





PHOTOGRAPHIC

THE LIFE OF GRACIELA ITURBIDE

ISABEL QUINTERO + ZEKE PEÑA



The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



These are so good.



But listen to your own eyes — they'll help you find your own understanding ...

Home.

So, where are you headed next?



Disculpe, señora ... Can I ask you a question?



I love the story these tell. But why only black and white?

Well, for me, color is fantasy. I see reality in black and white.



That's an interesting concept. Do you ever use digital?

No, never. I still only shoot with film. It's part of my ritual.



Analog? ¡Qué chido!



Graciela Iturbide is a photographer. She is an icon. Orgullo mexicano. Maestra.

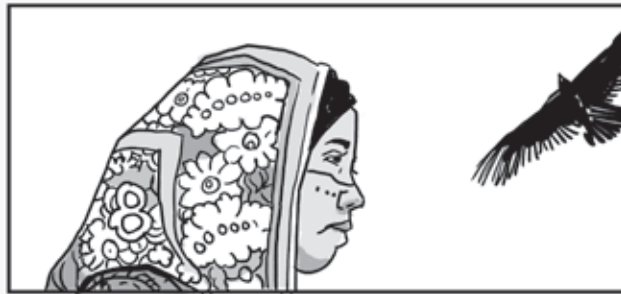


LET'S BEGIN this photographic journey in northern Mexico, where Western culture and commerce transformed the once-nomadic Seris, the indigenous people of the Sonoran Desert. Where Graciela Iturbide was assigned her first major commission by the Instituto Nacional Indigenista. It's as good a place as any.

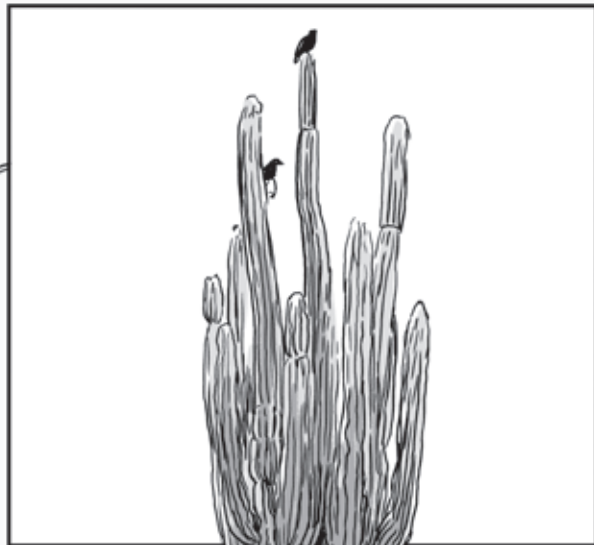
This story, Reader, is a piecing together of Graciela's life. It is a kaleidoscopic unraveling of almost five decades behind the camera. Of countless awards and exhibitions. In these pages, all the events are in order and none are in order. Is that not as it should be? It is in black and white because color is fantasy. Graciela captures reality in black and white. In the following pages, Reader, when you are admiring her beautiful and compelling and sometimes disturbing work, do not think words like magical or surreal—her images are as real as they get. Here is her story.

SONORAN DESERT. THE SERIS. 1979.

I photograph and exist in the in-between: those spaces where unknown worlds, real and imagined, intersect.



For me, the camera is simply an excuse to learn.



I see reality in another way with a camera. Looking through the lens, I peer into another world ...



Perhaps what I'm looking for is to enter a world unknown to me.





Photography reveals flocks of birds with unclipped wings moving inside me.



Their incessant fluttering is the sinew that holds my limbs together. Their chirping releases the shutter.

I am a bird and not a bird. I am a woman and then a bird. Or a bird and then a woman.



It doesn't matter.

What matters is this: the lens gives me bird sight. With it, I am made aware of the many angles of truth.



A life, a rock, a country exists in the reality that I imagine. Isn't that a powerful thing? Creating truth? The still image is suspended reality.

This is how I've learned to use my bird sight. But it hasn't always been like this.





