

Ay, yay, yay, yay.  
 Y aquella casita  
 Tan blanca y bonita  
 También se perdió.

He skipped breakfast that morning, complaining of indigestion, and went to sit in his chair under the ramada as was his habit. He did not respond to Abuelita's calls to lunch. And thus they found him, in his customary position, facing South, gray eyes open, staring and glassy; mouth stiffly agape in an interrupted command; cane brandished and frozen in midair, pointing out something on the horizon. "¡Ya ándale, vaqueros!"

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## Earth to Earth

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### Part I: 1910

THIS IS THE WAY YOU MAKE ADOBES: You lie in bed sleepless, staring into the darkness of the ceiling shadows made mysterious by the moon, waiting for Mamá to call you to get up. The cock has not even crowed, but you know that Mamá has been a long time in the kitchen preparing the canasta of food for the day at the river. Through a crack in the door you can see the faint glow of the kerosene lamps. You can hear Mamá's determined footsteps, the faint rustle of her petticoats, and the snap of the mesquite leña in the woodburning stove. You can smell the aroma of all the bocaditos she has prepared for the día de campo. She has made flour tortillas and wrapped them in an embroidered cloth. She has made fried chicken and salsa de chile verde and frijoles con queso which will stay warm in a blue enameled pot. There will be sandía, too, and empanadas de camote, and limonada in an earthenware crock.

You lie impatient and expectant, but obedient. You know that if you get up too soon, Mamá will scold you for being an encimosa and getting underfoot.

Papá is in the corral hitching up the reluctant mare to the wagon. You can hear the stubborn mare snorting and stamping, and your father's soft clucking admonishments. At last you hear the creak of the wagon wheels, the clink of the bridle, and the mare's rhythmic plodding in the fine dust of the callejón. Papá

will hitch the mare to the ancient álamo by the gate and come into the house and begin loading the buckboard with provisions. He will not forget the guitar.

The glow under the door begins to fade as the bedroom fills with soft morning light. My twin brothers, flojos that they are, lie sprawled in their cot, snoring in unison, their arms intertwined like two rag dolls. As inseparable in their dreams as in their waking hours. The baby sleeps peacefully in her cradle, her cherubic face glowing in the dawn like a miniature replica of the moon that has now dropped below the western horizon.

(I remember well the evening Papá began hewing the cradle from rough-sawn pine boards. He worked rapidly, wordlessly, concentrating, his brow furrowed, the aromatic pine chips piling up at his feet. I knew that it would not be long before there was another López mouth to feed. I remember, particularly, his large veined hands with the long delicate fingers, the nails bruised from hammers that had missed their mark. His varnish-stained palms were flecked by the innumerable slivers of all the wood he tried to bend to his artistic will while he plied his carpenter's trade. He was, with all those slivers, half tree, half man, strong and tall and straight and silent—a forest of a man who provided sombra for all. And when he finished the cradle, Papá gave me a penknife and I carved a clumsy flower on the headboard, praying all the while secretly, that the new baby would be a girl. My wish came true, and they named her Margarita, like the flower I had carved that day. And all of my life, because of that flower, I have felt blessed.)

The door opens. Mamá calls in a whisper: "¡Otilia! ¡Levántate ya!" I spring from my bed, fully awake, being careful not to disturb my mischievous older brothers, jealous of my grown-up responsibilities and my time alone with Mamá and Papá. I dress hurriedly. Today I will wear faded dungarees and a shirt of homespun, and botas. Mamá will braid my hair with rags. No silly ironed curls with ribbons. No frilly starched dress or stiff patent shoes that pinch. No lacy anklets that leave itchy little ridges in my skin. No reminders to: "¡Bájate; cuidate; siéntate; cálmate; no te ensucies!" Today, Mamá, relaxed with her novela beneath the

canopy of the cottonwood by the lulling river, a contented baby crooning at her side, will furl her banner and call a truce in her war against dirt and impropriety. And I will run free on the riverbanks, my trenzas unraveling, my boots abandoned and solitary in the crook of the tree. And I will catch frogs and June beetles and sail leaf boats and build castles of river mud and sticks.

