Felix K. Nesi

Excerpts from the novel [The People of Oetimu] (2018)

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So on a Sunday morning, the three of them on a motorbike, Maria, Wildan and Riko attended the mass in St. Ferdinandus Church, the assignment post of Father Yosef. Maria brought six bottles of beer, roasted chicken, sugar, coffee, and other kitchen supplies. Father Yosef received them well, but the head priest welcomed them with incredible cordiality.

“These are the blessed children of God,” said the head priest, “please... please join us for meals.”

The head priest was quite old. Veins appeared on his face, crisscrossing with wrinkles and blackheads, signs of aging. They ate together and talked about a lot of things—about politics and the future of the country, about the weather or the faithful that day—and that was the beginning of their closeness. Although administratively the family was not part of the parish, they always attended their Sunday mass there. Sometimes, when Wildan got a night shift (he worked in a public hospital), they went there to attend early morning mass, before sunrise. They often brought a variety of gifts, they could be kitchen supplies or toiletries. The head priest loved Riko very much. Often he lifted Riko high on the air, guessing the child’s weight and asking what did he eat.

The child just barely spoke mama and papa, so his answers always brought waves of laughter.

“Why are you so heavy, Riko? What did you eat?”
“Mammaaa!”
“What’s your favorite food?”
“Pappaaa!”

Children’s innocence often became adhesive for the relationship between adults. Grown-ups laughed and felt content with themselves. As time went by, the relation between Maria’s family with the Catholic rectory’s community became closer and closer. They’re not just bringing gifts for the two priests, but also for the people who work there. There’s a cook who also did the laundry, there’s a driver, and a gardener too.

On Riko’s third birthday, Maria cooked a lot of food and brought them to the rectory. They celebrated Riko’s birthday with Father Yosef, the head priest, and the workers. Father Yosef delivered a very long prayer, which made the child sleep without having the time to blow his candles first. Substituting for the child, Maria blew out the candles accompanied by the Happy Birthday song; afterward, the head priest said a short grace before meals, and gave thanks to God.

“God Almighty. Everything He arranges. May this child blessed with long life and soon be rewarded with a sibling.”

Maria shook her head.

“Not that one, Father, not now,” she whispered.

Everyone laughed spontaneously and that prayer was never answered. Two weeks after the little party, on the straight road in Naibonat, Riko and his dad were hit by the convoy of army trucks. The bodies of the father and son were dragged across the asphalt before being crushed into a shapeless mass.
It was a convoy of Unimogs that hit the road, at a speed of more than 90 mph. Developed countries really knew how to create killing machines, and people in the developing countries knew how to use those damn machines well. It’s a Sunday in the dry month of July. They were on the way to the grandmother’s house, delivering chicken feed. Wildan was used to go alone, but the second time he brought Riko along. He felt the boy was big enough to ride with him, father and son, only two of them, seeing the town and talking about things as men. The fragrant smell of rocks and the coastal wind, the chirping of birds, the dusty road. The sun was not even set yet. Its light was radiantly red a few inches above the Sawu Sea. That’s when his motorbike got struck from behind. They were dragged across as long as nine meters and ran over by three other Unimog trucks. The chicken feed was splattered all over the place. Blood and brain clotted together on the road. Riko’s eyeball was stuck on the Unimog’s wheel. People gathered but didn’t have guts to come closer. They’ve learned the hard way that often the eyewitnesses were the ones thrown in jail.

The convoy stopped. Some of the soldiers cursed the civilians that rode recklessly. East Timor was heating up. Soldiers were in a hurry because of war. Civilians should move aside whenever they saw the Unimogs.

After stopping for a while, the convoy moved on. They had an officer with the specific task of giving condolence speeches at civilians’ funerals.

Translated from Bahasa Indonesia by L.P. Hok

There was another Timorese man who wanted to become a servant. Not a servant of God, nor a servant at a foodstall, but a servant to the nation and its people. He wanted to become a soldier who would die for his country.

