Books by Gina Apostol

Bibliolepsy

The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata

Gun Dealers' Daughter

Insurrecto

BIBLIOLEPSY

Gina Apostol

SOHO

1. Bibliolepsy

Bibliolepsy: a mawkishness derived from habitual aloneness and congenital desire. Manifestations: a quickening between the thighs and in the points of the breast, a broad aching V, when addressed by writers, books, bibliographies, dictionaries, xerox machines, a sympathy for typists of manuscripts. Etymologically related to Humbert Humbert's gross tenderness, though rarely possessing its callous tragedy; occasionally accompanied by a liking for rock and roll. The endless logo-itch, desperately seeking, but it can't get no satisfaction. Biblioleptic attacks usually followed by bouts of complete distaste for words.

2. What I hate about the bibliolept

Name-dropping. The squandering of proper nouns like gaudy wealth. Sure sign of a) amateurishness b) an inadequate education c) paucity of imagination d) certainly all of the above. As if *to say* Kafka were *to be* him, cheap metamorphism.

But then again: after the reading, all I have is the name. Loss of text, disjunction from god. I recover by the sign of the cross: to say *en el nombre del Padre* as the shortcut of adoration.

Recuperation is here, in mere utterance of name: brief recovery of text, reader's brief sanctification.

Amorous indiscretion. Such volubility, such blatance of love, untiring discourse about books, at dinner tables, shopping centers, classrooms, séances, airports, beaches, toilets, museums, libraries, pubhouses, seawalls, conference rooms, studios, plazas, sports stadiums, fortunetelling sessions, hamburger stalls, salas, kitchens, bedrooms, bedrooms, bedrooms. Gush, gush, sputter, sputter, talk about books. Like a little girl without experience, unable to keep love from her lips.

Enamoration by language necessitates ejaculation by language. Conversation about books is the bibliolept's elementary form of satisfaction. But since bibliolepsy is always latent, seething beneath all activity, its emissions are continual, irrepressible. Places and events then just seem opportunity for biblioleptic expression, occasion for biblioleptic attack. The whole world is a stage for bibliovular release.

Lack of discrimination. The tendency to judge the writer only by successes, to excuse the badly written work. And finally, to love the bad book, the imperfect text, as much as the success.

The bibliolept is disarmed by failures of the text: not tolerant, as in that whore you want who expects all kinds, or charitable, like the mothering face of the virgin you want because she knows no better; but disarmed like the soldier who has pierced his opponent's flesh, seen blood run through a rupture. The imperfect text betrays to me my writer's mortality, weakening me, to lead me to

a perverse pleasure. I begin looking for blood. I begin to smell beneath the lacquered text the honest skin of earlier failure. I track in the success the fractures of my writer's past. I hunt for his weaknesses, so that to find the scratch beneath, the indecisions and revisions, to find him in the raw becomes another adventure, equally vital, equally doomed.

Adulterous adulation. Such wanton superlatives, polygamous praise—the reader's capacity for adulation embraces a harem of texts, each pronounced "adorable." Is such dissipation of love moral? Is it healthy? Is it just, to declare Sylvia Plath "lovable" and Shakespeare equally so?

These superlatives rush forth spontaneously, and this spontaneity is the reader's integrity. It is one's escape from rhetoric, escape from the divisive rationality that will certainly, in a few minutes, cut up the text into the categories of one's prejudice, park it into its pigeonhole; but for a while, to merely exclaim (the way Barthes's lover exclaims) "Adorable": this is the reader's primal lucidity.

3. Dolphins

I am not one of your pathetic women with domesticated reasons for their "looseness" (a word with interestingly set parameters of meaning, even in the current century); I do not lay about so voluminously out of a homemade Freudian angst, although a friend of mine, over coffee and cockroaches in Diliman, has asked me:

were you ever beaten as a child? And I marvel again at the linear meanings the word Freud has spawned, even in intelligent minds. Nor have I copiously coupled out of an inherent female faithlessness, my incorrigibly indiscriminate cunt: at heart, I'm the most faithful of creatures.

It might disappoint some people to know I had a happy childhood. I spent the first eight years of it with my father, Prospero Peregrino, an animator, my mother, Prima, an amateur taxidermist, and Anna, my sister, a sort of witch. I was named after my mother but have always been called Primi. Up until the time I was eight, I traveled with them, spending my earliest years looking at green and blue dolphins trailing boats in the sea. My sister Anna, who is always seven years older than I and has treated me often with the impatience my inability to catch up with her deserves, has told me there are no dolphins in or around the San Juanico Strait, in or near the Philippine seas, and I was too young and stupid anyway to remember anything.