Papá and the cuates will dig an earthen pit close to the river's edge. They will turn the clay-filled earth over and over with spades, mixing it with river water and straw. When I tire of play, I will roll up my dungarees to my knees and help, sorting out the large pebbles and then working the muddy mixture with my feet until it oozes between my toes. When the earth and straw and water are of the right consistency, Papá and the twins will hoist the laden buckets out of the pit and fill the rectangular wooden frames that form the adobes. I help tamp the mixture into the forms, smoothing the cool wet clay to the corners with my hands. I survey my handiwork and sign each one that I have made with the print of my bare foot. The frames are then set out into the sun to dry. In time, the cache of adobes, like giant terra cotta dominos, will grow until there is enough to make a wall. And then another wall. And then a room. And then another room. (Papá does not notice my footprints until the day he begins to lay the sun-dried bricks along the outline of the house marked with string. He laughs and lifts me high in the air with his sunburned arms. "These," he declares, "are for Otilia's house.")

When the day is done, I help load the wagon with the empty baskets and the pillows and blankets. While I wait for the others, I make a hiding place among the pungent straw and blankets. I inhale the sunset in great rosy breaths and try to pluck the evening star for my finger. Glad for the solitude, glad for the dove's lament, glad for the grillo, glad for the shining river, glad for the earth's turning and turning—the generous spinning earth that will yield up to us willingly, block by adobe block, room by adobe room, a new home on a barren lot on Anita Street.

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"The Federal Housing Act of 1961 strengthened the concept of urban renewal . . . Under the Renewal Act, public acquisition of land would be necessary. Consequently, when the area is ready for redevelopment, and following two acquisition appraisals, the city proceeds acquiring the land at 'its present fair value for present owners.' Such an endeavor is accomplished by negotiation, and if that fails, then eminent domain is exercised. Land acquired is then sold to private developers for its fair value after it has had two re-use appraisals . . . Usually the return from the sale to private developers fails to offset the acquisition, planning, clearance and off-site improvement costs. One important reason is that the land is purchased with structures which must be removed."

#### Part II: 1973

The unexpected knock at the door causes Doña Otilia López, viuda de Martínez, to suspend her knitting needles in midair. Poised like that, the needles look ferocious, difficult to associate with the confectionary of bonnets, booties and baby sweaters that materialized out of their metallic clicking. Doña Otilia sighs and places her latest project—yellow booties shaped like ducks—into the sewing basket at her feet. For grandchild number fifteen. Or was it fourteen? She always lost count. She glances at the electric Westclox she kept centered on a crocheted doily on the radio-phonograph console. The console, which her husband had bought after the war, had not worked for years, but she had kept it anyway, it being, in her opinion, her most elegant and practical possession. She stowed sweets for her grandchildren in the turntable, yarn and thread in the record cabinet. The top of the console served as the resting place, not only of the clock, but of

four generations of family photographs—antique sepias in ornate metal frames, black and white snapshots, technicolor wedding poses, blurred polaroid images.

(In a large handcarved frame of walnut, bedecked with two faded black ribbons, grinned the innocent and eager faces of the cuates dressed in jaunty sailor whites. They had enlisted together despite the pleas of Mamá. Twelve months later they would both be dead—propelled by a torpedo from the iron bunk they shared in the stern of the submarine. In step. Embracing in death as in life. When the telegram arrived, Papá planted two pine trees in their memory in the back yard. Two salt tamaracks grew there instead, from all the tears he shed that day. He did not speak for a year. And when he spoke, he said, "The house belongs to Otilia." And then, it seemed, the tree in him died. He grew frail and withdrawn, his trunk withered before its time, the leaves of his canopy dried and scattered by the winds of his grief.)

The trusty little Westclox hummed eleven. An unlikely hour for callers. Too early for lunch. Too late for café. Probably salesmen. Or Jehovahs. The Jehovahs persistent in spite of the fact that Doña Otilia's home altar, with its perpetually lit candles, was visible from the doorway, the array of saints, virgins, martyrs, and santos niños gazing sternly at any interlopers bearing unorthodox propaganda. The altar itself was not only a heavenly, but an earthly shrine as well. Mementoes of the rites of passage of Doña Otilia's family—funeral mass holy cards, baptismal and confirmation certificates, dried remnants from quinceañera and wedding bouquets, anniversary souvenirs—all were arranged lovingly among the santos and the plastic flowers from the five-and-dime.

