I follow him downstairs in silence. We step into a room with no windows and just enough space for the two of us to stand without our hands touching. He opens the gun safe and shows me his Sakos and Berettas, lets me hold one. But we didn’t come here for those and he puts the guns back in the safe and locks it. Floor-to-ceiling shelves are packed with accessories: vests he wears on hunting trips, several canisters of insect repellant, binoculars; then rows of screwdrivers, wrenches, pliers. The narrow desk in the center holds a scale and some sort of a metal instrument with a lever. He pulls out a chair and I sit, my eyes scanning the boxes of cartridges and many things he will name for me: empty casings, primers, oils, smokeless powder, and projectiles. He will teach me what each does, how they all fit together. I ask about a pair of metallic gold markers I notice on the desk in front of me and he says they are for coloring silver cartridges, to make them look like new. I now understand why I am here.

He stands behind me, points at the materials, and tells me how to do it: Roll the brass shell on a sponge-like pad smeared with a lubricant. Place the shell in the press fitted with a sizing die. Pull down the lever of the press to pop out the old primer and resize the shell. Clean the primer pocket to get rid of carbon left over from the last shot. Trim the brass casing. Pick up the cone-shaped metal instrument—he calls it the chamfer tool—and smooth the inside edge of the shell, then the outside, to
remove the burr. “This step is important,” he says: it prevents the bullet getting jammed in the chamber when you load the gun.

I work slowly, carefully. It feels like playing with matches. I pour the gunpowder into the container on the scale and enter “.45 g.” That’s grains, not grams; one grain is about fifteen times lighter than a gram. The scale is so precise that adding just two or three powder kernels will change the measurement. He wants me to see this, so I drop a few extra kernels, watch the number rise, then scrupulously remove them. I pour the gunpowder into the brass shell, put the shell back into the press, seat the bullet on top and hold it with my left hand as I press the lever with the right to crimp it.

I pick it up—my first cartridge. About the size of a chile de árbol rolling in my palm. Then I put it aside and follow the procedure again, this time a little faster. He watches patiently and when I pause reminds me what to do. Those who do this regularly can reload about a hundred cartridges in one afternoon. It takes me what seemed like an hour to make four.

Later, I will learn that .308 Winchester is the ammunition of choice for military and police sniper rifles. It is the civilian version of the 7.62 × 51mm NATO round that American soldiers fed their M14s in Vietnam, that the Mexican Army still used at the turn of this century to load their G3s. Longer and more powerful than the same diameter cartridge used by AK-47s, it can hit a human-size target half a mile away, and SWAT snipers rely on its accuracy to penetrate the skulls of hostage takers. But the ones I made are not meant for people. They will most likely kill deer or antelope. Maybe an elk. Possibly a boar. Each weighs just twenty-four grams. Like five sheets of copy paper.

When I stand up to leave, I don’t take them with me. They are material evidence that could implicate him, implicate me. By now I am used to this—not keeping anything. Not taking pictures. Not taking down people’s names. When I write about them, I call them by names I invented for them when I scribbled their number or directions to find them in my notebook. Those are the only names I remember. Some people, though, don’t even get fake names. But I can assure you that they, too, exist.

There is a principle in storytelling that suggests that noticeable details should be integrated into the plot. It is known as “Chekhov’s gun.” The Russian author advised young playwrights that if a gun appeared in the first act, it should be fired by the third. But that’s not how it works in Mexico. The way borderland journalist Charles Bowden put it: “In
Mexico, the gun may never appear, can be fired at any moment and a body will fall to the floor with no explanation. . . . Your life will have a narrative arc and in the third act you will be killed. But no one will hear the gun go off. And no one will know why you died. And more and more often no one will know who you are.”1
Before I saw the guns, I saw the wounds.

The young man sat on the bench in front of me and, after looking around to make sure nobody else was listening, leaned closer. His voice, barely louder than a whisper, blended in with the hum of a large industrial fan pushing hot desert air around the building with makeshift walls and corrugated metal roof. He said his name was Raúl and that he was from Acapulco, the resort city on Guerrero’s Pacific Coast.1 He fled after men wearing balaclavas forced his father into a truck and then dumped his decapitated body onto the street. He said he had HIV and had run out of antiretrovirals. I met Raúl and many others—men, women, children; Mexican, Salvadoran, Honduran—at the aid center for migrants steps away from the US border in Nogales, Sonora, where I was providing basic medical aid as a volunteer. They came with blisters on their feet, infected wounds, fever; without their insulin or other medications. Trying to outpace fear and not lose hope along the way.

