

## GROUND GLASS

Two years before my father died, we began talking. We spoke about his childhood in Indonesia and his experiences as a prisoner of war. He had not yet received his diagnosis of lung cancer. If I'd known his terminal illness was already stalking us, as it must've been by then, would this have changed the shape of our conversations? Impossible to say, I suppose. Only because I'd prompted him were we immersing ourselves around his kitchen table with a small black tape recorder lying between us, a grasp at some kind of formality. We put aside a couple of days a week. And they lasted a few months, these meetings that circled around his past. It was the most time I'd spent with my father for many years. We ate lunch between glimpses of other places, other times. He'd stopped smoking indoors by then, and his cigarette breaks outdoors on the back deck, just through the sliding glass doors, wove themselves into our talk. Sometimes he'd keep talking through the flywire screen, seated on a wooden bench, long legs crossed, elbow pressed sharp into his top knee so his hand could hover at face level, cigarette ready. Beyond stretched my mother's garden: a creeper twined over the railing of the deck, a grevillea in profuse red flower, honeyeaters and wattlebirds dipping into it with such purpose the whole bush shook with their comings and goings. My father's hacking cough accompanied us too, of course. It had been his signature forever, as familiar as breathing.

My father was born in Poeroektjahoe, a small Dayak village deep in the mountains of Kalimantan in Borneo. His father was an Adjutant Officer with the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army. His mother was one of only two white women living in the village. From my own childhood I knew, through my father, the story of my grandparents arriving by river at the tiny settlement deep in jungle, paddled upstream by Dayaks. My grandmother was fresh from the border of Germany and Holland, following her new Dutch husband into a foreign world. Now that I'm a mother myself, I can't help wondering who assisted her with the delivery of her first child, her labor in the heat, without doctors, friends, family. And then the tending of the new baby, my father.

"The Dayaks were very fierce," my father would tell my brother and me when we were kids. "They were headhunters. They hunted with poison

darts.” In our tiny kitchen, years before it was renovated, walls covered in lime-green 1970s wallpaper of palm fronds and ferns, he would mime dart-blowing, stalking a wild pig, holding still, then exhaling with force through an imaginary tube of bamboo held to his lips. “Blang,” he called, the pig falling. “The Dutch were there to wipe out headhunting,” he added.

He told only a handful of stories from those times. When he’d been drinking, he’d tell the story of ground glass. The first time, he was sitting at the kitchen table against lime-green wallpaper, two tall beer bottles wrapped in a brown paper bag on the table before him. The paper clung to the moist glass. He’d carried the bottles home with him from the pub just up the road, his favorite, called Khyatts. I never knew what it meant: Khyatts. He might have been carrying a piece of conversation home with him, lifted from the group of men he drank with. Or maybe it was a memory that surfaced on his lone walk home, in quiet suburban darkness, streets empty, windows filled with squares of light. He began speaking:

“Sometimes the gates opened, and a truck would drive into the camp. Straightaway word would fly round: the sugar trucks are coming. The women became *very* excited. Oh, they were excited.”

My father stood and raised his arms. ““Oh, the sugar trucks are coming,”” he called out in a high, impersonated female voice. ““Oh, the sugar trucks are coming.”” He sat and dropped his voice. “The sugar was not sugar as you know it. It was a kind of block. A block of solid molasses, mixed with straw. They made it for pigs. You know, it was pig food.” He was searching for words.

My brother and I had drawn chairs up to the table. My mother was standing. My father was far away, in the place of the story, and I was trying to bridge the gap between him and that place. His face was red from drinking. His eyes had that look I so disliked. When he was drunk his eyes became someone else’s.

“The women ran up to the trucks, crowded around, calling out. Guards pushed them back. Then the guards gave the word. Blocks of sugar were thrown to the ground. The women scabbled and fought. A new cry went up: ‘Ground glass. Ground glass.’”

My father pulled one of his bottles from the bag, and the moist paper tore. He flipped the lid from the bottle and poured himself a beer.

