

Abstract

An elevated *telenovela* as its author likes to call it, “Of Angels and Saints” is an unapologetically histrionic tale of unrequited affection, dissimulations, and the many metamorphoses of the elusive Rocío de la Merced, unexpected bride to a bachelor from an affluent clan of landowners south of Manila. In Hacienda Zavala, the marvelous contends with the mundane as the spurned Rocío grapples with entrenched standards of beauty, femininity, and worldliness—the exigencies of Philippine society. A celebration of the nation’s unique brand of cultural and spiritual *mestizaje*, “Of Angels and Saints” is an ode to the vivacity, the sublimity, and the lingering colonial agonies which all constitute Filipino culture as we know it today.

Keywords

Mestiza, colonialism, religion, society, *hacienda* (Hispanic-colonial estate)

OF ANGELS AND SAINTS

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AFTER THREE YEARS of absence, Rocío de la Merced had returned to the country just in time for the elections; but scarcely had she set foot in Hacienda Zavala when her homecoming had already revived dormant rumors, exciting the languorous town of San Pablo in Laguna like how the first squalls of the monsoon lacerate the torturous dry heat of the summer. She graced her husband’s estate, dressed in her usual opulent garb—a loose *terno* with butterfly sleeves that billowed in the wind, fitted with an anachronistic Medici collar that flared like a saint’s aureole in the sunlight. These ostentations lent her a pompous air, for which she was slightly forgiven nonetheless, as these were de rigueur for a wife of a Zavala, a member of the affluent family whose coconut tree plantations spanned hectares in a *hacienda* south of Manila. There were others, however, who instead spread viler rumors about her; that underneath those engorged dresses were physical flaws—an anatomical deformity or a blemished complexion perhaps, of which she must be terribly ashamed.

A little more than three years ago, no sooner had Rocío de la Merced been spotted with the Zavalas in their estate than she had become

an overnight sensation in Laguna; not that the townsfolk had at last acquired a taste for her, but just because anyone as enigmatic could easily be transformed into a celebrity, though a notorious one, amidst an uneventful provincial landscape. Rumors had crescendoed as loud as the eerie giggling of the cicadas in the summer; the peers of the family, out of concern (or so they said), commissioned private investigators hoping to expose any skeleton in the parvenu's closet, while the rest just squeezed out as much as they could from the grapevine, relying on *chismis*, and gambled the little they had on what they fantasized would be Rocío's secret. Was she from the city, a courtesan who crossed paths with the Zavala bachelor in a brothel where he was seeking to indulge his follies? Or was she the daughter of one of the estate's workers, so favored by Nature that the lad was seduced by her features, at the cost of defying all the rules and expectations of Society? The townsfolk placed their bets on the stories that titillated them the most, as if these *novela* plots they concocted were lunging at each other like roosters in a cockfight. Yet when the investigations turned out to be unsuccessful, all of San Pablo, rich and poor, who had been salivating for months awaiting the shameful revelation behind Rocío, were left disappointed; there was not a single record of her that could be unearthed anywhere. It seemed outrageous for the Zavalas to welcome a bride who had neither dowry nor renown to offer—this almost implied that she did not exist, like a *desaparecido* returning to a world at the instant when it had ceased to look for her! Nevertheless, the marriage could not have been preempted, especially since news about it did not spread as rapidly as it would have under normal circumstances. The wedding unusually coincided with a catastrophe which had disrupted the annual Coconut Festival in honor of the town's namesake, Saint Paul.

The Zavalas were well-known patrons of this fiesta. And aside from their monetary contributions, they partook in the float parade by sending out these decorated statues of saints from their estate's cathedral. There was a time when a farmer had wandered in this church at night, with the sinful intention of seizing some expensive antiques, only to be paralyzed by the whispering of these saints, suddenly incarnate, who were addressing the town's supplications among themselves. San Isidro spoke on behalf of the farmers who could benefit from more auspicious weather for crops, to which Santa Teresa de Ávila responded asking which tropical vegetables and herbs could best soothe the headaches of a certain spinster; this

