1982

Labyrinth of Little Streets| Poetry translations and fiction

Bettina Escudero
The University of Montana

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A LABYRINTH OF LITTLE STREETS

Poetry Translations and Fiction

Bettina Escudero

B.A., University of Texas, El Paso, 1979

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing

University of Montana

1982

Chair, Examining Committee

Dean, Graduate School

Date
For my children

Ricardo, Rodrigo, and Natalia
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INTRODUCTION

Because I had the temerity to talk about my soul in a poem, a prominent poet humiliated me in a workshop when I had just started writing. "You can't do that! It doesn't mean anything!" she ranted and raved. Yes, my poem must have been terribly mushy and sentimental, but ever since then I have looked for people (other prominent poets) who can write about their inner lives and their souls. I love the ease and passion with which Latin American, Spanish, and some European writers do this. They seem to be in closer touch with their emotional lives than we are in the United States, and I think American poetry is the poorer for it. We are afraid of passion, of being humble, of death, of acknowledging fear, and consequently of life and joyfulness.

I had read a poem of Antonio Machado's here and there, but one day about three years ago, Sam Hamill, co-editor with Tree Swenson of Copper Canyon Press, asked me to read "Cante Hondo," to him in Spanish. After he had seen my translations, he asked me to translate enough Machado for a little book. When he asked me to do this, I hardly knew anything of Machado or his poetry, and as I read from his collected works, I randomly chose to begin with those poems that particularly caught my eye (or soul). I found myself wandering through his poems just as I had wandered through the little streets of Michoacan in Mexico, feeling I had found a kindred soul.

Antonio Machado was born in 1898 and died destitute, in exile from
his beloved Spain, in 1939. He was part of the Generation of '98, a
group of Spanish philosophers, writers, and teachers who wanted to in­
fuse Spain with new energy and vitality during and after many years of
civil strife.

In Machado's poetry, there is always the balance between death and
life, as there was in his personality. John Dos Passos says that "He
was a man entirely of one piece ... He always held within himself as
much of death as of life, halves fused together by ingenuous artistry." It's one of the things that made me comfortable with Machado, his
ability to bridge the gap between these two existences so gracefully
and powerfully. Most of the time people ignore death, and by so doing,
lose much of life.

Machado also writes about innocence and the loss of innocence, the
sadness of it, yet always with its excitement and promise of new life.
It is because at the same time that we are losing innocence, we are also
losing life and getting closer to death, even though we feel more alive
and sometimes even close to ecstasy.

After the death of his young wife, Machado drew closer to death.
She understood his alliance with that other side of life, and in life,
was his partner. The three poems in the last section, Fields of Castile,
are about her.

Some of Machado's strengths in Spanish made his poetry particularly
hard to translate. One can sometimes listen to the sound of a poem and
perceive its meaning, like the heavy low sound of the words in "At the
Burial of a Friend." Machado does not write with eloquence and the
simplicity of his words could make the poems trite or sentimental. John
Dos Passos even thinks that, "the homely carefully cadenced words are so stuffed with feeling that they throb." "Cante Hondo," a deeply passionate poem about what is to be Spanish, incorporates some of Spain's most lasting traditions of music and dance; "cante hondo" is the soulful burst or cry of feeling that come from deep inside the body. In the poem, there is the line, "And it was Love, like a red flame." If these words didn't convey the relationship between death and love, the poem would lose its power. When the poem was first published, it read, "And it was Love, like fire burning." Just recently, I decided to retain Machado's own words.

However, Machado himself seems to be aware of this danger and sometimes I feel that he's deliberately toying with sentimentality. He did have a sprightly sense of humor that is more readily revealed in his aphorisms, sayings, and small songs. In "Tiaras of other days," the poem is saved from triteness by the last two lines, "you are these things of yesterday, my soul, and songs/ and stories of my grandmother." It concludes by being touching and warm. The experience of this poem is almost universal to the latin child of the middle and upper classes: the formal and almost rigid upbringing, save by the wonderful comfort and love of our grandmothers. Of course, good writers have taught us that if a story or poem doesn't risk sentimentality, then it's no good. The poem does lose one very important nuance in English by translating "tocados," into "tiaras." "Tocados," in Spanish can also mean "touched." The line could read, "Touched by other days," if "touched" and "tiaras," were interchangeable in English. But they're not.

Another place I had trouble translating tone or mood was in "Before
the pale canvas of the evening." Even though in English, the word "chimerical," sounds a bit awkward, I chose to leave the original word. In Greek mythology, "Chimera," is a fire-breathing she-monster; it can also mean a creation of the imagination, or an impossible and foolish fancy. Chimerical is someone or something given to unrealistic fantasies. What better or more perfect word for Machado! For one who blends dream, vision, death, and life.

In most cases, by exploring my vocabulary, I could come up with a suitable word. I'm thinking especially of the word "kindred," in "From the threshold of a dream they called me." The word for the Spanish "amiga," translates literally into "friendly," or "that is friend." But the poem wants to say much more than "friend." "La mano amiga" -- "the hand that's friend," implies a strong bonding, a trust, and lasting commitment. I think "kindred" gives those connotations, that "friend" simply doesn't.

Sometimes the word in English doesn't carry the nuances that it does in Spanish, but I found I could surpass that problem by using two words together in English that gave the same meaning or tone as the two in Spanish. The adjective and noun can trade connotations, and the implied meaning will be the same as in Spanish. For example, in "Thin murmur of gowns that move over the sterile earth," there is no translation for the word in Spanish "rumor," that I translated into "murmur." "Rumor" is the hum of voices in conversation when one enters a room. In the poem, though, this sound pertains to the gowns that were moving or passing over the earth! After many frustrating attempts with the words, "tenuous," "confused," "muffled," I finally decided on "thin murmur."
It gives the best image for those tenuous spirits whose roving presence is there, if we want to hear it.

Every poem had its particular problems, some more challenging than others, but I did try to be as faithful as possible to the original in meaning, tone and rhythm, if not rhyme.

---

VII

El casco roído y verdoso
del viejo falucho
reposa en la arena . . .
la vela tronchada parece
que aún sueña en el sol y en el mar.

