

The Impossibility of History

by Laksmi Pamuntjak¹

1.

Aristotle had something to say, once, about the difference between history and poetry, and it is that “the one tells what has happened, the other the kind of things that can happen. And in fact that is why the writing of poetry is a more philosophical activity, and one to be taken more seriously than the writing of history.”

There is something in that quote that hints at the weight accorded subjective human experience, a product of multiple, if inherently unreliable, consciousness, as opposed to the cold, hard, facts of history-writing.

But today we are talking about history and the novel—a genetically different animal altogether. So by way of anticipating the topic’s own delicious ironies—or, indeed, its own impossibility—I’d like to tell the story of David Hume who one day, when asked by a young beauty to send her some novels sent her history books instead. It was *Plutarch’s Lives*. However, he told her they were novels, assuring her “there was not a word of truth in them from beginning to end.”

As quoted by Jill Lepore in her brilliant essay for the *New Yorker*, “Facts or Fiction,” Hume later offered the observation that “If one person sits down to read a book as a romance, and another as a true history, they plainly receive the same ideas, and in the same order; nor does the incredulity of the one, and the belief of the other hinder them from putting the very same sense upon their author. His words, in other words, produce the same ideas in both.”

But of course this begs the question: if a history book and a novel are interchangeable, and they both offer the one truth, what is the difference between them?

As Lepore points out, Daniel Defoe suggested that a novel is “a private History”—a history of private life, as opposed to the panoptic gaze of History (with a capital H). In 1759, when Laurence Sterne was asked what *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* was all about, he said it is “a history—book of what passes in a man’s own mind.” Indeed, there was in the 18th century a community of believers forming around the notion that there were two kinds of historical writing; history base in fact (whose truth is founded in documentary evidence), and history based in fiction (whose truth is founded in human nature).

¹ This paper is no more than rough notes for a presentation at the University of Melbourne on 1 May 2008 under the title “The Impossibility of History” and should in no way or form be treated as a finished work or quoted without the author’s permission.

Nowhere was this more exemplified and embodied than in the works of Henry Fielding, who in the context of his 1749 *History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* insisted that what he wrote was “true history”; fiction was the domain of historians. The fact that history (the branch of knowledge that records and analyses the past based on empirical research) and the literary genre that became known as “the novel” were born around the same time made for a rather delightful irony: novelists called their books “histories,”—perhaps after the French model—and peppered their covers with the same claims: invariably, “Founded on Facts” or “A Tale of Truth.”

These 18th century novels also pretended they were grounded on historical facts. In addition to calling themselves “histories”, they were often presented as letters or journals—forms that were themselves parodies of the tenets of historical writing.

And they didn’t even stop at that: as Lepore tells us, most of the known names of the day—Fielding, Daniel Defoe, Voltaire, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin—wrote both novels and history books. There almost seemed a mutual admiration society at play: the century’s most influential historians, David Hume and Edward Gibbon, admitted to having enjoyed Fielding’s novels; meanwhile, Fielding conceded that reading history was the prerequisite to writing novels. “History, like tragedy,” Voltaire wrote in 1752, “Requires an exposition, a central action, and a denouement.”

In his compendium *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century*, John Burrow suggests that in the beginning history was, indeed, considered a literary art. Most of the history books of the day consisted invariably of fictitious speeches of great men, animated, in the words of Lepore, “animated by rhetoric, not evidence.” “Even well into the 18th century,” she maintains, “not a few historians continued to understand themselves as artists, with license to invent.” Hence the propensity for dismissing facts—for facts, were not hip.

How much of this propensity originated from the point made by Lepore that “Every history is incomplete; every historian has a point of view; every historian relies on what is unreliable—documents written by people who were not under oath and cannot be cross-examined” is unclear, but novelists cum historians had their most ardent spokesperson in William Godwin, who maintained that there is not and never can be any such thing as true history. “Nothing is more uncertain, more contradictory, more unsatisfactory than the evidence of facts.” he wrote, suggesting that, indeed, before his flawed sources, the historian is powerless.

So let’s imagine this for a moment: here is the historian who must take what his or her sources choose to tell, the broken fragments, and the scattered debris of

evidence. He or she could always, of course, just reproduce the sources, the “facts”. But as we know, he or she who only knows the dates, the names of actors and the sites of tragedy of any particular historical episode—something that sounds very much like history lessons in New Order Indonesia—essentially knows zilch.

“So dismiss me from the falsehood and impossibility of history, and deliver me over to the reality of romance.” Godwin pleaded in *Of History and Romance*, in 1797. The novelist or the romance writer, Godwin contends, is the better historian because he or she admits that he or she is partial, prejudiced and ignorant, and because he or she has not forsaken passion.

In other words, history concerns facts, of course, but because these have to be arranged and explained, the historian, according to Charles Brockden Brown—understandably a follower of Godwin—“is a dealer, not in certainties, but probabilities, and is therefore a romancer.”