His name was Linus, Linus Atoin Aloket. Linus Atoin Aloket grew up in a village near Tanjung Bastian, on the northern coast of the island of Timor. When he was eight years old, a group of soldiers hunting down East Timorese guerilla fighters stopped in his village. They gave him a piece of chocolate and asked him to climb a coconut tree, because it was a very hot day and they were thirsty. He had only climbed four meters up, when a gecko on the trunk of the tree attacked him. Because he was surprised, Linus let go of the tree. He fell and hit his ear on an exposed root of that coconut tree.

The young boy fainted for a moment, but a few small slaps from some of the soldiers helped him regain consciousness. With various words of encouragement, they made Linus chase the gecko, then twist the poor animal’s neck until it died in his hands. Since then, his dreams of becoming the minister of information changed to becoming a soldier. He wanted to fight the country’s enemies. Enemies of the country were like the gecko on the coconut tree. If they weren’t killed, they would kill the people.

After graduating from high school, Linus took the test to enter the army and failed. For three years in
a row he took the test, and three times he failed. His father sold many cows and plots of land to bribe several people, but he still didn’t pass. He was indeed tall and slim, with a broad chest and shoulders because he was used to carrying wood and pulling cows, but the incident with the gecko on the coconut tree had left him deaf in one ear. Deaf people may not enter the army. Before his father went completely bankrupt, he asked Linus to bury his ambition of becoming a soldier and find another more reasonable goal.

Linus was so disappointed, he got drunk for two weeks, then he went to Kupang to go to university. In Kupang he registered at the University of West Timor without any long range plans. Initially, his goal was simple: to become a graduate in economics. Upon entering the university, Linus found out about a military program for students. It was called Menwa, Student Regiment. They wore soldier’s uniforms, had ranks, studied military science, and were respected by the campus guards. Moreover, they were reserve soldiers, who at certain times would be called to the battlefield if the country needed them. Thus with hopes that grew out of what was left of his desire to be a soldier, Linus signed up to be a member of Menwa. He took the entrance test, but was rejected. Not just because he was deaf in one ear, but also because of his low intelligence.

Of course his stupidity had not been a problem in the previous army entrance tests. At that time, the military needed people who were brave more than those who were smart; people who didn’t think too much when standing in the front line shooting at the enemy. It was okay if they were rather dumb, the important thing was to want to shoot enemies of the state. However, the Student Regiment regarded lack of intelligence as a problem, because the Menwa served on campus and often had to face student demonstrations. Confronting students who liked to read books, members of Menwa had to be a bit smart. Linus cried when he was told that once again he was not accepted, even though, he really wanted to serve his country. The commander of the regiment patted him on the back and said, to serve the country, you don’t have to become a member of the student regiment.

For other people those would have just been encouraging words for someone who had been rejected. But for Linus, they were a noble message that he always remembered. When he woke up in the morning or before he went to bed at night he thought about a way he could serve his country; how he could wipe out the enemies of the state.

Linus then rented a room in a boarding house in which students from East Timor lived. Because he was kind and sincere, the students there quickly became close with him, and called him their Brother from Timor Loro Manu. They shared towels and ate from the same pot. They shared novels and drank gin from the same bottle. Solidarity quickly united them. As time passed, it wasn’t a problem if Linus joined their internal meetings related to their struggle for independence. They often invited him to discussions and brought him to meet Resistance leaders who came to Kupang.

Without their knowing it, Linus took notes on who was influential in their movement and recorded whatever they talked about. Then he gave those notes to soldiers in the District Military Command. Based on those notes, one by one rebellious students and enemies of the state disappeared. Those who didn’t disappear were impressed by the work of the Indonesian intelligence and quickly left Kupang, without ever suspecting their Brother from Timor Loro Monu. Just six months after Linus became a university student, no students could be found in Kupang who talked about human rights abuses in East Timor, what’s more about independence.

