

Field Trip

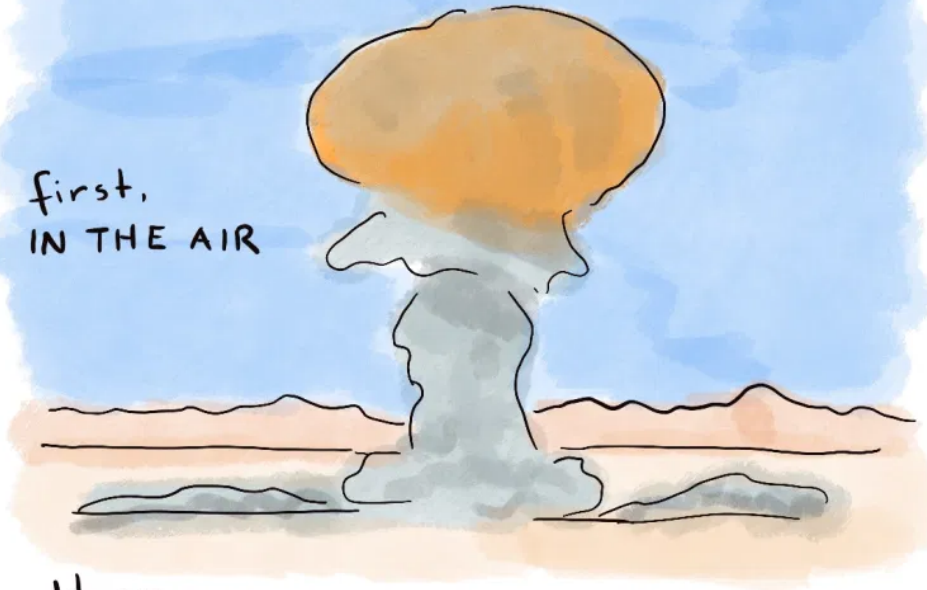
# The Desert Keeps Receipts

BY B. Erin Cole | OCTOBER 8, 2020

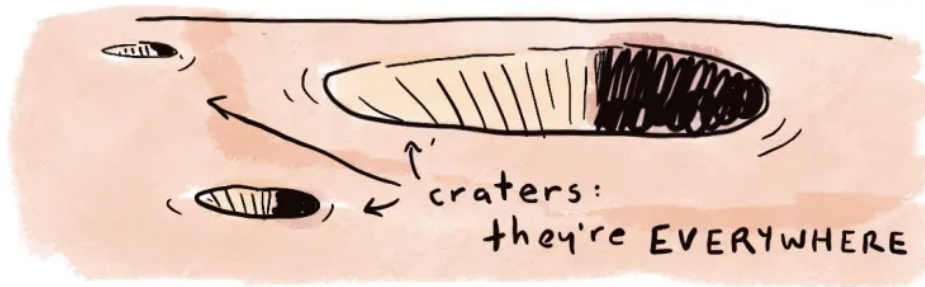


from 1951 to 1992, this is where the United States tested its nuclear weapons

first,  
IN THE AIR



then,  
UNDERGROUND (after atmospheric testing was banned in 1963)

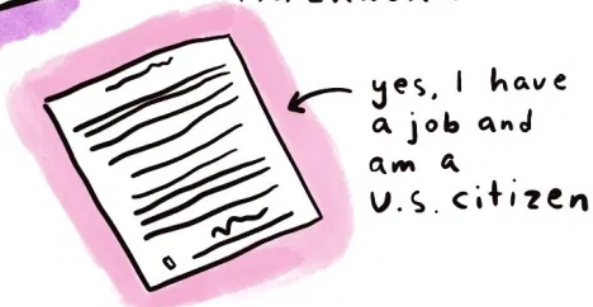


it's still an active military site, so you can't just GO there - you have to

**1 JOIN AN OFFICIAL TOUR**



**2 FILL OUT BUREAUCRATIC PAPERWORK**



**3 SHOW ID**



**4 WEAR A VERY SECRET BADGE**



**5 ALSO? NO PHONES ALLOWED**



tours are led by  
Test Site veterans

our guide began working  
here in 1951, + is very  
proud of the work  
he was part of

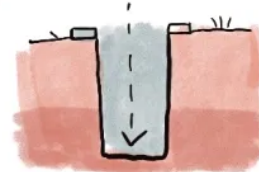
He has a LOT of FACTS to  
share with us about



bomb sizes  
(BIG!)



crater widths  
(WIDE!)



shaft depths  
(DEEP!)

and MANY, MANY opinions:



the best place  
for a steak + a  
drink near the  
Test Site in the  
1960s



the scientists  
who were  
best at  
horseshoes



it's a shame we  
stopped testing  
nuclear weapons  
in 1992

this might not be the right  
storytelling approach for this audience

a bus full of historians wants  
context, analysis, and meaning



(MY ANSWERS TO THE ABOVE QUESTIONS :

No. Good question. We all do. Yes.)

