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Nonfiction

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Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border*

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*In Search of Snow
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Poetry

*The Fever of Being
Ghost Sickness
Vatos*

THE DEVIL'S HIGHWAY

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A True Story

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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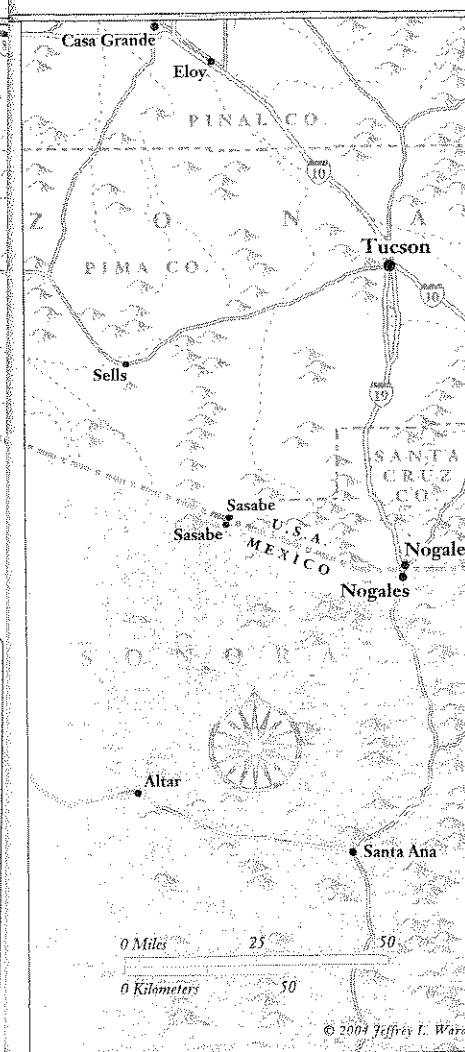
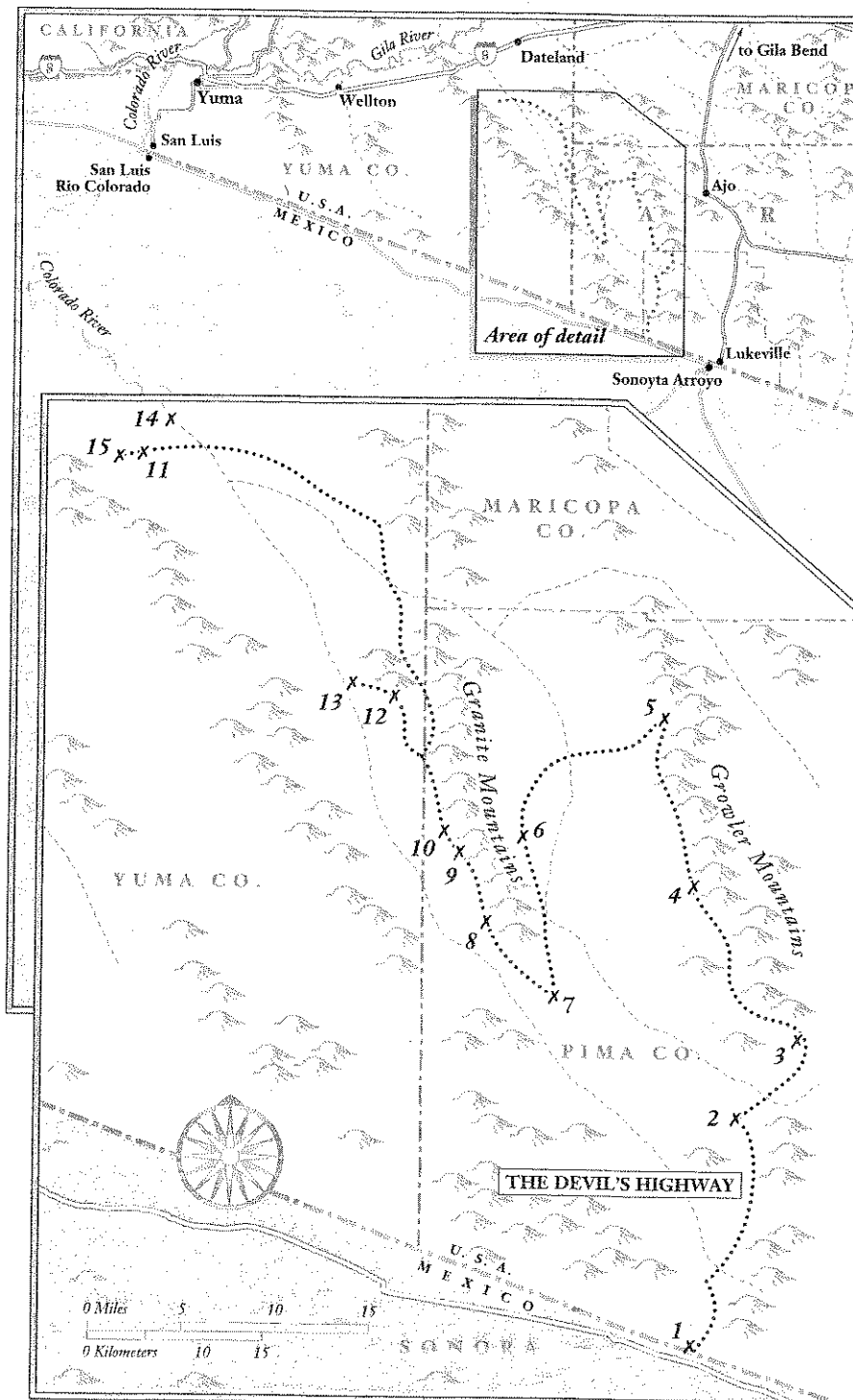
This account was based on many sources. Interviews and travel, of course, provided many insights and testimonies. I was granted unusually generous access to documents and governmental reports from both Mexico and the United States; these were central to the collection of stories. Border Patrol reports, sheriff's department reports, Mexican consular reports, Justice Department reports, legal documents, testimonies and trial documents, correspondence, and many hours of taped interrogations and confessions went into the research. Due to concerns about the personal safety of the survivors, their actual depositions were sealed. I spent hours in federal defenders' offices, in various consulates, in Border Patrol stations, with Samaritan groups, in diners over cups of coffee, in Migra trucks, and on the Devil's Highway itself. At the time of this investigation, the survivors were material witnesses in a criminal case, and were also clients in the notorious civil suit against the United States; because of this, they were shielded

