



Keith Harrison / THE MALCOLM LOWRY
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT GRANT

As soon as the cockpit door opens (*aeropuerto*), your throat will begin to ache. You will remember having heard that breathing the air of Mexico City is the equivalent of smoking two packs a day. You will want to say to the not-so-tall but dark and handsome stranger (despite those pock-marks), "*Gracias, pero estoy ocupada*," but because you will not be sure of your Berlitz Spanish, the first of your potential Latin lovers will hear: "Thank you, but I'm busy." Walking down the aisle with your carry-on bag, you will touch the girdle-like money belt around your waist that holds your passport (*pasaporte*), American bills, paper pesos, and even your traveller's cheques.

A smiling, grey-haired man will take your visa, and you will be feeling for the Mexican coins for tipping that you will have secreted in the inner pocket of your linen jacket in Los Angeles, when you realize that somehow you have stepped out in front of a machine gun (a word not included in your Berlitz travel guide). You will have joined a line of people moving unfazed past the hyper-alert eyes of a young soldier guarding a bank. You will wonder why you didn't just go to Hawaii.

Your taxi will be a cute pastel green-and-cream beetle. The driver will zoom off, looking for any hint of an opening—right or left—to dart into, and speed along the broad highway with the VW hood centred exactly on a white lane line. First men, then packs of kids, and finally grandmothers, will run out in front of your hurtling taxi. Lurching like suicidal matadors, they will cross between buildings of warm pink, bleached purple, dingy and acrid yellow, and different shades of jungle green. Not once will your driver slow, or swerve, and you will remember horror stories and realize that you don't know what to do *when* he kills someone. Desperately, you will want to tell him to stop this macho stupidity, but the only Spanish phrase that will pop into your brain is "*¡Al ladrón!*" and you will fear that your command "Stop thief!" will enrage him to a sure act of vehicular homicide, which now will be your fault. After only ten minutes in Mexico, you will find

yourself wondering how many thousands of pesos it will take to bribe yourself free after the fatal accident and get back to the *aeropuerto*, and Canada. Your Berlitz Guide will have a chart in back for tipping porters, waiters, maids, hairdressers, and lavatory attendants, but no useful suggestions about *policia* or judges.

But soon your taxi will be spinning you around the huge *zocalo*—and the square's endless flatness will seem unreal in this gorgeous clutter of a city. One-way traffic will enclose your whining beetle as it rushes past the windowed symmetry of the stone palace, past the green metal scaffolding stretching up the high, impossibly ornate cathedral, and, when your driver brakes suddenly, you will cringe—look over your shoulder for the expected crash—but *nada*, and on stepping out, you will find there isn't a scratch on the VW's two-tone painted shell. Though your eyes will be stinging from the harsh air, you will be so glad to be standing alive and unhurt by the entrance to the Gran Hotel Ciudad de Mexico, and the money in your hand will look so strangely blue that you will pay the driver with *poco* anxiety about being cheated. At the hotel doorway, however, you will flinch when the little girl with a smudged face and a little crutch bumps into you with one hand out, "*Señorita, por favor,*" and you will be *mucho* relieved to get inside the chandeliered lobby with its iron-caged elevators and hanging papier-mâché *piñatas*—red and spiky and festive and bulbous with the promise of gifts and candies.

Dr. Sachs walked across the *zocalo* (officially known as the Plaza de la Constitucion), and entered the middle gate of the fortress-like Palacio Nacional de Mexico. Above the staircase a man with a metal jacket had his knee between the legs of an Indian woman who had been forced on her back. And beside a cauldron (like a kettle drum glowing orange) three men were branding a trussed-up brown human body. A two-legged beast with a jaguar skin, blood-red lips, and sharp white incisors lanced a falling Conquistadore in the back. There in the mural's centre was the founding prophecy of the Aztecs, an eagle on a cactus holding an orange multiheaded snake in its mouth. Dr. Sachs felt more bewildered than exhilarated.

