

# **La Más Chingona**

Willy Lizarraga

*Some are transformed just once  
And live their whole lives after in that shape.  
Others have a facility  
For changing themselves as they please.*

Ovid (translated by Ted Hughes), *Erysichton*

You know how it is when you start to write a story and you realize that you need to do some research, learn how to play the piano or skydive in order to get a grip on your subject? Well, when I began to think about writing a book about Alberto, I knew I couldn't even write the first word without meeting Laronda. I also knew that once I met her, I would have no more excuses and would have to put it down on paper --my fellow pescaitos fritos wouldn't let me off the hook. So I kept procrastinating until one day I got on BART at 16<sup>th</sup> Street and got off at downtown Oakland, which might as well be a foreign country since I hardly ever get out of the Mission anymore. My plan was to visit Ruben at A Toda Madre, then see how I felt about walking two more blocks to The Pink Flamingo where Laronda worked as a bartender during happy hour.

It took me three visits to Ruben, three haircuts, really, because Ruben is unforgiving. If you want to talk to him at his barbershop, you have to let him give you “the A Toda Madre special.” I certainly didn’t need three haircuts in two weeks, but I couldn’t have done it without Ruben. Only he could prepare me to meet “la más, más, más chingona.”

“What can I help you with, handsome?”

That was how Laronda greeted me in her low, alto voice while my eyes adapted to The Pink Flamingo’s reddish darkness. And maybe it was in part due to my almost absolute unfamiliarity with the downtown Oakland scene, if you could call it a scene, but Laronda’s flamboyant presence in the midst of a mummified atmosphere of senior citizens marinating in hard whisky struck me as sublime: from her velvety voice and provocative thick lips to her imposing physique, so artfully chiseled in harmonious lines that just kept curving and curving. Everything about her seemed to have been custom made to haunt you, and might just make you want to jump from a bridge or a tall building on a lonely and desperate night of unrequited passion. So when she raised one eyebrow, looking teasingly into my eyes as if to measure the depth of my determination, I had to humbly lower mine because I simply couldn’t take the heat.

As I lowered them, I couldn’t help but notice her proud, long neck, more like a tower where a princess might be imprisoned; the ripe, wide shoulders; the firm, pear-like breasts pointing at me *como astas de toro, coño*; and going further down her body with all the caution in the world, her exposed washboard midriff, at which point I had to close my eyes, afraid of being carried away by the sheer visual pleasure she provided. And it wasn’t only a question of carefully sculpted body parts. There was something overtly whimsical about the

way she put everything together, so resolutely sure of herself as a work of art in progress, so natural yet contrived, so blond and so black at the same time.

“La hembra más chingona, pinche cabrón. Alberto had to find la pinche más, más, más retechingona, carnal. And I told him, that vieja is gonna pinche kill you, cabrón. You’re too old and too pinche poor for that mamasota, güey. But he wouldn’t listen, jijo de su madre. Then one day, to top it all, he comes to tell me she’s not a she. No mames, güey. The whole chingadera was just too pinche weird, you know what I mean. So I kept my pinche distance, ’cause I knew this thing with Larrumba, Larroma, Latoma, whatever her pinche name is, I knew it would end up badly, carnal. I pinche knew it.”

As I drank my Corona sitting across from Laronda, I had to acknowledge that she had surpassed every expectation I had consciously or unconsciously created in my mind based upon what Ruben had told me. Laronda was, indeed, “la más chingona.” And although Ruben was referring exclusively to her physical endowment, which was indisputably chingón, I was particularly impressed by her sophistication in the art of presenting herself to the public eye.

On any other body, for example, the red tube top, more like a horizontal brush of red paint over her torso, would have clashed with her green velvet micro-miniskirt. In her case however, they blended so artfully and with such offkey irony, as if she were making fun of herself for being so loud and louche.

I should also say that, in any other circumstances, a commanding physical presence like hers would have intimidated me to the point of rendering me useless. At best, I would have mumbled something incoherent, smiled and immediately fled to some dark corner to

brood over my incurable shyness. But I wasn't only a writer with a mission. I was also an emissary from Alberto's past. Running away wasn't really an option. And maybe my awkwardness helped. Maybe she sensed my motives had to be genuine to be willing to put myself on the spot like that. So she took pity on me as I explained:

“Ah, eh, ah-hum, I'm Alberto's friend, you know. We were very close when he lived in San Francisco. We all lived in this big house in the Mission. We had a band. Did he mention any of this to you? I'm sorry, my name is Alfonso but everybody calls me Foncho...”

Majestic and comforting in her poised, stylized silence, she let me fight my way through my words as if enjoying my struggle. Then, she finally said:

“I think I know who you are, honey. I know quite a bit about all of you guys, in fact. Alberto liked to talk about all of you, the pescaítos fritos. Did I say it right? I never thought of any of you as real people, though. You were just part of the stories he told me. And I'm sure you've talked about me a lot too. And you probably wondered if I was real too, right? What a surprise! Excuse me for a second.”

