

## BAS VETH: A COLONIAL MUCKRAKER

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The Dutch East Indies is the incarnation of misery for me. The twelve years I spent in those regions of exile are like twelve horrible dreams. I found nothing uplifting there; there I found everything that depresses. Good people became bad; what blooms pales, what flowers withers, what shines dulls, what glows is extinguished: ideas, feelings, thoughts, illusions, the body and soul of the Europeans who have to live there, in short, everything that comes from the far west called Europe, and alights in the far east called the Dutch East Indies. Begin in Atjeh, follow the string of volcanos across Sumatra, Java, the Moluccas, Celebes, and end at the most northern tip of the Sangir Islands, and you will find the same thing everywhere: degeneration, the decomposition of the pure European temperament.<sup>1</sup>

This harsh denunciation of colonial Indonesia opens an unusually severe critique that was published in 1900 in Amsterdam with the title *Life in the Dutch East Indies*. The author's ire was never mitigated; when he left the East Indies he "kicked the dock for the last time and I probably swore when I did it." Within this angry ramification, Bas Veth (1860-1922) attacked just about every aspect of colonial existence, from dogs to sanitary habits. The book ends with a stichomythia of indignation, similar to the end of Multatuli's *Max Havelaar*.

I planned revenge all the time.  
I wanted to settle accounts, completely.  
I wanted to square accounts, once and for all.  
I wanted to settle with that life in the Dutch East Indies,  
completely, so I would never have to return.  
I wrote this book. (171-72)

The book became the one note of consequence in what was otherwise an undistinguished career. Little is known about this romantic businessman, who could have been a double of Stern, the sentimental brokerage clerk in *Max Havelaar*.

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1. The text used was a new edition: Bas Veth, *Het Leven in Nederlandsch Indië*, ed. Rob Nieuwenhuys (The Hague: Thomas & Eras, 1977). It is a shortened version of the original text published in 1900. Throughout the article figures in parentheses refer to page numbers in this text. In my translations, I have attempted to preserve Veth's idiosyncratic style with its numerous inversions, neologisms, implied but not stated verbs, and peculiar syntax. He also often leaves out clear references to antecedents. I have kept his haphazard italicizing and explanation of Malay words. The scant biographical information on Veth is drawn from the above edition and from: Rob Nieuwenhuys, *Oost-Indische Spiegel*, 3rd rev. ed. (Amsterdam: Querido, 1978), pp. 263-70.

Veth worshipped Heine, Byron, Wagner, Multatuli, and various Dutch romantic poets. Though born in Amsterdam, his most cherished memories were connected with vacations he spent as a youth in rural North Holland where he declaimed sentimental French tragedies to local farmers' daughters. One must assume that the necessity of earning a living forced Veth to become a businessman. He left for the Indies at the age of eighteen, and stayed for twelve years. He was employed in Celebes (Sulawesi), Sumatra, and Java as a dealer in "ongeregelde goederen," which I take to mean that he bought and sold liquidation stock.

One cannot help wondering if Veth's initial decision to go to the Indies was a romantic one, perhaps inspired by Multatuli's writings which influenced so many young men of Veth's generation. If so, his subsequent rancor might be due to disillusionment, for the reality of life in the Indies was ill-suited for nurturing romantic *Weltschmerz*, an affliction which Veth confessed he suffered from. Nor was his choice of employment a happy one, since dealing in "ongeregelde goederen," a kind of salvage business, was a far from genteel occupation. Such dealers were akin to commercial raiders who preyed on misfortune and were always on the lookout for cutthroat bargains they could turn into a quick profit. Inhabitants of such a rough-and-tumble world would have had little sympathy for aesthetic delicacy.

But these are surmises; we simply do not know a specific reason for Veth's unmatched virulence. Nor do we know very much about his life after he returned to Holland. He seems to have published other, now forgotten, texts, and lived a quiet life that did not warrant public attention. Yet for several years around the turn of the century his book was a battle cry for controversy, while his name became part of the Dutch language as the noun *basvetterij*, a synonym for "to crab" or "to grouch."

*Life in the Dutch East Indies* must have hit a nerve at the time. The book was reprinted four times, which made it something of a bestseller in those days, and it "unleashed a stream of letters to the editor, [as well as] articles, brochures, and pamphlets" that continued for years. The outraged vehemence of his detractors proved, according to his contemporary Otto Knaap, that Veth "had hit the nail on the head."<sup>2</sup> If so, one cannot entirely dismiss his critics, because hardly anything escapes Veth's demolition.

