

LA PLAYA LOS MUERTOS

Donald Platt

Puerto Vallarta, Mexico

I.

Everyone comes to swim at la Playa los Muertos, the beach of the dead

No, more often than not, we come to sit in the hammock-like, blue-red-and-yellow-striped, cloth beach chairs under the blue sun umbrellas or the thatched palapas and sip margaritas from chilled, salt-rimmed glasses with chasers of beer

The waiters dress in white, are young and slender

We come to eat *mariscos* — tostadas with ceviche, shrimp enchiladas, octopus soup, mahi-mahi grilled in banana leaves with pineapple salsa. We watch the oiled girls in Rio bikinis and boys in thongs walk by on the beach of the dead

We say *Hola* and *Gracias* and point to what we want on the menu, unsure of how to pronounce it

The exchange rate is 15 pesos to the dollar

We come to listen to the rough music the waves make all afternoon, both monotonous and infinitely various. We come to forget wherever it is we've come from

✕

We watch the local men fish from the pier. Though they catch nothing, they discuss it at great length, trilling their *r*'s and breathing out their long vowels through parted lips

I take my first picture of the day

I order coconut milk. The waiter brings it in the yellow-green husk
whose top he has sliced off with a machete

He sticks a straw through the small hole so that I can sip it

It is lukewarm breast milk from tall trees with palm fronds

I write in a notebook

When I have finished drinking, the waiter cuts the coconut in half
on scarred butcher block so that I can dig out the meat from
the inner shell with a knife and eat

I pay in pastel paper currency printed with pictures of sun gods,
conquistadors, and liberators

✕

Two days ago I took snapshots of the one-room houses of the very
poor, on whose flat roofs rainbows of laundry hang from bal-
ing twine

Because the poor have no front yards, their dogs sleep on those
roofs, growl, and bark at passersby

I have walked on, with or without dropping coins into the tin can
of the man without arms, who sits on the steps of the Church
of Our Lady of Guadalupe

A cardboard sign strung by a string around his neck

Black lettering I can't read

He calls out, *Ore para mí*

There are no beggars on the beach of the dead. The *policía* keep
them away

Men hawk plastic bags of green, white, and pink cotton candy tied
to 10-foot poles

✕

My 14-year-old daughter has been vomiting for two days from
flu or from eating bad chorizo tostadas and stays in our hotel
room with the curtains drawn

She does not see, smell, or hear what I do on the beach of the
dead or on the Malecón, stone boardwalk which winds like a
serpent between boutiques and ATMs on one side and on the
other the ocean flashing like broken glass

She watches *House* on TV

Dr. House limps around on his cane, diagnosing impossibly rare
diseases, saving lives, and being willfully and wittily rude to
everyone without exception

House, on forced clinic duty, tells his busty boss, Dr. Cuddy, "So
either I can continue to swab people's privates or I can figure
out if this guy's delirium, pain, and insanely high heart rate
are life-threatening or just a personality quirk"

He makes my sick daughter laugh

✕

On the beach of the dead, a Mexican family on vacation tosses a
volleyball back and forth from grandmother to granddaugh-
ter to uncle to father to aunt to sister to mother to brother to
grandfather

A girl throws sand at her older brother, who sprints as fast as he
can from her

Two women jog four times up and down the steep stone stairs that
zigzag from the mountaintop hotels to the beach. One shouts
to the other in English, "Yes, there are 206 steps"

Sweat makes dark continents on the backs of their blue T-shirts

Now the brother holds the sister down on her back and shampoos

her long tangled brown hair with sand. He laughs so hard he drools. She laughs from the pure exhilaration of finally getting her brother to notice her

✕

Today a bride and groom get their photograph taken, standing on the hot sand

She wears a white satin strapless gown and clutches to her breasts a bouquet of roses

He's in a black tux

The photographer disappears under his three-legged camera's black shawl

Click, and the shutter will catch the silent wave behind them, about to break, come crashing down

✕

A wrinkled woman, hair dyed blonde, wearing a green gauzy dress, floppy-brimmed straw hat, and onyx earrings, walks her dog on the beach of the dead

Her bloodshot blue eyes underscored with kohl

The dog too is ancient and has lost all its hair except for several stray, white, cotton-candy-like wisps. Its piebald hide is black with a few gray spots

Impossible to tell what breed, though now I notice the pink-gray teats

The old woman is speaking Spanish on her red cell phone

Her depilated dog meets a large greyhound pup, whose coat has the color, luster, and softness of pussy willows in April

