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Book Author(s): Jason De León

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PART ONE

This Hard Land



Looking west toward the Baboquivari Mountains. Photo by Michael Wells.

Prevention Through Deterrence

NOTES FROM A CRIME SCENE

Drive out in the late afternoon to one of the many hills on the outskirts of the tiny Arizona town of Arivaca and look west. You will see the golden sun creep behind the Baboquivari Mountains. The vanishing orb makes it look as if the distant peaks and valleys have been cut out of thick black construction paper. It's the stenciled silhouette you see in old western films. For an hour or so, the backlit barren landscape glows as though it's slowly being covered in liquid amber. The beauty of this Sonoran Desert sunset is overwhelming. It can convince you that there is goodness in nature. It will make you briefly forget how cruel and unforgiving this terrain can be for those caught in it during the height of summer. Right now I'm dreaming about that sunset; visualizing my hand plunging into a watery ice chest full of cold beers. I can feel the touch of the evening breeze on my skin. These are the tricks you play in your head during the dog days of July in the desert.

The Norwegian explorer Carl Lumholtz once wrote that the summer heat in the Sonoran Desert felt like "walking between great fires."¹ That's putting it nicely. Right now it feels more like walking directly through flames. Despite the protection of my wide-brimmed cowboy hat, the sides of my face are sunburned after only a few minutes of exposure. Tiny water-filled blisters are starting to form on my temples, cheeks, and other places that get exposed to the sun when I lift my head or stare up at the empty blue sky. I try not to look up unless I have to duck under a mesquite tree or the trail makes a

hard break left or right. Better to keep your gaze downward to watch for sunbathing rattlesnakes and ankle-twisting cobbles.

Sweat beads up and rolls off my chin, leaving behind a trail of droplets on the ground as I walk. It takes only a few seconds for these splashes to evaporate. My clothes, on the other hand, are soaking wet. I find myself periodically shivering and getting dizzy; my body is working hard to make sense of this inferno. The overpriced backpack I am wearing has started to heat up along with the water bottles it contains. This means that from here on out, every time I try to quench my thirst, it's like drinking soup. It is easily over a 100 degrees and it is only 10 A.M. My sunset and cold beer fantasies are starting to lose their efficacy. Mike Wells and I are climbing through the Tumacácori Mountains with my longtime friend Bob Kee,² a member of the southern Arizona humanitarian group the Tucson Samaritans. Bob has been haunting these trails for years, leaving food and water for unseen migrants and occasionally giving first aid to abandoned souls he comes across.

It's a rough path full of sharp-angled rocks and angry mesquites whose branches all seem to be aiming for your eyes. We are moving at a fast clip, which is typical for any outing led by Bob. He is almost thirty years our senior, but is running us ragged as we struggle to keep up. Mike and I are being led by a wilderness Zen master who never seems to sweat, complain, or slow down. Every turn he makes seems to lead to another steep climb. I am convinced he seeks out the most arduous routes just to make sure that those he takes into the desert get a sense of how punishing this environment can be for migrants and anyone else who dares to hike this terrain in the middle of a summer day. "We're almost there. I promise," Bob says. I force a smile because in the past when he has told me this, it was a white lie to make me feel better. "Almost there" is one of Bob's euphemisms for "four more miles to go." On this day, however, the tone in his voice is different. He is not his normal jovial self. He hasn't been joking around, which usually includes offering to carry me on his back. It is clear that he is on a mission. We round a bend and stop. Bob calmly says: "This is the spot where I found the person. The sheriff's department came out and took away what we could find, but it was getting dark and we didn't have a lot of time to go over the entire area. It was mostly arm and leg bones and some pieces of clothing. I want to see if we can find the head. That would make it easier to identify the body. I'm sure there are still bones out here."

Just a few weeks earlier Bob had encountered the fragmented and skeletonized remains of a border crosser in this area. It was the second person he

had found in under a month. He called the police, who sent two detectives out to remove what bones they could find. Bob says they spent five minutes poking around before they called it quits. It was too damn hot and the cops were unprepared and unmotivated to do a large-scale survey. Besides, searching for the bones of dead “illegals” has never been a top priority for any law enforcement agency out here. The three of us have returned and are now looking for the rest of what was once a living, breathing person.