Veth's blistering contempt has a bitterness that classes his effort with Juvenal's misanthropic satire and not with the more tolerant subtlety of Horace. There is, for instance, no irony in his assault. Because he felt that he had been infected by the colonial "pest microbes" (22), Veth used invective as a prophylactic with the hope that potential victims who were still safe and healthy in Holland would avail themselves of his warnings to avoid future contamination. There is, therefore, and this is often true of satire, no ambivalence in his work. He does not want to amend vice, as Dryden claimed to have done, but would rather lance moral cancers, particularly those diagnosed as cupidity and hypocrisy. This does not prevent him from denouncing the colonial cuisine or sanitary habits as well.

The method of Veth's satire is akin to that genre's fundamental practice of reducing the complexity of life to simple terms. Satire is tyrannical and has no use for democracy; fairness and relativism would only dissipate the energy needed to better the enemy. Satire aims to draw blood and scorns negotiation, hoping to be, in Puttenham's phrase, "like the Porcupine that shoots sharpe

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2. *In de schommelstoel, Nederlandse Letterkunde over Indonesië van 1870 tot 1935*, ed. Rob Nieuwenhuys (Amsterdam: Querido, 1975), p. 75.

quils out in each angry line." Satire's denunciation is exclusive, and though this is by design and necessity, it is often used to brand the satirist a snob and his preferred society as conservative. Selective overstating, a device much favored by politicians as well, is a proper tool for "sham-smashing," as H. L. Mencken called the objective of his American brand of literary blood-letting. The satirist feels no compunction in pronouncing his opponent guilty on the basis of circumstantial evidence. Veth, for instance, condemns the Dutch colonial on the basis of what he eats and drinks, the hotels he frequents, and the physical condition of dogs and horses. There is no doubt that the satirist is prejudiced, but he cannot be otherwise since the desperate diseases of folly and vice require desperate measures. But there must be skill in his cauterization. The patient should not succumb, but should survive to be a living example.

Satire has no fixed style. Juvenal called its mode of expression a *farrago* or "hodge-podge" (*nostris farrago libelli*), and any stylistic weapon is allowed. Though Veth is not as great a writer as some of those mentioned before, he did have considerable talent and an impressive stylistic arsenal. In addition to straightforward execration, he made use of distortion (usually hyperbole), anecdotes, satirical lists (a device perfected by Rabelais), *reductio ad absurdum*, repetition, parody, neologisms, and the mixing of colloquial with literary Dutch. It is a deliberate style that is well aware of what it wants to do and how to do it. But it seems doubtful that Veth drew sustenance from the classic ages of satire. His master, it seems to me, was Multatuli and, in general, the Romantic movement; the latter provided him with the examples of Byron and Heine--Veth quotes both--as well as Crabbe in England and Jean-Paul in Germany.<sup>3</sup> Crabbe's satiric method, for instance, was based on realism and the firm belief that life was "a progressive disillusionment"; Veth's perception of life in the Indies was the same, while he too considered his method a realistic one in order to counsel prudence to young Europeans contemplating a career in the tropics.

Although Veth is prejudicial in his selectivity, hence untrue to actual experience, there is a compositional and symbolic order to his anatomy. His account is framed by the arrival of the innocent newcomer, his progressive disillusionment, and his repatriation which, rather than a joyous homecoming, has all the signs of a desperate flight. This obvious design has an oblique substratum indicative of Veth's negative attitude. It is manifested by associating static imagery with the Indies and kinetic imagery with Holland. This becomes especially clear in Veth's experience of nature.

Tropical nature is alien and oppressive. In what to many people would be a perverse inversion, tropical nature's fecundity and overpowering energy<sup>4</sup> is reduced by Veth to a sepulchral immobility; it is "heavy, broad, still, always tranquil [and] close . . . the landscape of the Indies does not provide joy" (35). The emblem of this inert torpor is the *waringin* tree which, described by Veth's neologism, is always "dead-dumb" ("*stil-stom*"). In contrast, European nature is a vivacious joy of exuberant good spirits, a Heraclitean *panta rhei*. The *waringin* tree in question was in the middle of the native market (*pasar*) in

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3. I consider Multatuli a Romantic; see my afterword to: Multatuli, *Max Havelaar or the Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company*, trans. Roy Edwards (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), pp. 338-78.