El mar hierve y canta . . .
El mar es un sueño sonoro
bajo el sol de abril.
El mar hierve y ríe
con olas azules y espumas de leche y de plata,
El mar hierve y ríe
bajo el cielo azul.
El mar lactescente,
el mar rutilante,
que ríe en sus liras de plata sus risas azules . . .
¡Hierve y ríe el mar!

El aire parece que duerme encantado
en la fúlgida niebla de sol blanquecino.
La gaviota palpita en el aire dormido, y al lento
volar soñoliento, se aleja y se pierde en la bruma del sol.
VII

The green corroded hulk of the old boat rests on the sand . . .
It seems the severed sail still dreams in sea and sun.

The sea boils and sings . . .
The sea is a sonorous dream under the April sun.
The sea boils and smiles with blue waves and froth of milk and of silver, the sea boils and smiles under the blue sky.
Milky sea, brilliant sea, smiling her blue laughter on her silver lyres . . .
The sea is boiling and smiling!

It seems the air sleeps enchanted in the glimmering mist of the white sun.
The seagull flutters in the slumbering air; and with slow drowsy flight, moves away and vanishes into the haze of the sun.
IV
EN EL ENTIERRO DE UN AMIGO

Tierra le dieron una tarde horrible del mes de julio, bajo el sol de fuego.

A un paso de la abierta sepultura había rosas de podridos pétalos, entre geranios de áspera fragancia y roja flor. El cielo puro y azul. Corría un aire fuerte y seco.

De los gruesos cordeles suspendido, pesadamente, descender hicieron el ataúd al fondo de la fosa los dos sepultureros . . .

Y al reposar sonó con recio golpe, solemne, en el silencio.

Un golpe de ataúd en tierra es algo perfectamente serio.

Sobre la negra caja se rompían los pesados terrones polvorientos . . .

El aire se llevaba de la honda fosa el blanquecino aliento.

-- Y tú, sin sombra ya, duerme y reposa, larga paz a tus huesos . . .

Definitivamente, duerme un sueño tranquilo y verdadero.
IV

AT THE BURIAL OF A FRIEND

They gave him to the earth one dreadful afternoon in the month of July, under a sun of fire.

A step away from the open sepulchre lay roses of rotten petals, among geraniums of bitter fragrance and red flower. The sky clear and blue. A wind blowing strong and dry.

From thick sagging cords, two sextons lowered the casket to the bottom of the grave.

And as it came to rest on the ground, a harsh blow sounded solemn, in the silence.

The sound of a casket on earth is something absolutely serious.

Heavy clumps of dirt broke over the black box.

The wind blew the dusty breath away from the deep grave.

"And you, already without shadow, sleep and rest; long peace to your bones . . .

Finally, have a tranquil and true sleep."
Una tarde parda y fría
de invierno. Los colegiales
estudian. Monotonía
de lluvia tras los cristales.

Es la clase. En un cartel
se representa a Caín
fugitivo, y muerto Abel,
junto a una mancha carmín.

Con timbre sonoro y hueco
truena el maestro, un anciano
mal vestido, enjuto y seco,
que lleva un libro en la mano.

Y todo un coro infantil
va cantando la lección:
mil veces ciento, cien mil;
mil veces mil, un millón.

Una tarde parda y fría
de invierno. Los colegiales
estudian. Monotonía
de la lluvia en los cristales.
V

CHILDHOOD MEMORY

Cold grey afternoon
of winter. The children
study. Monotony
of rain across window panes.

It's the class. In a poster
Cain is portrayed a fugitive,
and Abel dead,
beside a crimson stain.

In a sonorous hollow voice
the teacher thunders,
a badly dressed old man, spare and dry,
carrying a book in his hand.

And like an entire children's choir
students sing the lesson:
thousand times hundred, a hundred thousand;
thousand times thousand, a million.

Cold grey afternoon
of winter. The children
study. Monotony
of the rain in the window panes.
A la desierta plaza
conduce un laberinto de callejas.
A un lado, el viejo paredón sombrío
de una ruinosa iglesia;
a otro lado, la tapia blanquecina
de un huerto de cipresses y palmeras,
y, frente a mí, la casa,
y en la casa, la reja,
antel cristal que levemente empaña
su figurilla plácida y risueña.
Me apartaré. No quiero
llamar a tu ventana ... La primavera
viene -- su veste blanca
flota en el aire de la plaza muerta --;
viene a encender las rosas
rojas de tus rosales ... Quiero verla ...
X

A labyrinth of little streets leads to the deserted square.
To one side, the old sombre wall
of an abandoned church;
To the other, the white adobe wall
of a garden of palm and cypress;
and, in front of me, the house,
and on the house, the railing
of the window pane that lightly clouds
the smiling peace of her small figure.
I will leave. I don't want
to call at your window . . . Spring
is coming -- her white gown
floats in the air of the dead plaza --
she comes to ignite the red roses
of your rose bushes . . . I want to see her . . .
XIV
CANTE HONDO

Yo meditaba absorto, devanando los hilos del hastío y la tristeza, cuando llegó a mi oído, por la ventana de mi estancia, abierta a una caliente noche de verano, el planir de una copla soñolienta, quebrada por los trémolos sombríos de las músicas magas de mi tierra.

... Y era el Amor, como una roja llama ...

-- Nerviosa mano en la vibrante cuerda ponía un largo suspirar de oro que se trocaba en surtidor de estrellas --.

... Y era la Muerte, al hombro la cuchilla, el paso largo, torva y esqueletica.

-- Tal cuando yo era niño la soñaba --.

Y en la guitarra, resonante y trémula, la brusca mano, al golpear, fingía el reposar de un ataúd en tierra.

Y era un planido solitario el soplo que el polvo barre y la ceniza avienta.
Absorbed I meditated, unraveling threads of sorrow and despair, when it came to my ear, through the window of my study open to the hot summer night, the lament of sleepy stanzas interrupted by the somber tremolos of my land's enchanted music.

... And it was Love, like the red flame ...

Nervous hand on quivering string released a long sigh of gold that became a surge of stars.

... And it was Death, blade on her shoulder, with her long tread, severe and skeletal. Just the way I dreamed her as a boy.

And on the guitar, resonant and tremulous, the brusque hand, as it hit, sounded the repose of a casket on earth.

