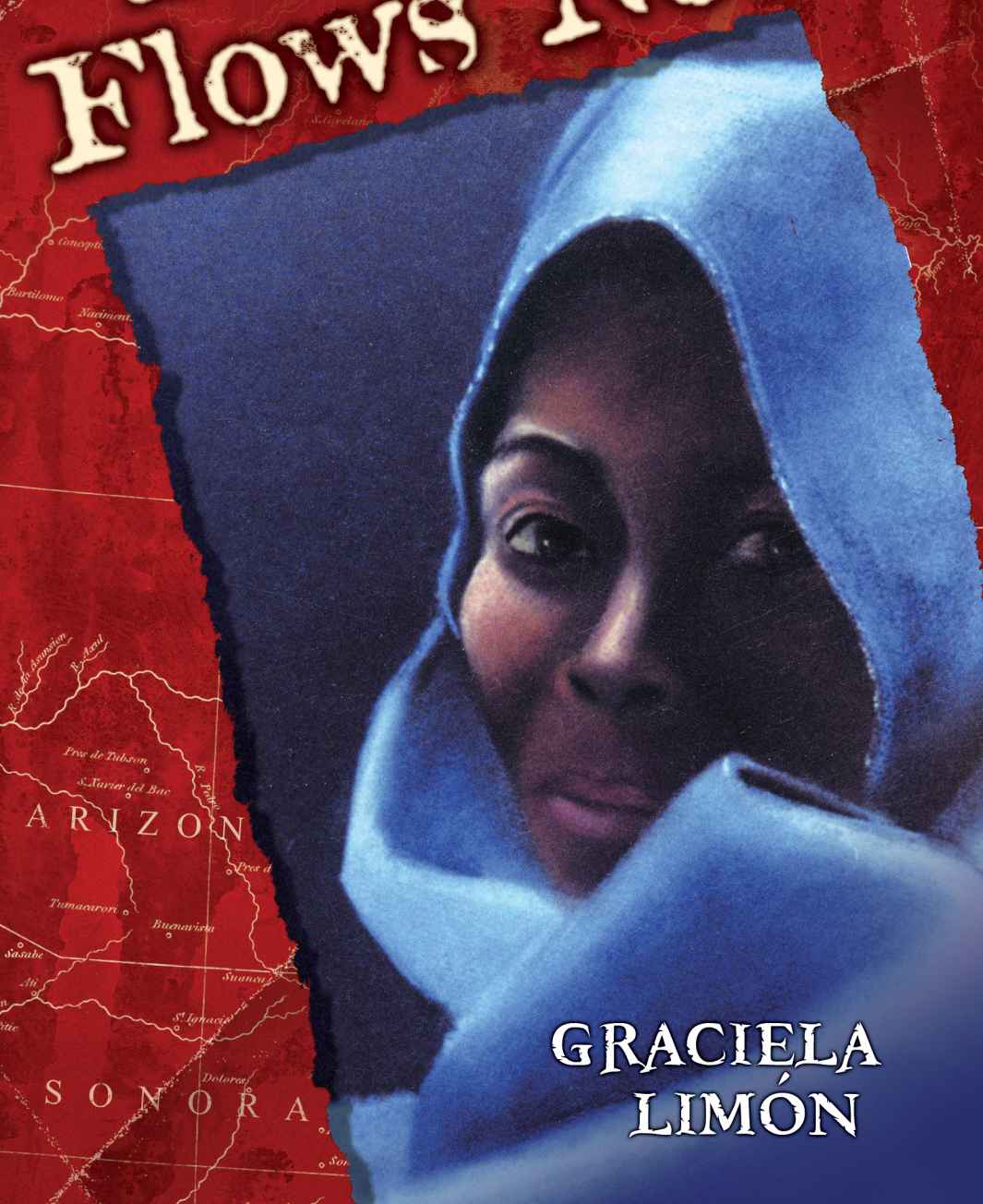


The River Flows North



GRACIELA
LIMÓN

The River Flows North

A Novel

By

Graciela Limón



Arte Público Press
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I dedicate
The River Flows North
to my mother and father,
immigrants from Mexico,
who made it possible for their
children to achieve the Dream.
—G.L.

The narratives that follow are fiction
inspired in part by true stories.

—G.L.

“ . . . *la gran marcha* (in Los Angeles) . . . played out as a celebration of the essential dignity of being an immigrant in the modern United States.”

Daniel Hernández
Los Angeles Times
25 March 2007

“It only made sense, then, that when he stunningly won an Olympic gold medal in freestyle wrestling, the Los Angeles-born son of undocumented Mexican immigrants (Henry Cejudo) would also share . . . his most beloved piece of cloth, the American flag.”

