

Day of the dead

Over the past two years almost 7,000 people have been slaughtered in a staggeringly brutal turf war between the country's ruthless drug cartels. As the executions spiral out of control, Ed Vulliamy reports from the frontline of one of the world's most lawless areas

Ed VulliamyThe Observer, Sunday 7 December 2008

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Three bodies lie in a Tijuana street during 72 hours of ferocious street battles between drug cartels. Photograph: Sergio Ortiz

As dawn broke over the desert, the body was still hanging beneath the overpass, having been suspended from it - decapitated and dangling by a rope tied around the armpits - at 4.30am. The sun rose, throwing rays like firelight across rush-hour traffic and discarded American school buses carrying workers to sweatshop factories, and it was still there three hours later, swaying, headless, in the cold early morning wind which kicks up dust and cuts like a scalpel though the Mexican border town of Ciudad Juárez, the most dangerous city in the Americas, and probably in the world.

This macabre murder takes the number of executions in this city of 2m people to about 1,300 this year, and the toll across Mexico - with most of the killing concentrated along the border with the US - to about 4,300. The body count is the result of feral slaughter among Mexican narco cartels fighting for the plazas, or corridors, of narcotics flowing into the US.

Since Mexican president Felipe Calderón launched a military counteroffensive against the cartels in December 2006, nearly 7,000 people have been murdered, with many of the victims mutilated, like this man, horribly and carefully, to bequeath some message or threat. Next to their prey this morning - left at the city's busiest highway intersection just as the factory shifts were about to change - the executioners, or sicarios, had hung a sheet on which they had painted a message: Yo Lazaro Flores, apuyo a mi patron, el monta perros - I, Lazaro Flores, served my boss, the dog fucker. Atencion, la linea - Look out, The Line. A crowd, mostly of men, assembles to watch in unsurprised silence as firemen erect ladders in order to wrap the carcass in a sheet, take it down, put it in a red van and drive it away, allowing Juárez to get on with a day that will see another three narco murders before it is out.

The Line is one of the plethora of factions fighting with ever more inventive twists of violence for the plaza, the river of drugs running north through Juárez into El Paso and from there across the US. And fighting, too, for the resultant plazas of Juárez and Mexico themselves. For where the river runs through, people will drink, and as a direct consequence of the Mexican cartels' near-monopoly of supply to the US, northern Mexico is ravaged by crack and methamphetamine addiction, and by the bloody battles for 'turf' on which to sell them.

Ciudad Juárez lives cheek-by-jowl with the US, and its 'twin city' El Paso on the other side of the border. But although the frontier is the narcotraffickers' greatest asset, the borderland itself, of which El Paso and Juárez form the heart, and the midway point, is a unique strip of land that is the world's busiest frontier between two countries, a terrain unto itself, a frontier simultaneously porous and harsh.

For while the wall, guards, patrols, customs and checkpoints endeavour to control drugs and migrants crossing the border, El Paso, like the other 13 twin cities of the US that face their Mexican neighbours, is almost as essentially Hispanic as its counterpart. It is a border which 800,000 people cross every day. Families live astride - and workers commute across - the frontier; it takes 10 minutes to walk from downtown El Paso to main street Juárez, from what is supposed to be the First World into what looks like the Third, yet is not. American and Mexican fire services answer each other's calls.

But the frontier is also brutal. As many are stuck alongside it as live across it. Since the initiation of Operation Gatekeeper by the US in 1994, the border is becoming a 2,000 mile-long reinforced, heavily guarded fence. Last year saw the highest ever number of deaths among those trying to cross the frontier illegally, mostly from exposure in the vast desert; there have been 10,000 since 1994. While free-trade accords and 'bonded' sweatshop factories all along the border render the frontier commercially nonexistent, bullets as well as goods cross the line after a US initiative this year - focused on El Paso and entitled Operation River Freedom Denial - authorised US agents to return fire across the border, after shots were fired at them from Juárez, and intelligence agents reported that cartel militias were ready to dispatch gunmen inside America.

So the borderland is a country in its own right, which belongs to both the US and Mexico, yet neither. I call this country - 2,000 miles long and about 100 miles wide, from the Pacific to the Gulf - 'Amexica'. And now, because of the flood tide of narcotics running through it, Amexica is a battlefield, still as charismatic and irresistible as it is cruel and terrifying.

