LONTAR

# Lontar Newsletter

Email: contact@lontar.org

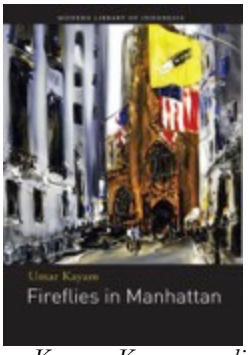
July 2020

## Greetings from the Executive Director

Slowly but surely we are getting used to the limitations imposed by the seemingly never-ending Covid-19 pandemic. Many of us have been compelled to become more innovative and creative in what we do—a trend that has been most evident in Jakarta's arts and culture community.

Starved for live entertainment, with no film showings at theaters, no concerts or performances, and no arenas hosting sports events, the Indonesian public enthusiastically welcomed the recent airing on YouTube of *Sandiwara Sastra* ("Literary Plays"), a series of 30-minute audio plays presented by a number of well-known actors. The plays were based on popular literary titles and, for many older Indonesians, hearing the plays read harkened back to the days when the radio was the only source of news and story-telling.

Production of the series represented a collaborative venture between the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Titimanngsa Foundation, an association fostering the performing arts, and the Kawan-Kawan Media group. The adaptations included *Ronggeng Duku Paruk* by Ahmad Tohari, which Lontar published under the title, *The Dancer*, and Umar Kayam's *Seribu Kunang-Kunang di Manhattan*, which Lontar released as *Fireflies in Manhattan,* both of which are part of our Modern Library series.




## Ruminations by John McGlynn

### Poetic Suasion

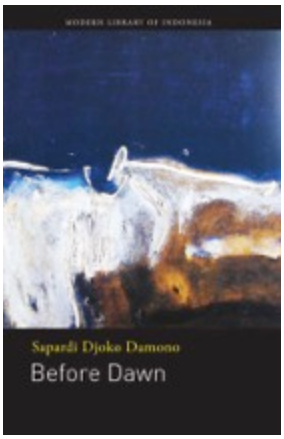
The recent death of Sapardi Djoko Damono (20 March 1940–19 July 2020), one of Lontar's founders, has had me thinking of the suasive role that poetry has played in my life.

Poetry was not a focus in any of my literature courses either in primary school or in high school. As a sixth grader at Saint Anthony's, Sister Aurea gave me extra points for memorizing Longfellow's "The Wreck of the Hesperus" and, as a junior at Weston High School, Mr. Gates (who suffered from muscular dystrophy and spoke with a tremor) had me record Shakespearean sonnets for our English literature class to listen to, but most all "assigned" poems were lofty in tone and meant to "elevate the mind"—whatever that meant.

It was my father, an avid and eclectic reader, who first showed me that poetry could be fun. His collection of brief poems by Ogden Nash, with such titles as "Fleas" (*Adam Had 'em*) and "I Love Me" (*I'm always my own best cheerer; / Myself I satisfy / Till I take a look in the mirror / And see things I to I*) made me laugh with delight. And then, when I was a senior in high school, it was my sister, Eileen, an Ibero-American Studies major, who inadvertently got me hooked on the genre when she forgot to repack her copy of Pablo Neruda's *100 Love Sonnets* after a weekend home from university. When reading the poems therein, I found verbal expression for feelings I was only then beginning to discover. (*I love you as certain dark things are to be loved, in secret, between the shadow and the soul*).

In my undergraduate years at university, as a habitutê of used book stores where dog-eared copies of poetry collections could be purchased for a quarter, Robert Frost got me thinking about what choices I would have to make in life through his signature poem, "The Road Not Taken." In "Two Scavengers in a Truck, Two Beautiful People in a Mercedes," Lawrence Ferlinghetti voiced perfectly my notions about entrenched societal differences between the working class poor and the elite rich. Sylvia Plath, through her exploration of gender stereotypes and social pressures in "The Applicant," gave grist to my mental mumblings about sexuality and parental expectations I would not fulfill. Bertolt Brecht honed these perceptions for me in his poem, "I Want to Go with the One I Love." (*I do not want to calculate the cost. / I do not want to think about whether it's good. / I do not want to know whether he loves me. / I want to go with whom I love.*)

On a sad note, note, we mourn the loss of Indonesia's preeminent poet and literary guru, Sapardi Djoko Damono, who passed away at the age of 80 on July 19. Born in Surakarta, Central Java, his passion for literature started at a young age, reading copious books, writing poetry while still in high school and starting a lending library in his neighborhood. He graduated from Gajah Mada University in Indonesian Literature, still concentrating on his poetry, but branching out into radio broadcasting, the theater and writing fiction and non-fiction. He was the recipient of many awards, notably the SEA Write Award in 1986 and most recently, the Akademi Jakarta Award in 2012. He taught at the University of Indonesia, serving as the dean of its Literature Faculty from 1990 to 2004.