The lighting, both clear (*claro*) and shadowy (*oscuro*), bounced

differently off the grand composite images framed beneath the seven deep, adjoining archways that folded in and out like a massive, half-defective accordion. There was also little accord between Dr. Sachs's expectations of Diego Rivera's art and this sombre, brilliant clutter of peopled violence. Neither the stone and marble architecture nor the brain's oxymorons (crude subtlety? lyrical Stalinism?) could contain the energies of these pulsating forms that were at once drab and garish. *Secuencia de la historia de Mexico*. But there was no evident *sequence* in these seven huge jumbled pictorial segments flowing and flaming and breathing into one incoherent panorama, only an intense feeling that the past must have been lived like the present: "confused, multiform, and unintelligible" (in the words of Paul Ricoeur).

The far *left* panel (that turned a corner) had Karl Marx in Heaven—the dead white European male painted above everyone else—leaning on a brick factory chimney of industrialization, a sun ringed orange-red dawning at his back, his arm outstretched and his index finger pointing, telling the Mexicans what to do with history, and offering the viewer a doubly consoling plot: narrative order and human triumph through class struggle. This story line would now displease environmentalists, feminists, "communists" who had ripped apart the Berlin Wall, and the intellectually decolonizing thinkers of South America. Could Diego Rivera, once friend of the soon-to-be-assassinated Trotsky, have been so willfully naïve as to paint ideological clarity into the unintelligible shadows of human experience?

On the opposite wall, the pre-Conquest alternative, the legend of Quetzalcoatl. His truncated, upside-down sun-face did not notice the tax collector below, or even the strange flying beast with two fiery tongues hovering above the molten lava of an exploding volcano. Staring at the inverted eyes of the pre-Hispanic sun god, Dr. Sachs's own eyes began to water and hurt.

Visiting time was over. But Dr. Sachs kept looking at Rivera's unsettling depiction of Mexico's national emblem. It made iconographic sense that the snake was the same orange as the Quetzalcoatl sun, the erupting volcano, the fiery cannon of the Conquistadores, the monks burning the codices, but why was there, near one end of the snake, a circling band from which four cloth-like cones terminated in four bright miniature balls? Dr. Sachs knew better, but rubbed at

irritated eyes. The snake's head, multibelled in appearance, looked like the cap of a court-jester. Mexican life, a joke?

After re-reading my mother's letter (Lucy, they're out there. You're just not looking!) I stare up at the dining room's elegant ceiling and want to take a stick to the fat red *piñata* hanging over my head. (Your second cousin Sam's new bride, Jessica, wanted to sing at her own wedding—"Stairway to Heaven"—but had a fit and threw her diamond ring at Uncle Max when he suggested the lyrics might be prophetic, given Sam's problems with his new pace-maker.)

By myself at dinner I feel the ache of the blues. This beer, with its two big red Xs, doesn't improve my mood. Maybe it's because I've got the two Xs of the female chromosome, Dos Equis, or maybe it's because I told the shy waiter *claro* instead of *oscuro*, and now this light-coloured liquid makes me see too clearly. (Get down on your knees and thank your lucky stars you didn't marry David who just got out of detox for the ceremony and was caught with his hand inside Aunt Eva's purse. First he said he was only looking for some Kleenex; then he claimed he was trying to find some Tums for the butterflies that always start flying around in his stomach whenever he shows up at a wedding, and finally he told Aunt Eva he wanted to borrow her vibrator! By this time his poor mother was crying her heart out, her face a black river of mascara . . .)

"Señora"

"Oui . . . oui, I mean, *si, si*." My brain tries to accommodate via the more familiar strangeness of French. "*Otra cerveza. Dos Equis. Oscuro. Oscuro.*" I wonder if he went to the wedding hoping to see me—this maudlin blob in a red dress in a foreign country.

My mother thinks I should smash my way to happiness—just blindfold myself, grab a long stick, and whack at what I hope is the *piñata*'s belly until the sweets of the world tumble down onto my lap.

David's sweet soprano sax I remember once, on a hot New York night, trembling with the sounds of love (maybe).

"Gracias."

