

Language Lessons on the Rio Grande

A TALE OF FRIENDSHIP AND CULTURE SET AFLOAT ON
THE NARROW, WATERY BORDER BETWEEN TWO COUNTRIES

—
BY CHANDRA BROWN

To comprehend the geography of Rio-as-border, it may be best to start in El Paso, Texas. El Paso and its infamous Mexican sister to the south, Ciudad Juárez, bleed together, a channelized urban river and fortified border tracing contours through crowded architecture. From El Paso, the Rio Grande forms the meandering natural border between nations until it reaches the Gulf of Mexico. According to the 1848 Treaty of Hidalgo, the boundary is the thalweg—the deepest part of the deepest channel—of the Rio Grande. Most Mexicans refer to this overly appropriated desert artery as the Río Bravo, *bravo* meaning *fierce* or *angry* or *agitated*. The Rio Grande has other, older names, too, from the languages that labeled this landscape long before Spanish and English outcompeted native dialects for the places here.

Then, from El Paso, it's five hours southeast to the Big Bend of Texas. Along the way you'll drive through several Homeland Security checkpoints, under one military-style surveillance blimp, past a dozen Border Patrol rigs. Eventually you'll veer off Highway 10 and re-route toward

Mexico, toward the dusty counterculture stronghold of Terlingua. And then you'll see Terlingua and the Big Bend are truly remote, wild, and removed from urban chaos, the type of place where you can hide, where you can disappear into the hazy distance between mesas.

Here where dust and heat and drought mandate slower movements, my friend Bobski has made a home in the style of the modern West Texas settler: a one-room bunker with corrugated metal siding meant to deflect the rays of desert sun, with an open-air kitchen and a Conex storage container on site. Bobski has carefully worn a faint mile-long loop through the chaparral around his little house. Laundry dries stiff as plywood on the sun-bleached line. He hauls water from the faucet at Desert Sports, the mountain biking and river outfitter he's guided with for the past twenty years.

Bobski, who is twenty-one years my senior and whose real name is Robert Gray, saw me through my parents' divorce, my college graduation, grad school graduation, through several breakings of my patchwork heart, through the death of one oversized Labrador named Parker and the last fourteen years with my sweet anvil-headed Lab Arlo. I picture Bobski cozied in fleece, with a curly brown ponytail snaking out from beneath one of those old triangular Patagonia stocking caps that came to a point above his skull, like the hat of a bishop. Bobski also taught me to drink coffee and to enjoy whiskey.

My sweetheart Nate and I made our first trip to Terlingua in February 2020. Bobski and I had gone six years without seeing one another: six years since we last drank beers together in Alaska, six years since I'd changed my mind about spending summers in a dry suit, guiding rafts on the silty runoff of glaciers, before I'd "retired" to working one or two trips a year in the Grand Canyon. Bobski still returns to Alaska each summer; he doesn't mind going to work each day in a Gore-Tex sack, or the mosquitos, or the insomniac sun, or the commute from the Lower 48. And his is no paltry annual journey: For the past thirty years Bobski has migrated like a Canada goose gutted stationary bus with a wood-burning stove, a La-Z-Boy recliner, and his fishing tackle. He works fly-out river trips in the Brooks Range, fishing trips on the Kenai and in Bristol Bay, and industrialized whitewater rafting trips for well-fed cruise line tourists on Denali Park's Nenana River. When the season is over, Bobski returns to Big Bend to guide canoe trips on the Rio Grande.

On February 13, I rode in a van trailing three canoes into the Panther Junction Visitor Center parking lot in Big Bend National Park. Bobski's Canadian partner, KT, who runs a bike shop in Ontario in the summertime, rode in the front seat, watching the rosy-colored landscape with the focus of someone who gets carsick easily.