A drive the length of that borderline battlefield begins where the desert sun sets into the Pacific, at the frontier between Tijuana and San Diego. I was with my colleague Jorge Fregoso one Saturday afternoon when the latest shooting started, targeting an Art Deco mansion in the Mision del Pedregal suburb, army trucks arriving to its left, police shock troops to the right. Only next day was the fusillade of fire at the villa revealed to have procured, for the authorities, Eduardo Arellano Felix - 'The Doctor', the nom-de-narco

he goes by - chief of the clan trying to defend the plaza of drug traffic to California. What followed the announcement were 72 hours of carnage in Tijuana during which 15 people were executed, taking the death toll in the city to 460 this year.

Through Jorge's extraordinary access to police communications, our first alert comes shortly after 3pm on Monday in a neighbourhood, or colonia, called Libertad, where a corpse lies in the dirt beneath a rung of steps made of tyres; some 30m away is the old wall that marks the border with the US, made of fencing brought back from the war against Iraq in 1991. The three young women from the forensic team (wearing identical grey shirts, black jeans and ponytails) and accompanying trucks of balaclava-covered troops then speed off to Mariano Matamoros on the outskirts, where another corpse lies, visible by the green light of a petrol station. The windscreen of the victim's Ford Explorer is pitted with three bullet holes, and he seems to have made a run into the street, followed by 25 further shots. Before the forensic girls have even finished, though, we are summoned across dirt tracks between cement buildings to a crossing between backstreets, and a lifeless body beside the doorway of a shop. When the cops pull back the sheet for the forensic girls to behold, we find a teenager shot at point-blank range in the face. Now the night really begins.

Jorge, working for the local Sintesis TV, receives news so fast that we speedway our red Volkswagen between the fourth and fifth Jeeps of a ninja-clad, machine-gun-toting police convoy (to the hooting fury of Jeep number five) heading for the next slaughter. The cordon of plastic tape reading Precaucion had not even sealed the scene when we arrive at the 9/4 minimart in Villa Foresta, where a blanket covers the remains of the security guard, with two more dead inside. There is wild wailing from the womenfolk as this body outside is revealed: his flesh cheese-grated by fire from a Kalashnikov, or Goat's Horn, as an AK-47 is known around here. All these scenes attract silent, wary crowds, usually young, yet more sobs follow the sight of those killed inside the store, loaded on stretchers into the white Forensic Department truck now carrying five former people. Heavy-set men, one in a sharp suit, arrive to look from a distance, embracing each other in a way that suggests burdensome comradeship but little sorrow. One of them goes over to console a young woman clutching a baby, in paroxysms of grief.

Car workshops, or yonkes, are a hallmark of Tijuana's byways, and next morning sicarios, brazen in the midday light, entered gate number one of Yonke Cristal, killing a man. His body was visible through the bars of a gate, while two other corpses were hidden behind a wall and a white van. That was Tuesday, and on Wednesday morning Tijuana awoke to the news that three more bodies had been found in an abandoned van and another in a car, this last a police officer called Antonio Hernando. The van had been dumped in Los Alamos and the dead men tortured, mutilated and strangled. The police officer's personal car had been parked, the engine running, just after 1am. It appears that he had been waiting for someone.

There are two kinds of cop killing, one illustrated last January in the colonia of Loma

Bonita, when the narcos crossed a line in the etiquette of drug warfare, executing not only the respected officer Margarito Zaldano but his wife Sandra and 12-year-old daughter Valeria. The other kind claims the lives of those who moonlight for the cartels, who may be targeted if they charge too much or renege on a deal, or whose services to one cartel offend another. During one shootout on a highway east of Tijuana last August, a truckload of police officers carrying 13 suspects was ambushed. Some of their detainees escaped and one officer was killed. The ambush had been carried out by other police officers working for a rival group.

