Contemporary Costa Rican Short Stories
in Translation

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An Anthology

Selected by
Gabriel Baltodano and Francisco Vargas Gómez
Translated by
Victor S. Drescher

© Editorial Universidad Nacional
Heredia, Campus Omar Dengo,Costa Rica
Teléfono: (506) 2562 6754
Dirección electrónica: ***euna@una.cr***
Sitio web: http://www.euna.una.ac.cr

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Dirección editorial: Alexandra Meléndez C., *amelende@una.cr*
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CONTENTS

PREFACE

Costa Rican literature is currently experiencing a period of growth. In just over thirty years, several schools of authors have come forward and enriched the panorama of Costa Rican and Central American letters. During this same time, numerous editorial and cultural efforts have prospered and have had the effect of diversifying the publication and consumption of books in general. There were also notable technological advances and the art of literary criticism made great strides, while new methods of work, research and distribution were developed.

Surprisingly, this promising situation is the result of a series of never-ending crises that altered the social order, and a combination of unresolved conflicts that shaped the sensitivities of writers and thinkers. Life in the current era has been convulsive and Costa Rican society has found itself in a permanent state of agitation. This can be traced back to the decade of the 1980s, a period that experienced economic collapse, the peak of conservatism, and the final gasps of the Cold War.

Just before this calamitous era, Costa Rica had been experiencing a bonanza caused by emerging industrialization, which allowed it to become an important center of intellectual activity. The Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports was established in 1970. This body stimulated the recovery of cultural heritage and the development of the arts. Its efforts also caused recognized authors to gather in the country and new publications were created for the purpose of strengthening the knowledge of Spanish American history and thought.

An essential part of the political, educational, and cultural advances of that time was the creation of public universities, television and radio. The theater and film industries, while not without critics, enjoyed state sponsorship and were put to work

in the service of education and in the formation of a national identity based on the values and customs of an agrarian past. All in all, they managed to improve national education and reduce the impact of overwhelming foreign influence. It is also true that they perpetuated traditional ideals that supported the narrative of equality and, thereby, covered over the growing social and economic inequality.

Now, the inherent limits to the industrialization program promoted by the Second Republic, the foreign debt crisis, and the rise in the price of oil, derailed, at the dawn of the 1980s, some of the social advances and expectations in the area of culture. Furthermore, although Costa Rica did not experience directly the conflagration of armed conflict in Central America, it did suffer the effects of impoverishment, the problems that stem from mass migration, and the marginalization of broad sectors of the society.

In the ensuing years, urged on by interventionists, and under the pretext of mitigating the economic crisis, national politicians began reorganizing the state model. By doing so, they abandoned some of the most cherished collective accomplishments and adopted the goals of the wealthy elites who have, from the beginning of the 1990s, promoted an open economy and less regulation.

Disenchantment, alienation, rampant corruption, lackluster politics, ideological extremism, increased class consciousness, and other openly conservative phenomena followed. For young people in the 1970s, who grew up with a revolutionary spirit, the fall of real socialism and the end of political utopias was a catastrophe. Their enthusiasm for establishing autonomy for the Third World turned into discontent. Bewildered by the discredited Sandinista movement, the violence in Central America, and the end of the Benefactor State, the Costa Rican intellectual class was a boiling kettle of contradictions.

Writers born at the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, like José Ricardo Chaves (1958), Alexánder Obando (1958-2020), Dorelia Barahona (1959), Carlos Cortés (1962), Rodrigo Soto (1962) and Uriel Quesada (1962), usually treat these topics in their stories. At the very least, they

recreate suffocating and violent environments. Often, the characters in their stories are oppressed, fearful, overwhelmed, and solitary beings. These characters are minor, anonymous figures who are looking for answers in their confused existence in a chaotic world.

With their help, some of these authors reflect on the passage into adulthood and first experiences with the world's cruelty. This is the meaning of the story by Rodrigo Soto entitled "The Chair" (*Floraciones y desfloraciones* [Blooms and Defloration], 2006). The genre of paranormal or fantastic literature is the ideal instrument for recreating agonizing experiences, passing back and forth between realities that don't line up. In "Jack London's Last Dream," Alexander Obando takes us on a round trip from the dream world to wakefulness, back and forth between literature and life, between alienation and lucidity.

Other stories included in this collection have as their protagonists characters that have broken the links that used to connect them to other people. Therefore, it shouldn't surprise us that stories like "Batman's Last Adventure" by Carlos Cortés, aim to go back to the beginning and tell stories of origin. To a large extent, self-isolation or turning inward is the principal characteristic of a group of authors who had to confront the loss of faith in their revolutionary projects. Cortés uses this story to reveal an authentic family secret, one that reflects the progressive disintegration of Costa Rican society.

It is understandable that nostalgia and isolation define the existence of these fictional characters, which, seen as a group, paint a picture of certain current concerns. Prone to criticize, and freed of all doctrinal constraints, these narrators explore other ways to present the social drama. Caught between the lighter side of history and the need to find some explanation, Costa Rican writers are delving into new worlds, new artistic resources, new ideologies.

With no future and no identity, Costa Rica can only be understood based on individual experience which, in contemporary literature, is taking the place of history. As long as reasonable doubt about the real accomplishments of the government persists, as well as the premature exhaustion of

political projects in general, pessimism and indifference will be the order of the day. Paradoxically, social struggles and efforts to vindicate special causes, which could very well be concealing the inability to realize meaningful change, are proliferating.

Contemporary narrators show a clear interest in the place given to women and to people with different sexual preferences in a traditional society. The demythification of patriarchal society and the battle against sexism and heterosexism are principal preoccupations for these authors. With changing sexual customs, media attention to homosexuality, and international vindication of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities, this debate gained strength in Costa Rica.

The tendency of sexual identity to be relative has precedents in Costa Rican literature, for example in the publication of *La isla de los hombres solos* (The Lonely Men's Island, 1968), by José Leon Sanchez (1929), and the collection of short stories *Mirar con inocencia* [Looking Innocently], (1975) by Alfonso Chase (1944). But it wasn't until the 1980s, as a response to the wave of anti-gay sentiment unleashed by the discovery of AIDS, that writers like José Ricardo Chaves delved into the analysis of these issues. The story entitled "The Bus That Disappears at Noon" (*La mujer oculta* [The Hidden Woman], 1984) suggests new ways of looking at the confirmation of alternate sexual identity. While it is a study of the protagonist's psyche, the story avoids typical dualistic and reductionist explanations and emphasizes the indeterminate nature of desire.

The current era is characterized by the boom in communication media, by its steady progress and by the overwhelming flow of images. The thought process succumbs to an imaginary abundance and sentimentalism, becomes weak, forgetful and lazy. The sense of reality and the historical meaning of artistic styles dissolve. Due to the lack of any official center position, and motivated by policies that prioritize profits, less serious writing has become the norm.

Younger Costa Rican writers, those born between 1965 and 1980, like spontaneity, and use colloquial Spanish but without localisms. They adopt a realistic tone and cosmopolitan settings. The rejection of any sort of nationalism and the desire

to become part of the new pan-Hispanic literature are two of their over-riding concerns. Catalina Murillo (1970), Juan Murillo (1971), Laura Fuentes (1978), Guillermo Barquero (1979) y Daniel Quirós (1979) are part of this group.

The works of this second-generation of authors embrace pop culture and the obscene, as well as the development of perspectives that are part and parcel of a cynical look at reality. Given the collapse of big promises of change, and the cult of novelty and personal style, writers no longer feel the need for a clear distinction between a commercial product and an artistic object. That is to say that they lose the distinction between a true literary form (serious and experimental) and "literature light" (minor and nonpersonal). In this way they call into question the value of the literary canon and literary tradition, while at the same time expanding literary modalities and the tones of literary writing.

In stories like "Odontologus Australopithecus" (*Cementerio de cucarachas*, [Cockroach Cemetery], 2006), by Laura Fuentes and "Little Cardboard Boxes," (*A los cuatro vientos* [To the Four Winds], 2009) by Daniel Quiros, the importance of laughter and irony is obvious. They sometimes shed light on the problems of living in society, and at other times vindicate or revitalize certain ways of approaching literary writing. These writers understand perfectly the artificial nature of the text and the creative liberty that comes with the job. In this way, they go beyond simple denunciation of society, which they subordinate to the aesthetic material and the accomplishments of creativity. Literature is conceived, under the reign of self-awareness, as an instrument designed to provide light entertainment. These stories are not obliged to confirm any particular identity or define pillars of Costa Rican mentality. A game in a vacuum, artistic pleasure and imagination are what matter most. It may be that these are ambitious exercises or that they are based on literary legends as in the case of the stories by Juan Murillo and Guillermo Barquero, or it may be that they deal exclusively with everyday life. No matter the differences or the distances between them, the determination to tell minor or minimalist stories prevails.

These same tendencies are found in the third generation included in this sample. We are talking about the newest writers, authors born since 1985. Both Cyrus Shahnavaz Piedra and Cristopher Montero Corrales use everyday life as the basis of their stories. It is obvious that the problems have changed and it's just as obvious that it will take time to see how their particular works will develop.

This anthology brings together a wide variety of stories written by three generations of Costa Rican authors who have revitalized the national literary landscape. Between skepticism and doubt, denunciation and playfulness, these authors are able to see through the appearances and discover the political, moral, and personal dilemmas of a society that is being tormented and shaken by constant change. This collection of short stories encapsulates disparate views and tendencies that only have one thing in common, their point of departure: the constant re-creation of an alienated society.

Gabriel Baltodano and Francisco Vargas Gómez
The Editors

TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

It gives us great pleasure to invite our international readers to accompany us, once again, down this pathway through the best works of Costa Rican literature. In this volume we take up a genre that is often considered to be of lesser stature, the short story. The reader will quickly discover, however, that there is certainly nothing second rate about this material. The stories that you are about to read are among the most creative and entertaining pieces of literature that you will find anywhere.

The selection of these specific stories was done by two experts in Costa Rican literature, Professors Gabriel Baltodano and Francisco Vargas Gómez, of the National University of Costa Rica. The collection covers a broad range of topics, exploring everything from the eroticism of "The Circus of Desires" to a street level view of the effects of immigration as seen in "That Utopian Word." The issues of gender identity and transsexuality are also visited. The anthology also brings together a wide variety of rhetorical techniques, beginning with a very traditional format, a hilarious portrait of a dentist, "Odontologus Australopithecus," and extending to the other extreme in "Out of the Need to Tell It," which may strike the reader as daringly experimental.

Finally, we want to thank the University Press of the National University of Costa Rica (EUNA) for making the publication of this important volume possible. And I, personally, want to thank my longtime friend and colleague, Professor Sherry Gapper, for the countless hours that she spent applying her unequalled proofreading skills to these translations.

VICTOR S. DRESCHER
March 22, 2022

THE BUS DISAPPEARED AT NOON

by JOSÉ RICARDO CHAVES

To Tennessee Williams, in Memoriam

"It's horrible to be different"
YOLANDA OREAMUNO

He was waking up again. He opened his eyes once more and found himself in the same surroundings. He was taking everything in slowly until he saw the alarm clock: nine o'clock in the morning. It was Wednesday, but that didn't matter. He was off today. The afternoon before, he had asked his boss for the day off in case he decided to go. And if he didn't go, well, he would just bum around the house all day, not doing anything, watching television afternoon and evening and, maybe, take a walk around the neighborhood a little later. Maybe. If he hurried, he could catch the ten-thirty bus and by one o'clock he would already be in his hometown. But he couldn't make up his mind. How would he react? Would he throw him out of the house or would he give him a hug? He really was afraid. The last thing in the world he wanted right now was to be rejected again. That may have happened before, but he really did not want it to happen again. No. Not again. That would be too much. But… this was a good opportunity. If there was anything at all still left there, what better day to enjoy it than today, his birthday? They always used to celebrate it together. Early in the morning they would go fishing and, around noon, they would return home where dinner would be waiting. Mom, the chicken is delicious and that sauce is finger-licking good. By three-thirty there would be cake, coffee, and candles. Happy birthday to

you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Dad, happy birthday to you. Yeah, the whole day was one big party. The fact is that this apartment really does smell like mold and I could spend my time today giving it a good cleaning, sweeping the dust bunnies out from under the bed, dusting the furniture and, maybe, even waxing the floor. I could also go over to Miss Rosa's house and keep my promise to clean her windows in exchange for letting me pay the rent a week late this month. Yeah, I could do that. And I could also just not do anything, play cards with the Cuban, the one who came here with all of those Mariel Cubans. Or I could watch television. It's been a long time since I've watched television in the afternoon. Of course, how am I supposed to do that when I'm working in the bookstore? But… But…

Having made up his mind, he got up quickly and took a shower. He got out his best clothes, the things he bought for last Christmas and practically never uses because they're so fancy. What a pity, these clothes wear out and, nowadays, with what things cost, who can afford to buy himself something a little bit nice? Anyway, that's the clothing he put on and he looked at himself in the mirror to make sure that it still fit, that he had not put on too much weight and that nobody would see his spare tire through his shirt. He looked fine. The diet was working but you could never let your guard down. Yogurt, a cup of black coffee and two slices of whole wheat toast. He brushed his teeth, splashed on a little bit of cologne and took off for the candy shop, the high class one downtown, to buy a box of chocolates, the good stuff, imported from Switzerland. If he was going to give him a gift, it had to be the best. He didn't want there to be any complaints, even if he had to borrow money from that Chinaman Miranda, even if he had to go into debt, it didn't matter; quality, the best… first class all the way.

He locked the apartment door. Apartment number eight in a building of thirty. A red ball belonging to one of the kids playing in the hallway whizzed by his head. He didn't say anything, as always, and one of the boys offered a halfhearted "Sorry." Then he looked at his buddies and a malicious smile spread across their faces.

"Good morning, Miss Gloria. How are you?"

"Fine, Louie. But, shouldn't you be at work?" asked the neighbor in a worried tone as she interrupted her sweeping in order to talk to him.

"Not today, Miss Gloria. I asked for the day off. I'm going back to my hometown, to my parents' place. It's my dad's birthday."

"Ah, good!"

"Right, look, I wanted to ask you if you could keep an eye on the apartment… Just in case. You never know. I won't be back until late tonight."

"Don't worry, Louie; you go on and have a good time."

"Thank you, Miss Gloria. Well, I have to take off, it's getting late. See you later."

"See you later, and give my best to your dad."

"I will. Thanks."

He left the building quickly, thinking about Miss Gloria and how, even though she never knew his dad, she wanted him to say hello for her. By the time he got to the corner he decided he was not going to have time to buy the chocolates and still catch the ten-thirty bus, so he took a taxi. He got out downtown and went straight to the chocolate shop. Before going in, he very discreetly looked at himself in the shop window to see if his hair was messed up. It was, just a little. So he smoothed it down with his hand, acting like his head was itching. Then he went in.

"Yes, those. The box with the green ribbon. Right."

He paid.

"Thank you."

Okay, got to get to the bus station. What time is it? What time is it? Let's see, let's see. Ten o'clock. Yeah, there's still time. It's not that late.

My Lord, it's hot, so hot. And this bus just sitting here. And that horrible music on top of everything. Ugh… Such heat. I'm sweating so much that by the time I get there I'm going to smell like an ape. Ugh… Come on, come on, don't be proud, he's a good man and he loves you, what he did, he did in a fit of anger, in his heart of hearts he still loves you, but…

that was really hard for him… when he found out… well… you know. Sure, he has his pride and he doesn't want to give in, you are the son and you have to respect him and not act that way. C'mon, son, c'mon. It's his birthday. He's not going to treat you mean, I know it. Mom, maybe, maybe. When is this damn bus going to leave?

It was a two and half hour trip. After the first hour the landscape became dry and monotonous. The plain extended before him like an enormous, steaming, yellow stain where few trees grew. The trees that were there were few and far between and scarcely had any leaves on them at this time of year. Ten minutes into the plains the same scene repeated itself over and over for the rest of the trip. So, for him, the landscape was not going to be anything new, nothing that he hadn't already seen. He felt a drop of sweat appear under his right side burn and he closed his eyes not paying much attention. The bolero music kept blaring on the radio and the fat lady in the seat next to him never even looked at him. It kept getting hotter and hotter. He was no longer accustomed to this climate. I hope the chocolates don't melt in this heat, I hope he likes them. Thank God we only have forty-five more minutes to go. He kept his eyes closed but the murmured conversations of other travelers all ran together and became a chaotic mix of noise that found its way into his head. And the heat…

The bus stopped now and then. Passengers would get off, others would get on. He was in such a stupor that he couldn't see who was getting off or on. Then a new voice rose up from the tumult. It did seem like a voice that he should know, but he couldn't even open his eyes. The voice came from the front of the bus and the person talking had to be half drunk. You could tell by the curious rhythm of his speech. Don't pay any attention, we're almost there, another half hour.

And I'm telling you that kid is a sonofabitch, a total ass hole, a bad son. And I mean it, a sonofabitch. If I wasn't afraid of going to jail, I would kill him myself. But you know, his mother, always begging me, always pleading with me. Let him go, he's your son. What kind of a son is that? None at all! A

scumbag, a sonofabitch. And excuse the language. He did that to me, to the family, to everybody.

That voice kept coming from upfront, disturbing, not letting him sleep. That familiar voice, repetitive, that voice that stood out from all of the others, overpowering the other voices. And the other voices were gradually becoming quieter as people were listening to that drunken voice, that voice that was condemning, that was not forgiving.

You know, ma'am, what it is to work hard all your life to support a family, to send the kids to school so they don't end up with calloused hands like mine… No, it's not fair… Only the worst kind of traitor, someone that even God would never forgive, can do something like that… So much effort… So much work… So many hopes and dreams, and then you find out one day that the boy, your very own son, is… Is… Is gay. A queer! Ma'am, can you imagine? Can you imagine the shame, the humiliation… I saw it with my own eyes, it was not something that someone told me… So then, why make such sacrifices? For nothing at all! It can just all go to hell! The house, the wife, everything… It's all just shit… The sonofabitch… The queer… My queer…

Yes. He knew that voice, the voice of a drunk blaming his life for all of his troubles, shouting at him, insulting him. Louie was wide awake now, listening to what the older man in front of a copper colored woman with gray hair was saying; he was frozen in place, all of his muscles were tense, the box of chocolates in his hands and the barren plains outside, extending to the horizon. Suddenly, almost automatically, he reached up and pulled on the cable. It was the last stop before arriving at the town, just five minutes away. The bus stopped and Louie got off quickly using the back door and not looking at anyone. No one looked at him either because by now everyone was focused on the old guy upfront that was making such a fuss. The box of chocolates was still on his seat.

Where he got off the bus there were no houses or trees, just the plain, immense and oppressive, extending to the horizon. Alone on the plain was the black highway that carried no vehicles other than that bus that was disappearing in the distance

behind a curtain of shimmering mid-day haze. He could no longer really make out the bus; it was no more than a spot on the horizon in the midst of an overwhelming brightness that invaded everything, and that heat… that overwhelming heat…

He smelled of sweat and there he stayed for a while, standing beside the highway. He was alone and no vehicle passed by. He turned his face toward the sky and opened his eyes but the sun was so strong that he had to close them again. Still, he kept his face pointing toward the sun. He wasn't thinking anything, he wasn't doing anything. And the drops of sweat that streamed from his face ran down making him look like a wax figure that was melting away. Then he turned and started walking back toward the city, far from his town.

JACK LONDON'S LAST DREAM

by ALEXANDER OBANDO

Jack had been confined to his bed since Thursday. Even though he supported prohibition in the state of California, many believe that he is dying of alcoholism. But that's not likely; Jack London hasn't had a drink for a very long time.

It is the greatest of ironies to be the American author best known for having traveled into inhospitable regions like Alaska, the Yukon, and the South Seas, and now to be lying in a bed writing articles, short stories, and novels. More than fifty books will flow from his pen before he dies.

The wolves are howling tonight.

Jack dips his pen into the ink well and continues writing the tale of an old man trapped in his cabin. He is up in the loft with his teenage grandson. They're both warming their hands by a small stove as they listen to the wolves howl outside. A few of them have already managed to get up on the roof, thanks to the huge amount of snow that has accumulated around the cabin. They have climbed up to the chimney itself, the weakest part of the roof, and have started to tear at it with claws and fangs. The old man warms his hands and then looks up at the roof. He warms his hands again and looks at his grandson, who is very frightened. The old man is frightened too, but doesn't let on because he doesn't want the boy to be any more scared than he already is. The boy asks the old man if the wolves will be able to get in. The old man replies with a lie, telling him that it's not very likely. The boy warms his hands and looks back up at the ceiling. He warms his hands again and looks at his grandfather's stone-cold face.

Jack dips his pen into the ink well again and looks out the

window. Across the street from his house there is a gas station. A vehicle is parked next to one of the pumps and a thin woman in a long dress, a nun, is getting ready to pump gas into her old van. Two other sisters are waiting in the cab.

London sees a wolf come within thirty yards of the truck. He wants to warn the nuns but something interrupts him: the wolves on the roof have now managed to tear open a small hole. One of them sticks his snout in through the hole and growls fiercely at the old man and his grandson. The boy gets up, picks up a broomstick, and hits the wolf on the snout as hard as he can. The animal squeals from the pain and pulls his snout back out. For the moment, they've gotten rid of him. However, the hole in the roof is now a little bit bigger. At any moment another wolf will stick his snout through that hole and maybe even his whole head.

A man has realized that a wolf is approaching the nuns and their old van. He picks up his shotgun and goes out of the gas station office. The nun sees him coming with his shotgun raised and is frightened. She thinks that he is aiming at her. The nun explains that she was going to pay for the gas, but the man gets an aggressive look on his face and scares the sister even more. The steam from another wolf's breath can be seen coming in through the hole. This time the grandfather picks up an iron hoe and is ready to do serious damage to the next wolf that sticks his snout in through that hole. The boy is breathing anxiously. The hole is getting bigger.

London is still terrified as he watches the wolf getting closer to the nuns and their truck.

Suddenly a shot rings out, followed by an explosion. The shotgun had been fired at a handsome silver wolf, but missed its target. A slug ricocheted off of the concrete, making sparks. These in turn ignited a puddle of gasoline on the ground. The fire spread rapidly.

The silver wolf is now sticking his snout through the opening in the roof. Jack is impassive as he watches the flames jump to the habit of the nun who was standing in the puddle of gasoline. The woman, on fire, takes off running like a human torch and the wolves along her path are also frightened and run away.

Another wolf approaches the gas station.

The man aims again.

He fires.

Jack's room is trembling from the horrific explosion at the gas station. His window shatters and the writer has to cover his face with his arms in order to avoid getting splinters of glass in his eyes. The pen falls from his hand and stains his nightshirt. The silver wolf manages to make the hole big enough for his whole body to fit through and he enters the cabin like a streak of silver. He has the boy by the neck before the grandfather can even react. By the time the grandfather has raised the hoe to kill the silver wolf, a gray wolf has come in through the hole and falls on the old man. Blood sprays everywhere. The wolves, the silver and the gray, are covered with blood, especially their snouts, which they used to rip apart the throats of their victims.

Now the real feasting begins.

Jack brushes the shards of glass off of himself in time to see that the nun's van has also caught fire. The second explosion that the writer hears is the old van's gas tank. Jack stares through the window and sees the two nuns inside the cab melting like wax dolls.

