



Illustrations by Laura Aitken

# A fly on the wall

I am a wanderer.  
I travel the open halls of our community center,  
Hop through holes in our makeshift roof,  
Float freely from kitchen to class to church.

Today, I take shelter from the sweltering South American sun  
Against the peeling walls of the preschool room.  
I park between the posters,  
A for *avión*, B for *bicicleta*.

I expect to hear sounds of laughter and of learning,  
Smell stove-fresh *tortillas* and *frijoles* through the open wall,  
But instead of *niños* I see *gringos*,  
And the room feels far more foreign.

The door doesn't swing chaotically  
From children chattering carelessly,  
Instead it enters woman, after woman, after girl.  
And they are careful.

The *gringos* welcome the women warmly  
With a smile that tries to transcend the language  
Barrier.

The question is pertinent but probing.  
*¿Está sexualmente activa?*  
The taboos—once touched, once felt,  
Can never be untouched.

Woman, after woman, after girl  
Steps up on a short stool to reach the stone slab turned exam bed.  
Their knees knock before drawing apart,  
As if they fight the resistance of remembering.

The *gringos* do their duties diligently,  
But their smiles tell lies called hope and equality.  
Their discouragement with futility smells  
Stronger than the stench of *machismo* in the air.

The prescriptions feel pointless, blocked by boundless barriers  
Rx: RTC in 1 month—*no tengo un carro*.  
Rx: surgery—*mi esposo no permite*.  
Rx: receive results by phone—*no hay teléfono*.

They try new questions to distract from the dismay,  
*¿Cuántos niños tiene?*—How many children do you have?  
*Ocho hijos, uno muerto*—8 kids, 1 dead.  
*Diez hijos, cuatro muertos*—10 kids, 4 dead.

I escape through the open fourth wall  
Where I find *niños* laughing and learning,  
Where I smell fresh *tortillas* and *frijoles*,  
Where I may wander.



Anjali Om