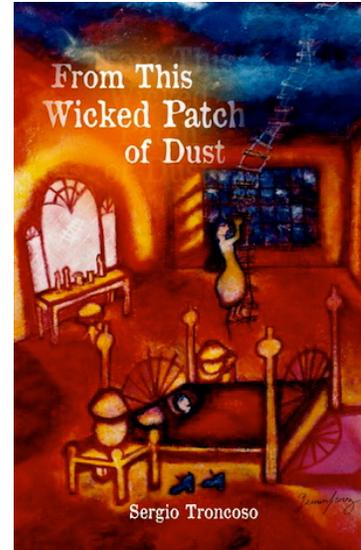


From This Wicked Patch of Dust, by Sergio Troncoso
 University of Arizona Press, 2011
ISBN-10: 0816530041
ISBN-13: 978-0816530045
 First Chapter



The Beatles in Ysleta: July 1966

Pilar Martínez stumbled into her mother’s apartment, which had once been a church in El Segundo Barrio in downtown El Paso. Nineteen-month-old Ismael was limp in her arms. Her husband Cuauhtémoc had locked the pale green Chevy Impala in the darkness of San Antonio Avenue. She glimpsed at her husband’s grim face. His brown trousers were speckled with mud and ripped at one knee. Pilar’s own face was streaked with an ashlike grime, and her jet-black hair seemed a ball of snakes twisting to escape their torture. Marching into the bedroom, she nestled Ismael into the rickety white crib and hurried to the living room. Cuauhtémoc unlaced his boots, and don Pedro and doña Josefina, her parents, waited in front of the rust-colored sofa. “Nos robaron el cobre. It’s been stolen, Mamá,” Pilar said, shaking the numbness from her arms.

“Cómo? Quien?”

“Probably marijuanos from the canal behind the lot. They stripped it,” Cuauhtémoc said bitterly, his green eyes flashing. He imagined twisting a rebar with his hands around an anonymous neck.

“We talked to don Chenko already and he’s coming back on Monday to redo the bathrooms, the kitchen. It’ll only take a few weeks.” Pilar slipped off her shoes, and fine grains of sand pattered on the floor. “Cuauhtémoc will do the plans for his new bathroom and living room to pay for don Chenko’s work, as soon as he’s able. It will be fine.”

“But we’ll have to move there.”

“What? To Ysleta?”

“To Ysleta. Or the same thing will happen again. Another catastrophe.”

“You don’t even have running water! Or electricity! Y los niños?”

“Mamá, we don’t have a choice.” They had spent the day putting up a makeshift chain-link fence around the lot. “If we’re not there, then our house will never be finished.”

“Pilar, what you need is a good dog and a club,” don Pedro said, hiking up his loose pants.

“What are you talking about?” Doña Josefina’s eyes bore through don Pedro’s shiny bald head.

Cauhtémoc trudged to the kitchen and poured himself a cup of atole. Would anyone dare break into their house if they saw someone living there? He stirred the hot thick brown elixir with a spoon and lost himself for a moment in the clouds of steam. Pilar followed him, while doña Josefina and don Pedro shuffled behind.

“Pedro can bring milk every day, on his way to Socorro. Milk and eggs, and whatever else you need,” doña Josefina said, wringing her hands as she sat at the kitchen table covered by a plastic tablecloth imprinted with yellow flowers and green stems.

“Seguro que sí. Whatever you need, you tell me. I can stop by everyday after I’m done on the farm, too.”

“We need to do this in a week, as soon as don Chenchó starts installing the new pipes, or the same thing will happen again,” Cauhtémoc said.

“It’ll be all right.” In her head, Pilar was already making plans to register the children at the new school two blocks from their house. That had been the plan all along anyway; they just had to start earlier. She marched through another doorway in the kitchen to the darkened bedroom where the children were sleeping. The aqua-blue wall between the kitchen and the bedroom reached only two-thirds of the way to what once had been the church’s ceiling, dividing the massive rectangular space like a gigantic I. Under the dome above the I, the pendulous air traversed every room in the house, vaguely connected its noises, and seemed to harbor a residue of bygone solemnity. Pilar returned and sat down. “Ay, que greñuda! I look like a witch with this hair!”

