The thrill of being here: a letter from Fortin de las Flores, Mexico

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May 9, 1998

Dear P——:

Morrey says I should tell you that we’re thrilled to be here, and though we’re certainly happy, I’m not sure I’d express it quite as she does. We love Mexico, of course; that goes without saying, but the experience is not exactly what we had imagined. For one thing, the penetrating pain in my lower back persists. In fact, it has worsened. Two days ago I decided to give in to the urging of my wife’s Spanish tutor Marciela, who is a zealous proselyte of acupuncture. She’s been preaching its virtues for weeks and was scandalized when I let fall in conversation that I’d actually visited a huesero, or bone man, out on the road to Huatusco. Apparently the possibility that my afflicted soul might be snatched out of her own grasp by a village sorcerer was too much to bear.

“Doctor Cabada has a remarkable reputation here in Veracruz,” she said. “She’s one of those practitioners with a sixth sense. When she’s diagnosing your disorder, you feel as if your skin were transparent. She can see right through you.”

I must have looked skeptical because she quickly added, “She’s also a very attractive woman—a petite beauty who can work miracles with needles.”

Marciela is a clever woman, I’ll give her that, but given my experiences over the course of the past year, one would think I’d put up a stiffer resistance. I’ve had, after all, my share of disappointments. The expectation that I would easily adjust to the Mexican university system, for instance, has proven overly optimistic. I’ve had an especially hard time dealing with the students’ irrepressible “sociability” during exams and lectures. Morrey and I have also had to abandon the romantic vision of ourselves as participants in the daily rhythms of the town. Our house—the grand rural villa we inherited from our exchange partners—is well designed for a manor lord, but not for anyone who actually wants to share in the life of the community. Isolated four kilometers from the central zócalo, we’re feeling like
gringo hacendados, cut off from our neighbors and above our proper station in the world. Those disappointments, of course, are matters of the spirit. We were hoping to slide easily into the inner life of this culture, but can't shake the sense of ourselves as awkward outsiders, unable to penetrate its simplest mysteries.

My body seems to have let me down in other ways, degenerating vertebrae being but one example. Another, recently, has been its wilting response to the weather. At the moment the entire state of Veracruz is suffering from a heat wave that has broken all records for the month of May—an effect, I am told, of La Niña. One expects such conditions in the miasmatic port, where visiting Europeans died of malaria, typhoid, tuberculosis, and "the black vomit" in astounding numbers until early in the twentieth century; but the brochures paint temperate Fortín de las Flores quite differently. At three thousand feet above sea level and some eighty miles inland, the village is said to enjoy a "cool, humid climate" that is "privileged" and "completely different" from that of the tropical zone along the gulf coast. Recently, that difference has not been much in evidence. My students, the vegetation, the buildings themselves seem to be giving off a green steam.

Yesterday I arrived at the address Marciela had jotted down on her business card and pressed into my hand. It was located on a dingy thoroughfare in Córdoba, the larger urban center of which Fortín de las Flores is now a kind of suburb. The street was choked by rickety black fume-spewing buses and lined with those ubiquitous shops specializing in muffler replacements and tire retreads. Although it was late afternoon, the temperature was hovering around 100 degrees. The humidity was suffocating. On the bottom steps of the narrow stairwell leading to Doctor Cabada’s office, a damp young girl sat playing with her shoestrings. I asked her if this was the acupuncturist’s address. She looked up at me vaguely and shrugged her shoulders, then returned to the shoestrings. I continued my ascent. On each step I felt a slight but perceptible increase in the temperature. By the time I reached the top, it must have been near 110, perhaps higher. At the end of the stairwell was a wide, dimly lit hallway with five or six doorways. The first one was open and appeared to be an office supplies shop. A fat balding man in shirt sleeves sat limply on a metal chair just inside the door. Behind him on scantily stocked shelves were boxes of paper and bundled stacks of pencils. I walked on and stopped two doors further down at an opening covered by a locked iron grate. A sign hanging over it read, Doctora Cabada, Medicina General y Acupuntura. It appeared that the hallway was doing double duty as a reception room, for next to the door a middle-aged woman, obviously waiting for someone, was sitting on
a cheap pink sofa, slip-covered in transparent plastic. A wobbling ceiling fan was whirring away ferociously over her head, uselessly stirring the soupy air.

"Feels like the building is on fire," I said.

