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"Arias, who reported the story in *People* magazine, here interviews virtually everybody involved in this affair, and reconstructs the agony of the families waiting at home as well as the desperation of the fishermen. The account of their adjustment to their plight is as interesting as the fact of their survival."

—Publishers Weekly on Five Against the Sea

# The Wetback and Other Stories

# **RON ARIAS**



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Recovering the past, creating the future

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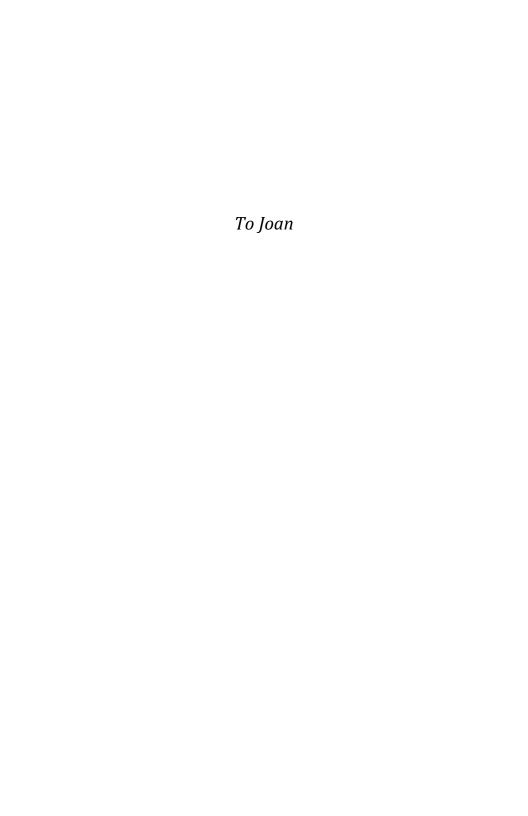
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## **Author's Note**

Most of these stories were written and published in the early 1970s when I was teaching and had the time and motivation to write creatively. I was driven to write fiction because I wanted to make sense of my life and life in general in my own way. And then for about thirty years I stopped writing about imaginary people and places, mainly because I had jumped into a rollercoaster of real-life stories as a journalist with a global beat, often feeling like a character in my own reported stories.

That period ended and I returned to writing fiction, motivated by the same business of making sense of people and what they do. Many of these tales may be read as allegories about a Los Angeles neighborhood called Frog Town, which no longer has an abundance of frogs and exists officially as Elysian Valley. But the stories all spring from actual facts, from a time when frogs were everywhere, when children found a drowned man in a dry riverbed or when a young soldier went off to war, disappeared and became myth.

For this collection, I have sharpened or rewritten published stories and have written two new pieces.



### The Wetback

That afternoon, Mrs. Rentería's neighbor's grandchildren discovered David in the dry riverbed. The young man was absolutely dead, the children could see that. For a long time they watched him from behind the clump of cat-o'-nine-tails. His body lay so still that even a mouse, poking into one nostril, suspected nothing. The girl approached first, leaving behind her two brothers. David's brow was smooth; his grayblue eyes were half closed; his dark skin glistened, clean and wet, and the rest of him, torn shirt and patched trousers, was also wet.

"He drowned," the girl said.

The boys ran over for their first good look at a dead man. David was more or less what they expected, except for the gold tooth in front and a mole beneath one sideburn. His name wasn't David yet; that would come later when the others found out. David was the name of a boy who drowned years ago when Cuca predicted it wouldn't rain and it did and the Los Angeles River overflowed, taking little David to the bottom or to the sea, no one knew, because all they found was a washtub he used as a boat.

Circling the body, the older brother said, "How could he drown? There's no water."

"He did," the girl said. "Look at him."

The younger boy backed away. "I'm telling."

The brothers then ran across the dry sand pebbles, up the concrete bank and disappeared behind the levee. Before the crowd of neighbors arrived, the girl wiped the dead man's face with her skirt hem, straightened his clothes as best she could and tried to remove the sand in his hair. She raised David's head, made a claw with her free hand and raked over the black hair. His skull was smooth on top, with a few bumps above the nape. Finally she made a part on the right side, then sat down on the sand with the young man's head on her lap.

Tiburcio and the boys were the first to reach her, followed by the fishmonger Smaldino and the other men. Most of the women waited on the levee until Tiburcio signaled it was okay, the man was dead. Carmela, the youngest of the women, helped Mrs. Rentería first, since it was her neighbor's grand-children who had discovered David. Then she gave a hand to the other older women.

For some time they debated the cause of death. No bruises, no bleeding, only a slight puffiness to the skin, especially the hands. Someone said they should remove the shoes and socks.

"No," Tiburcio said. "Leave him alone, he's been through enough. Next you'll want to take off his clothes."

