


Three days in the desert

Poetic wrestling with borderland injustice

Kevin M. Ressler

Introduction

I just returned from a week in the Sonoran Desert on a Mennonite Central Committee Borderlands Learning tour, and my mind and spirit cannot stop wrestling with discomfort. As much as the national psyche claims to be a nation of superior morality and methods from the rest of the world, it does not compute when you visit our practices around incarceration and detention. Having previously visited prisons in the United States, I was not terribly shocked to find what we consider acceptable behavior around immigration detention. Having previously traveled to other



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nations and visiting their Free Trade Zones, I was not terribly shocked to find the end result of economic refuge being sought. What does shock the conscience is how silent our politics and our news coverage are surrounding the root causes of the immigration crises.

We can get in a tit for tat around which party is worse on immigration, but it is dishonest to pretend that either one is good at all. Our present story begins with bipartisan legislation when

Bill Clinton was president, but Republicans controlled the house and the senate. Democrats and Republicans have had plenty of opportunities where they controlled all three branches of the federal government and done nothing with immigration.

Correction: both political parties have spoken nearly continuously for the need for comprehensive immigration reform dating to the Reagan administration, and in our present governance speaking loudly counts as legislation. Meanwhile, every successive president chooses the policies that set Border Patrol policy, not the least of which is the principle of us-

ing the desert as a lethal deterrent when we know full well someone will try the desert's likely death when they are fleeing the guaranteed death of gang violence or globalized economic exploitation.

Donald Trump, without question (and I don't think he'd take umbrage here because he is proud of this), has accelerated and expanded enforcement while slowing down processing. The slowdown is not just

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for border crossings but everything including processes such as green card applications for long-time residents marrying American citizens. These are simply new theaters in the war against the most destitute in our global society, the migrant. Migrants require leaving their permanent homes—often alone or with only part of their family—to find work or safety from violence. To survive. To exist. Usually, flight is from unjust poli-

cies which go unacknowledged by our politicians and news media—often these policies harm not only other nations' citizens but our own national interests. (NAFTA/CAFTA haven't been good for workers in North Carolina any more than they have been for workers in Mexico; the winners are big corporations and the donation coffers of their political stooges in Washington.)


If this is starting to sound complicated or complex, that is because it is. If this is sounding generational, that is because it is. If it's beginning to sound unsolvable, it isn't. But we do need to focus on what is driving the sense of impossibility: the love of money by some, which is greater than their sense of humanity.

For the majority of history, we did not have border walls or fences. The most powerful part of my trip was when a First Nations indigenous speaker told us how her family has, for millennia, walked back and forth between the lands now called Mexico and the United States for ceremony and family visits. This "border" was created by the descendants of foreign invaders who came without permission to these lands from Europe—namely, Spain and France and England and Germany. We are, in fact, the illegal immigrants, and now we have the audacity to put up fences between native descendants.

Why fences? There are those who love money more than humanity. They make money bulldozing the earth to set up the ground for the per-

son making money building the fence material for the people making money installing the fence. That unwieldy barrier makes opportunity for someone to make money installing the cameras. That makes money for a corporation to house detainees and make profit on their bodies and their work. (Historically we called that slavery and now we call it a for-profit prison company.) That company makes millions on ankle monitors and re-entry contracts. And we, voters, elect politicians for the sole purpose of lowering our taxes, even if our morality is lowered with it.

And so, this is who we are. The question is whether this is who history will know us as. Will we be remembered as the nation who said, “give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”? Or



The question is whether this is who history will know us as. Will we be remembered as the nation who said, “give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”?

will we be remembered for the tens of thousands of dead migrants having been turned away at the ports of entry driven into the killing fields of the desert for political gain and a stock market boom?

I believe we each have a personal responsibility to wrestle with the consequences of our social conditions. We don't choose to be born into the privileges and opportunity that we do nothing to deserve any more than the victims of oppressive systems choose to be born into the destitute places of colonial devastation.

And maybe our wrestling is inconsequential, but maybe that's the point. For me, the following poetic reflections represent just a sampling of my own wrestling.