That was eight years ago. Before President Trump ordered miles of new walls to be built. Before the Covid-19 pandemic and Title 42. Before I cared to know the difference between 9mm and 7.62.

When in the summer of 2022 I returned to Nogales, the medical clinic had moved to a separate room with floor-to-ceiling cabinets full of supplies at the new spacious migrant center across the street from the old one. Alejandra was sitting on the chair by the closed door while I poured red gooey Tylenol syrup into plastic cups and handed them to each of her
three small children. “Threats started coming,” she said, sharing tiny pieces of her story. This family, like Raúl years earlier, had come from Guerrero, and so did many others I spoke to that day. They were farmers and taxi drivers, cooks and craftsmen, who had fled their home when they could no longer pay extortion fees, when gunmen came to take away their cattle, burned their mango orchards, when their neighbors and relatives were killed or disappeared. “There is no law,” Alejandra said. There was nowhere they could turn for protection. Some had tried, went to the police, only to start receiving threats from them too. So they packed what they could carry and headed toward the US border.

Not everyone talked about the reasons they were fleeing Mexico. At the clinic, we didn’t ask them to say more about themselves than they wanted, focusing instead on what little we could do for them. But they didn’t even have to say anything. Their bodies—exhausted, dehydrated, marked by scars—were evidence that something back home had gone seriously awry for them to risk their lives on the journey north.

Raúl and Alejandra joined more than forty-five thousand Mexicans who applied for asylum in the United States over the past two decades. Fewer than six thousand people were granted it. Many crossed the border without asking for permission, knowing they would not qualify because the kind of violence they were fleeing from was not included in the mid-twentieth-century conventions still governing international humanitarian law. In 2021, US Border Patrol apprehended over 655,000 Mexicans—more than they had seen in years. In 2022, that number rose to over eight hundred thousand. That is more than the population of Boston. Or of San Francisco. As soon as the agents dropped them south of the border, many tried to cross again. And they would continue, until they made it or died trying.

I knew what guns could do to human bodies. As an EMT and paramedic, I had been on calls involving drive-by shootings and still have flashbacks of the scrambles inside the ambulance when our team, squeezed around the gurney, tried to save a life: starting IV lines, running fluids and pushing medications, inserting plastic tubes into tracheas to deliver air to the lungs, with lights and sirens on speeding toward the closest ER. But none of what we did mattered once the patient had lost too much blood, so we had to stop the bleeding first. And that meant feeling the body with our gloved hands to find the exit wounds.

“Always look for the exit wound,” our instructors in paramedic school kept telling us. Even though they knew the frantic reality in the
back of the ambulance, they made it sound elementary. The entry wound, where the bullet pierces the body, is usually round or oval and has an abrasion ring. An exit wound, in contrast, is typically larger and more irregular in shape. Due to the stretching force of the bullet overcoming the resistance of the skin, it resembles a starburst. Because the projectile never travels straight, finding the exit wound was important. It helped us understand its trajectory through the body, and suspect which organs may have been impacted, guiding our actions. Did the bullet pierce a major artery, causing critical internal bleeding that required a blood transfusion? Did it puncture a lung and we should prepare for a chest decompression? Not finding one was equally significant. No exit wound meant the bullet was still inside the body, inching its way forward through soft tissue and bone.

Locating exit wounds also has legal implications. When evaluating patients with firearm-related injuries, emergency physicians are asked to distinguish between entry and exit wounds in order to provide clues in the investigation of a crime. The appearance of the wound depends on the caliber of the weapon used, the distance from which it was fired, and the angle at which the bullet entered the body, among other factors, which makes interpreting one difficult. In legal proceedings, however, the distinction becomes critical evidence. It confirms the testimonies witnesses share in court, supports narratives of crime scene investigators, establishes the truth of what occurred: Was the victim facing the perpetrator or were they shot in the back? Were they murdered or did they kill themselves? These were not the kinds of questions that mattered to paramedics while we were attending to the injured, but knowing they could arise in the courtroom we had to be mindful about what we wrote in patient care reports we completed before we left on the next call. Further investigation of the wounds was not our job—that would often be done by forensic pathologists performing autopsies and even they couldn’t always tell an entry from an exit wound. As paramedics, we rarely learned the stories of the people we rushed to the ER—not why they were shot, nor if they survived.

