
Laksmi Pamuntjak

The Blue Widow

Sago palms don't continuously add foliage; they grow in flushes of new leaves. The native people of Buru had known this for many centuries. They also knew that in good times, *Metroxylon sagu* can yield between 15 to 25 metres of air-dried starch per hectare at the end of an eight-year cycle, and that, like a good wife, a good staple, they can tolerate neglect yet thrive anywhere as long as there is ample sunlight.

In fact, agriculture never meant much to the people of Buru, as food had pretty much always been happy meals: cheap, pre-packed and to go. They were, of course, the original fast food people.

Now that the Government had told them there would be strangers coming to the island, but strangers of a different kind, strangers who would not inhabit the coastal line but go further inshore, who would not just partake of their sago palms but slash through their forests and grasslands and pave the results with concrete, and who would in all possibility number 12,000 to their 7,000, they weren't sure how to think, or if they should think at all. *Beware!* the Government told them, *for they are unwanted, unmissed, spitted out people. Beware their strangeness and power.*

Six months after the first batch of strangers washed ashore and

set up house in oblong shelters 50 square metres wide, the natives – the braver among them in particular – began to invite themselves in. There they pointed at roof, pillar and wall and told the strangers, look at our *sagu*. It shelters, supports and enfolds: over, within and around. Just like a family. Okay, so you give us eggplant and long beans, spinach and convolvulus, fruits you said would delight us no end. (We'll see about that.) Padi whose tips glisten like gemstones on certain mornings, whose taste, you said, was the very substance of being and posterity. (We'll also see about that.) Quite frankly, we don't understand this emphasis on the future – on thrift and storage, on prayers and hope. We plant, we eat, and so it goes. But *sagu* is our family. It is there whether you need it or not, all day, all year, all time long.

Of course there was the occasional bloodbath. It was part of the whole thing, and the air was often at fault. While barter is a human instinct, there is always a limit to tradeable goods, and still more to what nature can yield on someone else's clock. For a while, the strangers were given 150 grams of rice a day and bits of other stuff, salted fish mainly, by the same people who screamed at them and often beat them up. At this point in time, the natives hadn't learned to measure weight in grams and time in months, but they knew that what appeared as discoloration in the rice was bulgur and that there was such a thing as the bitterness of fish. This is when the strangers could become as familiar to the natives as their own kin: sandwiched between poverty and hunger, they looked stupid and slightly mad. And as these strangers were often driven to pilfering any garden but their own, it is quite understandable why some of them often ended up floating in the river with their guts unzipped.

That man from across the river, for instance, what was he thinking, going into Manakati's house in the dead of the night? Tiptoeing like a cat in digitigrade and reaching out into the winnowing tray suspended on a wooden beam, in the middle of the house, a veritable taboo. Of course, he was merely hoping to steal some leftover deer, having sighted Manakati's family slaying one just the night before.

Manakati's family knew but they waited. They knew and waited just the way they knew the best way to lure deer and boars, which was by burning parts of the savannah on the eve of monsoon, and waiting

until the little suckers came out of hiding, to nose the wild grass that proliferated beneath the rain. And so they waited until the man came back the next evening, doing the exact same thing he did the previous night, running into darkness's glutinous embrace with a handful of entrails, laughing and serenading the moon while he was at it. When he realised that what he had been devouring was not the liver of an antlered mammal but the placenta of Mukabelen's baby, put there by Manakati's son, who had hoped to marry Mukabelen and was thus filled with spleen, it was too late; he knew he was a dead man, and death came to him sooner than he could count his steps back to the barracks. Mukabelen was the daughter of the king of Kayeli; on this land, no matter what the big guns in Jakarta might say, there was no going past that.

But not all of the strangers were quite that stupid; some were interesting, quite amusing really. Mukaburung had a story to tell.