They sniff each other, tails wagging like windshield wipers turned to intermittent, then to high

They play together, romp, cavort across the beach of the dead, kick
sand over the lotioned, bronzed bellies of the sunbathers

Mathilda, venga aquí! shout the greyhound's owners

A big-bellied father gets buried in the sand by his children and
then rises with a roar from the dead to run after the shrieking
kids

✕

Now the waiters from Spiaggia, the oceanfront restaurant that the
wedding party has rented for the day, bring out overstuffed
armchairs, polished mahogany coffee tables, tiki torches, and
microphones and set them in the sand

It is as if a living room has been set up on the beach of the dead, as
if a house has been turned inside out

A mariachi band comes out of the restaurant — four violinists,
two trumpet players, four guitarists, and one singer. They
form a horseshoe around the bridal couple, their friends, and
relatives, who all talk at once and hold flutes of champagne
like lit candles in front of them

No one will sleep tonight

✕

Spiaggia, in Italian, means *beach* or *shore*

Spiegare means *explain, spread, unfold, unfurl*

Would that my sentences would *unfurl* like the blue and white silk
banners hung over the streets of small dusty Mexican towns
in celebration of the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe

The waves *unfold* on the *shore*

Spiaggia

Spiegano

“Splain that to me again,” said my friend back in Carrollton,
Georgia

Carrollton, named after Charles Carroll, the only Catholic signer
of the Declaration of Independence and the longest-lived
signer, dying at 97

Carol town

Signer

Singer

✕

The mariachi men wear tight beige pants and jackets trimmed
with metallic gold, matching straw sombreros

The singer sings, *Negrita de mis pesares, Ojos de papel volando*

I ask the old woman with the dog what the words mean

Little negress of my sorrows, she says

Eyes like paper flying

One huge wave runs up the shore, laps at the singer’s white and
black, lizard-skin cowboy boots. He jumps back. Everyone
laughs. He moves the microphone farther from the ocean

The wave leaves its signature on the dry sand

Put the mic close to the surf, I want to say, so we hear the ocean’s
slow breathing amplified

✕

I stroll past the muscled bodies of the young men lolling in pairs
on white towels on the gay section of the beach of the dead

The white towels shine in the noon sun and set off the men's black hair, moussed and spiky à la the latest fashion, their black eyes, and their skin the color of unglazed red-brown clay that has been fired all night and is still cooling in the kiln come morning

Their beauty makes me lower my eyes, ashamed of my own desire

I try to stay out of the sun

I cover my 50-year-old body with an x-tra large gray T-shirt that says in faded black letters PURDUE BASEBALL

✕

I wear baggy yellow swim trunks with one white stripe flanked by two blue ones down each side

My beige baseball cap's logo reads NICK'S above a black fish skeleton, under which is printed in smaller lettering, *Virginia Beach, VA*

It is useless to pretend that I am not an American

I am just another queer gringo on la Playa los Muertos

✕

A corpulent man my age with his hair dyed a carefully restrained shade of auburn claps a waiter on the shoulder and says in English, "My, Juanito, but aren't you looking good today"

"Si, Señor. What would you like to drink"

The fat man leaves large tips, bright brass and silver coins embossed with serpents and winged creatures

✕

A young man holding a five-foot iguana goes from beach chair to beach chair, asking the *turistas* if they would like to take its picture with their digital cameras

The iguana has bright red spikes like coarse dune grass sticking up along its spine. Its orangey-brown scales form a beadwork highlighted by occasional green scales. On each side of its jowls, it has a round bulging plate the size of a 20-peso piece, subtympenic shield which has no biological function. A wrinkled leathery dewlap of scaly skin dangles from its chin like a beard. Each leg has five long toes that remind me of a child's curling fingers

Its eyes, black pinpoints against amber, stare back at me

The skin hangs loose around its legs, baggy trousers several sizes too big

Those unblinking eyes look back across millennia

O to be an ancient iguana held in a young man's warm arms, to be his livelihood, to be marveled over

✕

A woman in a green bikini stands in the waves that break on la Playa los Muertos, reading a paperback. What dark, shining, salt-stained words are written there that she does not look up at the sun rising over the tall green mountains behind us

A fire-eater breathes out flames on the Malecón so that everyone stands back and claps

A man pisses circumspectly against a far wall, golden urine pooling at his feet before it sinks into the sand

The old people with their ropey legs and arms whose flesh hangs down like turkey wattles, they come in their white terrycloth robes to sit in the sun

✕

They have the thin wooden wrists of scarecrows

They wait to lie down on the massage table that stands like a bier
in the shade cast by a white canopy