THERE'S SO MUCH TO BE CYNICAL ABOUT  
ON THIS TRIP.....



□ the promo film for the  
Department of Energy  
we watch en route from  
Vegas to the site  
-peppy!  
-uninformative!



□ the constant euphemisms  
← this is an "EVENT", not a  
"bombing"

□ the posters written in management-speak  
in the employee cafeteria + conference room



← I really wish I  
had written down  
the text of  
these

← shows it's as  
boring a place  
to work as any

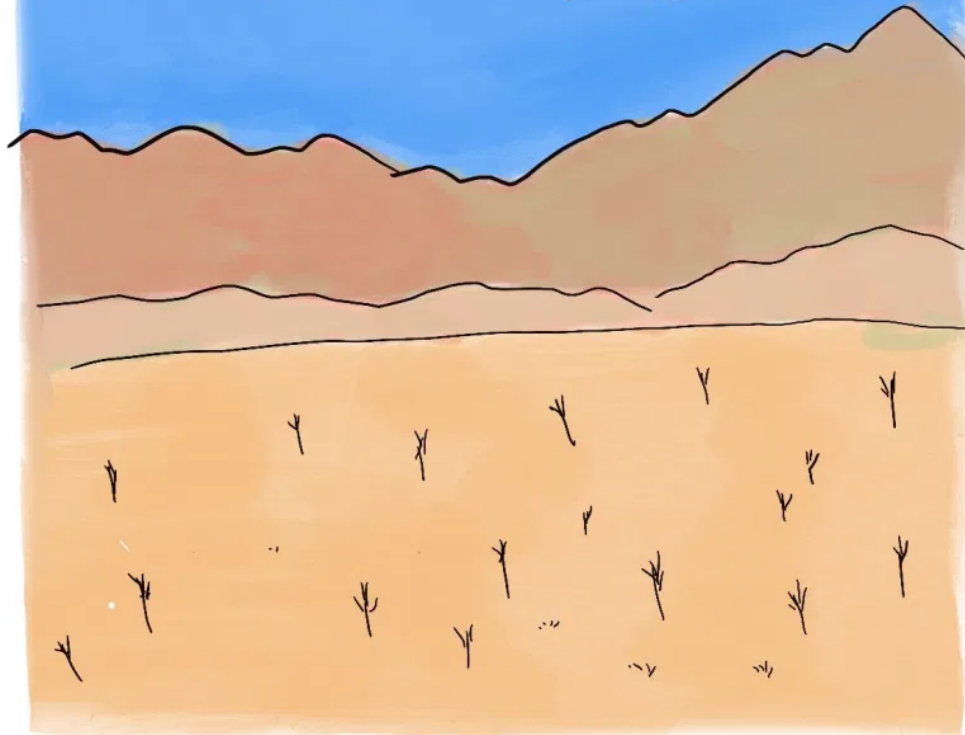
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□ every reference to  
"the Homeland" or "terror"  
(and there are many)

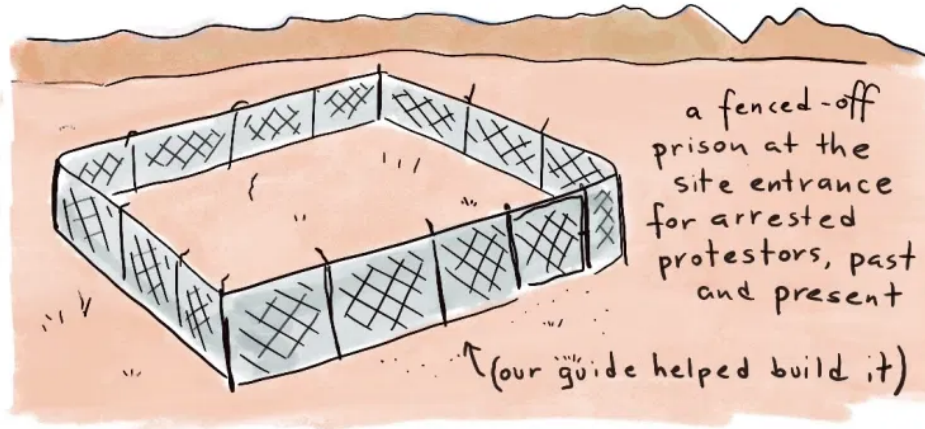
but are we using cynicism as a  
defense mechanism?