As he turns back into the room, he locks eyes with a wolf, his snout red with fresh blood, crouching at the side of his bed.

Jack lets out a scream but it's not enough. The wolf springs on him ferociously and, with a couple of steel-trap like bites, tears off the arm that was protecting his face.

He looks into the yellow eyes of the beast and suddenly seems to recognize something of himself.

That same night, Jack London dies in his sleep at his ranch in Oakland, California.

MISS FLORENCE

by DORELIA BARAHONA

Miss Florence, who had become a public figure in the country over the last 10 years, entered the Witnesses to the Kingdom of God Hospital and planned to die there. Tall and beautiful, with long blonde hair, she demanded total privacy and respect for her beliefs.

The great fortune teller, as she was called, refused to submit to any test, operation, or drug that would prolong her life even by a few days. No, she had decided that she wanted to die on a Monday without any doctors laying a hand on her and, most of all, she did not want to be seen naked. What could these little men in white jackets do for her, considering that throughout her career they had paraded through her office asking her, the great psychic, to direct their lives? No, and that's final. She soundly refused to be stripped, shaved, and sliced open by scalpels. "Let God take me to heaven all in one piece." Therefore, everyone from the hospital director down the line had to simply stand by and watch her do whatever she felt like doing. All in all, she was going to die any day now; her throat cancer was surely spreading into her breasts, something else that she did not want anyone to see because she swore to God that no one had ever seen them and she wanted it to stay that way until she was assumed into heaven. So it didn't really matter that the only medicine she would take was a potion contained in little blue bottles that was, supposedly, extracted from plants in Brazil and Colombia.

Overnight Miss Florence became spiritual director to everyone in her ward, then to those on her floor, and finally to the entire hospital. It was such a comfort to have her there at

just the right moment. She could make pain go away and help people forget their sorrows. She was such a courageous spirit, always smiling; she had time for everyone.

She walked slowly, all dressed up in her fortune teller garb, but wearing a yellow hospital gown over top of it all. This was the one thing that the hospital director had succeeded in making her do.

She never stopped putting on her makeup, not for one single day. The heavy black mascara on her eyelids ran in black stripes nearly to her temples. That was her trademark, as was her abundant head of blonde hair, the envy of all the nurses. Some of them compared her to a saint, others to Marilyn Monroe. Such a pity that she's going to die. She is such a good person!

Everyone went out of their way for her, bringing her cups of tea at times when it was not permitted, risking their jobs to slip cans of peaches or packs of menthol cigarettes under her skirt. Because one thing had to be said about Miss Florence, she was a heavy smoker.

At night her door was open to anyone who wanted to play cards: gin rummy, poker, dirty hearts, canasta, whatever.

She had her worktable brought from home, putting it beside the window with the deck of cards in place of the Swedish crystal ball that was a gift from a German client of hers as payment for a "favor," as she used to mysteriously call special incantations against the curse known as "*mal de ojo*," which is brought about by either love or jealousy. All night long you could hear the laughter of patients, doctors, and nurses caught up in the game. In that room, number thirty-three, a number that was carefully chosen by Miss Florence because she had so much faith in it, no one has ever again laughed in quite the same way. In fact, it isn't even a hospital room anymore. They turned it into a snack bar and hung a portrait of Miss Florence on the front of the counter. But even still, the merry laughter of those former days never returned.

Miss Florence was quite a character. She had been a model on magazine covers and then a schoolteacher before discovering her "true vocation." The people who took the most pleasure in

telling the story about how she had discovered her "true vocation" were three patients with AIDS. In defiance of the doctors' orders, she would slip off and go down to that forbidden ward once or twice a week, telling them stories and massaging their backs; she truly was a saint.

Sitting on her bed smoking, with her eyes rolled back as if in a trance, she would tell the story about how one summer, on a beach in Tamarindo, the Virgen of Los Angeles appeared to her: "… It was at night and I saw her out on the water all dressed in white with her hair as fine as sea spray. She gave me a message. Then I passed out and they found me the next day lying unconscious on the beach. From that day forward I have been a different person."

By the end of that testimony, all of the patients took a deep breath and were converted.

On nights when she wasn't playing poker, she was in the habit of going down to the basement where the morgue was located. This was discovered because she had left traces of lipstick on the mouths of more than one corpse and had made, with scented oil, crosses on the foreheads of most of them. She wanted to help them all find their way to the house of the Lord.

The hospital director could not forgive her this one. He padlocked the doors to the morgue and stationed a guard in the hallway. He told her that what she didn't realize was that she could infect the rest of the patients in the hospital with all kinds of diseases. Then he shouted at her, calling her crazy, a nut case, and a necrophile to boot.

From that day on the entire hospital staff, even the doorman, refused to greet the hospital director when they saw him. For this reason, and other things that aren't worth mentioning here, he resigned six months later.

Miss Florence was such a good person that she even helped the National Healthcare Office with her special talents. On Saturday she would predict the number of emergencies that they would have during the following week. She even predicted the exact number of victims that there would be in the event that the newspapers called: "May's Triple Crash." From that day on all emergency room personnel anxiously awaited her

predictions before preparing their facilities for the week and scheduling workers to staff them.

What a pity that it could not have lasted longer! She was only hospitalized for three months, but her memory lives on in the minds of most Costa Ricans, especially those who happened to be in the hospital during that time. And her impact was especially noticeable in the maternity ward where, for those three months, every little girl born, without exception, would be named Florence.

One of the things that amazed us most about her, besides her great abilities as a psychic and her love for others, was her incredible luck. If she didn't win at poker it was because she lost on purpose. The same went for the other games. And how could it be any other way considering that she could foresee everything! The first ones to discover her trick were the gynecologists, who were the sharpest, contrary to what everyone else thought. They started to notice that her eyes would become slanted and a calm smile would come over her face. At that moment her luck changed and she was the only one who lost. Many of them would bet heavily at the moment when her eyes supposedly "went slanted." But they never won unless they let themselves be swept up by the natural rhythm of the game. It was impossible to compete with her.

Another of her past times was to play the lottery, buying individual numbers that were never turned in. On the day she died they found sixty-five winning tickets in her wallet, each worth twenty dollars apiece. (Three of them had already expired). She also had the Grand Prize winner of the instant lottery in her hand and one hundred thousand dollars were donated to Children's Hospital, according to directions that she had scribbled on the back of the ticket.

Nobody understood why she never complained, since the doctors said that she should have been in terrible agony. She wouldn't even take painkillers, just her little blue bottles of potion. Nor did she lose weight, and she certainly did not seem to be slowing down. She died just the way she wanted it: with dignity and all in one piece. Even on her very last day she bathed alone, dressing herself and doing her hair as always,

adding volume to the hair on the top of her head by weaving crêpe into it, a practice that involved holding her arms above her head for twenty minutes. God only knows where she found the strength to do that!

Florence Carrillo Lopez died on a Monday at ten in the morning surrounded by those who were lucky enough to be able to get into her room. Everybody wanted to be there, everybody except for the two priests who worked in the chapel and who had taken on the task of emphasizing how unholy, how demonic her presence in the hospital had become. She was an antichrist in the form of a woman who shattered the morals of patients and employees alike, fomenting a pagan cult that encouraged illicit encounters between men and women, be they syphilitic, one-armed, or sterile.

Dressed in her purple tunic, she passed away peacefully holding a Holy Land Rosary in her right hand and the lottery ticket in her left. It was impossible not to get emotional upon witnessing such a grand finale. The women sang and cried. The men applauded wildly while mumbling prayers.

The line formed spontaneously; everyone wanted to kiss her hand, touch her one last time, wipe a little bit of her holiness onto their foreheads and their hands. Even the director got in line, kneeling at her feet and begging her forgiveness.

The nurses bought black armbands and the hospital became filled with floral wreaths. A funeral band played in the hallway at the moment the committee responsible for preparing her body for its last trip entered the room. They came in carrying a beautiful white gown that looked like a wedding gown, and a veil of light blue tulle exactly like one that the Virgin of Los Angeles would wear.

They entered the room in silence so as not to disturb her. A woman like Miss Florence never dies but, with her saintly powers, continues to hear and to bless. "Eternal life for Miss Florence!" cried the oldest member of the group. Everyone else in the group responded with a heartfelt "Amen!" And everyone in the hallway chimed in "Amen!"

The miracle happened when they took the sheet off of her and a ray of exceptionally bright sunlight landed on her face.

To a person, the women all made the sign of the cross, thinking that they would be the only ones to have ever seen her naked. She was so beautiful, so grand, that they could not help taking a few extra minutes to gaze upon her before taking off her dress, which was covered with holy cards depicting Our Lady of Perpetual Help and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, attached to the dress with safety pins and straight pins.

The first ones to witness the miracle were the two nurses at the bottom of the bed who had raised her skirts. They were stunned to see a pair of very robust legs and narrow straight hips, complete with an impressive mound rising between them.

Then the nurses at the head of the bed had a similar experience. Holding her arms so that they could pass the dress over her head, they found a bra that was filled with stuffing, covering a flat, smooth, masculine chest.

And the youngest nurse of the group cries out: "God bless Miss Florence, she has been transformed into Jesus!" The rest of them looked at each other for a second in disbelief and then quickly put on the shroud.

BATMAN'S LAST ADVENTURE

by CARLOS CORTÉS

I held onto the hope that my father would come back until that day when I was 10 and I went to the National Library. I remember the day very well, but not the date. It was toward the end of September and it was raining. It's still raining.

I had just turned 10. At my birthday party, when it was time to blow out the candles and make a wish, I sighed and wished that he would come back. I had done this many times, but this time I said it like someone who was casting a spell that was going to be fulfilled, with all of my might.

The next day I went to the library. I was clutching a wrinkled little piece of paper with the date April 17, 1962, carefully written on it. Every April 16th Mom would leave the house early and come back late from the school where she was working.

I went directly to the display of old newspapers and gave the woman behind the counter the crumpled piece of paper. I asked her if she would find me the newspaper from that date. She gave me a bothered look, assuming that I was one more little kid that just got out of school. At that time of day there were often lots of kids coming into the library and they would hang around the old newspaper section, sometimes snipping out articles.

"Is it very important?" she asked with a sense of self-importance, maybe to test my determination. Without taking a breath I answered: "Yes! Yes, it is very important." And I swallowed hard.

She asked me to fill out a little slip of paper and then she turned back around. It took her a few minutes to get up to the periodicals library on the third floor, but when she came back

she was carrying a large, well-worn book marked 1962, the year I was born.

I took the bound volume in my hands and went to a table that was still getting some afternoon light; I was shaking. It was raining. It's still raining.

I began to open the pages slowly, starting at the front and moving toward the back. In no time at all I found the headline that I was expecting: *Assistant Director of Sports Murdered in the Union.*

Mom had always told me that he had simply gone away, but that was impossible to believe. Even though the whole family had come to agree on their simple answer with no explanation, it was hard to ignore comments made under their breath by my cousins, or avoid the blank stares of aunts and uncles when some uninitiated outsider would let the subject fall out of the box of secrets. But in school there was no reason for my classmates to play this charade and, even though they were short on details, they often talked about his death.

When I could not take it any longer, I asked my mother again and she repeated what they always said: Your father went away. So I went to see my oldest uncle, Richard the Lion Hearted as we called him, and as he called himself. He was the only person on earth that I trusted but I soon learned that everything had been previously arranged among the adults. Without further explanation, he told me the same thing. I was eight years old, but something told me that there was more to it than that.

When school let out that year we went to Puntarenas, as usual, and we stayed at the Delgadillo boardinghouse. Mom wore ridiculous flowered dresses and a hat so slanted to one side that it covered half of her face. We traveled to Puntarenas by train but at the station we were met by a gigantic Chevy Impala with a man sitting behind the wheel.

When I saw him I thought maybe he was my dad and that he had decided to come back. If he had decided to go away, why couldn't he decide to come back? I said to myself.

The man opened the door for my mother and I had to squeeze into the backseat as best I could. We went to the

boardinghouse and, after Mom and the man talked and sipped lemonade for a while, I got bored and went to watch television.

At seven in the evening Batman was on, but Mom insisted that we go out with the man. I flatly refused to go and I believe I cried and stamped my feet until Mom resolved the matter with a couple of good smacks on my behind.

I will never forget her hand. She never beat me with a belt, as she always threatened to do, but I could feel her white hand growing steadily as it got closer to my butt and she gave me two or three good swats. Then I would calm down. That used to happen at least once a week. I behaved badly, pretty badly, but at that time in my life I felt that it was natural to behave that way and to push things to the limit, a limit that I never had reached.

That night we went to a place called *"Los Baños"* and Mom and the man danced. I sat at another table with my aunts and was bored out of my mind. I drank a whole lot of Orange Crush and ate bag after bag of potato chips. I put four whole nickles, a ton of money, into the jukebox that always played the same songs. I still remember that.

Mom heard and saw nothing but the orchestra and the swaying of the man who was holding her in his arms as if she were floating. I wasn't really paying attention but my aunts were saying that my mother had been *hooked*. Apparently to be hooked was a good thing. Later on I went back to the boardinghouse with my aunts and didn't see my mother until the following afternoon.

That night I hardly slept at all, not because of my mother but because the Delgadillo women were praying the rosary and that monotonous litany wormed its way into my dreams. *"Holy Mary mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death, amen"* over and over and over. Their prayers did eventually lull me to sleep.

What I could not get used to was the screaming of the kid in the room next door. At about midnight, or maybe later, an aunt came to explain to me that he had gotten sunburned on the beach, that he was red as a lobster and could not stand anything touching him, even the sheets on the bed. I was to be

patient and go to sleep. *Patience, little bug, the night is long,* she sighed with resignation. I started to cry, like before, but this time my aunt simply turned out the light, slammed the door, and walked away. I was left alone and thinking that I would never ever go sunbathing.

The next morning I was awakened by the sound of beans cooking in the skillet and the aroma that was spreading throughout the house. I came out of the room and saw the little boy who had been screaming the night before. He was wearing a Batman T-shirt. That made me so angry that I went back into the room and slammed the door. My aunts came running to see what was happening and they broke out laughing when I told them the story. I asked about my mother and they told me that she was still sleeping and that I should not waken her for anything in the world.

So then I asked them if that man was my dad. They turned to look at each other and with a smile said softly: "Maybe."

That morning I went down to the beach but instead of taking my clothes off I put on everything I could find and smeared some stinking oil all over my body.

Mom came to pick me up in the afternoon and gave me a big kiss. She seemed very happy and that made me happy too. I don't know if I have ever again seen her as happy as she was that time in Puntarenas. She was still going around in her ridiculous flowered dresses, but that didn't matter to me anymore.

That day we didn't eat at the boardinghouse; she took me out for chicken and rice at a restaurant called the Aloha. Then we walked hand in hand all the way out to The Point where we bought snow cones and watched the sunset, as if we were a couple.

At seven o'clock I was all ready to watch *Batman,* like I always did back in San Jose, but everybody was going back to the *Baños* place. I was just about to launch into my kicking and screaming routine when the man in the Chevy Impala came in carrying a plastic bag. Everyone in the boardinghouse was smiling when I opened the bag and took out the T-shirt.

I was so happy that I didn't mind going with them to *Los Baños*. But it turned out that we did not go to *Los Baños* after all,

we went to a place called "Tom Jones." At any rate, this place was not nearly as boring because the dance hall was completely dark except for the brightly colored lights that blinked on and off. And there was a gigantic tree in the middle of the room; its branches spread all over the ceiling. I still remember that they told me it was a giant fig tree. Everything seemed so strange.

Mom went to the bar and I went to sit with my aunts at a table close to the dance floor. Sometimes I would see her from a distance clinging to the man I thought must be my father, and I was happy.

The next morning I was the first one up in the boarding-house and I went out and marched up and down the main hall-way wearing my T-shirt. It was perfect and the only way it could have been more perfect would have been if I had the cape. Back in San Jose I already had a mask and a toy Bat mobile that Uncle Richard the Lionhearted had given me as a gift.

That night I got to sit in the front row, right in front of the TV. Everybody let me through and applauded me when Batman was coming on because I was wearing my T-shirt.

Colored TV hadn't come out yet but the Delgadillos put a sheet of colored plastic on the TV which seemed to magnify the images on the screen. The Delgadillos claimed that it was just as good as colored TV, but it wasn't even close. Besides, I preferred our Zenith back in San Jose because it was much bigger and looked like a piece of furniture.

As soon as Batman came on Mom left. I didn't pay much attention but she gave me a kiss and I could tell that she had put on her makeup and perfume and she looked beautiful. The reason I wasn't paying very much attention at the time was that the Joker had just tied Batman and Robin up and thrown them into a huge boiling cauldron. As usual, at the last Moment, the most dramatic Moment, the screen went to freeze frame, like when we played "statue." And a terrible voice asked: "*Will our Bat heroes be able to free themselves from the Joker's clutches before being burned to a crisp? Watch tomorrow at the same Bat time and on the same Bat channel.* And then we all sang out at the top of our lungs: "Dadadadadadadadadadada BATMAAAAN!!!!"

I didn't see Mom anymore that vacation but it didn't matter. I went by myself out to The Point; I wanted to wear my T-shirt on the dock. Going out on the dock was an adventure because on either side you could see fishermen using lines to try to catch toadfish. The boards were loose and eaten away by the salt water. Through the cracks you could see the foam splashing violently against the wooden beams and the rotting metal framework. Everything was rotten.

Halfway out the dock I came across a metal grid and a booth with a guard in it, but he couldn't see me because I was so short. I kept on going until I ran into some American sailors who had just unloaded a little ship that could be seen on the horizon.

I made my way through them and walked to the end of the wharf, almost to the edge. There I got a glimpse of the famous sandbars that, from what I had heard, didn't let the bigger ships enter the port.

The ocean looked choppy and I imagined that it would be full of groupers, big fat fish that are very tasty. You have to hunt them with a spear gun and you often see them tangled up in tuna fishermen's lines.

I leaned over the edge and was wondering if Batman could really fly, or if I could, but I was too afraid to try. The day was ending quickly, the horizon was swallowing the sun little by little, and the tide was coming in fast. It was a magical Moment and for an instant I felt like I really was flying. Soon a cold wind picked up and I decided to go back.

We didn't return to the beach that summer; I was sent to stay with my grandparents on their farm instead. Mom couldn't come to see me but my aunts and uncles often came to visit and would bring me messages and packages from her.

Before going back to San Jose, Grandma Margaret hugged me very hard and whispered in my ear to tell my mother that they loved her and they hoped she would never forget them. Then she took her best wooden spoon, one that was painted in bright colors like my mother's dresses, and wrapped it in newspaper. It was a spoon that my grandmother valued a great deal and as she gave it to me she recited a long list of warnings

and recommendations about taking care of it. To me it looked like a sword.

When I got home I gave it to my mother, but all I told her was that Grandma Margaret had sent it to her. I skipped all of the warnings and recommendations. But Mom understood its importance and, with a great deal of seriousness, hung it on the wall in the living room. I learned later that that wooden spoon was to be a wedding gift, for a wedding that never took place.

The following days were weird. I went back to school and tried to just ignore everything, but Mom was spending her days locked in the bathroom and not leaving the house. There were even days when she didn't go and teach her classes.

I didn't need to put my ear to the bathroom door to hear my mother crying, coughing, and vomiting. My aunts never told me anything; they just minded their own business. There were times when I heard them mumbling about Mom having a stomachache, but nothing else.

One day I came back from school and uncle Rigo stopped me at the door. Your Mom's in the hospital, he said. *Is she going to die?* I asked. No, he answered. *Don't ask that.* By then I was feeling alone and had learned to play by myself. It's sad to play that way, but it's also kind of fun. You don't have to fight with anybody. I dressed up as Batman and when I went to get the colorful wooden spoon I discovered that it had disappeared. I felt like the house was empty.

Mom came back a few days later, thin and pale, but at least she wasn't crying or vomiting anymore. I was happy that she came back, even though she was so ugly and would never again be the beautiful, smiling woman from Puntarenas. I never asked her about the man in the Chevy Impala, but I'm pretty sure he was not my father. It was better not to ask anything. *Don't ask that.*

Soon after that I started having insomnia and the doctor recommended warm milk with cognac, but it didn't help. I would wake up at night a lot and would lie there for hours that seemed unending. And Mom either wasn't home or would come in late.

I would try to stay awake for when she returned, but it was horrible. She had taken a job teaching night classes.

One night she came back early. I was still sleeping in the blue crib, even though my feet were sticking out at the bottom because we didn't have the money to buy a bed. I leaned over the banister on the stairway and saw a man.

It wasn't the guy from Puntarenas, but I imagined right away that this could be the one. Why? I don't know. This time I didn't ask any questions. I was really afraid that it was my fault that the other man had left, like because of my kicking and screaming and stuff. This time I was going to be well behaved. *Don't ask anything.*

Mom started to bring him to the house and they explained to me that he was Mexican and that he was her friend. I will never forget the day when the Mexican with a mustache had to go to the airport and Mom ran off in a hurry to say goodbye to him. From then on she often went to the post office to look for letters that never came. Mexico is very, very far away everybody told me, as an explanation. She kept on writing and writing and waiting.

One day a package did arrive from Mexico. Mom shut herself up in her room for hours. I imagined bad news and I knew that the Mexican wasn't the one either.

"Your dad can't be just anybody that comes along," an aunt explained to me, shrugging her shoulders. I shrugged my shoulders too, imitating her, but I had no idea what she meant by that movement.

On the next vacation she went to Panama. She bought all kinds of things down there and what she didn't need herself she resold and made a little bit of money on the deal. Her teaching salary was never enough. As for me, I went back to the farm in San Mateo with my grandparents.

She sent me the customary postcard from the Panama Canal and wrote excitedly that she had a surprise for me. Instinctively I knew what it was. Mom had found him again, my dad, and she was going to bring him back with her.

That turned out not to be it; she had bought me a Batman belt. My cousins already had one and I wanted one like crazy.

"You are never satisfied," scolded one of my aunts when she saw the unexplainable disappointment on my face. Mom didn't say anything, she just handed me the gift wrapped package and asked me to take good care of it. It is *very expensive* I remember her saying.

My aunt shook her head. *How much?* She asked, making the sign with her fingers that meant a lot of money. Mom didn't say a word and just smiled at me.

She continued going to Panama regularly and when her friends asked her about the trip she would smile and answer: "We're going out down there."

The following Christmas my aunts explained that Mom would come to the Christmas dinner with a "boy." That's exactly what they said. *A boy.*

On the day before Christmas, we were all dying of curiosity to see *the boy.* There was a great deal of anticipation in the house. Three months earlier, as I blew out my birthday candles, I had wished for his return: "Let Dad come back," but nothing happened. That's why I thought she must be bringing him back from Panama.

The idea made my head spin. Panama was the place where you could find absolutely anything.

It was Christmas Eve. Even though my aunts insisted that I change clothes and put on a long sleeve shirt, I put on my Batman T-shirt. It was my best shirt, the one I saved for birthday parties or Saturday afternoons when we went to the movies, or out for a stroll, or to the Viquez Plaza to go on the rides and the Ferris wheel.

I saw Mom pull up in a taxi and thought that something very important must've been going on for her to allow herself such a luxury. To come from the airport in a taxi had to cost at least fifty cents.