You will panic when the commercial jet (*Servicio Azteca de oro*) tilts

suddenly towards the snowy peak just outside your window. When the plane immediately rights itself, you will relax, realizing that the pilot—like a barnstormer from an old newsreel—has just tipped his wings to Mount Popocatepetl.

Later, bouncing on the runway at the Puerto Escondido *aeropuerto*, someone will say, “It’s only eighty degrees,” and you will be happy to be a long way from Ottawa and winter.

And at the hotel, Flor de Maria, with its white hand-plastered walls, the cement floor gouged and blackened to look like huge tiles, and fiesta colours everywhere, you will feel a sense of exotic exuberance, especially looking out from room *número quince* (**keensay**), at roosters, cabanas, palm and banana trees, and *el mar*.

At the sea’s ragged edge, you will wade warmly. Then, lying on your new beach towel, you will watch three brown boys scoop up small fish trapped by the turning tide and then hand cast lines with this living bait to pull in larger fish (*pescado*). Pelicans, whose mouths are not so pouchy here, will glide above the glassy sliding crests, waiting, like the crouching blonde surfer with a black knee-bandage, for the right wave. A woman in a shimmering dress will offer you one of the twenty hammocks bowing down her back, and you will say, “*Nada . . . gracias . . . nada.*”

In the humid room Dr. Sachs took out a spiral notebook, disorderly scraps of paper, and tiny pallid postcards. If events were threaded by time, then Diego Rivera had cut the warp strings—had pulled the rug out from underneath history. (A)voiding chronology, he was both the monarch of all he surveyed *and* the king’s mocking court-jester. But the problem with seeing history as a joke was that it wasn’t very funny. Also, for a punch line to work, the joke needed a sequence. Did the religious zeal of the monks burning the codices (*naranja*) come before, with, or after the cannon fire (*naranja*) of the Spanish soldiers, and where did nature, the exploding (*naranja*) volcano fit? All those orange images in the mural must be trying to make history intelligible.

How was Dr. Sachs going to produce a paper on Malcolm Lowry, Diego Rivera, and narrativity that would justify the travel grant?

I look at a mother and daughter walking barefoot towards me on this

scorching sand, each with a wide straw basket full of sandals on their heads. For the bulky mother the burden seems automatic, unfelt, but the (seven-year-old?) girl needs to keep reaching up to hold this weight in place.

I can barely imagine the skills needed to craft the beautifully stitched tan leatherwork taken down from their heads. Pointing to my pink feet, to the moulded air-pocketed sandals whose raised purple letters spell "Nike," I again say, "*Nada*."

I hate to watch the brown-eyed *niña* lift her basket up towards the sun, see her fighting to get the balance right on that small, rounded skull, while her mother sticks the huge basket back up top as if on a spike and observes her daughter's efforts—wobble, slip, grab, not holding on now—just as Ma did when I was learning to skate backwards on the frozen canal.

You will be sitting near the pool, on the rooftop deck of the Flor de Maria, gazing at *el mar azul*, sipping your glass of chilled white wine, believing you must be the only tourist in Mexico who needs a laxative, when you will hear a rustling above you in the vines and open rafters. Up in the corner, sitting on a thin plywood board, is a largish *gato* with black patches on tawny fur and big, darkly luminous eyes, and you will say, "*Buenas tardes*" to the owner's pet ocelot, and feel contented.

Dr. Sachs unfolded the small poster of the mural. *If* the Aztec myth of the founding of their empire was painted into the very centre of the middle panel by Rivera, and the depiction of the class struggle (relegated to a side wall) separated from the eagle on a cactus eating a snake by many intervening, magnificently vivid, but collectively incoherent images, *then* the Marxist narrative itself, instead of foreclosing through teleological revolution the heterogeneity of history, might be exposed ironically as historicized fantasy.

Refolding *Secuencia de la historia de Mexico*, Dr. Sachs picked up the Penguin edition of Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, with its cover illustration taken from Rivera's fresco, *Day of the Dead in the City*, itself centred on a man downing a glass—his eyes pressed shut.

