

## Galpones, Gallinas, Garrafas

Patrick Madden

This is their house: a *galpón*, really, a shed, a manger without the animals, without the *same* animals at least; they've got chickens and a dog and spiders in the corners, and a dirt floor packed down and smoothed and rutted, whitewashed cinder blocks, a greasy curtain for a door, thatch under corrugated tin, an oven in the summer, drafty cold in the winter, and no locks. Street address: Zorilla entre 8 y 9, Zorilla between the eighth and ninth parallel streets. No number, no street names except for Zorilla, which means "skunk," both in Spanish and in English, though I had never heard of it, but which is actually named for Juan Zorilla de San Martín, Uruguayan poet whose face appears on the twenty-peso bill and who is the author of the epic poem *Tabaré: A Novel in Verse*. The owners of the house next door where we park our bikes cleared out the *galpón* to rent it. Now José and Teresita live here.

Teresita is short and fat and dark and ugly in the way that Spanish speakers can say without meaning offense—almost as easy as tall and thin and blonde and beautiful—but which gringos like me have never learned and find hard to imagine. The diminutive in her name, *Teresita*, *Little Teresa*, is because she's slow, simple, in the way that people notice, even Spanish speakers, but rarely mention. She is cheery. She speaks with a lisp. She has a big, bulbous nose, crooked teeth, sagging skin. She is twenty-five or forty or somewhere in between. She accepts visits from just about anybody, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons especially. I am one of the Mormons, just come to Uruguay in late Spring, middle of December, unmoored and upside-down and feeling a sadness for Teresita in her poverty and squalor.

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From my journal, December 10, 1993: "Morning. We taught 5 ch. yest. and have 2 followups today. I did a lot of standing and smiling but I did teach 1/2 ch. 3 to Terecita and it went well. She's very poor." *Ch.* stands for charla, Spanish for missionary discussion. The third discussion deals with the law of chastity and reinforces Joséph Smith's miraculous vision and calling. This is the first mention of Teresita in my journal.

I have barely a recollection of that event as distinct from other memories, but I know I felt then (for the first time? more than ever before?) what we call culture shock, some crashing knowledge and guilt over my unearned prosperity, something about disparity and distribution and desserts.

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A memory: the *gallinas*, the chickens, run and peck at each other and the *gallos*, roosters, scream out with the sunset, nothing like the cock-a-doodle-doo on my Speak-n-Say when I was a toddler; this is screaming and this is sunset, not sunrise. I am sitting in a lawn chair, cleverly balancing books on my thighs, showing a flipbook of pictures of Jesus and line-by-line instructions for prayer: *Nuestro Padre Celestial . . . Te damos gracias por . . . Te pedimos . . . En el nombre de Jesucristo. Amen.* Elder Solomon, my fellow missionary, is smiling as he explains the Book of Mormon; Teresita smiles as she reads haltingly, word-by-word, missing some words, asking for help on others; José is smiling as he listens; he does not want to read anything out loud and he is very quiet.

Then it's my turn to read and I'm interspersing commentary with scripture, telling how the voice from heaven was probably God and the resplendent white figure hovering, descending, who do you think that is? It's Jesus, right, and the people were scared, although they'd been told by the prophets they never really believed it would happen and this on the heels of all

the destruction and darkness, can you imagine what is must have been like for them?

I'm trying to be intense, channel the Spirit. Teresita is trying to answer, sincerely, José is silent, looks like he's meditating, and a chicken jumps up onto my arm and settles on my book and we laugh and laugh and laugh.

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José works nights in the bakery, sweating in the red glow of the stone oven fire, kneading, twisting, stirring, slapping, molding, lifting, stoking. I think, *Give us this day our daily bread*, yet if José wants bread he must buy it like everybody else.

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Learning another language, as I was in Paysandú, can often be enough to change one's perspective. The new words and phrases, unfamiliar expressions, work a labor of understanding on the pliable mind. Certain radical linguists theorize that without language we have no thought—which I find hard to believe—or, more moderately, that the languages we use mold our thoughts—which I rather like as an idea. Yet how often can't we find the words to express what we think or feel? Contrariwise, how often is a word or a phrase untranslatable, viable only in one language where its definition floats beyond words in the realm of ethereal senses, shared experiences? In Romance languages, which include English and Spanish, the only two languages I know, words often have a direct translation—*gallina* is chicken—or, they may signal physical objects, easily identifiable and with a few possible translations or variations—*galpón* is a shed or manger or hut, such as that one over there; that's what it's called. The sentence structure between English and Spanish is nearly the same, and perhaps for that reason I began my mission frantically translating in my head anything I heard. I missed

a lot, splintered my own experience into fragments because of it, lived half in my head, half confused, in wonder and in awe.

