LONTAR

Lontar Newsletter

Email: contact@lontar.org

September 2020

Greetings from the Executive Director

As Covid-19 rages on, the "new normal" forced by the pandemic seems to have taken root in many aspects of our lives. Changed norms and regulations to conform with the disruptive situation have been reluctantly accepted. It is now natural to be scheduling meetings and seminars online, making the high number of "zooms" attended per day a badge of honor. Certainly, it is wonderful to see literary events and the performing arts back on the virtual stage, lifting spirits amid these challenging times. Credit for initiating these programs should go to the Ministry of Education and Culture. We too are also planning a literary festival to coincide with Lontar's 34th anniversary which falls on October 28, the same day as Youth Pledge Day (Hari Sumpah Pemuda).

With regional elections scheduled to be held in December, politics has become the dominant topic of conversation. With 50 out of the 270 regencies still classified as red zones for their high rate of Covid-19 infections, skeptics are pushing for the polls to be delayed to reduce the risk of causing more infections. But the government remains adamant about holding the elections as scheduled. For the first time, candidates must forego real-time rallies and deliver their campaign platform via social and broadcast media.

It is in the education sector where some of the Covid norms may be here to stay. The pandemic has compelled the government as well as teachers, parents and the students to rethink the whole learning process. Since March, the government has imposed a Learning from Home doctrine,

Ruminations by John McGlynn

Becoming, Part 1

On the day of my grade school graduation ceremony in May 1966 at the church of Saint Anthony de Padua in Germantown, Wisconsin, two things crossed my mind. When Father Cosgrove screeched the prayers of the celebratory mass in Latin, I wondered why he didn't speak in English. Since late 1964, it had become permissible for the mass to be conducted in the vernacular, yet here he was still speaking in a language no one understood. And at the end of service, when Sister Elena "F.S.P.A." handed me my diploma, I thought this marked the first step of my journey to becoming a "real person." In a way it was, because the very next day I began to "pay my own way," working June, July, and August as a hand on the Honer farm up the valley and over the hill from Glynnspring, my family's division.

The next four summers I worked first as a busboy and then as a waiter at The Patio, a restaurant with no patio but strategically located on Main Street in the tourist center of Wisconsin Dells, 50 Ks away, where I boarded and used the earnings from my initial 90 cents per hour wage to pay the rent.

By the time I graduated from high school in 1970, I really was on my own. My parents gave me a small Samsonite suitcase in which to pack my meager belongings but no promise of further financial assistance. As a college freshman, I was fortunate to obtain a small scholarship but even with an interest-free student loan on top of that, I had to work to make ends meet, shelving books in the underground chambers of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee library.

As a sophomore, I finally began to have some disposable income when working as a busboy at Frenchy's, a swank restaurant in Milwaukee that specialized in—You guess!— French cuisine but also offered exotic game dishes such as Reindeer Steak (which, "since the days of Leif Erikson, has been a Nordic favorite"). At Frenchy's, its bevy of buxom waitresses all dressed

JHM with Sister Elena FSPA on the day of his grade-school graduation in May 1966.

compelling schools across the country to adopt to a new way of teaching. According to the World Bank, the earlier reluctance among some of Indonesia's educational institutions to bring technology to the classroom has been turned around by the pandemic, even if it will pose problems for thousands of students from poorer families. In preparation for the new academic year, the government, supported by UNICEF, has been conducting webinars aimed at teacher capacity-building. More than 8,000 teachers across the country have so far attended them.

As a penultimate note, I'd like to invite more individuals to contribute to Lontar. Corporate philanthropy is now, understandably, almost exclusively being directed towards the health sector. As a result, we now have a growing backlog of titles just waiting for the necessary funds to be published. Please give to Lontar today.

Finally, as October is "Language Month" (Bulan Bahasa) and in celebration of Lontar's upcoming 34th anniversary, we are offering a discount of 20% on direct purchases of Lontar titles during the month of October. (Shipping charges still apply.) Take advantage of this opportunity and build your library of Lontar titles now.

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in French "maid uniforms"—high heels, black net stockings, short frou-frou skirts with big white bows on the back and plunging necklines at the front—but had been hired as much for their linguistic skills as how they looked in décolletage and were able speak to international businessmen in French, Italian, Japanese, or German and to local hoity-toity customers in British-affected English. This was a place where Goldschläger, with flakes of real gold, was a common digestive and tips of US$ 100 were frequent.

As a junior, after transferring to UW-Madison and switching majors from Fine Arts and Theater to Southeast Asian Studies, it was back to less glamorous job conditions: first cleaning and delivering typewriters for Stemp Typewriters on State Street but then, as a senior and able to type 75 words per minute, as secretary for the UW Southeast Asia Center. Along the way, I must add, I had acquired a partner and we were now sharing a house—our home—in Madison. The long and short of all this is that as I was becoming more interested in Indonesia, the more I thought I was becoming a true adult.