They wait for the masseur with his thick fingers

To pound, thump, and drub the blood back into their slack muscles

They moan again and again, as if he were making love to them

✕

Those who have been dead come alive again on the beach of the dead

They sit on the bronze knees of the statues who meditate in a
semicircle half-way down the Malecón and who gaze out
blindly over the blinding waters of the Bahía de Banderas

✕

I sit on the burnished lap of a robed woman who wears a deep-sea
diver's helmet and has three long wavery tentacles emerging
through holes in her helmet like thoughts from her left occipital lobe

The blue-green bronze of her round breasts has been touched to
gold by countless hands

Dana, my wife, sits on the knees of a king with crossed arms, who
has the head of a bird with a beak like a trumpet

I take their picture

They will remain undeveloped for years on the small, tightly
wound scroll of dark film

✕

We switch thrones

Play musical chairs

Now I move to a bronze bench that rests on two bronze human
legs

Everyone must go around the semicircle

Each leg has two feet, heels together, pointing in opposite direc-
tions like a ballerina's in first position

Along the four edges of the bench have been carved and cast 20
staring eyes

Passerby, stop, sit, and look around you

Lean back against one of the bench's two huge bronze ears

Hear the gulls' cries mix with the surf, which is the voice of the
invisible woman who sits next to you and wraps her arms
around you in the same way that the warm air embraces you.
It is scented with sea salt and, ever so slightly, with the purple
bougainvillea growing from ten flowerboxes on each of the
five levels of the white spiral parking garage across the de-
serted Paseo Diaz Ordaz

You must see in 20 different directions at once

II.

A young man on the beach by the Malecón balances tall boulders,
end to end, one impossibly atop another

He strains and sweats to lift stones the size of overgrown children

He cradles them in his arms, breathes hard

He makes the cairns slightly askew so that they look like they will
fall if the wind breathes the wrong way

Two or three stones to each cairn

One has four

They have the spare abstract beauty of late Brancusi sculptures

On the edge of the Malecón he has put a large white styrofoam cup, into which the crowd that watches him drops pesos

Three bronze dolphins leap and curve around each other in the midst of the mist from a circular, green-tiled fountain beneath palm trees, whose lower trunks have been painted white so it looks as if the trees are wearing white knee-high socks like schoolgirls

✕

A 20-foot bronze ladder extends upward from the Malecón at an 80-degree angle

It ends abruptly, leads nowhere

Two bronze figures in pleated gowns with heads that are downward-pointing equilateral triangles, the shape of spanokopita, climb the ladder

Each stretches his right hand toward some invisible thing that only he sees in the sky, blue blackboard smudged with the chalk dust of a few cirrus clouds

The locals call the sculpture “Jacob’s Ladder”

At the foot of the ladder, Jacob — same triangular head as the angels — stands with his mouth open in an O and raises both arms upward

He looks at the angels climbing the ladder to nowhere

His left foot rests on a pink-speckled boulder

In the Bible, Jacob laid his head on a pillow of stone to dream of angels

No, all night he has wrestled stones that are angels, pinned them
to the cold sand that will turn hot when the sun rises

✕

The rock-stacker wears baggy black pants rolled up to just below
his knees

He is stripped to the waist, skin the color of Brazil nuts, curly black
hair, a white shell necklace

One of his seven cairns suddenly topples

His bare left foot has a white bandage where a boulder has fallen
on his instep

Working on a three-boulder cairn, he twists the huge top stone
back and forth, trying to find the right spot where the axes of
the boulders will come into alignment

It is trial and error, tuning these stones to each other so they will
stand

Sweat glistens on his thick black eyebrows and runs into his eyes

He has to squint

He finds the right place for his stone and steps back

Three stones stand on each other's shoulders — yellow, gray,
lavender

Everyone claps, tosses more pesos into his cup

Another cairn falls

✕

Dana and I make love in the late afternoon

We are staying at the Hotel El Pescador, the Fisherman

A hummingbird, no larger than a child's thumb, perches on the
orangey-pink bougainvillea climbing the wall outside our
second-story balcony

✕

Dana lets the white towel fall from around her breasts

Across her abdomen: five small red moles called cherry angiomas,
known medically as Campbell de Morgan spots, benign

As if someone has scattered there a few grains of cayenne pepper

✕

The hummingbird's green wings, now still and folded, resemble
the leaves of the
bougainvillea

Now its wings make a green blur

It is like one of the battery-driven, hand-held "personal fans" we
used to buy at amusement parks in Georgia in the summer