elderly woman swore in her prayers that the town's relentless susurrations reverberated so violently through her head whenever she suffered a paroxysm of her migraine! Meanwhile in the corner, San Judas Tadeo could not help but weep over the most desperate of pleas addressed to him—notwithstanding how often he was beseeched by a grieving orphan or a widow to resurrect a deceased parent or lover, he could never inure himself to the most impossible of wishes and was tormented all the more for being unable to expend a miracle on everyone all the time, saving miracles for the most miserable of the miserable. And the farmer, having heard all this, was consumed by guilt as if he had actually committed the theft, for his faith in angels and saints had begun to wane which drove him to the precipice! Yet those murmuring statues had restored his faith!—he claimed inside the confessional the next morning, sparing no sin of his to the confessor, and no detail of the bizarre night before. Luckily for the Zavalas who had converted some parts of their hacienda into a tourist attraction, in the following weeks, there were multitudes of visitors and pilgrims flocking to the estate. Some were even policed for trespassing, lodging in the cathedral overnight, hoping to eavesdrop on the saints as the farmer did! Since then, every January during the Coconut Festival, when these divine figures of angels and saints marched the streets of San Pablo, they never failed to provoke a riot among the town's devotees, forcefully jostling against each other to steal a swift caress on a wooden leg or the filigreed cloth of the holy statues inanimate during the day yet fleshed out, *alive* at night.

Three years ago, the town's celebrations were arrested early in the morning of preparations, when dewdrops collapsed from the wing-like leaves of the towering coconut trees like torrents, inundating the estate grounds. The earth trembled vigorously, which then devastated all the floats for the procession, including those beloved statues. Fortunately there were hardly any casualties; but the town mourned over the festival, and even more over the felled, dilapidated statues, whom they believed would intercede for them to God at dusk in the Zavalas's cathedral, so that their petitions be granted.

The tale of the conversing statues was turned obsolete by another: that same morning in a town not too far from San Pablo, a pedestrian had witnessed a mound of soil that throbbed as the earth was shaking. The mound then transformed to have human extremities which burst through the damp and voluminous soil, beneath which someone appeared to have been interred. The earth undulated violently beneath its feet as the

creature struggled to stand. Some of the *cogón* foxtails bloom across the fields remained attached onto its back—soon the witness realized that these formed aggregations of plumage. It shook its body vigorously to remove any remaining soil and dirt, and planted its feet firmly upon the soil, standing erect before the pedestrian; and its voluptuous silhouette, that of a dark-skinned woman with foxtail wings, loomed menacingly over him. Shamelessly nude and barefoot, she took the first steps of her pilgrimage, sauntering aimlessly but in the direction of the estate. The creature soon vanished in the mauve residue of a dying evening, moments before a resplendent dawn awakened and drenched all of San Pablo in gold.

As the town was preoccupied with recovering from the catastrophe, little did everyone know that Dr. Arsenio Zavala y Marasigan, the last (and the most handsome!) of bachelors in the family, would marry Rocío de la Merced so soon, who was derided to be no more than a silly innamorata. Although the doctor never failed to appear debonair before all the ladies, with his lustrous pompadour and bespoke cotton suits that betrayed his *sajonista* ways; though he inflamed, through a winsome smile or an innocent quip, the yearning of various women, whether they were the virginal daughters of peasant farmers or the older dames of the Manilense elite, the gentleman did so indifferently, without meaning to—in fact, Arsenio never showed any interest in settling down with a woman, let alone a wife. It was a running joke among the lasses' whose advances he declined that the doctor would have already married his stethoscope if only he could sleep with it, seeing that he was “more enamored” with his *métier* as a scientist. Arsenio perfected his craft day by day till he was hailed as one of the archipelago's most competent physicians, yet in spite of this newfound renown, he treated patients at his usual fee and rarely turned down *pro bono* cases hoping they were medical novelties. But since he lived far away from the more peopled and urban Manila, eventually his practice lapsed into a humdrum routine after having cured all the sick in San Pablo (including the spinster's migraines!), and though he was beloved for such a miraculous feat, for him this meant that he could no longer sate his appetite for knowledge. He thus began to explore beyond the realm of human medicine, thus developing an eccentric penchant for zoology, botany, astounded by the diversity of creatures in his vicinity: rare insects, carnivorous plants, iridescent sea critters—all that was lurking, awaiting him in the Laguna wilderness!