“Doña Pepita, I need to ask you for a favor,” Cauhtémoc said, staring at the cup in front of him. “We don’t have the money for the new copper pipes . . .” His voice trailed off as he thought of what he had just paid for: the lot in Ysleta, the adobe for the unfinished rooms, more lumber, the chain-link fence.

“Por supuesto, Cauhtémoc. Whatever you want, m’ijo.”

“Seguro que sí.”

“Not give. Lend. We’ll pay you back in a few months, Mamá,” Pilar said.

“If I find out who did this, if they come back again, I don’t know what I’ll do. Malditos. Maybe I should buy a rifle.” A shiver raced up Cauhtémoc’s spine.

“We’ll call the sheriff, that’s what we’ll do. No rifle.”

“Call the sheriff? With what, Pilar?” There was still no phone service in Ysleta.

“Don’t worry. There are plenty of gente decente in Ysleta. Don Chenchó. Doña Lupe. Ramon. Pepe Chavez on Carranza, your sister Elvia. They will help us. Those potheads come out at night

only when there's no one around. We'll be all right, you'll see." A siren echoed in the distance, on Paisano Drive. The canyon of red-brick tenements and old stone houses gave the street an ominous, permanent darkness that at night seemed to hide eyes behind every hedge and porch, even in the trees.

The Chevy Impala with fins rolled slowly east. It was followed by Don Pedro's green and white Ford station wagon. Pilar inhaled the scent of wet dirt of the irrigated cotton fields on Alameda, which wasn't Alameda anymore but Route 80. The tangy smell reminded her of El Charco, the ranch in Chihuahua where she had lived as a child.

Pilar thought back to one day in 1944 when she had been nine years old. They were dirt poor, and her mother woke up every day before the sun rose to make tamales to sell on the street. Her older sister Estela and she cleaned and ground the corn meal before leaving for school, but doña Josefina also forced them to sell jamoncillo and piloncillo to the other children during recess and after school. One day Pilar decided to join a baseball game. When she returned to retrieve her homemade candy, the box was gone, stolen. Her mother slapped her across the face, smashed a broomstick across her back, and screamed, "You are a good-for-nothing! Why are you here? Why don't you just run away?" Pilar had never forgotten those words. For how long had she felt her existence had been a horrible mistake? What was it to believe you reminded your mother of her ill-fated decisions, her abandonment, the hardness of this earth? It had taken don Pedro to more or less heal this wound. This happy-go-lucky musician had intervened one year and fallen in love with doña Pepita. And she had not driven him away. Over the years, don Pedro had deflected her mother's bitterness and anger away from her children.

Don Pedro had worked as a bracero for an American copper company in Arizona, learned pidgin English, and moved to the border town of Juárez. He had first worked in Socorro for a commercial farmer. El señor Johnson grew to trust don Pedro and helped him apply for citizenship. Here was a man who worked the most difficult and dirtiest jobs, yet slapped the dust off his pants at the end of the day and genially waved to his boss, grateful for a glass of water. Without Papá, Pilar thought, they would never have left Juárez for El Paso, and Cuauhtémoc would never have followed her to America. Without Papá, where would they be now?

Through the rear windshield of Cuauhtémoc's Chevy Impala, Pilar glanced at her stepfather and mother. Don Pedro cautiously gripped the steering wheel, while Doña Josefina stared fiercely ahead. She was always on a knife's edge, ready for a fight. Don Pedro was an angel in a plaid shirt whose greatest pleasures were a banana-peanut-butter sandwich, a can of beer before dinner, and a good joke.

Their cars ambled into the colonia of Ysleta, which was a misspelling of the Spanish isleta, meaning "little island." A misnamed, misplaced swath of earth in what had been a prehistoric sea. The gravel slipped under their tires. Elevated dirt mounds of irrigation ditches cut short the horizon. The most unusual and even gaudy structure was the Ysleta Mission, which had been founded one hundred years before the thirteen colonies of New England had declared themselves the United States of America. With its three-story cupola, crumbly white stucco walls, and

rickety wooden fence, the mission had attracted a small settlement of adobe shacks. Mount Carmel was a warehouse-like new church with a gray asphalt roof and cinderblock walls, and lay to one side of the mission, anchoring a dusty little square against the grim and boundless desert.