And it was a solitary moan, one blow of breath that dust rakes and ash tosses to the wind.
XV

La calle en sombra. Ocultan los altos caserones el sol que muere; hay ecos de luz en los balcones.

¿No ves, en el encanto del mirador florido, el óvalo rosado de un rostro conocido?

La imagen, tras el vidrio de equívoco reflejo, surge o se apaga como daguerrotipo viejo.

Suena en la calle sólo el ruido de tu paso; se extinguen lentamente los ecos del ocaso.

¡Oh, angustia! Pesa y duele el corazón. ¿Es ella? No puede ser . . . Camina . . . En el azul la estrella.
XV

Street in shadow. Dying sun hidden by high massive houses. In their balconies, echoes of light.

Don't you see, in the magic of that flowered place, the flushed oval of a familiar face?

Behind the illusive glass, the image appears, rises, like an old daguerreotype, and disappears.

In the street, only the sound of your footstep; slowly, the echoes of the sunset fade.

Oh, anguish! The heart is heavy and sore. Is it you? It can't be... Something moves... The star in the blue.
El sol es un globo de fuego,
la luna es un disco morado.

Una blanca paloma se posa
en el alto ciprés centenario.

Los cuadros de mirtos parecen
de marchito velludo empolvado.

¡El jardín y la tarde tranquila! . . .
Sueña el agua en la fuente de mármol.
V

The sun is a globe of fire,
the moon is a purple disk.

A white dove rests
on the centenary tall cypress.

The myrtle flowerbeds resemble
withered and dusty wool.

The garden and the peaceful afternoon!
The water sounds in the fountain of marble.
VI

¡Tenue rumor de túnica que pasan
sobre la infértil tierra! . . .
¡y lágrimas sonoras
de las campanas viejas!

Las ascuas mortecinas
del horizonte humean . . .
Blancos fantasmas lares
van encendiendo estrellas.

-- Abre el balcón. La hora
de una ilusión se acerca . . .
La tarde se ha dormido
y las campanas sueñan.
VI

Thin murmur of gowns that move
over the sterile earth!
And sonorous tears
from the old bells!

Smoke rises from the dying
embers on the horizon.
White phantom house-gods
ignite stars as they pass.

"Open the balcony. The hour
of an illusion draws near . . . ."
The afternoon has fallen asleep
and the bells dream.
III

Y era el demonio de mi sueño, el angel más hermoso. Brillaban como aceros los ojos victoriosos, y las sangrientas llamas de su antorcha alumbraron la honda cripta del alma.

— ¿Vendrás conmigo? — —No, jamás; las tumbas y los muertos me espantan.
Pero la ferrea mano mi diestra atenazaba.

— Vendrás conmigo ... Y avancé en mi sueño, cegado por la roja luminaria.
Y en la cripta sentí sonar cadenas y rebullir de fiera enjauladas.
III

And he was the demon of my dream,
the most beautiful angel. His victorious eyes
shone like tempered steel
and the bloody flame
of his torch threw light
on the deep crypt of my soul.

"You will come with me?" "No, never;
tombs and the dead terrify me."
But his iron hand
hooked the flesh of my hand.

"You will come with me . . ." And I advanced in my dream
blinded by the fiery light.
Then, in the crypt, I heard chains clank
and the stirring of caged beasts.
IV

Desde el umbral de un sueño me llamaron . . .
Era la buena voz, la voz querida.

-- Dime: ¿vendrás conmigo a ver el alma? . . .
Llegó a mi corazón una caricia.

-- Contigo siempre . . . Y avancé en mi sueño
por una larga, escueta glaería,
sintiendo el roce de la veste pura
y el palpitar suave de la mano amiga.
From the threshold of a dream they called me . . . .
It was the good voice, the desired voice.

"Tell me: will you come with me to see your soul? . . . ."
A caress reached my heart.

"With you always . . . ." And I advanced in my dream
through a long, empty gallery,
feeling the touch of the pure garment,
and gentle pulse of the kindred hand.
V
SUEÑO INFANTIL

Una clara noche
de fiesta y de luna,
nocche de mis sueños,
nocche de alegría

-- era luz mi alma,
que hoy es bruma toda,
no eran mis cabellos
negros todavía --

el hada más joven
me llevo en sus brazos
a la alegre fiesta
que en la plaza ardía.

So el chisporroteo
de las luminarias,
amar sus madejas
de danza tejía.

Y en aquella noche
de fiesta y de luna,
nocche de mis sueños
nocche de alegría,

el hada mas joven
besaba mi frente . . .
con su linda mano
su adiós me decía . . .

Todos los rosales
daban sus aromas
todos los amores
amor entreabrá.
V
CHILDHOOD DREAM

On a clear night
of festivity and moon,
night of my dreams,
night of joy

--there was light in my soul
that today is all clouded,
even my hair
wasn't black yet --

the youngest fairy
carried me in her arms
to the joyful gathering
that burned in the plaza.

Beneath the crackle
of bright lanterns
love weaved
her skeins of dance.

And on that night
of festivity and moon,
night of my dreams
night of joy;

the youngest fairy
was kissing my forehead . . .
with her beautiful hand
giving me her good-bye . . .

Every rose bush
gifting its fragrance,
every love kindling
buds of new love.
X

Y nada importa ya que el vino de oro
rebose de tu cope cristalina,
o el agrio zumo enturbie el puro vaso.

Tú sabes las secretas galerías
del alma, los caminos de los sueños,
y la tarde tranquila
donde van a morir... Allí te aguardan

las hadas silenciosas de la vida,
y hacia un jardín de eterna primavera
te llevarán un día.
So nothing matters, now that gold wine
overflows your crystal cup,
or that bitter juice muddles the pure glass.

You know the secret galleries
of the soul, the roads dreams take,
and the peaceful evening
where they'll die ... They wait for you there,

the silent spirits of life,
and towards a garden of eternal spring
they'll take you some day.
XI

¡Tocados de otros días,
mustios encajes y marchitas sedas;
salterios arrumbados,
rincones de las salas polvorientas;

daguerrotipos turbios,
cartas que amarillean;
libracos no leídos
que guardan grises florecitas secas;

romanticismos muertos,
cursilerías viejas,
cosas de ayer, que sois mi alma, y cantos
y cuentos de la abuela! . . .
XI

Tiaras of other days,
shriveled lace and withered silk;
abandoned harps,
corners of dusty parlors;

blurred sepia tints,
letters that turn yellow;
unread old books
that keep dry greyish little flowers;

dead romanticism,
worn-out pretenses,
you are these things of yesterday, my soul, and songs
and stories of my grandmother!
XIII

Ante el pálido lienzo de la tarde,
la iglesia, con sus torres afiladas
y el ancho campanario, en cuyos huecos
voltean suavemente las campanas,
alta y sombría, surge.

