



# The Journey

## A Visual Testimony of Migration

*Having lived on both sides of the border may have been what gave Mexican artist Nora Hiriart the vision and sensitivity to establish a dialogue with the past of a group of Mexicans living in Philadelphia, almost all of whom are undocumented. Hiriart, who has lived in the United States for more than two decades, says that whenever she comes to Mexico on vacation, she questions the effects of migration to one place and the other. Harboring that concern, she began the project of El viaje (The Journey), to motivate people to express through art the emotions caused by the complex, painful experience of leaving your country of origin, emotions that are often long held inside. She repeated the same experience in El viaje de los niños (The Children's Journey).*

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Photos courtesy of Nora Hiriart.

*Voices of Mexico (VM)*: How did this project come about?

*Nora Hiriart (MH)*: When I used to come to Mexico on a visit and go on vacation to the mountains, I would see how certain communities had fewer and fewer people, and how some children were left in the care of their grandparents, without their parents. People used to live in the mountains, and so many of them didn't live there anymore, and you used to see only children and old people. But in Philadelphia, I would also see the conditions in which the migrants who had left their country behind in search of a better future lived. How, somehow, these people who in their towns were "somebody," here were just invisible. So, I started looking for a way to do some kind of work on this, and I got funding through a foundation in Philadelphia. Through the Philadelphia archdiocese, we formed a women's group and began doing this work called *El viaje* (The Journey).

*VM*: Was the idea to work with children, too?

*MH*: No, actually, the children's project came about spontaneously. They would go with their mothers because there was no one to leave them with at home. And, so the mothers could participate in the workshop, we adapted a little children's Mexican, Mayan, Huichol art program so they could paint and make little figures out of clay. So, while their parents developed their experiences, a Chilean friend of mine would tell the children about the history of the Huichol, the creation story, their wanderings through the desert. And that was when three children, brothers, said "We've been in the desert." And they began to talk about how their parents had sent them with a *pollero* [smuggler] to bring them on a less dangerous path, and all the ups and downs they had on the way. And that's where the idea came from of putting strips of paper on the floor so they could draw their experience. Sometimes, the children would tell stories or talk about feelings that even their parents didn't know about. This is the children's journey, and this is how they shared it with us.



Anita and her mother, San Mateo Ozolco, Puebla.



# Carlos

from San Martín Texmelucan, Puebla

“I lived with my aunt, and when I was about five, my mamá went to pick me up. She brought me toys and told me she was going to take me to meet my other brothers and sisters. At first I was happy with the toys, but a little while later, I wanted to go back to my aunt’s. My mamá fought a lot with her husband and he wasn’t good to me. And besides that, I didn’t get along with my brothers and sisters. My stepfather said that I couldn’t eat for free and if I wanted to eat, I had to help him in his workshop. When I didn’t do the work right, he would hit me. An older sister told my mamá that she wanted to take me so my stepfather wouldn’t hit me anymore. A little while later, I got some money and said goodbye to my mother and my friends. We took the bus to the airport; when we got to Tijuana, my sister called her husband in New York, and he was mad because she had brought me and he told her to forget about him. With the little money we had, we rented a room. I called a friend in Philadelphia, and he told me he

could help out for a month. My sister couldn’t get any work, but I got a job in a restaurant and then in a lathe workshop.

“We spent almost two months in Tijuana and from there we went to Mexicali. I called a number a friend had given me, and they went to pick us up that night. We walked all night; we slept on some rocks where there were animals, spiders, ants. . . . Like about four hours after we got there, the Migra showed up and took us to jail. The next day they let us go and we tried again and again. And the fourth time, we got to the border. The first two hours weren’t easy at all. It was very dark and there were lots of weeds and animals. My sister and I were very tired and we had to keep walking. Suddenly I saw clothing thrown on the ground and when I went to look, it was a dead man. We kept on walking; then they covered us over with a piece of canvas and when they took it off they said we should run toward a pick-up, that we were in the United States.”

