



This is a free sample from the collection *Multiplex Fandango* by Weston Ochse with cover art by Vincent Chong and an introduction by Joe R. Lansdale, published by Dark Regions Press available now and in stock on our website. The book is currently available in a leather-bound signed by both author and artist Deluxe Lettered Hardcover with slipcase edition and a 200 Signed and Numbered Limited Hardcover edition. When you're done reading the sample you can order the book directly through our website with free USA shipping at:

<http://www.darkregions.com/products/Multiplex-Fandango-by-Weston-Ochse.html>

Multiplex Fandango synopsis

Multiplex Fandango is subtitled "A Weston Ochse Reader" for good reason. This collection contains a comprehensive representation of short fiction and novellas by the Bram Stoker award winner and Pushcart Prize nominee, including his recent powerful Stoker finalist short story, "The Crossing Of Aldo Rey" and his brilliant Stoker finalist novella, Redemption Roadshow, as well as acclaimed favorites, "Catfish Gods" and "Big Rock Candy Mountain." Also included in this omnibus volume of sixteen short stories and novellas are six original new works of short fiction written especially for this collection including such future classics as "Tarzan Doesn't Live Here Anymore," "Low Men Weeping," and the stunning, "City Of Joy."

About the author

Weston Ochse (pronounced 'Oaks) lives in Southern Arizona with his wife, and fellow author, Yvonne Navarro and Great Danes. For entertainment he races tarantula wasps, wrestles rattlesnakes, and bakes in the noonday sun. His work has won the Bram Stoker Award for First Novel and been nominated for a Pushcart Prize for short fiction. His work has also appeared in anthologies, magazines and professional writing guides. He thinks it's damn cool that he's had stories in comic books.

NOW SHOWING ON SCREEN 12
The Crossing of Aldo Ray

**Starring Aldo Ray as a father who only wants to
return to America in order to save his child**

*“Puts the whole mess of illegal border crossing and desperation in a
whole new light.”*

—*Homeland Security Weekly*

Soundtrack by Blue Oyster Cult

*“Deep in each man is the knowledge that something
knows of his existence. Something knows, and cannot
be fled nor hid from.”*

—Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing*

In the long cold evening with the darkness dripping from the sky, I stood among them all. I, Aldo Ray, was ready to cross. I was ready to die. I was ready to do anything so long as I could get home. I had to get to my son. He had been taken and here I was, caught on the wrong side of the border.

A breeze smelling of sage and tumbleweeds swept across us. I swayed with those around me, allowing the wind to push me as if I were a stalk of wheat or a wildflower along the side of the road. To do anything else would be human, and they were far removed from human.

So was I.

We moved forward into the fence. We pressed as one. I could feel it give. I could feel it groan. In answer, we all groaned, adding our miserable symphony to the wind that raced along the thin barrier of metal all the way to the Pacific Ocean on one side and the Gulf of Mexico on the other.

We had walked for two days, dragging, tripping, stumbling through torpid heat and bone-chilling cold. *El muertos* did not feel anything anymore, but for us *animados* it was all too real. We wanted to wipe the

sweat from our faces and clutch our arms to our bodies, but we could not. *El caminar muertos* never would. The walking dead felt nothing. Nothing except the need to feed, to find that which they had lost, to move towards something they could no longer understand. And because they would not, neither could we—to survive meant mimicking as best we could this dance of the dead across the roiling sands of the Sonoran Desert.

Los Vaqueros began following us on the second day. They rode far out in the shadows of our crossing, careful not to let the *muertos* see their movement. Some said they were Mexican Army. Others that they were *enchantadors* and the reason for the *muertos*. Whatever they were, they could not really stop us. They just hovered on the edge of my vision, lean mirages twisting with an equine grace that left me longing to be alive once more.

But that was not to be. I was dead, or at least the *muertos* thought so. And that was the secret. They could not smell, nor did they seem to have any supernatural ability to realize that I was alive. But they could tell by movement the difference between *animado* and *muerto*. They could hear us and know from our speech that we were alive. The trick, as I had discovered on my two previous crossings, was to move like them, regardless of what might happen.

In front and behind me, I knew of four other *animados* like myself. Two of us were trying to get back to our families. Another worked for the *Zetas* out of Nuevo Laredo. He was a *sicario* and muled drugs across the border. The last was an *Americano* who had gotten drunk, been robbed, and sought to return to his home. It was an irony that he had to pretend to be a dead one of us in order to get back to where he belonged so he could live.

He had approached me a week before, after having sought me out in Puerto Peñasco, on the Sea of Cortez, where I was trying to earn enough money to pay the *Coyotes* for safe passage across the fence. A shrimp-boat captain I knew pointed me out as one who knew how to cross.