My aunts and uncles sat in the dining room with a serious look on their faces, waiting for the door to open. When it did, I saw a black man come in. Mom introduced him to everybody and once again she seemed happy and proud like before. This was *the boy.*

He shook my hand and gave me a present: a bag of sugar candy and some American chocolates. But then something happened. Suddenly I knew that *the boy* could not be him either. Something made it impossible. Nobody said anything, but one aunt gave me a hug and looked me deep in the eyes. The rest of them formed a protective circle around me.

The black man finally sat down at the table, but everyone else seemed to be frozen in place. "What's going on?" I thought to myself, but I didn't say anything. *Don't ask that.*

Mom went into the kitchen and from the dining room I could hear her shouting. Rodrigo, the oldest uncle, picked up on my uneasiness and changed his attitude. He passed a tamale to the black man and offered him a rum and coke. Then he started to make small talk about Panama. That's all I remember.

I went and sat in front of the TV, not saying a word.

A little later Mom came from the kitchen and we ate in complete silence.

After dinner she left with Damien, as the black man was called, *to cut a rug* is what the aunts said.

That night she came in late, very late, but I don't know exactly what time it was because it must've been too late for me. And she didn't even give me a kiss on the forehead.

On the next vacation I went by myself with my aunts to Puntarenas. Mom stayed back in San Jose. She did come now and then to the port to visit me, but we never again walked hand-in-hand out to The Point like a couple and she never again put on those flowered dresses that I hated so much, or the sun hat that covered her face but made her look so impressive.

She wasn't the same as before and neither was I.

By that time I was starting to think seriously that my father would never come back and I knew that nobody would ever tell me that. Not only that, but I knew that we would never even talk about it.

That's when I decided to slip off to the National Library. That was the last time that I wore my Batman T-shirt. I believe I had grown out of it.

It was about six in the evening when I called my aunt to tell her that I knew everything. They were about to close the

library and I felt the darkness closing in on me. Suddenly it was nighttime.

Over the telephone I could hear the anguish in my aunt's voice. She asked me to please come running over to her house immediately, not stopping for anybody or anything, and that we would have time to talk. No. We never talked about it again for the rest of our lives. Just that time.

As time went by, my friends finished telling me the rest of story, the story that they had heard from their parents and that they retold exactly as they heard it. But I never got up the courage to read the court documents.

The fact of the matter is that my father did not simply "go away." The fact is that he was in the Union Club bar one night when the man who would kill him called him from behind, shouting out his name, which is, of course, my name too. My father turned to see who was calling him and the man pointed a pistol at him, a pistol that he had just bought at a gun shop called *Polini Guns*. I still remember the name of the place.

I don't think he even had time to realize what was going to happen. Or did he? He was shot five times. Nearly all of the bullets struck him in the stomach and the newspapers in the old library said that he had died *instantly.* I didn't know the word but a friend of mine explained that it meant that he didn't suffer very much. At least that's what he told me.

I returned home and went in quietly. As soon as I got there, I crawled into bed, clothes and all. I lied there until I was half asleep, even though I felt like my head was exploding. I tossed and turned a while but since I could not go to sleep I got back out of bed and got undressed. I took off my T-shirt and hung it in the closet forever. It's probably still there today.

It's all a lie, nothing but a lie, I thought, as I imagined myself flying above the city, getting away from there, going wherever, and then quickly crashing down to the ground. Years later I made a photocopy of the newspaper article and put it in my wallet, like someone who always carries a picture of someone with them as a memento.

THE CHAIR

by RODRIGO SOTO

We had been climbing the path up the mountain all afternoon when we came to a shelter just a little before nightfall. From the very start I had a bad feeling about that place: things you feel but can't quite put a finger on. But there really wasn't anything we could do about it, since the next shelter was several hours away. After eating crackers with tuna and drinking some cold tea, we settled in on the ground floor. Nobody even mentioned sleeping upstairs. Nor did anyone mention the sensation we all shared that something was moving around up there, something dark, unmentionable, and terrifying.

As soon as we had settled in, I began to hear a scratching sound, sometimes a whisper, an almost imperceptible shuffling noise that was coming from the room upstairs and I knew that I was not going to be able to sleep. Later in the night the noises got louder and no one could pretend to ignore them any longer. We had to do something. I lit a candle and was not surprised to discover that everyone was awake. Their faces were all distorted by fear. The only one who was sleeping peacefully, innocently, was Amaranta, Juan Pablo's younger sister. Pale, freckled, and skinny, her parents stuck us with her every time they could, arguing that her illness—that's what they called the mild form of insanity that she suffered from—was no excuse for us to leave her behind. So we would take her along begrudgingly, mostly because no one wanted to deal with the guilt that would come of refusing to take her along. And the fact is that she was a very mild-mannered little girl who never bothered anybody.

And there she was, sound asleep, while the scratching and whispering noises upstairs grew louder. No words needed; Juan

Pablo himself shook her until she woke up. Amaranta rolled over in her sleeping bag and slowly opened her big eyes, eyes that always reminded me of a frog.

Her brother said to her: "There is a little creature upstairs that we want you to meet," he told her. "He's waiting for you up there. Go up and bring him down so that we can play with him for a little while."

The little girl brightened up with a smile and sat up immediately. I gave her the candle and we watched her unsteady silhouette go toward the stairs. As she was climbing, the shadows danced around the room, making it unrecognizable.

Amaranta let out a little snort as she reached the top step. Then we heard the squeaking of the door as it opened. A second later we were all paralyzed by her otherworldly, blood-curdling scream.

Once we had overcome our panic and managed to react, we all ran up the steps at the same time. I was one of the first to get to the top and to see Amaranta paralyzed in the doorway pointing into the room. The only thing in there was an old chair, but the cushion on the seat still bore a barely perceptible impression that suggested that there could have been someone sitting there just a second earlier. We'll never know what she saw because at that very moment she was struck mute. But this much is true: the panic that she felt in that instant remained stamped on her face like a mask for the rest of her life. And, in the very same way, we too have carried the guilt, the uncertainty, and the terror of that moment in our hearts to this very day.

TOO MANY DEAD POETS

by URIEL QUESADA

Mirma had just finished reading the brief article in the paper when she felt her body and the baby's body begin to tremble. *Yolanda Oreamuno has died. She was a beauty queen and also wrote…* The fetus moved uncomfortably, as if it understood the anguish that this news had caused its mother. *She was married to the eminent lawyer and intellectual…* "Go back to sleep," Mirma said softly while she ran her hands over the small immenseness of her abdomen, where the baby was floating, as she would say, sometimes sleeping and sometimes staying completely awake as if it already wanted to see the outside world. "It's too soon for you to be having nightmares about the dead. It's not your time; you don't have to know about these things yet."

In the 1940's she published essays and short stories, as well as a novel that was much appreciated by the well-read residents of San José… Mirma laid her open hands on the paper to see if they were trembling. That was the most common symptom of an oncoming panic attack, the thing that her doctor feared most. He had ordered her to remain calm, and not let her emotions upset her because that would affect the baby. "Rest and herbal tea, Miss Mirma," the doctor had told her. "Chicken broth without salt," was the recommendation that her mother sent her in a letter from Nicaragua. Her husband, on the other hand, had a much more practical approach: "Just stay in the house, Doll, and stay away from those weird friends of yours. If they make my blood pressure go up, imagine what they do to you in the fragile state that you're in."

In the kitchen she could hear a sound coming from the living room; it could have been the tick-tock of a clock or the

echo of a hidden heart beating in the wall. To Mirma it seemed like a long drawn out sigh. She caressed her stomach again, singing odd verses, putting the baby back to sleep with her affectionate murmuring. Then she took a pencil and made a circle around the obituary. *At the time of her death Mrs. Oreamuno was living in Mexico. The cause of her death is unknown.* Next to the circle she drew a sad looking eye. She liked to leave little drawings scattered throughout the newspaper, like a stick-figure that would pop up between two people in a photo, or even a complete landscape in one of those full-page ads where a great deal of space is left blank in order to make the product stand out.

This always bothered her husband Diego. "Listen, Doll, I don't like it when you scribble all over the newspaper; I take it personally. Didn't I buy you a notebook to draw in? Or is it just that you poets simply have to mess things up? You have a canvas, but you scribble on the wall. If somebody gives you fine paper and a pen, you go out and paint up the neighborhood. Somebody remodels a theater for you, but you go out and shout in the street. There something very wrong with your heads..."

Diego, George's father, Defunct-Diego, as Mirma would call him after the divorce, would always use himself as an example. He was a journalist dedicated to the cause of the working class. His career would make it possible for him to live with his family in fabulous places like New York, Moscow, and Beijing. Years later, Mirma would remember these moves only as nerve-racking adventures that were long on prestige but short on money. She remembered being cold, even hungry, while at the same time she had to admit that they met a lot of people, poets mostly, people dedicated to the cause, people who were happy to share what little they had and all that they dreamed. Maybe it was this imbalance between the material and the ideal that made Diego look down on poets. He did not want to be like them. He knew that, sooner or later, his position would have to be recognized as superior to theirs. Nor did he want his kids to spend too much time with them. Poetry was a highly contagious disease and the worst thing that could happen would be

to have a child become a poet. And that's what happened to George, maybe because he was born in San José a few weeks after Yolanda Oreamuno died, born in that San José where too few people mourned her passing.

There were times when, late at night in a hole in the wall café, looking out through the dirty windows at the deserted city that appeared even more fragile because of the fleeting nature of early the morning light, George and I would be drinking the latest in a series of whiskeys.

After a long silence he would tell me one of his favorite lies: "Because we were always traveling around, searching for the opportunity that would finally make my dad's fame, I wasn't born in Costa Rica but in a cold, dark maternity ward in the Bronx. Even though my folks didn't have money, they never did, although I didn't find that out until I was a teenager, they still took a chance on going to New York City where fame and fortune was supposedly awaiting them on a job with the unions and the growing Latin community. Dad would work a few hours at a Spanish-language newspaper and then would meet with leftist groups, supposedly to gain political experience. Meanwhile, Mom had to deal with the heat of the summer and the frigid winter cold in a tiny apartment. The only thing she could do about the heat in the summer was open the windows. For the winter cold there was a small gas heater, but there must have been something wrong with it because when the apartment was closed up tight there was always a sweet sort of odor that terrified my mother. The only way to keep us from being blown to smithereens was to keep the windows open, even though the frigid wind would chill us to the bone. My poor mother, who was always so talkative, would become very quiet over those long winters and that silence weighed on her. It was also hard on her that she couldn't talk with the neighbors. When she would try to speak to them, they would respond in incomprehensible languages, including a form of English with a strange accent that made no sense at all. That neighborhood was a mixture of poor people from all over the world, each one trying to work out their fear, their distrust, and the driving need to be understood by those around them. And even though English

was the *lingua franca*, mastering it took time, effort, patience and a complete letting go of everything that had come before: native lands and native languages, loved ones. It was not easy, even with the help of religious groups that gave free English lessons twice a week. The volunteers would come and go. Some had no idea at all about teaching and would grow impatient because the immigrants weren't learning a word of English. My mother would go down the steps slowly from the third floor of that dark building into the street with a short jacket on that was not nearly warm enough. Then she would walk with me in her abdomen to the Chinese store where she would point at things she wanted to buy. And she would try to make herself understood with little drawings that she would make in empty spaces in the newspaper.

"But how can you remember all those details when, if the truth be told, you weren't really there?"

He took a sip of his whiskey, his stare fixed for a moment on the view of the night outside that was distorted by the dirty window and a light-bulb reflected in the glass. Then he turned to me and looked me right in the eyes.

"George, you were not born in New York, you were born right here, in this San José. It's your brother that was born in New York, the one that died very young."

"You don't understand me," he shot back, somewhat gruffly. "A person is born many times in just the same way as he is dying constantly…" Then he touched my cheek with his big hand, too strong a hand for a poet. "Do you want to go to my place, to enjoy what is left of this moment?"

Mrs. Oreamuno will be laid to rest in the Aztec capital… That morning, Mirma did not know that in a few years she would be going on a trip to New York, nor that one of her sons would be born in a charity hospital in the Bronx, nor that she would have to be helped by people who spoke incomprehensible languages because, when it came time for her to give birth, Diego had left the city in order to meet a union leader in New Jersey, dedicated as he was, body and soul, to documenting what he considered an inevitable change in the course of human history. Mirma gave birth to a weak little boy, a small dark creature that

had trouble breathing, who slept all the time, and who decided to die toward the end of the following winter. By that time, Diego had convinced his wife that they needed to go to China or the Soviet Union where the new society was already on solid ground. Cuba was out of the question because, in spite of a lot of enthusiasm on the continent, it was still just in experimental stages. But the death of the baby had left Mirma so alone, feeling so abandoned, that she rebelled and a few days later took a flight back to Costa Rica. China and the USSR would have to wait a few years.

At the time of her death, she was 40 years old. That morning, in the ample blank space around a beer advertisement, Mirma drew a sad eye. At first she tried to erase it, but then she decided that she liked it and she went and got some colored pencils to give it depth. "Those were my eyes," George would tell me many years later, "with one eyelid drooping a little, and a dark brown iris; it was the look of a lost child." A few hours later Diego would scold her for being so childish, that newspapers weren't for drawing in but for staying informed. But still, the daily papers lying around the house were always filled with a certain kind of childish artwork: drawings of flowers, landscapes, scenes of popular festivals and faces, lots of faces. Mirma had hidden under a pile of laundry the drawing that she liked the most. It was a picture of a woman that looked a lot like her, with a short boyish haircut, thick lips, lips that would remind her former lovers of Silvana Mangano's lips, and a big belly. The woman in the drawing had such a long thin neck that she could lay her head down on her abdomen and listen to what was happening in there. That was the very reason for which she had such big eyes; they contained the expression of someone who knows a terrible and life-changing secret that she has promised to keep forever.

She is survived by her husband and a son. That morning, as had happened before, she was trying to listen to the baby. She pushed her chair back and, fighting against the logic of her anatomy, tried to listen to what was going on in her abdomen. But, since her head was small and she could not stretch her neck to wherever she wanted it, she couldn't do it. She ended

up having to admit once more that she was awkward and unable to be like her drawings. Then she went back to stroking her abdomen, this time as if asking it questions. The child would always respond with answers that Mirma could feel in the tips of her fingers. For Diego, this pregnancy had unleashed in his wife some very odd behavior. This business of touching herself so strangely and saying that she was communicating with the fetus made no sense at all to him. Whereas other women would have cravings for sweets or exotic foods, Mirma seemed to be more preoccupied with shaping the creature with her hands, using those hands to penetrate the indecipherable world of that creature that, little by little, was becoming accustomed to solitude, the very core of human existence.

It truly was a morning of the dead. San José was completely socked in by gray metallic clouds that were so impenetrable that no sensible person would dare go outside without an umbrella. Mirma was not planning to go out; the doctor had forbidden her to do so. The baby was very heavy and her thin legs could barely keep her up. For several nights now she had been sleeping among pillows to avoid dying of suffocation because of the new shape of her body. She was also beginning to nod off asleep unexpectedly and during these brief naps she was starting to see things. She called them "revelations" but her husband said they were nothing more than pure fantasy because he believed that they had to think only serious thoughts that would keep them alert to the coming political changes which, in his opinion, were simply inevitable. They had to be ready to be involved at any moment. At the beginning of these sleeping spells, Mirma's mind would go back to a fairly recent past. She had gotten pregnant with George when she was 20 and looked a lot more like the woman in her drawings. She was thin, a bag of bones with huge eyes that stirred the passions and the pens of the poets of Granada, Nicaragua, where she was born. The people there had every reason to begin to identify her as the muse that had inspired heartrending verses written in a bohemian community where many poets would labor, rather hopelessly, for most of their lives. She was so slight, so beautiful, so provocative. There is also the fact that she was a Trejo, which

made her even more desirable because of the way she was challenging her noble lineage and disdaining the family fortune in favor of poetry. I met her in San Jose, at a party for her 65th birthday. George was with me; he had invited me to come and meet his mother. Mirma was reliving her days as a muse, reciting the poems of unrequited love that she had inspired in the poets of Granada. Rather than calling herself the black sheep of the Trejo family, Mirma insisted that she was the red sheep and proclaimed to all who would listen her philosophy of life: happiness is the best form of protest. Making fun of his mother, George said that if his mother was the red sheep of the family then he was the pink sheep. "But you're not alone," I told him. "Don't forget about us, your friends. We are the ones who make up your flock."

"My mother always believed that she was destined for love; that was her downfall," said George, as he watched her dancing among the guests' tables. "It wasn't her excesses that wore her down, all the wine and all the sex that she started having from the time she was a girl. What really aged her was her absolute faith in the wisdom of the heart."

It was during that period dedicated to love and rebellion that she met Diego, who had come to Granada to write about the city and its poets. Mirma let him seduce her with his words and his promises to take her to the ends of the earth just to make her happy. Following a decision that she could never completely explain, even to herself, that's what she told George anytime he asked her the question, she came to San Jose where there were none of those fabulous old mansions of her childhood, and where the poets were much more discrete, accustomed as they were to fighting, word by word, against the general disdain, belittlement and screaming silence that surrounded them. Very quickly Mirma began missing her open spaces and her people. In order to console herself, she began to get to know writers. She would buy books and attend recitals. Diego told her to be careful, that she had a reputation to protect, and that it didn't look good for her to be seen hanging around in these unruly and, frankly, effeminate circles. Mirma didn't understand her husband's problem. As far as she could tell, the local poets and

Diego were all fighting for the same causes. Nevertheless, even though they all shared the common goal of saving the working class, even though they all criticized the system with the same ferocity, even though they all dared to imagine a different world, something separated Diego from the local poets. There was a mutual distrust, even though the Costa Ricans could not bring themselves to express it openly. Mirma decided to be cautious. But when all was said and done, it didn't matter how careful she was, in the short time that she spent with the local poets they all knew who her husband was. "They would look at her with suspicion," George told me. "Even today many of them have still not accepted her completely. Even divorcing my father was not enough to prove her loyalty to them. And that same rejection has affected me too. She continues to be seen as the Nicaraguan from Granada, wife of the man who traveled the world and made a small fortune promoting revolutionary dreams."

Ms. Oreamuno wrote essays that were published in prestigious newspapers and magazines. The little house in San Jose quickly became enormous and empty. For that reason, when her body began to fill up with baby, her constant napping would carry her back to better times. Also, her need to draw came back like a vice. At first she would draw the fleeting memories of what she had just dreamed, then came the obsessive figure of the long-necked woman, the one who could see both the past and the future, including that day on which I miss George and Mirma so much. In one of our last bohemian nights together, George took some papers out of his jacket that always had a strong tobacco smell. Sheets of paper with small, tight, handwriting on them that chronicled the day when his mother went out into the street looking for someone who remembered Yolanda Oreamuno and who mourned her death. That Yolanda, the writer, the one who suffocated in San Jose, the one who could neither forgive nor ask forgiveness and who preferred to pack up her talent and her beauty and set off for Mexico where she died poor and sick.

"You hold onto these papers." The papers were trembling in his hands. "I know myself, I almost lost them in one of my

moves… It's a miracle that I haven't burned them… You know how I leave lit cigarettes lying all over the place…"

Then he pulled out another handful of papers and spread them out on the table among the dirty whiskey glasses. He said that Mirma had seen me during one of her trances: "You were crying, sissy, but my mother always believed that that man crying was me morning someone's death…" The papers were covered with absurd drawings, almost childish drawings. "She gave me these once I was able to understand death without it bothering me… She gave them to me as proof of my destiny…"

"But how can you be so sure that that guy in the drawings is me?" I replied.

"Because I never cry. You, on the other hand, I have found teary-eyed on any number of occasions. Besides, when I found these papers the first image that came to mind was my mother telling me of one of her "revelations" about a man who was crying over his losses… That man was not me, it couldn't be."

He took a long sip from his glass, then gave me this piece of advice from his mother: "Never cry alone. There is no suffering so intense as the suffering that we cannot share with someone."

Frightened, Mirma opened her eyes. Instead of the usual "revelation" of poets celebrating life, she had seen a man bent over a small desk, crying. He was in a room where the walls were peeling because of the humidity, and where pigeons were peering in through the large picture windows. Time passed and the man continued to suffer without anyone coming to console him. Mirma was convinced that this stranger, supposedly the child about to be born, was crying for her.

At the time of her death she was living in Mexico. She reread the article about Yolanda Oreamuno; it seemed so sparse. Another wave of anguish came over her, as her inner voice convinced her that this sad note was also about her. There would have to be some changes made to the obituary, like the place, the date and the cause of her demise. You would probably also have to change the number of children, but, in general terms, this announcement about Yolanda foreshadowed her own disappearance, forced into exile and solitude by absurd passions like love or faith in books. Then she made a decision. Ignoring the

recommendation of her doctor, she went out into the street to find a telephone booth to call Diego. "He's busy," they told her at the newspaper office. "This is his wife," she replied in a pleading tone. "I will go tell him, but you know him better than we do. He's not going to be happy about this." She waited on the line for what seemed like an eternity. When he finally came to the phone, Mirma thought she was going to faint. "What's happening, Doll? You're interrupting me." He was trying to sound calm. Mirma could hardly get the words out: "I'm very frightened, I've seen the future." Instantly her husband's tone of voice changed. "And that's what you're calling me about?" She let go a deep sigh. "Yolanda Oreamuno has died." There was a pause. "Nobody liked that woman, Doll, always bad-mouthing Costa Rica. Did you know her?" Diego couldn't understand his wife's response. He told her to calm down and repeat what she had just said very slowly. "I never saw her in my life, but she's dead." Diego was covering the receiver with one hand and Mirma could hear somebody talking but could not make out a complete conversation. "Listen, Doll, I'm very busy." Diego had stopped talking with the other person. "Go back home and have yourself a cup of tea. Take a long nap and you'll see how much calmer you'll feel when you wake up." Still, she needed to be comforted. Did she have to ask him in so many words? "What time will you be home?" Mirma didn't even try to cover the sadness in her voice, her husband never noticed it anyway. "I don't know," he answered.

George would tell me that his mother was afraid of him even before he was born. She never told me about the visions, or maybe she did. One time, for example, we had been drinking in a bar and I took her home. George was off on a tour with some other poets so the big old house where the family landed after Diego's rise and subsequent fall was dark. "Sit down and promise me one thing," she said, while she mixed drinks for both of us at the small bar in the living room. "Don't ever leave George alone, even when you no longer love him." At that stage of our relationship, such a request was not only possible, but even natural. I took it as a sign of confidence, of complicity. "Don't worry, Mirma, we count on each other." She gave

me a glass and drank half of hers in one swallow. "I am touched by the fact that you are so honest that you aren't even aware of your own lies." These seemed to me like the words of a sad drunk, although drinking normally put Mirma in a good mood, fun and entertaining. But I didn't know then about her premonitions. She saw a version of the future that afternoon when Yolanda Oreamuno died and she was determined to tell her son about it. George never knew for sure how much of his life was truly predestined, or to what extent he, himself, was guiding his actions in such a way as to fulfill his mother's fears and give her that horrible peace that comes when your worst dreams are fulfilled. "There's another possibility," I told George. "You have interpreted your life according to your mother's visions. You have dedicated yourself to finding connections between words and events that otherwise would never have been connected." "That's why I'm a poet," he replied with a glass of whiskey in his hand, "like you and my mother." I agreed, grateful to be considered part of this small circle of lost souls.