LET'S GO BACK to the very beginning, when Graciela was a little girl. Before the awards and the exhibitions. Before she met the famous photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo, before she met the painter Francisco Toledo, and way before she went into the Sonoran Desert to photograph the Seris. In this land of Before, Graciela had no great adventures; nothing was unknown. The eldest daughter of a well-to-do family, she lived in a world where expectations were set and not questioned. Where you were told, "Believe in God, marry, have children, keep a home," and you obeyed. That is what Graciela did, marrying and having three children in her early twenties.

But like all birds who are put in cages, even ornate ones, she was restless.

Paving your own path comes with sacrifice, Reader. Do you know how painful sacrifice can be? Graciela gave up a life of comfort and convention—choosing instead the path of the artist and risking everything.

Not all women artists have enjoyed the freedom that she has. Graciela knows she has been lucky, and she doesn't take her opportunities for granted.

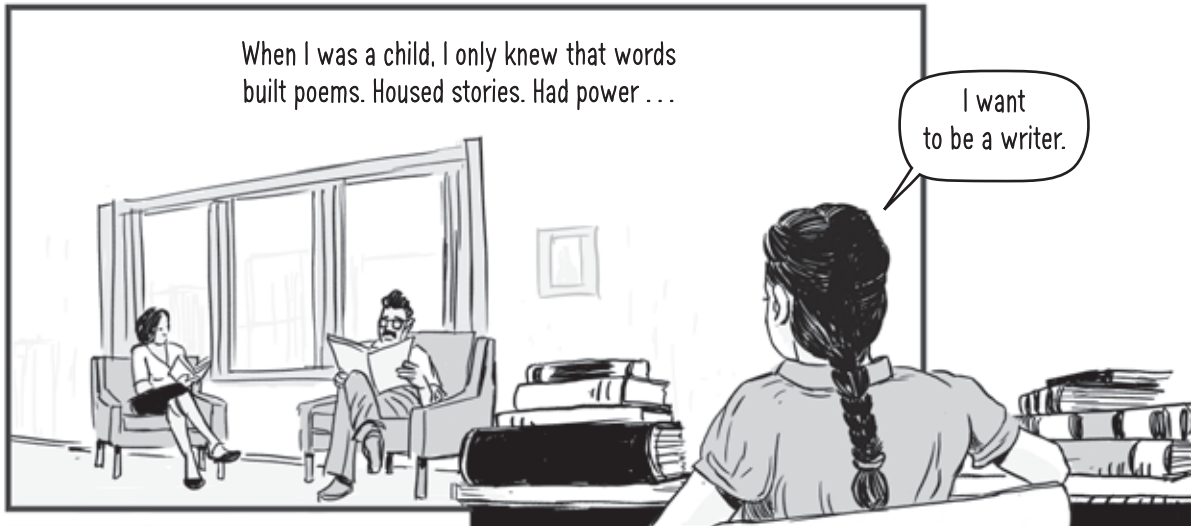
MEXICO CITY. 1950S.

When I was a child, I did not know I would someday photograph the Seris in the Sonoran Desert. Or witness enduring rituals that bind my country. Or that birds would offer freedom. Or lead me to see fragments of myself reflected in my subjects . . .