La estrella es una lágrima
en el azul celeste.
Bajo la estrella clara,
flota, vellón disperso,
una nube quimérica de plata.
XIII

Before the pale canvas of the evening,
tall and dismal, the church rises,
with its spiky towers
and its bells turning softly
in the hollows of the wide belfry.

The star is a tear
in sky blue.
Beneath the clear star,
floats, like scattered fleece,
a chimerical cloud of silver.
XIV

Tarde tranquila, casi
con placidez de alma,
para ser joven, para haberlo sido
cuando Dios quiso, para
tener algunas alegrías . . . lejos,
y poder dulcemente recordarlas.
Peaceful afternoon, almost
with serenity of soul,
to be young, to have been young
when God wanted, to have
a little joy . . . far off,
and gently be able to recall.
LXVII

Si yo fuera un poeta galante, cantaría
a vuestros ojos un cantar tan puro
como en el mármol blanco el agua limpia.

Y en una estrofa de agua
todo el cantar sería:

“Ya sé que no responden a mis ojos,
que ven y no preguntan cuando miran,
los vuestros claros, vuestros ojos tienen
la buena luz tranquila,
la buena luz del mundo en flor, que he visto
desde los brazos de mi madre un día.”
LXVII

If I were a poet
gallant, I'd sing
to your eyes a song as pure
as clean water on white marble.

And in a water stanza
the whole song would be:

"I know they don't respond to my eyes,
that they see and don't question when they look,
your eyes, your clear eyes hold
the good tranquil light,
the good light of the world in bloom, that I saw
from my mother's arms one day."
XXV

Allá, en las tierras altas,
por donde traza el Duero
su curva de ballesta
en torno a Soria, entre plomizos cerros
y manchas de ruidos encinares,
mi corazón está vagando, en sueños . . .

¿No ves, Leonor, los alamos del río
con sus ramajes yertos?
Mira el Moncayo azul y blanco; dame
tu mano y paseemos.

Por estos campos de la tierra mía,
bordados de olivares polvorientos,
voy caminando solo,
triste, cansado, pensativo y viejo.
XXV

There, in the high land
where the Duero River draws
his cross-bow curve
around Soria, between leaden hills
and stains of wasted ever-green oak,
my heart wanders, in dreams . . .

Don't you see, Leonor, the river poplars
with their stiff branches?
Look at the blue and white Moncayo; give me
your hand and let's walk.
By these fields of my homeland,
bordered by dusty olive groves,
I walk alone,
sad, tired, thoughtful and old.
XXVI

Soñé que tú me llevabas por una blanca vereda, en medio del campo verde hacia el azul de las sierras, hacia los montes azules, una mañana serena.

Sentí tu mano en la mía, tu mano de compañera, tu voz de niña en mi oído como una campana nueva, como una campana virgen de un alba de primavera. ¡Eran tu voz y tu mano, en sueños, tan verdaderas! . . . Vive, esperanza, ¡quién sabe lo que se traga la tierra!
XXVI

I dreamed you led me
along a white trail,
across the green field,
toward the blue of the sierras,
toward the blue mountains,
one serene morning.

I felt your hand in mine,
your hand of companion,
your soft voice in my ear
like a new bell,
like a virgin bell
on a spring morning.
Your voice and your hand,
were so real, in dreams!
Live, Hope, who knows
what earth devours!
XXVII

Una noche de verano
-- estaba abierto el balcón
y la puerta de mi casa --
la muerte en mi casa entró.
Se fue acercando a su lecho
-- ni siquiera me miró --,
con unos dedos muy finos,
algo muy tenue rompío.
Silenciosa y sin mirarme,
la muerte otra vez pasó
delante de mi. ¿Que has hecho?
La muerte no respondió.
Mi niña quedó tranquila,
dolido mi corazón.
¡Ay, lo que la muerte ha roto
era un hilo entre los dos!
XXVII

One summer night
-- when the balcony and door
were both open --
death came to my house.
It approached her bed
-- without even looking at me --
and with very fine fingers
tore something frail.
Silently and without a glance,
one again, death passed
right in front of me. What have you done?
Death didn't answer me.
My love remained peaceful,
my heart mournful.
Ah, what death ruptured
was the thread between us.
Proverbios y Cantares

IV
Nuestras horas son minutos
cuando esperamos saber,
y siglos cuando sabemos
lo que se puede aprender.

VI
De lo que llaman los hombres
virtud, justicia y bondad,
una mitad es envidia,
y la otra no es caridad.

X
La envidia de la virtud
hizo a Caín criminal.
¡Gloria a Caín! Hoy el vicio
es lo que se envidia más.

XII
¡Ojos que a la luz se abrieron
un día para, después,
ciegos tornar a la tierra,
hartos de mirar sin ver!

XXI
Ayer soñé que veía
a Dios y que a Dios hablaba;
y soñé que Dios me oía...
Después soñé que soñaba.
XL

Proverbs and Songs

IV
The hours of our day are minutes
when we are waiting to know
and centuries when we know
what there is to learn.

VI
Half of what people call
virtue, justice, and goodness,
is envy,
and the other half isn't charity.

X
Envy of virtue
made Cain a criminal.
Glory be to Cain! Today
vice is most envied.

XII
Eyes that opened up to light
one day, so that, later, they could blindly
turn to the earth, sick and tired
of looking without seeing!

XXI
Yesterday I dreamed I saw
God and I spoke to God,
I dreamed that God heard me . . .
Then I dreamed I was dreaming.
XXXVII
¿Dices que nada se crea?
No te importe; con el barro
de la tierra, haz una copa
para que beba tu hermano.

XXXVIII
¿Dices que nada se crea?
Alfarero, a tus cacharros.
Haz tu copa, y no te importe
si no puedes hacer barro.
XXXVII

You say nothing is created?
Don't worry; with earth's clay, make a cup
so your comrade may drink.

