

14 September 2019

PHOTO ESSAY

# The American Dream

The cruel and confusing US immigration process strips people of everything they have

BY TOM KIEFER



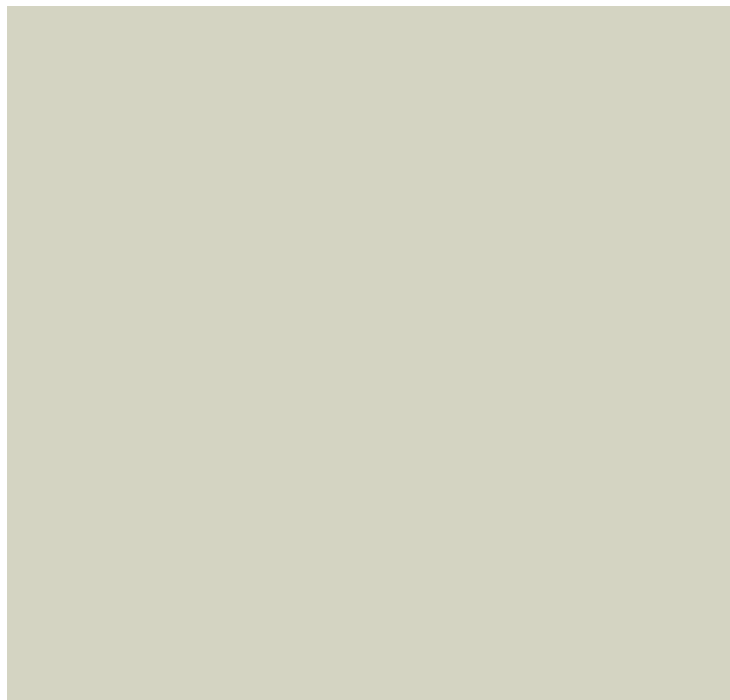
“El Sueño Americano” documents the belongings of

“E migrants and smugglers discarded at a US Customs and Border Patrol facility near the US/Mexico border in southern Arizona.

It was during my fourth year working as a janitor at a Customs and Border Protection processing facility that I asked to retrieve from the trash the cans of food carried by migrants to bring to a local food bank. It was when I started collecting the food that I saw what else was being thrown out: deeply personal items such as rosaries, bibles, wallets, toothbrushes, shoes, clothing, belts, family photos and more. Being a janitor, I was in no position to speak up – I would have been fired.

Knowing these acts of confiscation were morally wrong, it took several years to arrive at a place where I felt I could arrange and photograph these belongings in a way that showed my deep regard, respect and empathy for the people who carried them – and for the items themselves.

That our immigration policies are confusing, arbitrary, increasingly cruel and subject to change on a whim is deeply tragic. Stripping away such deeply personal items doesn't just dehumanise the individual, it dehumanises us and those who allow callous and inhumane acts to happen in the first place.





### **Virgen de Guadalupe**

Virgen de Guadalupe is a revered entity within the Catholic faith, particularly in Latin and Hispanic culture. Migrants will carry religious objects such as bibles, rosaries and votive candles to give them guidance on their journey north. Personal property such as these figurines are generally considered non-essential, potentially lethal and discarded during intake





