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Fragment from *Saman*

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What is the difference between dreams and reality?

It was 1979. My father sent me off to a strange new city. It was a vast place, like a jungle, so when I set off for school my mother always gave me two bread rolls. One to eat. The other to tear into little pieces so I could leave a trail of bread to follow on my way home. I learnt a lot from Hansel and Gretel. They had evil father too.

The school I had been exiled to was housed in a very peculiar building surrounded by a river so deep that ancient fish inhabited its depth. Nobody knew how many of them there were; they had been there for hundreds of year and nobody ever seen a dead fish floating on the water. The fins of these fish gave off phosphorescent glow as they swam in the dark crevasses and gullies of the river. But when they reached the surface of the water, their fins would get caught on the algae, sluggish and black with age, rather like a forelock of hair. They rarely surfaced and when they did it was only for a second or two, leaving a fleeting impression of ripples and shadow. Green water. Green moss.

The gates of the school could be raised and lowered with an iron chain that was greasy with oil. When it was lowered the steelspiked wooden palings formed a bridge. When all the pupils were lined up ready to go in the principal would rotate the lever until the gate shut with a loud boom that made your hair stand on end. Any student trying to escape would fall into the river, and those ancient creatures would devour him with more relish than an eel eating a fat, fresh, warm turd.

I used to weep because I wanted to go back to my quiet little town. But there was no way I could escape. It was impossible.

And so I danced.

My body danced. It twirled and writhed like a flower bud cut by children from its stem and then set on a course in a stream. I saw them following me everywhere I went: children following their dancing flower bud from the dikes. When I had finished they would clap their hands.

“Hey new kids, where are you from?”

“I’m descended from the nymph.”

They laughed so hard it knocked me off my feet.

I am descended from the nymphs. I lived in a women’s compound where all the children danced. All around the compound were hills inhabited by giants: the ogre with a protruding jaw, the ogre with flaming hair, the green ogre, the eggplant-nose ogre, the carrot-nose ogre, the radish-nose ogre. Ferocious ogres. They were both the enemies and the butt of jokes by the knights, who dismissed them scornfully as weird, insignificant fugitives. But I fell in love with one of them.

Because the ogres would be killed as vermin if they set foot inside the compound, which was behind the knight’s quarters, I used to meet him secretly under the kepuh tree. We wound about each other like a royal serpent nagagini making love to a common snake. But the gardener caught us and told my father. He have orders for the knight to capture my lover and I was exiled to this town. Here he would tie me to my bed at night and drill me in the

first rules of love. These were his lessons: First. It is the prerogative solely of the male to approach the woman. A woman who chases a man is a whore. Second. A woman shall give her body only to the right man, who shall support her for the rest of her life. That's what is known as marriage. Later, when I had grown up a little, I decided that marriage was nothing more than a hypocritical prostitution.

In this alien city, every day at sunset my father would give the orders for me to be tied to my bed. Because I was descended from the nymphs. But what he didn't know was that each night I would learn to enjoy the pain. In the morning I would take pleasure in stretching my limbs when the chains were taken off. During the day I did my lessons at school. Mathematics, science, social science, the state ideology Pancasila, and handicrafts.

The other students sneered at me and one by one began avoiding me. Only one girl would listen to what I had to say. I never knew if she believed what I said or just liked my stories. But she stood by me. Her name was Laila. She's been my friend ever since.

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When I was nine I was not a virgin. People didn't consider a girl who didn't yet have breasts to be a virgin. But there was something I was keeping secret from my parents:

When they got wind of the fact that I was secretly meeting an ogre, my mother revealed a big secret: that I was actually made of porcelain. Statues, plates and cups made from porcelain come in hues of blues, light green, even brown. But they mustn't be allowed to crack, because if they do they will be thrown on the rubbish dump or used as tombstone ornaments. My mother said I would never crack as long as I kept my virginity. I was taken aback: how could I preserve something I didn't yet have? She told me that there were three openings between my legs. Don't ever touch the middle one, she said, because that's where it's kept. Later I was disappointed to discover that I wasn't special. All girls are the same. They might only be teapots, bowls, plates or soup spoons, but they were all made of porcelain. And as for boys? They were ivory: and all ivory cracks. When I grew up I found out that they're also made of flesh.