The woman patted her bouffant, which had been pushed sideways by the hot wind of the fan. "I hardly noticed," she replied wryly, rolling her eyes toward the ceiling.

I took the only other seat in the hall, a white plastic lawn chair. Moments later a small figure of indeterminate sex and age materialized behind the iron grate and pulled the clanky levers that unlocked it. The figure ushered the middle-aged woman into the interior, then turned back toward me. It smiled, winked, and held up its right hand, squinting through thumb and index finger, as if to say, "Just a wee bit of time, my little man, and then we'll come for you, too." She retreated into the darkness. The grate clanged shut. The locks were thrown back into place with lots of metallic clicking and clacking.

For the next fifteen minutes I sat in the silence of the hallway staring dumbly at the walls, trying, without much success, to avoid the oppressive sensation of the stifling air by withdrawing into my own skin. The heat, the humidity, the furnace-like exhalation from the overhead fan stupefied my senses. I felt as though I were sitting in the midst of a mirage: The walls, chairs, windows appeared glistening, wavy, and moist. Trying to pull myself together, I finally opened my satchel and extracted the book I had brought along, Jorge Ibargüengoitia's Las Muertas. It was not much help. I staggered through a paragraph, my mind so addled by the heat that I found myself drifting hazily into the scene described by the narrator. He is standing on a hot dusty street in a small Mexican pueblo, watching a woman approach whom he thinks he recognizes as his one-time girlfriend Serafina. The sun is beating down. He is not sure it is actually her. His knees are trembling, and he wonders to himself if he still feels love. By the time he recognizes her, it is too late. She walks directly to him and opens her mouth as if to smile, revealing the broken tooth. Then she slaps him hard across the face, turns around, and walks away. "Our relationship was like that," he says.

At precisely this moment in my reverie, the odd-looking figure guarding the entrance to Doctor Cabada's inner chambers suddenly reappeared, quietly ushering the middle-aged woman back into the hallway. The latter nodded at me and made her way toward the stairwell with as much dignity as the temperature and her teetering bouffant would allow. My senses still dull, I watched as she disappeared down the stairs. The small figure then crooked a finger and beckoned me into the adjoining room. I wiped my face, stood up, and followed her into an office.
It became almost immediately apparent that this was Doctor Cabada herself, not an assistant, as I had first thought. True to Marciela’s description, she was most certainly petite, and—if one’s taste happens to favor the bizarre—she might also be described as attractive. Her proportions, however, were all askew. She was tiny, but even so, her head was undersized for the rest of her person; she bore a peculiar resemblance to those unfortunate children who suffer from premature aging. She had a rabbit-toothed smile and a child’s haircut—a kind of pixie, I guess. Instead of the usual white getup of the medical profession, she was wearing a sleeveless, open-necked white blouse and baggy black shorts, out of which protruded a pair of remarkably knobby knees and thin bare legs. Her feet were shod in earth sandals. So completely did she contradict the American medical type, I knew I would like her. The doctor was well under five feet in height, but she immediately leveled our relationship by asking me to sit down on one of the folding chairs. Standing, she looked at me with that expression of patronizing attentiveness that doctors all over the world are undoubtedly taught in medical school.

As she asked me perfunctory questions about my dolores, I looked around the office, doing my best to ignore what felt like steam rising from my body. The walls were covered by framed certificados de asistencia, diploma-like documents that provide certified proof of attendance at professional conferences and workshops. There must have been forty of them in the small office. Perhaps in reaction to this battalion of official authorizations, I felt compelled to present myself as an actual person rather than as a mere patient. When she finished jotting down my history, I asked her questions about her work. She had studied, she said, in the medical faculty at the national university in Mexico City and at an acupuncture institute in Paris. Her card, whose tiny logo featured the head of Pacal, the seventh-century Mayan king of Palenque, also indicated a degree from Veracruz University in Jalapa.

“What you need to know,” she insisted, “is that there are two styles of acupuncture. One is practiced by the Chinese, who originated the method thousands of years ago, and the other, using a more scientific approach, is practiced by the French. When I say ‘scientific,’ I mean, of course, ‘scientific’ from the Occidental point of view.” Doctor Cabada allowed as how she herself follows the French school.

The cost of this first session was 140 pesos, or about seventeen dollars. That included the price of the needles. If I go back, it will only cost me ten dollars per session. I had the option of keeping the needles myself for the duration of the treatments or leaving them with Doctor Cabada.
“Once we finish,” she explained, “there is a special protocol for their disposal. If we are not careful, they may end up pricking one of the pepineros who live in the municipal dump.”

