

Ernesto Galarza Commemorative Lecture

On the Bridge, At the Border: Migrants and Immigrants

Fifth Annual Lecture
1990

Stanford Center for Chicano Research
Stanford University

Ernesto Galarza
Commemorative Lecture

Presented by

Arturo Islas

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Preface

Noted novelist Arturo Islas has been a member of the Stanford faculty since 1970. Through his writing and teaching, Islas has helped give Chicanos a sense of dignity and respect in North American centers of higher education. His creative writing and his activism made Islas the unanimous choice to deliver the fifth annual Ernesto Galarza Commemorative Lecture sponsored by the Stanford Center for Chicano Research. Special thanks should go to the selection committee made up of Gerald Lopez, committee chair, Professor of Law; Carlos Munoz, Professor of Ethnic Studies, University of California, Berkeley; Jose Padilla, Director, California Rural Legal Assistance.

In his lecture, Islas depicts the dilemmas Chicano writers feel today. How can Chicano writers be recognized and published in national centers? After posing the problem, Professor Islas allows his work to speak for itself — and it does, with warmth and humor, as the audience acknowledged in its enthusiasm, laughter, and applause.

Renato Rosaldo
Director, SCCR
August, 1990

Forward

Mae Galarza

Mae Galarza was born at the beginning of the 20th century. She grew up in a small hamlet of table grape vineyards neighboring Sacramento.

Mae became a teacher. She met Ernesto at the beginning of her teaching career when his younger sister was one of her pupils. They married and moved to New York City where they studied at Columbia University.

Mae and Ernesto found their experience at the university joyful and thought-provoking as they learned and discovered the philosophy of progressive education. They worked together for seven years in an elementary school where they practiced their progressive education beliefs.

Ernesto and Mae moved from New York to Washington D.C. and eventually returned to California. As a couple, Ernesto and Mae remained actively committed to educational issues and enjoyed their union as best friends. Always, Ernesto referred to Mae as his companera. Their two daughters and wealth of community members contributed to a rich life together.

The following introduction was written by Mae Galarza.

Ernesto Galarza:
Growing Up Through Five

On the very top of one of the western ranges of the Sierra Madre Mountains, between San Bias and Tepic in the province of Nayarit, Mexico, Ernesto Galarza spent the first five years of his childhood. Neron, the family pet dog, had learned to push the hammock cradling the new baby when he cried. Uncles, aunts and cousins shared his protective world. These years of growth were full of natural learning. Modern conveniences and gadgets did not exist for Ernesto's family, or for any of the 200 village residents.

In the home, a *candil*, (a wick in a small can of kerosene) offered a faint light in the darkness. In the street, there were no wires, telegraph poles, or electric lights of any kind. The myriad of stars that filled the sky, sparkled intensely and required no repairs. Also, one did not wander around at night. The dark night meant sleep, to provide the human power for the next day's work.

At night, the large, one-room cottage was divided by sheet-like curtains into three bedrooms. Young Ernesto and his two cousins, Jesus and Catarino, slept in a loft on mats of palm and pine leaves. They had fun climbing the notched pole to settle for the night, and listening to the quiet talk of their elders below and to nature's sound — nocturnal insects calling, rain pelting the thatched roof, and wind blowing softly, or maddeningly. In the morning, the drapes were pulled aside for housekeeping and the day began with the preparation of the regular meal of coffee, beans and tortillas. The hot coffee warmed their hands and invigorated them for the tasks that needed to be done.

After eating, the men went off into the mountains to work patches of corn and beans, and to pick coffee and fruit, especially bananas. The boys had their turn to eat after the men; then the women, the mother and aunt, ate last.

After breakfast, Ernesto and his cousins rushed out to feed and care for the pets, Neron, Coronel — the rooster, the hens, and the burro, *Relampago*. The corral was their home. But food was also available for them in front of the cottage just one step from the front door. Coronel would lead the parade through the back door and on to the front door to pick at the waste thrown from the line of cottages facing the main trail. Neron might find a bone or two. Coronel and the hens would peck, and *Relampago*, in contrast to his name which means lightning, would furnish burro-back riding for teaching the boys equilibrium. Sometimes the neighbors borrowed him for their children. If he wandered too far away there was always someone to bring him home. He sort of belonged to everyone in the village.

The street garbage provided food not only for the domesticated animals, but also for the wild vultures. One day, while Coronel and his flock were feeding, a *zopilote* dropped from the sky with his five-foot wing span to peck at some entrails. But, Coronel, to save his hens, entered the fray. Fighting with thrusts of spurs, battling with beak, he issued a warning clutter of warrior bursts. Heightening the drama, Neron came to the rescue of the rooster and finally the *zopilote* flew to the top of a tree with just the unsavory entrails won. An exciting rural scene like this would be the talk of the town for days, being repeated from one youth to another, and to the adults who were not present. Coronel had acted magnificently. The vulture was a coward.