A*nd she also wrote…* Mirma went down the street asking passersby if they knew about Yolanda Oreamuno. Some of them wanted to help: "Does she live around here?" "Do you know where she lives?" She could not share her mourning with these strangers, nor did she want to interpret this moment of loneliness as a sign that she wore stamped on her forehead. In spite of her fatigue, she continued walking aimlessly until she found herself in the neighborhood of an English teacher who was also a writer. They weren't close friends, but at least they had talked at some recent literary events. She had read several of his books and liked them. She knocked on the door shyly until the writer's wife opened it and said: "He wasn't expecting you, but he knew that someone was going to pass by. Come in." Mirma struggled up the couple front steps. The house was smaller on the inside than it looked from the outside. It made Mirma think of a dark wooden box that smelled like clean floors.

"You are the journalist's wife," the woman said, inviting Mirma to follow her back to the tiny kitchen.

"And you are Teresa Robles," she answered timidly.

"It's sad that we have to meet under these circumstances, although we have seen each other before at various gatherings and poetry readings. Do you have any family here in San Jose?"

Mirma shook her head. She felt drained, conscious of the weight of the creature in her belly.

Teresa made a gesture for her to take a seat at the table. Without a word, she put water on to boil.

"Damien has been feeling so bad," she said, while putting a bowl of sugar, a basket of bread and three cups on the table. "He has been drinking all day, ever since he heard the news this morning. He doesn't normally drink like this, he never has, and I decided to send my daughters over to my sister's place. It's unbelievable how quiet the house is without the girls around."

She finished brewing the coffee and sat down across from Mirma.

"Eat something; it'll be good for the baby."

But what Mirma really wanted to do was throw herself into this woman's arms and cry like she would have with her best friend.

"I knew Yolanda very well. I admired her all my life; she was a brave woman," said Teresa sweetly.

Without really knowing why, Mirma started to sob: "I'm so sorry, I feel terrible, I just don't understand."

Teresa reached out and held her hands. "You're going to have a child now. Take care of yourself and take care of the baby. There's nothing else to understand."

Mirma's response was a strange movement, a mixture of an emphatic *yes* and a tremble.

"He is going to be born here, in Costa Rica. He will be a poet and he will not die alone."

Teresa squeezed the young woman's hands: "Yes, of course." On her face was a pious expression, as if she knew something dark that had to be kept secret. At that moment Damien appeared in the kitchen doorway. He was a lean man with curly hair and a mustache. He moved slowly, like someone who had just awakened in a place he wasn't familiar with.

"Look, Damien, this is Mirma Trejo. Do you remember her?

She came by to express her condolences," Teresa explained. "About Yolanda."

Damien let himself collapse heavily into the only empty chair. Now he seemed disoriented and angry. For a moment, all you could hear was the sound of the coffee pouring from the pewter pitcher into the cup. The couple let Mirma sob until she felt a little better.

Without addressing anyone in particular, although he may have been talking to himself, Damien said: "Do you know what I can't forgive Yolanda for?" "For not sticking it out. Writing, sometimes just living, is nothing more than hanging in there, just toughing it out."

Mirma nodded in agreement like someone does when they have just discovered an evident truth: with a mixture of fear and amazement. Teresa, for her part, was enjoying the coffee quietly, taking back some of this time and space for herself.

Suddenly, Damien got up, went to his room, and came back with a book. On the first page he wrote: *To Mirma Trejo, the flame*. From that moment on they didn't say anything more about Yolanda but talked about the baby to be born, the magnificent Nicaraguan poets and about how much Mirma looked like Silvana Mangano.

Years later, when George was given that book as a gift, he asked his mother what was the meaning of the dedication. "You're the poet," was her answer. "It's up to you to find the deeper meaning." George kept that book for years, then put it in my hands the day I told him that I was leaving, that, come hell or high water, I had to get out of there. When I saw the dedication I was overcome with curiosity. I asked him if he had figured out the meaning of the words "*the flame.*" "I'm still working on it," he replied in a very sad voice, a voice similar to that of all farewells, but at the same time unique. "Hang in there forever, George. Do it for yourself and for me as well," I told him, and even though he promised that he would, he died shortly after I started my trip. It was not Mirma who told me, but a common friend who in turn had learned it from someone else. "It isn't known if he suffered at the time of death. They found him stretched out on the sofa in the living room, fully

dressed in a suit, with a small stream of blood coming out of the corner of his mouth. The last person to see him alive was a neighbor lady. George told her that he was planning to go out and enjoy himself and she didn't become concerned until days later, since he would often disappear for periods of time, either to write or because of a lover.

And although I called Mirma, she never picked up the phone. I left messages and sent postcards that never got a response. I kept traveling because the need to get away was stronger than the bond I felt with either the dead or the beloved survivors. I continued to put distance behind me until I wound up in this little room on the third floor of an enormous, rundown house from which I can see some pigeons that have built a nest in a hole in the roof. And they, I suppose, can also see me. A few nights ago I had a dream that made me write immediately and beg for information about Mirma. "No one told you?" That was the reply I got on email. "That lady died in her sleep on Monday. They've already buried her, but not next to George because nobody knows where he is buried."

I swallowed my first sob as if somebody was going to hear me, as if my sobbing would have mattered to anyone. I go over to the bookcase that I had made out of some old boards and bricks. I take the book by Damien Robles and open it to the dedication: *To Mirma Trejo, the flame.* "You didn't tough it out, bitch, you did just like George, you couldn't stick it out." Then I go back to my desk and I cry. I imagine that from the depth of the sheet of paper Mirma is watching me cry. As if these were the appropriate circumstances to mourn certain deaths, I was also all alone, leaning over this child's desk that someone who had lived here before left in this room. The desk is too narrow and low, it gives me a pain in the back. And it is decorated with little flowers and with stickers of cartoon characters. So I laugh while I cry. I cry because of the pain in my soul and the pain in my back. As I cry, I imagine that Mirma is taking my tears and transforming them into the drawing of a young pregnant woman with a long neck. The more I cry, the more the stomach of this large-eyed woman grows. The more alone I feel, the louder Mirma laughs at me in my imagination.

The room I was in when I got this news has a strange shape. For this reason, not many things fit in it and a lot of space is wasted. On the floor I have a mishmash of papers in which my life and my thoughts are all mixed together. Outside, the highest branches of an oak tree sway in the breeze. I watch a pair of squirrels run from one branch to another and I hear the deep, throaty, mumbling sound that the pigeons make. The guy who sublet this room to me had not asked any questions or required any paperwork. He didn't want to get into any trouble with the homeowners, he just needed the money. As soon as he saw me crying, he went into his room and closed the door. In other words, no one in this entire gigantic house can comfort me.

Through the window I can see spring arriving in an explosion of magnolias. Life goes on, in spite of everything. Maybe I should go out in the streets and offer my condolences to someone: "Mirma Trejo died. She was loved by poets and she was also a writer. She knew the meaning of the word *flame* and the fate of poets." Yes, I will go out and shout like a madman. I will take the book with the dedication with me. Out there, in one place or another, even though they don't know it yet, someone is waiting for me. I'm going out to look for them.

THAT UTOPIAN WORD

by CATALINA MURILLO

I always wanted to live like a European, without really knowing what that meant. My God, it's hot today, a heat like their ancestors knew. This line's not going anywhere.

"And why are you taking ethics class, if you're Spanish?

Their ancestors, that's who seemed to be rippling in the hot air out there; so many old people who, once upon a time, were seated in this square at day's end and who are now dead. If they could come back now and see their neighborhood, what would they say?

You are from where your dead are buried, would say I don't remember exactly which Ursula from which novel, refusing to leave her hometown. That must be the sadness that we all carry within us here; no matter how many papers they give us, we still don't have our dead.

"Man, what you were missing," a government official answered me one day in such a Castilian manner: short and straight to the point. And to think that I was only trying to be a little poetic for him! (Blessed be his thick Iberian beard).

Now the line has changed but we haven't moved ahead because the Peruvian is teetering, clinging to his liter bottle of beer as if it were the mast of a ship bouncing around in rough water. He is ready to have a dialogue of the absurd with the implacable Chinaman.

In the midst of this stupor.

He has undoubtedly stolen some little trinket, but the Chinaman saw him on closed-circuit TV and he doesn't make mistakes; making mistakes is a luxury that is not permitted. The line is long and packed with Latin Americans. *"And you*

came to live in Spain for this?" My brother asked me when he came to visit one summer. Then he added: "*You could have had this in Tegucigalpa; it's closer and easier."* But I always wanted to live like a European, without really knowing what that meant.

The line is long, varied, and sewn tightly together in a trance by an evil form of pleasure that seemed to be shared. The Peruvian is calling the Chinaman "brother" and is telling him in a whining tone not to be upset, and how could he accuse him of something so ugly as stealing. We're all getting sick of this and everyone is feeling like slapping him around and telling him not to be such a jerk. But it turns out that nobody likes the Chinaman. "That Chinaman, he looks at us with genocide in his eyes," a lady next to me says. It is obvious that he would prefer a world that didn't have us in it, his customers.

So, all in all, as I was saying: everyone felt like smacking the Peruvian but see how, suddenly, nobody did anything and we all just stood there staring at the Chinaman with a look of shared mockery on our faces. Staring at the Chinaman who barely knew three words of Spanish. *"Castilian, sweetheart, that's the language of Castile; Spain does not exist, it's nothing but a fantasy,"* my former Catalonian boyfriend would correct me immediately (blessed be his green eyes); he and his compatriots fighting not to be considered Spaniards and us fighting for just the opposite.

As I was saying, the Chinaman barely spoke three words of Spanish, but that angry look in his eye more than made up for it and seemed to represent five or six thousand years of fearsome power. He stood there, unmoved, looking at the Peruvian, who changed strategies from being a sad clown (I guess you could call it a "strategy), to trying to get us on his side, calling the Chinaman "stinky chinky" among other childish rhymes.

A little girl in the line laughs. She's wearing shorts, a T-shirt and a veil. She's the one who asked her friend: "*Why are you going to ethics class if you're Spanish?"* Aside from those two, there are two impatient Moroccans and four placid Indians; I'm guessing they're Bolivian, short, dressed in bright colors, and wearing too many necklaces and rings. Placid, yes: that's what

our prejudice tells us when we hear their rhythmical manner of speaking and see their constant beatific smile.

In the midst of this stupor.

The vicious heat of summer is about to enter the city and the worst thing about Madrid is about to come back to life. Madrid, the news of your impending transformation is out. Now is the time.

When my brother came to visit last summer, he spent the entire time out on my balcony, trying not to let his Bloody Mary slip from his hands. (There is no place in Madrid that can mix a Bloody Mary right). "*This whole neighborhood looks like a religious card for Holy Week: everybody dressed in robes and sandals*," he said, looking down on the plaza from above. "*You came to live in Europe for this?"*

And as he said the word "Europe," a whole string of words tripped off his tongue: churches, perfumes, furs and pearls. That utopian word "*Europe, Europe*" floated overhead in the boiling August air above the plaza where short little Indians, Arabs, shiny black Africans and even some locals languished in the heat. The latter did not seem terribly troubled by this new panorama. They acted like they were watching this carnival from a distance, believing that "all these people" were just passing through. They hadn't yet realized that these people had come to stay.

And this is when, as I was saying, you even start to imagine the smell of sea salt, and our local square, the "*Plaza de los Lavapiés,"* reminds you of a cement beach where heavy transatlantic ships ran aground: all of those buildings that surrounded it, as if they were pointing at it. And now is when, amid all of my digression, the Chinaman comes out from behind the counter with a baseball bat. And the fact is that he's more likely Korean, because he's tall and stocky. Or else the same thing is happening to me as happens to kids when they go to the zoo and discover that real, live, flesh and blood, animals are not nearly as pleasant, endearing, and chatty as they are in Walt Disney's cartoons. And the same goes for the Chinese.

Everybody in line became as still and quiet as plaster statues. This really upset me. If there had been any Spaniard (other

than the little girl who's getting ethics instead of religion, *in spite of* being Spanish) some kind of debate would have broken out in this popsicle stand, a wild and chaotic debate maybe, but a debate after all. Here, under the protection of this Constitutional Monarchy, a cyclist makes a head fake as if he were actually going to ride on the sidewalk and you have a legion of old ladies swinging their purses. Here (and my brother says that in Germany it's the same, but even worse, the charm of Spain seems to be this *being here*, here between Europe and the Third World. Here everybody feels a little like they have to be guardians of order and norms of communal living.

But at this moment, here, nobody says anything. Even the Peruvian has shut up.

I asked myself why over there, *there,* which is how they refer to where I am from, it stopped being that way, if it ever was. Over there, *there,* as they say here (as if that made it closer), it's just the opposite: norms and laws are made to be broken and nobody pays any attention until something happens that requires finding someone guilty. Then they dust off the law books to explain who was negligent, who let that balcony rot until it fell down and flattened a passerby, who had already been warned not to walk under there. It serves him right that he was killed; that will teach him.

It's like an evil power reigns over there and we all approach laws with a mocking defiance; a defiance that sometimes goes to incomprehensible extremes. My brother and I, who often take little bourgeois trips to places in the civilized world (how does one get to parts of the world that are not?), found ourselves in a taxi in Managua one day. We are stopped at the intersection and the driver is irritated and angrily blowing his horn at, you're not going to believe this, the red light.

"Wait a moment!" I hear my voice saying. I don't know exactly who I'm talking to here, but this can't be. Let's talk about this, let's have a discussion. If they could do it in the agora in ancient Greece, we can do it here in this Seven-Eleven. "You stole something from this gentleman, right, sir?"

"Stole what?" Is the first reaction of the guy being questioned as he continues to wobble around that center of gravity

that rarely fails drunks. He answers playing the innocent, but he's already on the defensive.

Surprise: The person who is most upset at the Socratic path that things appear to be taking is the inscrutable Chinaman. He doesn't take his eagle-like stare off of the thieving Peruvian for even an instant, but upon hearing me speak he frowns.

"Listen, friend," I said to the Peruvian, hoping to create a bond between us, but talking through the baseball bat. "Don't you see that things like this make everyone around here look at us in a bad light? Anybody can see that you're a good person; give whatever you stole from this gentleman back to him."

"To the stinky chinky"

Laughter breaks out in the line. The fact is that he was truly surprised by what I said and it struck him as very funny. But that's when someone said, with a very obvious Arab accent:

"Fucking South American."

And turning around I felt very clearly what Caesar must have felt when he looked into the eyes of Brutus.

"The German has spoken!" cried the Peruvian in a mocking tone.

"Please, gentlemen…"

But at this point a little voice speaks up: "Fuck, the guy who said that has balls. And guess who said it: the little girl that takes ethics class. And she added: "It's all the same to the Arab."

"Listen!" Says the little girl in the veil, as she slaps her friend on the chest with the back of her hand.

"But I'm not talking for you, silly," explains the little Spanish girl. And having said this they take each other by the arm. It's obvious that they are very good friends, those two.

"Now let's see, gentlemen…" I begin again.

(Have I said that I always wanted to live like a European, without knowing exactly what that meant? And that explains my insistence, my blind faith in the power of the word. There is no corner on earth that the word doesn't reach, I like to think. And at what point did I associate dialogue with Europeaness?)

A puddle of beer. The Peruvian has turned his bottle upside down to waive it at the Chinaman's baseball bat. That's when

the Chinaman swings the bat as hard as he can and knocks the bottle out of the Peruvian's hands. The bottle shatters on the floor and the Peruvian screams. His wrists must be shattered. I get a little bit of blood on my Benetton dress. How quickly chaos ensues, and how easily. The little girls scream. The scream of a child rattles everyone on earth. The Peruvian is rolling around on the floor in pain, kicking the air. The four small Indians run and hide. I take the little girls aside and shelter them a bit; they are horrified, especially the little Spanish girl, whose eyes are popping out and whose mouth is trembling. It makes me terribly sad. "*Why do you take ethics class if you're Spanish?*" The little Arab girl asked her a bit ago. Spanish kids get religion and immigrants get ethics. *"Because my parents say they aren't sure that God exists*," she answered, unable to hide her pride in having such progressive and interesting parents. Poor child, when you get older you're going to be a lot like me. I'm sorry, little one, pay the price: look at the violence, look at it well, thousands of children all over the world see it every day.

The two Moroccans were going to take advantage of the situation and leave without paying, but the Chinaman steps into their path. It's a standoff and the three of them are thinking about it. I pull out my cell phone: Send the police. My Spanish friends always made fun of me for this: *ritzy South American*, they would call me, because I belong to the class of people that feels secure when they see the police arrive. But a sudden and very accurate slap from the Chinaman sends my cell phone flying through the air like a mechanical bird.

I look down at the floor and stay quiet and still as if I were standing in front of a mad dog. Silence. All that is left now is the silence. And that's when you could hear the throng of people that had formed outside and were trying to look in through the door and the windows to see what was going on. And among them was a young Spanish guy who walks in to the place like Peter coming home. They say that it's the camera that acts like a shield, that gives them so much security. He probably congratulated himself for being at the right place at the right time. We will never see that photo that so humiliated us.

"I'll be damned" grumbled the Chinaman, putting the bat down.

Everything went back to normal, more or less. The line formed again. The Peruvian got up on his feet without anybody's help. We look like the actors in the last scene when the curtain is starting to fall.

I'll be damned, said the Chinaman in his obvious Chinese accent. So those were the three words he knew in Spanish. That's how he, in his own way, was also trying to fit in.

AGAINST AIRPLANES

by JUAN MURILLO

As I write this, and over top of Tunstall singing in my headset to her lover on the other side of the world, I am vaguely listening to the safety instructions being recited by the head flight attendant. I stopped paying attention to this ritual several years ago and occasionally feel guilty that, in case of an accident, my ignorance would certainly turn out to be mortal for me and for some of my unfortunate fellow travelers. But let's be frank, the fact is that every accident in an airplane turns out to be mortal, and what I know or don't know is not going to have much of an effect on the outcome. No life has ever been saved in an airplane crash because someone knew how to use the oxygen mask. The oxygen mask is there so that panicking passengers have something to keep them occupied and in their seats. It also gives them the feeling that they have some control over what is going on while the plane is falling.

Flying in airplanes reminds me of two short stories, one written by Gabriel García Márquez and the other by Julio Cortázar. The García Márquez story is, of course, about a beautiful young female passenger who is seated on a plane right next to Gabo and whose youth is not a sufficient reason for the famous Don Juan not to make advances on her. The Cortázar story is "The Island at Noon" and all I remember about it is the description of this white island in the mirror of the blue ocean and his amazement and curiosity upon being able to see it from such an impossible angle on several flights. Essentially these two stories represent the two perspectives that one might have on the absurd notion that a group of people can climb up into an aluminum tube and then travel at a speed of 500 miles

an hour at an altitude of 33,000 feet. One can be amazed, or horrified as in my case, or one can simply remain calm as if this were part of the natural order of things and flirt with the girl beside you which, on today's flight, is a rather tall, freckled girl who fell asleep the second her body hit the seat, well before takeoff. I always preferred Cortázar and his astonished look at the fantastic strangeness that is reality. Unlike García Marquez, he didn't need to exaggerate it in order to be astonished; everyday life was strange enough for him.

In general, the fact that an airplane can fly is astounding. It really is something impossible that has been rendered possible through dogged human persistence. And it would be understandable if it were something that had been done a couple of times, let's say, in order to win a bet. But the fact that it is done every day, at every hour of the day, as if it were the most normal thing in the world, is scandalous. It would not seem normal to anybody that a bus could fly or, for example, that the room where the Supreme Court meets could fly. But it doesn't surprise anyone that airplanes, which are impossible, horrific and unexplainable machines, should fly. Not only is no one shocked, quite the contrary, people think it's perfectly natural, like eating or making love. Flying seems *natural* to these people. Obviously, they all have to be crazy.

Flying in an airplane has only one possible explanation: It's an act of collective hysteria, a scene set on a stage. To a certain extent, it is beautiful to see people get so taken up by this fiction that they lose the sense of reality and go on such a harebrained activity while talking about things like shopping and family gossip. They close their eyes to reality, they ignore it. Here is the reality: When airplanes break down, it's catastrophic. They don't break down like cars do. In the case of a car, when something goes wrong with the engine, the car stops and the driver, in this case you or me, gets out of the car and raises the hood. We look at the engine very intently as if due to some sudden revelation we would be able to figure out what's wrong and bring it back to life. Eventually we always give up and end up pushing it off to the side of the road, hoping that a tow truck, or a mechanic, or someone who knows more about

cars than we do, will turn up. In the meantime, we sit on the side of the road eating potato chips and thinking how odd it is that winter hasn't come yet. With airplanes it doesn't work that way. When a plane's engines fail, it falls from the sky like a rock full of people who are in a great big hurry to get to the ground. The pilot, like the driver of the car, only knows how to push buttons, press pedals and move levers; but when things break down, just like with the car driver, all he can do is guess and, in the pilot's case, use the radio to announce whether the plane is pitching, if you're lucky, or has gone into a spin if you're not. The same goes for other types of mechanical failure. For example, planes have tires just like cars and they usually blow out on landing and takeoff and usually, because of the speed involved, fly apart in a thousand pieces. I know this because I have seen it happen. Sometimes the pieces of tire are sucked into the turbine, which obviously is not made to grind up tires and is, therefore, also destroyed, or at least left totally useless. In other cases, as in that of the Boeing MD-80, when the only screw that supports the stabilizer in the tail goes, the plane neither pitches nor goes into a tailspin but, rather, decides to fly upside down for a while, to the horror of the passengers. Then it heads down at top speed to its meeting with the ground.

But human kind, *homofictitious*, we can live with our backs turned to reality. It is true that we are the only members of the entire animal kingdom that have the ability to pretend that things are fine while we are actually about to die. We get on the plane knowing that it's going to fly. The fact that things might go wrong, that by tomorrow there may not be enough left of us to fill a matchbox, that doesn't worry us. We aren't afraid of that, not afraid at all. We are afraid of other things, not airplanes but things that we have been told are bad for us. Germs, for example. Ultraviolet rays, serial killers, cancer. Those things do scare us, bad things that want to hurt us. Airplanes, no, airplanes are good, they take people here and there, whether or not they have a good reason to go here or there. Ah! But notice that airplanes can be allies of those other evils. Patient zero (the original carrier) of AIDS was, as a matter of fact, a flight attendant who flew happily among the great cities of

Europe and America in a flurry of sexual activity that made him the virus's perfect ally. If he hadn't been a flight attendant but a farmer, or, let's say, a gymnastics instructor, that would not have stopped the epidemic either because he or one of his lovers would have, sooner or later, decided to fly someplace in an airplane and spread their love around the world. You don't have to look any farther than the flu virus, which mutates every year and then, with the help of an army of airplanes carrying infected people, circles the globe in a couple of months, filling the planet with runny noses, aching bones, and employees that miss work. Some of them, like those who already had AIDS, get the flu and die. All of this is the fault of airplanes.

I look out my little window and see a terrible scene. Everything is so minute, so far away, way down there in the pit of vertigo. Small towns are spots riding horseback on the hills. Each one has a cemetery that looks like a small lot filled with teeth that some neurotic cannibal has placed there to blanch in the sun before making himself a necklace. Out from a mantle of clouds now comes an army of sleepwalking geese marching along in step with a sheep wearing a visor and following the course of the Sucio River, going down the slope of the Irazu volcano like a memory that got lost in the past on its way to Nicaragua.