XXXVIII

You say nothing is created?
Potter, to your pots.
Make your cup, don't worry
that you can't make clay.
Voices in the Straw

"Córrele, Mama. Hurry." The boy ran ahead of his mother, skipping backward, laughing, black hair flying as he jumped up and down, his broken huarache strap flapping against the ground. The worn cotton pants barely reached the top of his ankles, and the strap of his brown and grey woolen satchel crossed his breast, almost like an ammunition belt of an old revolutionary. The young woman walked behind him, with easy rhythm like a willow branch swings with a smooth steady breeze, a quiet smile on her face, enjoying the warm December air in the Mexican highlands of Michoacan. She loved the mountains dressed in pine green that seemed to hug the town. Her son disappeared among the bustle of people in the town plaza.

She crossed the street and quickened her step as she went past two soldiers posted outside the bank building. On the wall beside the soldiers were crooked and uneven political slogans and she wondered how the people had managed to paint them there. Quickly, she lowered her gaze. She passed under the arched passageway which made a cool shade over the red mosaic sidewalk all around the plaza. She turned the corner with its aroma of fresh bread from the bakery. Past the corner, she lifted her gaze: there were the huge cottonwood trees surrounding a field beyond, where the street gave into gravel, and finally, hard earth. Even though she was still a few blocks away, she could hear their leaves rustling a song she was familiar with.

Her son, Juanito, stood under one of the trees, leaning against the massive trunk, holding his hands in the small of his back. He watched
Pablo and an older man make adobes. Pedro shoveled the straw into the circle of mud, while Pablo's big bare feet trampled it, mixing it well. Pilar stopped beside her son. He rested his head on his mother's hip and wrapped his arm around her waist.

"You smell like fresh mountain wind," he said to her.

She bent down and kissed the top of his head. How soothing his tender hands had felt when as an infant he always wanted to be near her as if to retain the physical connection between them intact; later he was always leaning on her, touching her; he would saunter off, but would return soon for reassurance, leaving tiny invisible imprints on her body, like the patter of soft summer rain. Now, when she made the tortillas in the morning, the warm smell of the wood stove would draw him near to her.

She watched the tall brown man, his skin smooth and shiny, thin lines baked into the brown face by work and sun. The mud had splattered his white pants as he stepped over it; they were rolled up to his knees, baring his hard calves. He smiled at her and nodded his head in her direction. She smiled too, turning her bright black eyes downward. She avoided his glance as all good women avoid men's direct glances, though her face flushed with pleasure. He kept his eyes on her a moment, then he said to Pedro, "That's enough," signalling to him with extended arm, his hand raised.

"Sí," Pedro said, and mopped the sweat from his face and neck with a red kerchief. He took off his huaraches and rolled up his own pants. He stepped into the mud to help Pablo mix the clay mud. The mother and child watched the men work the adobe. Then they each took an end of a long board and began to spread the mud evenly on a square piece of
ground they had already staked out with string.

"Dye, Pilar," Pablo said, looking over his shoulder, "I've seen how you struggle to make the little one's clothes white."

"Si, Pablo," the woman laughed lightly, embarrassed.

"On the television they advertise a new soap. They say it gets your clothes white without scrubbing too hard. They say it is easy."

"What do they call it?" Pilar looked at her sandals; her long black lashes made a shadow over her eyes.

"It has a North American name, but they call it Rayo Azul," he said, hitting the mud repeatedly with a shovel. Then he straightened up, buried the tip of the shovel and leaned his elbow on the handle, making his whole body slant sideways.

"You like the pictures on the television set?" he asked the boy.

"I like to watch it outside the store," the boy said, "I like when the cowboy with the white hat catches all the bad men! But no one can hear it. You can't hear it through the picture window. And besides, they talk in English and we can't understand." He looked up at the big man with his big round eyes and wiped the hair from his face.

"Come see it at my house when you want. Maybe sometime soon your mother will decide about me and her and you will be able to watch it every day." Pablo rested his eyes on the woman while he said this. Then he turned to the boy again, "Me, I only watch it to see what they say about the new land reform. It is better than the radio. You can see their faces while they talk."

"Land reform," Pedro said under his breath, "Huh."

"What do they say?" Pilar asked him, but she was watching Pedro, the smile gone from her face. She remembered the blank faces of the soldiers
standing outside the bank.

Pedro hit the mud faster, and he fixed his hard steady eyes on her.

"So far, they only want us to elect our leaders," Pablo said, visibly ignoring Pedro.

"Well, have you told them we have, that you are the leader here?" Her body had stiffened.

"We are waiting for the other communities," Pablo said. "It will be good when everyone will have a piece of good earth to grow food -- it pains me to see so many of our children die so young. . . ." He pulled the shovel loose.

"The man is crazy to hope that will ever happen," said the older man, without stopping his work.

"It will happen." Pablo said.

"What will happen is a shot in your belly, unless we pick up our rusted old guns," he replied.

Pilar recalled the last time she saw Juanito's father waving good-bye from the door. He was on his way to work. She shut her eyes tight to send the image away.

While they talked, Juanito was looking at an army-green car that was approaching. When it passed by them, Pilar turned her face away, hiding her chin in her shoulder, shutting her eyes. Pablo stared at the car through the dust. After it went by, Pilar bent down and swatted the dirt out of her dark woolen skirt, embroidered with green stitching around the hem.

"There they go," Pablo said, resuming his work.

"Hijos de la chingada," Pedro said, and turning his head, spat on the ground.
Pilar and Juanito stared at the empty and dusty road. Then Pilar took
the boy's hand, saying, "vamonos."

"Good day," Pablo said, waving his hand.

Having a bit of distance between her and Pablo, she looked into his
eyes. He responded with an encouraging smile. As they walked on, they
stopped here and there for Juanito to glide his fingers over the black,
even words painted on the adobe walls that ran alongside the road.

"What does this say?" he asked his mother as he moved two fingers up
and down one word.

"That's a big word. It says Justice."

"And this one?"

"Do you wish you could learn to read? Go to school?"

"What does this one say, Mamá?" he insisted, his back to her, his
fingers carefully flowing over the letters.