There were many similar events for the enjoyment and learning of an

observant and wondering child. For example, there was a village storyteller and a village historian. The storyteller had a ritual before her presentations. Storytime was announced by her appearance. She walked down the street, her many skirts covering her bare feet until she arrived at her selected spot in the plaza. There, seated under the tree she would roll her own cigarette and blow a puff before beginning a ghost or mystery story, or telling some fantasy. The children would sit in a circle, listening, watching, and absorbing. As her cigarette shortened, and the sky darkened, the children would leave, one at a time. The village historian, a very old man, told stories of ancestors and history so that generations of children would continue to remember culture, family and significant events.

Ernesto's formal education at this time came from two sources, his uncle who taught him sign language and his mother who gave lessons using the abacus, slate and pizarra. Young boys would gather around to view and listen to the explanations about letters from their teacher. Perhaps best of all, Ernesto's mother taught reading rudiments by using the one book that they had — a cookbook. The self-taught younger uncle, with his harmonica, imitated sounds of birds, wind and other natural phenomena. He played folk song tunes on the harmonica while Ernesto's mother sang as she cooked.

Courtesy was a must. Greetings to all were given every morning: to the family, to people in the street, and to neighbors when food was delivered or borrowed.

Outsiders who travelled through town provoked thoughts about what work a youth might do as a grown-up. An occasional authority on a handsome high horse, saddled in leather and silver, paced slowly through the village which was his stage. Peddlers were not stately or officious but were nonetheless quite interesting. With

their trinkets for sale, they carried gossip from other towns, and sometimes a letter or two for a village native.

The mule drivers, with burros heavily burdened, danced back and forth to ensure the line in the center of the trail. The boys watched the *arrieros* feed their tired animals, release their packs for the night and repack them for the journey down the mountain the next morning. Whether or not the boys thought of becoming mule drivers they took delight through imitating the language and action of the *arrieros*.

The processes and ingenuity of the street artisans were open for young and old to view and discuss. The butcher was the master slaughterer who provided not only meat, but strips of leather that were dried, rubbed with tallow to give them strength and then used as bags for carrying lunch or for crates to transport chickens to market. The shoemaker made huaraches — worn only when the terrain was exceedingly rough — the preference was bare feet. The young girls learned to sew, cook, launder and carry *ollas* of water to the cottage up the slope above the *arroyo*.

The *arroyo*, or free water system was the scene of much activity. The young boys watched the older boys swing from the branches, create a tumult of fun and noise or vie for the attention of bravo howls. In the nooks of the ponds, on the white sandy beaches, the women washed clothes. The morning parade of women carrying jars of water on their heads or shoulders formed a pretty sight.

The village economy served its uncomplaining citizens. There were no luxuries and no gaps between poor and rich. All villagers were poor but happy in their free village. No family *jefe* was a *peon* of an *hacendado*. There were no jalopies, bicycles, or Mercedes. The roads were not built for machinery, they were only for pedestrians on foot. There were no schools

organized for classroom teaching. There were no churches, priests or ministers who would preach morality to the young. But the extended family was close at hand, sometimes living in one large room.

There was a glimpse of the textile industry in the Galarza home since Ernesto's mother worked with needles and a sewing machine. Sometimes Ernesto was allowed to arrange palm leaves on the earthen floor to protect the clean materials. To avoid being called a sissy, no one saw him help with the treadle.

Was this environment a good substitute for a school? Indeed, though not housed as such, it was a school. Ernesto, sitting on the front doorstep in Jalcoctan, watched as his world passed by. There he viewed television without cameras or a big screen. There were no homeless and no unemployed. His first five years were spent living in a camp-like atmosphere that many boys today look forward to as summer recreation. These early years had an effect in the formation of Ernesto's character as a citizen of unusual quality. Ernesto Galarza was a man of conscience who believed in taking a stand against corrupt power. He was a man of action. He was a man of modesty and courtesy; a man who spoke well in English and Spanish, debating convincingly the cause of justice.

(Mrs. Galarza also included statements from friends and scholars of Ernesto Galarza. The following excerpts are reflective of the esteem and admiration accorded to Ernesto Galarza by those who knew him intimately and the scholars who would later become acquainted with his work and activism.)

James Murray, Attorney, represented Ernesto Galarza in a lawsuit filed against DiGiorgio Fruit Corporation, in 1960. Referring to the outcome of the trial, he remarks:

"But Ernesto was satisfied. He was after that phoney report. He had proved that that "Congres-

sional Report", held out for years by Di Giorgio, was a fake. That report, denouncing farm workers and their leaders, had been introduced in evidence by attorneys for Di Giorgio in seven previous law suits. Not one of those defense attorneys in those cases had objected. They fell for the fraud.

"That denunciatory "Report" has never been used since. So Ernesto was gratified that he had exposed that anti-union, false report which had been used to bash farm workers for years. His goal was never gain for himself."