“The guards had filled the sugar with ground glass. You couldn’t eat it.”

He drank and caught my eye over his glass, as if I too were someone to be wary of. Then he set the glass down. I could feel his anger—or was it disappointment?—something fierce and unappeasable in the pit of my own body. My brother, mother, and I were in some inexplicable way to blame. I was filled with a vast puzzling sadness at his tale. It washed about in the darkness as I lay trying to sleep. Years later, I would find histories of internment, of women's and children's camps, and I would track down firsthand accounts and diaries kept during the war. But back then it was just a fragment of a story in a tense beer-filled kitchen.

Around that time my mother was fond of unhulled brown rice. It fit with the bran, wheat germ, and lecithin, the '70s health foods she made us sprinkle on our semolina porridge. I used to sit on the back step where the dogs slept and hull the rice with a mortar and pestle. You worked the grains against the sides of the mortar to loosen the hulls. Then you shook the mixture carefully, flipping it a little, and the hulls would rise to the top. This became one of my favorite pastimes, seated in latticed shadows, next to the thick warm scent of dogs' bedding. I think, now, I was probably trying to immerse myself in a world where a handful of rice was a bounty. A block of pig food a treasure.

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Before the war my father's family moved a number of times, relocating to different areas of Borneo and then Sumatra, settling in the mountain township of Bukittinggi. Here, at the age of twelve, my father was ordered to leave his house by Japanese soldiers. He was never to set foot in his childhood home again. He was interned in prison camps for three and a half years, and after the war based in a compound in the coastal Sumatran town of Padang under British military protection. In 1947, as Indonesia's postwar fight for independence was intensifying, his mother was attacked by guerrillas or freedom fighters, as they were variously known. A hand grenade was thrown at the jeep she was travelling in. She never walked again. With the extent of her injuries, she was sent by navy hospital ship to Holland for medical care, the family with her. My father was aged about eighteen when he arrived in Holland for the first time.

"Crowds were waiting on the wharves when we docked," he said. "People shouted, 'Here come the orange heads. Here come the watermelon heads.'"

"Why?" I asked.

“We were not highly thought of,” he said. “In the playground we were called names, all the colonial Dutch. We weren’t really accepted.” They were referred to as the Indonesian-Dutch, their authenticity in question.

He never returned to Indonesia; neither did he stay long in Holland. He worked for a few years as a navigation officer on ocean-going tugs—a life afloat between national boundaries—before migrating to Australia. During our talks at the kitchen table, I asked him why he’d never been back to Indonesia.

“We did not belong. The Indonesians did not want us there. I would never go back,” he replied.

As a child I was unsure how my father’s pre-Australian life fit together. I knew it through fragments as disassociated and decontextualized as the story of ground glass. When I asked him whether we could talk about his war years, it was because I was doing background “research” for the novel I was writing. Research never seems quite the right word—I was trying to get a feel for things. I was attempting to write prison camp scenes, starvation, deprivation, their reverberations across lifetimes, but it was all so far from my own experience I didn’t know how to broach it. Or whether it was right to try. So we sat at the kitchen table, the small tape recorder lying between us, raucous calls of wattlebirds in the background. Sometimes I prepared questions, but I was equally interested to see where his recollections would lead—memories unfolding of their own accord. In my study drawers are the microcassettes containing his voice. Occasionally these days I chance across them, in search of paperclips or an ink cartridge, and shy away from them. I’m not sure I could bear the return of his voice from across the grave, the immediacy so much more messy and sprawling than the fragments I’m polishing here.

Sometimes, as he was speaking, the tape would come to an end. Instead of turning the cassette over or replacing it with a fresh one, I’d let the little black machine turn itself off. Heedless, my father continued talking. Back then I believed some more accurate, deeper, truer story would emerge, beyond the reach of recording.

