

# COSTA RICA

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"Coming newly into Spanish, I lacked two essentials—a childhood in the language, which I could never acquire, and a sense of its literature, which I could."

—Alastair Reid, *Whereabouts:  
Notes on Being a Foreigner*

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turies-old minuet.

They spawn deep in the sand, and when they attempt their return, they are flipped belly up and are left, flapping in vain, rocking back and forth stubbornly on their shells.

Turtle in the soup, eggs in the gut of some turtle-bashing drunk.

Sure, God made the animals first and then man.

If the animals are dying, does the diviner divine who's next?

*Translated by James Hoggard*

## The Blue Fish

Julietta Pinto

DREAMS FLED INTO HIDING on contact with the light, and his sleepy eyes began to receive images that awakened reality in his mind. The last minutes before falling asleep and the first on awakening are states that do not permit one to feel either dead or alive, like intermediate steps from light to shadow in which the ability to see is lost and confusion reigns. Little by little, familiar shapes stand out, and the mind, distressed at leaving mysteriously attractive and unknown areas, begins to calm itself and, by means of relationships, locates itself in space. I am me, I am alive, this is my house. But that morning it was not his house. A strange room, different objects, startled him and only once he sat up did he realize that he was not dreaming, and he remembered that he had arrived at Puerto Limón two days ago. The plane trip had been quite an experience. Holding on to his mother's hand he had felt his heart accelerate along with the engine. When the noise indicated maximum speed and the plane shook on taking off from the earth with the effort of a soul departing the body, he had squeezed his mother's hand and closed his eyes in fear. A few moments later, feeling himself being rocked among the clouds, he opened his eyes and was amazed to see the roofs of the houses disappear in the distance as the blue mountains came closer. White clouds, like veils of mist, crawled through the valleys, and they were so delicate he could see through them. How free he felt when he was above the

earth! He knew the height of the mountain, and to see it looking like a blue miniature, like the one his mother always put in the Nativity scene, made him feel drunk with the strength and power a man feels on conquering nature, even if only for brief moments. The trip was short, and he kept his eyes wide open so as not to miss a single detail of the constantly changing landscape unfolding before his eyes. The motionless rivers seemed to be sleeping, as if immobilized by a magic spell, and the trees grew bigger as they approached the ocean, not only because the plane was losing altitude but also because the vegetation grew taller and thicker, as if to pit its strength against the ocean's and show that it would fight if invaded. He remembered the excitement of landing, how a gray strip widened until there was enough room for the silver wings to fit, and the roar of the waves when the engine was turned off. A trip on a bus took them past tumbledown houses whose porches were filled with black youngsters of all sizes, their naked bellies sporting their navels like misplaced buttons. They waved their arms wildly, greeting the driver. Watching the bus go by was probably one of their favorite diversions and helped them forget the hunger pangs that racked their young bodies. You could see the misery in the houses that were falling apart, in the people dressed in rags, and in the haggard faces of the old folks, with dark stooped bodies.

The hotel looked like any other hotel, but the owners had added their personal touch of spontaneous charm, a characteristic of everyone in the port: the driver, the owner of the boat, the man who rented bicycles, even the little boy who sold lottery tickets and whose wistful expression convinced the mother to buy one. They all had an agreeable and cheerful attitude, quite unlike the sullen inhabitants of the capital.

Everyone wanted the visitors to know and love their city as they themselves did. They suggested new places, which were never disappointing, because the tropical beauty of the Atlantic was beyond what anyone could imagine. His eyes still held reflections of the Mohín River, its banks drenched in green, reflected in ripples of quiet water, and the marvelous beach they found on disembarking. It was a narrow strip of land that struggled to survive between the ocean and the river. The coconut palms with their green and gold leaves were unaware of the danger they lived in: as languorous as women in hammocks, they swayed back and forth without worrying about the weather. His heart beat faster at the memory of the train whistle — which sounded at the precise moment he was crossing the bridge to return home — and the terror he felt when the vibrations went through his body, transmitted by the boards that lined both sides of the bridge, offering protection in case of emergency. And an emergency it was. If it had not been for a fisherman who was there and held on to him with strong arms, he might have thrown himself into the river out of desperation at seeing the oncoming train. It seemed to him that the boards weren't strong enough to support him, his mother, and the fisherman. As the train went by the three of them almost lost their footing. But when he reached firm land, he felt years older and very proud of what he would tell his playmates. His spirit absorbed the beauty of beaches like Portete and of far corners where the tropical vegetation exploded with new shoots and leaves, of sunsets doubled by their reflection in the ocean, of the moon coming out when the sun was hidden, as if it felt obliged to take its place in order not to leave the sky sad and alone in the darkness. The moon's pale light was a sad copy of the sun's, but on being reflected in the ocean it acquired a misty tone that filled its surround-