I knew the pepineros. Driving past the big waste sites, I had seen groups of these indigents picking through the heaps of rubbish for food and who knows what else, surrounded by hordes of raucous sea gulls and pustulous buzzards. Doctor Cabada’s solicitude on their behalf seemed rather quixotic, considering the hazards they daily endured, but I had read once that in Mexico City, where there are hundreds of them, they are well organized into unions or syndicates, and their leaders and votes have a significant impact on city politics.

After our interview the doctor ushered me into a large central room with several small chambers off to the right side. Through an open door at the end of the room, I could see another large space with a Persian rug and some floor pillows. She looked at me with a benign smile. “It’s time to go to sleep,” she announced. “Lie face down on the bed in that alcove over there. I’ll be in shortly.”

I walked into the wrong room.

“Not that one,” she scolded. “This one over here.”

I backtracked and entered the room she indicated with her finger. The air inside was not moving, in spite of another slowly churning ceiling fan. A short examination cot, whose far end was tilted upward, took up almost all of the available floor space. Its imitation leather surface was covered by an ill-fitting, rumpled, contoured sheet and a flattened pillow. Someone—perhaps the woman with the skewed bouffant—had obviously occupied it very recently. I gave the sheet a tug to pull out the wrinkles, but it and the pillow flew onto the floor in a heap. Scooping them up, I managed to put the sheet back on upside down, then flipped it over again, hoping that Doctor Cabada wasn’t watching. When I tried lying down on the cot with my head on the higher, pillow end, pain shot up my back and down my legs.

I got off the cot and turned around, letting my head and arms hang over the edge. It was an awkward position. My legs and size 13 feet—gargantuan by Mexican standards—did not fit. I was forced to spread my legs apart, bend my knees, and prop my feet on the wall. Uncomfortably conscious of the lack of dignity this posture afforded, I announced to her that I was ready.

“By the way,” I said, “I’m wearing an orthopedic girdle.”

“That’ll have to come off first,” she answered briskly as she entered the room.

I struggled down from the cot again, removed the brace, and wrestled myself laboriously back into position. Once there, Doctor Cabada tugged my T-shirt up
around my neck, lowered my khakis a few inches at the waist, and rolled my pants legs up to the knees. It occurred to me that I would have been more comfortable with fewer clothes on, but besides dreading the torments of getting up again, I wasn't sure that near nudity was acceptable. I could recall an incident a few years earlier, in Istanbul, when I had tried to move my loin towel while getting a body scrub in a Turkish bath. My scrubber, an impressively mustachioed man with bushy eyebrows, slapped my hand with such indignation that I felt like a sexually deviant five-year-old. The lumps of damp, bunched up clothing would have to remain where they were.

Thus prepared, I awaited the penetrating needles with some apprehension. I had seen them in Doctor Cabada's office. The only other set I'd ever laid eyes on were the ones used in the infamous acupuncture scene in Emmanuelle, a movie I first watched with hypnotic, if not wholly chaste, attention nearly twenty-five years ago. It had firmly fixed my impression of acupuncture and perhaps played some small role in my acquiescence to Marciela's urging that I see Doctor Cabada. If it had, the reality that now lay before me bore little resemblance to its celluloid representation. I certainly looked nothing like the patient in that film, a Dutch actress named Sylvia Kristel who played the restless young wife of a French diplomat. Nor would anyone take Córdoba for Bangkok, where the movie had been shot. Most significantly, the needles displayed before me in Doctor Cabada's office were a good deal less impressive than the foot-long variety that had dangled so enticingly from the various erogenous zones of Ms. Kristel's exquisitely naked body. If there was any resemblance at all between the two scenes, it must lie in the appearance of the two acupuncturists. The one in the film, if I remembered correctly, was a wizened little Asian man with a wispy gray Fu-Manchu beard. Making allowances for race and gender, his exoticism bore some similarity to that of my diminutive Mexican practitioner.

