

Nukila AMAL
Fragments from a novel, and a story

From the novel *Cala Ibi* (2003)

[...]

READ THE ADS

In the beginning you did not know. And suddenly there it is. An object, a service. A catch phrase. A face, many faces. Suggestions laid bare. Icons, dreams, signs, colors, a blaze of words. Perfect images, whispering, seducing, bewitching eyes and ears.

In the beginning you did not know. Then you see it once. Then you know it is there. You see it twice, over and over again, everywhere, every which way. It makes you want it. Need it. Can't live without it. Then you set off to purchase it. For a moment you are fulfilled, you have exceeded yourself. If you forget, you will be reminded again and again, that it is still there, and so, your memory rekindled, you set off to purchase it again. And again. (come, consume, wear, use, eat, more, spend, drain your pocket for me, it's safer, it's faster, it's cozier, it's easier, multiply, one more, I am your dream, wear me, ride me, how gorgeous you look, your life is wonderful, the latest model, this bonus that freebie, more sophisticated, speed it up, your life will be more wonderful, desire me, need me, own me, more, more...)

In the beginning you did not know. Then it transformed your not knowing into knowledge. Pixie-dusting knowledge into desire. From desire into need, inescapable. Ads are like the devil.

One night after work, I go home early, when the city lights have just been switched on. Driving my car in the traffic jam of Jakarta, I watch what lies outside the window, unperturbed by the universe out there. I remember the strange feeling that sometimes emerges when I am between those building. As if I am lost in a jungle, a man-made forest of concrete, iron, steel, glass, lights. I'm afraid I can't get out from here, forever going around in circles, in this man-made labyrinth.

But that night suddenly I am enthralled by the city center, as if upon the first gaze. The city is slathered in words, in lights. Billboards, giant television screens, commercial balloons, corporate logos, neon signs... I blink away. Words flash across the roadside, out front, in the corner, by the clouds, at the back, as if randomly scattered. Hardly left anything: neither void for the eyes nor silence for the ears.

Can one decipher all these words until one's tears dry up, no longer able to cry, this flood of words and images, news of trade and competition, nocturnal verbal carnival? Can one guess the fate of mankind, by reading the products of the mind of civilization: the graphomaniac, informaniac, electric, psychedelic society? Can one, having read deep enough far enough long enough, find something amid this flood of language of lights, a hidden literature of sorts, perhaps prose, perhaps poetry? Can one trace all human languages on the streets, and find a deeper consciousness that surface beautifully from all screens all spreads?

A perfect sentence, or just one simple word.

Can one stroll from street to street, with a letter a word a sentence that suddenly glow into road signs in the middle of this forest of concrete glass asphalt? Salvaging words from the prolonged trip of going round and back and forth. Can the center's commotion aim one towards a precipice, without all this optical-acoustic illusions, a silence without noise?

I gaze at the city lights wide-eyed. On the side of the street, a wire communication ad says CAN AND WILL. I look at it for awhile. A glint of a feeling, a sliver of thought. An indeterminate moment. I pull over, grind the car to a halt on the side of the road. Feeling a bit anxious, but with plenty of guts. I go out, and begin my stroll on the sidewalk.

Stepping out onto the city sidewalks, I have now become a pedestrian. A face among unfamiliar faces. A body walking, a cluster of networks as delicate as a spider's web, my bones the veins of leaves that buck at the evening breeze, my tangled veins as fragile as glass, a layer of thin membrane... I have feared that I will die on the street, in this city. But I will not die tonight, not on these streets. Tonight I want to be a reader. That way a day might not go away in vain. Maybe there will be a poem or a story. Just one meaning, and I shall die happy. Even without, there will still be a story of a night walking slowly reading the ads. A sweet unexpected impromptu. Even if all this reading, all these streets, does not get me anywhere, casting only a lasting weariness, it is perfectly fine. I shall still die as happy.

Maybe it's a prayer, a hope. Instantly answered. IT'S WORTH THE TRIP. My eyes read the promise on the plastic bag lugged by a mother walking away before me. I read with a smile, almost happy, feeling as pink as doughnut frosting.