During my early thirties I visited Bukittinggi. This journey, too, was “research” for the novel. I was hoping to glean a sense of place. By chance my father’s youngest brother, Paul, was visiting Australia from Holland before I left. Unlike my father, Paul visited Indonesia often. So it was Paul who drew maps of the town and marked a cross where their childhood home stood.

He drew maps of Padang and a hesitant cross where my grandmother had been injured. (He was only four when it happened.) He gave me names of hotels and told me to find Kamal, an Indonesian friend who made his living taking Polaroid photos on the pathways at the top of a steep park above Sianok Canyon. This was the late 1990s, just before digital cameras took off, so I can't imagine how he'd now ply his trade. I took an old Super 8 camera with me, borrowed from a friend. Its nostalgic air seemed fitting. I wanted to see for myself an imagined place, one formative for my father. The places we know from childhood we have encountered in ways different from adulthood. We see them and sense them when we're still receptive to their full detail. We have not yet learned the habit of blotting out, skipping over, or generalizing the full particularity of our immediate surroundings. We sense presences beyond the visible and sit whispering secrets to our pet dog, as John Berger puts it in *The Shape of a Pocket*. What I pictured, then, on my father's behalf was a lost landscape his imagination had made him receptive to, and which, in turn, had shaped his imagination. But when I returned with my photos, my snatches of Super 8 film that rushed by, he would not look at them. He flipped through, but he was not *pausing* to look. I wondered then whether all this time I'd been looking in the wrong place.

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For some people, there are places so loaded with distressing incident it's not possible or desirable to re-enter them. In those first couple of bewildering weeks when my father and his middle brother, Martin, were sent out of their house early in 1942, they tried to work out where to go. My grandmother was in hospital with a complicated third pregnancy—soon to deliver Paul. My grandfather had been posted to Sumatra's north with news of the arrival of Japanese troops some weeks earlier. My father literally had nowhere to go. They ended up sheltering in the local church, given refuge by nuns. During those days he saw violence: mutilated bodies of Indonesians hanging from trees. When the Dutch colonists had been sent onto the streets, local Minangkabau people ran into deserted houses, carrying out furniture and household belongings.

"The Japanese put a stop to the looting very, very quickly," my father said. They hung looters from trees, arms hacked off, as a warning. After a while the Japanese soldiers moved the swelling numbers of homeless sleeping on the church floor into a local school. The school became my father's first prison. More prisoners were brought in. Now there were hundreds. But no facilities. People waded through their own excrement, succumbing to

disease, the war only just begun. No wonder my father did not want to see these sites again. The nostalgia was more mine than his, and it was for an imagined past, an imagined geography.

During my visit to Bukittinggi, I stood outside his family home. The fence was made of molded concrete, the wooden gate painted a blue-green so matte it had a white bloom. I didn't dare knock at the front door. I pinned the address onto a paper sign, which I stood holding self-consciously as my then-boyfriend, Evan, filmed me. Evan was an artist, and he was playing the artist-documenter while I played the writer-tourist searching to unveil family history. We were doing it half in jest, playing around, and yet deadly serious. Maybe if I'd been braver I could have knocked on the door. But the house had new occupants now, and I could not bring myself to unlatch the gate and approach up the front path. A couple of weeks later in Padang, I walked streets thick with traffic and noise, trying to work out where the road had run between the two parts of the postwar British compound, one containing a school, the other a hospital. Not far from Paul's cross designating the hand grenade was a roundabout. At its center stood a huge bas-relief monument of cast concrete depicting the overthrowing of imperial rule: a battle between heavily armed Dutch forces and minimally armed Indonesians. And I couldn't feel a vestige of my grandmother there, the way history sometimes has a feel to it, a presence.

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Paul was still in Australia when I returned. It was he who leafed through the photos with me and listened to accounts of the steep bus journey winding up through the mountains from Padang to Bukittinggi, the bus driver playing chicken with oncoming traffic, my malaria tablets inducing a trance-like state so that I envisaged with hallucinatory clarity gruesome ends to the passengers hurled into ravines below. He listened to my stories of meeting the hotel owners he'd recommended and of my travels with Kamal in and around Bukittinggi.

