



THE
PASSION
OF
BENJAMIN
SAENZ

A BORDER POET RISES FROM THE ASHES.

By Cecilia Ballí

PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNIFER BOOMER



THE

email came on May 4, 2010, calling forth all artists, activists, and journalists who could gather the nerve to cross the Santa Fe Street Bridge from El Paso into Mexico. “We’ve turned our back on Juárez,” declared the sender, a local bar owner and writer named Richard Wright. “Some of us stopped going back in the nineties, when news accounts of the femicides reached their peak. Now Juárez is a wholesale murder factory. We wring our hands, and sign petitions, and pray. So far to no avail.” He lamented, “I miss Juárez. I miss the mystery of it. I miss the duplicitous love it shows me. The loud music and improbable color schemes. The simple pleasure. The stupid surly joy.”

He offered up a plan: everyone should gather at the Kentucky Club the following Friday evening. “We’ll sit at the bar, and drink Kentucky Club margaritas, and watch the long shadows across the street. We’ll tip the bartenders, and they’ll take the money and buy groceries, and the money will flow through the Juárez economy. . . . We’ll get a little bit of our Juárez back. The Juárez we remember, and the Juárez we imagine.”

At his desk in his apartment in El Paso, the poet and novelist Benjamin Alire Sáenz read the email and thought, *I’m on board.*

For nearly a century, since Prohibition, the Kentucky Club had been an institution for West Texas border crossers. Generations had gone there for the same reason we all go to bars, according to Sáenz: to remember and to forget. Legend has it that a very special drink was invented there decades ago (though Tijuana, among other places, disputes that), when a woman asked for something besides straight tequila and the bartender made up a concoction just for her—a drink that would catch on like wildfire north of the border and that is still served in its purest and most unadorned form at the Kentucky: tequila, lime juice, Cointreau. The margarita.



Located four blocks south of the Santa Fe bridge on the main drag in Ciudad Juárez, the Kentucky Club became legendary as American celebrities traipsed through. Marilyn Monroe celebrated a quickie divorce there, and Al Capone, Ernest Hemingway, Frank Sinatra, and Ronald Reagan also stopped in. By 2010, however, it seemed to be heaving its final breaths. Two years earlier, a struggle over territory had broken out between two drug cartels, turning Juárez into the so-called murder capital of the world. No longer allowed to cross the border for fun, the frisky American soldiers from Fort Bliss had been replaced by ten thousand Mexican soldiers sent to wage war against the cartels. One by one, the businesses around the Kentucky Club shuttered their doors, and its nervous owners refused to talk to the press.

Only fifteen or so souls heeded Wright's call that Friday evening, and Sáenz and six journalist friends were among them. "People, even though they thought this was a great idea—'We should all go'—they didn't have the courage to go," he says. At the bar, he grew pensive. He remembered the first time he'd gone there, on the spur of the moment with his high school friends. How they'd paid their penny, or whatever it was, at the bridge, and crossed with the thrill and fear of knowing they were doing something they weren't supposed to, and stumbled upon streets filled with people—adults, children, Mexicans, gringos. Sáenz still had the face of a baby, but his buddy Martin looked older,

so they planted themselves at the Kentucky's massive polished mahogany bar, and Martin ordered two Cuba Libres as though he did it all the time. As Sáenz drank his, he felt something he'd never felt before. He felt like a man.

But that had been nearly forty years ago. On this Friday night, over tacos al carbón and Dos Equis, the conversation kept veering back to the same terrible topic: the violence in Mexico. It seemed there was nothing else those days. The mood was somber.

On their way back to El Paso, Sáenz's group was asked by the U.S. Customs agent what they were bringing back from Mexico, and one of the journalists replied, "Loneliness, sadness, and nostalgia." The night had left a mark on everyone. At home, Sáenz went straight to his computer and wrote, "Avenida Juárez. May 7, 2010. 12:37 a.m."