Bob is right. There are bones that the detectives overlooked, but we have to cover a lot of ground before we find any of them. There are pieces strewn everywhere. We walk downslope and see part of an articulated arm wedged between two rocks. Aside from sinew still holding the bones together, it has been picked clean of skin and muscle by an unknown creature. Further up the trail I notice several white flecks that stand out against the red mountain soil. It looks as if someone dropped a box of blackboard chalk on the ground. I get closer and realize they are splinters of human bone, mostly sun-bleached rib fragments that have been cracked and gnawed by some long-gone animal. Just off the trail I spot a complete tooth lying on top of a rock. This dental find gives us hope that the skull is nearby.

We start a desperate search for this person’s head. Rocks are overturned. Subterranean nests are probed. Bleeding hands blindly grope under thick brush in hopes of finding bones that may have been squirreled away by scavengers or deposited by monsoon flood waters. Everyone is moving with great urgency despite the debilitating heat. After forty-five minutes of intensive survey, we give up. There is no skull. There are no other teeth. We do, however, come across a pair of worn-out hiking boots in close proximity to some of the bones. Where the hell is the skull? I start imagining what has happened to it. A montage of laughing vultures rips this person’s eyeballs out of the sockets. I hallucinate two coyotes batting the head around like a soccer ball so that they can access brain matter through the foramen magnum. It’s a moment when you despise the capacity of the human imagination. People whose loved ones have disappeared in this desert will tell you that it’s the not knowing what happened to them coupled with the flashes of grotesque possibility that drive you insane.

Mike starts snapping photographs while Bob collects bones. The gnarled arm fragment goes into a black trash bag. The ribs and tooth fall into a Ziploc. Bob scribbles down the GPS coordinates and will later deliver the remains to the sheriff’s office, where he will be scolded for “disturbing a crime scene.” The irony of the statement is that the police were already out here once and Bob is



Human tooth, Tumacácori Mountains, 2011. Photo by Michael Wells.

simply collecting what they overlooked during their hasty survey. The fact of the matter is that although this is a crime scene, few people actually care or want to know what has happened here. For many Americans, this person—whose remains are so ravaged that his or her sex is unknown—is (was) an “illegal,” a noncitizen who broke US law and faced the consequences. Many of these same people tell themselves that if they can keep calling them “illegals,” they can avoid speaking their names or imagining their faces. The United States might be a nation founded by immigrants, but that was a long time ago. Countless citizens today suffer historical amnesia and draw stark divisions between the “noble” European immigrants of the past and Latino border crossers of today. How quickly they forget about the violent welcome receptions that America threw for the Irish, Chinese, and many other newly arrived immigrant groups. The benefit of the chronological distance from the pain and suffering of past migrations is that many Americans today have no problem putting nationality before humanity. A cursory glance at the online comment section of a recent article titled “Border Crossing Deaths More Common as Illegal Immigration Declines”³ provides insight into some of the more extreme anti-immigrant perspectives on migrant death:

I'm not condoning deaths or anything, and I do think it's cruel to let a human being die in pain, but in a way isn't it better? I mean after all some of these people are risking their lives because there are nothing better [*sic*] back home, and if they die on the way, at least they end their sufferings [*sic*].⁴

Since it is a common practice to print indications on everything in the US, and since just printed indications will not . . . [deter] people from entering the US illegally [*sic*], why not . . . take some of those dried out corpses, hang them at the places where they [migrants] are known to cross with a legend, "This may be you in a couple of days."⁵

When you see such comments, which accompany practically every article about migrant death on the Internet, you think you're mistakenly reading the American Voices column from the satirical newspaper *The Onion*. It should be easy to dismiss responses like these as extreme forms of Internet hate speech, but this disregard for the lives of undocumented people and the idea that dead bodies should act as a form of deterrence to future migrants are fundamental components of the US federal government's current border security strategy.

But that fact doesn't really matter as we survey the ground for more human remains. The desert has already started to erase this person, along with whatever violence and horror she or he experienced. This event will soon be forgotten before it was ever known.

