

One Day in the Life of a Mexican Mercado

describing a day in ±1995, but not much has changed

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6:00 AM, near The Merced Market, Mexico City...

Emerging from an underground walkway at Pino Suarez Metro Station -- the subway -- I head east on San Pablo Avenue toward the Merced. It's 64 degrees and streetlights are still lit; the sky is just light enough to announce an overcast morning. On San Pablo the traffic is already heavy, though only a fraction of what it will be most of the day.

Stores along the street are closed. They're the kind with roll-up metal fronts, and they're separated by concrete dividers. The street's wall of corrugated-steel and concrete projects a cold, hard, indifferent feeling. Every three or four minutes small rockets explode in the sky, announcing a religious event, and causing small flocks of pigeons to fly from one rooftop to another.

A block from the market I pass the first three establishments open at this hour: a pay bathroom, and two small, open-fronted restaurants with coffee machines. Two prostitutes stand on the sidewalk, leaning against the wall, the only ones in the street making eye contact. Near the mercado, several young men retrieve dollies from storage rooms and push them toward a large parking lot where trucks are unloading.

Coming to the end of San Pablo, I cross the big north/south avenue known as the Anillo de Circunvalación, or Circulation Ring, and enter the mercado proper. A man beneath a sign reading "Jugo de Naranja 1 Peso" splits greenish oranges in two, places half at a time into a stainless-steel squeezer, pulls on the handle, and squeezes orange juice into glass cups; he's selling all he can squeeze. Another man peddles sweetbread and coffee from a wheeled cart.

The first selling-stalls met with are closed-up lockers with corrugated steel, roll-up fronts. They're packed side by side, forming several austere, boxy little buildings with naked passageways between them. None is open at this hour. On the concrete landing of one stall a boy of about ten awakens, rubbing his eyes.

The acre-large, main truck-unloading zone lies beyond the lockers. Loose paper and plastic bags clutter the entire area, and in the southeastern corner there's a heap of garbage twenty feet across and two feet deep. A dog paws through it, and so do seven people. One woman wearing an embroidered

blouse, an Indian *huipil*, systematically scavenges discarded potatoes, cuts them in half, and drops what's good inside into a plastic bag; most potatoes, however, she just throws back. At one side of the unloading zone a frail-looking, bent-over old man with a luminescent drop of liquid dangling from his long nose idly sweeps at the mountain of garbage with a broom constructed of yard-long, curved switches tied onto a handle.

From the unloading zone, the interior of the main Merced building can be looked across. Throughout the huge building dozens of naked, glaring, incandescent light-bulbs hang from long wires. There's already lots of activity inside, but it's only the vendors arranging produce, and *cargadores*, or young men with pushcarts, freighting produce from the unloading zone to individual stalls.

Seventeen trucks with railings seven or eight feet high and beds twelve to fifteen feet long are parked in the unloading zone. Seven trucks carry wooden crates of red tomatoes, eight carry crates of green husk-tomatoes, or tomatillos, one has white onions in large, red bags of webbed plastic, and another holds green chili peppers in large, white, web-plastic bags. About thirty young *cargadores* mill around, a few transferring crates from trucks onto their pushcarts.

The square-sided crates measure about fifteen inches across, and thirty inches deep. It's hard to see how the *cargadores* could load more of these crates onto their pushcarts. One cart carries twenty-four crates of husk tomatoes. A wooden crate loaded on one dolly collapses, causing the two crates atop it to tip over and spill red tomatoes onto the asphalt. The tomatoes roll and roll in all directions, like a diffuse red bubble exploding silently across the parking lot's dark-gray asphalt pavement.

At 6:30, the proprietors of several stores across the street from the unloading zone roll up their corrugated steel doors and begin stacking bottles of soft drinks and orange juice onto the sidewalks in front of their stores. Several new street cleaners join the skinny old man still fighting the trash. At the mercado's various entrances and all around the unloading zone, about a dozen people fan smokey, charcoal-fire braziers with picked-up sheets of discarded cardboard; later they'll sell hot tacos, huaraches, and roasted ears of corn. A Volkswagen-bug taxi arrives with its interior jammed from floor to ceiling with two-foot long, clear-plastic bags of potato chips.

I follow a *cargador* carting twenty bags of green tomatoes. He leads me to the Merced's very heart, to a stall where a thirty-five year old man wearing an apron awaits him. The man nods to a spot on the floor next to his stall. As the young *cargador* unloads, the stall owner stands with his hands on his hips, looking at the tomatoes with a resigned expression on his face. His face

seems to say, "So, this is what I'm working with today... "

As the *cargador* unloads his green tomatoes, a very loud radio fills this entire section of the Merced with Glen Miller's big-band music. Swingy music mingles with the chirping of house sparrows up in the mercado's rafters. Also in this moist, chilly morning air there are pungent odors of celery, ripe mangoes, cantaloupes, and the butchers' odor of warm, dismembered flesh. The feeling is friendly and hopeful, despite the early hour and glaring light bulbs.

Probably only one in twenty persons in here is a customer; most are stall owners and *cargadores*. Near the Merced's metro station, not far from the building's center, already a number of young men are methodically ripping ten-foot-long banana leaves into squares, which will become the wrappers many people steam their tamales in. Vendors next to open crates of onions cut off the bulbs' roots before arranging them. Others shine individual tomatoes or apples with rags; or arrange their produce into straight lines, or neat heaps. Tomatoes are ordered into four-foot-high pyramids. The tomatoes are so similar in size and shape that within the pyramids they order themselves into horizontal layers reminiscent of diagrams in college geology textbooks portraying the neat geometrical arrangement of carbon atoms inside diamond crystals.

7:00 AM

By now about one in five people inside the Merced is a customer. In the streets around the Merced, a veritable army of men in red-orange suites and rubber boots is materializing, pushing metal drums on wheels, sweeping sidewalks, streets, and unloading zones with switch-brooms. The first policemen appear, wearing black uniforms and blue, bullet-proof vests. *Cargadores* with dollies are everywhere. At the Merced's eastern unloading dock, about forty trucks, many twenty-five feet long and with sidings ten feet high, are backed against the elevated walkway, unloading. Above the trucks, through broken-out windows of the Merced's second story, I can see whole rooms filled with red, webbed-plastic bags of white onions.

A certain frantic, chaotic feeling has come into the mercado scene. Things are happening so fast it's hard to keep up with everything needing to be described. And it's only 7:00 AM!

A man unloading ears of corn from a red pickup truck meticulously arranges each ear into a four-foot-high, white, webbed-plastic bag. When the bag is full, he heaves the whole thing onto his back -- a prodigious feat -- but when he walks away bent beneath this load, about thirty ears tumble from the bag. A pitiful look crosses his face. He slams the bag down hard and sets to

repacking it.

A competition clearly takes place among store owners who stack cans on sidewalks before their stores. Here's a pyramid of cans of condensed milk five feet high. There's such commotion everywhere that it's hard to see how these pyramids survive without being knocked down.