On the edge of the sidewalk lies a scrap of newspaper. I pick it up, fixing a quick gaze at the latest technology, a flat screen TV. EVERY DETAIL IS SO CLEAR. Then I toss it into the waste bin, laughing, because the TV is dead. Because what is alive are the ads, what is alive are words. Objects have perished in the horizon, those millions of attractors. What remains are words bright and thick to the eyes, hoarding more behind the letters – as if uttered, flooding my consciousness, more than meets the eyes. A transparent inferring, surreal, invisible, yet present behind the visual reach of all form color visage. Perfect images. BEYOND YOUR IMAGINATION, just like what the shiny red car says on the billboard.

I walk unhurriedly, not towards something but anywhere the eyes lead the feet. My eyes are guided by the city's alphabet, a perfect discontinuum, an ocean of happenstance. Read. All these broken words, this unrelatedness... Perhaps I may be able to let loose a fine thread of order out of this disorder, perhaps flay a neat plot out of its hide, perhaps a story – to whose ending I do not know yet. Like myself at this evening's end. Myself in the closing of the year. Myself in the future.

But the future is days that come one at a time. And tonight, the streets will unveil sentences one at a time. The streets will be visited upon by the angels of disclosure, one angel for one sentence. Read...resembling almost an ancient summon for a man in a cave once upon a time. Archangel Gabriel has descended upon him in light, commanding: Recite...

Yet this is merely an act of reading, not reciting. Reading is akin to a gentle whisper, a thin drizzle, the murmur of wind, the sigh of a conch, the rustling of leaves, the hiss of embers emitting the final glow. Reciting is like a shout, amplified, echoing everywhere. Because a whisper is far more enticing more reaching more moving than a shout. A whisper always falls softly to the ears, unlike a shout that slams your ears deaf. Only reading in your heart, in solitude, in silence without noise.

Tonight the city's cosmos is like a Book unfurling. Expanding interpretation, shaking imagination loose to rise into the heights, and there is only one mind dancing with another (fallen angel, obedient angel, such a fine line, both only make human more human). How far will you go, O Maya, O human reader?

I walk in a sea of people. They know that eventide is near; packing sweat and dust, they hurry home. They might lose, they might win. WINNING IS A MIND GAME, so says the traffic overpass. Buses and cars suddenly proliferate. Looking like a thousand-legged caterpillar in multicolor, squirming in the traffic's slow dance. Forward, forward, in all this progress.

I feel myself shrinking into a dot among thousands of intersecting lines. Lines that move sharply hurriedly forward, lines that seek out flat plane, spatial form, shape and volume. And I a mere speck unwavering, yet aimless. I am going nowhere. Why are they going everywhere. Hey, why go home, look, the streetlights are turned on. Hey, read the ads, tonight they are neither street seducer nor commercial break, but signpost, taking you to a destination.

MAKING LIFE MORE ALIVE, says the cigarette on a bus. I look at the bus receding from view, parading the message around the city. Maybe the bus trip is in vain. Don't people see there is joy in all this pathetic reading? The void between words, the vast expanse between vowels and consonants. Silence that is full of sounds. Hidden literature, prose and poetry... Don't they see? GOOD TO READ AND NECESSARY, even a magazine knows that.

But people cannot care less; they still depart, zipping by like dyslexics like illiterates. Just like me all this time. Maybe they have known all along, the city streets do not lead anywhere. Maybe they have known all along, all these manmade writings of light are empty, all these flickering lights to-ing and fro-ing meaningless. Maybe they do not like to read, maybe they do, maybe they never really read. Maybe they are choked by too many words, having no more space for silence.

As for me, can it be glimpsed in the future that every sentence read tonight is merely a small piece in an enigmatic puzzle? Is this city only a small figure at the corner of that large puzzle? Can it ever be seen in its fullness, something completely unexpected, a certain meaning, which emboldens me, bold enough to end all restraint of desire, this endless running in circles, my life's own vicious cycle?

A young man hurtles forward after bumping into me from behind. What is he after, I wonder, yet I do not scream or curse at him. I only gaze at his back, at his black t-shirt that says JUST DO IT.