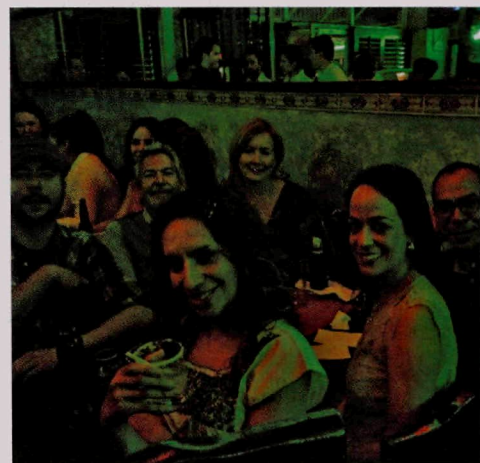
OPENING SPREAD: Benjamin Sáenz at his home in El Paso on May 24, 2013. LEFT: The interior of the Kentucky Club on New Year's Eve, 1986. BELOW, LEFT: The exterior of the Kentucky Club on March 30, 2013. RIGHT, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Sáenz's teaching assistant, CheChé Silveyda; Sáenz; Angela Kocherga, border reporter for Belo Television; Alfredo Corchado, Mexico correspondent for the *Dallas Morning News*; Cecilia Ballí; and Mónica Ortiz Uribe, senior field correspondent for *Fronteras*, at the Kentucky on March 30.

The prose poem that emerged speaks of a group of "ragged pilgrims" who return home from the Kentucky Club shouldering the weight of a single thought: *Juárez is dead*. As they cross the Rio Grande, the poem recalls Charon, the ferryman in Greek mythology who carries the newly deceased across the River Styx, which separates the worlds of the living and the dead.

"The immigration agent checks the passport of a young woman: What were you doing in Juárez? Do you have a death wish? When he asks the next man in line if he has anything to declare, the man laughs: I would like to declare my sadness. I would like to declare that all my dreams are dead."

It was an ode to a dying city, but it was also, like much of his writing, an ode to Sáenz's inner state. Over the next three years, he would spiral down to the lowest point of his life and then, improbably, soar to the pinnacle of his career. In March of this year, Sáenz's short-story collection, *Everything Begins and Ends at the Kentucky Club*, won him one of the country's top writing prizes, the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, making him the first Latino, the first Texan, the first Southwesterner, and only the second gay writer to claim the coveted prize, which had previously gone to such esteemed authors as Annie Proulx, Philip Roth, and Sherman Alexie.

Sáenz's twentieth published book—and probably his most honest yet—*Kentucky Club* reflects the depth of what he survived during the most harrowing years of his life. While the devastation of Juárez forms the backdrop to several of the stories, the true battles happen inside, where his protagonists confront life's deepest wounds and silently yearn for love—or at least, Sáenz says, salvation. The book is so intense that some critics have suggested it teeters on the melodramatic. But Sáenz's tales capture what happens when extreme violence in the world resonates with the hurts one carries within. When a self begins to disintegrate, they ask, how does one put it back together? It's a question Sáenz himself is in the process of answering. | **CONTINUED ON PAGE 144**



THE PASSION OF BENJAMIN SÁENZ

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"I wrote this book, in many ways, to save my life," Sáenz says. "I write all my books to save my life, I think."

On a Saturday evening in late March, two weeks after winning the PEN/Faulkner, Sáenz is sitting in the living room of his El Paso home, a modest rental house he moved into three months earlier that resembles a cultural arts museum. Large canvas paintings, some of them his creations, adorn the walls, and vividly painted wooden bookshelves are packed with literature and topped with handmade ceramic-and-wire figurines. Above the red leather chair where he sits, dance costumes of a skeleton and a jaguar warrior, antiques from southern Mexico, hang from the ceiling like sentries guarding a folk underworld. Everything is a swirl of color. Wistful violin jazz plays softly. (Although Sáenz and I have known each other for several years, this is only my second time visiting him at home.)

The fourth of seven children, born to Mexican American parents and raised on a small cotton farm near Las Cruces, New Mexico, 45 miles northwest of El Paso, Sáenz lived a childhood that resembled that of many of his young characters, who are often intellectually curious boys from desert communities, drawn to art and books, who grow up too fast and long to be noticed and embraced by the adults around them. (In one story, a school counselor reflects on his students: "So many of them were like the plants that survived here, living without water. How did they do it?") After his family lost its farm when he was in the fourth grade ("It was right after Kennedy was killed," he tells me), his father went to work as a cement finisher and his mother cleaned homes and labored in factories. Sáenz worked too, painting apartments, picking onions, roofing homes, and cleaning toilets. His relationship with his father was not unlike the fragile relationships his characters have with theirs. "I remember when I was five," he says, "my parents asked what we wanted for Christmas. I asked for a teddy bear. And my father"—his voice gets choked with emotion—"looked at me with a look that could kill. And then I thought, 'There's something wrong with me.'

