

Tombs

by Carlos von Son

Drawings by Rosama Bohórquez



He arrived to Tijuana in early spring. The smell in the terminal was worse than in the bus. The colors of the city were opaque, with trash everywhere; the walls, cold and dirty, full of strange symbols. People dressed differently: women in shawls of mystery and long skirts that extended back to their towns of origin; women with bright colors that imitated guacamayas; women with short tops and miniskirts that seem to vanish the forbidden; and women with so much makeup they resembled masks from the south. Men were dressed in ponchos and huaraches with the dust of their hometown; men with pants and shirts so tight that they could hardly move;

arrogant men in cut off shirts exposing brown muscles; men in pointy snakeskin boots and cowboy hats from the north; men in vividly colored shirts with geometrical patterns; and young men whose clothing was twenty times bigger than their size.

A swarm of taxi drivers surrounded him. He got into a malodorous taxi that moved more by inertia than its motor. Unbeknownst to him, he paid too much for the ride. He was dropped off in the outskirts of a run-down neighborhood. He knocked on the door of an apartment on the verge of crumbling. A woman, filled with hugs and kisses, answered the door. They walked up the stairs to an apartment

made up of a narrow entryway, a bedroom, a tiny bathroom and kitchenette empty and dirty. During the next few hours, dust flew out of the windows, dirt out of the front door, and buckets of black water flowed through the gutters of the hallway. The very next day a dirty old couch, some crates that served as table and chairs, a paint shop calendar, a blanket, grocery store bags filled with toilet paper and candles filled the apartment.

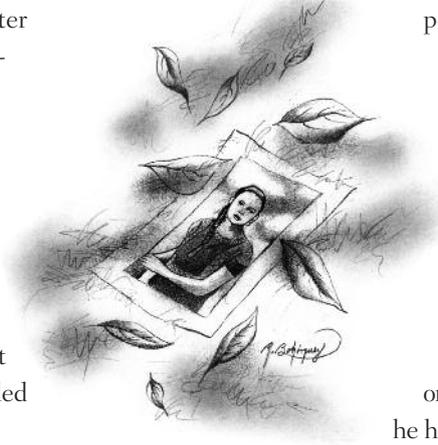
Autumn arrived with the falling leaves of such few trees and All Saints Day. The mist disfigured the streets and the people, and just like with the romantics, the nostalgic feeling for his hometown added more mist. But, what was more imprinted on his face, were his memories of her, and those memories were a constant drizzle during those last days of October. In this land of strangers, and as a stranger himself, he was overcome by the longing to be with his people, to visit his cemetery, and above all to bring flowers, candles, incense and bread to her tomb. He wanted to return; he wanted to be picked up by the storm and carried back to his homeland. In the market and on the streets appeared marigolds, candles, incense, skeleton figures, sugar skulls and the bread of the dead. The colors of his nostalgia intensified, and seeing all the people gathering relics for their altars he cried: he cried for her, for his memories, for being so far from her tomb.

He went to the bakery and returned with a big bag filled with fresh dough. As in a ritual, he cleaned the sitting room, lit some candles and incense, spread out a clean white sheet and extended the

dough. With repetitious movements, he softened the dough, and the blending of his sweat with the sweat of the dough shaped the form. He molded it, and in his artisan hands appeared bones, and more bones, bones like those bones that he had had loved in dark days and bright nights so many times. He extended another white sheet on the other side, and placed the bones, one by one, from one side to the other, until he had assembled her faithful

skeleton. He set them out to dry. In the following days, with wet hands, he bathed them with the tenderness that one would bathe a newborn. He gave them the soft texture of a lover's gentle touch. His fingers had not forgotten, and he relived every touch of her skin. From his memory and his hands a lovely skeleton emerged. He went to the cemetery and, with the little money he had, bought the most distant plot and a pine casket. That night, he returned with the bones made of love and dough. It was the last day of October, and with the care of a mother and the sweetness of a widowed devotee, he placed the bones in the casket. Then he dropped, like a leaf from a tree, a picture of her. He closed the casket and the ropes, hanging like extensions from his fingers, lowered the box. The fragrant soil rained over her until she vanished.