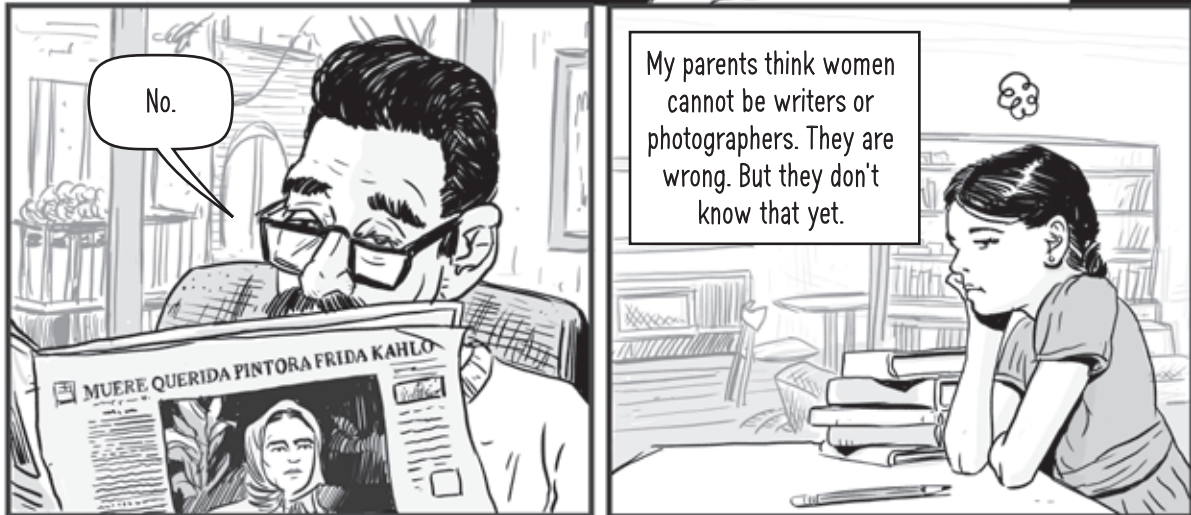
When I was a child, I only knew that words built poems. Housed stories. Had power . . .

I want to be a writer.



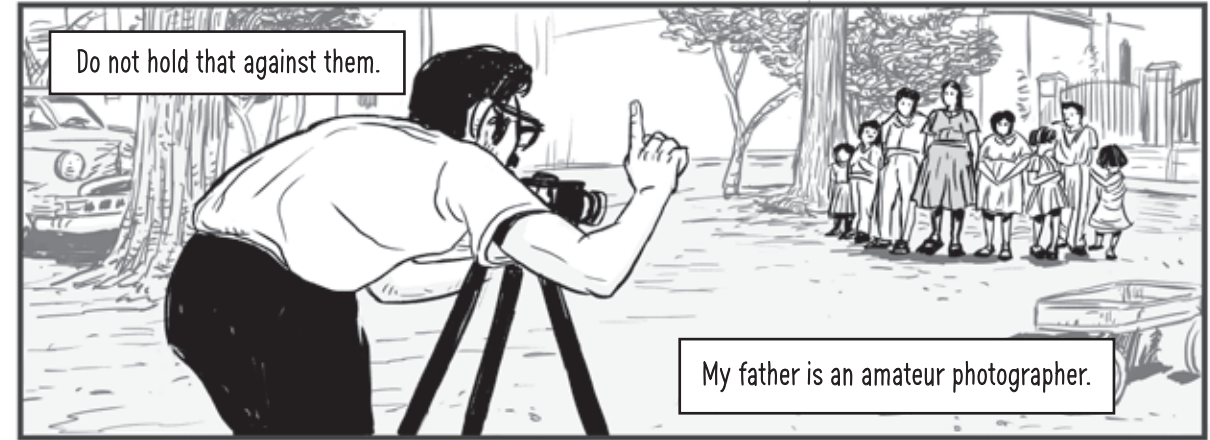
No.

My parents think women cannot be writers or photographers. They are wrong. But they don't know that yet.



Do not hold that against them.

My father is an amateur photographer.



He takes photos of his thirteen children.



OK, just one more. Graciela, sonríe, smile.