**Duct tape water bottle**

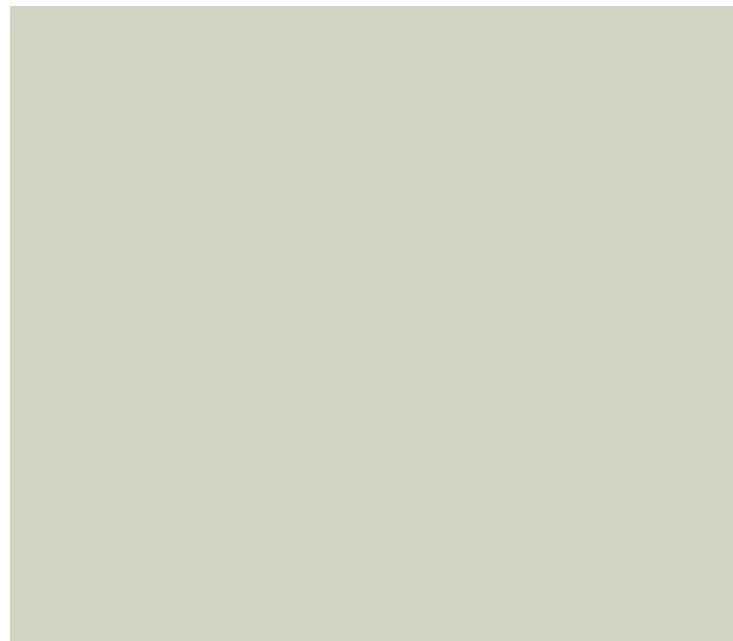
This two gallon water bottle was reinforced with duct tape to strengthen it while crossing the desert. One gallon of water weighs 8.36 pounds. A bare minimum of one gallon of water per day is needed when temperatures exceed 80 degrees (26C) and physical activity is involved in order to avoid severe dehydration leading to hyperthermia (extreme exposure) and death





### Soap

Personal hygiene items such as soap is considered non-essential personal property and is disposed of during intake