When Arsenio and Rocío were pronounced husband and wife in a surreptitious ceremony within the family cathedral (now devoid of the beloved statues), the exclusive circle of invitees, nonplussed at the groom's unanticipated capitulation to domesticity, observed the wedding so microscopically, thus believing there were clues concealed in plain sight to the aberration of a union that unfolded before them. One guest remarked how the décor and the hors d'oeuvres were wanting, appearing to have been prepared in such haste bordering on negligent, while another scrutinized the bride's gown and how it barely seemed tailored; how it seemed cheap and inappropriate for a Zavala wedding! But the most unusual among the many criticisms was about the kiss at the end—how Rocío and Arsenio kissed as if thespians on stage, having rehearsed a maneuver to disguise that their lips had not actually met. The rumors surrounding the marriage never subsided, and scarcely had the two embarked on the next chapter of their lives when new canards were once again stirred (which were nonetheless partly true) that Arsenio had been abandoned by Rocío who was spotted fleeing the islands in an ocean liner that departed from the Cavite shipyard.

To everyone's surprise, three years later, the wife had returned to her husband, and San Pablo could hardly recognize Rocío, who was striding the hedge-lined paths of Hacienda Zavala with a poised and almost intimidating gait. As she ascended the stairway of the house, she was hesitantly received and attended to by the housemaids. She paid them no heed, busy perusing the family portrait in the *caída*—this grand painting was the first object which caught a visitor's eye upon entering. It was hung on the wall between two french doors, each leading to a balcony from where one could marvel at the vastness of the estate. Drawn on the portrait she was listlessly examining was an ensemble of fair-skinned *mestizos* staring back at her just as vacantly. Rocío chuckled, almost as if relieved to have been excluded; she would rather sport a cheeky grin instead of suppressing it for a dreary painting. Arsenio caught her sniggering like a fool, so he approached the portrait as well, joined her and perplexedly stared at it before breaking the silence,

“What's so funny, ha? Don't you think the painter did a fine job or no? Or was that angle an unflattering one for me? If only you weren't away, you would've been beside me up there.”

Whether or not Arsenio was serious about what he had said, Rocío knew that this was a tiny white lie offered out of courtesy. Even if she

had stayed behind, she would have been excluded nonetheless. She would only appear out of place—her swarthy visage marring a canvas abundant with shades of cream and carnation. Instead of responding, she simply caressed his cheek before reaching in for a kiss, but Arsenio preferred a tight embrace instead. Slightly embarrassed by this attempt to collect the unpaid debt of a wedding kiss, she then mumbled,

“Forgive me, *cariño*. It’s just that I’ve missed you a lot.”

“Are you ready for the *miting de avance*?”

Rocío nodded and followed Arsenio into their bedroom. The housemaids heaved a sigh and jealously imagined Rocío, with her deformed body, making love with the most handsome Zavala, wishing they were in her place instead.

Their bedroom was adorned with antique furniture fashioned out of expensive Caribbean wood. A wedding photo of them was juxtaposed with framed critters on the wall, ranging from colorful butterflies to fearsome tarantulas, and in one corner of the room hung the cage of a scarlet lory that could sing operatic arias in various languages. On a shelf, sandwiched between leatherbound books was the glass terrarium of a young python, which to Rocío’s surprise had already turned a brilliant, *calamansi* green. Three years ago, when she gave the snake as a parting gift to Arsenio, it was a tad smaller, as yellow as a ripe lemon. Although initially she was not as interested in animals and nature as her husband, Rocío eventually grew fond of the python as much as he did. Upon seeing it metamorphosed after three years, she gasped, marveling at the snake in its predatory pose, stolidly perched on a moist bough but ready to lunge if anything were to approach dangerously close. Arsenio, on the other hand, was sifting through the papers on his desk, humoring his wife with the bare minimum of conversation about her travels and apprising her of his grandfather’s campaign for *alcalde* of San Pablo.

Rocío approached his desk, glancing at the pile of scattered documents that preoccupied him, then she noticed a photo of Arsenio’s mother in her youth, with her gleaming eyes, the crevices on her cheek beginning to show in incipient laughter. Her mother-in-law was as fair-skinned as she was painted in the portrait, but instead of a formal and stern terno, here she was photographed in a more casual, white summer dress, at the threshold between humanity and divinity. Instead of brooding excessively over the photo, Rocío embraced Arsenio from behind, wrapping her arms around his neck, albeit encumbered by the accoutrements of her dress.