ings with melancholy and created another ocean, mysterious in the light of its waves.

Everything interested and excited him, but from the moment he saw the blue fish, everything else dissolved into a kaleidoscope of figures and landscapes that served as a backdrop for this ideal creature. The fish ruled as lord and master of his thoughts, with the force of first love and the same persistence, so that even after it is finally over, it tries to return in the melody of a song or the color of a flower. He had seen it the day before, when they went to the island of La Uvita. The boat, at the speed of a darting fish, sprayed drops of salty water over his face, rosy with happiness and sunshine. The island was only a short distance away, and the calmness of the ocean made the trip even shorter. The ocean was a copy of the sky in a slightly darker tone, and the crests of foam were like brushstrokes breaking the monotony of the color. The uninhabited island was a refuge of trees and plants, a dark green stain competing with the brilliant blue that surrounded it, and its coral reefs protected it from the fury of the waves on stormy nights . . . On calm days when the tide was rising, the water would furiously push its way out, bursting in sprays of foam on reaching a hole in the coral. Soaring several meters, it would then fall exhausted by the effort. The water was absorbed immediately, and silence prevailed for a few minutes, to be interrupted by the special sound, like fleeing crabs, of a new spray of foam. The nests of wild ducks balanced on the highest rocks, and the parents flapped their wings, protecting their young from the danger of intruders. They would leave for a while, their agile bodies dropping to the ocean as if shot by an arrow: seconds later they would come up triumphantly, with a little fish in their partly open beaks.

The marine life on the rocks was strange and looked amaz-

ingly like flowers and fruits. On the other hand, the algae and coral at the bottom of the rocks, seen through the transparent water that moved with the waves, looked like sea creatures. Leaning over to contemplate all the beauty, he saw a flash of blue lightning that disappeared in an instant, to reappear again. At first he didn't believe it was a fish. The blue was the same as the color of the butterflies that fitted across the pastures of the *Meseta Central*. The sunlight reflected on it so brilliantly as it moved through the water that it looked like an engraving on blue foil. The fish seemed to know this and displayed its beauty with gentle motions. Sometimes a wave would carry it away, and just when the boy was losing hope of seeing it again, it would reappear with a flash of blue. The island's enchantment vanished, the sea urchins and conches no longer interested him; he was held in thrall observing the fish intently and longing to hold it in his hands to see if it was real. His knees hurt from kneeling, and his hand tried unsuccessfully to catch it. Though annoyed, he obeyed the third time his mother called him to hurry because the boat was about to leave. He fell asleep dreaming of holding it in his hands and discovering the secret of its brilliance. The memory seared his mind again, and he got up hurriedly to go to the island. This time he really would catch it. He took a little butterfly net with him, sure that he would capture it. When he asked the boat owner about the blue fish, the owner looked at him curiously and said he had never heard anything about fishes that color. But he was so sure of his fish, he wanted to show it to everyone so they wouldn't think the sun had caused him to imagine it. As soon as they arrived at the island, he went back to the same place where he had seen it the day before. It didn't take long for the fish to appear, and the boy was excited at seeing it. The fish seemed even more brilliant

than the day before, and he became so absorbed in watching it that he forgot the net. The fish moved faster and faster; it seemed to multiply until there were three or four fishes in its place. Then it would tire and rest, and in the stillness it looked like a butterfly on a stone flower. During one of these rests, he lowered the net cautiously, caught the fish in it, and pulled it out, enjoying in anticipation the result of his catch. It was a great surprise to see the net empty. Thinking that the fish had slipped out at the last minute, he tried again — with the identical result. He tried impatiently to catch it again and again, but when he was sure it was in his power, there was only water running through the holes in the net. And the fish, unafraid of the danger, returned again and again, moving rapidly or keeping as still as an inanimate object.

