

Lance Garland, "Border", *AmeriQuests* (2017)

Two men make their way toward guard posts by way of motorcycle. A long line of automobiles is evaded because they are on two wheels. They skid and surge, zigzagging between idling cars and trucks. Their wait is not long. The man in front stops when he is fifty feet from the immigration shack. He takes off his dusty helmet, brow soiled and damp, dark hair stuck to his olive skin. A scorching sun fills his eyes and forces him to look downward as his co-patriot stops alongside. The second man doesn't remove his helmet, slowly lifts the visor to reveal radiant green eyes that are dry with fear.

"This is it. We won't have any problems." The first man says with a force in his voice like the desert wind.

A hesitation by the second man, then he lowers the visor in response. The lead figure looks back to where they came from. Lingers too long. The second throttles loudly and takes the lead.

He is correct in his assertion that they won't have any problems.

As the two men race south, it is clear to them that things will no longer be the same. The line to Mexico seemed long, but the line to get back into the States is much longer. From a bird's eye view, the line is tripled in comparison. Higher still, the divide between countries is stark, almost unfriendly. There is a vast difference between border towns. Much more still between resources and money. Most immigration moves north, toward opportunity. The two men may be among the only migrating South at this moment.

They have no time to stop in Tecate. It's corrugated roofs and ample taco stands blur as they race through the brown, ocher, and yellow town. Too many times they've heard the stories of bribery in border towns and they want to be anonymous as soon as possible. Dust clouds rise behind them, remnants of their past lives.

Weeks before at a roadside restaurant in Panama, after the Court Martial and with the new details of their coming dishonorable discharges, they decided that together they would run. Dishonorables meant there would be no veteran's benefits from the military; it meant no school money, no medical, and worse, it meant that they would be almost un-hirable. They talked about their chances, but at twenty-two with no work history besides the military, with no family money, and with a Great Recession coming to sweep them away they decided to take control as best they could, cash out their retirement savings, and go forth in search of a better life. It was a rushed decision that needed to be executed quickly.

Out of Tecate and riding east on federal highway 20 through the arid landscapes of rolling hill, around Mexicali and down highway 40 the two men travel until the sun starts to dampen, and the darkness unfurls like a great foe against them. The first man turns off the highway onto a dirt road to nowhere, and stops when no far-off lights are visible around them. Wordlessly he dismounts and immediately begins to remove his dusty pack from the back of his bike. He walks out to a clearing between desert bramble, takes off his helmet.

The desert air feels thankfully cool as I take off my helmet. There isn't much light left, so I set to getting the tent up as quick as I can. I'm riddled in sweat, and I can smell the fear in it. It's covered me all day, for days before. A mixture of disbelief and anxiety is manifest in my fingers as I finish the last clasps of the tent, our home now. ***Why did I do this? Why did I follow him here?***

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He comes over, drops his pack. After a few minutes he's gather enough tinder to start a small fire. It becomes the only light we see. I begin to warm my hands that are now unexpectedly chilled. He has other plans.

"I can't believe we crossed the border with these passports on us," He says as he rummages through his pack with exaggerated movements, angry.

He pulls out a passport he has hidden deep within the only remnants of his former life. He examines it beside his new passport, the passport we bought from his uncle, the career criminal. We are career criminals now.

"We have to burn them."

Methodically, I find my passport stowed carefully away in my favorite book, *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. My fake passport is the one I used to get across the border. We need the stamp, proof we are on this long journey, proof needed to get into the other countries on our way. Our real passports are liabilities now. Side by side in both my hands I have an immediate hatred of the fake one. It even feels false in my hand, heavier, like a chain. I pull out my real social security card, my birth certificate. They rustle like dead leaves in the wind.

He places his real passport in the fire with flippancy, next, his proof of birth, his card, his license.

"You can only call me Jasper from now on. Jasper Donnelly."

I look at my life in my hands, then to his now burning in the fire, then back to my life. A desire to be embrace by my mother fills me, the smell of the coconut butter shampoo in her hair, but it passes in an instant with my inability to comprehend what I've left. Feelings don't matter anymore. There is only one thing left to do now.

"Did you hear me?" His anger brings me back to the fire. He pulls a long drink from a whiskey bottle I didn't even know he had. It's half gone already. "Say your name."

"What?"

He pulls again, coughs, and spits. "Tell me you heard me. Say my name."

"Jasper," I whisper as the wind sweeps the floor of the desert under our feet.

"And yours."

I look down to the new document. A profound resignation fills me as I whisper, "Henry."

