowd gathers and watches police clean up the murder scene.

Rocha, the people in the barrio say, sold more than *P.M.* He also offered cocaine at four to six dollars a packet. He'd been warned twice by mysterious strangers to cease this activity. He did not listen.

He allegedly earned about three hundred dollars a week as his cut of the retail cocaine business, more than three times what the neighboring factory workers, his customers, make. As he lies in a pool of blood in the bright sunlight, his brown jacket is neatly folded on the traffic island, his cap on the pavement, where it tumbled from his shattered skull. A woman in a tube top takes his photograph with her cell phone while uniformed schoolgirls stand in a pod and watch.

There are more than twenty thousand such retail outlets in this city, many employing vendors working three shifts a day. Now there is a battle going on for these small ventures in cutthroat capitalism.

A friend of mine can barely leave anything in his house, because local addicts rob it the moment he exits. He is on his third large dog. The previous two were poisoned. He has hopes for the third guard dog.

The day after the killing, the vendor is the cover story in *P.M.*, the tabloid he peddled on his traffic island. His street name was *El Cala*, The Skull.

On March 27, 2008, the army admits it is taking Juárez by force. In front of the hotel downtown, a soldier stands with a .50-caliber machine gun. Over 180 armed and armored vehicles hunt evil on the streets, plus an air wing that includes a helicopter gunship. Two thousand troops arrive, or more. Or so the government says, the press repeats, but no one is ever allowed to make a real count. The soldiers wear black masks and are short and dark. The officers have lighter skin that loses pigment steadily as the rank gets higher until there is the rarefied air of the generals who look like Europeans dropped in some colonial outpost.

Roadblocks go up everywhere, especially at night, when events are difficult to see and impossible to monitor. The authorities say this is necessary because two hundred people have been murdered since the first of year.

There will be ten patrol bases and forty-six roving units. Night life in Juárez collapses because the local citizens dread hitting a military checkpoint in the dark.

It is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Semana Santa, Holy Week, a time for families to reunite and for men to gather and drink themselves senseless as they bask in the grace of God. Two police cars convoy through the quiet of Juárez, one with a city comandante, the other with bodyguards. Suddenly, they are pinned at a traffic light by a car in front and then another car pulls alongside and machine-guns the vehicles. Customers at the nearby gas station duck as bullets plunge through metal.

The comandante's bodyguard dies and others are wounded. This bodyguard has a curious past. In January, the comandante's name—Victor Alejandro Gomez Marquez—was posted on the list that appeared on the monument to the fallen policemen as a person scheduled to die. But the bodyguard is the man who truly hears death whispering in his ear. He recently told his mother he had fifteen days to live. Then, he came over to his mother's house again and sat with a friend as they drank a liter of whisky. This time, he told his mother he had at best eight days to live.

She told him, "Be positive. Christ's blood is covering you and protecting you."

Now, he is done with living.

The mural depicts a conquistador, another wall is a collage of snapshots from the work. A sign says, "God is greater than my problems." In the corner rests a metal statue of a man in armor. This is the office of El Pastor, José Antonio Galvan, the radio evangelist who took in the battered remains of Miss Sinaloa and gave her succor in the crazy place. He is sitting right in front of me, a mop of graying hair, a fleshy body, a ready smile. He is showing me a movie of the asylum—men beaten by police and dumped half crazy on the streets, addled addicts with seeping ulcerated wounds, women who will never remember what happened to them and never want to remember.

I stare at the ruined faces in the video and ask, "Does your congregation support this work?"

He smiles, points to the crazy people on the screen, and says, "This is my congregation."

There was a bad storm in the winter of 1998, and El Pastor was driving in Juárez when he saw a mound on the street and swerved just as a man emerged from the pile of snow where he slept. God spoke to him at that moment and so El Pastor rounded up friends and for a day gathered the wounded off the streets—brain-damaged addicts, ruined gang members—everyone left at the mercy of the snows in a city without mercy.

"Oh, they smelled bad," he says, "covered with shit and all that."

The office of El Pastor once was a drug house where addicts punctured their veins and savored their dreams. He descended on this place as a street preacher raving in the *calles*. The local priest called him a devil. But he drew others to him. As for the devil, El Pastor fights him daily—he keeps a black and red punching bag near at hand and slams it with his fists as he fights Satan.