[...]

THE LAND'S SPELL

The island used to be a no man's land.

Then, it was once a woman's land.

Onewoman, who has much to give, to bring to life. A being overflowing with love (the love, its magic spell its doom). She knows that such a love will one day finish her off, yet the desire to share that love is so inevitable, and she has been too tired of being alone. Whereas the world, everything that is out there, appears so round (often like a circle of snake biting its own tail), giving her a feeling of dread. Onewoman craves a coupling. She needs the body of a man. And a crazy desire: to split herself into halves.

Onewoman copulates with a man. The man enters, the man possesses. Onewoman feels herself splitting, but beautiful. And all of a sudden she is half herself, feeling thus at her most beautiful. She gazes at her new odd-looking self (this body: his, mine). A wholeness, a body shed, two that is one, one that is half, union after a great divide, parts becoming whole. Oneness. Wholeness. Completeness. A state of perfection.

Halfwoman so loves her new body, more than her love for the old. Halfwoman loves halfman. She lays a crown on halfman's head, bestows upon him the ocean, whispers secret poems into his ears. Halfman declares, "Until death do us part". He is even ready to die for her, all for his severe love for halfwoman. And each day is a discovery: the slant of a new smile, a new curve, laughter of a different tone, a gesture of the arm never seen before, a streak of gray hair...

The island is at its most beautiful, halfman-halfwoman.

Yet halfman, who is left-brained, secretly conceals and imagines in his half-brain a metamorphosis: to expand himself. It seems odd to him, residing in a body only as a half-self. He has to be big as he can be. Indeed, halfman does not care for what is - and ought to still be - beautiful, all that is in place. He desires power over all things, and to stand tall upon such power. Defying the body's symmetry. And so he plans an end, a consummation.

They make love, halfman giving halfwoman the kiss of death, sucking on her half-lips deeply. So deeply that heat pounces in. Halfwoman's mouth stiffens, choked cold in the throat, then spreads down and takes root in her body, like powerlessness. She watches halfman incredulously as he begins to enlarge in her body, in their body (why, you betray me, don't you love me?) The color of halfman's face is an endless shift: brown white pink gold black red white -the color indescribable, just a glowering bright. A glowering that spreads lightning inside out. Devouring erratically the sole calf leg, sucking the veins neck bellybutton arm breast of halfwoman (my love, you love us too much, that is your sin). The body, halfwoman's shape ever vanishing, looks contorted (you have even foreseen your own doom). The body appears to be strengthening, its muscles iron and steel, swelling to the size of mountains. Halfman is ever more oneman. And thus he begins his stride across isles, showing off his might everywhere. This strange body walking straight, tiptoeing, attacking.

What remains of halfwoman is only her stomach. That womb, a cavity ceaselessly filled, in order that men multiply, a body fated to shed, repeating birth pangs (my dying beloved, I love you still, always). Halfman becomes oneman becomes manymen, too many men (My love is just as severe, have I not warned you? Woman, I punish the one I love the most, so that I know, I really want to know, the extent of your weakness and your strength.)

Oneman walks proudly as he tells his story as history, in a thousand languages echoing loudly, shouting out the land with many names. Miliku, Moloku Kie Raha, Al-Mulk, Maluqua, Moluccas, Molukken, Maluku. There he is, swaying lunging at islands amounting a thousand minus one, and many more beyond, wanting to render himself king of ten thousand islands. Oneman's footprints are everywhere, cast by feet so rock-solid on land.

The land, now bereft of its spell, which was once held in the grip of onewoman's hand. That grip on the land, a love overflowing, a curse as well as a blessing, its magic spell its own doom. She has known, yet she loves on, this man, the sacred twin, a sweet ally of doom.

The island becomes a man.

Mastered land, of His Majesty.

Translated from the Indonesian by Laksmi Pamuntjak and Nukila Amal

*

Laluba

Let's go out to sea, my child. It is time. I sense them coming closer. I can hear faint echoes of voices adrift in the dawn wind. Listen, this early morn the wind comes not softly in rustles, but hissing and slashing along the road. It is screeching through the aching joints of the windowpane, whistling through the cracks of the squeaking door, rushing chill, enclosing the house in cold. The candle stirs as if nudged: blazing awhile, blinking awhile. Harsh dark is forcing its way in through every hole.