Laronda walked away to help the only other three clients at this time in The Pink Flamingo. Judging by the way they reacted to her attention, one could say they lived for this moment. This was the high point of their day. You could even say that these few minutes that Laronda devoted to refilling their drinks, talking and flirting with them, kept them going, perked them up, infused them with just enough zest to shake off the deathbed look they had worn when I walked in.

I wondered, then, if they would experience massive heart attacks upon finding out that she wasn't really a woman. Maybe it didn't matter. Maybe it was a mere “technicality,” as Alberto said the only time we had the nerve to ask him whether all those rumors about him

having a transsexual affair were true. And now looking at Laronda displaying her hostess talents while Joe Turner sang *Every Day I Have The Blues*, I had to admit that I couldn't have found a better suited heroine for this tale. At which point, I looked at myself in the classic wall-to-wall mirror behind the bar and, to my surprise, I didn't look that out of place, especially if I kept moving my head to the beat while grabbing my Corona and swinging it like a wind instrument or a gun. And when the song ended, the tomb-like silence made me think, not without pride, of how much of Alberto's downtown-Oakland world I had managed to get to know in just a few weeks.

Then the jukebox came back on strong with Jimmy Smith and Dr. John playing and singing *only in it for the money, honey*. And I felt smart, cool, sexy, like a private dick from a vintage TV show.

Meanwhile, the more I visited The Pink Flamingo, the more I talked about Laronda and the more bewildered my fellow *pescaitos fritos* appeared.

"So, tell us, Foncho, how are things going in downtown Oakland, man?"

"Couldn't be better, really."

"Is she as spectacular up close as from far away?"

"Toda una dama..."

"Ay, ay, ay."

"You don't find girls like her too often, ah?"

"That's for sure, man."

"Sounds like you're very impressed by her, right? Maybe..."

“You can think whatever you want, Rosie, and you too, Ali. But let’s just say that she’s very mature for her age, smart and dead gorgeous.”

“Did you explain to her why you were looking for her?”

“Of course, man. Do you think I’m gonna pretend something else and lie about the whole thing just to get some information about her and Alberto?”

“Hey, sometimes you don’t have to pretend.”

“Wow, you guys are sick...”

“And you’re so honest and pure...”

“Fuck you all.”

“Hey, come on, Foncho, cool down and tell us about her.”

“Yeah, man, don’t be a shithead. Give us a few revelations.”

“Vamos, che, Foncho, no seas cagón.”

“Hey, Jesús, how about another bottle of Rioja, por favor?”

“Well, honey, believe it or not, I’m a total San Fernando Valley girl. Plus, I went to an all-boys Catholic school, just to give you an idea of the hellish time I had growing up. My mother, bless her heart, tried her best to give me an education. She just never understood that more than an education I needed to be myself. She was a single mother doing her best to raise a crazy teenager. I don’t blame her. All I knew is that I had to get the hell out of there as soon as I could.

“So, at fifteen, oh, yeah, I left home, survived the streets of L.A. and now I’m here. And what’s more important, I’m doing my thing, my art. Alberto, by the way, hated it when I said that. He had this thing against calling yourself an artist. Everyone in this fucking town

is a fucking artist, he'd say. Where are the normal people? Anyway, he helped me focus, you know. He knew his Latin music and moves and taught me all about the songs I now perform. And maybe I didn't give him back as much as he would've liked, but love isn't something you give as payback, you know. I was always honest with him. I never made him believe we were a couple or that kind of thing.

“Sometimes, to tease me, you know, he'd say I was with him 'cause he reminded me of my father. The thing is I never knew my father. All I have are a few photographs of him. He's very dark and has an Afro and a mustache, just like Alberto. He's also Latin, from Panama. That's where he lives now. The thing is it really turned Alberto on when I'd call him *papi*. It turned me on, too.

“If I have to describe our relationship in a word or two, though, I'd say it was a all about having siestas together. I mean, I'd just go to his place for lunch, late lunch, you know, and he'd always cook something for me, usually fried fish, which is why the band was called Pescaíto Frito, right? You see, I know all about you guys. And before getting in to bed, you know, he'd play music, and we'd dance. Or he'd play the bongos, and I'd dance for him. He'd teach me some moves and songs and show me the covers of these incredible mambo records from the forties and fifties. That's how I got ideas for my costumes. Are you really writing a book about Alberto?”

For too long, perhaps, Laronda had been established in our collective imagination as Laronda Lamatadora (“Laronda the Killer,” literally), a transsexual femme fatale who maliciously used Alberto and discarded him when he was no longer useful. It was practically impossible, in this sense, to ask the pescaítos fritos to see past Laronda's calculating vixen

image and consider the possibility that she might just be a young, talented and articulate young woman who was simply trying to make it as an artist, and who was in as much shock as any of us upon hearing about Alberto's suicide. For them, Laronda was and forever would be Alberto's nemesis and "the curse of so many men who just can't see beyond her fucking amazing body."

