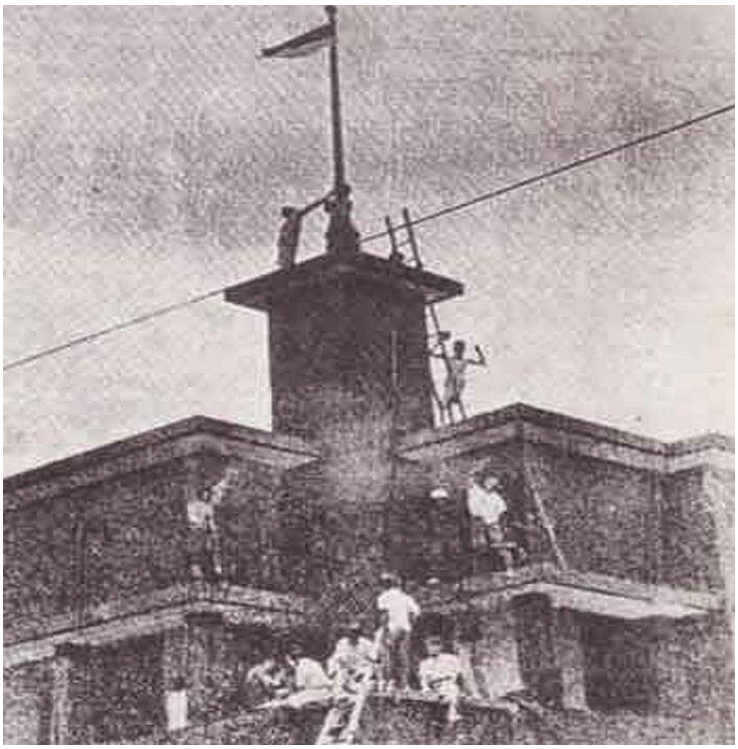


Cacophony

Wednesday, September 19, 1945.

Surabaya is a slumbering city. The muezzins, who had already clambered up the steps of the minarets to dutifully call all to prayer, are the first to observe the sun rising lazily out of the vast sea.

As-salatu khayrun minan-nawm!

(Prayer is better than sleep).

When the sunlight creeps into every nook and cranny, the surface will turn into a furnace that leaves your feet blistered if you aren't quick enough.

As-salatu khayrun minan-nawm!

Mothers gently but firmly shake their children awake, leaving them no room to rub their eyes nor utter but the slightest groan at being roused so abruptly.

and they don’t rub their eyes nor groan.

and hot bowls of rice porridge are shoved into the hands of all.

and front doors swing wide open and young and old pour out into the streets.

and stalls are set up.

and merchandise is haggled over.

and the uncontrolled laughter of children rouses those who had pulled their blankets over their head.

When the roosters called out their salutations, Surabaya had long put up its walls in anticipation of the sun's torrid assault.

As-salatu khayrun minan-nawm!

Surabaya is a brilliant glistening gem under the morning sun.

Surabaya had bled and wept over the past 350 years.

A pale people, crazed looks in their murderous eyes, had emerged from their ghost ships. Phantom hands off loaded strange customs in boxes.

Insatiable hunger.

Surabaya is the city of heroes.

They were turtles that had emerged famished out of the sea and consumed all in their path before retreating to their distant domain.

Surabaya. *Sura ing baya*. Bravely facing danger.

In their infinite scavenge the turtles dragged us underwater in chains. We tried to track ourselves through tracing the ashes of our homes, beds, loves, friendships.

The empire of the rising sun emerged from the horizon at sunrise carrying a white flag.

Under auspicious winds they had come.

Auspicious winds we were promised.

It was a hurricane that swept away the turtles.

IheardtheycutthemupinpiecesIheard
theylockthemupincagesIheardthey
havetostareatthescorchingsununtilt
heirlittleheartsgiveoutIheardtheysn
aptheirnecksIheardhatchlingsaretos
sedintothewavesIheardthattheyhave
liedtousIheardthatitiswewhoarenext

In

are

of

the eye

the storm

we

I have heard someone bursting through the door in the dead of night.

'*Auntie, where did uncle go*?'

IMPORTANT NOTICE: CALL FOR SCHOLARSHIPS

The empire is searching for the brightest minds to study at the most prestigious universities of the nation. Tuition, school supplies, accommodation and travel fares will be fully paid for. Intelligent young women are encouraged to hand in their applications BEFORE MARCH 17 at Jl. Tunjungan No. 73. Incomplete applications will not be taken into consideration.

"Comfort women, a euphemism for women who provided sexual services to Japanese Imperial Army troops during Japan's militaristic period that ended with World War II and who generally lived under conditions of sexual slavery." source: https://www.britannica.com/topic/comfort-women accessed November 18, 2026.

The voracious storm devoured the soil, the people and finally, the sky.

'*That cloud looks so strange. Why is it shaped like a mushroom?*'

It is the morning of August 17, 1945. The city of Surabaya awakens from its slumber. Some 450 miles to the east, the city of Batavia, now Jakarta, is being roused. At 56 Jalan Pegangsaan Timur stands a house. It has a red pointed roof and its walls are painted white. There is some shrubbery surrounding it. It is like any house. At 10:00 a.m. (Tokyo Standard Time), a conversation taking place in the red house in Batavia, now Jakarta, is heard in Surabaya, some 450 miles to the east. This male voice emerges determined, steady over the radio. He will become the voice of a nation.

