

THE SOUTHERN MAGAZINE OF GOOD WRITING ★ PROUDLY PUBLISHED FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ARKANSAS

OXFORD

★★★ AMERICAN ★★★

DIANE ROBERTS DECLARES WAR
ON COLLEGE FOOTBALL

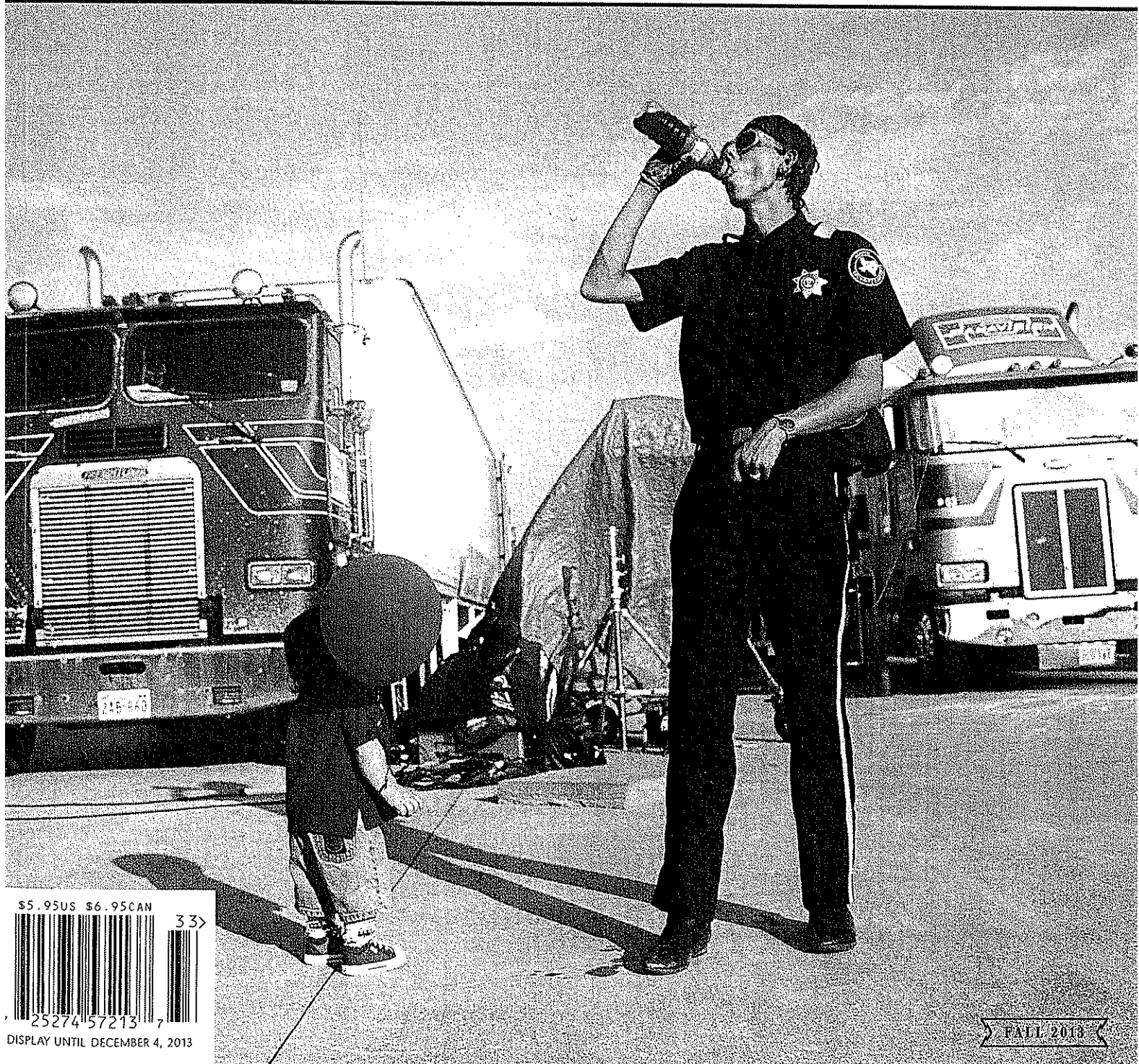
WILLIAM GIRALDI ON THE
LOCAL SOULS OF ALLAN GURGANUS

THE SECRET LIFE OF NUNS: ALEX MAR
REPORTS FROM HOUSTON

LESLIE JAMISON CHANNELS JAMES AGEE

FICTION BY GEORGE SINGLETON

SUSAN STRAIGHT, DAVID MEANS, WENDY BRENNER, CHRIS OFFUTT, BETH ANN FENNELLY,
TOM FRANKLIN, JOHN T. EDGE, AND HUNTING FOR HUMANS IN SOUTH TEXAS



\$5.95US \$6.95CAN

33>



DISPLAY UNTIL DECEMBER 4, 2013

FALL 2013

crowd unleashes a cheer that rivals the gunfire in terms of sheer volume.