And Jesús would add, looking at me as if he had the moral duty to warn me against my best intentions: "Joder, macho, no vaya a ser that you, too, coño, are gonna fall for her, and the next thing we know you're also jumping from a fucking tall building de los cojones."

"Maybe you're getting a little too close to her, man. D'you know what I mean?" Ali would warn me, too.

Rosie, well, Rosie went straight for my throat or my balls:

"Che, Foncho, maybe like Alberto you'll find in her what you've been missing all your life."

All in all, though, the more I told the pescaítos fritos about my visits to Laronda, the more they all became obsessed with her and with the idea of seeing her perform.

"Che, one thing. Does she talk to you like she's talking to a reporter, a shrink, a friend or what?"

"Well, maybe like a combination of all of the above."

"And what about you, Foncho?"

"What about me?"

"I mean, is she just a character in your story or can you actually see her as a real person?"

"What kind of a question is that shit, Rosie?"

“Never mind, never mind. No need to get upset. All we want to really know is when can we see her perform?”

“I’ll find that out for you next time.”

“You mean you haven’t asked her yet?”

“Fuck, Rosie, it’s not like the minute I walk into The Pink Flamingo I pull out a list of questions and go through them.”

“One last question, then. What does Ruben think about Alberto and Laronda?”

“Ruben? Well, for him, Laronda’s la pinche negra despanpanante and Alberto el enano eléctrico de la chingada and the whole affair was the worst chingadera Alberto could’ve gotten into.”

“Good, very good, Foncho. It sounds like you’re doing your homework. How’s Ruben doing, anyway?”

“Okay, I guess. He’s my man in downtown Oakland, you know. He better be good. ’Cause without him, I’m lost in that part of the world.”

“Not to mention the free haircut you get every time you visit him, right?”

“D’you like how my hair looks?”

“Honestly, Foncho, you look like a retired down-and-out salsa singer.”

“Well, that’s exactly who I am, Rosie.”

“Well, that’s how you look, che.”

Ruben’s A Toda Madre is completely covered by photographs of famous salsa musicians. And when I say photographs, I don’t mean posters. As he likes to remind you, “All these photos are pinche real, carnal, autographed and everything.”

And you have to admit Ruben's collection is no small feat. He has them all, from Tito Puente, Celia Cruz and La Lupe to Ismael Rivera, Ruben Blades and Adalberto Santiago, framed and everything. He even appears in a few of them. His favorite, also the biggest, is the one of him flanked by Hector Lavoe and Willie Colon, the three of them wearing the same aviator-style sunglasses and white three piece suits. They look like they grew up together.

"That was at pinche Madison Square Garden. Out of this pinche world, carnal, let me tell you. Chingonísimo, cabrón."

Ruben speaks freely and loudly while he cuts hair, like he's addressing every one in the barbershop, including the passersby. You come in, sit down, grab your Playboy or Hustler and wait for your turn as you listen to him. Occasionally, he listens to you, but only after you listen to him. Anyway, apparently Ruben was trimming Alberto's Afro when he first heard about Laronda.

"Don't cut too much, okay, Ru? Don't get carried away, man. I got a hot date tonight and I want to look real sharp, elegante, comprendido?"

"Hey, pinche Alberto, you're in professional hands, cabrón, so shut up... Do you remember my friend Chela, carnal? You saw me talking to her yesterday, and don't tell me you don't know who I'm talking about because I pinche saw you checking her out, cabrón, la güera esa, grandota, bien buenota, although she's no spring chicken, real bosomy too, with big hair, very tejana la condenada..."

"What about her?"

"Well, she's going out with a young man, I mean really pinche young. And she's madly in love with el cabrón. Can you believe? A woman her age going out with a twenty-something?"

“And?”

“What do you mean ‘And?’ cabrón? I’m trying to convince her to forget him, güey. ‘Cause he’s always running around with other viejas y esas cosas, you know. He’s un pinga loca, tú sabes. So she suffers like a maniac. But you know what, Alberto? She got mad at me. Can you believe it? I was only trying to make her see the truth and she pinche turned on me, carnal.”

“What truth are you talking about, Ru?”

“Que el cabrón only wants her for her money and the pinche green card, güey. Está ilegal, you know. I mean she shouldn’t have all these illusions about him. It’s like going out with a whore. I mean would you fall in love with a puta, Alberto?”

“Lo que faltaba, you giving her advice about who to love or not to love. She has the right to fall in love con quien le dé la gana, Ru, and you better remember that.”

“Yeah, but then she comes to me to pinche whine and cry...”

“What’s wrong with whores anyway?”

“Nothing. You just don’t pinche fall in love with them.”