BONE DUST: RENDERING BARE LIFE

Many border researchers turn to Giorgio Agamben's influential work on sovereignty, law, and individual rights to understand the role that the physical space between adjoining nations plays in the construction of citizens, noncitizens, and state power.⁶ Agamben's *state of exception*—the process whereby sovereign authorities declare emergencies in order to suspend the legal protections afforded to individuals while simultaneously unleashing the power of the state upon them—is a particularly salient concept for those working on the margins of nation-states. It is here that the tensions of sovereignty and national security are both geolocated and visibly acted out on a daily basis.⁷ Like Agamben's characterization of the concentration camp, the spatial arrangement of borders often allows a space to exist outside the bounds of normal state or moral law. Border zones become *spaces of exception*—physical and political locations where an individual's rights and protections under law can be stripped away upon entrance. Having your body consumed by wild animals is

but one of many “exceptional” things that happen in the Sonoran Desert as a result of federal immigration policies.⁸

Roxanne Doty has pointed out that the US-Mexico border forms an exemplary space of exception where those seeking to enter the country without permission are often reduced to *bare life*—individuals whose deaths are of little consequence—by border policies that do not recognize the rights of unauthorized migrants.⁹ At the same time, these policies expose noncitizens to a state-crafted geopolitical terrain designed to deter their movement through suffering and death.¹⁰ The perception that the lives of border crossers are insignificant is reflected in both their treatment by federal immigration enforcement agencies and in the pervasive anti-immigrant discourse, including the online comments cited above. Contributing to this dehumanization is the fact that the Sonoran Desert is remote, sparsely populated, and largely out of the American public’s view. This space can be policed in ways that would be deemed violent, cruel, or irrational in most other contexts. Just imagine how people would react if the corpses of undocumented Latinos were left to rot on the ninth hole of the local golf course or if their sun-bleached skulls were piled up in the parking lot of the neighborhood McDonald’s.

The isolation of the desert combined with the public perception of the border as a zone ruled by chaos allows the state to justify using extraordinary measures to control and exclude “uncivilized” noncitizens. It is a location “where the controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended—the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of civilization.”¹¹ Sovereign power produces migrants as excluded subjects to be dealt with violently while simultaneously neutralizing their ability to resist or protest. The environment becomes a form of deterrence so that “the raw physicality” of the desert “can be exploited and can function to mask the workings of social and political power.”¹² If we dare to approach this frightening geopolitical space, we can see how America’s internal surveillant gaze functions,¹³ and understand why maps of this region should be labeled “Here be monsters.”

As we start to walk away from this death site, I notice something on the ground. Crouching down, I pick up a piece of bone smaller than my fingernail. It immediately crumbles to dust. I try to hand it to Bob, and an unexpected breeze passes through and blows many of the particles off my hand. I scrape what I can from my finger and sprinkle it into the bag. It’s a futile gesture. There is little that forensic scientists can do with bone dust. This person will

likely become a line in the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner's database of migrant fatalities reading: "Name: Unknown. Age: Unknown. Country of Origin: Unknown. Cause of Death: Undetermined (partial skeletal remains)." The identity of this individual and much of his or her body has been swallowed up by the desert, and there were no witnesses. Bare life has been reduced to shoes, shards of bone, and the "Unknown."

I often think about this particular day, for two reasons. First, we know this death and its physical erasure are by no means a unique event. Between October 2000 and September 2014, the bodies of 2,721 border crossers were recovered in southern Arizona alone.¹⁴ Approximately 800 of these individuals are still unidentified.¹⁵ Second, this particular moment in the desert perfectly illustrates the structure, logic, and corporeal impact of current US border enforcement policy. This point was driven home in the spring of 2012 when I visited the Juan Bosco migrant shelter in Nogales (see chapter 5). The stucco walls of this nonprofit organization are always decorated with glossy Mexican government fliers that warn about the conditions in the desert, oversized maps produced by the group Humane Borders showing locations of border crosser deaths, and photocopied posters put up by family members of missing migrants. It wasn't until 2012, though, that I noticed for the first time a tiny sign on the wall of the men's bathroom that had been produced by the US Department of Homeland Security. In Spanish the flier warned, "The next time you try to cross the border without documents you could end up a victim of the desert." This line was accompanied by a pathetic cartoon drawing of a saguaro cactus.