What Linus was doing was much more successful than that done by official informants who worked for the state. The intel had been tracking student rebels for a long time, but they had never
succeeded in catching even one. The scoops they got were only about puppets who didn’t know anything. The university students seemed to be able to tell who were intel, even when they didn’t wear dog tags, let their hair grow long and had student identification cards.

“The more you all try not to be known, the easier it is for us to know you,” said one student who was arrested during a demonstration. “Your bodies smell of blood. We can smell you from a kilometer away.”

Not one student suspected that Linus was a military informant. Military informants were usually rather intelligent people, while they knew Linus as a kind of a dumb guy. Indeed, there weren’t any soldiers who weren’t dumb, because they didn’t want to read and liked to burn books, but Linus was too dumb to be a military informant, that’s what the students thought. Linus’s face never crossed their minds when they tried to figure out who it was who had destroyed the student movement.

That situation really benefitted the army. The soldiers liked Linus more and more and he was protected as a valuable asset. He was often given cigarettes, invited on outings; both outings to KarangDempel and to fancy hotels which provided high class prostitutes with special rates for the knights of the nation.

“In this ever changing world, money can buy happiness, if you know how to use it,” one soldier told Linus.

Linus wrote that sentence on the wall of his room, as a reminder to himself. He always repeated that amazing quote, and as much as possible he tried to use his money to buy happiness in this ever changing world. However, even if it was only a little, those soldiers were paid by the state. Meanwhile, Linus wasn’t paid by anyone. He still depended upon the money his parents in the village sent him every month.

Since he needed more money to buy his happiness, he always asked his parents for more money. In the letters to his father he often raised the amount he must pay for his courses and made up various needs. Since the newspapers and radio continually reported about the rising prices of products, his father understood if his son needed more money. Besides, his son was very responsible and always explained in detail where the money went. The money was spent on useful things, things that could usually only be described with foreign terms. Although the father’s tongue was stiff from chewing betel nut, and it was difficult to pronounce those terms, he always tried to mention them at the market or places where people gathered. In that way, people would look at him with admiration, and he would feel like selling his cows and land to educate his son had not been in vain.

“I don’t know what to do.” That’s what he said when his brother-in-law came to the house. His brother-in-law had walked thirty kilometers, to let him know that the grandfather of his son-in-law’s parents who lived in Ponu had died.

“Why don’t you know what to do?” asked his brother-in-law.

“The cost of the study tour for our future graduate has gone up again this month.”

His brother-in-law didn’t ask for a contribution then, and he also didn’t ask what a study tour was, because he was afraid of seeming uneducated, although indeed he had never been to school.

Another time Linus’ father had asked a crowd of people at the market whether anyone wanted to buy land near the beach?

“Why are you selling it, Sir?” someone asked. “Isn’t that ancestral land, inherited from your
forefathers?”

With a gloomy face mixed with a sense of pride Linus’ father replied: “A letter just came yesterday from our future graduate. The cost of non-laboratory practices doubled this month.”

No one asked the meaning of that strange term, because they didn’t want to seem stupid. However, each of them began to complain about the costs of their own children’s education, complete with various foreign terms and their respective costs. The more varied and difficult the terms, the more expensive they seemed to be. One person then grumbled, why to be regarded as educated, did they have to pay so much for foreign terms.

“Moreover, what’s the use of those foreign terms anyway? Can you eat them? Can they make the rain fall more regularly?”

Many people nodded and voiced agreement.

“Ah, just like the uneducated villagers you all are,” Linus’ father jumped in. “Those foreign terms will make our children graduate from university. Once they have graduated, they will gain an academic title, then they can easily get jobs and receive monthly salaries.”

Many people nodded, agreeing with Linus’ father’s explanation and no longer agreeing with the person who spoke earlier.

But that person debated, saying: “We spend money to obtain an academic title, then we use that academic title in order to look for money again. How stupid we are.”

Many people laughed and again agreed with him.

“Now, didn’t you just say how stupid we are?” Linus’ father said. “Because we are so stupid, we are obliged to educate our children, so that they don’t become stupid like us.”