His tired arm and numb knees were proof of the long hours he had spent in the same position dipping the net. He heard his mother's voice. She was anxious because the boat would not wait, and they had to return to the capital that day. He threw away his useless net, left the island, and departed from the port.

Years later, whenever happiness that had been within arm's reach vanished for no logical reason, he always remembered the blue fish transformed into bubbles of foam.

*Translated by Angela McEwan*

## The Spirit of My Land

Yolanda Oreamuno

I AM FILLED with my own thoughts. Filled inside like a clay jug filled with water. I have thought about the wind. I must think about its thread traversing the earth to find what I'm looking for. But today, I don't know when, at what instant, I thought about the spirit of my land. I sensed it; but I don't know where. I know I have to follow the thread of the wind to find it, the wind that travels from north to south, knows the seas, strolls down streets, and gets tangled up in the forest. To find what I'm looking for, and what I sense and divine without realizing, I have to follow the thread of the wind.

Starting where it gets bored playing alone on the savanna. Where the earth is parched and burning, where the sun isn't content with fondly caressing the shape of things, where it gets into the pith of trees and the marrow of men. There, where it has stripped vast horizons bare of silhouettes. There in the north. The land has been stretched like a quilt over a bed and, stretched and open, it's still looking for its skeleton. Mornings dawn like one great rosy opening after another, the air vibrates endlessly, and the echo seems to laze around in the elements. Everything is full, hot, dense, the land stretched, no little patches of shade, no little nests of even slight cool, the land strewn upon itself, deceitful, horizontal. In the summer, weather-beaten and grimy like street kids on whom filth has molded a likeness of themselves. The true land seems to be under that cloak — in the summer, dust, and in the winter, mud, which is the earth lying down on itself. The marrow, the

"And where is Jacobo?"

"Back then he told me he was going to work at Punta Quepos, and he disappeared without a word."

He paused to reflect a moment, and then his eyes opened wide, and with a new tone in his voice, he added:

"Man! — I hadn't thought about that!" And then, smiling sweetly, with his face spattered by the sea — or by tears — he said, "Well, so be it — may God bless her."

In the heart of the Gulf of Nicoya a pelican dropped beak first and came back up with a corvina. Another pelican, flying just above the water, snatched the fish and fled toward the mangroves.

*Translated by James Hoggard*

## She Wore a Bikini

Alfonso Chase

IT WAS THE EIGHTEENTH OF AUGUST at exactly nine o'clock in the morning. I did see her, for sure. But it was just as if I hadn't. Everyone knows about the Adelita González affair because it came out in the newspapers and for several weeks everyone was talking about the case. No one knows whether Adelita González ever returned or not, but the fact is that she never went home and her family ended up selling her things, and little by little all her friends have gradually forgotten about her. I knew her because she demonstrated beauty products, and she used to like to go to art shows, and she and I shared a great admiration for Maria Callas, whom she actually resembled, according to what her closest friends say. But it seems to me that her style was more like Renata Tebaldi's.

Adelita González was from a very good family. She came from the people who made this country, and she ended up selling beauty products when she no longer wanted to go on applying her creams to her own face, which had started to wrinkle a little. She was an expert with makeup, capable of transforming La Segua into Daniela Romo and Elizabeth Taylor into Morticia.

I think she had studied in New York, or else Paris — at least that's what I heard her say. She was from such a good family that she never lacked for a clientele, and getting your makeup from Adelita González was not only very expensive but in fact



an honor. She lived alone. In a huge house left to her by her sisters, who had become nuns and lived in Nicaragua, or maybe it was Guatemala, since occasionally she would get herself a ticket and disappear there somewhere. She liked to travel. When she was a little girl she'd been sent to visit some aunts in the States, and she ended up with an itch to travel. So once a year she would go off to Europe, to Mexico, maybe Peru, and this year she had been wanting to go to Japan. Or to Australia, according to what she told us at the last show we saw her at. There's been a lot of talk about Adelita González's trips, but I think it's just talk. Someone once said that when she was abroad in those countries she would be transformed: she would stop being the Adelita we all knew and would turn herself into a completely different woman, not just in her makeup but in her clothing too and even in the way she talked.