I laughed at this crude representation of the desert, but also started thinking about how this was one of the few times I had seen a warning sign produced by the US government in a Mexican shelter. More interesting, however, was that the wording of the pamphlet personified the desert as a perpetrator of violence targeting migrants.¹⁶ Conveniently, this flier contains no mention of the tactical relationship between federal border enforcement policy and this harsh landscape. When put in historical context, however, this public service announcement offers insight into the structure of the Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD) strategy that since the 1990s has deliberately funneled people into the desert. It also illustrates the cunning way that nature has been conscripted by the Border Patrol to act as an enforcer while simultaneously

providing this federal agency with plausible deniability regarding blame for any victims the desert may claim. In what follows, I outline the history and logic of PTD and begin to draw the connections between border enforcement policies and the migrant suffering and death that I explore in detail in the rest of the book.

OUT OF SIGHT

In July 1993, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)¹⁷ promoted Mexican American Border Patrol agent Silvestre Reyes to chief of the El Paso Sector. Reyes was brought in during a moment of crisis when a series of lawsuits and claims of human rights violations had been brought against the Border Patrol in the region. Two of the major grievances lodged against the agency were that legal Latino residents were subjected to unfair racial profiling and harassment, and that the consistent pursuit of undocumented border crossers through neighborhoods was a dangerous and abusive practice.¹⁸ The majority of El Paso residents who lived along the border were Latino, which made it difficult for *la migra* to figure out who was “illegal” without directly interrogating people. Locals were tired of law enforcement questioning them about their citizenship while they were going about their daily business. In response to these complaints, Reyes came up with a radical new enforcement strategy that would fundamentally change how the border was policed. Timothy Dunn describes what happened on September 19, 1993, when Reyes launched “Operation Blockade”:

The emphasis of the operation was to deter unauthorized border crossings in the core urban area between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso by making a bristling show of force. . . . This took the form of posting 400 Border Patrol agents (out of 650 total in the sector) on the banks of the Río Grande and adjacent levees in stationary, ubiquitous green and green-and-white patrol vehicles around the clock, at short-distance intervals (from fifty yards to one-half mile) along a twenty-mile stretch between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. . . . This mass posting of agents created an imposing line, if not [a] virtual wall, of agents along the river, which was supplemented by low-flying and frequently deployed surveillance helicopters.¹⁹

Prior to this strategy, the standard operating procedure had been to try to apprehend border crossers *after* they had crossed the boundary line. The circuslike atmosphere created when dozens of people at a time jumped the bor-

der fence while agents in green uniforms chased after them like Keystone Cops was ludicrous. Comedian Cheech Marin even built his film *Born in East L.A.* around this borderwide phenomenon. These daily scenes exemplified the difficulties of trying to seal the border. Reyes's mass deployment of agents in and around the El Paso port of entry was an effective public relations move that seemed to satisfy local residents. This "show of force", however, didn't stop illegal immigration. It mostly frustrated migrants accustomed to crossing in urban zones and forced them to move toward the edge of town where they could easily hop the fence in depopulated areas.²⁰

In addition to funneling traffic away from downtown, this strategy also made migration less visible and created a scenario in which the policing of undocumented people occurred in areas with few witnesses. Out of sight, out of mind. Despite the fact that this "deterrence-displacement" strategy only made border crossers harder to see,²¹ some politicians soon touted it as a success.²² The operation's effects were felt along much of the US-Mexico border during the 1990s when it was adopted in Southern California ("Operation Gatekeeper" in 1994), Arizona ("Operation Safeguard" in 1994 and 1999), and South Texas ("Operation Rio Grande" in 1997). When Reyes set Operation Blockade in motion, he intended to shift traffic away from the city and "put [migrants] out in areas where they're on [Border Patrol's] turf."²³ Little did he know that this approach would soon evolve into a large-scale policy that would strategically use the natural environment and subsequently become the foundation for border security in a post-9/11 world.