The night had fallen when he placed a wooden cross facing west. Colorful flowers crowned their love and the tomb while he lit the candles. He kneeled to one side, and with extreme care removed from a small box a cup of chocolate, sweet bread and two pomegranates. He cut one





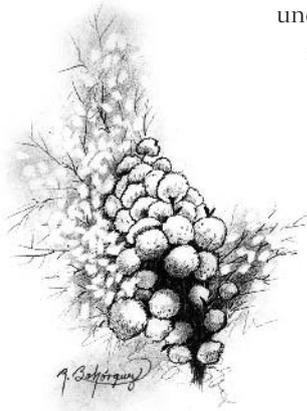
open, revealing the luscious and vivid red of the fruit with its enticing fragrance. He lay down by the side of the tomb, a tomb without a gravestone, with his fingers dispersed the spirited fruit covering with live red cells, like kisses, this sacred place. For each granule he shed two tears, and in those red crystal beads the sun rose again. That night he had many dreams, dreams of touching, dreams of fingertips and lips, of bodies, of pomegranate flesh and dough bones. He relived and recreated, he loved and was loved, and the night and the dreams oscillated from absence to presence, from yearning to caressing.

Through the dreams he decided to return to his hometown. One night, like he had done so many nights before, he entered the cemetery and dug out the

wooden box to find rays of light. There she was with her loose clothes, her loose ring and necklace and all the other gifts. He took many colors of thin tissue paper out of a sack. Softly, he removed her clothing as he had done so many times before. With remarkable devotion and precision, he collected every piece of her fragmented body. He wrapped each part in a sheet of colorful paper. He opened the sack and, one by one, placed them in like a ritual of conception. His movements generated a myth. When he finished, he closed the sack, and her essence emanated like a last and first breath. He filled the pine box with red and white carnations. He lowered the box deep into the ground.

He returned to the streets of Tijuana with his precious sack. He concealed it





under his bed, and every night talked to her, told her stories and dreamed her. Without opening the sack, he would move it and change its position and would caress the surface of it as if it were her skin. That night, he went back to the cemetery in Tijuana and retrieved the dough skeleton. He took it back to his room and placed the dough bones with nurturing care in a cardboard box, which he placed in the dark, warm and empty space of the old oven. Instead of thoughts, an image appeared in his mind. He visualized her tomb without a gravestone but with an abundance of flowers in the small place that lay between two graveyards. He dug out the grass, and formed a circle in the center. Within the circle, a rectangle for the white flowers. The five points of the star: yellow, white and red flowers to ignite the night. He dug a deep rectangular hole in the center of the star which was oriented to the East. This way, the evening star would receive the very first rays of the sun. He nailed the wooden box shut and cleaned it as a mother cleans a cradle. Then, he removed the colorful paper from the sack, and her bones, her scent and his memories. He cried, he cried of sorrow and delight; he cried for his past, for his existence and for his future. He cried for the hereafter. He placed her bones in the box as if she were performing a dance. He dressed her with red, yellow and white. He kissed her, closed the box and closed their world again. As he did before he lowered the wooden

box and his tears fell down with her in the tomb. He covered the hole with an earthly embrace.

He brought the flowers close and planted the white baby's breath in the mirrored rectangle. Then, with the dawn and dusk flowers, he formed the inner circle and the five triangles of the star. They opened the way. He placed the stones with the same care as he placed the bones in the box. One stone for every bone. As the tomb and the night were completed, the first rays of light surfaced in the skyline to the East. Tears and dew broke the light in a myriad of shades. The points of the star led the light to the four corners and to the center of the world.

He looked for his dog. He called him a thousand times. No response, nowhere to be found. Alone, he returned to his room with an empty sack and a sadly content heart.

He slept and he dreamt of dawn and dusk, of circles of days and nights, of bones and bodies, of flowers and stones, of candles and stars. He envisioned rivers and roads, an abundance of moons and suns, stairways going down and up and playful dogs showing the way. When he awoke, he went to the bakery and bought the bread of the dead. At the store, he bought a clay mug, chocolate, candles and two pomegranates. Night fell on the second of November. There were many people at the cemetery. Some were surrounding her adornment of flowers. A glow brighter than the flickering candles illuminated their faces. He looked at the star, a star of bones and memories, of lights and remembrances, a brilliant star of colors; but now the star was body, a body of flowers and earth, simply glowing — like her. **MM**