Many people nodded and once again believed in Linus’ father.

One morning before breakfast with his face still creased from sleeping, Linus’ father went to see the extension consultant for livestock and asked whether he knew a business person in the city who wanted to buy eight of his cows.

“Hi, Mr. Uno Nakmolo. Why do you suddenly want to sell that many cows?” the livestock extension consultant asked.

“The costs for our future graduate have gone up again,” the old man said. “A letter arrived last night. It was sent via a SinarGemilang bus. The room rent has gone up. Smoking costs have gone up. Drunken student costs also have gone up. Lately all costs have gone up, right? That’s the way it is.” He raised his shoulders to signal you must know what I mean.

But the extension consultant said, he knew what room rental costs were, but he didn’t know what smoking and drunken student costs were.

Linus’ father looked into the face of the extension worker in shock, then concluded that not all people who look educated truly are educated.

“It’s like this, Sir,” he said, “smoking is one of the monthly activities on campus. Drunken student is too. There are other costs as well, such as study tour, non-laboratory practices, hangover, and so forth. You were a university student at one time, right? Certainly you understand. Oh, I see the
problem, I understand. Maybe these are new terms in education. You graduated long ago, so you
don’t know them.”

With pity for the father, the livestock extension consultant explained the meaning of all that per
monthly nonsense with regard to their future graduate who was just studying economic
management. In disbelief, the old man took a motorcycle taxi to the terminal, boarded a
SinarGemilang bus, and after an eight-hour journey arrived at the West Timor University. He sought
out information from an employee there, and after confirming that his son who he had trusted was a
clever thief, his father was no longer willing to pay for any foreign terms other than tuition fees and
room rent. For food each month the future graduate was sent rice, dried fish, dried meat, and a little
pig fat in a bamboo container.

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“On campus there are lots of free vaginas. Just date them, then use them for pleasure. If you get
bored, look for a new girlfriend.”

A soldier said that when Linus told him with a worried face how his father had uncovered his
corruption. The soldier was just joking around, but for Linus whatever words came out of a soldier’s
mouth were true and had to be followed. So he looked for a student who he could date. However,
unfortunately, Linus was not lucky in love. He was handsome with wavy hair always neatly cut, he
had a tall, athletic physique and always smelled good, but there were no students who wanted to be
his girlfriends. He was never able to connect with them in conversation if they walked together.

In Timor, there’s an unwritten rule from long ago that if a man and woman walk together, the
woman must always walk on the left side, so she is protected if there is a lustful horse—or more
recently a truck full of soldiers—that would graze her.

But Linus’ left ear was damaged from the time he was young, so if they walked together, he couldn’t
hear what the woman was saying, so their conversations never connected. Besides that, Linus’
knowledge was very limited—to be honest, he was dumb and rarely read. Female students on
campus were crazier about the intelligent activists, even if the activists were unkempt and messy
and hated by every potential parent-in-law.

Linus, on the other hand, was good-looking, athletic, and very pleasant to show off. The women
liked to invite him to walk on the beach, and they would take romantic poses if there was a
photographer who passed by. They would show off those photos to friends of friends who didn’t
know Linus; and make up stories that they had dated a really handsome guy.

Yet when they reached the end of the beach and Linus expressed his love, they would look at him
with disgusted expressions that couldn’t be disguised and politely refuse him.

“My brother, you are too good for me. I think of you as my own older brother.”

Linus again felt down and depressed.

“But they want to go for a walk with you, right?” one of the soldiers asked, and Linus nodded.

“Just drug them,” he continued laughing.
“How do you do that?” Linus asked.

The soldier introduced him to a certain drug mixture which was cheap, and the ingredients could easily be found in local shops. With the right dosage, that potion could lower a woman’s consciousness and increase her sexual excitement. All he had to do was make sure the potion got into the woman’s mouth.

