



Lontar Newsletter

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October, 2025

Greetings

October marked the one-year anniversary of President Prabowo Subianto's administration. A short time, to be sure, but a time when pundits and analysts rushed to evaluate the productivity of his 43+ ministers and their policies. Judging from the reports from many fronts, it has been a mixed bag. Our primary concern is, as always, the education sector and, in that field, the year has been a worrisome one. In its enthusiasm to create a comprehensive environment of quality education throughout the nation, the new government has created programs and policies that seem to contradict one another or are, seemingly, directionless.

The greater public initially gave it support to the free lunch program for students throughout the country—whose aim is to ensure that students do not go hungry while going to school—but then cases of food poisoning occurred, even causing a number of fatalities. Alarm bells went off. The lack of proper monitoring and accountability on the necessary hygienic procedures of providing the school meals put a harsh spotlight once again on administrative negligence and lack of planning.

Another round of applause was also given to the creation of “Sekolah Rakyat,” (Community Schools), a boarding school initiative for children from low-income families. But critics saw this as yet another diversion of funds from addressing existing systemic challenges affecting schools—for instance, unpaid and poorly-paid teachers, inequitable distribution of resources, and run-down buildings. The

Ruminations

Impressions #1

Born in July of 1919, my father, John Alexander McGlynn, Jr., was 73 years of age when he came to visit me in November 1992. I was worried: would he have the stamina for the five-week Indonesian holiday I planned for him? Would he be able to keep up with his travel-companion, Jerome “Carp” Rockweiler, a spring chicken in comparison, just 50 at the time. I also wondered what his first impressions of Indonesia would be—anything like mine in 1976?

I asked my father—ordered him, in fact—to keep a diary during his trip. He was well-read man, a highly observant person with a gift for gab but one who had never used this skill set to put down his thoughts in writing. I promised to transcribe and edit his diary and produce a booklet as a gift for “the progeny,” the term he used to refer to my siblings who financed his trip.

“John,” as I will henceforth call him—I am “John Hubert” or “son John”—more than kept his promise; he produced a document of more than 21,000 words. In his diary or “log book,” as he called it, John imagined himself to be a ship's captain; Carp, his travel companion, was “the crew.”

The first entry in John's log book (edited and abridged) reads as follows: “Cap's orders, sealed, were to sail in a westerly direction into the great unknown, to determine whether the world was round or flat. Another reason for this epic is, if possible, to track down the progeny's long-lost brother, John Hubert. Some are of the opinion that he has been devoured, after being properly spiced and stewed by a jolly crew of cannibals. Another (and more attractive possibility) is that the prodigal has cornered the trade of the spice isles and is lolling about in the midst of a vast and lustful harem. Naturally, both Cap and his crew hope that the fate of the missing prodigal is contained in the second option, for several reasons: John Hubert will, from the goodness of his heart, take in the weary Argonauts, give them a night's lodging, some warm beer, and send them away laden with gifts: namely a shipload of pepper and a dozen or so spares from his harem... But come to think of it, that is a hell of a lot of pepper.”

Because of a misunderstanding on the date of John's arrival, I was not at Soekarno-Hatta Airport on the afternoon of Tuesday, November

question asked was, why not solve these problems first?

Perhaps, however, the venture that has sparked the most questions as to the direction of where educating is going in this country, is the plan to create two categories of “Garuda Schools,” i.e. “top schools.” In this plan, existing Garuda schools will be “transformed” through by enriching them with international standards of science and technology. Other, new Garuda schools are to be built from scratch in underdeveloped areas outside Java. Four schools are reportedly being built this year in the regions of Bangka Belitung, East Nusa Tenggara, North Sulawesi and North Kalimantan, each at a cost of Rp. 200 million (approx. US\$ 12,000). Critics say that the government seems set to launch a two-tiered education system—one for the privileged few and another for the majority in underfunded schools. This seems confusing, with no priority given to any one of the programs.

Another anniversary in October was the 80th anniversary of TNI, the Indonesian Armed Forces, celebrated on October 5 with a multi-million dollar extravaganza of military pomp and circumstance in and around Lapangan Monas, the National Monument Square, in Central Jakarta.

A third anniversary in October was that of Lontar, whose 38th birthday on October 28 passed with no fanfare at all. Because a Rp. 500 million grant from Dana Indonesia, supposedly guaranteed to us this year by the Ministry of Culture, has yet to be dispersed, there was no money for book production, much less a birthday celebration.