Cida S. Chase, Associate Professor of Spanish at Oklahoma State University has lectured extensively on Ernesto Galarza. She writes:

"Ernesto Galarza's multiple contributions to the Humanities reveal a sensitive and talented man. The legacy of his works constitutes a valuable treasure for the Mexican-American community and the general populace of the United States."

Introduction

Renato Rosaldo
Professor of Anthropology

It is a deep and unexpected pleasure for me to introduce Arturo Islas, creative writer and Professor of English at Stanford. The pleasure is unexpected because prophets so rarely become known in their own land. And, indeed, the Stanford Center for Chicano Research has never before recognized one of its own as the Ernesto Galarza lecturer. The pleasure is deep because Arturo Islas and I have been friends and colleagues for some twenty years.

One can list Professor Islas' accomplishments — his celebrated first novel, *The Rain God*, and his recently published *Migrant Souls*; his popular courses on American and Chicano literature and culture; his extraordinary talent for enabling Chicano students to find their own voice in writing; his passionate activism at Stanford on behalf of the Chicano community. These accomplishments are considerable and they have earned Arturo Islas respect within and beyond the university community.

Yet Arturo Islas is more than his accomplishments. He is one of those rare individuals who is as loved as he is respected. His capacity to listen and care, to empathize and offer insight, have made Islas a revered friend and colleague. His human intelligence and gift for friendship make him a man whom many of us esteem and love.

These words can, perhaps, mislead those who don't know him well. What I've left out is his wonderful understated sense of humor. This humor suffuses his written work, even if cer-

tain critics seem to confuse deadpan humor with earnest depiction. One hopes that *Migrant Souls* in time becomes recognized as the significant comic novel it is. As a contribution to this recognition and as an introduction to the writer himself, I can do no better than conclude by reading the following passage from *Migrant Souls*:

"After the war, their mother took to raising chickens and pigeons in order to save money. Josie saw their neighbors enjoying life and thought that her mother had gone crazy. Eduviges had even bought a live duck from God kows where and kept it until the Garcias next door began complaining about all the racket it made at night. Josie and Serena had become attached to it, so much so that when it appeared piecemeal in a mole poblano, both of them refused to eat it.

"It's too greasy," Josie said, holding back her tears and criticizing her mother's cooking instead.

"Then let your sisters have your portion. Eat the beans," Sancho said from behind the hunting magazine that was his bible.

"I don't want it," Serena said, her tears falling unchecked. "Poor don Pato. He didn't make that much noise. The Garcias are louder than he ever was."

Ofelia was dutifully, even happily, chewing away. "I think he's delicious," she said.

On the Bridge, At The Border: Migrants and Immigrants

Arturo Islas

I begin with a parenthesis. (In the last month, I have attended the first annual Latin American Writers' conference held in this country at Long Beach and the DIA Arts Foundation Writers conference in New York City. It was a pleasure to be invited to speak in both instances as a Chicano/Mexican American writer and to sense a genuine interest in the work of writers from our background. We are rarely invited to share the company of those who are recognized and esteemed in their respective countries as writers. More often in the past and at such gatherings, we have been looked upon as token figures by both North and South American members of the literati. Not so on these two occasions and I returned from them with exhilaration and a growing sense of vindication.

My remarks and observations at today's gathering have been taken from my presentations at those conferences and are notes to the perfect lecture I would have liked to deliver. After years of practice, I have not yet attained to those heights. That's why I have to keep doing it over and over until I learn how. I am not apologizing for the informal and personal nature of what I am going to talk about with you. This is only an introduction to my style, which has been criticized as overly autobiographical; if, in fact, it is that, I trust it is not egocentric or narcissistic. In my experience of teaching literature, particularly that which has been written by members of North American cultures that have been ignored or looked upon with disdain by the mainstream, autobiographical narrative has served as a powerful

and eloquent form.

At the two conferences I attended, much of the discussion focussed on cultural identity and the crisis of representation, two phrases which I took literally though, frankly, over the years I have grown tired of the word "identity" — so often it is used to mean "confidence" — and the whole question of who or what a writer "represents" seems always to come back to my own heart and not anyone else's. Nevertheless, much of what I am saying today touches upon these issues.)

I consider it a great honor for me as a writer and teacher of literature to have been asked to give the Galarza lecture this year. Usually honored in the breach, teaching and writing are not held in as high regard as the work of doctors, lawyers and business people, who are generally regarded and who regard themselves as truly living in the world and as having a closer connection to what is called "real" life.

In his life and work, Ernesto Galarza combined scholarship, teaching, writing and public service and set an example for us all. He would have been as proud and delighted as I to see how many more students from our shared background are now in the academy and on their way to being public servants. As our segment of the Hispanic population west of the Rockies continues to swell into majority status we are going to need many more young people with the kind of knowledge and dedication that Ernesto Galarza brought to his struggles as a labor leader to create parity for people of Mexican heritage in the fields and factories of northern California and elsewhere. I am deeply moved and feel very privileged to be the one chosen to speak at this annual Stanford tribute to him. And it is a very special treat to see my mother and father — Jovita and Arturo Islas — as well as the lovely Mae Galarza and so many old friends in the audience. Thank you for

coming to hear what I have to say.