from direct contact with me. The hours of their torment, however, were well documented, often in their own words. And the Mexican officials who handle their cases were forthcoming with information, sometimes offered surreptitiously, off the record, or representing messages the survivors wanted heard. Some of the sources for this book did not choose to be—or could not be—quoted directly.

The year I spent researching and traveling consumed four leather-bound notebooks of about 144 pages each. Much of that material, of course, was tangential. Still, about half of each notebook went into this book. Certain passages, nevertheless, were subject to educated conjecture. For example, no number of letters to Jesús Antonio Lopez Ramos, aka Mendez, will ever be answered. He simply won't answer questions, largely to protect his loved ones from payback by the Coyote gang. Fortunately, his testimony and writings and taped *pensées* are available for study. Any discussion of his private thoughts and motivations could only be taken on faith based on his various statements—some of them contradictory. The opinions of his attorney and of the Mexican officials who dealt with him were also of great help in decoding the cipher that is Mendez.

Furthermore, some conversations were implied—they are presented in the text as possibilities based on recollections and inferences from the recorded testimonies. These are shown without quotation marks. Where the actual words are known, they are presented as straight dialogue.

Finally, although I wasn't with them on the morning when they awoke lost in the Sonoran desert, I have spent many spring mornings there. I know the smell and sound of the dawn quite well. I know the time of year. And I know the weather conditions in which they found themselves. The Welltòn 26 had scant time to worry about the nature aspects of their journey. But no story about death and the Devil's Highway could rightly exist without the strong presence of Desolation, in all its intimidating glory.



1. Saturday, May 19, 1:40 p.m.
Group entered by vehicle at Quitobaquito.

2. Saturday, May 19, 3:00 p.m. High temp. 96°.
Group was dropped off at this location and told to follow the guides on foot.

3. Saturday, May 19, 11:30 p.m.
Group arrived at this point and observed lights that they believed to be a Border Patrol Agent in Bluebird Pass.

4. Sunday, May 20, 6:00 a.m.
Group continued northwest and attempted to cross over the Growler Mountains several times.

5. Sunday, May 20, 2:00 p.m.
At this point, the group decided to rest during the heat of the day. After resting until night, the guides were disoriented and began walking westbound away from Ajo.

6. Sunday, May 20, 9:00 p.m. High temp. 96°.
The group arrived at the Granite Mountains. By this time, they were out of water.

7. Monday, May 21, 6:00 a.m.
The two guides collected money from the group and said they were going to get water. They told the group to wait in this location and abandoned the group.

8. Monday, May 21, 2:00 p.m. High temp. 95°.
When the group realized that the guides were not coming back, they decided to continue on. The group was desperate and out of water.

9. Tuesday, May 22, 2:00 p.m. High temp. 108°.
Two members of the group became ill and died in this location during the day.

