

Invisible Men

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Living twilight lives camped out beneath freeway underpasses and deep inside barely accessible canyons, a few thousand undocumented laborers hide out from the U.S. Border Patrol by night while seeking minimum-wage work by day. In this selection, **William Langewiesche** (b. 1955) goes in search of an encampment of such workers, men and women who, in his words, "occupy the lowest place in the entire United States." Telling the story of one Jesús Ruíz, Langewiesche paints an unusual portrait of hope and despair, as Ruíz and his family find in America a life that is only marginally better than the one they left behind in Mexico. A writer and journalist, Langewiesche is a correspondent for the *Atlantic Monthly*; his work, including this essay, has also appeared in *The New Yorker*. His books include *Cutting for Sign* (1993), *Sahara Unveiled* (1996), and *American Ground* (2002).

Five million people live illegally in the United States. Two million live in California alone. More than half of those are Mexican, and by the standards they left behind almost all are doing well. Many now inhabit apartments in the barrios of Los Angeles and other cities, where they can blend with the large populations of legal immigrants and walk the streets openly, without worrying about arrest and deportation. Even for those who have settled outside the safety of the barrios, it is not a bad life, warmed as it is by hard work. But there are gradations to the experience, and they are severe. At one extreme are a few thousand squatters who have scattered into the construction-torn hills of northern San Diego County. They scavenge jobs and hide in furtive groups, inhabiting cracks in the affluent suburbs and enduring ferocious new pressures from the United States Border Patrol.

There have been Mexican squatters in San Diego for at least a hundred years, and at times they have been hunted but never before so intently. Three years ago, the local authorities razed the last of the old established camps—regular shantytowns, some with shanty bars and shanty churches. And the squatters who remain in the hills today are the ones who cannot be bulldozed away. Estimates of the numbers out there range from five thousand to forty thousand. Lacking contacts and knowledge that would allow them to reach safer ground, they crouch instead in farm sheds and camouflaged scrap-wood shacks, and bear the weight of California's displeasure. There are too few of them to form an underclass, but they are the people who now occupy the lowest place in the entire United States.

They are not easy to find. I spent days in January looking for them among the colliding coastal towns—Del Mar, Encinitas, Carlsbad,

Oceanside—and east across twenty miles of fractured landscape to Escondido and the craggy mountains, which rise like a wall, imposing an end to the helter-skelter of the county's development. The search was a spiral descent through the rankings of illegal immigrants. Beyond the easily found apartment dwellers, beyond the well-housed crews on big vegetable and flower farms, I was led eventually to smaller farms, where the owners were not to know of my presence, and where the workers sometimes ran from my approach. Those workers were squatters, and felt hounded and insecure, but on private farmland they enjoyed some protection from the Border Patrol, so they lived one step above the bottom.

The bottom was a place I finally found fifty miles north of the border and just inland from the coast, in a brushy ravine known loosely as Los Olvidados, which means "the forgotten ones," although the people there were living like ghosts, unseen rather than out of mind. This ravine lay like a scar through an area of expensive residential developments with more uplifting names—La Costa, Marea, Serenata—which had spread in advancing patterns of half-million-dollar houses across the hilltops overlooking it. The houses had been painted in pastels, and given cathedral ceilings and high arched windows, and seemed so light and airy that they might have been inflated. The streets were clean. Some were protected by electric gates. The ravine, by contrast, seemed merely ugly—a steep-sided gulch about half a mile long, bisected by a high-tension power line and littered with piles of illegally dumped trash—the sort of place that San Diegans pass by and hardly see. But I had been told to stop and to notice that some of those trash piles had roofs and walls, and that the wind might carry the sound of men's soft whistles, and that on gray winter days smoke rose from campfires hidden among the stunted trees.

A rain had fallen. I clambered up an embankment and started down into the ravine, moving carefully along foot trails through the brush because I was concerned that I might be mistaken for the Border Patrol. The ravine's population was said to have been about a hundred last summer but to be fewer now. About halfway down, I heard voices and spotted a patch of tin roofing through the trees below. I was cut off by a gully and forced onto another trail, which eventually led to a windowless hut with a padlocked door. The hut seemed to have been abandoned, if only temporarily. But just down the trail beyond it I came to a larger shack that I now know as the home of Jesús Ruíz.