4. Aldous Huxley, for example, in what seems to me a correct view of tropical nature vis-à-vis the European or British one. See the essay "Wordsworth in the Tropics," in Aldous Huxley, *Collected Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 1-10.

the town of "Payacombo" (in Dutch more commonly spelled Pajo Koemboeh) in western Sumatra.<sup>5</sup>

A waringin tree is an incredibly large tree, very venerable, the patriarch of tree people. Strings of aerial roots are suspended from its branches, its leaves are tiny, but it has millions of them. At first I felt nothing but admiration and I kept on contemplating those waringin trees. The first time I saw them they stood there dead-dumb, dead-dumb in the pasar. Not a leaf stirred and the aerial roots hung down limply and languidly, immobile. And I left Payacombo full of respect for those magnificent waringin trees. They seemed to me to be symbols of the tropics's luxuriant nature. Such power! Such an abundance of creative potential. In Europe a waringin tree would shade a city square. I experienced a feeling of holiness and I began to understand why a childlike people considers the waringins sacred.

And again I partook of the banality of mercantile life. A year later I was in Payacombo for a second time and I was stretched out in a long chair on the hotel's front veranda. The waringin trees stood dead-dumb in the pasar. Not one of the millions of tiny leaves stirred and the aerial roots hung down limply and languidly, immobile. I was in Payacombo in 1887, 1888, 1889, 1890, 1891, and for the last time in 1897. The waringin trees stood there always and always dead-dumb in the pasar and not one of the millions of tiny leaves stirred and the aerial roots hung down limply and languidly, immobile. I have seen it rain in Payacombo, have seen it thunder, and seen lightning, there was even a breath of a wind now and then. But those waringin trees stood there always, always dead-dumb in the pasar. Not even the wind seemed able to move them and there never issued a mysterious whispering from that army of leaves, no matter how hard it blew. And one afternoon, while I was dreaming in my long chair with those dead-dumb waringins in front of me, I fell asleep and I suddenly saw a row of poplars moving deliciously back and forth, nodding their heads in a stately fashion, I heard the language of rustling leaves in a wood of beech trees, there was a stirring in a forest of oaks and acorns fell, bouncing so marvelously on the dry fallen leaves, a bird sang and white clouds floated in a blue sky. There was a murmuring wind and fresh air. And I lamented: take me away from here and put me under a willow tree near a ditch in Holland, but let me not waste away under these dead-dumb waringins. . . . Do you understand now why I think that European nature is more beautiful than the one in the Indies? The rice fields and other crops do indeed bring life and variation, but

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5. Pajo Koemboeh was the name for both the town and a district in western Sumatra, above the median of that large island, in the mountains of what used to be called the "Padang Highlands." This area was much favored because of its mild climate, due to its elevation of some sixteen hundred feet above sea level. Abundant rain made it ideal for growing such lucrative crops as coconuts, tobacco, and cacao. After several good roads had been built and a railroad connection had been established, the town of Pajo Koemboeh became an important market place, where thousands of people from the Minangkabau region came to buy and sell on Sundays. The huge waringins in the *pasar* or central market were famous. The name derives from *pajo*, "a swamp," and *koemboeh* (*kumbuh*) a kind of reedlike grass.

without them, and without the monkeys in the jungles, there's wellnigh the silence and peace and loneliness of the grave, even if everything is green and a formidable hot sun is burning. (38-39)

It doesn't take long for Veth's dislike to become all inclusive.

And it is always hot, hot, hot, and again hot, always. Nature and climate ruin the European. That eternal green and boring blue do not inspire him but numb. The vernal smile is not known in the Indies, but they are well acquainted with the dazed, apathetic tropical grin. I am not a great admirer of Indies's nature. She is almost always boring, she does not comfort, she does not inspire, because she does not speak to us. To be sure, she is magnificent now and then, but it is a dead magnificence. Nothing sways there, nothing rustles, there is no stiff breeze, there are no skies, no beautiful drifting clouds, no mingling of shades. (20)

Like Kay in Andersen's tale "The Snow Queen," a piece of the demon's mirror seems to have lodged itself in Veth's soul. Even a splinter of it could turn a person's heart into a lump of ice, make the most beautiful landscape look like "boiled spinach," and "distorted everything they looked at, or made them see everything that was amiss." For Veth even manages to turn the tropics into a kind of winter. He asserts that for the returning European, the mere promise of Holland is enough "to thaw the glaciation of the Indies" (107).