10. Tuesday, May 22, 11:00 p.m.
Other members of the group became ill in this location and five left to go for help.

11. Wednesday, May 23, 5:00 a.m.
The guides that had abandoned the group continued walking northwest, almost reaching Dateland, Arizona, before they were overcome by the heat.

12. Wednesday, May 23, 7:30 a.m.
One of the five who had left the group became ill and was left behind in this location.

13. Wednesday, May 23, 10:00 a.m.
High temp. 110°. Initial group of four was encountered by Wellton agent here as he was cutting the Vidrios Drag.

14. Thursday, May 24, 5:00 a.m.
Another member of the group was tracked to this location, where he was found deceased.

15. Thursday, May 24, 6:00 a.m.
Another member of the group was tracked to this location and found alive.

The Rules of the Game

Five men stumbled out of the mountain pass so sunstruck they didn't know their own names, couldn't remember where they'd come from, had forgotten how long they'd been lost. One of them wandered back up a peak. One of them was barefoot. They were burned nearly black, their lips huge and cracking, what paltry drool still available to them spuming from their mouths in a salty foam as they walked. Their eyes were cloudy with dust, almost too dry to blink up a tear. Their hair was hard and stiffened by old sweat, standing in crowns from their scalps, old sweat because their bodies were no longer sweating. They were drunk from having their brains baked in the pan, they were seeing God and devils, and they were dizzy from drinking their own urine, the poisons clogging their systems.

They were beyond rational thought. Visions of home fluttered through their minds. Soft green bushes, waterfalls, children, music. Butterflies the size of your hand. Leaves and beans of coffee plants burning through the morning mist as if lit from within.

Rivers. Not like this place where they'd gotten lost. Nothing soft here. This world of spikes and crags was as alien to them as if they'd suddenly awakened on Mars. They had seen cowboys cut open cacti to find water in the movies, but they didn't know what cactus among the many before them might hold some hope. Men tore their faces open chewing saguaros and prickly pears, leaving gutted plants that looked like animals had torn them apart with their claws. The green here was gray.

They were walking now for water, not salvation. Just a drink. They whispered it to each other as they staggered into parched pools of their own shadows, forever spilling downhill before them: *Just one drink, brothers. Water. Cold water!*

They walked west, though they didn't know it; they had no concept anymore of destination. The only direction they could manage was through the gap they stumbled across as they cut through the Granite Mountains of southern Arizona. Now canyons and arroyos shuffled them west, toward Yuma, though they didn't know where Yuma was and wouldn't have reached it if they did.

They came down out of the screaming sun and broke onto the rough plains of the Cabeza Prieta wilderness, at the south end of the United States Air Force's Barry Goldwater bombing range, where the sun recommenced its burning. Cutting through this region, and lending its name to the terrible landscape, was the Devil's Highway, more death, another desert. They were in a vast trickery of sand.

In many ancient religious texts, fallen angels were bound in chains and buried beneath a desert known only as Desolation. This could be the place.

In the distance, deceptive stands of mesquite trees must have looked like oases. Ten trees a quarter mile apart can look like a cool grove from a distance. In the western desert, twenty miles looks like ten. And ten miles can kill. There was still no water; there wasn't even any shade.

Black ironwood stumps writhed from the ground. Dead for

five hundred years, they had already been two thousand years old when they died. It was a forest of eldritch bones.

The men had cactus spines in their faces, their hands. There wasn't enough fluid left in them to bleed. They'd climbed peaks, hoping to find a town, or a river, had seen more landscape, and tumbled down the far side to keep walking. One of them said, "Too many damned rocks." *Pinches piedras*, he said. Damned heat. Damned sun.

Now, as they came out of the hills, they faced the plain and the far wall of the Gila Mountains. Mauve and yellow cliffs. A volcanic cone called Raven's Butte that was dark, as if a rain cloud were hovering over it. It looked as if you could find relief on its perpetually shadowy flanks, but that too was an illusion. Abandoned army tanks, preserved forever in the dry heat, stood in their path, a ghostly arrangement that must have seemed like another bad dream. Their full-sun 110-degree nightmare.

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"The Devil's Highway" is a name that has set out to illuminate one notion: *bad medicine*.

The first white man known to die in the desert heat here did it on January 18, 1541.

Most assuredly, others had died before. As long as there have been people, there have been deaths in the western desert. When the Devil's Highway was a faint scratch of desert bighorn hoof marks, and the first hunters ran along it, someone died. But the brown and red men who ran the paths left no record outside of faded songs and rock paintings we still don't understand.

Desert spirits of a dark and mysterious nature have always traveled these trails. From the beginning, the highway has always lacked grace—those who worship desert gods know them to favor retribution over the tender dove of forgiveness. In Desolation, doves are at the bottom of the food chain. Tohono O'odham poet Ofelia Zepeda has pointed out that rosaries and

Hail Marys don't work out here. "You need a new kind of prayers," she says, "to negotiate with this land."

