



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