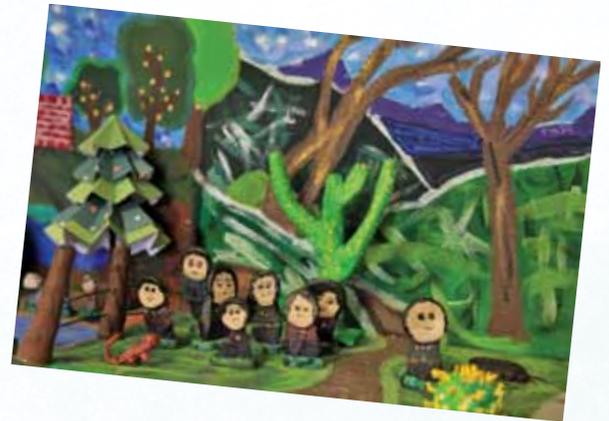
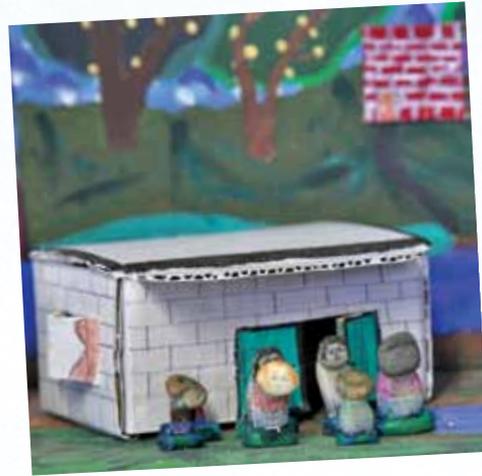


# Damara

from Mexico City

“First my papá went off and left us. I was about four. The year after he left, he sent for my mamá and she left us with my aunt and my grandmother. One day my papá came for us. I was eight. We went to Tijuana and stayed on a ranch close to where there were a lot of people waiting for the *coyotes* [smugglers]. We walked two nights and a day to cross. We saw the helicopters; I was scared because I didn’t know what was going to happen, but I wanted to see my mamá. They caught us once and took us to one of the jails on the U.S. side. That night they sent us back to Mexico. The next day we tried to cross again; we walked a day and a night; we were hidden under a rock, about eight of us, and then a van came to pick us up. We drove about an hour until we got to a hotel in the United States, and they took us to another house where we stayed for a week, and then we came to Philadelphia. When I got out of the car, it was snowing and everything was white. Then I saw my mamá; she didn’t look the same as when she left me.

“I couldn’t remember anything that had happened to me. I never wanted to talk about it because of how terrifying it had been and I just erased it from my mind until I came to the workshop and the project helped me remember what had happened to me.”

