



## Greetings from the ED

Amid the brouhaha over the negative aspects of education during all of May, a glimmer of hope seems to have broken through the storm of debates over corruption and plagiarism and the rising cost of higher learning in Indonesia. At long last, the government will include literary works in all learning levels from elementary to senior high school. The Education, Culture, Research and Technology Ministry recently announced that 177 literary works will be utilized as reference materials for teachers nationwide, in addition to what has been available so far. What is most heartening is that among the books listed in this new literary curriculum will be a number of controversial publications, such as *Bumi Manusia* (This Earth of Mankind), authored by renowned writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer. For a long time, starting under the regime of President Suharto, this book was publicly banned. Together with similarly banned books to be introduced at schools will be a collection of poetry by Wiji Thukul titled *Nyanyian Akar Rumput* (The Song of Grassroots), which tells of injustice under the New Order regime of President Suharto. Wiji, who disappeared under mysterious circumstances during that period, remains missing and is an icon to those fighting for freedom of expression and equal rights in the country. This new development is part of the learning objectives under the Freedom to Learn (Merdeka Belajar) curriculum initiated by Education, Culture, Research and Technology Minister Nadiem Makarim a few years ago. Needless to say, this initiative was greeted positively by all concerned, educators and students alike. The big question now is

## Ruminations

### Limbo

“Limbo” has numerous meanings, a number of which appear to represent certain periods in my life. There was, for instance, a time of religiosity.... As a place name, “Limbo” or, more specifically, the “Limbo of Infants” (for there are several other kinds of Limbo), is defined by Catholic theologians as the abode of unbaptized souls who died in infancy—children too young to have committed actual sins but had not yet been absolved of original sin through baptism.

Boy oh boy, when I was a boy, attending St. Anthony de Padua Grade School and going to church every day except Saturday (unless it was my turn to serve as altar boy at Saturday-morning Mass), I thanked the heavens my parents had been raised Catholic and had had me baptized. But then, I thought, what about all those unbaptized pagan babies around the world? What if they died before being baptized? Were they to reside in Limbo for eternity, without ever having the chance to see God? Was that fair?



A certificate of adoption for a pagan baby.

<https://www.brooklineconnection.com/history/Schools/PaganBabies.html>

whether this initiative will be followed by the acquisition of those literary works and their distribution in schools. The opportunity to access more genre of books will hopefully lead to increased reading habits that would eventually produce critical and creative minds.

Another positive development in the field of education and culture has been the formation of the Indonesian Heritage Agency (IHA). Launched by Minister Makarim recently in Yogyakarta, the IHA is an additional sector of the ministry, with the intention to specifically manage the 18 museums and 34 cultural heritage sites around the country. “It’s time we make museums and cultural heritage sites as an open classroom, to support the learning process for all times,” declared Makarim at the official launch of IHA. It will certainly be a big challenge to revitalize museums and transform into an attractive and interesting classroom. Let’s face it, museums in Indonesia in comparison to those in neighboring countries such as Singapore, are in need of extensive renovation, if they are to attract more visitors. Yet, expertise and experienced professionals will be needed to transform the many cultural and historical artifacts now housed in museums around the country. Most importantly, there needs to be continuous financial support by the government as well as regional and local administrations to make this endeavor successful.

We at Lontar are ecstatic over these new developments and look forward to the many ways we can contribute to this immensely positive development. And we appreciate your continued efforts to support us in this effort.

Yuli Ismartono ([yismartono@lontar.org](mailto:yismartono@lontar.org))

Mercifully, as I learned from my third grade teacher Sister Theolene of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, there was a way to prevent such a thing from happening, that being to collect funds for distribution to Catholic missions abroad which, for every five dollars sent to them, would adopt a pagan baby on the donor’s behalf and have the baby baptized.

The students in my class were each given a fold-out cardboard collection box on which were depicted smiling faces of cherubic children, mostly Indian, African, and Asian—Not a white mien among them (except for Baby Jesus)!—and our class was given one month to raise the five dollars required for an adoption. If we succeeded in raising that amount, my class would be given a certificate of adoption and the student who contributed the most would be allowed to choose the baptismal name for the pagan baby.