History as science, however, didn’t take place until well into the 19th C. Since then, the scene, both in America and Europe, consisted mainly of the historians’ mad scramble to distinguish themselves from the fray, even if it principally involved discrediting their predecessors. Still, “histories” abounded—most of a decidedly novel-ish persuasion.

There is, however, another dimension that fiction provides and history writing doesn’t (even though it should.) The historian’s grossest illusion (and deception) remains, until today, the tendency to promote the idea that only the great are good. This relates very closely to a panoptic vision of history—one that doesn’t zoom in on tiny spaces. Fiction, in other words, can tell the story of ordinary people. It is in this spirit that we owe the 18th century’s fictive history—the history of what passes in a man’s own mind, many of whom, interestingly but somehow not surprisingly, were women, written by women.

3.

So where are we now in this divide? The sentiment of the 80s and 90s suggests there was an anxiety on the part of historians that the integrity and gravity of history was being undermined by literary theorists who kept hammering the 18th century message. Fast forward almost two decades and we have, on the one hand, the pummeling of Simon Schama’s *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* as a fanciful, self-indulgent project that “put the integrity of the discipline at risk.” and the profusion of historical novels and movies starring Cate Blanchett and, well, Eric Bana.

But have we really given up on truth?

Before answering this question, I'd like to first place myself in history.

I was born in 1971 and raised in Jakarta. This was a time in which history seemed to have been divided, or indeed, conscripted, into Old Order or pre-Suharto era and New Order or the Suharto era. Suharto's New Order history textbooks, like their Stalinist counterparts, were deadening, dull accounts, choc-full, as described by Gerry van Klinken, of grainy photographs of soldiers and rows of somber-looking men at diplomatic conferences.

Now, after Suharto's resignation in 1998, a much freer publishing environment saw long suppressed historiographies reemerge and vie for new adherents. Indonesia is no more defined by a state vs society dichotomy, and the state often finds itself relegated to the sidelines, more as a spectator rather than source of power. But what we have in its stead is the struggle for hegemony between groups in society, with some bent on imposing a single value on our vast diversity.

Meanwhile, the unprecedented levels of freedom of expression and organization that we have enjoyed since the collapse of the Suharto regime has generated not just remarkable achievements in literature, the arts and the intellectual sphere, but also in the essential idea that freedom and democracy should go hand in hand, as indeed, one cannot exist without the other. Consequently, there is now real fear among the people that this hard-fought free expression will be lost or sacrificed in the hand of Islamists who care nothing of the existing nation-state, the idea of Indonesia. No wonder that the recent tide of Muslim conservatism has been met by popular resistance that unites Balinese, women's groups, artists, the Javanese *abangan* (involving symbolic reemergence of their dormant cultural expressions) and others from many walks of life.

Still, the anointment and reaffirmation of state ideology *Pancasila* and state slogan *Bhineka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) by various groups in society as a common unifying language against the controversial anti-pornography bill is very telling. As some of you in the audience may know, the anti-pornography bill was drafted and fought for by Islamists, and seeks among others to regulate the way women dress.

Why the decision to use that language and why is it pertinent to the shapes of record and remembering? First, the words were there, pre-existing, readily available.

Second, they seem to have a resonance with many Indonesians, perhaps in the form of sedimented memory, something that was so central to the idea, or the imagined community, that is Indonesia.

Third, shifting the discourse from pornography to notions of nationhood and diversity is crucial and strategic because a) it does away with the morality angle.

Despite it not being the point, being seen as opposing the anti-pornography bill can be construed as being pro-pornography, and that still doesn't sit well with a majority of people, especially women whose lot it is the bill is actually aimed at. b) because they allow us to turn on their heads deeply entrenched New Order nation-building rhetoric and reinterpret, reinvest them with a new meaning. They allow us to appeal to, reeducate, and refresh public memory of the strength and beauty of difference. In that way, Pancasila that was made into an exclusive property of the New Order, a doctrine of antagonism and repression if you will, is now a free invitation to all.

In that light, my generation was born and reared in an Indonesia of truncated experience. Even with the advent of remembering, of long-silenced victims beginning to find their voices, of initial, though often thwarted, efforts of getting to the bottom of a litany of vague incidents that happened in the "politicide" of 1965, the absence of historical memory – which has been described by the late Daniel Lev as the ability to call up political knowledge and to put it to use in thinking about change – surrounded the notion of "reform" with a jarring sense of void. For me, this is interesting to ponder, especially as reform brings by its very nature increasing affirmation of universal values within what Goenawan Mohamad describes as a uniquely Indonesian "process of plurality." But after enduring such a long history of repression, when the Other was not allowed to be the Other, it is also a moment when "the forgotten, as it were, are coming with a vengeance."

4.

One of whom are the communists and alleged communists of the Indonesian communist party, up to 1 million of whom were killed in perhaps one of the bloodiest communist purges in the 20th century. And some 12,000 alleged communists who were carted off to the tropical gulag of Buru in the Maluku islands and detained there for a decade without due process.