"My dad, after that, he took all of my brothers hunting, kind of as a coming of

age. But he never asked me." His father's distance only made his mother love him more. He became her *consentido*, the favored son. "I was different from her other sons," he says. "Her other sons were like little men that could hang out with their father. I was never that boy."

When he graduated from high school, in 1972, joining the priesthood offered an education his family never could have afforded. Sáenz was drawn to the church by the Catholic leftists of the day, such as the labor agitator Dorothy Day and the peace activists Philip and Daniel Berrigan, who believed that God was a God of the poor, a concept he found beautiful. The decision resulted in the adventure of a lifetime. He enrolled in St. Thomas Seminary, in Denver, then spent four years at the University of Louvain, in Belgium, volunteering for a summer in Tanzania. Climbing to the top of the breathtaking Usambara Mountains, he was forced to confront the history of colonialism. "Tanzania was so beautiful," he recalls, "but I realized I could never be a missionary, because I thought the whole missionary project was in fact a colonialist project."

Once back in El Paso, his worldly sojourns seemingly over, life as a parish priest overwhelmed him. He quit after three years, in 1984. He'd been drafting a novel in his spare time, and it was, by his own account, "beyond awful." But it led to an important discovery: his real calling was to be a writer.

He took jobs waiting tables in Louisiana and Houston while he saved money to go back to school. He returned home, to the University of Texas at El Paso, and obtained a master's in creative writing. Next, he started a doctoral program at the University of Iowa, but he was there only a year before Stanford University came calling, offering one of its coveted Wallace Stegner Fellowships for poetry. In his early thirties, he was already rising to the top of his field at a time when Latino writers found few places to publish.

In 1994 he returned to El Paso a third time, this time for good, nabbing a teaching position in (and eventually the chairmanship of) the UTEP creative writing program, which today offers the only bilingual MFA program in the country. He is now one of our most prolific authors: he has published twenty books across four genres and received numerous accolades, including an American Book Award for a poetry collection, a Lan-

nan Literary Award, two Lambda Literary Awards, and a nod from *Poets and Writers Magazine* as one of the world's fifty most inspiring writers. His children's and young-adult novels sell by the tens of thousands—one of them, *A Gift for Papa Diego*, has sold more than 100,000 copies—and teachers and librarians across the country use them to teach the Latino youth experience.

Yet literary stardom couldn't ward off the loneliness that had always haunted him. There was something no one in his life knew. As a young boy, Sáenz had been sexually abused by a family member, and he had responded by protecting everyone, even his mother, from the pain of finding out. He did what many young survivors of abuse do: he willed it aside and for many years avoided sexual thoughts of any sort. He eventually wed an El Paso family court judge and had what he considers a devoted fifteen-year marriage. But the relationship gradually grew strained. In 2008, when he was 54, he went to a rehabilitation center in Minnesota for what he believed was an alcohol problem. The staff there saw something else: they referred him to a center in Santa Fe to get help sorting through his sexual trauma and sexuality. After two months of therapy, he came to terms with the fact that he was gay. In the spring of 2009, he and his wife filed for divorce.

He is still reticent to discuss his marriage or his abuse in much detail, since both caused him and others great pain. When he finally acknowledged his sexuality, he says, "I didn't put it in the newspaper, but I told all my friends."

As he transitioned to living alone, a whole new life opened up. He began visiting the gay bars downtown, where he was surprised by how much attention he received from younger men. Sáenz felt like the adolescent he'd never gotten to be. He learned that he was a thrill seeker, open to everything, including the array of recreational drugs that flows unfettered across the border and that he found was part of the culture he had entered. "Chasing the dragon" is the expression he uses in one of his stories to describe the elusive pursuit of euphoria—that hope for momentary transcendence—that leads to addiction and, in the worst cases, death. "I couldn't handle it," he says. "I just couldn't handle it. And I experimented with everything."