This carnage can be traced back to the Seventies, after the US set out, successfully, to destroy indigenous production of 'Mexican Mud' heroin, poppies for which were ideally suited to the Pacific state of Sinaloa. The American offensive involved an uneasy partnership with the Mexican government, which had ruled in co-existence with the Sinaloan heroin barons. Washington then embarked on the covert backing of right-wing Contra rebels against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. The Contra's weapons needed paying for in currency that would not show above board - cocaine from Colombia. Now the Sinaloan barons became couriers in both directions, flooding America's streets with crack and high society with cocaine. As Don Winslow wrote in his reality-based novel about the narcos, *The Power of the Dog*: 'Somewhere along the line, they figured out that their real product isn't drugs, it's the 2,000-mile border they share with the United States.' As masters of the border, the Mexican narcos assumed control of the hemisphere, so that now, according to the US Drug Enforcement Administration, 90 per cent of all drugs entering the United States do so as part of Mexican cartel business. The major import is still cocaine, though recent Mexican mass-production of methamphetamine accounts for nearly all US consumption, as it does across Latin America.

The Sinaloans carved the border into plazas, each considered the territory of a cartel. That to the east, along the Texas border, was the 'property' of the Gulf Cartel and its military wing, Los Zetas, comprised of former Mexican Airborne Special Forces, some of them trained to combat the narcos at Fort Benning, Georgia, but offered better money to defect to their quarry. In the middle was Juárez, formerly called El Paso del Norte - the Northern Pass - and a smuggling route as old as the border. According to the DEA, in its heyday the Juárez cartel was the biggest drug trafficker in the world, shifting more than 50 per cent of all narcotics consumed in the US, under the control of Amado Carrillo Fuentes, 'Lord of the Skies', who died mysteriously in 1997. The plaza between Tijuana and California was run by the Arellano Felix Organisation, formally established after the arrest in 1989 of the elder statesman of Mexican trafficking, 'El Padrino' Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo. Gallardo had five nephews, the Arellano brothers, and Eduardo was the last to remain at large.

There has been savage violence among the cartels. In August this year, Jesús Ruben Moncada was arrested in Los Angeles for the infamous massacre of 19 people in 1998, including a baby clutched by its mother - an episode which forms the opening scene of

The Power of the Dog. But other, longer, periods have enjoyed what in Italy would be called a 'Pax Mafiosa', whereby things remain relatively calm and 'the product' keeps moving. When peace is blown apart, power is shifting across the plazas.

The war since December 2006 has raged for three main reasons. First, it is a response to Calderón's dispatch of the army to the borderland, the first real offensive by any Mexican government against the cartels. Second is the rupture of any Pax Mafiosa by a fourth cartel, the Sinaloa. Its leader is Joaquin 'El Chapo' Guzmán - aka 'Shorty' - who defected from Gallardo's heirs, the Arellano brothers, and has now declared war against them and in pursuit of the entire frontier. Against the Gulf cartel's Zetas, Guzmán recruited his own military wing, Los Negros, the Men in Black. A truce brokered in prison between Guzmán and Juárez (against the Gulf Cartel) has collapsed. And the Sinaloa have brought their war to the Western Plaza of Tijuana. Guzmán was arrested in 1993, but in 2001 escaped just before being extradited to the US, becoming something of a narco folk hero.

But a third, monstrous, reason is of less concern to the US and almost taboo in Mexico: that hard drugs have become the scourge of borderline Mexico. And the street war for this domestic plaza is just as savage as that for narcotic exports, if not more so.

The crowds fill Tijuana Cathedral, wearing football shirts and quietening babies. The market stalls outside sell accoutrements of Catholicism imposed on to earlier lore that are inimitably, wonderfully Mexican. It may be of concern to the Vatican, but it is of deep meaning to many Mexican faithful that the Virgin of Guadalupe, national symbol and Queen of the Americas, can also represent the Aztec mother goddess Coatlicue, who wears a skirt of serpents and symbolises the womb and tomb, fertility and destruction. During the Credo, a text message arrives to say that Eduardo Felix Arellano was arrested during the shootout at the villa yesterday.

After celebrating Mass, Archbishop Rafael Romo is briefed on the arrest by a whispering aide. He is gracious and calm: 'It is a time of challenge for us as Christians and citizens whose quality of life, and lives themselves, are in immediate danger,' he says. 'The violence is now against all society, and this is the difference.'

Most of the narco aristocracy are devout Catholics, or go through the motions of devotion. There is an unofficial narco 'saint', Santo Jesús Malverde, a bandit to whose shrine in Sinaloa traffickers pay homage with devotional pledges, or mandas. In the Eighties, narcos aligned themselves with the church's conservative wing against priests advocating Liberation Theology, and one of the scandals of recent Mexican history was the Arellano clan's murder of the populist Cardinal, Juan Jesús Posadas Ocampo, in 1993.

