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Laksmi Pamuntjak: *Letters From Buru*

Laksmi Pamuntjak is the author of two poetry collections, *Ellipsis* (one of *The Herald UK's* Books of the Year 2005) and *The Anagram*; a treatise on violence and mythology entitled *Perang, Langit dan Dua Perempuan* (*War, Heaven, and Two Women*), and a collection of short stories, *The Diary of R.S.: Musings on Art*. Pamuntjak also translated and edited *Goenawan Mohamad: Selected Poems* and Goenawan Mohamad's book of aphorisms under the title *On God and Other Unfinished Things*. She is also the co-founder of Aksara, a bilingual bookstore in Jakarta. Pamuntjak is currently at work on her first novel, *The Blue Widow*, about the historical memory of 1965. She has also recently been appointed a jury member of the Amsterdam-based Prince Claus Awards Committee.



Letters from Buru

--- Dec. 1973

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I imagine you this weeping, pearly blue.

31 December 1973

Dearest—

The year is drawing to a close and I am, again, cushioned at the base of some tree, watching yet another *ketoprak*. The others are spread out, huddled in their own unprepossessing bunches. Extension cords from the giant speakers not far from where I am sitting snake through the grass all the way to the stage; wow, aren't we using a lot of electricity today.

There is a gay feeling in the air. The place is suddenly an oasis of brilliant moonlit optimism suspended in a haze of *laissez faire* and we do not recognize ourselves. The sky is a canvas on which greedy gods are doodling. It may even be chilly but we are numbed to reality.

As I told you earlier, it's been a rather compassionate year. There can be as many as two, sometimes three shows a year, and the repertoire ranges from shamelessly banal to determinedly different. But most of the time these *ketopraks* are quite tedious.

Most of the actors and musicians of tonight's show came from Unit XIV Bantalareja. They're a vain lot, I must add, always psyched up about themselves. They boast as many as half a dozen groups with a decidedly old

Jakarta bent, one for *lenong*, one for *orkes keroncong*, one for *irama Melayu*—Bantala this, Bantala that, Bantala what's-it. The motor is a group of Tangerang youth with a certain amount of bile about them, and a certain veiled disdain for the genteel sensibilities of the shadow puppet theatre, the *wayang*, so they can always be counted on for political fervour. They do stick to lifting only popular stories from Javanese history books, as they do now, but they really are not very imaginative. Short of ideological freedom, most of the stories are chosen for their anti-feudalism. It's all about heroes and patriots. Great, mind-numbing stuff.

(Being the unit closest to Namlea, these Bantalareja guys also get to look forward most to the giggling coastal girls.)

Of course like all folk performances, the stories behind the screen are much more delicious, and for a few days during rehearsals fresh love was declared, new acts and allegiances were made, old friendships were broken. There is a sense of deepened reality to the air, precisely because laughter suspends disbelief. Such is the narcotic effect of art. But by tomorrow, all will be depleted and everybody will be slightly depressed.

Bhisma

February-March, 1974

It's been a while since I've given food a thought. Every so often there will be "patients" coming to me with some minor grievance concerning the things they've eaten.

Most prisoners on rice field duty look forward to getting their extra protein from catching the *orong-orong* that comes out and floats haplessly in water after they crush the soil in it. There are *kelabangs* too, a kind of crab-like spider, and of course, the easiest of all—lizards. The *kelabang* releases a bluish substance when it comes in contact with fire so often this gives those who consume it the most debilitating case of the runs. One has to admire their valor: we're as hardy as they come, they always say, don't know what plagues us this time. Still. Some have managed to get so sick they need to be transferred to the hospital in Namlea, the port city of Buru.

Today a man was brought before me who had recently sought medication for *kelabang* poisoning. Only this time he was barely a man: it was clear that he'd been knocked about unconscious, with two stab wounds on his abdomen. I asked the people who'd brought him in what happened. They said he'd had diarrhea so severe that he had to—just absolutely had to—empty his bowels into the Wai Bini. Now there is an express rule in the penal colony that no one should empty their bowels into the river, because we rely on it for clean water. It is our only source.

So of course they beat him up. And I feel awful, because he had sought treatment from me, and yet he had obviously mistrusted it (or me) not to have taken the tablets I'd given him.

Bhisma

----, 1974

It just dawned upon me, darling. About waiting, I mean. When we talk about waiting, we do not talk about a few hours, days, even months. It's about reaching a point where you occasionally dare to wait, such as when you pick up a pen and a sheet of paper, see the first smile of a recovering patient, or meet a visitor who tells you "It's still better to have a home than no home at all."

There is this man from Banten I visit from time to time. He believes I have a special power. When he first tried to point me to the fact, I dismissed him immediately. Don't want to hear it, I said. I bet it's something about my name. And if it is, then I already know about it. Don't need a sage from black magic land to tell me that I will only die when I choose to. That yours, my love, will be the last face I see. But gradually I see what he means. There have been too many moments in which we as a collective would be beaten senseless for the error of another yet I have slowly come to realise that when it happens I do not feel any pain.

I don't feel it during interrogation either, which is really a mere excuse for torture. They say physical pain always mimes death, and each time pain is inflicted upon the body, it is a kind of mock execution. I try to conjure these things in my mind almost to elicit the tonal sensation of pain, if there is indeed such a thing, but I can't. I can see what it does to my body, the gashes, the long, angry streaks, the swollen pus, and I can see what it is all about, the power game, the naked show of brute force. But I can't summon the feeling.

It is an idle hour, and I have acquired it through sly machinations. Darkness now.

My love. I have to take leave of you once more.

Bhisma

---, 1974

Amba,

I've learned to love the ocean because unlike the mountains I rarely see it. I often think of boating out instead of being boated in. I imagine the tremendous reefs under the water, the anemones my blind friends tell me are glued on them like jeweled mouths. Colour and poison they say are two sides of the same coin.

Imagine, then: An island this precariously small, and yet one that refuses to be leveled down by anything – not even by the sweeping blue and fickle waves.

You learn so much from people who in different parts of their lives have agreed to live on the coast. The three villages nearest to us are full of them. They are Butonese, and therefore not from around here, but they are happiest at sea. Every day they say to themselves tomorrow we might live another day. They feel the slightest threat in the sky, detect the ocean's panic. Yet they sleep noiselessly and rise early as though to race dawn to another beginning. I'd like to take you with me to live by the ocean, if only to remind me of this thought where happiness knows itself.

Bhisma

(excerpts from the manuscript *The Blue Widow: A Novel*)