In the cockpit of my plane there is a pilot who is into Harleys. He bought himself a pair of goggles that look just like John Travolta's, who is also a pilot, even though he hates flying. He's putting coconut suntan lotion on his arms because on this route he always gets sunburned. He's drinking a martini. He's telling the copilot about a lady friend that he has in New York who is a contortionist. The copilot is listening to the pilot talk about everything this girl can do and is thinking that the pilot has to be making it all up because the pilot is known to be a big talker. Meanwhile, he asks the stewardess to bring him another piña colada. I don't know if all of this is actually happening, because there is a security door that protects them from the gaze of curious onlookers, but I can imagine it happening. Fortunately there is automatic pilot.

I have several friends who are pilots. They laugh out loud when I speak against airplanes. For them, air turbulence is just plain fun. My glass of whiskey is trying to fall off of the little table in front of me, which is actually no more than a shelf, and that makes me very angry. They don't know that there are people who hit their head on the panel of buttons overhead during these bumpy rides and spend the rest of their lives a vegetable. There are good pilots and there are bad pilots. There are also good pilots who sometimes have to stay up all night because they just got married or because the baby has a fever. There are others who fall in love with their lover but don't want to leave their spouses, whom they still love, and this upsets them so much that they hardly know if they're flying an airplane or sitting in the bathroom with the newspaper. There is one case that I remember well because the transcription of the conversation going on in the cockpit is available on the Internet. (Only the conversation leading up to the accident, of course). I also remember it because on this flight, Avianca 011 Paris-Madrid-Bogotá, there were several great writers: Jorge Ibarguengoitia, Manuel Scorza, Marta Traba and her husband, Angel Rama. One should not speak ill of the dead, so I'm only going to reproduce the original. It's a bit difficult to read because it's in pilot language, but by the end everything is clear.

23:52:02	*Copilot*	*We're heading for Barahona, one hundred eleven eight*
23:52:03	*Pilot*	*Eleven eight?*
23:52:06	*Copilot*	*Twelve eight.*
23:52:18	*Pilot*	*Aren't we actually passing by that?*
23:52:20	*Copilot*	*We are crossing over it, yes sir.*
23:52:22	*Copilot*	*Castejón is at one hundred fifteen six.*
23:52:24	*Pilot*	*One hundred WHAT?*
23:52:55	*Copilot*	*Fifteen six.*
23:52:55	*Tower*	*Avianca 011 You are passing Barahona. Proceed directly to CPL and continue your descent to level nine zero. Over*

23:53:06	*Pilot*	*What was that? Directly to Papa?*
23:53:14	*Pilot*	*Four forty four.*
23:53:20	*Copilot*	*Darn! That's behind us.*
23:53:23	*Copilot*	*Let's see if this is going to work. Because it won't take that position.*
	Pilot	*Oh, it won't take Charlie Papa, but you can put in the route to V or RR.*
	Pilot	*What is it?*
	Copilot	*Fourteen five.*
23:53:37	*Pilot*	*Isn't it there?*
23:53:42	*Copilot*	*No, that's, it was the, the, the, the position for Madrid.*
23:53:47	*Pilot*	*Aha!*
23:54:21	*Pilot*	*Did they drop us down to nine?*
23:54:25	*Copilot*	*Two nine nine.*
23:54:27	*Pilot*	*Did he say they dropped us down to nine thousand?*
23:54:29	*Copilot*	*Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Nine zero.*
23:54:35	*Copilot*	*Charlie Peter Lima is forty nineteen five.*
23:54:37	*Pilot*	*Forty…*
23:54:58	*Copilot*	*We're going to put this Peter Lima thing in here. What was it?*
23:55:02	*Pilot*	*Pass me the cookies, please.*

I will copy down the rest later, but first I want to write something about the authors who were traveling on that plane. Let's start with Ibarguengoitia. He was more than a little upset because he was seated in the last row, on the aisle, with a curtain to his left that was supposed to block the odors coming out of the bathroom. But, really, the only thing the curtain did was to keep passengers in the aisle from seeing him there. People standing in line for the bathroom would get tired of standing and would sit on his armrest, which was just barely visible beneath the curtain. Logically enough, Ibarguengoitia's forearm was resting on the armrest and soon became a cush-

ion for tired prospective toilet users. It's unpleasant enough to have someone sit on your arm, but even more so if that person is in a hurry to go to the bathroom. So it's understandable that Ibarguengoitia was becoming more and more angry as he understood that flying next to the bathroom was an uncomfortable situation with no simple solution.

Scorza, on the other hand, had been totally absorbed for the last several hours in his battle with the passenger next to him, a square-jawed Spaniard with hairy forearms of a salt-and-pepper appearance, who insisted on taking over the entire armrest. He couldn't keep his arm on his side of the armrest, probably because his over-sized belly was pressing hard against his arm, making that position impossible. Nor could he put his arm on the front half of the armrest because his elbow was not that far from his shoulder. Finally, he couldn't put his arm on the rear half of the armrest because his spare tire had invaded that area. The truth be told, the Spaniard had one arm too many to be traveling comfortably on that plane. It would have been a whole lot better, Scorza was thinking, if he didn't have that arm, if he had had it cut off and was convalescing in a hospital instead of sitting on this plane. There he could be suffering from phantom limb syndrome instead of taking advantage of Scorza's kindly nature, which is what allowed the Spaniard to completely take over the entire armrest. It had taken Scorza too long to understand that the square-jawed Spaniard's notion of etiquette did not include sharing when space was scarce.

Rama had fallen asleep the minute the plane took off. He was dead tired because he had got up early to review one of the lectures that he was planning to give at the meeting in Bogotá. The purpose of his presentation was to re-vindicate Ribeyro, calling him one of the most important authors of the *Boom*[1]* and putting him ahead of the Peruvian, Mario Vargas Llosa. This was going to most certainly cause sparks to fly from that famous Arequipan author and promised to create more than one amusing scene; if not amusing, at least memorable. When he woke up, it wasn't because of the uncomfortable position

[1] Name given to an explosion of literary creativity in Latin America in the 1960's and 1970's. (*Translator's note*).

that sleeping upright requires, making it impossible to lie on your side or on your stomach, unless you happen to be as agile as a worm. It wasn't because the flight attendant smacked him on the shoulder with the refreshment cart, nor was it the little boy in the seat behind him that had been kicking him in the back. No, what woke Rama up was an odor, a human odor, powerful, offensive, an odor of dried sweat that had been sweated on again and dried again by the heat of the human body, then enclosed in a tight leather case and brought to sweat again until the rancid concentration had attained an impossible level of stench. Rama had taken off his moccasins before he went to sleep because he knew that when he flies his feet swell a bit. And if your feet are going to swell, it's best to just let them swell as they please. The passenger beside him, wearing a faded yellow T-shirt and baseball cap, had watched Rama with great interest as he took off his moccasins and decided that there was apparently nothing wrong with taking your shoes off in a plane and he did the same immediately. The man was a sailor and an electrician and his company had ordered him to get off of the ship at the first possible European port and go immediately to Madrid, where he should catch a plane for Bogotá. He was needed there to replace a shipmate who had been electrocuted while installing a new stove for a girlfriend that he had in São Paulo. The poor guy hadn't even had time to take a shower and had left the ship in the clothes that he was wearing for work. When he took off his shoes he noticed the smell, but since he was accustomed to odors thousands of times worse in the tightly sealed bunks of the cargo ship, that didn't seem to be reason enough to keep his shoes on. As soon as his toes discovered their freedom, they wiggled around like ten happy little earthworms breathing for the first time in several days. They released their special aroma that went right up Rama's nasal passages and interrupted his dream where Vargas Llosa was shouting in an incomprehensible mixture of Quechua and Spanish, something about how much class it takes to be a real Peruvian writer. Marta Traba is traveling with him, but nothing wakes her up. Her eyeballs are flitting around at top speed beneath the thin bright covers that are her eyelids. In her dream

she is running along the edge of a windy cliff of Tepuy Roraima, fleeing an animal that she calls a Griffin, although it isn't, but it does look something like an eagle.

Airplanes sometimes explode mid-flight. It's true. Nobody likes to talk about, but it does happen. They just explode, for no obvious reason. It's not surprising, when you consider that an airplane is really just a balloon made out of aluminum foil, inside of which people are watching movies that they wouldn't pay to see if they were on the ground, while soaring through the sky at meteoric speeds, separated from the abyss by a wall the thickness of a soft drink can and their indisputable faith in human genius. Naturally, we owe the discovery of metal fatigue to the airline industry. Thanks to their constant experimentation with putting human beings on airplanes, they finally understood why the fuselage will, from time to time, simply explode when the metal is finally sick and tired of being packed tight with air pressure and people wanting to visit Disneyland, and flying thousands of times up into and back down out of an atmosphere that doesn't support life. This seems to me like something pretty obvious, something that we learn with a lot of screaming and crying when we're three years old at a birthday party where a balloon settles ever so slowly down onto the lawn and teaches us this lesson with a bang. Over time, aeronautical engineers have come up with fabulous systems to keep the plane from pulverizing when it explodes in midair, the way the first ones did. Nowadays, airplanes have reinforcing bands that limit the damage to specific sections of the fuselage. Now, when the horrible event happens, the losses are limited to some poor unfortunate flight attendant who was getting ready to head down the aisle, passing out chicken, beef, or pasta, with his little cart that will now accompany him on his unexpected trip down to the ground. Sometimes the hole in the fuselage is not caused by metal fatigue, but by some inattentive luggage handler who forgets to close the luggage compartment tightly because he's worried that today he has to submit a urine sample as part of the anti-doping program and he knows that he's not going to pass. Logically, the door on the luggage compartment will wait until the plane has reached cruising altitude and veloc-

ity before flying open, being ripped from the plane, and dragging with it one single row of three seats, with the passengers duly attached to their seats by their seat-belts. As you can see, seat-belts are every bit as helpful as oxygen masks, that is to say, not at all.

The girl sitting next to me has awakened and, without moving from the position that she found most comfortable for sleeping, is looking at me with a sweet smile on her face. Given her freckles and red hair, as well as her height, she is probably Irish. She has a pleasant face, affectionate, and she's looking me over as if I were some sort of zoological specimen. I watch her staring at me out of the corner of my eye, but I can't tell if she's talking to me because I have my headset on and the insane drumming of a group that calls itself Zoviet France doesn't let me hear a thing. It's better that way because everybody knows that in conversations there are pauses during which one can start feeling the need to worry. It's better for me to stay in this trance of automatic writing that doesn't let me think of anything other than the next word. She's probably wondering about the drop of sweat that is running down my temple when the temperature in the plane has finally dropped to that bothersome chill that doesn't quite require a jacket and that you just have to put up with, in the same way prisoners everywhere put up with things. Because when you think of it, we're all prisoners here; we can't escape. Once the plane has taken off, there is no way to change your mind. All you can do is resign yourself to accept whatever happens. But we're not going to follow that particular line of reasoning here because I can easily foresee the state of claustrophobia to which it leads. So it's best I just transcribe another portion of the cockpit conversation on the ill-fated Avianca flight 011 on which Scorza, Rama, Traba and Ibarguengoitia are traveling, along with their companions on their last trip, ten minutes before the accident:

23:56:23	*Pilot*	*Listen, you people are going to work this plane on to Bogotá. All of you.*
23:56:47	*Tower*	*Avianca 11 remains in radar*

		contact and is authorized to approach Barajas, runway three three, altimeter one zero two five point seven.
23:56:59	*Copilot*	*One zero two five point seven. Authorized, approaching Madrid.*
23:57:05	*Engineer*	*Zero two five point seven*
	Copilot	*Yes, sir, around there, at one hundred thirty Vi. Ref.*
23:57:46	*Stewardess*	*Did you say something?*
	Pilot	*What, China?*
	Stewardess	*What did you say?*
	Pilot	*That you guys are working t his plane on to Bogotá.*
	Stewardess	*Why? What about the other crew?*
23:57:58	*Pilot*	*They're going to Tripadis.*
23:58:01	*Stewardess*	*But, why? They have more time than we do.*
23:58:07	*Pilot*	*That's for the higher ups, the What they say in Bogotá.*
23:58:15	*Copilot*	*Let's see.*
23:58:23	*Plane*	*(ALTITUDE ALARM SOUNDS)*
23:58:30	*Pilot*	*So we are saying that Madrid is at one thousand nine hundred and ninety eight.*
	Copilot	*Set the marker.*
23:58:36	*Pilot*	*We are going to work within a three twenty-nine with the localizer set on one hundred nine nine.*
23:58:40	*Copilot*	*Three twenty-nine.*
23:58:42	*Pilot*	*One hundred nine nine, right?*
23:58:45	*Copilot*	*We are going to cross the marker at two thousand three hundred and eighty two and in case we overshoot we go up to three thousand five hundred feet. We leave in direction three twenty-nine, we are heading for*

Getafe, crossing five thousand
NDB Getafe. We are going
up to five thousand.

The copilot's last sentence transcribed here contains an incorrect altitude, different from the altitude at which the Barajas airport is actually located. The copilot says two thousand three hundred and eighty-two (2,382) when Barajas is actually at three thousand two hundred and eighty-two (3,282) feet above sea level, a simple transposition of two digits.

The stewardesses, besides distracting the pilots with mundane questions about work schedules, also, from time to time, lower themselves to attending to passengers. Between the ritual of swabbing down the kitchen, as this phase is known among stewardesses and flight attendants, they exchange information that is vital to them about which passengers should be completely ignored during the flight because of their bad attitude, abuse of the call button, or just plain ugliness. In these exchanges, secret code words are usually used so that passengers within earshot of the kitchen can't understand. But these often have very rude meanings that I'm not going to write down here. My flight attendant, for example, is a heavyset and very effeminate black guy with a shaved head who hated me from the moment I got on the plane and has made it his mission to turn all of his coworkers against me for the simple fact that I insisted that he bring me a whiskey the second I got to my seat. He brought me one, twenty minutes after takeoff, and walked off with my twenty dollar bill, claiming that he didn't have any change and that he would get it for me later. Now there is no way to get him to come back. I must have pressed the call button at least 30 times by now, in addition to waving my arms, trying to get him to see me. The young lady next to me, of course, is smiling to herself, but not in any negative or sarcastic way, but with a certain kind of tenderness, the way someone looks at a little baby that just vomited on itself because, well, it's a little baby and can't help it.

The service crew, that includes stewardesses as well as flight attendants, are members of a lowly and generally despised caste.

The passengers don't like them, maybe because they are suspicious of their phony professional smile that you never see in their eyes. The flight crew absolutely hates them because they wear the same uniform but the only thing they have to know to get that uniform is how to recite the blurb about the emergency exits. The only time the people in the cockpit don't look down on the stewardesses is when they're planning to make sexual advances toward them, which is something that the poor stewardesses have to learn to deal with from the very first day on the job. Of course, it doesn't help that they have to live almost full time in hotels and airports. This form of global homelessness, unsupervised by a spouse, leads to a level of promiscuity among pilots and copilots, for example, that is only topped by that of doctors, who spend their days poking around in the orifices and feeling the protuberances of everybody they meet, which impacts their libido in ways you can imagine. Stewardesses live in this sort of generic purgatory that we know as airport hotels and airports. But they do this with the full knowledge that it's the interior of the plane, being on board, that is real hell. It may be that the despair produced by this lifestyle is what leads them to drug trafficking. But they are not all bad; there are a couple of good ones. The stewardess involved in the dialogue above, for example, was a Colombian girl that they nicknamed China. She was not very bright but had a good heart and was truly concerned about making her passengers' time on the plane as bearable as possible. On this particular flight she was in a particularly good mood because she was planning to stay in Madrid with a male friend from Andalucía and she expected that this visit would promote her to the rank of lover. She was hoping that they would stay in rather than go out partying because she thought they were clearly beyond that stage by now. She was in such a good mood that she handed out pillows and blankets all over the plane, knowing that they would only be used for two hours and then she would have to gather them all up again. Of course, she did this before she got the terrible news from the pilot, three minutes before midnight, that she had to stay on that plane all the way to Bogotá. To say nothing about what would happen nine minutes after

that. Marta Traba was happy to have the pillow and blanket because she was dead tired and she simply detested overnight transatlantic flights, something that nearly everyone can agree upon. Marta's sleep was undisturbed by the bad odors and the other usual bothers that are part of trying to sleep on a plane. Her dream continued uninterrupted although now the beautiful mountain, Tepuy Roraima, had been transformed into a hallway in an airport where she was running desperately to catch a plane that would take her back to Columbia and to her home, where she hadn't lived for years. When she gets there she suddenly feels a profound happiness because, finally, she had returned home. A stewardess who looks exactly like the one who had given her the pillow comes up to her and hands her a tray carrying a hamburger with the bun made of Colombian arepas. The stewardess says kindly: "Take this and forgive me for what happened before." And she made a quick curtsy, lifting the corners of her apron. Suddenly Marta, to whom this all seemed so real but at the same time so unusual, realizes that she has to be dreaming. She looks at Angel Rama, her husband, sleeping beside her in his uncomfortable airline seat, with a little pillow under his head. She gently runs a finger across his high forehead. Angel, who was awake while she was sleeping, watched her rapid eye movement beneath the thin cover of her shiny eyelids and thought how much he loved this woman. But he would love her even more if she would just wake up and talk to him, so that he could avoid talking to the sailor beside him who has discovered that he speaks Spanish and is telling him about Honduras, which is where he's from, and which has the only maritime school in Central America, the only one, he repeats emphatically, as if this were impossible. Rama nods and turns back to look at Marta, his companion on this trip that has had them crisscrossing the Atlantic, polishing the necklace of Latin American literature, only to end up stranded and broke in Paris. Suddenly he wants to hold her gently, smell her hair, and fall asleep with her, feeling her breathing on his chest.

Obviously, ships have been victimized by airplanes. For thousands of years ships were the way to cross the oceans. You had to have a good reason to board them because the risk

was considerable. The trip was usually brutal and it's not hard to imagine that, after their experience on the trip over, many would refuse to return to the ship and take the trip back. And it's more or less against this backdrop that the world was populated. Ships had an air of adventure. People spent days, weeks, months with other passengers that they knew, with whom they conversed, fell in love, hated, and sometimes even threw overboard after getting wrapped up in a fight over honor, fueled by after dinner drinks, imbibed on a deck with no other light but the moon. In a plane, on the other hand, we are reduced to such humiliating trivialities as fighting over the armrest without even looking each other in the eye. Ships no longer make transatlantic crossings for passengers, with the obvious exception of cruises, which are actually floating hotels more than ships and whose goal it is to make you forget that you're even on the high seas. When my father left to study in Spain, he went by boat from Cartagena de Indias, where he had arrived by way of the Panama Canal. He vomited regularly on every day of the 23 day trip. Like Rama, he happened to get an Italian bunk-mate whose pungent feet earned him the nickname "Stinky." It's clear that my father wanted to go to Madrid to study, otherwise he would have never gone on such a trip. But once he was there, he spent seven years away from his family with no other contact but letters because the return trip could only be the last one. When he graduated he came back on a plane. No celebrations on deck, no drinks in hand to toast the crossing of the equator. The unnaturalness of the crossing, the lack of time to fortify the spirit in order to confront the end of one era and the beginning of another, to be standing one day in front of the *Cibeles* statue in Madrid and in the Central Park of San Jose, Costa Rica, the next, was such a jolt for him that he always felt like he had lost something along the way. He returned to Madrid many times, but never found what he lost.

My little glass of whiskey finally got dumped. It spilled right onto my crotch (where else could it go, being on a plane, as I am?) This happened when the guy in front of me decided to violently push his backrest into a reclining position, putting the monitor of my laptop, which was sitting on the little table

attached to the back of his seat, under a great deal of pressure. To keep the monitor from exploding under the pressure, I pulled my laptop toward me with a powerful jerk and the little plastic glass, which was sitting beside the laptop, slipped happily from the table and fell at a constant velocity, and inevitably, toward my crotch. The girl beside me found it amusing; I did not. At least she is now trying to get the attention of the flight attendant that hates me. I hope she's going to order more whiskey. While we are waiting I learned that she's not Irish but Basque, that she's from Bilbao but lives in Madrid and that she speaks Spanish. And no matter how hard I try not to, I am blushing at the thought that she has been reading everything that I have written. She offers me her hand, smiling as she looks at my scarlet red ears, and she tells me that her name is Maitane but that people call her Maite. We shake hands and I tell her my name. At that moment the plane enters one of the many cumulus clouds that populate the sky like cotton frogs on a gigantic lake where we are the mosquito. The plane shakes violently upon running into the vapor. I squeeze her hand harder and close my eyes. These tremors push the capacity of the plane's wings to their limit. I am certain that the aluminum framework supporting the extremely heavy Rolls Royce engines is going to give at any time and we will be left without wings, a projectile full of people that are full of plans full of kids. The shaking seems to go on forever and I bear it as best I can with my eyes closed. Seconds pass, then minutes. When it finally stops, I open my eyes and am horrified to discover that I am still squeezing Maite's hand very tightly in mine, which is bigger. But Maite doesn't seem bothered, it's more like she can't take it any longer and her smile gives way to an explosion of laughter. The hostile flight attendant comes back with my change and I tell him to keep the money and bring me three whiskeys. Maite also orders one for herself. Things seem to be improving, but I'm still sweating and my hands are trembling a little bit.

Ibarguengoitia, sitting in the back of the plane, has decided to push the curtain that was protecting him from the bathroom odors back out of the way so the people standing in line would stop sitting on his arm. The bathroom odors aren't that

terrible, really, and if you don't look that way you can pretend that you're seated in a less awful part of the plane, although it doesn't get that much better. When he boarded the plane he bumped into Rama and his wife Marta, and they exchanged a few words. Rama is a guy you have to be careful around; he enjoys his own profanity. He also saw Scorza, whom he doesn't know very well, and who gave him an unfriendly look when he passed by him. Ibarguengoitia doesn't know it but Scorza doesn't like him very much, although to be frank, he doesn't hate him either. One thing that bothers Scorza, among other things, is that nothing is ever serious for Ibarguengoitia. For him, everything is a joke. That bothers Scorza, truly, because there are things that aren't funny, serious things that need to be treated seriously. While trying to control his desire to give the Spaniard an elbow in the ribs, Scorza is thinking that for Ibarguengoitia nothing matters. Staring intently at this guy who, to his utter and complete surprise, seems to be extending an arm into Scorza's seat, he is thinking that Ibarguengoitia is the way he is because everything has always come easy to him in life: grandson of a Mexican hero, funny, award winning, wealthy, famous, at least more so than he is. It bothers him, it bothers him, it bothers him. He remembers the reason why Ibarguengoitia left Coyoacán in Mexico City. It was because one day in the park he saw a cage with two coyotes in it, the symbol of Coyoacan. He decided at that point that all was lost, but, one wonders, what does he think about the poor, the Mexican Indians, those things don't bother him. He probably thinks it's funny. Like in a dream, Scorza suddenly remembers an article by Ibarguengoitia from about a month ago where he was talking about a frustrated attempt to bomb an airplane leaving Orly airport for Istanbul. His conclusion was that someone like him, at the beginning of the eighties, had a greater probability of dying at the hands of a fanatic than of winning a one hundred meter race or being elected to Congress. At this point he's happy that their flight is to Columbia through Madrid and not Greece, for example or Egypt. But Ibarguengoitia, who isn't listening to what Scorza thinks, remembers, all of a sudden, a verse that he loved from one of Scorza's poems which says:

"I'm going off to battle, be happy so that I don't die," and Ibarguengoitia decides that Scorza is definitely a better poet than novelist. This brings him to thinking about his own novel, *The Friends*, a working title he has changed ten times and will probably change ten more times. Finally, he thinks about the unexpected and pleasant similarity that he sees between Scorza and one of his characters. He decides to talk to him when the plane lands and they have to go and pick up luggage. Maybe he'll ask him if they could meet at the hotel in Bogotá and have a tequila or a pisco and discuss Scorza's verse which he, in particular, completely agrees with.