During one pass across the Anillo de Circunvalación I look southward and see that two or three blocks away a great number of people are gathering, so I go there. It's the Mercado Sonora. Among North American and European ethnologists, the Sonora is the most famous of all Mexican mercados because here one can buy every kind of herb -- for culinary, medicinal, and even magical purposes. In the past, and possibly even now, it was infamous for the rare and endangered animals its vendors sold.

The Sonora's aisles are so narrow, with so many articles extending from the stalls into the aisles, that it's hard to navigate. I ask an old, crook-backed Indian woman hunched beneath a shawl next to a head-high pile of well sorted medicinal herbs if she'd talk to me, for a fee, about the various herbs in her pile. She becomes angry, "No, not me, you go away, you go talk to somebody else!" she almost yells. Maybe she's afraid of gringos, or maybe too many ethnology graduate students have made the same proposal and wasted her time.

I ask three other herb dealers the same question, and always I get negative results. Finally, in one little stall on the Sonora's south side, standing at the back of his pickup truck cleaning brown blades from large bales of lemon grass, I strike up a conversation with thirty-five year old Jaime García Galván, of Tepetlixpa, in the state of México. I tell him of the trouble I'm having finding an herb dealer willing to talk with me.

"I'm an herb dealer," he laughs. "I'll be glad to let you spend a day with me when I go collecting." Well, Jaime doesn't look as interesting as the old woman or some of the others inside the Sonora, but he's friendly, and he is indeed an herb dealer. We set a date to get together. His story is one of those you can read in our series of profiles of mercado producers and dealers at <http://www.mexicanmercados.com>.

Not far from Jaime's booth lie garagelike stalls filled with cages of birds, from chickens and ducks to canaries, budgies, and parakeets. Also there are wild birds, and most of these are in pretty bad shape. Already this morning several have been tossed into the gutter.

The Sonora's western side specializes in black magic. Lots of rattlesnake skins dried ruler-straight, with rattles still attached, are stuck like large pencils in clay jars. Desiccated hummingbirds, their eyes sunken into black pits and

their feathers dark and glossless, are displayed like keys on a ring, the metal ring passing through the tiny birds' necks. Typically the rings of dried hummingbirds are suspended from a stiff rattlesnake skin stuck in a clay pot. Also there are magical symbols carved in wood, plus there are Tarot cards, and wrapped-up packages of different sizes, adorned with zodiac symbols, with contents not apparent to the uninitiated.

Further along there are dried fox skins and armadillo shells, and stall after stall of live animals kept in tiny cages, everything from lizards, frogs, and turtles, to rabbits, pigeons, squirrels, and yard-long iguanas. I leave the Sonora and head back northward, toward the main Merced building.

At 7:30, the noise is almost overwhelming. All around the Merced, stalls selling tapes of music turn on their boom boxes, flooding the streets, stalls, and unloading areas with cumbia and rock-and-roll. A loudspeaker at a corner of the unloading zone squawks a taped message extolling the virtues of Conchamaca Cream. A policeman stations himself at a busy street corner, pays no attention at all to the traffic chaos around him, but blows his whistle like a child fascinated with its sound.

At 7:45 on General Anaya Street, on the Merced's northern perimeter, an old man kneels on the sidewalk, rests his hands on his cane, and with his fingers holds his tilted hat to receive coins. His bare feet stick through a hole in the chain-link fence behind him. He mumbles continually, unintelligibly, sometimes lifting his rosary to his lips to kiss. A few feet up the sidewalk an old woman squats next to a tattered, black shawl spread on the sidewalk, on which is offered for sale two pairs of used, cloth loafers, and a very dogeared Bible.

8:00 AM

The Merced and surrounding buildings and streets are absolutely congested with buyers, and everywhere there's feverish movement. There's an urgency in the air to get things done; harsh sounds and odors set the nerves on edge. Wherever there's a spot to sit or even lean against a wall, people cluster with tired looks on their faces, and bags and baskets of produce scattered around their feet. Two heavily loaded *cargadores* meet at a narrow intersection and neither yields. They squabble, then one backs up, muttering about people lacking all sense of respect.

I wander aimlessly through the cavernous Merced, more carried along by relentless, noisy currents of humanity than navigating my own way. Stall owners in a heightened state of alertness scan all potential customers for the merest sign of interest. All passers-by are peppered with the queries, "*Qué quiere llevar?*" "*Qué le damos?*" -- "What do you want to carry?" "What can

we give you?"

Sidewalks around the Merced are also choked with vendors. An alert-looking, handsome, clean-cut young man comes down the street calling, "One peso, different-flavored ices, one peso, delicious ices, one peso." His monotonous, repetitive pitch recycles on and on as he sadly glances into the faces of us all, the thousands and thousands of us. Now he approaches a building, leans his shoulder against it, fixes his eyes on the sidewalk, and gives the impression that he's listening to something the building says.

On the Merced's northern perimeter I find a low wall to sit on. Next to me there's a young Indian woman with a baby cradled in the *rebozo*, or shawl, tied around her neck and one shoulder. A large basket stands next to her. Her husband comes from the Merced loaded with purchases, arranges them in the basket, whispers to her, then plunges back into the mercado's pandemonium. The baby begins to softly whimper, but with its first sound the mother shushes it, and the baby obeys.

Near the intersection of Rosario and A. Olvera, where bagged charcoal is sold along the sidewalk, an old Indian lady in a straw hat sits gazing down the long line of white, plastic bags stacked along the curb. Her stoic, somewhat grim expression seems to say that she's prepared to sit there for eternity. At the other end of the line of bags a young Indian man perches on a sack slapping a slab of pine kindling against his leg, keeping time to music that only he can hear.

In the Mercado General on the Merced's eastern side, in a stall specializing in grain and beans displayed in open wooden bins, I discover some good looking granola, or muesli. Concocted mostly of oatmeal, shredded coconut, raisins, and peanuts, this is just what I need. I buy a kilo for ten pesos.

9:00 AM

Snacking on the granola brings on thirst, so I look for an orange-juice stand. It's hard to find a stand not recycling the same unwashed two or three glasses among all customers. Finally there's someone dispensing juice into disposable paper cups. With my granola and freshly squeezed orange juice I settle in a quiet spot across the street, next to four prostitutes at the entrance to the subterranean passage beneath the Anillo de Circunvalación. Finishing my juice, I realize that nowhere in the entire mercado complex have I seen a single trash can. Apparently, mercado patrons are expected to discard napkins, peelings, avocado pits, etc. in the gutter along the sidewalk. I do this, but feel guilty.

Back at the Merced's northern truck-unloading zone, the music and monotonous harangues issuing from loudspeakers are so loud that it's

actually painful. At 9:30, about 90% of the Merced's stalls are open, and the building is absolutely packed with rushing, pushing buyers. Nonetheless, even at this hour, in a few of the mercado's odd corners, homeless people curl up sleeping.