Waking to pee, I get an unexpected gift: the delicate pink light of dawn over fluttering palm leaves. Looking from the narrow bathroom window at the ruffled sea, I remember our family visiting David and his mother one spring, and his gift of cut branches. I was expecting all the buds to come out as pink blossoms. I still can't forgive my mother for the telling, and re-telling, of his gesture as "the terminal dumbness of Lucy's first boyfriend." Now I would be far from disappointed to see a bouquet of buds come out as new green leaves.

The sun is turning the rose sky blankly white.

You will stroll along the beach to the curve where *los pescadores* gun their boats up onto the sand above the tideline, where eager women with knives lift out and gut the silver fish. You will walk on, towards the rocks and the lighthouse, following a stone path, past the initials of lovers scratched into circular cactus pods, over foot-bridges crafted from cement, and will be startled at the scuttle of a huge iguana.

Returning for breakfast, you will hear pinging, as *los pescadores* hammer at rudders and propellers, straightening and fixing, while the women tie new knots in the drying nets. You will think you detect a cheeping noise from sand-coloured crabs chased by running shore birds.

At the table, to the polite, baffled waitress, you will keep saying, "*Oui . . . oui.*" The bananas, small and newly picked, will loll deliciously on your tongue, sweeten your breathing.

Spinning the pages of the novel, Dr. Sachs read:

The flare lit up the whole *cantina* with a burst of brilliance in which the figures at the bar—that he now saw included besides the little children and the peasants who were quince or cactus farmers in loose white clothes and wide hats, several women in mourning from the cemeteries and dark-faced men in dark suits with open collars and their ties undone—appeared, for an instant, frozen, a mural. . . .

Dr. Sachs knew critics had interpreted *Under the Volcano* ("backwards revolved the luminous wheel" at the foot of this page) in terms of cinema and Buddhism, but was this passage at the end of the opening chapter, and, more specifically, the word, "mural," a kind of *mise-en-abyme*, a miniature inner mirror to the novel's artistry? And was this putting into the abyss of endlessly reflecting mirrors related to Lowry's *barranca*, the ravine into which the hero's corpse is thrown on the last page? But the beach was not a place for intellect, or ethics.

Carleton University would not be pleased, Dr. Sachs suspected, to learn that most of the funded research time had been spent at the resort village of Puerto Escondido. What plausible narrative could be constructed?

(Lucy, they're out there.) I should send Ma a postcard in Hawaii, but the sun's too hot. A siesta?

She has a sense of humour for everyone else: Why not for me? At that first post-marriage party she gave, with Larry, my new, roly-poly stepfather, she must have sat on the floral sofa for three hours with a string of film negatives looped around her neck, her face expectant, amused. Wearing an Expos cap, he scratched at his crotch, and laughed like a burro.

No one could guess: Some day my prince will come.

I'm too tired to write.

At the neighbouring Hotel Santa Fe you will eat garlic red snapper with *media botella de vino blanco*, will say "*Muy bien, gracias*," and will wonder if you saw this headless *pescado* flopping on the bottom of a beached boat in the morning. Also, for a flickering moment, you will ask yourself why those seated have light skins while those carrying things have darker pigmentation, but you will remind yourself you're here on vacation—to have a good time—and the sunset will fill the warm Pacific sky with at least an hour of postcard colour.

And, after, you will decide to tell the tall, red-haired Australian, "*No, no me interesa, gracias*," and not worry about the Spanish pronun-

ciation marks you can never remember, but will feel cruel having to translate for him, "I'm not interested, thank you."

Returning along the beach, you will be listening to *el mar* and watching the light of *la luna* on the wave-tips, when a short man will hold a bright knife with a rusty edge in your face. You will give him all the paper pesos and confusing coins in your pocket *rapidamente*, and will get back to the hotel *rapidamente*.