When I think about the spirituality of these things, I am often reminded of the story of Jacob on the road to reconciling with his brother Esau. He wrestles God through the night, unable to overpower or be overpowered, and he refuses to accept the unresolved stalemate without a blessing. It is here that God says to Jacob, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome” (Gen. 32:28 NIV). The great blessing comes when we encounter the intractable realities of the world and refuse to be overcome by a poor theology of acquiescence but instead demand more of God and each other. Poetry is my wrestling match; I hope it helps you wrestle.

Three days in the desert

*I have never known true hunger.
Yet at least once daily
I have been bound by habit
Stating with certainty, "I'm starving!"*

*I flippantly eat a whole bag of chips
because I can. Because they are there.
Because bags of consumerism are always there
littering the cabinetry with ugly unnecessary.*

...

*I have not known thirst, truly.
Not spot seeing, dizzy before falling, thirsty.
My day's epilogue at worst finishes,
"I probably should have drank more water today."*

...

*I see three flames, prayer lamps,
They dance as if braiding among
each other, both fencing and standing alone.
I stand among the fires, yet I run cold.*

*How dare I sit stilled in silence
while the whole world burns?
Who am I to suffer the contemplation
available only in privilege. Thinking, inactive*

*too many times I have heard
the mock, sincere sounds garbled
out of the mouths of religious brethren,
"Why? . . . this thing. Why?! . . . that thing. . ."*

*Too few times have I heard
The cry out from believers
"Where is God in this?"
Or from the faithless, "I, am God."*

. . .

*Whether fancied self as follower
or a drum beating troubadour leading
yourself, it's a reflection of the future:
we make the world the way we walk.*

*Who will follow? What will survive
of America? Who will survive as America?
We are in a time to define time to come.
Like Leopold to Congo, this is the darkness.*

*Our heart's darkness is found bright sunned
three days in the desert, running for freedom,
hope sold around the world to market shoes.
Long lines. Sold out. The reckoning is the dead.*

*If there is not death, you will be welcomed
With a cold cell and hate. Promises, broken.
Land of the free . . . unless pushed away from port
through three days in the desert, a killing field.*

An American poem

*I've seen Edgar in my nightmares,
and I've seen Whitman in my dreams.
I found Amiri Baraka (because they
don't teach him or Matriarch Nikki).*

*By their words, dreams, songs,
I've woken up walking in fields, gold,
and full of grain, and I've drowned
in two oceans while swimming home.*

*But nobody here knows what home is,
well, not anymore. Because somewhere
we came from somewhere else.
And sometime, we came from some
other person's century.*

*Persecuted, and persecuting and cycling
the violence we were born of.
Someday, I dream, we'll stop screwing
the blacks, we'll stop screwing the whites,
and we'll stop screwing the Asians,
stop screwing the Jews, the gentiles,
the Muslims, the other—whoever the other
is in order to stop screwing ourselves
because everyone is everyone else.*

*But this is America. Land of Tinseltown.
It's not as pretty as in the movies.
It's not as ugly as they claim across the seas.
This is America, accurately called experiment,
and it's far from perfect,
and I'm not yet sure the results are in.*

We are captives to the lottery of gestation

*Laying on my back on a loveseat
in my bedroom I stare.
I can see all the cracks and fissures
the plaster ceiling is a century old;
I am considerably older now.*

~

*Younger, then, at sixteen, I slept on boards, raised,
a platform my Nicaraguan hosts called bed.
Normally, this, and the other laid on by
my fifteen-year-old travel companion
were reserved for the Papa and Mamita
of this campesino house.*

*She, my friend, was granddaughter
of an indigenous American, political prisoner.
I, grandson to the first African Mennonite Bishop.
Our blood knew racism, oppression, then triumph
Our bodies knew the privilege of being descendants:
the children of revolutionaries who refused cages.
Here, now, growing into adults on learning tours.*

Looking to the galvanized roof, then, I saw poverty
because I was young, I listened more.
Some breathed heavy, labored sounds of labor.
I've never slept much, or well, and I feared:
nobody snored half as
loudly as I would have
sleeping on the floor, might I stir them?
And I the privilege of the bed, would I wake them?

