

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Excerpts from Great Philippine Jungle Energy Cafe

Alfred A. Yuson

Philippine Studies vol. 33, no. 3 (1985) 322–339

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Excerpts from Great Philippine Jungle Energy Cafe

ALFRED A. YUSON

AGUA DE MAYO

THE MIDDLE DAYS of May were as sepia as all other days, perhaps even more so by a shade. The summer had been unusually hot, unusually dry even for an island where wind and rain were alien for a quarter of a year. Until everything gathered together for the feast of *Agua de Mayo*. Tempers, childbirths, sermons, swallows and crows, old lakes, young boys, pig's tails, mayors and mayors' wives, silent enchantresses — everyone and everything! *Agua de Mayo*! Moveable and spontaneous — percussive drops calling one and all out to the streets for the feast of brown bodies drenching, children jumping for quick growth, coconut halves collecting the sacred day's rainwater — *Agua de Mayo*! The first rain of May. Water from the heavens as salve for spirit, colic, cough and cold. Water for the parched season of nothing to be thankful for. By tradition blessed and holy, oh, as the fluids of Mother Mary, of first rainwater of May, when all the dust fell prey to the rataplan, the drumming. First thick drops of prayerful water, prayed-for water, incantatory rainwater pirouetting on bodies sepia and streets dry as dust the begetter, raindrops, first raindrops of May! Until then summer would stay sultry, could only be so. Brows and breasts were knit and frayed, blew to the quick. Dust took over papers, sheets, cups, books, groins, hair, heads and lives for whom loves stayed in dry heat till heat itself overcame with its first May come. *Agua de Mayo*!

This day of May, in Bacong, portent seemed to hang unawares, over the dusty air. Six horses were seen, of a sudden rampaging through the short streets. Heard over the din of thundering hooves

was a yell so free, fierce and alive urging the spectacle on as from someone who had been there in the near past, in those short dusty streets, and now familiarly come back, such was the triumph of his cry in full flush of dust. Six horses. Of different colors and breeds. In order of appearance, from left to right as it were through the southern end of town, give or take a nose, the twenty-four thundering hooves belonged to: (1) Bucephalus; (2) Scout; (3) Hero; (4) Marengo; (5) National Velvet; and (6) Ilocos King.

Seen on top of one horse, extreme right, was a young fellow whose figure seemed familiar but really in all that dust one could not tell, he wasn't even laughing like Leon the prankster devil. Seen jumping from Horse One to Five and back again, like a circus bareback specialist, was an older man who seemed in all that dust to be enjoying himself, such was his power. They charged through the short streets clouded with dust, the older man yelling in full flush, so free and fierce and alive.

Melecio.

Kinoa the barber recognized him, and said thus, Melecio, he has come back, but where the devil did he steal all those horses? Melecio's not one to steal, said Balboa whose straight black hair had been cut off into inchstrips and which now flew about like no one's business but the dust's. Where the devil did he get all those horses, Kinoa persisted. And why does he jump from one to the other bareback and all, while the younger fellow stayed all the while on Extreme Right, is that Ilocos King?! How should we know, Balboa answered, his nostrils quivering in the prick of dust and hair. Come on, cut off the other half of my head's hair, and stop being such a philosopher.

Paquito the dwarf espied the swirling clouds of dust from his perch in the belfry. He dropped his four-foot baby python, Isabella. The young she-snake coiled instinctively around her master's stumpy leg. Paquito pulled Isabella off and placed her in a corner, where an endcoil of rope lay in wait for the gnarled stumpy hands to toll the hours. Paquito squinted at the clouds of dust rising up over Bacong's central street. He had never seen such a phenomenon before, he thought. Mostly it had been sunsets over the mountain with twin horns, *Cuernos de Negros* they called it, that, and sunrises with that awful Leon coming out from the surf and playing with himself right before Mass. This was something else. He had to squint and still could not quite make out

what caused the swirling clouds of dust. He did something only dwarfs are trained to do from birth. To sharpen their sights, they spat into their fingers, rubbed these quickly against their butts, then spread their palms over their eyes. Instantly he saw, and knew, and cursed.