Everything about El Pastor is vital and coarse, his language often vulgar, his feel for the crazy people visceral. The world is lucky he gave up the bottle and the drugs and turned toward God.

El Pastor spent sixteen years as an illegal in Los Angeles and learned to be a crane operator, do lots of drugs and alcohol, and earn sixteen dollars an hour. He could be rough on the job—twice he threw men out of buildings and he was not on the first floor. Eventually, he went to prison and then was deported back to Mexico. He became a street addict in Juárez. Then in 1985, he was born again and began preaching on the street to drug addicts. Rough edges remain and keep him honed. On one arm he has a tattoo of a good-looking *mestiza* and on the other, a good-looking Indian woman. Before he went to work in the United States, he hated white people and despised Mexicans who crossed over. But then he married, had children and went to El Norte. And found that this country he disliked fed him and his family and now he says, "I love Mexico, but not the Mexican system." He has two kids

in college in the United States, and one son has served eight years in the U.S. Army Special Forces. Now he must raise ten thousand dollars a month on the radio simply to meet the medical, food, and staff costs of this crazy place he has created.

He gives me the short course in the history of his city.

"The violence is high in Juárez," he says in a soft voice. "A lot of young people come to Juárez and have the American dream—it is so close. But now the border is closed. People come from the south, they are clean and hard-working and they don't know anything about the streets. And guys take them in, and soon they are selling their bodies and using drugs. After a year, they have gang tattoos. The capos now sell drugs here where there is a growing market because then they don't have to cross them into the United States. Now fourteen-year-olds are moving a ton of cocaine."

I ask if he remembers a patient called Miss Sinaloa.

"Oh, yes," he says. "She was at an orgy."

The Casablanca is, of course, white and has many rooms with parking beside each one and metal doors to protect the privacy of the cars and license plates from prying eyes. Men bring women here for sex and love and joy and whatever other terms they prefer. This was Miss Sinaloa's eventual destination. In front stands Valentino's, a large nightclub with red-tiled domes, the party haven that also beckoned her.

Miss Sinaloa came here from her Pacific Coast home. For days she was raped by eight policemen. Her buttocks bore the handprints of many men by the time she got to El Pastor, and there were bite marks on her breasts.

She arrives at the crazy place on December 16, 2005, after 5 P.M. The city police bring her out and dump her. They have, they say, had her in jail, but she is too much to handle. She fights and yells and is no fun at all.

She has lost her mind and now she comes to the place of kindred souls.

Everyone is not as lucky as Miss Sinaloa. Heidi Slauquet was very good-looking and made paintings. For years, she was a party girl in Mexico City,

and in the early 1990s, she wound up in Juárez. For a while, she had a nightclub where *narco-traficantes* liked to go. For a while, she was a lover of Amado Carrillo. And then when that wore out, she became a kind of hostess and made sure beautiful girls came to the parties, girls like Miss Sinaloa.

On November 29, 1995, she takes a cab to Juárez International Airport. The cabby eventually turns up dead. Heidi never reappears. People at the airport say that Heidi's cab was stopped by what looked to be federal police.

Nobody talks about them, because silence means everyone can pretend they do not exist. They are on every street, sometimes asleep on the sidewalks or huddled in a doorway. No one knows their real numbers because a real count would slap reality into everyone's faces. They are the brain-damaged of the city. The mother could not get enough food when she was big with child, or she had bad habits, the booze, glue, paint sniffing, all kinds of habits. Or she managed to deliver a healthy child but then the street finally beckons and the child goes to the glue and the paint or maybe meth claws the brains out. Still, they are there, on every *calle*, legs shortened by hunger, wizened heads from malnutrition, jerky movements from the chemicals, madness in the eyes, and often there are voices, brilliant voices that speak to them even though the rest of us are not privileged enough to hear these voices.

I am on the main avenue, I have just crossed the bridge, and the morning is sunny and bright with promise. She walks up with a shuffling gait, her head rocking as she jabbers. She's wearing Capri pants, black running shoes, and a knit blouse, and her hair is clean. She has some of her teeth and is coasting somewhere in her thirties. She is a whore and from the looks of her emaciated body I guess heroin or meth, but I don't know. What I know is this: She is a product of the city, a testament to the cheap drugs and the expendable lives, and her story will never be in the newspaper, nor will she—or the army that wanders the city and is just like her—ever be counted and considered in the studies and essays about life in Juárez.

