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Borders, to me, have always been lines in the sand, something I wanted to cross. I applied for the Burns Fellowship because I wanted to report on the ultimate price people pay for crossing borders. I was looking for death.

The border between Mexico and the United States has been virtually sealed since the attacks of September 11, 2001. Metal fences have been erected. The U.S. Border Patrol, once part of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, has become a military-like agency of the Department of Homeland Security, and was, in a chilling symbolism of the climate change at the border, renamed ICE, Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The sealing of the border isolated many women in Mexico. It separated them from their husbands working as day laborers in the U.S. Previously, the day laborers had been shuttling back and forth between their families in Mexico and their jobs in the U.S. Now they are stuck. Many of them no longer return to Mexico. They fear they might not make it back into the U.S.

The women are left with a stark choice. Either they stay behind or they follow their husbands. It has led to an increase in the number of women crossing the border. The Arizona desert is one the few parts of the border where it is still relatively easy to cross. But it is also the most dangerous part. More migrants die in the Arizona desert than anywhere else along the border. And with the number of women trying to cross the number of women found dead in the desert rises.

I had previously accompanied a young woman on her journey from her village in the south of Mexico to New York. Now I wanted to make the reverse journey. I wanted to accompany a woman on the saddest of journeys, on her way home to be buried.

I wanted to show the price of migration. I wanted to show the long and complicated process that begins when a dead body is found in the desert. I wanted to show what it means for the families left behind. I was looking for death, but the story I wanted to tell was that of the life behind it.

I started my journey in San Antonio, where I picked up my car, an 18-year old black Mercedes 300E. It thought it fitting to embark on my journey in the car of a migrant. It is the car of my mother-in-law, a woman who left her country, the Dominican Republic, and went to New York so her daughter could have a better life.

San Antonio is hours away from the border, but it is a good place for a migration tutorial. I went to the center of town and touched the white-washed walls of the Alamo, the site of a historic battle over where Mexico ends and America begins that, in a way, never ended. I rode a bike around my mother-in-law's neighborhood, feeling like an alien in the land of the car.

Space is not an issue in Texas. I saw front lawns the size of football fields, so green, so impeccably manicured that they would put any German house owner to shame. And then I saw who mows these lawns. Mexican day laborers.

In the afternoon heat, when no one else walked the streets of San Antonio, I saw them toiling in the gardens of people who would like to see undocumented immigrants deported, except for the ones mowing their lawns. At one house, I saw them kneeling in front of a sign that said "God bless the U.S.A.," carefully cutting the grass around it. They looked like they were praying.

At night, I marveled at the creatures I saw standing in the dark. Deer and men with hoses, watering their lawns.

The next morning, I rose before dawn and went on my way to Phoenix, almost a thousand miles to the west. I passed towns with names like Welfare and Comfort and was tempted to take a detour and stop in Truth or Consequence. But I was told there wasn't much truth to be found there and decided to keep going. Signs repeatedly warned not to mess with Texas, and one advertised "Texas Ranches," inviting me to call 1-800-860-LAND and talk to an agent at White Realty. No brown-skinned need apply.

I followed an endless black ribbon of asphalt bisecting a land that used to be Mexico. Maybe that is why the American flags fluttering next to the highway were the size of tennis courts. It seemed like somebody wanted to remind me whose country this is. Some businesses were so kind as to point out a unique quality of theirs. They were "American-owned."

The highway I was following, the I-10, runs more or less parallel to the border. Driving for hours through a vast emptiness, an unending sameness of brush and brown sand, I was reminded of the epic task of guarding this border, the longest in the world between a poor and a rich nation. Sometimes a white-and-green Border Patrol S.U.V. materialized in the brush next to the road, seeming lost.

After a while, something else materialized in the brush, the black silhouettes of oil rigs, moving their heads up and down as if bowing. And then, on the other side of the road, high up on the hills, I saw the other side of Texas: the swirling propellers of wind generators. A procession of trucks carrying the giant windwheels passed by, and then I saw where they were coming from: Mexico. I liked the idea of Mexico propelling Texas into the future.

I reached El Paso after dark and decided to stay for the night. I went to my room on the eleventh floor of the Hotel Camino Real, once the headquarters of Pancho Villa and his revolutionary army. I opened the curtains and saw death.

Across the Rio Grande flickered the lights of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico's deadliest city. Juárez has a way of devouring people. Women vanish and reappear as bloated corpses in the desert, naked, raped and beaten to death. Reporters are executed in broad daylight, shot in the head on their way to work. Others who cross the paths of the drug cartels are found with their heads detached from their bodies.