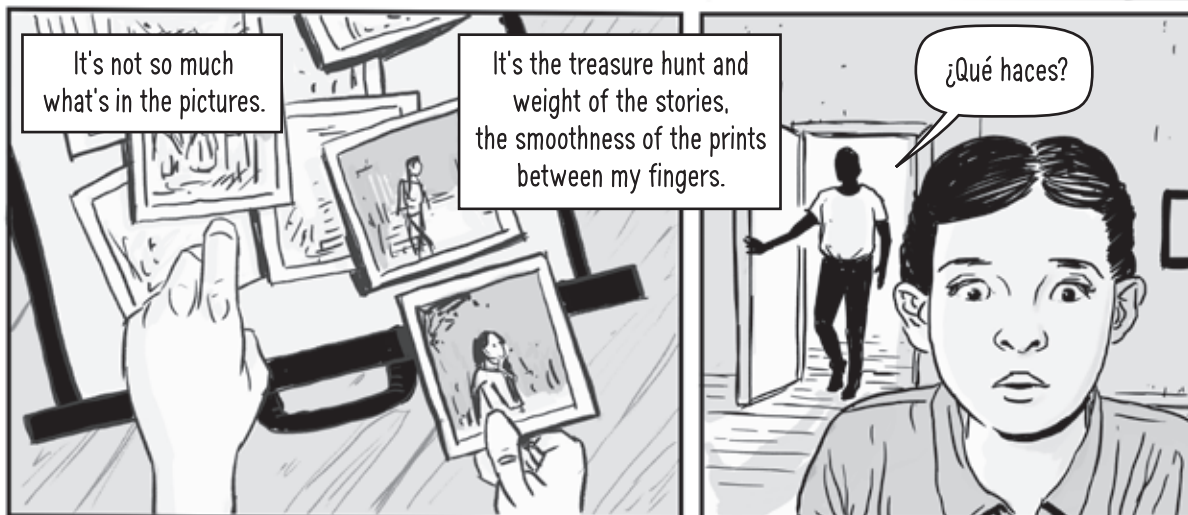
I, the oldest, do not like to have my photo taken.





He keeps the photos in his office.

Sometimes, when no one is looking, I sneak in to steal them.



It's not so much what's in the pictures.

It's the treasure hunt and weight of the stories, the smoothness of the prints between my fingers.

¿Qué haces?

¿Qué traes ahí?

Nada.

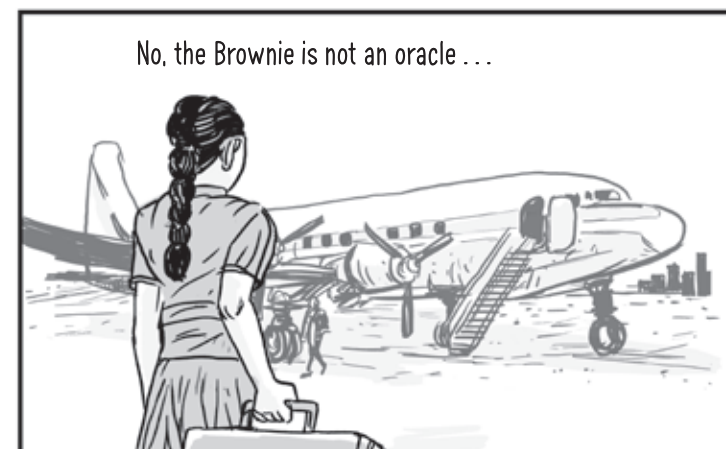
He gets tired of me stealing his photos and buys me my own Brownie camera.



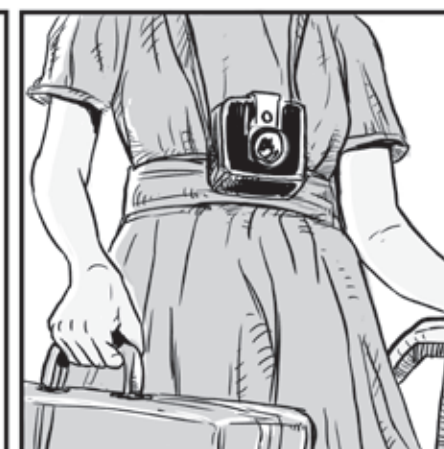
If you think a prophecy is revealed when I hold my first camera, you'd be wrong.



There is barely a hint of the images and the stories I will freeze in time.



No, the Brownie is not an oracle . . .



It is simply a gift from my father before I go away to Catholic boarding school. It is the first time I will be on my own. The first time I am away from my family. And their expectations. This is important.