Before we'd left Melbourne, Paul had suggested visiting the southwest coast of Sumatra and staying at a small fishing village he knew. Kamal accompanied us on this trip also, although he was unfamiliar with the region and had never visited it himself. There was no family history attached to the fishing village. After a couple of weeks of visiting scenes I'd come to know through my father's stories told to me and the little black tape recorder—Fort de Kock, Lake Maninjau, the top of Sianok Canyon where he used to

fly paper kites as a boy, and the river far below where he'd swum, the school where he'd been imprisoned, and the church where he'd taken shelter—it was a relief to step into simpler tourist travel. After a day-long journey of swapping bus and bemo routes, we arrived in a small coastal township. The streets were almost deserted. We couldn't find the hotel Paul had mentioned, and there was only one other place to stay. The hotel owner was reluctant to take us in. At first he refused, but when we returned, he grudgingly agreed. The rooms were grim and stained. Across the road, two men running a small eatery were unwilling to serve us. Kamal talked with them for quite some time before they brought out plates of simple fried rice. Ramadan was about to begin, and I wondered whether their reluctance was due to the imminence of fasting. Kamal said the food was not good. That night, returning from our meal, and greeted by the stony silence of the hotelkeeper, we decided to move on next morning. The hotelkeeper told us there was somewhere else to stay further down the coast, out of town.

We found it right on the edge of the sand, nestled beneath a couple of steeply leaning palm trees. Inside, the bedroom walls next to our bed were marked by numerous red lipstick kisses. Once we'd rejoined Kamal that afternoon, he told us the rooms were used for illicit sex. He was very uncomfortable and said we should leave. We negotiated a meal of fried rice through the woman running the place. She too barely exchanged a word with us. Kamal picked at his food, saying the rice was not fresh, and that it was easy to fall ill from stale rice. I wandered about on the sand nearby, pocketing chunks of bleached white coral. I was feeling responsible for dragging everyone to this inhospitable place. We walked down the road to see what was about. The road twisted and turned along the coastal edge, flanked by steep walls of vegetation. There were no other buildings or people about, apart from vehicles that passed, their open tray backs filled with groups of young men. Each time the men spotted us by the roadside they yelled and called, voices travelling as they disappeared round the bends. Twilight began falling quickly and densely. More vehicles passed. We could hear engines approaching and the swell and fading of jeers. Surprise, perhaps, at two white westerners walking the roadside. Kamal explained that this is what happened on the eve of Ramadan: young men raced about while they could. Next day all would become still. During Ramadan, Kamal told us as we walked, there would be nowhere to eat during the day. He was not Muslim himself. He told us we would have to find places run by Chinese Christians to get food, and

we would have to eat indoors, out of sight. “You have to know where these places are,” he told us. At another bend in the road, we began the return walk. A group of young men pulled up alongside, and an exchange took place between them and Kamal. They were offering to drop us back at our rooms. I didn’t want a lift, but Kamal said we should accept. Evan and I said no as politely as we could, but the young men insisted. Kamal too insisted. I couldn’t tell whether he was sick of walking, or being courteous, or defusing a situation. We climbed on, trusting his judgement, and I jammed my back as hard as I could against the cabin as we sped round the bends, holding tight to Evan’s knee. It was everything I could do not to be tossed violently across the tray by the speed and tight corners. For the first time in the journey, I was entirely unsure what was happening. A number of other vehicles passed from the opposite direction, and each time the young men yelled out when they saw us, just as before. For a moment I wondered whether this was not a column of vehicles, as I’d assumed, but the same few, circling back and around. Another passed. I had a clear view of the men seated on the opposite tray. I locked eyes with one of them, and as we gazed at one another, he slowly and deliberately ran his finger across his throat. Our gazes remained locked as he disappeared from view.

