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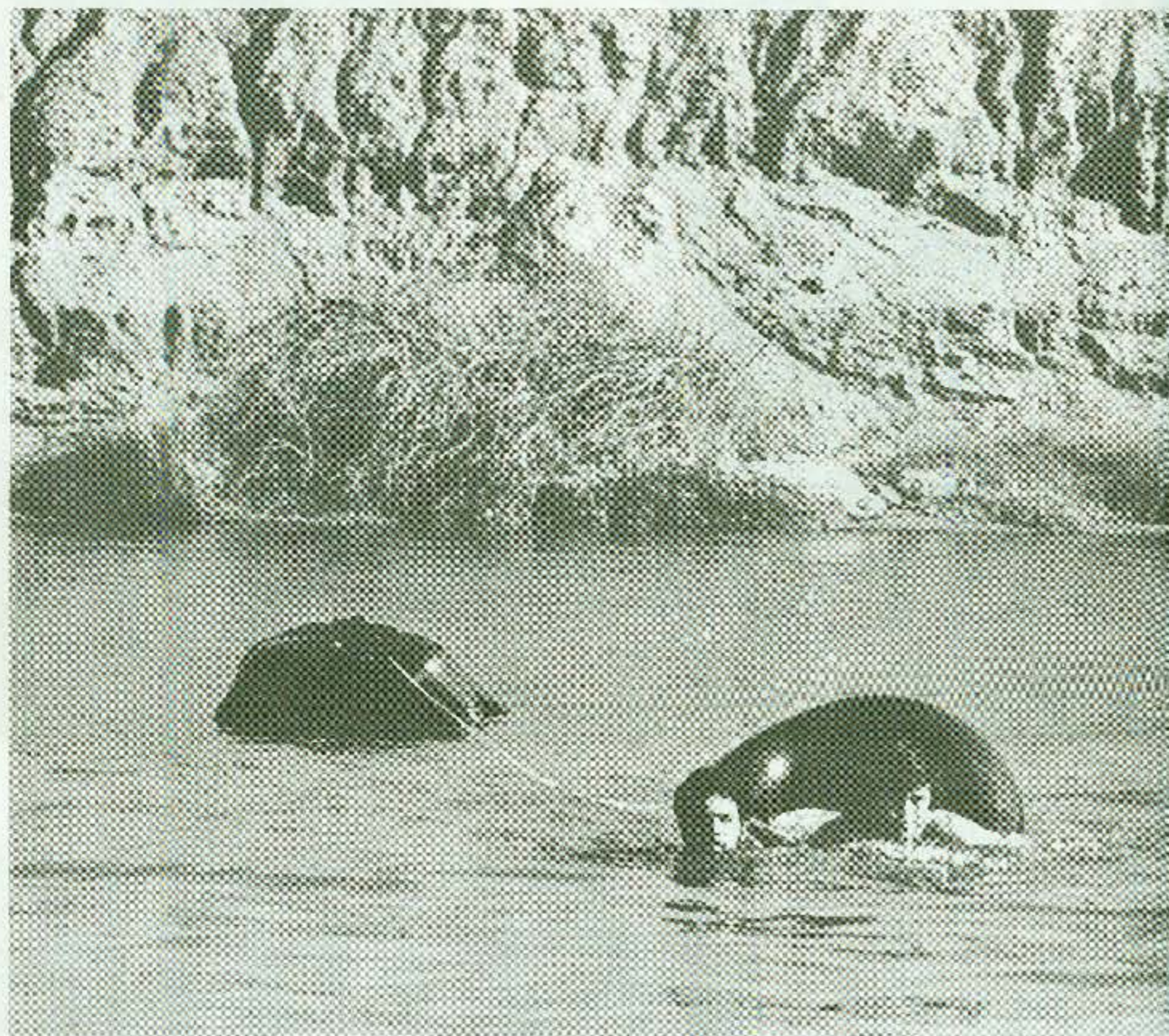
SUMMER 1986