The family of Toenggoel Siagian, my first Indonesian-language teacher, came from North Sumatra—father from Porséa, mother from Baligé—and his tales of life in a Sumatra village got me intrigued by the region. In May 1976, when I arrived in Malang to study advanced Indonesian at IKIP Teachers' College, the first person I met was Dameria "Damé" Nainggolan, whose family also came from North Sumatra. Another student I got to know was Wilson Manik who originally came from Samosir Island. This trio of friendships seemed to point me towards travel to the Batak homeland.

During my ten-weeks of language-study at IKIP, Damé and I became joined at the hip and we were soon viewed by other students (and Damé as well, I intuited) as a couple. Never once did I kiss her lips but I knew that she knew I treasured her. At the end of the program, with three month's left on my visa, she and Wilson planned a trip for me to their homeland: Wilson arranged for me to stay at his family's home in Sangkal and Damé wrote to her aunt, a nurse in Baligé, asking that she be my guardian when I was in that part of the region. She also insisted that I visit Batunadua, a village near Pangaribuan, where her grandmother lived, and she pressed on me a letter to give to her.

On the evening of Sunday, September 12, after two-days in steerage aboard *Tampomas II*, ten-hours on a suicidal bus ride to Tigaras on Lake Toba's eastern shore, a forty-minute motor-boat ride across the seven kilometer stretch of darkening waters, and a half hour walk down a dusty road, I was welcomed in Sangkal by Wilson's family.

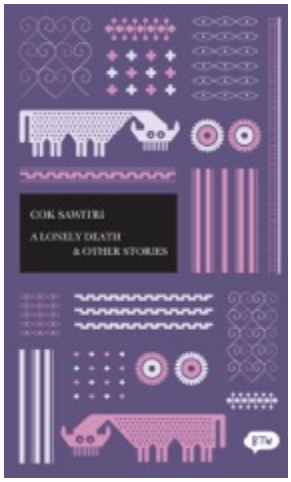
Sangkal was not a village but a *desa*, whose denizens occupied homes scattered along Toba's shore. There was the occasional traditional dwelling, with a horn-shaped roof and beautifully carved outer walls, but most were more rudimentary in appearance: raised rectangular boxes of roughly hewn wood with tin roofs whose interiors were divided by plaited mat walls or

Author of the Month

Cok Sawitri

Cok Sawitri (Sedemen, Karangasem, Bali, September 1, 1968) is known as a writer of short stories and an activitist for women's issues, for social and cultural issues and for theater. She founded the Forum Perempuan Mitra Kasih in Bali, which advocates and campaigns on women's issues. Her books include *Meditasi Rahim* (1991), *Pembelaan Dirah* (1996), *Anjing Perempuanku* (2003), *Aku Bukan Perempuan Lagi* (2004) and *Kiamatku dalam Jarak 3 Sentimeter* (poetry, 2013).

Book of the Month



A Lonely Death and Other Stories
By Cok Sawitri
Translated by Marjie Suanda (English translator), Julius Dallmeyer (German translator)
Rp. 100,000

The congregation of Sibatu-batu Catholic Church in Sangkal, Samosir, September 1976. (My travel companion, Virginia Crockett, is visible at the back.)

hanging cloth. No running water, no electricity. The nights were cool but the days so hot that meals—most often, a mixture of corn and rice with a a green-tomato *sambal*—were prepared outside, at the back of the house, on a stone hearth.

For the next week, I and Virginia, a fellow student who joined me on this leg of the trip, washed our clothes and drew our water from the lake. There, we also bathed: she with other sarong-clad women in a semi-secluded inlet, I with the younger men, in the buff and farther out in Toba's waters where the current could more effectively carry away our corporeal effluence.

The week in Sangkal, with its new sights, sounds, and sensations, was one of becoming for me, the transformation of a greenhorn into one a little less green. There was a two-hour boat ride with Wilson's mother to Harrangaol where she sold her green tomatoes; an hour-long walk to the neighboring *desa* to observe a courtship ritual and dances; a hike in the barren hills around Sangkal; and many more memorable excursions but the one that sticks most in my mind took place on my penultimate day in Sangkal, when I went with the Manik family to Sibatu-batu Catholic Church for Sunday services.

Because the priest came to Sangkal only once a month, mass in the dirt-floor church that day was led by a village elder. As he intoned the prayers in Batak, I thought back to the Latin masses of my youth and thereby concluded that the language one spoke in to God did not matter. Be it Latin, English, Batak or any other language, because we are all God's children, all members of the one family of humankind, God would understand.