The haze lifts and I see the targets have become shrapnel; there are more open flames on the range than I can count. Forklifts and four-wheelers haul away the wreckage. The demolition crew brings in fresh cars, a water heater filled with diesel, and the aqua fiberglass shell of an in-ground swimming pool. The sun is beginning to set and there are still two more sessions today, two more chances to experience fireballs from hell, two more opportunities for the people to erupt in a muscular howl, whooping into the smog-swathed clearing in the woods as though the demolition has resurrected something inside of them.

The urge to unload some lead into a hatchback or water heater is hard to deny. I am not a gun owner, but am reminded of the pleasure of shooting cans with a pellet gun. I wander down to the machine-gun rental booth. For \$150, I can rent a gun of my own loaded with fifty bullets, about one minute's worth of entertainment at Knob Creek. I keep walking. ☘

Code 500

BY STEPHANIE ELIZONDO GRIEST

The first thing Brooks County lead investigator Danny Davila wants to know is whether I have a weak stomach. We are sitting in his cramped office at the sheriff's department in Falfurrias, Texas, on a sweltering July afternoon in 2012. Before I can respond, he slides a three-ring binder my way. "The Dead Book," he calls it. Inside are dozens of laminated photographs of the remains of the thirty-four undocumented immigrants who have died in the county's scrub brush so far that year, presumably while side-stepping the nearby U.S. Customs and Border Patrol checkpoint.

"This is the American dream," Davila says, spreading his arms wide, as if to signal beyond the wood-paneled room, "and this is where it stops, right here." He thumps the binder with his forefinger.

I grasp the Dead Book with both hands and

open to a random page. A dark-skinned man in yellow briefs is curled in the fetal position atop a blanket.

"We find them naked sometimes, but it's not because they were abused or anything," Davila explains. "It's just their last-ditch effort to try to cool off. They don't know that makes it worse."

It almost looks as though the dead man was caught in a moment of contemplation; his muscles are relaxed and his gaze is soft. But then I look closer, and I see that ants are swarming his eyeballs. I turn the page quickly, scan some typewritten reports, then stop at the next batch of photographs. An engorged hand, roasted purple and protruding from the dirt, its fingers extending skyward. A face that is half skull, half meat, and a full set of teeth. A belly so swollen it has split like a chorizo on a grill. Each image traumatizes me further, yet I keep flipping the pages to prove that I can handle the gore. Twenty minutes ago, a rancher called in a Code 500; the thirty-fifth body of the year has been discovered. If my stomach is up to it, I can accompany Davila on the retrieval.

By year's end, there will be three Dead Books perched atop Davila's desk, along with a "Missing Persons" binder full of photos and e-mails sent by anxious families in Mexico and Central America. The year 2012 will break all records for Brooks County, with 129 bodies found somewhere along 942 square miles of ranches and roads. Not only is that body count a 200 percent increase from 2011 but it comes at a time when migration across the U.S. border is at a historic low—nearly half the rate of even four years ago. In 2012, the entire state of Arizona recovered just 28 more bodies than this tiny Texas county claimed.

So why has Brooks—a full hour-and-a-half drive from the Mexico border—become a killing field for immigrants? Davila thinks Arizona's notoriously stringent regulations could have something to do with it. Then there's the weather. Texas has suffered its worst-ever drought these past two years, and temperatures routinely hit triple digits. Coyotes tend to tell their clients that they'll only need to walk a couple of hours to avoid the checkpoint (as opposed to a couple of days), and that the trail cuts through a nice ranch. Unprepared for the harsh conditions of the South Texas desert, many immigrants succumb to heat exhaustion, and die when the other travelers continue on without them.

The rise of the Mexican drug cartels, which have largely taken over the smuggling business,

has led to even more deaths. Ten years ago, immigrants could hire local guides in Mexico to walk them across the border for \$1,000 apiece; today, they usually wind up with cartel minions who not only charge exorbitant rates but occasionally orchestrate kidnappings halfway through the journey so they can extort even more money from families back home. Davila tells horrifying stories about immigrant abuse. One woman he recently apprehended managed to escape after the coyotes "had their way" with all the women in her group.