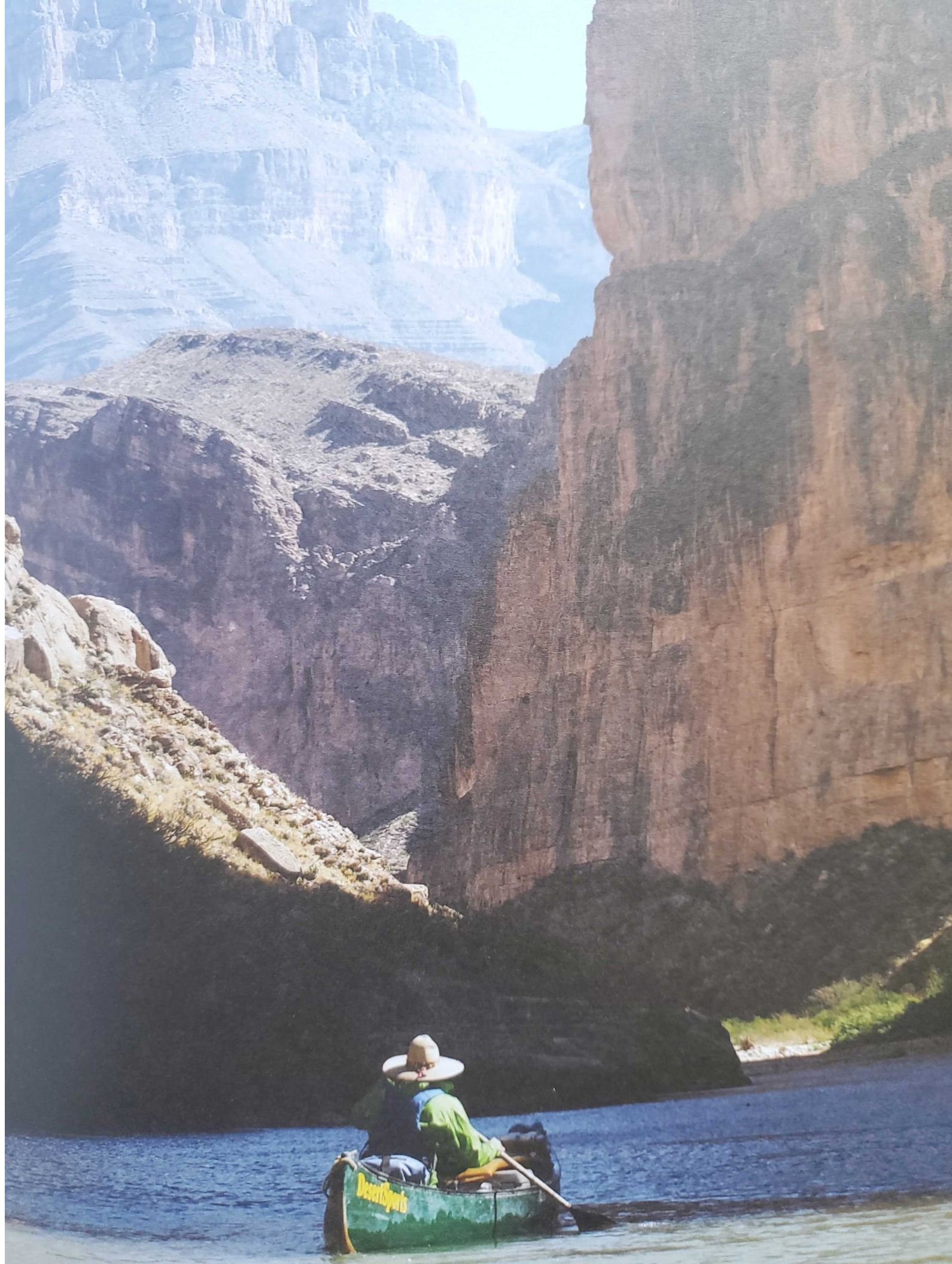
Bobski began to guide us, as most old river guides tend to do. He narrated the geology of Big Bend: Mariscal Mountain; Sierra del Carmen limestone; Mount Emory, the tallest peak in the Chisos range; Sierra del Caballo Muerto—the Dead Horse Mountains. Big Bend occupies the southern reach of the Laramide orogeny, named after the Laramie Mountains of Wyoming. An orogeny is the event wherein mountains are created. It's what happens when two plates collide, at the boundary of two converging slabs of crust. Mountains are often formed at the edges of plates—at borders—and although we perceive them as timeless, they were, just like you, me, and Bobski, *born*. These mountains along the border between the U.S. and Mexico, they are what emerged from worlds crashing together.