On a sidewalk outside the Merced's northern entrance, a policeman approaches a young woman selling freshly squeezed orange juice. He asks for a glass, drinks from it, and then says, "It's a donation, right?" "No!" the young woman replies, a horrified look in her face. But she knows that the policeman expects free juice. "Welllllll... well, OK. No! Welllllll..." Before the young woman can say no again, the policeman walks away smirking, not paying.

A few years back inflation had so reduced the power of the peso that it took thousands of pesos just to buy a snack. Consequently the Mexican government knocked three zeros off the peso, issued the Peso Nuevo, or New Peso, and overnight what earlier had cost a thousand pesos now cost one. In the mercado about half the vendors still think in the old system. The man who sold me my orange juice asked for a thousand pesos, but he was satisfied with the one given him.

By 9:45 the unrelenting confusion and noise catalyze a curious emotional state in me; I start feeling detached, like a shimmering, sovereign eyeball gliding unseen through a surreal landscape. Suddenly it strikes me that the mercado is music and all the things in it are tones, and that the tones cluster in every key and every mode, and not much in harmony with one another. Yet, the mercado's overall rhythm, its pulse, is the same everywhere, lusty, full of life, somehow cheerful and hopeful, and I'm part of it. The mercado's colors begin exploding inside my head like effervescing bubbles. Now I wander aimlessly, and here's what I see:

- **stacked soda bottles, luminescently red or orange inside**
- **deep green blades of spring onions heaped on a red sheet of plastic**
- **rusty red chicken bodies roasting on a grill**
- **clear-plastic bottles of yellow safflower oil**
- **yellow bananas with black bruise-spots**
- **Volkswagen-beetle taxis painted green and white, with square, purple information boxes on white doors**
- **yellow and orange plastic tarpaulins over sidewalks**
- **orange carrots in gray-brown wooden crates**
- **green and orange papayas on a table below a red tarpaulin**
- **orange squash blossoms bound with green grass blades**
- **green and yellow watermelons, one cut open shockingly red and wet inside, glistening in the sunlight**
- **burgundy hued mangos**
- **yellow and white blocks of cheese stacked on shelves**
- **rusty red links of sausage draped on a black wire**
- **half a pig, flesh red with white fat, on hooks**
- **pale orange tostadas in clear plastic bags**

- inside the Merced, hundreds of piñatas of every color suspended from timbers above the stalls
- a dayglow-orange sign with black hand-lettering reading *Macizo de Res 18 kg*
- skin tones of naked women on magazine covers at street-corner kiosks, the eye irresistibly drawn to black pubic hair
- red blanket beneath dozens of rainbow-colored trinkets from Oaxaca
- three-foot-tall clear-plastic bags of yellow-orange cheese curls stacked seven feet high
- inside a semi-truck's cargo area, its back doors open, shiny red, white, and blue aluminum cans of Pepsi Cola stacked to the ceiling
- dozens of crates of blood-red tomatoes along sidewalk

10:00 AM

At 10:00 I shift to nose-walking; I go to the middle of the cavernous, new, modern-looking, mostly empty Plaza Comercial, standing next to the main Merced building. Here the odor of bare concrete and steel mingles with echoic house-sparrow chirps from high in the metal rafters. Now I walk sniffing toward the main Merced building, and this is what comes to me:

- the slightly stinging odor of sudsy detergent where a woman mops the concrete floor in front of her *comedor*, or eating stall
- wool, at a stall specializing in hand-woven sweaters
- coffee, from a white styrofoam cup on a counter
- the fresh-ironed odor around a stall selling T-shirts that on their fronts boldly proclaim "Innovation Sportswear Fasteners"
- truck exhaust fumes, odor of oil, someone's cigarette
- dried peppers in four-foot-high open bags, the dust burning my eyes
- toasted corn
- more dusty, dried peppers, this time as I pass, the odor gradually fusing with the moist, green smell of a four-foot-high stack of head lettuce
- over-ripe bananas
- basil, as a woman walks by carrying an armload of herbs
- leather, around a stall selling sandals
- greasy odor of twenty plucked chickens on two rotating spits inside the shining aluminum hood of a *comedor's* big rotisserie, the chicken bodies wet-looking and dripping
- mellow, simmering stews richly spiced with cilantro, or coriander, from *comedores* preparing for the lunch rush
- the general odor of vegetables, like V-8 Juice, especially celery
- garlic in two-foot-high wicker canisters; I smell the garlic and the wicker wood itself
- the dusty odor of white, bound-together corn shucks stacked in silolike mounds twenty feet high
- crushed-herbage odor of stripped and folded banana leaves
- ripe mangos
- granola, mostly the odor of honey and shredded coconut
- charcoal smoke from *comedores* on the Merced's south side
- roasting pig and frying onions
- urine around the metro entrance
- the odor of plastic where red, yellow, and white plastic buckets are stacked along the sidewalk

- the odor of boiled potatoes, but here no one boils potatoes... ; oh, it's glistening chicken bodies again, rotating wet and glistening inside a big rotisserie; maybe my nose is getting tired; time to end...

11:00 AM

By 11:00 I need a rest. I go to the small unloading zone on the Merced's southern end, hoping to find a quiet corner. But in the spot I'd been thinking of there's a chattering man surrounded by an audience of about ten people. He's chalked a ten-foot square around himself, and the people stand outside the square. He's kneeling, surrounded by the following: a row of face-up Tarot cards; a small, black statue of an owl, with seven red candles laid radiating from it; a red, foot-long box ornamented with zodiac symbols and the English words "7 Holy Bath Waters"; another box on which, in Spanish, is written "The Seven Holy Waters of Osirisus"; two glasses of clear liquid, and: a tall aerosol can on which is written, in Spanish, "Money Luck Love Health."

A yard-long green iguana, emaciated and lacerated with wounds, poses beside the collection. The man is occupied with a living snake, a young boa constrictor. The snake advances toward the line of cards and the man explains that the snake is "choosing cards," sending him messages. After the snake chooses a card, the man pulls the snake back, but it keeps slithering forward, "choosing" other cards. The man, aged about twenty-five, with an awe-struck voice and trembling hands, discovers profound significance in the chosen cards.

"Step up closer, ladies and gentlemen," the man calls in Spanish. "The snake won't hurt you. What will harm you is the snake with two legs. My snake will not harm you, but you know that in the hearts of some people, yes, there can be bad thoughts, bad intentions. No, ladies and gentlemen, I am not a *brujo* (witch doctor), but I am one who can undo black magic practiced by those who would harm you. We all have seen how certain piglike people of low morals, envious of us working men and women, every Thursday and Friday go down to the Sonora Market and buy blood and venom of rattlesnakes, and we all know what evil purposes those bad people seek, and I am here to show you how to protect yourself, I from Juchitán, Oaxaca, the very land of *brujería* (witchcraft) and *curanderos* (healers)."

The man repeats all the above as new people join the circle. He talks in circles as he motions us to step closer, to pay attention. He asks a matronly, middle-age woman to show her palm; she does, and he reads it with raised eyebrows and a rapt expression on his face:

"Oh, I respect you," he says. "You are a mother like my mother, always working hard, and if you see someone hungry, you will give food meant for your own mouth. You are kind, hard working, and generous. Is this not true?"