I called "*Buenas tardes*" from a distance and was answered quietly from the inside. The shack perched on a narrow terrace dug into the hillside fifty feet above the floor of the ravine. It was built of plywood and corrugated plastic, patched with black plastic sheeting, and held together

with nails, branches, and the frame of a wheelbarrow, which had been wedged into the dirt. Trash spilled down a steep slope below it. The bushes smelled of urine. The center of the shack was a roofed but open-sided living area, which looked out over the ravine below; it was joined at one end to a three-walled kitchen, with rough shelving and a gas burner on a plywood table, and at the other end to a windowless sleeping room about the size of a big mattress. The sleeping room had a door that could be locked with a bicycle cable.

Jesús Ruíz sat in the living area on a plastic garden chair. He was twenty-two years old—a short, Indian-looking man dressed in a wind-breaker, jeans, and untied basketball shoes. He had high cheekbones, clear eyes, and a musical voice, which imparted a peculiar quizzicality to his speech. He spoke no English. His Spanish was better than mine, but crude nonetheless: he confused *he* and *she*, and had problems with the use of the past and future tenses. This was because he was a Zapotec, from the Mexican state of Oaxaca, and he spoke primarily Zapoteco. But he was not given to conversation in any language. After he invited me in, we sat mostly in silence. He did not understand my interest in his life. He said that, like the other squatters at Los Olvidados, he was a day laborer. He found jobs by knocking on doors or standing on the streets. Usually, he worked as a gardener.

During that first visit, he did not mention the Border Patrol or deportations or his long experience with coming back across the line. All that may have seemed too obvious to him. He told me that he had moved north in 1991 and had returned to Oaxaca four times since. He might have been talking about vacation travel. He said he preferred to fly from Tijuana rather than to take the bus. When I expressed surprise, he explained impatiently that the flying was faster than the driving—five hours instead of eight days. He meant that his time was worth money. Otherwise he would have stayed in Mexico.

I was more interested in why he stayed here, under siege in Los Olvidados, instead of moving on, at least to the relative safety of a farm. He would say only that he did not like hard labor. But, as I later learned, there was more to his immobility. Like other Zapotecs in the ravine, he came from a parched mountain village called Santa Ana Yareni, five hours from the city of Oaxaca in a four-wheel drive—a place so isolated and Indian that for years it had lacked any connection to the labor market of the United States. But, beginning in 1984, many of the men there were recruited by a California flower grower who needed workers for his farm, in Somis, an hour north of Los Angeles. The Zapotecs were taken by train to Tijuana and smuggled to Somis, and there they were enslaved: held in a compound in perpetual debt, frightened into submission by

warnings about the Border Patrol, and forced to work sixteen hours a day. Some of the men eventually sought help. In 1990, a federal grand jury in Los Angeles indicted the grower on charges of slavery. The slavery charges were dropped in a plea bargain, but he pleaded guilty to corporate racketeering, as well as to labor and immigration violations, after a complex prosecution that navigated the difficult distinctions between safety and captivity, hard labor and servitude.

The Zapotec slaves had meanwhile fled south to the ravine at Los Olvidados, where a few villagers had already established themselves, because of the presence nearby of an aging hippyish couple who liked to drink and party with them. The couple had visited Santa Ana Yareni and had once taken a village elder to Marine World to "blow his mind." This was the closest thing the Zapotecs now had to a useful immigrant network in California, and it wasn't much. The trauma of the Somis slave camp had set them back at just the wrong time in American history—four years after the great immigration amnesty of 1986, and at a time when political sentiment had turned strongly against immigration. The attraction of Olvidados was at first the freedom it offered, the day-to-day choices to work at one job or another, or simply to rest in the ravine. But within a few years that freedom meant little.

Jesús Ruíz was too young to have been a slave, but he was affected by the Somis experience just the same. In 1991, his father fell to his death while planting corn on the precipitous mountain above Santa Ana Yareni. Jesús was sixteen. After the funeral, he decided to head north, and he knew of nowhere to go but Los Olvidados. In January, when I first met him, he faced the same lack of choice.

Outside his shack, a little stuffed elephant hung by its trunk on a string from a tree. Jesús said that he had three children. The first—a girl now four years old—was born in Mexico. After spending nearly a year alone with the baby, his young wife, Juana, had insisted on coming north to unite the family. "She wanted to see California," Jesús told me. "She thought everything would be easy."

In 1993, Juana took the baby on the bus to Tijuana and, after sneaking across the border, moved into the shack. Everything was not easy. Then, as now, water had to be hauled in yoked buckets down the steep slope from a ridge-top hydrant. But, aside from the threat of sudden deportation, the living conditions in the ravine were no worse than they had been within her memory in Oaxaca. Jesús wanted Juana to be realistic about coming north. "I told her, 'You have to work if you want to live here. That's the way it is in California.'" He got her a cleaning job three days a week. There were other women living in the ravine, and they helped with the baby.

