Jeremiah In The Desert

by Jeff Dingler

There was a word burning in the old darkness behind my eyelids. Witness, it said. All the way out to the desert I followed it, whispering it to myself. I rented a camper, gave my wife a kiss, and drove the 2,100 miles from Brooklyn to West Texas and then looked at myself in the rearview mirror. My dark glasses and gray beard turning grayer. “Now what, old man?” I asked myself. Now what?

After driving for three days on the road, I’d built up in my head a grand reception. I thought there would be other people protesting outside. People to say, “Hey, welcome to the resistance, sign up here.” When at last I arrived at the Tornillo site, which required quite a few turn-arounds down dead-end roads, I thought maybe I hadn’t arrived at all. There was no one. Absolutely no one. And nothing to see except a bunch of fencing and flat roads and an abandoned border toll plaza where I parked my camper. The one noticeable feature was the strangely large gates into the camp, made of desert sandstone like they existed long before the concentration camp erected its fences.

I’d gone that distance to stand by the edge of a road that no one drove past. No one save camp employees and what looked like old prison buses and other vehicles loaded with migrant kids. You could never see much—a small palm pressed against a tinted window—the silhouette of a sunken head—shadows riding a bus into the darkness.

I started the Witness Facebook page, but it felt more like a journal than it did anything radical. I recorded online what I did outside the camp—the trucks of equipment that

rolled in through the old stone gates like they were prepping for Doomsday. And of course, the buses filled with human traffic, the migrant teenagers, that came mostly at dusk or night. I held up my sign to it all. The sign Clarissa had designed. FREE THEM. But I'd never felt so old, so out-of-date. Who was really seeing this FREE THEM? How to give the words the kind of energy and momentum where they could strike sparks and start a fire?

In the beginning at Tornillo, they didn't have the chain link fence covered with that green mesh that now surrounds all the camps. I could see straight through the diamonds of the fence to everything going on inside. And yet, there was almost no one to see. The front of the concentration camp was so immense, several football fields in length, that it concealed the inner workings. In the evenings, when I played my guitar in front of my camper, I wondered if the children, wherever they were hidden inside, could hear me singing, or if, like everything else, the Chihuahuan Desert carried my voice away with the yellow dust that silently filled my lungs and made me hack every morning and evening. There should've been hundreds of kids inside, but I rarely saw them from where I'd parked. Only glimpses of disappearing figures between the buildings and mammoth white tents. I began to question if I'd parked at a mirage.

Somewhere around the end of my first week there, I woke up feeling nauseous. I checked my phone and saw it was past noon, which meant I'd tossed and turned most of the night. It felt like the end was gnawing away inside me. I had the camper keys in my hands,

scraping their jagged teeth over my guitar calluses. Pack it up and head back to Brooklyn, my head told me. Come down to Tornillo? What a fool. And do what? Do what?

I sat down in the driver's seat and put the key in the ignition. Then I stopped myself. Something inside me said move, take some steps, get out of this stinking camper. So I took the key out of the ignition and stepped outside. I left the security of that abandoned toll plaza and kept walking into the desert until the fencing of the camp was all to one side of me, and I could look askance for kids inside. But I didn't see any. I walked until I heard what sounded like birds crying in the distance.

I followed these sounds along the southern side of the camp, walking until I reached a section where inside lay more of the desert-colored military tents, more than I could count in that moment, neatly clustered together, row after row. And beyond these rows was a bright green field where finally, instead of a flock of birds, I found the kids playing soccer.

"My god," I said to myself.

At first, I thought it was another mirage. Two-dozen kids running back and forth on the field that glowed eerily green in the flat desert. Maybe two-dozen more sitting on the sidelines. The kids were dressed in the same, plain tees and sweaters and pants, but they were smiling, laughing, kicking the ball as hard as they could and shouting the names of what I guessed were the stronger players. They looked maybe fifteen or sixteen in age. A tall one with big ears launched the ball straight into the goal and his team cheered. I wrapped my fingers around the links of the fencing, trying to get a closer look. A hefty

youth care worker was maybe ten feet away from me, leaning against the fence and watching the boys as they played.

“Hey you,” I asked the worker, trying to make chitchat, “is that AstroTurf?” He barely turned his head toward me. “The soccer field,” I continued, “it can’t be real grass.”

He was silent for a long moment, as if deciding whether to take me seriously, this old man appearing out of the desert to pick his brain about soccer turf. “It’s fake,” he said before turning his head and spitting into the dust. I gave up on him and paced the length of the fencing in front of the fake field, keeping my gaze on the children. After a few minutes, the curiosity over my presence on the other side had drawn a small crowd of six boys. What the hell? I thought. It’s now or never. I took a few steps closer to the fence and said “Hola” very softly to see if they would respond.

After a short silence, one said, “Hola” back. He had a square face and a very short Mohawk haircut. I asked him, “Cómo estás?”

He snuck a look at the other boys, who nodded their heads at him. “Bien,” he said.

“Yeah, en serio?”

He nodded his head again, getting a little confident like, Yeah you don’t scare me. Definitely a teenager but, I could tell, still a boy on the inside. I smiled at him and asked, “De dónde eres?” He told me Honduras. I glanced at the big-bellied worker staring off into space. I took a step closer and whispered, “Y cuánto tiempo aquí?” I thought I misunderstood him, but he repeated himself and I couldn’t believe it. Cuatro meses, he said. *Four months.* It knocked the wind out of me. I didn’t even have to ask the others

after that. Tres meses, said one with a light mustache and dark eyes. También cuatro, said another tall and skinny like a bean pole. Cinco meses, said one with a scar running slantways across his lips.