Pak Sapardi will forever be etched in our memory as one of the founders of Lontar, together with Goenawan Mohamad, John McGlynn, the late Umar Kayam, and the late Subagio Sastrowardoyo who passed away on 18 July 1995—almost exactly 25 years ago to the day that Sapardi left us.

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In a creative writing course at the University of Wisconsin-Milwauke, I was fortunate to have as a guest lecturer the ever so diminutive but highly formidable Anais Nin whose poem, "Risk," persuaded me that I must try to be myself, regardless of what others might expect. (*And then the day came, when the risk to remain tight, in a bud, was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.*) Finally, it was Walt Whitman, whose "Calamus" poems in *Leaves of Grass* celebrate "the manly love of comrades," who made it clear to me that while I was different from most others, I was not alone in the world. ("*I wish to infuse myself among you till I see it common for you to walk hand in hand.")*

I first met Sapardi Djoko Damono as a student at the University of Indonesia in 1977 and it was he—along with my other teachers: Widarti Gunawan and the late Boen Oemarjati—who renewed in me my enjoyment of poetry, this time Indonesian poetry whose non-gendered language gave love poems, especially, a new appeal. From Amir Hamzah to Toeti Heraty and beyond, unless poets specify the gender of their love object, their poems can speak for everyone, not just for one segment of the population or the other.

While the late 1970s was a time when the power of the New Order government was seemingly invincible and many poets were voicing their discontent through their work, Sapardi's verses—unlike those of many contemporaries, whose allure was more political than poetic—subtly addressed issues such as love, loss, and longing that are, in the end, more important than a transient dictatorial government.

In mid-1978, when the All-ASEAN Poetry Festival was to be held at the Jakarta Arts Center (Taman Ismail Marzuki), Sapardi asked me to translate the Indonesian and Malaysian contributions to the catalogue. Through this enjoyable task, I came to know the work of a host of Indonesian poets.

Years went by—I obtained an M.A. at the University of Michigan, worked as an interpreter for the U.S. Department of State, then returned to Indonesia and began to work full time as a commercial translator—but never did my interest in poetry waver and, in 1986, when Sapardi received the SEA-Write award and he asked me to translate a collection of his poems for distribution at the awards ceremony in Bangkok, I welcomed the opportunity. With in-kind assistance from PT Temprint at the behest of Goenawan Mohamad (GM), a close friend of Sapardi's, we published *Water Color Poems* and it was during this process that the three of us discussed Indonesia's need for

The cover of *Water Color Poems* whose publication led to the founding of the Lontar Foundation.

## Author of the Month

## Clara Ng

**Clara Ng** (Jakarta, July 28, 1973) is a writer of novels, short stories, essays and tales for children. In 1997 she graduated from Ohio State University, America, with majors in Interpersonal Communication and Linguistics. Her first novel, *Seven Seasons a Year*, was published in 2002, and she has been prolific ever since. Her novels include *Blues* (2004) *Lipstick* (2005), *The (Un)Reality Show* (2005), *Bridesmaid* (2006), *The Last Dimsum* (2006), *Utukki: Wings of the Gods* (2006), *Three Venuses* (2007), *Twin Eclipses* (2008), *Tea for Two* (2009), *Varaiya's Spells* (2010) and *Love Drama Potion* (2010). In 2010 *Varaiya's Spells* was on the long list for the *Khatulistiwa Literary Awards*. In 2008 several of her short stories were anthologized in the book *Falling Angel and Other Stories*. Clara also writes fairy stories for children and has won the Adikarya Ikapi award twice, for books in the series *Sharing Stories sharing Love* (2006) and *A Million Colors of the Rainbow* (2007). In 2011 Clara conducted her "literature literate" and "storytelling parents" campaigns in a number of schools in Indonesia, coinciding with the release of *Tale of the School on the Cliff* (2011). Coinciding with the release of this book,. She also leads creative writing classes in a number of cities

## Book of the Month

**All Women have Affairs and Other Stories**
By Clara Ng
Translated by Pamela Allen (English translator), Jorn-Holger Sprode (German translator)

Goenawan Mohamad, Sapardi Djoko Damono, and Subagio Sastrowardoyo, three of Lontar's founders, outside the home of JHM.

a literary translation organization whose output of translations would give voice to a side of Indonesia not often heard in the international media. GM invited two other writer-friends, Umar Kayam and Subagio Sastrowardoyo, to brainstorm this idea and it was several long conversations at my home (with the four of them often lapsing into Javanese) that led to the establishment of Lontar in 1987.