✕

We would direct the air from those one-inch-long fan blades to-
ward whatever part of our bodies was sweatiest

It felt like someone blowing on elbow, cheek, clavicle

"I want to be in charge of the next kiss," says Dana

✕

Her tongue roves slowly over the roof of my mouth, tongue, the
insides of my cheeks, teeth

She tastes of what we have eaten

Scallions, garlic

Almonds

✕

Sometimes I think her long tongue almost touches my epiglottis

At sunset the sky blooms

It is the color of the bougainvillea outside our window in full
flame

It never rains in the high season

✕

When I fell in love with Dana 24 years ago, she had a spastic gray
Maine coon cat named
“Brip”

“Brrriipp” was the sound she trilled at the torn screen door to call
him inside for his dinner

His name in her mouth was the sound of worn blue cotton paja-
mas being ripped up for rags

Because Brip ate dry cat chow called Fisherman’s Medley, Dana
nicknamed him “the Little Fisherman”

The hummingbird’s needle-nose beak drills nectar from each
fragile cup

✕

Let the sun close its one fiery blossom

Let the golden script of cirrus clouds blow away like so much chaff
above the blue Bahia de Banderas in the high season

✕

In the morning the maid puts fresh sheets on our beds, changes
the towels, gives us new rolls of toilet paper

A young man mops the terra-cotta tiles of the hotel lobby with a
mop that looks like gray dreadlocks

A ten-year-old boy in red pants jumps down four stairs at once,
arms outstretched, shouting “Wishhh,” pretending to fly

Hotel porters hurry by with their dollies stacked six feet high with
the pastel lozenges of luggage — white, pink, mint-green,
azure, bright yellow

✕

When the speedboat pulling the parasail turns away from us, I
can read the black letters of the advertisement on the white
chute, under which a woman dangles

AGUA — The Strip & Lingerie Club

Dana and I point upward and laugh, but sex *is* water

The woman’s cries grow smaller

III.

The waves keep breaking on the shore of the dead all night

Their long repeated lament, *ai, ai*, as if the Pacific Ocean — the
tranquil one — were saying Kadish for each one of us

Or is the surf our mother’s lullaby, easing each of us back to
dreamlessness

No, the surf is a diamond-tipped needle stuck on static, the black
grooves of a long-playing record

Dance music to which our parents used to jitterbug until dawn

Waves our grandparents would waltz to

The lights of the great hotels lining the dark mountains behind
and to the north of the beach of the dead shine all night

✕

Tropicana, Yasmin, Gaviota Vallarta, Hacienda San Angel, Posada
de Roger, Rosita, Casa
Dulce Vida, Ana Luz, Buenaventura — their lights do not go out

The night watchmen with their small black boxes of keys, hung
over their shoulders on leather straps, keep walking the hotel
corridors, inserting the keys into locks on each floor, in the
lobby, by the pool to tell someone they've been there and have
not fallen asleep

✕

Two late-night revelers stagger home to their hotel at six a.m.,
walking in the light surf along la Playa los Muertos

I sit on our hotel's terra cotta-tiled terrace overlooking the Bahia de
Banderas in the darkness

They wave at me, raise their almost empty bottles of tequila blanco
to toast the dawn, which is now only the slightest fading of the
black sky

The east turns slowly to new, blue, unwashed denim

Silver rivets of stars

The man in the white thong, who is bald and has Kaposi lesions,
has come early to walk the beach of the dead and see the twilit
dawn

He leans gently on his lover, as he would a crumbling stucco wall

Night still surrounds us, the color of black pottery from Oaxaca,
fired in open pits at low temperatures so that the wood smoke
imparts its color to the clay

✕

All of a sudden, sun

Comes up behind me like a mugger

The terra-cotta tiles turn in ten seconds from gray to pink, to rose,
to their true red-earth tone

I turn

I turn and see the banks of layered altocumulus over the moun-
tains glow the same color as the terra-cotta tiles under my feet

✕

The sun is a juggler in a yellow derby and red bodysuit on the
Malecón

She juggles five orange balls at once

The day is the whiteface mime who points to the prettiest girl in
the audience, mimes her curves like a potter shaping a vase
from wet clay, puts one thumb and index finger in his mouth,
and whistles silently

The purple morning glories by the pool at the Hotel El Pescador
open

The halogen security lights shut off

✕

The first joggers in gray sweats shuffle by

A man comes and sits on a white plastic chair 50 feet from me and
smokes his first cigarette

Firefly glow of the cigarette tip as he pulls the smoke all the way
into his lungs