Paquito to the snake: "You will not believe this, Isabella, but it is Leon our fool of a friend, he has come back with his good-for-nothing brother-in-law, and I think they're planning to steal the show come fiesta time."

Padre Salsa was relieving himself when he heard what seemed like conquistadors come over the New Land once again. "Cortez," he muttered, and wiped himself. "He has found the Fountain, no, it's de Leon, yes, good old Ponce, he has found the Fountain and come to share the blessings of youth, yes!"

Padre Salsa quickly adjusted his tunic and rushed out into the courtyard, where he nearly stumbled into the dwarf racing past with that, ugh, four-foot snake coiled round his stumpy leg. "No, you are not to share in the Fountain," Padre Salsa cried, striking out with his cane.

But everyone knows dwarves cannot be hurt by handcarved objects, and the baby python hissed in contempt at this doddering old priest's lack of native lore. Coiling looser, Isabella allowed herself to be dragged into a more intimate inspection of a phenomenon. The stumpy leg raced on with another, raising its own train of dust, as dwarf and snake beat priest and cane by a proverbial mile.

He was first on the site, was Paquito. Knowing the ways of his fool of a friend Leon, he positioned himself inconspicuously in a side niche within the old banyan's buttressing roots. A sleeping firefly woke to the surprise of daylight glint in Isabella's eyes, and fluttered quickly off its way to deeper darkness.

Silvestra came calmly out into the small bamboo porch just as Leon and Melecio rode in with the six horses. Close on their heels and hooves were Kinoa the barber, Anacleto the ricecake peddler, Meniang the mat weaver, Pepe Quimpo and Gelio Joaquin who were apprentice Guardia Civil, Balboa the loafer son of a *hacendero*, Imelda the profligate widow with Turing-her jeweller in tow, Magno the fisherman who all this time had secretly lusted after Silvestra, the portly mayor, his two bodyguards, three aides, seven properly uniformed *Guardia Civil* with rifles and bayonets, Botong,

Enteng, Nanding, the mayor's buxom wife, Tacio the historian, and finally Padre Salsa with his cane.

Isabella the snake sank into sleep as her master sat still in his banyan niche. The proceedings Paquito observed would of course later be recounted in diverse oratorical fashions and focal lengths, and Tacio himself would prepare a lengthy account which he would later put to the lamp, in the sheer idiocy of his last years, sighing to himself that the unearthly was not his province . . .

"Bestra!" Melecio cried loudly. "We have the charm! We have the charm!"

The hooves thundered to a stop amid a final swirl of dust, and through the clouding screen Leon's eyes spoke of calm resignation as they met Silvestra's. The eyes locked in understanding, for both knew that pain was fast at hand. It would follow the false glint of power, yecch, but naturally.

"We have the charm! We have it!" Melecio jumped off the faithful pinto Scout and rushed through the wall of dust to take Silvestra in his arms. "We have come back with it, Bestra! And nothing can stop us now! "

Just as Melecio lifted Silvestra triumphantly off the porch, the pursuing townsfolk came into view. Immediately they formed a circle around the hut, the way curiosity tends to approach as a swiftly dwindling radius of intimacy.

Paquito saw it all, and marvelled.

Leon got off Ilocos King, and with a pat on its tan Godolphin rump sent it off hoofing once more, followed by the other five, off towards the sea to raise another fine cloud of dust.

Melecio strode confidently to the narrowing circle, his arms in full akimbo.

"Well, if it isn't our portly mayor come to lead his faithful people . . ." said Melecio sneeringly.

He hadn't even noticed their diminished chances for escape as the horses galloped past the old banyan, sending a speck of hurting dust into Paquito's left eye before they eventually and most unceremoniously disappeared. The dwarf squinted his way through what he realized was a historic precedent of vainglorious local importance, the kind of myth-seed which would upstage even his Isabella's worth as fanciful ally.

"Well, if it isn't the mayor's wife, lover of pig's tails, come to see how their able guards will soon march off with their own tails

between their legs . . ." Melecio sneered further.

Silvestra eyed Leon. They discoursed quickly through the impending contretemps.

"How is it, Leon, that the weak speak more than the strong?"

"It is like the littlest bird, who chirps for more than its fair share of space. Hovering over much more of place, the hawk remains silent."