But then she got pregnant with their second daughter and had to stop working. When she went into labor, Jesús took her to an emergency room and naively signed her in for a two-day stay at the hospital. The hospital did not ask about the couple's immigration status. The baby was born an American citizen, and Jesús was presented with a staggering bill for four thousand dollars. Slowly, he managed to pay it. By then, the family had moved into a two-bedroom apartment in Carlsbad with seven other Oaxacans and were beginning to live the urban lives of more typical illegal immigrants. At a vegetable-packing operation near the ravine, I met an old Oaxacan peasant with a pencil mustache and a straw hat, who described the horror not of such overcrowding but of the unnatural vertical stacking that is part of apartment life—the footsteps above and the quarrelling below, the distance from the sweet soil. Jesús and Juana were less attached to the land, but they realized that they were saving no money. In 1996, they returned to Los Olvidados. Jesús assured me that Juana did not mind. When she got pregnant again, she enrolled in a prenatal program, which cut the medical bill in half. The family's third child and its second American citizen, a boy, was born last September.

One rainy afternoon in November, 1997, when the new baby was two months old, the Border Patrol raided the ravine. Jesús was returning on his bicycle when he spotted the vans parked on the nearby streets. He could do nothing to help his family, and he slipped away. The Border Patrol agents closed in on the ravine, moving heavily down the trails with their radios squawking. They were preceded by a chorus of whistles and warning cries: "*La Migra!*," short for *Inmigración*. The agents were slowed by the slickness of the ground, and, as a result, almost everyone in the lowland escaped. Juana, up on the steep hillside, had her babies to think of and could not run. A cousin who also lived in the ravine was visiting her. The two women shut themselves into the darkness of the sleeping room and tried to soothe the children. 15

The United States Border Patrol is not a timid organization. In San Diego County, where a third of its sixty-eight hundred agents are deployed, there were more than a quarter of a million apprehensions and arrests in fiscal 1997 alone. That number is about half of what it was just two years earlier—a reduction that now seems to be undeniably the result of a tough new defensive effort initiated in October, 1994, throughout San Diego County, and especially along the critical fourteen miles of border facing Tijuana. The effort, dubbed Operation Gatekeeper, is based on an increase in fences, surveillance, and front-line patrols, and also on a new commitment to patrolling north of the border. Within the confines

of San Diego County, the operation has been a success. Its national significance is harder to judge. Critics say that illegal immigrants are simply bypassing the operation by moving a few miles to the east or that, more ominously, apprehensions are down because the new defenses have forced a professionalization of the border crossing, which, in turn, means that the flow has become smarter and more difficult to stop. But Border Patrol agents are not prone to indulge in such doubts. San Diego is their sacred ground, and the success of Gatekeeper, however narrow, has at last given them a scent of victory.

In Los Olvidados, the squatters imitate the heavily burdened agents yelling "Stop running, you Mexican motherfuckers!" and they boast about their own taunting responses of "*Chinga tu madre!*" It is not just a word game. The agents do sometimes club people, and they separate families during deportation and deliver terrified peasants by the thousand to the predators who inhabit the filthy streets of the Mexican border cities. Nevertheless, the Border Patrol is not, as its critics claim, an inherently abusive organization. Its arrests are routinely softened by a grudging respect between the pursuers and the pursued. In rare cases, this may lead agents simply to let people go. I'm guessing here because no one will admit to such acts of grace. But when two rain-soaked agents finally got to Jesús' shack they found a frightened family inside, and after hearing that the babies were Americans they turned and went away. Still, Jesús had to assume that next time the outcome would be different. He had been captured twice already in 1997 and deported to Tijuana. This was not how he wanted to rear his children.

In the end, it was the talk of El Niño as much as the increasing pressure from the Border Patrol that drove the family apart. Even before the seasonal rains started, many of the women and children in the lowland had gone scurrying for shelter—some to local apartments but most back home to Mexico. After the November raid, the last of them left. The rain kept falling. Jesús reinforced the shack, but by early December the solitary living had become too hard for Juana. Jesús bought airline tickets for Mexico City and sent the family off to live there with a cousin. The departure left only two women in Los Olvidados—a toothless Chihuahuan, who slept in a tree house with a vicious little dog, and a peroxidized hooker who frequented a colony of heavy drinkers on the far hillside. From Mexico City, Juana sent Jesús a note in Spanish, which he taped to the sleeping-room door: "Specially for you my love. I always want to be close to your side, but it is not easy. Night and day I think of you because I feel a coldness in my heart that you are not in my arms in order to hold you and to kiss your sweet lips. I love you and I miss you, but destiny has made us be apart from one another. The end."