Archbishop Romo is direct: 'They expect to come and talk about what they do. Our word to them is clear: we will talk about these things. But we will urge them to leave behind this evil.'

Mutilations have hallmarked this year's slaughter, and Dr Hiram Munoz, chief forensic autopsy expert assigned to the homicide department in Tijuana, told me how 'each different mutilation leaves a clear message. They have become a kind of folk tradition. If the tongue is cut out, it means they talked too much. A man who sneaked on the clan has his finger cut off and maybe put in his mouth [a snitch is known as a dedo, or finger]. If you are castrated, you may have slept with the woman of another man. Decapitation is another thing altogether: a statement of power, a warning to all, like public executions of old. The difference is that in normal times, the dead were "disappeared", buried or dumped in the desert. Now they are displayed for all to see, so that it becomes a war against the people.'

Fregoso and I drive to the Federal Valentina Farias Gomez primary school. It is beautifully clean and the children chirp around the playground before settling in for lessons with orderly discipline. One morning last March, however, they arrived to find 12 festering corpses across the road from the gates, tortured and with their tongues cut - people who talked. The principal, Miguel Angel Gonzalez Tovar, is simultaneously courteous and exhausted as he understates what he tries to do in running a school where 'the children of narcos, children of police officers and children of ordinary workers attend. The situation is very delicate. There are evil people in our area, but they still send their children to school.' That morning, he says, 'was terrifying. The children and staff were terrified, but everyone knew what was happening. We try to teach against that message, like an island of education, peace and security for the children, but we are fighting barbarism and cannot be isolated from what is going on outside.'

A 15-year-old pupil at Abraham Lincoln Escuela Secondary School No 32, in Rosarito Beach near Tijuana, was killed in a narco shootout this year. Now, on the school's basketball pitch, the recently appointed state prosecutor of Baja California, Rommel Moreno Manjarrez, is joined by newly installed police chief Elijio Montes to reassure teenagers. 'The police are with us, and there is new hope against violence,' pleads the prosecutor. The pupils applaud and shout 'Viva Mexico!' Later Montes, in his leather bomber jacket and jeans, says: 'I'm from here. And my life is to try and change where I'm from. We, the police, are infiltrated by narcos, but for two years we've given them a fight over what happens to these kids. If I didn't think we stood a chance, I wouldn't do it.' He adds: 'This is the border. We're stuck in a cultural sandwich between what America wants up there, which includes drugs, and whatever Mexico is becoming down here.'

Prosecutor Moreno talks about training in Sicily with the anti-Mafia pool led by the great (and assassinated) Judge Giovanni Falcone, and about purging police corruption. And he warns: 'We hope to be seeing the fall of the Arellano cartel but have no illusions that one cartel's misfortune is another's potential. We know the name of Guzmán's man in Tijuana,' says Moreno, with Falcone's plain-talking boldness: "'El Teo", he calls himself, Teodoro Garcia Simental - a defector from the Arellano.

He will fight even harder for this plaza now, and we will fight harder to stop him.'

Victor Clark Alfaro has for decades campaigned from a block of flats opposite Tijuana's municipal hall, from which hangs the name of his organisation, the Binational Centre for Human Rights. Clark's work involved naming figures in authority controlled by the cartels, 'but I have stopped,' he says, with blood-curdling directness, 'because of the likely consequences. I have lived with bodyguards for years.'

Clark alludes to the narco war's hidden nature: 'What we see on the streets is a symptomatic violence. We do not see the interests which invisibly support the Arellano brand, and its rivals, in construction, hotels, discos, tourism, real estate.' He talks about how free trade accords have opened up routes for the drug traffickers, so that 'while they wage war on Mexican society, they are integral to the Mexican economy'.

One of the most articulate expressions of that war deep inside Mexico was the narco grenade attack on an Independence Day parade on 15 September in Morelia, killing seven and injuring 152. And while I was en route from Tijuana to Ciudad Juárez, news broke that a LearJet 45 had crashed in Mexico City while making a normal approach to the airport. On board were two of the government officials most publicly associated with the crackdown on cartels: interior secretary Juan Camilo Mourino and the former director of federal organised crime investigations, Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos. Eyewitnesses said the plane exploded in midair. Speculation of sabotage was immediate.