AMERICAN DREAMS

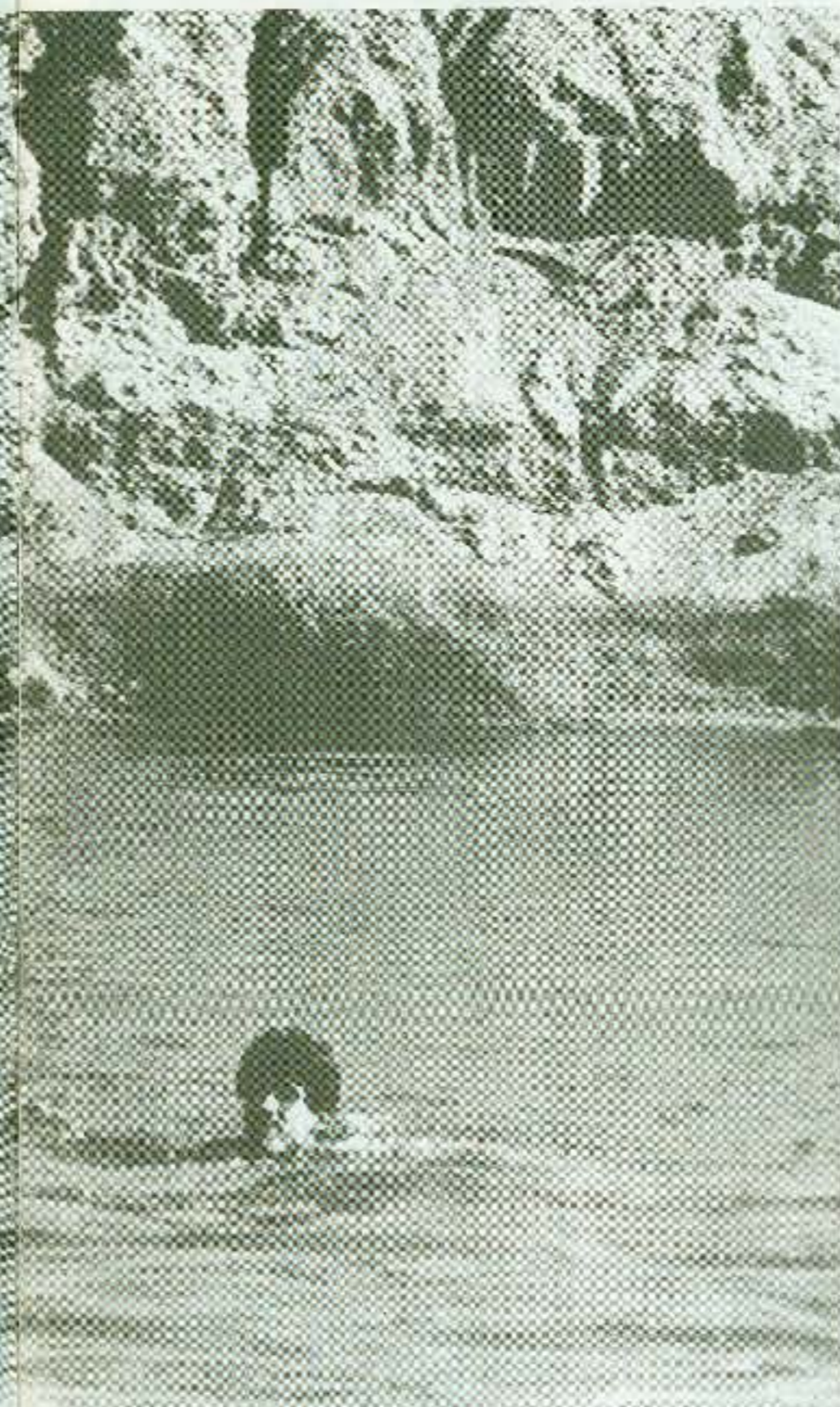


THE STORY OF MEXICANS TRYING TO MAKE

A LIVING IN THE U.S.



