

# Bustamante On My Mind

by Gill Ediger

A talus fan spreads out across the valley floor,  
Covered mostly by the dingy green of desert plants:

Acacias by the score—

Mesquite, huisache, catclaw, and black brush

Just to name a few;

White brush, sage, and mountain laurel

With its deadly red mescal beans dangling there like peanut pods;

Cholla, prickly pear, and *tasajilla* (jumping cactus)

Represent the family *cactacea*;

The yuccas—spanish dagger, *lechuguilla*

Waiting innocently to spear intruders; and

*Ocotillo*—long barren arms reach up to heaven,

Begging for some rain to make them green.

The soil's a ruddy mix of sand and clay and

Rocks, both angular and round,

Brought down by countless rains and

Puffed by winds to form the desert pavement

Scratched and shuffled many times by hoofs of

Mexican goats and burros out to make a living

Eating thorns and dried up sticks.

Banks of low gray clouds

Have played across the valley all day long.

They came first from north and west,

Piled up behind the mountains,

Spilled slowly over—slowly creeping waterfalls—

Cascading halfway down the slopes before evaporating—

fizzling out—

Into thinning horsetail wisps, only to reform

Lower down as mere ghosts of scuddy clouds—

Thin, swirling curly-cues of cloudy gossamer,

Spinning swirls of misty currents—

Rising, falling—eddies moving up and down and

Here and there,

Distracted by the undulations of the mountain side.

Thunderheads imbedded in the higher clouds

Boomed out deep bass rumbles that shook the ground and

Shook the car-sized rock I'm sitting on.

Lightning hit the high line in the valley and

Blew the power out in town.

Gray slanting streaks of rain moved in the valley,

Kicked up the desert dust, and

Turned it into mud before amalgamating with

The saw-toothed mountains on the other side.

Then they blew away and left us all in peace.

Canyon wrens sing, now, in their descending call; and

Blackbirds—grackles—perch on boulders,

Watching over their domain,  
Fussing in their gravelly voices at  
Anything that makes a move within their field of view.

A flock of flying objects, unidentified,  
Flutters by—  
Diving left and right in unison—  
All screeching, squawking as if to call attention to themselves.  
A pair of something else birds beats and batters,  
Screaming in a bush beside me,  
Too caught up in their copulating frenzy  
To pay me any mind.

The clouds have changed direction now,  
Passing back to northwest, stopping,  
Dammed up in the valley by the mountains as  
They slowly rise to get away from  
Warmer southeast winds that push in from the Gulf.  
The front passed over, left its mark then  
Petered out and passed back whence it came.

Broken clouds still dot the sky.

Intermittent holes allow the sun to  
Beam its rays upon the valley floor as  
Little spots of light line up like soldiers  
Marching slowly over fields of onions, beans, and garlic  
Toward the drabness of the unkempt desert.

This desert, as I've said, sits on the talus fans—  
The out-wash cones of cobbles, silt, and sand  
That's mothered by a million rains and  
Brought down the canyons  
From the limestone mountains up above.

The fan in front of me was fathered by  
The *Cañon del Palmito*,  
A ribbon-like arroyo with a cobbled bottom—  
Gray—  
And winding unconcernedly across the fan  
To join the little river—  
*Sabinas* it is called—  
Aheadin' to the sea.

When I first came here 30 years ago  
That arroyo and a narrow serpent gravel road from town  
Were all the punctuation marks there were upon the desert floor.  
They came together, finally,  
At a fairly level, dusty, thorny, river gravel covered  
Piece of ground we called the "parking lot".  
The road came to an end!  
Or rather, it transitioned to a trail  
Then wound on upside the arroyo for a while.  
The canyon headed up and up and up an ever steeper gulch—  
Diminishing dendritically—till somewhere,  
Near the top,  
It lost itself amongst some rocky cliffs where

Resurrection plants and *lechuguilla*  
Clung to cracks and razor sharp rillkarren.

The other way, out past the talus fan, the valley lay.  
Still does!  
It's changed a little. *No!*  
It's changed a lot.

The sleepy-looking, slowly-moving town of Bustamante  
Lies off to the left—the north—  
    With the water tower sticking up, as prominent as ever.  
All the rest is just a dull mosaic mass of  
    Avocado green and dusty white and  
    Aqua blue and titty pink and  
    Rust-ban red amongst the trees—and  
    Other *fauna tropical*.  
Like any other of a thousand Mexican towns.