I asked Jesús why Juana had not moved back to Santa Ana Yareni. He said that there was nothing for them there. I asked about their future. He said that it lay on the outskirts of Mexico City, where, with the money he would save now, he might eventually buy a piece of land and build a one-room house. It was something permanent to work toward. But I am not sure he really believed in it. He would be lucky to make three dollars a day in Mexico. His retirement plan was simply to grow old so he wouldn't have to eat much. He told me that he would visit his family in the summer of 1999, and that he would stay for two months before leaving again for California.

I said, "It's hard."

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He said, "It's life."

Still, I wondered why he did not acknowledge his troubles. Was it politeness? Naïveté? A sense of privacy? For nearly two weeks, I kept coming back to talk to him. Only with time could I get him even to admit that within the ravine there is crime, that hard drugs are used, that men get crazy drunk and fight and set their shacks on fire, that men get sick and babies die, that the shacks are burglarized, that skinheads threaten Zapotecs on the street, that Chicano gangs attack and rob them within the ravine, that a man must be ready to run at all times, that capture by the Border Patrol is a serious setback. All this I had to learn first from other men. But Jesús had made a commitment to endure here illegally, and he insisted that it was the right commitment, and I came to realize that he described his life to himself as he described it to me. Only once, at night, over a beer that had slurred his speech, did he come close to expressing regret. He showed me a guitar, and said he was learning to play it. I asked him why, and he said, "So I'm not just hanging around crying." And even then he was not maudlin. He told me, too, that he enjoyed listening to music, especially *norteño* ballads—stories in song about love and violence and life underground in the United States. I noticed that Jesús had taken Juana's note off the door. We were not friends, but we could talk if I did not insult him with pity.

One step higher in the underground life, I found my way to a different group of squatters, who, because they had a little something to lose, were concerned that I not identify them by name. The group consisted of a dozen farmworkers who were mestizos from Michoacán. I spent several cold nights with them, huddled around a smoky wood-burning heater built of two fifty-gallon drums stacked horizontally and welded together. The men lived in a derelict chicken shed on a family farm that nestled against the steep slopes of the eastern mountains, about an hour from the coast.

The farm grew avocados. Most of the remaining farms in San Diego County are just such family operations, unable to survive without illegal workers. There are big farms, too, but, like those elsewhere in California, they tend by now to hire legal workers, often unionized, and to house them more or less correctly. The small farmers are not necessarily bad people, but they lack the economies of scale. Rather than comply with burdensome regulations pertaining to the living conditions of farmworkers (whether illegal immigrants or not), they have simply dropped out of the system. For them, the beauty of the arrangement is its deniability. Near Escondido, a flower grower said to me of his own foreman, "Manuel? Manuel? No, I don't know no Manuel. If you mean one of those wetbacks who come walking through here, I've got nothing to do with them." We understood each other perfectly. It was early evening, and he had studiously turned his back on the men who were settling into the shell of a wrecked greenhouse. Many other farmers similarly turn their backs. Their men become "trespassers," for whom they cannot be held responsible. And then, of course, every morning the farmers turn around and hire the same "trespassers," having at some point gone through the motions of checking their immigration documents.

The avocado grower who employed the workers in the chicken shed did not know that I had been talking to them. I asked his permission only afterward, and he found a way to deny it. But I liked him. He was a hard, flat-bellied man of nearly seventy, a classic California grower—silver-haired, tanned, handsome, a Ronald Reagan type. He called his softer friends "puss guts." And he had a sense of humor. He said, "Fifteen pickers show up one morning, but only one's got papers, so I have to tell the others I'm real sorry but I can't use them. What happens? Two hours later, they show up again, and this time they've all got papers. There's only one problem—every one of these fellas was born on the same day, and every one of them crossed the border at the exact same time." He shrugged. The law did not require him to be an expert. 25

He thought of himself as a good employer. He told me he would never ask his workers to do something that he himself couldn't do. That was not necessarily a reassuring thought. He had hired college students on summer break, but they couldn't keep his pace for more than a morning. He had hired high-school athletes, but they didn't know how to dig or hammer. And that was in the past—the situation was worse today, of course. Finding Americans of any description had become practically impossible. He thanked God for the Mexicans, who came begging for the jobs and were strong pickers and knew how to dig and hammer and didn't whine or complain. He described what they went through, hour after hour, climbing the steep slopes of the groves carrying hundred-pound

bags of easily bruised avocados. "You ought to try it," he said, eyeing me skeptically.