The narco factor is the hardest to quantify, because almost none of the bodies discovered in Brooks County undergo autopsies, which cost at least \$1,500 each. It simply costs too much to determine whether a person died of exposure or as a result of violence. The county's entire operating budget is just \$585,000 a year, barely enough to pay its employees. Davila, after eighteen years on the job, makes only \$27,000. Moreover, wild pigs and vultures usually find the bodies long before the authorities do, ravaging potential evidence. In the reports filed neatly on Davila's desk, the cause of death is invariably listed as "hiking through ranch illegally," even when the more accurate culprits might be climate change, sadistic coyotes, or U.S. immigration policy. No matter the cause of death, one thing is certain. "Hiking" is deeply murderous in South Texas.

"I don't know if this body is a stinker or a bloater or what," Davila says as we climb into a black Ford F-150. He never knows what awaits him on these runs: scattered bones, a freshly vacated corpse, or something in between. Davila's supplies are in the cab of the truck. There's a camera tripod, a camouflage jacket, a flashlight, gloves, a body bag, and a gun, all coated in dust.

We zip down County Road 201, past the Brooks County Detention Center and a string of bail bond agencies housed in trailers, toward town. Historically, Falfurrias has been famed for two things: a nineteenth-century faith healer named Don Pedrito Jaramillo and a dairy that sold its sweet cream butter across the state in yellow-and-blue boxes. While Jaramillo's shrine still draws dozens of pilgrims a day, the dairy has since become a Whataburger, and the downtown strip largely consists of dollar stores, loan offices, and pawn shops. Of Brooks County's 7,200 residents, nearly forty percent live below the poverty line. It's not hard to fathom why smuggling is so lucrative here.

"You find someone lost in the woods and you

take them home, call their loved ones, and say, 'Hey, for five hundred bucks, I'll take them to Houston.' Then you wait for the money to be wired over, and you put them on a bus," Davila says. "I'd say forty percent of the population here is involved like that."

Indeed, I'll turn on the news the next day to learn that the wife of the justice of the peace in nearby Kenedy County has been busted for transporting ten undocumented immigrants in her Hummer. She charged \$500 a head.

As someone born and raised in Falfurrias, Davila finds it all disheartening. "That's the hardest part of this job, policing your own, the people you grew up with," he says, shaking his head and stroking his moustache. He's a handsome man, late thirties with thick black hair and dark olive skin. Though he routinely sees unspeakable things, he seems inherently upbeat, always joking and grinning. His name is stitched across his shirt and his rubber bracelet reads PEACE. Leaning over the steering wheel, he flicks on the radio. *This beat has got/Right out of hand*. It's Bananarama, the '80s British pop band. The song is "Cruel Summer."

A ranch hand wearing a rosary as a necklace ushers us in at the gate of a sprawling ranch, one Davila asks me not to name. We're among the last to arrive—the Border Patrol, the justice of the peace, and the sheriff are already here, and the undertaker is on the way. The body is located in the far recesses of the property, so we must travel in a caravan so no one gets lost. As we amble down the caliche road, Davila points out where gaping holes have been cut into the barbed-wire fence. Some ranchers have left out ladders in the hopes their fences might be spared, but the hikers don't seem to use them. It's the same with the water. Afraid, perhaps, of being poisoned by the big tanks painted blue especially for them, the immigrants opt to break the valves off windmills and drink that water instead. Although every rancher I've met out here expresses compassion for the immigrants, they feel a grudge against them, too.

At 3.3 miles, we switch to four-wheel drive, take a right, and begin off-roading through the brush. My heart is beating in my throat, and Davila doesn't help when he notes that this seemingly deserted ranch is actually teeming with smugglers. "There ain't *someone* looking at us," he says. "There's a whole *lotta* people looking at us."

He is constantly reminded that the smugglers monitor his actions. Not long before our

meeting, a stranger approached him at the store and said, "I noticed your antenna is bent, what happened?"

Davila laughed it off—"I hit a butterfly," he told the man—but the point was clear. People know what kind of car he drives, and where and when, which is especially disconcerting given that he has a young daughter. I ask how he deals with the stress, and he quips, "I take a lot of blood pressure pills."

In time, we see a navy hoodie dangling from a fence. The truck ahead of us parks and so do we. The brush has grown too thick for driving. It's time for us to hike.

I smell the body before I see it. The scent wraps around my face like a hot towel, burning my eyes and stinging my throat. It is violent and rancid and frightening. I start breathing through my mouth instead of my nose, but that transfers the sensation to my tongue. Now I am eating death instead of smelling it.

Trailing behind Davila, I enter the woods. The brush is so dense, I must clear it with my arms before each step, half swimming across the loamy soil. Brambles crack beneath my boots. It is 95 degrees.

