

A Mostly True Day in Eloy, Arizona

*Roxanne Lynn Doty**

This is the end of the line. In ways you still do not foresee. Whirlwinds of brown earth dance across dry land and walls of loose soil march through open desert, across Interstate 10. Boarded up storefronts line Main Street, sun beats down on yards of burnt lawns full with rotting wood and an assortment of junk. An old woman sits on a chair in the laundromat. She wears a multi-colored, flowered housedress and eyes you suspiciously. You were excited about coming here. Such a convenient piece of research, so close to your home, your university. But, now you are uneasy about the article you will write, the publication that will follow, the citations that will appear in other articles.

You have come with an arsenal of facts, academic concepts, and theories to this small dusty place. This shadow world of disappeared people and law enforcement. The names of famous thinkers are on the tip of your tongue. You will make up a story; take it away to people in large conference rooms in Hilton hotels with pitchers of ice water on long tables. Questions will be asked. Why do you not reference the prominent thinkers? Why no footnotes? You will have no easy answers. Some things you will not say. About big, well-funded research projects and conferences, elaborately choreographed conversations, self-referential feedback loops that adorn institutions of knowledge. You will fear sounding anti-intellectual. And hypocritical. Because you partake of the profit. You will note the increased surveillance at these conferences, the ID requirements to browse the book display. You have already wondered many times for whom knowledge is pursued.

The potential for profit always lurks behinds tragedies and vulnerable populations. Remember those photos you took several years ago? That road between Tombstone and Bisbee, Arizona? Where it all started. The profound doubt, the distance, the loss of faith. The detainees on the side of the road. Spectacles to you, objects of your curiosity. You knew this and still you snapped photos one after another. And you never could completely remove yourself from this voyeuristic desire. Hunter Thompson said the writer must be a participant in the scene while he/she is writing it. But you have not figured out how to do this, not really. How to genuinely participate.

The private prison stands on 320 acres of Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) land about six miles from Main Street in Eloy, Arizona. Along with the Speedco truck stop they make up the two major revenue sources for this city. Set back a hundred feet or so on Hanna Road, The Eloy Detention Center is easy to miss in the expanse of bare brown earth sitting

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alongside irrigated fields of cotton and grain. ‘Out of sight, out of mind,’ the Mayor tells you. ‘Like their own little city.’

A guard smokes a cigarette under the splintered shade of a Palo Verde Tree. Heat quivers in waves in front of the swirls of barbed wire that surround the facility. Three Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials, two CCA personnel from headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee, a Phoenix-based CCA employee and a guard greet you, request your car keys and identification. The lobby is full with people waiting to visit detainees. You are given the ground rules; no use of names in anything you write, no communication with detainees. You will not be shown the ‘high security special management unit.’

Detention and deportation of undocumented migrants has skyrocketed in recent years, all previous records broken under the Obama administration, though the trend began many years ago. Since 1994 the average daily population of immigrant detainees rose from around 6,000 to the current 34,000. ICE adheres to a ‘detention bed mandate’ of 34,000 detainees per day. They don’t like the word quota, preferring ‘annual performance goals.’ The performance goals depend on places like Eloy and Florence, Arizona; Taylor and Raymondville and Houston, Texas; Estancia, New Mexico; Gainesville, Georgia; Decato, Florida and a whole slew of towns and cities across the country. A shadow world. People disappeared from public places as they did in Latin American countries in the 1970s. Taken from their homes, their places of employment, the streets of their cities. Parents snatched from their children. Lives shattered. Law enforcement. Ordered spaces of security. It is the world we live in today.

The thing that strikes you most at the Eloy Detention Center, aside from its utter bleakness and silent violence, are the posters in the common area of one of the pods, i.e. detainees’ living quarter. Female detainees made the posters. ‘They can draw anything they want,’ the guard tells you. One of the posters contains the words: ‘When you are kind to others, it not only changes you, it changes the world.’ A flurry of pastel-colors surrounds the words, a brush of childish flowers and hearts swirl below. Similar words and drawings fill the other posters. You notice a young female detainee standing in front of the TV watching an old movie from the 1990s. You are only about six feet from one another. She is the same woman/girl you saw at the Coordination Center in Tucson, waiting to be processed. Your eyes meet and you both look away. So often you feel called upon to fall away from yourself, to honor the procedures, the rules for enforcing truth.

Despite the theories and concepts, you are mostly filled with fragments. Of scholarship. Of yourself. And you are not certain what they mean anymore. This woman/girl is another fragment. Tiny, impossible connections. You wonder what right you have to be here at all with your longing to touch something real, to find that vein Derrida spoke of and the syringe that will deliver the blood of writing.

Seventy-two tunnels connect Nogales, Arizona to Nogales, Mexico, some dug by hand. These collapse very easily. Others are more sophisticated. Dark and damp and claustrophobic, shallow pools of water glittered on the floor; a sense of suffocation crept over you. Centers of Excellence at three universities work on tunnel detection. There is another thing. The Pepper Ball Launching System or PLS. The acronym rolls off the tongue fast and slick, like a bullet leaving the barrel of a gun. It smells like baby powder when a Pepper Ball hits its target, i.e. a person and explodes. The target, i.e. person is momentarily blinded. Scholars in the large room at the Border Patrol Station lined up to give it a try on a cardboard dummy. Like fairgoers at a shooting gallery.

That's where you first saw the woman/girl, at the Coordination Center, in a building next to the PLS demonstration. In a panopticon-like room that overlooked twenty glass-enclosed smaller rooms arranged in a semi-circle, each filled with detainees on their way to Eloy. She wore a Curt Cobain t-shirt, his face half-smiling, dark sunglasses. She looked about the same age as your daughter, nineteen.

There are other tunnels. Tunnels that run through you and your longings for a path from the writing that fills your office and your curriculum vitae. An escape from the god of theory that demands you understand through its many lenses. It walks with an authority that swells and storms with the force of the desert haboobs that descend on this small place, rip roofs from homes, blow over semis and leave layers of dust in the wake. When did social science stop being literature? When did the political and the poetic become separated? When did we become so certain of the border between fact and fiction? When did the academic writer become prisoner to the comforting area of ordered space?

The young woman in the Eloy Detention Center. You are certain that she is the one you saw at the Coordination Center. As you are equally sure that it does not really matter if it is the same young woman or not. Or if you saw her several months ago or two weeks ago or last year or never. Or if the town you are in is Eloy, Arizona or one of the many other detention towns. The truth of the story remains unchanged.

By mid-afternoon stifling heat has engulfed Eloy. As you pull away from the curb a small creature scampers from under your car to the middle of the street. You step on the brakes. A small black rat. It stands on its hind legs as if contemplating in which direction to go, then begins to run in ever-tightening circles, spinning in a small frenzy, lost in a sea of scorching black asphalt and trapped in the blinding glare of the sun. It does this for several minutes, closing in on itself. You are mesmerized by this ugly little creature; close enough to see its eyes, dark and bulging from its tiny rodent face. Finally, you pull away from the curb, keeping the rat in sight in your rear-view mirror. By the time you reach the corner, it has stopped moving.