Doña Otilia crosses the room, her chanclas slapping on the threadbare carpet. Her eldest son, Miguel, who had gone to night school and had done well for himself, had insisted, against her protests, on that carpet. He was muy de moda, up on things, and said it made the house more modern. Besides, it was for her own good. Throw rugs were dangerous. She might catch her foot and slip and break her hip, and that would be that. As she makes her way to the door, Doña Otilia notices for the first time that the

old wooden floor of pine planks that her father had so painstakingly laid so many years ago was once more beginning to show through the worn fibers of the cheap carpet. "Todo a su tiempo," she thinks to herself, satisfied. She had noticed too, lately, the sagging roof, flaking paint and cracked plaster that exposed the adobe walls of her house. She liked it that way, she mused, even though Miguel was always worrying himself with painting, plastering and repairs. But to Doña Otilia it was as if the house were trying to reveal itself, throwing off its superfluous garments, like an aging queen removing her makeup. She thinks about the pitter-patter of her childhood footprints in the walls. She smiles.

Doña Otilia opens the front door. Through the latched screen she can make out the blurred faces of two men. Both wear dark suits and ties. (¡Qué simples! ¡En este calor!). Both are perspiring profusely and mopping their brows with white monogrammed handkerchiefs. They shift from foot to foot, uncomfortable with the heat and with their unfamiliar surroundings. They are not salesmen or Jehovahs. There are no wares or pamphlets. They carry, instead, black briefcases that bode of something official. The scruffy little mongrel of Doña Amelia next door barks ferociously from behind the broken slats in the picket fence. The curtain at the window moves slightly as Doña Amelia positions herself to get the best view and to hopefully be within earshot. There will be much speculation and discussion of the strangers over afternoon coffee. Doña Otilia chuckles to herself because for once she will have the upper hand of the conversation.

The shorter of the two men speaks first, in halting high school Spanish.

"¿Es Ud. Sra. Otilia López Vda. de Martínez?"

"Sí, señor."

"¿Es Ud. la dueña de esta casa?"

Proudly. "Sí, señor."

He raises his black briefcase and snaps it open, revealing the contents: official forms in triplicate. The tall man then waves a business card in his chubby fingers. Doña Otilia marvels at the pinkness of his skin—the same color as the bonnet for grandchild

number nine. Or was it number ten? She squints at the card through the screen, having left her reading glasses behind with her knitting. The card is embellished with the blue and gold seal of the city. It reads:

Donald K. Murphy                      City of Tucson  
Urban Renewal Project                Relocation Counselor  
Bilingual

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"When the Old Pueblo's Urban Renewal Office was first established, interviews were conducted with residents of the area to be demolished. Preliminary work on relocation problems was mapped out. Thereafter, a marketability study and reuse appraisal of the neighborhood were completed. An eighty-two-member citizen's advisory redevelopment committee, which had been appointed by the mayor, held its first meeting in October, 1969. At this time subcommittees were formed to deal with planning, financing, relocation, legislation and public information. In April, 1971, the city's advisory committee adopted the subcommittee's report and recommendations for planning for the Old Pueblo District. The plan included a community center with a music hall, theatre, and concert arena. Later stages of the plan called for an office plaza, condominiums, and a Mexican style village with restaurants and shops that would be a tourist attraction. Upon approval by the mayor and council, the financing of the plan was presented to the voters of Tucson who approved it by an overwhelming majority."

## Part III: 1976

Sam Morgan worked a toothpick in the gap between his front teeth to get the piece of bacon rind that had been stuck there since breakfast. After he had dislodged the fragment of pork, he continued to chew on the toothpick, moving it dextrously from one side of his mouth to the other. He did this habitually, hence his nickname, Woody. To his co-workers at Johnson Demolition and Salvage Company, the toothpick had become an integral part of his personality, like the Dallas Cowboys cap he invariably wore to protect his ruddy face from the sun. In spite of the cap, the sensitive skin on his nose was always peeling from exposure.

Morgan's back felt stiff that morning, and he kept shifting his position in the metal seat of the bulldozer, adjusting a cushion against the small of his back. He used his right hand to operate the shift lever and his left to steer the bulldozer into position, lining it up with the gaping doorway of the old adobe house he was about to raze—number 57 in his plot map. The doors and windows of the house, and anything else salvageable and salable like bathroom and kitchen fixtures and usable lumber, had already been removed, and the walls and the roof of the humble structure had begun to sag in acceptance and resignation. This one's gonna be a cinch, Morgan thought matter-of-factly to himself. Maybe he and the crew could take an early lunch.

It was only 9:00, and although he had had his usual big breakfast—four eggs, pancakes, bacon, orange juice and coffee—Morgan was already thinking about lunch. His wife had packed him his favorite—bologna sandwiches slathered with mayonnaise and Hostess Twinkie cupcakes to wash down with Koolaid. He was looking forward to not only his meal, but to the camaraderie of the noon hour. He and the rest of the crew could always find a shady spot under a big old tree on the Mexican side of town. They would sit in a semicircle, leaning against the rough bark and boast about women and fishing and argue about football. He had already picked out today's lunch site—two brooding tamaracks that towered in the empty lot behind house number 57.