Out of frustration, she tore the oppressive collar, revealing a décolletage beaded with sweat which then cooled in the laved air that lingered after a usual episode of rain showers. She cradled her chin on his shoulder; her arms brushed against his neck, and her temples were gently teased by the curls of his hair.

“What are you doing?” Arsenio chuckled.

“I mean, we are husband and wife. Can’t we act out our roles for a bit?” jested Rocío.

Suddenly, she was swallowed by a force within her, as if a predator were eating her inside out. She kissed his cheeks, explored him with her hands, tracing his collarbone and navigating the gossamer of veins and the ridges along his arms. Her next breath, she thought, would be an opportunity to indulge in the lingering vetiver of his French perfume, which combined with his sweat emitted a distinct and enticing aroma—for three years, though she may have been tempted to sleep with another man, to find herself a honey-skinned American for a beau or humor an admirer from the Mediterranean, she remained a faithful wife and abstained from the ecstasies of the flesh; and believing it was a reward of some sorts, she shamelessly indulged in her husband’s body and in its scent—faint, sweet—wafting right under her nose ... Arsenio intercepted the wandering hands like a gentle reproach to a misbehaving child,

“That tickles, Rocío! Something’s up tonight. You’re acting strangely affectionate.”

In this idolatry for her husband, she felt a ticklish lightness within her bosom. And the aroma of flesh she was shamelessly gasping for smelled as sharp for her as the scent of blood does for sharks. Famished from years of loneliness, she turned into a carnivorous savage, stuttering, cross-eyed, suppressing the urge to lunge at his neck. Her body burst at the seams of her dress, and Arsenio, who stayed aloof while Rocío seduced him, was jolted out of his sangfroid by the feverish sensation of his wife’s naked chest pressing against his cold and stiff shoulders. He grabbed her and set her on the bed, while she spread out her arms and legs across the ivory bedsheets; she struggled to breathe, clawing at the man before her, clutching his wrists and pulling his hands closer to her nude body, demanding to be touched, bitten, *ravished!* Arsenio could not help but clench his fingers around Rocío’s arms; they clasped onto her so tightly she whimpered in pain and was frightened lest he planned to hit her. When she had quieted down, the man examined her body with

a cold objectivity—this sudden attack of lustful madness he posited a symptom not of love, but of some disease, some sort of “jungle fever” she may have contracted abroad. The dispirited Rocío remembered the purpose of their wedding three years ago as she was prodded by all sorts of medical apparatus: a thermometer in her mouth, a stethoscope on her chest, a sphygmomanometer’s cuff tightened near her elbow. The night that Arsenio discovered her, he immediately asked her to be his wife, but this proposal was not in the least romantic; rather it was a *quid pro quo*—he promised her security in the guise of marital fidelity as long as he could investigate her fascinating anatomical features. She recalled her baptism that fateful night—moments before she was taken to the house to be washed and inspected by the doctor, when he caught sight of her hiding in the thickets, he cried out “*rocío!*” seeing the beads of sweat across her dark skin luster in the faint light of distant lanterns—how they scintillated like dewdrops scattered across foxtails did at sunrise!

Rocío had begun to sob, and Arsenio asked what was hurting her. She could not answer, stifled by a melancholy, a fury that could not congeal into speech. But within, she wrestled with these sorrows. She convinced herself to be grateful toward her husband (his lack of affection notwithstanding), who promised her that the world would soon become her sanctuary. Rocío refused the idea of resenting him, for thanks to him, she had traversed oceans, continents, and had basked in the marvels of this world: from the temples of Angkor Wat to the streets of Paris; from the skyscrapers of New York to the glaciers of Patagonia! After three years, she felt compelled to return the favor: to stand firmly among the Zavalas at the *miting de avance*—the final rally held on the penultimate afternoon of the electoral race—and thus exuding an air of sophistication as she had learned from the *haute société* of Europe; that after years of autodidacticism, she was now able to engage in matters of the law and politics, and could express her thoughts so eloquently that though she was still disliked for having scaled the social ladder, Rocío seemed nonetheless capable of persuading the townsfolk, and thereby campaign for the Zavala candidate. The harrowed creature attempted to disguise the frustrations betrayed by her grimace, relaxing her stiffened body. As a woman of society, it was indecent of her to have acted so recklessly, and after gathering herself, almost breathless, she uttered,

“I’m alright. It’s the fatigue from travelling, *cariño*. Just a bit of rest is all I need.”