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io, thus forcing him and Carp to make their own way to my home. “We took a cab, driven by a wild man, to son John’s ménage,” he writes, “and to our surprise arrived in one piece and were welcomed warmly. My first impression of Indonesian people is of their extreme politeness and genuine friendliness—except for cab drivers, who from Timor to Timbuktu, are a bunch of thieves.”

At that time, in 1992, Lontar’s office was located just three doors from my house. The office had a large bedroom with a separate entrance where visitors stayed. That is where Cap and Crew slept during their time in Jakarta.

On Wednesday, November 11, John writes: “After showering and shaving there was a quiet knock and in glided a breakfast of boiled eggs and tropical fruit, transported by son John’s chief cook & maid. I’m getting to like this sort of service—I fear too much, for there’s a good chance that I will be constrained to fire the progeny’s mother if she is too noisy or not sufficiently respectful when she serves her lord and master breakfast in bed.”

John and Carp spent that day and the next five in Jakarta. On the first day, as John notes, “We embarked on a pre-planned tour of things educational and historical. The main foci of the day were two: number 1, a tour of the buildings and artifacts of the Dutch East India Company, built largely between 1635 and 1700, and gave one to ponder on man’s inhumanity to man. Number 2 was the waterfront with its vast open-air market. Foul-smelling, filthy, but fascinating, surrounding and surrounded by countless numbers of miserable hovels of people who lived and worked there. In spite of these depressing surroundings, the inhabitants were, without fail, polite and friendly, and the children—of which there seemed to be an endless supply—were, I believe, the happiest group of waifs I have ever seen, a damned sight more so than the dour, spoiled, little brutes one would see at Disneyland.”

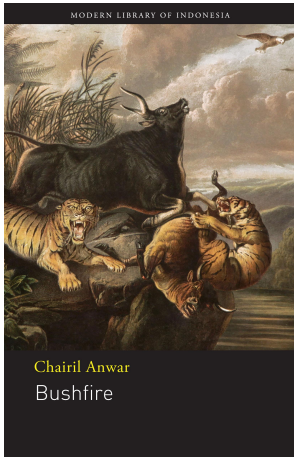
I included in John’s “educational” itinerary a visit to Laris Love, a factory of a beauty parlor located near my home. It was the first time in his 73 years John had been to a salon on his own. “Inasmuch as son John had noticed that my toenails looked like cloven hoofs, he talked me into

having a manicure and pedicure. Imagine that! I must admit it was a new and rather pleasant experience. One charming young lady took charge of my hands, and another my feet. They clipped, filed, dug, and massaged the extremities for about an hour. Must admit, both



“Captain” John on Kaliage Besar Island

FORTHCOMING!



Born in 1922, Chairil Anwar died an early death, in 1949. His poetic career was brief—just seven years; his poetic output, too, was limited—just 78 known poems. But so great was his influence that the day of his death, April 28, is now celebrated in Indonesia as Literature Day.

With the ouster of the Dutch colonial rulers by the Japanese military in 1942, the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, and the Indonesian revolution (1945–1949), the 1940s was a time of monumental change—and not just in the social-, economic-, and political fields but in the field of literature as well. There, a true revolution took place, with Chairil Anwar in the vanguard. Gone were the tropes and allusions of his romantic predecessors and though romanticism did not disappear altogether, it was now embedded in a realistic awareness of a new day and age.

Authors coming of age at that time, Chairil chief among them, began to try new possibilities in the use of Indonesian. By freeing themselves from the constraints of the traditional grammatical rules they developed a new and more practical style. During that period, Indonesian was transformed from a one-sided intellectual language into a genuine general language of culture. The modern simplicity of this new style in prose style had its counterpart in the economy of language in poetry, of which Chairil Anwar is the main and most outstanding exponent in Indonesian literature.

the attention and the results were pleasant.”

Very early on Friday morning, I go with them by private boat to the privately-owned island of Kaliage Besar, four hours north from the city’s shoreline, in the Jakarta Bay. “Toward evening, son John, Carp and I took a motor dinghy to a fishing village on Kelapa Island about a mile away. It



Carp Rockweiler, “the Crew” (and intrepid photographer) on Kelapa Island

proved to be most interesting, a place of grinding poverty—beastly crowded, especially with kids, goats, and scrawny chickens—yet the adults were extremely polite and the children happy. It gives one to think...”

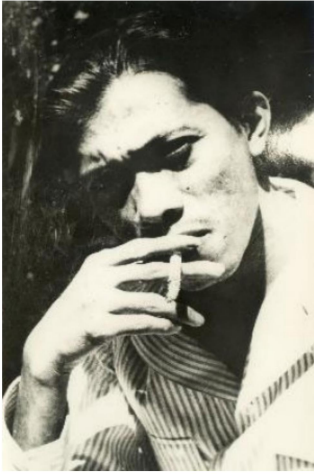
Memories of my late father and his Indonesian holiday came to me two weeks ago when I turned 73. I smiled to think of how anxious I’d been about the well-being of a man as elderly as he. I mused on his first impression: “My first impression of Indonesian people is of their extreme politeness and genuine friendliness”.

