

THE LAST STORY

Anita Rodriguez

One winter was enough to bore a hole in my dirt roof. Then my walls began to dissolve a little more every year until almost two centuries after that first trickle I am no longer a church, or even the ruins of one. I am only a wall, a fragment of disappearing memory, like a last tooth in the silent jaws of my builders who lie buried under my floor.

But if you look closely you will see that patches of layered plaster still cling to me, each one a season in my history, a page in my story. Those layers were applied by human hands whose bones I tenderly cover now, returning their love. Just as they once sustained me, now I shelter them under my melted flesh.

You can see their fingerprints in my plaster, proof of how much they loved me. Come closer! See how this coat is a different color? I smell like mushrooms and moist dust, don't I?

Feel how smooth I am, and how my paper-thin layer of micaceous orange clay looks like copper? It comes from that canyon, west of that cedar tree by about two fingers. The women of this village used to walk all the way to that canyon and carry it back, two comadres to a bucket, and decorate me and their houses with this clay.

We lived, the houses and I, we were born from the breathing earth, we were the membrane that united the village with nature and each other in interpenetrating cycles. Through us they molded a relationship with the seasons. They built us and we embraced them with graceful warmth while blizzards screamed across

the frozen desert, we sheltered them from the summer glare, and in the sweet spring they repaired and re-plastered us in gratitude.

The winter storytelling sank into our bodies, we absorbed the harvest gossip, drank the cries of the newborn, the bendiciones and maldiciones of the dying and the living are stored in our walls. We are the witness. We remember their voices. Everything that was said and not said, the anger, the joy, the suffering and the prayers—we hold it—it is imbedded in us.

We are the only shape of their history that survives, the reliquary of their traditions, the evidence of their sense of themselves as a people, the people of a village with a name, even if only a place in the unmapped wilderness, with a crumbling church whose copper alis you can touch with your finger. Feel how slippery it is?

Touch me.

Let your fingers become eyes and ears. Hear that? Those are the enjarradoras, laughing and giggling. They called them golondrinas after the flocks of chirping swallows that build their mud nests on the walls of the canyons. That's exactly what they sound like, isn't it?

Not only did we shelter and keep them safe from the violence of nature, but we united them—especially me. Oh yes, people worked on each other's houses—but everybody worked on me, the church. The men became zoqueteros, they hauled dirt and mixed it in great, shallow boats in bursts of intense labor. Then they would rest, keep the enjarradoras supplied with mud, and move the scaffolding. The women became cocineras and enjarradoras, the first filled the air with the aroma of food, the second with their ribald jokes and laughter, safe from censure high on the scaffolding, gossiping like birds.

They lovingly stroked me with wet plaster that felt to them like the sweet flesh of their children. It felt so good! Lay your palm flat on me, let your hand remember these fingerprints because they will be gone after the next spring rains. Don't go!

Wait—let me tell you how they soaked that coarse orange clay until a layer of slippery, liquid copper rose to the surface like glittering cream on rich, red milk. Then they blotted that lovely color onto my walls with sheepskins. They would admire their work, comment on the way the light caught the soft undulations in my hand-made walls, how I shone like amber satin.

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For a long time after they left I used to talk to the empty houses.

But one by one their vigas sagged, their walls dissolved, and they began forgetting, getting the stories mixed up or leaving out parts. Annoying as that was at least it was something. Now they are all nothing but shallow mounds, scraps of long-ago lived stories imbedded in them, a rotting piece of cloth, a rusted frying pan with a hole in the bottom, the shard of a mirror that once reflected living faces. Now there are no voices at all, only the wind blowing, the deep, smothering silence of snow, or the rain pelting my flesh back into the earth from which I was raised.

I can't remember how long it's been since all I had were my memories. But even they are leaving me. I have almost forgotten the words to the alobados, the Latin responses of the mass, even the rosary.

My santos are long gone, San Antonio, Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, San Miguel and Jesús Crucificado. And gone with the santos are the women who

gave their hair to the santeros, changed their clothes, and draped them in purple for Lent, swept my floor, and kept me standing with their annual replastering. Oh, you should have seen the processions, the flowers, the candles! On feast days you could feel the heat, there were so many candles. Can you smell the wax?

Here comes that hawk. He always perches on me, because from here we can both see far, although not so far as when I still had my modest steeple. But he never says anything. He is only looking for something to eat, and when I ask him if he has seen any sign of my people coming back he is irritable, and snaps “No! And you always ask the same thing.”

Yes, it’s true. And I asked his father and his grandfather the same thing. I have been watching the horizon for generations of hawks.

I tell myself, “It will begin with a dot in the landscape exactly where I watched them vanish so long ago, that precise spot I know in every season and time of day. It will not escape me. That dot that will grow larger gradually, until at last I will hear them urging the oxen on, “¡Andale! ¡Haaaa! ¡Dale!”