The Devil’s Highway
A True Story
Luis Alberto Urrea
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In May 2001, 26 Mexican men—fathers and sons, brothers and strangers—attempted to cross the Mexican border into the desert of southern Arizona known as the Devil’s Highway. More than half of them died. Why? Because they wanted a better life offered by work and more money north of the border. Because work for $10 a day in Mexico might be $40 a day in the United States. Because the Border Patrol now guards easier crossings so well that, per the law of unintended consequences, illegal immigrants unwittingly risk death by passing through a desert so fierce that only a few might make it across. Because coyote gangs lure pollos into paying to be guided to the promised land by promising how easy it is—and if things get rough, the coyotes abandon the pollos in the desert after taking their money with one more false promise: They need the money to buy water and will return to save them. As Luis Alberto Urrea says:

if you know Spanish, you know that the word for “chicken” is galina. “Pollo” is usually reserved for something else. A pollo, as in arroz con pollo, has been cooked.

Cook is what the Devil’s Highway does, although coyotes say it’s a walk in the park taking only a couple of hours. Take a cold soda pop, they say, then catch a ride on the other side. Because for men who’ve done physical labor outside all their lives? What they don’t know is that the desert is designated wilderness, untracked, surrounded by rugged mountains, and they might march three days or more without supplies, shelter, or water. Coyotes have no map, no compass, and no ability to navigate by the stars, and often lose their way in the dark, sometimes walking in circles as one leg naturally strides longer than the other, such that they ignorantly head back to Mexico.

Urrea writes excruciatingly of death by heatstroke—first heat syncope and fever, then muscle cramps from the body dumping salts, followed by clumsiness, heat exhaustion from a spiking fever, vomiting, and fast, shallow breathing. “Eyelids scrape across eyeballs dry as pebbles.” Body fluids drop precipitously, the heart beats faster to suck up blood insufficient to feed all the organs, and the first die from cardiac arrest. If they live past that, then comes tunnel vision, echoes in the ears, fainting, skin burning from falling and lying on the scorching desert sand.

Sooner or later, you understand that you have to drink your own urine. You piss in your hands, or in whatever container you might have. You try not to dribble a single drop, and you lament all the priceless piss wasted on the desert floor. You hold your breath and forget about the taboos and you gulp your own hot mess. And you piss into your hands again until it’s gone. You’re alive! You’ve beat death with your own water.

This desperate tactic only delays a fever burning to 108 degrees,

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