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Excerpt from the novel *Orang-Orang Oetimu*

All in all, about fifty people were separated from the larger crowd, including Julio and his family. After the larger group was ordered to remain seated, the smaller group was marched outside and then led towards the harbor. Julio walked the route with his daughter and wife at his side. The morning sun warmed their throats. Swallows flitted back and forth around the harbor. The touch of his wife's hand felt gentle on his wrist.

At the gateway to the harbor, two soldiers ordered the younger women in the crowd to remain behind, Laura included, who then stood at the gateway watching the backs of her parents as they were led to the end of the wharf. There, she saw the group divided into smaller numbers, each forming a perpendicular line as wide as the pier. When one line was formed, that line was gunned down. When another line was formed, it too was gunned down. On and on this went, with the bloodied corpses then shoved into waters below.

Three women screamed and tried to run but they were shot in the back and fell dead on the pier. From the gateway, Laura could see her parents holding hands, and even though the distance was too great for her to see their faces, she knew that they were looking into her eyes. Her heart stopped when she saw the bodies of her father and mother collapse on the pier. Her neck stiffened and her eyes blurred, but she was too afraid to cry.

After the mass execution at the harbor, a van took Laura and the other young women who had been separated from the executed to Hotel Tropical in Lecidéré, on the far eastern side of the city. There, her true suffering began. She was raped, interrogated, and tortured. Her interrogators asked her repeatedly about her connection with Unetim, why she was a Communist, and other such questions to which she could only say that she didn't know what they were talking about, but they whipped her with belts, called her a Communist whore, and stubbed burning cigarettes into her flesh. Soon she stopped even trying to answer and said nothing at all because her words were useless and had no effect at all.

At Hotel Tropical, Laura witnessed the misery of numerous detainees: the men who were tortured and forced to squeeze her breasts with their hands and the women who were treated no better than she. She and the other prisoners could only stare at one another. They were too tired to even cry.

Several months later, Laura and other women were moved to the former Sang Tai Hoo store in Dili's shopping district which had been turned into a prison. It was a new location but also the same treatment that was doled out to her: repeated interrogations and frequent beatings. Sometimes a soldier would come into her room and rape her; sometimes she was taken by jeep to an officer's private quarters where the same was done to her.

Laura became thin and unkempt. The food was so bad she could barely make herself swallow the stuff. Her face was covered with cuts and abrasions and her skin was scarred and swollen in places where she was burned with cigarettes. Forced to sleep on a dirty floor in an airless room, her condition worsened. The toilet was plugged and the place swarming with flies. Sunlight rarely entered the tiny room. Scabies began to cover her skeletal frame but even as she grew more gaunt, she stopped menstruating and her abdomen began to increase in size. When she walked it didn't seem as if her bony legs would be able to support her bloated stomach. As her wounds began to fester, her condition worsened.

One night a Timorese volunteer soldier came to the room for her. She assumed that he was going to rape her but, instead, he led her outside and ordered her to get into a jeep. The Indonesian soldiers outside stared at her, uncaring, as if knowing where she was to be taken. She expected that she would be

taken to an officer's quarters but instead the jeep traveled westward, past two guard posts and far beyond the city borders.

At a stretch in the road where it divided the savanna, the Timorese irregular pulled the jeep to the side of the road. "I was ordered to kill you," he said to her in Portuguese, "but I've seen too much death already. Get out and kill yourself before I change my mind."

Not replying, Laura got out of the jeep and entered the savanna. Expecting the man to shoot her in the back, she tried to hasten her steps but her weakness and heavy belly made her falter. Twice she fell before reaching the thick woods on the other side of the grassy plain. There, at the forest's edge, she turned to look back. The jeep had yet to move from its parked position. Without another thought she pushed her way through the skirt of creepers and vines and entered the darkened woods. Lantana thorns and sharp branches dug into her wounds but she kept walking. Her hair became tangled in underbrush and she cut her feet on broken snail shells but she still kept on walking.

Weary beyond belief but afraid to sleep, Laura kept on walking until she came to a river valley that stretched to the west. The ground was wet and slick and she often slipped but she managed to make her way to the river where she drank from it and then began to follow its course, distancing herself further from men and the city.

That night she walked far, even with no moon to illuminate the way. The forest's darkness was a wall but the reflection of the stars in the river's narrow stream became a pathway for her steps. The chirping of insects kept tune with the rippling water and her labored breaths. After walking for hours, she sat beneath a lontar palm and fell asleep.

In the morning, as the new day grew light and forest animals began to stir, she awoke and began to walk again. Throughout the day she walked like a somnambulist, going farther westward as she followed the river's course. When hungry, she picked leaves and ate them. When thirsty, she bent and drank from the stream. For days and days on end she did this, walking until weariness overcame her and then finding a place to sleep. She ate anything that could be eaten and drank the river water but rarely did she feel true hunger. The farther she went, the thinner her body became, even as her belly bloated. Flies followed her wherever she went, attacking her festering wounds. From sleeping where she could, on bare ground, dried leaves and caked mud now stuck to her skin and clothing. Her nightgown, one with a puppet motif which she had been wearing when taken from the city weeks before, was now torn and tattered and deep grey in color. Her hair was matted and smelly. Once a pretty sight, she was now a fright.