In early 2011, his 83-year-old mother

grew ill. Sáenz sobered up to be present for her and his sisters, who were caring for her. “I loved my mother with all my heart,” he says, “and she loved me. I wasn’t going to let her down in her hour of need.” Eloisa Alire Sáenz went to her grave never knowing that one of her own kin had broken her favored child’s spirit. But he believes that in her heart she knew everything else—about the drugs, about his sexuality. “I think a part of her knew all of my story,” he says. “Not details. I think because she knew, she loved me all the more. When she would look at me, she would light up, because I think she understood somewhere in her what I had gone through and what I had survived. My mom might have lived in a little bit of denial, but she saw me. She knew the man I was.”

Her death left him reeling. A year later, his voice still shakes when he remembers. He’d never felt so alone. Or so devastated. “I had no idea it would hurt that much,” he says. “I had *no* idea.” He went into a tailspin and slipped back into drugs. Seven months later, his friends intervened. He spent 28 days back in a drug rehabilitation center.

At the lowest point of Sáenz’s addiction, a

close friend helped him to see that maybe he had turned to drugs because without them it was too threatening to be physically close to a man, something his culture and childhood trauma had hardened him against. He would, at 58, have to learn.

Somehow, through the worst, he kept writing. Immensely self-disciplined, he still made it to his desk most days, and he began transferring his experiences and discoveries to the page. This was true of *Kentucky Club*, but also of a second award-winning book he published last year, the young-adult novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, about two teenage boys who strike up a friendship that may be something more. Still, Sáenz admits he isn’t sure how much he knows about himself today, and that’s probably why he writes, to keep finding himself. “We lose ourselves all the time,” he says. “And then we have to find ourselves. The only time I’m not lost is when I’m writing.”

Sitting in his living room, he picks up a copy of *Kentucky Club* from the handcrafted coffee table and rubs its cover. “Writing this book saved my life,” he says again. Put out by

El Paso’s spunky independent publisher Cinco Puntos Press, its cream pages are slightly ragged at the edges, like the region where it is set. Soon after Sáenz visited the Kentucky on the border, he asked himself, How many people read poetry? He wanted Juárez’s plight to touch more people, and it occurred to him that the short story—a form he hadn’t used in eighteen years—was the answer. He would, he thought, make readers care by getting them wrapped up in a love story and breaking their hearts. The first piece, “He Has Gone to Be With the Women,” a story that ends sorrowfully with the protagonist at the Kentucky Club, was published by an online literary magazine and drew a strong response. He wrote a second. Then a third. It was then he noticed the pattern: at some point, all of his characters were passing through the Kentucky. Why? What did it represent to him, and to them? And why were they always drawn there just as their dreams were fading or just as they were about to bloom?

And then it dawned on him. *Everything begins and ends at the Kentucky Club.*

That's where it had all started—an idea for a book that would ultimately allow him to write his way out of darkness. So that's where he would go to toast the PEN/Faulkner Award, with some of the same people who had been there at the beginning. When we finished talking, Sáenz got up from his chair and texted his friends to let them know he was ready. As the sun completed its majestic, multihued descent into the desert, three of the journalists who had been with him that first night gathered for a repeat trip across the border on Holy Saturday.

They paid five dollars to leave their car in a parking lot on the American side and 35 cents each to the white-haired lady who greeted them at the bridge from behind a window. It was a little past nine in the evening, but traffic was sparse—gone were the snaking lines of cars from the days when few feared going into Mexico. Gone, too, were the blank-faced boy-soldiers, their mission a failure. In their stead was a pair of imposing blue federal police trucks on the Avenida. Sáenz and the journalists trekked past a few nightclubs that glowed like neon embers, then gasped when they passed the large glass windows of Martino, where patrons had once dined in red-leather booths on escargots, tenderloin, and quail served up by white-jacketed waiters. To their surprise, the place was spruced up and apparently back in business. After the extortions and shootouts and empty streets had cowed the owners into closing, its longtime employees had pooled their hard-earned pesos and reopened in February as Nuevo Martino.