Pilar pointed out the church to the children and explained its role in Christianizing the Tigua Indians, who still lived in Ysleta.

“Will they shoot us with arrows?”

“No, Panchito, these Indians don’t do that anymore.”

At the end of the road and dust, Cuauhtémoc finally found the old one-lane wooden bridge across an irrigation canal that joined Old Pueblo and Socorro roads. The Impala’s white-walled wheels rattled each plank on the swaying bridge. Don Pedro waited till Cuauhtémoc’s car was on Socorro Road before guiding his station wagon onto the bridge.

After a few minutes of bumps and near-stops, the cars turned onto a nameless street of hard-packed dirt. In the hazy morning daylight of the Lower Valley, Pilar could distinguish the few scattered shacks of their neighbors, as well as the wooden stakes and neon-pink plastic ribbons that marked the boundaries of purchased yet still empty lots. About halfway down the dirt street, the pale green Chevy Impala stopped in front of a chain-link fence and an unplastered adobe house with sheets of plywood for doors. One side of the front yard was a giant mound of gravel and sand for mixing cement; the other side was a gigantic four-foot cube of adobe, with stalks of thick yellow straw intermittently protruding from the rough brown brick like crooked antennae. Behind the chain-link fence lay a small runoff canal cut into the sand and subsoil.

“This is our house, niños,” Pilar announced before she pushed open the heavy car door.

“Here?”

“Yes, here.”

“But, but, but there are no windows,” eight-year-old Julia, the oldest, stammered.

“When we get more money, we’ll get windows.”

“What about the rain?”

“It doesn’t rain in Ysleta.”

“Never?”

“Almost never.”

“What do you mean by ‘almost’?”

“Rarely in the summer. Don’t worry, Julia, we’ll have windows in a few months. Before it gets cold in October. Now, take Panchito and Marcos and keep them busy outside. Don’t go into the canal.”

“What canal?”

“The one behind the house.”

“Why can’t we go there?”

“It’s full of spiders and frogs and snakes and niños de la tierra. If one bites you, you will die.”

“Will, will we really die?”

“Well, maybe you’ll just get sick.”

“Like throw up?”

“Yes, you’ll throw up all day,” Pilar said, searching for Cuauhtémoc, who had been unloading the Impala’s trunk. “You cannot go into the canal. Is that understood, Julieta?”

“Sí, Mamá.” Julia ran to the chain-link fence, waited for her father to open the gate’s lock as he came back for another load from the car, and ran toward the mounds of sand and gravel. Francisco and Marcos chased her. Pilar lost sight of them as they hid behind the stacks of adobe. Only their giggles echoed in the deserted street.

“There are niños de la tierra in those adobe bricks too, and in the backyard. You didn’t tell her that,” Cuauhtémoc said, his head halfway inside the trunk of the Chevy Impala.

“I don’t want them to get filthy in that canal. God only knows what’s in there.”

“You also didn’t tell her about ‘no Beatles.’ Which reminds me, I need to buy several extra gallons of kerosene for the lamps and stove.” There was still no electricity in Barraca. The electric company had promised Cuauhtémoc that by the end of the summer, maybe by early fall, they would put the posts and overhead wires in their neighborhood. Pilar had been outraged when he had reported the news to her. “You tell them we have children? Babies?” she had exclaimed. But other families with children had already been living in Barraca for years. They were only the latest arrival.

Pilar and Cuauhtémoc unloaded the final box of pots, pans, and canned food from don Pedro’s station wagon. Doña Josefina hovered over the toddler Ismael, who walked cautiously to the fence, gripped the chain-link with his chubby hands, and gawked at the half-made adobe house. As soon as Mayello napped, Pilar thought, maybe her mother could help her ready the bedroom for the night, and cook lunch and dinner. Perhaps Papá could saw the plywood door for the outhouse so that Cuauhtémoc could fasten it to the frame before nighttime. For now, an old white

sheet on nails would do. It was work, and more work, and in a few days progress, and in a few months . . .

“Mamá! Mamá!”

“What happened?” Pilar finished tugging the jug of kerosene into a corner, where the children would not knock it over.

“Marcos fell down, cut his leg. He’s bleeding.”

“Where is he?”