That is part of my attraction to El Pastor. He gets the rejects of the Mexican health system, of the Mexican jail system, and of Mexican compassion.

He also gets the people the U.S. Border Patrol apprehends who are crazy with the damage of life. The agency tosses them back in order not to take care of them. And El Pastor scoops them up and takes them to his crazy place in the desert, and for the first time in years, these people have someone touch them and not cringe.

I look at her and say, no.

She continues weaving and bobbing around me, and then, with a smile, she staggers off to find some other hope of a blow job, a few pesos and a fix in the early morning Juárez light.

But she is everywhere in this city and sometimes she is a woman and sometimes she is a man, and sometimes she is a child, but always she is a casualty of the life of this place. And a hero because simply dealing with the life here and refusing to give in takes courage that is absent among the rich and powerful of this city.

El Pastor is a small lens, and if you look through this lens, you see these invisible people because he is their last and only hope. And he has files, over a thousand files on the invisible people of Juárez.

Here is one.

He goes by a lot of names and one he really likes is Pedro Martinez. He is forty-two when American psychiatrists interview him. The agents have caught him yet again in the United States illegally and then they decide he is a crazy person and so he becomes something for American medicine to explain.

This is not easy. He says he has been in the Kansas State Penitentiary, but a search turns up no records. He says he was evaluated in the county jail in Danville, Kentucky, but these records also cannot be found. He does say this: Five years ago, he was hit on the back of the head and lost consciousness. He had a urinary infection in Florida. He had gonorrhea and injected himself with penicillin. He has also tried things. From age seven, he smoked marijuana for ten years. He has been treated four or five times, he notes, for inhaling thinner. He tried crack cocaine but this only lasted four months. He likes beer and figures he has been an alcoholic since age eleven. Actually, he

offers, he lost his license in North Carolina for drunk driving. So he's been around and really toured these United States.

He was born in Tabasco, Mexico, but was raised in Veracruz. His mom is dead, his dad alive somewhere, and somehow he managed to get through the sixth grade.

Oh, and he is married to a woman from Iran, one he met in prison in Kentucky, and they had several children together. The marriage lasted two years. Here the doctors falter and find his stories from Kentucky hard to follow, something about a guy named Jim Buster and woman known as De Fannie.

He has worked. He has done gardening and manual labor and been out in those fields. He has also worked with growing tobacco.

There have been bumps on his road. In Kentucky, his girlfriend was difficult and so he was convicted of burning down a house. He tries to explain, but the doctors cannot follow the flow of words he spews—something about homosexuality, medical stuff, mental health stuff, small brains. He did a year in Mexico, he says, for selling marijuana. Six times he has been jailed for entering the United States of America. Also, he laughs as he answers the doctors' questions and they find this inappropriate.

So they decide he is suffering from a psychosis.

But Pedro Martinez insists he is not mentally ill. He is six feet two inches tall and weighs 149 pounds and his body temperature is 96.3.

The doctors notice that he has poor eye contact and sometimes he is hard to hear because he lowers his voice. Also, during one interview he asks the doctor, "Do you hear the voices?" He would turn to a corner of the room and talk to a woman named Peggy, but the doctors noted that they could not see Peggy. Besides that, he has poor grooming.

When he was told he would face a hearing on his mental competency, he said, "The judge, I am the judge."

When he saw the doctor's chart on him, he said, "I am not taking this shit. Give me the chart. Take your name off the chart."

So they douse him with pills, antipsychotic medication, and this calms him down. Now they realize he is paranoid schizophrenic. Case closed.

And then, to solve all the problems, he is booted across the bridge, and El Pastor finds him on the street and takes him out to that crazy place. His brief fling at history—those U.S. medical evaluation records—ends and he rejoins the invisible people from whom he came. He is part of that army that has brigades all over Mexico and all over Juárez, the shock troops of poverty and drugs and booze and despair. He can negotiate the United States, he just cannot convince American experts that he knows as much as they do.

This happens. The brain-damaged often fail to get serious notice from the authorities.

But time is on the side of Pedro Martinez. Each day, there are more and more like him. The world now is designed to raise up huge crops of people just like him.