Around 2006, I became friends with some ex-political prisoners (*eks-tapol*), heard their stories and decided to go to Buru Island two years after the bloodiest widespread religious and ethnic tension in the Maluku islands. I knew I wanted to tell their story.

Second, I have always had a fascination for mythology. Every beginning a repetition, as they say. Myths do not just explore our desires, fears, longings, and provide narratives that remind us what it means to be human, but also kind of reminds you of ambiguity, vacillation, lack of definition as the essential human condition. The mighty Hector who ran from Achilles like a bat from hell, for instance, or Clytemnestra who killed Agamemnon almost in cold, clinical fury.

And yet mythology, exemplified at least by two epics, the *Iliad* and the *Mahabharata*, is also famous for only getting half of the story: they both offer a

novelistic approach to character but are strangely devoid of interior. And because I have always wanted to tell the story of Amba from the *Mahabharata*, the woman twice rejected, a princess who was abducted by a warrior who after returning her to her angry and reticent royal fiancée also couldn't marry her because he had vowed celibacy, and of the warrior who abducted her, Bhisma, I began writing both prose and poetry around that topic. I not only body forth them, I feel, but also body forth the story of a war within a family through them – which is only fitting, as the *Mahabharata* is after all a timeless allegory of war within a family.

So in my novel Bhisma is an *eks-tapol* who may or may not have been murdered there in 2006 and of Amba's -- his lover, who by then is 60 years old -- quest to find out the truth. It also tells the story of Srikandi, their illegitimate daughter, who is a globetrotting performance artist who struggles, both personally and professionally, with multiple identities, global realities, borders, tolerance, difference, and what it means to be "Indonesian" as well as a Muslim today, in a world increasingly divided into Fundamentalism and the rest of us.

5.

Which brings us to the question: why a novel? How can a novel accommodate what I want to do with this story that no other genre cannot? First of all, I have always been very clear that I want to tell the story not as a story of good and evil, black and white, not even as winners and losers. But essentially as a tragedy of death and destruction in which everybody, the oppressed and often the oppressor, bar none, was essentially a victim.

Here we necessarily go back to Milan Kundera and some of his timeless observations on the subject in *The Art of the Novel*. "Man desires a world where good and evil can be clearly distinguished, for he has an innate and irrepressible desire to judge before he understands. Religions and ideologies are founded on this desire." They require that someone be right: either the Kurawa of the *Mahabharata* was bad and the Pandawa was good, either Indonesian communists were bad and the Indonesian army was good, either the Old Order was bad and the New Order good. It is this "either-or" that the novel's wisdom, which Kundera calls "the wisdom of uncertainty", seeks to address.

Yet man cannot escape History—the novels of Kafka, Musil, Broch and Pramoedya Ananta Toer show that—and just as man's interior cannot be reduced, it no longer has anything to do with the train the adventurers used to ride, with nary an aim or thought; History is impersonal, uncontrollable, incalculable, incomprehensible, and we are all in its clutch. We find ourselves, as Kundera puts it, in the "terminal paradoxes" of the Modern Era, where novelists discover "what only the novel can discover": they demonstrate how, under such conditions, all existential categories suddenly change their meaning.

But there are many meanings as there are many truths, as the world of one single Truth—the world of Indonesia’s Socialist experiment as well as its Totalitarian successor in the mid 60s, for instance—and the relative, ambiguous world of the novel are molded of entirely different substances. Totalitarian Truth excludes relativity, doubt, questioning; it can never accommodate what Kundera calls the *spirit of the novel*.

Yet it is not as if that spirit—made up quite considerably of play—wasn’t somewhat constrained by History: it got itself tied to the imperative of verisimilitude, to realistic settings, to chronological order which in a sense only Kafka broke in the 20th century, in which he shows that the novel is a place where the imagination can explode as in a dream and the novel can escape the seemingly inescapable imperative of plausibility.

I shall now read a passage from my novel in progress, *The Blue Widow*, of Srikandi’s dream of the father she never knew: Bhisma, the ex-political prisoner. Srikandi, as I mentioned, is a globe-trotting performance artist. Here she is in New York, with a performance behind her, and a new lover who has just shared her bed.

An hour later, undressed, sated and slightly unravelled, she wonders whether to tell him about the email, for really, it is that easy, to tell it to a stranger, a stranger you may not see again: *listen, this is my story*. She does a double-take. He is leaning back against the bunk of this bed she right now wants in her life, and not just anytime but now (though tomorrow she may think differently). She knows this much about him now, that slow pacing, that long drinking in. It is early days yet but in such short a time, they’ve built a repertory of gestures, of familiarities, broken down a few barriers. She no longer sits in pose, stiff-backed, with that slight tucking in of the belly. Her shoes are off, her legs are up, right underneath left, as at home, wherever she is sitting. She hasn’t brushed her teeth since sundown the day before.

“You’re beautiful,” he says, as she knows he would.