Within the month, my class succeeded in raising enough pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters to amount to US\$ 5 and—Holy smokes!—it was I who somehow managed to collect the most funds in the class. I don’t know how I did it, because I had no allowance, but probably from the coins I’d find in the cracks between and at the base of the cushions on the couch in the living room of our home where, after Sunday dinners, my father and uncles would retreat for a smoke and chat and their trouser pockets, now pointing downward at a 45-degree angle, would discharge a portion their contents. This being 1961 or thereabouts, I chose the name John Fitzgerald, after the country’s first Roman Catholic president. Sixty three years later I now cringe at the thought of an elderly male in Africa or elsewhere still being chided by friends because of his name. Whatever the case, in my continued endeavor to save pagan babies, I also secretly baptized my younger siblings just to make certain they did not end up in Limbo.

There was a time of insouciance.... “Limbo” is also a dance or contest of Trinidad origin that involves bending over backwards and passing under a horizontal pole lowered slightly for each successive pass, the aim being to pass forward under the ever-lower bar without falling or dislodging the bar.

For this game, which was popular when I was pubescent, my siblings and I would use a bamboo fishing pole as the limbo bar. We usually played the game in the front yard where the thick grass on a particular patch of ground would soften our falls. We sometimes cheated by playing on upward sloping ground, making it easier to keep our balance as we bent backward before attempting pass under the pole. We had no portable record player on which to spin “Limbo Rock” by Chubby Checker or “Jump in the Line” by Harry Belafonte—Heck, we didn’t even have those 45 RPM records—but having memorized their music from repeated listening to the songs on the radio, we could hum the you

## MAY ACTIVITIES

Akhir pekan lalu, telah diselenggarakan Makassar International Writers Festival 2024 (MIWF 2024) di Fort Rotterdam Makassar. Lontar berpartisipasi dengan menyelenggarakan dua acara, yakni peluncuran dan diskusi buku *At the Circus* karya Nukila Amal penerjemah Toni Pollard, dengan pembicara Nukila Amal, Ramayda Akmal dan moderator Zen Hae ( 24 Mei 2024).

Hari berikutnya (26 Mei 2024) diskusi teater Indonesia membicarakan dua buku naskah drama *The Cockroach Trilogy* karya Nano Riantiarno, penerjemah John H McGlynn dan Barbara Hatley dan *Era of the Bat* karya Ikranagara penerjemah Cobina Gillit dan Kay Ikranagara. Pembicara Eka Putra Nggalu, Luna Vidya, Gladhys Elliona, dan moderator Ilda Karwayu. Acara ini terselenggara berkat dukungan Kementerian Pendidikan Kebudayaan Riset dan Teknologi RI.



Ramayda Akmal, Zen Hae dan Nukila Amal



Luna Vidya, Gladhys Elliona, Eka Putra Nggalu,  
Ilda Karwayu

songs and would always break into laughter as we shouted “How low can you go?” when waiting for the next sibling to fall.

After the game, as the sun sank behind the ridgeline in the West, I’d lie there on the cooling grass, looking up at the sky, blinking my eyes in time with the flashing of fireflies in the gloaming, and wishing that time would, at least for a while, cease to move forward, allowing me to remain free of responsibility. But time is a wild stallion, heeding no human reigns, and galloping forward at ever greater speed, with the days, months, and years of our lives receding swiftly behind us.

“Limbo” is also an intermediate or transitional place or state of being, a rut I felt myself to be in throughout most of my college days and early years in Indonesia. Where am I going and what am I doing were constant questions and it wasn’t until 1987, when Lontar was born, that I, at the age of 35, began to feel my days of transience were finally behind me.

Looking back at the decades since, I see that while focusing attention on work and personal success, I too often paid little attention to the concerns and needs of family, lovers, and friends. Not to distract from this failing but I have, in my 71 years, frequently seen this to be the case with others as well. And that, too, is yet another definition of “limbo,” i.e., to “cause or to bring into being a state of neglect.”

Now, finally, we come to the last definition of limbo I would like to cite, that being “a state of uncertainty,” which ever more increasingly haunts this current and later period in my life.