The woman admits that it is true, and then the man examines the palms of two others, saying similarly flattering things and, again, it's all confirmed. The man kneels, puts a card in the snake's mouth, the snake bites, leaving prick-points clearly visible in the card's surface, and the man places the card atop one of the glasses filled with clear liquid. He now explains that the snake's evil essence is transferring into the liquid, and as he speaks an oily film indeed coagulates atop the liquid. He pulls forth a red bandanna and as he relates how certain envious, evil people cast spells on innocent working people, he artfully folds, refolds, twists, and pats the bandanna into human shape; it becomes a well proportioned, very well made rag doll.

The man now opens up the doll's "stomach" and while speaking of the wisdom of not allowing just anyone to take your picture, he tears a card into pieces and places the pieces inside the doll's "stomach." He closes the doll up and places it atop a large picture of a saint, and then sprinkles the snake-poisoned water in a circle around the doll. He lets us understand that if the card had been a picture of one of us, we would now be completely bewitched.

He draws from his black bag a vial of dark red liquid that well could be blood, and we understand through an oblique remark that this is rattlesnake blood, the essence of evil. He pours the scarlet liquid into what remains of the snake-poisoned water, turning the water bright red. Now the man pulls crystals from his black bag and says that they are blessed. But now he looks us all in the eye and says that before he can continue we must all tell him whether we believe in God and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Everyone does, so he crosses himself and continues.

He drops the blessed crystals into an untainted glass of clear liquid, swirls it around, and then pours part of this "blessed water" into the glass of red, envenomed liquid, swirls it around, and within seconds the red fluid becomes perfectly clear. He drinks it and declares that good really has triumphed over evil.

As he speaks more of his personal battle against black magic, he brings forth several clear-plastic bags filled with small, plastic stars of every color, the kinds grade-school kids get glued to their charts when they do something right. These stars, he claims, have all spent three days and nights in the Church of Guadalupe, and are thus blessed in the very same way that the crystals have been blessed, and possess the same purifying powers.

It's not long before several onlookers fork over pesos, buying little bags of colored, plastic stars. Before handing over each bag, the man sprays it with the big aerosol can saying "Money Luck Love Health."

All during the above presentation, not far away, a loudspeaker on a tall,

slender pole has been blaring the virtues of Conchamaca Cream. It has been such an oppressive presence, such an annoyance as we around the snake-man tried to listen, that now I go and pay attention to what this loathsome noise is saying.

The man's voice on the loudspeaker is high-pitched, monotone, repetitively speaking hypnotic sentences that don't ever seem to end. The tone in the man's voice is that of a bored father telling the little child the obvious for the millionth time, "You must eat to be healthy, eat, eat to be healthy..." Here are the translated words spewed by the obnoxious loudspeaker:

"Ladies and gentlemen now I want to tell you about Conchamaca Cream. Conchamaca Cream is for bathing, for white spots, black spots, scars, the cream doesn't burn on contact with the skin, the medicinal cream, Conchamaca Cream is for white spots, black spots, scars, the cream doesn't burn on contact with the skin, it cleans, it disinfects, just put it in your bath water or bathe your skin in it, and then in a few days your skin looks great, we have the medicinal cream, Conchamaca Cream for white spots, black spots, scars, come on and get to know Conchamaca Cream, Conchamaca Cream, for white spots, black spots, scars, come on and get to know Conchamaca Cream, Conchamaca Cream for white spots, black spots, scars, doesn't burn, doesn't inflame on contact with the skin, come on get to know Conchamaca Cream, Conchamaca Cream, for white spots, black spots, scars. We also have Tepezquite Pomade, good for burns and similar wounds."

"We have Tepezquite Soap and Tepezquite Pomade, for burns, cuts, and similar wounds, for sores, scratches, for the itch, come on and get to know Tepezquite Soap, Tepezquite Soap, good for burns and other skin problems, massage it into the hair, it fortifies, it maintains the hair, come and get to know Tepezquite Soap, the medicinal soap, Tepezquite Soap, Tepezquite Soap, massage it into the hair and it fortifies, it maintains the hair, come on get to know the medicinal soap, medicinal soap, Tepezquite Soap, for burns, cuts and similar wounds, for sores, scratches, for the itch, come on and get to know Tepezquite Soap."

"We also have..."

NOON

I'm ready for a break, but it's clear that there's no place in the Merced quiet enough and calm enough for a rest. I escape across the busy Anillo de Circunvalación, count thirty-seven prostitutes across from the Candy Market, and head down San Pablo to the park called Plaza San Pablo, five blocks to the west.

Each prostitute projects a different image. A few are dressed in very tight, usually brightly colored trousers, low-cut blouses, and very high heels -- sexy in a more or less standard way -- but most are crassly attired in skirts so short that buttocks are visible, and blouses so open and tight that not only breasts but also gross rolls of fat are exposed. One woman wears nothing but a bra, a rubber girdle, and high heels. Others wear see-through clothing through which dark nipples and triangles of pubic hair are clearly visible.

A few behave flirtatiously, one or two look very ashamed, but the typical attitude is that of bored aloofness, looking as if they were waiting for a bus, except that they make eye contact. Several young men stand talking with various women. But after every talk I see, the man walks away with eyes glued to the sidewalk, and the woman looking disdainful. Regular Mexicans on the street, except for middle-aged men, pay no special attention to them. A candy peddler approaches one woman after another, and several buy from him. Middle-aged men, on the other hand, often make a show of walking past them, smiling and leering theatrically, apparently enjoying displaying their macho interest.

I approach a pretty, nicely dressed woman and ask if she'd care to sometime meet me for a small fee, and simply talk about her life. Where she's from, why she became a prostitute, what it's like... She laughs in my face and haughtily says, "Honey, I'm not in this for the fame, but for the money, money, money... !" and she pushes me away.

I walk farther, regain my composure, and a few stores later approach another woman, this one not at all pretty, rather fat and coarsely dressed. I explain my proposition, but apparently she doesn't understand. She says that I can have "everything" for the equivalent of US \$12.50. She seems to be an Indian, so maybe she doesn't understand Spanish very well; I repeat my offer, very slowly, emphasizing that I only want to talk. She looks terribly flustered and comes down to \$10.00, and then, before I can say another word, "No," she says, "\$8.33! Everything, everything for \$8.33... !" I decide to simply pay this for the talk, but then discover that in my billfold I have no bills smaller than about a twenty. She cranes her neck, sees the money, and starts calling, "No, \$12.50, \$12.50!" I feel bad about the whole scene, shake my head, and leave.

After buying a liter of milk along the way, I reach Plaza San Pablo, find a seat in the shade next to a fountain, and open my bag of granola. As I'm munching, a handsome man passes by, in his mid thirties, and asks me in English if I have a light. I tell him I don't smoke and he disappears. Ten minutes later he's back, and this time he sits next to me and asks where I'm from. It turns out that he's lived several years in southern California.

