

## **“Boundless Road” by Ariel Urquiza**

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“Is it me or is the truck making noise?” the passenger asked.

“It’s this shitty road,” the driver replied. “All these damn rocks.”

“The Dodge is hopping,” the passenger said, looking in the rearview mirror, “like a frog. It’s weird they gave El Coyote the new Dodge today. He’s going to total it. He has no clue how to drive on an unpaved road. Hell, he has no clue how to drive on asphalt! And I bet El Gota doesn’t have the balls to ask him for the wheel.”

The driver didn’t seem to be listening. He looked annoyed, as if he hated driving down that endless road that parted the desert in two. On the left, a reddish, rugged mesa. On the right, gray flatlands littered with stones that reflected varying tones in the sunlight.



*“Shadow Play” photograph from ultrajet.com.*

“You always drive the Dodge,” the passenger said. “What happened this time?”

“El Coyote asked me for it,” said the driver. He shrugged his shoulders. “It doesn’t matter to me.”

“Did I tell you about the time El Coyote was driving and these gendarmes started chasing us? It was in Bolivia, in Santa Cruz de la Sierra.”

“Bolivia doesn’t have gendarmes.”

“What do you mean they don’t? In Santa Cruz they do. We were on a boulevard in downtown Santa Cruz with these gendarmes chasing us in a truck. El Coyote crashed into six or seven cars and then we ended up on the sidewalk. Luckily, we were armed to the teeth and used our vehicle as a barricade. We pumped that truck full of lead.”

The driver didn’t say anything. He cleared his throat, rolled down the window, spit out onto the road, and rolled it back up. Some dirt flew into the cabin. He waved his hand, as if trying to brush away the dust. Just then he noticed that the passenger had lowered his head into his hands. He was crying silently. Only the spasmodic movement of his skinny shoulders revealed that he was weeping. The driver was about to say something, but he chose not to and returned his attention to the road before him.

The passenger pulled himself together and turned to look out the window.

“Alright, alright. It was nothing,” he said after letting out a long sigh. “Look at those hills. Those colors.”

The driver didn’t look at the hills but rather at the passenger. He gave him a sidelong, grave glance, and raised his eyebrows.

“This road is long as fuck,” he said, probably just to say something, and slapped the wheel with his hand.

“I like the desert,” said the passenger. “It reminds me of when I was a kid. When my brothers and I got into trouble, my grandmother would say that she was going to leave us out in the desert so the sun could cleanse us of our sins. Imagine all the sun I would need at this point in my life.”

The driver took his hand from the gearshift and slid the seat back to give himself more room. When he finished adjusting it, he turned on the radio but couldn’t tune anything in.

“It’s been two years since this piece of shit hasn’t worked and they still haven’t fixed it,” he said. Still, he kept turning the knob from one end of the dial to the other, until he gave up and turned it off.

“Poor grandma,” said the passenger, not giving the silence a chance to grow. “When she was an old woman, she sat by her front door and stayed there all day. There comes a time when life is nothing more than memories, she used to say, and what measly things memories are.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I don’t know. Just small talk. I don’t know. I really don’t know. Did you hear that? My stomach is growling.”

"We'll have ourselves a hell of a meal when we get to Orán," said the driver.

"Yeah, well, it's not that I'm hungry. I don't know why my belly is making that noise. Besides, Orán is still a long way off."

"Yeah, it is."

The metallic-blue Dodge Ram that followed them sped up sometimes and seemed about to pass them, only to slow down and fall behind, becoming a brilliant dot in the rearview mirror.

"To think that we've worked together for years," said the passenger, "but we've never really talked, have we?"

The driver didn't answer; not a single muscle on his face moved. Only his eyes did, every now and then, to look for the Dodge in the mirror.

"Am I wrong?" asked the passenger.

"We've talked a few times. Sure we have."

"But with other people around. Just the two of us, almost never. I don't even know where you're from. From your accent, I'd guess Buenos Aires."

"I was born in Venado Tuerto," said the driver.

"Where's that?"

"South of Santa Fe."

"Well, I wasn't too far off," said the passenger. "I'm from San Juan."

"Obviously."

"You knew that?"

"Everyone knows you're from San Juan."

"Not everyone. The President doesn't know. And I don't think the boss does, either."

"What do you mean? He has to know."

"What does he know," said the passenger, looking out the window. He remained lost in thought, contemplating the scenery. His lips, barely separated, gave way to a flaccid smile. In the midst of all the desert, a green strip appeared over the horizon, and as they approached, it stretched out like a road that ran perpendicular to the dirt and gravel path they were on.

"What are you laughing at now?" the driver asked.

"Nothing. I don't know. At life."

The driver glanced at him for an instant and returned his gaze to the road. Now he looked more disgusted than grave.

“At life,” repeated the passenger.

“I can’t wait till we get to Orán.”

“Fuck off with the Orán business. We both know we’re not going to Orán.”

“Oh, no? Where are we going then?”

The passenger didn’t answer.

“We were supposed to go last week,” said the driver. “I don’t think they’ll be very happy with us.”

“If you say so.”

In the rearview mirror, the driver saw that the Dodge had fallen way behind and he slowed down. There were no other vehicles on the road.