Beyond that, groves of trees—  
    Mostly pecan,  
    A major source of income here—  
    Spread out  
To cover 50, maybe 60 hectares of the desert floor.  
    Always have, as I recall.  
Watered by *acequias* from the same Sabinas River,  
    Flowing out of *Cañon Bustamante*.

The railroad running valley-center  
    Forms as straight a line as can be seen.  
Nearby, the road—State highway number 1—runs parallel.  
Fence rows surround the garlic fields—  
    No vampires here.

    Aside from that,  
In 1967 all there was to see  
Were the peaky hills across the valley  
    Rising into ever higher purple ridges of  
Cavernous limestone as they transitioned into sky.

Today a long straight stretch of graded gravel road  
Runs from the town right to the “parking lot”.  
It replaced the two-track donkey road we used to use and  
    Ripped the talus fan asunder.  
From up above it looks for all the world  
    Like the runway of some major airport—  
Bustamante International perhaps.

Back then—in '67—  
The two-track road left town and  
    Headed, sort of, for the “parking lot”.  
It didn't really have what you could call “direction”.  
It just wound around;  
Went up and down; and  
    Basically, just wandered toward the cave.  
It's twists and turns weren't really guided by the ground—  
    It could have been put anywhere.  
More likely it just followed some forgotten goat path,

Avoiding brush and cactus long since dead.  
It took the path of least resistance,  
Though rather crookedly, at best.  
I don't think a dozer blade had ever moved a rock  
Or scratched a thorny bush—  
The road just formed one day and,  
By God,  
That's where it stayed—  
With all its rocks and ruts and  
Twists and turns and  
Trials and tribulations.

It ended at the "parking lot."  
Or "campground" it was sometimes called.  
(We didn't know about the campground in the canyon then.)  
Someone had run a dozer up the creek and  
Shoved some river cobbles 'round and made a flat spot—  
Well, fairly flat—about an acre big.

Then they'd gone away and let the stickers grow.

Those that didn't grow just kinda laid there  
Waiting for whatever, whomever, to come along.  
In places there was soil where  
Bermuda grass made a valiant struggle to survive,  
But goats and burros kept it cropped so close  
That it just barely did,  
Although they fertilized it well.

The rocky ground was seldom flat.  
It wasn't quite the world's worst campground  
But better than a KOA.  
It was handy,  
All we had,  
And we were young and tough and  
Inexperienced as campers.  
We'd come to cave,  
Not to complain about the cultural exhibits.

Arriving there at 1 a.m.  
We'd lay out our groundsheets  
Avoiding—mostly not—the thorns and lumpy rocks.  
Then we'd roll out sleeping bags—  
Army surplus,  
Chicken feather filled—  
That cost as much as fifteen dollars—twenty with a cover.

Feathers would sneak out of  
Rips and tears from time to time and  
We were loathe to sew them up by hand,  
But did.  
Duct tape hadn't yet become  
The general purpose mender it is now.  
Foamy sleeping pads hadn't been invented yet, I think,  
And air mattresses were rendered worthless by the thorns,  
So we crashed there without much fanfare,  
On the ground.

Someone always had to mention just  
How bright the stars were here  
And whistle up a verse or two of  
*Deep in the Heart of Texas.*

Or if there was a norther blowing,  
Then they'd bitch about the wind and cold.  
Sometimes it rained.  
We'd stuff ourselves into cars—  
We didn't fit— and  
Try to sleep asittin' up.  
Nobody had a tent,  
A tarp,  
A plastic sheet—  
Not anything!  
We just toughed it out.

Twice we toted stuff up to the cave and camped out there.  
I guess that once could be condoned;  
But why would anybody do it twice?

Late at night the only sounds we heard were  
Coyotes singing to their moon or mates.  
And whistles blowing and  
The rumble of the train upon the tracks.  
The dimly glowing blue-green light shone  
Out of windows of the  
Passenger cars and  
Moved across  
The valley floor well out ahead of its associated noise—  
A rumbling glow worm  
Chewing its way  
Slowly  
Through the desert darkness.