"Most of my time up there was spent in jail," he laughs, and as he says this

he lifts his shirt to show his chest, belly, and sides tattooed with a large swastika, and what appear to be demonic symbols.

"It's beautiful up there," he says, leaning back with his hands cradling his head, and looking as if he's decided to tell me a long story. "It's easier there, and I want to go back. Down here it's hard to get money. For a lot of us, all we can do is steal and do tricks. That's what I do. During the nights I circulate through the parks, looking for gay guys. They like me. Sometimes they take me home with them, feed me, give me a shower, and let me sleep. Then, when daylight comes, I go to the parks and sleep. Sleep all day, work all night."

He speaks more about the ways of gay men, at first referring to gays as "them," but finally referring to them as "us" and "we." Then he launches into a diatribe against the transvestites on La Reforma. "Most of them look good, and you never know they're what they are until the last moment," he complains bitterly, spitting into the grass. It occurs to me that maybe he can help me make contact with a mercado prostitute who'd tell me her life story.

"I can tell you what you'd hear without your having to go to the trouble," he says, shaking his head and smiling curiously. "All mercado prostitutes have essentially one of two identical stories. First, they were in some little town or village someplace in Mexico, fell in love, had a baby, got kicked out of their parents' home, came to Mexico City to get a job and support the baby, couldn't find work, and then became a prostitute because that's all they could do."

"Second," he continues, "they fell in love with some guy, left home to live with him, the money ran out, things got desperate, and then the guy says, 'There's one way we can make money and stay together... ' and of course that means her going out whoring, bringing the money home to him. Sounds crazy, but that's the way it goes nowadays. If she's real lucky, he doesn't beat her... "

1:00 PM

Inside the Merced there are simply too many people, and they all look too busy and too harassed. In much of Mexico the hours from around noon to about 4:00 PM constitute siesta time, but not here. Again I gravitate to the southern unloading zone, hoping to find a quiet spot.

Beneath the tree where I'd hoped to find some tranquility, there's another chattering man with a tablecloth on the pavement, and an assortment of items spread before a crowd. This time it's heaps of medicinal herbs alongside several foot-high color photos and drawings of the interior of the human body. The man peels the leathery skin off a *zábila* (agave) leaf, then grates a white onion onto a napkin. He fashions the napkin with its grated

onion into a bag, then squeezes the bag so that onion juice dribbles onto the exposed, glistening, mucilaginous *zábila*-leaf flesh. Now he grates an avocado pit over the leaf, and crumbles a kind of mint into the resulting melange.

As I take notes, a well dressed man of about fifty, with a sharp-featured, alert-looking face simply walks up and asks what I'm doing. I explain, and he rather pointedly remarks that gringos are always coming here and writing bad things about Mexico. I assure him that that's not the case with me, and then I ask him what he's doing here.

His name is Armando Cerezo Ponce, and he's the maestro of a group of about five young men learning from him how to sell medicinal herbs in the street; the man working with the *zábila* leaf is one of his students making a practice run. We talk about herbs, and when he sees that I also know about them and can tell him about cures I've seen in other places, he warms to me completely, pats my shoulder and tells me he likes me. I ask him, if he had to go live on a desert island and could take only one Mexican medicinal plant with him, what would it be?

"*Guarumo*," he replies. *Guarumo* is the umbrellalike cecropia tree, a member of the fig family, common in abandoned fields and along roadsides in Mexico's tropical, humid lowlands. He says that it heals lots of things, even diabetes.

I tell Armando that in the Sonora Market I've seen dried rattlesnake skins and desiccated hummingbirds for sale, and I ask him what people do with them.

"It's the blood people are after," he replies, "not the skins. Those are just displayed for advertisement purposes. People use the blood for skin problems."

"I've heard that sometimes rattlesnake blood is used to cast spells," I venture. Armando looks at me sideways through narrowed eyes, and some kind of smile crosses on his face.

"*Quizás*," he replies: "Maybe."

As we speak, I watch the student apply copious amounts of *zábila*-leaf/onion-juice/grated-avocado-pit/mint concoction to the swollen knees of a fat, middle-aged woman. The juice soaks the tops of her black stockings, but she doesn't seem to mind. Eventually she hands the student some money.

I ask Armando if he wants to speak to the readers of this essay. The quick-witted little man acts as if this is the most natural idea in the world and, without skipping a beat, squares himself and speaks these translated words

into my recorder:

"First, I greet you, with friendship, as a neighbor. This is a land full of botany, and I'd like for you all to know that our botany is very extensive, very good, very... well, unlimited. I have worked in this field for forty years. I learned my art from books... "

Now the student, who has finished his work, approaches us, says that he didn't get much money, and complains about the man with the snake who's taking all the business today. As Armando and his student speak, I notice that the air is full of bird chirps. A fellow who wanders the streets with dozens of cages of songbirds on his pushcart has moved next to us.

Among the usual canaries and budgies are several species of native Mexican birds, surely captured in the wild, now ratty-looking. I identify the tropical mockingbird, the Scott's oriole, Baltimore oriole, brown-backed solitaire, cardinal, western finch, and several red-lore parrots.

Finally I take leave of my friends, Armando insisting that we exchange addresses. Now the parking area holds only ten trucks, and they are empty; but the loudspeakers blaring out ever- recycling tapes for Conchamaca-Cream drive me away. Inside the Merced, it's not quite as busy as before; a surprising number of stalls are equipped with TVs or radios. On General Anaya, the old man with his feet stuck through the hole in the chain-link fence behind him is still there, still mumbling, still kissing his rosary, but the lady with two pairs of loafers and an old Bible for sale is gone. Suddenly a young man walks up to me, reaches out to shake my hands, and begins talking to me fast and hard:

"My name is Julio Pedro Hernández Olvera, from here in the D.F., practitioner of twenty years of *merolico*. *Merolico* is a word used by street people for individuals like me who can convince. It's a word for people who are like politicians. I convince people that they have powers. I give them faith that they can take control of their lives, that they should believe in themselves. I know that religion is just business, a way to marginalize people, and keep them from thinking for themselves. I have people examine who they are, where they come from, and where they're going... "

I ask: "Is it possible that you're selling something that can help people realize their potential?"

"Yes!" he responds joyously. "I sell pyramids. Pyramids because pyramids concentrate energy, and people can use that energy to do and be whatever they wish. Jesus was initiated atop a pyramid, as was Abraham, Mohammed, and all other great prophets. My pyramids are small, made of wood, but

covered with copper, because copper conducts energy."

Julio goes on and on even as above us a loudspeaker blasts out the merits of Conchamaca Cream. I feel claustrophobic, cornered, and just want to leave. I try to say goodbye but Julio talks on and on. Finally we exchange exuberant handshakes and pats on backs and as I turn to walk away there's a fifty-year old man in a straw hat smiling effusively, looking me in the eye and holding out his hand as if he's next in line to meet me. We shake and he says:

"Mexico is a happy, open country and we're always glad to have you visit. As we say in Mexico, 'God grabs you by the throat, but never chokes you!'"

