

Roadside Death Marker

David Porter

I wanted to be your favorite pop song. Jangling guitars and tambourines, Beatle boots and girl group harmonies. Set me on repeat, play me over and over, the chorus you can't shake out of your head.

Jeff, John and I buy Mexican car insurance for the RV in San Ysidro. By ten Tijuana is gritty and gray, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, growling Volkswagens, a bullring by the sea, valleys clotted with the rusted hulls of dead cars. South of Ensenada 1 becomes two lanes, a thousand potholed miles to Cabo San Lucas.

I was the earnest boy, standing on the lawn of the house of the girl he loved. It was snowing. I waited for you to answer the door, the star of a movie about an earnest boy. I wanted to serenade you.

The way you spoke to me when I was yours, breath and spit and heat. You unbuttoned an old red flannel shirt, dropped it to the floor, stepped toward me. The carpet slanted, tumbled you toward me.

Dawn. A breeze slipped through the window, shivered the curtains. You laughed, pulled a sheet to your chin. Tide of air, your morning skin.

We have a twenty-six foot RV, seven surfboards, four wetsuits, three rash guards, one boogie board, five leashes, fifteen bars of surf wax, a television, a VCR, a camcorder, a CD player, ten movies, forty CDs, one copy of *The Magnificent Peninsula*, one copy of *Baja California, A Lonely Planet Travel Survival Kit*, the "Traveler's Reference Map of Mexico, Baja California" and the Surf Reports for Baja Norte and Baja Sur.

Costco before we left California. We have five pounds of pasta, three jars of marinara sauce, two pounds of butter, four pounds of sausage, two gallons of milk, two boxes of regular Captain Crunch, a box of Total, a pound of sugar, four frozen pizzas, two loaves of wheat bread, five pounds of peanut butter, two pounds of strawberry preserves. We have three pounds of Peet's coffee, two cartons of Marlboro

Regulars, a box of matches, two cases of Tecate on ice in a cooler beside the refrigerator.

We have a toaster, a coffee maker, a microwave, a toilet, a shower, a kitchen table and a couch. We have aspirin, Pepto Bismol—liquid and tablet—toothpaste, shampoo, soap, deodorant. I sit on the toilet and watch 1 recede, a black line through the desert.

Above San Agustin Jeff presses the wrong tank control button, evacuates the black water. We leave our shit baking in the road, continue south.

The float of ranchero guitar, Peñafiel bottle caps, flecks of warm water surf wax. Twelve inch crosses painted white, pushed into the dirt alongside 1. Time is heat, sunlight, miles.

I become millenary.

I left you homeless, bereft of the city I was building, where we were driving. The way you thought I twisted beneath the lights in the produce section, flickered, turned into the person who would leave you. A payphone off Route 80 in Nevada, midnight. "I miss you so much," you said. "I hate being away from you."

Old records, piles of paper, traffic on the bridge, the same song on the radio, three times every day since summer started. A glaze of light along the ridges, some reference to a saint.

Why have I been given anything? I can't keep it.

Below Mulege. On the beach at Punta Arena I write I LOVE YOU in zinc oxide between your shoulder blades. Unshuttered and adored, drench you with my mouth and hands.

We could have changed everything down here. Parked in pebbles and dust, bottled water and straw sombreros. We could have taken the sun full on, been extraordinary in the heat and cholla and sand. Realized this was something.

Driving south from Loreto, Ciudad Insurgentes by nightfall. We come over a hill, drop, a stray dog standing in

the middle of our lane. Jeff leans on the horn. The dog turns toward us, its face calm, expectant. Jeff slows and presses the horn again, but the dog doesn't move. Jeff stops five feet from the dog and leans on the horn. The dog walks across the dividing line and stops in the middle of the northbound lane. Jeff accelerates. The road descends, veers left. If we looked back we would only see the road curve up and around, the dog invisible. "That dog's going to get fucking whacked," John says. The road uncoils into straightaway. A truck whips past us in the northbound lane.