I see pueblos nestled in mountains rolling into cities and ranchos.

I take my first photograph.

An alchemy.

I become bird in the heavens and am filled with birds. The camera awakens wings. The wings give me new eyes.



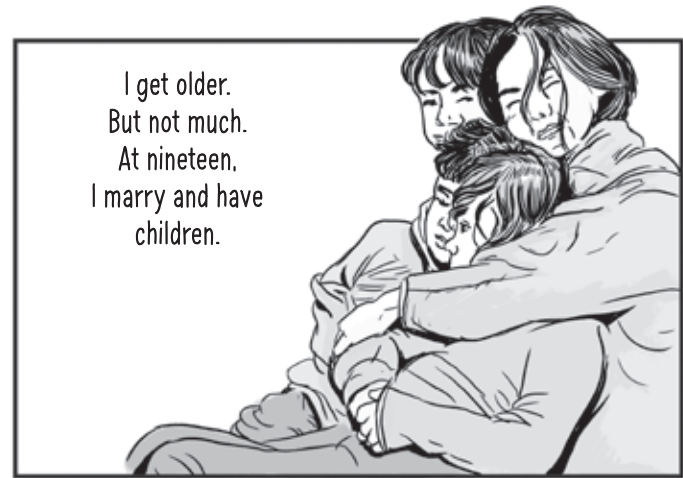
And I will never stop flying.



MEXICO CITY, 1970S.



I get older. But not much. At nineteen, I marry and have children.



But I become restless. At boarding school, I learned about drama and acting. My interest in theater piqued, I enroll in film school at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.



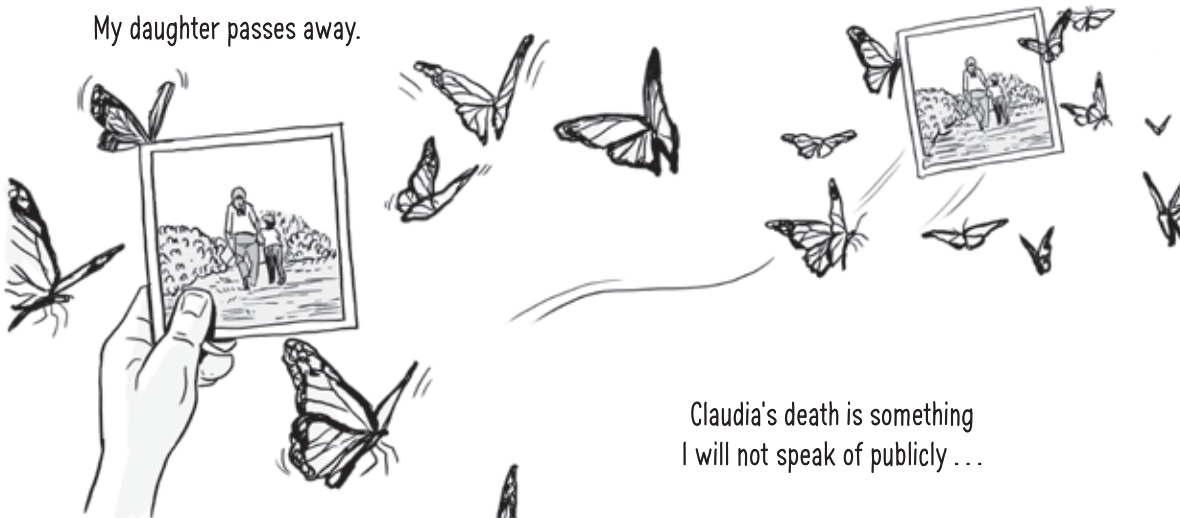
Okay! Action!

My films win awards and I revel in the creative process.

Then an unimaginable tragedy.