The first time the sky and earth came together, Elder Brother, I'toi, was born. He still resides in a windy cave overlooking the western desert, and he resents uninvited visitors. Mountains are called do'ags. In the side of one do'ag can be found the twin caves where the spirit of the evil witch, Ho'ok, hides. The coyote-spirit of the place is called Ban, and he works his wicked pranks in the big open spaces.

Everywhere, red shadows. Tiny men live underground, and they are known to the Yaqui Indians hereabouts as Surem. In the past, before the first white man died, Yuku, the devil, controlled all the corn until the crows stole it from him and let some of it slip so men could eat. Mexico's oldest hoodoo, La Llorona, the wailing ghost, has been heard rushing down nearby creek beds. And its newest hoodoo, the dreaded Chupacabras (the Goat Sucker), has been seen attacking animals, lurking in outhouses, and even jumping in bedroom windows to munch on sleeping children. An Apache witness said the Chupacabras was a whispering kangaroo. It said, "Come here." He swore it did.

The plants are noxious and spiked. Saguars, nopales, the fiendish chollas. Each long cholla spike has a small barb, and they hook into the skin, and they catch in elbow creases and hook forearm and biceps together. Even the green mesquite trees have long thorns set just at eye level.

Much of the wildlife is nocturnal, and it creeps through the nights, poisonous and alien: the sidewinder, the rattlesnake, the scorpion, the giant centipede, the black widow, the tarantula, the brown recluse, the coral snake, the Gila monster. The kissing bug bites you and its poison makes the entire body erupt in red welts. Fungus drifts on the valley dust, and it sinks into the lungs and throbs to life. The millennium has added a further danger: all wild bees in southern Arizona, naturalists report, are now Africanized. As if the desert felt it hadn't made its point, it added killer bees.

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Today, the ancient Hohokam have vanished, like the Anasazi, long gone in the north. Their etchings and ruins still dot the ground; unexplained radiating lines lead away from the center like ghost roads in the shape of a great star. Not all of these paths are ancient. Some of the lines have been made by the illegals, cutting across the waste to the far lights of Ajo, or Sells, or the Mohawk rest area on I-8. Others are old beyond dating, and no one knows where they lead. Footprints of long-dead cowboys are still there, wagon ruts and mule scuffs. And beneath these, the prints of the phantom Hohokam themselves.

In certain places, boulders form straight lines, arrayed along compass directions on the burning plains. Among these stones are old rock piles in the shapes of arrows. They were left by well-wishers in 1890, aiming at a *tinaja* (water hole) hidden among crags. Cairns that serve as mysterious signposts for messages long forgotten mix with ancient graves. Etchings made in the hardpan with feet or sticks form animals centuries old and only visible from the air. Some of these cairns have been put in place by Border Patrol signcutters (trackers), and they are often at the junction of two desert paths, but the cutters just smile when you ask what they mean. One more secret of Desolation.

When the white men came, they brought with them their mania for record keeping. They made their way across the land, subduing indigenous tribes, civilizing the frontier. Missionaries brought the gentle word of the Lamb. Cavalrymen bravely tamed the badlands, built military outposts, settlements, ranches, and towns. Cowboys rode like the wind. Gunslingers fell. The worst bandits you could imagine drank rotgut and shot sheriffs, yet lived on in popular mythology and became the subjects of popular songs and cheap fictions. Railroads followed, and the great cattle drives, and the dusty range wars, and the discovery of gold and silver. In the great north woods, lumberjacks collected

the big trees. The Alamo. The Civil War took out countless citizens in its desperate upheaval.

Every Tijuana schoolkid knows it: it's the history of Mexico.

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If the North American continent was broad ("high, wide, and lonesome"), then Mexico was tall. High, narrow, and lonesome. Europeans conquering North America hustled west, where the open land lay. And the Europeans settling Mexico hustled north. Where the open land was.

Immigration, the drive northward, is a white phenomenon.

White Europeans conceived of and launched El Norte mania, just as white Europeans inhabiting the United States today bemoan it.

They started to complain after the Civil War. The first illegal immigrants to be hunted down in Desolation by the earliest form of the Border Patrol were Chinese. In the 1880s, American railroad barons needed cheap skilled labor to help "tame our continent." Mexico's Chinese hordes could be hired for cheap, yet they could earn more in the United States than in Mexico, even at cut rates. Jobs opened, word went out, the illegals came north.

Sound familiar?

Americans panicked at the "yellowing" of America. A force known as the Mounted Chinese Exclusionary Police took to the dusty wasteland. They chased the "coolies" and deported them.