Would I show my comparative comfort, insufficient?
Sixteen people, normally on the floor. Three generations.
The first (or fourth) on yellow foam pads on boards.
Now, four generations lay below me, all on dirt floor.
I feared sleep. Disrespect to the honor of the gift.
There are no cracks on a zinc, corrugated roof.

~

Most haves have never seen such a ceiling.
Mud floors don't have the even and measured lines
of my century old wood floorboards.
The castaway attic loveseat is more comfortable
than the elder's prominent, padded wood bed.
Older now, the cracks remind me so much is broken
These floorboards are still original, the built wood.
I wonder, though I know the answers
"Is this room for one bigger?
Theirs slept over a dozen.
They split the room, hanging black plastic
for the privacy of an American boy and girl.
Trash bags, a luxury, split so I had a quarter
and she had a quarter
and they all shared half.
Two sections for eighteen.
Two sections for one.

~

Then, I visited a factory. Textiles, jackets, shirts.
Today, I wonder if the shirt I wore
that day had been made there. Then,

*I was too young to think to check the tag.
The irony would not have been lost on me
you don't need age for that kind of wisdom
but you need age to think to verify.
I don't shop at that outlet anymore.
I still don't remember to check the tag
Vietnam? Bangladesh? Indonesia? Nicaragua?
We wear our sin on our skin,
the export of slavery and its sibling hegemony.
So close to us, that which warms us
should chill our heart. Suffering, for what,
so I can have different colors for every season?
How do I thank them for my warmth?
America first, under the guise of the religious vote?
I know the name of the man who fixes my furnace
but the name of the laborer who stitched
my socks and my underwear? Mystery to me.*

~

*These hundred-year-old plaster cracks staring at me
make me wonder, are they or the world more broken?
Does anyone even really care?*

*A decade later from then and I was now a delegate leader.
Irony not lost on me during the return visit.
Fate? Fortune? Divine schadenfreude?
Surely, just coincidence finds me hosted again
by the same family, again offered the same bed.
I am much, much older now. I still am unaware
when do I learn when I am being gracious, when offending?
Papa and Mamita are gone now,
Mama and Papa then are they now.
I have made it normal, three generations
on the floor. And I. And my companion.
Have I tainted his experience? Robbed future guilt?*

*None of them remembered me. I did them
but not their names. . .*

~

*Now, a decade again beyond the last trip,
two past that first endeavor.
This is a recounting of memories in three parts.
I've paper pictures from my first visit.
I've digital images of my second.
I pour over these now without memory as guide.
What bewildering greatness is my fortune
to lay here on a comfortable castaway loveseat
to write poetry, the luxury of thought not needing
to weed and plant and till and harvest a garden
to survive and feed my foreign guests
a meal cooked slowly because it cooked over open fire.*

*With strong memory, deeply in waded reflection
their lives are more significant it seems than mine.
Their consequences both more severe and unavoidable.
My third floor second guestroom and makeshift office
are larger than their whole living space and kitchen.
Surplus room. This modern manifest destiny.*

*They hope a rain won't wash out their floor again this year,
I hope the rain doesn't drench my vanity tomatoes.*

*I have a dog and cat for pets, luxury companions
who sit quietly when I feel like avoiding my family
but not suffering the indignity of being alone.
They have a dog, starving as it were from visual inspection
who protects their crops from animals and neighbors
but can do nothing against the tide of climate change
my life in excess does little to help but all to create.
Some keeper of the dominion I am.*

~

*Twenty years past my first trip. I wonder:
that young girl, my age the first time I met her
already a twice over mother the second time.
Is she already the Mamita on the wooden bed?
I will not return again this decade to come to know.
They would again, this decade, still toil in fields*

*a life with little in the way of choice.
They would again, this decade, not remember me
because we do not exist in the same world
where one looks at random pictures and reflect.*

*I do not equally exist in the casual snow globe
playpen of mind and memory that they do in mine.*

We are captives to the lottery of gestation.