The NAFTA trains fly through at 80 miles per hour now.  
The station's closed and boarded up.

Mornings there were almost always chilly.  
Maybe because we always went in winter.  
Maybe because that's how the desert is!  
Beer left out overnight to cool  
Was often had for breakfast—  
Along with eggs and bacon and canned juice and  
Day or two old store-bought sweet rolls.  
Any cooking that we did was on a Svea stove in  
Teflon coated frying pans.  
Later we got some Coleman stoves,  
But kept the stupid Teflon frying pans.

During and after breakfast  
Caving gear was sorted out;  
Carbide lamps were loaded up,  
Their water drippers tested.  
Packs were packed,  
The cars were locked, and  
People started up "the trail".

“The trail” was right at one mile long.  
It started at the west end of the parking lot.  
From there it paralleled the canyon  
For a quarter mile or so,  
Climbing gently as it cut into  
The limestone of the mountainside.

It was, without exception, unimproved.  
What work they’d done had usually made it worse.  
Erosion had left sticks and stakes and boulders  
In the path like pins and bumpers in a pinball game.  
Mostly 3 to 6 feet wide  
It rambled on along taking pretty much whatever  
Rock or ledge appeared in stride.  
(Shorter people took a shorter stride, of course,  
But also took a lot more of ‘em.)

Suddenly the straight track took a different turn.  
It turned back to the left to start  
A steep ascent that didn’t stop  
Till it had climbed a quarter kilometer  
Right up the wall.  
It hung tenaciously to limestone cliffs and  
Doubled back upon itself,  
Then doubled back again, and then again.  
Forty-three switchbacks is what they claimed,  
Though other sources counted fifty-two,  
And sometimes several numbers in between.  
I suppose if every little turn and misalignment were considered  
One might count up several hundred dozen.

At any rate,  
The trail climbed steeply ever upward—  
With but one or two slight declinations—  
Toward the platform shelf  
That forms  
A resting/waiting spot before the very entrance to the cave.

New people were always eager to get started from the camp.  
They’d be up and moving early,  
Checking out their gear,  
Asking questions,  
Watching for some sign.  
After breakfast we’d check their kit and send them on their way.

The first part of the trail was rough and awkward  
But offered little reason for concern.  
They’d thought the hike would be a breeze.  
That is if they had thought about the hike at all.  
Then it made its turn and headed up the cliff!

Before fifty footsteps had been laid upon the first incline  
Their hands were resting on their hips;  
Their lungs were breathing deeply in their heaving chests.

Upon the third switchback the sweat was flowing freely.  
And by the fifth their long sleeved

Shirts and sweaters were removed—  
Even on the coldest days.  
Soaking wet T-shirts hung upon their sticky backs.

They stopped and rested,  
Stood akimbo, leaning forward,  
Panted heavily,  
Then looked, forsakenly, on up the trail—  
Along the slope—  
Which headed up the mountainside.

Disdain and disbelief were showing in their eyes.  
Most had never climbed a little hill  
Nor even hiked a mile.  
They were flatlanders—South Texans—  
From a country where the  
Water only runs  
Which ever way the wind decides to blow.

They had no way of knowing that  
Three dozen switchbacks and  
Three-quarter thousand feet of elevation change lay just ahead!

They tied their shirt sleeves 'round their waists,  
Took one more daring, long and doubting look  
Up the steep trail and,  
Having regained most of their composure,  
Sighed heavily and hung their heads and  
Plodded on again.

That scene would be the standard fare,  
Repeated every three or four minutes  
Along the trail till everybody reached the top.  
Their gaze fell mostly on the trail  
Just three steps up ahead.  
They had to watch their step, of course,  
But feared that what they feared  
Might really be up there,  
In front,  
Somewhere!  
They blocked the future from their minds;  
The *be-here-now* was hard enough to deal with  
At the moment!  
The question, "What am I doing here?"  
Rolled over in their thoughts  
More times than they could count.  
But among the puffing and  
The panting and  
The sweating and  
The anticipating fear to look ahead,  
They put one foot before the other  
Time and time again.  
For one brief hour out of time  
Their lives were dominated,  
Totally,  
By this trail and  
By the mountain where it lay.

They bowed their heads in reverence—  
    Unrealized.  
And moved their feet ahead  
    One at a time.  
And made their peace  
    With what they had to do.