Ibarguengoita doesn't know, however, that that meeting will not be possible, because the die is already cast. In the cockpit of his plane is a pilot who has an incorrect number in his head, a mistaken altitude that he believes he must reach in order to be able to land. He is pressing on the descent lever and overriding the automatic pilot while he has this final conversation with the copilot:

00:03:50	*Copilot*	*Barajas Tower, good evening, this is Avianca eleven.*
00:03:52	*Plane*	*(Warning sound that automatic pilot has been disconnected.)*
00:03:53	*Tower*	*Avianca zero one one, good evening, authorized to land, runway three three, wind one eight zero, zero five.*
00:04:06	*Engineer*	*Cabin signs, please.*
00:04:19	*Copilot*	*There, I set the ILS, Commander I take it down or I leave it ready.*
00:04:35	*Copilot*	*As long as you don't switch it on, it will follow the heading.*
	Pilot	*Sure, of course.*
00:04:38	*Pilot*	*We're going to set this there, wait.*
00:04:41	*Copilot*	*It's set.*
00:04:47	*Pilot*	*The markers are on the ADF's?*
00:05:42	*Copilot*	*The localizer seems like it's… Some*

		thing's wrong… Wait.
00:06:05	*Plane*	*TERRAIN.*
		TERRAIN.
		WHOOP.
		PULL UP.
		TERRAIN.
00:06:09	Pilot	Okay, okay.
	Plane	WHOOP.
		WHOOP.
		PULL UP.
		WHOOP.
		WHOOP.
		PULL UP.
00:06:14	*Pilot*	*Okay. (Warning sound that automatic pilot has been disconnected.)*
	Plane	WHOOP.
		WHOOP.
		PULL UP.
		TERRAIN.
00:06:18	*Copilot*	*The terrain commander says.*
00:06:19		*FIRST IMPACT (Warning whistles that spoilers are out, accelerators in progress.)*
00:06:22		SECOND IMPACT
00:06:24	*Pilot*	*Let's see A P A*
00:06:27	*Copilot*	*Command…*

Then nothing but the silence of a blank page. My hands are trembling. I can't control them. Maite is beside me, looking at me. The expression on her face says everything. She takes my hand. With the other hand I lift my little glass of whiskey and drink it all down. I look out the window. Thousands of little white buffaloes are stampeding through the warm air over the water below. Their shadows on the surface of the water look like the freckles on Maite's face.

I know that the plane will land, that the sound of the landing gear engaging will terrify me, even though I know what it

is. I know that when the cabin signs light up it will remind me of what I have just written. I know that the landing will seem too rough, no matter how delicately the pilot sits the plane down on the black ribbon of runway. I know that when the engines are reversed to slow the plane I will think that they're going to explode, and when the plane finally stops I will understand that the impossible has happened again and that this is not the flight on which I will die, not yet. I know that as I get off the plane I will still be trembling, and having some absurd conversation with Maite. I know that I will pat the plane's fuselage right beside the door with my left hand three times upon getting off, just like I do when I get on, religiously. Maite will go off in the line for citizens of the European Union and I will get into the line for foreigners, where a young customs official will find out that I'm not carrying a copy of my hotel reservation because I normally go straight to the hotel and present myself at the reception desk. He will also discover that I don't have any cash on me because I drank it all up between the airport bar and on the plane. I normally take money out of an ATM as soon as I arrive, rather than carrying it with me during the flight. He will say to me: "Step over here, please." And I will find myself in a waiting room, seated beside a Moroccan and an Ecuadorian. I will understand that my probability of being put back on a plane in a few minutes is pretty high. When they escort us to a shuttle that is expecting to take us to the gigantic airport bus nicknamed "*La Jardinera,*" I will have to claim executive privilege and insist on speaking with a higher ranking official with more experience for whom I will fake extreme indignation, telling him that I'm going to Port Banús for a *business meeting.* The higher ranking official will inspect my two passports stapled together, gorged with visas, tattooed with stamps that show passage through Heathrow, Arlanda, Schipol, Orly, Barajas, JFK, MIA, George Bush, Toncontín, Santa Maria and 100 more that I no longer remember. And he will understand the error made when I was asked to come along in this group. Behind me, on the bus, the Moroccans are starting to protest my special treatment in Maghrebi. At the same time, a young Libyan, who looked like he had been stuffed into a suit

for this occasion but didn't speak Spanish, insisted that his case also deserved to be reviewed. When his request was denied, he passed quickly from tears to shouts to a struggle which ended with him being grabbed by four officials at the same time. Still trembling, I will return to get my bags, which will no longer be on the conveyor belt but sitting there waiting for me by themselves, just like I am now, in the enormous baggage claim area. I will find a note in the outside pocket of my smaller suitcase: "I waited for you but you didn't come out. Call me." With a number and the signature: Maite.

In just seven days I will be back in the air. My flesh, bones, and blood moving at 500 miles an hour, over a fall of 33,000 feet. But at this moment, in this big empty room, with this note in my hand, Scorza's verse suddenly lights up my surroundings with a golden flash of revelation:

I am going to battle, be happy so that I don't die.

Then I will pick up my bags and leave, with the determination that comes from the last chance to find a place outside of this purgatory, far from hell, where the call that I am about to make is not prohibited.

ODONTOLOGUS AUSTRALOPITHECUS

by LAURA FUENTES

Darwin was clearly mistaken. The evolution of the human species is nothing more than a myth.

It was time to have my wisdom teeth out, so I decided to go see my dentist. Sitting at his desk he looked like a gorilla in a nightgown. After tactfully agreeing with my diagnosis, he invited me, with the exaggerated courtesy of a knight from days of old, to climb up into the dentist chair.

First he jammed the little water nozzle thing into the back of my gums. Once he was confident that he had completely taken away my ability to speak, he prepared the syringe with anesthetic and drove it deep between my back molars.

He waited a few seconds then picked up his extraction tool and opened my mouth with a powerful tug on my chin. He very quickly broke through the surface of the gum in order to get the wisdom tooth that was developing in the base of my jaw.

Once he had a hold of it, the transformation began. He planted his knee in my thigh and, supporting himself with his free hand on my face, he crushed my eyeball. The mascara that had been on my eyelashes was now smeared on the white of my eye. I felt my nose breaking and I was glad that I wasn't wearing lipstick because by now I would have it in my hair.

After climbing on top of me he was able to get a firmer grip and he started to tug on the molar. As if pulling on the mythical sword of King Arthur, he moved over me like this massive powerful hulk. With the eye that was still intact (I couldn't help feeling like a Picasso drawing from his cubist era), I could see his wild hair, the sweat dripping from his forehead, the angry

gleam in his eyes.

But the wisdom tooth wouldn't budge. He stopped for a second and murmured with delight: "I have to break the molar inside the gum. As I squealed in horror he picked up a different instrument and began pounding away. And he kept on pounding the molar savagely as blood began to run down my neck.

At that moment, through the eye that could still see, I saw his silhouette against the light over the dentist chair. He had become a hominid from three million years ago violently striking an anvil that was giving off sparks (chips of my tooth). My dentist had become the first primitive man trying to discover fire.

He stopped pounding and removed a few fragments of the molar. He picked up the extraction tool again and, planting his size fifteen shoe on my nearly fractured leg, he bent my neck back with a jerk, removed his hand from my Picasso face and placed it on my head. He then began to pull my hair so hard that I could feel myself entering a state of premature baldness.

He tugged and tugged on the tooth until it finally came out. At that instant he straightened up under the light and emitted guttural sounds of satisfaction. He held the wisdom tooth up and studied its curved root, smiling with pleasure. All he needed to complete his cave man image was to pound his chest loudly.

He got down off me, removing the 450 pounds of forlorn mastodon that had been crushing my body. He asked me to rinse my mouth and he sat down at his desk to study, like a fascinated child, the wisdom tooth that he had just taken out of my mouth.

By the time I was finally able to sit up straight in the chair, he had prepared the bill. I knew it was going to be expensive; I was prepared for that. But what surprised me was the dentist's signature. It was a kind of scribble in the form of a bull.

Years later I learned that his family came from Altamira[2].

[2] A region of northern Spain known for its prehistoric caves containing drawings of bulls (*Translator's s note)*.

THE UGLINESS OF CHEAP HOTELS

by GUILLERMO BARQUERO

To the Hotel Aveyron dancer

The room stunk. It was the same stink that he knew so well from so many hotel rooms: a mixture of the sweat of thousands of bodies that had been in the place and the smell of motors of little vacuum cleaners that leave invisible lint. Carpeting does not help to freshen the place up; there's an accumulation of dust, debris, insects, and feces of invisible little animals that accumulate unnoticed over the years.

The spiral staircase was something that he could have called "beautiful," or at least "strange," or, more accurately, "strangely beautiful." He climbed the three levels that led to the half golden, half rust-colored, doorknob. The room didn't have a number. Since he didn't have much money, it didn't seem odd to him that the guy at the desk, a perfectly likable fellow, the professional receptionist of small hotels in big cities, polite, smiling, and patient with those who don't know the language very well, had given him the key that simply said "Ellie." Since the room was one of the last ones down the hall, it couldn't be confused with the others, which were all perfectly numbered. "The Ellie room, sir," the guy had told him, in his neutral French that he used with the Chinese and the Turks, who barely knew two words of that language. He, Manuel, knew somewhat more than two words of French and smiled as he took the key, which was on an enormous, ridiculous, and cold key ring.

He stepped into the room and was struck by the unpleasant aroma of millions of different kinds of sweat: fatigue, love, fights, and sudden nocturnal punches thrown by forgotten

nightmares. He opened the window and his fingers felt the impact of the cold outside. He had never seen snow before and, as he watched the large celestial flakes fall from the sky, he realized, as he stood at the third floor window, that he had never felt such cold before either, in spite of the jacket, the black gloves, the ridiculous scarf, and the thermal underwear that he had purchased before leaving his country. He touched the grid that was covering the heater and that was painted the same cream color as the rest of the room. It looked like it hadn't worked for years and was only kept in the room to give the impression of warmth and normalcy, within the limits of what could be expected in a one-star hotel. He had been in two other one-star hotels, and the heater worked fine in those. But here there was nothing more than this cream-colored grid mute and ornamental.

He instinctively took the pack of cigarettes out of the left pocket of his jacket. There were only three left and they were all pretty wrinkled up. Maybe they had gotten damaged during the walk from his last hotel, a trek of ten city blocks. That hotel was of the same class as this one, just a few euros more expensive. His lighter, in the form of a small revolver, amused him. Despite having studied it for hours on end the night before, studying each and every detail of the trigger, the handgrip, and the cylinder, which did not turn, now, in the room called "Ellie," he was looking at it again. Held in a vertical position, the little silver-plated device shot out a spindle shaped flame in the same way that a real revolver would have shot lead bullets. It made him laugh when he lit the cigarette and his face was full of smoke, making his eyes water as they were slightly irritated.

He picked up the can. It was the second thing that he had noticed upon entering the room, the acrid odor being the first. It felt like somebody had just recently taken it out of the refrigerator. That was the good thing about cheap hotels; you could find a can of beer that somebody had left behind like a kind of gift from the previous guest, or maybe a token welcome gift left by the owners of the hotel. He was debating whether or not he should put it back in the fridge, but then he found his fingers covered with foam as he lifted the little metal tab that, in the

silence around him, made a sound like the explosion of a small, harmless, hand grenade. He took a sip and was surprised not to be disgusted by the taste, since it turned out that only the can was cold. The liquid inside, bitter and fragrant, was at a temperature that reminded him of beer that had been sitting on a table for more than half an hour, which is when it starts to warm up and taste like something else.

Somebody opened the door. "Water, water," said a mouth that was part of a man entering the room carrying a vacuum cleaner in his hand. Manuel didn't understand what the guy was trying to say. He was a little black man who smelled like the carpeting in the room. Or maybe he had accumulated all of the odors of all of the carpeting in all of the rooms that he had vacuumed with his gray vacuum cleaner with little rubber wheels, today or all these years, if it had been years, that he had been working in this hotel.

"I don't understand, sir," replied Manuel, raising his hands in the air, meaning that he would be able to understand if the man spoke a little more slowly.

He repeated the word two times more, raising the thumb of his right hand to his lips, making the unmistakable gesture meaning "I'm drinking something."

Manuel understood that the man from the hotel was offering him water, which he accepted, nodding his head.

After bringing a pitcher of water and a small clear plastic glass, the man began to vacuum the room. Manuel took his second to last cigarette out of the pack and began to smoke. This time he gave no thought to his revolver-shaped lighter. The constant and bothersome noise of the vacuum cleaner made him forget, for a few seconds, about the cold, which hadn't let up. He excused himself and left the room.

Descending the spiral staircase, he could hear the sound of the vacuum cleaner fading in the distance along with the odor of the man and the carpeting. And the image of the dead heater was fading little by little as well. Our memories of hotels fade. They have to fade, he thought to himself in a muted sort of way, more as if he were reading these thoughts than thinking them. What you see and smell in hotels, the odor of millions of

different kinds of sweat, the noises from the showers and the bathroom sinks, the screams muffled by the walls, have to die like burned photographs of an unpleasant and boring vacation, he was thinking as he arrived at the hotel's front door.

The ground was covered with snow. A great white carpet, slippery and dirty where people had already walked on it, or where the natural color of the sidewalk underneath it was starting to show through, was reflecting the last rays of the day's light. Or was it the brightness of late afternoon in Paris, something to which he had not yet become accustomed? At this hour, he thought, it would be completely dark in his country or, at least, the light would not have this consistency of neither day nor night but rather an undefined sort of mixture that the sun creates before it goes into hiding. He flipped his cigarette butt to the ground without worrying about stepping on it to put it out. He laughed at the effect that the snow has: no need for either refrigerators or ashtrays; the snow was this omnipotent being that not only prevented fires but kept things from spoiling.

A man passed in front of him, greeting him with something that was neither a gesture nor a word but rather an attitude taken on by his whole body, which shrunk ever so slightly as it slipped by the obstacle that was Manuel standing like an idiot blocking the door of the Horloge Hotel. Manuel walked to the corner, which was barely twenty yards away, carefully planting each foot on the snowy ground before taking a step. The sidewalk seemed to be rejecting his body, like a drop of oil laid on the body of a dead person. He moved along by holding onto the bricks and stones that jutted out of walls of the ancient buildings that were standing there like mummies next to the sidewalk. On the corner, he held himself up by grabbing onto a small metal railing that surely was put there so that old people could brace themselves before crossing the street. The snowflakes had stopped falling, but the cold seemed to him to be the same as before, steady and merciless. He imagined himself bare-naked in the middle of the street, dying of the temperature, which was surely only a few degrees below freezing. The taste of the beer, half of which he left in the can back

in the room, the vacuum cleaner man probably drank the rest of it, he thought, was rising up to his nose through his partially opened mouth. Because of the cold, the smell of the beer was coagulating and sticking to the place where a mustache should go, that little patch of skin above the upper lip.

Two guys came out from one of the corners near where Manuel was standing and observing the changes in the thin skiff of snow on the cement and the cars parked along the side of the street. One of them called out in a voice that sounded like a shout. He was gesticulating wildly, as if the snow or the cold, or maybe his own shouting, had suddenly driven him crazy. Manuel felt the other one's arm grasp him. He was a fat guy taller than him and Manuel could feel the skin of his hand through his black leather glove. They both spoke basic French clumsily and, as absurd as the situation may have seemed, Manuel understood them to say that they were the French police. "We are the French police, we are the French police," repeated the guy who was shouting, staring at Manuel with his blue eyes, which were popping out of their sockets and seemed inhuman. He was moving the fingers on his right hand in a gesture that meant "money;" he was frantically ordering Manuel to take out his money.

"I don't understand," replied Manuel, in a French that was more correct than that spoken by these two policemen, who were obviously not only impostors but idiots to boot.

"We are the French police," repeated the guy with the blue eyes, while the other one continued to grip Manuel's right forearm in his gloved hand. Manuel felt that he had to remove his right hand from his jacket pocket because he didn't want any physical contact to crush his last cigarette.

The guy with the blue eyes kept making the "money sign" with his thumb and forefinger, producing a small clicking sound that was like a fourth voice on this afternoon of half melted snow. Manuel took out his wallet. The guy that was holding him grabbed the wallet and took out the two bills that Manuel had there; he raised his eyebrows as if to say: "This is all you have, ass hole?" Manuel simply shrugged his shoulders, meaning that he couldn't care less what the man thought about how much

money was in his wallet. At this point, he was thinking about his passport and the two twenty-euro bills folded inside of it, all of it stuffed into his ridiculous thermal underwear. "That's all I've got, that's all I've got," Manuel repeated several times in a quivering sort of Spanish that was so different from what he would've used in any other circumstance. "Sons of bitches," he said in a very loud voice, because he knew they wouldn't understand him, and he started to walk away. The blue-eyed man shouted something incomprehensible, like nearly all of the words that Manuel had heard or said in the last few minutes. He could feel himself sweating under the jacket and the two shirts, in spite of the cold outside. It seemed to him like, just as with the carpeting and the millions of different varieties of perspiration in hotel rooms, the odor of the snow was timeless, cumulative: wet cement, bodies in constant motion, water that is held stagnant by the cold until the ice completely disappears and is swallowed up by the countless city sewers.

Upset by the encounter with the two men, who were now beginning to follow him, shouting in a language that was neither French nor Spanish nor Arabic nor any other dialect on earth, he didn't have time to grab onto the railing but slipped and fell on the cold ground. He felt like he had landed hard on the frozen skeleton of a mastodon. The two men picked him up and helped him get himself together, all the while continuing to utter incomprehensible words. The three started to walk together; the few people who had gone out on this January 2nd did not show the slightest bit of interest in this multicolored block of unfortunate beings. Manuel thought about his last cigarette, his luck, and what was probably left in the pack that he was carrying in the pocket of his jacket.

When they arrived at the door of the Horloge Hotel, he suddenly wrestled himself free of the hold that the men had on him, thinking briefly of a scene from a *film noir.*

The mixture of hot sweat running down his back, the ice that had soaked him upon his fall, the poor heating system at the hotel entrance and the memory of the ice on the sidewalks, immediately drowned out the sound of the yelling and screaming by the two men that he had left outside. At the reception

desk, the likable guy with his professionally neutral smile raised his eyes from a large wrinkled newspaper and looked at him. Manuel wondered for a second if he might be a Frenchman raised abroad.

"Is something wrong?" the man asked in French. Although Manuel had not understood each and every word, he understood the question. The man was smiling at him as if he had a perpetual motion machine in his mouth. Hotel receptionists are always smiling, Manuel said to himself, as he thought about the cold he was feeling from the ice melting on his jacket and part of his pants, and the two men outside, whose voices were no longer audible. He wanted to say that he was fine, but only made a very simple gesture, like that of a child, or someone who is mentally ill.The man behind the desk mumbled something and went back to reading his newspaper, continuing to smile.

The spiral staircase had the same odor as the rest of the hotel, the same odor that he had perceived coming from the landings of other stairways, since his arrival in the city. His father had told him that in Paris muggings did not take place in the way they were accustomed to. There were no knives or guns or absurd struggles or blows. Parisian thieves were refined scammers. Manuel was a quasi-victim of a stupid scam and, as he was walking up the steps and back to his room, he was checking out his various limbs to make sure that his body, his life, his passport, and his cigarette were real. As he came to his door, he saw a handmade sign that simply read: "Ellie." He did still have the key and, as he opened the door, he felt his body taken over by that bothersome and persistent form of shaking that only happens to a body when it is thousands of miles from home and, in addition, in an absurd situation.

Once inside the room, he was assaulted by the stale odor of the thousands of sweating bodies that had been there before him. Just like him, they may have been lying on the bed, or meditating, making love, masturbating, thinking about suicide or about passion, praying or reading. The light coming in from the outside was being buffered by something that was either a curtain or just a reddish piece of cloth hanging over the dirty windows. And that light was changing by the minute. It was

that ill-defined time of day that could either be the beginning of night or the first light of day. He was surprised to see the can of beer sitting on the coffee table just as he had left it before going out. The rest of the room was almost exactly the same as well. The guy with the vacuum cleaner may have straightened a few of the hangers in the closet that was missing its doors. While vacuuming, he may have gone to the trouble of moving Manuel's open suitcase, which was spilling its contents all over, but he had only moved it by a little bit.

He went over to the window. Snowflakes were no longer falling. According to something he had read on a sign with orange letters on a black background, on one of the streets that he had walked along, it rarely snows in Paris, and much less on January 2nd. He also thought that this could be the last time that he would see snow, and that didn't worry him or make him sad a bit. The damn snow that had melted and then frozen again on his clothing was making his skin feel like it was being pierced by sharp little points. It was a cold that he had never felt before, a cold that had no shape or form. In fact, the smell of the snow, which had by now completely disappeared from the sidewalks and the streets, was rising up to the window where Manuel was leaning out ever so slightly. That ice, changed into water and then into vapor, a steaming form of filth, smelled of so many things that were repugnant or nameless that it quickly erased all of the photos that he remembered of Alpine landscapes or children playing in the snow, making their horrible snowmen in Canada or the United States.

He thought about the three nights, including this one, that he would be in Paris before leaving the city, the country, the continent. He was feeling more hungry than nostalgic, but he didn't have much money, at least not enough to treat himself to anything special. And he had already been eating poorly. He stuck his hand into his thick, uncomfortable, thermal underwear and managed to reach his passport. He pulled it out. He was surprised to see his photo and, at nearly the same time, the two twenty-euro bills that still belonged to him, as well as the coins that he had been accumulating from buses, the subway, and the cheap tasteless meals that he had been buying in the

street. He thought about the two guys and what he would've done if they had actually stripped him out on that thin layer of snow and left him without his emergency money. "Money! Money!" They shouted furiously in their rudimentary French. He was planning on saving some of that money to get himself back home.

When he felt that the sweat on his back was drying, he leaned out the window. The light was surreal. It was not as cold. He heard water running somewhere and thought that maybe it was one of the communal showers that can be found in the hallways of cheap hotels. He tried to calculate the number of bodies that had passed through those showers since the construction of the hotel. He didn't know the exact date of its construction, or in what year it became a hotel, but it was certainly at least two hundred years ago, maybe more. How many different forms and varieties of filth could have run together down those drains, and from the drains down to the sewers, in the freezing cold winters and insufferably hot summers? He took off his scarf and turned around facing the grid on the heater, the actual word for which he had to admit he didn't know. For some reason, he remembered that the man at the reception desk had told him that it wasn't working but that he could give him some extra blankets and lower the charge for the room. He wasn't cold, but he thought about what it could be like in the very early hours of the morning and in the predawn hours, which could last forever in the winter of this gray city. That's when the temperature dropped and the odors from the carpeting and the wallpaper stagnated, when you would light a cigarette and the smell of the smoke hung in the air like a greasy hand that was trying to smother a child.