“I had a strange dream.” She smiles, not looking up. “Do you want to hear it?”

He reaches to her but she is at the other end of the bed. He retreats, his eyes gentle.

“I see a man lying face down in a thicket, and from the color of the loam, from the undergrowth, it looks in but not of my soil. So faraway, as though another land. There is hardly anything left of him, just hair matted with damp earth, bones jutting out of rotting flesh. A bit of plastic he must have had on him when he met this sad end. But in that dream I know what he looked like. I know what he saw.

“He was beautiful, no, fine, really. Even with the pouch under his eyes, the sunken cheeks. Equal light and shade even when he was

scared, yes he was very scared, and that fear was close to me, like something I went to sleep with and woke up to every day. You know how that is?"

"And what did he see?"

"He saw red and white. He saw red and white all over. As he swam the river, dragged himself up the shore, walked into the tangle of roots and bushes, felt the first stabbing pain, and as he looked up and saw his slayer, he saw red and white. He had whispered red-white, red-white, repeatedly, after our national flag, after something in him that had died, perhaps. He saw red-white even at the point his body burst open, and his insides, all that water and goo, began to wet the sand.

"After that, nothing. I had intimations, sensory spurts, rather, of a man followed by a smell, his own, the smell of an animal locked up in a cage, but I couldn't piece him together."

But something stops her from telling him about the email. It would be too intimate, too trusting. She has not decided whether there'll be more New York-with-Isaiah, whether she'd email him when she returned, whether she'd keep his phone number.

But the words in the email stay with her, like a ship that has come to dock, having toiled forward so long, having seen so much with its rusty eyes.

Ultimately, all novels concern themselves with the enigma of the self. As soon as you create an imaginary being, a character, you are automatically faced with the question: What is the self? How can the self be grasped? It is, as Kundera says, one of the fundamental questions on which the novel, as novel, is based.

To achieve this end, the novelist does not only interrogate; he or she also invents: an "experimental self", to understand possibilities of existence. I am fascinated, for instance, with promiscuity—why someone like Srikandi is so confident and world-weary but so insecure and unmoored at the same time—or piety, or conservatism, or the slide into it, rather, as attested by Amba as she grows older. I am fascinated by irony, by the sick hands of History, by the ways innocent people placed at the wrong place at the wrong time have their lives irrevocably transformed.

Here are excerpts from *The Blue Widow*:

Julius and Jacko turned out to be pretty good friends. In the days of Inrehab they had not just been carrying provisions to the Military Command, they had also been recruited by the guards to help cook and run the odd errands for them.

When Jacko arrived in Buru, he was exempted from prisoner status and duty on account of him being a minor, but he was retained for practical reasons. At that time, Julius, whose father was Ambonese and was close to the chief of the *soa*—a territorial unit comprising one to two dozen *mata rumah* or households, where some of the units had stood—had taken to hanging around the barracks relatively freely. As he was later fond of saying, children were not to be feared. He had a flair for languages and saw similarities in his and Jacko's features. They were also of the same age.

When the outsiders came, Julius's father along with his native neighbours were pushed further inshore, up the mountains, towards the river. But Julius stayed on account of Jacko; the bond in their eyes hadn't died.

And now we were at Julius's house, pounded bamboo walls underneath a sago palm roof where he had lived just after it all began, or more precisely in 1971, the year Zulfikar Hamsah and Bhisma Roesad were vomited out by the ship that had borne them across the tropical seas, like a giant sea slug shaking off its plankton. *But then, Zulfikar laughed, we were exactly that: plankton—wandering things, creatures led astray.*

"There were a thousand of us." Zulfikar said, sipping his tea.

"It was a hot 1971 evening and a thousand of us were sailing on the *Towuti*, a state-owned cargo vessel, in the wake of the second batch, some 850 of them, which came to occupy Units XIV and XV. It was a tough act to follow, as was the case with most sequels. They said the former was called a 'Pure Jakarta Unit', almost all peopled by inmates from Tangerang and Salemba prisons. Tough and torrid, knocked every which way. Nothing that they haven't gone through. Meanwhile, Unit XV was primarily West Java and Banten. You could get killed not speaking Sundanese there."

Something in this roused Julius, who until then had been a calm and gracious host, and seemingly undeterred by the weight of memory, or by the menace of the immediate. He turned around to his old friend.

"Jacko, tell them. You came from the same place."

"I know that place," Zulfikar suddenly interjected. He looked at Jacko long and hard. "I *know* that place. You were one of the tragic ones. A free person who courts and marries his own prison."

They were starrng in their own little theatre, the little tics and cues dating from way back.

Too happy to oblige him, Jacko told it in the expected manner, straight and dry, how he had been running after the truck that bore those courageous students from University X. They were members of CGMI—he told us—or the Centre for Indonesian Student Movement, which in 1956 merged three communist-led local organisations into one.