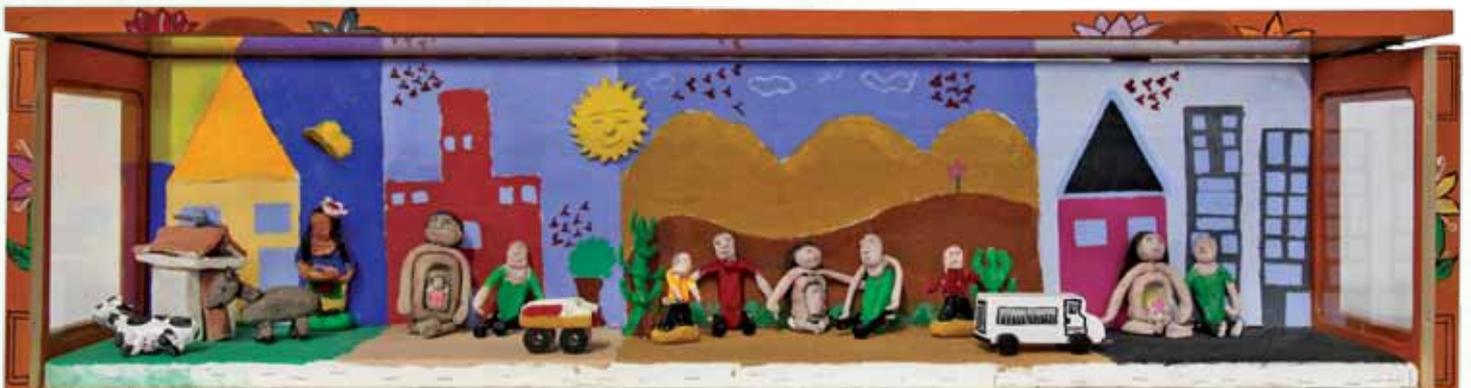


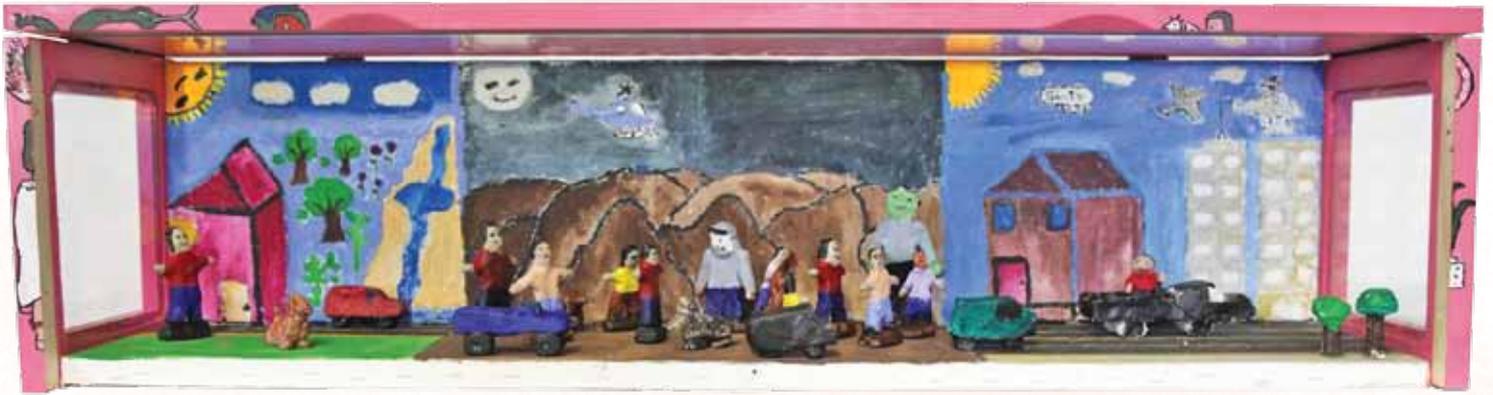
# Edith

from Philadelphia

“My family is from Domingo Arenas, in the state of Puebla. They say it’s very pretty, but I’ve never been because I came in my mom’s belly when she was pregnant. We left the town and went to Nogales, Sonora. We waited there until the weather was right to go into the desert. It was hard for my mom because she was pregnant and it was really, really hot. Besides, when we were walking, some men stole my dad’s shoes and their money. After a lot of suffering, they finally got to Arizona and then Philadelphia.

“My parents came because they wanted something better for us, because when they were little they didn’t have shoes or money. It’s nice here; we have clothes; I have a family that loves me; we have shoes; something to eat, school, a house, and an education. My parents work a lot so we can have everything we need because they couldn’t [when they were kids].”





# Javier

from the state of Hidalgo



“I came to the United States because not everything in Mexico was good. I had a bad relationship with my stepfather. When I was 13, they asked me if I wanted to come; they told me it was really nice here, and that you could earn a lot of money. I went with my uncle; this was an adventure I wanted to go on, but it was only a dream because the reality is very hard. We left Nogales, Sonora, and the same people who were leading us offered me drugs. They took us into the desert; from there you could see the wall separating Mexico from the United States. We walked and walked until we got to some caves. We slept there until somebody yelled, “la migra!” I ran really fast through the brush and they didn’t catch me, so I hid with some friends. Finally they did catch me; they cuffed me and they took me away in a van. They asked me how old I was and I lied; that’s why they didn’t send me to a center for children. They had me there for about three days and it was really hard. Later I tried again, ‘til I was able to get across. I’m happy I came here to Philadelphia and I’m trying really hard because I want to be somebody in this life.”



# Myrna

Here I am the worrier, nostalgic and weeper

There I am the *Tampiqueña* fresh with goldfish (or swarms of colorful fish)

