

Atitlán

by [Carol Gilbertson](#) in the [June 27, 2012](#) issue

I don't know if it's Kaqchikel or Tzutujil
they speak here. I use my small Spanish
to haggle for a woven bracelet.
Mark and the girls wander off,
so I walk alone past stalls of cheap skirts
and plastic shoes, baskets of melons,
even a table of carved statues of the local saint,
Maximón, with his Stetson hat and big cigar.

In a shop I'm drawn to a crucifix,
hanging alone among the clay pots.
The carver has nudged the local wood
into its graceful form. Shy, he says a price—
hardly anything—but my local cash is gone
and my watch shows nearly noon,
time for the last boat back.

At the dock the rest look impatient,
the boatman drumming the motor,
but I can think only of the pale wood,
the stripe of darker grain in the hanging head.

The boat rides low in the water,
and as we reach the lake's heart—
great craters guarding its distant shores—
the wind comes suddenly alive.
People have warned us
of the lake's treacherous afternoon *xocomil*—
the wind that carries away sin.
The pilot turns away. I catch Mark's eye
and look at our daughters in a crush of fear.

As the village shoreline shrinks,
I remember that locals plead
with their cowboy saint,
offering oranges, cigarettes, and soda.
The waves rise and we sit stiff,
our eyes on our distant beach.
I picture the carving, the curve
of the corpus, the crossed feet.

No one in our boat can calm the storm.