“Why?”

“Because, ay, Alberto, you sound like a pinche child de la chingada, *why, why, why*, because, yes, *because* love is what they make a business at.”

“I thought it was sex.”

“Whatever. The only thing I know, pinche güey, is that you don’t ask for real love de la chingada from a whore for the same reason you don’t ask a pinche janitor for dinero, cabron.”

“Or a fucking barber.”

“You got that right, Alberto.”

“And what if I tell you that my hot date tonight is kind of a whore.”

“Pinche cabrón, Alberto, there’s no such thing as kind of a whore, güey. She either is or isn’t. You can’t be un poquito pregnant, cabrón.”

“Well, she’s an erotic dancer.”

“Ay Chihuahua, she’s probably gorgeous, ah.”

“Incredible, man. And she moves like an angel.”

“More like the pinche devil, I’d say. Ay, Virgen de Guadalupe, protect this pobre jijo de su madre who is in deep shit for a pinche beautiful woman. Ay, ay, ay, las mujeres. Qué cabronas que son!”

Etta James sang *At Last*. Late afternoon at The Pink Flamingo. With Ruben’s Tex-Mex babble fresh in my mind, I felt courageous enough to ask Laronda how she met Alberto.

“In a Vietnamese deli, of all places. Not the most romantic place on Earth. But their chicken sandwiches are out of this world. Excuse me, honey, if you don’t mind.”

Once again, off she went on her choreographed bartending tour, blowing kisses at her elderly clientele, tickling their bald, grey heads and telling some mildly dirty joke just to make them blush while she poured them drinks.

There was, I would say, something teasingly perverse about the way she poured beer into a client’s glass, as if she’d figured out the perfect height and angle for the foam to rise to the rim, threatening to spill, yet it never did. And she would align her small yet perfectly shaped breasts behind the foaming glass, as if just to remind you of her merciless power to make things rise by her mere nearness. And as I watched her, Ruben’s unflinching version of Alberto and Laronda’s first meeting came back to me:

“You know that el cabrón de Alberto didn’t pinche eat anything but Asian, right? Well, he was hooked to this Vietnamese deli in Chinatown, especially on weekends, carnal. He just couldn’t live without their Soup Number Two. And I have to admit, cabrón, I got hooked too. I mean it’s better than pinche Viagra, güey. So, always before a hot date, I learned from Alberto, I drink my Número Dos and it never fails me la chingona jija de su madre.

“Anyway, that’s where those two met. El cabrón said to me that he thought he was hallucinating when he saw her walk into the deli. He thought he’d OD-ed on Sopa Número Dos. And pinche Laruma, Laroña, Larima, whatever her name is, ordered a chicken sandwich with tons of jalapeños. That’s what he said. And then la jija de su madre sat at the table right next to his. Imagine it, chingaos: drinking your Vietnamese Viagra next to la hembra más chingona you’ve ever seen in your pinche life. Like lighting a match when you’re soaked in pinche gasolina. No mames, güey.”

Laronda finished her geriatric tour, danced her way back to me with a few mambo steps and picked up her tale where she had left it:

“First of all, I’m tired of guys saying all sorts of things to me everywhere I go. So I don’t even pay attention anymore. Maybe for that reason I don’t remember exactly what Alberto first said to me. I think it was something about the sandwich, something about the jalapeños. Oh, yes, now I remember. He asked me if I always liked my food that hot.

“I like everything hot, I answered.

“Well, it makes sense, ’cause you’re the hottest thing I’ve seen in my life, he said.

“And part of me thought, Oh God, here we go. Now I have to put up with this fucking jerk until I finish my lunch. I noticed though he spoke with a very suave and seductive voice, deep, you know, with a mild foreign accent. And then he didn’t say anything

more. He just let me eat in peace. That's, I think, what really made me pay attention to him. That's the advantage older men have over the young ones. Young guys are too persistent, you know. They're like fucking flies. Anyway, while I ate my chicken sandwich, I checked him out and he looked like a musician to me. That big hair and swagger and those mischievous eyes, I thought, that's someone who's used to being on stage and knows he's popular with the ladies. Anyway, when I was about finished, Alberto said to me something like, 'I don't want to sound too nosy, but what's a beautiful woman like you doing in this funky part of the world?'

"What was I gonna do? I mean, it was cliché, sure, but he had this kind of old-school charm, you know, and I was kind of digging it. So I said:

"I live around here."

"I live around here too and I had no idea this was such a special place. What's your name?"

"Laronda."

"Wow, you're the first Laronda I ever met. Do you know what it means?"

"I know it's Spanish, honey. That much I know. But I had no idea it had a meaning."

"It means a round, like a round of drinks, and it also means going around and dancing in a circle or sometimes just walking around."

"Well, that's amazing. I mean that pretty much describes my life. I work as a bartender, you know. So, I guess, that makes me an expert on rounds. And I also dance around for a living. Wow, you've made my day, honey. What's your name?"