Here I am the good people, *cumbiera*? with problems in paying the rent

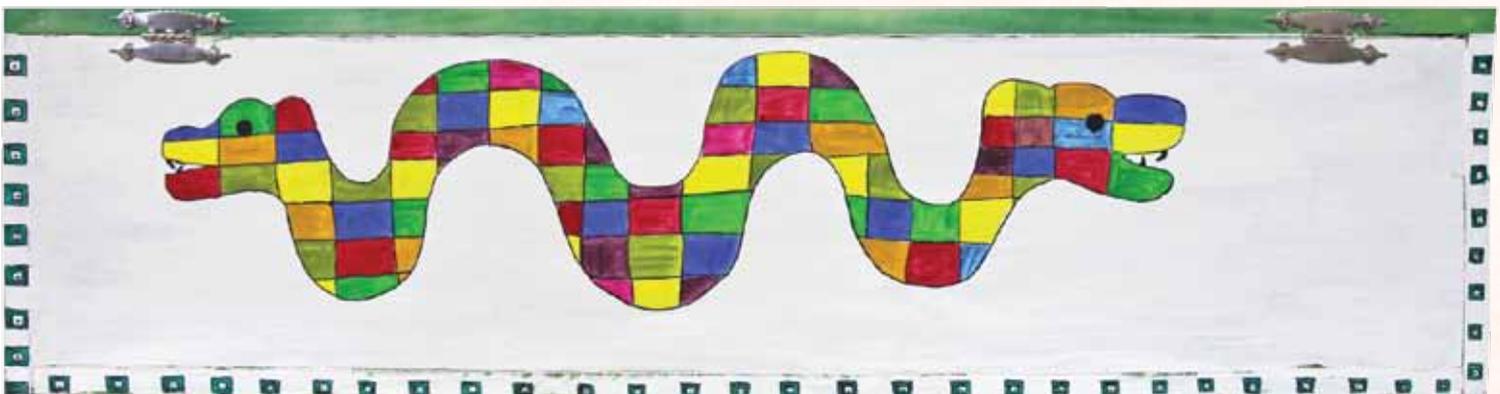
There I am as free as the wind and as poor as a leaf that falls from a tree

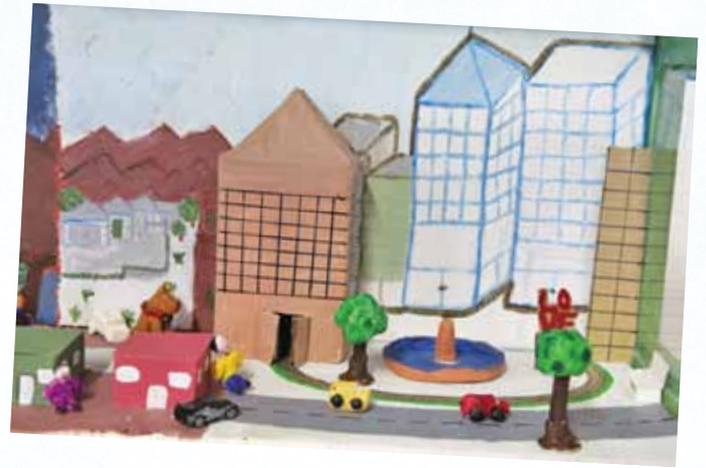
Here I am the inveterate Dreamer in an unbreakable crystal

There I am the butterfly as red as the tulips, yellow like fresh mangoes and purple as the ornaments of the day of the dead

Here I am the sober' discolored by the urban environment

There I am the aroma of *cempasúchil* with mud between my fingers and the scent of wet earth





## Susana from San Mateo Ozolco

“First my papá came so he could give us a better life. My mamá, my sister, and I stayed behind for a year, alone, living with my grandparents. Then my papá came for my mamá and they were there eight months, until my mamá heard that my grandma was sick. So, then she came back. But after a year, the four of us went. We started our adventure, leaving behind our family. We said goodbye, and I still remember their faces when we said that someday we’d be back. It was the first time I had ever been on a plane; I was so excited, but scared, too. We stayed in a house for three days, and we went to another town to meet up with somebody else. We spent two days in a hotel. In the afternoon the *coyote* came and took us to the desert in a truck. We started off at about six in the morning. That night it rained really hard and instead of

walking seven hours, we walked for 17. We got to a tree to get out of the rain and pretty soon a Migra truck came up. We ran to get away; we had to cross a river that was running really strong for two hours. I got stung by a scorpion, and my papá decided it would be better if we gave ourselves up to the police because we just couldn’t go on. But some people took us into their home, and gave us food, and asked their sister to help us cross. After two hours on the road, some men were waiting to take us to Philadelphia. The trip took three days and three nights. When we got here, I was surprised to see how pretty it was.” **MM**

*Teresa Jiménez Andreu*  
**Editor**