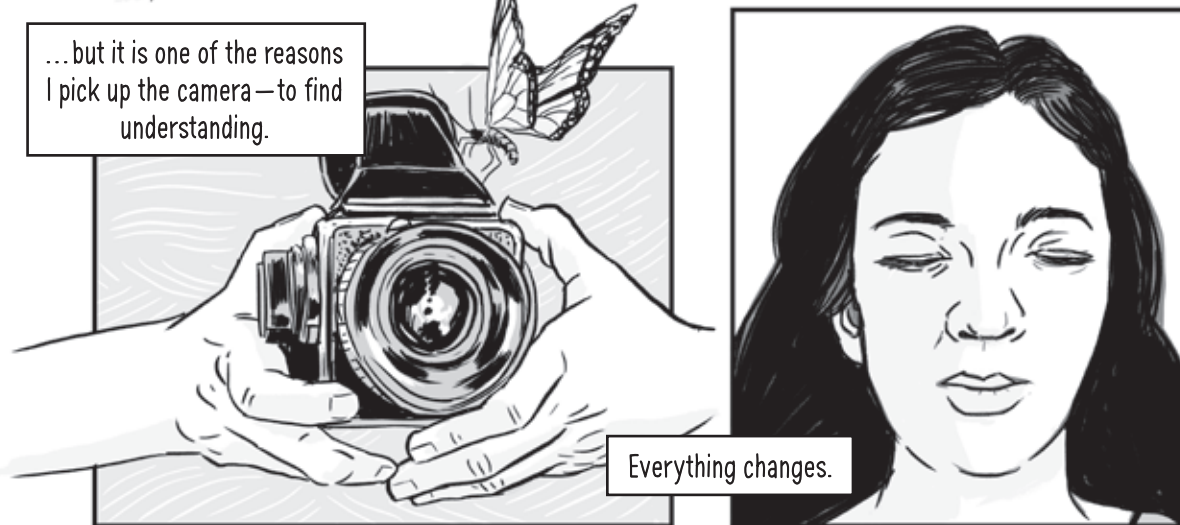


My daughter passes away.



Claudia's death is something I will not speak of publicly . . .

... but it is one of the reasons I pick up the camera—to find understanding.



Everything changes.

I choose photography over tradition.



I become the black sheep in my family. This is how I find my selves. By choosing who I will be.



In 1970, the year Claudia dies, I take a class with Manuel Álvarez Bravo. Mentor. Leyenda. Mi maestro. He asks me to be his achichincla—his assistant.



He takes me to Mexican farmlands. We photograph places I've never been.

Now?

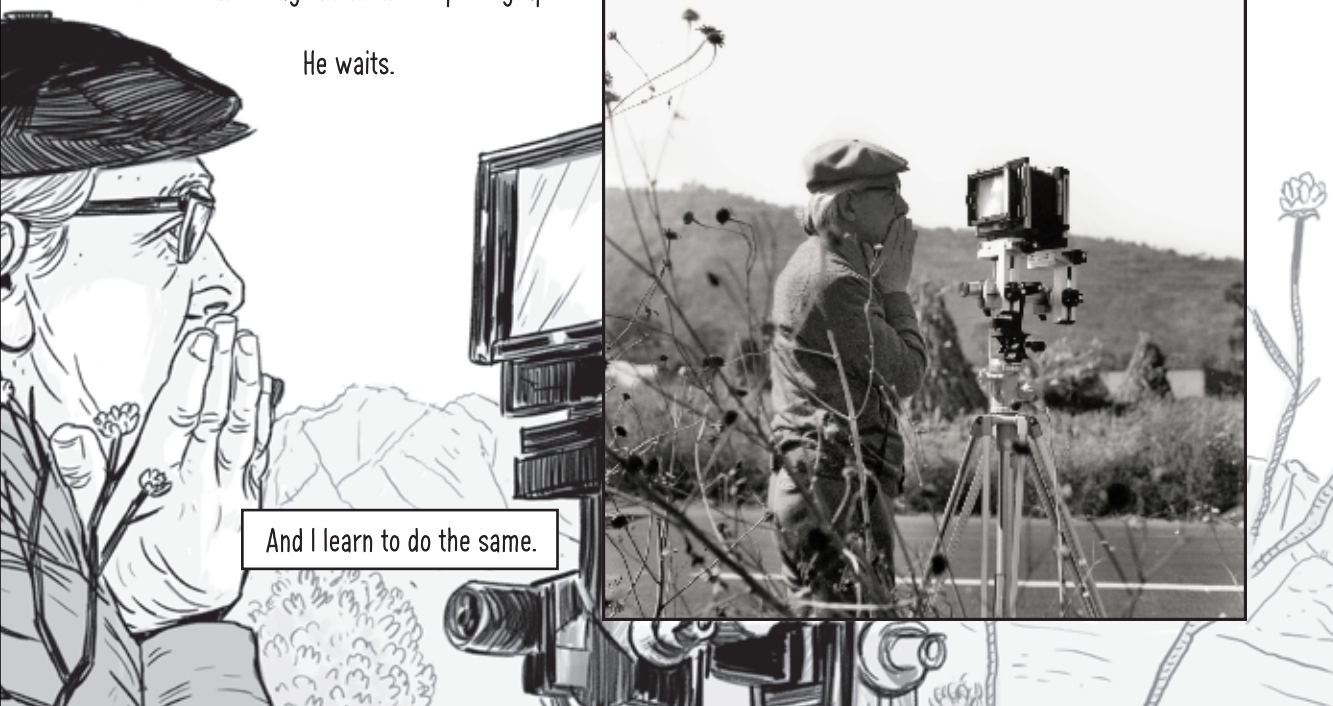
Let's wait a little longer for better light.