When LACSA made the first direct flights to New York, Adelita was one of the first passengers to get off and breathe the air of that huge airport; it was polluted, of course, but at least it wasn't the foul smell of tacos and deep-fried food that we're used to around here. So it hasn't seemed so strange to me that she just disappeared and dropped out of sight ever since the eighteenth of August.

But the truth is that Adelita González is needed around here. I always liked to have long talks with her because she knew all the stories about everyone in San José. While going about the business of face creams and makeup, one learns a great deal, as I was able to observe. During these transformations women's tongues loosen, and Adelita — with astonishment written on her face — would hear things that not even the OJJ knows. It was something people mentioned often when she disappeared. Because many women, and even their husbands, used to ask her for hints about what she had been

told in so-and-so's house that could be useful at what's-her-name's and later on at you-know-who's. By this I'm not trying to say that Adelita González was gossipy and still less that she would repeat in conversation what she had heard in those homes. But occasionally her tongue would come untied and, without giving names, of course, she would tell things that would make your hair stand on end, and then she'd leave us up in the air, like a suspense novel, until the next week, when she would continue the story with what she had heard in the latest makeup session. They say that many people were after Adelita González to ask her things that only she would know, and that when the Iran-Contra thing hit, Adelita knew all about the situation down to the last detail, even down to the names of the politicians here who were being supported by Contra funds. One of the most charming things about Adelita was the way she would tell a story. She must have had a gift for it, since she gave everything a touch of suspense without giving away any names, but we all knew who she was talking about, just by paying a little attention.

It was by sheer accident that I saw her on August eighteenth. I was in Yohan's, waiting for some friends, when I saw her coming out carrying a bag and some books she had bought nearby, and after saying hello she said she was going to tan herself completely black because she was on the way to the beach to get rid of her stress. A kiss on the cheek and she was gone, who knows where. There's been a lot of speculation about what happened since then, above all after we were called to testify.

She left her car at a cousin's, one of the Gonzálezes of Escuzú, driving it herself up to the garage, and from then on no one knows a thing. How did she get to the Coca Cola station to catch the bus? Why didn't she go to the beach in her car,

or at least, in the minibus run by the tour company? Or better yet, by plane, to save time? These questions are all nothing more than speculation, since the thing is that she went by bus, one of those that run between San José and Quepos, and that the other passengers recognized her from the photo they were shown. They said she was reading at first and afterward she started talking with everyone; and right around Orofina she got off the bus to buy some fruit and stretch her legs. After this she went on with the trip, asking someone something about where Kilometer 35 was, or 33, somewhat concerned that no one could tell her exactly. She was wearing white slacks and flats (color unknown) and carried a small satchel. She didn't get off near Jacó but about two kilometers before it, where someone (without being absolutely sure about it) showed her where Kilometer 35 was. The strange thing is that a man was waiting there for Adelita González: a young guy, good-looking, about twenty-eight, so the passengers said, who was signaling to her from the top of a small hill. Adelita said good-bye to everyone and told them she would probably see them again that weekend in Quepos, where she'd be going next. No one knows anything about the man waiting for her, because she registered alone at the hotel at 2:40 in the afternoon, giving her real name and asking for a public telephone even before her room was ready. No one knows what Adelita González said at the time, nor whom she spoke with, but a woman who worked in the hotel said that she looked mad, as if she were talking with someone who exasperated her. But nothing more. The young man at the desk said afterward that she had requested a room away from the noise of the discotheque, and that all the calls she made were made from the public phone, and that she didn't receive any. Before going down to the beach — it was rather cloudy that day — she went

up to the restaurant to have a piña colada, and greeted some women there, wives of some travel agents who surely must have been among her clients but who later on didn't want to testify, feigning ignorance.