I continue east. Late one night I make it to a destination fixed firmly in my mind: the upper row of rooms at a motel in El Paso, overlooking the industrial lights, lure and menace of the most charismatic, terrible, libidinous and daunting city I know: Ciudad Juárez. The city that exists, so they say, between something and nothing. 'If Juárez is a city of God,' goes another saying, 'that is only because the Devil is scared to come here.'

But before crossing the border, counsel comes from the most renowned Mexican journalist to call Juárez his home, Alejandro Paez, who lives and works in the capital but has moved his family to El Paso, unapologetically, because of the violence. 'Whoever controls Juárez has left those behind in the city to fight a battle to the finish. Yes, they're all there: Sinaloa, Juárez, and the Zetas trying to get in too, because they all need to maintain the corridor into the US. But not one of the big bosses in the battle for Juárez has been touched, not one - they are far away. This is a fight among gangs on the ground, and it's becoming a massacre.'

Juárez was always a city of transit and became infamous for the mass murder, after torture and violation, of 400 young women in the Nineties. Julian Cardona, who curated a shockingly prescient book published 10 years ago entitled Juárez: Laboratory for Our Future, and who stayed here, cautions that 'the war has become so anarchic that it makes little sense to draw lines between cartels on the streets. We will have counted 1,400 dead in this city by the end of the year, and in most cases, the executioners don't

even know which cartel they are working for. If they change sides, from someone far from here who is part of the Juárez cartel to the Sinaloa cartel, they don't know it. They have turf, orders to do this or that or kill someone, but never why, or who for.'

In July, the Bush administration launched the Merida initiative, whereby Mexico receives \$1.4bn in phased aid to propel its offensive against the narcos. But the offensive, says Ignacio Alvarado Alvarez, who runs an investigative media service in Juárez called Al margen, 'is due to the fact that by the mid-Nineties, the federal government had lost the diplomatic relations it previously had with the cartels and needed to move as a matter of governability, because the cartels had power over the state and local police, and authorities. In reality, it's an equilibrium of power, the drug market following the logic of any other globalised commodity. The government wants to control drug trafficking, but not destroy it - that would be to lose one of the pillars of Mexico's standing in the global economy.'

The cartels, meanwhile, 'have replaced the old pyramidal chain of command with the same concession or franchising system as any other commodity,' he says. 'Drug trafficking has become more democratic in the modern, capitalist sense, outsourced and opportunistic.' It takes a moment to realise how disdainfully funny Alvarado is being about the 'legal' economy, as well as the killers: 'The cartels don't need to control the streets, because they cannot, so they franchise them, get other people to kill and die, and collect the taxes and commissions. All they need to control is the corridors across the border, because Juárez is the one place from which you can reach any part of the United States.' This 'outsourcing' has been a speciality of the Sinaloa cartel: to franchise use of its corrupted officials and even tunnels under the border equipped with ventilation, lights and rails, in return for 'taxes' and commissions from sub-contracted traffickers.

Cardona and I return to the scene of the decapitated body at the overpass. Hundreds of people must have seen it. As it turned out, the message was also directed at us, the press. The severed head was found days later in the Plaza des Periodistas - Journalists' Square - at the foot of a statue of a boy hawking newspapers, a celebration of old Juárez's pride in itself as the cradle of the free press and the Mexican revolution of 1910. On 14 November, one of the leading reporters on crime in Juárez, Armando Rodríguez of El Diario, was shot 10 times by a lone executioner while warming up his car. His eight-year-old daughter, whom he was taking to school, was in the passenger seat. Rodríguez became the 28th reporter to be killed by narcos since 2000, with eight others missing, presumed dead.

Cardona and I calculate that the getaway route of those who hung the body passed a Honeywell factory. 'There's a lot of world-class business here,' says Cardona, 'and these worlds entwine. Young families come north, the girl gets a job in the maquiladora [factory] and the man is economically impotent but sexually potent. That was an element in killing the women, but is even more so in the narco war - if the man has no

income, he can earn working for them. And if he has a habit, which he probably has, he turns to crime and drug dealing to maintain it.'

Cardona's latest book of photographs, *Exodus*, is about migration and people smuggling. 'This now overlaps with the narco war, using the same routes as the people smugglers, the Coyotes, and extorting them,' he says. 'Maquiladoras-narcos-migration - that's the triangle. If you keep these things separate you will never understand what is happening in this city.'