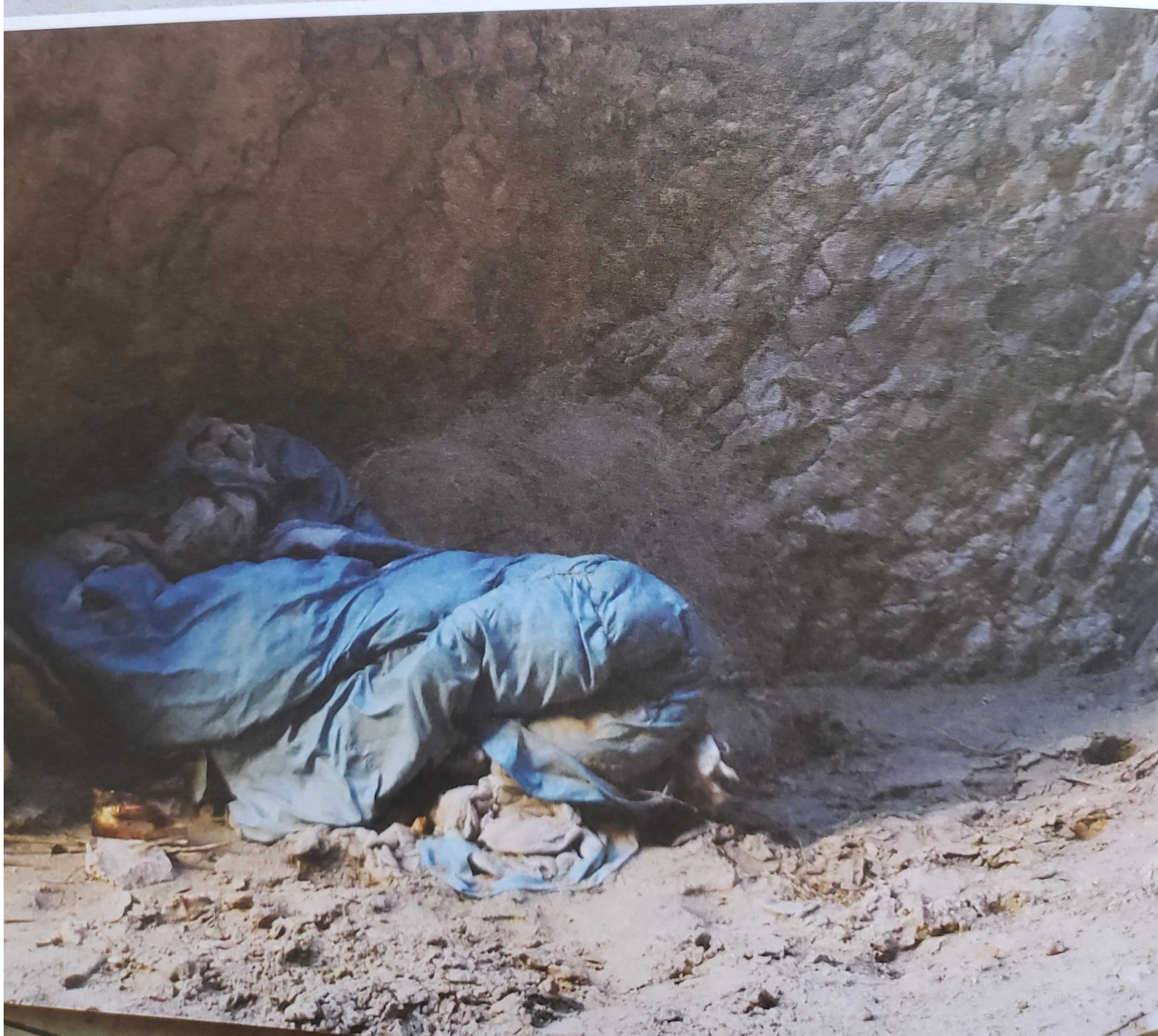
Orogeny implies *origin*, and I think of the geneses of names—words—and of people, of our individual trajectories, of mountains, of rivers.

Our destination that February morning was Boquillas Canyon. *Boca* means mouth; *boquillas*, then, little mouths, funnels, portals. Maybe it refers to the myriad local hot springs, steaming apertures scattered across the region. Or, Bobski joked as we wrestled our canoes against an assertive afternoon wind, maybe it means "place where the breeze is born." The place where I grew up in Alaska was named for Chief Wasilla, a respected Dena'ina Athabascan leader. Though the origin of Chief Wasilla's name is disputed, there's some common acceptance of the translation as "breath of air," or, as Bobski used to say, "cool breeze." He nicknamed my best friend from high school "Breezy," after our hometown.