Something else we liked about Adelita González was that she showed good taste in everything. Her bathing suit, according to the hotel gardener, was nothing special — it was just like the ones worn by all the young women her age — but he did notice that she had a radio, or rather a walkie-talkie, as if to complicate things. No one besides the gardener saw her with the device. And later he forgot everything. Her good taste was reflected in all her things, but especially in her perfumes, about which she was — if you can put it this way — a fanatic. Nothing that had been made here. Pure Bruno Pitti or Estée Lauder, but brought from Paris or London. Cigarettes, when she smoked, only Benson & Hedges; and a touch of Rémy Martin, to vary the afternoons on the ground floor of the Hotel Costa Rica, where she used to sit, waiting for nighttime. All this comes to mind because so many people were struck by the fragrance of her perfume, which remained for a long time in the room from which Adelita González had by then disappeared after spending three days and four nights in the hotel, though it grew much fainter at dawn, as far as they were able to determine, since she never came down for breakfast.

No one knows what became of Adelita González. For two days they searched for her in the ocean. Up and down the beach, almost to Doña Ana. But nothing. Beside a small waterfall they found a pack of cigarettes: Benson & Hedges, and close to some nearby rocks, a broken mirror, a small one like the ones that come in a compact. Adelita González must have been walking around there and farther down the beach to be

able to disappear that way. No death notice has come out because the family isn't certain whether she has been drowned, kidnapped, or murdered, since her body has never appeared. It seems that she spent all those days writing in a notebook that has never been found, or else calling on the public telephone as well as doing some other little things, now consigned to oblivion, that might have clarified the situation a little. I have no definite opinions about the case, but I have gotten into investigating it, not really deeply, but at least out of respect for my friendship with her: the victim, the deceased, the missing, the vanished — however one might think of Adelita González now. Her hairdresser, Melito, ventured the theory that it's possible, since she was bored with everything and everyone, that she may have decided to have some plastic surgery (she needed it anyway) and to change her hairstyle, to be what she really wanted to be, which Melito never bothered to specify. The hypothesis doesn't sound so strange, especially concerning Adelita. But it doesn't jibe with her going to the beach, the walkie-talkie, the notebook, the phone calls, getting off the bus before arriving at the hotel entrance, meeting the man in the red shirt right alongside the road, and not even with the little mirror found among the rocks on the beach.

Several depositions about the case may be taken into consideration, which, because of their contradictions, retain some interest.

#### The Busdriver

She got on at the Coca Cola station. She sat in one of the seats in the back and started to read while the bus was loading. Once on the highway, she kept looking out the window, as if trying to see if any cars were following. I could see her face, and her hair, and I was even going to try to get her attention,

but only for a few seconds on three or four occasions. When we passed the airport, the woman — at that age you never know if they are señoritas or not — moved forward a few seats to ask some girls if they knew where Kilometer 33 was: I could hear it clearly. Even though I've been on this route for five years, I didn't know anything about any Kilometer 33, but later I discovered that it was where an old milestone marked a pasture where they say airplanes have been seen at two o'clock in the morning. No, not seen — heard, really. Then I heard her asking again, and the whole way after Orotina she sat near the rear window, to keep looking at the road. Someone said Kilometer 35, or 33, was coming up, and she rang the bell. Then I could see a man on top of a little knoll, he was wearing shorts, a flowery shirt, and tennis shoes, but nothing else. I never thought any more about it until I saw the photo in *La Extra* and began to put things together.

#### The Hotel Receptionist

She came in and registered with her name: Adelita González. I didn't see anything strange about her. Only I did notice the smell of her perfume and the fact that she immediately asked for the public phone. But it was all normal. We don't usually notice details about our guests, since we see so many and we don't like to dig into what they come here to do. We assume that they come to relax, but it doesn't matter to us what happens to them outside the hotel. She was just a woman, like all the others. They come here all the time. Especially the wives of travel agents, or gringas or Germans, they are the ones we see the most. But she was from here. It couldn't be anybody other than the one I saw later in the newspaper. She took the key and never brought it back. I gave her a room that's like a little cottage, close to the one occupied by the boys who come

here to surf. Yes, I saw her a lot, calling on the phone and poking around in the local crafts shop. Nothing the other people don't do. I never saw her in a bathing suit, or in a bikini, like the women from the little snack stand down there say they saw her in. She was too old to wear a tanga, the way the laborers at the cabins at the end of the beach said, much less dental floss, like it came out in the newspaper. She didn't have black hair, either, like it said in *La Extra*. She was a blonde, tending toward red. Dyed, of course. You have to be careful about things like this, that you don't confuse the woman — excuse me, the *señorita* — with a tourist from Panama who did have black hair and went around all day in a tanga . . .