"It says, Out, and the next one, Yanquis."

"What does, Yanquis, mean?" He looked at her.

"North Americans. Would you like to live in the States of North
America?"

"I'd rather be here," he said, "with you, and Abuela, and my old man,
and EVERYBODY!"

"But wouldn't you like to have your own television set?" she asked,
"that way you wouldn't have to stand outside the store when you wanted to
watch it."

"Do they give you one when you cross the border?" He continued
talking without waiting for a reply. "Besides, if you marry Pablo, we
could have one here, too," he said, turning his whole body around to face
her.

She didn't know if she could lose another man to the struggle. Juanito's father disappeared, disappeared into nothingness when he began to speak out. Juanito trotted off, leaving his trail on the brown dirt wall, as if marking the way for his mother to follow. Where the wall ended, he turned sharply and pushed open a wooden door. He came upon a yard and scrambling among chickens clustered at the gate, called, "Ya llegamos, we're here. We're here!" His mother saw the squawking chickens flutter out of his way as he ran to an old man who stood up to welcome him. Juanito bumped against the old man, hugging his legs even before the man could bend down to embrace the boy.

"Juanito, Juanito, come play!" called children from the yard. Juanito waved his arm.

"Oyes, Juanito," a big woman sitting on the cement floor of the portico called, "let me give you one of my hugs!" She cradled him in her arms like an infant, but his legs spilled beyond her body, to the ground.

Other men and women rested their backs against the wall in the shade, while others sat on the step between the terrace and the wildly flowered garden, in the open sunlight, working the straw with their fingers. They laughed and talked as Juanito went around their circle, greeting them.

Pilar knelt beside the fire that blazed quietly beside the portico. She drank coffee in a pewter cup, the color of midnight sky.

"What's the matter?" the big woman asked.

"Nada. Those men in green make me uneasy," Pilar said in a soft voice; her hand around the cup moved in circles, making the coffee swirl around
and around.

"Sí," the big woman nodded.

The child gathered some pieces of straw from the pile next to the house. He sat against one of the three thin wooden posts that held up the thatched roof over the portico. Then he began to weave the straw carefully, slowly, his brown hands awkward in their movements, twisting the twigs around and under each other. He stopped and shook his head and looked over to the big woman on his right, who, like the others, was actively engaged with her dexterous fingers. "Let me see how you do it," he eased his way beside her. Everyone talked and worked.

Pilar added a piece of wood to the fire, which they kept going all morning. After they heated their beans and tortillas at noon, they let it burn out. A wood stove would be useful, but too expensive. Juanito sat close to the big woman, his chin on her shoulder, watching her hands work.

"You are too ambitious, Juanito. Make another star, the bird is too hard for you," the woman said, gently intertwining the dry straw.

"I already know how to make stars. I've made a lot of stars. I want to learn how to make a bird."

The old man leaning against the house said to him, "Here, Juanito," a large straw mat lay in front of him, "come help me finish this petate. You can lay it on the floor in your house after you finish it."

"Gracias, Viejito, but I want to make the bird."

"Bueno," the woman said, helping the boy get started, leading his fingers with her own large assured ones. Around them, five piles of finished straw figures rose in heaps: the star, the burro, the cone of
life, the spiral, the bird. Two men and three women intermittently tossed more figures into the piles as they finished them.

When Juanito finished a figure that might resemble a bird, he held it up, his eyes big and a huge smile of open pride, "Look. See? I made a bird!"

"Yes," the old man said, "we see."

They laughed as they passed the bird around from hand to hand and each admired it and praised Juanito. His mother continued working, looking from the cone of life she worked on to Juanito's face, wondering what would happen to him if she took him away from all these people that loved him, far away to the United States of North America. They would be able to eat more than just beans and tortillas; he could learn to read, go to school. Before the bird reached the end of the circle, Juanito jumped up.

"Here, let me fix that strap on your huarache while you play. Take them off," the old man said.

Juanito pulled the huaraches off his feet and gathered them in his hands; he ran over to the old man and dropped them in his arms with a warm grin, eyes beaming, while the small, wrinkled eyes of the old man shone on the boy; his hand patted the boy's shoulder. Juanito skipped off to join the children who were standing close together in front of the adobe wall, facing a girl with a runny nose who stood about ten yards away from them. The children dodged back and forth, while she stood ready to throw a ball, looking at one child, then another. Finally, she threw the ball toward them, trying to "burn" one of the children standing next to the wall. A little boy let out a shriek and peals of
laughter as the ball came toward him; he swiveled and fell to the ground as the ball barely missed hitting him. The others jumped safely out of the way.

II

"Ay! Que bonito te ves!" Pilar stepped back from the chair on which Juanito stood, admiring him in his St. Joseph costume.

"Don't call me pretty, Mama. I'm a boy!" Juanito said, the pitch of his voice raised.

"Boys are pretty, too, my son," she said, hugging him.

He squeezed her, his arms tight around her neck, his head resting on her shoulders.

"A ver, a ver. Let me see the boy." Pilar's grandmother came into the room.

"Mama, take off your apron. Let's go build our fire," Pilar said.

"Oyes, you look like the real San Jose!" said the grandmother to her great grandson. "Let's walk you to the procession." She looked at Juanito as she took his hand. "Pilar, you start the fire. I'm to take my son to the procession." From a chair between the two iron beds, she slipped a shawl into her arms and wrapped it around her short body, over her apron.

"I'll come with you," Pilar said.
The old woman held his hand inside her hardened grip. Pilar watched how the old woman listened to him with her entire body, eyes intent, body close to his, ears open only to his words. They walked together through the front room and out the door into the street. Many people had already lit their fogatas, the fires flickering their dancing shadows onto the empty chairs assembled around the individual fires like sentinels.

Twirled ribbons of white, red, and green crepe paper criss-crossed each other back and forth from roof to roof above their heads as they walked, hand in hand in the middle of the street, closed off to cars or trucks for the Christmas procession. Piñatas dangled from taut ropes clasped to the roofs of opposite houses, so that as the two women and the young child walked, the boy would let go of his abuela's hand, skip a few steps and jump, trying to touch the base of the piñata with the tip of his fingers, although Pilar knew it was impossible. He was still too short. Then he would wait for his mother and abuela to catch up and would quickly take hold of his great-grandmother's hand again. The piñatas were in the same forms as the straw objects: the burro, the star, the spiral, the bird. There were no cones of life. People liked the stars for Christmas, multi-dimensional, like five funnels fastened together at their wide ends, making a single round center, their pointed ends piercing the air. Each one a crisp clear color: green, blue, red, yellow, orange, purple, all with white trim; thin paper streamers rippling from each of their five tips.