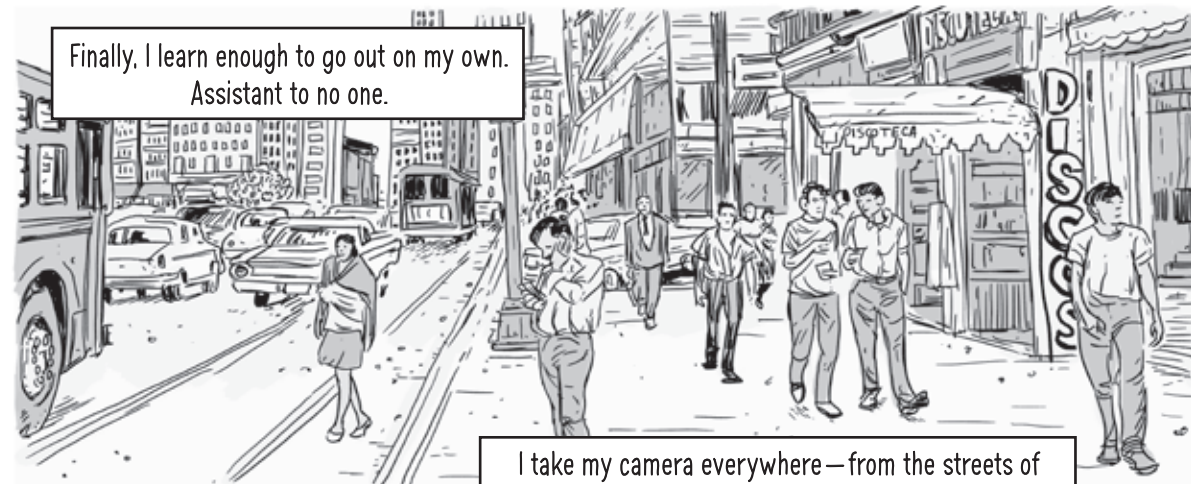
Don Manuel has a poetic sense of time. He does not stage moments to photograph.

He waits.

And I learn to do the same.



Finally, I learn enough to go out on my own. Assistant to no one.



I take my camera everywhere—from the streets of Mexico City to los campos Don Manuel introduced me to.

Soon, I will be offered my first big commission. But before that, there will be birds. And they will be with me always.



Something changes in how I interpret reality. My eyes shed a lining. I look for signs.

Though I am no longer Catholic, I am always looking for signs.



And there they are.