#### The Cleaning Woman

I saw her when we met in the corridor, since I was coming from doing the cleaning in her cottage. Her hair was a kind of chestnut brown, and she was wearing some white slacks and carried a satchel and a bigger suitcase. Nothing strange about that. I really liked her perfume, it was like violets; well, perfumes fade away very quickly here. She went in and shut the door and then opened it again to give me a little bag of *chicharrones*, fried pork rinds. I took them just to be polite, because I never eat those things, I'm a vegetarian.

Later on, along about five, she was walking through the bar as if she was expecting someone, and then she went to make a call from the phone, the public telephone that's in front of the reception desk. When it was almost dark she went out to walk along the beach, with a little plastic beachbag and a scarf, a pretty one, thrown over her shoulders. Then I lost sight of her until the next day, in the morning. She was going down to the beach wearing a two-piece bathing suit, not a tanga or a bikini, like all the gossips around here are saying, and car-

rying a magazine and a notebook. Then she disappeared toward the west, where the waterfall and the rocks are. It seemed to me she was talking with someone, someone who was near the bus stop, but I couldn't be sure about that. I never saw her again until they started making all the fuss about her and went to look for her in her room, where I'd been doing the cleaning every day at about ten in the morning, and the only thing I noticed was the fragrance of her perfume and a cassette player, a tiny one on the nightstand that was taken away by the police or the family. I had been fooling around with it, so they must have found my fingerprints on it. But nothing else. No, I never saw her go in the water, at least not in front of the hotel. I can't confirm what those laborers say, that they saw her in the water almost at the end of the beach . . .

#### A Laborer

We saw her going in the water down where the UNEBANCO cottages are. Wow, what a woman! What a shape! Wearing just a little bitty piece of dental floss and something that from a distance looked like a little line drawn across her breasts. First she would put one foot in, and then the other. And then she would run into the waves with such swaying and jiggling that it took our breath away. That's the way it was every day, early in the morning and then just before nighfall. Since she couldn't see us, we spent the days doing our work and watching her. After getting wet in the ocean, she would throw herself on the sand, turning over now and then to get the sun, and stopping just in time to keep from getting burned. Then she would put some cream on and rub herself all over; she'd look all around again and put on some oil, or whatever it was, on the places I was telling you about. The construction job nearly collapsed right there. Or we nearly fell off the roof. She

spent a long time at this, but I don't know how long exactly. I noticed that she would take a black thing, something like a walkie-talkie, out of her plastic beachbag and start talking to someone, but I can't say for sure that's what it was. We never saw her with anyone, and those books, they were just for show, because she never read a thing during that time. Then she would get up, throw a towel over her shoulders, and start to walk down the beach, barefoot. We had already started home, thinking just what you're thinking. And that's what we know — excuse me, what I know. Now you can ask the others, just in case . . .

#### The Gossips at the Food Stand

We've been working here for something like twenty years, selling lunch things. It was don Victoriano who recommended us, and here we stayed. We can state that we saw her every day. Ever since she came down the highway, on foot, because at that time, after lunch, we're in the habit of sitting in the patio, listening to the radio. She was very pretty, and quite young, considering how old they say she was on the TV. She had a satchel and two suitcases, one big one and one small, and some magazines and some books. She would come out in the mornings and afternoons, and then she would come out again almost at nightfall. Nothing out of this world, considering the women who come to the hotel. You never even know who they are, but they are all tall and blonde. But she was kind of brown-haired and not so tall, though taller than us. Some of them come here looking for a boyfriend. It's not nice to say so, but we have seen things that if we hadn't turned our eyes away in this world, but here people go crazy with just the smell of the ocean. Ladies stop being ladies. Men behave like little kids,

and the surfer boys are always ready to go on a spree, and sometimes they even go swimming in the raw, not around here, of course, but down where we go to get our firewood.