I first stepped foot in Jakarta on the evening of May 31, 1976. To my chagrin, the brother of an Indonesian friend who was supposed to be there to greet me was not in evidence. When I did manage to reach him by phone, he said he would come to get me—but not for another hour.

In my diary, I wrote, “By this time, it was getting late and the airport was almost deserted. Fortunately, there was one café still open and I waited there, spending the time chatting with the three people working there who were approximately my age. At one point I had to go to the bathroom and did so, leaving all my bags unattended at the café. When I came back, they were still there but it was only then it dawned on me what a stupid thing that had been for me to do: to trust that they would not be stolen or rifled through. Would that be likely at a big-city airport in the USA?”

In regard to my father’s first impression, since I first arrived in Jakarta 49 years ago, I have heard that opinion expressed innumerable times. As to my first impression, enough to say I would not leave my bags unattended today.

John McGlynn (john_mcglynn@lontar.org)



CHAIRIL ANWAR, one of Indonesia's most famous authors, was born in Medan on October 26, 1922. There he attended a Dutch elementary school and then a Dutch junior high school, but he dropped out before graduating. At the age of nineteen, after the divorce of his parents, Chairil moved with his mother to Jakarta where he came in contact with the literary world.

Chairil began to gain recognition as a poet in 1942 with the publication of "Nisan" ("Gravestone"), which he wrote after the death of his grandmother. Her demise apparently awakened him to the fact that death could wrest life away at any moment; most of the seventy plus poems he wrote before his own early death in 1949 refer, implicitly, to such an awareness.

Often called Indonesia's "Arthur Rimbaud," Chairil's work is marked by an intensity and *joie de vivre* that reflected his own radical lifestyle. Through his use of everyday language and new syntax in his poetry, he set an example that was soon picked up by other writers and positively altered forever the development of the Indonesian language. He was at the vanguard of the "Generation of '45"—that group of writers who came of age at the time of the Indonesian revolution.

In memory of the words he left behind, April 28, the day of his death, is now celebrated as Literature Day in Indonesia.

Surat dari Pejompongan

BIEBL

Kawan Moer,

Kali ini aku kepingin bercerita—nanti akan kupersempahkan dalam bentuk fiksi—tentang seorang penyair penting dari Republik Ceko. Namanya, Konstantin Biebl. Mungkin kau pernah membaca karyanya di masa mudamu dulu. Selain sebagai salah seorang penyair Ceko yang penting dari generasi Poetisme dan Surrealisme, kehidupan pribadinya juga tidak kalah menarik. Bukan bagaimana gosip-gosip asmara yang menerpanya, tetapi karena akhir hidupnya yang tragis. Ia mati bunuh diri.

Kepadamu aku tidak mungkin menceritakan seluruh peri kehidupannya, sebab itu akan kelewat panjang dan suratku ini singkat saja. Aku ingin bercerita kenapa aku mau menulis kisah tentang penyair ini, terutama hari-hari terakhirnya di Praha dan Slavětín sebelum ia bunuh diri, juga hari-hari setelah kematiannya yang banyak mengundang dugaan ini dan itu.

Syahdan, penyair kita, Konstantin Biebl, tiba di Praha, Minggu, 11 November 1951, pukul lima sore, setelah tinggal di Slavětín seminggu lamanya. Namun, siapa sangka jika kepulangan ke kota kelahirannya itu adalah yang terakhir dan pamitan kepada ibunya Hermína Bieblová adalah ramalan yang menjadi kenyataan: "Saya tidak akan pernah kembali, Bu." Sebab beberapa jam setelah tiba di Praha, pada tengah malam, Biebl melompat dari jendela apartemennya di Na Vytoni 7 dan mati keesokan harinya. Mayatnya dibawa pulang ke Slavětín dan dikebumikan di halaman Gereja Santo Yakobus Yang Agung, tidak jauh dari rumah keluarga Biebl, pada 19 November sore.

Inilah kisah kematian penulis Republik Ceko yang paling banyak menimbulkan perbincangan dan masih menjadi misteri hingga hari ini. Sebab, kematian itu bukan sekadar perkara orang yang mengakhiri hidupnya atas kemauan sendiri, tetapi juga peristiwa itu terjadi dalam situasi sosial-politik Ceko yang penuh tekanan dan kecemasan. Terutama setelah Partai Komunis Cekoslowakia (Komunistická Strana Československa, KSČ) melakukan kudeta tidak berdarah pada Februari 1948 dan sejak itu bermulalah rezim sosialisme di Cekoslowakia.