It didn't take long for the natives to understand that the strangers were often starving. Mukaburung knew because she had met Sentanu when he was out felling the *sagu* that belonged to Mukaburung's clansmen, and had liked him instantly. Normally she would lunge forward, aim, and then spear the likes of him to death for such an offence, but lately she'd been feeling a bit tender, a bit mushy at the centre like an overripe cassava, she even had its colour, its odour. So she let him rape and pillage, wrench and plunder, it was the fourth day now, watching him from behind a tree. At night, the forest was an accomplice: all jutting limbs and wide, gnarled torso, a text that knew better than its author. On the night Mukaburung decided to come out, its breath was thick as gravy, hardening the air towards man's pleas.

And just how the man pleaded for his life we would never have learned, had Mukaburung not felt strange stirrings in her womb, at the moment Sentanu turned around and paled at the sight of her.

Spare me, he had said, even if he knew it was pointless, she didn't understand a word.

Instead, she pointed at his jackknife, hip in Java but pitiful in Buru, in a way that halted the man's heartbeat momentarily.

And then, before he could respond, she was upon him in one fell swoop, punching her weight with her knees just under his chest. She yanked the jackknife from him, and the man was saying *no, no, you*

don't understand, and farewelling the chalk-white moon and the fuzzy stray cloud in front of it.

Flashing by now faces, colours, images like telegraph poles seen from a moving train, funny how that deep flesh-ripping pain could hover instead of penetrate, and how he was now seeing the dim, flickering light on the porch of his beach house as he would see it from a boat, the nape of his mother's neck, sweat like beads. They were always poor, and father had not come home one day, the sea had swallowed him like a jilted lover, and all that it left them was the stink of fish, not unlike what he was smelling now, stronger with every rise, with every fall, up and down, something of him sloshed in tears like the prodigal glue.

Sentanu found himself in tears at this familiarity, and this, combined with yet another smell, one he didn't recognise and one which punched its vileness now with every thrust and was almost willed into becoming something else until its day-self did not recognise its night-self, made him come and come, three, four, five times, the first two coming out pretty much the same time, like *pelog* climbing on the shoulders of *slendro* – an accidental unison.

And when the deed was done, and through some twisted mechanism in his brain, he had gone for more of the same thing, the same emptying out of sperm such as he had never known, he found himself resorting to a ritual Mukaburung had suddenly insisted upon, and he had risen to it as though an escape from himself, or a homecoming to the self he had lost, whoever knew these things.

First she would point at an area in the forest, one she'd usually primed and primped before she dragged him there, a little bed-making staked by two intersecting branches, and when she was sure they were quite alone, she would start running around a circle, with him close on her heels, and they would go on like that with increasing jubilation and abandon, until in the gathering fog she would stop, her firm arms enfolding a tree, and he would pierce her in the rump with such force, coming almost as soon as he entered.

In time he would much prefer this mode of entry, even if the ritual that seemed so necessary to Mukaburung to ensure he got to that point quickly lost its thrill. Once daylight ceased to sugar surfaces, her visage seemed more to him a study in the wreckage of the human face and that

smell that had perplexed him – well, he realised it had the quality of leprosy. Something breaking free from a blockage so deep and wretched and real, carrying the source close to an open wound that was him.

And so he began to notice scab in place of skin, pustules where it wasn't crust. In certain parts, she was either so scaly, Mukaburung, or so ulcerated, and her thin, coppery hair, combined with the active rot of skin that shunned both water and soap, had begun to unsettle him. He stopped seeing her, seeking his *sagu* elsewhere.

Into each circumstance some flaw must fall, of course, but on the sixth day of abstention, lying on his bunk back in the barrack, 25 strong on his side and another 25 on the other, damp and malarial and seeped in by the elements, where everything he lived with was somebody else's B.O., bad breath and putrid arse, he found he was missing Mukaburung. She was, all things said, a body ready for him, even if she smelled like liquid manure.

Mukaburung, on the other hand, loved having this man lie on top of her, so roasted and heady and foreign in smell, and whose skin was as smooth as hers was rough, facing her instead of her back. She loved how he didn't just plug it in but played first with her nipples, squeezed and danced his forefinger on them. She loved how in the beginning he chewed upon them also, preferring them it seemed to her chapped lips, which he had gnawed away at the very first time she sat on him that night but never again, thinking them perhaps more treacherous than the twin peaks that watched over them – a safe place.

