

Our Altars Are Crowded

By Elizabeth Farfán-Santos

Our altars are crowded
with people who shouldn't be there.
We need a bigger table
for all the life suddenly turned memories
for all the gifts we didn't get a chance to give
for the experiences left behind.

¿Pero donde pongo el abrazo, the last embrace I meant to give you that morning?
The day I decided I wouldn't let COVID keep me from hugging you any longer. I was going to wear three masks; I was going to be careful.

¿Donde pongo el encuentro con su bisnieta, the long-anticipated meeting I planned for that morning?
The day I decided I wouldn't let COVID keep you from her any longer.

Where do I put it?
I wasn't prepared for the crowd
of life left behind
of touch suspended in the air,
falling on itself,
collapsing on itself.

We weren't prepared.
But our altars are crowded
with photos and meals meant to be shared
no *veladas*
with life still meant to be lived
no *velada*
and all we can do now is
get a bigger table.

Our altars are crowded
and everyone is here
abuelitos
padrinos
madrinas
papás
hermanos
tías
comadres
la mejor amiga

*mamás
vecinas
maridos
el sancho
esposas
primas
hijos
compadres
estudiantes
amantes
novios
mentoras.*

They're all here
and there's so much *chisme*
so much to catch up on
so much to remember
memories to relive
gifts to give.

Yes, our altars are crowded
and in the crowd, we embrace.

*Se da el abrazo,
bien fuerte y bien dado.
Es el encuentro que pedimos
y en el disfrutamos y celebramos.
En el nos soltamos
nos libramos de la tristeza.*

We release the longing
for the physical body we knew
and with that the touch suspended in the air
collapses
onto the soul,
the spirit that is now all around us
and within us.

Our altars are crowded
and here, we accept
the warmest embrace
the kindest touch
and the purest presence
of those we love
never really gone
only more present than before.

Our altars are crowded.
The table is set.
The food is served.
We're all dressed up
and the celebration is about to begin.
Buen provecho.

Elizabeth Farfán-Santos is a medical anthropologist and author of *Undocumented Motherhood: Conversations on Love, Trauma, and Border Crossing*.

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