Past Desperado's disco and rodeo, into the Calle Sierra del Pedregal, one arrives at a gated property known as the House of Death after 36 bodies were found buried beneath the patio last March. Nearby is the Hospital Juárez, where wounded survivors were taken for treatment 'but killers came there to finish off the job,' says Cardona. It was after this episode that Red Cross workers in Juárez stopped treating people with gunshot wounds, as threats and taunts arrived on their own emergency service radios. And last August, sicarios pulled up outside a drug rehabilitation centre off Avenida de los Aztecas and executed nine people at prayer. Gangland graffiti spraypainted on the stricken building and in the alleyway give some clue as to why: 'Locos 23. El Signo', and 'Signo RIP'. El Signo was a member of the Locos 23 drug-dealing gang.

Which brings us to the fiendish nightmare of the internal drug plaza of Juárez, and indeed of Mexico itself - 'The Sideshow', as America calls the side-effects wars that don't go to plan. Outside Juárez, through contaminated desert dust, along boulevards of shopping malls and nightclubs, past compounds of prefab houses, lies the Alberque Para Discapitados Mentales, a care home for those afflicted by drugs.

A rust-coloured iron door is pulled aside to reveal people in various states of derangement and decay, either cowering and jabbering to themselves, dancing like marionettes, or rooted to the ground, staring at nothing. Some come forward, as though propelled by electric shocks, to greet a visitor. First is Rebecca, in a red beret. 'Yo soy Rebecca! Becky! Crazy Baby!'

This project, Vision en Accion, was founded by a pastor named Jose Galvan, who has yet to arrive. But there is another remarkable man here: Joshua Rosales, the keeper of the lodge. He has a face that has lived through battered times but which has an inexplicable inner calm behind the intensity. 'Most of them have been addicted to drugs for years,' he says: 'crack cocaine, crystal meth, heroin; made in Mexico, intended for the US, but it only gets as far as the streets of Juárez. Rebecca was a strip dancer, got raped, got into crack, went to jail - but she's getting along better now.' Sometimes these people just roll up at the gates, 'with some voice inside telling them they're desperate. The hospitals don't want to know, and someone has to.'

Joshua left Juárez for California, to live and work. 'I used to do drugs and deal. I came back because my mother was sick, but kept taking the drugs - I was one of them,' and he gestures across the yard. 'Then I had a car accident. I lay here for a year, in a corner

with the door open, watching people jumping around. And the Lord told me not to be one of them again. All I wanted to do was walk.' Which Joshua did, and stayed. 'Do you want to see where I lived on the floor for a year?' he asks. To say that the stench is unbearable is no insult, it is simply to admit that there is nothing like the suffocating stink of tribulation, surrogate for all those words one is not hearing.

There is hope here for Manuel, a former crack addict on a high wire between saving himself and the abyss. When he hears the voice of a rapper called 'Mr Bone', he explains, coherently and penitently: 'Mr Bone tells me to kill my mother. He comes into my room, and tears fall from my eyes. And when I get with my friends, the four little witches arrive, and Mr Bone, too, and they order me to fight with guns.' For four years, Manuel has been coming here, to try and substitute drugs for religion, or at least survival.

Joshua explains what is happening in Juárez. 'Most of these addicts were selling drugs to feed their habit. But they never see the big fellas. They buy it off people one step up the line, take some then cut the rest to sell on. Sell it in the wrong place, you could get shot. The big guys don't know what drugs look like, don't know what Juárez looks like. They just pull the \$250,000 a day.'

A man joins us, Luis Noreto. 'He tried to kill someone three or four times, and his mother,' says Joshua. 'I hit some bad luck,' says Luis. 'My mother was praying for me with a candle, but I thought it was a sword, so I tried to kill her, and she brought me here.' Luis was on crystal meth, 'rock' and sniffing paint thinner, 'but now I'm clean, and have Jesus. I want to stay here forever and help people like I was; to be like Joshua.'

One can think what one wants about born-again Christians, but there is little room for quibbling on the frontline: this really is the war on drugs. And anyway, the Pastor himself arrives. He has little (earthly) backing for what he does here, but looks like a movie star acting a former streetwise kid from the barrios of El Paso, which is what Galvan is - the former barrio kid, not the movie star. 'I was born in Ciudad Juárez, but I was 14 years over there, from 1972. Man, I was making money, driving a crane, spending it on drugs and babes.' Then, in 1986, 'I got deported.' After which, echoing Joshua, 'I was one of them, completely lost'.