Suddenly, they heard a sharp explosion, like thunder splitting the sky. It made the old woman shudder. Her hand immediately went to her breast, and holding her breath, she said, "Ay, Dios mío. What on this
"The earthly world was that?" Pilar put an arm around the old woman's shoulder, and seized Juanito's hand.

"The firecrackers have started!" Juanito shouted. "The firecrackers!"

"No, son. It's too early for the firecrackers," said his mother.

The boy looked up at her, then at his Abuela, whose face had turned ashen. "Don't be scared, Abuela, come on. My friend, Pancho, is going to be the St. Joseph in his neighborhood."

"I'm so pleased," the old woman answered. Pilar searched the street. She saw men armed with rifles rush by one of the side-streets in a large green truck. At the end of the big street, she could see the usual commotion of people. The burro on which the Virgin Mary would sit was already there; the many little angels; the parents of the children talking loudly and laughing; the children, some of them standing stiffly in their costumes, others running about playing; the three kings magnificently dressed for the occasion. Pilar lingered away from the crowd, straining her eyes, willing them to see beyond the darkness of the side streets.

"Where's the Virgin?" Pilar's grandmother asked one of the older persons.

"She's not here yet."

"We'll leave you now," the old woman said to Juanito, looking back at Pilar, who nodded. She held the boy by the shoulders, and said, "Do you remember what you have to do? Walk slowly, now, you don't want to tug at the burro and have the Virgin fall down. Soon she will be the Mother of the Child Jesus."
"Sí, Abuela. I will be careful." His excited feet shuffled in the dirt street. "And don't wander away from the crowd," the old woman warned, making the sign of the cross on the boy's upper body, then she cupped his face in her hands and kissed his forehead. The boy held her forearms. When she let him go, he quickly disappeared among the people. The old grandmother joined Pilar. On their way back, people filled the street, sitting and talking by their fires or wandering from fire to fire greeting their neighbors, offering buñuelos, or exchanging some other holiday food. They stopped many times to talk and ask if anyone heard the explosion, "Don't you ladies worry," people said, offering them the holiday delicacies. They wanted to go build their fire, but the old woman told Pilar she was tempted to accept a jug of ponche, with just a pinch of rum; she said the rum would warm her belly; it felt empty and cold as ice.

"Andale, Abuela, You're in no hurry," the big woman who worked with Pilar said. She gently took the old woman's arm and showed her to a chair, giving her and Pilar a cup of hot punch. The old woman protested mildly, turning to Pilar, but Pilar followed the big woman and sat down. The woman's husband poured rum into their punch.

"A little bit won't hurt. It is good for you on the holy day," he said.

"The apple and cinnamon scent remind me of all past Christmases, the joys and sorrows of them tumbled together," the old woman said to her granddaughter. Pilar was very quiet. She felt uneasy; she couldn't forget that loud noise. It seemed to her that everyone was ignoring it. She'd feel better if they'd talk about it. While they were drinking the
the holiday punch, a strange man came to them and announced that Pablo, who was the Virgin's godfather, was nowhere to be found and they could not start the procession without him. The old woman stood up. Pilar tightened her hands into tight fists under her shawl.

III

"I tell you. You must go. We will get word to your uncle in Chicago that you are coming," the old grandmother said.

"No, Mamá, I cannot go until Pablo returns." Pilar felt confused. Her body didn't know what to do, or her mind what to think.

"But why, child? You cannot wait for Pablo. You've always wanted to go, and I, Dios mío, have never let you," the old woman raised her hands and shook them at the ceiling, looking with imploring eyes to heaven and the God she believed in. "now is the time to leave. I feel ... a whirlwind in the still air, like the darkest dark in a black dream."

"No, Mamá. Don't say that. It is nothing. You'll see, Pablo is alright. It's only been a day. We shouldn't be so worried. Oh, God." Pilar sat down at the small table in the middle of the kitchen, her hands grasped one over the other, as if she were trying to wring them into one single hand.

Juanito ran into the room and stood suddenly between the two women. His face colorless, though he was panting.

"Qué Pasa?" His mother asked, sitting up, leaning forward on the
The strained feeling in the room startled him, took his breath away. But his body perceived everything to be the same. He looked around the room. Nothing has changed: The beans are slowly cooking in the earthenware pot on top of the wood stove; the dirt floor is still hardened to a shiny glean with the years of sweeping with water; the old calendar from “La Surtidora,” the general store, is still nailed to the whitewashed wall; the thick short candle still lit in front of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the corner. His abuela is leaning on the old wooden cabinet where they store the food and dishes. The women’s eyes are not shining. Their stillness is not a happy stillness. Suddenly, a fear he has never known permeates his little body, and he wants to run and scream; he feels like someone wants to grab him, force him into a nailed shut crate, like they do the prisoners.

“What is it?” the young mother asked again.

"Mama, in the street I saw some soldiers in a big truck. I've never seen such a truck," he tried to speak slowly, but his words came out in a torrent. "They stopped in front of a house and they all jumped out and went inside." He looked from one woman to the other.

"You stay away from those men! They’re bad men!” the old woman raised her voice at the boy, pointing her index finger at him while she spoke. The boy fell back a step or two. Pilar wiped her skirt of invisible dirt and Juanito took small steps toward her, until he was standing behind her chair, holding the two spool-shaped ends of the back of the chair. Pilar looked at the old woman take the lid off the pot of beans and stir them with a long-handled spoon.
"Don't scare him like that, Mama," she blurted.

"I made that spoon," Juanito announced.

"You have to do it for the boy," the old woman said, sitting next to Pilar. She placed her elbows on the table and rested her face on her raised hands, searching for Pilar's eyes. One of her hands went out to stroke Pilar's arm. Pilar shook her head, and tears streamed down her face. Juanito sat next to his mother, across from the old woman, his chin digging into his chest and his hands fidgeting with a cloth napkin he took from the table.