2:00 PM

I'm gliding again, moving like a cloud in the sky, detached, feeling the mercado beat, and going with it, and slowly I come to be touched by all the faces full of character that drift past me. In every face I dwell on the lines, folds, scars, looks in the eyes, and I fancy that I, like the snake-man, like the pyramid seller, like the gay already knowing the prostitutes' stories, am clairvoyant, can see plainly into the hearts of everyone passing, that this woman works herself to exhaustion, this man is plain stupid, this little kid is a joy to be with, this person has suffered, this one had high hopes but now is resigned to much less. It strikes me that the butchers in their butcher shops all look exactly the way butchers should look, and the same for the pharmacists, the truck drivers, and the middle-aged women with shopping bags, all like perfectly appropriate figures enshrined in Norman Rockwell paintings.

Now I notice the large numbers of policemen in the area, mostly standing around in conspicuous clusters of three to seven, usually talking and joking with one another, and typically with their backs toward the market area, seemingly paying no attention to what's going on. At several street intersections where chaos reigns, policemen stand doing nothing.

At an intersection with a functioning stoplight, a policeman stands blowing his whistle in artful, expressive glissandos, pointing, waving, and posing majestically, but I see plainly that he's just motioning vehicles forward who can do nothing else but move forward, and when the light stops all traffic, he tells everyone to stop. If he'd go down just one street where a stoplight is lacking, his art would be so useful...

At another intersection a policeman steps into traffic going through a green light, stopping all cars with a raised hand and a whistle. I assume that for some reason he wants to let us pedestrians cross, but it turns out that he only wants to cross himself. Once across the street, he walks up to a

building, leans against it, and looks bored.

At 2:30, after periods of weak sunshine, on the western horizon, dark, slate-colored rain clouds begin forming; what a pleasure to see towering thunderheads framed in the beautiful, deep-blue sky above this seething mass of humanity.

At 2:45, happily expecting a refreshing storm, I find myself on Santo Tomás between Carretones and A. Gurrión, right across the Anillo from the Merced's main entrance. A crowd of people stand in the narrow, one-way street, so something special must be going on, and I go over to see what's up.

Between 150 and 200 men, maybe eighty percent in their twenties, form a long oval ring about 200 feet long, wedged between the walls of the narrow street; thus flattened, the ring crosses the street in two places. Most men lean against walls, with curious looks on their faces. Inside the ring, about twenty prostitutes walk counterclockwise, prancing as if in a beauty pageant. One woman, smiling vivaciously, coyly approaches a young man, walks her fingers up his chest, tugs at his collar, rubs his groin area, and says something. A middle-age fellow stands just outside the oval, so I walk up and ask what's going on. He looks at me unbelievably.

"Business," he finally replies.

"Well, they're prostitutes," I continue, "but I've never seen anything like this. Is this some kind of ceremony?"

"No, man," he laughs, "the girls are just drumming up business. They're trying to get the boys' attention, get them excited"

"Why don't they just go stand along the street?" I ask.

"Well, it's specialization," the man says. "Here it's faster, but cheaper. The average price out there is US \$12.50, you go to a hotel room, and it takes a little time. Here, they ask US \$8.33, you go into that little room over there, get about five minutes, and then it's over. Hey why don't you show a little spirit and get one yourself? You're a gringo, you can afford it."

"I worry about AIDS."

"Oh, we all use condoms; it's OK. That's no good, but for such a low price we just use condoms and exercise our fantasies. So, go get one, *ánimate!*"

"I'm in love with a woman I don't want to betray," I say, and this stops his urging. After a while he continues:

"It's a hell of a lot of money, isn't it? You can see how many are using that room, and I can tell you that half the money goes to the organizers as soon as you walk in. I've been there. I know. And this is just one place where this goes on, and it goes on every day like this, every day... "

He tells me of five other streets in the general mercado area where the same event takes place daily. Each location has its own specialty. In one, the girls are expensive but you get more attention, in another they are especially pretty, and in another they know special ways to treat you.

"It's the economic situation," he sums up, getting a philosophical tone in his voice "There are more girls every day, you see it, more and more every day. And they're getting more aggressive, and cheaper. Over on the Reforma, it goes on round-the-clock. One shift goes to sleep, another comes onto duty. Anything you want."

Without thunder or wind, a cold rain begins falling. The crowd breaks up. We scatter and black water with garbage floating in it pools against the curb.

3:00 PM

Less from hunger than a need for cheery company, I go looking for a snack in the Super Mercado de Carnes, the "Meat Market" in a building near the main Merced building, equipped with many *comedores*.

A *comedor* is smaller than a restaurant, but more substantial than a mere stove set up along the sidewalk. Food selection is usually limited to one or two main items, and you can order coffee and soft drinks. In a corner of the Super Mercado de Carnes, dozens of *comedores* stand next to one another, isle after isle. I walk among them wondering how to choose between them, and how, because there are so many, any make enough money to survive.

Finally I pass one with three bouquets on the counter, a four-foot high arrangement of bright-red gladiolus and white baby's-breath, another consisting of a glass filled with roses, and the last holding a large, deep-green shock of parsley. This *comedor*, like all others here, is about fifteen feet wide and ten feet deep. Inside, instead of the usual one or two cooks, there are six women and one man. Of the six women, five are in their early twenties, and the other is a middle-aged woman whom at least one of the girls calls Mamá. Despite there being no customers, everyone keeps very busy, except for the young man sitting in the corner next to the money box, coolly chewing a toothpick.

The older woman possesses a handsome face reflecting strength and character; one sees that she has worked very hard in her life. Since her teeth are profoundly bucked and her upper incisors are rimmed with silver, her

unreserved smile is simply dazzling. She notices my interest, waves me over, and enthusiastically summarizes the glories of her cooking:

"I choose the freshest vegetables and fry them in our secret batter, never too long, just enough to impart to them a perfect texture and flavor. A little salsa verde, or salsa roja if you prefer, on the top, and then the beans with just enough fried onion to make the flavor the way we like it. Our stew is the best, a harmonious blend of herbs... "

It's clear that the señora knows she's putting on a show, and she's loving the attention, and loving making all of us laugh. I pull up a stool and order bean soup. As I wait for my order, I try to talk with the girls, but they're so busy it's hard. Finally I ask one what it's like working in a *comedor*.

Obviously she has mixed feelings. She starts to answer several times, but always reconsiders. Finally she laughs and says, "Well, the good part is getting to dispense so much good food to nice people, and getting to know them, but the bad part is the hard work and long hours, and how easy it is to get fat!"

The dish I'm served isn't what I expected, but it looks great. It's a large bowl of very spicy tomato broth in which swim both a large hunk of deep-fried cauliflower, and a dollop of the lady's famous "onioned black-beans." A substantial mound of hot tortillas is served on a saucer covered with a pretty cloth.

As I'm being served, the señora asks if everything looks OK; as I'm eating she asks if it tastes good; when I'm finished, she asks if I enjoyed it. She also asks what a gringo like me is doing in the mercado, so I tell her about my writing project. When I rise to leave, she places her hand over her heart, smiles crookedly, and launches into another performance.