I practiced waiting. Stood myself in long lines at the bank, outside movie theaters. I found empty chairs at the dentist's office, sat and stared at my feet—no appointment. I wanted to feel time crippled, watch its pace become moribund, seep into all of my minutes. Feel it decelerate the moment you touched me.

The RV is always low on gas and full of black water. South of Ciudad Constitucion I buy refried beans, salsa, tortillas. I stop playing cassettes, search the radio for ranchero music, Selena. I stop speaking English in the mercados and Pemex stations and RV parks. Jeff and John sit up front smoking Marlboros, drinking Tecates. I watch the Llano de Magdalena through the windows, Galloping Cactus and Century Plants. We drive toward Todos Santos, an RV park south of El Pescadero.

Our roads full of cars, our sky full of planes, my mouth and hands full of you. The world shrinks around me, makes me itch. I want to skip back, rewind, drop the needle at the crackling beginning. I want to slow it down, reverse it, a boy in a straw sombrero beneath a palapa on the beach at San Pedrito. Backwards into the future, a perpetual homesickness.

We could pretend it's dawn, always at the beginning, forever slipping into a morning, the world quiet and waiting. We think we have the future, but we're lined up against the sun. We're going to lose.

We find clean, shoulder-high waves at Playa Los Cerritos. Little kids run up and down the beach kicking soccer balls, riding belly boards, laughing. We surf all afternoon and return to Playa San Pedrito for showers and dinner in the RV park restaurant. I carry my board, razor and

dry clothes to the bathroom. The campground is deserted in the day's last heat.

He's over six feet, blond and burly, carrying a longboard and a bucket. "Eric," he says. We shake hands. He lives in the big trailer below the hills at the north end of the beach. He's been down here three years.

"I'm building a place down by Los Cerritos, no other houses around. I'm waiting for these guys I hired to dig a well for me." He owned supply stores for marijuana growers in Tempe and Long Beach. Grow lights, humidifiers, fertilizer. Mail order. "The FBI kept trying to get my customer lists, close me down. I sold it all to my partner and bailed down here. My kids still live in LA."

"Do you ever miss home?" He shakes his head.

"I hope I'm dead before they wreck this, too."

We give up an afternoon in the water to drive the two hours from San Pedrito to Cabo San Lucas. We drink Coronas and weave our way through No Fear t-shirts, silver rings, painted pottery. Outside the market it's Baskin Robbins, Pizza Hut, Carlos and Charlies, Cabo Wabo. I walk past an American kid crossing Boulevard Marina, silkscreen of a blonde in a bikini with enormous breasts. "Let's see the Japanese build a better one of these."

The postcard you bought me at that place in North Beach, a photograph from the Sixties. A couple walks toward the ocean after sunset, the sky inflamed—inside of a pink grapefruit, skin of a tangerine. He carries a longboard, the lights on a municipal pier glittering behind them. The caption at the bottom reads 'one more time.'

Her hair is long, her arms and legs thin and muscular. The string tying the bottom of her bikini, her flat stomach, the poise of her breasts, she walks into the surf.

I dreamt of California. Wet sand, the darkening sky red and sweet, the cool wet clean of her skin. Stand in the outgoing tide, press yourself against me. Give it to me once, now, while I'm still young. While I'm standing in the surf, waiting.

We stop at a roadside shrine, a small wooden altar painted white, embraced by bougainvillea. Statue of the Madonna, unlit candles, bouquets of red and pink paper roses, the sky the color of your lips when it was cold. St. Patrick's Cathedral, Rockefeller Center, the windows at

Lord & Taylor.

I don't know what other people say to themselves. We live in our own languages now. Our country is finished.

The evening empties itself into the sky, the RV idles. Looking back over these years you'll see a boy driving toward you.

I saw you. I really saw you.

Watch you fade.