Everyone here is always talking. But no one ever says a real word because that can get you dead. Some blame the language, the calculated indirection of Spanish. Some blame a lack of education. Some blame the dust that is always in the air, the endless dirt giving everyone a mild cough that they use to punctuate sentences and to accent their silence and comments. Some claim fear creates the silence. In the past few years, Mexican reporters who bother to report are sometimes murdered and so the reports are becoming rarer in this nation. A newspaper story on a killing will have an almost pornographic description of a car or a corpse—and silence on the killers. This is the sound of the growing terror, this silence.

Guns make up for the silence that coats everyone's lips. The city police lieutenant and his son get in his huge, new four-door Nissan Titan truck. The boy is eight, his dad thirty-two. About 250 rounds dance through the machine. The wife races out, sees the carnage, and tries to drive them to the hospital. But the cop dies, the boy's arm is destroyed, and he dies also. The neighbors come out and stare. Numbers help. For example, 237 rounds were fired from guns of 7.62 by 30 caliber, 16 rounds came from an AK-47, and 1 round came from a 7.62 by 39 caliber. The cop was on a list of names posted

January 26 on the police memorial monument. He was characterized under the heading FOR THOSE WHO CONTINUE NOT BELIEVING.

The neighbors say that it is terrible about the child because the boy was young and innocent and played in the street a lot. No one is willing to give the reporters their name. And after a while, no one wants to talk at all. That is the silence that graces the city. Things happen and no one says much. Then after a while, no one admits the thing even happened.

Across the river in El Paso, the daily newspaper fails for days to make any mention of the dead cop or the dead eight-year-old boy. The silence can be a great comfort. Things can be frightening and yet reduced to nothingness by silence.

At noon one day in May, I am standing in a crowd staring at a dead man on the sidewalk. He was executed twenty minutes ago. Then a call comes, there is another killing. We rumble up into the hills. The body has been taken away, and now people stroll past the blood on the dirt as if there had been no gunfire, no scream, no thud, no murder. Just the soft buzzing of flies over the puddled blood. The wind carrying dust, the cry of roosters.

Two guys are in a Honda and it is Friday night. Two vehicles pull up and machine-gun them. No one notices. A man is walking down the street at night. He is riddled with bullets. After a while, people creep carefully from the houses. And then suddenly a pickup truck appears, and six men climb out, grab the body, toss it in back, and drive away. After that the police and soldiers arrive, but of course there is nothing for them to do. Or say.

Silence.

There are two ways to be safe and to stay sane. One is silence, pretending that nothing happened and refusing to say out loud what happened. The other is magical thinking, inventing various explanations for what you refuse to say and by these explanations dismiss the very thing you cannot let pass your lips. Of course, this applies only to individuals. Newspapers, politicians, and government agencies have a third method, they cite organizations—the drug cartels—and say that whatever is happening is because of "them." This tactic is very appealing and takes one back to childhood, when the night belonged

to monsters and hobgoblins. It was the tool of the cold war, when communists lurked under the bed, and is the tool of the new wars against terrorism and drugs. Like a stopped clock, it is accurate now and then. Organizations of all kinds lie, cheat, steal, and kill. But in Juárez, almost no account explaining the killings is linked to fact.

Instead, the cars driven by killers and the cars of the dead are lovingly described. Spent cartridges found at the scene are sorted by caliber and counted. The dead are sketched—the color of the skin and hair, the size of the bodies, the estimated age. But often there are no names, nor do updates appear in future editions. Three carloads of men described as commandos hit an upscale motel for lovers, one that functions almost like a gated community. They find a man and woman in a room, kill them, leave, and then nothing. The meaning beneath the skin of the word *commando* is never explored. But it is carefully reported that one hundred spent cartridges littered the room. The governor, José Reyes Baeza, announces on March 24 after a long silence, "All of the public security agencies are infiltrated—all of them, pure and simple—and we are not going to put our hands in the fire for any bad element."

He also tells the populace that he has assurances from the highest government sources that the violence will decline in the next few weeks. Apparently, there is some wizard in the ministries who has access either to the future or to the forces that have been killing wholesale since New Year's Day.

There is nothing but silence from the police forces, and not another word is said in the press.

Silence, like protest, is the drug of our time, the way we do something by doing nothing. We march, we wave placards, and we go mum, and all avoid touching the levers of power and all avoid stepping on the third rail of truth.