Like Ernesto Galarza's, my grandparents were from Mexico and though I did not, as he, spend my childhood there, we were never very far away from it in El Paso, Texas. In fact and practice, my hometown has many more connections to northern Mexico and southern New Mexico than to the rest of that curious place called Texas, a mythical and disturbing country all its own. People of Mexican ancestry — some who speak with Texas accents, especially if they spend their lives on a golf course — are now the majority group in El Paso and the confidence that comes from strength in numbers is beginning to make inroads into the once all-Anglo political structures of the town.

The pace is slow and the very real obstacles of prejudice and bigotry still very much there but the movement toward parity, even maybe real equality, like the pre-historic lava that gives shape to the landscape, is inexorable. My parents and I won't see it, but my niece and nephew will and by then, I trust their teachers will be allowed to tell them how they got there. My own teachers, who were well-meaning, devoted and Anglo, never mentioned the contributions of people from my background to the cultural and economic life of the country. Quietly, insidiously, we learned that our heritage and history were nonexistent. Plymouth Rock and the English language were the "real" America, the true "democracy."

Like Ernesto Galarza, I learned Spanish at home and happily to this day, we slide with ease from one language to another in my parents' household, sometimes stopping to create new words and expressions that are part of border culture with an atmosphere all its own. I am one of those people who think that a truly educated person knows more than one language.

Before migrating to California (as Mr. Galarza did at an earlier age than

I), I was educated in the public schools that my parents had attended before my brothers and I were born. People of Mexican ancestry in what was then a thriving military town did not enjoy the privilege of a college education. They were working so that their children could enjoy it. My father thinks his sacrifices have paid off. He likes to say that his youngest son, a lawyer, will defend him on earth, that his middle son, a priest, will defend him in heaven, and that his oldest son is at a "big deal" college in California teaching the *gringos* how to express themselves in their own language.

I return often to my parents' home now — you can go home again and again after and if you are willing to grow up — and to that southwestern desert country where the light has a clarity that stuns and where one is closer to the sky than anywhere else on earth. I consider myself, still, a child of the border, a border some believe extends all the way to Seattle and includes the northern provinces of Mexico. In my experience, the two-thousand mile-long Mexican-United States Border has a cultural identity that is unique. That condition, that landscape and its people, are what I write about in my fictions.

Like some of my characters, I often find myself on the bridge between cultures, between languages, between sexes, between nations, between religions, between my profession as teacher and my vocation as writer, between two different and equally compelling ways of looking agape at this world.

When I write, I am in a privileged position between these disparate entities and in my imagination, if not in real life, I can walk from one side of a border to another without any immigration officers to tell me where I should or should not be. I also see myself and those who share Ernesto Galarza's and my cultural and historical background as migrants, not immigrants. And though we may have some points in common with our His-

panic sisters and brothers in this hemisphere, the historical, economic and social connections of the Mexican people to the United States have their own rich and painful particularities. History has a great deal to do with cultural identity and in my work, I examine such connections and attempt to transform them into art. I am still learning how best to weave political and historical issues into my narratives so that they do not overwhelm the characters unless I want them to do so. Latin American writers have a gift for being able to incorporate life and death political concerns into their fictions artfully and I study them with envy and admiration.

At the first annual Pacific Coast Latin American Writers' conference held in Long Beach at the end of April this year, Peruvian poet Antonio Cisneros described the political situation in his country with humor and despair and wondered aloud if Peru would still exist when he returned to it and his family later that week. Fernando Alegria, Chilean novelist and don of Latin American letters in this country, told us about his recent visit to Chile. After many years of not being allowed to see his family and native land, his return included a triumphant celebration of the publication of his biography of Salvador de Allende. In a deadpan voice, eyes full of satire, he described how his Chilean brothers and sisters forget all about history during the summer months and lie side by side on the beaches of the Hispanic Pacific Coast rim.

From Mexico, the wondrous Elena Poniatowska observed that the talk of writers at Latin American conferences somehow always got back to politics and that, like it or not, writers in Latin America are political figures. She chided her Peruvian brother Cisneros for speaking about his wife as if she were a possession and said she wished she had such a wife to take care of the business of living while she wrote her essays and novels.

Novelist Antonio Skarmeta from Argentina revealed that Mr. Fujimori, most probably (and improbably) the next president of Peru, was really a fictional invention of Gabriel Garcia Marquez created for the purpose of driving fellow novelist Mario Vargas Llosa out of his mind. And later, during the question and answer period when I was asked about the connection and communication between Mexican and Chicane/Mexican American writers I took the opportunity to say in an aside that I would gladly be Elena Poniatowska's wife.