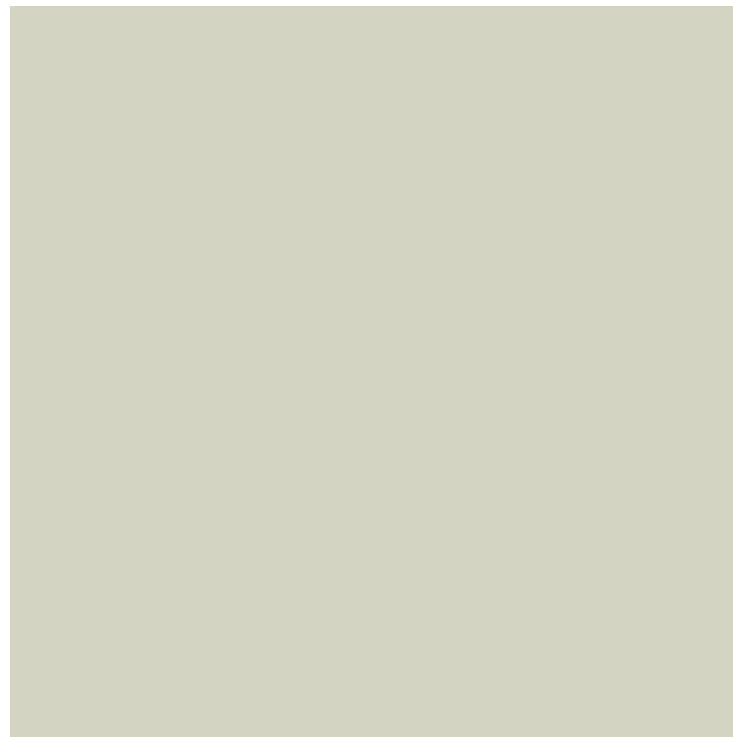


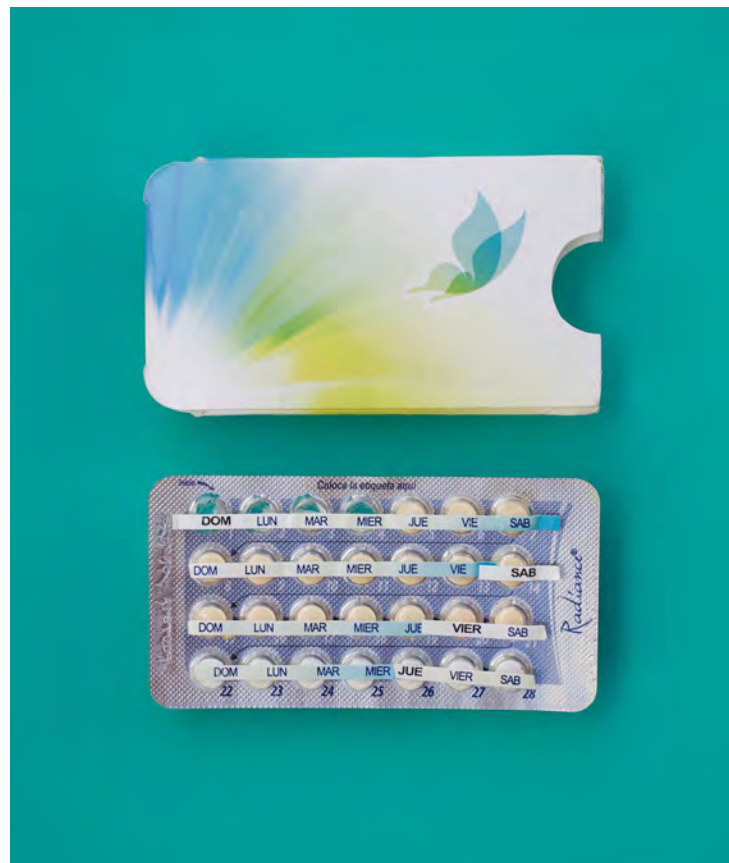




### **Nuevos Testamentos**

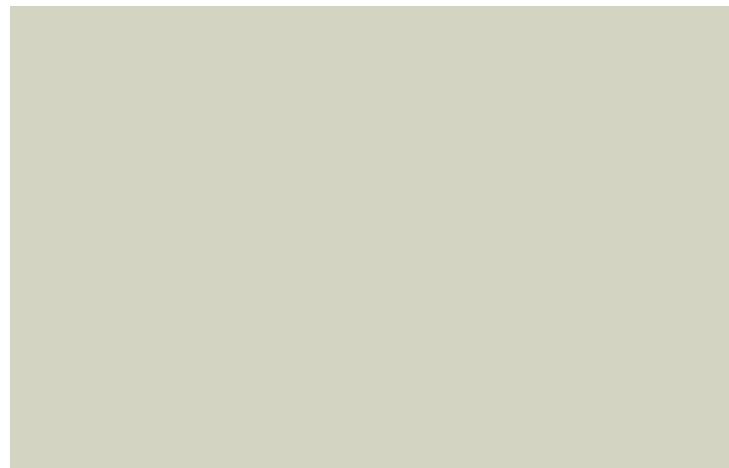
Placed upon a migrants' bandana, these bibles were considered non-essential personal property and discarded during the initial stages of processing





### Contraceptive

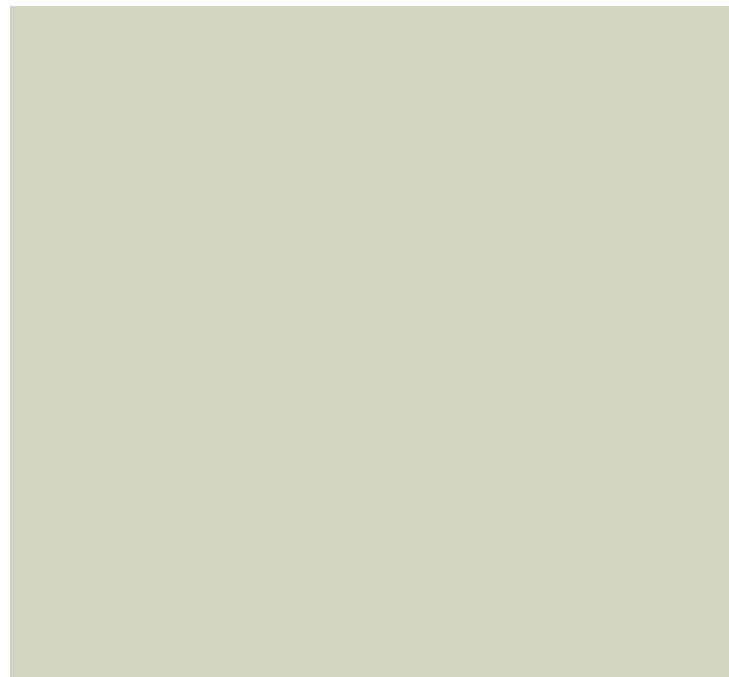
Migrant women face additional threats on their journey through Mexico and into the United States. While there are no agreed statistics, it is thought that at least 25 per cent of women who travel are sexually assaulted. Considered non-essential personal property, birth control pills are generally surrendered during intake