I sit on a tree well surrounding a scraggly shrub just down the street from one of the houses of death. Directly in front of me is a federal cop—a few minutes ago, they took my passport, examined it as a mystery object, and called it in to be recorded. I am now on notice. The street is rough and dirt, and ten yards to the west is a walled compound with a camera watching the

entrance. Fifty yards down the *calle* the boys are digging, and eventually thirty-six bodies will come belching out of the ground. No one in the neighborhood ever heard, saw, or smelled a thing.

The bodies will not be shown to grieving relatives of missing people, nor will the location of the bodies be disclosed, nor will the press mention that the bodies have vanished.

The dog snarls through the steel fence. He is the only person here in the moment and refuses to be silent. The federal police wear masks.

Weeks and weeks go by, and the only mention of the bodies in the newspapers is that they have been taken off to Mexico City. Not a single sentence on who these forty-five people in the two death houses once had been, nor is the identity of their killers ever discussed in print. Nor is there any exploration of just who owned these two buildings where people were murdered and buried in gardens of bones.

Silence.

• • •

The sacred lines are being erased as the walls go up and towers slam light on the ground at night. The war flees into the sky, where machines enable the illusion of control. For over eighteen hundred miles the line between Mexico and the United States follows a river or crosses deserts or scampers up and down mountains or wallows in the wind softly singing against the green face of the grasslands.

I am sitting along the line and I am far from Juárez and Miss Sinaloa, but it is all of a package. The fabled cartels have been assigned cities, and made into boxes and arrows on organizational charts created by the U.S. agencies. But they seem reluctant to stay within these lines.

A month ago I drove a dirt road past two big work camps with piles of steel girders and rows of heavy equipment, depots where men went forth each day to weld and build car barriers to stop evil people from bringing evil things north. This is homeland security.

Then last week a semi with a loaded trailer came through the car barrier and drove north on a dirt road. And didn't quite make it. I stand where it slid off the road and down a steep slope. I can smell cow shit and the stench of death—it was officially hauling a load of steers. The new car barrier didn't stop it because someone has already cut out chunks in two places and put in gates.

No matter. Up in the sky, there are Black Hawk and A-Star helicopters, and big dirigibles looking with radar deep into the heart of Mexico, and ground sensors in the dirt and towers with magic eyes hooked to computers, and a standing army of gunmen in uniforms—more people, at least twenty thousand, under arms to police this line than the roster of the entire U.S. Army at the beginning of that long-ago Mexican War.

This is the blanket we use to wrap our nervous dreams, and we call it security. We invent special nodes of hell, cartels, cities like Juárez. We call killers drug lords as they sell industrial compounds, torture, and murder. We scan the skies and the earth, we stare with infrared lenses in the night, we bluster and weld and build walls. And we never really face what is in front of us, never face what is inside our gutless language of cartels and drug lords and homeland security, never face that forces are unleashed on the land with names like poverty, a fix, murder, and despair, and our tools cannot master these forces.

Miss Sinaloa knows this. And I am learning.

I am standing on the edge of order, a place called Palomas, Chihuahua, about an hour or so west of Juárez and on the line. Census data says seventy-five hundred people live here, but due to the economic failures of farming, then of migrant smuggling, followed by the current boom in killing and kidnapping, it may now be home to three thousand. In 1916, Pancho Villa crossed here and attacked Columbus, New Mexico, an army fort and hamlet three miles north. The United States responded by sending an army south under General John Blackjack Pershing, a military venture that never even caught a glimpse of Villa. *Palomas* means "doves," but today there is no cooing in

town and little else except violence in the air. This morning, around 7 A.M., a man was found out at the town dump riddled with bullets—rounds that seem to indicate a military weapon. I wander past the big statue of Pancho Villa and walk up to the small police station. One officer is out front, and at my approach, he flees into the station.

Everyone is a bit skittish here.

On February 18, 2008, four men were cut down and two died. On February 27, two men were cut down at the gas station on the main drag. The barrage ran three minutes, and the two men tasted the force of three to four hundred rounds. Then in the middle of March, the police chief fled to the United States and his staff deserted. Temporary cops were sent in from Ascensión. After that, two corpses were found by the road south of town. And just a day or two ago, four bodies were found burned to bone in a ranch house. But then in May 2007, four guys drove up to the U.S. border crossing here with three of them dead, including the driver. The wounded guy in the front passenger seat managed to keep a foot on the gas pedal as the rolling charnel house crept into the port of entry.

