Within the narrow cavern of two weeks' time in early June, there was an embarkation to be made, carving through the borders of space and time to glimpse a facet of what was once the conflict of the Joads and the Californian ranchers, and what is now the crisis of immigrants from the Southern border.

At this season of the year, when the election catches, the eastern part of Oklahoma blooms with moist verdure. The sky is populated with clouds, hanging in high puffs, and the sun beats down sharply on the shoulders of the people.

In the 1930s, a series of dust storms and severe droughts hit this area of the Great Plains. Crops withered and died, the ground cracked and split, leaving farmers without income or food. Together with the Great Depression, the collapse in commodity prices left many farmers in irreparable financial ruin. Over 2.5 million people participated in the mass exodus from Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, and the other Plains states.

Of these, 200,000 moved towards California, traveling along Route 66, the 'path of people in flight.' John Steinbeck, already a successful writer, now working as a journalist on commission from the *San Francisco News*, watched the crisis unfold. Supported by the Federal Resettlement Administration, he immersed himself in the lives of migrant workers and staring unflinchingly at the social and economic abyss of the time. His reporting was published by the *News* in 1936.

When you stare into the abyss, the abyss also stares into you; deep in the crevices of Steinbeck's mind, a novel, an epic, a masterpiece coalesced. *The Grapes of Wrath* — "part labor testament, part family chronicle… part transcendental gospel" — was born. In a frenzy, Steinbeck flooded pages with the journey, both physical and spiritual, of the Joad family in a mere five months.

Steinbeck's novel has persisted throughout the years with continued cultural relevance. The Joad's journey is almost biblical in both subject and proportion; to shadow them would be a similarly hallowed endeavor: to trek dustily from Austin; through Sallisaw and Clinton in Oklahoma; across the panhandle of Texas; into the New Mexican mountains to Santa Fe; then Flagstaff, and down, to the broken, sun-rotted canyons of downstate Arizona; then climbing, climbing through the lushness of Yosemite until one collapses upon the neat rows of Californian pastures that stretch into the horizon.

The present time

Within the physical journey is also a journey of discovery, of spirituality, where the lines between politics, migrancy, economics begin to blur, where Republican red and Democrat blue smear into a rich purple, where past and present mingle and books ripple open into highways to drive into.

The story of 'the Joads' and the 'Okies, whoever they are today,' remains the same, although it seems to be unfolding along different lines. In the 2020s, many journey in the opposite direction, along 'the mother road' of Route 66, towards Oklahoma.

Sallisaw, Oklahoma and Clinton, Oklahoma share many traits. Lying like backwaters, the working-class cities are nestled in the heart of Oklahoma's greenery, hunkered quaintly down, weathering the stream of time. Daily life unfolds slower here, with unpretentious pleasure. Hickory-smoked barbecue and stewed beans and freshly brewed coffee wafts in the air. Food and drink, served in styrofoam cups and worn wooden tables, is cheap, hot, and filling.

"The dollar goes farther here… numerous people are leaving California, by the thousands," states Pat Smith from the Oklahoma Route 66 Museum. "[T]hey went that way in the Great Depression, now they're coming back."

The migrants from California are matched with an equal, if not more numerous number of immigrants from the Southern border. Grainy snapshots of Hispanic peoples sprawled across the news, laborers swathed head to toe despite the flaring heat. They are the dispossessed, those who braved the gauntlet, seeking salvation for their families.

Discussion is sparked across the news, about how the people from the south "send the bad ones over", how taxes and cost of living will only rise if they are allowed in. Much of this is corroborated regarding the influx of domestic migrants, travelling through the United States.

"So now it's making - people that have lived here all their lives - difficult for them to purchase a home," Smith says about the Californians. "Because they cannot afford one, because the markets went up so much because of the people coming in from California."

In retracing the mythical path of the Joad family, one gleans a curious perspective not just into the eyes of the modern equivalents of Steinbeck's 'Okies', but the lives of the Californian ranchers, whose unmitigated evil is left unexplored in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Most noticeable in the average American is how detached they seem from the issue of migration. In marked contrast to the political pundits and talking heads whipping up a fury of fear and polarization, those we talked to were largely untouched by issues of migration.

In Austin, Texas, a "sea of blue in a state of red", the air is thick with the scent of barbecue. One culprit of which is Franklin Barbecue, where the line for lunch plasters across the walls, snakes outside, and coils in on itself. Pitmaster and Kitchen Manager Matthew van Orden, with towering stature and quiet confidence, showed off the 600 briskets being smoked at one time. When asked about immigration, he spoke in platitudes, "Nobody should be illegal, we're all human beings, we're all on the same planet, we're all breathing the same air."

Despite the important sentiment that "there's no reason to be angry at a person who's trying to do better for themselves," van Orden seemed to have little to say personally and seemed not to notice the delivery people before his eyes who spoke exclusively in Spanish.

Jeff Mayo, editor of the Sequoyah County Times in Oklahoma, had a calmness and calculatedness about him. He noted that when a tornado swept through, much of the re-roofing was done by people whose first language was not English. He, Pat Smith, and restaurant owner Daniel Neenan had much the same to say: they were hard workers, good

people. Yet none of them seemed to have had any measure of deep interaction with the immigrants.

Rugged Santa Fe follows the flat jumble of concrete and steel of Texas and the foliage of Oklahoma. Winding streets and adobe buildings seem to breathe an earthy smell of art. The streets are louder than Sallisaw and Clinton, filled with the birdsong of Spanish. [Something more here?]