He finishes the bottle of whiskey, comes over to the log I'm sitting on and wraps his right arm around me. "I'm sorry. It's been a weird day." He nestles his face into my neck.

At first I resent him, his touch. I don't want him to touch me. I'm angry with him. There's no reason for him to become so despondent to me, so unreachable. If we don't do this together then I won't be able to do it. Going on this insane journey is difficult enough, but to now feel like I am on this journey with a stranger is too much to bear.

He doesn't relent though, and he starts to kiss my neck. I'm shocked by the realization that he has never done this before, openly kissed this soft part of me without shame, without worry. *Did we really have to come out here in the middle of nowhere to do this?*

Most of me continues to pull away from him, wanting him to feel as distant and unknown as I have since we left. My body a protest against his. My body a protest against this fucked reality I've found myself in. I'm more than angry with him. I'm angry at it all. Then the air leaves my lungs, that realization, *it all*. I give in.

As Jasper and Henry sit on the log together, the fire beside whimpers and coughs as it consumes Jasper's old documents. Jasper's face finds refuge in Henry's neck, the warmth of his skin, the stability therein. He kisses that solid place, grips Henry's face, holds on for all that he lacks. Henry grips back, holds tight. Clothes fall like dead documents around them. Naked, they fall back to the dust behind the log. At last there is a place of wetness in all that arid space, a place they find like a mirage and cling to with the fervor of survival. They roll in that wetness, as the dust sticks to their backs and thighs. Under the sleepy gaze of a wincing moon, they openly share their last remaining hope, one another. When Jasper is done, Henry drinks his last drop. All is dry again. Jasper rolls off of him, crawls to the tent. He snores within minutes as Henry gathers his scattered clothes and papers. He puts his old boxers back on, his white t-shirt, his thin jeans. Grabs a fleece from his bag and he sits back down on the log. His fingers canvass the surface of his old passport. He presses his fingers to the place on his lips where he can still feel Jasper's rough young beard. He covers his face as he slowly drops the document into the fire. The others fall without such effort. For just a moment the thin white moon is reflected on Henry's cheek, like an ember, then gone. He makes his way to the tent. They lay side by side, without touch.

When Jasper wakes up to the silvery dawn, he notices the aroma of the ocean and wonders why he didn't smell it the night before. His eyes are dry. Rubs them hard and looks over to sleeping Henry, breathing audibly. There wells up in him a grief for what he has asked of Henry, and a shame for how he has treated him since they embarked on this journey. Anger spools up within him from the reality of their predicament. Anger seethes at his old country, at his own history, the damage that has been done. He realizes that every morning from this day on he will have to come to terms with his new life.

The day is rising outside the tent as Jasper slowly zips the door closed behind him. Yellow streams of light tint the grey slowly white, as a marine layer sets a light haze across the sky. Beyond their dusty campsite, just out of sight, is the Pacific Ocean. They are a few miles from Puerto Libertad, a coastal town on the eastern shore of the Gulf of California.

As Jasper begins to make a small fire to cook breakfast, he hears a commotion in the thicket to his left. Curious, he stops what he's doing and walks over to the noise. On the other side of the bush, a plastic bag whips around violently, full of air one moment like a hot air balloon, and squashed flat next by a bird. The tussle between animal and bag goes on for some time, as the animal screams, "Keeyaarr! Keeyare!" Then the bird gives up and all is silent. Jasper stares at it, the way it's constrained by the bag, wrapped up in it. The bird looks as if it will die soon, exhausted, panting uncontrollably. Noticing the razor sharp and somehow fake looking orange beak, he wonders if he should try to help. They sit there together, looking at each other, regarding the other and estimating the threat level of physical interaction. Jasper moves slowly toward the bird. It doesn't react so he moves closer. When he gets within arms reach, he stops, and waits for the bird's approval. It simply gazes at him. With meek hands he lifts the bird and begins the difficult task of untwining it from the ribbons of torn plastic. The bag has cut small abrasions into the skin beneath the bird's grey feathers. Once removed, Jasper places the bird on the ground, wondering if the bird is injured any further.

Once on the ground, the bird jumps back, as if in a sword fight, with wings slightly lifted, head held high and back in preparation for attack. Jasper lets out a little laugh, and can't help but think the bird looks like Zorro, with its black feathers around its face like a

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bandana, and the almost cartoonish way it animated itself after having been motionless in his hands.

His laugh seems to appease the bird, as it lowers its wings, and speaks, "Kip... Kip," He almost nods at Jasper then begins to examine its body for damage. Once it is done, it hops twice and jumps into the air, flying north.