Then we have near cognates, we wonder at origins, searching for deeper meanings. I am thinking, specifically, halfway out of the blue, of *compadre*, which many of us know from cowboy movies, *com*: with, *padre*: father. I'm wondering, though, at the deceptively simple etymology I've imagined, noticing the similarity to *compartir*: to share, more exactly, to break together (images of breaking bread); and *compadecer*: to sympathize, to empathize, all in one (relative of compassion).

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A re-creation: Near sunset under ombú tree branches behind the house in folding chairs. Teresita and José both. Solomon and I both. Reading aloud, explaining, questioning:

Teresita, I say, Will you be baptized?

Yes, says Teresita. I was hoping you would ask.

I notice the frogs singing, which I've never noticed before, and Teresita sings Thank you, thank you, thank you.

\* \* \*

Teresita didn't have a dress that she felt would be nice enough to wear to church. We said, It doesn't matter what you're dressed like; what matters is what's in your heart, which is true, but not exactly realistic, so Teresita borrowed a dress.

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Teresita and José weren't married, not legally, so we made the arrangements with a friend who worked at the city hall and someone baked a cake, which we carried carefully supported on a sheet of aluminum-foil-lined cardboard with toothpicks stuck into it and clear plastic wrap covering and mostly not touching the frosting because of the toothpicks, and José wore a short-sleeve plaid-pattern button-down shirt but no tie and didn't shave

that day, and Teresita wore makeup for the only time I ever saw and a purple dress with white trim and bows and a tremendous smile, and the witnesses, one wore sunglasses and one wore a cap that he took off for the ceremony and another wore unwashed hair and torn jeans, and Solomon and I took pictures, the only pictures that were taken that day.

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In the house (converted dirt-floor cobweb-wall whitewash cinder block shed) through the door (rusted aluminum missing screen ragged curtain) in the kitchen (overrun non-refrigerated towel-covered corner) on a counter (chipped blue propped leg wooden table) was a *garrafa* (naked free-standing burner-topped propane tank) which they used for cooking. This was their only stove, their only oven.

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Teresita was pregnant for the fourth time. Three times previously she had miscarried. The doctors called it *aborto espontaneo*; Teresita wondered if she had done anything wrong.

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Tempting to revisit metaphors and parables when their symbols are present in life. As with bread, so, then, with fruit: fruit of labors, by their fruits ye shall know them, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee? A friend asked Solomon and me for help picking plums from two trees in his yard. They were delicious plums and brightly colored, and they came off their branches easily with a gentle tug on their stems. We ate plums in the trees, not very high up, and we let the overripe plums fall to the dogs, and we gathered buckets full. When we were done, the owner sent us on our way with a bag of plums. We wanted to save them and eat them, but we took them to José and Teresita's *galpón*, left them just inside the door, then slipped quietly away.

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Teresita was baptized on April 10, 1994. She was the fourth person I baptized during my mission. She was glowing and nervous and stiff and heavy to lift back up from the water.

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After months of mandated rest for Teresita, handfuls of pills each day, and weeks on end of sleepless nights for José, their daughter was born hopelessly deformed. I remember my mixture of joy and sorrow, the feigned congratulations, the silent relief that she wasn't mine to take care of. I held her when I visited, after she had been nearly three weeks in the intensive care unit and between trips to Montevideo for treatments and observations. Her crook arm dangled uncomfortably, tapping my side as I bounced her, and I can still see her crusted tears, still hear her weak cry. I looked around her to her surroundings. What could I do? I left, eventually, ashamed, guilty, helpless, my only escape a forgetting.

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Months before then, before the baby was born, Teresita was in the hospital, mandatory rest after premature labor, severe pains, blood discharge. Outside the hospital the world went on almost as usual, street vendors sold their grilled meats and rug vendors sold their rugs, people walked by quickly and slowly, cars idled near the sidewalks, cars drove by rapidfast on the roads, and I observed the life, the grief, the unknowing of others who, like me, were pacing waiting for their loved ones inside the hospital.

Immediately to the south of the hospital, running east-west, a split boulevard comes bucking up from the river then rides the hills out of town to the east, to the heart of the country. In the rosy dusk, the first sliver of the full moon shimmers above the horizon like a child peeking over a table. With the silhouetted trees in the distance to give perspective, you can

see the moon moving, slowly, but amazingly fast, much faster than you ever thought, much faster than you might imagine when you see it fixed in the night sky. I sit in calm reflection, awash in scarlet, staring because I think I have seen it all. I offer a silent prayer, smile with the movement of the moon, glory in the majesty, the perfect intimacy of the moment. All around me cars and busses and people walking hurry home in the last light of the day. When the moon has finally launched into open sky, almost pulling the trees with it, I think it is bigger than anything I've ever seen. It glows orange and immense, hovering just above the road, and, though I know better, I can't resist; I take a picture.

Months later, when it's developed, the picture shows what science has already proven: the moon is no more brilliant, not any larger, than it ever is. Once we scrutinize it, the moon is never as grand as we remember.