She would come out in a two-piece bathing suit, but then she would take it off and be almost the way God brought her into this world. A minibikini, or a teensy little tanga, and she didn't look bad, either, she looked like a twenty-year-old, she almost looked like a completely different woman. One day she was talking with a handsome guy in shorts and tennis shoes, really muscular, like the ones who come here with their surfboards in the summer. They didn't talk long, like right there by the bridge, and he handed something to her, some kind of package, but we don't know what it was. It seemed funny to us, it really did, that some stranger could bring her something here. But nothing is strange anymore. We never saw her up close because she never came to buy anything, but Natalia, the cleaning woman from the hotel, told us that she ate breakfast alone and had dinner almost at nighttime, but that she spent the day listening to conversations on a huge cassette player that the police took away, or else the family, after everything began to come out. We don't know what happened to her. The night before it was discovered she wasn't anywhere around, there was a god-awful lightning storm, and about nine we saw something like a little light from a launch out there, or a small yacht, sending signals to the beach. But that's common around here. Because there are guests who rent boats to go off and whoop it up somewhere else, or couples who rent them for a honeymoon cruise. We have no idea what could have happened to her. Oh, yes: we insist that she wore a little bikini, but we don't remember what color it was. Now we're getting tired of all these questions about Teresita González — that was her name, wasn't it? My son sent me clippings

from the papers so we could get the whole story and see the pictures they took of us when the journalists were here. Just one thing we want to get clear: she wore a bikini!

#### The Gardener

She was pretty close to where I work around the cottages, and I could watch her from the moment she arrived, despite the fact that always by two in the afternoon I leave the hotel. Nothing out of this world. I heard her talking with someone in her room, though that could have been the radio they said she brought; because it wasn't music but something like conversation. She smiled at me two or three times and she gave me a book about mental health that the investigators have been looking through: *Rest and Live*. It's a book that teaches us to live without straining, which is an art, like using the magic powers of the mind and the guide to a happy life. I like all that a lot. And she must have read my mind, because that book is worth about nine hundred pesos and I couldn't get it around here. To me she seemed like a very special woman. She was tall, well built, though a little fat for my taste, which at my age is satisfied with just looking. I saw her leave in the morning and again later in the afternoon. She must be a vegetarian, because they told me in the dining room that she only ate salads.

But she really wore a lot of makeup for someone going to the beach, and that was something that really surprised me. What really got my attention was the fact that she would change her makeup every day. No one has mentioned this, but it seems very interesting to me. She changed her face like you would change your handkerchief. One day she would go out with a lot of lipstick on her mouth. The next day she would have a tiny little mouth, and in the afternoon her eyelashes

would be standing straight out, like they were artificial, which gave her a really strange look. I think she wore a wig, but I can't be sure, because she changed her hair a lot from one day to the next, too. I never saw her go in the water. There must be some confusion, because I never saw her in the ocean, not even when I went to throw the clippings away at the end of the beach. She spent her time reading. Books on mental concentration, of course, or on how to win friends, or about spiritual things, because she gave me the impression of being given to things like that. Yes, she wore a bikini, but it was a very respectable one. I don't know if it was really a bikini, but it was a lilac-colored bathing suit that went very well with her skin, which seemed healthy to me, and very young considering how old the radio said she was. I can't tell you anything else now because it's a waning moon and I've got to go and prune the shrubs. She smiled at me twice, and she had nice teeth. Nothing out of this world, although she was a beauty of a woman, and so healthy! But she never went in the water, even though she went around in a bathing suit . . .

#### Melito

I've known her for about ten years. She always treated me special, particularly when she came back from one of her trips. She would send me clients, the same ones she was doing the makeup for. She was very fussy about getting her hair cut, and lately she insisted that I change her hairstyle. She spent hours and hours looking through catalogues, but she always preferred her own in the end. She liked to talk about the things that were happening in the country, especially about political scandals, contraband, drug traffic. But there was something that didn't set right with me. It was OK that she liked to travel, but sometimes it seemed to me that she had some jobs to take

care of. As if she were working for someone, or something. But she was very strict in her habits and said that it was necessary to establish the death penalty for perverts and drug dealers. A friend of mine thinks she was working for the police and that they did away with her for playing detective. But that's all very strange. The people who work for Interpol and things like that are not girls from good families, and she was first cousin to half the country, with the blood she had in her veins. She would laugh at all that stuff and say that genealogies are only good for breeding cattle, as her Uncle Ricardo said.