Happy are those who believe in God, trust in the absolution of baptism, and who have every confidence of finding eternal contentment

in the afterlife but, having long ago shed myself of such convictions, I no longer fear what will happen to me in the afterlife. Instead, I contemplate on what we can do here, in our life on this earth, to ensure that our pagan babies — whether they are children of human shape and form or babies of a very different sort, like poverty reduction programs, like climate-mitigation processes, like such ventures as Lontar—will continue to develop and thrive long after our own demise.



With three of my own pagan babies in 1964,  
younger siblings Christine, Colleen, and  
Luke.

John McGlynn ([john\\_mcglynn@lontar.org](mailto:john_mcglynn@lontar.org))



Philipus Joko Pinurbo, (11 May 1962–27 April 2024), who wrote under the name “Joko Pinurbo” but was commonly known as “Jokpin,” began writing during the 1980s and is today seen as one of Indonesia’s most popular and influential poets. He authored well over a dozen collections of poetry and, more recently, began to publish prose works as well, including his debut novel, *Srimenanti* in 2019 and, most recently, a collection of short stories titled *Tak Ada Asu di Antara Kita* in 2023. His work has been translated into English, German, Russian, and Mandarin.

Jokpin won many literary prizes, including the Lontar Literary Award in 2001, the Indonesian Language Center’s Literary Award, in 2002 and again in 2014; and the Khatulistiwa Literary Award in 2004. He was recognised as an Outstanding Literary Figure for the Year by *Tempo* magazine in 2001 and then again in 2012. In 2014 he received the SEA-Write Award.

A completely unpretentious writer, Jokpin found inspiration for his poems in everyday situations and events.

Lontar has published two collections of his work—*Trouser Doll*, in 2001, and *Borrowed Body and Other Poems* in 2015—and hopes to publish a historical anthology of his work in the not too distant future. Jokpin leaves behind not only his wife and two children but, on a happier note, inspiration for countless readers.

## Surat dari Pejompongan

### JOKPIN

Kawan Moer,

Puisi Indonesia adalah sesuatu yang serius. Sejak awal, para penyair kelahiran Sumatra—dan lain daerah di Hindia Belanda dahulu—adalah mereka yang menggunakan puisi sebagai pernyataan sikap terhadap kekangan adat dan gencetan kolonialisme. Dalam suasana tegang itu, hampir tidak ada waktu sedikit saja untuk tersenyum. Atau, menikmati kehidupan dalam seginya yang menggelikan.

Dalam prosa, sedikit berbeda. Cerita-cerita pelipur lara muncul hampir seluruh tradisi bertutur di Indonesia. Dalam bentuknya yang lebih modern, sketsa atau cerpen Muhammad Kasim, atau Soeman Hs. yang lebih kemudian, adalah gambaran kehidupan sehari-hari di Sumatra dalam langgam yang menggelikan. Kisah-kisah lucu diangkat ke permukaan sebagai bacaan hiburan dan masyarakat menikmatinya.

Namun, puisi yang sudah telanjur serius sejak kelahirannya, tambah berat pada generasi Chairil Anwar. Luka akibat Perang Dunia Kedua tidak sepenuhnya bisa disembuhkan. Sajak-sajak terakhir Chairil Anwar menunjukkan kecenderungan itu. Puisi-puisi sesudahnya, semisal karya Toto Sudarto Bachtiar dan Ajip Rosidi, juga menanggung kemuraman yang kurang-lebih sama.

Singkatnya, kehidupan kota setelah perang dan bagaimana kemerdekaan mendorong warga kota menjadi manusia baru—tidak sepenuhnya berhasil. Mereka masih berkubang dalam kemiskinan, pengungsian dan perang yang terus ada. Gencetan-gencetan ini membuat para sastrawan generasi ini sebagai orang-orang yang terluka dan mereka menyuarkan semua itu dalam karya-karya mereka.

Setali tiga uang dengan dasawarsa terakhir rezim Sukarno. Sastra dan politik bergumul, isap-mengisap. Hampir tidak ada pihak yang tidak punya sikap politis—termasuk mereka yang tidak berpartai, pada akhirnya, juga sebuah sikap politis. Tidak ada lagi ruang untuk bersendau gurau di antara sesama. Luka-luka dan kekalahan setelah Peristiwa 1965 makin membuat sastra kita penuh dengan tragedi dan trauma.