Doctor Cabada's needles, though less impressive than their movie counterparts, still got my attention. They were around two inches long, just about the same length, in fact, as the lepidopterist's pins that I had used as an adolescent to fix butterflies on balsa mounting boards. The first inch, the part that penetrates the skin and enters the body, is made up of a very fine stainless steel wire. The second inch, also of stainless steel, is a bit thicker. It looks like a very tightly coiled spring, and it terminates in a kind of pin head. Like the much larger ones I recalled protruding from Ms. Kristel, these needles are very flexible. To Westerners like myself, the idea of being cured by mere penetration (as opposed to injection)
holds some of the fascination of a magician’s trick, the one in which the assistant, always a voluptuous blond in a tight suit, stretches out in a wooden cabinet that the master illusionist then transfixes with swords. The blades enter the box, first from the left, then from the front, then from the right. The blades are retracted. There is no blood. The audience is left gasping. It is, I suppose, a kind of baptism: a death by sword, a coffinlike box for the interment, a resurrection. The blond lady emerges from the enclosure like Lazarus from his tomb. Her gleaming white teeth shine out at the astonished onlookers. She throws her hands high in the air, twisting her wrists outward, crossing her legs slightly at the knee. She spins around, demonstrating to everyone’s satisfaction the integrity of her organism. She appears more vital, more vibrant with life, renewed.

Perhaps this now trite magician’s trick is, in fact, simply the residual shell of a once powerful rite, the sensationalistic remains of religious rituals and miraculous interventions that once possessed such a compelling hold on the human imagination. In acupuncture I vaguely glimpse the mystic Asian origins of this familiar sideshow ruse. Here, there is no sleight-of-hand. The blade pierces the skin, enters the flesh, penetrates the body. As I dangled face down across her cot, Doctor Cabada explained to me that some treatments in fact require the complete transfixing of a body part.

“In those cases,” she said, “needles are inserted from both sides of the affected body part until their points are touching in the middle. The method is commonly used to treat foot problems.”

The alarm that this image evoked was only partly allayed by the conviction that my feet, though large, were in fine shape. I asked her how acupuncture is supposed to work. Doctor Cabada continued in the same accommodating tone.

“Acupuncture rearranges the body’s different energy fields,” she began. And on the apparent assumption that such talk would be intelligible to me, she explained the curative mechanism in terms that relied heavily on metaphor.

“The body,” she said, “contains two thousand or so acupuncture points that are all connected by pathways called ‘meridians’ or qi [she pronounced it chee]. These qi conduct energy between the body surface and the internal organs and regulate the body’s yin and yang—positive and negative forces. Acupuncture helps to maintain the proper balance of both. Some practitioners say that it works by creating tiny bridges between blocked energy pathways; others claim that it blocks pain impulses as they travel through the nervous system.”
This clarification provided a picture of the process that I could almost follow, but it left a lot of questions unanswered: Are these pathways visible in the same way that the nervous or circulatory systems are? How are the blocked energy pathways detected? By what series of steps did the first acupuncturists arrive at the decision that impaling was sound medical practice? To mollify me, Doctor Cabada offered a more or less Western explanation to supplement the poetic one: “The needles may also release endorphins,” she said, “chemical substances that anesthetize the patient to pain.”

Though not entirely satisfied, this made a bit more sense to me.

For the next twenty minutes, Doctor Cabada worked assiduously at “situating” the needles. When she put one in, I could feel it penetrate the skin. It was like a mosquito bite, and I had to repress the urge to smack at it with my hand; but once that urge had passed, I felt almost nothing at all. As she was doing this, we continued talking. My head hung over the edge of the cot, my hands alternately pinned under my chin, protecting it from the hard edge of the table, or pressed against the floor, supporting the weight of my shoulders, arms, and head. The ambient heat did not help matters. Sweat was collecting on my nose and dripping onto the linoleum floor. My glasses were fogged and had slid to the end of my nose. Every so often I’d try to push them back up the bridge, but given my position, this was a Sisyphean task. Other than my hands, the floor, and the little puddle of sweat, the only things I had to look at were Doctor Cabada’s feet, which I now noticed were covered by a peculiar dark stain. Perhaps they were simply dirty; under the circumstances it was hard to tell, and I decided, in any event, not to look too carefully.

Many people—especially in the United States—complain that doctors thrive on the inequality that exists in their relationships with patients. Certainly it is true that intimate examinations of the body confer on the examiner a power that is easily abused. Is not this spectating itself a kind of figurative penetration? Seeing Doctor Cabada’s feet at such close range, however, reminded me that the spectating that takes place on these occasions can be a two-way affair, and although patients are barred by decorum from keeping a chart or making comments during these “physicals,” nothing prevents them from taking note mentally.