"Shall you talk this way forever, now that you've swallowed the banana's charm?"

"No, my dear sister Bestra, no way. My speech shall curve here and there the way the banana shapes its day."

"And how did it taste, this drop from the banana heart?"

"It was not from the heart, but from the latest unfurled leaf. Just as your husband had said."

"Melecio heard it wrong. The charm comes from the banana heart, on the night of the new moon. That is the lore."

"No matter. I was laughing and my eyes were closed. The drop could have come from banana heaven, for all I know. It tasted like reveries of old age, or like the secret of a successful recipe for *leche flan*, or like the beginning of a dream of grace . . ."

"Did both of you swallow the charm? I think not."

"No. You are right."

"It was you."

"Yes."

"And Melecio's drawing from you, he is like that, he will sap your strength, Leon."

"You have been silent yourself, though allow him the same . . ."

"Seeing as how he is ignorant."

"Seeing as how he's a fool."

"Yes, but don't you just love 'em . . ."

"Louts and fools, yes, my soft spot is even softer now, like a newborn's fontanelle, what with that infernal drop of banana mush . . ."

"And how did it happen? I suppose you yawned in attendance, and true to the elliptical manner of fate, the sideline grew more precious in the lack of moonlight . . ."

"No, I tell you, I laughed, most inadvertently so. And you speak like me now, my dear sister."

"Yes, we both speak like the tortoise. Remember, Leon?"

"I remember, yes. Yours was the power."

"But I am woman. I need it not for show."

"But I am young."

"And have to explain away your laughter . . ."

"Yes, before it melts into yawn . . ."

"So you did, You opened your mouth, in bold bored disbelief, and the drop from the heart slid through. It's so you, Leon."

"What heart?"

"The banana's."

"What we eat boiled in vinegar?"

"The same. Its tip was the source of your six vanished horses."

"What do you prate about, Bestra?"

"Didn't you receive the drop from the banana's purple heart?"

"I tell you, I don't know. If you say so. Expect it from the latest unfurled leaf I was told. The youngest of greens. At the right moment. In the right spirit. Facing east. All that balderdash. So said Melecio. Of course I did not believe. But somehow my mouth must have wavered so in risible appreciation, and the drop slipped in. The night of the new moon, that too, of course."

"No, Leon, you were not under a leaf that dripped. The magic liquid pearl came from the darkest purplish tip of the banana heart. Up north they say whoever catches it in his mouth finds himself defending it against an army of familiars. If he keeps the charm in his mouth till sunrise, then it is his for a lifetime. All that is as true as the heart is purple, and pointed, and tastes delicious boiled in vinegar. That is the lore. Melecio misled you."

"Like a fool."

"Like a fool, and a soon-to-be-crippled husband."

"I know now why you had been selfish with your power, Bestra."

"You understand, Leon. Bear it like a smile, for as long as you may, for it shall soon turn into grimace."

"Words beyond the tortoise, sister."

"Words that flutter like the mysteries of pictures."

"Words that circle and swoop, as the hawk of destiny now does to your fool little bird of a husband."

Their eyes locked, Leon's and Silvestra's, and they shared, shhh now . . . sibling seerdorm.

Melecio, arms and soul and mind akimbo, sprang forward to meet the spectating circle. Instinctively the mayor moved back, and in his official portliness bumped into Botong, causing the lad's

chin to reflect a suddenly spinning world as of falling glass, the head it belonged to colliding vertiginously with the chest of a retreating Guardia Civil, sending his lightly cradled rifle crashing to the ground to strike up a slight swirl of dust simultaneous with a loud report and Melecio's proximate scream.

Silvestra and Leon rushed forward as Melecio crumpled to the ground clutching his shattered knee.

The crowd moved back in various directions, leaving the offending rifle lying all alone in the settling dust before them. Melecio screamed proximately in distant pain. Silvestra gathered him in her arms, and in an instant he was reduced to quiet sobbing. Leon strode forward.

Paquito peered closer from his banyan niche.

Leon collected the rifle and laughed. He wrenched off the trigger and trigger guard and tossed them aside. The Guardia Civil retreated in lockstep. The mayor's wife clung to Botong who was nearest her. Enteng tripped over himself as he joined Nanding in pulling Botong away.