He said he got good work from the Mexicans by staying on them all the time. He liked Rush Limbaugh. He disliked the ACLU. But he also disapproved of the way some of the local farmers treated their men, and he included his own brother in that category. He pointed out that the chicken shed was a chicken shed no longer, and that he provided the workers there with power and running water and that when they remembered to remind him he replenished their gas, so they could have hot showers as well. He thought he treated them fairly.

The men in the chicken shed didn't exactly disagree. They said the farmer was tough and explosive, but if they went about their work correctly, he left them alone. They knew about living conditions at neighboring places, which were dark and brutishly cold. They had found this farm through their friends and had been coming here for years. The advantage of the job was the relative security it offered—an approximate assurance that there would be work on most days and that without a warrant or the farmer's permission the Border Patrol could not come onto the property and take the workers away. This farmer had mixed emotions about illegal immigrants and wanted those in the cities to be rounded up, but he did not like the Border Patrol, and for thirty years he had kept its agents off his land. So the chicken shed, however leaky its roof, was in the most important sense a good shelter.

I asked the men about the financial details of the job. They said that they made the minimum wage, but that after deductions for taxes and Social Security it amounted to less than five dollars an hour. They used phony Social Security numbers and knew they would never see that money again. They were paid by check every two weeks, and if they did well they earned about nine thousand dollars a year, of which they might mail six thousand dollars in money orders to their families in Mexico. Sometimes they carried cash when they returned to Mexico, but hemmed into their clothes because of shakedowns by the Mexican customs officials and the police. Within Mexico, they preferred to travel by air not merely for speed but for altitude: it allowed them to fly over all such risks of the road. I told them that I was familiar with the habit from traveling in Africa. They asked me if life in Africa was truly harder than in Mexico, and I answered that, yes, in general it seemed to be.

We got back to life in San Diego. The chicken shed had a Coke machine outside and a television somewhere. The men slept on wooden bunks in tangles of coats and blankets, and did their cooking on two old gas stoves. Every day, a *lonchero* drove up in an aluminum-sided catering truck to sell hot drinks and groceries and a few clothes—and also, quietly,

perhaps beer, penicillin, and marijuana. *Loncheros* gain exclusive rights to farm encampments. The term, which derives from *lunch*, understates their importance to the besieged workers: by delivering the necessities (which include check-cashing and loans) to places like the chicken shed, they allow the squatters the choice of remaining within the boundaries of their refuge for weeks at a time. Later, when I talked to the farmer's wife, she expressed confusion at the men's allegiance to their *lonchero*. She had offered to do their grocery shopping for them at a store called Smart & Final, and they had refused. But, of course, grocery shopping was all she would have done for them, and they knew it.

To the men in the shed, the Border Patrol's Gatekeeper operation felt like a storm outside. One night during my stay, a man arrived after five days of crossing the border on foot. He had joined a guided group that intended to skirt the defenses by taking a bus thirty miles east from Tijuana. The group crossed the border, but within a few miles it was surprised by a roving team of Border Patrol agents. The man ran, and during the following nights he made his way north, navigating by the lights of airline flights. It hadn't always been so hard. One of his friends in the shed said, "You can tell they're looking for different ways to keep people down." I disagreed, saying, "I think they're looking for ways to keep people out." But that was an argument about intent.

The fear outside the farm was palpable. One night, I went up a dirt road into a canyon where prostitutes gather every Monday to provide the workers with sex. Because the farmers don't want prostitutes on their land, the men are forced to emerge into the open. That night, about thirty men had taken the risk. The prostitutes were Mexicans and worked in shifts arranged by age, starting with the oldest, who were perhaps in their midtwenties. The women carried cardboard to lie on and transacted their business quickly in the darkness—fifteen dollars for the basic, twenty-five without a condom. A *lonchero* had arrived to sell beer and music tapes, but it was a bad party. The canyon had been raided the night before, and the men were extremely nervous, startled by every flicker of light or unexpected footstep on gravel. "*Aguas!*" they kept hissing, which means "Look out!"

Back at the chicken shed, the squatters acknowledged the relief they felt upon returning to their refuge. I told them about Jesús Ruíz and the day laborers of Los Olvidados—people who had found no such shelter. They knew all about that kind of life. They told me about migrants who had lived nearby in a clay cave beside the Pala River until one rainy day the cave collapsed and killed them. The story was about gradations. There are two kinds of squatters in San Diego. The farmworkers did not feel privileged to live in a chicken shed, but they were glad not to have been buried alive.