And today?

Sinful frontier towns with bad reputations. Untamed mountain ranges, bears, lions, and wolves. Indians. A dangerous border. Inhabitants speak with a cowpoke twang, listen to country music, dance the two-step, favor cowboy hats, big belt buckles, and pickup trucks. That ain't Texas, it's Sonora.

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January 18, 1541.

Sonoita (also known as Sonoyta) was perhaps not much more than sticks and mud, but it was a stopping point for a Spanish expedition in search of, what else, gold. Even in 1541, Sonoita was the unwilling host of killers and wanderers. The leader of this clanking Spaniard patrol was a firebrand known as Melchior Díaz. He didn't especially want to spend his holidays in the broiling dust of Sonoita, but he was deep into hostile territory. It was commonly believed that the natives of the Devil's Highway devoured human children. The Spaniards weren't planning on settling—spread the cross around, throw up a mission, and hit the road in search of better things.

Melchior Díaz was trying to reach the Sea of Cortez, lying between the Mexican mainland and Baja California. Perhaps he knew that ahead of him lay the most hellish stretch of land in the entire north. The dirt paths he rode his horse down on that day are now the paved and semipaved barrio lanes of modern Sonoita. Some of the hubcap-popping boulders in Sonoita's hillside alleys are the same rocks on which Melchior's horse's shoes struck sparks.

He died trying to kill a dog.

He probably didn't have anything against canines—his troop had dogs that they used to hunt down game and humans. But there were also the feral creatures that dashed in from the outskirts of the settlement to slaughter his sheep. Melchior Díaz kept his sheep in small brush corrals, attended by his Indian slaves. But the wild dogs had a way of sneaking off with lambs when nobody was looking.

And Melchior was cranky. He had spent his holidays far from home, among the savages, and even Tucson was only a small scattering of huts and lean-tos. He couldn't have been farther from Mexico City or Spain. Sonoita was the end of the world. A Christmas in this outpost did not inspire joy. Besides, conquistadores were notoriously short on joie de vivre.

Melchior rode well, and he rode well armed. He certainly car-

ried a sword and a fighting dagger. He probably carried a harquebus and a long metal-tipped lance, the M16 of the day.

Melchior was a strong man and a powerful fighter. In the narratives of the Coronado expedition, we see him plying his trade: "... the horsemen began to overtake [the Indians] and the lances cut them down mercilessly ... until not a man was to be seen."

This rout of natives serves as the preface to the story of death that begins with Melchior Díaz.

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We know that he was riding his horse down one of the settlement paths. We can project the smells swirling around him: horse, dirt, his own stink, chickens, smoke, dung. Not all that different from the smells of today.

He was approaching his sheep pen, perhaps where the *Así Es Mi Tierra* taco shop, or a Pemex station stands today. Melchior squinted ahead and—Damn it to hell!—those lazy slaves of his had allowed a dog to get in the pen!

Perro desgraciado!

No record states how Melchior entered the pen, but it doesn't seem likely he stopped to open a gate. Not Melchior. He jumped over the fence, and in jumping, somehow he bobbled his lance throw and missed the dog entirely. You can see the dog yipping and sidestepping and making tracks for the horizon, casting wounded looks over his shoulder. And here is where Melchior Díaz died.

The record states that Melchior, somehow, "passed over" the lance. Did he fall from the horse? No one knows, but the lance managed to penetrate his gut and rip him open.

The desert ground must have seemed terribly hard as he hit it. As Melchior died (it took twenty gruesome days) on his stinking cot, he burned and howled. Flies settled in his entrails. Maybe the very dog that killed him drew near to sniff the rich meaty scent. The fallen angels of Desolation came out of the Cabeza Prieta, folded their hands over him, and smiled.

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The land had been haunted before Melchior died, and it remained haunted afterward; 150 years after his death, Catholic apparitions plagued the tribes. Various peoples had alarming encounters with meddlesome white women who flew above their heads. In the lands of the O'Odham, a white woman bearing a cross came drifting down the Devil's Highway itself. The warriors who saw her immediately did the only practical thing they could: they filled her with arrows. They said she refused to die. Kept on flying. Her story was written down in 1699, but the scribe who wrote this history tells us it had happened so long ago that the tribe had already forgotten her.

Fifty years after this Blessed Virgin UFO, a female prophet came out of the desert. She was known as *La Mujer Azul*. The Blue Woman. They filled her full of arrows, too. This time, she died.

Jesuits rolled in. They made the People as unhappy as the mysterious spirit-women, and Pimas raided the town to bludgeon its missionary to death. Angry Yumas by the Colorado River dragged a Jesuit out into the light and beat him to death.