Galvan converted to Christianity on the streets upon which he was found by urban missionaries. The result was this place, which Galvan believes to be his destiny. 'The task,' he says, 'is to dignify the lives of these people, and to return those lives to them.' We agree that, whatever one believes, the bedrock of Christianity is a progression from Crucifixion, via Descent into Hell, to Resurrection - ie Good Friday, Easter Saturday and Easter Sunday. And that whatever is happening here is some propulsion of lost souls from the Saturday stage into sunrise on Sunday.

As we say our farewells, a figure crawls across the roof, silhouetted against the golden flare of twilight on the desert horizon, croaking: 'Yo soy Rebecca! Crazy Baby!'

But before the eastern sky quickens next morning and the sun rises in my face, I have driven an hour along Interstate 10, despite another two executions in Juárez. For major news has broken: one of the founding commanders of the Zetas, Jaime Gonzalez Duran, has been arrested between the Gulf cities of Reynosa and Nuevo Laredo, along with the largest arsenal ever seized by any Mexican government raid: 428 guns of every kind, anti-aircraft missiles, 287 grenades and 500,000 rounds of ammunition.

The four bridges linking Nuevo Laredo to its sister city on the US side, Laredo, are the umbilical cord connecting Latin American freight with North America; 40 per cent of all trade between the US and Mexico crosses the border here. Some 8,000 American trucks converge on Laredo daily to rendezvous with a matching number of Mexican truckers for the transfer of payloads at vast freight yards 10 miles inside the US, a commercial DMZ full of containers as far as the eye can see. More than 12m barrels of crude oil a day cross the line, along with 432 tonnes of jalapeño peppers, 11,000 cash machines, 16,000 TV sets - all this and more through a town which on the Mexican side didn't light the streets until recently. This is where the war began. Because wherever there is trade there is transport, and wherever there is transport there is a billow of drugs into the United States. Which is what made the Gulf cartel and Los Zetas a murderous power across this terrain, and why Guzmán could not let them keep the bridges, and the lowlands towards the Gulf, without a fight.

But upon arrival in Nuevo Laredo now, there is a menacing calm, duly explained by Raymundo Ramos Vasquez, once a journalist for *El Mañana*, the local paper with a reputation for fearless reporting on the narcos, but now director of the Nuevo Laredo Committee for Human Rights. 'It became too dangerous to be a reporter,' he explains, needing to elaborate little: the paper's doors are protected by a bomb-proof screen on top of which is a memorial to those who died in a grenade attack in 2006. The target had been Jaime Oscar Tey, a journalist known for his investigations of drug traffic and factory conditions.

'I just couldn't carry on,' says Ramos. 'What would be the point, now that the papers do not publish the killings because it's too dangerous?' But here comes the twist: 'There have not been so many this year. Officially, 60; I reckon 100.'

A degree of Pax Mafiosa has returned to Nuevo Laredo. 'There has been a truce,' says Ramos. 'The Gulf and Sinaloa reached an accord, the Gulf are in control, and the army patrols every block of the city. But there has been little impact on the drug traffic.'

So the mind boggles as we skirt the city, past the queue of loaded lorries three miles long waiting to cross the busiest bridge in the world, Puente Comercio Mundial No 3. At any time, there are 30,000 containers in Nuevo Laredo awaiting transportation, and a portion of them will be loaded with extra goods which do not appear on the ledgers, waved through by border officials bought by the cartels, on both sides. It is true that most corruption is on the Mexican side, but US officials are bought too; last month a veteran US customs official called Jorge Vieja was arrested in Eagle Pass, up the road,

for securing passage for 3,000lb of cocaine.

But other containers bring freight south, from the US into Mexico. And this is what concerns Ramos: the barely discussed smuggling in the other, southerly, direction - not of drugs but guns, the counterflux that those few US agencies taking the threat seriously call 'Iron River'. 'It's obvious that without drugs there would be no war,' says Ramos. 'But without the guns, there would be nothing to fight it with. I've been campaigning for five years for action against the selling and smuggling of guns. For the Americans, it's a billion-dollar business, and whenever the Mexicans find an arsenal, they feign surprise!'