In my attempt to connect with something of my father’s past, and to connect with historical patterns broader than those of my own urban Australian life, I felt utterly out of my depth. With each bend I tried to see if we’d drawn near our rooms, to sense whether the vehicle would slow to drop us off. We were so outnumbered I could barely begin to imagine what would happen if the driver and his passengers had other intentions. Finally we slowed. Safely inside, I was shaken. Ever since we’d arrived in the fishing village, Kamal had been saying that the people here didn’t want strangers around. But his reaction had seemed so at odds with the description my uncle had given of the village. Paul had befriended two local fishermen who took him out on boats painted aqua and maroon. He’d shown us slides of hand-built outriggers floating in turquoise waters, and he’d written the names of the two fishermen down among the pieces of paper I carried everywhere with me like talismans in a plastic envelope. The first morning we’d walked onto the beach where huts were built on the sand for smoking fish. Unlike Bukittinggi, which has a tourist population, there wasn’t a single other foreigner in sight. A flock of young children assembled around us, naked boys doing backflips on the sand. We wandered by smoke-blackened pits and rows of wizened pale fish



on racks. We passed a creek flowing with raw sewage. I kept mentioning the names of the two fishermen, but no one seemed to know what I was talking about. I thought then that Kamal kept saying we were not welcome because he too was in unfamiliar territory. He was as much a stranger here as us. In Bukittinggi he had taken pleasure in introducing us to different dishes at small roadside stalls. He knew the food vendors and chatted to them as we ate at portable tables and benches. With him we tried dishes of tiny fried fish served in cupped banana leaves, pieces of chicken coated in a crust of red chili so intensely hot I couldn't eat it, and a mix of local vegetables, including some kind of fungus round and smooth as an eye, in delicate sauce. We drank tall glasses of black tea and sweet coffee with grounds thick as mud at the bottom of the cup. But in the fishing village he barely ate. The food isn't good, he kept telling us, deeply distrustful.

Lying in the room by the beach with its red lipstick kisses flowering on the walls, I kept seeing the guy staring at me over the tailgate, slowly running his finger across his throat. Again and again I experienced the deliberation in his fingertip. I thought of my grandmother lying by the jeep, something snapped in her spine, hedged in by violence. Now I too felt violence, or at least its threat, a taste of it, edging in around me.

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My father's family's experiences in Indonesia give me one view of colonization and its endings, throwing up the question of home and belonging. The way my father told it, Indonesia was a place they deserved to get kicked out of. His story represents in microcosm the large-scale processes of postwar fights for independence in countries under imperial rule.

In my father's stories, I see a young boy thrown brutally into homelessness. Not a metaphoric homelessness, but leading his middle brother, Martin, by the hand along the streets and sleeping for the first couple of nights in vegetation near the Minangkabau houses. It was Indonesian people who brought the two boys pieces of food. He was, in effect, abandoned by his parents: his father at war, his mother in hospital.

"What about your neighbors or family friends?" I asked him. "Didn't anyone help you?"

"No," he answered. "Everyone was too confused."

I see him vulnerable and adapting fast. And somewhere in the course of the ensuing four years he was rewrought. I can see, too, how these stories romanticize my father, redeem him through his horrors, his losses, his exiles.

And how they have an exotic allure—when I was growing up they were so at odds with my white, middle-class suburb, and my mother’s conservative Anglophile family. My father’s messy background in Indonesia, his mother’s childhood in Germany, Dutch roots, and lowly immigrant status as a *new Australian* didn’t sit well with my maternal grandmother’s notions of propriety. After I’d written about his experiences, transforming them in my novel, I thought I’d laid all this to rest, but here I am writing this eulogy, picking up the fragments again. But this time, instead of seeking them out, it’s as if they’ve come seeking me.