It is the same for all professions that service the body. When I have my hair cut, I repress the urge to inspect the fleshy undersides of my barber’s arms as they hover and wobble inches from my face. When my eyes are examined, I refrain from studying the curious scar my optician sports just below her widow’s
peak (no doubt the mark of a childhood accident). And after my teeth have been scraped and cleaned, I try not to scrutinize my dentist’s nostrils during his brief peek inside my mouth, though I cannot help noticing how his respiration vibrates the coarse black hairs that protrude from those orifices. Here now was another occasion for polite forbearance: I averted my eyes from too penetrating an investigation of my acupuncturist’s lower extremities. The patient-doctor relationship requires mutual discretion and confidentiality.

Closing my eyes to avoid the sight of Doctor Capitán’s mottled feet, I drifted back to the memory of my dentist’s nostrils. In my drowsy state, their coarse and quivering hairs served, oddly, as an image of the needles I could only imagine bushing out on my back. Such strange orifices in themselves, the nostrils have in their very name a token of penetration. The word derives from two Old English roots, *nusu*, or nose, and *thirl*, or thrill. The nostril is a “nose-thrill.” Originally, the verb “to thrill” meant to pierce or run through the body with a weapon such as a spear or lance. A *thirl*, or thrill, when used as a noun, referred to the hole produced by that weapon. Anglo-Saxon warriors, as I recalled from my readings of the ancient sagas, were always “thrilling” their enemies in this fashion. Later, of course, we forgot about the spears and lances, and the verb came to be associated only with nonmaterial objects: One is said to have a “thrill of emotion” pass through one’s body. We still sense the original connection, I suppose, in *thrillers*, the word for novels and movies whose plots move ineluctably toward the plunging of a sharp object—a knife, a spear, an ice pick, a pitchfork—through the thin envelop of human skin. The victim is thrilled by a dagger; the spectator feels a thrill of horror as he watches. Nowadays, however, the original meaning of the term has fallen altogether out of use, and when we use it in the second, more abstract, sense, we often drop the prepositional qualifiers as redundant, speaking merely of the “thrill” itself. But surely we lose something when our metaphors die, and reminding ourselves of the origins of the word recalls us to a truth of our own nature, reviving the idea that having an object penetrate us, pass through us, is at once horrifying and intensely stimulating.

In Mexico, at least, the fascination of such penetrations is alive and well. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the national television networks’ nearly obsessive replaying of *every corrido* (goring) that takes place in the country’s bullrings; or in the custom, when the perpetrator of a horrific knifing is apprehended, of displaying his sullen photo, bloody weapon in hand, on the pages of even the most respectable newspapers. It is also evident in the awe with which
many Mexican Catholics regard the bloodiest depictions of the Crucifixion, always on view in the country's churches and cathedrals; and more than anywhere else, in the annual rituals that take place on Good Friday. Clearly, for many Mexicans, some of the power of that day's events is derived precisely from contemplating the piercing of Jesus' hands, feet, and side during his final agony. I thought of conversations I had had with a woman in Puebla during Holy Week. She knew the men in a small nearby village who play the role of Jesus in the annual reenactment of the Passion, allowing their hands and feet to be transfixed by the nails that hold them to the cross. Although Mexico is famous for such reenactments—the one in Iztapalapa, for example, draws more than a million visitors a year—very few of them include hand and foot impaling, and you won't find any of those that do listed on the usual tourist routes. Mexicans, however, know about them and are remarkably tolerant of them, even when they think they are the product of peasant superstition and fanaticism.

The men chosen to play the role of Jesus go through a period of intense physical and spiritual preparation, for besides the nails, they are subjected to whipplings, beatings, the crown of thorns, and the march down the Via Dolorosa, the Path of Sorrow. On their shoulders, they must bear the two hundred-pound cross for more than a mile, and, imitating each step that Jesus took, they reenact the three moments when he falters and falls. Many of them involuntarily collapse more times than the script calls for. Some have to be helped in the final stages of the journey by their neighbors, who act out the role of Roman centurions. The candidates for the part of Jesus must meet strict requirements regarding height, age, marital status, and moral stature. For those who are chosen, the role brings with it the reverence of the entire community.

Reverenced or not, it was hard for me to imagine them going to the local hardware store on Maundy Thursday to pick up the spikes that would fasten them to their wooden racks the following day. But as it turns out, there is a mundane aspect to their preparations: The nails used to crucify these modern day Cristos are as special as the acupuncture needles Doctor Cabada uses to pierce my back and legs. They are sterilized stainless steel nails made particularly for the occasion. They are, as it were, medical-grade hand and foot spikes.