Lantas, kapan kita bisa tertawa? Ah, tidak lama setelah itu. Ketika puisi lirik yang serius itu mencapai kemapanan, sehimpun penyair memperkenalkan “puisi mbeling”. Remy Sylado berhasil memberikan alternatif bagi puisi Indonesia yang saat itu diklaim kelewat serius dan formalistik. Remy hadir dengan puisi yang bisa berbicara tentang apa saja—termasuk yang cabul, banal, dan mengocok perut. Puisi bukan barang mewah, apalagi kudus. Ia bisa jadi apa saja, mengandung apa saja, oleh siapa saja.

Pada puisi mbeling ada gema pantun jenaka dari masa silam yang belum terlalu jauh. Ada pula kritik sosial dari zaman yang baru lalu.

**Trousers**

He wanted to buy  
 a new pair of trousers  
 to wear to a party  
 so that he would look  
 handsome and confident.

He tried  
 a hundred different styles  
 in different shops  
 but he couldn't find any  
 he liked.

In fact,  
 he took off his own trousers  
 in front of the sales staff  
 and ignoring their flattery  
 threw them away.

“You know, don't you,  
 that I'm looking for  
 the best fitting and most stylish  
 pair of trousers  
 to wear to the cemetery?”

Then he scampered off  
 without his trousers  
 and wandered about  
 looking for his mother's grave  
 so that he could ask her,  
 “Mummy, where did you put  
 that funny pair of trousers  
 I used to wear  
 when I was a baby?”

*Translated by Harry Aveling*

This poem was first published, in Indonesian, under the title “Celana” in a collection of poems by the same name (Magelang: IndonesiaTera, 1999) and then later in *Baju Bulan* (Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2013).

Joko Pinurbo (Jokpin) mengambil ilham dari itu. Tapi, Jokpin adalah anak kandung puisi lirik Indonesia. Ia tidak meninggalkan puisi lirik, sebaliknya mengolah kembali langgam itu, terutama langgam puisi lirik Sapardi Djoko Damono. Puisinya bisa sangat serius, ingin berfilsafat, tetapi juga menimbulkan cengiran di kali lain. Ia mengkritik bukan seperti Rendra atau Taufiq Ismail yang cenderung terang-terangan, sebaliknya, ia menyindir, sesekali meledek, bahkan meledek diri sendiri.

Aku menyenangi Jokpin karena ia adalah penyair kita yang sadar bahwa bahasa Indonesia bisa diberdayakan sebagai bahasa puisi hingga pada tarafnya yang maksimal. Sesekali memang ia masih terperangkap pada ungkapan yang cenderung klise, tetapi tidak jarang ia sampai kepada permainan bahasa yang canggih, antara bunyi dan makna, antara rupa dan nada. Penyair seperti Jokpin tidaklah banyak jumlahnya, Kawan.

Baru-baru ini kudengar kau mencoba menulis puisi lagi ya? Ah, apa kau masih memainkan langgam puisi para penyair kita yang dahulu kaupuja-puja itu? Aku tahu, itu adalah pilihan yang penting pada masa gontok-gontokan, tetapi, apakah hari ini ia masih perlu. Aku tidak meragukan bakatmu, Kawan, tetapi jadi kepingin tahu pada permainan apa lagi yang akan kausajikan. Aku kagum pada komitmenmu, kepada rakyat sebagai pencipta kebudayaan yang sebenarnya.

Aku melihat langit merah di barat sana, padahal belum lagi senja. Merah oleh darah orang-orang Palestina yang mati dibantai oleh tantara Israel. Aku tak ingin memanggil Jokpin. Biarlah ia beristirahat dalam damai. Kini, bersaksilah lagi, Kawan. Inilah masamu. Bangkitlah lagi dengan kata-katamu yang dulu. Yang setajam lembing, menusuk ke jantung lawan. Kata-kata yang seperti lautan darah, Kawan. Diam dan menelan segala derau, segala risau.

Aku menunggumu, Kawan, di tikungan yang tidak ada bintang. **Zen Hae** ([zenhae@lontar.org](mailto:zenhae@lontar.org))

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