Unable to sleep, Dr. Sachs found the light switch in the dark, sat up in bed, and flipped through the pages of the spiral notebook. There was the quote from Paul Ricoeur about "the undeniable asymmetry between the referential modes of historical and fictional narrative." But the problem was that the same word(s) and image(s) had to be used for both what had happened and what had been made up. Before Rivera painted his murals, horrible things like colonialism had *happened*, but *as* representation this knowledge entered a zone of mere "meaning," cohabiting with the fictive, or even with hate-mongering fantasy like the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

If there was no way to tell apart the telling of fiction from the telling of history, then the knife held to the throat might as well be made out of paper.

I can't say, "The weather is here, wish you were beautiful."

I can't forget to put the "Dear" in front of "Ma." This date, "Dec. 22," seems fraught with soft heaviness for me, like the postcard's image of Rivera's *Flower Day*, an enormous basket of cut white blossoms.

I guess there are no adventures without misadventures. Some times Mexico has the feel of a big family wedding gone wrong, but no one wanted it to end up that way, so, along with the harshness, there's a forgiving warmth. Say "Hi" to the "Prince" for me. Lucy

The man with tight pants, spare gestures, and pale sunglasses who

takes your ticket for the chartered flight will turn out to be the pilot of this twin-propped plane (no co-pilot), and as you are flying out over *el mar* as a way of gaining height before taking on the inland mountains, you will wonder if there is anyone in the control tower. Your ears will ache in the (unpressurized?) cabin, and you will be very scared at the way he is steering—just above the jungle ravines and *between* the mountain peaks which disappear into clouds.

Dr. Sachs re-read the echoing sentence, starting midway, trying to separate it from personal associations:

(. . . to persuade herself her journey was neither thoughtless nor precipitate, and on the plane when she knew it was both, that she should have warned him, that it was abominably unfair to take him by surprise.)

Skiping further down the page, searching for the word "Oaxaca," Dr. Sachs found where last night's re-reading of *Under the Volcano* had stopped:

The word was like a breaking heart, a sudden peal of stifled bells in a gale, the last syllables of one dying of thirst in the desert. Did she remember Oaxaca! The roses and the great tree, was that, the dust and the buses to Etna and Nochitlán? and: "*damas acompañadas de un caballero, gratis!*" Or at night their cries of love, rising into the ancient fragrant Mayan air, heard only by ghosts?

Dr. Sachs was half-puzzled by Lowry's language of elegiacal desire for a place where he had been thrown in jail for debts and drunkenness, and pondered if Lowry's prose here had become "sentimentalized" by internal focalization through the female character of Yvonne, and if this were a psycholinguistic gender stereotyping, or perhaps had its source(s) in the biographies of Lowry's first and second wives (whose emotional expressiveness likely had been previously (de)formed through hegemonic social construction). Dr. Sachs also

questioned the vague reference to “Mayan air,” since Mayans didn’t live anywhere near Oaxaca. Additionally, Dr. Sachs wondered why it was impossible to enjoy reading a book anymore.

I’m tired, and the cigar smoke is getting to me, but two wonderful musicians, Gil and Cartas, are playing on the violin and guitar in this roofed-over courtyard, El Sol y La Luna. I’m thinking about my hotel bed at the Parador Plaza, just across the street (*calle*), when I recognize the first bars of “Djangology.”

Felipe Moreno enters with an *amigo*, waves to me. Earlier, I talked to him at the contemporary *museo* about his weavings that had alternating patterns made by sewing strips of cloth over the wool before dying, then unstitching them to emphasize the bands of complete blankness among the colours (except where the needle’s piercings left dots of dye). He had suggested El Sol y La Luna for *la musica*.

As I clap for Gil and Cartas, Felipe comes over to my table, alone, wearing a silk shirt. I gesture towards the empty chair, and the musicians begin to play a fast dance. I order two Dos Equis, *claro*, and Felipe insists on paying for both drinks.

La musica begins to fill my head with the dizzying light of both the sun and the moon.

It’s not *claro* at what point I have decided not to use the phrase that starts with an upside-down exclamation mark, *¡Dejeme tranquila, por favor!* because I already know I don’t want to be left alone.

At the Oaxaca runway, although you were first in line, the pilot will board the heavy German couple and two male passengers before you, up front, to balance the helter-skelter stacking of bulging cardboard boxes in back where you will sit.