One rainy early season day in Denali, many years ago, Bobski recruited me to help him pack hypothermia kits into large dry bags. The bags were filled with discarded layers of wool and fleece, and each river guide had to carry one kit on their raft. Each kit had a number Sharpied on it; Bobski gave me kit #1, and then he proceeded to call me "Number One" from that day forward. That's his nickname for me: Number One.

We launched at Rio Grande Village shortly after noon.
We passed the riverside village of Boquillas del Carmen





on our right, sometime during the heat of that first day, and then later a crossing where horses, local guides, and ferrymen await visitors beneath thatched-roof *palapas*. Boquillans sell bent-wire peacocks, beaded scorpion figurines, and knit beer koozies that read *NO AL MURO*: No to the wall. Any American tourist with a passport may visit Boquillas, patron a café, and return to Texas in time for ribs and Lone Star Lagers. Most of the villagers to the south, however, lack the necessary documents to venture beyond the northern bank.

After 9/11 the U.S. closed this crossing, costing the park almost three hundred thousand dollars annually in revenue from both sides of the river: southbound travelers en route to Mexico and Boquillans trudging north to buy provisions in Texas. For the next eleven years Boquillas was isolated to the point of starvation. Boquillas is yet without electricity and is debilitatingly remote; the nearest town with groceries is one hundred fifty miles away. Drought killed the few crops and goats that can be cultivated in this landscape; kindhearted Texans snuck food and supplies across the river; Boquillans left figurines on the bank with honesty jars, hoping that their neighbors to the north might take a scorpion and leave a dollar. In 2013 the crossing reopened, this time with a two million dollar customs facility and computerized passport control, managed remotely by officials in El Paso. Without scannable, barcoded passports, Boquillans—unless they choose to defy the law—are all but stranded on their side of the river.

Yet the border along the Rio Grande is naturally porous and this is somehow comforting. The potential for the physical exchange of people and goods and ideas across an inherently permeable riverine membrane feels almost magical when lines and laws otherwise dictate migration, movement, and the direction of dreams.

What a thing it is to float between two countries. On river left, Big Bend National Park, West Texas, USA. This is public land, where Americans and our visitors can wander among the ghosts of dinosaurs, where arroyos incised in ancient limestone invite the Vibram-clad feet of walkers, and where maps and visitor centers direct our

attention toward the secrets of an increasingly fragile and isolated ecosystem. And on river right, northern Chihuahua, Mexico: a world away, removed from the rules and structure and protection of American administration by a thin, green line of river.

At camp that first night the wind was incessant. We slept on the Mexican side, on river right. “Technically, it’s not legal,” Bobski explained, “but here in the canyon we don’t see too many people.” We decided to name the site Fisherman’s Grotto—*La Gruta del Pescador*—after a stony respite a hundred yards up from the beach, where two limestone escarpments offered protection for an evening fire. Tucked away in the grotto was a sleeping bag ravaged by desert creatures, its innards spilling onto the sand and tangling with a wad of fine-meshed fishing net. There were also some bleach and detergent bottles, presumably repurposed as scoops. At the upstream edge of the entrance, Nate spotted a few cans of food, rusted, without labels, yet unopened, half-buried in the sand. These objects were clues to a puzzle that was neither ancient nor particularly confounding. “He probably floats down from Boquillas village,” Bobski said, “or maybe he walks down. Either way, the fisherman still uses this site. There are plenty of catfish and carp in the water here.” The grotto had an unsettled feeling, like so many places in the Southwest: It was charged with the kind of energy you feel at an archaeological site, yet this place was undeniably modern, active, and important. We built a small fire after dinner, but kept our distance from the fisherman’s stashes.

The next morning, Valentine’s Day, after a walk up Arroyo Puerto Rico, I found a geode on the beach. The layers of the geode were like a tiny topo map, concise and contained by stone. The layers conveyed boundaries, repetitious shapes that define limits, and those limits were held in place by a crust of gunmetal grey that was mottled, as though by lichen, with another copper-colored layer and patches of yet another stone the color of smoke, or of a dove’s feathers. The geode had six, maybe seven, facets, and on one of them was the window, the opening, *la boquilla*, to and through the glassy portal to the heart of

Boquillans left figurines on the bank with honesty jars, hoping that their neighbors to the north might take a scorpion and leave a dollar.