Morgan was feeling lucky. Work had been steady since old man Johnson and his son had gotten a big contract with the city. Rumor had it that they had contributed generously to the mayor's re-election campaign, and rumor had it also that there were a lot of fat cat bankers and contractors who were very happy. But Morgan had no interest in the wheeling and dealing of politics or high finance. The relevant thing to him was that there were over 300 houses in 34 square blocks of city-owned land to be razed. It would take at least a year and it paid union wages and overtime. Which was a darn site better than working as a security man at the salvage yard out on the old Nogales Highway when there was no contract work. He disliked the tedium of the job, but what he disliked most was showing effete interior designers around, while they scoured the place for "antiques" and exclaimed over what Morgan dismissed as junk. That was woman's work. But operating the dozer took skill and being job foreman gave him status in his co-workers' eyes.

With the dump trucks and front loaders idling by, García, the flagman, signaled Morgan forward, keeping a wary eye all the while on neighborhood truants who might venture too close to falling debris. Morgan whistled the theme from "M\*A\*S\*H" between the gap in his teeth and stepped on the accelerator. The bulldozer clanked and sputtered and spewed thick diesel smoke into the clear morning air. Morgan made a mental note to himself to spend a day overhauling it in the shop the next time they got rained out. With Morgan guiding it carefully, the dozer jolted forward slowly and at last met the wall of the old adobe with a resounding thud. The house shuddered but held. Morgan shifted into reverse and with García guiding him, backed up 100 feet to gain momentum. He lurched forward and rammed again. There was a loud crashing sound and then what seemed to be a suspension of all sound—a heart-piercing muting of men, children, engines, birds, dogs and idle conversation.

Then the old adobe house trembled, sighed, splintered, cracked and collapsed in on itself with a small explosion, enveloped in a shroud of dust that hid its final hour mercifully from view.

Then the dusty veil rose like fine powder into the golden morning air, carried aloft by a sudden westerly breeze from the river valley. The dusty cloud, catching the sunlight, gained momentum and floated over City Hall and the County Buildings and La Ramada Condominiums and the Federal Buildings and the Hilton Resort Hotel—until it settled, mote by golden mote, footprint by tiny footprint, on the parched and abandoned bed of the river.

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## *María de las Trenzas*

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María Carmen del Castillo, like the summer sun that hovers just below the horizon, hesitates a moment before rising. She lies motionless, attentive, as if listening to distant music, her delicate hands folded on her bosom, her unplaited hair spread on her pillow like the undulating waves of a dark and stormy sea. A breeze makes the cottonwood by the arroyo tremble and moves the curtains of her open bedroom window. Already in that breeze is a portent of the day's heat which is to follow—like the warm elusive breath one feels in a crowded room. But for the moment, María savors the fleeting coolness of the morning and continues her waking dream . . .

(María, María, María de las Trenzas, her waist-length braids entwined with flowers and leaves, climbs the pyramid of chiseled stone at dawn. Its pinnacle is lost in haze from the surrounding lakes and expiatory fires. Its heaven-thrust altar shines crimson from the dawn and old sacrifices. And María, dressed in a flowing robe of white gossamer, bears the vestal flame and offerings of precious stones and her virginal self. The priest waits, arms upraised, obsidian dagger poised, his eyes bright and burning with secret knowledge. And the choral priests, robed in feathers, arms interlocked, chant and sway with soundless feet. And somewhere from beyond the shadows, the rawhide drums beat and call hypnotically: "María, María, María." And María climbs steadfastly, determinedly, toward the seductive echo, her heart pounding, her gaze unflinching, until she reaches the top of the pyra-

# *Days of Plenty, Days of Want*

Patricia Preciado Martin

Camino del Sol

A Chicana and Chicano Literary Series

The University of Arizona Press Tucson

©1988 by Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe  
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Ⓢ This book is printed on acid-free, archival-quality paper.  
Manufactured in the United States of America

04 03 02 01 00 99 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Martin, Patricia Preciado

Days of plenty, days of want / Patricia Preciado Martin.

p. cm. — (Camino del Sol)

ISBN 0-8165-1946-3 (pbk.)

I. Mexican Americans—Social life and customs—Fiction.

I. Title. II. Series.

PS3563.A7272D39 1999

813'.54—dc21 98-46458

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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