I've been sitting here all night, warming myself by the flame of this candle in the kitchen. The edges of the flame were dancing yellow blue, they threw my shadow against the wooden walls – my shadow a swaying phantom dancing while I sat still. For hours I've been gazing at the wooden slats, my eyes tracing their surface cracking rivulets of pale veins. But I didn't speak to them. I didn't speak to you. I didn't speak to anyone. I have just been sitting here in the corner, waiting.

Let's step outside now, very slowly. There is no need to rush. I want the soles of my feet to embrace fully what they touch, feeling the wooden floor, the moist soil, wet grass, fallen *jambu* blossoms. The thin threads of *jambu* blossoms feel like silk to my feet; many of them have also been caught along the bamboo fence. I will pin a blossom to my hair. Your father planted this *jambu* tree, now it's blooming for the first time – how sweet and fresh the fruit will taste when it ripens. Look at the tree, its surface almost entirely covered by blazing pink, almost electric. When night falls, people can see it from the edge of the village.

Our village: houses and shacks lining up in death rows; shivering walls of concrete. Dark. In the houses, the faint glimmer of kerosene lamps illuminates the dreams of restless souls, no longer able to sleep tight. I'm sure you are also not sleeping. How quiet it is. Only the sound of the sighing wind, one or two insects, and breaking waves. In silent times like this, I had hoped to be able to capture the sound of your heartbeat or snoring. There are also voices, the men on night-watch chatting in low tones. We don't need to go past them. We will pass along the side to the back of the house. I am not in the mood for being questioned.

At the back of the house there is a *ketapang* tree. Below it there is an overturned boat – your father's boat. My back aches, lately I tire easily. Let's sit here on this boat, waiting for sunrise, morning, and other things to come.

From here we can see our home, village, peninsula, beach, and the sky all at once. Look at our home. A wooden house upon a platform on stilts, a sprig of *jambu* tree peeking pink beyond its roof. It's going to be a while before its gifts ripen; how I long to taste just one fruit. Our house, it's been more than three years I've lived in it. The villagers helped your father build it back then. Without pay – except for two or three professional builders. It was enough to pass around a couple of pots of coffee and some *kretek* cigarettes in cups in the afternoon. With the occasional treat of steamed cassava or fried banana. Many things have been built working together in this village: schools, homes, the church, the mosque, the meeting hall, and boats. I remember steaming yellow rice for giving thanks when the house was done. Later that night a new kerosene lamp was glowing in the newly built house. Your father and I were so enthralled watching our shadows swaying and jerking all along the

wooden walls. We weren't the only ones dancing. The table, chairs and cupboard joined us too.

This boat feels damp. So is the tree trunk I'm leaning on. Are you leaning comfortably on the wall of my womb? My child, my hope. How the state of things has changed my hopes to anxieties. What is leaping into your mind right now? Is it like mine? Or do you pass through all of this without memory, burden, hope, hindrance? I can no longer look at the ground beneath my feet, obstructed by you. But I don't mind taking you everywhere I go, even though you fill up my body – I am swollen like a cow.

I remember a cow on the deck of a motorboat, a long time ago. She lay there with bound hooves, eyes wide open towards the sky, thrashing. The boat felt like it would overturn, shuddering wildly with the struggling of the poor cow, not the waves. I held your father's arm tight; he smiled to calm me. Look, he said, fingers pointing to the side of the boat. I saw two dolphins, their grey bodies swimming guiding the boat. The kids in the boat shrieked with delight, pointing, Oi, laluba, laluba! The hunched backs of the dolphins sinking and surfacing, faces smiling like your father's.