"I was only a boy then, a hanger-on and barely out of my *celana monyet*." Jacko said animatedly. "It was funny, when I think back, how

most of the CGMI guys who were on the truck were actually the sceptical ones. It was strange, the appeal by CGMI headquarters to guard the university. Days of hot silence and just like that, so suddenly. The guys knew that, it almost felt like a trap.

“Anyway, I still remember how they met and fought between themselves, in the lecture rooms, in the canteen, in the shed on the left wing of an old, abandoned factory Djon and his band of brothers somehow had access to, where paint cans and tin drums piled against the wall, cobwebs embroidered every corner, and there was nowhere to sit except cardboard boxes and rotting tables. On the night of 19 October, they were discussing whether to make Molotov cocktails. It was so exciting, like a scene from a movie.”

“And was it the next day, that you saw them in the truck?” Zulfikar asked purposefully, playing the egger-on.

“Yes. I was just hanging around the campus, as usual, but that day there was so much noise, so many people flapping about.”

Clearly this was the point in the script at which Zulfikar, well-oiled machinery that he was, was to take over.

“They had sensed but never really knew for sure. Right, Jacko? Eighteen days after and CGMI still hadn’t decided, *couldn’t* decide, its official position. There were no clear directives from the Communist Party, which seemed just as flummoxed. You could neither officially announce your support of the Party nor do much to consolidate internally. Yet since 1 October, people had lived in a tidal wave of confusion and disquiet.

“But politics had run by us like a hare out of a harem, speedy but stupid. There were so many questions in the air but everybody ate the shit anyway. To anybody who can answer this I’ll give you my house and its contents, all I have left in the bank: How could there be a movement, ostensibly to protect the nation’s head, but one that failed to act on the orders of Sukarno and dissolved his cabinet instead?”

I saw Jacko raise a finger to the air like a boy in class, he couldn’t help it. “But, *pak*, you do remember that day, don’t you? There were all these green berets, a swirling throng of them. The 72nd Regiment Command, if I’m not mistaken. You remember how they were feted like local sons returning from war, with victory in their hands. Folks were asking: Where is Chairman Aidit? Where is Nyoto? Sudisman? What’s the word from the Central Committee? But most of us were too busy drooling. And I went up the truck.”

“And you went up the truck,” Zulfikar repeated.

“You were what, 12, 13 at the most back then?” I couldn’t help asking while staring at Jacko in amazement, this man in so many ways still just that—12, 13.

“Eleven,” Zulfikar said.

“Anyway,” Jacko said chirpily, sensing the stage lights were on him once more, “everybody was cheering me. They said, Jacko, Jacko, come with us. We all thought we were going to safety. We trusted those army

guys. They were our best friends, they were our heroes. Only Pak Adjie had shooed me away, saying, get out, get out Jacko, something is wrong. I adored him—he had grown up, like myself, in a family of eight children of which he was the eldest.”

“Planning,” Jacko continued, quickly, when he saw Zulfikar about to fill in the gaps, “Didn’t save him from politics. But he nearly saved me. For I had listened to him and clambered out of the truck.”

“Holding up his pants,” Zulfikar said, indicating he’d heard this story a thousand times.

“But then all these other people in the truck were watching me. People I knew. People who smiled at me and asked me about my mother, who was ill, and gave me stuff. Mas Djon, the firebrand. Mbak Narti, a member of Gerwani, the women’s arm of the Communist Party ...”

“The soul of our struggle,” Zulfikar said.

“And Mbak Sita.”

“Sita the beautiful.”

“And so—“ Jacko was at full throttle by now, his voice rising with excitement, “there they were, watching me, mouth agape, calling me, Jacko, Jacko, *what the hell*. And then I locked eyes with Mbak Sita. Even she wanted me back. The most beautiful woman who’d ever lived, calling me, Jacko, come on. I mean, do you know how that felt, to be needed? So I went back up.”

I stole a glance at the woman, who was listening intently to Jacko. She must have known how that felt—to be to many people the most beautiful woman who’d ever lived. Did she drive Bhisma to his fate, I wondered.

Amba closed her eyes. “And where did they take you?”

“To Wirogunan Prison, of course. By far the most lenient prison in Java.” Jacko looked up at her. “Even then. I never saw Narti and Sita again.”

What is suspicion?

The next morning the same neighbour who had looked in on us the day before arrived with two other men. One of the men recognised Jacko and Zulfikar. *I never forget a face*, he said, *they were here alright. Unit down by the Wai Apo.*

“Hey, you.” He pointed at Jacko. “What name did they give you at the barracks?”

Wiping sleep off my eyes I rose in a panic, searching for Julius. He was nowhere to be found.

“Dog, right?” The man continued. “Something to do with dogs.”

I heard Zulfikar draw a long breath while Jacko sat huddled at one corner with his arms around his knees, small and petulant. “Black dogs”, a typical insult for Ambonese who assisted the Dutch in the colonial days, was often used on *tapols* who’d served as moles for the guards.