Laura continued to follow the river which ever more westward it took her, into inhabited areas. When passing through the outskirts of a village, the people there would fall back and pretend not to see her because crazed people had become a common sight and witches and evil spirits were in abundance too.

By the time she had passed tens of villages her strength was spent and finally, one day, when the sun was at its peak, instead of finding a place to sleep, she went into the village she had been passing.

It was *musim tofa*, the time after the planting season when the sun is most hot; when cattle and other animals cluster in the river; and when farmers take a break from cleaning their fields to have their midday repast in field huts.

When seeing this alien creature come into the village, people who were in their homes immediately shut their front doors but then went out the back door to watch in curiosity and little children scurried to the fields to find their parents. One person took the initiative to sound the bamboo *kentong* that hung in the village *lopo*—which was the first time the alarm bell had been sounded since being placed in the communal meeting place at the behest of officials from the department of information because most of the people didn't understand the use of such a thing.

"Aina! Ama! There's a witch! There's a witch!" the children screamed at their mothers and fathers.

The men and women in the fields and the savanna, who were now resting after their meal or feeding their animals, scurried to return to the village. The excitement spread quickly and in no time at all the young woman, that alien creature, was being followed by machetes, swords, shields, and mantras. The

woman kept walking, deeper into the village, wobbling as she did, with her blankly-staring eyes almost concealed by her matted and repulsive head of hair. Her body smelled like a corpse and flies circled around her.

Young men with weapons followed her from a safe distance, protecting themselves with prayers to the ancestors they had never properly memorized. Behind this flank of young valiants, women and children tread cautiously, bearing both fear and curiosity.

Because the woman never turned as she advanced into the village, in time more and more people filled the path at her rear, clustered behind the armed young men who kept up a steady guard, sometimes barking an order at the crowd behind them for them to keep a distance while hoping that the woman did not turn to cast a spell on them and the other people behind her.

In front of a store, the only building in the town with cement-block walls, on whose façade was stenciled the words "Subur General Store: Built with Patience," the pitiful looking creature collapsed to the ground. There she sat with her almost fleshless bottom on the rough and broken asphalt and began to cry. She cried loudly, wailing and pointing at the sky with her two arms raised high and then beating her swollen belly with her fists.

Since the day her mother and father were killed, this was the first time Laura audibly cried. From that day onwards, she had rarely said a single word, and now her voice trembled uncontrollably.

The armed lads lowered their weapons but the other townspeople remained at a safe distance, close enough to watch but far enough to flee if something happened. The young woman's shrieks and cries stirred their sympathy but because she kept pointing at the sky, they wondered whether she might be reciting a mantra to call down lightning to strike them dead.

The village *temukung* was Am Naijuf, an elderly man who had survived the Japanese occupation decades previously but whose actual age was undecipherable. He was a short man without a single black hair on his bald head. The soles of his feet were broad and callous-hardened from many years of walking. After ordering two youngsters to fetch Ain Sufu, the healer who lived at the village's edge, he then stood calmly in place, chewing on his quid of *bétél*, like a cattle dealer waiting for his stock to be weighed.

Not too long later, the two boys returned on their pony. "Ain Sufa isn't at home," they said out of breath. "She's gone to Fetful Hill to help Ain Nel who's having a baby in a field up there."

The chief spat a tide of red saliva on the ground. The young woman's wailing continued to fill the air. "Then go get Am Siki," the chief then told the boys.

The boys got back on their horse and galloped away again.

Am Naijuf took out tobacco and a lontar leaf and slowly rolled a smoke. He'd taken only four drags on his cigarette when the boys returned. Behind them, astride his own horse, was an elderly man who was wearing a baggy white t-shirt, the kind that Father Verrharen gave away whenever he visited the village, but one so threadbare that it looked like he had been wearing it for years. His woven sarong was faded, too, as was the small *aluk* bag that hung from his neck. His skin was wrinkled but his mane of straight hair was long and tied neatly at the back.

Getting down from his horse, the man approached the chief. Other elders in the crowd approached as well and began to exchange quids of *bétél*. Meanwhile, the heart-wrenching cries coming from the woman on the ground continued to fill the air.

"She's been like this since coming here," the chief said while putting a bit of lime into his mouth. "Anytime anyone comes close to her, be it man or woman, she starts to scream and cry."

The other elders nodded, waiting for Am Siki to speak but the latter was masticating a mixture of medicinal herbs. When finished, he spit on his hands and smeared them together, after which he stuck his fingers into his *aluk*, touching something inside while mumbling a prayer. After first raising his eyes skyward, he then made his way through the flank of armed men to approach the woman.

All those who had gathered there went back on guard, the elders with prayers, the young man with weapons, and the woman and children ready to run.

Am Siki advanced slowly, one step after another, towards the wailing woman. Suddenly, she raised her face towards him, and when their eyes met, Am Siki knew instantly that the woman had lost her soul. He slowly extended his hands towards her, palms outward, as if to touch a wild horse. Suddenly the woman stopped crying and stared sharply at him. For several seconds, the crowd tensed, the hairs on the backs of their neck standing straight, unable to guess what would happen next. Would the creature attack Am Siki? Would she cast a plague on them from her two eyes?

*Translated from Bahasa Indonesia by John H. McGlynn*