“I need to get back,” he had said.

“No way. *Usted está en América. Usted no puede pretender estar muerto muy bien.*”

“But I can pretend to be dead,” he argued. “I’ll do what it takes. All I want is to go home.”

I still turned him down. How can someone from a land that is so alive be any good at pretending to be dead? And I would have never have shown him had I not gotten the call from *mi esposa* telling me that my son had disappeared from the playground. Some predator had stolen him and I

needed to return. So I taught the *Americano*, also knowing that I might need him to help me if it came to that.

“Are you sure they can’t tell I’m alive?”

I remember how remarkable it was that he never once disbelieved in the *muertos*. He took it for granted that they were real—so American to believe so easily.

Then we had lain on the ground pretending to be dead, our bodies covered in pig’s blood and entrails until the herd had appeared. They came from the Black Sand, heading inexorably towards a lonely spot in the desert where it looked like the dunes met sky. When they came grunting and groaning over the top of us, the hardest thing was to keep still. We let them stagger above us, taking us for fellow *muertos*. The herd was halfway over me when in a state of electric terror I slowly lurched to my feet and joined them in their northbound shuffle.

That was two days ago. Two days of sweating and shitting and crying as I cramped and stumbled, so many times almost giving away my living condition. They never stopped so I never stopped, until we came to the fence the Americans had built. So many thought it was to keep people like me out. They had no idea about the Black Sand that was growing like a cancer through the old country, infecting all of those who walked across it,

turning them into mad, hungry creatures.

We kept pushing against the fence. I felt the press of dead and rotting bodies against me. Teeth snapped near my ear. I watched beetles burrowing into the skin of the woman directly in front of me, someone's mother who was forever changed. Here and there pieces of them were missing, as older bodies had risen up while the Black Sand crept across the land. Some were nothing but dry bones and guitar-string tendons. Others had blown open, the heat expanding their bodies until the stitches along their torsos had snapped, peeling back the skin like their flesh were a strange, rare fruit that blossomed only on the march.

Suddenly a man screamed. It was the *sicario*. He had lost it. He shouted for the *muertos* to get away from him, for them to let him through. There was an uncomfortable rustling as they began to turn towards the flailing movements of one they had thought of as their own.

He screamed again, this time using my name. *If you want to see him again*, he shouted.

I turned with the *muertos*, just in time to watch one of them chew his ear off, as casually as a cow would munch a wild flower in a field.

The *sicario* pushed the thing that had once been a woman away and drew a pistol from beneath his poncho. He fired several shots towards the

knees of those nearest him, sending them tumbling to the sand. He turned towards the barrier and did the same thing, until a pathway was cleared for him.

He hollered for me once again, but I could no more help him than I could help myself.

He leapt upon the dead, writhing bodies, using them as steppingstones for his last, desperate jump. He dropped the gun and grasped the top of the fence all in one gallant move. He began to heave himself up to the top, when one of the things grabbed his foot. It held him there, as a *muerto* child crawled up its back and sunk broken yellow teeth into the mule's leg.

The *sicario* screamed and kicked, but could not break free. The *muerto* child wrenched back its head and came away with meat, leaving red, shiny bone free to be tickled none so gently by the hot desert air. The *sicario* screeched incoherently. This time when he kicked out, he lost his grip and fell backwards. He hit the ground with a bone-jarring thud and was quickly lost from sight amongst the crush of the dead.

His screams were abruptly silenced, only to be replaced by the hungry groans of the *muertos* who were too far away to feed, but realized that a meal was being missed just beyond their grasp.

I groaned with them, at once both horrified by the death and relieved that it was not me.

Then I spied a camera atop the barrier. It sat several meters west of my herd and focused on the incident. The Americans saw everything. That they did not do anything was so much a part of who they were. I imagined them in some sort of immense building with a million monitors, watching everyone do everything, but doing nothing about it themselves. What good, I wondered, was all that technological superiority if it was never used?

As the weight of a dead old man pressed against me, I became aware of the packets taped to my ribs and chest. They contained I knew not what, but getting them to the other side was what the *sicario* told me would keep my son alive. They had found me soon after the *Americano* and co-opted both of us into their crime. For it was their car that my son had entered.

The barrier began to creak and bend. It was not designed for the weight of the herd. The excitement of the feast had brought more *muertos* forward until the press drove all the air from my lungs. I was desperate to breath, inhaling shallowly as I pushed with the rest. My head swam. For a moment I was no longer there, but transported to a time before.

“Aldo,” came the plaintive cry down the telephone. “José is taken.”

“What do you mean, taken?”

“He was at the playground with the other boys, then on the way home, he got into a car.”

“What kind of car? Whose car?”