Maybe forty feet away, I can see a black pair of jeans. An occupied pair of jeans, stretched out in the dirt. One foot remains inside a sneaker, but before I can spot the other, I see the arm. What's left of the arm. Not long ago, that arm must have hugged and danced, carried firewood and groceries and children, but now it has been eaten to the bone, with just a few pulpy morsels remaining. The hand, meanwhile, has been ravaged not by animals but by sun, baked so black it almost looks blue. My eyes drift toward the mid-section of the body. At first, I think it is wearing a child-sized t-shirt, but then I see the belly has bloated to colossal proportions, so engorged it has exploded along the jean line. Slick black beetles crawl in and out of its crater.

It's the face, though, that unravels me. From the nose down, its remaining skin is black and leathered, but the top half is strangely untouched, the color of a bruised peach. There are deep holes instead of eyes, and the mouth is open as if silently wailing. The hair is streaming all the way down to what used to be elbows, thick and black and damp. *It's a woman*, I think, and with that realization comes the overpowering urge to scream, to continue the sound her own mouth was making before "hiking through ranch illegally" forever quieted her voice, to continue the collective wail they all

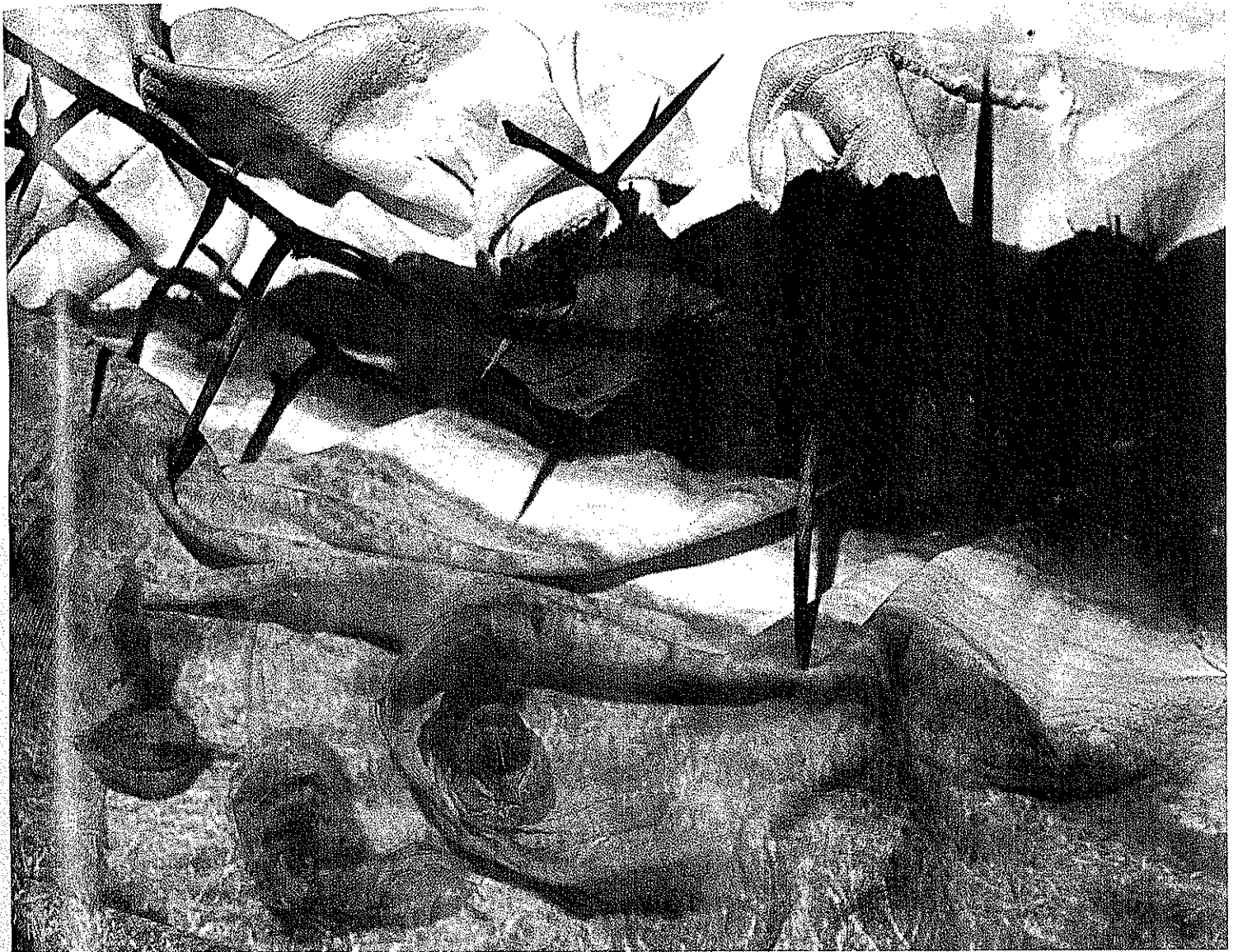
must have been making before winding up inside the three-ring binders of Brooks County Texas. I bite my lips until they bleed.