In the thirty three years that have passed since that time time, Lontar has published translations of more than 2,000 poems by more than 350 Indonesian authors, and just as I found words for my feelings in such Western poets as Plath, Whitman, it is my fervent and lasting hope that readers will find poetic suasion in the work of Indonesian poets as well.

### An Appeal

As of 31 December 2019 the Ministry of Education and Culture halted funding for the National Book Committee (Komite Buku Nasional or KBN). In the previous four years, KBN provided financial subsidies for the translation of close to 2,000 Indonesian titles into other languages. The disbandment of KBN and, more specifically, Indonesia's Translation Funding Program was a serious mistake. The mistake was not so much in the Ministry's halting of funding for KBN per se but the lack of vision on the part of the Indonesian government as a whole in supporting the establishment of an independent institution, not beneath a particular ministry, that is devoted to the promotion of Indonesian books abroad. This is where the true error lies. Before disbanding KBN, the Ministry of Education and Culture should have taken the initiative to organize or support the establishment of such a venture—something that it is still not too late to do if there are government personnel who believe that Indonesian voices deserve to be heard on the international stage. I appeal to the office of the President, the Ministry of Education and Culture, and all other parties concerned to right this matter as soon as possible.

## Give2Asia

What is Give2Asia?

Founded in 2001, Give2Asia is a U.S.-based nonprofit organization that connects corporations, foundations, and individual donors with trusted local charities in 23 countries.

Their mission is to strengthen communities in Asia by making cross-border giving easier and more effective. Give2Asia's team of grantmaking experts and in-country advisors enable you to give with confidence.

And the Lontar Foundation has qualified by passing Give2Asia's due diligence review. So Give to Lontar via Give2Asia:

https://give2asia.org/lontarfoundation/

## Book Review

*Malay Seals from the Islamic World of Southeast Asia: Content, Form, Context, Catalogue.* By Annabel Teh Gallop. Singapore: NUS Press in association with the British Library, 2019. xvii+852 pp.

This exemplary piece of scholarship will be the essential and definitive reference work on the sigillography of the Muslim Malay world for a very long time to come. Based upon Gallop's unpublished doctoral thesis "Malay Seal Inscriptions: A Study in Islamic Epigraphy from Southeast Asia" (2002), which was the first (and also last) book-length study ever to examine this neglected sub-area in the field of Southeast Asian studies, the present (significantly augmented and updated) publication constitutes a careful documentation of 2,168

Malay seals. The pièce de résistance of this volume is its catalogue (pp. 53–722), which provides detailed descriptions and photographs of these seals from many public and private collections worldwide, including the deciphering and translation of the inscriptions, mostly mostly recording seal impressions stamped in lampblack, ink or wax as found on such manuscripts as letters, treaties, and legal and commercial documents… Read more >> SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia Vol. 35, No. 2 (2020), pp. 383–405

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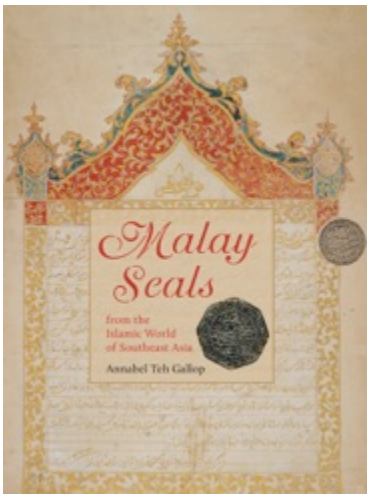


**Malay Seals from the Islamic World of Southeast Asia: Content, Form, Context, Catalogue.**

By Annabel Teh Gallop. The Lontar Foundation in association with the British Library.
Hardcover, full colour, jacket: xxii + 786 pages
ISBN: 979-623-7150-09-1
(Special discount for direct orders from Lontar as well as for schools, libraries, students, and scholars.)

Book order: contact@lontar.org

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**Watch our Writers Who's Who on Lontar's YouTube channel.**

**Avianti Armand**
https://bit.ly/31jrJRY

**Putu Oka Sukanta**
https://bit.ly/2XvmzB6

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