It was the nineteenth century, however, that really got the modern era of death rolling.

The Yumas got stirred up again and massacred the evil scalp-hunting Glanton gang by the banks of the river in the mid 1840s. Then, in 1848–49, the California gold rush began. Mexicans weren't immune to the siren call of treasure. By now, the Cabeza Prieta/Devil's Highway had been trod by white men and mestizos for 307 years. It was still little more than a rough dirt trail—it is still a rough dirt trail—but it was slyly posing as a handy southern route through Arizona. White Arizonans and Texans hove to and dragged their wagons. Thousands of travelers went into the desert, and piles of human bones revealed where many of them fell. Though the bones are gone, wagon ruts can still be found, and near these ruts, piles of stone still hide the remains of those who fell.

One writer who has focused on this desert, Craig Childs, tells of a pair of old bullet casings found out there. They were jammed together, and when pried apart, an aged curl of paper fell out. On the paper, someone had written, "Was it worth it?"

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The Sand Papagos saw the endless lines of scraggly Mexicans as a rolling supermarket. Their strategy was similar to their approach to the floating virgin: shoot arrows. Wagon train after wagon train was slaughtered. Besieged Mexicans begged their own army to protect them, but the Sand Papagos and their leader, a warrior named Quelele, the Carrion-Hawk, were ready for them, too.

Just to make sure the Mexicans got the point, Quelele let it be known that his favorite snack was dead Mexican. "I don't need the wagons!" he boasted. "Bring on the Mexican army! I am the Carrion-Hawk! I'm hungry for Mexican meat!"

Between Quelele and the harsh landscape, the numbers of dead soared beyond counting. Human skeletons were found lying beside the road, and eerie cattle and horses, reduced to blanched mummies, were reported to be standing out among the ironwood trees. Graves surrounded some waterholes, up to twenty-seven around one pothole alone.

A westerner named Francisco Salazar seems to have been the first to keep an eyewitness record of this phase of the killing fields. By 1850, he wrote, the Devil's Highway was "... a vast graveyard of unknown dead ... the scattered bones of human beings slowly turning to dust ... the dead were left where they were to be sepulchered by the fearful sand storms that sweep at times over the desolate waste."

In the following years, over four hundred people died of heat, thirst, and misadventure. It became known as the most terrible place in the world.

And it's beautiful. Edward Abbey, the celebrated iconoclast

and writer, loved the place. He chose to be buried there, illegally, among the illegal Mexicans he despised.

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A young Tucson man stops at a table in a Mexican restaurant and addresses the gathered eaters. He has overheard their conversation about the desert. He pulls up a chair and launches into his tale.

He is a warlock-in-training, studying with one of the many shamans plying their trade in the area. He smiles and confesses that a certain aspect of Tucson is bothering him. That empty dirt lot? Over on the corner of Fourth and Speedway? Like, a couple blocks from the Yokohama Rice Bowl?

The master has shown him that the lot has always been vacant, empty since the 1600s. Nobody has ever dared build upon it, and the houses around the lot are plagued by ghosts and poltergeists. But they're not really ghosts. Dude, they're demons. It's one of the seven open gates of hell. A magus can sit in his pickup and summon the Beast while eating a teriyaki bowl and Diet Coke.

Thus, this small narrative is also about Tucson, the civilized part of Desolation, a city with its own secrets and holes. A desert can be a scrape of land or a small gravel lot. You can imagine the spirit of the empty places. The places named for the devil himself.

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Route 86 begins its life in Tucson as "Ajo Way." Here, a source close to this story once saw the actual Cabeza Prieta.

Beyond the O'Odham village of Sells, near the Coyote (human-smuggler) pickup point of mile marker 27, there is a dirt bank beside Highway 86. A few concrete houses sit behind it, about one hundred yards from the road. On the top of the bank is a single mailbox, on a crooked white pole.

It wasn't even at night when the Cabeza Prieta showed itself. It wasn't dawn, or the gloaming of sunset. It was in the heart of a brutal desert afternoon. The sun was bright, and the temperatures were hovering at about 104. Not a cloud in sight.

Suddenly, the ground split. Just a little hole, more of a slit, really. Maybe an ant hill, gravel scattered around the edge. Dirt welling up out of the hole like water.

Out of the small hole rose a black human head. It glistened, either wet or made of coal, some black crystal. Its eyes were burning white. Its teeth were also white. Its face was narrow, and it sported a sharp beard on its chin. It rose until just the tops of its shoulders were visible. It cast a shadow. And it turned as it watched the traveler pass.

It was laughing at him.