“And you.” The man shifted his blazing gaze at Zulfikar. “Aren’t you the one who racked up a lot of shit when First Lieutenant Panita was done in? Got a hell of a lot of people in trouble, didn’t you?”

And then his eyes were on Amba, and I couldn’t guess what he was thinking of, a woman so foreign amidst this heat and dust and green-bellied flies. Not waiting for Zulfikar’s reply, he asked sharply, “Is this your wife?”

“Yes.”

The man was pondering their positions relative to each other; there were none of the telltale marks, even if it had confounded me for most of my adult life what the telltale marks of marriage actually were. I saw Amba quickly inching towards her “instant” husband, willingly if not urgently for the first time, and in the clamour of things unknown, the sharpness I felt in my heart, I realised, was of jealousy.

“What are you here for?”

“We’re here on business. This Jacko here is my local partner,” Zulfikar said, calmly.

“What sort of business?”

“Bits and pieces. But mainly maleleuca oil.”

“Where is this business? Where is it based?”

“Pak Samuel here is my partner in Ambon. We do business through Firma Abdulalie. You know them, yes? Their main office is on Jalan Sultan Babullah, the one with that famous seafood restaurant just across the road. Best oil there is. And best seafood.”

As I was admiring Zulfikar for his unflinching wit, the burly man, who had been sizing me up before, looked at me again, up and down.

“Have I seen you before?” He said.

Play it safe. “I’m not sure, *pak*, but maybe.”

“Where do you hang out?”

Caution. “Namlea, *pak*, mostly. Also, I have friends in the police force. We sometimes hang out.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Zulfikar glance at me, ever so briefly. Did he know, I wondered. Yet you never knew with the guy, maybe he’d known all along and factored this into his mental sheet—*here’s another one not to be trusted*—so either way I would have had to come out. Meanwhile, the burly man looked vaguely familiar. I was certain we were one of a kind, only that he most probably worked for the green berets—the crew cut that hinted beneath his cap, just above those ropy cords of muscle that had begun to slacken with age, said as much.

And then it all dawned upon me—Julius. The shit.

“Who do you know?” The burly man continued to press me.

Even though I felt I was losing my grip, and I was angry, I knew less information was always best.

“Oh,” I said dismissively, with a nervous laugh, “you know, just a few junior sergeants from the tactical unit. They’re mainly in internal security and crowd management, and often, you know how it is, they’re

seconded to the transport division, or even the business services bureau so that they actually have something to do.”

“I’ve seen you around. You drive around.”

“Yes, *pak*. You’re right, *pak*.” *Always play dumb, and nice.*

“So where is your vehicle?”

“Out there, *pak*.” I pointed out the window to roughly where I had parked Hasan’s stupid van.

“Are you being paid by these people.”

“Yes, *pak*.”

“And you are all staying here.”

“Yes, *pak*.”

“Why not in Namlea?”

At this point, Zulfikar rose and as he did so he fished out something out of his pocket and offered all three men cigarillos out of a thin lacquered box, an expensive frivolity in the national capital but a girlish atrocity to these men no doubt, something even the natty *ex-tapol*, never one to appear a dandy, was careful not to enjoy in wrong company. I saw him pat the burly men on the shoulder as they looked at her and grinned and looked at Amba again, whispering things I refused to understand but which seemed to move our situation from grab bag to house of mirth.

She had remained quiet throughout, and as well she should. Of course, there was no way around it; she had to pay her dues and save us, and Zulfikar, after all, had come from a generation of men who despite their insistence on female purity perhaps still thought them privately either latent *kuntilanaks* or gambling chips. And so all four of them went outside, taking that laughter with them, and eight cigarillos later they cleared out of sight with nary a word. In the end, you knew that everybody—even the hardest, most battered of them—was essentially star-struck, and hungry, and perverse, something in them always cocked towards the stars and the moon and the good old rupiah.

And, finally, passages that talk about Bhisma's life in Buru, filtered through others:

Aura and afterglow. They were the only two words that seemed to matter to the healer, who was from Banten, and who had in the first hour offered us no nourishment—not even water—in exchange for our money.

When we reached his house, on the edge of a valley that almost spilled out into the vastness of Lake Rana below, he was out poking the soil beneath an outgrowth he seemed to want to get rid of. His house was a stand-alone structure made of driftwood and stringy bark, as opposed to the more usual *gaba-gaba*. It took some time to make him out. He was grizzly and sun-browned, and looked about a hundred years old. Dressed carelessly in a pair of tattered shorts, he seemed oblivious to the gritty earth prickling his bare knees. A green chair stood between him and the entrance to his house, on which an inflatable Dora Emon sat with a grin as wide as sin.

Amba, in her two-day clothes and no foundation, blotted her face with what looked like a powder puff.

"A girl gave this to me." The old man grinned proudly, pointing at Dora Emon.

I could feel the collective shudder before Zulfikar stepped forward to extend a hand. But even he was stopped in his tracks.