"Who knows what will happen next," the old woman said. After Pilar stopped crying it became very quiet in the growing dusk. The light in the room grew pale and yellowish. The old woman stood up and checked the beans again. Juanito stole a glance at his mother. Her eyes were still shiny wet with tears.

"Mama, don't you remember you wanted to go? We could have our own television, remember?" he said, but he grew very still. His eyes stared ahead, at nothing.

Pilar watched his blank face, and waited for him to talk.

"What is it, my son, tell me," she said, holding his cheek.

"I am looking at the pictures in my mind. When we cross the river at night, there won't be any television sets, will there? Remember what my aunt told us about crossing the river at night? She said she could feel the water on her calves like an icy slippery eel." His hand went out to his mother's lap. She imagined the water of the Rio Grande River cold in the winter desert, brown and heavy with mud. He looked down at her calves, clean, strong, and shiny, and his other hand touched his own.
calf. He rubbed his hand on his skin, up and down, up and down, and
suddenly he surprised her by saying, "Is Pablo dead, Mama? Is that why
you're crying?" While he spoke, she imagined Pablo's destroyed body in
the ravine where the other bodies were found, piled one on top of the
other, so mutilated you couldn't tell who was who. Yet, that was better
than prison. Her son bolted from his seat and ran out the door. Pilar
followed him. She called him to her and sat on the ground next to the
house, gathering him into her arms.

"I had a dream last night, the night of the procession." He looked up
at the North Star in the darkenend sky, and pushed his mother's face up
so she would look too. Pilar nodded and looked into his face, a faint
glimmer of a smile on her face, like hope.

"I dreamed I was floating on one of the straw birds. I was riding it
like a horse. The bird was very big, Mama, so big."

"Yes," she said.

"In my dream, I floated, flying in the air and all of a sudden the
bird started to grow until it became a huge enormous star! And then it
exploded into bigger and bigger and bigger circles of color," and he
expanded his arms wider and wider as he talked, his body straightening
tall as if he were perceptibly growing. "The colors seemed to be alive;
they were the colors of the rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue
and violet."

"Were you scared?" the mother asked.

He looked up at the sky. No. I wasn't scared. I want to see Pablo,"
He snuggled close to her again, his shoulders bending forward, his body
small once more. She rocked him, moving her body back and forth, in the
quiet slow rhythm of lullabies, letting the darkness gather around them.

The old grandmother came to the door. "Juanito, run and tell the old man that you and your mother are leaving," the old woman commanded the young boy.

"What?" the boy asked.

"No," said Pilar impiously, her eyes large.

"Don't you ask questions! Do as I say," the old woman told the boy.

The boy stood up and looked at the shadow of his great-grandmother in the door, then at his mother.

"No, wait." Pilar said. She held him by the waist.

"Wait nothing! Go on." The old woman waved the boy away. "And hurry back!" she cried after him. Already down the street, he turned his head and waved his arm back at her to acknowledge that he heard.

"I can't leave now, Mama," Pilar said.

"Don't be silly, child." the grandmother said. She crossed her arms and her feet and looked down at the hard brown earth. Pilar grabbed the tin pail from inside the door and crossed the street to fetch water. A single naked bulb lit the small terrace of the public faucet. She stared at the water and wished her mind would run as smoothly and clearly as the water rushing forth, so she could refuse her grandmother's wish without being insolent. She could send Juanito away. She could stay. No. No. She couldn't. Could she live without him? Absentmindedly, she turned off the faucet, and started to walk in the direction of the plaza. Soon, she found herself running, thinking that maybe the televisions might have news of Pablo. As she ran, she almost bumped into a couple who were also walking toward the town's center. They were foreigners, most likely
North Americans, but they didn't look like tourists. Pilar wondered what they were doing in this neighborhood. She had never seen Americans in this part of town. In front of the appliance store, a crowd stood looking inside the large window, mesmerized by the moving pictures on several black and white television sets blinking behind the glass. Pilar joined them and watched for a little while. Her attention shifted from screen to screen, searching for news. But even if the news came on, or even an announcement, she realized she couldn't hear across the window. She wouldn't know what they said. She and all the others could only see the movement of the people on the screens. The North American couple approached the crowd. At the same time another man joined the people. Looking intently at the screens, his mouth barely moving, he said, "Cuidado. Allí vienen."

The American woman quickly took a pair of sun-glasses and perched them on top of her head, as if she had a second pair of eyes that stared up at the sky. She also produced a bagful of the straw figures Pilar made for a living. Pilar saw the man imperceptibly elbow the woman as an American made Plymouth Imperial turned the corner. It stopped in front of the store and two soldiers got out of the car.

Pilar felt everybody hold their breath, their bodies stiffen as if in a still photograph. One of the soldiers looked threateningly at the people, holding his rifle with both hands. The other one opened the back door of the car, and a well-dressed Mexican man got out and hurried into the store. Everyone held still. Pilar looked at the Americans and the man returned her gaze, smiling at her. She turned back to look at the televisions.
Once the car was out of sight, the couple began talking, as if the picture had been burst. They spoke in English and Pilar couldn't understand a word they said, though she tried to listen to the expression of their bodies and the tone of their voices. The woman spoke forcefully and shook her fist and the man made agreeing movements. Slowly, as she stood there in the street, among her people, with these strangers, her eyes lost the dullness that her worry had spread over them, and the fear that had wrapped itself like hot steel pressing against her body, the fear that immobilized her and froze her thoughts and feelings, left her. She could face the pain now. Now, she knew that whether she married Pablo or not, she was already running the risk of losing him, because she already loved him. She loved her people. She had a place. She felt the North American woman's gaze on her, and she turned around and looked at her. Then she stood face to face with the man, and after looking into his eyes, she began to walk away, her own eyes searching the street for sight of either Juanito or Pablo. Soon, she found herself running toward the ravine where the army dumped the murdered corpses. Her heart pounded like a growing rumble, the pounding resonating throughout her body, the roar growing of itself, like an avalanche.

She approached the ravine and in the dark she saw the profile of her small child, his hand leaning on the trunk of a tree, supporting his body that was wretching in spasms over itself. He turned and saw her and he screamed, "Mama'. Mama'."