For ten minutes you will hear the twin engines run roughly without the left propeller going around, and then you will see the pilot step down out of the tiny cockpit, spin the immobile prop once by hand, and climb back in.

As the overloaded plane lunges forward and eventually stumbles off the runway’s end into the shimmering afternoon sky, you will feel an odd fatalism, and nod off.

Standing again in front of *Secuencia de la historia de Mexico* with its populist cartoon boldness, Dr. Sachs wondered some more about Rivera's wife, who had once been occluded, but had recently become a feminist cult figure. Dr. Sachs walked down the corridor to look for a second time at the husband's ambiguous representation of Frida Kahlo, the most prominent figure in his depiction of Mexico's Aztec origins—lifting her dress to expose one knee, her chin up. Was Frida Kahlo's own small-scale art and obsessive self-portraiture a necessary refusal and narcissistic strategy of survival under the masterful, monumental male gaze?

Or did Lowry have it right (at least, textually), "*No se puede vivir sin amar*," and the super-subtle critic had no useful analytic vocabulary (voyeurism? hierarchization?) for understanding that Diego simply wanted to paint Frida, the woman he loved to live with, as the beginning of everything? In fact, Dr. Sachs wondered if the shift in Rivera's master narrative from Marxism to Catholicism made public during his final illness could be traced to Frida's earlier death.

Rivera's dark and bright mural bits, Dr. Sachs sensed through stinging eyes, had to be understood as discrete parts implying the wish for a completed and intelligible whole, a way of making tangible the human fragments that are the open-ended hurt of history.

I am riding in a taxi through this city that's nearly as populous as my own country, and at Alameda Square it seems all the people in Mexico City have gathered. In lines blocks long, families wait for the seated red-coated figure on a raised platform in the park. The taxi halts in the middle of brown faces shining in the sun, and neatly dressed bodies cross over into the park, and I see another red-coated figure further down the long park, with its own enormous gathering, and yet another, further away and smaller, and still another, in a near infinite mirroring. Along the full length of Alameda Square there must be at least two dozen Santas!

And I think of David that Christmas time in New York, hopping down from the bandstand at the break, strolling over to the bar,

asking me why Santa had no kids. Thinking that this was a different David, I was shaking my head even as he said, "He always comes down chimneys." Why did it sound more brutal than hip?

During that final set his saxophone collected every last sixteenth note and muted half-rhythm from the other musicians in the quintet, and he put everything into one long solo that sang, honked, and soared, screeched and whispered and wailed, and sang again, but felt nothing like his gift to me of leafy summer abundance, just six months earlier. David's last solo seemed too self-regarding, aggrandizing, maybe only a magnificent performance of self, but what else is a *solo*?

And when I went to visit him in that cramped dressing room five minutes after the show, he just grabbed me under my sweater, under my bra, roughly squeezing my breast like it was a *piñata* to break open. "Not like this," I said. And he let go, his coked-up eyes wandering back to the beautiful tubular curve of his instrument lying diagonally on a chair.

This taxi won't get me to the *aeropuerto* in time for the flight.
Why should I want to send him a postcard?

December 24.

Dear David, I've been hanging out at the beach, trying to relate Malcolm Lowry's narrative structure to Diego Rivera's murals, but thinking how it's like melodic lines in jazz, something to jump free from, or like fishermen's nets just tied together to make openings. I never thanked you for those branches of budded leaves. To quote Malcolm Lowry, "*No se puede vivir sin amar*," meaning, "I-you-one can't live without love." *Gracias*.

Lucy.

This taxi's going nowhere. ¿ So? ¿ What self-imposed narrative plots my return to a cold grey city of colourless skins?

At Los Angeles you will have your passport taken as if it belongs to someone else. (You'll never make anything of yourself unless you go to collage.) Your identity will be read aloud, "Dr. Lucy Sachs," while his eyes fix on your face, before moving down to the official sameness, the photo that glints under the fluorescent lights, like a broken, half-dark blade.

You will be given back your picture, upside down.

With her name, in my hand.

Holding on.