Consistent with the general reductive pattern of Veth's satire, one will find that the lifelessness of tropical nature is duplicated by the physical deterioration of the Europeans, particularly the women. They strike Veth, "almost without exception," as suffering from "severe anemia" that is evident in "their dull, hollow eyes, in the limp, colorless ears [and] in their vacant expression." Their life in the Indies is a living death. "European women who go to the Indies in good health impress those who see them upon their return after several years' residence 'as if they have died already.' They died while they lived in the Indies. They return like ghosts." The same thing happened to the British woman in India. She too was not considered a true "memsahib" until "she has lost her pretty color--that always goes first, and has gained a shadowy ring under each eye--that always comes afterwards."<sup>6</sup>

But the centerpiece of Veth's description is the "Indies man" and everything that pertains to him. Veth is not referring to a person of mixed blood, as was the more common meaning of the term at that time, but to the full-blooded European, or *totok*. (There's the same confusion here as with the term "Anglo-Indian" in colonial India. It originally referred exclusively to British people living in that colony, but by the end of the nineteenth century it meant specifically a person of mixed blood, later known as a "Eurasian.") Using one of satire's favorite techniques, Veth reduces the "Indies man" to a robot in the service of Mammon.

The real reason the Dutch are in the Dutch East Indies is business, business in the larger sense of trade, agriculture, industry, and mining. If the Indies no longer produced coffee, sugar, tobacco, and other products, and if the millions of Natives [sic] preferred to walk around naked or in clothes they manufactured themselves, and there was no more gold, petroleum, or tin, then all the Europeans

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6. Michael Edwards, *Bound to Exile. The Victorians in India* (1969; U.S. ed. New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 161.

would pack their bags and leave the place, never to return. The bureaucrats, the officers, and the merchants would simply be gone. We're in the East in order to buy products and to sell articles made by European industry.

Veth even used the taboo subject of sex to illustrate one of the ways the European male is destroyed by the Indies. Not concerned with the fate of the native woman, Veth seems to regard her association with a white male as a form of iniquitous vengeance. Clearly, succumbing to a native woman is tantamount to surrendering to a dangerous lure:

Let Native men live with Native women according to their customs-- which can be sweet at times, naive, even pure. There's much that's holy in their rites and in the simplicity of their lives, as long as they've not been tainted by European contact, and hence instructive to us westerners. But I'd rather see a European keep a marvelous dog or a fine horse than a Native woman. Where it concerns a man and a woman living together I pay no attention to class, nor do I really care about racial differences. I will acknowledge all relationships, but I will never approve of a European associating with a Native woman. It is a relationship that dishonors both. Whatever beauty a European lodges in his soul cannot be expressed when he lives with a Native woman. Whatever beauty lodges in her soul cannot be expressed when she lives with a European. The two are worse than strangers. They are spiritual enemies.

Veth is consistent in his denunciation of the "white barbarians." The only time an Indies man mentions God is when he swears; he is an inveterate booze hound; he has no class, no style, no culture; he loves dirty jokes and his notions about women are on a level with a "quadruped." Having frozen his enemy into a uniform type, Veth expands the portrait by fitting the "Indies man" into a larger classification. The only aspect of colonial life in the Indies to elicit Veth's approval is the club, or *soos* as it was called by the Dutch. It was the one institution that he considered to have class and the only place where he felt "European." For the rest, he portrays colonial society as comprising a collection of puppets manufactured to demonstrate an absurd form of etiquette. They will "introduce themselves to the most impossible people at the most impossible times and places. . . . In the Indies you only become a person after you have introduced yourself." He provides a grotesque list of instances when this ceremony will take place, illustrated by a number of anecdotes, one of which took place in the Moluccas. Some naval officers were introduced to a "clump" of ladies during an official reception. One of the officers found himself next to a woman who had joined the reception *after* he and his fellow officers had been introduced. He was not aware of that, yet he is cold shouldered. When she turns her back on him he asks what he did wrong, and "there issued a snarl from the mouth of the beauty: 'You are not permitted to speak to me, you have not been introduced. I don't know you.'"