A few hours' drive from Santa Fe is the jagged chasm of the Grand Canyon, then further south, a brief respite from the staggering, 40ºC heat: Flagstaff, Arizona. The air is cold and snappy after rain, like ossified taffy. A queer calmness fills the streets, each dwelling almost detached and isolated from its neighbors.

Alex Holder was exuberant and chirpy, settled cheerily behind a barista counter at Val's Workshop. She flitted between espresso machines, and her smile was pixie-like, bright and full. However, as a first time voter, she was hesitant in expression when it came to politics.

"I think anyone should be allowed anywhere you want, right?" she asked. "I don't mind immigrants at all. At all." Holder admitted that she rarely discussed such things, and was, for the most part, blissfully unaware of much of the going-ons of the migratory world. She was perhaps the best example of the divide between what was espoused on television and what was actually felt by the American middle class.

The only other trend common among the eclectic smorgasbord of personalities was an overwhelming air of pessimism. Any possible hope for the upcoming election was choked in the sludge of senility and radicalization.

Up in the mountains of Santa Fe, a peculiar individual who has requested to remain anonymous sat across the table. His skin was weaved distractingly with esoteric images and symbols. Jangling steel jewelry lined his wrists, fingers, and neck. His frame, wiry and unassuming, belied tales beyond imagination and a mind flickering with intensity. He recounts matter-of-factly a release beyond the mortal plane prompted by psilocybin mushrooms, an awakening and transition into a state of infinitude.

In contrast, the puppet show "tactics" of politics feels "surface level," he said. But they are a portent of doom. "Orwell has probably prophesized it the best, you know, I think we're really quite on the brink of living in that."

He also predicted the collapse of capitalism: "In this particular case, there'll be the collapse, it'll be financial, it'll shake people up. There'll be chaos." But he also said he would be prepared for the apocalypse, or the "awakening" that would follow. "I mean, I'm not as crazy as these people that have for two to five years," he said. "I've got one gun. And, you know, [a] couple thousand rounds of bullets."

He wasn't the only one preparing for an apocalypse. Up in the mountains, there is the great red slash of the Grand Canyon, layered jaggedly with the roasted hue of a million sunsets. The sun itself is never gone for more than a second, flashing between the clouds like a gold tooth.

Under the heat, Adam Sandler (no relation to the comedian) trudges along in a blue, fur-lined Cookie Monster Suit, a battered fanny pack tied around his waist, an ice vest beneath his outfit, offering photos in exchange for tips. As he wipes the sweat from his brow there is a calm, eternal resignation in his eyes.

Perhaps it is his specific position that makes him such a climate change doomsayer. “Since I've been here, first Alaska was a little bit warm, and then it gets progressively worse and worse, what you're seeing in the southwest with the heat waves, floods in Iowa, it is gonna get to the point where there will not be resources for people to live.”

When asked about the migration crisis, climate change remained similarly at the front of his mind. “Now with climate change, you should do something radical, like, say, anybody that immigrated to this country after 1990 and their kids that were born here should be given a check for $30 to $50,000,” Sandler proposed, “And told that they have to leave the country or they'll be forced to be deported, and then the rest of the people have better lives, they can use the tax dollars to do infrastructure change, so people can survive climate change.”

And when asked about which candidate would help with climate change, there again, the pessimism. “I don't think… it doesn't matter, they don't have a realistic approach. They're just sitting there with the country having its hand out in the wind, waiting for a giant catastrophe to happen like Hurricane Katrina.”

Across Route 66 the story is the same. The air is draped with a heavy cloak of indifference and defeatism. Van Orden called the migration crisis a “political gambit that’s never gonna get fixed…. because it’s election season and that means get people angry.” He went on to say the election is “gonna be whatever, wherever the dice fall… we’re f***ed no matter what.”

Oklahoma’ nest among the trees didn’t protect it much from the storm. Though Smith said, “I feel like after the election, it will probably be better,” Neenan, interviewed just after, shared a similar sentiment, admitting that “it’s a tough political year for Americans.”

In Santa Fe, Brianna Greene and ?? are reluctant to even cast a vote. “It’s kind of like, I’m not going to choose the lesser of two evils,” said Brianna. “Do I exercise my right to not vote? And to not support someone who I don’t *really* support?”

“I haven’t seen much of a solution,” said ?? “Either one is not fixing anything for me.”

In the rich, fertile valley of Salinas, nothing grows stronger than powerlessness and despair. Hannah James, normally as rambunctious and good-natured as a golden retriever, had nothing but outrage. “I couldn't even watch the debate the other night because I was so angry.”

“Actual dialogue, actual exchange of ideas in our government, working to actually do things for the people and have a functional government does not work.” She states that America is in a state of “political gridlock” and “increasing polarization”, causing political institutions to “rapidly fall apart.”

A number of people declined to even speak on the election because it was a sore subject. Across the hallowed road of Route 66 that has watched the country's politics play out, there was an anger that flashed whenever it was brought up. Anger for the selection of the candidates, anger for the lack of anything being done whatsoever, anger at a feeling of being left behind.

More than that, in the eyes of the public there is a growing cynicism. And in the souls of the people the grapes of wrath that once grew 'heavy for the vintage' now turn cold on the vine, and they drop to the ground and fester into sludge that reeks of pessimism and contempt.