“In the back. We were playing hide-and-seek and I was about to count to twenty and Pancho and Marcos were running and Marcos fell down and Pancho stepped on his leg.”

“My God. That’s a deep cut, niño. Let’s wash it with soap and put a bandage on it.”

“Pancho pushed me! He did! He pushed me!” Marcos cried, his brown face streaked with dirt, tears leaving behind crooked white lines on his cheeks.

Pilar glanced at Pancho. The older boy was frightened. His white T-shirt was torn at the belly button, and his stomach bulged over his waistband.

“I don’t think he meant to do that. Pancho, go fetch me a bandage from the bedroom, inside the black shoebox next to my shoes. Julieta, what is Mayello doing in that corner by himself?”

“He’s playing with rocks.”

“Go get him.”

“Mamá! Esta comiendo tierra!”

“Clean his hands. Bring him over to the faucet too. Now Julieta!” Julia pushed Ismael to the faucet in the front yard, their only source of running water until their indoor plumbing was reinstalled and connected to the main water line by don Chenco. As Pilar kneeled to rinse Marcos’s gash, she noticed Mayello was grinning. The baby’s face was smeared with mud and grime. A muscle spasm rippled across Pilar’s back like an electric shock. She closed her eyes and faced the ground on all fours, sweat suddenly dripping from her cold temples.

“You cannot eat dirt! You cannot push each other! You children need to help me! I can’t do this by myself!” she yelled at the ground, her head half-dizzy. A migraine seemed to want to start and not start inside her head.

“We’re sorry, Mamá. We promise to help you.”

“I’m sorry too.”

“Me too.”

On her knees, Pilar blinked and inhaled. She whispered to no one in particular, “Why did we come to este maldito terregal? Why to this wicked patch of dust? What have I done?”

“We’ll help you, Mamá.”

“I know you will, sweetheart. You know I love all of you?”

“We love you too, Mamá.”

“Yes we do!”

“Listen, tell me one thing and I’ll let you go play again,” Pilar said, as she struggled to her feet. “Say, ‘I am not sorry for being a niño. I am proud to be a niño!’”

The children looked at each other quizzically. Pilar smiled to reassure them. “Just say, ‘I am proud to be a niño.’ Say it loudly, so even la viejita doña Hortencia can hear you. It’ll make me feel better. Please, do this for your mamá.”

“I’m a niño!”

“Niño!”

“I’m muy proud to be a niño!”

“Thank you. Now go play and be careful.” Pilar watched them sprint to the other side of the house, beyond her view. Above, a biplane gently descended to the cotton fields on Avenue of the Americas. The biplane’s buzz seemed to expand the reach of the blue sky. She walked to the outhouse, knocked perfunctorily, and pulled the sheet open. She stared beyond the chain-link fence to the desolate landscape. Suddenly the stench overpowered her, and she vomited into the rancid abyss.

The absolute silence and darkness unnerved everyone. They were used to El Paso’s city buses rumbling up and down the cracked streets until midnight. Children ran, shrieked, and laughed on the sidewalks, in between parked cars, even in the alleys, until the streetlights flickered with a weak orange light. If the night air was warm and dry, the old men and women dragged out their lawn chairs or reclined against their stoops, and smoked and gossiped after dinner. But in Ysleta, beyond the city, the red sun sank behind the Franklin Mountains in the west, and darkness enveloped the earth.

When Pilar fetched a blanket in another room, the adobe walls and the unfinished doorframes were lost within a thick blackness. She felt as if she had plunged into the ocean’s depths. The darkness quivered with her every step. Her hands touched the walls in front of her, the doors, the

nothingness of space that wrapped itself around her like a black sheet. From one dark corner of the bedroom, Pilar overheard sobs.

“M’ija, it will be okay,” Pilar said gently, crouching next to Julia.

“Why did you get me that record if we were coming here? Why?”

“It will take only a month before they put in electricity. Then you can have your Beatles.”

“How much is a month?”

“Thirty days.”

“That’s still too long! I hate it here!”

“Julieta, things will get better, I promise you. This Saturday we can visit your abuelita and listen to your record some more. How’s that?”

“Can I stay with abuelita until we have electricity?”

“No, I need you here to help me with your brothers.”

“I still hate Ysleta and I hate you for bringing me here.”

“Julieta, I know you don’t mean that.”