Jasper feels an instant pang of sorrow as the bird, majestic in its flight, soars away from him.

"Some thanks there, Zorro" He says aloud to the bird. The interaction with the bird means something to him, but he can't really place what. All he knows is that somehow he feels just a little better. If he had the self-awareness enough to know, he would be able to define that feeling as hope.

Zorro is an Arctic Tern, and on his way south as well, on a migration that is the largest in the animal kingdom. He is halfway on his journey from his breeding grounds in Alaska down south for the summer to the Antarctic, headed in the same direction as Jasper and Henry, filled with the same instincts, the same needs.

As Zorro flies off to find his flock Jasper heads back to the tent to get to work on his fire, a pensive smile on his face, the feel of Zorro's feathers imprinted on his skin.

I make my way back to my fire-in-progress and start putting it together. Hopefully I can get some breakfast cooked before Ca- I mean Henry wakes up. Henry. Before Henry wakes up. What was his last name again?

Today needs to be better than yesterday. It simply has to be. The fire grows slowly. With the lightweight pot full of water from the gallon jug, the boiling soon begins. First, there needs to be two cups of instant coffee, and after that the oats can go into the remaining liquid. Black coffee in two tin cups. Henry starts rustling awake. He steps out of the tent as the oats finish cooking. I pour some honey over them and hand him two cups, one of coffee and one of oats.

"Good morning," I say with a purposeful smile, feeling forced instead of authentic. He nods.

We eat in silence as we sit on two small rocks. I roll the oats around in my mouth as I try to come up with something, anything to say to him. I've never been in this place before, devoid of everything, even words. The urge to roll around in the dirt with him overcomes me. Last night was the only good thing that's happened for weeks. Even that didn't come easy.

He eats fast, finishes the coffee, and immediately begins packing up our things. What's the rush? He seems far-off, miles ahead on this journey, maybe lost. When he has the tent packed up and I begin to punch my sleeping bag into my stuff sack, he walks over to his bike and begins securing the gear to the back. After the things are secured he opens the gas tank and pulls on a piece of string. When he gets to the end of the short string he pulls out a tube. You can see the money through the clear plastic. He told me he saw it in a movie once, said that we had to bring all our money with us. After my sleeping bag is packed and I load my bike, I follow his lead, making sure that he sees that my money is still in the tank as well, doing my best to put him at ease.

He starts his bike and for some reason it feels like he's screaming at me even though he hasn't said anything all morning.

"Time to get out of here already huh?" I stop until he looks at me. When he does, those eyes, so deep and so full of emotion, I can't stand it.

He nods.

I jump on my bike and start it, cutting out onto the dirt road with angst. At the main road I take a right, accelerate up a small hill, and once I crest it I see the Gulf of California. It slows me down. Below us is a small town with a factory that has two smoking pillars.

When we make it to the water, I stop and park the bike. The water is calm and soothing as I grab the soiled dishes and make my way to wash them. As I scrub them with only my hands Henry squats down next to me and grabs two cups. His left arm brushes mine, he keeps it there as we work together.

Once we're finished, I stand up and strip down to my skivvies, leaving my clothes in a messy pile. I need to rinse this dirt and sweat off my body. Without words I run into the water, dive, and come up feeling an awesome sense of revitalization. I tread water for a few seconds before turning to see Henry jump in behind me. He swims underwater for a few moments. When he surfaces and opens his eyes I splash him in the face. He takes the bait and splashes me back, then swims toward me in a chase to dunk me, which I evade for a few strokes. When he finally dunks me I grab his feet and pull him under. We surface and pant, catching our breath as we find our rhythm of treading water.

When we climb out of the ocean we stand up together in our dripping underwear, pausing to enjoy the view. A large flock of birds passes before us, mostly in one large group, but with a few stragglers. I can't help but smile.

"I rescued a bird from a plastic bag this morning. He looked just like Zorro."

Henry looks over at me, a quizzical yet amused look on his face. He lets out a half laugh like a sigh, and shakes his head with a slight smile.

He puts his left arm around me, our wet underwear sticking together. I inhale deeply, the oxygen running like electricity through my lungs. Something between us releases.

"Where do you go when everything has been taken away from you?" His words are searching, trying to find a place to land.

I gaze off at the flock of birds, the way they soar, the way they move forward.

With some wild form of determination I look over to Henry. He looks back, expression unchanged. I smile the smile of explorers, of those who know not what they move toward but know deeply that they will find. And with all the assuredness of blind idealism and total complete faith in hope I reply,

"To Patagonia!"