Throughout the conference, I was struck by the feeling of being treated as an equal by these fine writers, known and revered in their respective countries. They took my words and work seriously and were eager to listen to a description of my place as a Chicane/Mexican American writer in the cultural life of the United States. What could I tell them but the sad truth?

To their credit, the literary establishment of the northeast — which has the power to decide what the rest of the country reads — does recognize the work of some Latin and South American writers. In their reviews and literary journals, they discuss them with respect and admiration. Their Hispanic names are often seen alongside the names of the writers, young and old, who are revered in North America.

Alas, except for two notable and instructive exceptions, we have not seen the names of any writers from the Chicane/Mexican American tradition in these esteemed journals. In the early eighties, much attention was given to two men of Mexican heritage born and educated in this country. Both received front page and lengthy reviews in the respected and widely distributed periodicals of the nation.

One of these writers, at thirty-five, wrote an autobiography in which he rigidly separates the private from the public and excoriates any teacher who

favors affirmative action and bilingual education, even though he himself reaped the benefits of such programs for his own education. He has since become a favorite of the English Speaking Union.

The other, who wrote a novel told in the first person by a young Chicano gang member in East L.A., turned out not to be Hispanic at all, but an upper-class, Yale-educated older member of the literary establishment who had been blacklisted for his political views. Apparently, he revealed in an interview, he could only write after his traumatic blacklisting when he imagined himself to be an underprivileged young Chicano from the barrio.

That's it. They are the only two writers who have made their way — as Mexican Americans and Chicanos — into the cultural imagination of this country. I find the condition of the first writer pitiable and instructive and to the second I want to say that Chicane/Mexican American writers have not had the distinction of being blacklisted. We have been unlisted.

Arturo Madrid, in an interview with Bill Moyers, is correct when he says that we have been systematically and effectively erased. And when we are not, as happens now and again to some, we are dismissed with condescension and thrown to the sociologists and historians outside of our culture to be put back in our place.

In the last few months, it has been a pleasure and pain to watch how the reviewers of my second novel have tripped all over themselves not wanting to understand the very clear distinction I make between migrant and immigrant and how important I think that distinction is to an understanding of the Mexican American/Chicano experience. Why would they feel so threatened by it?

I simply state the facts: the first is that Mexican people were in this part of the United States before the European immigrants traveled westward

to claim it for their own after they "discovered" us and our Native American brothers and sisters. ("Annihilated" or "put in our place" are more appropriate expressions than "discovered." Naturally, the northeastern immigrant view which made its first appearance in 1620 would be Eurocentric; they came from Europe, after all. And they simply have not learned how to imagine anything that moves north and south in this hemisphere. Ever notice how, except for drugs and debts, we do not hear much about what is going on in the cultural life of Mexico?)

Fact two: Mexicans did not cross an ocean with the intention of starting a brand new life in a "new" world. They were already very much a part of the landscape even before it changed its name from "Mexico" to the "United States" hardly more than a century ago.

These two historical facts are the basis for the migrant concept that I explore in this second novel of a trilogy. Migrant psychology, I suggest, is different from immigrant psychology in subtle and significant ways. And it pervades every condition of Mexican people's lives in this country, whether they are citizens or not, from the workers in the fields who harvest the food on our tables to the students who are asking that the contributions of their culture to North American life be acknowledged in the classroom.

I suspect that part of the reason some are so threatened by this migrant concept is that they will be compelled to examine from another, less comfortable, perspective, the actions of their forefathers in the creation of what in the academy is currently labeled "western" and "non-western." Let me give you my no doubt oversimplified definition of these terms as they have come to be used by intelligent and well-meaning scholars. If it came from Europe, it is "western." If it was already here in this hemisphere, it is "non-western." What folly, fragmen-

tation and fears lurk in such a view of our cultural lives in this part of the world?

The implications of this kind of intellectual tomfoolery overwhelm me and the juggling of such blatantly contradictory terms makes me despair for the academy. And so, still on the bridge, I run toward my fictions, to the balm of art, knowing that even the most vituperative piece of writing can serve the healing process. And even if I am made uncomfortable by my own imagination and prose, I remember that all art worthy of the name ought to make us uncomfortable. Discomfort often forces us to think and grow. It will not kill or maim us. The pen may not be mightier than the sword these days, but it can be as mighty.

I write to explore these conditions as I see them from my vantage point on the bridge. I do not even think of resolutions. I think of solutions as liquid, forever changing their shape according to what contains them. The liquid itself flows or freezes, stagnates or bubbles. The possibilities are endless and my bewildered characters swim along as best they can.

All that I have said to you, I have tried to incorporate in my work and for the last part of my talk, I will let my characters speak for and through me. I do not always agree with them and how some of them lead their lives upsets me greatly. But even when I am troubled by what they do or say, I remind myself that the great justification for the act of writing and reading fiction is that through it we can be disciplined and seduced into imagining other peoples* lives with understanding and compassion, even if we do not "identify" with them. Spending a lifetime on this bridge at the Border has taught me a great deal.