Leon wrestled off the bolt and cast it aside, laughing and moving forward. Kinoa backed up slowly, fingering his scissors in his back pocket. Meniang made a hasty sign of the cross and turned away. Pepe and Gelio stayed rooted with their mouths agape, surprised at Leon's show of strength.

Leon tore off the barrel, metal sights and all, and flung them to the ground. His laughter became more robust as he came close to the retreating crowd. The mayor tried to grab at one of the fleeing Guardia Civil, but the anonymous uniform was quick to elude him. Balboa comforted Imelda, much to Turing's disdain. He held on tighter to his jewelbag as the randy Magno jostled past to get close to the mayor's buxom wife. The mayor's aides and bodyguards were quick to run off faster than everyone else, and were now even racing past the doddering Padre Salsa and the mortified but intensely curious Tacio.

Leon grasped the stripped wooden rifle and quickly rubbed his hands in spirals around it. He pulled one end and bent it into a curving handle. He tugged at the rest and tapered off the rifle into an elegant cane. Paquito's jaw almost dropped, had it not been for Isabella waking and coiling up against it.

With a roar of laughter Leon jumped up across the crowd, soaring quickly and magnificently past everyone agape to land right

beside the astonished Padre Salsa, whom he now gave a resounding smack on the tunicked bottom. Tacio dropped his journal in bewilderment. Leon went after the Guardia Civil and not one of them proved too quick for his cane and laughter. Finally Leon found the mayor and gave him too a sharp whack that brought Paquito out like a shot from his banyan niche. Isabella coiled tightly around a leg, wondering as to her master's next stumpy move. The master proceeded to bump into a figure standing by the old banyan. He hadn't noticed her from his niche. She was Sisa, who now took no notice of the dwarf as she surveyed the proceedings with a new face, one that was — yes — now breaking into a wide smile.

From a hundred feet out Leon felt another phenomenon contesting his first grand show of magic. Instantly he espied Sisa by the old banyan, with Paquito at her side gazing up at her incredulously. Sisa's smile grew wider and a rumble of thunder rent the air. Leon laughed, tossing his head back vigorously.

Sisa joined him in laughter, and instantly the skies broke into a respectful, tentative drizzle. Leon waved his makeshift cane and laughed a covenant with Sisa. The rain began to fall in torrents. Agua de Mayo!

And Silvestra walked slowly back to her hut as Leon picked up the fallen Melecio and dragged him off sobbing through the blinding rain and past the dumbstruck crowd for whom the twin images became shimmering studies in elegant, measured escape, until they noticed a small skulking figure rushing up to join the modest exodus, with something four feet long or so coiled round its stumpy leg and waving up against the harsh large drops of the first May rain, and they knew that elsewhere in town the young boys and girls were jumping for joy and good growth while their fathers and mothers collected the sacred rainwater in coconut halves and pranced about too bathing in the rain's glad abandon, while here they stayed rooted under more than just a drenching force, gazing wonderingly at the three strange fugitives making their way in the distant haze towards the path that led to the foothills. One clutched his leg while another had something coiled and mysterious around his. And the third, leading them, boomed with laughter that drowned out even the raging rataplan that was Agua de Mayo.

ISABELLA AND THE FALLEN BOLO

Isabella's skin would grow tight two or three times a year, her scales losing the sheen that was necessary to look sinister. Old silver had to go, make way for fresh glint. Isabella was not quite a serpent's year when she felt the first of these stirrings, and she would mark the day down as one of great discomfort for she was within prying eyerange of human companions.

They weren't exactly interested, however. Only Leon felt an embarrassment in the offing when he noticed Isabella stripping off ineluctably in the deepest shadow provided by Paquito's leg. There was a mosquito on the leg, and Paquito slapped at it.

"One less from the jungle, one life less that one is," the dwarf said to no one in particular.

Melecio sobbed, clutching at his knee.

"Leon says the bullet is not there, and Silvestra's drawn the pain, is that not right, Leon?" The dwarf turned to Leon, not noticing Isabella shirking from both stumpy legs in extreme shyness.