"Ha—you're looking at me like that. I know what you're thinking." The healer laughed. "One word, Banten, and you think once trouble, always trouble. What claim has it got to self-rule?"

The old man was unsteady on his feet, hobbling towards us now with the stick as we approached. In fact, we had almost forgotten that Banten had been granted its independence from West Java and became, in 2000, its own province, but of course we were thinking other things—black magic and devil's rock, fertility and failure—and how spectacular it was that this man, who looked as though he hadn't bathed for a year, had kept himself abreast with the latest news. He too had been an *ex-tapo*; Indrapura, or No. XV, was his unit—"always a good number"—and after many years of isolation, he seemed to think other people no different than dogs, or goats, or ducks, and he was his only audience.

"It keeps away the thieves," Zulfikar said instead, with a nod towards Dora Emon.

There was something deeply depressing about Dora Emon being the last holdout refusing to leave. *Remember history*, she seemed to be muttering beneath that oceanic beam.

Suddenly the old man perked up. He was waving his stick now, animatedly.

"I used to plant lots. You see that soil over there? I used to stake my riches with bamboo shards ringed them around like this"—he demonstrated by dancing around—"but even I needed magic."

He stopped and looked at Dora Emon, with something akin to love.

"So, will you start planting again?"

The man seemed amused by Zulfikar. "No, but I'll keep the aura."

He was squinting now at our official enigma, perhaps recognising himself in him.

"Do I know you?" he asked.

"I am a friend of Bhisma Roesad from Unit XVI. My name is Zulfikar."

As they finally shook hands, I heard Zulfikar's voice quiver like a bird's brief glance towards a friend before taking flight.

"Pak Rukmanda," he said. "I am so happy to meet you."

Later, we were sitting on the porch, with Dora Emon moved slightly over by the side. Pak Rukmanda was sitting on the damp edge of the raised platform made of split slabs; you could feel the house had no foundation. Jacko was in no mood for small talk and volunteered to put a blanket of soil over the ruffled areas. If he was upset about Julius's disappearance, he was doing a good job at concealing it.

There will always be thieves, even at this height. The old man laughed. *But that's alright.*

"You gave Bhisma your powers, yes."

"You knew him well?"

"Yes." Zulfikar nodded. "We were close."

"Have both of you been in touch since you left?"

"No."

I was waiting for that moment when Zulfikar would go off his leash, being, as he was, in the company of his past. But the steadiness was still there in his eyes. He'd tempered the age of hysteria until he'd become its master, causing it also in others, perhaps, though always on his clock.

"Let me get this. You never tried to find out about him. Not even once."

"I, well, always knew he was going to be alone. And compelled"—here, Zulfikar's voice began to fail—"to do something heroic."

"And that's why you never tried to find out about him."

"Let's say I know a little of what to expect."

In the pause that followed, it was Amba's voice that rang. There seemed a new resolve to her tone, a different tenor.

"Pak Rukmanda," she said. "It is I who need to find Bhisma."

Such was the authority of her grace that even Zulfikar, who was about to leap into some kind of action, decided to hold back. At that moment, he was experience defeated, street-cred tamed and tired. The funny thing about logic; contrary to prejudice, it is not surprised by the latter's sly patterns.

"So you are she." The old man smiled, as though all along he had known not just it—the relationship, the "it" of the matter—but also her, the other half of the equation.

It's hard to pin down the pleasure of moments like these; the two main characters, however broken-backed and withered—or perhaps because of it—seemed attuned to each other's moods, and this gave them a rare chance to under-act.

"Pak Rukmanda." She said the old man's name again, calm washing over her now. "An anonymous person sent me news that Bhisma has just died."

Instead of launching into a typical outpouring of condolences—which everybody knew was just sorrow by proxy—the old man leaned back with a toss of the head, and alongside it, a draught of clarity that seemed of another age.

"Let me tell you about aura and afterglow."

First, the world shudders. Everything is askant, off center: the sky, the flow of water, the roof of branches. Ellipsis. You are not in the picture, you're someone looking in at absence, and absence doesn't alter anything. The following day you are back in frame, but in that rightness, you know you are no more the same.

The first time I noticed Bhisma's effect on others was when he was lent to us on a *meranti* logging project. There was not enough manpower in our unit, and he was just next door, and young, and trained after two or three years of digging trenches and opening up land to build roads in seven-hour mornings and six-hour afternoons. People wondered about him: his stiff-backed reserve, his impossibly fine features, too aristocratic to say a word. There were whispers that his hands were a godsend to fellow men but too tenuous for the elements. But that first day, he stood in the 35-degree sun and shed power as though there were tens of men crammed into him, each arresting, allaying, affecting.

I knew he was special.

It all stopped when a malaria outbreak hit Wai Apo and quickly spread through the units. Bhisma was pulled out from *corvée* and other duties to tend to the patients. Mind you, this was way before everything became specialised. When Lieutenant-Colonel Samsi came and turned everything around, I mean.