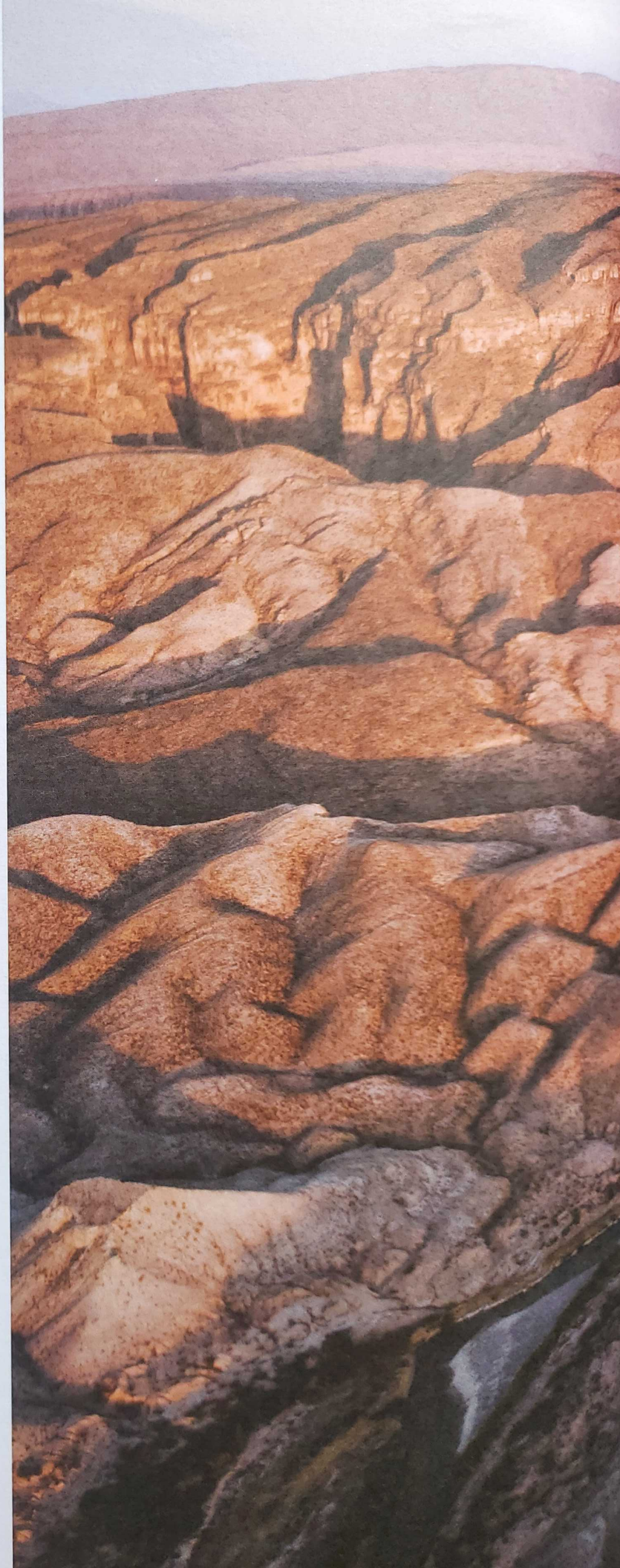
the thing, to a tiny universe within.

“Are you going to keep that rock?” Bobski asked me, quietly, looking over my shoulder. I nodded, knowing I wasn’t supposed to. “Good,” he said and descended the beach toward his canoe, his gait stiffer than I’d ever noticed before.

River work is layered. For many career river guides, there’s the movement, shifting with seasons, the intensity of seasonal community, and the longing that comes as the dearest of friends, coworkers, family leave for their respective faraway places when autumn comes. There’s the loneliness of detachment, the disassociation from societal norms, the lack of health insurance. Layers of *shoulds* and wishes and *if onlys*. Bobski came within a semester of graduating from college—fittingly, he studied English and philosophy—but he did not finish. He commented to me on the water one day that, now, as he prepares to turn sixty and his body grows tired, his young-man choices torment him. What does the twilight of a career feel like when you don’t have the safety net of retirement, pension, savings? The summer when I was nineteen, Bobski had a beautiful, strong girlfriend named Victoria. She left me a note as I prepared to leave the waning Alaska summer and return to Bozeman for my second year of college. *STAY IN SCHOOL, CHANDRA*, she wrote. And I did. As much as I wanted to drop it all for full-time river life, I stayed in school, and I finished. And I know this made Bobski proud.