Leon stripped off the hot skin from the boiled yam and tossed it Isabella's way. If the snake would not eat while in its act, then the peelings would have to join its own for a good random pattern, Leon thought. Leon thought again, and chewed off a large piece of the yam.

"Yes, that is right," said Leon. "Perhaps Melecio feels some other hurt."

"Is that right, Melecio?" questioned Paquito. "Is there another hurt?"

"Do you have to ask?" replied Melecio. "Don't dwarves know all the answers? When were you ever not entirely insolent in your knowledge? Leon, why is it so? Why so suddenly does it come, the pain after quick triumph? Why are we given only a few moments to savor what we've craved for, and immediately the shame should follow?"

Leon chewed at the yam, realizing that its dry fibrous taste didn't go well with the morning's rhetoric. He thought hard for an answer, something that would fail to satisfy Melecio so that he wouldn't be pressed for more masterful replies in the future.

"Look at the snake," Leon said simply.

"Her name is Isabella," said Paquito.

"What about the snake?" asked Melecio.

"See how it suffers the embarrassment of molting. Soon it shall have a new skin, just as your wounded knee will soon have a new, tougher skin. Skins are like that. They have no respect for whether you crawl or stand. Destiny is like that. It has no respect for times of triumph."

Immediately Leon felt the terror of error, seeing Melecio knit his brows in an attempt at understanding. Oh no, the morning shall shed more questions, thought Leon.

"But why must mine be short while those of others are excruciatingly long?"

Leon plunged headlong, what the hell. "Perhaps because you mind it so. That is why we are here and why Paquito has joined us with his Isabella, and why the she-snake is shedding for it is her morning's destiny. Such was yours. While now ours is to finish off these yams and march higher up the mountain. And later this afternoon we shall rest and relieve ourselves of all the yams' sweet alkali, and march again, till night and a new morning and all we'll do is go up higher while circling this mountain, for now such is our destiny, and the mountain's."

The natives called the mountain Talinis for its sharp peaks. The Spanish came and saw the twin peaks as horns. They named the mountain Cuernos de Negros, Horns of the Devil, thinking it funnily appropriate that the island the mountain belonged to had itself earlier been named Negros for its dark-skinned aborigines.

If you look at the island on a map, fair chances are you'd recall sometime in your boyish past you bent from the waist and peered between your legs at your Aunt Rita, she of the jutjaw and the well-coiffed chignon and string of pearls almost as large as your marbles, and a scent that drew attention even while you nursed your year's prize cold.

The outline of Negros Island much resembled an inverted silhouette of a lady with a powerful neck and a high bun on her head. Where the lady's eye would be, the taller peak of Cuernos de Negros rose to a craggy cloud-capped height.

When Pedro Saavedra, Spanish surveyor and heir to a brewery fortune in Galicia, stood on this peak in 1765 and thus came to the crowning culmination of seven months of geodetic cum geologic work on the island, he took one long sweeping look at the

curving coastline to the south, where the island's head widened to the sea's hairdressing hands, and breathed deeply the way Galicians of high birth do before their first swig of malt at sundown.

"Ah, yesss . . ." Pedro Saavedra hissed softly, drawing in the lowlying clouds to view the neighboring islands of Siquijor and Cebu across the strait, and directly south the big one, Mindanao of the large promise despite the betelnut-chewing, bloodred-spitting Muslims.

6,967 feet, inscribed Pedro Saavedra on his ledger. He turned about again to sweep the panorama of the island's southern end. Down from the peak the jungly growths began less than fifty feet away. Undulations of dark dipterocarp green descended gradually to a vast plain where a carpet of coconut palms stretched out towards the sea. A pair of eagles swooped in ritual romance down the slope and when they lofted farther along towards the faint steeple of Valencia, the town by the foothills, a roost of blackbirds darted quickly through their familiar course of dead trees. Wisps of smoke rose from the towns below: Zamboanguita, Siaton, Dauin, Bacong, and the large capital of Dumaguete. Thinner curls of rising noonday smoke could be seen across the foothills where bands of slash-and-burn farmers tended their season's patches of tubers and legumes.