We lived intermittently in Tacloban, the capital of the Eastern Visayan province of Leyte, typhoon path, lush place of impeccable monotony, a richness sworn to stasis of coconut green and coconut brown and coconut white and yellow, living nightmare of my sister, but to that we will digress in another chapter. For me, things were different. The attraction was not Tacloban but the boat travels we took to and from the city. We often traveled in inter-island boats plodding through the Visayan provinces, Cebu with its sparkling fish, Negros and its giant dogs, then

finally Mindoro's faunal feast: monkey-eating eagles; fabled bovine tamaraws; soft red-eyed tamarins, the smallest monkeys in the world; and dolphins like flashing glass domes, quick and thickly crystalline.

I think it was the dolphins that made my parents leave the side of the ship when I was eight. My father was a short man, eyes myopic and uncompromisingly sad. I see his eyes in the faces of many people, those destitute creatures, for instance, who stare at you asking for money, as if tatting on you guilt for their misery. I think the fierce sadness in my father's eyes, though, was basically his myopia. He was the only man in this country who loved his wife.

My mother was a beautiful woman, but she was crazy. She was descended on both sides of her family from feudal plunderers, on her father's side American, on her mother's side Spanish. My sister Anna is supposed to look like her—a plaster fairness of skin, moist like a new sculpture; a face like the mask of an ancient doomed prophetess. And underneath the stilled art of their features there was a dormant color, a sort of fire stirring in my sister's blood that made her flesh never static, never mere slab of stone. You see that in many women of mixed, infernal blood, I think, a reddening beneath eyebrows especially, around the ears and by the ankles, along the wrists and the nipples of the breasts and possibly above their pubic softness; at strategic points in their body: a glow. I shall always be sallow beside them. Contrary to all your expectations, I am not dark-skinned, dark-eyed, dark-haired. I'm not thin, slightly anemic-looking, I do not have hair

that falls straight like a fan to cover my face. I do not have a voice that is part whisper, part preparation for a scream. What I got from my mother was her inclination to fat and a diluted form of her whiteness. My whiteness has none of the subtle passion of her hue; my skin has the tendency to turn the color of sour milk. What is interesting about my breasts is not a pale transparency that echoes blood, but a black birthmark near my right nipple, like a spider. My hair is an obvious light brown, and it curls naturally at the sides, only slightly, as if in a kind of forgetfulness. They say I have my father's eyes, but in pictures and in the light, the iris turns into a redness, wine-like, the way my mother's did.

My mother, as I said, was crazy. They say she couldn't stay in one place for more than four days—an exaggeration. My father, I think, was essentially sedentary (despite his name); you note that in his pictures, by his cheekbones that make him look Chinese, which he was: this immobility. He looks as if he would have wanted to stay in one house only for the rest of his life, making his cartoons. Instead, my mother took him along on her dead-animal trips. In the diary of their stay in Mindoro, one of the last places they visited, she said she wished to "find the one death that did not, in secret, wish for resurrection." Yet she was pleased to reconstruct the dead, keeping them alive with no effort. "The Authentic Resister," she noted in her diary, "is in none of these known animals. In my hands they all keep wishing to come back." My father, at the time, was on his way to making a full catalog of all the possible movements of the mouth, a philosophical

undertaking as well as a practical guide for his colleagues. He already had versions of the coital and post-coital mouths and was in the midst of finishing that point at which the lips open ever so slightly, in either deep sleep or first lust. Anna and I used to keep these drafts with us, until by momentum of our disjunct lives we lost some, most probably in one of those flash floods Manila keels on as it weighs itself mindless into the sea. My memory tells me I was looking at those drafts on the boat that day, but, as Anna says, maybe I was too young and stupid to remember anything.

Aside from the drafts, my father also made drawings of unhuman men for commercial firms in Manila; he mailed them periodically in big plastic envelopes: coffins, he called them. My mother, on the other hand, was beginning to despair of anyone's ever really dying. In a tidy manner of putting it, my father the animator and my mother the taxidermist jumped off on the twin ends of these illusions—my father's productions of impossible lives and my mother's belief in impossible death; and there they are in the sea with my impossible dolphins. Among my father's effects that I still have is that unfinished mouth, which seems to promise so much in joy, the possible attitude of their first thrill as they looked together at the sea, at death that was, I suppose, another matter of lust.

"Beggars," Anna said. "Child beggars. Those are what you saw by the side of the ship. Children in the water yelling at us to toss them coins to dive for and keep. Not dolphins, ninny. Or I, too, should have seen them."

For six hours, the ship circled the waters. Divers jumped in pairs to look for my mother and father. They found neither. Prospero and Prima were last seen by a passing drunk, startled sober by flailing legs. Anna and I were in our cabin. People surrounded us to comfort us, as if the claustrophobia of bodies might help. Anna pushed them away politely by merely turning her back and bowing her head at the sea.