He looked to the right and to the left and down into the street. A woman walked from one side to the other in his field of vision; she walked slowly, making noise when she stepped on the dirty ice, which by now would be more accurately called water, or wet filth, or crud. To the extreme left of his field of vision, he could make out the two men leaning against the façade of one of the buildings. He felt a stream of blood shoot from his heart to the rest of his body. Instinctively he felt his

jacket pockets. In a split second, before he could get his head back inside and close the small rectangular window, he realized that they had found him from outside the building. The sound of water running in the distance had stopped. Without even thinking about it, he found his pack of cigarettes. To his surprise, he discovered that the last one was still completely white and, although wrinkled, was not in any worse shape than it was in before. He put it on the coffee table, beside the beer. He took a sip from the can. The new taste that the beer had acquired was totally disgusting, like the smell of the room, concentrated by the passage of this day that was fully in the process of disappearing. The beer tasted like a pillow, like drool, sweat, or bloodied throw rugs.

He left his passport in the room, as well as the lighter shaped like a little revolver, his belt, the coins, the metro tickets and a map that was so wrinkled that it made the city unrecognizable. As he looked back, it struck him that those things looked like objects found in a criminology textbook, accompanied by one of those disturbing photos where the eyes of the cadaver are disguised or covered over after the fact with a black band. He took the two twenty-euro bills with him, folded up in his right fist. He closed the door and crossed the chilly hallway to arrive at the shower room. He washed his body that didn't smell like anything, or that had lost its odor in the winter that he had never experienced before, or that had smelled but had been purified by the snow. In his foggy state of mind, making every effort not to think about anything, Manuel imagined the water being heated by some electrical mechanism that had been implanted in the bowels of the old hotel like a cancer. The hot water was sucking the odor of lint and mites out of his body, as well as the cold that had been embedded in his skin. It was also dulling the sensations of having been mugged and of having to travel in a foreign country without very much money. He stuck his head out of the shower due to the same instinct of self-preservation as before, a feeling that was growing with each passing minute of the day that was ending. The two bills, folded tightly and barely recognizable, were on top of the towel, next to the deodorant. He had put everything on top of the

white toilet, the finish of which was starting to peel away. He finished showering, thinking about the fact that he only had two more nights: this one was already over, had already expired. The recent events of this evening would be erased during the night, the black night of winter in Paris, which was not at all the way he had always imagined it. It was not romantic, not literary, not seductive and not lyrical. It was cold, smelly, suspicious and ordinary, like a prostitute of the lowest kind. Or a festering infection.

The first thing that he noticed upon entering the room "Ellie" was the complete and total change in the light. The room had now been taken over by genuine nighttime. He threw the can of beer into a small plastic wastebasket. The sound the can made in the basket, caused by the chilled liquid and its aroma that spread around the room, gave him an uncomfortable feeling that was neither hunger nor thirst, but rather a desire to waste the night, to drink straight from a bottle of cheap red wine, the kind that people were drinking on the 31st of December, almost three days ago. He went back over to the window. He remembered the feeling of his body slamming against the cement sidewalk covered with that scaly skin of snow, and the moment when he first saw the two men, who were now standing in front of the Horloge Hotel. They were arguing in a low voice and, the second Manuel leaned out of the window, they looked up at him the way one looks up at the full moon, in complete silence, and never asking yourself why you do it. That same instinct of self-preservation made him quickly pull his head back in from the window. He thought about calling the police, then he realized that would be impossible. He would be hard-pressed to give any precise information to the person that answered his call. He didn't know what number to call and he didn't know how to use the phone for local emergency calls. He had only used public telephones a few times to call home, and he did that with phone cards that came with simple illustrations on how to use the phone. He didn't know how to say "tie" in French, much less "plush jacket," "wicked blue eyes," or "a guy a little taller than me but much heavier."

He left the "Ellie room," planning to climb down all of those steps to the reception desk in order to alert the man with the immutable smile about the two men out in the street. Outside of the room, he found the hallway to be totally dark. Manuel put his hand on his chest. He stood motionless, talking himself out of going down the stairs. He was nervous. He wanted a beer, but one that was very cold, in a bottle, five thousand miles from there, in the bar that was about a mile from his house in San Jose, Costa Rica.

He returned to the room. He went over and leaned out the window again. The two men were staring at him. Even though the distance was considerable, they looked to him like they were not breathing, not blinking, not even alive, until one of them, the short one with blue eyes, started shouting unintelligible exclamations. He raised his hands and moved them around like the blades of a windmill. He kicked the ground and gave Manuel a look that meant that he wanted him to come down to the street because they had a score to settle. Manuel looked at them both without saying a word. He was thinking about the content of his likely nightmares, about the smell of the night, which was no longer the smell of melted snow but rather the cement below, which was exuding not only centuries of history but also innumerable days of small and seemingly harmless bits of garbage. He went back to the coffee table and picked up the lighter shaped like a small revolver. He started to play with it, smiling as if the filth and ugliness of this night had zapped his brain. In spite of the fact that the room wasn't being heated by the broken down, ornamental, heater, it wasn't too cold. He aimed the revolver at the guy with the blue eyes, then he pointed it at the fat man who was a little taller than him. He raised one of the fingers on his right hand, making a gesture telling them to go to hell. The two men spoke between themselves. Their muffled voices filled the street and, from the third-floor window, where Manuel was observing them, those voices became a buzzing sound that released a pale white steam like the words of devils that solidify in the night.

A few minutes later, the fat man who was taller than Manuel spoke slowly toward the hotel window, gesturing and moving

his mouth wildly. His hands appeared to be pleading and the rest of his body was communicating some unacceptable, unimaginable defeat. Manuel, leaning out of the window, observed the gestures and movements, but did not understand a single word. The man seemed to be crying; it was obvious from his trembling voice. That was not French, or maybe it was a distorted form of French spoken in some colony. But it could have been something completely different, something not related in any way to a romance language. The man did not stop. He kept up what seemed to be a prepared speech that he had learned decades ago, or a soliloquy from some unknown play. The guy with the blue eyes looked back-and-forth from his companion to Manuel, like a disinterested puppet. Manuel thought about the Parisian scammers, about life in the city that he would be leaving in a couple of nights, about the smell of the hotels, and the filth of everything touched by everyone else.

He reached for the pack of cigarettes and, using the small silver-plated revolver, managed to light the wrinkled white cylinder. Once again, the smoke made his eyes water. He blew the smoke to his right. The man below, on the sidewalk across the street, continued his speech and his pleading gestures, expelling his own smoky steam with each word. We all blow the same smoke, thought Manuel. We take the same steps, we touch the same things, we sweat the same sweat. He himself would beg, leaning against the façade of some building in his city, thousands of miles from there, in a city that is poorer than this one but just as full of scams, pleas, and outstretched, begging hands. Or he would watch other people begging, if things were going well for him.

He closed the window. Even with the noise of the voice below, distant and unintelligible, he was determined to go to sleep. He raised the fingers that held the cigarette to his nose; the smell of burnt tobacco was unpleasant. The soliloquy of the tall fat man seemed to blend with the sweaty smell of the carpeting, the odor of the sheets, the aged breathing of the wood. He felt the early morning cold.

LITTLE CARDBOARD BOXES

by DANIEL QUIRÓS

Irene liked the evening because it was the beginning of her day. She wasn't comfortable when the sun was high in the sky, when silhouettes of the human anthill were scurrying around like lost souls outside her window. The end of the afternoon, when the sun was painting the walls a golden hue, was like a distant sigh that assured her that she was one day closer to her death. Otherwise time went by, superfluous, useless, with an odor of senselessness, tainted with an illusion of days, weeks, months and years. Nothing made any sense, only the evening.

Outside, the timid September wind barely moved the branches of the almond tree in front of her window. At a given moment, when the sun was reflecting on the branch closest to her studio, she would go and put the teakettle on to boil and get the bag of coffee that her mother mailed her monthly from her native land. She would open the bag slowly, letting the aroma of her childhood, coffee plants, rain and cilantro, fill the apartment. Then she would fill the plastic teaspoon with the dark powder, and let the grains fall slowly into the French press, like grains of sand falling through an hourglass. While waiting for the water to boil, she would rest her hands on the small ledge in front of the window, pleased to see the day breathe its last shimmers of gold and purple.

The studio was situated on a small hill, behind the almond tree and three palm trees with dense foliage. It was a spy's look-out where you could watch the passers-by and the traffic without being seen. The window was the last thread that connected her to the outside world. She preferred it that way, to be anonymous to movement beyond the window, like when she was a

little girl and would let herself sink to the bottom of the pool to listen to the distorted sounds, holding her breath until the last possible moment, when her lungs burned from the need for air and she had to get back to the surface, more out of instinct than desire.

The teakettle boiled, calling Irene from her place in front of the dusty windowpane. She picked it up with a small purple towel and poured it above the cup, watching the water fall through a cloud of steam. Outside the window the sound of an engine filled the street with anticipation. An instant later Irene watched the moving van pull up to the apartments in front of her studio. There were six apartments and they were striking because they gave the block the look of a neighborhood in San Francisco, something out of the ordinary in southern California. They had identical facades painted a light grey, and large windows that let in the light, as well as the gaze of curious onlookers. Irene spent most nights in her apartment in the dark, sitting in front of her window with a cup of coffee, slipping unnoticed into the lives of her neighbors. For the last two weeks the lights in apartment #3 had been off at night. The couple that lived there had separated. Irene had watched them fighting night after night. Without knowing what they were saying, Irene was convinced that the woman had a lover. She was not surprised that the apartment had rented again so quickly because it was a very desirable neighborhood.

The engine stopped just as Irene was sitting down at the table beside the window. It was a gigantic moving van, probably the biggest model owned by the moving company whose logo was painted on the sides of the trailer. A man of average stature got down from the truck. He was wearing jeans and a black T shirt. He had no unusual features, nothing that would make him stand out in a crowd. Irene even found herself feeling a bit guilty that she was disappointed in her new neighbor. Over the next few hours she watched this solitary man unload the truck, moving all of his possessions, box by box. He did everything at the same pace and in the same order: he would climb up into the back of the moving van, push one of the boxes to the edge, get back down, take the box in his hands, climb the nine steps

up to the main entrance of the building, turn right, disappear in the hallway for a few seconds, reappear in the doorway of the empty apartment, sit the box down beside the others, then go back down and repeat the process all over again. The surprising thing was that every one of the boxes was identical, small cardboard boxes that measured six inches on every side, made of the same cardboard, no label, nothing more than a piece of Scotch tape on the top and bottom of each box.

For several hours the man went up and down, up and down, with the same little boxes. Irene drank cup after cup of coffee while she watched the man intently, thinking that it would take him forever to unload that gigantic truck, one little box at a time. At midnight the man came down the steps from the building, opened the door on the passenger side of the moving van, took out a small bag and went back to sit down on the third step. In the bag there was a bottle of water, a sandwich, a cookie, and a toothpick. When he finished eating, he used the toothpick while he gazed at the stars and digested his meal.

Irene couldn't understand her curiosity about this man. He wasn't attractive, there was nothing special about his clothing, and she had never heard him utter a word. There was just something special about the way he unloaded his boxes. He did it without appearing to be happy or sad, he didn't move too fast or too slow, he did not even seem to be aware of the world around him; he walked unhurriedly, at the pace of someone who was spending a Sunday in the park. Box after box he followed the same rhythm, always looking straight ahead. His perfect posture gave the impression that he was proud of himself, pleased to be carrying the boxes up to the apartment. At three in the morning the man closed the door in the back of the moving van, climbed the steps, and entered the empty apartment. The place was already pretty full and the man had to make a space among the piles of boxes in order to lie down on the carpeted floor and go to sleep.

Irene sat in silence for an hour, looking at the darkness in the apartment from her studio, before deciding to go to bed. But she couldn't sleep. She changed positions, threw her pillows on the floor, searching for the thread of sleep among

her blankets. But she couldn't forget the face of the man with the boxes. She saw him on the chalkboard of her unconscious, climbing those nine steps, carrying his little cardboard boxes one at a time up to his room. Why hadn't he packed his things in bigger boxes? Why didn't he carry more than one box at a time? That way it wouldn't take so long, it would be more efficient, and he could finish quicker. Didn't he have some family member or a friend that would help him? With more people helping he could empty the van no problem, surely in half the time. When daybreak came to paint the white sheets with its shy morning touch, Irene was still awake. In the early morning silence the ceiling fan was creating a gentle breeze. As the fan blades turned, Irene entertained herself counting the times the same blade would pass by a stain on the ceiling: 52… 83… 112… 174… 222. Each time the fan blade completed a circle, she would see the face of the man with the boxes. Could he be counting his little boxes the same way?

Irene woke up in a sweat, feeling anxious, as if she didn't recognize the same old sheets and the stained ceiling with the fan circulating the stale air. Exhausted, she got up to make herself a cup of coffee. In front of the apartment building the moving van was still sitting there, like a harmless giant. The kitchen clock said 2:30 when Irene saw the man come down the steps from his building, buy a newspaper, and go over to the café on the corner. At 5:30 he came out of the café and went straight to the moving van. From day's end until the following daybreak he unloaded little boxes that were identical to the ones he had unloaded the night before. At midnight he took the same break, sitting on the same step, eating the same sandwich, and the same cookie. At three in the morning the man made himself a space in the room full of boxes. Then he lied down on the carpeted floor and went to sleep. The man followed the same schedule for the next two weeks: he unloaded the truck throughout the night and Irene followed his every move with a curiosity that she couldn't explain.

Inside the man's apartment there was barely any room left, just a narrow little path that went from the doorway to the center of the bedroom and then to the bathroom, fighting its

way through the piles of little boxes. Irene couldn't sleep, trying to understand why the man hadn't opened the boxes, or why he was still sleeping on the floor, surrounded by mountains of cardboard. It was simply inconceivable that someone would pack up their worldly possessions in such little boxes, wasting so much time unloading them and storing them. What could one of those little boxes hold? Maybe a plate, a glass, a shirt, a shoe, a hat; something that could be put together with other things, little by little, to make a life or have a purpose.

Exactly two weeks after he arrived, just before three in the morning, the man unloaded the last of the boxes. Inside the truck, all that could be seen was a reflection of the night outside, and apartment #3 looked like it was about to burst with cardboard. In the silence of the early morning, Irene could feel her heart beating in her chest to the rhythm of the fan blades: 52… 83… 112… 174… 222. She was sure that the man would open the boxes now, would unpack the mystery that was consuming her. But the man showed no emotion whatsoever. If he was happy about finishing the job, it didn't show. After sitting the last little cardboard box down in the apartment, the man's facial expression did not change a bit, nor did his calm and measured step. It was five minutes till three in the morning when the man came down the steps, closed the back door of the moving van, locked it with a padlock that he had in the bag, and went back up to lie down in his usual spot and go to sleep. Irene couldn't go to sleep, terrified by the thought that he might start opening the boxes without her being there to watch. She decided to stay up, convinced that the great mystery would be resolved the next day.

The next day the man came down the steps at the usual time and headed for the café on the corner. Irene was thinking that as soon as the man came out he had to start opening the boxes. After all, he did like to work at night. But when the man came out of the café at 5:30 and returned to the apartment full of boxes he didn't do anything. After going to the bathroom, he lay back down on the floor, surrounded by boxes, crossed his arms behind his head, and contemplated the sky through the window. Night came in like the tide, slowly, and enveloped the

sky with a bright October moon. A gentle breeze rustled the branches of the almond tree, drawing a labyrinth of shadows on the studio's white walls. Sitting in the dark, Irene could see the man's silhouette, still stretched out among the boxes, arms still crossed behind his head, contemplating the stars. Fatigue was catching up with her; her nerves were shattered by the caffeine. She was losing patience waiting for any kind of movement, the slightest sign of something happening. But nothing happened. At daybreak, Irene made herself another cup of coffee and looked over at the man sleeping peacefully among the little cardboard boxes.

At 2:30 the man went into the café on the corner. He came out at the usual hour and walked over to the parked moving van. He's going to do something; he has to do something, thought Irene. After opening the rear door of the moving van, the man walked back up the nine steps and entered the apartment full of boxes. Irene had gotten out of her chair and went over to press against the window pane, like a little girl outside the window of a department store at Christmas time. She didn't realize that her hands were pressing the window sill so tightly that her fingernails were digging into the white paint. The man picked up a little cardboard box, went down the hall, down the nine steps, and loaded the box onto the empty truck. Irene felt the strength going out of her legs. Exhausted, she fell back into the chair by the window and watched in desperation as the man did his job all over again, in reverse. Not even the slightest change of expression was visible on the man's face. The look was the same, as was his proud posture and steady pace. One box at a time, he loaded the gigantic moving van all over again.

Irene watched the man work for two weeks. One at a time the windows in the other apartments would go dark and the early morning silence would be broken only by the occasional barking of a dog or the noise of a passing car. Against the background of that silence, Irene followed the echo of the footsteps made by the man with the boxes. She saw him in the light of that solitary street, a human silhouette that seemed to be following his own shadow as he went up and down, up and down, those nine steps. Night after night he worked, always

ending up in the same place on the carpeted floor, sleeping like a child without a care in the world. Meanwhile the mountains of little boxes were starting to melt away, like anthills that were being taken down one grain at a time.

Irene couldn't tear herself away from the window. Her day started when the man went over to the café on the corner. She anxiously awaited the moment when he would begin his nocturnal march. Sometimes she felt as if she were walking alongside him as he climbed the steps for the last time and found his usual place on the carpet. Thanks to the light from the street that entered the man's apartment like a ray of sunlight streaming through the window, she could see him stretched out on the carpet and wanted to stroke his hair as he slept. When she would finally find her way back to her own covers, Irene's mind was invaded by visions of cardboard boxes and the incessant march of that man carrying them like an unstoppable tide. She would wake up in the morning exhausted, unable to remember for sure whether she had slept or not. Frantically she would reach for the clock beside her bed to make sure that it wasn't time yet for the man to come down the steps and go over to the café on the corner.

It took the man exactly two weeks to fill the truck back up. On the last night, when the man finally put the last box on the moving van and locked the big door with the padlock he carried in his bag, Irene couldn't sleep at all. She didn't know what to expect. Sitting in darkness until the soft light of a new day found her, she was torn between an ardent desire that something happen and the absolute terror that it all might come to an end. That day the man didn't do anything at all, just like on the day when he had finished unloading the truck over two weeks ago. Unable to sleep, unable to make herself move away from the window, drinking cup after cup of coffee, Irene waited with an impatience that grew from an emotion into a physical sensation. When the man finally came out of the café at 5:30 on the second day, Irene wanted to shout at him through the window pane to make him stop whatever he was going to do. Calmly the man opened the big back door of the moving van and removed one of the cardboard boxes. He's going to unload

it all over again, thought Irene; this can't be happening. But the man didn't start to unload the truck. He took the box he had in his hands and he placed it on the sidewalk in front of the apartment building. Then he turned and looked up at Irene. There was no way that he could have seen her. Surely he could not have noticed that she was watching him all those nights of loading and unloading. But there was no way to deny that for a few seconds, an eternity of seconds, he was looking at her. There was no doubt whatsoever, he had looked at her. Then, without saying anything, with no more warning than the same steady pace that he always used, he returned to the back of the truck. After locking the rear door with the same padlock, he climbed up into the cab and started the engine. Standing at the window, Irene watched the moving van drive away.

Without knowing why, Irene ran toward the door of the studio. She felt as though she were seeing herself from the outside, as if her body had never left the chair by the window. From high above, behind the almond tree and the palm trees, she watched herself cross the street and run toward the little cardboard box on the sidewalk. The sun was painting the front of the apartment buildings a rich golden color like ripened wheat. She spun around, almost expecting to see herself through the window up on the small hill. She stooped down, picked up the box and started to open it. A chilly wind told her it would soon be nighttime as she struggled to break through the scotch tape on the top of the box. Then she felt as if she were watching herself, in that desolate street, in front of those apartments that looked like they belonged in San Francisco, holding an empty cardboard box at nightfall.

THE CIRCUS OF DESIRES

by CIRUS SH. PIEDRA

The woman who gives herself just because,
because of loneliness, because of being forgotten…
NICANOR PARRA

She who, in the blink of an eye, is singing José Feliciano's latest hit. She who was guilty at fifteen, at forty, and at thirty. She who looks out of the corner of her eye to see if it's the twenty-eighth day or if she has to make up some kind of excuse. She who wipes from front to back, because of the thing about infections. The very same one who, that afternoon when the weather was so beautiful, was so happy. The one who felt lost, who couldn't sleep, who was awake all night, who, at the thought of loneliness, looks around for someone new, silently imagining studs for herself. She, the sower of omens, who got up this morning at 5:00 am to get to her soap opera on time. She who watches the soap, the whole soap, then opens her eyes and gets in the shower, making the same identical moves under the water as she did yesterday. She's the same one who, stepping out of the shower, continues humming Feliciano, that handsome Feliciano; she who admired handsome Feliciano, she who gave herself completely to the first man who whistled at her over her shoulder, that same afternoon when she gave it up at fourteen, at thirteen, at twelve. The same one who thought about God day in and day out, and went to church on Sundays. The one that no one could ever figure out. The spy in the doorways. A liar through and through, she could see her purse reflected in her shoes, an aesthetically impeccable body. Legs straight, chin thrust forward, even if you fall into the holes in the street, the woman who was her friend and mother used

to tell her, she who is watching the soap opera somewhere else now and who also used to invent studs under the sheets. She who wears very high heels, uncomfortable, the kind that can come off at any time. She who packs her handbag, throws in the cell phone, eyebrow pencil, pocket calendar, thread, needle, sanitary napkins, condoms (just in case), photos, keys, heartaches, lies, hypocrisy, discouragement, despair, etc. She who goes down the steps quietly to not wake up the boyfriend of the one who is the daughter, the one who peeks through the keyhole of the door as she passes. While she, the mother, passes by, takes a breath, doesn't make a sound, longs for happiness. The one who is lost, she who walks around bearing a circus of emotions, a scruffy bag of anguish. She who pours herself a bowl of cereal while feeling the pain of the open sky above, gray, nickel, zinc. She listens, very closely, to the little birds outside streaking across the sky, but she doesn't pay too much attention, not wanting to feel the sadness of the world and spill her cornflakes onto the table. And while pouring the milk, looks at her breasts, her bra, her abdomen cut off by the table so that she has to lean back to look at her legs, legs that go all the way down, plain, dark, the legs that support her entire slender being. She who chews her cereal thoughtfully, looking at the fridge, the yard, talking with the dog, touching the wall, looking at the bananas in the fruit bowl and dying of laughter. She who remembers, she who feels the scorn, she who remembers him climb up, get down, go in, above, below, or she remembers him behind her, stroking her back with that shielded look of fading lust that is perennial in the eyes of a man's man. She who remembers all these things on this sad pearl gray morning, a morning for melancholy that, like her, a woman with her forties, and more, behind her, sees the birds fly through the air, brushes her long, dark, ironed hair with profound nostalgia. The same steps, the same stride, she goes up, selects a dress, dress upon dress, looks at her shoes, heels, purse: it all matches perfectly.