Now the police hide in the station. They are new, brought in from out of town. They don't really patrol, in fact. They sleep in the jail, where it is safe.

They sell a brand of tequila here shaped like a cartridge. It is called Hijos de Villa, The Sons of Villa. By April 1, at least forty people have been murdered in the town of doves.

Two teenage girls in tube tops and slacks pose at the point on the bridge between Juárez and the United States where a plaque announces the border. A friend snaps a photograph. Just below, a Border Patrol chopper sweeps along the line. No one even looks over at it.

On the U.S. side of the bridge, a holding pen teems with Mexicans. They wave and laugh in their cage of cyclone fencing topped with concertina wire.

The dust blows in Juárez, the workers climb aboard white school buses for their one- to two-hour ride down bad roads to their shifts. I'm standing in

a barrio searching out the whiff of another recent murder, this time of a former municipal cop. But my attention strays. The roads are dirt here, some of the tracks require punching the truck into four-wheel drive. Everyone here works in a maquiladora. I look to the north and see the blue federal building in downtown El Paso and the sweep of the American city up the slope of the Franklin Mountains. I stand on the slope of the Sierra de Juárez, over the ridge from the giant white horse and the asylum where Miss Sinaloa briefly took shelter. The border is hard-edged, but at times the sweep of the two cities makes them seem like one. But in the end, death can draw the sharpest line.

José Refugio Ruvalcalba was fifty-nine on November 27, 1994, when he turned up exactly on the line—midway on the bridge between the two cities—in his Honda Accord. He'd been a state cop for thirty-two years, and both of his sons were with him that day. All three were in the trunk, beaten, stabbed, and strangled. The father had a yellow ribbon around his head, one that flowered out of his mouth.

He knew where the line was and what happened if that line was crossed.

So do American political leaders, since they never seem to come here.

But everything else does.

The barrio where I look down from Juárez at El Paso is part of the puzzle of the violence in Juárez. These districts are drab, dirty, and largely unvisited by anyone but their inhabitants. Most places are stuffed with people who work in the maquiladoras.

Later, I am with a man wearing black in a barrio across from the asylum that was once home to Miss Sinaloa. The white buses lumber past with the tired faces of the factory workers. The road is ruts. Most of the shacks lack electricity or water. The wind pelts everyone with dust. The houses themselves are a chaos of boards, pallets, beams, rebar, old cable spools, tires, bedsprings, concrete blocks, posts, scrap metal, car bodies, old rusted buses, stone, rotted plywood, tarps, barrels, black water tanks for the periodic deliveries, plastic buckets, old fencing, tires, bottles, stove pipe, aluminum strips, pipe, broken chairs, tables, and sofas—all this the raw material for the

construction of the shacks. Like the asylum itself, the place feeds off what the city rejects.

People vanish. They leave a bar with the authorities and are never seen again. They leave their homes on an errand and never return. They go to a meeting and never come back. They are waiting at a bus stop and never arrive at their assumed destination. In the late 1990s, people began keeping lists of the disappeared. One such list hit 914 before the effort was abandoned out of fear. None of these lists covered very many years. Nor did any of the list makers ever think their work was a complete tally. No one really knows how many people vanish. It is not safe to ask, and it is not wise to place a call to the authorities.

Still, we love the hard look of numbers. So murders are tallied, and for fifteen years, until the bloodshed of 2008, Juárez reliably produced two to three hundred official murders a year. Of course, skeletons periodically turn up on the edge of town, and these do not enter the totals. And once in a great while—the FBI announcement of mass graves in Juárez in December 1999, the publicity by the the DEA over a death house in January 2004—homes are found where people are taken, murdered, and buried. Each time such a house of death is revealed, there is a great to-do, a sense of something extraordinary coming into the light of day. People always say they are shocked, the neighbors always say they noticed nothing amiss, the press always says the authorities are digging, digging, digging and will soon get to the bottom of things. Every effort is made to keep this extraordinary moment within the realm of order and to process the corpses so that numbers and structure can be felt and touched.

Forensic experts huddle in these digs at death houses. They have no names, and their bodies appear in the published images, but not their faces. There are few, if any, reports of their findings. They are the costume of order more than the substance of hard facts. For that matter, the various elements of law enforcement at these special charnel houses appear in the newspaper wearing masks. Only the cadaver dogs show up with clear faces.