To be continued…

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Work in Progress

In past newsletters we have noted that Lontar's relies on external financial assistance for the continuation of its work. As of yet, revenue from the sale of books covers less than half of the foundation's financial needs. Recently, we also put out a call for "angels"—donors who are willing to underwrite the cost of a publication which, for literary texts, generally ranges between Rp. 50 and 100 million per title. Here, we thought readers might like to know the titles (or working titles) of ten works in progress and the order in which we hope they will be released.

Author and Title (or Working Title)

1. Heru Joni Putra: *Will Badrul Mustafa Never Die? Verse from the Front*
2. Subagio Sastrowardoyo: *And Death Grows More Intimate*
3. Iwan Simatupang: *Red*
4. Putu Oka Sukanta: *Weaving Dignity*
5. Nano Riantiarno: *Cockroach Opera Trilogy*
6. Ikranagara: *Plays by Ikranagara*
7. Acep Zamzam Noor: *A Swatch of Twilight*
8. D.I. Loebis : *Secret Document*
9. Hamka: *'Neath the Shelter of the Ka'abah*
10. Iwan Simatupang: *Kooong*

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Give2Asia

https://give2asia.org/lontarfoundation/

Surat dari Pejompongan

AMIR

Kawan,

Beberapa waktu lalu aku membaca kembali puisi-puisi Amir Hamzah, juga sejumlah prosa dan esainya, untuk persiapan sebuah kumpulan puisinya yang akan diterbitkan Lontar. Bagiku, Amir adalah puncak tertinggi sastra berbahasa Melayu di Hindia Belanda pada masa 1930-1940-an. Maaf, aku tidak punya pengetahuan tentang puisi yang berkembang di Semenanjung Melayu pada era yang sama.

Meskipun saat itu bahasa Melayu sudah diakui sebagai "Bahasa Indonesia" melalui Sumpah Pemuda 28 Oktober 1928, langgam puisi Amir sepenuhnya adalah langgam puisi Melayu. Pantun—dan syair—Melayu menjadi tenaga utama yang menghidupkan puisi-puisinya. Boleh dibilang, puisi adalah "bentuk *par excellence* pantun".

Puisi adalah curahan perasaan dalam bentuknya yang paling indah—dalam "rupa mahasempurna". Itulah kenapa Asrul Sani menyebut puisi-puisi yang dikerjakan oleh generasi Amir sebagai "puisi emosi-semata". Namun, sebenarnya, keindahan bentuk itu adalah hasil pekerjaan yang penuh risiko. Untuk mencapai kesempurnaan bentuk, misalnya, Amir dengan sengaja memangkas bentuk kata, mengusung neologisme, membiarkan ketaksaan dalam tulisan dan ucapan dan lain-lain eksperimentasi.

Amir adalah juga seorang internasionalis—meskipun ia belum lagi menjangkau puisi modern abad ke-20 sebagaimana Chairil Anwar. Ia telah menantang habis-habisan bentuk tradisional pantun untuk menanggung modernitas yang tengah melanda. Puisinya menjadi cemerlang sekaligus "gelap" bukan hanya penggunaan kata-kata arkais, tetapi juga akibat pengetahuannya yang luas tentang banyak khazanah: filsafat, mitologi, Kitab Suci, dongeng, budaya luaran hingga semangat politik.

Amir bukanlah Takdir yang penuh semangat dan cenderung didaktis. Jika Takdir serupa komandan kaum ksatria, Amir adalah pimpinan kaum brahmana; yang lebih senang bertapa dan menilai dunia dari ketinggian. Ia tidak mengumbar hasratnya akan politik dan pembangunan jiwa manusia, tetapi menunjukkan itu secara lamat-lamat saja. *Buah Rindu*, misalnya, ia persembahkan "ke bawah pedua Indonesia-raya"—di samping "ke bawah lebu Ibu-ratu" dan "ke bawah kaki Sendari-dewi".

Namun, ialah yang paling cemerlang di antara generasi Takdir—sebelum akhirnya surut oleh fasisme Jepang. Sekelompok pemuda revolusioner yang kalap di awal masa Revolusi tidak menilai penting semua kecemerlangangnya. Bahkan, perannya di Indonesia Muda pun tidak dindahkan. Ia diculik dan dibunuh bersama orang-orang yang dianggap pro-Belanda di Kuala Begumit, 20 Maret 1946.

Sajak adalah seni sedih, kata Amir. Bukan hanya karena berpisah dari kekasih atau rindu berjumpa dengan Sang Pencipta, tetapi juga karena amarah dan kebodohan manusia yang tak bertepi.

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