We gather around the woman—Davila, the sheriff, the border patrol, the justice of the peace, the ranch hand, and me—yet we stand a good fifteen to twenty feet away. We lean forward, as if over an imaginary railing, but no one steps any closer. It could be that we are respecting the privacy of this tragedy, or taking care not to trample any evidence. I've been told that these bodies harbor all manner of wildlife, including snakes and spiders. Perhaps no one wants to get bit. I've also been told that people's spirits hover long beyond death—the spirits wait for someone to find them, then affix to the shoulder of the living. Perhaps no one wants to get cursed. Or maybe we're just sparing ourselves further revulsion. Like everyone else, I stand close-but-far, despite a pressing impulse to run up and hold what's left of the woman's hand.

The justice of the peace asks for the time. We all scramble for our watches and cellphones, grateful for the distraction. After much discussion we decide it is 12:35 on July 3, 2012, which the justice of the peace jots in her notebook. Although this woman has clearly been gone for days—three, by Davila's estimation—this will be her official time of death. And because there is no obvious sign of foul play, no hatchet sticking out of her skull, for example, her death will be attributed to "hiking through ranch illegally."

Just then the undertaker arrives on the scene. He is an older man, slight of frame, and he carries a white bed sheet and a large cardboard box. Breaking through our imaginary railing, he walks right up to the woman's feet, sets down his parcels, and slides on a pair of blue rubber gloves. He briskly searches her pockets, inches from the beetle pit. First he finds some dollar bills: a twenty, a five, three ones. He piles these atop the woman's thigh. Next he pulls out an LG cellphone and wipes it clean. Running his fingers along her bra line, he checks to see if anything is tucked inside, an ID maybe, or a list of phone numbers. There is nothing.

Now comes the task of slipping the woman into the bag. He unfurls the sheet and lays it out next to her, though ultimately it must go beneath her. Carefully, he rolls the woman onto her side—but that makes her scalp fall off, hair and all, with a strangely soupy sound. She has become liquid. All of her is leaking



and dripping, colored fluids as well as beetles. The undertaker catches her scalp and swiftly slides it back into place, as though assisting a lady with an errant wig. While the rest of us simply stand and stare, Davila bounds over to help. They push the sheet under her, then roll her back on top.

"She's small," Davila announces. "Probably Guatemalan. Or Honduran."

The two men swaddle her in the sheet, half bones, half stew, and then stuff her into a black body bag with gold zippers, taken from the cardboard box. Davila, the sheriff, and the Border Patrol agent fan out thirty feet and scan the brush for approximately half a minute before heading back to their respective trucks. There is no evidence in sight. We leave behind only an empty water bottle and a host of beetles. No words are spoken. No rites are given.

Over by the Ford, Davila wipes his shoes on a patch of huisache. "Gotta make sure there's no bodily fluid on me, 'cause it will stink," he explains.

We notice the undertaker struggling with a gurney, and Davila hurries over. Together they prop it open, lay the body bag on top, strap it down, lift it up, and roll it into the back of the van. Davila introduces me to the man from the funeral home, whose last name is Angel, pronounced *An-bell* in the Tejano way. I want to say "how fitting" and applaud his professional graces, but before I can speak Davila tells him I am a writer.

Angel shakes his head. "A lot of people write stories," he says softly, "and nothing ever gets done."

I hear this a lot, and though it never fails to shatter me, I usually try to brush it off with a self-deprecating remark and a smile. But there's

something about being a Mexican American in this landscape—a product of "illegal hiking" myself—that emboldens me to hope that maybe, just maybe, something will change this time in Washington. To hope that by writing about this woman, I will memorialize her, this woman who went hiking through a ranch and got annihilated, this one member of the 129 who will die in the brush in Brooks County in a single year. Even if we never learn this woman's name—or whether she's Guatemalan or Honduran, or for all we know Chinese, I will think of her feet and her face when I brush my teeth and try to fall asleep. Does this count as something getting done?

I wish to say this and a great deal more, but there isn't time before Angel retreats to his driver's seat, where he removes a pair of badly soiled gloves. He already knows he'll be back tomorrow. ❧