“A big one. A town car I think.” The unspoken question was—did I know to whom it belonged?

“Did you call the police?”

“Of course not.” She cursed through her sobs. “Aldo, you know we can’t do that. Why such a question?”

“Have there been any calls?”

“Why would there be calls? Who would call?”

“I don’t know.”

My lie lay there, expanding into the silence. Finally she spoke once more.

“Get him back, Aldo. Do what you have to do to get him back.

¿Comprende?”

“Si,” I had said. I had been about to tell her how much I loved her when the dial tone hit me like a blow in the gut. Do what you have to do to get him back, she had said. So I had.

The *Americano* began to sob. He was several feet to my left and I could feel the shudder of bodies as they turned towards him. The stress of being dead was too much for him, as I knew in my heart it would be.

He too had packets taped to him, as did the other like me who was returning to her family—a young woman who had been picked up in a raid on a processing plant in Illinois and deported. She had the longest way to travel, but her determination was that of a mother who had to return to her children. If I had to wager, it would be on her. If I had bet on the *Americano*, I would have lost.

I saw what would happen before he felt the teeth sink into his shoulder. A *muerto*, who reminded me of a shopkeeper I had known in Nogalas who sold overpriced rugs to *touristas*, began to chew on the *Americano* as if he were a rack of prime meat. First one bite and then another. The *Americano* screamed, the sound barely registering amidst the groans around us, as the herd once again pressed itself into the fence.

The obstruction before us began to shriek in protest. Reinforced metal, backed by rebar and steel-pilings, it was no match for the combined press of the dead. With a metallic scream, a section tore free and gave way. The first rows of *muertos* stumbled through the gap, as those behind trampled them to the ground. Limbs were crushed and broken as those who had

fallen sought to stand while the others above them continued to shuffle forward.

I was far enough back to keep my balance. The groans increased as the *muertos* found the way ahead open. Like the cry of cattle about to stampede, they raised their heads and moaned towards the jet-black sky. I groaned with them, and in my lament felt compassion for those who were dead and about to die once more. The unfairness of it struck me, even though I could do nothing about it. That is what made me human, I supposed—the realization of what was being lost.

After the fence was breached, I lost sight of the *Americano*. We surged forward onto a flat plain. I had been here before. The terrain and location of the Black Sand almost ensured that the herd would end up at the same position along the border. To our left and right metal walls had been constructed like chutes in a cattle yard, guiding us onward to where I could see the *arroyo* begin. We shuffled and lurched forward. As always I wondered if the *muertos* knew where they were going. Did they have a goal, or were they as mindless as they seemed? What were they hungry for?

Then it happened.

I stumbled and fell to my knees. I was so caught up in my own thoughts that I had forgotten that I was supposed to be mindless and dead. A clumsy foot planted upon my back drove me into the ground. Another struck the back of my head and I must have blacked out for a moment.

Which is when I dreamed of Aldo Ray—not me, but my famous namesake. Tall where I was short, handsome where I was average bordering on ugly, blonde where I was black-haired, and white where I was brown. My mother had given me the name of her favorite American actor and hero in the hope that I would grow up to be like him—in the hope that his name would give me a head start on the American Dream. He had starred with James Coburn, John Wayne, Spencer Tracy, Katherine Hepburn and everyone who was anyone. With a name like that, how could I lose? He had been a hero during World War II, serving as a Frogman in the Pacific. With a past like that, how could I not succeed? Yet, as I told my mother, I could fail all too easily because a name does not make the man. She could have called me George Washington, but in the end I would always be reminded that Washington was not and had never had been Mexican. And therein lay the truth of it.

I came to my senses with a wetness down my back. It burned, as if someone had scraped the skin away. I wanted to touch there and see if I

had been bitten, but I dared not. Any movement that was not that of a *muerto* would doom me to the same fate as the *sicario* and the *Americano*. So I lurched to my feet again, using the press of bodies to propel me upwards and forward. My head ached, and my eyes felt dull. One of the packets had fallen loose and now hung free from my body, occasionally slapping my side as I stumbled onward.

Soon the steel walls were replaced by the sandy dirt embankments of the *arroyo* that rose up to twice the height of the tallest man. During the monsoon seasons the rain collected and rushed through the natural channel, seeking low ground and washing everything away in its path. Then it was dangerous, but not as dangerous as it was now. Now the water was replaced by the *muertos*, who were no less a natural force than the storms that filled this conduit.

I noticed a change in my stride. My legs felt like they were no longer my own. The dull ache that had gripped them a day ago was now gone—to be replaced by a feeling of weightlessness, as if the limbs were no longer there.

Suddenly a gunshot rang out from far ahead. I knew it to be the beginning of the end, and the most dangerous part of the trek. The Border

Patrol were taking aim at us, using their high-powered rifles to shoot us like chickens locked in a coop.