Arsenio noticed that Rocío was beginning to fall asleep, and out of pity for his wife, he lay beside her and gently lifted her head to let it rest upon his chest. Before she had completely surrendered to the pangs of drowsiness, she first had to ignore the inertness across her husband's body that pronounced the aching he never failed to provoke in hers.

The next morning, as one of the housemaids routinely cleaned the couple's bedroom, she found foxtails trapped in the damaged fabric of Rocío's dress.

Preparations for the *miting de avance* before election day were already underway even before the dew had slipped and dried off the multitudes of coconut tree blades across the estate. Arsenio's grandfather was rehearsing his exhortations with his grandson in the *sala*, before journeying into town for his daily campaign. On the same morning, the housemaid who a few days before discovered the foxtails among the shreds of Rocío's dress, had already invited her fellow maids to convene outside the bedroom, and they peered through the hinges of the door to verify whether the disastrous angel of the earthquake four years ago and Rocío were one and the same. Struggling to see clearly through this partition, one of the maids mustered the courage to open the door carefully for a more rewarding view. This was the opportunity to expose Rocío de la Merced, the myth in the flesh, the culprit behind the calamity that ruined the Coconut Festival three years ago! Yet before anyone could clearly resolve any hellish deformation, the python slithered through the door, having grown abnormally overnight and appearing to have a belly and an appetite for an adult person. It aggressively lunged at the maids, and it buried its fangs into the central conspirator's leg before escaping into the estate! The shrieks of the maids disturbed the morning peace, thus interrupting Arsenio, his grandfather, and waking Rocío, whose first instinct was to hurry and close the bedroom door. Arsenio anxiously entered the bedroom, shutting the jalousies tight, and begged his wife to remain inside for her safety. When he was about to close and lock the door, at the foot of the doorway he noticed the leader of the conspiracy, incapacitated from the vicious attack crawling toward Rocío, pointing at her and stammering,

"D-d-d-demoniya . . .!"

Arsenio ran outside the house and commanded that everyone should concentrate their efforts in retrieving his wife's python, even

promising a handsome bounty on the serpent's head. He turned to the other housemaids, shivering with heads downcast; he threatened to dismiss them from their jobs if they dare speak of what they might have seen. Unfortunately, new rumors were already erupting across town as Arsenio uttered this warning—rumors that were injurious to his family's campaign, expecting that at the miting de avance, his grandfather would be badgered about his wife or the giant python slithering free which put the lives of San Pablo in harm's way; both of which were irrelevant to his political platforms, his plans for the town! But this miting de avance scheduled that same afternoon was now at risk of cancellation, with its organizers refusing to proceed until the matter had been cleared up. In a town like San Pablo, the people would surrender to someone like Rocío; queue day and night to kiss her feet or steal a glance of her had she only resembled a seraph fallen from heavens, with velvety aquiline wings and dressed in robes of silk, but she was depicted to be the opposite—she had erupted indecent and nude from the ground, with skin as dark as the soil within which she had been interred, and with frail wings constructed out of grass foxtails for feathers!

Caged inside their bedroom, Rocío was isolated from the buzzing rumors but was not at all oblivious. She had begun to ruminate on all the possible strategies to escape and proceed with her voyage around the world, yet the thought of parting from her husband again, this time never to return, she could not bear! The years of solitude only daunted her, for if freedom came at such a cost, she would rather be incarcerated in this unfriendly town; greeted by supercilious portraits and housemaids every day; ostracized by pallid flesh, all instead of enduring nauseating months at sea; falling asleep speaking to herself in the dark; imagining Arsenio's presence, imagining his embrace—she would rather be a prisoner than be free yet lonely! Rocío could always make the world her sanctuary as her husband had promised, but it was nonetheless a world that she no longer recognized, or one she no longer had to pretend to recognize, a world that beckoned to her in Arsenio's voice, a world that she understood only through her husband—through what he is, through what his society is, through what they desired from her, through what they needed from her!