Despite the sudden and spontaneous connection between the two, however, apparently nothing of consequence happened during their first meeting. He didn't even ask for her phone number and she didn't offer it either. A month or so later, on a warm early-October afternoon at the Flea Market in Berkeley, Laronda and Alberto would meet again, this time, though, *ay Chihuahua*, as Ruben would say, their story would take a brisk and intimate turn.

"I was just chilling, you know, walking around, enjoying the sunshine, talking to my Senegalese friends who sell these gorgeous African crafts. Actually, I was trying on this silver ring with this leopard design, when I sensed that someone was staring at me from behind and from a very close range. I turned around, expecting to face some horny and stoned local weirdo or maybe a suburban kid from Concord or Lafayette whose hormones had just gone out of control, but it was Alberto, smiling at me and caressing his mustache. And you know how it is when you see a person for the second time but it's really the first. So I said to him:

"Where's your sombrero little elf?

"I remember very well I said this because I was kind of struck by how short he was and because he didn't know or maybe he pretended not to know what an elf was. He said he'd never read children's stories.

"The minute I could read, I went straight for X-rated books, he said.

"And I don't remember what I answered. All I remember is that right away we got into this really nice groove, and he insisted on buying me the ring I'd been trying on. It was only five bucks, so I let him.

"We kept on strolling. I was wearing my bright, taxicab yellow tank top, that's how he called it, and my red leather miniskirt. I literally shone brighter than the sun, honey.

Alberto was wearing his Flea Market drummer outfit: a white T-shirt with the sleeves cut off

and jeans. He told me he'd come to drum a bit and that, if I didn't mind, he'd join the drummers for a while. I said I'd wait for him while I had lunch.

“And I think that's when everything just turned around. I mean if there was a moment when I knew for sure something was bound to happen between Alberto and me, I think that was it, 'cause I sat down to eat my carnitas burrito with tons of jalapeños, just the way I like it, with a nice feeling running all over my body, uh-hum. The food was good and from where I was sitting I could hear and see him play from a safe distance. So, I kicked back and let the drums take me wherever they wanted me to go. He was soloing like mad, and I felt it inside my groins, like it was taking possession of me, like in a voodoo ceremony. And I could see his thick, brown arms going at it, his eyes closed, his head tilted back, his smile all over the place, his big mustache flying all over the congas.

“When I finished eating, I thought of walking toward the drummers, maybe dance a bit, but then I thought I might distract him. I got up anyway. I was getting anxious. And as I started to walk toward them, he must've seen me, 'cause he immediately stood up, gave a few complicated handshakes, you know how drummers are, and walked toward me. When he stood in front of me, he said:

“Wow, your legs come up to my chest. Luckily I have a big Afro to measure up to your shoulders.

“I put my index finger on his lips and asked him if he wanted to go to Telegraph.

“Any excuse is a good excuse to be close to you, he said.

“Then he said something that freaked me out:

“All I ask is that once in a while I have the pleasure of waking up from a siesta and looking at your gorgeous chocolate eyes.”

“It was kind of shocking, you know, I mean in a good way. Things were just rolling fast, and there was little I could do to stop it. Well, I didn’t want to stop it. And as we stood there sort of talking, although mostly just staring at each other, I could hear his drumming buddies making funny comments about us. And I liked the fact that it didn’t bother him. We walked to the BART station, passed right in front of his buddies, and he put his arm around my waist. One of the conga players screamed –Hey, Alberto, you sure you don’t need any help, man? Everybody laughed, including us.

“On Telegraph, inside a record store, things began to get really hot. For some reason I couldn’t resist pinching his arms. I don’t know what got into me. At some point I must’ve pinched him really hard because he turned around and slapped me on my ass so hard that it burned. It made a big, loud sound too, like a conga. And everybody in the store turned around to see what was going on.

“Then, I remember Alberto pulled out a Cuban CD and said that he wanted to buy it for me. I told him I’d feel better if he let me buy one for him too. He started to pull all these CDs from the shelves and talked to me about them. I thought, right on, this guy really knows his shit. So I told him I was looking for a person just like him to help me out with my shows. He looked back at me as if I’d just made him the happiest man on Earth. Then he started asking me all kinds of questions:

“You mean you move your lips but you don’t actually sing?”

“That’s called lip-synching, honey.”

“And you dance too?”

“That’s what I just said.”

“Interesting, very interesting.”

“He picked a record by this singer from Spain, Isabel Pantoja, I think.

“She’s not my cup of tea, he said, but she sure is the favorite of all lip-synching female impersonators in Latin America. Who knows? You might like her.

“Then he asked me if I knew any of the other records he’d picked.

“To be honest, darling, I’ve only heard Celia Cruz. She was my mother’s favorite. And that’s it, really.”

“You got a long way to go then.”