Finally, the group arrived at their temple. A red awning with yellow lettering announced, “World Famous Kentucky Bar 1920.” A plastic banner below chimed, “*La casa de las margaritas.*”

The narrow, dimly lit tavern was busier than it had been in years. Again, Sáenz and his friends were impressed. The place was a whirl of sound: thumping, tuba-tinged *banda* music from the jukebox, raucous conversation, and lots of laughter. Most everyone was *juarense* that night. As a waiter tried to find them a table, Sáenz, the consummate writer, looked around, taking it all in. “When I was writing the stories, I would picture this bar,” he said, nodding toward the stretch of mahogany that was lined shoulder to shoulder with customers. Above, red and green bulbs burned on

colonial-style chandeliers, and strings of green-red-and-white Tecate-themed *papel picado* crisscrossed the ceiling. The walls were covered with framed sepia portraits of movie stars, boxers, matadors, and revolutionaries, especially Pancho Villa. On large flat-screen televisions mounted in every corner, two young fighters danced around the perimeter of a boxing ring, their grim, sweat-covered faces turning puffy and raw.

A table was secured, and a middle-aged waiter dressed in a black shirt and vest and yellow tie led the *americanos* to it. No one ordered margaritas, but a round soon arrived on a plastic serving tray, compliments of the house. Always on the job, the reporters asked the waiter if the crowd was indicative of a citywide resurgence, and ever optimistic, as *juarenses* tend to be, he said things were definitely improving. A margarita was raised: “Here’s to your book, Ben, and here’s to Juárez.” Sáenz only smiled and raised his glass too.

Was Ciudad Juárez back? The writer and his friends debated that question the rest of the night. After four years of carnage, murders had dropped from a peak of more than 3,100 in 2010 to just over 300 in 2012, which was too much death, but not unusual for a large Mexican border city. Still, the locals understood that this relative peace had come about mostly because one cartel, for now, had overcome the other. What did it mean that happiness had to be brokered, that being able to spend a night on the town meant learning to live with the unsmiling, mysterious character who stood by the door all night, arms crossed over bulky flak jacket, studying the clientele carefully and every now and then leaning outside to confer with another figure who murmured into a walkie-talkie? “If the other guys wanted to make a statement, this would be the perfect place,” one of the journalists insisted, and the others scoffed but skittishly watched the door each time it swung open.

“The world was neither cruel nor kind,” reads a line in one of the *Kentucky Club* stories, “The Art of Translation.” “But the boys in the world—it was the boys that were cruel—that’s how they translated the world, with fists, with rage, with violence.” On the TVs, the young boxers were looking less and less like themselves, their skin beginning to split open, the blood on their faces mixing with sweat.

Was Sáenz back? Ultimately, only he knew the answer to that, for it was inside of him. As he wrote of a character in another story from the collection, “He would have to learn how to save himself from everything he’d been through. Salvation existed in his own broken heart and he’d have to find a way to get at it.”

It was almost midnight by the time everyone stumbled back to the border, too tired and tipsy to locate exact change for the turnstile. As Mexico bid them “*Feliz viaje*” and they made their way up the bridge’s pedestrian ramp, the writer, a little wobbly himself, grew reflective. “I like the idea of salvific history,” he said. “Biblical history is salvific history. And it isn’t without suffering. You know, the Old Testament, forty years of wandering the desert, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera? Even the journey of Christ took place in the desert. That’s where he meets his demons. That’s where he meets his God. And he can’t meet one without the other. And that’s the border. And *that’s* the desert. Right? Yeah. Maybe that’s why I like this place. Because it *is* that. It *is* that.”

A man in a wheelchair with stumps for legs rattled some coins in a plastic cup at the tourists, then thanked them for their dollars. They passed the marker signaling where one country ends and another begins. An American federal agent sat perched on the railing, watching the cars. From an old green van nearby, the Mexican national anthem blasted from the speakers, meaning it was midnight. “Happy Easter!” Sáenz called out to his group with great joy. “*Happy Easter!*”

He would not declare his sadness to the customs agents at the inspection station up ahead. He would not declare that his dreams were dead. As he struggled to pull his ID from his wallet, because he had forgotten his passport, the agents gathered around a copy of *Kentucky Club* that one of his friends brought out, and they studied with admiration his picture on the book flap, then Sáenz himself. In the Bible, Jesus’ resurrection happens dramatically: one day he rises up from the dead and is transformed, and the meaning of his suffering becomes clear, and all who witness it are filled with hope. In life, resurgences happen more slowly, tentatively, always with the chance of falling again. But yes, Ben Sáenz was back. 📌

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