Seeing the photo of Arsenio's mother on the desk, Rocío seized it, simultaneously admiring and cursing the woman's diaphanous skin, contrasting it against her own, clawing at her ebony hide as if desperately

hoping to excavate ivory underneath. She would have torn the picture into pieces out of rage had she not come to her senses. Arsenio barged in the bedroom to find Rocío on the floor, wailing like a banshee, writhing in jealousy! She suddenly clasped onto his feet, begging him to fix her, to transform her into a beautiful lady like his mother who resembled the Madonna.

“Yet you are already beautiful, *cariño*! There is no need to change yourself!” pleaded Arsenio.

“Not beautiful enough! Darling, if I were as beautiful as you say I am, then may I ask: why do you hesitate to touch me? To kiss me? Have I not turned myself into the woman, the wife, that you wanted me to be?”

“You are beyond all of those, Rocío!”

“How can this town adore me if I remain a freak in my own husband’s eyes?” cried Rocío harrowingly.

Arsenio then reluctantly carried her like a newborn into their bathroom, cradling her in his oar-like arms and admiring for the last time her skin as he laid her down in a fragrant yet scalding concoction of papaya, goat’s milk, rice, turmeric, lemon juice, and orange peels among others—a *mélange* of ingredients that was rumored to bleach the skin mercilessly, yet whoever was willing to undergo this trial of fire would come out as ethereal as a saint. As her skin melted into the tub, she convulsed, suppressing the urge to howl, and would rise from the bath sporadically to gasp or to gaze into Arsenio’s eyes. She looked steadfastly at him; she sniggered and smirked like a lunatic, anticipating her rebirth into a creature as tantalizing as (or perhaps even more than!) her husband, a creature no longer inferior to anyone, to those fair-skinned dolls on portraits and pictures, to her mother-in-law; she would no longer belong to a menagerie of carnival attractions, for a *human* she would finally become! And she could join in the ranks of the *Zavalas*—*no*; she even wished to surpass them! After such an ordeal, Rocío would not be content to emerge from this lake of fire that scorched her into whiteness as a mere human; she desired for divinity, to be worshipped as a deity, no longer ridiculed by nor victim to the inane rumors whose clangor she could endure no more! Rocío was determined to silence San Pablo once and for all by exacting a sublime sort of vengeance, singeing their eyes with unfathomable beauty: the fearsome beauty of angels, of saints!

Arsenio left their bedroom abruptly when he recognized the clamor from outside the house. From the balcony, he could see hordes of townsfolk

thundering for Rocío, wishing to punish her for the catastrophes they believed she had caused. The family deemed it imprudent to simply banish the people with force as it would damage their chances at winning the election, and so, Arsenio's grandfather stepped forward and attempted to negotiate with the protesters. There was no success at placating the uproarious people, who even started to demand the withdrawal of his candidacy if the family refused to present the creature rumored to have emerged from the depths of hell three years ago.

A bellow of agony silenced the cacophony of protests across the estate. Arsenio rushed back into the room to realize that his wife had emerged from the bath, staggering toward the balcony, as nude as the first time he discovered her in the wilderness. Rocío strode in unconscionable pain, but before appearing on the balcony, she first glanced at the family portrait. She was shocked to see the stern faces now smiling upon her, as if inviting her to join in the image. Now brazen, Rocío forcefully swung open the doors of the balcony; there she stood statuesque, as marmoreal as the balustrades she leaned on, and raised her arms to the sunlight, thus refuting all the rumors of any flaw that marred her divinity. The townsfolk gasped and fell prostrate on their knees. On that day, all of San Pablo basked in the exquisiteness of an angel, a saint; a native Eva in a tropical paradise, seized from Arsenio's rib and molded into a woman by the fingers of God himself!