“Nothing like finding the right man for the job, I said.

“Then, as we were paying at the cash register, I saw the mark I had left on his upper arm. It was a turning into a bruise. I felt sorry. So I licked and kissed it.

“Wow, man, does she do that all the time? the cashier asked.

“All the time, Alberto said, with this sexually charged voice that got me wet.

“Then, he suggested going across the street for a drink. We sat in the furthest corner of this pub full of college students. The Lakers were playing the Bulls on the television.

“He said I needed a basketball player, someone tall and imposing, not a dwarf like him. I told him that only I get to decide what kind of a man I need. We laughed and talked about what it takes to make it as an artist in this world. We split the bill. Then we got to that awkward moment when someone had to say something and, I have to admit, he rose to the occasion and said in this matter-of-fact tone:

“Why don’t you come over to my place?”

“Does that mean you’re willing to put your life in my hands?”

“Is that what I’m doing?”

“I’m not your ordinary girl, you know.”

“I never said you were.”

“And he grabbed my hands and kissed them. I felt his moustache tickling me. The college kids kept looking at us like we were a freak show or something. I don’t understand why they all gotta be so clean cut and asexual, do you?”

“Regardless of what happened with Laronda, man, I still believe that if Alberto hadn’t moved to Oakland, he’d still be alive. I mean why did he have to go over there?”

“Well, Ali, why did most of us leave the Mission?”

“Yeah, but downtown Oakland, man?”

Ali, “the Ayatollah of the blue notes,” as Alberto liked to call him, sometimes gets stuck on one note, one question in this case. Let’s call it the question of the night, stubborn and abrasive like the fog devouring Valencia Street, erasing borders and softening edges, making us feel like ghosts or vampires inside Café La Michon.

“Anyway, man, Alberto liked funky places.”

“True, but he also liked to see people on the streets, especially at night. And, excuse me, but downtown Oakland in the night breaks the bravest man’s heart.”

Ali spoke as if he didn’t really want to dwell in the past yet, at the same time, couldn’t quite escape the urge to make sense of it, which reminded me of the way Alberto talked about his childhood and hometown in Chile. “Barely a dot,” he would say, “in the middle of the driest motherfucking desert.” He also liked to say that leaving “all that behind was the best fucking thing that could’ve ever happened to me.” But then, no matter how good Alberto’s life happened to be in San Francisco, he would occasionally fall into manic depressions, his famous “black holes.” And he would just lie in bed getting stoned, almost catatonic, often obsessing about his mother back in Chile and her thousand and one

girlfriends having tea and gossiping about everybody, especially about him, the crazy, absent son.

“Their voices, man, they are just too much,” he would say, covering his ears with his hands.

Then you have to consider, not without experiencing a sense of almost tragic bewilderment, the fact that Alberto ended up spending the last years of his life in the American urban version of the Atacama Desert, an un-city, ghastly in its contrived desolation, clichéd in its hopeless violence and nebulous memory of better times, “in exile,” as he liked to say.

“Well, at least Laronda helped him survive Oakland, no?”

“That’s one way of putting it, I guess.”

“Is there another way, Foncho?”

“Hey, I’m just a writer, not a philosopher.”

“Maybe we should open another bottle of Rioja to lighten up the mood, man.”

“I’m all for it, man, ’cause we gotta get in the mood to check out Laronda’s show at midnight, remember?”

“Absolutely, coño. This is a big night de la hostia,” Jesús said as he looked for a special bottle in La Michon’s secret, wine-for-great-occasions compartment.

Then, as we were about to make the official toast of the night, El Maca walked in. And having arrived later than usual, he immediately began swearing in “español de los cojones” to catch up with his daily quota of ultra-Spanish expressions, más cojones, coño, hostias, arza, in order to fully incarnate the greatest Filipino flamenco dancer in the world.

Given the overtly gay nature of the Stud's transsexual Tuesday night, I thought only the hardcore pescaitos fritos would come to see Laronda's show. Contrary to my expectations, however, everybody who was anybody in La Michon, including the *desaparecidos* like Gabriela Pizarro and Julio Landoni, who everybody thought had gone back to Guatemala, and Jorge Molina, who had just come back from spending a year in Peru and Brazil and, berimbau in hand, performed for us his latest shamanistic hip-hop creation. One could say that the spirits hadn't been this high in years. It reminded me of the old days, when Pescaíto Frito was the hottest underground Latin band in the City and we and our friends and fans wrote history en masse.

On our way to the Stud, I ended up in the back seat of Scheherazade's SUV, next to Ali, Rosie and Jesús. Shelly and Patricia sat in the front. Scheherazade, Ali's cousin, had been the first to buy a cell phone, the first to get a Palm Pilot, the first to get a dot-com job and the first to jump off the dot-com bubble before it burst. She had also been the first to buy an SUV and now was about to sell it to buy a hybrid, which was the topic of conversation in the front seat. We, in the back seat, argued for the millionth time, thanks to Rosie, about whether it was possible to sing salsa in English or in any language other than Spanish.