Anyway. So here is Bhisma quickly rising from paramedic to doctor because he was smarter than all the certified doctors and soon everybody was begging to have him look after them. Partly because he was serious, earnest, eminently methodical, some said of a "German" turn of mind. I see you smiling, Bung Zul, you know what I mean. But chiefly because he was that rare breed of person to whom true humanity lies in relieving suffering.

But it was those qualities that also made him suffer. The dearth—of medicine, of equipment, of a system—was too much for him. Not to mention ethics. He fought the guards, was pummelled along with the patients they had beaten up, and, in solidarity, ran the punitive distance the patients were sentenced to until they had no choice but pronounce themselves fully recovered.

And yet, it was a strange time. There were flarings, portents. Lieutenant Panita Umar was murdered around this time. There was another corpse, not long after, found floating in the river; his head almost severed from his torso. By that time, we were ready for everything, but still, there was real fear in the air.

When Bhisma was still being loaned out to us, we had nearly completed the 7-kilometre road that linked our unit to Unit III. To me, somehow it was the worst torture of all. As there were not enough sickles and *parangs* and shovels to go around, we often had to slash grass two metres high with our bare hands. And after months of that, it killed you, just—killed you.

So, one day I was asked to inspect a small dike out west. I was not feeling well, so Bhisma and two more *tapols* were dispatched along with me. Anyway, on our way back to the barracks the sun was getting low, and I was dawdling a bit. Suddenly I felt something cold crossing my feet. It took some good five seconds before I looked down and realized it was a mud snake. Not your typical *sanca*, which you frolicked and practically slept with in the barracks. But a black brute, about four feet long. So this is it, I thought to myself. This is how I meet my end. Vaguely, I remembered the general rule of waiting until you're at least the same distance as the length of the snake to start moving away. But I froze. I was in shock. All I remember was staring at one of the men ahead of me and thinking how funny he had looked with hair caked with a thick layer of mud, how helmet-like and bald, and how that was to be my last vision on earth. And then, there it was, the sick sound of something snapping, and the next thing I knew the snake was lying a few metres away, with its head chopped off. A few metres away, Bhisma was staring at it, dumbfounded, fresh blood dripping from his *parang*.

"Why did you do that?" I asked him at long last.

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Just felt I had to."

We stared again at the carcass of the mangled reptile.

The helmet head tried to take a closer look but I pushed him back. *Don't*, I said. *Dead snakes are known to bite.*

"That's it," Bhisma said suddenly.

"What's it?"

"They say to kill a snake you've got to cut off its head, not hack at its tail."

I stared at him.

"That's what made me do it," he said, again, with that hard but vacant look.

Later I realised this was the essence of Bhisma, a Menteng kid for all intents and purposes; confident, well-heeled and cultured, but also educated in something his lot seldom were: suspicion. He'd do this kind of stupid, artless, non-thinking thing, as he probably would when suddenly faced with Suharto and his closest cronies in a quiet alleyway, but at other times, he would exercise the utmost restraint when he realised that certain actions might have dire consequences on his ability to help them in the long run. As when he didn't budge when a band of fellow *tapols* was beaten to a pulp in front of him for being caught hoarding crops, that sort of thing.

This is when I thought I'd give him my powers."

In closing, I'd just like to reiterate that historiography writes the history of society, not of man. The stories of ordinary men remind us that there are things pertinent to history that historiography often misses, such as the clothes people wore, the culling of animals that may shed some light upon the policies of the time and how they affected ordinary people.

Yet there is a principle just as important: historical circumstance not only must create a new existential situation for a character in a novel, but History itself must be understood and analysed as an existential situation. Just like Tereza in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, who cannot bear the spectacle of her lover Tomas' weakness, experiences vertigo and chooses to flee by emigrating, here is what my contemporary characters learn in *The Blue Widow*, when they are talking to an *eks-tapol* stalwart:

S had been anything but helpful. He had the face and bearing of an old guard: rough-hewn, territorial and he had looked at Zulfikar as though he'd come face to face with another worthy inmate, another powerhouse.

"Bhisma never mingled with us," he said in between incessant puffing. "He used to live just there, at the corner house, but he seemed to resent our presence. Needed space, he said, as if we didn't."

"Did he live with anyone then?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Who was he close to?"

"No one, to my knowledge. I mean, he's not necessarily what you would call friendly. Some of these *warga*, you know, they just can't snap out from the past. Just a few weeks back, for instance, an ex-head of the prison guard came to visit. He'd always been one of the better ones. Smuggled in homemade snacks for the masses and foreign magazines for the sophisticates among us. Done that for years.

"Anyway, there he was. The ex-head of the prison guard, I mean. Being greeted in some lunch get-together at the old military command. Everybody bar none took their seats before him as if he was still presiding over us. Everything about them, their downcast gaze, their obliging nods, pulsed as if on autopilot, their entire *body language*—so New Order!"

Oh, he was so full of hate.

Thank you.

Laksmi Pamuntjak