Pedro Saavedra breathed deeply before scanning over the rest of the pages in his work ledger. Latitude 8°, longitude 123° 28,432 feet at the island's widest, 131,848 feet at its longest, chromatic basalt studded by sulphur vents all along the serpentine vein of prehistoric crater activity . . . There right about there, he squinted towards 8 degrees north-northeast, that crystal speck some three thousand feet away is the volcanic lake the natives called Balinsasayao for its dancing swallows, where black swans were also said to have once glided along the dark serene surface.

There is too much dark beneath this country's serene surface, Pedro thought to himself. Such belief in the warmth of blood, even we Castellans would be knitting our brows to comprehend. Such children. If the blacksmith Joaquin had not forged a plow in Manila in 1586, they would still be tilling their soil like children. And still they have much to learn. And they laugh so and sob so about their children's tales, their healers, sirens, naiads, vampires,

talismans, elementals, shaman, priestesses, their sorcery!

Pedro Saavedra heaved a sigh. Such children. Had we not brought tomatoes they would still be stewing their pork in pale soup.

Melecio began to think of tomatoes as they circled higher up the mountain. Tomatoes rubbed in salt was his choicest meal after the dried small fish they called *danggit*. This mountain diet was hardly appealing. That wild chicken Leon brought down with an unerring stone would have tasted better with tomatoes. The yams are getting stale. A boar would be fine, if only Leon took the hunting and foraging seriously. Had I his powers, we'd be feasting all the way to the very peak.

Tomatoes. The smell of tomatoes. It is in the air, not just in my head, I must be going mad, this jerking knee has caused my nose to trace cruel illusions!

The wafting scent of sauteeing tomatoes stopped Leon in his tracks. His vision adjusted to the foliage as he searched for an imminent clearing. A few more steps, past the apparently befuddled Melecio, brought Leon closer to the source.

Five men sat in a circle by a brook. Across some rocks was a larger clearing where a makeshift hut stood. There. From where the smoke rose, there by the back of a hut a fire was heating up an iron pan where pork fat had been thawed to a simmering pool of suet now fast softening the slices of garlic, onion, and tomato the smell of which was now bewildering even the jungle birds.

A sixth man emerged from the back of the hut with the pan's handle wrapped up with thick banana leaves. The man paused by the hut's door, from where now appeared a woman who quickly dipped into the pan for a fingertaste and a peremptory nod of her head. The man with the pan hurried back towards the fire. The woman crossed the clearing to join the men by the brook. Instantly Leon recognized her.

Pintada.

The battle was swift and to the point. Leon strode out crying her name, Pintada, and in an instant the five men bolted forward with drawn bolos.

"Pintada! " Leon cried out, calmly striding towards the brook. "I'm going to marry you here in this mountain."

Melecio and Paquito shuffled along behind him, slightly apprehensive at the sight of five men with drawn bolos now encircling them, and yet quite willing to go along for another test of their young man with powers. Hadn't Leon chased smartly after the jungle fowl, soared into the air at moment's warrant, performed amid twig and tendril and bush and vine with dazzling speed, hadn't he looked gracious in his laughter as he spun around with the obvious utmost understanding of the elements, hadn't he danced magnificently among the Guardia Civil while wielding his avenging baton, hadn't he exhibited his mastery of the occasion whenever demanded, hadn't he begun on a prodigious note in working up his triumphs?

The charm was working, Melecio and Paquito thought. And Leon was making good use of it. Rather flamboyantly on occasions, quite haphazardly in some, yet always managing to make it work, simply work. Even when the feat seemed somehow betoken to the spirit of abandon, indeed Leon brought the prize of deed home.

Too, he sowed in one's memories the picture of elegant physical display that somehow gave the impression merely of potential. More could be done with such leaps and landings. The aerial pirouettes could be tamed to a pattern for surer control. The attack's design could be made corollary to the finality of maximization, the optimum practical end.

Leon's play seemed too antic and given to open chances. The possibility of failure existed. The overall rhythm bordered on the precarious. At times the situations approached the ridiculous, when the call for the classic could easily have been met with mighty feat had it been executed with a touch of sobriety.

"Pintada! " Leon chatted casually as he crossed the brook. "Twice I have dreamt of you, and cannot forget your naked shape that day of the raging storm. I am marrying you in this mountain."