With that potion, Linus began to see action. He always bought ice cream and all kinds of foods for each woman he invited for a walk who had already regarded him as an older brother. After she swallowed the food he had given her and became dazed, Linus would bring her to his rented room and have fun.

There were too many women who wanted to go out walking, what’s more to be treated to snacks by a handsome guy. Thanks to that magic potion, in one month, Linus could sleep with four to seven different women. Although they cursed him, none of the women dared to report Linus to the police. They would be humiliated all over again by being asked: If you didn’t want to, why did you go to his room? Was your vagina wet at the time?

Once there was a woman who did go to the police department in desperation. She felt she had been humiliated and wanted to bring charges against Linus. “I was unconscious when I was brought to his room,” she said, “as if I’d been drugged. No, my vagina was not wet.”

“Sir, don’t you have a daughter? Arrest this sex criminal!”

This woman’s accusations made the police pick up Linus.

But at the police department, Linus laughed at the woman.

“Two minutes after I began to gyrate, she was gyrating too, Sir. She even began moaning, ‘Oh, oh,’ like that Sir.”

Everyone laughed and the woman wasn’t given a chance to say anything else. Linus was allowed to go and they regarded the woman as a campus prostitute who made the report just because she wasn’t paid enough.

That made Linus feel even freer to continue his actions. Body after body was groped, and he made his way into vagina after vagina; from those who were still virgins to those who had had abortions, from those who smelled like onions to those who smelled of sandalwood.

In the eighteenth month, Linus felt like there was something wrong with his penis. Since he had begun his actions, he had never worn a condom, and always ejaculated inside the women’s vaginas. But of the one hundred thirty-eight women he had slept with on campus—he had kept notes on all of them, not one reported that she had become pregnant.

Feeling curious, Linus changed his tactics. Every time he met his next potential victim, he would pry into information about the last time she had menstruated. In this way he could calculate her fertility cycle, and he would take action just when her eggs were the most fertile.

The first time he tried it with Novi. He slept with her and waited. Two months later Novi looked at him in disgust, but her stomach was just fine. There were no signs of pregnancy. He worked up the courage to ask whether Novi felt any signs of being pregnant. Was she menstruating as usual?

Novi stared into his eyes while spitting on the ground.
“If I’m pregnant, you’re dead,” she answered.


God had cursed him. He was sterile.

*Translated from Bahasa Indonesia by Marjie Suanda*

“Writing Orang-orang Oetimu, Writing Wounds”

This essay discusses the motivations behind writing one of Felix Nesi’s characters: Laura, a young woman who, in the novel, is kidnapped, separated from her parents, detained without trial, tortured and abused before finally escaping into the forest and stumbling upon a small kampung (village).

I

The moment I saw that Laura had died, I leaned against a wall and cried. It was 3 A.M. and deathly quiet. I couldn’t believe that after everything Laura had been through since her arrest, after she survived torture, after she fled to the forest, after she managed to guard against ghosts and wild animals, she chose to die giving birth. When I stopped crying, I spent more than six days trying to compose a version of the story in which Laura didn’t die, trying to convince her to stay alive.

I had already written about Laura for a long time. I’d known her since she was a kid (I ended up cutting the part about her growing up and dating Fernando from the first draft of the novel, it didn’t end up in the published version)—I had fallen in love with her and didn’t want to let her go. But just as with the character Am Siki, I never managed to persuade her to stay. Laura is still dead, put out of her suffering.

I couldn’t bring Laura back, but the truth is that as I cried for over twenty minutes right after her death, I realized my heart was already scarred with so many state-sponsored wounds.