And yet from up here Juárez looked tranquil, its lights glowing like candles floating in a black sea. On the face of a hill beyond the city, towering over it in the dark, was a Jesus figure. I looked at the city and decided to cross.

I walked down El Paso Street and found myself alone in a dark place. During the day it is the city's busiest street, bustling with shouting vendors and Mexicans coming across the border to buy products made with the cheap labor of Mexican hands. Now it was a ghost town.

I walked past Benny's Pawn Shop and stores with names like Bueno Amigo, Mundo Nuevo and Frontera Shoes. Another shoe store was named Casa Blanca, giving it a standing in the rest of the world similar to that of another white house.

At the bridge crossing the Rio Grande, the price of migration is 35 cents. I paid and kept walking. The river was almost dry, bringing Mexico and the United States closer together. On the Mexican side of its concrete embankments were murals with messages for the other side. "Border Patrol: *Asesinos!*" read one of them. Painted below it was a lifeless body caught in cross hairs.

In the middle of the bridge, at its highest point, were two plaques commemorating its opening on October 28, 1967. One was in English, the other in Spanish. Lyndon B. Johnson was here that day. I looked down at the river and saw a message for his current successor. "*Ser humano es ilegal,*" it read, asking if being human is illegal.

I walked into Mexico and nobody cared. A lonely migration officer was standing at the end of the bridge smoking a cigarette. An endless stream of people walked past him. He didn't look up. Maybe it was Mexico's way of showing America its openness. Or perhaps the officer didn't want to know who was crazy enough to come to Juárez.

I had been to Juárez before to report on the drug cartels and the way they strangle the city. In a strange way, I never felt uncomfortable in Juárez. I have a reporter's drive to immerse myself into strange worlds, and it helps, as a female colleague once told me, that I look harmless. Gangsters like the company of harmless men.

As I walked down Avenida Juárez, I remembered the night when a Mexican crime reporter had introduced me to the city's underbelly. He took me to a taco stand and made me order a *sobrecito*, a small envelope with cocaine for the price \$10. It was my Juárez moment. I made the vendor write me a receipt and put it on my expense report. In the strange beauty of German expense rules, I was reimbursed for buying cocaine. The receipt for two pens and a notebook was of course rejected.

Avenida Juárez begins where the bridge crossing the Rio Grande ends. The street is the artery of the city's nightlife, lined by bars and discotheques, fueled by drugs and desperation. Very young girls in very short skirts staggered around on very high heels. Walking past a woman selling dream catchers in the colors of the Star-Spangled Banner, I entered the Don Felix Bar and found everything that a sign at the entrance said was prohibited inside: minors, arms, drugs. My affection for all three is limited, and I kept walking toward the place I was looking for.

Terrible stories are said to have started and ended at the Kentucky Bar, but you couldn't tell from its classy appearance. Well-dressed people were sitting at a beautiful old wooden bar, being served by bartenders who moved with swift elegance. And here I was in the city of death, talking to a bartender from Chiapas who wanted to know why communism had failed in East Germany. I walked home a happy man that night and fell asleep in the comfort of a bed on the safe side of the border.

I drove to Tucson the next day, where I hoped to find the story I was looking for. And I did. I met with the two men who, in a rare and remarkable case of Mexican-American cooperation, are connected by death. When Mexican migrants die in the Arizona desert, Jeronimo Garcia's phone rings. Garcia's task at the Mexican consulate in Tucson is to identify the bodies found in the desert and to bring them home.

But migrants who illegally cross borders don't want to be identified. Most of them are found without any identification. That is when Garcia turns to Dr. Bruce Anderson, the Pima County medical examiner. The dead decompose fast in the desert, and often their bones are all that is left of them. Anderson examines them looking for clues. He can tell a lot by looking at bones: the age, the ethnicity, the medical history. But often a DNA analysis is the only way to identify a body, and that requires a family to come forward and provide a sample to match.

Garcia and Anderson meet regularly to look at the bones and rifle through the belongings of the dead, hoping to find a clue. They try hard to catch up with the number of bodies arriving at the morgue, but they are hopelessly behind. There are almost 200 unidentified dead bodies in Anderson's freezer.

I spent several days watching Garcia and Anderson at work. They were generous with their time and the access they granted me. They understood the needs of a reporter, and they made sure that I knew how death smells.

On the day I met with Garcia at the consulate, I got lucky. I ran into a couple that had driven in a battered pick-up truck from Chicago to Tucson because they were looking for their daughter Erika. Erika and her cousin Estela had left their village in the south of Mexico to follow their husbands to Chicago. They had not seen them in years and were raising their children on their own.

