# *The Interior Circuit*

## A Mexico City Chronicle

Francisco Goldman

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From the air, on a flight in, what the eye mostly picks out from the megacity's stunning enormousness is a dense mosaic of flat rooftops, tiny rectangles and squares, and a preponderance of reddish brown, the volcanic *tezontle* stone that has forever been the city's most common construction material, also other shades of brown brick and paint, imposing an underlying coloration scheme. But there are also many concrete and metallic surfaces and many buildings painted in pastel and more vivid hues like bright orange, and rows of trees, and parks and *fútbol* fields, and modern towers rising here and there, in Polanco, Santa Fe, and the august Torre Latino Americano at the edge of the Centro, and the straight and snaking traffic arteries, beady and silvery in the sunlight, and an infinite swarm of streets. You think, of course, awed, of the millions and millions of lives going on down there. (I reflexively think, as I have for years whenever flying into the city, that she's down there somewhere, living her mysterious life beneath one of those tiny squares, her too, and also her, Chilangas, female residents of the DF, who over the past two decades I've met only once or twice but who left an impression, women who almost surely no longer remember me.) From the air, perhaps because it is such a predominately flat city and almost all the roofs are flat and because so much of it is brown, Mexico City looks like a map of itself, drawn on a scale of 1:1, as in the Borges story "The Exactitude of Science," which refers to "a Map of the Empire that was of the same Scale as the Empire and that coincided with it point for point."

Supposedly the young Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski (Joseph Conrad), seeing a map of Africa, put his finger in its cartographically blank center, the void of an unmapped Congo, and said, "I want to go there." An opposite of that map would be the *Guía Roji*, which evokes Borges's map sliced and bound into an inexhaustible book. My spiral-bound large-format 2012 edition presents Mexico City's streets and neighborhoods in 220 pages of zone-by-zone maps; at its front 178 additional pages of indexes list some 99,100 streets, and 6,400 *colonias*, or neighborhoods. The Mexican writer Alvaro Enrigue told me that when he was a boy an aunt gave him a *Guía Roji* as a Christmas gift, inscribed, "This book contains all roads." The *Guía Roji* also suggests a Borgesian metaphysical limitlessness, a bewildering chaos that is actually possessed of a mysterious order that even those who've spent a lifetime exploring the city can only dimly perceive. The *Guía Roji* may be every taxi driver's bible but he or she needs a microbiologist's eye, quick mind-hand coordination, and a strong, intuitive memory in order to use it effectively—i.e., find the way to an obscure destination—along with, probably, apt patience and interpersonal skills for engaging with querulous, frustrated, drunken, clueless, and otherwise unhelpful passengers. For instance, the first page of the index, under the letter A—which, like all the other index pages, has six vertical columns of street names in tiny bold print, each street's *colonia* listed below each name in infinitesimal print, with map-page number and map quadrant (B-3, for example) to the right—reveals 82 different Mexico City streets named Abasolo. I didn't recognize Abasolo as an iconic Mexican name, like, for example, Juárez or Morelos. I asked some of my friends why there were so many streets named for Abasolo, and no one had any idea, though it turns out Mariano Abasolo was a relatively minor revolutionist

in the war of independence from Spain. In an exercise akin to counting grains of sand, I took the time to count 259 streets named Morelos in the *Guía Roji* index; Calle Morelos's columns are followed by several more of Morelos variations: the numerous Morelos that are *avenidas, cerradas* (dead-end streets), *calzadas* (inner-city highways), *privadas*, and so on. Let's not count all the streets named for Benito Juárez, far more numerous than even Morelos. As for Calle Abasolo, two separate *colonias,* both named San Miguel, have streets named Abasolo, one on map-page 246, the other on page 261; so do two distinct Colonia Carmens. There are numbered streets too. Over a hundred Calle 1s; nearly as many Calle 2s. The city has some 6,600 *colonias,* and fourteen of them are named La Palma and five are named Las Palmas. And so on. *Buenas noches, señor,* please take to me to Calle Benito Juárez in Colonia La Palma . . . now the fun begins.

Whenever I flip through the minutely mapped pages of the *Guía Roji*, I like to put my finger down on a randomly chosen page, and then, lifting my fingertip, leaning close, and squinting, discover, in tiny print, the name of the street I've landed on—just now, Calle Metalúrgicos, on map-page 133, in a *colonia* called Trabajadores de Hierro (Ironworkers.) Never heard of it. Though Metallurgists is obviously appropriate for a *colonia* named Ironworkers, it still seems like a pretty weird name for a street. What's it like to be a child, trying to incorporate the fact that you live on Calle Metalúrgicos into your sense of the world's hidden meanings and magic and of your place at the very center of it all? That your street, your *colonia*, is a magnet, pulling the entire universe down toward you? Turning to the index I find that Mexico City has five different Calle Metalúrgicos, in five different *colonias.* I look at the gridded Mexico City map on the back cover of the *Guía Roji* and find the square numbered 133,

situated almost in the middle, just within the yellow-shaded northern border of the DF. Green-shaded metropolitan Mexico City, in México State, lies just beyond.

Calle Metalúrgicos, in Colonia Trabajadores de Hierro. What's it like there? That was the driving game I'd come up with. To use the *Guía Roji* almost like the I Ching, open to any page, put my finger down, and try to drive wherever it landed. A game of chance and destination, if not destiny. Of course, first I had to learn to drive around Mexico City. Since, technically, I did know how to drive, it seemed redundant and embarrassing to enroll in a driving school, but doing so also seemed a good way to get used to being behind the wheel again while also learning the city's traffic rules and layout under the instruction of a knowledgeable guide. I'd never learned to drive with a stick shift; I'd driven only with automatic. Learning to drive standard, I decided, would justify enrolling in a driving school, because then I would be overcoming two inhibitions at once. I looked up driving schools on the Internet. I went to the *Guía Roji* store on a gritty street in Colonia San Miguel Chapultepec, and bought the huge map of Mexico City that now hangs on my wall; my 2012 *Guía Roji;* and a small, rectangular illuminated magnifying glass that would surely prove crucial for reading those densely intricate map pages, especially if I found myself lost while driving in the dark. I went with my friend Brenda to Dr. York, a trendy Colonia Roma eyeglass shop that also sells secondhand English books. Brenda picked out for me a pair of eyeglass frames that I had outfitted with bifocal lenses, and I also bought a copy of Halldor Laxness's *Independent People*, a book I'd been meaning to read for years.

I procrastinated on the driving project, but I wore the eyeglasses all the time. Print was now magnified and clearer. By

day the world lost its soft blur. My eyeglasses were a cinematographer who'd mastered the noirish expressionism of Mexico City's nighttime streets, shadows starkly outlined; street lamps like glass flowers instead of spreading haze; the rediscovery of one-point linear perspective in long, receding double files of softly gleaming parked cars; the intermittently illuminated facades of old and sometimes very old buildings like glimpses into individual personalities that are hidden by day, revealing scars but not secrets, battered but proud endurance, psychotic earthquake cracks, the maternal curve of a concrete balcony holding out its row of darkened flowerpots.