"I think it's better if we think about another kind of music, che," Rosie said.

"Why?"

"Just for practical purposes."

"So how about Cajun music?"

"I don't know shit about Cajun music, man."

"How about gospel?"

“Okay, gospel is good. Thank you, Foncho. You’ll see my point in a second. I mean do you think it’s possible to sing gospel in Chinese, for example?”

“Well, I don’t know Chinese, Rosie.”

“In Arabic then.”

“Well, it’s possible. I mean there’s this tradition of praying and singing at the same time. In fact, they’re inseparable. You sing the Koran. And there are, I think, seven official styles. I’m not a Muslim, so I don’t know much about it, but that’s gospel music in Arabic, Rosie.”

“That’s an excellent point, Ali, really. So now, here’s the thing: does it sound like gospel? No, of course, which proves my point that if you sing gospel in Chinese or Arabic or Spanish or any other language it becomes something else.”

“Well, it’s not the same but it’s equivalent, Rosie.”

“Fucking shit, Ali, you are so fucking stubborn. Patricia, what do you think?”

“What do I think about what, Rosie?”

“Do you think it’s possible to sing salsa in Chinese or Arabic or any other language but Spanish?”

“You can have salsa in any language, sure, why not? What’s the problem with singing salsa in another language?”

“No problem, except it’s no longer salsa.”

“Because...”

“Because Rosie says so, right?”

“Okay, okay, what happens to salsa in English?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean does it sound the same?”

“Get to the point, Rosie.”

“How does it sound? Answer, please, Foncho.”

“Well, it depends, Rosita darling. If the singer’s Frank Sinatra, it would sound like a swingy ballad. If the singer is Stevie Wonder, then it probably becomes soul. And when I sang, and you guys played, it was Latin funk. And we were the kings of Latin Funkfusion.”

“So you admit that it was more funk than salsa, right?”

“Well...”

“Goddamit, you guys are so fucking stubborn...”

And I would’ve probably forgotten all about Rosie’s fundamentalist approach to salsa if Laronda’s performance at the Stud hadn’t been a further commentary on what was possible (or not) in the Latin mode.

Now, if the mode that night was certainly Latin and funky, as usual, the mood was a bit trickier to define. It wasn’t that clear what our expectations for the night were. Personally, I was convinced that Laronda was incapable of putting on a bad show. I had insisted, nonetheless, on painting a sort of garish caricature of a woman lip-synching songs by ABBA’s Latin equivalent, just to prevent any major disappointment. And the minute we walked into the Stud, the décor, cheaply stuck in the seventies, revolving disco ball included, confirmed our worst fears. And when the MC, a fat, bald and hairy transvestite dressed in a golden bikini, introduced the star of the night as “Fabulous-caliente-picante-sexational Laronda,” I think it would be fair to say that most of us were prepared for the worst. Until a rather too familiar 1940’s big band Hollywood-mambo soundtrack filled the club and swung our mood in a more optimistic direction.

Then it was all about these massive, meandering horns rising in sharp waves, crashing abruptly and rising even higher again and again. And in the silence in between, you could hear the sharp and concise layering of a complete set of Cuban conjunto percussion. Hardly a few bars into the song, we all looked at each other as if to make sure everybody recognized Yma Sumac's *Goomba Boomba*, although more like to make sure we weren't dreaming the same lavish ultra-mambo sound, while the rest of the audience seemed as absorbed as we were by the music. The audience, by the way, was as ethnically diverse and hip as they were monolithically young, half in drag, half in club gear, and even the few who appeared to be wearing nothing special didn't look as boringly square as we did.

They also seemed to know Yma Sumac's tune by heart. They hummed their way down to Yma's sensual, androgynous groans, and then went up with her, half way up, to be more precise, because nobody could possibly match her beyond-soprano flight. And as Yma Sumac was about to go for one of her first major sopranissimo climaxes, Laronda descended from heaven. Like a seasoned circus acrobat, she simply lowered herself from a rope and slowly allowed herself to land at the center of the stage, all the while lip-synching with controlled irony. She wore a mango-melon lace bodice under a transparent, black, short veil that came down from a tutti-frutti hat. Both her stockings and her platform shoes had a tutti-frutti pattern too.

"Fucking holy shit del coño de su madre," I heard El Maca mumble next to me.

Contrary to our gaudiest expectations, Laronda didn't wear much makeup, and more than a singer or a cabaret diva, she came across as a dancer, moving with solid poise and incorporating jazz and modern dance steps to the Latin swing.

"Wow, she's like Carmen Miranda, Ginger Rogers and RuPaul all put together in one amazing package. I'm so glad I came," Scheherazade said to me.