Seated in front of the mirror, throbbing sorrow over her face, the face that she has been looking at every day of her life, watching it age quickly and at her expense, keeping it enter-

tained with toys; she starts to draw lines like birds in the sky, first one color then another, to this side then to that side, penetrating deeper and deeper into the creases of fear and old age, working that rouge into her soul, a stabbing pain that hurts her, she who lets herself feel the pain of guilt and consent. Pulling on her dress, a murky look in her eye, she leaves the room, locking it behind her because she thinks that the daughter's boyfriend (a tough guy who sometimes makes things up) goes in and smells her bras and panties. She herself wearing those panties goes down the steps in delicate despair because it's late, because she works and she's a teacher and it's getting late. She who lets herself be greeted so early by the timid sunshine on such a sad, cold day, riding this bungee cord of days, of dances, of erect nipples, of articles of clothing thrown all over the place. She who opens the car door, forgets, then goes back to turn out the lights in the carport. She who slams the door in order to awaken those who still have a little bit of love left, she who always feels out of her element, the one that lives on nothing, the one who is still very well-built for her age.

So she gets in the car, like every other day for the last eighteen years. She looks at her fingernails on the steering wheel, nicely painted, presentable. She puts the cell phone down on the car seat, between her legs, because she knows that in ten minutes, when it's six-thirty, it will ring. She fluffs her hair with her fingers. She puts on a little more lipstick, starts the engine, heads off to work, she thinks about the days, the lesson plans, the entire week, last week and this week. She sacrifices a little bit of today in order to smile at the guy in the left lane and ask him to give her a little bit of space. She, who is always so available, so giving of herself and so sought after, has always had a hard time forcing a smile and holding it for very long.

She who is so beautiful, even at her age, has to swallow the bitter pill of being the lover of so many married men, who, at dances, fake a kiss and pretend to ask for a little bit of dessert. She who is who she is shows that she is strong, that she doesn't cry, but goes home and under her cot finds her stuffed animals and sinks back into her childhood, unable to control a sob that sounds like the seagulls in gloomy Puntarenas. She who watch-

es the soap opera with eyes red from crying and from sand. She who rubs her arms raw over Julio, wrings the cold sheets in her hands for Alejandro, longs for Alvaro's embrace, while overpowering loneliness pecks at her incessantly, never leaving her in peace.

She who, even when alone, doesn't know how to pass the time, she who feels like she's being tortured when she listens to Dolores Pradera, she who is wearing clean panties.

Waiting then to see another woman's husband who was making eyes at her come out of the bathroom and squeeze him tight until the other guy pulling on the door wants back in: Mr. Testosterone, the shameless one, always sweating, an untamable cowboy.

She who at 6:30 hears the cell phone ring, takes it out from between her legs and recognizes the number of her dear unloved but begged for little boy. He, for his part, so handsome on the outside, struggles at the sight of her bra with the fear that is eating him up inside. She is waiting for him. She who is waiting for him. He who loves to pick up the pace, has the look of morning, cigarette in his lips, twenty-eight years younger.

He opens the door, gets in, she takes a deep breath and grabs a hold of as much of his cologne as she possibly can in one gulp. He understands his adversary, she has masturbated over him and he over her.

She who is the lovable companion, caring. She who gives him a ride to work for no particular reason, to listen to her. He, the one who listens to her sincerely. She tells him about Julio, round-trip to France, always the same wife, seven wives in addition to the only one. But not the only one, she is the winner. She who screwed him just yesterday and tells him about the size of his dick, a never-ending shaft that she could feel all the way up into her stomach. "My best sex ever." A careful lie for both of them, justified as literature by the wise listener, he who writes, a fierce lover of letters. She digs up other stories for him, describes the scene, he had everything ready for me, candles, the whole nine yards. He who feels her pain, sincere, hearing her heart being broken. She who watches him recede into himself, so sheltered in his seat. She who laughs, he who makes

her laugh, he who is laughing about having to leave her and she is dying of sorrow, numb. And he guilty, already thinking, "of course, I should have known," hanging his head, in her solitary burial place for men-a long line of men-all transparent.

And she tells him about her debts, new business opportunities, and he gives her ideas. She tells him to go away. He encourages her, lifts her spirits. He, for whom everything has always been so easy.

And she, the woman who always leaves him behind, who destroys him, who ditches him. She waves goodbye, she doesn't deny it, but that's how she remembers him, leaving for the day, the whole day, until tomorrow.

She who keeps her legs squeezed tight together early in the morning for fear that cold might get in there and leave her frigid for the rest of her life. The one who has no hope left that might raise her up. She who always goes down the steps the very same way, carefully, distrusting. She who takes the same shower every day, using the same amount of water, waiting for her imaginary beau to appear. She is the one who has been through hard times, who never celebrates anything, even the passing of the Pope. She who gave birth to her first daughter after being raped, to her second son out of love, but raped again later when he had started to grow up. It is she who sits in front of the mirror and remembers, while painting her face, the huge claws on that horrible man, the one that shouted at her that she was a whore, who left her all beat up and then later they had the most delicious fuck, clinging to each other tightly, each one enjoying the other one's vice. She who checks the mail three times, missed calls twice, and who goes to bed every night, cell phone in hand, sending messages to all of them to see who might be interested. She's the one who's always telling her girlfriends how important it is to get screwed, that desperate need that you have inside but which demands a declaration of love and deliria of tenderness. She who jealously watches over the four corners by which the boy arrives, that male who climbs into the car with her, confidently. The one who worries about the family but stays away from them. She who allows all twelve levels of hell to flow, burning in her vagina. She who

burns herself when she smokes a cigarette, who leaves the toilet seat down, who hates shoes without high heels and petticoats with circles or little balls on them. The hapless slave of her own omens, her isolation, her alienation. She is the same one who works just because, because of the performance review, because of the foundation, because of the organization, for consolation, for whatever else. She who earns less, the one nobody likes, the manipulator that everyone looks down their nose at. She who ends the day and then goes off to smell every part of a man's neck, every nook and cranny of his body as she kisses him on the cheek (and dreams of kissing him in other places), but is afraid of the social aspect, the religious prohibition. She who no longer believes in love, but, having been free, needs a man to lean on.

She who had thought seriously about suicide but is afraid of loneliness and the sorrow it would cause her children. She who on her own account does know about the lonely sadness of children. The one who would love to take those carefully measured substances that they sell in pharmacies, legal poisons. She who, even on a beautiful morning of scattered clouds predicts a rainy day, she who has been broken, submissive to her future, the unlicensed, casual sex-worker.

She who goes wherever her uterus takes her. The one with nail polish remover on her nightstand. She who never covers up when she has a man next to her. The one with the broken heart. The intrigued lover of beauty and deception.

OUT OF THE NEED TO TELL IT

by CHRISTOPHER MONTERO CORRALES

My brother Carlos tells the story that once, while he was doing graduate work in Brazil, he was in a bar one night and witnessed a person having an attack of schizophrenia. The poor guy was telling everyone that out in the street there were people following him who wanted to kill him. But when he pointed outside at the would-be killers, the street was completely empty. Carlos's other brother, Rodrigo, who is a psychologist, listened to him, never contradicted the schizophrenic, and never told him that he was having a crisis and that his tales were not only surprising but unbelievable. As a good therapist, he knows how to read the situation and, in the midst of a show of all the signs, how to take the ailing author by the hand and accompany him through his tale. That's the way it is with a good poem, you believe what it says, you do what it says and, because it is so surprising, you cannot contradict it. I believe that a schizoid poem should shift from a somewhat rigorous pattern of punctuation to one that is more chaotic, should stay within a range of meters, not adhering to just one meter, and should use different characters to say the same words that sound alike with a musicality that strays off occasionally but that always comes back and, furthermore, charms us with a magical tale. Ah, and I forgot this part, it should start suddenly out of nowhere, just out of the need to be told.

***

As a kid I never liked to kill *gryllidae*
The word in English is "cricket"

(and saying it reminds you of the sound they
make when you smash one).
As a teenager they made me angry
and their chirping upset me.
Later on I learned to get drunk
and to make the sound "cricket" with the sole of
my shoe
today I take care of them, I listen to them,
I take a sip of boiled water after one chirp
and after others I rest.
Nor do I like to eat rabbits
but it's because of their red eyes
and their horrible smell, not because they're
charming
and lovable, as my mother used to say,
she who was always afraid of cats.
When I wake up I feed the cat.
I boil water and make her lemonade.
I cook some eggs, toast bread, and add the brains
of a mythical wild boar that on Sundays
gives us ham and caramelized pork chops.
I have been told that, unlike venison,
their meat is incredibly lean,
9.30 grams of fat per hundred grams of meat.
It contains no sugar and is best cooked
with ginger at a low temperature
between 160 and 171°F

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

José Ricardo Chaves (1958) won the *Premio Joven Creación* [Creative Youth Award] at the beginning of his literary career, for *La mujer oculta* [The Hidden Woman] (1984), containing the short story "El autobús que desaparece a mediodía" ["The Bus Disappeared at Noon"], included in this anthology. For his *Cuentos tropigóticos* [Tropigothic Short Stories] (1997), he was awarded the *Premio Nacional de Literatura Aquileo J. Echeverría* [Aquileo J. Echeverría National Award for Literature]. He published *Jaguares góticos* [Gothic Jaguars] (2003) in that same genre. Other novels we find *Faustófeles* [Faustopheles] (2009), which earned him the *Premio de la Academia Costarricense de la Lengua* [Costa Rican Language Academy Award] in 2010. He also wrote the novels *Los susurros de Perseo* [Perseus' Whispers] (1994), *Paisaje con tumbas pintadas en rosa* [Landscape with Tombstones Painted Pink] (1998) and *Espectros de Nueva York* [Ghosts of New York] (2015). He has been instrumental in the publication of various anthologies related to Costa Rican literature: *De obscuras extranjerías* [On Murky Foreign Affairs] (2007), *Voces de la sirena. Antología de la literatura fantástica de Costa Rica* [Voices of the Siren. An Anthology of Costa Rican Fantastic Literature] (2012) and *Pacriqui. Relatos fundacionales costarricenses de crimen y misterio* [Pacriqui. Foundational Costa Rican Stories of Crime and Mystery] (1906-1911), published in 2017. He earned a doctorate in comparative literature at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, is an academic at the National Institute for Research in Philology, and is an honorary member of the Costa Rican Language Academy.

Alexander Obando (1958-2020) lived for extended periods of time in the USA. The tale "El *último* sueño de Jack London"

["Jack London's Last Dream"], featured in this collection, bears witness to his interest in American literature and the adventure genre. His other publications include the novels *El más violento paraíso* [The Most Violent Paradise] (2001 and 2009) and *Canciones a la muerte de los niños* [Songs for the Death of Children] (2008), the book of poetry *Ángeles para suicidas* [Angels for Suicidal People] (2010) and the anthology of short stories *Teoría del caos* [Chaos Theory] (2012). In 2008 he published the volume *La gruta y el arcoíris: antología de narrativa gay-lésbica* [The Cave and the Rainbow: An Anthology of Gay Lesbian Narrative]. He was awarded second place in the *Premio de Poesia Jóven "Carmen Lyra"* [Carmen Lyra Youth Poetry Award] granted by the municipality of San José in 1988. He also won the *Premio Internacional de Poesía "Juan Ramón Molina"* [Juan Ramón Molina International Poetry Award] in 1991, funded by the Central American Council on Higher Education and the Salvadoran-Costa Rican Cultural Institute. In 2010 he won the Aquileo J. Echeverría National Award for Literature.

Dorelia Barahona (1959) has written the novels *De qué manera te olvido* [How Do I Forget You], which won the *Premio Juan Rulfo* [Juan Rulfo Award] in Mexico in 1989; *La edad del deseo* [The Age of Desire], which won the *Premio Editorial de la Universidad de Costa Rica* (an award granted by the publisher Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica) in 1994; and *Retrato de mujer en terraza,* [Portrait of a Woman on a Terrace] published in Madrid by Verbum Press in 1995 and again in Costa Rica, by the *Editorial de la Universidad Estatal a Distancia* in 2002. One of her short stories, "Un amor posible" [A Possible Love], won an award in the literary contest sponsored by the *Revista Nacional de Cultura* [National Culture Magazine] in 1996. Other novels by this author are: *Los deseos del mundo* [Worldly Desires] (2006), *La ruta de las esferas* [The Route of the Spheres] (2008) and *Zona azul* [Blue Zone] (2018). Furthermore, she has published collections of short stories such as *Noche de bodas* [Wedding Night] (1995), *La Señorita Florencia* [Miss Florence] (2003), which gives us the short story by the same title featured in this anthology, and *Hotel Alegría* [Happiness Hotel] (2010).

She has studied philosophy, fine arts, ceramics, the history of art and painting in Mexico and Madrid. She teaches at the National University of Costa Rica (UNA), is a screenwriter and a columnist.

Carlos Cortés (1962) has published poetry, novels, and anthologies of short stories in Central America, Mexico, and Europe. His literary works have been translated into German, Bulgarian, French, and English. One of his most acclaimed novels is *Larga noche hacia mi madre* [A Long Night toward My Mother] (2013), which was nominated for the *Premio Internacional de Novela Rómulo Gallegos* [Romulo Gallegos International Novel Award] and which won him the *Premio Centroamericano Mario Monteforte Toledo* [Mario Monteforte Toledo Central American Award], in Guatemala, and the *Premio* Áncora [Áncora Award (sponsored by the national newspaper *La Nación*)] in Costa Rica. Other novels by his pen are *Cruz de olvido* [Cross of Forgetfulness] (1999), *Tanda de cuatro con Laura* [The Four O'clock Show with Laura] (2002), and *Mojiganga* [Masquerade] (2017), for which he received the *Premio Centroamericano de Literatura Rogelio Sinán* [Rogelio Sinán Central American Literary Award]. His essay, *La tradición del presente. El fin de la literatura universal y la narrativa latinoamericana* [The Tradition of the Present. The End of Universal Literature and the Latin American Narrative] (2015) earned him the National Essay Award. He has written four anthologies of short stories: *Mujeres divinas* [Divine Women] (1994), *Crucificciones* [Crucifixions] (2004), *La última aventura de Batman* [Batman's Last Adventure] (2010), which includes a short story of the same name that we include in this anthology, and *Los huérfanos del absoluto* [Orphans of the Absolute] (2018). His poetry consists of over ten collections that have been compiled into one volume: *Vestigios de un naufragio. 1980-2015* [Remains of a Shipwreck 1980-2015] (2015). He studied Journalism and Communications at the University of Costa Rica and in the French Institute for the Press, as well as at the University of Paris II. He is currently a professor at the University of Costa Rica.

Rodrigo Soto (1962) has published works such as *Mitomanias* [Mythomanias] (1983), a collection of short stories that won the Aquileo J. Echeverría National Award for Literature. He would win this award again for his book entitled *Floraciones y desfloraciones* [Flowering and Deflowering] (2006). His other anthologies of short stories are: *Dicen que los monos* éramos *felices* [They Say that as Monkeys We Were Happy] (1995), *Volar como* Ángel [Fly like an Angel] (2007) and *Otros reinos* [Other Realms] (2012). He has also made inroads into poetry with his works: *La muerte lleva anteojos* [Death Wears Glasses] (1992), *Damocles y otros poemas* [Damocles and Other Poems] (2003) and *El laberinto encendido* [The Labyrinth on Fire] (2010). In all he has published nine novels: *La estratégia de la araña* [The Spider's Strategy] (1985), *Mundicia* [Cleanliness] (1992), *La torre abolida* (The Tower in Ruins] (1994), *Figuras en el espejo* [Outlines in the Mirror] (2001), *El nudo* [The Knot] (2004), *Gina* [Gina] (2006), *Las sombras de Lisandro* [The Shadows of Lysander] (2011), *En la oscuraña* [In the Spiderly- Darkness] (2012) and *Aquí las noches se hacen largas* [Here the Nights Are Getting Long] (2015). Nor is he a stranger to theater; he made his mark in that genre with the adaptation of the latter novel to the stage in 2008, and with his monologue *La hija de Barbazul* [Bluebeard's Daughter] in 2011. His publications have been translated into French and Portuguese and included in prominent anthologies like *McOndo* (1996). He is a screenwriter and audiovisual producer. He has studied philosophy at the University of Costa Rica and cinematography at the Autonomous University of Madrid.

Uriel Quesada (1962) published the collection of short stories entitled *El atardecer de los niños* [The Children's Twilight] (1988) which won *Premio Editorial Costa Rica* in 1988 and the Aquileo J. Echeverría National Award for Literature in 1990. In 2005 his collection *Lejos, tan lejos* [Far Away, So Far Away] won the Áncora Award in Literature. He also wrote the novel *El gato de sí mismo* [One's Own Lackey], which won the Aquileo J. Echeverría National Award for Literature in that same year. In collaboration with Letitia Gomez and Salvador Vidal Ortiz, he

wrote the volume *Queer Brown Voices: Fourteen Personal Narratives of Latina/o Activism*, which won the Ruth Benedict-AAA award in 2016. Quesada has a Master's degree in Latin American Literature from New Mexico State University and a doctorate from Tulane University. He is currently living in New Orleans, USA, and works at the University of Loyola in New Orleans where he holds the position of Director of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies.

Catalina Murillo (1970) was awarded the Aquileo J. Echeverría National Award for Literature in 2018 for her novel *Maybe Managua* (2017). Her other publications include the novels *Largo domingo cubano* [A Long Cuban Sunday] (1995), *Marzo todopoderoso* [All-Powerful Month of March] (2003) and *Tiembla, memoria* [Tremble, Memory] (2016). She has also cultivated the short story and the chronicle, genres within which her volume entitled *Corredoiras. Largo domingo cubano* [Shortcuts. A Long Cuban Sunday] (2017) neatly fits. She is an author and a screenwriter who has studied Collective Communications at the University of Costa Rica and audiovisual production in the International School of Motion Pictures and Television in Cuba.

Juan Murillo (1971) published the collections of short stories *Algunos se hacían dioses* [Some of Them Became Gods] (1996) and *En contra de los aviones* [Against Airplanes] (2011); his short story of the same name is contained in this anthology. His latest collection of short stories is *La isla de los muertos* [The Island of the Dead] (2012). Working with Guillermo Barquero, he compiled the volume of short stories entitled *Historias de nunca acabar: antologia del nuevo cuento costarricense* [Never-Ending Stories: An Anthology of the New Costa Rican Short Story], published in 2009. And they have both ventured into the field of literary dissemination by means of blogs and as editors. In 2008 they founded the independent publishing company *Lanzallamas*. Murillo was also responsible for the selection of poems and wrote the prologue of the book entitled *Judas: 12+1 poetas nacidos en Costa Rica después de 1970* [Judas: 12+1 Poets

Born in Costa Rica since 1970] (Guatemala, 2013). He is a lawyer and a literary critic.

Laura Fuentes (1978) has to her credit the publication of two collections of short stories: *Antierótica feroz* [A Ferocious Anti-Erotic] (2013) and *Cementerio de cucarachas* [A Cemetery for Cockroaches] (2006). Her story contained in this anthology comes from the latter publication. Her book of poetry, *Penumbra de la Paloma* [Shadow of the Dove] was published by the Costa Rican Ministry of Youth and Culture in 1999. She has also published a wide variety of pieces including poetry, prose, and academic research in reviews and anthologies, both nationally and internationally. She has a doctorate in sociology from the School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences, in Paris. She is a professor and researcher at the University of Costa Rica and at the National University (Costa Rica). In the latter institution, she is director of Ístmica, an academic journal of the College of Philosophy and Letters.

Guillermo Barquero (1979) is a writer and a photographer. He received the Áncora Award in 2010, for his book entitled *Metales pesados* [Heavy Metals] (2009), which is his second book of stories and which contains the tale "La sucia vida de los hoteles" ["The Ugliness of Cheap Hotels"] featured in this anthology. In this same literary genre, he published *La corona de espinas* [The Crown of Thorns] (2005), *Muestrario de familias ejemplares* [A Sampler of Exemplary Families] (2013) and *Anatomía comparada* [Comparative Anatomy] (2017), a work which won him the Aquileo J. Echeverría National Award for Literature. His novel, *El diluvio universal* [The Universal Flood] (2009), also won the Ancora Award. Other novels by this same author are *Esqueleto de oruga* [Caterpillar Skeleton] (2010), *Combustión humana espontánea* [Spontaneous Human Combustion] (2015) and *Derrame de petroleo en Lesotho* [Oil Spill in Lesotho] (2016). In collaboration with Juan Murillo, he gathered and published the collection of short stories *Historias de nunca acabar: antologia del nuevo cuento costarricense* [Never-Ending Stories: An Anthology of the New Costa Rican Short Story]

(2009). He is the author of the photo essay *Apuntes de una ciudad* [Notes on a City] (2018). He studied microbiology and works as an academic at the University of Costa Rica.

Daniel Quiros (1979) had his first collection of short stories, *A los cuatro vientos* [To the Four Winds] published in 2009 by the Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica. His first dark novel, *Verano rojo* [Red Summer] appeared in 2010 and won the *Aquileo J. Echeverría National Award* for Literature that same year. That novel was translated into French in 2014. Also in 2014, he published the second novel in that series featuring the detective Chepe. That novel bore the title *Lluvia del norte* [Rain from the North] and was translated into French under the title *Pluie des ombres* [A Shower of Shadows] in 2015. His last novel, *Mazunte* was published in 2015 and, like the two prior novels, was translated into French in 2017 under the title *La disparue de Mazunte* [Missing in Mazunte]. He has a doctorate in literature from the University of California, San Diego and lives in the United States where he teaches literature at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania.

Cirus Sh. Piedra (1985) is a young Costa Rican writer of Iranian descent. In 2009 he published the collection of short stories *El circo del deseo* [The Circus of Desire], which won him the Creative Youth Award from the publisher Editorial Costa Rica. His short story of the same title is contained in this anthology. One year later he produced a second anthology of short stories, *A la luz del alcanfor y otros cuentos*. [By the Light of Camphor and Other Short Stories]. His first novel, *El diminuto corazón de la Iguana* [The Tiny Heart of the Iguana], was distinguished by an award from the publisher Editorial Costa Rica in 2013.

Christopher Montero Corrales(1986) is a very new Costa Rican author. He has already published three books of poetry: *Criaturas exhaustas* [Worn-Out Creatures] (2013), *A ojo de pájaro* [Bird's Eye View] (2017), *Canicas galaxia* [Galaxy Marbles] (2017) and *Échele miel* [Put Some Honey on It]

(2018). His essay *Apuntes para una educación holista* [Notes for a Holistic Education] was published in 2017. In 2018 his collection of micro stories *Los cerdos comen bellotas* [Pigs Eat Acorns] (2018) won him the Aquileo J. Echeverría National Award for Literature in the category of short stories. He studied anthropology, sociology and comparative literature. He is currently working as an academic in the National Technical University (Costa Rica).

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Victor S. Drescher has a Master's degree in the teaching of French as a foreign language from the Sorbonne, University of Paris, and a Doctorate of Modern Languages (DML) from Middlebury College in Vermont. In 2007, he retired from Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) where he taught French and Spanish and served as Director of the Critical Languages Program, and Director of Foreign Language Study and Internship Abroad Programs. In his 35 years of service to IUP, he created study abroad programs and exchange programs with universities in France, Germany, Mexico, and Costa Rica. In 1992, he founded a center for translation, IUP Translation Services. His publications include articles in the *Modern Language Journal* and a bilingual volume of poetry by Carlos Francisco Monge entitled *La tinta extinta/Invisible Ink.*

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