Because these Good Friday piercings are associated with religious mysteries, one would think that they might carry a wholly spiritual charge. But for Mexican Catholicism, the primary significance of the penetrations appears to be what they tell us about our corporeal life, the body's aptness for sin, suffering, and sacrifice.
A mere sack for our souls, our flesh stands ready at every moment to manifest its predilection for corruption. Poke a hole in its envelope, and the spirit is apt to squirt out like the obfuscating ink of a frightened cuttlefish.

Dangling head down over the edge of Doctor Cabada’s cot, trying to avoid looking at her peculiar feet, I had plenty of time to consider the idea of transfixed bodies. The history of my own partial and complete transfixions flitted sequentially before my closed eyes. As a boy, I had enthusiastically suffered the usual catastrophes. In grade school, I accidentally punched a staple through my finger. I remember staring at it dumbfounded, thinking, *This hurts like the dickens.* But what left the most lasting impression was the vision of a real object sticking out of both sides of my finger. The image seemed pregnant with ineffable meaning. As a nine-year-old, I had once tried to cut through a thick piece of hemp rope with a pocketknife. Sawing away, I finally yanked the blade through the last fibers and into my face, neatly sticking it sideways through my nose. Perhaps it was this experience that sensitized me in later life to the suggestive etymology of the nose-thrill. A few years later, on a hunting trip with my older brother, I had chased a wounded pheasant down an Iowa ditch and up into a partially harvested cornfield. Crashing through the corn rows, I ran full tilt onto an electric fence stake sticking up at a forty-five-degree angle among the broken stalks. The steel rod ripped through my jeans and embedded itself an inch or two in my thigh. I was impressed by this feat (for so my adolescent mind construed it) and always bore the scar it left with special pride, giving it precedence over other, similar proofs of adolescent derring-do.

Although I was given the usual childhood vaccinations, and was therefore familiar with syringes, my first significant experience of penetration perpetrated by an agent other than myself occurred when I was twenty-one. It happened during what should have been a harmless enough instance of what the police blotter calls “theft from an unoccupied automobile.” The automobile belonged to my girlfriend, and it was parked on 86th Street between Madison and 5th Avenues in Manhattan. Looking out a window of the thirtieth-floor flat we were visiting, we saw a man removing items from the car, which was stuffed with everything I owned, en route to a new home in Vermont. With a rush of adrenaline, I jumped into the elevator, ran out into the street, and confronted the would-be thief. After a few minutes of absurd debate over his actual intentions—he insisted he was simply putting things back in that a couple of black kids had been in the process of stealing—he ended the discussion by pulling out a switchblade and plunging
it toward my chest. Reflexively I threw up my hands, and the flashing metal went through one of them—in one side and out the other—instead of into a more vital part of my person. The effect of this experience was unlike the earlier ones. Instead of the absurd sense of personal accomplishment that had accompanied the prior events, I suddenly, and for the first time, had a powerful, almost incapacitating, consciousness of vulnerability and mortality. I’ve never decided whether this consciousness, which I retain to this day, is a neurotic response to the assault or simply a heightened awareness of existential reality.

These were not, of course, pleasant memories to call up on the acupuncturist’s cot, but they came spontaneously and unbidden, and they reminded me that penetration, fascinating as it may be as an idea, is rarely experienced as anything other than traumatic. Breaching the body’s packaging has its consequences. Jesus on the cross, Saint Sebastian with his arrows, or the dozens of other pierced and bloody saints adorning the walls of churches all over Mexico offered vivid images of mortal penetrations. Why are the Iberians and Mesoamericans so fascinated by the transfixed body? Is it simply morbidity? Or could it have some connection to a loftier, more ethereal human desire? There is something, after all, in each of us that desires penetration, both to be penetrated and to penetrate the other. Lovers, of course, know all about these desires, and for millennia the probing of sexual organs has stood as the preeminent metaphor for more spiritual forms of human merging, the real possibility of ecstatic rather than traumatic invasions of the self. But beyond our sexual play, we sense the existence of other, more mystical doorways into and out of ourselves. If Doctor Cabada is right, acupuncturists have identified over two thousand of these mysterious portals. Is the fascination with fatal penetrations, then, so separate a thing from the erotic and spiritual? At bottom, the desire for penetration—or the fascination with its representation—reflects our resistance to the confinement of our own identities, the limitations of the human condition, the solipsism of individuality.