HOSTILE TERRAIN

The logic behind Operation Blockade was straightforward. Placing heightened security in and around the downtown urban port of entry in El Paso would force undocumented migrants to attempt crossings in more rural areas that were easier for law enforcement to monitor. Although this initial strategy in El Paso had neither been officially sanctioned nor fully evaluated by INS, it immediately garnered media and political attention and was soon adopted as a part of a new federal project. Less than a year after Operation Blockade, INS published its Strategic Plan,²⁴ which essentially repackaged what Reyes had done informally into a national program: "The Border Patrol will improve control of the border by implementing a strategy of 'prevention through deterrence.' The Border Patrol will achieve the goals of its strategy by bringing

a decisive number of enforcement resources to bear in each major entry corridor. The Border Patrol will increase the number of agents on the line and make effective use of technology, raising the risk of apprehension high enough to be an effective deterrent.”²⁵ One of the primary components that structured the new PTD strategy was the recognition that remote areas along the border (e.g., the Sonoran Desert) are difficult to traverse on foot and hence can be effectively used by law enforcement. This, however, was by no means a recent epiphany, as noted by historian Patrick Ettinger: “From their earliest work enforcing the Chinese Exclusion Acts [enacted in 1882], immigration authorities had discovered that the desert and mountain wilderness could be made effective allies in the fight against undocumented entry. Desolate routes deprive migrants of access to food and water. Only along well-defined roads or on railroads could immigrants obtain the necessary resources for travel, and it was along those routes that immigration patrols might be best stationed to capture undocumented immigrants.”²⁶ As one federal agent testified in 1926, the goal of border enforcement was to “at least make attempts to cross the border dangerous and hold illegal entry down to small proportions.”²⁷

The acknowledgment that the desert, as well as the other extreme environments cross-cut by the border, could strategically be used to deter migrants from illegal entry on a large scale was not, however, formally laid out in policy documents until the start of the official PTD era, after 1993. The initial Strategic Plan memorandum was among the first to refer to environmental conditions as a potential resource for securing the geopolitical boundary: “The border environment is diverse. Mountains, deserts, lakes, rivers and valleys form natural barriers to passage. Temperatures ranging from sub-zero along the northern border to the searing heat of the southern border effect [sic] illegal entry traffic as well as enforcement efforts. *Illegal entrants crossing through remote, uninhabited expanses of land and sea along the border can find themselves in mortal danger*” (emphasis added).²⁸

Although policy makers have written extensively about PTD for decades,²⁹ only the earliest documents associated with this strategy articulate a clear vision of the role that officials imagined the environment playing in enforcement: “The prediction is that with traditional entry and smuggling routes disrupted, illegal traffic will be deterred, or forced over more *hostile* terrain, less suited for crossing and more suited for enforcement” (emphasis added).³⁰ Prior to PTD, the dominant enforcement practice emphasized catching people after an illegal entry had been achieved and then processing them through

the *voluntary-departure complex*, whereby apprehended migrants were permitted to waive their rights to a deportation hearing and returned to Mexico without lengthy detention.³¹ Many have described this as a relatively useless process that individuals become familiar with, and less afraid of, after repeated apprehensions.³² PTD was a direct reaction to the ineffectiveness of this previous disciplinary practice.

In the 1994 Strategic Plan, the use of the word *hostile* suggests that this new form of boundary enforcement was intended to be more aggressive and violent (and thus more effective) than previous programs. The word choice is also interesting given that the architects of the Strategic Plan did not involve only the Border Patrol, but also included “planning experts from the Department of Defense Center for Low Intensity Conflict,”³³ experts who had previously been charged with developing strategies for quelling insurgencies in the developing world.³⁴ The great irony is that some of the migrants whose movement these defense experts were working to stop were fleeing violence in Central America that US interventionist policies had sanctioned and supported.³⁵

After this initial report was issued, the words used to characterize the desert environment would be gradually changed from “hostile” to “harsh,” “inhospitable,” and the like.³⁶ This shift in tone reflects but one of many bureaucratic attempts to sanitize the human costs of this policy. For example, although actual desert conditions are a linchpin of this enforcement strategy, relatively few public documents focused on PTD describe them or comment on the correlation between the strategy and migrant fatalities.³⁷ In addition, despite showing numerous photographs of agents both on patrol and “rescuing” people in the Sonoran Desert, the 2012–2016 Border Patrol Strategic Plan makes no mention of this landscape or its key role in deterring migration. This hostile terrain is now camouflaged in policy memorandums.