She found his closed eyes at the point of entry thrilling, as if he wanted to feel more, feel her more, and the sheer fact that he had to get out of his pants to take it out and stick it into her seemed so preciously elaborate. She loved watching him afterwards, how his long, tapered fingers caressed a cigarette paper, and spread over it a pinch of tobacco from end to end, letting it spill out a little on either side before rolling it the way she was rolled, as something prized. How he then picked up his fledgling cigarette with both hands, two fingers on the far side and thumbs on the side closest to him, packed his tobacco into a cylinder and then rolled the paper over the cigarette until it became something smokeable. How he would just sit there after the first exhale, his gaze trailing it as far as it would go before dissolving in air, before return-

ing to give her a smile. Mukaburung later learned that everyone, each one of the strangers, had that look, with their other organs so separate from their eyes they might have belonged to two people. He would never leave in a hurry, indicating often with a nod in the direction of his camp, with its two-metre wooden fence that rose against the moody blue like a sick song, that it wasn't always so bad there.

'Don't they beat you up over there?' (Mukaburung made gestures of beating herself up.)

'They beat you everywhere.' (Sentanu pointed at the sky, the trees, the mountains and made wide, embracing gestures with his two arms.)

She understood. She once saw how he had traded that same type of cigarette with men in green, not all of whom behaved so terribly, and she had even seen them share some of the rice he'd stashed away in the depth of the forest. She could see how those men in green, despite their inclination to use the butt of their rifles on her lover and his friends, were at times completely at the mercy of the latter, whose lot it was to hunt, cook and store. Even though she still couldn't quite get the obsession for those sickly greyish-bluish-white grains, especially because the areas around the barracks were teeming with cassava, corn and soy beans along with foreign-looking vegetables of every kind. Still. She understood.

Altered thus by love she twittered and twittered, not for a short while but a long time, for she was not named the face of a bird for nothing: *yes, I can see you are among the favoured.*

Later she would include this among a list of reasons why he shouldn't have his penis sawn off and ground to mince. He gave her pleasure, surely that was punishable only by a fine, that would help both lives. And so for a while she let herself be soothed by the feeling that he wouldn't die any time soon, not, at least, on her account.

The matter was settled following the day in which, upon noticing Mukaburung's unusually florid face and demeanour, her brothers and kinsmen took to following her into the forest, and then to the clearing further inside where only *nituros* – dead souls – dared to venture. When it became clear to them the situation they had at hand, Manahonja, the eldest of the kinsmen who also happened to be Mukaburung's husband, decided that a fine certainly seemed most

appropriate, given the humiliation he had suffered, and the amount of *sagu* he had lost. *Give me all that you own*, he told Sentanu as the man slouched before him, tied on a stake, with his face crushed.

‘I have nothing.’

‘You *keto-keto* with my wife. You have to pay me.’

‘I am sorry. Oh God, I am so sorry.’

‘Sorry’ and God meant nothing to Manahonja, and at that moment he felt like cracking the man’s face open with his *parang*, were it not for the presence of Jajitama, the *kepala adat* – custom-keeper – and the unit commander responsible for this shrivelling worm, a dour-looking Javanese man named Sugeng. Things had certainly changed around here, Manahonja thought desperately. Not only did wives go out to find pleasure and talk and giggle about it, but strange men now came to advise them on the politics of *keto-keto*.

Or maybe we should just kill him, he suggested helpfully to Jajitama when he caught the old *mauweng* pouting and frowning as though he had run out of wisdom.

‘We can’t. They didn’t do the deed in the house.’

‘They didn’t?’

‘Oh, Manahonja. You saw it yourself. You brought dozens of people along who all witnessed that they didn’t do the deed in the house.’

‘And that made it alright?’

‘We’ll focus on the fine.’

‘But she is *my wife*! Doesn’t that count for something?’

‘They didn’t do it in the house.’