### Satisfies!

The Snickers brand of chocolate bar is generally the most popular of all carried by migrants and US Border Patrol agents. All food is considered contraband and is dumped during intake and subsequently delivered to the landfill

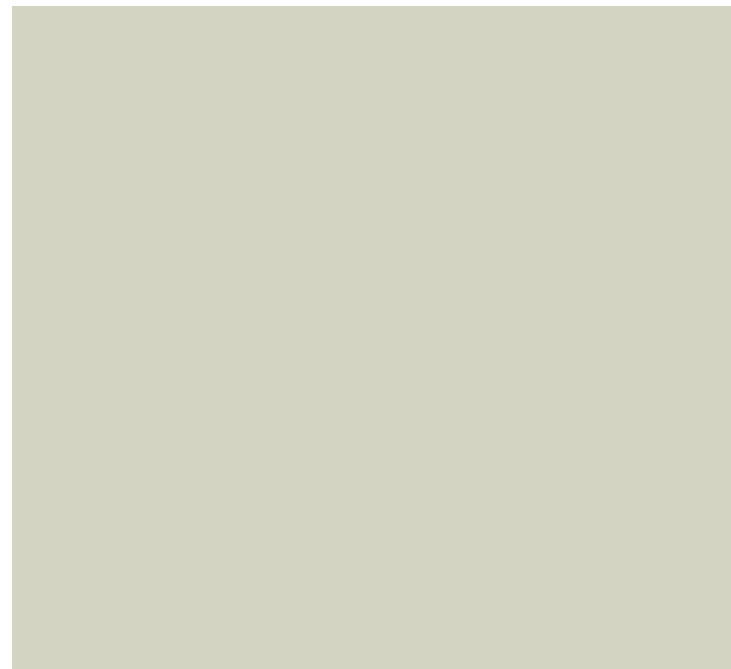






**Princesses**

All personal property considered non-essential is surrendered during the first stages of processing





### **Shoelaces red**

Similar to belts, shoelaces are stripped from migrants because they are considered lethal and could be used to harm themselves, or others. Detainees subsequently move through the United States court system and are deported without belts for their pants or shoelaces for their shoes





**Nail clippers**

Personal items such as nail clippers are considered potentially lethal, non-essential personal property and discarded



**Brush, comb and mirror assembly**

Personal belongings such as combs, brushes and mirrors are considered



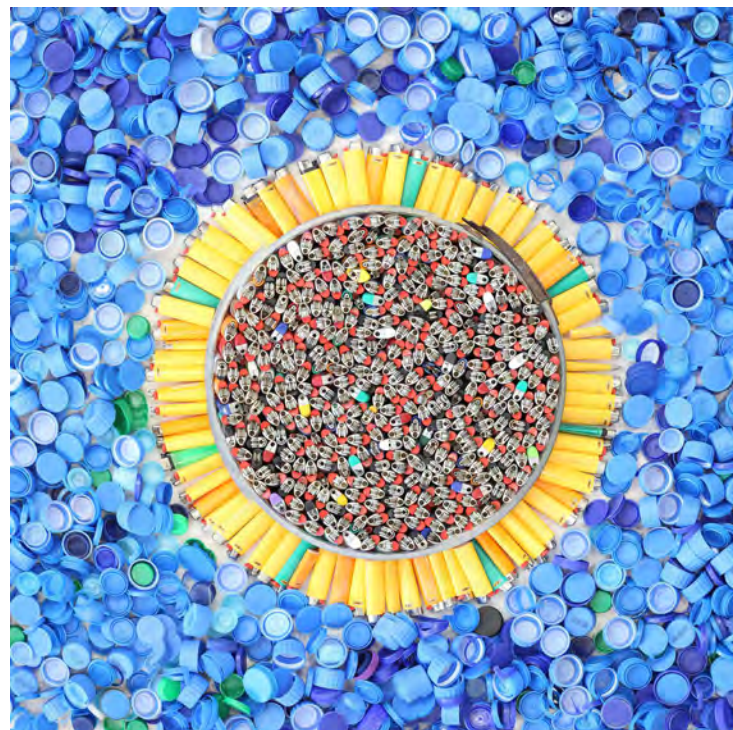
non-essential and potentially lethal items to be tossed during the first stages of intake