Five months! I stood agog. “En serio?” I asked the boy.

“Sí,” he said and bit down on his lip exactly where the scar formed a split. When you’re sixty-seven like me, five months is nothing. You breathe in and out and five months pass. But when you’re a teenager, that’s a big chunk of your formative life—spent in a concentration camp where you can’t even get a hug because physical contact is against the rules. I thought about the damage done to the kids being forced to stay here, the trauma, the scars that I’m sure like teenage boys anywhere they tried to conceal under a numbness that gets confused for toughness.

I noticed the Mohawk boy turn to his left and we all copied him. The worker was heading our way. “Get away from the fence,” he said, “Get away!” The boys scattered, but lingered nearby looking at me. “You,” he said, pointing at me, “you can’t talk to them!”

“Oh, hello again,” I said, “you didn’t want to chat over there.” He put his face against the fence and told me I wasn’t allowed to talk to them. “Why not,” I asked, “can you talk to them?” He wouldn’t say. “C’mon, you must be allowed to talk to them.” He turned back toward the children, pushing and shoving them away. He tried standing in front of me, but I could tell the kids didn’t respect him. More were gathering to get a glimpse of “el gringo viejo.” It made me smile. Soon the commotion attracted two boxy security guards making a beeline for my position. This scattered the boys with terrified averted gazes.

These two guards, clearly gym fanatics and dressed in tight grey uniforms, stopped in front of where I stood on the outside and glared at me. Without saying a word, they turned their massive backs, big enough to block me out, and parked themselves there. It was checkers in the desert. If I moved, they moved with me, and any child on the inside that walked past these two guys gave them a wide berth.

After another half-hour, a dust storm began to roll in, and I decided to return to my camper. As I walked away, one of the workers blew his whistle three times and the kids who'd been playing began to line up single-file. I turned to watch as the joy and childishness fell away from those teenagers. *Your phone,* my brain told me, *get it out quick and take a photo*. I was so angry I could barely hold it straight, but I got one decent shot and posted it.

The original caption said: “They keep promising it will be gone by Christmas. So far, it seems unlikely. Come, join me at the gates. Help me keep watch. Witness for yourself.” And, well, that was it. That was the post that defined it for me, my role as a Witness. It received only four reactions and four shares, but I discovered that Witnessing is kind of a quantum concept. Something changes when you observe it because seeing is subversive. Remember that, just seeing is subversive.

That post paid off in other ways. Early one steel-bright morning a day or two later, I heard someone knocking on the side of my camper. I opened the door and there stood a Latina woman, rather tall but square-shaped, maybe 40s or 50s, with her hair pulled back in a thick, black question mark of a ponytail. Under one arm, she had a basket covered with a kitchen towel. She asked if I was Jeremiah. I looked around at my dusty camper as if it were my office. “At your service,” I said. I combed back my frizzled hair and straightened my glasses.

She introduced herself as Saraí Reza then extended her hand and gave me a strong handshake. “I live in El Paso,” she said, “and do activism work up there.”

“El Paso,” I replied, “you drove all the way from El Paso?”

She smiled. “Yes, I’m Texan,” she said with some pride, “I’m used to long

drives.” I then asked her what brought her out to the lovely borderlands, and she told me a mutual friend had introduced her to my Witness page. “And you wrote in one of your posts, come join me or…come see Tornillo for yourself, something like that, so here I

am!" And she gestured with one hand at the emptiness of the ghost toll plaza where my camper was parked, the dust and sand howling. "I brought you tea and fresh fruit from El Paso," she said, "figs and pears." My eyes got wide at the mention of figs. She removed the kitchen towel and held up the basket so I could see the fruit, neatly bunched together, smelling sweet and flowery.

"Yeah…that sounds like a lovely idea," I told her. "I have an extra chair in here, let me grab it for you." I took two steps into the camper, then stopped and stuck my head out and asked again for her name.

"Saraí Reza."

"Reza… That means 'to pray,' doesn't it?"

She smiled, "Yes, you speak Spanish?"

"Un poquito," I said, not wanting to warm up this old brain too early in the morning. And without coffee. While I tore everything up inside the camper searching for the other chair, my synapses were on fire. I thought I'd been alone in the desert when I wasn't alone at all. Like a rare super bloom in a bitter wasteland, everything suddenly opened up for me. We're living in a kind of Philip K. Dick fever dream, all of us connected through a cloud of data and information swimming through the airwaves. With a few photos I could take Tornillo and those kids out of the mouth of the borderlands and show them to the world. One photo, one post at a time. One becomes two becomes four becomes eight and so on and so on. Now we've got so many volunteers, it's become a part-time job keeping track of all the schedules, making sure there isn't ever a break in the chain of Witnesses. To

think it started with a total stranger knocking on my camper parked in the desert. I laugh at how few of us there were then. But it was the right few. A precise few.

Yes, time speeds up as you age, but in some ways it also begins to dilate and slow down again, and you appreciate the smaller moments more.

I still dream about Tornillo, still think about some of the whispered conversations I had between the holes in the chain-link. In un-eyed corners, I would give a thumbs-up or a wave or a quick Cómo estás? or Cómo te llamas? Once I noticed a boy shyly following me on the other side, the fence's shadow stretching over him like a spider web with a thousand flies knotted up in it. I could tell he wanted to say something but didn't know how to start. So I snuck over and told him, "No estás solo."

And he smiled, a goofy smile with a big chip in the front tooth, and said, to my great surprise, "Exacto." *Exactly. "*Exacto amigo."