My hands lost their feeling as well. It was as if they belonged to someone else.

More gunshots followed the first. Although I could not see what was happening, I had witnessed it before on my first trip. Bullets were ripping through heads. Blood and bone was flying everywhere as marksmen found that sweet spot in the brain of the *muertos* that caused instant—and permanent—death. The fear I had was the fear only a living person could have. I had to hope and pray that I would not fall into the sights of a trigger-happy border guard.

I lost the feeling in my arms around the same time the minefield came into view. More than a hundred small rectangles were placed in the ground facing upwards. I knew that they were called Claymores and fired thousands of ball bearings towards their targets, ripping them apart in an instant.

As the first ranks of *muertos* shuffled forward, night became day as a row of mines was triggered, shredding dead flesh. The surge halted for a moment as the flashes of light blinded the *muertos*. I think it scared them a little, too.

Yet still we pressed ahead.

I could no longer feel my body. It felt like I was walking in a dream where I moved but did not know how. A thought began to form in my brain, but it was hard to concentrate on such things.

I groaned and for the first time realized that I was hungry. The *muerto* in front of me had long ago rotted away, scraps of grey and green skin flapping as it moved. It did not appeal to me, but then I remembered the woman. I knew that she was somewhere forward and to the right of me. I willed my body to move in that direction, and began to jostle and push my way through the pressing mass of dead flesh.

The front ranks continued their forward momentum. This time they were allowed past the next two rows of mines until there were hundreds of *muertos* in the field. Then, as the mines were detonated, a supernova of sound and fury tore them apart, sending them skyward only to rain back down in a shower of body pieces and bone fragments.

I groaned again.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew I still had a son to save. I remembered the far-away words of *mi esposa* when she told me *to do what I had to do*. But I was becoming insatiably hungry. Instinctively, I sought

out the woman I knew to be alive. Had the *muertos* known about her, they would be looking as well. But it was my secret, and she was mine.

When she came into view, the realization finally struck me. A burst of rational thought sparked through my dying brain cells as I now understood that I had somehow been bitten, perhaps when I was down, perhaps when I was not looking. A tiny part of me—that part that was still *animado*—screamed for the change to stop. It begged for a chance to save my child, who would most assuredly die without my delivery of the packets taped to my body. It cried out for a second chance to be human.

But the rest of me that had already died ignored my entreaty and cared only for its unholy appetite. No longer was my fuel the need to save my son. No longer was I to be Aldo Ray, the hero of the movies. Now I was a monster—hungry beyond hunger, and eager to sink my teeth into this woman with whom I had shared a conversation before all this had all started.

“Do you really think we can make it?” she had asked.

“Piece of cake,” I had said. “Being dead is the easiest thing. It’s being alive that’s hard.”

We had laughed at the joke, then covered ourselves in pig’s blood and waited for the herd to cross over us. At the time it all seemed like no big deal.

I pushed through the last few of my fellow *muertos* and staggered up beside her. She turned her head minutely, recognizing me out of the corner of her eye. But I was not what she expected. Her gaze widened as she realized what I had become. I could see the terror in her understanding that she would never make it back to her family.

She tried to back away as I leaned towards her. The hunger was overpowering. I was close enough to take away her face, but instead I lightly kissed her cheek.

That surprised us both, and soon she was swept away in the press of bodies. For a brief moment humanity sparked again inside me. The last thing I remembered about myself was who I was—my name, and who my mother had wanted me to be.

Aldo Ray.

And then the hunger took me over until I exploded in a shower of light and heat. And as I rained down over the desert, I finally knew where the Black Sand came from. I knew from what it was born. It was from a hunger far older and far deeper than any of us. And it was growing. And it would soon take over us all. And I became one with the land, and was greeted by fellow *muertos* as they too rained down and joined me in the *arroyo*—a monsoon of the dead, and us flowing nowhere, forever.

Story Notes: When Steve Jones asked me to submit to his upcoming zombie anthology I was psyched. Although Steve and I had a legendary tussle over grooming standards, Elvis clothes, and cross-dressing, which came to the forefront at the Bram Stoker Ceremony in Toronto in 2007, I'd never worked with him. For that matter, I hadn't written a zombie story either. Thus was born this story. Living on the Border, I have a definite perspective about the wall and the events as they transpire down here. Taking a serious issue and bending it with genre was difficult, but by using the synecdoche of Aldo Ray, I think I pulled it off. This was a finalist for the Bram Stoker Award.

Multiplex Fandango by Weston Ochse

Read the rest of the stories by ordering the book at:

<http://www.darkregions.com/products/Multiplex-Fandango-by-Weston-Ochse.html>