And then public notices of the death house and its bodies vanish from the papers much as the dead vanished from the city itself. Memory ebbs, and the cavalcade of the vanished and of the dead disappears from sight and becomes some ghost column winding through the city streets that no one professes to see. Or the dead sit in the cafés where they had their last cup of coffee, belly up to the bar where they had that last drink, huddle in the dust and wind at bus stops where they awaited that last ride.

Sometimes, the vanished never reappear. Normally, there are killings because of the drug industry, and these executed souls are found at dawn on city streets like the litter that slaps the eye in the morning light after a boisterous fiesta. But there are periods when no such bodies appear with hands tied with duct tape and a bullet through the skull. There is no way the drug industry with its implicit contractual protocols can take a holiday from death. It is simply impossible in a multibillion-dollar industry that has no standing at law to collect debts or enforce discipline without murder. Sometimes the vanished never even become a name on a list. People fear reporting their missing kin—in one instance, twelve bodies were dug up at a death house and not a single person slumbering in that ground had been reported missing.

So, there are clearly two ghost patrols out and about in the city. Those murdered and secretly disposed of by the drug industry, and those who vanish for whatever reason and are never reported.

During the season of violence that swept through the city and brought me into the circle of Miss Sinaloa, I stopped at a convenience market to buy a bottle of water. Taped below a pay phone was the photograph of a cop with the date he went missing, his name and a phone number where someone waited for a message about his fate. I thought the city's magical powers had reached a new level when even the police must seek anonymous tips to find one of their own. Just down the road was a huge billboard soliciting recruits for the very same police force, an image of a man in a helmet who wore a black mask and carried a machine gun.

Vanishing here is always a possibility and it gives the city a special aura. Kidnappings are frequent, but they at least mean someone wants to return

the missing and is acting in a rational manner where a human has a value in money and a feasible transaction is possible. Vanishing means a page left half-written, a tale never fully told. It is more final than execution because it means not simply being murdered but being erased from any real memory or participation in the human community.

Certainly, the city police have become alert to this vanishing thing. Traditionally, they must leave their guns at the station house when they finish their shift. But now they are publicly complaining about this practice that forces them to travel home like any other citizen, without a weapon. They say this policy is now unacceptable.

The avenue curves down by the river and enters the zone in the southeast where Juárez has been migrating to flee its moldering core. The car flows past the giant flagpole erected in the 1990s by then President Ernesto Zedillo so that a gigantic Mexican flag would gently wash across the face of El Paso, but the Mexican park later became a popular dumping ground for bodies.

Finally, the neighborhood looms where the army has detained twenty-one men and seized guns, ammo, and other tools of the trade. It is a "narcolandia," a place where those in the life build their dreams and live out time until their mostly early deaths. The streets have names like Michigan, Alaska, Arizona, Oregon, a roll call of states in the nation just across the river. Mansions rise up—one is three stories of gray concrete with the orange girders still uncovered and is a work in progress, maybe six thousand square feet or more. Next door, workmen install expensive wooden doors on yet another mansion. The men glare. No one is to come here unless they belong here. My friend will not come here alone, and as he drives down the *calles*, he cautions me about taking notes.

Many of the new houses are for sale—perhaps sudden promotions have prompted the owners to new quarters. But there is a second possibility. The killings constantly create vacancies. Just as some architects—and the rising narco-class is a keen market for architects in a city of grinding poverty—have vanished after finishing narco-mansions. No one asks why.

It is a blue-sky day and the sun hits empty streets. No one is out in the yards, no one is walking, no one is visible at all. It looks like a ghost town, but there is a constant feeling of being watched. In the 1990s, a photographer from the local newspaper vanished after taking images in such a district. When he appeared weeks later after his colleagues publicly protested, he had little to say. Except that it was a misunderstanding because he had simply on impulse decided to go to the beach in Sinaloa. A yellow sign tacked to a telephone pole advertises tarot card readings and amulets. This is a world of change and random fates.

We come upon it in a cul-de-sac, two and half stories, gray with dark trim. A black, wrought-iron fence protects the front. The gate and door are padlocked. A colored flyer has been stuffed between the bars touting a furniture sale. This house is empty. Here the military found twenty-one men, a lot of arms, and what they claim was a factory filling little bags with drugs. The supply of drugs was modest. But in Mexico, seized drugs have a way of disappearing once in the custody of the authorities. Sometimes, tons vanish—in the 1990s a full-bodied jet filled with cocaine somehow fell into federal hands, and yet, within a week, by some kind of sorcery, the load was being peddled on the streets of Los Angeles, according to U.S. agents.