Members of Indies society were best observed in hotels. There "everybody is treated equally, everybody pays five or six guilders a day, and the gin that's on the front veranda is offered free to moderate drinkers as well as alcoholics, to the high and mighty as well as to the little man. There is one class, one gin for *all* the guests in an Indies hotel. Such democracy!"

The Indies man's favorite stomping ground (besides the club) was an abomination for Veth. "Oh, that hotel life in the Indies! It's simply awful, only pigs and insensitive Indies people can feel comfortable there." The bill of fare only made it worse. "What an unsavory pool stinks in an Indies hotel!

And the food! The rijsttafel in a hotel . . . is simply awful; the steak and potatoes that follow later taste of rancid coconut oil. You get up even hungrier than when you sat down. And some of the guests have such weird mugs! We apparently become strange and peculiar creatures after we've been in the Indies for several years."

If one reflects on Veth's portrayal of the Indies man and his generally negative interpretation of tropical nature and society, one realizes that he has performed the rare feat of transforming Multatuli's "emerald belt" of islands into a sepulcher. Bas Veth's glacial anatomy of tropical life in the colonial Indies is a book of death. Sin, sorrow, decay, and death are loathsome consequences if a man leaves the Eden of Holland for the benighted wilderness of the Indies where his pursuit of money is nothing but an excremental vice. Life in the Indies is an inhumation. Most appropriately, Veth ends his Stygian account with the real blackness of death. It fits the symbolic pattern of his book by turning the natural, moral, and societal quarantine of the colonial island realm into a real, but infernal archipelago. To be sure, he allows himself to escape, but for most inmates the captivity became permanent due to physical death. This ineluctable reality reminds us of the realism of satire when, as Swift did so masterfully, the mocking mask is removed to display the mirthless face of fact. The sudden, swift death from tropical disease was a cold certainty for the European usurpers. As a repatriated Englishman wrote in a melancholy poem about India: "death and sickness" is "the tribute that we pay . . . as the price of Oriental sway."<sup>7</sup>

Functioning like a coda, Veth concludes his book with four vignettes that are like snapshots of death and disease. As if to emphasize that this ultimate reality needs no embellishment, they are written in a simple and direct prose. The bulk of *Life in the Dutch East Indies* was written with a crabbed eloquence, replete with neologisms, stylistic inversions, baroque amplification, and hyperbolic repetition. But it appears Veth realized that his parting shot would be more persuasive if the facts were left to speak for themselves. Compositionally, the vignettes also recapitulate the book's narrative structure because Veth's port of entry in the Indies was the harbor of Padang in western Sumatra. He described his arrival with little enthusiasm, perhaps due to his melancholy realization that his sentence of exile seemed without parole. The last vignette of life in the Indies takes place in Padang as well, and it also describes the arrival of a ship. But this time it is a hospital ship. Its passengers are beriberi sufferers. This is the final leveling down to a democracy of death. The patients are Europeans, native soldiers, as well as convicted criminals. For all of them it is the end of the line; the grimace has turned grim and colonization discloses itself as a real and lethal disease. It is the bleak fulfillment of the book's motto, taken from the inscription above the entrance to Dante's *Inferno*: "Abandon all hope you who enter here." In a larger sense it also prophesied the ultimate demise of European colonialism.

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7. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

## VIGNETTES OF THE INDIES

*Blackness*

## I

It was dusk. A procession hurried along Nipah Avenue--the avenue of swamp palms.<sup>8</sup> In front walks a Native mandur<sup>9</sup> from the chaingang barracks with a *badiëntje*<sup>10</sup> in his hand, a small stylish walking stick, and with a white band around his arm.

Then, as if floating in the air, a somber object: a wooden, triangular roof, painted black, two meters long, bouncing on top of several bamboos that rest on the shoulders of black, human shapes--chaingang convicts who are acting as pallbearers. Underneath that black roof lies the corpse, the corpse of one of their comrades who has just succumbed to cholera:<sup>11</sup> he is the tenth casualty today in the chaingang barracks.

The corpse was quickly wrapped in a piece of Madapollam,<sup>12</sup> soaked with carbolic acid, laid on a *tikar* (mat) and put under the black roof. And one, two, three, the roof floats in the air already, bouncing on the bamboos that creak and squeak under the weight.

