

Peter Sean Woltemade
The Skulls

Some time ago I was staying in a small village in northern Peru. The mountains there are not the country's highest; they are not dramatic in the same way as the Cordillera Blanca in Huaraz or the sharp snow-covered peaks such as Alpamayo in Cusco, where one has to do real climbing to get to the top. There are many places in northern Peru where the mountains are covered by the so-called cloud forests. It is hard for me to imagine a more beautiful landscape. Early one morning I set forth to explore the area around the mountain village. The weather was excellent; I was looking forward to the outing; there was much to look at in this relatively untouched region. If one were lucky one might even catch a glimpse of a bear, I had been told. I saw the sunlight reflected by the wings of hummingbirds; big blue butterflies fluttered above the trail. I slowly worked my way upward, and at one point I must have arrived above the general tree line. I could see far into the distance on all sides; the wavy outlines of the mountains continued all the way around, dark blue with thin clouds drifting between gorges or wrapping themselves around peaks like scarves. I had caught sight of a church some distance ahead, and I had chosen this church as my goal for the day. It looked very close, but it nevertheless took me three hours to reach it. There were no other buildings nearby, at least none I could see.

The sun beat down on the region; the air flickered with heat, and it is this flickering, a satiation of the air, that I find unique and very much associate with South America. The little church stood like a watchtower in this mighty landscape. I pushed open the wooden door and entered the crooked room. The altar was carved in wood and depicted a myriad of biblical scenes; probably it had been made by a local Indian during the seventeenth century. The unbelievable skill of the old Indian woodcarvers is known far and wide. On one wall hung a moth-eaten Christ on the cross. On the other wall there was a painting of the Virgin wearing a dress shaped like a mountain with borders and small stars in gold leaf, which testified to the fact that the painter must also have been an Indian. The Virgin had become the great mother who became the Apu of the mountain.

I sat down on a bench to rest and fell into a doze, and I woke to the sound of dragging feet. A very old woman in the company of a small boy came into the church. The woman wore a dress made of several thick blue and red layers; on her head she wore an odd red hat with a little veil of strings of beads that hung down from the edge and over her eyes. Each of the two held out a skull. They walked all the way up to the altar, laid the skulls carefully on the floor, and then knelt in prayer. The woman mumbled an endless litany, and while this was going on a dog came into the church. It was skinny and completely black and resembled a coyote; it sat down next to the kneeling old woman but soon got up again and ran outside. I don't know how much time had passed when they came back down the center aisle, once again carrying the skulls. I greeted them, but the woman appeared not to have heard me. I sat there for a little while yet, but then I walked out into the sunshine. The woman and the boy, who had been joined by the black dog, were walking away. I could not resist; I sim-

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/4

ply had to ask. Despite the fact that this strange performance had filled me with a certain reverence, I quickened my pace to catch up with them.

“Good afternoon, señora,” I said in a louder voice. She turned around and looked me straight in the eye.

“Good afternoon, señor.”

“Pardon me,” I continued. “May I ask you a question?” It did not seem as though she found it strange in any way that I was standing in front of her in this desolate landscape with a question on my lips.

“What would you like to ask?” The woman’s voice was cracked but authoritative. She held the skull lovingly, as did the boy, who stared at me with big dark eyes.

“My curiosity will not leave me any peace until you tell me why you are carrying around a skull and why the boy has one too.”

“All my life I have gone to church with my parents, and I still do.”

“So you are carrying your parents around. But then who is the boy?”

“He is my great-grandson. He usually carries my mother; this is because they can talk to each other and he tells me everything she says.”

“Thank you. I understand better now.”

They turned around and walked on.

I had said I understood it better, but I suppose that was a misrepresentation of the facts. To someone like me, this was a strange custom. I followed them with my eyes; I was looking into the glare of the sun and could barely see them. And the next moment they had disappeared behind a rock outcropping.