Its slow fade as he exhales

Hand in hand, a man and a woman walk down the beach

On the hotel terrace a young man in a gray-hooded sweatshirt
sweeps into a red-handled dustpan the night's leavings: ciga-
rette butts, candy wrappers, white camellia blossoms, plastic
forks

Seven pelicans fly in a diagonal line low over the water 30 feet
from the surf, skim the surface on hovering wings

✕

Now I can see the sign that tells us the “Condiciones Del Mar”

The green flag is for “Mar En Calma”

The yellow for “Precaución”

The red for “Peligroso”

The flag today is green. We will take the water taxi to Yelapa

In three days we will fly home to the ice storms of Indiana, which
we left a week ago at three degrees above zero

I still have the cold I caught in Chicago

✕

The palm fronds sway in the light breeze like old men doing tai
chi, moving their arms slowly from side to side

High hawks circle on an updraft

Dust, trash, and camellia blossoms, the young man sweeps them
from the terra-cotta tiles into the one pile

✕

Purple-necked pigeons, heads bobbing as they walk, look for
taco crumbs under the white plastic tables stamped with blue
crowns above the logo “Corona Extra”

A rooster crows, church bells start ringing

Neither they nor the rooster will shut up

Its cry is someone trying to rip sheets of tin with his bare hands

I smell something cooking from the taco stand on the side street

Grilled shrimp for tostadas

The hotel boy skims bougainvillea petals off the pool's surface
with a square of fine netting on a pole

What does he do with the purple-red petals but throw them away

✕

The pigeons coo and chortle

One early fishing boat with a blue awning sets out for the horizon
beyond the Bahia de Banderas

In the distance, to the south, I see the three green loaf-shaped
islands with brown cliffs. They are called "Los Arcos"

El arco iris means "rainbow"

Iris's arch

Iris, messenger of the gods, slid down to earth on rainbows that
were to her as waterslides are to us

Los Arcos

✕

My job is simple and unending: say the names of everything on
the beach of the dead

It can't be done

Some of the pigeons are gray, white, and black

Others are brown and white

All have pinkish claws that almost match the terrace's tiles

✕

A slalom water-skier in an orange life jacket kicks up rooster tails
behind a speedboat

How can it be that one day he will die

His single ski flashes in the sun

He leans back against the pull of the boat so that his right shoulder
nearly grazes the water

✕

I too will awake, step away from my body, leave this poem

✕

Up the beach, farther north along the horseshoe bay, the yellow
ten-story walls of the Hotel Canto del Sol shine

They are the color of egg yolk

Dana calls me on my cell phone to tell me she needs Twinings
English Breakfast Tea, skim milk, toilet paper, an English-
language newspaper

Lucy has stopped vomiting

On the beach of the dead a father and a daughter hit a small black
ball back and forth with ping-pong paddles

✕

A black-haired woman in a yellow shirt and red sweat pants jogs
along the beach with a water bottle swinging in one hand

Her hips sway and say

Hola, todo el mundo

Hola, father and grown son, you who draw up two blue lounge
chairs to watch the waves, talk quietly, and then fall silent
when she passes

Hola, dead pigeon, stiff in the sand where you finally fell, one wing
sticking up like a black sail

Hola, boy made of bronze, naked except for the straw hat that
dangles from the string around your neck and jounces on
your back as you ride overinvisible waves on a seahorse, your
own jet ski, whose verdigris tail curls into a Fibonacci spiral

Hola, men at the pier, trying to attract customers for your water
taxis, shouting in English, "Do you want to go to Yelapa"

The waves break, keep repeating the decades of their endless
rosary

Hola, hola

✕

A young girl in turquoise shorts runs shrieking into the waves of
la Playa los Muertos

She jumps up and down, waves blindly at the sun with both arms
as if it were a white, silver-spiked piñata, which she hits and
breaks open with a stick on the Day of the Three Kings

Hola, Rosita

Hola, Estella

Every day the sun breaks and spills its light over the Bahía de
Banderas

We are children down on our hands and knees, scrabbling for
hard candy

We cannot hoard the light, eat it, or give it away

✕

O watch and listen

Listen watch O and

and and O O

Listen O watch and

✕

Ghost crabs with their eyes mounted on antennae scuttle side-
ways, rearrange and anagrammatize bits of straw washed up
at the high-tide line

They carry away the straw in white claws almost as big as the rest
of their bodies

A little yellow truck, which looks like a steamroller, goes beep-
beeping down the beach, sweeps up sand and rocks, but spits
back only the sand