We were used to people crowding around us. When we visited my grandmother's towns, children followed us without compunction. Maybe because I was abnormally fair, albino-like (unless I put on my favorite rouge), and my sister was preternaturally beautiful. Also, we liked to speak in English, the language of my grandfather whom we never knew, a raspy, unreasonable proclivity. Such commotion over my family I took as a matter of course; and on the ship I believed, at first, that people were mistaken, my parents were merely up to one of their tricks—they liked to shock. Once, outside of a church, they had staged a mock mass with incompletely stuffed birds, one bird's head veiled by thin, flapping skin as if for church, an impressive eagle playing priest, dead birds snoring and birds with eyes poked out staring vacant and bloody. Kneeling at my pew I was horrified and didn't take communion, to expiate for my parents' folly. Anna was beside me, laughing. They did crude things like that. Also, my parents were very good swimmers. We lived by the beach, and they were always going off by themselves, at one point not returning until past the curfew hour, bedeviling us.

But the diving was in vain, and maybe I whimpered silently, without tears, because tears were not a Peregrino predilection; worse, my mother frowned on them. The dolphins appeared like silver floating rooftops, glinting and fatidic. The ship's motor roared and we headed home.

My mother's mother, the Abuelita, grand old hag drooling diamonds and saliva, was on hand to meet us when the ship docked. In the shock of having such suddenly orphaned grandchildren, she spoke to us in English when we stepped down from the boat. She usually spoke in a speedy and malarial kind of Spanish, I think to scare us. She was especially overwhelmed by my trembling wan eight-year-oldness and in a fit of sympathy deeded us instantly (she always had a lawyer nearby, half-man, half-beast) five barrios in Barugo and the plaza in Alang-Alang, which the municipal hall rented from her for use during fiestas and other affairs, and for which they paid her a fortune when they wished to install, in order to be like all other normal towns, a statue of Jose Rizal, even though no one loved him.

A new life began when I was eight. In this way my story is easy: it's so cleanly demarcated.

4. A bibliolept's father

My father was a Peregrino from Tacloban, the city proper, of Calle Veteranos, formerly Imelda Avenue, whitewashed and

paved. When with the new regime it was given back its old name, it became again an avenue of decay, just like the rest of the city.

It's clear that progress is only a matter of fashion in my hometown.

My father's initial homestead remains the same, a plywood and beamed second-floor, one-room apartment, rented to his widowed Chinese mother by a Filipino landlord out of sympathy and inertia. Prospero was the son of a municipal clerk who died young and a half-Chinese woman who knew the guile of money but did not master its seductions: she was a two-bit usurer and visionary, compulsive mahjong player. His mother, legend tells it, died in the midst of taking a pair of winds to complete a mahjong of bamboo *escalera*: the symmetry of play knocked her heart out, and she expired ecstatic on the tiles.

My father struck out on his own. As a boy, he worked as a janitor at the Divine Word Missionary School to earn his tuition. A priest discovered his talent at drawing when the young artist drew, with delicate accuracy, the carabao nostrils and ovine hair of the priest who was to become the first Filipino president of the school in 1976. The priest who discovered him, a German, laughed outright but didn't even compliment the boy: he reprimanded him. Prospero soon left for Manila to learn the tricks of komiks drawing, then of animation, through vagabond passion and lucky breaks. His first big break was the war.

He was only seventeen and Manila was already an old city. Ruin was immanent in the usual places, the esteros of Chinatown,

the view by the Bay, the circular plazas of Intramuros near which the stalls of whores and book dealers were to rise side by side. But there were already komiks, made of worse-than-toilet paper, which was convenient anyway for use in open-air bathrooms above the Pasig River. He hung around Tondo, hangout of romance komiks writers as well as of the vicious city hoodlums soon to fill the ranks of both traitors and guerrillas.

Amid Tondo's cynicism, the cunning of its cul-de-sacs and passion, my father learned the trade of wartime errantry and art from Dominador Velazquez Goya, dean of sensationalists and son of thugs. Goya, of full Chinese descent, like many of his conjuring blood in places that have erased them, had remade himself at the donning of a well-worn, famous name.

These notes I cull from random sources, but mostly from my godfather Diego Bastardo. My father never had anything to say for himself: he had the sullenness of people who are too easily moved. He had two obsessions: his cartoons and my mother. He let other facts be.

Here are some details I've managed to gather. Trained at first in sign-lettering, this Chinese tycoon Dominador Velazquez Goya soon saw where the money was in the printed press: the sentimosingko komiks Manila devoured by the swarm, sold on sidewalks beside shoeshine boys and fruit vendors, featuring ornate stories of fatal love, bad faith, and stupid twists of plot—the diet of the Philippine siesta, if not of the Philippine soul. At the end of his life, Goya saw the renovations to his capital—rent-a-komiks benches

before the gates of convent schools, blockbuster Tagalog films based on the engrossing silliness of his writers' plots—and the enterprising artist died content.