I’m from Nesam, a small kampung (village) between Kupang and Dili. Aside from the ghost Bito’o, the one creature you wouldn’t want kids to stumble upon in the forest while searching for birds or fruit is the fretilin. People would say that the fretilin had big afros and mustaches and liked to murder children. The negative stereotypes still exist today. Sometimes, when I show up in my kampung, aunties will say: *Auh, ho nakmo onaha fretilin!* Shit, you look like a fucking Fretilin.
When I was in fourth grade, a lot of refugees from Timor-Leste arrived in my village, and one entered my class. Her name was Yanti. She was pretty and quiet. She got along with our classmates but didn’t like going to school. Her father would drop her off at school carrying a switch from a tamarind tree. He would haul her into the schoolyard hitting her; you could see that the little girl was terrified of school and that her father was broken-hearted—you could see that he was crying while hitting her. But you’d quickly forget all of that because, just a moment later, something else would happen: a fight would break out between teenagers from the kampung and the refugee camp. A house would get burned down. Someone would get hit by an arrow. Gunshots would sound. Policemen would search anyone wearing camo and beat teenagers up for no reason. Soldiers would mill around looking for prostitutes, and other stories you wouldn’t want to hear.

II

In fourth grade, I almost got in a fight with Kristo and Frid, two of my brothers, after they told me that the books I read so seriously by the light of the gas lantern were fiction, and fiction means that those books are filled with nonsense, that people make it all up, and that I was wasting my time reading all that junk. But once I managed to accept that those stories had been invented, I started to enjoy writing. When else would I be allowed to lie to people like that?

I became the writer for my friends at Nesam Elementary School. I would write four-page stories in my exercise book and my classmates would take turns reading them aloud, commenting on them, or adding in story ideas. I crafted tales in which the hero was a young kid who went on holiday to his grandmother’s, or a student in Java, or a child who put out a fire at Gambir Station in Jakarta. That sort of thing.

But I never wrote about Timor. Later, I realized that, when I would write, Timor felt very distant. It wouldn’t even come to mind. Even though I lived in Timor, everything I read (in the world of literature) brought me closer to Gambir Station, to the National Monument, or to middle class families in Jakarta with two kids, the likes of which I’d learned about in library books, all provided by the state.

I was alienated from my own home. I grew up with the notion that we weren’t important in Indonesia’s eyes. Teachers would get mad if we spoke in local languages in school. That’s village talk, they’d say, don’t use it. Eating betel nut is uncivilized, wearing woven cloth is primitive, even though our teachers would use it to make the school uniforms. On the map hanging in our classroom, the name of our former kingdom was spelled wrong. They’d turned Oelolok into Oilolok, but not a soul would protest because, in our eyes, the city people who made maps were always right. Maybe it was us, the uneducated people from the kampung, who was wrong.

These are just examples. I could go on talking about the role of the church, about my experiences confronting racism and colonialism, about foreigners coming to Timor, or about how, after moving to Java, I met Javanese people face-to-face. Some were good people, and some saw me as an ugly eastern islander—stupid and a troublemaker. Little memories like these become wounds, which, in turn, would transform into the anger I realized I felt after crying over Laura.
At the opening of the 2020 Winternachten Festival in Den Haag, Goenawan Mohamad said: *literature and art cannot be built by anger*. He wanted to explain that he didn’t hate the Netherlands, that he wasn’t angry, even though the Dutch army had shot his father. With so much pain and anger in my own heart, what could I say in the face of a statement like that?

In the middle of a book discussion at the Petra Book Club in Flores a few months earlier, a teenager asked me how long it had taken to do the research for my novel. He was a bit shocked that I could narrate so many violent events. I write about myself. In the face of so many wounds, I only needed research to finish up the story. For so long, we have known that something happened and continues to happen, we live in fear, we can feel hearts breaking, as when Yanti’s father cried while hitting his daughter, or when Indonesian soldiers tell us that we should marry Javanese girls to better the Timorese race. We know something is happening, we just don’t know what it is.

Motivational writers as well as psychologists always say: sharing heals pain. I have written and shared my story with you in the form of a 200-page novel. But when I look at this country—its treatment of Papua, eviction after eviction, the killings of activists, and more—it seems, to this day, to exist only to harm. And I cannot hope, or think it possible, to heal or forgive.

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*Translated from Bahasa Indonesia by Lara Norgaard*

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