Bobski taught me to row boats almost two decades ago. He would ride in the front of my boat while I was training. I’d row him down the Nenana River canyon and he’d shift in obvious, excruciating discomfort from one side of the raft to the other, looking at me through the blackest of sunglasses as though I didn’t see the rocks we were careening toward. He’d grimace and brace for impact as I flailed with my oars. I was surely made more nervous by his anxiety, but I—we—kept trying. I failed at least two checkout runs before I finally passed. Eventually, I was allowed to row shivering fleshy cargo down the Nenana. And Bobski was so pleased, which was the best and most poignant part of the thing.

On our February trip through Big Bend the water was low and green and warm. The river moved slowly, almost reluctantly, and we all slowed to its pace. But the wind was persistent and the canyon walls limited our sun and I woke up each morning reluctant to get out of my nest. After so many years of subjecting my hands to Alaskan waters







and winters, my fingers don't work well when it's cold; my hands become useless clubs and I cannot trust them. I tried, though, on this trip, to get up before my friends to make coffee for Bobski, to be respectful, to allow KT and Bobski a sleep-in, to deliver green tea to Nate while he was still cozied between our wind-blocking stacks of dry bags. The early mornings, before conversation and beers and the annoyances of tandem canoeing, allowed me time to settle, to review the questions from the day before. There are a lot of questions we cannot answer on the river, despite the library of naturalist books and maps that Bobski carries in a waterproof box. We made a list of our questions and resolved to consult the pocket oracle upon our return to cell towers. We wondered if swifts are monogamous; what, exactly, a duck's eclipse plumage is eclipsing; how to discern between the most prominent layers of limestone in Boquillas Canyon; what the hardest vegetable wax in the world is, etcetera.

We do know that the second-hardest vegetable wax is *candelilla*, a reed-like desert plant whose waxy coating is used globally in things like lip balm, shampoos, and chewing gums, and which you can be almost certain was harvested and processed by rural Mexican laborers and transported by burros. On the southern side of the river there are the ghosts of *candelilla* camps, places in the corridor where Mexican wax-makers—*candelilleros*—have dug vats into the earth, deep and wide enough to hold three hundred gallons of water and sulfuric acid. Heavy, rusted grates cover the vats, lonesome no-good shoes remain on the beaches, scattered, their fabric eroded presumably by acid. Also: empty two-liter soda bottles, the sun-bleached plastic or foil skins of junk foods, bottles of laundry detergent, cotton t-shirts. Some items seem to have been left intentionally, as though the wax-makers' return is imminent, and so we never lingered too long. We loaded the trash that would fit into our canoes and kept moving downstream.

There was a strange dichotomy there: The *candelilla* camps felt ancient, and certainly some of them are. But on our third day we stopped at one clearly no more than ten years old, and still operational. Of the individual objects found in Big Bend's twenty-six thousand known archaeological sites, which ones are relics, not to be disturbed, precious hints at the answers to our big questions? And which, like the plastic bottles I've shoved beneath my canoe's seat, do we condemn as trash?

At the border, words behave like swallows, darting, flitting casually through and between languages. Linguistic boundaries dissolve: ancient Aztec emerges freely through the gaps in the dominant Spanish and English, the three whirling together like currents. On an afternoon walk, we wandered farther up Arroyo Guero. "Arroyo is a canyon, right?" Nate asks. A wash, a drainage, a dry channel. And *guero* is Mexican Spanish for blond, fair, light, as the rocks here are.

Bobski always used words that shone from beyond the limits of my vocabulary. He referenced books I'd never read and maybe never would. His Spanish, even though I took it in college as a major, was always better, more functional, more spirited than mine.

There are cross-sections of the river that Bobski calls concretions: pebble-pocked swaths like sandbars cemented in place. The river flows shallow over these submerged peninsulas, these rainbow-rock beaches buried just beneath the surface, and in a canoe you should watch for them. But on foot, walking upstream from camp, they offer an immensely satisfying substrate: solid and predictable, unlike the sandbars of most of the desert rivers I know. On our third night, at an expansive windswept camp, KT and I went upstream, over the concretion and above a brushy island to take a bath out of view from the other members of our party. At the upstream tip of the little island, the concretion gave way to a small pool, shallow enough to stand in and deep enough to submerge all your dirty parts, to take a tiny swim.