The houses are orange, red, green, yellow, blue, and purple, the columns rise at the porticos, the huge windows are tinted and some soar two stories. The garages stare out like blank eyes. Large dogs bark from within. This is "narcotecture," the three-dimensional statement of the dreams of the poor who now prosper. There is no real effort to comprehend the scale of the business here. Officially, the population of Juárez is 1.2 million (or 1.4 million or 1.6 million—even something as simple as a census is hard to pin down here), but all urban populations are pegged by the federal government at a low number so that tax monies that are repatriated to the various cities can be kept low. In the case of Juárez, the population is possibly 2 million, but this is an estimate, just as no accurate map of the sprawling city and its squatter colonias exists. But taking this number of 2 million and making a conservative estimate that 5 percent of the population lives off the drug industry suggests that the

minimum number of the people in the life and their dependents is one hundred thousand. By the mid-1990s, conservative students figured 30 to 40 percent of the local economy ran on laundered drug money—others set the figure at more like 60 to 70 percent.

Tijuana, a city officially at around 2 million, is credited with lower drug usage than Juárez. A recent study found over twenty thousand retail drug outlets in Tijuana, mainly cocaine and heroin. In Juárez, there are at least as many such venues. The peddlers earn three hundred dollars a week, there tend to be three shifts, so let's posit for Juárez twenty-five thousand outlets (a conservative estimate) and figure a payroll of seventy-five thousand retailers, each earning three hundred dollars a week. This amounts to a bigger payroll than that earned by the two hundred thousand factory workers earning on average seventy-five dollars a week. And of course, the real money is not in the retail peddlers but in the organizations that control them and import and package their products. This is the economy of the city. This is supply-side economics flooring the killing ground.

The city is studded with narco-McMansions. They have bright colors and often feature domes with brilliant tiles. They are the reward for work.

The work is constant and wearing. The city of Juárez has a monument to fallen officers on a traffic circle, and suddenly that list appeared taped to it, naming cops who would die.

A few days later, four cops on the second list were killed. Forty cops have left the force since the first of the year. In February, a drive-by shooting at the house of a dead cop was accompanied by yet another list taped to the building. This list was not made public. But the police announced they would no longer be answering calls but preferred to stay in their station houses.

All this notice will vanish, that is what happens in this city. When the migration north was just beginning to pick up in 1993, the line between El Paso and Juárez was where the first real effort was made to block Mexicans, an operation that became the source for all the notions of a massively beefed-up Border Patrol. When Amado Carrillo was running a cartel that hauled in $250 million a week in the mid-1990s, Juárez was barely a speck in the mind

of the American government or media. When he used the same private banker at Citigroup in New York as the then-president of Mexico, this, too, was of no interest. When the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) passed and went plowing into the lives of millions like a greed-seeking missile in the early 1990s, this city that pioneered using cheap labor to bust unions and steal American jobs continued to be ignored. Only brief flickers of interest in the dead women of Juárez captures any American audience, and that, too, is a hit-or-miss thing, something that lives in the limbo land of issues rather than of solutions or actions. Only as the killing of 2008 accelerates does Juárez get new press attention and finally draw attention to a simple fact: It is dying.

On February 26, Ricardo Chacon was in Ciudad Chihuahua, the capital of the state. He'd left Juárez even though he was second in command of the unit once headed by Comandante Lozano, the man who survived a fifty-one round barrage and was now hiding in a U.S. hospital. Chacon planned to quit his job. Instead, he was shot in the head and killed. Two days later, Juárez officials decide to address the problem of crime. They launch a campaign against jaywalking in the city.

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WINNER OF THE SOUTHWEST BOOK AWARD
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Ciudad Juárez lies just across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas. A once-thriving border town, it now resembles a failed state and has the highest murder rate in the world.

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The recipient of a Lannan Literary Award for Nonfiction and the Sidney Hillman Award, CHARLES BOWDEN is the author of many books including *Down by the River* and *Some of the Dead Are Still Breathing*. He writes for *Harper's, GQ, Mother Jones, New York Times Book Review,* and *Aperture* among others. Bowden lives in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

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