Pintada studied the grinning young man who continued stepping boldly forward. She saw how Igme lunged at him with a bolo, and how Leon, in a blur, caught Igme's hand and with a sharp twist sent the bolo crashing to the bottom of the brook, where for eighteen years it would undertake the process of rust until a young boy on a vine-gathering chore would drag it out as a serendipitous show for an older sister.

Pintada saw how the rest of her men pounced on the lone laugh-

ing figure of Leon and how they began to stumble or fly around in different directions, and how their bolos were quickly collected by the dwarf with a snake coiled round his leg, and how the other older man with the jerking knee tossed something colorful and angular and feathery to the laughing young man, Leon, who caught the wildfowl's birdbeak he had a week earlier fashioned for a playful pecking tool, and now used it as such, pecking away at the fallen men until they all scampered off in one direction of disgrace.

The sixth man now came running from back of the hut with the sizzling held upright with thick banana leaves in one hand and the steaming pot of rice in another. Pintada waved him still, her eyes locked with Leon's. Leon brought the birdbeak up and pursed his lips against it, then tossed the fancy craftwork to Pintada. She caught it and smiled, and brought the same to her mouth. Melecio's own was watering at the sight of the sauteed tomatoes, so that soon a tacit understanding presided over the group and they all sat down silently by the brook to share in a fine midday meal in the mountains.

Isabella slithered off Paquito's leg to inspect the smooth stones on the brook's bottom. There was some strange shape in the water, with a long outline like that of a fallen bolo, but Isabella thought it best not to disturb the clear shallows. Isabella felt sleepy. The dark serene surface was the dream the she-snake sought to play with.

THE PAIN OF POETRY IN ONE'S PRIVATE PARTS

"And the landscape was littered with fallen giants . . ."

"What's that, *kaibigang* Pintada? "

"A line from the poem I composed last night."

"Ah so! A bandit queen who writes poetry? "

"Why not? "

"Why not indeed? Why not Nixon? Hee-haw! "

"Strange lines! That is good poetry too, but much too abstract. The critic de Guzman should lavish interminable serials upon such lines."

"I'm afraid I don't follow."

"You shall follow, Leon. You and your men and the she-snake shall follow me higher up the mountain, till we meet up with

Buhawi's camp."

"Who is Buhawi? "

"Our leader. I'm surprised you have not heard of him."

"Our town of Bacong does not subscribe to mountain news."

"Buhawi is well known even in the capital town of Dumaguete. The provincial authorities are troubled by his growing reputation."

"The master bandit of the mountains, is he? "

"We are not bandits as some would think. We are, ehem, a spiritual group, and Buhawi is our leader. He has vast powers. We worship him, and our God through him."

"Why is his name taken from the waterspout? "

"He moves like the waterspout, rapidly in circles. He dazzles with his whirling. His wit turns water into wine. He produces talismans and inscribes sacred protection on vests and kerchiefs. He heals the sick, repairs the wounded. His prayers to the elements are heeded. Indeed he is master of this mountain. My poems are paeans to his great figure and the ideas he teaches. He is a great spiritual being, really rather supernatural. He is magnificent in battle. He floats like a butterfly, he stings like a bee. He has hands of stone and can dance all night. He shall be pleased to view your own delightful little tricks. And you yourself cannot help but learn from Buhawi, for his pact with magic is as strong as the southeasterlies in June. He can speak with the moon."

"Oh, such power."

"He is nothing short of incredible, Leon. We are a happy camp. The food is good and varied. There are enough women for the men. We live liberally. We are one with the trees and the wind. We will be happier when you join us."

"I would be happy to."

"Very well then . . ."

"That man you were with during the storm, called Fidelito I think, would he be in the camp too? "

"Yes."

"I will have to make a fool of him, so Buhawi will take to me quickly."

"That is a good plan."

"He does not matter to you? "

"Everyone in the camp matters to me."

"And Buhawi — he is your lover . . ."

"Yes."

"But I know I shall marry you in this mountain."

"So you shall. As all the others have."

"Oh."

"You are young and disappointed."

"No, I am pleased with fresh learning."

"Then it shall not matter to you that I marry others, as I will marry you."

"It shall not greatly matter."

"Then let us do it now, there by that other clearing, while your friends and my cook and the she-snake are all asleep."