I've not known Bobski to swim for fun, and I only know of one time when he swam involuntarily. We were on a private winter Grand Canyon trip in 2009, on my permit, with some of our best friends. His was the lead boat and I was kayaking, paddling "one of those little plastic coffins," as he likes to call kayaks. At Hermit Rapid we ran in two pods, and I was on shore getting into my boat when my barrel-chested friend John Hoshall came running up the beach from the scout in his tomato-red dry suit, yelling "Bobski's swimming!" and my world, for a moment, turned upside down. Absolute incongruity: Bobski does not swim. And when I caught up to him his rowing frame was bent and he was shaken, cold, scared. "That tenth wave, Number One," he breathed heavily. "She got me!" I don't know if Bobski has taken an involuntary swim since, but I doubt it.

Down low, after we came out of the canyon on our fourth day, the walls of Sierra del Carmen limestone were

replaced by thickets of giant river cane. The view from river-level is limited once you emerge from the canyon; the banks are strangled by cane. As we floated lazily through this dry and sandy jungle, I plucked another plastic two-liter Coke bottle from a tangled mess of half-submerged reeds and branches on river right. How many bottles is this, now?

The effort to eradicate this thirsty, dominating colonizer—*Arundo donax*, also known as carrizo cane or border bamboo—has bankrolled Bobski's winters for decades. The control project is funded on the U.S. side by a partnership between Coca-Cola and the World Wildlife Fund. I stared at the bottles littering the floor of the canoe and wondered why the company responsible for producing three million metric tons of the plastic waste each year—more than one fifth of the world's PET bottle output—is funding a riverbank restoration project along the border.

"I don't think anybody who works on these projects for very long thinks of it as an eradication," Bobski explained. "It's a little bit like 'The Coalition for a Little Less Corruption in Government.' It's more realistic to think of it as a limiting effort: establish a few big breaks in the huge walls of cane to expose a little sediment to erosion, open up some beach access for visitors, and give species like willows a chance to get a foothold. *Arundo* and feral burros and Republicans—we probably can't get rid of them, but they should be held in check."

Arundo is so aggressive and resilient that it's seemingly impossible to control, despite bulldozing, aerial herbicides, mowing, burning. The USDA even purchased *Arundo* wasps from Europe—another foreign species—as biocontrol. The wasps lay eggs in the cane, hatching larvae that invade the innards of the plant, thereby weakening its colonial ambitions.

Embedded within the giant river cane controversy also lurks the issue of human migration. *Arundo* hides *people*, too. Here you have an invasive plant species that the government spends millions of dollars attempting to control that just happens to offer hostile yet effective cover for immigrants attempting to make their way north, against the law. Floating on the Rio Grande, you can see the places where people exit the jungle of cane and enter the river corridor. What a relief that water must be, for a few moments, before they enter the thicket on river left and continue to crawl northward, past the opening of the boundary, into the desiccated heart of the desert.