The states bordering Mexico (California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas) cherish the lore of firearms as part of their heritage, and are those in which it is easiest for the narcos to buy weapons. In El Paso in August, Michael Sullivan, director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, said the US and Mexican governments were co-operating in an effort to trace weapons seized in Mexico, finding - to nobody's surprise - that between 90 and 95 per cent originate in the US 'mostly from the four southwestern states. Two-thirds were traced back to Texas.' There are more than 6,700 arms dealers within a short drive of the border - three dealers per mile of frontier. One, X-Caliber, a distance away in Phoenix, was shut down in spring for allegedly dispatching hundreds of AK-47s to Mexico. Known as 'straw buyers', agents for the cartels cruise gun stores and fairs to buy weapons. Typically, last year, a carpet salesman called Adan Rodríguez was jailed for five years after procuring 112 assault rifles, handguns for two men from the Gulf cartel. All he had to do was pretend to be a security guard, buy the weapons and take them to a safe house, where he was paid a commission per gun, in cash. Back in a town called Sierra Vista, Arizona I had driven down Fry Boulevard, where Saguaro Firearms is located. A store assistant said he thought the new fence and an armed guard atop a tower 'every 100 yards' along it might stop the 'hype' about arms to Mexico. Over the road at Trail Boss Guns 'n' Gear, polite staff urged Mexican border police to be more vigilant against smugglers.

But one does not always have to be surreptitious. The ATF's special agent in Arizona, Tom Mangan, told the Los Angeles Times candidly: 'Gun shows have become troublesome. You see the Sinaloan cowboys come in, you see them with their ammunition belts and ammunition boots. You can see the weapons being rolled outside to their cars. Why do they need high-powered guns? Because the Mexican military is armed, too, and they need to pierce that armour.'

In ancient Mexican lore, there lies behind the sun that shines a black sun, which leaves this world to shed light upon another, beneath. The Aztecs believed the black sun was carried by the god of the underworld, and was the maleficent absolute of death. And behind the sunlight of the deserts of Amexica there is some maculate black light which gives nothing back; un-shining behind the eternities of space and sky, or the bustle in all those streets with hot peppers and freshly gathered pistachios tumbling from every open storefront.

And one feels that black sunshine, especially after the pleasure of talking to Dr Munoz, director of the forensic autopsy team in Tijuana. He sees the world very clearly from the slabs on which saprophytic corpses are laid for inspection. 'I spend my life interrogating people who cannot talk,' he says, 'who have suffered terrible pain, but now feel nothing. They can only communicate silently through the appalling things that have been done to them. I have to look for a cause, not a result. I have to rewind the movie, work out what was done, and why.' Why did he chose this job? 'Because I love medicine, and I love the law.'

After discussing various mutilations and their significance, Munoz affirms how 'the principal message is to other cartels. They want respect, they want to say: "This is what we do." There's also a message to their own people. The more brutally we get you to do things, the more brutally they could happen to you.'

He frames this macabre slaughter in historical terms. 'Consider how great civilisations fall, the marks of their last days.' He cites ancient Rome and 'the nature of public execution'. Torture and violent public execution also marked, he says, 'the end of the Middle Ages and Inquisition as they gave way to Renaissance and science. There are these great moments of civilisation and science, but they try to be better than they are, and when they fall, they resort to public execution. And I think we are now in a moment of crisis, in the culture of global business.'

In what Munoz calls 'times of normality', 'the narcotrafficante saw himself as a bandit, but also a patron. He gave villages electric light, distributed gifts for Mother's Day, presents to children. But this was no different from the factory manager who allowed his workers a cigarette break or free coffee machine. It meant nothing sincere, it just kept everyone making the product. But what happens when this system reaches a crisis? Things change, they must keep supremacy, they must keep control. The narcotrafficante is the most global of all businessmen, and now he must make you loyal or afraid. And he does this with public executions involving mutilation as a demonstration of power, as do all cultures in their final phases.'

Munoz is a man of courtesy and good humour, and I suggest that he strikes one as someone who enjoys a good wine and hearty meal.

'I spend all day with the dead,' he replies, 'so I have to live life to the full. When I am with colleagues, we always joke about death, and at death. I live like a man who sits eating a delicious taco on the street, aware that every moment could be his last. One bullet, and you are dead.'

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