‘He still has to pay with his blood. And Mukaburung too, that whore.’

‘Stop being so stubborn, Manahonja, it is too risky. There are more of them than there are of us. They’ll blow us up in no time if we even as much as touch the dog. You should have done what Manalisa did to the butthead who ate his baby’s placenta. Gut him quietly in the night and toss him into the river. Now you’ll be lucky if you get paid at all and your wife still wants to *keto-keto* with you.’

Jajitama was old and if years of gate-keeping had taught him anything, it was that everything, the aroma, the taste, the texture of

things he once thought were indispensable would eventually vanish, the way he too couldn't hang on to the memory of his dearly departed wife's body. For as long as he had known his people, unpaid fines were the surefire triggers of war between *soas*. But when outsiders began to descend upon them, starting with the Butonese, the Ambonese, the Bugis, this last happiest in trade, he saw how it was possible to learn something new and be the better for it. If only Manahonja could keep his trap shut, he could have let his slut wife have a go at it longer until she became comfortable and transgressed all the way like women eventually always do. But Manahonja was young. Thriving like a hundred others on brawn, feeding on each other's otherness.

So it was that Sentanu regained his freedom, though he was never to go within a visible distance from Mukaburung's village. But everybody knew that what it really meant was that he had become the safest person on Buru Island. Even if he were to violate the terms of his so-called release, no one would dare touch him for fear of stoking the fires of retaliation. The natives had decided that they were far too outnumbered to insist on a levy the criminal and his protectors maintained he couldn't fulfil, but for which they had in turn accepted the unit commander's offer of cooperation. And it was then that Mukaburung knew she had done a disservice to her fellow women.

It didn't take long for the weight of unpaid levy, so taxing on custom-driven psyches, to reach fevered heights. The cry was for blood. And so did Mukaburung find herself one day tied on a stake the way her paramour once was, but for much longer, and stripped of clothes, and food, and water, with Manahonja beating her up before the entire *soa*. One could almost drink the joy condensing around her in the air.

As though that wasn't enough, she was dragged from her place in the sun, marked out by chilli-snarled trees, to a confined house where she was ordered to make three hundred spearheads and an obscenely long wooden penis the width of her own thighs. When she was done with it, she was told to circle the village's shrine seven times, her artwork over her shoulders. She cursed *emangin* for letting her live instead of allowing her to roam free as a bloodthirsty *nituro* so that she could saw off Manahonja's penis and stuff it into his greedy mouth. She cried and cried without really knowing why, perhaps because

Manahonja had never really shown the least care for her, let alone made love to her in that tumescent way she so loved of the funny-smelling stranger even if her husband was just as mangy and pustular as she was, or perhaps because she was more alone than she ever was, and with no hop of man or *sagu* to call her own.

But life, as Jajitama had understood it, went on, and soon, after months of 'cooperation' with the strangers, the natives ceased to wait for a *sagu* tree to reach 12 metres before they could fell it. Leisurely midday conversations among men were full of revelations.

'Of course it makes sense now that we don't have to wait until we've given eight *tomangs* to the king before we can do anything.'

'The king is stupid!'

'No, we were the stupid ones.'

'But this way he too will get more *tomangs* in less time. What was he thinking?'

'Don't look at me. How do you suppose I know how the king thinks?'

'I've knocked down five *sagu* trees in the last three weeks and that's 25 *tomangs* or 187.5 kilograms, at 50 rupiah each. I've made five times more than I have in six months.'

'Soon we'll have no *sagu* left.'

'But we'll be rich and the king can ...'

And so against this backdrop where the ordinary world outside the strangers' had been eradicated, an altered realm where suddenly nothing was ever so simple anymore, Mukaburung decided to drift away quietly into the night. There never was a time, at least in her lifetime, where there was less an us and them, an inside and outside, *sagu* and padi jostling for the one space on this earth of mankind. But why did she feel a sadness beyond murder that clung to her now like shadows moulding the black concrete under her feet? It was as if no one – no thing had ever trespassed before.