She used to get combed out here, but she always arrived already made up. She would send me really good clients, who never made me do much unless they called me to come to their houses to comb them out. Impossible! I can't close up the salon. She wasn't gossipy, but she liked to know everything about everyone. It was almost an obsession with her, and she had an incredible eye for the messes women get into, she really liked that. She knew all the gossip about her clients, who later became her friends, but she liked to keep their little secrets.

About her very little was known. Just that she liked to travel, and once a client told me that when she was in another country she became different in every way — in her clothes, her hairstyle, down to her way of walking. Someone else told me that she had seen her in Lima with a young man, sort of muscular, but it seems strange to me because she always liked more mature men, men with the kind of elegance the Rocky-types nowadays don't have. I read the statements that appeared in the papers, but the people who saw her there are swinging their bats too high, or else they are hiding what they know. Especially the old women at the food stand. I don't think she wore a bikini. Once she brought in a photo album from one of her trips, but the pictures of her always showed

her alone, in front of some big building, and there was one very nice one taken at Niagara Falls. Yes. She had two sisters who were nuns. Once a woman told me that she had another sister, her father's doing, but that they had never even spoken to each other. Family things. Inheritances and stuff like that. Because she was very straitlaced and liked to talk with intellectuals and was a friend to artists who sometimes went to the theater with her or to the movies. I never knew about any of her sweethearts. But they say that her lifelong boyfriend used to drive her crazy, with a male friend of hers. Maybe that's why she was so strange. I knew her well, but nothing more than what I've told you. No. Juan barely knew her, because she never invited us to her house. That's the way she was. A little reserved, but friendly and even a little bit playful when she got into telling stories. But I am sure of one thing: she did not wear a bikini and she did not like cassette players. I don't know why. But I'm certain that she preferred good sound equipment and she had even bought some, the latest thing — one that plays steel disks, or whatever they're called . . .

We all know about the Adelita González affair. It all came out in the papers, and for several weeks everyone was talking about the case. I don't know what could have happened to Adelita González, really. I stopped thinking about her after six months or so. Other more important things kept me busy, and I was on the verge of forgetting about her entirely until a few weeks ago, when I received a little postcard from the Cayman Islands, and then another from New York, and finally one from Venice. No message, either handwritten or printed. But all of them bore a stamp that shows a very tall palm tree, and if you look at it closely under a glass, you can make out a woman wearing a bikini. But I'm not sure about this. It could be that

I'm getting mixed up. We all know about the Adelita González affair. The one who was wearing a bikini. A tanga. Why not? The last time anyone saw her she had on this little bit of dental floss and a tiny strip you know where. It came out in the papers, but after a little while no one talked about it any more . . .

*Translated by Leland H. Chambers*

## The Carbonero

Carlos Salazar Herrera

AND SO, IN A COLD, grief-stricken voice, the carbonero said:

"I must get revenge! . . . I'm going to think up a punishment that'll last her a lifetime, that'll torment her as long as she draws breath. I'm going to think — how to put an end to her laughter forever! That pretty laugh of hers."

*Ah! . . . as she says.*

It was one of those stormy nights when the fog lays shrouds on Cerro de la Muerte.

That Saturday, shivering through the chills from his fever, the carbonero walked from the work camp to his hut, taking the dark, wet shortcut through the oak grove, under the crisscross of branches, among the haphazard columns that resembled the mossy ruins of a gloomy cathedral filled with the incense of fog.

Now and then he heard the low notes and drums of Afro-Caribbean music, mixed with cheerful outbursts and voices.

His hut was at the end of the shortcut, next to the two shacks for the mules and the charcoal; the hut was for Ibo the carbonero and his wife, Lila.

He went into the silent hut and closed the door. A few flames still played like salamanders among the cinders in the hearth.