

**Marianne Villanueva**  
**Magellan's Mirror**

*And if our Lord and the Virgin Mother had not aided us by giving good weather to refresh ourselves with provisions and other things we had died in this very great sea. And I believe that nevermore will any man undertake to make such a voyage.*

—Antonio de Pigafetta, Chronicler of the Magellan Expedition

The crew encountered the giant during the winter, after months of battling the waters just south of Brasilia. He was described by the sailors as being twelve or thirteen *palmas* tall, which is to say, over eight feet. While the men watched from the ships, this singular individual danced and sang and leaped across the sand. Over his shoulders hung the pelt of an animal. As far as they could determine, the animal had the head and ears of a mule, and a neck and body like those of a camel. On his feet the giant wore a pair of elaborate boots, made also from the skin of an animal, which added further to his already great height.

The island was near the site of present-day Butuan or Limasawa. Limasawa has the shape of a finger thrust into the ocean; its topography is generally flat. Butuan is much larger, a ring of beach surrounding a mountain wreathed in clouds, whose topmost peaks flash in fading evening light, flash like prince's metal.

They had been delivered from the doldrums only six months past; now they wanted to make up for lost time with good speed: fifty to sixty leagues westward each day. Yet the crew were anxious. Perhaps, several of them said, they had already passed their destination; perhaps even now they were already approaching the fabled kingdom of India.

It was November when the Genoese pilot of the Santa Maria found a current. It led them to a vast and peaceful ocean, an ocean whose soft, purring sighs and amber warmth held them all in its watery embrace. The weather was mild, the sea an unbroken stretch of glass. Suddenly, the crew forgot scurvy and exhaustion, and even the last dreadful sight of the men put ashore in Guam, the ones slain by the cannibal Chamorros. The terrible screams from the beach had carried across the water to the black ships. Oh, what misery!

That Sunday, the crew heard mass on the ships' decks. Magellan ordered the last of their bread to be broken.

The two hundred seventy-seven men who had first set sail in the five *naos* were down to less than one hundred fifty. Among these was Antonio de Pigafetta, citizen of Venice, diarist, gadabout. He had joined the voyage, not his first, because of the lure of cinnamon and pepper.

It is Pigafetta's account that comes down to us, centuries later. "The globe," Pigafetta writes, "this magnificent globe." One imagines Pigafetta seated on a narrow bed, turning the pages of his diary with long, slender fingers. One imagines these fingers caressing his papers as well as his writing implements.

The ship's log indicates that Magellan's crew crossed the equator on the Feast of St. John of the Cross, the 14th of December. The year was 1520. The men were "so transported with delight," Pigafetta wrote, "that we had no more rest all night."

There are those who claim that the invitation extended to the first giant was made at the point of a halberd against the small of the giant's back. Pigafetta, however, disputes this version, maintaining that the first giant boarded the ship willingly. No man could have comfortably reached up to slit his throat. It had to be the back, whose surface was scarred in complicated patterns, the work of weapons both mysterious and thrilling.

At Magellan's order, the giant was plied with wine. "We sat with the creature till late at night," Pigafetta writes, "observing a spreading flush around his eyes." Suddenly, the giant pulled from his breech cloth a dead rat, and this vermin the giant began to gnaw, using both hands, spewing small bits of fur and cartilage over the dining table. The crew watched as the giant licked his digits, delicately, and then bent down and licked the table afterwards.

Was it then that the commander ordered his men to produce a mirror? And to what purpose? The largest of the mirrors, an oval shield of burnished metal, was kept in Magellan's cabin at all times. Smaller ones were with the goods the crew would use as barter. Over the years, the men began to attribute magical qualities to this object. The Captain's steward claimed that, on occasion, the mirror glowed like sunstone. Now, the Captain ordered this mirror to be fetched.

When the burnished shield was set before him, the giant leaped back, grew agitated, shouted and in general exhibited all the attributes of profound terror. Not wishing to fall victim to the giant's violence, the crew quickly scattered. In their panic, they caused the shield to fall. A long crack appeared near the bottom, a most unpropitious omen. Some of the men drew their swords, but Magellan bade them to desist. Stepping forward, the captain picked up the mirror and threw his cloak over it. Whereupon the native's anger quickly subsided, and all were able to resume their seats at the table and continue their meal, although in absolute silence.

By the time the giant was rowed back to shore, a number of his kind had collected on the beach. They had apparently been watching from the cover of the deep jungle; they had seen their companion being rowed to the black ship, in a craft that looked like a black beetle, with many stiff arms and legs. The sailors who were in the boat taking the giant back to shore described how, the closer they came to land, more and more of these fantastical creatures emerged, so that eventually there were almost a score of them on the beach, all watching the boat's approach in fear and apprehension.

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