“¡Qué maravilla, che! ¡Qué maravilla!” Rosie kept repeating to herself as she tried without much success to get closer to the stage and Yma Sumac’s voice went from Barry White to Maria Callas, passing through Celia Cruz and Luciano Pavarotti.

I had to admit I couldn’t have asked for more. I had been visiting Laronda at The Pink Flamingo for a few months already, yet this was also my first time seeing her perform. So I was in as much a state of bewildered awe (Alberto would’ve called it “un orgasmo perpetuo”) as the rest of the gang. I also had a lot more invested in seeing her show than anybody else. Since meeting Laronda, in fact, better yet, since knowing that I had to meet her to write this story, I knew that seeing her perform was all I had (aside from her words) to recreate in my mind in palpable terms the artistic and sentimental connection between the two of them.

And sure enough, as she lavishly danced her way around the stage, something about the precarious and volatile terrain on which their relationship stood became a bit more accessible to me in all its trans-cultural and existential tension and its counterpunctual complexity, to put it in musical terms, the only terms, I am afraid, acceptable in this tale: Laronda’s *sexational* rising star meeting Alberto’s waning moon as musician turned artistic consultant. Was it all a matter of learning how to be part of her success, then, without letting his own sense of failure get in the way? Did it all depend on his ability to share *her* triumph from behind the curtains while curtailing any desire for a deeper or simply more committed sentimental bond?

So, while Laronda transported us with effortless androgynous grace to Mamboland, I couldn’t help but try to answer those questions yet, in the process, piled up more and more

questions on top of each other, as I couldn't help hearing Alberto's thousand-and-one aunts' voices, all coming at me at the same time as if they were the only ones who could provide answers and insights to the real drama behind Laronda & Alberto's artistic and erotic partnership.

"Ay, mighty God, do you know that by the time Lucy's son killed himself he was a striptease impresario in San Francisco?" said one of the aunts.

"Thank God both his parents were dead by then is all I can say. To fall in love with a stripper, oh my God. That's just too much to take. Don't you think so?" added another.

"Worse than that, my darling, a hustler, a whore."

"Jesus Christ, worse than a whore. We're talking about a black transsexual hustler. Can you believe it?"

"Well, that crazy boy only cared about drums and sex anyway."

"That's right, darling, that's right. Drums and sex. What a waste, oh mighty God."

Then, as Yma Sumac climbed to the highest Andean peaks propelled by her Peruvian lungs, to my surprise, it was Ruben's lascivious Tex-Mex funk that took over and pushed aside Alberto's thousand-and-one aunts' voices like nothing.

"Did you know that Laruma, Larama, Laraña, she, he, whatever, goes to Norman's, la muy cabrona. That was Alberto's gym, carnal. That's why I'm surprised el cabrón hadn't run into her before. But así es la cabrona vida. That's why I always keep my eyes wide open. Sometimes you're looking around like mad for a pinche woman and you don't realize she's standing right next to you. Anyway, he was out of his pinche mind for Miss Trans-Fit California. I mean he was making big plans de la chingada. He was gonna tour all over the

world with her. And he was in heaven playing her Latin music coach, image consultant, Latin lover and pinche fucking Mexican, carnal.

“He said they were gonna start an entertainment company. Picante Productions, that’s how they’d named it. Ay, cabrón. They were going to hire dancers, musicians. Alberto was dreaming big, like he was on acid or something bien grueso, carnal. And I would tell him: she’s not pinche real, cabrón, jijo de tu santísima madre. But he didn’t care, chingaos.

“So I got tired of warning him. I mean I wasn’t going to pinche ask him how do you like her pinche black cock de la chingada, cabrón? What could I do anyway? Alberto was entitled to live his pinche fantasy and I didn’t want any part in it. ’Cause I’m not into pinche fruity chingaderas, güey. I’m from Texas, carnal. I mean, how many times I’ve come to pinche blows de la chingada with other cabrones because they assume I’m gay just because I cut hair, jijos de su madre? And don’t get me wrong, güey. We all have our funny side. I can understand a pinche one-night stand packing fudge. We all have our caprichos, chingaos. Pero el cabrón was talking like they were going to get pinche married, carnal. No mames, güey.”

Meanwhile, Yma Sumac kept on hitting those glass-shattering notes again and again. Not even the horn section now could keep up with her with art-deco undulations. And Laronda went around the stage calling the audience to join her. El Maca, Scheherazade, Nganga, Manolo and Patricia jumped onto the stage and formed a conga line behind her. Then, Laronda broke away from the line, walked toward the audience and, as if she had wheels on her feet, slid into a split as the trumpets and trombones played the last note and we screamed and applauded as loud as we could.

“I’m not into suicide, and I’m definitely not a lesbian, but I can see killing myself for a woman like her,” Scheherazade said to me as we walked out of the Stud and the fog attacked us and we rushed to her car as if we were running late for our Cinderella curfew.