I feel all of our protective  
shields going up

because this place is  
PROFOUNDLY + DEEPLY sad

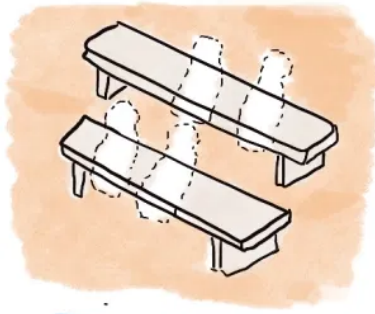


a seven-hour tour  
a seven-hour parade of terrible things

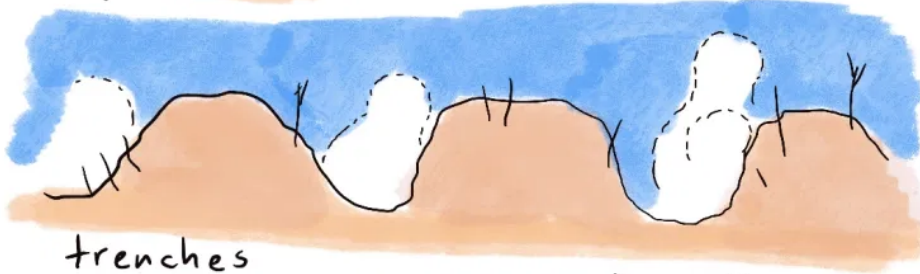




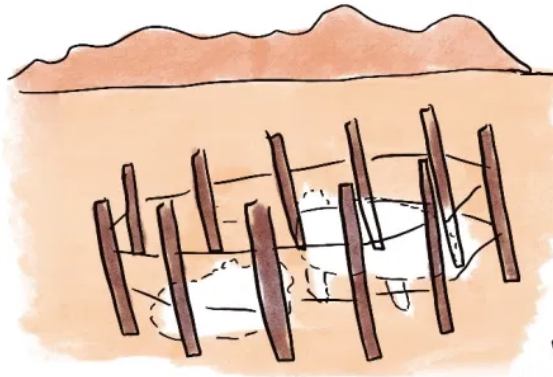
So many reminders of the violence  
done here...



desert-worn benches  
where officials + the  
media watched tests  
at close range



trenches  
where soldiers crouched as the  
government exposed them to  
nuclear blasts

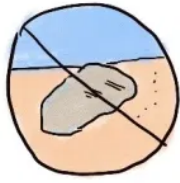


pens  
for the pigs  
scientists tested  
radiation on

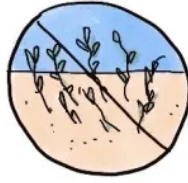


my skin is  
the closest  
thing to  
people skin!

we frequently stop + get off the bus,  
and get warned not to pick up or touch things