To the old hands,  
    Knowing what lay ahead  
    Made the trip a lot more bearable.  
We knew the trail and what it held in store and  
    So prepared ourselves to take it all in stride.  
You could pace yourself and still keep up a steady clip.  
You knew not to stop and let your muscles chill.  
    Keep moving was the key!  
You knew how far you had to go,  
And how and when to drink your water ration.  
    You could leave camp last and still  
    Arrive on top before the main mass did.

    You'd pass them on the trail,  
Panting, puffing,  
Hearts pounding loudly,  
Bulging blood veins pulsing on their necks and temples,  
    Throbbing beneath their ruddy, sweating skin..

    Their chests heaved rhythmically  
As their expectant eyes watched my approach.  
"How much farther?" was their invariable request!  
It didn't matter where along the trail we were—  
    First switchback or near the last—  
"We're just about half-way!" is all I'd ever say.

"Half-way? Oh, man!"  
    They'd whine,  
And slowly shake their heads,  
    Crest-fallen.  
Resigned—*resigned*, I say—to meet their uncertain fate,  
    For not the last time on that momentous day.  
Their pondering gaze would drop back to the ground  
As thoughts of turning back went through their troubled minds.

    But the logic,  
"It would be stupid to have wasted all this  
    Time and energy just to turn back now,"  
Rolled off their countenance as did  
The very sweat from off their brow.

"Half-way?"  
    They'd ask in disbelief—  
    Again—  
Whilst adding up the time and distance,  
    Toil and sweat that  
    They'd just made it through,  
    To try and see  
If they still had enough reserves to do it all again.

“Half-way!”

They’d mumble to themselves

And shake their heads—

Again!

They’d look up the mountain side where palm trees

Clung to craggy cliffs and

Wonder

Where up there they had to go,

Then look back down to see how far they’d had to come;

And then they’d look back up again.

“Half-way? God damn!”

“Come on along,”

I’d say, not even letting up the pace.

They trusted me for reasons still a mystery!

They hitched up their packs;

They stood and turned and

Started up the trail,

Their chins still resting on their chests,

Their hands still weighing on their hips.

And so it went,

Time and

Time and

Time again

Until I neared the top.

Just before the last switchback,

However—

*The very last one, understand!—*

There lay a certain, smooth, flat weathered wall of

Dark gray limestone—like the blackboard in a school.

It begged to have a word or two scratched on it—

Perhaps a sentence written or

A problem of arithmetic.

It begged, at least,

To serve a purpose more than

Just to be a rock.

So, sometime early on,

I’d picked up a chunk of chalk-white calcite from the trail

And printed large block letters

HALFWAY

On that rock.

To me this rock was always dear because

I knew

*The end of trail lay just around the corner.*

But it—the word—

HALFWAY

Wrought fear and loathing in the hearts

Of many a newbie caver through the years.

I’d go on up the trail,

Up to the entrance shelf and  
Sit there

While the  
Sweat dripped off and  
Pulse rate stabilized.

The sounds of gravel grinding and of  
Puffing breaths warned of cavers coming up the trail.  
I'd hush the crowd assembled there  
And have them listen for a while.

A hundred feet before the trail's end—  
*Which they had no idea at all where was,  
Of course—*  
They'd come upon this dark gray, impressive rock  
That said in no uncertain terms,

HALFWAY.

"Halfway?"  
We heard them cry in disbelief.  
We giggled silently.  
"He said halfway was *way* back there!"  
"God damn! I'm going back!"  
Another said.  
"I don't believe it!" yet a third one wailed, "I'm dead!"

By then we all were giggling and  
Poking fun and  
Hooting down at those below.  
They heard our voices and called up,  
Exhausted,  
"Hey, how much farther is it?"

"You're almost half-way,"  
I said.  
And everybody with me'd laugh.

"Ah, this is bull shit!" came the tired reply.  
"Come on up here and rest,"  
I hollered down.  
"There's a flat spot and some shade."

Low rumblings and debative voices could be heard  
As they discussed it 'mongst themselves.  
Then the sounds of gravel grinding and  
Puffing breaths  
Told us--again--that they were coming up.

The entrance to La Gruta del Palmito  
Yawned open  
Just behind my back.