Your father: teacher, earth-guardian, husband, male, human. And female, too. Yes, at times he could mother you more than I. If my belly was sore, he would sit by my side and calm you by whispering sweet things, singing, or telling stories for you. At times he would be silent, caressing the outline of your form on the skin of my belly with profound awe. We could feel your tiny hand on the surface of my skin, your fingers clenching, your foot kicking (maybe you are a boy, or a girl?). He would be silent during those moments, looking at you and me in turn with his full dark eyes. I imagine that waves of thoughts and feelings were crashing within him, and words couldn't do them justice. I remember those eyes of his filled with darkness, when he left one night. He didn't say much. No promises. No sentimental goodbyes like in those war movies. I only remember seeing his wet feet disappear into a motorboat that was bobbing up and down among waves crashing by the beach. Then the motor roaring. Your father stood erect looking straight towards the west, to the direction of the peninsula across the water, where the sun disappears. Not once did he turn his face, until the rumbling of the boat softened and could only be heard faintly as the boat turned around the peninsula.

Your father, taken by death in a battle he did not wish.

Look at the sea. Over there, where the rows of mangroves and rocks go out, that is the peninsula. Our place of celebration. Your father and I went there one morning, after finding out you had become a foetus in my womb. At that time the sky was clear after dawn rain, there was a rainbow arching low in the southwest. In front of me, your father paddled the boat slowly. Between us there was a thermos filled with coffee, walnut bread, pound sago, two mugs, and a straw-mat. Above us little birds flew past, chirping. Below colourful coral could be seen under a veil of clear blue green water. And fish. Bright coloured little fish swimming amongst the coral. On the beach, we ate and talked and ate and talked until your father fell asleep by a mangrove bush. I lay looking at the sky, feeling myself and everything under the sky so very sweet. I took that joy home, when the sun had moved right above our heads. We were gliding in the boat, heading for home, the water splashing by the oar as I told your father that I had found a name for you. Laluba.

If it's a boy? Asked your father.

Laluba, I answered.

If it's a girl?

Laluba. You will glide through the water swimming like a dolphin. Like the fishermen's children here. Their bodies breathing the fragrance of salty sea; burnt reddish hair with blond streaks, and bronzed dark skin like their fathers who worked bare-chested under the sun. In the morning they would run out and spread along the shore squealing excitedly, welcoming their fathers' boats that had come home from sea... The fathers, who later left them. Few returned.

They had run short of men to defend the district. How bizarre, I thought at the time, not enough men in a world that had too many, a world where everything was done their way.

The night of departure for the additional men. It was late, but our village did not sleep. People were packing. Mothers were standing with worried faces. Children were running here and there. At the beach, supplies stacked in little mounds like a harvest of cloves and copra. I stood by the beach, observing it all. Not far from me, a group of men were speaking of dismembered bodies, about bodies thrown out to sea, about little children being taken away.... Your father drew me aside by the hand, its hairs standing on end, as he took me away from the crowd. We sat on a fallen coconut tree, gazing at the star-studded sky. Your father spoke, many are injured . . .

Injured, wounded, dying. All of us here are dying, my child.

Ah, forgive these recollections, my child. Memories come flashing through me and I want to sink them all to the deepest ocean floor, until there is nothing left to swim up to the surface.

What time is it? Look at the sea. Its surface has turned silver grey. Only two or three stars lingering, a tinge of golden orange light promising the sun in the horizon. I always love the morning and afternoon sky. The sun, rising or setting, the sky looking the same, tinted with soft hues. Orange. Russet. Pink. Blue. Purple. Grey. We never know the beginning or the end of something. Time left unresolved . . . You will learn how enchanting mornings can be, my child.

I dreamt of you a few nights ago. You, a drowning baby fish, not swimming up to the surface. You were blazing white, while the sea slowly changed from blue to red to green, showing you crystal clear in its depth. Above you, there was a big fish eating a fish that was eating a small fish. The jaws of the fish opened wide with sharp teeth. I remember telling your father of my dream in the morning. Your father guessed that, perhaps because yesterday afternoon we had stayed too long at the market, a million forms and colours of fish must have filled my mind and were brought into my sleep. Sitting on the veranda while drinking coffee, your father told how in the beginning, all life on earth was in the ocean, about animals having denizens of the sea as their ancestors, about fish breastfeeding their young, blind fish, phantoms of the sea in the shape of octopi with giant eyes, sea cliffs, ocean chasms — abyss . . . that's how your father called it, he learnt it in a book. I imagined the abysses in the depths keeping for eternity the dreams of prehistoric fish that desired to crawl upon the land. Do you dream too? Do you dream about reefs and cliffs, about your mother, about human beings? Maybe your dreams are without images, like the dreams of blind fish in still water caves, in the deep abyss, or —

. . . they have come.