On staring at a wall between nations

*I am not as struck as my expectation.
When the wall comes into touch
it feels one-part modern art installation,
one part hate. I feel all parts angry,
the largest portion that I am not angrier.
It is an "aesthetic wall" I think,
having memory of pictures of the prior.
18 year old Kevin would be ashamed,
I didn't even explore in my mind
how I could possibly tear this down. . .
. . . even Reagan could dream of that.*

*18-year-old Kevin should be ashamed
of many things: comfort, silence,
false propheteering for easy targets,
comfort, and the ease of compromise
or at least of self forgiveness.
Comfort.*

*People are dying in the desert,
young Kevin will say. "People
are dying in the fucking desert:
parched lips, cactus pricklers,
frozen to death or dehydrated
and you're still worried
people will get hung up on fucking
and give no two shits:
people are dying in the fucking desert*

*deal with the words,
God is offended by the giant scars
cut deeply across her
beautiful creation.*

*I am not as struck as my expectation.
When the wall comes into touch
it feels one part modern art installation,
one part hate. I feel all parts angry.*

*Out the windshield and through the wall
I see shadows of the thirsty migrant flicker.
Scattered, to die silent
one by one over hours or days or years
No one knowing; forensics fall short.*

*There is a Mexican saying:
"There is more time than life."
Life, like Time, can move
forward and back
I have seen migration, in my life, in yours,
in the history of life itself and the life of history,
forward and back. Life is migration.*

*Three times they built a wall to bridge the arroyo
Three times the flood tore the gates down.
Build a taller wall, they say, make it aesthetic,
they say, but nature will always push through.
Did you know? The first time? The second?
There is a constant pressure of the absent.*

*The things we don't know, the things
Which should break our hearts.
The things which break the heart of a mother
whose son left long ago, in hope. Silence.
They are met with silence. Pressure.
Pressure in the heart, an aching, a longing.
Love inventing but also knowing.*

He would have called by now. He would have called.

*Her love is an art form, distorted by what she saw
Him, walking forward, away, warmed by her embrace.
Her love is an art form, absent nothing
But the voice of her boy. Her dead boy.*

*“I will send for you mother.”
“It’s just for a job mother.”*

*Unknown Male. May 29, 2003.
The tombstone read.
Nobody will ever know
if he dried out in the desert with
the ants crawling in his mouth
like the dark stream of absence.*

*Or if somewhere an agent drinks
To forget the night he first said,
“It’s a job. It pays the bills.
It feeds my daughters,
It clothes my wife.
It pays for their college.
It bought the dog.
I don’t live lushly.
I do need to live.
It’s a good job.
I’m just enforcing the laws”*

*And what of you?
Are you different now, wisened by years?
Is your thinking more forward, blunt?
And your politics? Have they changed?
Softened for the love of your children?
Hardened by the fear of their safety?*

*When have been the interruptions?
The transitions? Has there been hope*

*that you will grow or are you bound,
destined to fall back?
Are the gates closed?
Can we breach the wall
to embrace once more?
Two forgotten loves
like a mother
Hugging a lost son
Across vast distances
Past deserts
Past arroyos
Beyond life
There is still time.*

My Mulatto Blues

*I am afraid to touch this tip
Down to the page
For if I slip
And write my rage
I may lose, my positions
Goodbye job, and
Goodbye wife, and
Goodbye child, and
Raising her life
Through all that may bruise.*

*But how will I tell my little love,
the world is not all I said before
when first experience unmoors her?*

*Once unfurled
The truth is a distant shore
Where comfortably the masses
Reside, numb
I do desire not to feel
The pains.
Dumb to speak the ire.
Praying the hope of a world
Doesn't rest on me,*

*Yet I realize just how grave
It is I don't wallow in how I'm depraved
But grab to my goodness
And break all the rules
Fumble around as I press in the dark
I am at least aware the inequality is stark
We can no longer afford
The comfort of fools*