In 1994, it was predicted that PTD would push the migrant experience beyond simple apprehension and deportation. The architects of the Strategic Plan relied on a number of key assumptions, including the fact that “violence will increase as effects of strategy are felt.”³⁸ *Violence*, however, was poorly defined in this document and probably too blunt for some people’s liking. Later policy briefs substitute this word for euphemisms such as “costly.” A congressional report written just three years after the Strategic Plan stated: “The southwest border strategy [previously known as the Strategic Plan] is ultimately designed

to deter illegal entry into the United States. It states that “The overarching goal of the strategy is to make it so difficult and so costly to enter this country illegally that fewer individuals even try.”³⁹

Although no public record explicitly states that a goal of PTD is to kill border crossers in an attempt to deter other would-be migrants, the connection between death and this policy has been highlighted by both academics and various federal agencies charged with evaluating Border Patrol programs.⁴⁰ An excerpt from a 2010 report to Congress reads: “‘Prevention Through Deterrence’ . . . has pushed unauthorized migration away from population centers and funneled it into more remote and hazardous border regions. This policy has had the *unintended consequence* of increasing the number of fatalities along the border, as unauthorized migrants attempt to cross over the inhospitable Arizona desert without adequate supplies of water” (emphasis added).⁴¹

This comment that the increasing number of migrant fatalities is an “unintended consequence” of PTD is misleading and ignores previous evidence suggesting that policy makers were well aware of the role that death would play in this enforcement strategy. For example, a 1997 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) identifies as one of the “Indicators for Measuring the Effectiveness of the Strategy to Deter Illegal Entry Along the Southwest Border” the “deaths of aliens attempting entry.” Concerning the “predicated outcome if AG’s [the attorney general’s] strategy is successful,” the same report claims that it “depends on how enforcement resources are allocated. In some cases, deaths may be reduced or prevented (by fencing along the highways, for example). In other cases, deaths may increase (as enforcement in urban areas forces aliens to attempt mountain or desert crossings).”⁴² I had to read the foregoing quote several times before I fully grasped its message. It clearly and publicly states that one way for the government to measure the efficacy of PTD is via a migrant body count. In some ways this is merely a sanitized version of the many anti-immigrant comments that accompany online articles about border crosser deaths; for example: “As long as the immigration numbers are declining . . . I can live with the border death numbers.”⁴³ The sector of the American public that attributes a low value to the lives of migrants seems to mirror the federal government’s perspective.

The statement from this official document suggests both that early on in the planning of this policy the migrant death rate was considered a useful metric to gauge the program’s effectiveness (i.e., “violence will increase as effects of strategy are felt”) and that the Border Patrol clearly understood that

fatalities would rise as “enforcement in urban areas forces aliens to attempt mountain or desert crossings.” This report was published prior to the spike in deaths that occurred in the Arizona desert starting in the early 2000s.⁴⁴ As early as 1997, however, evidence clearly showed that the body count associated with PTD was primarily caused by “environmental exposure (falls, hyperthermia, dehydration).”⁴⁵ Rather than shooting people as they jumped the fence, Prevention Through Deterrence set the stage for the desert to become the new “victimizer” of border transgressors.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

Since the beginning of PTD, both the number of people who have been apprehended in the remote regions of Arizona and the annual rate of migrant fatalities have risen steeply. In 1993, 92,639 people were caught by Border Patrol in the Tucson Sector. By 2000, this number had grown to 616,346, an almost sevenfold increase (see appendix A). Although overall apprehension rates across the southern border did not rise significantly during this seven-year period, the funnel effect of PTD became visible as crossing attempts in the Tucson Sector skyrocketed. In 1993 this sector accounted for 8 percent of total southern border apprehensions. By 2000, 37 percent of all immigration arrests happened in this region. For almost two decades, until recently, the Tucson Sector was the primary crossing corridor for undocumented migrants.⁴⁶