Rocío turned around contentedly, indulging in the awe she struck in the people of San Pablo, only to encounter the fugitive python before her. She was stricken with trepidation at first, fearing she was feeble prey caught in its predatory gaze, but when tears began to fall from its eyes, she was outraged! Asserting her hauteur as a society lady, she questioned the serpent—how dare this reptile show clemency toward her? Did she not look sublime? Did she not look tantalizing, so succulent a prey in this fair skin? Let it ravish me to death!—she thought; but when the weeping serpent was captured, a cascade of shame overwhelmed her as it was pushed out of her gaze. Her housemaids clad her gently with a brocaded peignoir, her usual finery, and the crowd outside applauded, chanted to her as if she were an apparition of the Virgin. *Nuestra señora*—they clamored! *Nuestra señora*—they sang! Arsenio took her by the hand, guiding her back into the bedroom and propped her on the bed. He noticed that Rocío was quivering in her new body, rendered speechless by the tremendous veneration outside, and hoping to provoke a reaction,

or at least to mellow her petrified countenance, he kissed her cheeks; his coarse palms and nimble fingers grazed the nacre veneer over her arms; he caressed her as devotedly as one would with angels and saints, and told her *sotto voce* as one would in prayer,

“How beautiful you were before this . . . and yet, *cariño*, how beautiful you remain so!”

The crowds eventually receded to the streets. There were a few disappointed to realize that she was cut from the same cloth as them all along, but most were genuinely ridden with contrition over having doubted her, having indulged in all the calumnies they either uttered or propagated all over San Pablo. The next morning, the townsfolk hurried to the ballots to cast their votes for Arsenio's grandfather, who would indeed be proclaimed the town's new *alcalde*, a landslide victory which he owed to Rocío's apparition—the candidate could only have emerged victorious because she did as well, prevailing over hearts once hostile towards her. After the elections, however, she fell into a mysterious torpor, and as she appeared to be ill once more, her husband attempted to examine her but was refused. Since that day, she spoke less and less, until she resorted to communicating (and only if she absolutely needed to) with the household through mutters, gestures and gazes. She made herself prisoner in the bedroom for the rest of the year. The newly celebrated and beautiful Rocío was never spotted out in public again. Rumor has it that the maids were disturbed by shrieks and muffled wailing from her bedroom at night, but these were nothing compared to the terrifying morning the Zavala ménage awoke to an omen as sinister as a biblical plague!—the house was deluged with blood that profusely flowed through the stairs and out into the gardens, even being spewed out by the marble sphinxes of the fountains; and the source was speculated to be none other than Rocío's bedroom. Arsenio could not confirm this, for apparently by then his wife had asked him to sleep someplace else, seldom permitting him to visit her. Since he convinced himself that being separated within the same estate was at least far more preferable than, say, living a thousand leagues apart (though it hurt no less), he respected all his wife's exigencies in hopes of salvaging a relationship that mysteriously soured too quickly. Rocío eventually abandoned her husband sometime in January, and though her departure was not totally unexpected, Arsenio was as devastated as a widower, mourning her loss as if she had actually passed away for he was certain—Rocío de la Merced had left him for good.

Arsenio and the housemaids were finally able to enter the former prison of his wife; they did not expect, however, to be repulsed by such a horrendous sight!—the canopy bed once swathed with ivory sheets and pillows, the *récamier* once fitted with the softest cream-colored cushions, and Rocío's silk peignoir once a mellow translucent pink, were all drenched in crimson blood! In one of the shelves of a disordered chiffonnier, they discovered used sewing instruments, with unraveled thread spools, scraps of lace, and discarded needles stained with dried maroon patches of blood; and though he wished his intuitions were false, Arsenio, upon closer inspection, cursed as he confirmed that those particles hooked upon the needle tips were sinew, shreds of human *flesh*! He was so overwhelmed that he forewent investigating what atrocities had occurred within those walls. He could not afford to be tormented by such a blood-curdling image of self-mutilation, for aside from grieving over Rocío's departure, he was also preoccupied with the upcoming fiesta—the Zavala family once again resumed their post as patrons of the Coconut Festival, and by then, he must have rid himself of a glowering face, and be able to feign his winsome smile for the whole town to fawn over. For the first time in almost four years, the statues of angels and saints were finally repaired, repainted, and restored to their former glory; the whole town eagerly awaited the procession of these miraculous figures upon the streets of San Pablo, for everyone believed that the fiesta this time around inaugurated more favorable seasons for the town, no longer to be beleaguered by calamities. In the midst of the parade, the merry throngs of dancers, and the resounding trumpets and percussion, the townsfolk spotted a creature soaring above, farther and farther until it was out of sight! Since it appeared to have come from the hacienda, the people of San Pablo cheered more enthusiastically believing it was a majestic bird the family had set free for the occasion. Arsenio, however, whose undivided attention was devoted to manning the float of his family's saints, felt his heart sink when a few foxtails, puffed up like feathers, collapsed gently upon his feet.