When I first wrote this scene to what became the novel *Migrant Souls*, it was a story called "The Middle of Nowhere."

"The Middle of Nowhere"¹

For Thanksgiving, in the border-town of Del Sapo, Texas, Eduviges Salazar decided to bake a turkey with all the trimmings. She had memorized the recipes in the glossy American magazines while waiting her turn at the Safeway checkout counter.

Because the girls — Ofelia, Serena and Josie — were in public school and learning about North American holidays and customs, Eduviges thought her plan would please them. It did and even Josie allowed her to embrace her in that quick, embarrassed way she had of touching them. As usual, her husband Sancho had no idea why she was going to such lengths preparing for a ritual that meant nothing to him.

"I don't see why we can't have the enchiladas you always make," he said. "I don't even like turkey. Why don't you let me bring you a nice, fat pheasant from the Chihuahua mountains? At least it'll taste like something. Eating turkey is going to turn my girls into little *gringas*. Is that what you want?"

"Oh, Daddy, please! Everybody else is going to have turkey." The girls, wearing colored paper headdresses they had made in art class, were acting out the Pocahontas story and reciting from "Hiawatha" in a hodgepodge of Indian sentiment that forced Sancho to agree in order to keep them quiet.

"All right, all right," he said. "Just stop all the racket, please. And Serena, *querida*, don't wear that stuff outside the house or they'll pick you up and send you to a reservation. That would be okay with me but your mother wouldn't like it."

Serena and Josie gave each other knowing glances. "They" were the *migra* who drove around in green vans, sneaked up on innocent dark-skinned people and deported them. Their neighbor down the block —

Benito Cruz, who was lighterskinned than Serena and did not look at all like an Indian — had been picked up three times already, detained at the border for hours and then released with the warning to carry his identification papers at all times. That he was an American citizen did not seem to matter to the immigration officers.

The girls were brought up on as many deportation stories as fairy tales and family legends. The latest horror had been the discovery of twenty-one young Mexican males who had been left to asphyxiate in an airtight box car on their way to pick cotton in the lower Rio Grande Valley.

When they read the newspaper articles about how the men died, Josie and Serena thought of the fluttering noises of the pigeons their mother first strangled and then put under a heavy cardboard box for minutes that seemed eternal to the girls. They covered their ears to protect their souls from the thumping and scratching noises of the doomed birds.

Even their mother had shown sympathy for the Mexican youths, especially when it was learned that they were not from the poorest class. "I feel very bad for their families," Eduviges said. "Their mothers must be in agony."

What about their fathers? Josie felt like asking but did not. Because of the suffering she imagined they went through, Josie did not want to turn her feelings for the young men into another argument with her mother about "wetbacks" or about who did and did not "deserve" to be in the United States.

In the time of the turkey smuggling incident, Josie had begun to wonder why being make-believe North American Indians seemed to be all right with their mother. "Maybe it's because those Indians spoke English," Josie said. Mexican Indians were too close to home and the truth and the way Eduviges looked at Serena in her art class get-up convinced Josie she was

¹An edited version of this story appears in *Migrant Souls*, a novel, (New York: Wm Morrow, 1990).

on the right track.

So in 1947, on the Saturday before Thanksgiving, their mother and father took them across the river in search of the perfect turkey. Sancho borrowed his friend Tacho Morales' pickup and they drove down the valley to the Zaragoza crossing. It was closer to the ranch where Eduviges had been told the turkeys were raised and sold for practically nothing. Josie and Serena sat in the front seat of the pickup with their father. Eduviges and Ofelia followed them in the Chevy in case anything went wrong.

Sancho was a slower, more patient driver than their mother, who turned into a speed demon with a sharp tongue behind the wheel. More refined than her younger sisters, Ofelia was scandalized by every phrase that came out of Eduviges' mouth when some sorry driver from Chihuahua or New Mexico got in her way.

"Why don't they teach those imbecilic cretins how to drive?" she said loudly in Spanish, window down and honking. Or, "May all your teeth fall out but one and may that ache until the day you die" to the man who pulled out in front of her without a signal.

Grateful that her mother was being good for once and following slowly and at a safe distance behind the pickup, Ofelia dozed, barely aware of the clear day so warm for November. Only the bright yellow leaves of the cottonwood trees reminded her that it was autumn. They clung to the branches and vibrated in the breeze, which smelled of burning mesquite and Mexican alders. As they followed her father away from the mountains into the valley, Ofelia began to dream they were inside one of Mama Chona's blue clay bowls, suspended in mid-air while the sky revolved around them.

To Josie and Serena, it seemed their father was taking forever to get to where they were going. "Are we there yet?" they asked him until he told them that if they asked one more time,

he was going to leave them in the middle of nowhere and not let their mother rescue them. The threat only made them laugh more and they started asking him where the middle of nowhere was until he, too, laughed with them.