Bill Plascheke
Los Angeles Times
20 August 2008
Summer Olympics, Beijing, China

ONE

Crossing to la Ocho

There is a pathway traveled by migrants that cuts away from the Mexican border as it slithers north through the Arizona desert up to Interstate 8. Migrants know this highway as *la Ocho*, the road that takes them to a better life, but the trail that leads to that highway is ruthless and unforgiving. Its sand, underpinned by sighs and shattered dreams, begins in Sonora, somewhere in *El Gran Desierto*, and slashes through Sonoyta on Mexico's side of the border. It swings in a westerly direction and crosses the line toward the American side at Tinajas Altas. At that point the route pushes north through the Lechuguilla Desert into Arizona and beyond, finally reaching *la Ocho*. There the pathway stops without reason or explanation. It just stops.

Hot wind blows through that desert corridor and sweeps across miles of sand; it swirls dust devils beyond the horizon, and its fiery tongue licks cactus and ironwood trees nearly to

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the ground. Only the craggy mountains that rise from the flat floor of the desert can withstand the blasts. They stand defiant, and even their names evoke fear: Gilas, Aguilas, Growlers and Mohawks.

From sunrise to sunset, saguaro cactus cling to the skirts of those mountains seeking shelter from the relentless sun. Like sentinels, arms stretched upward, they wait patiently for lost travelers to slink by, usually seeking the meager shade given off by their branches. And just as the saguaro cactus seek the shade of the mountains, other life holds fast to them. Slithery lizards creep in and out of crevices to avoid the dangerous rattler, and even the skittering scorpion. Plants and stunted trees jut out of cracked ancient rocks. Fearfully, they all await the inexorable sandstorm that will come as it has for millions of years.

Natives, *conquistadores*, settlers and prospectors have dared to undertake the desert crossing, and it is undeniable: The dead outnumber those who have lived to tell what happens on that passage. So many migrants vanish without a trace, although a bone or a skull or a mangled shoe is sometimes sighted. Most likely it will be an empty plastic jug that is seen skittering across the sand. Yet despite so much danger, human migrations go on. People attempt the crossing because they have dreams to pursue or oppressive lives to escape. Those people fix their eyes on Yuma, Dateland, Ligturta, Gila Bend and beyond. They change routes, crisscross and retrace their steps, because of the danger of being discovered by *la Migra*, uniformed men who drive unstoppable vehicles or worse, the others who call themselves vigilantes.

Despite the risks, some migrants make it to *la Ocho*, and once on that highway, the flow of people moves to where jobs wait. Word gets around when a letter with a few Amer-

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ican dollars reaches towns in Mexico, in El Salvador or villages in Guatemala and Honduras. When news arrive telling that a loved one made it across, that he or she is at work in Pittsburg, Bangor or Hayward, then the many disappearances on the desert road fade from memory. It is at that moment that a tiny spark flares inside Demetria, Pablo, Braulio or Chela, until it becomes a bonfire. A few clothes are packed, and the cycle is set in motion, embraces are exchanged, and the perilous journey begins. Only words of warning linger: *¡Cuidate de la Migra!* *¡Cuidate del coyote!* *¡Cuidate del narcotraficante!* *¡Cuidate . . . cuidate . . . !*

Most travelers are unsure where to go, but they head to dusty towns and truck stops like Sonoyta, el Saguaro, Los Vidrios, El Papalote, Ejido Cerdan and La Joyita. These places face Arizona on the Mexican side of the border. Rumors tell of shorter routes, less dangerous than others from where a man or a woman can walk the desert in two days at most, and finally reach *la Ocho*. Two days is not much, and it can be done. In fact, it's done everyday. All it takes is a little thirst and fatigue.

Soon men and women find themselves huddled together as they listen to a *coyote*. They don't know one another and refuse to reveal their names. They're too shy or too afraid. Instead, they eye one another to calculate age, and guess if that one is Mexican, Guatemalan or Salvadoran. Little by little, eyes take in shoes, or dress, or jacket, hoping to identify material or cut, and they look for anything that might inspire trust. Each one wants to know something about those strangers, but apprehension forces them to withdraw deep into themselves. Only later will they break that isolation and tell their names and stories. For the time being they are withdrawn and lonely. They turn their attention to the *coyote* and

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listen. Although they don't trust him, they must believe in him because they have to, he will be their guide. They agree to set out next day at dawn, following his lead through the desert.

The desert passage waits for the travelers. Some who travel it make it to *la Ocho*, then they head east and north to packinghouses in Kansas and construction sites in Illinois. Others end up in the beet fields of Colorado and the lettuce and strawberry harvests in California. But others stay behind with their dreams of the good life, and they haunt the pathway that might have taken them to *la Ocho*.