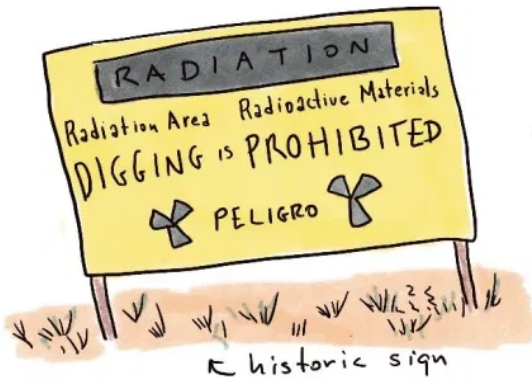
NO



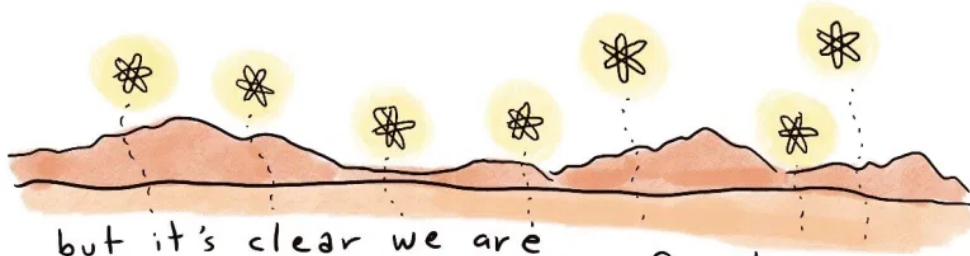
NOPE



NO NO NO NO  
GET AWAY FROM ME



we are  
assured there's  
no danger from  
being here for  
a short visit



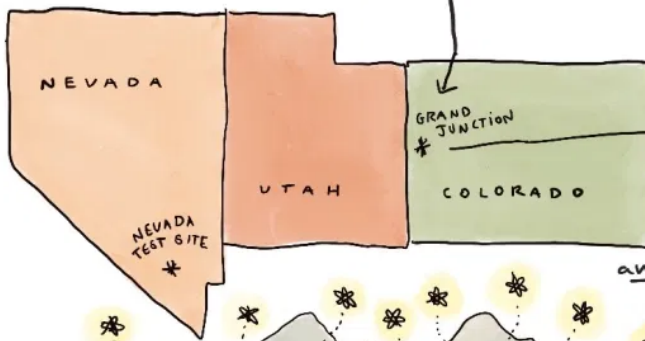
but it's clear we are  
immersed in a landscape of risk  
a damaged place that damages  
in return

but even with the sadness  
even with the risk  
I really feel at home here



my body is surprisingly  
at ease

I grew up in the desert  
in another damaged place



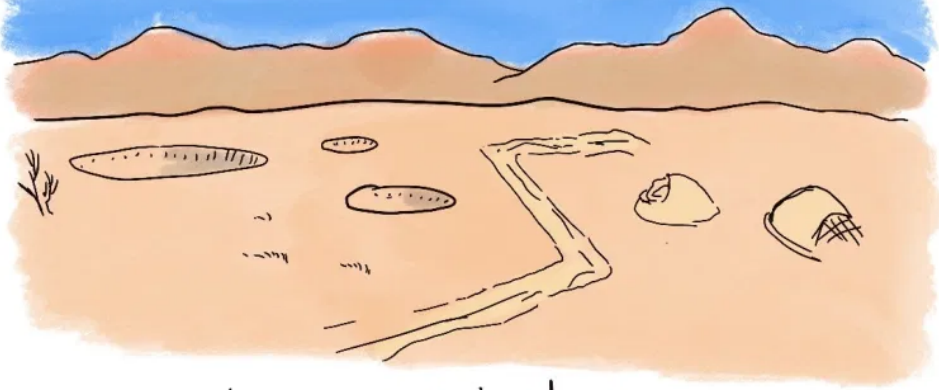
where the U.S.  
processed  
uranium for  
the Manhattan  
Project + early  
Cold War



and where a big  
chunk of the city  
was built on  
radioactive  
fill dirt!



despite that, I trust the desert  
I may be cynical about many things, but  
Not this landscape



the desert keeps receipts  
it's really hard to hide your  
fuck-ups in such a delicate place

I now live  
somewhere  
**LUSH**  
and **GREEN**  
it's pretty, but  
the truth of  
everything seems  
hidden to me



(not pictured: genocide)

as our tour nears its end  
it gets hotter  
we get quieter  
but our guide keeps going

we're going  
to watch this  
video of site  
explosions

but let  
me tell you  
about getting  
a good deal on  
a used car



I think it's time to go back to Vegas



who's ready  
for a  
SHOWER?



who's  
ready for  
a NAP?



who's ready  
for a  
DRINK?

we all have a lot to process, to discuss ?  
we all have a lot of dots  
to connect in new ways



we stop at the  
NEVADA TEST SITE CAFETERIA



snacks



drinks



the  
restroom



I buy  
ice cream

it is very  
cold + very  
sweet

I am grateful

for the brain freeze

+ to feel something again.

END



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B. Erin Cole <https://contingentmagazine.org/author/erincole/>

<https://contingentmagazine.org/author/erincole/> B. Erin Cole is an exhibit developer at the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul. Before that, she was the assistant state historian at the History Colorado Center in Denver. She also draws a lot of comics, and is working on a book-length graphic memoir about recovering from traumatic brain injury. She got her PhD in history at the University of New Mexico in 2014, and occasionally thinks about doing a comics version of her dissertation.