I have a recurring dream of a flurry of wings with a man in their midst and the sky promising, "I will plant birds in my earth." I awaken, grasping at falling feathers that disappear when I open my eyes. I don't know what the birds mean until I go to Guanajuato.

"Eyes to fly with?" I ask. I am looking for insight into the things that have been broken in my life. Sometimes my only therapy is seeing. Photographing.

¿Ojos para volar?

I need to understand Death, so Guanajuato is where I take its picture.

I catch Death's grin on the faces of angelitos; infants turned angels before their first steps.

A cemetery in Hidalgo is the last time I photograph Death without permission.

Vultures appear in my path, eating what's left of what once was a man.

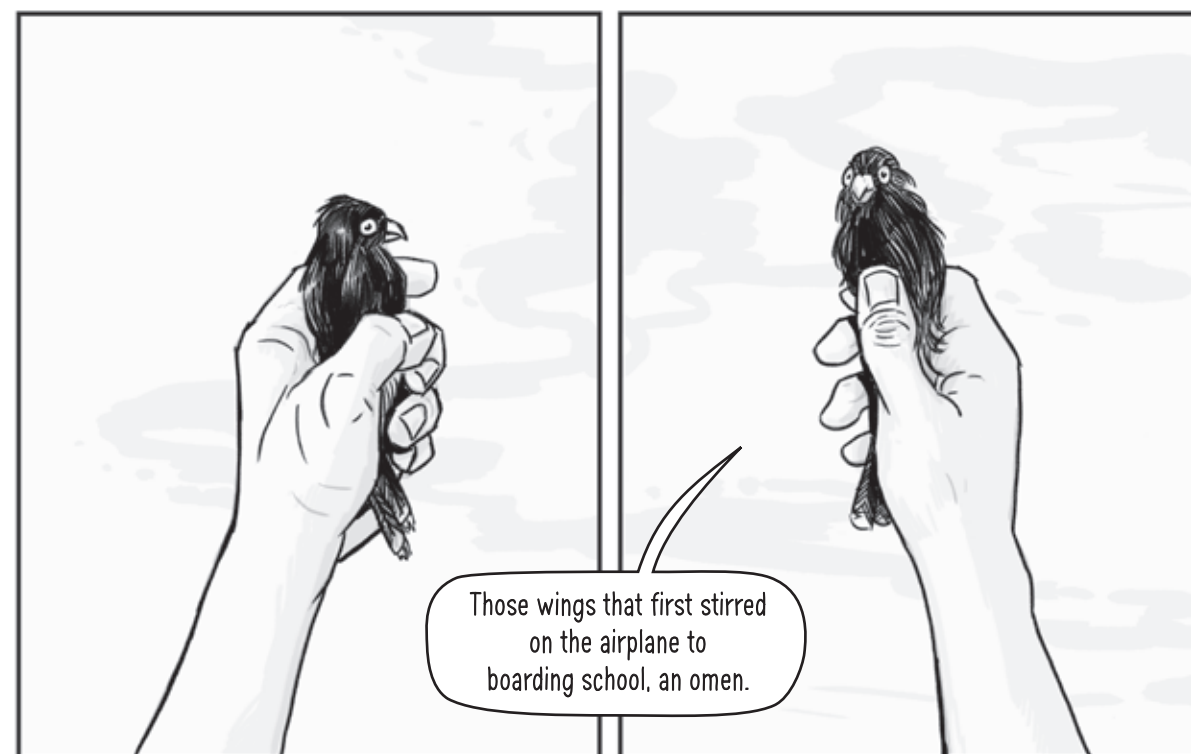
It is Death saying, "If you want to photograph me, here I am. But no more suffering, Graciela. No more." Here is where I begin to photograph birds.

Birds take me to Las Islas Marías,
and there is the man from my
dreams, planting birds in the earth.
Their flight a possibility.

Brassaï, one of my favorite photographers,
believed that life is caught in dreams.
He was right.



Bird is dream is camera is self is life.



Those wings that first stirred
on the airplane to
boarding school, an omen.