From Solitaire to Solidarity

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The day after Edward Abbey died, in the spring of 1989, his friends and family wrapped his body in a sleeping bag, packed it in dry ice, and loaded it into the bed of a blue Chevy pickup. They drove west out of Tucson, then south toward Mexico, cruising along the blacktop, then crunching dirt and rock as they chased the late-afternoon sun deep into the heart of the Sonoran Desert. There, amid the flat, alluvial basins and the ragged, looming ranges of the Cabeza Prieta Wildlife Refuge, somewhere just north of the borderline, in the brittlebush and creosote and ocotillo and saguaro stands, they committed Abbey's body to the earth. They chiseled his epitaph into a slab of varnished basalt: "EDWARD PAUL ABBEY / 1927-1989 / 'NO COMMENT.'"

This was the late author's wish: that he should be buried in some desert wilderness, far from cities and civilization, where his remains might "help fertilize the growth of a cactus or cliff rose or sagebrush." But in the nearly 30 years since his death, strange changes have come to these

wild lands. Today, Abbey's grave is merely one among thousands, the surrounding desert a kind of vast and terrible cemetery—or rather, and more precisely, a modern-day killing field.

This is the Sonoran border zone, where immense, thorny scrublands stretch up into high sierras, whose peaks of pine and granite suspend like islands in the hot, wide sky. It is the home of the Tohono O'odham, Hia-Ced O'odham, Cocopah, Sobaipuri, Akimel O'odham (Pima), Yavapai, Kwatsáan, and Xalychidom Piipaash (Maricopa). It is parched in the dry seasons, diluvial in the summer monsoons, and sliced through at its midriff by the US/Mexico borderline—in some places a steel wall, in most places a barbed wire cattle fence. Here, there is atrocity, and the victims—in a tragically ironic if incidental coincidence of history—are the very class of people that Abbey both feared and reviled: "illegal aliens" (his preferred, "perfectly correct" term).

In the years since Abbey's death, the US government has retooled this harsh and spectacular terrain into a technology of war, building barricades through cities like El Paso, Tijuana, and Nogales and thus pushing unauthorized border-crossers out into the desert, where the US Border Patrol hunts them down. Since the early 1990s, over 7,000 human remains have been recovered from the US frontier with Mexico, mostly from the desert backcountry of Southern Arizona. Exact figures are impossible to ascertain, but probably closer to 10,000-15,000 people have died from the crossing—most commonly from exposure and dehydration—although as far as anyone knows, the number could be three or four times that.

Nearly all of the dead and disappeared are Mexican and Central American migrants and refugees, the distinction between these categories—migrant, refugee—being almost entirely a technical legal one, with little basis in the complexity of people's lived experiences of poverty, cartel violence, state repression, and a myriad of other structural and personal realities. Many are undocumented residents of the US trying to return home after being forcefully separated from their lives and families through deportation. Everyone, in some sense, is seeking asylum, and everyone must walk, for days or often weeks, in order to circumvent interior Border Patrol checkpoints, which are located anywhere between 25 and 75 miles north of the actual line.

While reports of recreational hikers who get lost and survive for days in the wilderness make national headlines, here, every day, people have similar but more harrowing experiences, and their stories go largely untold. On their journey, crossers are hunted by armed and often belligerent border agents who, without warning, descend, war-like, from helicopter or horse or ATV. In the desert, migrants go hungry. They run out of water. They walk until the skin separates from the bottoms of their feet. They are abused or abandoned. On the trail, they pass by the remains of those who tried, but failed, the selfsame crossing.

"[I]t might be wise for us as American citizens," Abbey wrote in his later years, "to consider calling a halt to the mass influx of even more millions of hungry, ignorant, unskilled, and culturally-morally-genetically impoverished people. [....] Especially when these uninvited millions bring with them an alien mode of life which–let us be honest about this–is not appealing to the majority of Americans. [....] Therefore–let us close our national borders to any further mass immigration [...]. The means are available, it's a simple technical-military problem."