**Malverde**

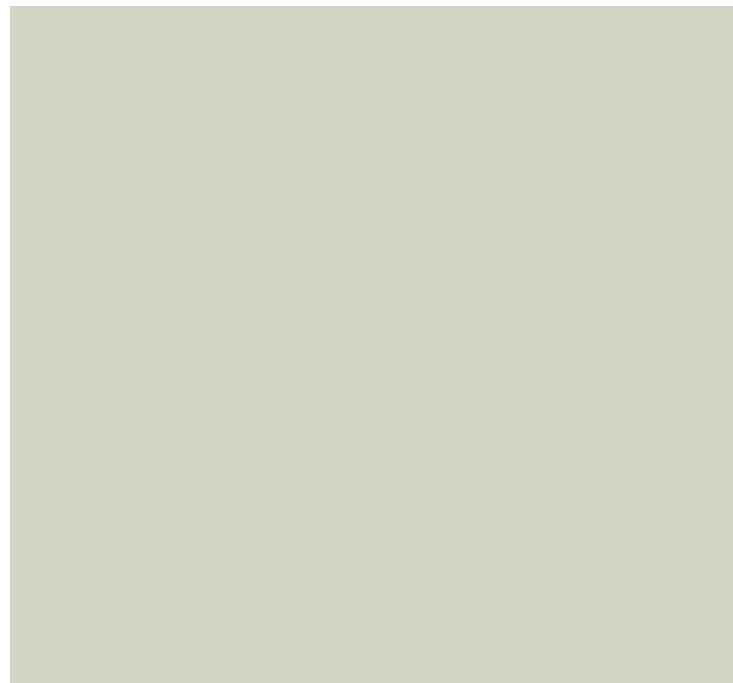
Malverde is a folklore hero in the Mexican state of Sinaloa. He is considered a Robin Hood figure, stealing from the rich to give to the poor. This wooden plaque of Malverde was considered non-essential personal property and confiscated during intake, as were the accumulated collection of coins





**Sunflower**

Cigarette lighters and bottle caps of mostly water bottle and electrolyte drinks, an essential and effective rehydrating fluid