'*Quick! Turn up the volume!*'

> *"We the people of Indonesia do hereby declare the independence of Indonesia. Matters concerning the transfer of power and other matters will be executed in an orderly manner and in the shortest possible time." - President Sukarno, August 17, 1945.*

Surabaya has changed.

Surabaya has not changed.

The muezzins have ascended the minarets to call for prayer at noon.

As far as the eye can see, is a sea of red and white.

Some of us are enjoying a momentary repose from the heat inside.

Should young people walk around the streets carrying weapons?

Those poor street vendors, crouched down amidst puddles of their own sweat!

The turtles will pay with their blood.

They're fanning themselves with banana leaves.

For freedom I am willing to die.

I don't even remember what day it is.

Today? It's September 19, 1945.

SIAP! (GET READY!) THE TURTLES HAVE RETURNED. THEY AND THEIR TREACHEROUS ASSOCIATES HAVE BEFOULED THE YAMATO HOTEL WITH THEIR RED, WHITE AND BLUE FLAG.

I can barely breathe in this crowd. Although the sun has gone down, the heat is suffocating. I wish my mom didn't hold onto my wrist so tight. I can feel the sweat on my body and I want to go home to wash up. Mom, nothing is happening here, surely we must be able to go home. Why do you tighten your grip on me? She is not even looking at me. I don't think she knows we must go home immediately. Her eyes are fixed on something up above, but I can only see the backs of the people in front of us. Mom, could you at least tell me what you're looking at so we can go already?

I have to crane my neck but I can see it clearly. This odious relic of the past! How dare they come back? How dare they taunt us, how dare they want to feed us to their bonfire embellished with our skin and bones again? My veins are about to burst. I think my heart might stop pounding now any moment. Someone do something already!

"Let go." I said sternly. They're weeping on their knees. "Don't go," they beg me. My parents don't understand. The world is so much more vast than they could ever imagine. I still hear him. His voice rings in my ears. I hear him when I wake up. I hear him when I go to sleep. He haunts, no, visits me at night! I can even recite him by heart now. *We, the people of Indonesia, hereby declare independence*. I look them in the eyes and see reflected in it the rage of my people. My people. I walk towards the door of this hotel Yamato surrounded by the bodily heat and passion of my brothers and my sisters. We are invigorated, we will lean on each other, we will care for each other, as good brothers and sisters do!

A phantom comes gliding out of the hotel lobby. "I've come to negotiate," he says. Well, our demands are quite simple, really. "Take down that flag immediately." The turtles will one day accept that this land does not belong to them, our soil is not to be cultivated under the constant coming and going of the whip, our seas, vast and wide, navigated by us for centuries, will reveal its mighty constellations to guide us to us and us alone. This land has been of our ancestors and now it shall be ours. His thin lips form into a cruel smile. "No." he said, "The Republic of Indonesia does not exist!"

When the world ended, I ducked between my mom's long limbs. There was so much shouting, so much noise. I had never heard a noise so thunderous. I couldn't breathe. The shouting didn’t stop. I covered my eyes with my hands, I wished I could go home and wash up. I wished to be anywhere but here. The air smelled like iron. I feel something warm trickling down on me, but I am too afraid to look up. I wish my mom would hold me tighter, but her grip on me seems to be loosening. Why now? Mom, please just hold me this one time. I am scared. Maybe I should ask her to do it. I will ask her. Through my wet fingers, I see two men tearing off a singular blue stripe off a flag up on the roof. They hold up this red and white flag. I don't understand. Mom, why are you not holding me? Mom, why are you not answering? Answer me!

"MERDEKA! MERDEKA! (FREEDOM! FREEDOM!)" replies the crowd.

It is the morning of September 20, 1945. The city of Batavia, now Jakarta, awakens from its slumber. Some 450 miles to the east, the city of Surabaya, now the city of heroes, has been up all night. At 56 Jalan Pegangsaan Timur President Sukarno smiles to himself. He must be pleased. His heart must be filled with pride, for some 450 miles to the east, the spark of the revolution had caught fire and set ablaze the turtle's nest.

NOTICE TO THE NATION:

SAUDARA (BROTHERS AND SISTERS), YESTERDAY YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN SURABAYA HAVE MADE YOU PROUD. SAUDARA, YESTERDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, AT 9:00 P.M. TWO HEROES, HARIYONO AND KUSNO WIBOWO CLIMBED ONTO THE ROOF OF THE HOTEL YAMATO AND DESECRATED THE FLAG OF THE ENEMY. SAUDARA, IT IS OUR FLAG THAT IS BEING FLOWN ON THE HOTEL YAMATO NOW AND FOREVER. MERDEKA ATAU MATI! (FREEDOM OR DEATH!)

Surabaya is the city of heroes.

We don't feel the blisters at all!

Surabaya is the city of heroes.

Serve up the bowls of rice porridge cold, for all I care!

Surabaya is the city of heroes.

Sir, we don't need food when we have weapons plenty to feed our bellies!

Surabaya is the city of heroes.

Laugh all you want, now that you still can!

Today, too, shall come. Surabaya, the city of heroes, is in the eye of the storm. Today, too, shall go. Surabaya, bravely facing danger, is at the frontline of a nation. Below the horizon a great peril is forming. Let them come, for we are ready. And at last, when the sun glides back into the waves, the city bids farewell to the sun.