

Norman Erikson Pasaribu, *Happy Stories, Mostly*. Trans. Tiffany Tsao. Tilted Axis Press, 2021. 161pp. ISBN: 978-1-911284-63-5 (paperback)/ 978-1-911284-62-8 (ebook)

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The English translation of Norman Pasaribu Erikson’s Indonesian short story collection, *Cerita-cerita Bahagia Hampir Seluruhnya* (2020) opens with a note that the significance of “hampir,” meaning almost, lies in its resemblance to “vampir,” the bloodthirsty creature. The stories that follow examine the relationship between these two words, specifically, how the pursuit of happiness in a heteronormative, capitalist-driven world is a soul-sucking endeavour—especially for queer people—because the promised rewards are always just out of reach. Blending a variety of narrative genres ranging from speculative history to metafiction to absurdist tale, the collection explores the fraught emotional terrain of the almost and what it means to inhabit the impasse of what the literary scholar Lauren Berlant calls cruel optimism, i.e. “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1). Contemplating grief, heartbreak, anger, abandonment, and loneliness, the stories invite readers to see how paying attention to and staying with such heavy, unpleasant feelings can also yield beauty and life-affirming insights.

Longlisted for the 2022 International Booker Prize, the collection was described by the judges as presenting a “vibrant mosaic of contemporary Indonesia” (website). Many of its stories are set in Bekasi, a commuter city in the megalopolis of Jakarta and in several of them, this urban setting reflects the sense of alienation and internal struggle of its characters. In “Enkidu Comes Knocking on New Year’s Eve” and “A Young Poet’s Guide to Surviving a Broken Heart,” the occurrence of floods and rains—which has intensified in the city in recent

years—serves as a metonym for the ending of relationships and how life goes on in the wake of devastation. The story “Three Love You, Four Despise You,” a lyrical description of the cramped living quarters of a kos, a room in a boarding house, reflects the despair of a struggling young gay writer trying to make ends meet.

For a collection that presents itself as focusing on queer experience, it is significant that the more rounded, complex characters tend to be found in stories about protagonists who have caused harm, often unintentionally, to the gay people in their lives. “So What’s Your Name Sandra,” for example, is about a mother grieving the death of her gay son, whom she had disowned because of her religious convictions. The story, like a few others in the collection, features Indonesia’s Christian Batak community and spotlights how religion has been instrumentalised against queer acceptance. Yet, “The True Story of the Story of the Giant” also demonstrates how religious communities cannot be held solely responsible for queer violence. The gay character in this story, Tunggul, may be invisible to both his Christian father and Muslim mother, who simply see their son as a battleground for their religious differences. Yet, the focus is on the story’s protagonist-narrator Tunggul’s college mate, whose acceptance of queer people in his life mainly rests on the extent to which they can meet his needs. In narrating experiences of harm directed at the queer community from the perspectives of its perpetrators, the larger aim is not simply to highlight the benign violence of heteronormativity, but to underscore how even those who inflict harm suffer grief and loss.

The collection draws inspiration from the work of the French philosopher and mystic, Simone Weil, most explicitly in the story, “Metaxu: Jakarta, 2038.” As its title suggests, the story borrows from Weil’s concept of metaxu, the Greek term meaning in-between, to convey the idea that it is through the material world, where God is assumed to be absent, that the divine’s presence is indirectly felt. To illustrate this concept, Weil uses the metaphor of a wall,

which separates two prisoners, as the very same means through which they can communicate with each other by knocking and tapping. In the story, a church confessional's walls represent the in-between and its narrative premise is that of a parishioner confessing to a priest. Told in the first-person, the narrator's confession becomes the vehicle through which her history of broken family relationships and unresolved guilt are relayed; significantly, though she no longer believes in God, she continues to attend church. Accordingly, the practice of confession, itself a form of storytelling, is not to seek absolution from God, but to connect with a listener or reader to air out and work through one's past. Similarly, in another story, "Ad maiorem dei gloriam," an elderly nun's encounter with a gay man and his daughter on an excursion beyond the convent reminds her of a past heartbreak and reveals the deep loneliness that her vocation has forged. There is no happy resolution, simply the nun's catharsis of feeling her emotions in the presence of a stranger. Even in the afterlife, the setting of "Welcome to the Department of Unanswered Prayers," no answers are forthcoming as to why people suffer. Yet, stories—the collection suggests—can be a means through which people come to terms with their own and each other's pain, and that this too is sacred work.

Storytelling may be essential for surfacing and surviving harrowing emotions, though the collection's self-reflexive meditations on writing are not without grief. In "A Bedtime Story for Your Long Sleep," for instance, a creative writing student is invited to explore sadness only to have her story ultimately dismissed and ignored. The references to the power of writing and the writer's struggles perhaps reflect the soul-sustaining yet challenging terrain of a contemporary world literary industry, which is increasingly interested in showcasing under-represented perspectives but may not always provide the sustainable material conditions for writers who tell these stories.

In this regard, the loving care with which Tiffany Tsao translates the collection is noteworthy. Having also translated the author's collection of poems, *Sergius Seeks Bacchus* (2019), Tsao brings a fine balance of readerly sensitivity and writerly craft especially when translating the work's lyrical passages, replicating their syntax, rhythms and pauses. Heterolingualism, the use of multiple languages, within a literary work is a known challenge for translators. The original Indonesian bears traces of contemporary globalisation in its frequent usage of Anglicised terms and Internet-speak (e.g. informasi, btw); phrases and terms from various Batak languages, as well as interlingual puns that work across Vietnamese, Indonesian and English, also appear in at least one of the stories. This multitude of tongues echoes the cosmopolitan sensibility that is also evident in the collection's eclectic cultural references ranging from Ang Lee's movie *Brokeback Mountain*, the Epic of Gilgamesh, a Sumatran urban legend about a giant, Joni Mitchell, Sylvia Plath, and so on. To reproduce this effect in English, Tsao sometimes leaves Indonesian terms untranslated and unitalicized not only to register the stories' cultural provenance. In the same way that Indonesian language and culture has evolved by absorbing English, the translation thus infuses English with Indonesian. Moreover, this translational approach also counters any presupposition of Indonesian as a homogeneous language and culture; instead, Indonesian languages and cultures are dynamic and constantly interacting with multiple influences from all over the world. *Happy Stories, Mostly* is a promising glimpse of what contemporary Indonesian writing has to contribute to world literature and this translation is a gift to English readers.

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