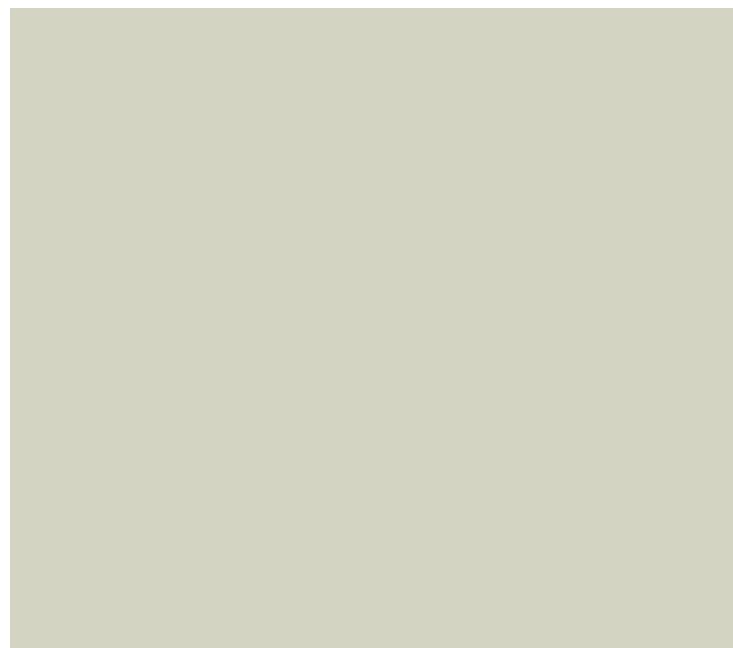






**Baby food**

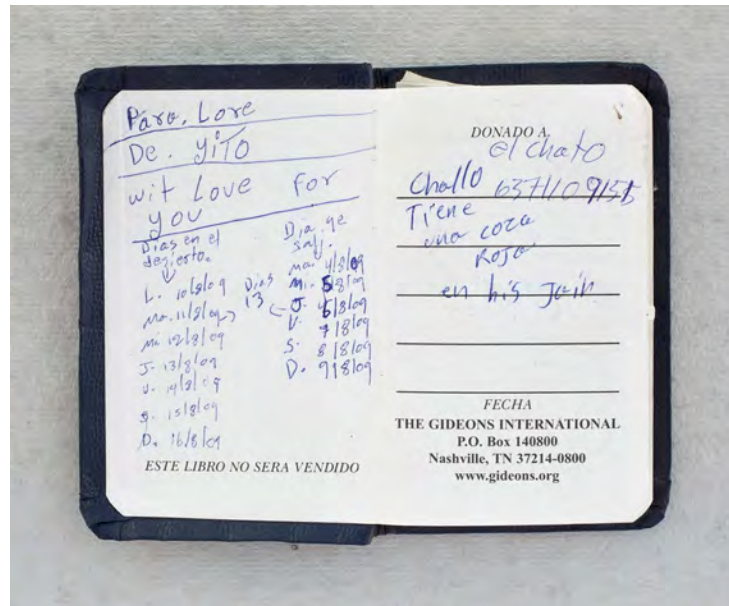
The type of food carried by migrants varies greatly. Babies and young children will travel with parents or older siblings across the desert. All food is considered contraband and given up during intake





### Flatware

Utensils used for eating are considered potentially lethal personal property and are discarded



### Inside cover

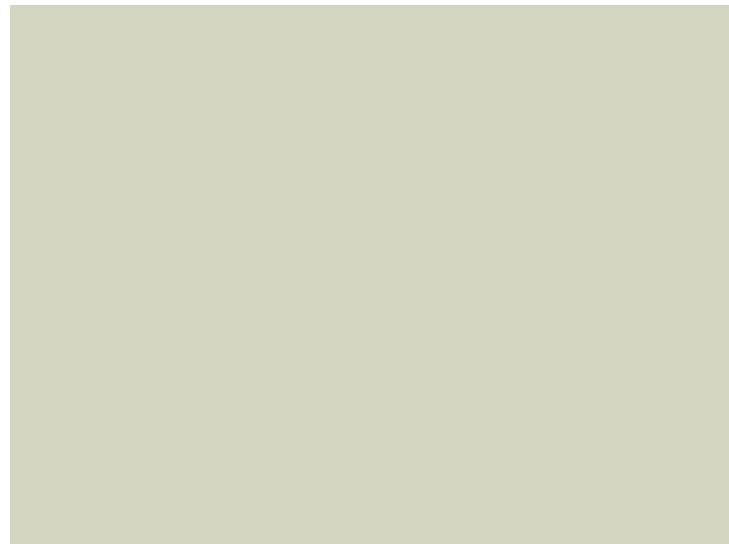
The inside cover of this New Testament bible has a record of a migrant's travel to and entry into the US via the Mexico/Arizona border. This person crossed into the US on August 10, 2009 and was apprehended six days

later. The item was considered non-essential personal property and discarded during processing