"The middle of nowhere, smart alecks, is at the bottom of the sea and so deep not even the fish go there," Sancho said, getting serious about it.

"No, no," Serena said, "It's in the space between two stars and no planets around."

"I already said the middle of nowhere is in Del Sapo, Texas," Josie said.

"I know, I know. It's in the Sahara desert where not even the tumbleweeds will grow," their father said.

"No, Daddy. It's at the top of Mt. Everest." Serena was proud of the B she had gotten for her report on the highest mountain in the world. They fell silent and waited for Josie to take her turn.

"It's here," Josie said quietly and pointed to her heart.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Josie, don't be so dramatic. You don't even know what you are saying," Serena said. Sancho changed the subject.

When they arrived at the ranch, he told Eduviges and the girls that the worst that could happen on their return was that the turkey would be taken away from them. But the girls, especially, must do and say exactly as he instructed them.

Their mother was not satisfied with Sancho's simple directions and once again told them about the humiliating body search her friend from New Mexico, *la senora* Moulton, had been subjected to at the Santa Fe Street bridge. She had just treated her daughter Ethel and her granddaughters Amy and Mary Ann to lunch at the old Central Cafe in Juarez. When Mrs. Moulton had been asked her citizenship, she had replied in a jovial way, "Well, what do I look like, sir?"

They made her get out of the car, led her to a special examining cell, ordered

her to undress and made her suffer unspeakable mortifications while her relatives waited at least four hours in terror, wondering if they would ever see her again or be allowed to return to the country of their birth. Then, right on cue Josie said with Eduvigés, "And they were Anglos and blonde!"

While their parents were bargaining for the bird, the girls looked with awe upon the hundreds of adult turkeys kept inside four large corrals. As they walked by each enclosure, one of the birds gobbled and the rest echoed its call until the racket was unbearable. Serena was struck by an attack of giggles.

"They sure are stupid," Josie said in Spanish to their Mexican guide.

"They really are," he said with a smile. "When it rains, we have to cover the coops of the younger ones so they won't drown." He was a dark red color and very shy. Josie liked him instantly.

"How can they drown?" Serena asked him. "The river is nowhere near here. Does it flood?"

"No," the young man said, looking away from them. "Not from the Rio Bravo. From the rain. They stretch their necks, open their beaks wide and let it pour in until they drown. They keel over all bloated. That's how stupid they are." He bent his head back and showed them as they walked by an enclosure. "Gobble, gobble" the guide called and the turkeys answered hysterically.

Josie and Serena laughed all the way back to the pickup. Ofelia had not been allowed to join them because of the way their mother thought the guide was looking at her. She was dreaming away in the back seat of the Chevy while their father struggled to get the newly bought and very nervous turkey into a slatted crate. Eduvigés was criticizing every move he made. At last, the creature was in the box and eerily silent.

"I think it knows what's going to happen," Josie said.

"It's too stupid to know," Serena told her.

"Now listen, girls," Sancho said, wiping his face. "I'll do all the talking at the bridge. You just say 'American' when the time comes. Not another word, you hear? Think about Mrs. Moulton, Josie." He gave her a wink.

The turkey remained frozen inside the crate. Sancho lifted it onto the pickup, covered it with a yellow plastic tablecloth they used on picnics and told Serena to sit on top of it with her back against the rear window.

"Serena," he said, "I'd hate to lose you because of this idiot bird but if you open your mouth except to say 'American,' I won't be responsible for what happens. Okay?" He kissed her on the cheek as if in farewell forever, Josie thought, looking at them from the front seat. She was beginning to wish they had not begged so successfully for a traditional North American feast. Nothing would happen to Ofelia, of course. She was protected in their mother's car and nowhere near the turkey. Josie felt that Serena was in great peril and made up her mind to do anything to keep her from harm.

On the way to the bridge, Josie made the mistake of asking her father if they were aliens. Sancho put his foot on the brake so hard that Eduvigés almost rearended them. He looked at Josie very hard and said, "I do not ever want to hear you use that word in my presence again. About anybody. We are not aliens. We are American citizens of Mexican heritage. We are proud of both countries and will never be that word you just said to me."

"Well," Josie said. Sancho knew she was not afraid of him. He pulled away from the shoulder and signaled for his wife to continue following them. "That's what they call Mexican people in the newspapers. And Kathy Jarvis told me real snotty at recess yesterday that we were nothing but resident aliens."

After making sure Eduvigés was right behind them, Sancho said in a

calmer, serious tone, "Josie, I'm warning you. I do not want to hear those words again. Do you understand me?"

"I'm only telling you what Kathy said. What did she mean? Is she right?"

