By: Poppy

The nearly 2,000 mile long border dividing the U.S. and Mexico begins at the Pacific Ocean, cuts through the Sonoran Desert, then the Chihuahuan, and eventually meets the Rio Grande river snaking it's way to the Gulf of Mexico. The "Wall" which has divided this land for decades has been a mix of cattle fencing, twisted and rusting barbed wire, an actual wall, nothing at all, and for a short time even double-stacked shipping containers. Now, the Trump administration has allocated $46 billion to build a "Smart Wall" along much of the border. The Smart Wall includes two 30 ft. tall steel walls separated by a 60 ft. expanse of road, all heavily surveilled with various types of technologies and patrols.

Double wall construction is currently underway in an expanse of the Sonoran Desert, cutting between Lochiel, Arizona and La Noria, Sonora. Here, land defenders began a tree sit over a month ago in a cottonwood tree on the path of the new wall. Another tree sit sprouted weeks later on the Mexican side, but lasted only a short while due to instantaneous and intense repression.

I joined the struggle against the border wall in Lochiel because it felt personal to me. I grew up about 30 miles from Lochiel, in a small town in Southern Arizona that acts as an unfortunate safe-haven for border patrol agents, soldiers, and MAGA republicans. Militarized check-points dot the surrounding roads and a surveillance blimp looms in the sky, keeping an omnipotent eye on all who dare to cross the unforgiving desert below.

Several close friends from my childhood came from families in which their mothers had migrated from Mexico or Central America while their fathers were either in border patrol or served in the military. Growing up in the borderlands was like living in an "in-between" space, where many felt like they didn't belong to any particular culture. Racial tensions, constant surveillance, and fear of mistreatment under the law were commonplace, even for children. Border surveillance technology was normalized to such an extent that students visited the blimp on school field trips.

When I first told a friend from somewhere else about the tree sit, they were shocked to learn there were even trees to sit in along the border. I've found when people think about the borderlands, they often imagine nothing but dry and desolate open desert. Hostile, sharp, forbidding. This can be true, but the area surrounding Lochiel has something else to show. The gently rolling hills of the San Rafael Valley tilt into the Santa Cruz river, which is lined with dozens of giant cottonwood trees. Right now, everything is bright green and rich brown from a summer of heavy monsoon rains. Flowers bloom throughout the valley and grasses grow unreasonably tall. The valley is teaming with life. With each step on the crunchy desert floor, what seems like hundreds of tiny grasshoppers leap into the air. Rattlesnakes, kingsnakes, and gartersnakes slither past. Scorpions and their illusive cousin, the vinegaroon, hide alongside the freshly made paths, mostly undetected. Tarantulas roam the roads. At night, bats and even fireflies float about the sky. Birdsong heralds in each new day. Mountain lions, jaguars, and bears have explored this valley and the surrounding mountain ranges for time immemorial.

For the past 200 years, ranchers have lived in Lochiel on the Arizona side of the border and La Noria on the Sonoran side. These parcels of land are currently separated by cattle fencing at most, and these families have comfortably co-existed.

Relative calm in the valley ceased to be months ago when the construction began on the new double wall. Now, giant machines rumble and shake at nearly all hours. They have to grade the roads again and again in an attempt to force the land into a shape that will allow the easy movement of their machines. Delightfully, floods from monsoon rains have impacted this dirt road many times, trapping machines in thick mud, and halting work at least for a day or two at different times. Concrete footings have failed from the floods and sections of wall have toppled. The earth is acting to resist the wall, too.

Other machines dig deep, narrow trenches in the ground to support the footings for the 30 ft. tall sections of steel wall. Concrete mixers pour, water trucks spray, the occasional waste management truck drives the shit of workers away from the destruction site. On top of heavy machinery, the border road bustles with border patrol vehicles, army trucks, national guard humvees, and private security. All the while, helicopters and drones fly overhead.

Four cottonwoods originally stood in the way of border wall construction. Last month, a digger pulled at their roots, dislodging them from the soil and weakening their stability. The digger then violently wacked at the limbs and trunks of three of the trees until they collapsed on the roadside.

The fourth remained standing with the help of quick action from brave friends on the ground and the birth of the first tree sit, although her root system was also destabilized when the other three trees were felled. What roots remain beneath the road are constantly compounded by the destructive daily caravan.

Now going for over a month, the tree sit continues to keep her standing and halt the construction of this small section of border wall. This sit has been maintained by nearby locals as well as friends from across the North American continent. Local ranchers, the fire chief, and even the sheriff himself have visited and voiced their support of the tree sitters and opposition to the wall. It feels like nobody wants this wall to be built. Its construction is senseless, destructive, and painful. It stops the free movement and ease of daily life in this region, representing only greed from people who have never experienced what it’s like to be on this land. No extractions of the sitter on the northern side of the border have been attempted, and repression at this point has been relatively mild.

By contrast, the short-lived tree sit on the Mexican side was met with immediate, high-stakes consequences. After only two days, the livelihood of the land-owner of the tree in Mexico was threatened, along with sensitive citizenship statuses of tree sitters and supporters. Border patrol, the Mexican state police, and the Mexican army arrived at the tree sit to forcefully put a stop to the emerging camp.

While these tree sits are a new and flashy tactic for this bioregion, resistance to the wall is nothing new. In Lochiel and La Noria, neighbors on both sides of the border have been getting together for years to voice their opposition of border wall expansion. Members of the Tohono O'odham Nation have been historically opposed to the border bisecting their ancestral lands. They went so far as to recently close their own nation's borders to anyone aiding or supporting the construction of the wall. Similarly, people have been resisting the destruction in Big Bend National Park in Texas.

Resistance is possible and necessary along all 2,000 miles of the border. It goes further than that even – contractors, sub-contractors, funders, and so on have connections and offices across the country. The border is everywhere and resistance can happen anywhere! It can look so many different ways. It is our duty to not only dream of but act toward an end to ongoing colonial violence.

A banner reads, "Another world is being born. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing." When the machines stop, I can hear laughing. I can hear my friends talking about what can happen next. I can hear the cicadas screaming. I can hear raindrops on the leaves.

When I pause, I can feel the infinite possibility of what we will create. In this space, we are destroying the old world in the little ways that we can and we are building a new one together. We can create a world wherein people and animals can move and live freely. We can win.