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The men walked onto the end of a dirt road. They couldn't know it was called the Vidrios Drag. Now they had a choice. Cross the road and stagger along the front range of the mountains, or stay on the road and hope the Border Patrol would find them. The Border Patrol! Their nemesis. They'd walked into hell trying to escape the Border Patrol, and now they were praying to get caught.

In their state, a single idea was too complex, and they looked upon it with uncertainty. They shuffled around. It was ten o'clock in the morning, 104 degrees. Dust devils, dead creosote rattling like diamondbacks, the taunting icy chip of sunlight reflected off a high-flying plane. Weird sounds in the landscape: voices, coughs, laughter, engines. It was the desert haunting they'd been hearing all along. When they heard the engine coming, it sounded like locusts flying overhead, cicadas, wind. And the dust rising could have been smoke from small fires. The flashes of white out there, heading toward them, popping out from behind saguaros and paloverde trees—well, it could have been ghosts,

flags, a parade. It could have been anything. They didn't know if they should hide or stand their ground and face whatever was coming their way.

When the windshield flashed in the morning sun, they stood, they walked, ran, tripped, fell. Toward the truck, the white truck. The unlikely geometry of disaster once again worked them into its eternal ciphers.

Border Patrol agent Mike F., at the tail end of another dull drag, was driving his Explorer at a leisurely pace. No fresh sign anywhere on the ground. Boredom. He was about to pull a U and head back to 25E, the dirt road that cut down from Interstate 8 to the Devil's Highway and the Mexican border beyond, looked up, and beheld the men as they walked out of the light. Nothing special. You got lost walkers all the time, people begging for a drink. They often gave themselves up when they realized the western desert had gotten the better of them. Sometimes, you beat them down with your baton, and sometimes everybody just laughed and drank your water.

Only one of the walkers stepped forward. The rest hid under trees. They were watching Mike F. like deer in the shadows.

He took in the scene as he rolled toward them.

He stopped, put the truck in park, and opened his door. He put out a foot and gestured for them with one hand to stay put while he got the radio mike with the other and called in to Wellton Station. Cops tend to assess a situation at first glance—people are always up to something. In the desert, they were often involved in some form of dying. Most of them, if not in trouble, were sneaky. If they weren't illegals, or smugglers, or narco mules, they were trespassing on the military base in some Ed Abbey desert fantasy, or they were cactus thieves, swiping young saguaros for their Scottsdale gardens. Gringos caused more alarm out there than Mexicans. And the OTMs—Other Than Mexicans—were so hapless and weird that you'd just laugh. Like the time they found a large group of Arabs in matching slacks and neckties, like some demented terrorist Jehovah's Witness

neighborhood canvass. "Oh? Are we here illegally? Oh! This is, you say, the United States? Right here? No, we did not know that. Praise to God. We were taking a walk, *Allahu Akbar*."

Bad guys had cornered the market on trying to look casual and "innocent." Mexicans, when not giving up, when not running like maniacs, often got wide-eyed, like a two-year-old stealing cookies. I didn't do nothin'! I was just out here looking around! The more innocent they acted, the more nervously slouchy and devil-may-care or childlike in their sinlessness, the more hinky the whole scene was, and the cop would start fingering his sidearm.

These guys were clearly no threat—no need to unholster a weapon yet. The radio call went something like: "We've got five bodies on Vidrios Drag, over." His voice probably sounded bored.

"Getting bodies," in Border Patrol lingo, didn't necessarily mean collecting corpses. Bodies were living people. "Bodies" was one of the many names for them. Illegal aliens, dying of thirst more often than not, are called "wets" by agents. "Five wets" might have slipped out. "Wets" are also called "tonks," but the Border Patrol tries hard to keep that bon mot from civilians. It's a nasty habit in the ranks. Only a fellow border cop could appreciate the humor of calling people a name based on the stark sound of a flashlight breaking over a human head.

Agent F. did not say he had "tonks" on the road.

Arrests of illegals are often slightly wry, vaguely embarrassing events. The relentless border war is often seen as a highly competitive game that can even be friendly when it's not frightening and deadly. Agents often know their clients, having apprehended them several times already. Daytime arrests have a whole different tone than lone midnight busts, out there in an abandoned landscape where the nearest backup might be a hundred hard miles away. But night or day, the procedure tends to be the same. The cop gets out of the truck and adjusts his gun-belt and puts his hands on his hips and addresses the group in

Spanish: "Hola, amigos! Estan arrestados." The Border Patrol so terrifies some of them that they give up immediately. Things happen. Stories burn all along the borderlands of Border Patrol men taking prisoners out into the wasteland and having their way with them. Women handcuffed, then groped and molested. Coyotes shot in the head.