I confess to you, P__, it is a good part of the reason for my presence in Mexico: the probably impossible dream of true self-transcendence, the merging of oneself inside another. From the moment Morrey and I crossed the border, I have had fantasies of penetrating Mexico, but I have also wanted to be penetrated. How does one do either without violating or being violated? As a foreigner, my presence in this country is always tentative. As a gringo, my national identity arouses, no doubt, a certain degree of resistance among some Mexicans. They have never
forgotten, as we Northerners have almost all forgotten, the casual assumption of superiority that has underlain so many U.S. invasions of their national body, not to mention the outright amputation and theft of almost half their territory. Though our countries have lain side by side in an uneasy embrace for nearly two hundred and fifty years, the relationship has almost always been a violent one, the tip of Texas thrusting down past the bent leg of Tamaulipas like a bull’s engorged cock. Under the circumstances, I’d be suspicious, too.

Very recently we have been reminded of the tenuousness of our presence here by daily headlines announcing the government’s decision to begin vigorous enforcement of the Mexican Constitution’s infamous Article 33: “The Executive Branch of the Union shall possess the exclusive right to expel immediately from the national territory, without benefit of trial, any foreigner whose presence in the country it deems inappropriate. Foreigners shall not be permitted to intervene, in any form, in the political affairs of the country.” Over the course of the past year—really, ever since the Zapatista uprising of January 1, 1994—the Zedillo administration has been extremely sensitive to, and worried about, the role of outside visitors in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been sending their representatives to those areas to observe the administration’s handling of the current phase of the Zapatista revolution. On April 13 this year, just five days after we ourselves had passed through Ocosingo and some of the other Chiapas hot spots, twelve internationals, mostly European, were arrested there and expelled from the country on the basis of Article 33. More—eighteen, I think—have been expelled this month. Mexican immigration officials, clearly acting on orders from higher up, are making it very difficult for the NGOs to do their work here. But every foreigner expelled also represents a diplomatic and public relations going for the administration, which has had an almost impossible job competing for international sympathy with the Zapatistas, who possess virtually no weapons other than Subcomandante Marcos’s remarkable rhetorical skills.

I, however, am no NGO observer. Morrey and I are here teaching English to wealthy Mexicans who couldn’t care less if they learn English, and to a few scholarship students who are actually working at the language and who help us maintain the illusion we’re doing something worthwhile. The rich students see me as an intruder, no doubt: someone who doesn’t understand their culture, their needs, their way of mastering the ropes that will tie them some day more firmly to the power they were born to inherit. And they’re right; every assumption I see them acting on is an education for me. The scholarship kids, by contrast, take to me.
They're serious young people who earnestly believe that they will be rewarded according to their talents. Perhaps they will be right, too, if Mexico's new democratic "opening" is for real.

In the end, I cannot avoid the reality of our relationship. The real learning and giving, from the beginning, has been almost entirely one-sided. For lack of something substantial to offer of my own, I'm reenacting an old gringo tradition. Under cover of helping out, I'm taking. I'm taking the knowledge I've gained of the culture, of the people, of the places I've lived in and visited. I'm taking a new sense of my own collective past. I'm also taking a much needed break from the expectations of my own hectic American life. I'm taking in the spectacle of a country whose agonies and pains I can never fully feel, but whose joys and pleasures I eagerly soak up. In fact, in order to assure our memories of the year-long stay, my wife and I are also taking away a small pickup truckload of physical objects—furniture, pottery, rugs, masks, alcohol, books, tiles—in exchange for our U.S. dollars, which now seem to us as piddling as the hawks-bells and glass beads of the Spanish conquistadors.

Still, apart from the sheer enjoyment of living outside my own culture, apart from the temporary escape from my own life, the serious question for me has always been, How can I be here? And now that I think about it, I guess I can actually ask, "Where's the thrill?" It strikes me as preposterous to think of myself as truly contributing something toward the betterment of Mexico, though it's difficult for teachers these days, wherever they happen to be, to avoid missionary fantasies entirely. The pay for both vocations must be about the same, and one feels comforted by the notion that relative penury represents sacrifice in the service of a higher cause. I am tempted by the same fantasies at home in New Orleans. From one point of view, we're all "in the bush." At the frayed end of the twentieth century, however, no thoughtful person can forget the complicity of uninvited evangelicalism in the pursuit of Mammon and power or the arrogance that so frequently blinds the advocates of a particular salvific path to their own ignorance. In the end, too beset by my own limitations, I know that I am no missionary either.