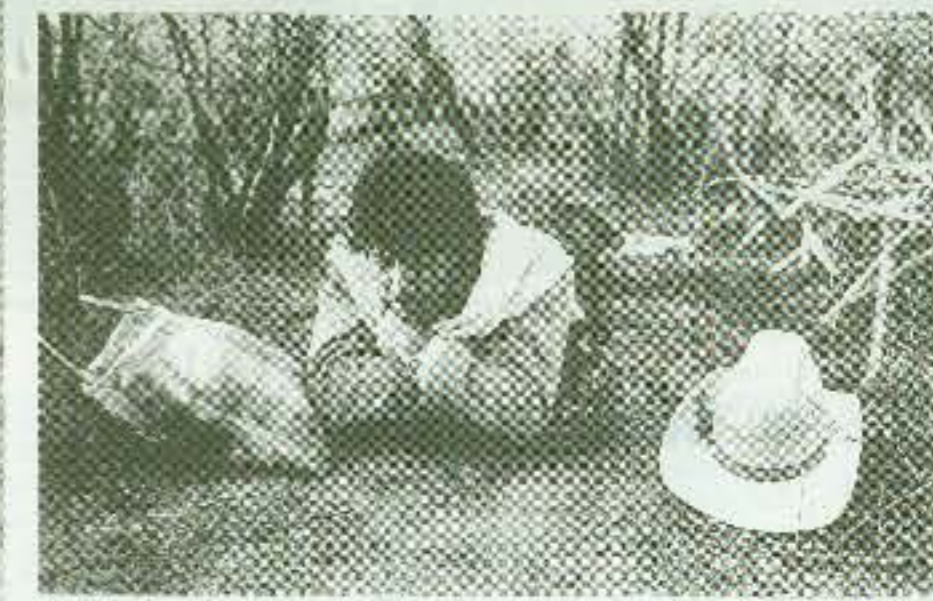
led by a "coyote," a group of Mexican laborers ford a river near Yuma, Arizona, part of the 2000 mile U.S.-Mexican border



Having arrived safely, the now-illegal aliens don their clothes, kept dry in plastic bags.



A group makes their way through a barbed wire fence that marks the border.



Out of the view of surveillance aircraft, a campesino awaits a coyote to lead him to safety.

"ILLEGAL"

DREAMERS

Photographs by Philip Decker
Text by Lorna Cheriton

"I know that I'm not a criminal. I'm not here to break laws or hurt anyone. I'm here to earn money with my sweat. We work in the rain, in the snow, with fevers and colds because we need work. One goes to the United States out of necessity..."

Pedro Estrada, a Mexican "illegal alien" who works each year on a citrus ranch in Arizona.

Pedro had to leave his village, Puerto Colorado, as a young adolescent to look for work in Mexico City so that he could contribute to the family income. After laboring for 13 years in various factories and construction jobs, he returned to his family's land in the mountains near Ahuacatlan, about 250 miles northwest. Pedro continued working in Mexico City as a migrant construction worker in order to feed his wife and children.

But neither his salary in Mexico City nor what he earned in Puerto Colorado kept pace with the soaring prices of the most basic commodities and services. Nor

did he like city life. "Mexico City is infected! The air is bad and there are robbers and murderers in the streets. I thought that my children would grow up more sane in the country," he recalled from his village. "Here we have corn, it's the most important thing. With corn we're sure we'll eat. In Mexico City you have nothing but your salary."

There is, in fact, little work available in the vicinity of Puerto Colorado. Other than the few who own a store or work for the local bureaucracy, the men farm the land or work in construction, earning between 500 to 1000 pesos



Don Genaro, a neighbor of the Estrada brothers, prays at a service in their village in Mexico. Genaro was one of the first in his community to have commuted across the border in search of work, having picked cotton in Texas in the 1940s.



Alex Estrada, a young undocumented worker, picks grapefruits near Phoenix, Arizona.

A PERSONAL REFLECTION

By Philip Decker

As you read this, dozens—or possibly hundreds—of “illegal aliens” are crossing the United States border. Instead of a Statue of Liberty, the United States greets these men with harsh labor, meager pay and a life burdened with brutal physical and psychological abuse. In 1985 over one million undocumented workers were arrested and deported by the Border Patrol. During the same year, I lived with, photographed and interviewed Mexican farmworkers in citrus orchards in Arizona, in their home communities in rural Mexico, and during several border crossings.

During a typical commute, Mexican workers spend hours curled up under prickly bushes or piled on the floor of a “coyote’s” car, playing an adult version of hide-and-seek with the high-tech border patrol. They must often risk their lives by patiently enduring days and nights with little food and water, or fording wide, surging irrigation canals and rivers, or trekking vast stretches of scorching, waterless desert. I have met many “illegal aliens” who have seen their friends tragically die from exposure in the Southwest desert.