"Kathy Jarvis is an ignorant little brat. The next time she tells you that, you tell her that Mexican and Indian people were in this part of the country long before any *gringos*, Europeans (he said 'Yurup-beans') or anyone else decided it was theirs. That should shut her up. If it doesn't, tell her those words are used by people who think Mexicans are not human beings. That goes for the newspapers, too. They don't think anyone is human." She watched him look straight ahead, then in the rearview mirror, then at her as he spoke.

"Don't you see, Josie. When people call Mexicans those words, it makes it easier for them to deport or kill them. Aliens come from outer space." He paused. "Sort of like your mother's family, the blessed Angels, who think they come from heaven. Don't tell her I said that."

They were now driving through the main streets of Juarez and Sancho was struggling to remain in his lane. "God, these Mexicans drive just like your mother," he said with affection.

At every intersection, young Indian-women with babies at their breast stretched out their hands toward them. Josie was filled with dread and pity. One of the women knocked on her window while they waited for the light to change. She held up her baby and said, "*Senorita por favor. Dinero para el nino.*" Her hair was black and shiny and her eyes as dark as Josie's. Her words came through the glass in a muted, dreamlike way. Silent and unblinking, the infant stared at Josie.

"Don't roll down the window or your mother will have a fit," Sancho said. He turned the corner and headed toward the river. The woman and child disappeared. Behind them, Eduviges kept honking almost all the way

to the bridge.

"I think it was blind," Josie said. Her father did not answer and looked straight ahead.

The traffic leading to the declaration points was backed up several blocks and the stop and go movement as they inched their way to the American side was more than Josie could bear. She kept looking back at Serena, who sat like a *Virgen de Guadalupe* statue on a yellow plastic covered throne.

Knowing her sister, Josie was certain that Serena was going to free the turkey, jump out of the truck with it, gather up the beggarly women and children and disappear forever into the sidestreets and alleys of Juarez. They drove past an old Indian woman, her long braids silver grey in the sun, begging in front of Curley's Club. And that is how Josie imagined Serena years from that day — an ancient and withered creature, bare feet crusted with clay, too old to recognize her little sister. The vision made her believe that the middle of nowhere was exactly where she felt it was. She covered her chest with her arms.

"What's the matter? Don't tell me you're going to be sick," her father said.

"No, I'm fine. Can't you hurry?"

Seeing the fear in her face, Sancho told her gently that he had not yet figured out how to drive through cars without banging them up. Josie smiled and kept her hands over her heart.

When they approached the border patrolman's station, the turkey began gobbling away. "Oh, no," Josie cried and shut her eyes in terror for her sister.

"Oh, shit," her father said. "I hate this goddamned bridge." At that moment, the officer stuck his head into the pickup and asked for their citizenship.

"American," said Sancho.

"American," said Josie.

"Anything to declare? Any liquor or food?" he asked in an accusing way.

While Sancho was assuring him that there was nothing to declare, the turkey gobbled again in a long stream of high-pitched gurgles that sent shivers up and down Josie's spine. She vowed to go into the cell with Serena when the search was ordered.

"What's that noise?" the patrolman wanted to know. Sancho shrugged and gave Josie and then the officer a look filled with the ignorance of the world.

Behind them, Serena began gobbling along with the bird and it was hard for any of them to tell one gobble from another. Their mother pressed down on the horn of the Chevy and made it stick. Eduviges was ready to jump out of the car and save her daughter from a fate worse than death. In the middle of the racket, the officer's frown was turning into anger and he started yelling at Serena.

"American!" she yelled back and gobbled.

"What have you got there?" The officer pointed to the plastic covered crate.

"It's a turkey," Serena shouted. "It's American, too." She kept gobbling along with the noise of the horn. Other drivers had begun honking with impatience.

The patrolman looked at her in disbelief and yelled, "Sure it is! Don't move," he shouted toward Sancho.

Eduviges had opened the hood and was pretending not to know what to do. Rushing towards the officer, she grabbed him by the sleeve and pulled him away from the pickup. Confused by the din, he was making gestures that Sancho took as permission to drive away. "Relax, *senora*, and please let go." Eduviges tightened her grip, buried her head in his jacket and made sobbing noises that took him off guard. "Don't cry, *senora*," he said. "It's only your horn. I'll fix it in no time at all."

In the truck, Sancho was laughing like a maniac and wiping the tears and his nose on his sleeve. "Look at that, Josie. The guy is twice as big as your

mother."

She was too scared to laugh and did not want to look. Several blocks into South Del Sapo, she was still trembling. Serena kept on gobbling in case they were being followed by the *migra* in unmarked cars.

Fifteen minutes later, Eduviges and Ofelia caught up with them on Alameda Street. Sancho signaled his wife to follow him into the vacant lot next to Don Luis Leal's Famous Tex-Mex Diner. They left the turkey unattended and silent once more.

"Dumb bird," Sancho said. With great ceremony he treated Eduviges and his girls to *menudo* and *gorditas* washed down with as much Coca Cola as they could drink.