Joined by Estela's brother, they had crossed the border with a group led by a smuggler from their village. But on their way across the desert something went wrong. The women got weaker and weaker, and at some point, according to Estela's brother, they collapsed and died. The smuggler did what all smugglers do in the desert: He moved on and left the dead behind.

When Estela's brother arrived in Phoenix that night, he called the Mexican consulate's hotline and told the officer on call what had happened. The officer picked up the brother and alerted the Border Patrol's search-and-rescue unit. They went looking for Erika and Estela the same night, but the brother couldn't remember where exactly the women were left behind, and several attempts to locate the bodies failed.

There was something else about the story that made me want to tell it. Erika and Estela didn't just die on the same day. They were also born on the same day.

I had found my story, and Tucson was the place to report it. I had wanted to be in Tucson from the beginning, but The Arizona Daily Star was not interested in hosting a fellow, and I chose The Arizona Republic instead. And now I had to move on to Phoenix. I returned to Tucson as often as possible, but I was torn between reporting this story and being a good fellow at The Republic.

I received a warm welcome at The Republic by David Fritze, a senior editor. David set me up with a desk, a computer, a phone and a Republic email address. He was also kind enough to help me find an apartment.

David is in charge of what the paper calls its "first amendment team," a team of reporters focused on writing in-depth stories for page one. He understood that this was the best place for me in the newsroom and was eager to help me get stories into the paper.

My story about death on the border, however, was not what David wanted me to work on. It was too large in scope for the paper; it had to be reported in too many places and for too long a time. Instead, David wanted me to work on a story about another recent development. The Bush administration had installed more conservative immigration judges in Arizona, and the result was that more people ended up in detention.

The story was difficult to report because I needed to get numbers from the Justice Department and talk to the judges, and both weren't very cooperative. But I found a story inside the story that was interesting from

a German perspective: a German woman in detention. Renate Chanrai, a German married to a wealthy Indian, had been living in Arizona for several years, overstaying her visa. Then she was stopped at a Border Patrol checkpoint on a highway in California. Now she was waiting in detention to see a judge.

In a case of poetic injustice, it was no longer just Mexicans and people from other less-privileged countries who were thrown in detention for living in the U.S. illegally. Now it could also happen to a blonde German with money, and Renate Chanrai was the perfect example. I met with her lawyer and her outraged white friends one morning and then drove with the lawyer to the infamous Eloy Detention Center to interview Ms. Chanrai.

The Eloy Detention Center is, perhaps fittingly, situated in the desert, about two hours south of Phoenix. It became infamous for its harsh treatment of inmates and because it is privately run, by the Corrections Corporation of America. In the lobby, while waiting to be escorted to the interrogation room where I would interview Ms. Chanrai, I saw a plaque proclaiming the company's principles. One of them read: "Deliver value to our shareholders."

I found Ms. Chanrai in despair. Her hair uncombed and her eyes bitter, she had been waiting in detention for almost two weeks without seeing a judge. Her love for America was now soured by her contempt for the administration's immigration policy. She admitted she had been living in the country illegally and did not object to being deported. She had just one final wish. "I don't care where they send me," she said, "I just want to be able to fly business class." I wrote a story about her for *Der Spiegel* and filed it under the headline "The Illegal German."

While continuing to report my story about death on the border, I started working on a challenging assignment for *The Republic*. David wanted me to write about a group of undocumented immigrants that had been overlooked: college graduates. Highly skilled, but unable to find legal work, they disappear into a shadow economy. Instead of working in fields they studied, as lawyers, engineers or social workers, they end up in the same place as their uneducated parents: behind supermarket registers or as baby-sitters.

It was a challenging story because while talking to me openly about their situation, none of the graduates wanted to see their names or faces in print. It was a telling detail in itself, but *The Republic* was hesitant to run a story with protagonists without a name and a face. I filed it under the headline "Illegal Intelligence."

My closest and most trusted advisor in the newsroom, next to David, became *The Republic's* immigration reporter, Daniel Gonzalez. Besides being a kind and humble man, Daniel was generous with his sources and a source of inspiration. He was also not part of a phenomenon I witnessed in amazement: reporters who sit at their desks for days and write stories without leaving the office. Without Daniel and David's

support I would have felt very lonely in The Republic's newsroom, and I thank them for that.

Toward the end of my fellowship, when the financial world started to crumble, I made an excursion to New York. I went to an auction at Christie's and wrote for Der Spiegel about how the financial crisis was affecting the art market.

And then it was over. After chasing stories and death, after crossing borders and driving 2,886 miles, my fellowship came to an end. But I felt as if my journey had just begun.

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