. . . when the light of day had come. Light enough to come attacking.

Ah, you keep kicking in there. As if striking, I can feel your clenched little fists on the wall of my belly. What are you anxious for? Sssshh, sssshh . . . don't worry. It's only the sound of a bomb. Or a grenade, maybe. Did you know, they can put together a soundless bomb with coconuts? Without an ear-piercing explosion, just a small thump in the coconut shell. Then the only sounds heard are the screams or groaning of exploded skulls . . . Let's get up. The mob, those men, they have reached the edge of the village. Their shouting is loud and coarse. Don't you listen to it, don't take it to heart. They've made a habit of shouting at each other in the deep jungle or amidst the roaring sea. Can you hear voices? . . . Such uproar, many voices, striking my ear drums, yet I can still hear the sound of waves in the ocean. There is also the cry of a bird not sure from which tree. Or maybe that was the cry of a human being, I'm no longer sure. There is a strange smell suspended in the air, not the fragrance of salty sea or grass, but like the stench of the district's slaughterhouse.

Which way are you facing? Your vision is clear, transcending my skin. In front of you, the sand and the sea are glimmering as if scattered by a thousand diamonds. Dewdrops dangle at the tips of blades of grass, refracting light. The sun has turned into a large crimson ball, silent, far from all this noise. How life holds you tightly in its gentle embrace when death looms so close by. I imagine, you looking at the world for the first time in that way. Would you be relieved leaving the darkness towards the colours of the world? Or would you be like me right now, seeing colours at their sharpest and finest distinction, seized suddenly by the enchanting beauty. Everything radiates with life. Observe it all with lucid eyes. Be enchanted, be delighted. My baby, are you happy being able to see all this?

Or are you looking behind through my back, to the lumbering crowd over there? They are running, scattering, bumping into each other like crabs in a wooden crate dumped in the market, like fish struggling to run away from the trap of the fisherman's net. Their eyes open wide bloodshot red like those of fish left unsold for days. Black smoke is billowing into the air (I hear they never spare anything, or anyone). Orange flames, appearing more arrogant than the sun . . . vengeance more arrogant than the heart . . .

Neither the good, nor the bad, but those pitted against one another.

Forgive them, my child. Those men have simply never felt what it's like to bear life in their bodies like a woman with child. They bear death in their arms and fingers. Artefacts of murder clink and clash thunderously, while they are the people being pitted and clashed against one another. Maybe they know or only half know or don't know or don't want to know.

But you ought to know, my child. Because simply believing is never enough. You could possibly be deluded. And end up being helpless. You, I, they, Galela, Halmahera, we are all helpless.

Among the sand by my feet there is an empty shell, as small as my thumb. I will pick it up and play with it in front of my belly so you can see it closer. This once housed a hermit crab. Such a beautiful home, with delicate whorls spiralling to its pointed apex. Its soft orange colour has faded in the wash of waves, bleached by the salty water to pale white, now opaque. The inhabitant must have deserted it a long time ago. Why did she leave? Maybe the house had become too stifling, no longer comfortable for her body, no longer safe as shelter, no longer meaningful to inhabit. Why stay? She decided to go, maybe returning to sea.

Crawling along the sand, looking for a different home in the depths. Yes, why stay, my child? They do not allow us to grow here, at this beautiful shore. This village, like any other place, was never built to last forever. Let us go.

To the sea. Only the sea will liberate. All branches of rivers, all their wanderings and meanderings end here. No longer having origins or history, neither trace nor colour. All the same. Blue sea. Immense. Flat. Calm. Here droplets of water mingle, float, break into waves and rise rushing to the sky. Blue sky.

. . . what was that. Something just whistled past entering the water, not far from my arm. One moment, let me look for it . . .