Abbey spent time in the area where he is buried. He worked as a seasonal park ranger at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, a 500-square-mile section of beautiful, biodiverse Sonoran desert that abuts both the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge and the borderline, where a seemingly remote wilderness meets Mexico's Federal Highway 2 in an abrupt collision of cactus and rock with asphalt and steel. Even in 1987, before there was significant migration through this desert corridor, Abbey sent a letter to the superintendent of Organ Pipe, complaining about

“illegal border crossings and the cutting and removal of ironwood in the vicinity of Quitobaquito and Papago Well.” He added, “Are you people aware of these incursions? Seems like we’re going to need a stronger Border Patrol soon.”

I also spend time in this area. For seven years, I have worked seasonally with No More Deaths, a migrant solidarity project that provides sustained and direct humanitarian aid to people crossing the border in southern Arizona. We leave food and water on migrant trails; we offer first aid and respite to people in distress; we witness and document the crisis of death, disappearance, and violence in the remote desert borderlands. Over the past few years, we have driven every accessible road and hiked thousands of miles, on and off trails, in the area where Abbey is said to be buried. We have not, as far as I know, come across his grave. We have found bodies and bones, though—many of them.

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It’s late Winter. In southern Arizona this means cold nights and, when the sun breaks the horizon, warm, dry days. A group of us is gearing up for a cross-country foot patrol along the western slope of the Growler Mountains, an immense, north-south cordillera that emerges from the earth like the mangled, fossilized spine of some primeval leviathan, delimiting, in part, the eastern boundary of the Cabeza Prieta Wilderness. We load the trucks with crates of water, canned beans, snack food, and medical supplies, then drive west into the desert, gliding through sand washes and convulsing down stretches of hard-packed washboard. We park just a few miles north of the Papago Well area referenced by Abbey in his letter to the superintendent, then set off northwest along the foothills, cutting across the arroyos that meander down from the mountains and coalesce into rivers of sand that snake lengthwise along the valley floor.

“Papago” is the Spanish misnomer for the Tohono O’odham, whose 4,341-square-mile reservation lies just 15 miles to the east of where we begin our patrol. In part, we are looking for strategic locations to establish water and supply drops, but we know that success here is unlikely: Almost the entire Refuge is also a designated Wilderness Area, and driving is prohibited. This is ostensibly to maintain the wilderness quality of the land, but the Border Patrol routinely drives wherever they want with an impunity that has come to typify the agency; there are now over 10,000 miles of illegal roads within the boundaries of the so-called wilderness. (It bears mentioning that this impunity extends even to acts as heinous, yet not uncommon, as the murder of children, as in the case of 16-year-old José Antonio Elena Rodriguez, who in 2012 was shot in the back and head 10 times by a Border Patrol agent. José’s family organized to put public pressure on the courts, and the agent was eventually charged with second degree murder, but was soon acquitted, marking the only time that charges have been brought against a federal agent for committing a cross-border killing, despite the quite regular occurrence of such incidents).

This place is vast, remote, isolated. It can feel sequestered and unseen. But the gaze of the state is always (maybe) scanning across it, looking down upon it, peering out from within it. There are cameras in the cacti, drones in the sky, motion sensors buried in the ground: a Panopticon without limit or form, built into the living texture of the natural environment.

As we descend into a small drainage, then rise up through the thornbrush to crest another of the sloping hills that reach out like fat fingers to form the flanged skirt of the Growlers, we hear the familiar, unsettling buzz of machine: Border Patrol ATVs, a helicopter in the distance. Mistaken for border-crossers, we are surrounded. They see our white skin and hiking packs,

and without a word, peel out across the bajada, churning up biocrust and smashing through the chaparral like belligerent cyborgs patrolling some dystopian colonial outpost, hunting for aliens. Like men on the frontier.

Abbey was eerily prescient in his assessment that "…most of the border could be easily 'sealed;' a force of 20,000, or ten men per mile, properly armed and equipped, would have no difficulty—short of a military attack—in keeping out unwelcome intruders." In the early 90s, the number of Border Patrol agents nationwide totaled about 4,000. In 2009, that number had grown fivefold, to 20,119. Since then, it has hovered steadily at around 20,000, with about 85% of all agents stationed along the southwest border. It's difficult to imagine Abbey applauding as thousands of armed federal police occupy a beautiful desert wilderness, but perhaps his fear of the "*Latino* invasion," as he put it, surpassed his distaste for the "technological military industrial planetary superstate" that he frequently and fervently condemned. In a letter published in the New York Review of Books in 1981, Abbey put it bluntly: "[T]he tendency of mass immigration from Mexico is to degrade and cheapen American life downward to the Hispanic standard."