"By all means."

"Come."

"Yes."

"Crossing this brook makes me tingle already."

"This is my first time."

"Oh."

"Please be considerate."

"By all means, Leon."

"By all means of magic, may I stifle the laugh while marrying you."

"Your meter is varied, your rhythm sprung."

"You were lovely naked in that hut in the middle of the storm."

"Septameter — the first foot anapestic, the next three iambic, followed by another anapest then two closing iambs. Quite lilting, with regular upswing. The imagery is tripartite, simple and strong. Makes you bate breath for the coming lines, to realize the full symbolic potential not to mention the hopping growth. . ."

"You would be lovely right here."

"Here? "

"Here."

"Perhaps a little closer to that bush, right there."

"Alright."

"There. This is fine, right here. Now let's see each other."

"Oh, you are lovely indeed."

"Take off your mountains and pants, Leon, if you want to marry me."

"Oh Pintada."

"There. Now come here."

"Oh Pintada."

"This is all? "

"Oh, Pintada! "

"And it is you who will laugh? "

"It is I. For now I put this tiny thing into you and albeit thrust tinily shall trust the pearl to glaze your walls as laser probes, far and wide off my penis tip, and you shall swoon."

"Oh yes, Leon, I feel it! It is as you say indeed! Oh, like nothing else before, except perhaps with that mute old gardener in Kabankalan."

"Feel how it can search in circles."

"Almost the way Buhawi moves in his sleep. Still and all, a wondrous talent! "

"I just knew I had it, though never had tried. It is a good first marriage."

"Yes. Search some more."

"Yes."

"Oh yes."

"Oh."

"Oh."

"Oh."

"Ooohhh..."

"Ooohhh."

Melecio coughed in his sleep. Paquito stretched a stumpy leg. Isabella lay coiled and still, dreaming of surfaces.

The lovers lay silently at rest for a while, until:

"Oh, Leon."

"Pintada. I have not had my fill."

"Oh, Leon."

"Pintada."

"Wait. A different way. Try this."

"Oh, you are lovely even without a face and breasts. What is this on your rump? A blue tattoo. I see. Oh my painted one. But what a tattoo! Why, it is the Spanish lion in the seal and the flag, and oh, this is good, why it quivers so when I thrust tinily with my powerful pearl, oh how delightful, it becomes a flying dragon, no, it can't be, yes, oh yes, it's flapping mightily like the great Philippine monkey-eating eagle, and now, oh, Pintada, what a great moving tattoo and what a wonderful feeling, again, oh, Pintada oh, ahhh, ahhhh, ahhhhhh, now I feel such a

dove in thee, such peace of my married one, oh Pintada, thank you for a wonderful afternoon."

"A Dovegion fuck it was, if you must know. Although I wonder about the dragon and the monkey."

"The way I saw it, it was lion to lion."

"You are right too. But your name alone does not guarantee entry. Best to have your private parts painted."

"Oh I shall enjoy the pain."

"I would be happy to do the painting myself."

"I would need a mighty image, something that can cut up the Spanish lion, as pointed and piquant as El Cid's instep when he gazed in such heroic pose with one leg poised on a rampart. A mighty image, Pintada."

"It would be hard to accommodate a mighty image on your tiny head, Leon, unless of course I painted the Santo Niño."

"A terrific idea. The smiling boy with the powers over fervid breasts, the darling of mighty matriarchs, the folk hero cutesy tot with the world in his palm, yes, such a fitting assassin for the Spanish lion, oh, you do deal in poetry, Pintada."

"It would still be difficult, very hard indeed, unless it was very hard."

"Make it happen, Pintada."

"I shall have to tongue your tiny tip."

"While you tattoo. Excellent."

"Tough. But what the heck, tough titty, as they say. Hope it works."

"It shall, Pintada. For I would want to marry you again and again in this mountain, to enter your lion's den again and again, if you should beard my tip with the power of the infant, as I come with you to meet Buhawi and learn more tricks from him. It shall be so, I know. For the nonce I am tired and want to sleep for a while, to dream of Teresa, Maria, Pilar, women I shall meet and marry, all after Buhawi passes water on my face. Good day to you, Pintada."