“Don’t tell the others,” said the passenger.

“Don’t tell them what?”

“What do you think? About my turning on the waterworks back there.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t ever tell them. Not now, not ever.”

“I won’t say a word about it ever.”

“Thanks. And I want you to know that I don’t hold this against you.”

The driver fidgeted in his seat.

“Hold what against me?”

“Nothing. I just wanted you to know that.”

They fell silent, listening to the sound of rocks hitting the chassis.

“My grandma was right. What measly things memories are,” said the passenger, and he rummaged for something in his pocket. The driver shifted his eyes off the road and looked at him in alarm, until he saw him pull out a wallet, and from the wallet a photo.

“Look at how beautiful she is,” said the passenger, showing him the photo.

“Who’s that?”

“My eldest daughter. She’s eight.”

“Put it away, will you? Come on, man, put it away already!”

“What’s with you? I can’t even show you a photo of my daughter?”

The driver shook his head, as if he couldn’t believe what was happening.

“Forgive me,” said the passenger, “I didn’t mean to make things harder on you. I just wanted to share something. There’s so much that runs through someone’s head at a time like this, you know?”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know.”

“If you’ve got so many things running through your head, why don’t you just shut up, at least for a while.”

“For that very reason. I don’t think I have to explain it to you.”

The Dodge began to flash its lights at them. Again and again. And although the sun dominated the desert, they could both see the lights. They looked in the rearview mirror and saw them.

“It’s nice here,” said the passenger. “Especially this spot. Take a look. It’s like a painting, see?”

“I already told you, I don’t like the desert.”

The Dodge honked at them.

“The boss doesn’t know me. He doesn’t know the kind of man I am,” said the passenger. “My only flaw is that I’m too trusting. I trusted Carrasco, and now it’s clear you can’t trust anyone.”

The driver didn’t pay him any attention. He continued to slow down until he came to a stop by the side of the road. The Dodge pulled over right behind them.

“I think El Coyote wants to talk to you,” said the driver. “Why don’t you get out and see what he wants?”

“I don’t think he has anything to say to me. I know him well, El Coyote. He’s not getting out of that truck. Not him, not El Gota.”

For the first time during the trip, the driver looked the passenger straight in the eyes.

“Get out,” he said.

“Can I leave my wallet? More than anything because of the photos and that sort of thing. I’d rather leave them here.”

The driver assented. The passenger pulled out several photos from his wallet and kissed each one. Then he put them away again.

“What are you looking at me like that for?” he said. “As if you don’t know I’m unarmed.”

“Come on, let’s get out of the truck already.”

They both stepped outside. The others stayed in the Dodge, no longer flashing lights or honking.

“Let’s move away from the road,” said the driver, tilting his head toward the desert.

They walked on a reddish surface, a mix of clay and sandstone. Now and then the passenger lifted his arms up and the arid, cold wind puffed up his shirt. The driver stayed a step behind, occasionally looking at the passenger’s narrow, somewhat stooped back, and at other times lowering his head to see how the clay was dirtying his boots.

When the driver stopped walking, the passenger half turned and looked at him.

“Keep walking,” the driver said. “A bit more, go on.”

“Forgive me if I made you uncomfortable. It can’t be easy being in your shoes.”

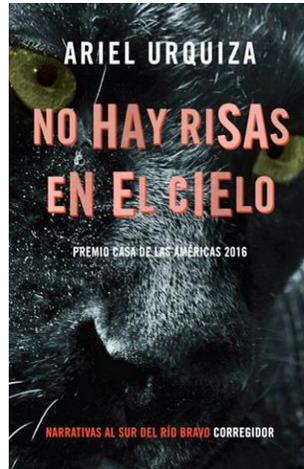
“Go on, walk.”

“I don’t want to get tired.”

“Quit fooling.”

“I wanted to make it easy for you, but have it your way,” said the passenger, as he moved away.

It was then that the driver pulled out his pistol and clicked off the safety. For a while he kept the passenger in his sights, like someone waiting for just the right moment to snap a photo. He saw the passenger walking slowly, his back to the sun, following his shadow into the vastness of the desert.



*Translated by Dario Bard from “El camino sin orillas” as printed in No hay risas en el cielo, published by Corregidor, 2016, available from [Cúspide](#). The original Spanish version of this story was also published in [Página 12](#).*

*Ariel Urquiza is a writer and translator born in Tres Arroyos, Province of Buenos Aires, who presently resides in the City of Buenos Aires. His literary debut, No Hay Risas en el Cielo (published by Casas de las Americas in Cuba under the title Ni una sola voz en el cielo), won the 2016 Casa de las Americas prize for the best short story collection of the year. An earlier, unpublished novel, Ya pueden encender las luces, was a finalist for the Third Eugenio Cambaceres Prize awarded by Argentina’s National Library. Urquiza’s writings have also appeared in various anthologies, literary journals and newspapers. For interviews and reviews, visit his personal blog, [Ariel Urquiza](#).*

*In this video, Urquiza appears on Canal Iberoamericano to briefly discuss the Casa de las Americas prize and the issue of drug trafficking, the central theme of No hay risas en el cielo (in Spanish).*

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