Underlying my father’s stories of rupture are the stories of Indonesian people whose own homes were appropriated while the Dutch were in power. And so his recollections are filled with contradictions and inconsistencies that are difficult to sort into discrete and sensible patterns. His displacement was the rightful return of the Indonesians’ homelands. The events I’m touching upon involve at least two sets of conflicting memories and histories. Because of this, it is almost impossible for me to write redemptively of my father’s past, or to recuperate it in any simple way, especially writing from within a settler culture such as Australia’s, where the question of dispossession is still pressing and unsettling. I have no illusion that my father and I were close—he was too bound up in his own melancholy to permit that. But in my visit to Indonesia, I can see myself trying to draw closer to understanding him through his fractured past. And although I was focused at the time on gleaning background detail through our conversations and through my travels—the touch of tropical air and torrential downpour, exact foods eaten in the prison camps, what happened the day he was freed—I can see now that one of the things he bequeathed me is the notion that home is something unsteady. It can be there and then gone. And it may not have been yours in the first place. Some time ago I happened to hear a radio interview with a classical musician, whose name I can’t recall, who moved from England to Canada in her youth. The interviewer asked where home was for her.

“Your childhood home is your core,” she said unequivocally. “It’s where your imagination is shaped.”

And even in our globally networked culture, where people move back and forth across national boundaries, and where home may be something multiple rather than fixed, there’s still part of me that mourns my father’s loss of a place he knew through the core of childhood.

The day he was set free, a lone English soldier arrived at the camp on a bicycle. There had been rumors war had ended. But the soldier on his bike brought the news. He handed out cigarettes and condensed milk in tubes.

"I sucked the milk straight from the tube," my father said, miming at the kitchen table, and he looked slightly ridiculous, an aged man with a crumpled neck suckling at something imaginary. "Oh, it was good," he said. We sat back in our chairs. After a while he said, "But you had to be careful not to eat too much. One man died from too much chicken. I'll never forget that. You could only increase your food gradually. Little bit by little bit. A few extra grains of rice, a few shreds of chicken. That's how we did it. We had to take it very easy."

He began smoking that day, lighting up one of the English soldier's cigarettes.

We walk a little way along the local pier, and my father stops to rest on a bench that looks westward across the bay at the city skyline. A cold south-westerly blows in over the water. The day is gray. My father's wearing a padded light gray jacket, pulling it closer round his neck. If I look closely I can see it's slightly soiled at the cuffs and collar. I take a photo of him on the bench under a curved wooden shelter, gazing across greened wind-driven water, his new walking stick resting near his thigh. A few weeks later, I drive him farther round the bay to Rickett's Point, a place he's visited often over the years. He goes there to walk and take photographs of shells in wet sand, tussocks of blond windswept coastal grasses. I help him into the café. A woman around my own age stares at us as we come towards her. In that moment I realize how frail he's become, how the shape of his skull is beginning to show. He orders a milk shake. I look at him. I've never seen him drink a milk shake. It's a child's drink. We sit outside, away from the crowds, at a picnic bench beneath old ti-trees whose boughs dip toward the ground, then scoop upward again, their trunks peeling in strips like sunburned skin. My father sits hunched above an oversized yellow and white cardboard cup. He probes around in the cup with his straw for a while, then manages to poke the straw into a hollow cube of ice, which he flicks onto the ground. A seagull waiting at our feet dashes towards it, then draws up, disappointed. My father probes again, clumsily, hands unsteady.

"There's too much ice," he says. He sounds irritated, or is it disappointed? I ask if he wants help. "Nay, nay," he says, clipping the words. He flicks

another ice cube. Again the seagull scurries forward. Is it through sight or scent, a shape apprehended, that the bird recognizes right at the last moment this is ice? The watery blocks rest on the ground, beginning to melt, hollowed out inside. I drink a terrible weak coffee. We don't say much, the sea glinting through low trees, just there across the lawn, but too far for my father to walk. The seagull eyes us. Now and then, it cocks its head at the littering of ice cubes, almost interested, but then holds still. I drop my father's huge cardboard cup heavy with milk into the bin, hear it hit the bottom. Then we make our slow way back to the car.