He was transported back to the first time his heart had swollen suddenly for his wife, Rocío de la Merced. On that afternoon when she was adored by all of San Pablo, he sensed how envious the town was of him, for beaming with pride, he could claim that sublime goddess as his wife. On that day half a year ago, Arsenio at last suffered the brunt of the years he spent wasting away at a career, at a hobby, studying every

creature under the sun including his *wife*! Rocío was shuddering before him, ashamed, anxiously pulling the ends of her nightgown tighter and tighter till the fabric engulfed her almost entirely, save for her fingers, toes, and head. As Arsenio's eyes tirelessly pursued hers which wandered all around the room, he glanced here and there at the uncovered patches of skin, as vulnerable as unconquered territory, as fair as a seraph's, and that lonely white terrain, in spite of its emptiness was somehow pregnant with regrets—he lamented all those nights he spent examining her instead of worshipping her; instead of allowing himself to be prey to that lustful creature; to resist those greedy embraces and cloying kisses no longer; to yield to the ecstasy she proffered so unabashedly, then to resign tenderly in each other's arms; to fall and lie vulnerable beside her, at her divine mercy. The opaline mirage that mesmerized San Pablo had not impressed Arsenio so much as it recalled to him the vanity of all those vapid Manilense debutantes, but nonetheless he was enraptured as everyone else, pained by a bittersweet tenderness for reasons that eluded him. It was not a question of beauty; he was certain. He found Rocío beautiful from the very beginning, and thus she remained throughout her many transformations—from a swarthy creature lurking in the wilderness to a cosmopolitan society lady, till she was scorched into a white marble statue of an angel or saint. What a pity it would be if the doctor were perhaps set aflame by the last embers of Rocío's years of self-immolation, right when the martyr's conflagration was already sputtering into ashes ...

And when he finally caught those leaping eyes that afternoon ... alas! He was bewitched by the charms of a domestic life! He could see himself cradling a swaddled child, whom he'd then sway gently in a hammock. He thought of how his heart could burst at the lilt in the toddler's voice as it was tickled, whom Arsenio could see rowdily charging through the chambers and corridors of the house before escaping into the gardens; and this cherub would fall down onto the grass, exhausted, and there he was by the child's side, ready to wipe the sweat dripping from those rosy cheeks, to admire the child's resemblance to its mother. Arsenio could envisage the three of them as a family sprinting through the coconut trees of his estate, swimming in the lakes of Laguna, and climbing the mountains of the South, and all this unraveled before him as he gazed into Rocío's eyes that afternoon, for he was resolved to make love to his beautiful wife that night, to smother her at last with cloying kisses, to nestle her in greedy embraces as if they were smitten newlyweds

consummating an unconsummated marriage; and though he hoped she was burning with lust for him as she always did, he was, however, met with eyes as opaque as marbles. Arsenio sensed (and in retrospect was now painfully certain) that something had irrevocably changed between the two of them. That night when they finally had made love for the first time and were about to sleep, before he was able to completely surrender to the pangs of drowsiness, he first had to ignore the inertness across his wife's body that pronounced the aching she began to provoke in his.

Once Arsenio was asleep and the chaos of that afternoon had languished into the usual silence, Rocío crept out of their bedroom and in the moonlight, she recognized bloodstains leading to balcony, a trail of her first steps as a reborn woman earlier that day. On the wooden floor, a heap of severed foxtails, dyed a deep red, fluttered as the humid zephyrs of May blew past Rocío, who had gently picked up the featherlike foxtails, the last souvenir of the scorned angel risen from the earth. She cradled the foxtails in her arms, dampening them with tears before stowing them away somewhere in her bedroom. From that day forward, only the pallid apparition of a mortal on that balcony would remain enshrined within the idolatrous conscience of San Pablo, while she alone, plunging further in the unbearable solitude of that May night, mourned a beauty lost to foolish whims—a beauty far greater than that of angels and saints.