Pada saat itu para seniman Cekoslowakia bekerja dalam ketegangan antara anjuran partai dan kebebasan kreatif. Sejumlah penulis yang dianggap kurang setia kepada partai dikeluarkan dari Serikat Penulis Cekoslowakia. Kukira situasi ini juga punya kemiripan dengan situasi Indonesia masa Demokrasi Terpimpin, ketika seniman-seniman Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (Lekra) bersitegang dengan—tepatnya memprovokasi—seniman-seniman bebas yang menandatangani Manifest Kebudayaan (Manikebu). Tapi, biarlah ia menjadi pembahasan sendiri nanti.



Hanna Rambe died on October 15 at the age of 83. Born in Jakarta in 1940, in the mid-1960s Hanna began to study English literature at the University of Indonesia but did not complete her degree. Instead, she became a journalist, first working as a copy-editor at the *Indonesian Observer*, then as a translator and reporter for *Indonesia Raya*. She also worked as a contributor to the magazine *Intisari* and then as a journalist at *Mutiara* magazine. Her work as a journalist very much influenced both her research methods and her writing style. When preparing *Mirah dari Banda*, for instance (published by Lontar in English with the title, *Mirah of Banda*, in 2010), she spent a month in Banda doing research. While writing *Seorang Lelaki dari Waimital*, (“A Man from Waimital”) she traveled numerous times to the difficult-to-reach interior of Seram island.

As testified to by her publication history—with writings and books on the Moluccas, the Sriwijaya Kingdom—Hanna was especially interested in histories of pre-independence Indonesia. She also wrote biographies, including one about Suyatin Kartowijono, a pioneer in the struggle for Indonesian women’s rights. She sought to give voice to the marginalized and for that she will always be remembered.

Situasi Cekoslowakia masa sosialisme bisa mendorong kita untuk melihat peristiwa kematian Konstantin Biebl dari sudut berbeda. Apa benar Biebl bunuh diri? Bagaimana jika ia dibunuh?

Sebelum aku masuk ke dalam permainan tebak-tebakan yang tidak ada ujungnya, yang serupa membuka kotak pandora sejarah Ceko semasa rezim sosialisme, ada baiknya aku bolak-balik dulu sejumlah catatan tentang Konstantin Biebl. Namun, bukan tujuan ceritaku ini untuk menjadi semacam rekonstruksi historis atas hari-hari terakhir sang penyair. Bagiku, membaca Biebl sebagai manusia sejarah adalah penting, tetapi yang tidak kurang pentingnya adalah bagaimana saya bisa menyelami fakta-fakta seputar dirinya, sejarah sastra dan politik Ceko, dan dari situ saya bisa bermain-main secara kreatif. Karena itu, tulisan ini mencoba mengocok, bermain-main, antara fakta dan fiksi, antara fiksi dan nekrologi, antara apa yang telah terjadi dan yang mungkin terjadi.

Singkat kata, bolehlah ceritaku ini disebut sebagai “sejarah palsu” Konstantin Biebl.

Permainan ini kukira akan bisa menarik jika saja aku mampu mengamalkan jurus-jurus penulisan yang mumpuni dan seandainya kelak tuliskan itu terbit, aka nada sesuatu yang baru tentang fiksi sejarah—terutama tentang kehidupan pribadi seorang penyair. Kebetulan saja, kali ini ia adalah penyair asing yang di Indonesia hampir tidak dikenal. Sebab satu-satunya penyair Ceko yang dikenal di Indonesia adalah Jaroslav Seifert, karena dia memenangi Hadiah Nobel Sastra pada 1984.

Taruhlah proyek penulisan kali ini adalah semacam perkenalan lebih lanjut tentang kesusastraan modern Ceko, terutama melalui kehidupan penyair Konstantin Biebl.

Tapi, sampai pada paragraph ini aku belum juga menceritakan peri kehidupan Biebl yang kumaksud tadi. Ini memang tengah menjadi bidang perhatianku belakangan ini. Ini semacam pengantar sajalah buatmu. Sebab, sejatinya tulisan itu masih kugarap dan mudah-mudahan aku akan bisa cepat menyelesaikannya.

Kukira itu dulu pengantar dariku ya. Salam buat keluargamu. Ah, musim gugur sudah mencapai puncaknya saat ini ya. Ciao! **Zen Hae** (zenhae@lontar.org)

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