

The Empty Cistern

Sally Stratford

Silence and grace,
the only words I know
in either of their languages,
so I don't say much.
I stand at the small spring
and look over their valley
dotted with log houses.
The village seems abandoned.
Everyone's working the fields,
clearing the skeletons of last year's harvest
that could blow away with the dry soil.
We talk about water lines and pumps,
the cistern we built last year,
barely a dozen of us, professors,
students, a translator.
I climb up and peer into the cool cube,
dust covering the bottom.

A woman carries water down
the hill and washes clothes
with the same muscles she uses to grind corn.
Too far away to make eye contact.
I look up and the sky stretches tight
across the valley, tree line to tree line.
Then I understand how the night will come,
the sky crammed with stars
and the people will tell their stories,
each one a kernel,
alternating colors like a corn necklace,
maybe even a few about us, the gringos.

Tonight, back at Margarita's,
we will stare at the ceiling
and tell our stories,
whispers fading into the music
coming from the bar across the courtyard tile,
while the Tarahumaras sleep in their open valley.
The cistern alone on the hill,
without even a drop of water
steadily filling with stars.