### **Bobby pins**

When apprehended in the desert by Border Patrol agents, migrants and those seeking asylum are taken to a Customs and Border Protection processing facility for the initial stages of intake. Items considered non-essential or potentially lethal are confiscated and thrown in the trash







**Virgen de Mickey, red**

A migrant or someone seeking asylum will bring extra clothing when crossing the desert – items considered important or that represent their hopes or dream. This jacket appears to be a souvenir from Disneyland or Disney World







**Belt labyrinth**

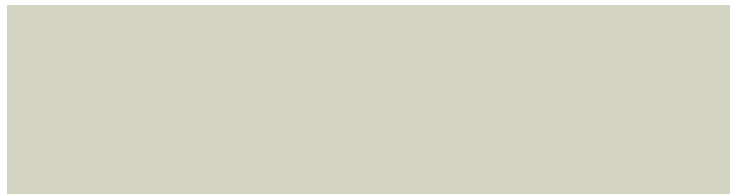
All detainees are stripped of their belts, which are generally discarded. As they move through the court system and are eventually deported, they wear pants with no belt and shoes with no shoelaces





**Candy target**

A discarded cardboard shooting target overlaid with various candies and throat lozenges. All food carried by migrants is considered contraband and discarded during intake





### Oral hygiene

Toothbrushes are considered potentially lethal, non-essential personal property and are disposed of during intake



### Shoelaces

Shoelaces are removed from all shoes and are discarded because they are considered potentially lethal. As the detainees move through the court system and eventually deported, they are forced to walk in their shoes without shoelaces





**All Stars**

A pair of Converse sneakers considered non-essential personal property and given up during the first stages of processing





### Condoms

Personal items such as condoms are confiscated and considered non-essential property and discarded during intake







### Tuny

This is an effective and compact source of food and protein carried by migrants when crossing the desert. This brand features a ring-pull lid which does not require a can opener. All food including items such as powdered milk, dehydrated soup or granola bars carried by those apprehended are considered contraband and confiscated





**Quinceñera glove**

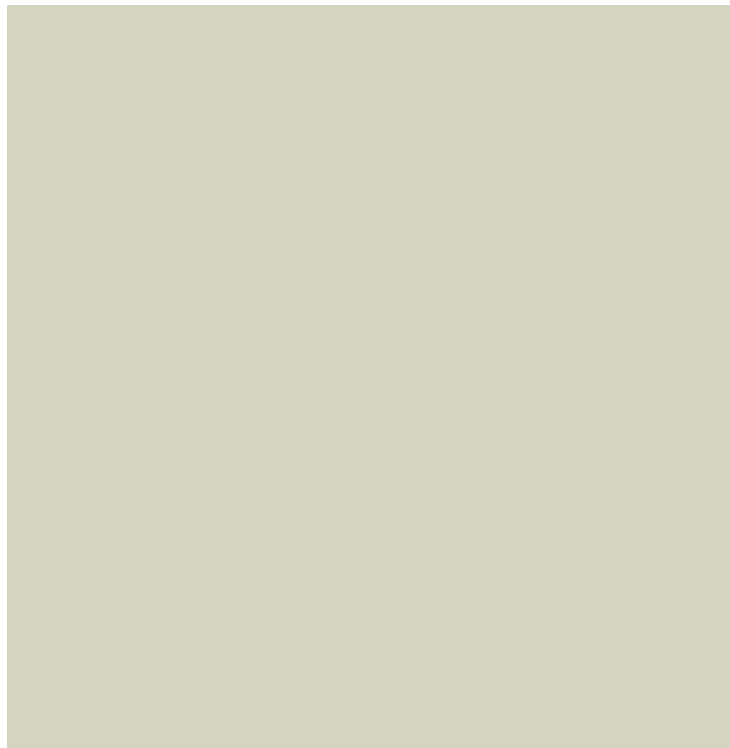
Quinceañera is a celebration of a girl's 15th birthday in many parts of Latin America and elsewhere in communities of people with Latin and Hispanic heritage; it marks the transition from childhood to womanhood. This glove was considered non-essential personal property and discarded during intake