By the time I began research on gun trafficking, several years had passed since my last shift on an ambulance, but what I was doing felt familiar—I was looking for exit wounds. Although firearms injure and kill individuals, whose bodies absorb the lethal force of the projectile, gunshot wounds reverberate through the community. The impact of a bullet exceeds the punctures and scars it leaves on the human body, penetrating social fabric, creating collective damage shared by families,
neighborhoods, and passed from the present to future generations. The effects of guns are physical and social, material and political. Tracing these injuries requires peeling back legal ideologies and official state narratives that circumscribe how we think and talk about firearms. It entails finding and feeling the rough edges of the starburst that US firepower has left on the body politic bisected by the border.

We often hear that gun violence in the United States has reached alarming levels. The number of mass shootings—incidents in which four or more people are wounded—has been going up: Since 2020, there have been approximately two such events every twenty-four hours. Each day, more than a hundred Americans die from firearm injuries—over half of them by suicide. Having surpassed vehicle accidents, gun violence is now the leading cause of death for children in the United States. We know that Black communities have been disproportionately affected by widespread use of firearms: Black Americans are ten times more likely to be killed with guns than White Americans and they are three times more likely to be fatally shot by police. Data show that, in the past five years, 20 percent of US residents have experienced gun violence, or have a family member or a friend who has. Although firearm injuries kill fewer people than heart disease, cancer, or opioid overdose, social and psychological effects of the ubiquitous presence of guns in this country are incontrovertible. A survey by the American Psychological Association conducted in 2019 found that a third of Americans are so concerned about mass shootings that their fear prevents them from attending public events, and going to shopping malls, schools, and movie theaters.

This gun violence epidemic doesn’t stop at the border: Firearms sold in the United States also threaten and hurt people abroad—in Canada, the Caribbean, Brazil, Central America. But there is one country in particular which has been on the receiving end of American firepower with devastating effects—that’s our southern neighbor, Mexico.

The official counts are well known and repeated often: the quantity of firearms—sold, recovered, traced, destroyed; and the number of people—injured, disappeared, dead. Sometimes these numbers are put next to each other. Like figures in the Harper’s Index, the facts, distilled into percentages and sum totals, highlight contrasts, which raise questions:

Number of people killed in Mexico in 2019: 35,588
Number of people killed in the United States in 2019: 16,425
Murder rate per 100,000 people in Mexico in 2019: 28.74\(^{15}\)
In the United States: 5.07
Percentage of homicides in Mexico committed by firearm in the 1990s: 10\(^{16}\)
In 2018: 69\(^{17}\)
Number of gun stores in US states bordering Mexico: 9,940\(^{18}\)
Number of gun stores in Mexico: 2\(^{19}\)
Percentage of firearms recovered at crime scenes in Mexico originally purchased in the United States: 70\(^{20}\)
Lowest estimated number of US firearms smuggled across the Mexican border annually: 200,000\(^{21}\)
Number of outbound firearms seized by US agents on US-Mexico border in 2019: 189\(^{22}\)
Seized by Mexican customs: 122\(^{23}\)

In Mexico, as in the United States, gun ownership is a constitutional right. But while this right is nearly absolute in the United States, where federal gun laws are few and weak—almost anyone can buy an unlimited number of firearms of any caliber—it is much more attenuated in Mexico, where the government regulates how many and what type of guns and which citizens are allowed to have them, severely limiting domestic circulation of weapons and ammunition. This legal asymmetry between neighboring countries has created a thriving black market of firearms: In Mexico, organized crime groups that fight over drug trafficking routes, as well as citizens faced with increased levels of violence in the country, where they are unable to trust law enforcement to protect them, pay smugglers to bring them guns from one or another of the thousands of gun stores and pawn shops just north of the border, usually in Texas and Arizona, but also farther away: in Florida, Arkansas, Minnesota.\(^{24}\) Although the numbers are mere estimates—nobody knows how many firearms and how much ammunition illegally crosses the US-Mexico border annually—the southbound flow of weapons is copious enough to merit being called an “iron river.”\(^{25}\)

Raúl, Alejandra, and many others who walked through the doors of the migrant aid center in Nogales, had traveled for thousands of miles to flee from various armed groups. The distinction between those labeled “organized crime” and those wearing uniforms with the insignia of the state, whether police or military, was irrelevant to them. It