Although Prevention Through Deterrence redirected people toward more “hostile” ground, it has not significantly dissuaded would-be crossers, a point recognized as early as 2001 by the GAO: “Although INS has realized its goal of shifting illegal alien traffic away from urban areas, this has been achieved at a cost to . . . illegal aliens. . . . In particular, rather than being deterred from attempting illegal entry, many aliens have instead risked injury and death by trying to cross mountains, deserts, and rivers.”⁴⁷ Many have died since the implementation of this policy, and the correlation between the funneling of people toward desolate regions of the border and an upsurge in fatalities is strong.⁴⁸ Still, even when the connection between PTD and migrant death is recognized by the federal government, there is generally a refusal to causally link the two phenomena. As a 2012 GAO report notes:

Known migrant deaths fell from a high of 344 in 1988 to a low of 171 in 1994 before climbing back to 286 in 1998. According to DHS data, known migrant deaths climbed from 250 in 1999 to 492 in 2005, and averaged 431 deaths per

year in 2005–2009 before falling to an average of 360 per year in 2010–2011. . . . The apparent increase in migrant deaths is particularly noteworthy in light of the declining number of alien apprehensions (i.e., estimated unauthorized entries) during the same period. . . . Overall, these data offer evidence that border crossings have become more hazardous since the “prevention through deterrence” policy went into effect in the 1990s, though once again the precise impact of enforcement on migrant deaths is unknown. [emphasis added]⁴⁹

There is also significant disagreement among the federal government, social scientists, and human rights groups regarding how to count dead border crossers. Compared to other organizations, the Department of Homeland Security routinely publishes the lowest number of recorded migrant deaths.⁵⁰ Given the unpopular and controversial nature of such statistics, it is not surprising that the government lowballs these body counts. A conservative estimate is that 5,596 people died while attempting to migrate between 1998 and 2012;⁵¹ and between 2000 and September 2014, the bodies of 2,771 people were found in southern Arizona,⁵² enough corpses to fill the seats on fifty-four Greyhound buses. These grim figures represent only *known* migrant fatalities. Many people may die in remote areas and their bodies are never recovered. The actual number of people who lose their lives while migrating will forever remain unknown (see chapter 3).

Silvestre Reyes’s Operation Blockade in El Paso in 1993 may be separated by 350 miles and almost two decades from the ravaged skeleton described at the start of this chapter, but the two phenomena are unequivocally linked. Operation Blockade became the cornerstone of a nationwide border policy that used, and continues to use, the desert as a weapon. Prevention Through Deterrence has evolved from an explicit program that once acknowledged that the dangers posed by the desert could be strategically exploited as a weapon in the war on immigration to a sterilized description of an enforcement paradigm that has unfortunately (and “unexpectedly”) resulted in migrants “risking their lives.”

In 1994, the federal government clearly appreciated that people could be funneled over “hostile terrain” where law enforcement had “tactical advantage.” Twenty years later, the common Border Patrol discourse focuses on blaming the smugglers who “endanger migrants in the desert.” This shift in federal tone that now deflects culpability away from policy and toward the environment

and *coyotes* is summed up well in an article in the *Arizona Daily Star* in which a Border Patrol agent reflects on the discovery of several migrant bodies: “The Sonoran Desert is extremely vast and remote with very few water sources. . . . [I]t is important to realize illegal immigrants are being victimized and lied to by smugglers who lead them through treacherous terrain and expose them to extreme conditions.”⁵³ Joseph Nevins has wisely pointed out that the federal government’s refusal to acknowledge any responsibility for this death toll, coupled with the blaming of *coyotes* for taking people through high-risk areas, overlooks the fact that the “significant growth in use of *coyotes* has been the predictable, direct result of the enhanced border-enforcement strategy.”⁵⁴

The increase in migrant traffic through Arizona and the rise in crossing fatalities indicate that security practices have effectively and systematically funneled people toward violent terrain and made the process more deadly. In no uncertain terms, Prevention Through Deterrence relies on the desert to “deter” people from attempting to cross. But what does this “hostile” landscape look like? What are the environmental factors that are meant to stop people? In the following chapter I address these questions and offer a theoretical framework to help understand the complex relationship between border crossers and the many humans and nonhumans who act as agents of deterrence.