The undocumented worker’s hardships don’t cease when his commute to find work in the U.S. ends. I lived in the Arizona citrus orchards and saw workers—hardworking fathers, sons, husbands, and community leaders from rural Mexico—wake up wet and cold in the morning dew

and rain, curled up like grown fawns under the very same trees they harvest at dawn. I have seen men “clean” their bodies and clothes in irrigation canals polluted by pesticides. I have seen men under the constant gnawing fear that the Border Patrol will deport them back to Mexico, depriving them of the money to feed their families.

The U.S. immigration policy has consistently carried a clear message—Mexicans are highly desired as laborers, but not as citizens. Undocumented workers have become the backbone of major industries in the Southwest and by now throughout the U.S. Because this labor force is “illegal,” Mexicans must work for less. They can’t organize, vote, or voice grievances; their deportation to Mexico is only a phone call away to the Border Patrol. Harboring powerful feelings of inferiority and fear, they remain powerless, intimidated and manageable. A Mexican worker rarely brings his family to settle in the community in which he (and possibly his father and grandfather) labors. He’s more likely to go back to Mexico as soon as he’s earned enough money to support his family.

The current national attention to the Simpson-Rodino immigration reform bill and the Sanctuary Trial in Tucson attest to the increasingly complex and controversial debate over illegal immigration. Given the U.S.’s historical pride as a nation of immigrants and as a refuge for the poor and abused, immigration issues are exceptionally emotional and politically charged. Peter Shuck, a law professor at Yale, describes the core of the debate:

“Immigration law seeks to answer the very first questions that any society must put to itself: What are we? What do we wish to become? Which individuals can help us reach that goal? And most fundamentally, which individuals constitute the ‘we’ who shall decide these questions? In the course of answering them, the American community is defined. Because these are open-ended processes, American society has never satisfactorily or finally answered these questions. Because our values and reality are constantly changing and evolving, it probably never will.”

Immigration issues are moral issues that deeply affect us all. The current debate over Mexican illegal immigration has as its focus the enabling of U.S. industries to enjoy a healthy surplus of labor while not letting this workforce “threaten” the culture, language, demography, and political status quo. But we must remember that people have basic human rights regardless of whether they are labeled “legal” or “illegal,” or have a piece of paper in their pockets, or stand to the north or south of an arbitrary line drawn on earth. This is the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave for some, but not for others. For millions of Mexicans it is the Land of Harsh Labor and Fear. ■

Philip Decker, a former ICP student, has been living with, photographing and interviewing migrant farmworkers in the U.S. and Mexico since 1982. His photographs and slide-shows are being used by various farmworker agencies to train outreach workers, for public education, fundraising and lobbying.



Alex Estrada in a happier mood entertains friends at a hometown saloon.

a day (the equivalent of less than three U.S. dollars). If Pedro’s two hectares (about five acres) don’t produce enough corn to feed his family and livestock for an entire year, and usually they only produce enough for eight or nine months, he must spend at least two days earnings a week just on corn. Imagine a worker in the United States spending two days of a week’s salary on one staple such as wheat.

For these reasons, more than half of Pedro’s male neighbors, including his brother Alex, have worked in the United States at least once. But getting work in the United States is extremely expensive and risky. For him the commute to the U.S. has required a two day, 1,400 mile bus ride to the border, a three day wait in an abandoned desert shack for a “coyote” (a smuggler of Mexican workers like himself) and an all-night walk through a hazardous 18 mile stretch of barren, waterless Arizona desert.

Pedro must leave his family enough money to buy food until he can send them part of his U.S. dollars. Financing his trip costs almost five months earnings, requiring him to sell a cow (one cow is all that remains in the family “savings account”). He and his brother Alex would rather live and work the whole year in Mexico with their families, land, community, language and customs. Although they brave the dangers and physical hardship of the trip to the United States out of economic necessity, their dreams are in Mexico. ■

Lorna Cheriton is a fulltime student from Canada. This article is based upon research by Philip Decker.