“Yes I do.”

“Well, I don’t hate you. I love you. Let’s go to sleep now and get up early. You say your prayers?”

“God, please take care of me, take care of all my family, and take care of me while I sleep.”

“Good night, preciosa.”

“Good night, Mamá. Mamá?”

“Yes?”

“Can I pray for one more thing?”

“What?”

“God, please let me hear the Beatles’ *Second Album* in Ysleta as soon as you can.”

“Good night, Julieta.”

As she drove one Saturday morning to the Big 8 for groceries, Pilar saw a sign---“German Shepherd puppies \$5.” She stopped at the white brick house next to the farm, and the white-haired Anglo lady let her choose from the three puppies left. Pilar picked the strongest puppy, black and gray, the one that leaped at her knee as soon as she stepped into the backyard. His face and big ears were black. His eyes gleamed like black marbles. His chest, with a star-shaped patch of gray, seemed like a furry shield, his paws, also gray, like socks. Pilar brought him back in a cardboard box in the back seat of the Chevy Impala. She could not wait to see the children’s faces. Carefully she set the box down in one of the unfinished rooms next to the kitchen, but when she stepped into the front yard, the children were nowhere in sight.

As she marched around the house, Pilar thought she heard Julieta behind the outhouse in the canal. She leaned over the chain-link fence and scanned the banks of the canal. She finally found them throwing rocks behind doña Hortencia’s fence, partially hidden by the tumbleweeds and cattails scattered along the banks.

“Didn’t I tell you not to come back here? Just look at you!” Francisco and Marcos sat halfway down the embankment, white with dust. Each boy clutched a rock in his hand. Julia was holding Mayello’s hand at the top of the crumbly embankment. “Get out of there now!”

“I told them not to, Mamá. I told them, but they wouldn’t listen to me,” Julieta pleaded, guiding her youngest brother away from the canal’s edge.

“You were throwing rocks too! Don’t lie!” Marcos yelled as he scurried up the incline on all fours. The boys stumbled to the top of the embankment.

“Look at your pants and shirts! I just washed them yesterday.”

Pancho seemed on the verge of tears. Marcos glared at Julia, and kicked dirt onto her sneakers.

“She was showing Mayello how to hit the beer bottles at the bottom, wasn’t she, Panchito?” Marcos said. Pancho said nothing.

“I was not!”

“Yes you were! But Pancho’s the only one who broke a bottle! You weren’t even any good!”

“Liar!”

“You’re the liar!”

“You’re just a tonto who doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“You’re just a girl!”

“Both of you stop it. I don’t want you coming back here. What if one of you tumbles into that green water? What if Mayello follows you and cuts himself on the glass or rocks? Do you know there are scorpions and snakes in this canal?”

“I’m sorry, Mamá.”

“Sorry.”

“Go wash all your clothes in the washtub, then hang everything up in the backyard. I’m tired of cleaning up after all of you.” Pilar returned to the house, all four prisoners following solemnly behind her. About halfway there, she suddenly turned around and said, “I have something to show you.”

“What is it?”

“A surprise. All of you wait right here and I’ll bring it out. Close the gate, Julieta.” Pilar carried the cardboard box to the front yard and placed it on the hardscrabble grass. Immediately the puppy jumped out, wagging its black tail.

“Un perrito!”

“He’s so fast!”

“Is he ours?”

“Yes, he belongs to all of you and it’s up to you to take care of him. Mayello, he doesn’t bite. Relax, niño. He’s just excited to see you.”

“He’s beautiful. Look at his fur. He’s so cute.”

“Is he a boy dog or a girl dog?”

“He’s a boy dog.”

“Does he have a name? Look how he licks me! He loves me!”

“He’s black like a wolf. Is he a wolf?”

“No, he just looks like one.”

“Lobo. Let’s call him Lobo!”

“Yes, Lobo! Here Lobo!”

“Mom, how big will Lobo get? Bigger than Papá? Mayello, he’s not going to bite you!”

“Big. German shepherds usually get very big. Did you know German shepherds are very smart?”

“I’ll bet he’s smarter than Julia.”

“Look, Mamá, Lobo’s chasing a snake! Get it, Lobo! Get it! Atta boy! It went into the adobe!”

“Jesús, María, y José.”

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