**Polo shirts**

Migrants generally carry additional clothing when crossing the desert so they will have something clean to change into when they arrive. Considered non-essential personal property, extra clothing is often discarded during intake





**Water bottles**

In the Tucson sector of the US/Mexico border, heavy-duty non-biodegradable black plastic bottles are commonly used as canteens and are occasionally covered or insulated with remnants of clothing or blanket







**Pope John Paul II, pre-paid calling card**

A pre-paid calling card carried by a migrant or someone seeking asylum. When apprehended by a Border Patrol agent they are taken to a Customs Border Protection processing facility, most personal belongings are confiscated and thrown in the trash. Taking away a calling card further thwarts an individual's ability to contact family members or friends to let them know where they are



**Trail markers**

Brightly coloured objects are placed along a path to assist those migrants



travelling behind. These rubber ducks were used as trail markers, one of which still had a twist-tie used to fasten to a bush or tree branch



#### Billfolds and wallets

After being apprehended, a detainee's belongings are either placed in a property bag or remain in the backpack they travelled with. Sometimes essential items such as wallets and personal identification is discarded





**31 chances to win!**

This non-winning lottery ticket cost \$20.00 and was most likely purchased by a drug smuggler or a “Coyote”; a slang term for someone who smuggles people across the US/Mexico border, often collecting a minimum of a couple thousand dollars from the migrant. The collection of coins underneath the ticket is from that thrown away during intake





### Threads and needles

Clothing worn when travelling several days through the desert easily becomes severely stressed, ripped and torn; needles and thread are brought along for repair



### Gloves

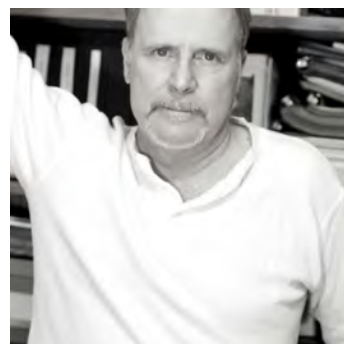
Different gloves for different reasons. The desert and mountain terrain along the border varies greatly, with cacti and other abrasive plants. During winter months temperatures easily drop below freezing. Drug smugglers handle bales of marijuana often covered in rough burlap material and twine. All gloves are considered non-essential personal

property and surrendered



**Coolpix**

Found inside a Converse tennis shoe, this camera was considered non-essential personal property and surrendered



Born in Wichita, Kansas, fine art photographer [Tom Kiefer](#) was raised primarily in the Seattle area and worked in Los Angeles as a graphic designer. Kiefer moved to Ajo, Arizona in December 2001 to fully concentrate his efforts in studying and photographing the urban and rural landscape and the related cultural infrastructure. Kiefer's first project, Journey West

Exhibit (2001-2011), was created during his process of discovering and documenting the natural and man-made landscape between towns and cities in his adopted state of Arizona. Kiefer's current project, El Sueño Americano – The American Dream (2007-present), features the personal effects and belongings of people apprehended in the desert by US Border Patrol agents. Selections



from this project have been exhibited in numerous solo exhibitions including the Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles, California (October 17, 2019 – March 8, 2020), the Fuller Craft Museum, Brockton, Massachusetts (January 26 – July 28, 2019) and the Saugatuck Center for the Arts, Saugatuck, Michigan (October 26 – December 21, 2018). Print and online publications including *The New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, *HuffPost*, *CNN* and many others have showcased Kiefer's work. He lives and works in Ajo, Arizona, about 40 miles north of the US/Mexico border.

*Courtesy of Tom Kiefer and REDUX Pictures*



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