Ah, an arrow. It missed its target. Maybe it's this kind of thing that has just pierced my shoulder. It doesn't feel that painful, like the peck of a cockatoo. I'll pull it out . . . there's blood on the arrowhead. Sharp red. Mine. Luckily it didn't hit my waist; you could have gotten hurt in there.

Child, turn around and take a good look at him. The archer. He stands tall between blades of grass. He can't bring himself to lift his bow to aim once again. That thing just lies limp in his fingers. Perhaps because I turned to meet his eye, smiling into his face. He looks tired and handsome, in a tartan shirt that most teenagers wear these days. His years of youth are enough to make him feel it's his right and duty to finish us, that young angel Izrail.

I'll just throw this arrow away. Don't cry, sweet child. You're already big, almost eight months, you have to be brave. Let's continue this journey. The ocean's arms have spread kindly, welcoming us, embracing up to my knees. I promise, this won't hurt at all. You, I, the young archer, all of them, will die anyway. It's only a matter of how. One never knows how death will appear. I simply do not want their ghoulish hands to rip my stomach and tear you away from me. You, my beloved sanctity, a purity that must never be blemished. You must not die that way, too painful for you. I will save you.

Beloved, pretty baby fish in the ocean of my womb, Laluba. With you, I am complete. I am everything that I have ever wanted to be: child, pupil, worker, wife, mother, woman, witness, winner. Early doom, baby, is your mind teeming with questions? Why are your breasts drenched, mother, why is the *jambu* blossom in your hair being swept away by a wave, why are you letting go of the seashell, why are you destroying me?

Would you believe my answer, the reason of all reason on the face of the earth. Would you have faith in me?

Because I love you. Aeons my soul has lived, never have I wanted to kill this body, end this one chance to life. Allow me to save you, even though I must die for it.

Is that enough, my child? Will that do? Because I truly love you, more than life itself.

. . . I have born witness along the road, I bear witness now in the depths.

To You, to Whom all prayers and questions are addressed, from wretched souls on unkind nights. Thousands of broken murmurs whispered to the air rise up towards the sky. Would one more prayer mean anything? I'm tired of praying; those prayers were never even for me, but for all wretched ones. I prayed also for the hearts of those who love You, but could not love one another with that same heart. And this time, God, I pray for the children who were never born.

So soundless. Warm. Sunshine enters these depths, illuminating the water a clear blue. A shadowed blue, greying. Changing greenish grey. Greening further. Little fish come swirling, surrounding, unsurprised. Behind them float shadows, gliding. Men. Pale white, blue, purple. They look at us unblinking, unspeaking, only their hair, fingers and clothes waving. Poor coral reefs . . . Ah, I can see your father, my child. He is coming towards us, gliding between the men. Look at his hair, swaying like a horse's mane, his tattered clothes swaying like anemones. He is looking at you with a luminous face and a smile as wide as clouds, to you, still curled up, so timidly. Take his hand, child, his soft white palm holding a pink *jambu* fruit for us, a ripe one, juicy with the ocean water. Suck it deeply; it tastes so sweet and fresh . . . Swallow, swallow it deeply, deeper. . .

Translated from the Indonesian by Kadek Krishna Adidharma

Translator's notes:

'*Laluba*' means 'dolphin' in the local language of Galela, on the shores of Halmahera, one of the islands in the Northern Moluccas, where this story is set. During 1999 – 2000, irrational violence that took place in Ambon rapidly escalated into an ethnic/religious conflict all over the Moluccan archipelago; many villages and islands were massacred by their own kin and their once-peaceful neighbours.

Jambu (*Eugenia aquea*) or 'rose-apple' is a juicy fruit that grows in tropical climates. Depending on the variety, the colour of the fruit when ripe can be pink, green or blood-red. The taste is tangy to sweet, mostly watery-sweet when fully ripe. To imagine the taste try a cross between a tangy apple and a juicy sweet pear.

Ketapang (*Terminalia catappa*) is a kind of almond tree, also known as 'beach-almond', whose bark is used for tanning leather and whose kernel produces oil.

Izrail is the angel of death who reclaims departed souls in Islamic teachings.