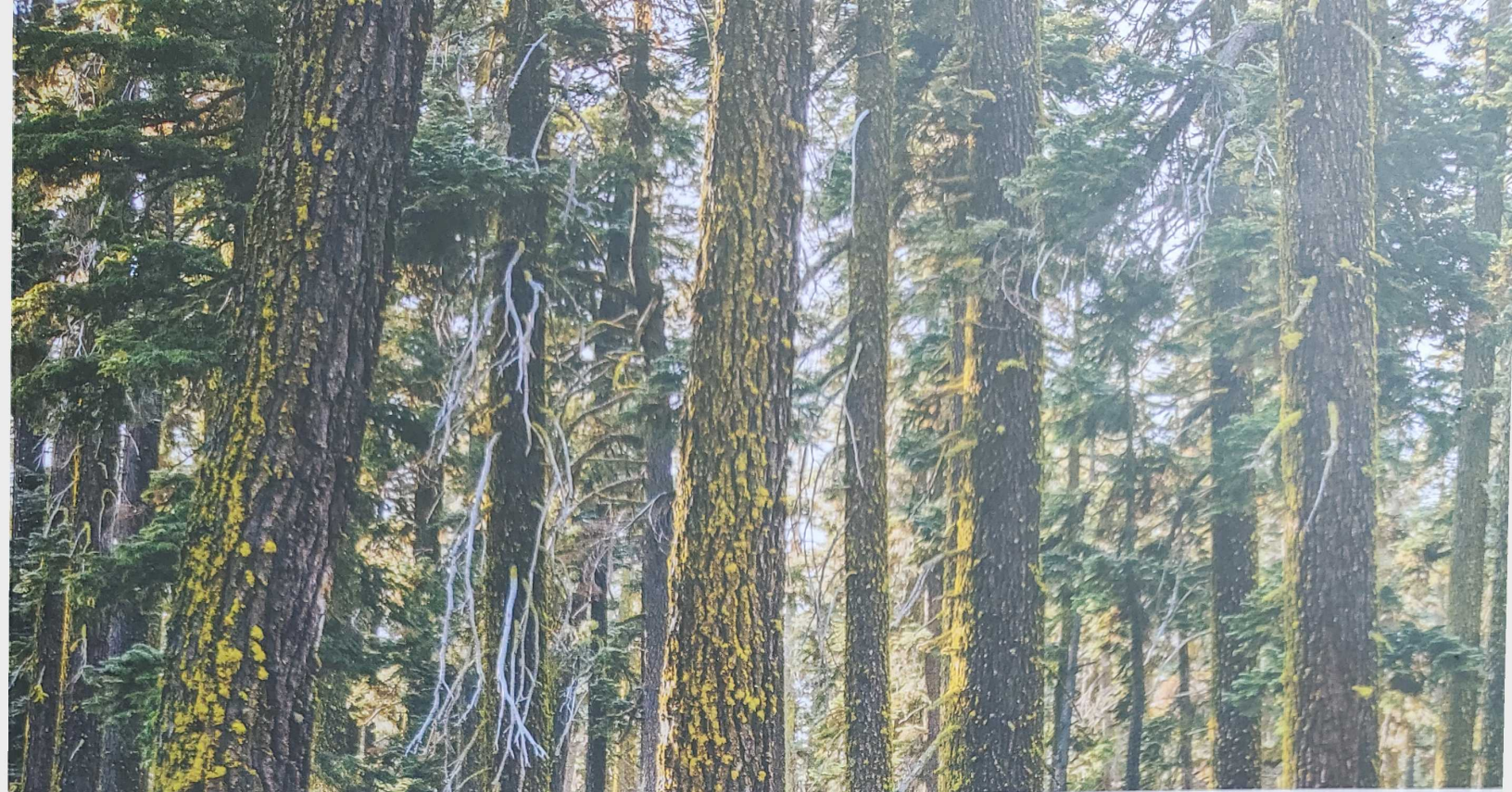
Our last night on the river, we camped on a beach

where you can get above the cane and see for miles. As KT sipped her sotol by firelight, we watched the moon rise over the mesa and Bobski announced that it would be a dewy night. Burros patrolled the bench above us, a beaver, *Castor canadensis*, thrashed against the water in the dark. The air grew dense and cold and wet. I curled up next to Nate and watched as a halo formed around the moon, *la luna*.

The next morning, our final day on the rio, we resorted to lining our canoes past a bend in the river called Pillow Rock. Not like the Class V rapid of the same name on West Virginia's Gauley River, but rather a creeping, quiet corner where the water has the potential to slowly siphon a canoe toward a boulder and wrap it there. Low-intensity, high-frustration, not worth the risk. So I watched Bobski deftly line his boat, and then KT's, around the corner, wading into the current within an inch of the top of his XtraTuff boots, guiding the empty boats toward the safety of the eddy below. When it was my turn I unfurled our bowline and followed Bobski's steps, his movements exactly, my heart pounding—certainly not because this was dangerous but because I wanted desperately to do it well. There was no celebration when the boats were all safely below the lurking boulder, but we continued downstream together and that was good enough.

I tucked the geode away in my lifejacket and waited until I returned home to Montana to take it out, to roll it over in my fingers, that tiniest of topo maps, the most delicate and perfect of concentric shapes. The lines within the geode are the contours of mountains rising from the edge, the limits that define our memories, the worn paths of circumambulation, the boundaries of the countries we're born into, the lines that tell us how far we can go and by what time we have to be home. We live within and among and between lines. The line of Rio Grande, the line of the border, fills the liminal space between cultures, governments, and politics; the canyons of the Rio Bravo transcend the concerns of humans.

And humans, with all our love, daydreams, insecurities, doubts, and hopes, belong between the dusty banks. In the space between limestone walls, we are suspended in, supported by, the water that defines our country and our very existence. That space holds us—and also our histories, our fears, and our memories—and we are washed downstream, with all the rest of it. ■



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