Tiburcio was overruled: off came the shoes, a little water and sand spilling out. Both socks had holes at the heels and big toes.

"What about the pants?" the grocer Wong asked. "You going to leave them all wet and sandy?"

"All right, let's take them off," Tiburcio said, rolling his eyes back, seemingly resigned to the inevitable.

In this way they discovered the man not only lacked a small toe on one foot but also had a large tick burrowed in his right thigh and a long scar running from one hip almost to the navel.

"Satisfied?" Tiburcio asked the crowd.

Everyone was silent.

David was certainly the best looking young man they had ever seen, at least naked as he now lay. No one seemed to have the slightest shame before this perfect shape of a man. It was as if a statue had been placed among them and they stared freely at whatever they admired most. Some of the men envied the wide chest, the angular jaw or the hair, thick and wavy. The women for the most part gazed at the full, parted lips, the sunbaked arms, the long, strong legs, and of course the dark, soft mound with its finger of life flopped over, its head to the sky.

"Too bad about the missing toe," Wong said.

Smaldino elbowed his way forward for closer scrutiny. "And the tick, what about that?" he said after a moment's inspection.

Mrs. Rentería asked for a book of matches, which Wong quickly gave her. After striking the match head on the cover, she held the tiny flame close to the engorged, whitish sac until the insect withdrew. There were oohs and ahs, and the girl who had combed the dead man's hair began to cry. Carmela glanced at the levee, wondering what was keeping her uncle Fausto.

They all agreed it was death by drowning. That the river was dry occurred only to the children, but they remained quiet, listening to their parents continue about what should be done with the dead man. Smaldino volunteered his ice locker. No, the women complained. He would lose his suppleness, the smooth, lifelike skin would turn blue and harden. Then someone suggested they take him to Cuca, perhaps she knew how to preserve the dead. Cuca had cures for everything, so why not for this beauty of a man?

"No!" Mrs. Rentería shouted, unable to control herself any longer. "He'll stay with me." Although she had never married, never been loved by a man, everyone called her Mrs. out of respect, at times even knowing the bite of irony could be felt in this small, squarish woman who surrounded her house with flowers and worked six days a week changing bedpans and sheets at County General. "David is mine!" she shouted defiantly.

"Who says?" Tiburcio asked. "And since when is his name David? He looks to me more like a . . . " Tiburcio glanced at the man's face. " . . . a Luis."

"No señor!" another voice cried. "Roberto."

"Antonio!"

"Henry."

"¡Qué Henry! Enrique!"

"Alex!"

Trini, Ronnie, Miguel, Roy, Rafael, Bruce Lee . . . The list grew, everyone shouting a name. One by one they turned away to debate the naming, everyone except Mrs. Rentería. She stepped next to her prize and kneeled for a moment. Then she stood and wrung out the sopping gray shorts. Gently, she slipped his feet through the holes in the pathetic garment, eventually tugging the elastic band past the knees to the thighs. Here she asked for help, but the group of curious adults and children didn't seem to hear. So with a determination grown strong by years of spinsterhood, she rolled the body onto one side, then the other, at last working the shorts up to his waist. The rest was the same and she finished dressing him by herself.

In the end, Mrs. Rentería had her way. When the others stopped arguing, they returned to surround the body, now clothed, although no one seemed to notice. He appeared as breathtaking dressed as he did naked. "You're right," Tiburcio

told Mrs. Rentería, "his name is David . . . but you still can't have him."

About this time Fausto arrived, helped by Mario, a hip, goateed boy whose weaknesses were stealing cars and befriending old men. The two figures stepped slowly across the broken glass and rocks. Fausto, winking at his niece, immediately grasped the situation. David was a wetback. Yes, there was no mistake. Years ago, hadn't he brought at least a dozen young men from Tijuana, one, sometimes two at a time, cramped in the trunk of the car? Months later, after they had found work, the grateful fellows would sometimes show up at his house, dressed in new clothes, sometimes sporting an earring in one lobe. The clothes, even when spiffy, were always the same kind of clothes. Fausto wasn't too quick to spot the new women arrivals, but the men, like young David here, were an easy mark.

"How can you tell?" Smaldino asked.

The old man raised the hoe he used as a staff and pointed to the gold tooth, the cut of hair, the narrow trouser cuffs, the scuffed, pointy shoes. "It's all there. You think I don't know a *mojado* when I see one?" As a last gesture, he stooped down and closed the dead man's eyes. "Now, what will you do with him?"

A small girl stepped close to Fausto and asked if she could have the young man.

"No, m'ijita, he's too old for you."

Mrs. Rentería repeated her claim, and before the others could object, Fausto asked in a loud voice what woman among them needed a man so much that she would accept a dead man?

"Speak up! Which of you can give this man your entire love, the soul of everything you are? Which of you, if not the señora here? She has no one."