Continuing along the western slope of the mountains, we find four or five partial human skeletons at different points throughout the afternoon. White human skulls, bleached from the sun. Other bones scattered around. Pieces of clothing. Backpacks, blanched and brittle. We mark the location of what we find with plastic orange flagging, log the GPS coordinates, then continue on. When we get back to town, we will call the sheriff's office and report what we have found. We will follow up with the police to ensure that they collect the remains and transfer them to the Pima County Medical Examiner, who, with the help of the nonprofit Colibrí Center for Human Rights, will attempt to identify the deceased and notify their families.

The area we are in was once an active military training ground and bombing range. We pass by an enormous missile, maybe 10 feet long, laying in the dirt like a kind of swollen metal stump, rusty and sinister and surreal. Only a few miles farther north, a barbed-wire fence marks the southern edge of the still active portion of the Barry M. Goldwater Airforce Range (BMGR). Warning signs are posted intermittently, stenciled with the black silhouette of a grim reaper: boundary markers at the threshold to the land of death. It is not enough to funnel border-crossers into the desert. It is not enough to make them walk a hundred miles. They must now pass through an active military target range, where literal bombs fall haphazardly from the sky. This section of the BMGR is closed to the public and to humanitarian groups. In a few exceptional instances, the Air Force has granted restricted entry to civilian search and rescue teams responding to specific reports of missing migrants. In just one small section of the Range to which they were granted provisional access, the group Águilas del Desierto has discovered over a dozen individual sets of human remains. The BMGR is a black site, where the border security regime sends migrants to disappear. It is a mass grave, of unknown and ever-expanding magnitude, stewarded by the US Department of Defense.

We near the end of our long walk. My legs are loose and beginning to burn. I am hot and mildly delirious, sitting in the scattered shade of an ironwood tree. One of my companions is poking around the volcanic boulder-field where we wait for the rest of our group to catch up. "Hey, check this out," she yells, "There's petroglyphs. Also, I think I found Edward Abbey's grave." "What?!" I'm jolted out of my stupor. "Holy shit." We climb up the hillside. There are petroglyphs everywhere, spirals and circles and figures of burnt ocher inset against the black varnish that coats the rock. Among these old etchings, chipped into one of the blocks of pockmarked basalt, in careful, capital letters, a different kind of engraving: "EA."

It’s not his grave. It doesn’t have the right inscription, and it doesn’t look like the headstone in the picture—which I have seen and which I am confident is real—that somehow made its way onto the Internet. Nonetheless, I feel certain: this must be Abbey’s handiwork. Chances are, his grave is close by too. The rest of our group catches up, and we walk the last mile back to the trucks.

We watch the sun set. The desert is thick, warm, yellow. I think about what it means to make one’s mark—about what it means for the descendant of white settlers to write over, or next to, these deeper and more weathered histories. I think about how conquest happens in different ways—some harsh, violent, conspicuous, others more casual and routine. I think about how it feels to hike 20 miles through the desert, but with good shoes, in nice weather, with plenty of water, without fear, and without my future and the future of my family hinging on my success.

One of Abbey’s most quoted passages, from the “Introduction” to *Desert Solitaire,* goes like this: “[Y]ou can’t see anything from a car; you’ve got to get out of the goddamned contraption and walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you’ll begin to see something, maybe. Probably not.” I think about that passage, from a book that I once read with wide, admiring eyes. I think about how its meaning, now, for me, has changed. I think about the people I’ve met who have actually crawled, on hands and knees, through the desert, through the thornbush and cactus—people who have, truly, left their blood on the trail. These people— people of struggle, indigenous people, the people who Abbey despised and wanted to expel—these are the heroes who deserve our homage. And our solidarity.

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