"Señor gringo," she says, " please write that we here in our little *comedor* in the heart of Mexico City's ancient historic section send our sincere greetings to your esteemed readers, and invite them to come eat with us."

The girls explode into laughter, and I promise to write her words. My meal's cost is 83¢/. I try to pay a dollar because I received so much more than I had expected, but the tip is refused.

Again I plunge directly into the Merced, but it's so congested and hectic that I plunge right back out; people here are too busy to deal with nosey writers. At a store built into the side of the "Meat Market," on Rosario, I spot more granola; since my earlier purchase was so good and went so fast, I buy more.

Once the granola is scooped into a large plastic bag I attempt to pay and take the bag, but the sales girl refuses my money, saying that I have to pay at "the box." She fills out a form in triplicate and directs me toward "the box," where another young woman sits looking very bored, working on her nails. The sales girl walks to "the box" with me and drops the three forms into a box inside "the box." The box lady yawns, takes the form, accepts my money, imprints each form with a large, ornate, black-ink stamp, impales one form on a large spike holding hundreds of other such forms, hands back to me the two remaining forms, and my change. She tells me to carry the two stamped forms back to the sales girl, who meantime has resumed her station next to my granola on the counter. I hand the two forms to the girl, she reviews them officiously, drops one into a slotted box, and finally presents me with the third stamped form, and my plastic bag of granola.

This morning, for a while it seemed that the legions of sweet sweepers might actually dominate the mercado-area's glut of garbage, but at 3:45 PM, once again, the garbage is winning.

4:00 PM

The inexpensive *comedor* meal starts me thinking about prices. Now I begin walking randomly, jotting down prices seen on price tags of items sold in stalls and stores contiguous with the Merced, and inside the Merced itself. In the following list I convert all "pesos per kilo" prices to "dollars or cents per pound or unit," using the exchange rate in force during my visit. The frequent price tag of "1 peso/kilo" translates here to "8¢/lb." By the time you read this the peso may have gained or lost considerably relative to the dollar, but at least the following list should give an impression of relative costs.

husk tomatoes.....	8¢/lb
ground red pepper with added lemon.....	38¢/lb
roasted sweet corn on a stick, w/ chili & salt.....	17¢/ear
small pears.....	8¢/lb
taco of liver and onions.....	17¢/taco
attractive red skirt for women.....	\$2.17/each
nylon children's panties.....	17¢/each
papaya.....	8¢/lb
pencil with large green eraser.....	8¢/each
child's T-shirt with Betty Boop on front.....	\$1.00/each
nice-looking woman's leather shoes.....	\$5.83/pair
plastic flip-flop sandals.....	\$1.33/pair
white cotton socks.....	83¢/pair
Black & Decker steam iron.....	\$16.67/each
simple water glass.....	17¢/each
tamarind fruits.....	45¢/lb
red tomatoes.....	15¢/lb
Kimlark white paper napkins, pkg of 500.....	\$1.25/pkg
smoked bacon.....	99¢/lb
hot-dog sausage.....	45¢/lb
Chester cheese.....	\$1.51/lb

135" x 184" orange, polyethylene tarpaulin.....\$10.83/each
 safflower oil.....\$1.67/bot
 top-quality pineapple..... 26¢/lb
 octopus.....91¢/lb
 refined white sugar in a plastic bag.....84¢/lb
 dried Puebla black beans.....26¢/lb
 ultrapasturized milk in paper carton.....46¢/quart
 use of rest room at corner of mercado.....17¢/visit
 ranch-style white cheese..... 60¢/lb
 chicken-meat paste made into loaf.....65¢/lb
 Pepsi or Fanta in aluminum can.....25¢/each
 pistachio nuts in shells..... \$2.12/lb
 taco of turkey meat.....25¢/taco
 Delmonte peach halves in heavy syrup, 29 oz.....92¢/can
 edible squash blossoms.....23¢/lb

At 4:40, several vendors selling goods from blankets or mats spread in the paved area of the southern unloading zone are packing up and going home; it's the first sign of the mercado closing down.

At 4:50 another fellow with a snake comes into the southern unloading zone, draws his operation area in chalk on the pavement, and begins his spiel. Once a healthy crowd has assembled he pulls up an empty crate to sit on, but the crate collapses and he spectacularly falls flat on his back, his legs jabbing into the air. Everyone laughs, but people help him up, someone hands him a more sturdy crate, and the words, faces, and demeanor of everyone express the sentiment that, "We know how you feel, buddy, so we're with you if you want to get up and try again..." And he does.

5:00 PM

At 5:00, the Merced's fruit stalls remain open but do a slow business. The *comedores* are bustling but, in the streets, about a third of the vendors selling from blankets or mats are gone, another one-third is packing up, and the mercado's tension level has reduced markedly.

The Merced's aisles are open enough for me to venture into the main building. As I pass before the metro exit, out of the blue a young man of about twenty-five approaches me, says that his name is Juan, that he operates the *comedor* next to us, and that I should sit down and have a meal. His *comedor* strikes me as the busiest, most efficient looking, and cleanest in the mercado, and certainly it's the most favorably situated, right next to the metro exit.

"We have the best food in the place," he says. "Entire families come to eat their main meals with us but right now we need people to see a gringo eating with us. We like gringos. Especially those blue-eyed gringo women. They're not at all like the dumpy little brown things we have here, like that one over

there."

Juan points to a pretty young woman stirring carnita chunks on a comal. She laughs. It's clear that Juan and his coworkers are tired and need some comic relief. However, Juan goes too far, making racy, embarrassing remarks about the carnita lady.

Finally one of the cooks directs Juan's attention to a customer needing service and, right in the middle of a sentence, he stops talking to me and rushes to the customer. The pretty carnita girl just laughs again and shrugs. It's been a long day, she explains, and there are still three hours to go.

By 5:30, about one in ten of the Merced's stalls is closed, each covered with a plastic tarpaulin lashed down with rope. Of the remaining stalls, about half are without customers. Some vendors are settled before TVs while others stare blankly into space, and a good number lie on rags in the backs of their stalls, sleeping. Many stand sorting and rearranging their produce. Most started working ten or eleven hours ago, and it appears that most will stay for another hour or two.

Maybe one reason people here can endure such long hours seven days a week is that they enjoy friendships among their fellow workers. There's plenty of inter-stall hobnobbing going on right now, and it's much more animated and friendly than what one would see, say, among supermarket personnel in the U.S.

Right beside the Merced, wedged between the Flower Market and the Candy Market, the Iglesia de Santo Tomás de la Palma is a small church with a scrupulously clean, spacious courtyard paved in stone, completely enclosed by a high stone fence. At 5:30, with the feeling of evening coming into the air, I enter the courtyard and am surprised that amidst all this chaos and noise such an island of peace can exist. Sitting on the ground and leaning against the church wall, two Indian women air their sore feet. A drunk sleeps by a wall, and a man stands in a corner poring over his ledger. Through the church's massive, open wooden doors, an altar is barely visible in a dimly lit space, bearing about twenty flickering candles; several faithful kneel before it.