And now at a trot to the graveyard, to the graveyard for convicts. Behind the bouncing roof follow two laconic grave diggers, also chaingang convicts, who very cleverly carry their spades on their shoulders as if they're playing soldier. Every so often the procession goes faster and the bamboos squeak louder and the roof heaves up and down as if at sea and the grave diggers shuffle along with the spades on their shoulders.

From the Nipah Avenue, along the Muara,<sup>13</sup> to the beach, that's where the convicts' graveyard is. Dusk has almost turned into night. The sea is black and the black waves beat against the beach. The hurried procession has arrived. Quickly the grave diggers take the spades from their shoulders and dig a grave

8. The nipa(h) palm is the *Nipa fruticans* palm that has a short trunk and grows mainly in swampy areas in brackish water. Its leaves were used as *atap*, the most common of roofing materials.

9. *Mandur*, from the Portuguese *mandador*, was the title of a native overseer or foreman.

10. *Badiëntje* is the Dutch spelling of the French *badine*. It refers to a small stick or riding crop, usually made of rotan. It was flexible and light.

11. Cholera was particularly lethal to the European population. Caused by the cholera bacillus, it was a very contagious disease that was most often contracted from the drinking water and the lack of hygiene when dealing with cholera patients. Symptoms were severe diarrhea, vomiting, cramps, dehydration. Cholera was, in Veth's time, usually fatal.

12. Madapollam cloth was a stiff, heavy, calico cotton cloth originally woven near the town of Madapollam in the Madras residency in India.

13. Although Veth capitalizes it, "Muara" is not a proper name but was the general term in Sumatra for the "mouth" of a river.

right next to the waves. The black object has been put on the ground; it is lifted off the bamboos and the corpse is shoved into the hole next to the waves. The hole is quickly kicked full with sea sand, some stamping down with the feet and a couple of blows with the flat of the spades.

Finished.

They all march back to the barracks where the cholera is raging. Tomorrow the mandur and the laconic grave diggers will take the same route--but they might be under the black roof themselves, and be buried on the beach, where the black waves splash.

## II

The cholera raged in epidemic proportions. In the kampongs the Natives died like rats and mice. In the Chinese quarter things weren't quite right either--every day there were five, six, ten cases. But the cholera had still spared the European population of the place.

At night the conversations were all about this macabre subject; and around the gossip table it was said that as many as a hundred Natives were dying each day, died from cholera. They had seen them drop, saw them die in convulsions before their very eyes. A lot of cognac is consumed.

Suddenly: a shock, a shudder went through the European community. Did you know: Mr. A. has cholera. The first European to be attacked by the hideous disease. And that afternoon Mr. A. is dead, died from cholera. It's as if everyone is overcome by terror. They are oh so afraid.

Even the undertakers shrink back from their task. The corpse of the cholera patient is not removed and the families who live next door to the deceased complain to the assistant resident of police, whining from cholera fear, claiming that the corpse is stinking already and that the stench is driving them from their homes. And a note is written to the warden of the jail: "Provide a couple of convicts to bury Mr. A's corpse around eight."

At eight, Native prisoners carry a rough black box into the room where the corpse of the cholera patient is lying. With great indolence--fatalism, the chains and their somber lives lead to indolence--with great indolence the unfortunate chaingang convicts put the corpse in the box.

And now to the European graveyard. Quick.

Neither kith nor kin, neither friend nor foe, follows the somber procession, wait, yes, there's one, one lone friend. A grave has been hastily dug in the European cemetery. Around nine o'clock, in the dark of night, the procession of blue clad convicts approaches the cemetery with the cholera corpse.

A lantern in front, a lantern in the rear, two crocks of carbolic acid. The graveyard supervisor and the warden are standing by the hole, waiting for the procession.

Javanese oh-sounds from the mouths of the convicts, the pounding of footsteps approaching, approaching the grave.

Dull lanternlight. The black box. Lower it into the hole as quickly as possible; the crocks of carbolic acid cluck while they're emptied over it. Everything taken care of. Burial of a cholera victim; the first case among the Europeans of the place.

No friends, no flowers, no minister. Sinister removal to the graveyard, then hiding it beneath the earth.

### III

I had taken my bath at six in the morning and was drinking my cup of coffee and reading the paper in my long chair.