Texas Rangers allegedly handcuff homeboys and toss them into irrigation canals to drown, though the walkers can't tell the Border Patrol apart from the Rangers or any other mechanized hunt squad: they're all cowboys. Truncheons. Beatings. Shootings. Broken legs. Torn panties. Blood. Tear gas. Pepper spray. Kicked ribs. Rape. These are the words handed from border town to border town, a savage gospel of the crossing. And the dark image of the evil Border Patrol agent dogs every signcutter who goes into the desert in his truck. It's the tawdry legacy of the human hunt—ill will on all sides. Paranoia. Dread. Loathing. Mexican-American Border Patrol agents are feared even more by the illegals than the gringos, for the Mexicans can only ascribe to them a kind of rabid self-hatred. Still, when the walkers are dying, they pray to be found by the Boys in Green.

The Border Patrol is understandably touchy about this reputation. They think the Jack Nicholson film *The Border*, where all agents and officers are corrupt, is funny as hell. They recommend a good Charles Bronson film about the Border Patrol if you want to know what it's really like. Something a little more straight up, more cowboy—cowboy in a good way, in the traditional way.

The five men rushed toward the truck.

"They're dying," they gasped.

"Who's dying?"

"Men. Back there. Amigos."

Seventeen men, they said.

Agent F. gave them water. They gulped. They puked the water back out and didn't care. They drank more.

"Muertos! Muertos!"

Seventeen. Then thirty. One man thought there were seventy bodies fallen behind them.

When Agent F. called it in to Wellton, the station's supervisory officer said, "Oh, shit."

For a long time, the Border Patrol had worried that something bad was coming. Something to match or outstrip the terrible day in 1980 when a group of Salvadorans was abandoned in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, and thirteen of them died. If it was the Border Patrol's job to apprehend lawbreakers, it was equally their duty to save the lost and the dying.

The guys at Wellton knew the apocalypse had finally come.

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Southern Arizona is divided into two Border Patrol sectors, Tucson and Yuma. Fifteen hundred agents patrol Tucson sector; three hundred work Yuma. Tucson handles the eastern half of the state, starting at the small city of Ajo and covering Tucson, Nogales, Douglas, Patagonia, and so on. Yuma sector patrols the west, all the way to the Colorado River and beyond. They are responsible for Gila Bend, Dateland, Wellton, San Luis, and Yuma. Strangely enough, they also patrol into California's Imperial County. This has caused legal tribulations with the Mexican consulate in Calexico, California: illegals apprehended in eastern California should be tried in San Diego, but they are transported to Phoenix, where their cases are heard. Responsibility for these people can stretch from San Diego to Calexico to Tucson and finally to Phoenix. It only adds to the general chaos that rules the border, a chaos that the Tucson consul calls "the politics of stupidity."

Both Border Patrol sectors had been hammered by growing tidal waves of illegals. Urban crossings had been sealed off, and now smaller rural crossings were systematically clamping down. Operation Gatekeeper, the final solution to the border crossings, introduced by California in the late nineties, had ushered in a

new era of secure urban borders and trampled wilderness. San Diego, Calexico, Yuma, El Paso, Nogales, Douglas, they were all becoming harder to get through. This looked great for the politicians of the cities. Voila! No more Mexicans!

Bigger fences, floodlights, a Border Patrol truck every half-mile, sensors, infrared spy videos, night vision cameras, Immigration and Naturalization Service checkpoints on all major freeways in and out of town, more agents.

But now, smaller, rougher places were becoming hot spots. The drug-smuggling village of Naco, for example. The small chicken-scratch settlement of Sasabe. The Tohono O'Odham reservation's small villes.

And astounding numbers of humans were moving through their deserts. Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, a relatively compact portion of Tucson sector, was withering under two hundred thousand walkers passing through every year. Deaths were on the rise: in the half decade before Mike F. found the five walkers on Vidrios Drag, more than two thousand people had died along the Mexican border. Death by sunlight, hyperthermia, was the main culprit. But illegals drowned, froze, committed suicide, were murdered, were hit by trains and trucks, were bitten by rattlesnakes, had heart attacks.

The unofficial policy was to let them lie where they were found, resting in peace where they fell. Any fan of Joseph Wambaugh books or cop shows on TV can figure out the rest of the story. All cases, for all cops, require paperwork. The Border Patrol is no different. Each corpse generates a case file. Every unidentified corpse represents one case forever left open—you can never close the case if you can never find out who the dead walker was or where he or she came from. But uncollected—unreported—bones generate no files. Besides, how do the agents know if the bones are one hundred years old?

The Arizona Border Patrol's beat included this deadly western desert, a region enclosing Organ Pipe and the Cabeza Prieta wilderness, the Papago (Tohono O'Odham) reservation, the