What my visit to Doctor Cabada's office has given me is a new way to think about being here. Whatever analgesic benefit I derive from the acupuncture, I can take its metaphors with me: borders, bodies, thrills, fields of energy. Nonviolent, bloodless penetrations. It can be done. This is what Walt Whitman understood when he chanted the body electric, the great poet's answer to the eternal problem of individual, bodied, sheathed identity. He knew that the human form is in some
sense a besieged fortress, our selves ensconced behind the walls of our skins. But he also knew that the fortress is ceaselessly subject to an ecstatic betrayal, the skin itself inviting the outside in. For Whitman we are all of us permeable forms, our borders and walls porous. We have only to open our portals to the world, to receive the blade willingly and let it pass on through.

Mine is no callous shell,
I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop.
They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.

It's doubtful that Whitman ever experiencedupuncture, but he certainly wrote about the body as if he had. I like his insistence on the possibility of contact, of feeling, after all, that the skin is such a thin, fragile, penetrable, conducting membrane through which at any moment the other might come rushing.

Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity,
Flames and ether making a rush for my veins,
Treacherous tip of me reaching and crowding to help them,
My flesh and blood playing out lightning to strike what is hardly different from myself . . .

Every time I read those lines from Song of Myself, I am shivered by a nostalgia for some lost contact, some ecstatic crossing of human borders. Perhaps it is partly a reaction to the culture I grew up in, where all the emphasis is on the other side, on the glory of individuality, of uniqueness, distinction, and separation.

Back on the cot, I heard again the drone of the overhead fan, and as I opened my eyes, I could make out Doctor Cabada's sandaled feet shuffling about beneath my nose. My arm had fallen asleep. I tried to move and experienced a very odd sensation in my limbs and back.

"This must look very strange," I murmured to Doctor Cabada, who was hovering over me and busily moving back and forth from one side of the bed to the other.
"Yes, it does," she confirmed. "But it is also very beautiful. The silver of the needles is pretty, and they are all arranged very symmetrically from your neck to your lower calves."
"I must look like a porcupine," I hazarded.
"Yes, a very pretty porcupine."

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She left me there, recommending that I relax as much as possible. Given the heat and my own stupor, this suggestion would have been easy enough to follow had it not been for the extreme discomfort of my position. But I disconnected myself as much as I could from my physical state and lay there half comatose for the allotted thirty minutes. Afterwards, Doctor Cabada returned to inspect my progress. She let her hands play over the needles, and I could feel them undulating back and forth along my spine and legs. It produced a most peculiar feeling. I imagined my back as a field of unmown grass, the wind blowing across the needles, moving them in billowing oceanic waves.

A few minutes later she said it was time to remove the needles, and she began plucking them out, one by one, and placing them with precise fingers in their labeled vial. When she finished, I got to my feet, straightened my clothes, and tried out my body, walking up and down the room as if inspecting a new suit. Sensing that the situation called for tentative physical movement, I stretched my arms above my head and twisted the wrists back and forth. It occurred to me that I looked . . . well, ridiculous, as though I were bungling an ancient rite whose performance required more vigorous belief. Doctor Cabada cocked her small head to the side and asked me how I felt.

"I can't tell," I said.

"You should feel that the pain is lighter," she said helpfully.

"Lighter in what sense?" I asked, visualizing the pain as a sack of grain on my shoulders.

"Less pain," she replied.

"I'm not sure, but I still feel some discomfort on my left side, near the kidney. It aches a little there." I also felt very wrinkled and damp and itchy.

"You'll probably feel a bit worse tomorrow," she said frankly. "This is entirely normal. However, with further treatments, you should expect a gradual lessening of pain. Why don't you come back in seven or eight days, and we'll repeat your treatment for a minimum of four visits?"

"I'd like to," I said. "But unfortunately, I'm leaving the country on the twenty-eighth of the month."

It is already the ninth, but no matter. She told me that telescoping the treatments should make little difference in their effectiveness, and she'd be more than happy to insert the needles every four days to finish a complete regimen before my scheduled departure.
I left my needles with Doctor Cabada and was ushered out the grated doorway. At the end of the hall, the fat man in shirt sleeves remained at his post. At the bottom of the stairwell, the damp young girl had disappeared. I emerged into the still sweltering Córdoba evening. It seemed to me that I felt better. . . .