From a bedroom beset by the flavors of horsedung and the esteros, during the war Goya funded guerrillas and their enemies alike: "In business, like art," he told my young father, "one succeeds by a sense of proportion." Through Goya's connections, Prospero befriended radical satirists and collaborating illustrators. A quick study and silent autodidact, my father learned above all to treasure craft, the rigidities of light and dark, line and shadow, the deliberate temper of representation.

"He was blind to ideas," my godfather Diego Bastardo told me, "but alive to shapes, spaces, shades, like a dog in delirium."

His absorption with komiks drawing, the tidal wave of art as Dominador Velazquez Goya prophesied it, made him a lunatic among the imbeciles of Tondo in the forties.

In the fifties, in the exhumed gaiety of postwar dreams, my father's work was in demand among the burgeoning komiks houses of Goya's empire—action, fantasy, horror komiks, American-Japanese moro-moro komiks, in which Americans looked like Archangel Gabriel and the Japanese like bonsai Jack Palances, and above all romances, romances, romances. With sophistication in an industry come atomizing, categories, esoteric specialties. By the sixties my father was a whiz in all, drawing intricate monkey-men, Roman gladiators, Aztec gods, goat-redeemers, carabao clowns, harlequins, Byzantine courtiers, all the usual characters

in the normal Filipino plot, and finally women: full-bodied, anatomically precise, naked. My father, I must admit, was a precursor of the "bomba" rage, salacious stories of carnal glee, though he was never a part of it. For my father, komiks' evolutionary slide into graphic passion was mainly a matter of technical precision, a lover's intimate erudition.

But who am I to know what went on in his possibly celibate soul?

I have no reports of amours, affairs, visits to whores, platonic interests, love rumors about him. I only know that in the late fifties, he was employed by a romance empire, and became famous for refusing to go "bomba," drawing women half-naked, breasts showing like swollen mangoes, when the story required simply a head and a balloon of words. For one piece, some late chivalry made him keep his women, with their snub-nosed profiles and deep, shadowy eyes, perfect bodies, and black lips, clothed in every frame.

"He was the only man fired because of his virtue," my mother once said of those days.

It was perhaps then that my father began what became known, in later, more sophisticated circles, as The Coitus Model Sheet, which he revisited and polished all his life. Imagine my father released from the bondage of other people's lusts and finding the pure lines of his own. Imagine him in postwar Manila configuring limbs and labia with both love and invention, a kind of fantasy of empiricism, precise and wild at the same time. A

progressive friend who came from abroad saw his sheets of coupling couples, a series of pioneer drawings by this isolated man, and recommended him to the one of the animation houses in Asia, up north, perhaps in mutant, atomic Japan. He began to work freelance and piecemeal, practicing an art that for him had appeared in a vacuum—in the accidental space from which pure creation occurs.

This last is my own rumor, making its way into other documented allegations. What we know is that my father was one of the first to draw for companies overseas. They say that he visited Tokyo, and was so stricken by what he saw—progress and the wave of the future—that he began to draw what was known as his first real animator's scenes, *Velocity Man*. They were crude drawings at first, built from the heart's insular schooling—for all Filipino animators then had to teach themselves. He worked with a secret fraternity of men living before their time, working for the enemy: the future. It was a sect dabbling in pure art, because their work was conjured from almost nothing.

Viewers who might have the chance to watch the early versions of *Velocity Man* might note the special melancholy with which he drew the hero, who had the twin burdens of supernatural speed (his secret identity) and unspeakable illness (his ordinary life), the last of which made him irritable and prone to bad judgment. You might note the bitter look on his face when, in one segment, Velocity Man runs over a faithful, albeit misguided, admirer just to win a race: what purity of pain in those

eyes, what subtle execution by the sad, tubercular animator, Prospero Peregrino.

For by that time my father had contracted TB; but much worse, he then proceeded to fall in love.

The difference between an animator and an illustrator, my father had once said to me, is that the animator looks only for the key to passion, while the illustrator crowds too many other things in his frame—he has not found his purpose.

To recuperate from his illness, he returned to Tacloban, a portfolio of in-between scenes to his credit, a freelance artist in a young business, with a contract to draw figures for an experimental cartoon for cigarettes: harbinger of "Champion sa lasa, Champion sa halaga": in short, he'd become a sophisticate. What a confusing thing life was that to the island he had left behind the woman he had been drawing in his old career as romance illustrator was herself returning, in flesh and blood, on the same ship as he. Two months later, they were married.

5. Love in third class

Prospero had never met Prima Mercader Watts in his life, but he recognized her kind from the start.

In the plots of komiks stories, women like her were obsessive compulsions, mortal dangers, and crosses to bear.

He could tell she wasn't used to the public inconvenience of