*They shot a boy in Ferguson
Yet it took some time to catch the news
And when it did
It caught the virus of racial animus
And historical enmity
The battle lines were drawn long before
Any of us were born
The just are all accusers
To their differentiators
Defenders to the death of those of ancient texts
And passed on stories told them are their side
So the poor kill the poor and the slightly lesser poor
Shoot them with cans of mace and cans of tear gas,
Rubber bullets,
They start with live rounds and live rounds
Will eventually return once the ticker tellers
Have told the tale till it's taken as truth
The wealthy will track their stocks.
They will pat on the backs those who have protected
Their way.
This is an America where might is right and poor
Eats poor in hopes of wealth.
They choked a man in NYC
He wasn't charging tax quite appropriately
On the cigarettes he was selling
One by one on the streets
This is not a happy poem.
The roses are dead, the violence comes from the blues
I long for the day when I am seen same as you.
This poem will be seen as divisive*

*But it is not intended to be.
It is little more than an attempt to share the world
I have no choice not to see.
I remember hearing about four girls in Birmingham
I remember hearing about amadou diallo
I remember hearing about sean bell
I remember hearing about mike brown
I remember hearing about tamir rice
I remember hearing about sandra bland
I remember hearing about aiyana stanley-jones
I remember hearing about how they shot them down
I remember hearing they weren't seen as same.
I remember hearing about Timothy McVeigh
I remember hearing about Ted Kaczynski
I remember hearing about Dylan Roof
I remember hearing about James Alex Fields Jr
I remember hearing about how the law
Treated them like humans, humanely,
got them off the streets and put them on trial
while keeping them in protective custody.*

*The tip of this pen today is unlikely to make
Any new friend. The ink of this pen today
Is hoping to make your heart rend
The rage I have for these and other unjust things
Are not the result of black rage
But the serious undertaking of my white Mennonite ways
Applied seriously to my black bodies pains.
But, I am not two halves of two different people.
I am wholly me asking would you be wholly you?
Can you see that your brother and your sister too,
Your mother and your father are equally true?
The God that is in one is basking, beaming in each:
A song from a steeple.
We are awaited to join hands in laughs.
I begin my effort by singing to you,
This song in verse hoping for days anew.
Friend, stranger, enemy too.
This is my mulatto blues.*

*A misunderstanding as to how I see this sensible world
integrated and lived in bliss, constantly confronting
Irreconcilability in the news.
Banned by law and religion in fools.
We are not captive to the rules.
My life was illegal merely 50 years ago
Because my black mother didn't share with my white father
The same kinky hair.
Eventually, to injustice, people said no.
I look at you, my species siblings
Knowing beyond the narratives you have the nibblings
Of the sweeter taste beyond the fed fluff
Open ourselves and we will find we are less different
Than we are in kind.
It's as difficult as it's simple to tell the narratives enough.
I swear to you, I am not drunk
And my beliefs are not a metaphorical skunk.
I have heard worser slurs as a pacifist
That I am a snake oil bursar
Who places in peril the weak who are oppressed
And vulnerable. And somehow truly I am the masochist.
Every day I live under this American flag, I feel a great burden
A need to nag, to combat with optimism against every hater
By sharing truly this magnificence of overcoming both sides
Intransigence.
My legal being shows we can be greater.
As time progresses we do well to have some chaos
Which eventually we join to quell. Since history shows,
We'll need some pizazz to gain the attentive bullhorn
Of news and show the transformation of my mulatto blues
Into the future sound of my daughters' mulatto jazz.*

We have seen starvation

Leader: From Eden into the world we have come, Lord.

People: We are forgiving, for having experienced exile.

Leader: As we wander this world of such brokenness and pain,

People: We are grateful, having seen suffering not ours.

Leader: full deep with bigotry and hatred,

People: We are humbled for having seen troubles of others.

Leader: of crises and disasters natural and manmade.

People: We are patient for having seen starvation.

Leader: People on one half of the world chuck food.

People: People on one half of the world lack food.

Leader: Too often their meals are memories,

People: too often many dream just of scraps,

*Unison: Allow us a strength deeper
than we could sustain ourselves
knowing we have more to share
than we need to protect to keep.*

About the author

Kevin M. Ressler is married to Melissa Ressler, and they are working to raise Acacia Atieno and Iriana Awino with a passion to better the world beyond themselves. Kevin studied Justice, Peace, and Conflict Studies as well as Theater at Eastern Mennonite University and holds a Master of Divinity from Lancaster Theological Seminary. He is Executive Director of Meals on Wheels of Lancaster and serves on a variety of community boards.