When my parents discovered that I was going out with an ogre from the forest, they gave me their second piece of advice. Virginity is a woman's gift to her husband. And virginity is like a nose: once you lose it, it can't be replaced. So you must never give it away before you get married, because then you will be damaged goods. But the day before I was sent to this foreign place I made a decision. I would give my virginity to my lover the ogre.

On that last night, under a purplish moon, I crept out to the pavilion and tore it out with a teaspoon. It looked like a red spider's web. I put it in a wooden Jepara box and gave it to the dog. He was in fact a courier between me and the ogre.

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I have become increasingly skeptical of the notion that most ogres originated from India; rather they boarded ships from Europe seeking spices in the East Indies. They had matted hair and sun-ripened skin because from the West the sun baked their bodies on the decks. And the salty air. These infidel ogres were accompanied by their priests, who were also infidels and ogres, and in the islands of Java and Bali they met brown maidens dancing naked in the river. Girls and older women bathing and washing. In fact slim brown men also bathed naked in the rivers, but the eyes only beheld what was chosen not by the eyes.

I could not possibly know what was in the minds of the ogres if I had not acquainted myself with one of them, who ventured deeper into the interior and spied on me dancing without a thread on my breast in a ditch by the hills. But I knew what was lurking, and because of that I sat down on a rock. Then he emerged from the clump of leaves and confronted me in amazement because I did not gather a cloth to cover my breasts.

“Who are you?” he said.

“People here bathed twice a day,” I replied.

Then he sucked the tip of my breast, unendingly, and told me his story. It was the first time he had sailed so far east. So far that he did not believe he could return to the West, even as the seas made you believe that the earth is round. In this country people thought that those in the East lived according to strange customs. Their men attached decorations to their penises, on the surface or within the skin. Their women, without shame, aroused the desire of their men and also of strangers, since they indulged in sex without any sense of taboo.

Then he handed me a journal: IN THE LAND WHERE OUR LORD IS NOT YET KNOWN THE RACES WORSHIP THE LEWD. THEY CREATED MANY CONCOCTIONS FROM ROOTS IN A CAULDRON PURELY FOR CONTEMPTIBLE PLEASURE, ERECTING STATUES OF BODILY UNION. AVERT YOUR GAZE IF YOU BEHOLD THEIR WOMEN BECAUSE THEY POSSESS POWERS OF MAGIC. THEIR MEN ARE FORCED TO MUTILATE THEIR GENITALS WITH TERRIFYING OBJECTS—BEADS FROM BONES AS WELL AS THE FURS OF ANIMALS—TO FULFIL THE THIRST OF THEIR WITCHES FOR INCUBUS. BECAUSE THERE IS NOT A SINGLE BEING IN THIS WORLD WHO POSSESS A PENIS AS LARGE AS THE DEVIL’S. THE GIRL BARE THEIR BREASTS WITHOUT SHAME, SUSPENDED LIKE TWO PAPAYAS, A FRUIT THAT I WILL BRING BACK TO EUROPE FOR ALL OF YOU. THE SKIN OF THAT FRUIT IS SOUR. BUT IS FLESH IS SWEET. SEEDS LIKE NIPPLES. (V D C, SERVANT OF OUR LORD WHO JOURNEYS, 1632)

I doubled up with laughter.

“Why?” he asked. “Didn’t you possess me with your nakedness? And your breast are like chocolate milk.”

Then he removed his trousers. Then I knew that the sun had baked his waist, chest and arms. And I told my story:

In my country people speak of your land and our land, your people and our people. We are the noble people of the East. You, the depraved of the West. Your women wear bikinis in the streets and have no regard for virginity. Your school children, boys and girls, live together out of wedlock. In this country sex belongs to adults through marriage even if they were married at the age of eleven and regarded as already mature. In your country people have sex on television. We do not have sex on television. We have the decent foundation of the great East. Your customs of the West are not noble.

Then I handed him a copy of the newspaper that I had used to wrap my panties, It reported on the opinions of bureaucrats about the danger of Western culture through films and consumer products. And also tourists on Kuta beach. Kompas, 1995.

He looked bewildered. “Where are we?”

I said, “Aren’t we in the 20th century?”

He was still puzzled. “This is a very strange place. How could I possibly be in two eras at the same time?”

I said, “Time is a curious thing. How can it separate us from the us in the past?”

And East-West is surely a strange concept, since we were discussing decency while stark naked.

Translated from the Indonesian by Pam Allen