At 5:45 the mound of discarded produce and plastic bags at the end of the northern unloading zone is again as imposing as it was early this morning; several people scavenge through it. At the edge of this zone a sweeper in a red-orange uniform sits on a curb next to his switch-broom and portable barrel, doing nothing. I sit beside him and strike up a chat. He's worked in a restaurant in New York City for two years, and speaks maybe twenty words of English. He says that people "on the other side" (in the U.S.) have more money than here, but maybe people here are happier. As it grows darker I

return to the southern unloading zone to find most remaining open-area vendors packing up.

What a task it must be to unload and later reload their goods every day. One vendor who earlier unpacked about fifty pairs of shoes and arranged them neatly on the pavement now returns each pair to its box and stacks the boxes onto a dolly to be wheeled off someplace for overnight storage. A woman with about a hundred children's T-shirts refolds each shirt so that wrinkles don't develop, and then carefully positions each in a big bag. With their pushcarts, once again young *cargadores* are conspicuous everywhere; now it occurs to me that during the middle of the day they almost disappeared.

6:00 PM

In the main Merced building I decide to buy a kilo of bananas from a stall staffed by two young men and one young woman. All look dazed and exhausted. As I approach the stall one of the young men mechanically asks "*Qué quiere llevar?*" -- "What do you want to carry?" -- which he must have asked a thousand people today. When I order a kilo of bananas he just stares looks at me uncomprehendingly, his mind's tired circuits apparently jammed. Finally they woman calls out, "Give him a kilo of bananas!" The young man springs to life so abruptly that he knocks over a large tray of cactus fruits, or tunas, and then stands there glancing sheepishly between me and the spilled tunas.

"Long day?" I ask.

"*Sí*," he admits.

By 6:15 the crowds are thin enough on the Merced's southern end for me to find a low, quiet wall on which to sit and eat a banana. As I'm peeling it, one of two women sidewalk vendors, who are packing up, walks up to me and asks in broken English if I speak Spanish. Then in Spanish she continues:

"My friend and I are going home now, so don't you stay here alone. At this time of evening the *rateros* (thieves) come out, and you're not safe here. You take your bananas and go up there next to the woman selling tamales. Don't even keep your bag of bananas on the wall beside you because they'll run up and steal it. And don't you even think about sleeping here tonight, because they'll kill you."

I thank the woman, who sells Barbie dolls from a bag. She says that her English comes from having spent her childhood in Laredo, on the Texas border. I take my bag of bananas and walk around.

At 6:30 about two-thirds of the unloading zones' open-air vendors are gone,

but the loudspeakers still blare out their messages for Conchamaca Cream. About half of the fruit and vegetable stands inside the Merced are closed, and hardly any of the rest are doing business. *comedores* along the mercado's perimeter, however, are doing a booming business. The clothing stalls are fairly active. The concrete-and-corrugated-steel stalls that opened so late this morning sell electronics, and now they also are doing brisk business. The absolutely busiest place in the whole market zone is a small, dark room among these stalls, equipped with twelve video-games. Here every machine is occupied by a young male, behind which stands a line of other young males awaiting their turns.

At 6:45 I'm watching rush-hour traffic on the Anillo when I spot my first other gringos of the day, a young man and woman, and I must laugh, for they, like me, have problems accommodating the mercado's general rhythm and way of being. Crossing the Anillo, they walk smack into the door of a green and white Volkswagen taxi unexpectedly stopping in their path; all day long I've not seen a single Mexican walk into the side of a car like this. On the sidewalk before the Merced, not anticipating a step in an odd location, both trip where I have tripped, but where no Mexican ever trips. As they walk away, looking backwards, trying to figure out what that step is doing in such an unlikely place, they catch their heads on a tarpaulin's guide wire strung high enough to clear low-riding Mexican heads, but not high enough for tall gringos.

As darkness falls, on the Merced's eastern side, where most stalls sell seed and grain and now have their corrugated steel fronts rolled down, I pass along the very long concrete passageway. This is a hard, cold essay in grayness. Naked incandescent light bulbs cast sharp, black shadows. A penetrating, cold wind blows trash paper across my path; echoes of my steps sound desolate and sad. At the end of the long passageway, one seed stall is still in the process of closing down; a young man sprinkles water atop a yard-wide burlap sack of dried peppers.

The taco stand across the street is besieged with so many customers that the fast-working señora looks like a puppet frantically flailing her arms.

7:00 PM

It's completely dark as I walk along the Merced's southern perimeter. A drunk with a beer in his hands approaches and begins talking and shaking my hand.

"I'm a fish seller and I'm drunk because I worked so hard all day," he slurs. Before he can continue, another drunk comes up with a scowl on his face.

"What are you doing here?" he demands of me. "I've been seeing you

walking around here all day. What are you doing here?"

Before I can extricate myself, yet a third man approaches, also a little drunk, but for the most part coherent. I fear that the three men, at a given signal, plan to mug me, so I break from their encirclement; as I'm making for the middle of the unloading zone, I'm relieved to see that only the last man is in pursuit. In the zone's center, where I have maximum visibility because of light issuing from the dozens of naked lightbulbs in *comedores* around the perimeter, I stop and let the man catch me. It turns out that all he wants is to talk.

He talks endlessly, not letting me excuse myself. Without making a scene by pushing him away physically, all I can do is to stand in the darkness as a very cold rain begins to fall, and listen. As he rambles on I peer through the Merced's open doors for what will be the last time. Merchants there are tying down their tarpaulins; in the *comedores* along the perimeter everyone is working hard. At last the blaring Conchamaca Cream advertisements have been replaced by laughter from the *comedor* area, and cheerful cumbia music.

"Bob Dylan," the man says, thumping me in the chest and fogging me with tequila breath. "You know Bob Dylan, right? I tell you, he came to Mexico, and you know why? He and I ate peyote together. Peyote! Good Mexican plant! Only grown in a little place down in Oaxaca I know about. It doesn't make you hallucinate, just helps you see things as they really are. Bob Dylan! Our Mexican plants aren't like yours. Our plants let you see! Using our plants is like conducting a religious ceremony, a mass... !"

The drunk's unexpected reference to a mass stuns me with insight. For, it occurs to me that at this very moment here at the Merced, a kind of mass is indeed taking place. It is a mass in which hard-working, tired vendors and customers are taking part.

For, apart from all the dreams, hopes, and illusions we humans are subject to, there remains the fundamental truth that each of us shares a condition with all other humans, and indeed with all other of the Earth's living things; and that is, that, to survive, we must take into our bodies a rich assortment of nutrients. We must eat and drink wholesome foods.

Therefore, among the mere handful of human activities about which there can be no doubt as to their appropriateness and necessity, there is the mercado's mass-like coming together in one place to exchange food. And it is further worth celebrating that this inescapable chore can be accompanied by laughter and music, in a workplace riotously alive with extravagant colors, odors, sounds, and every hue of humanity.