"Tuwan." I look up. A Native boy with a piece of paper. "Mr. W. died last night. The funeral will be at five this afternoon." And a name under it. Must be a friend. Mr. W. Yes, I knew his liver had been bothering him for some time. He complained a lot when I saw him recently. Oh, there's B., a good friend of W., riding into my yard; he's got to know more about this affair.

"Good morning; you've heard already, right? W. is dead. Happened sooner than people thought. Had to have an operation because of a liver abscess. The operation yesterday went very well, but W. died last night from some complication that the doctors hadn't counted on. Well, he's dead."

"You're also going to the cemetery this afternoon?"

"Yes."

Had to go out burying this afternoon. Came home from work at four, an unusual hour. Black pants and jacket, black gloves, white tie, top hat. It's still very hot. Sweating in the black suit, drove to the house of the deceased in a dos-à-dos.

The box was just being carried outside.

Funeral procession.

Walk through the cemetery to the grave.

Box carried by undertakers.

The friends behind it, also the minister.

Everyone has been called away from work or has just gotten up from their siesta.

In full daylight, at five in the afternoon, the faces look remarkably disheveled, so yellow, so tired, so funereal. The cohort itself looks like a succession of corpses behind a corpse. And the costumes that are supposed to be black! Many suits are green-gray, brownish instead of black. A display of old clothes. Hardly anyone fits in his black jacket and the trousers are too short. And in those green, gray, brown-yellow, old fashioned mourning clothes the ashen friends follow the box, some of them wear round hats that are brown or gray.

The minister speaks by the grave.

That's the way it's supposed to be, they say.

The friends and acquaintances around it.

The hole is half filled with water; it rained during the night and in the morning. The box is lowered into the hole, plop, disappears about halfway into the filthy liquid.

Some flowers are tossed in; a few spadefuls of earth on the already wet lid of the box.

The corpse of the man who we were yesterday congratulating around five on his successful operation plops today at five into a grave half full with water.

#### IV

They signal the boat from Atjeh from the tall signal post on the other side of the Padang River.

The people who rent out carriages saw the signal and hurried to get the mylords, victorias, and calèches out of the sheds that are supposed to be coachhouses--old, rickety, dilapidated, faded vehicles and coachmen hasten to harness the miserable nags, those equine ghosts of Rosinante.

And then the ferocious rush to the landing by the Muara, over the roads of Padang, and if it hasn't rained for a long time the clouds of dust whirled behind the vehicles, dust that penetrated everywhere, into all the houses along the road. The cracking of whips and the shouts of the drivers. A wild chase. And soon after the signal, rings were hoisted on the signpost, black rings. One, two, three, four, five.

From the hospital they were keeping an eye on the number of rings that were raised. And they hurried to collect tandus--litters--and chaingang convicts to carry them. Every black ring on the signpost meant that there was a need for ten or twelve tandus, and they kept on adding new, black rings--six--seven. They stop hoisting them: seventy tandus. That is to say: seventy sick or severely wounded men were on board the boat from Atjeh, and they were so ill or infirm that they could only be transported by litter from the wharf to the hospital.

And those carriages--the worst of Padang's carriage business--serve to transport the sick who can still walk a little, just enough to go down the wharf to the Muara.

And little by little everything is collected near the Muara. And now it's nothing but wait, wait by the moorings. The big steam launch that was sent to the Atjeh boat, now anchored in the roads of Pulu-Pisang, still hasn't come back. Finally, finally the steam whistle is heard behind Monkey Mountain and the launch comes around the Whale--the large, smooth rock at the foot of the mountain--to go up river, and docks. Then the sick and wounded are carted off.

Many hang down limply, they can't move anymore. Most are beriberi sufferers--European and Native soldiers, and convicts as well. Those who can, still walk, some are put in the carriages. The seriously ill, those who are near dying, and those who have died already, are carried in the tandus.

The drivers are back on their seats.

Cracking of whips. And they proceed along the Muara. The beriberi patients who are riding, are driven at a gallop to the hospital. They're followed by the procession of tandus. It goes calmly, very calmly. One after the other,

the tandus pass by very slowly. And in each tandu is a seriously ill patient or a dying one, or a dying beriberi patient.

There are countless tandus. Another one, another, and yet another. And yes, finally the last one, the last one that disappears through the gate of the hospital.

The beriberi procession is over.