



■ LAS COLONIAS

Oh ciudad de los gitanos!
¿Quién te vio y no te recuerda?
O city of the gypsies,
Who that has seen you can forget?

—Federico García Lorca

“¡NOGALES. NO ES UN RANCHO, ES UN CORRAL!”

That was Blanca’s view of her city. It was the perspective of one of the “cattle.”

We were sitting on a couple of battered, half-woven beach chairs in the dirt in front of her home in La Solidaridad. Around us was the most randomly formed and positioned array of houses imaginable. To one side was a tar-papered shack with one window and a draped-plastic doorway, and across the dirt path, a four-room brick house with neatly arched windows and a paneled wood door. Beyond were hill after sandy hill of plywood and cardboard hovels, cinder block shops and houses, and a sea of tin roofs glinting in the last rays of early evening.

Blanca’s own home was a compromise between her dreams and what she could now afford. A poured concrete slab floor supported a house of cardboard.

“I arrived here two years ago, and it was crowded then, but it’s worse every day!” she told me, craning a sun-lined neck to survey the surrounding scene.

If Nogales is a corral, I thought, then it has only one fence: the international border. No need for any barrier on the southern side, for few go back. They only keep coming up—wave after wave looking for something better than what they have.

“We came here like everybody else, looking for work—from the state of Jalisco, from a village near Guadalajara. My husband and I and three of the children. Since last year we have a fourth.”

“Guadalajara is the home of mariachi!” I said, speaking of one of my favorite Mexican musical forms.

“Yes,” she laughed, “in our *tierra* we had much music but little work. My husband is a welder and there was nothing for him there. So we came up here. But he doesn’t find welding work here, and I am in the factories—the *maquiladoras*.”

Like all the big border towns, Nogales had assembly plants—*maquiladoras*—that were paying between four and five hundred pesos a week—forty or fifty dollars. Impossibly little from the



■ LA LÍNEA

Temo que la verdadera frontera
la trae cada uno adentro.

I'm afraid that each of us carries the real frontier inside.

—Carlos Fuentes

WE WERE WALKING IN COLONIA BUENOS AIRES WHEN I SAW A COP leaning his considerable weight against a gate in front of what appeared to be a large, empty stone house facing the border fence. It was the last home on Calle Internacional; the street there gave way to a concrete stairway rising up the steep hill to the east. The cracked and weedy steps paralleled *las láminas*, as the fence of corrugated metal landing strips, recycled from the Vietnam War, was popularly known. A few houses were visible on the hillside, but then the stairway, dirt paths, and border fence all disappeared over the rise. The *municipale*—recognizable by his brown uniform—looked bored and friendly, so I walked over to ask him what was going on.

"I am guarding this place," the cop said amiably, jerking a thumb over his shoulder, "una casa confiscada de un narcotraficante"—the confiscated house of a drug trafficker. "We took it a few weeks ago, but we haven't got the owner! Now we have to watch it to see that he doesn't sneak back."

Or anyone else, I thought, thinking of our friends the street kids, for whom these *confiscadas* often served as clubhouses and sleeping quarters for as long as they could manage to squat in them. These sometimes palatial homes were scattered about the city, some of them in the wealthy neighborhood of Colonia Kennedy but many in the poorest areas: brick, stone, or cement-block mansions amid the shacks and trash heaps.

I asked if he saw much action around the fence, telling him that on a visit there a few years earlier we had watched people pouring through a hole cut in it. "I watched people from one of those houses up the hill," I told him, "who must have had a business doing that. The emigrants waited patiently in a line that stretched down the stairway. And a lookout surveyed the scene from the top of the fence. Every time the coast was clear, another one or two people would crawl through the hole and then slide down the grassy hill on the American side, clutching their few belongings and disappearing into the streets of Nogales, Arizona."