

My name is Ratu Rizkitasari Saraswati, and you may call me Saras.

I'd like to start by sharing a prayer from the Prophet Musa, or Moses, or Moshe. I've always said this prayer in my heart when sharing stories. "My Lord, expand for me my breast [with assurance] and ease for me my task, and untie the knot from my tongue. That they may understand my speech."

In this performance, I am going to share with you the experience I have since returning to Indonesia this dry season and coming back to the Netherlands experiencing my third summer and autumn in this land. These stories I am going to share are inspired by the experiences, encounters, conversations I have with people and observations of transformative nature in Molenwijk. Things that could and should be said, and things that couldn't be said, as far as my concerns to myself and people around me. Knowing that, unfortunately, there are such limits that apply to someone like me, in this land. I would prefer to express it in writing and tell these stories in the form of parables, poems, and proverbs that come before me and after me. I hope they will go through us. Please bear in mind, all comes from care, otherwise as an artist I have no creation to share.

Laju-laju perahu laju, jiwa manis indung disayang.. Indung, indung, indung, indung, indung, sayang.

Sail, sail the ship away, sweet soul motherly love... mother, mother, mother, my dear mother.

Parable of the Tongue

While living in the North, the southern woman often felt pain radiating from her tongue. She does not know where it came from, why and since when.

When she returns to the South, she goes to see a master by his own means in her hometown to find out the cause of the pain in her tongue.

First mountain passed, second mountain passed.

After examining the woman's tongue, the master explains to her, "Your tongue is getting bigger, wider, swollen. Don't you realize?"

"How so, sir?" asks the woman.

"Your body has two seasons, the North has four seasons," he continues his reasoning. "The water in your body seeks their landscape. As we speak now, your swollen tongue is squeezed between your own teeth. You are biting your tongue from time to time. For sure, it is causing constant wounds."

All the way home, the woman tries to stick her tongue out, as far as she can, then she finally can see it. Her tongue has wavy edges following the shape of her own teeth, the lines are formed by very deep strokes. She chokes up over what she sees happening in her body. "He... is... right... I... did... not... realize... it..."

Second mountain passed, first mountain passed.

She eventually can collect herself as she arrives in front of her house. She says to herself, "How come, I've been talking with a wounded tongue all this time."

Steel posts make a fence

Brick stacks make a wall

Tooth rows make a fort

And a fellow suggested to her, "Rest your tongue."

"But I think my tongue is bigger than my mouth."

"How could I rest my tongue?"

"Should I stick my tongue out?"

First rice field passed

Second sea passed

Third coconut tree passed

Fourth day passed

Fifth year passed

Sixth decade passed

Seventh century passed

The wiseman says, "You shouldn't begin praying when your stomach is empty. Eat first, then you pray."

Therefore, they go to the kitchen where their only food is stored. Each of them chews one grain of rice, one grain of salt, and one drop of oil.

Berapa banyak nasi yang dibutuhkan untuk seseorang berdaya mengangkat jarinya?

How much rice should one eat to lift a finger?

How many potatoes should one eat to feed an entire village?

How many bites of apples should one eat to speak this very line?

“Abundance is to share apples with wasps.”

Wasps, wespen, tawon

*** Saras sips water

Last September, by coincidence I attended and participated in a funeral prayer, a shalat janazah, for a woman in Mosque Nasr in Indischebuurt.

And then we go to the poem.

Do you know that there is no scarcity in heaven?

Is that true that there is no scarcity in heaven?

Who told you that there is no scarcity in heaven?

Weet jij dat er geen tekorten in de Hemel zijn?

Is het waar dat er geen tekorten in de Hemel zijn?

Wie heeft jou verteld dat er geen tekorten in de Hemel zijn?

Humming "Indung, indung, indung, sayang..."

There is a parable that my teacher told me in school, which I still remember to this day. A man (it is a man, not a woman, I remember it vividly). A man walks in the neighbourhood after eating his meal. He feels that there is a little piece of food stuck between his teeth. It annoys him, it disturbs him very much. When he passed by a neighbour's house with a wooden fence, with his hands, he peels a chip of a splinter from the wooden fence and uses it as a toothpick.

And that splinter of wood later becomes the very thing that hinders him stepping into God's heaven. That very splinter that he takes without permission from the owner.

Humming "Indung, indung, indung, indung, indung, sayang..."

Mother, mother, mother, my dear mother

Now, we go to the next parable.

Parable of the Crocuses

In the South, there is a special crocus flower that grows in the valley between mountains. The name is zafran although here they called them saffron crocus. When it is blooming, we can find long thin threads surrounded by delicate purple petals. In natural science, the thread is called stigma. People use these threads as spices for cooking special dishes. Harvesting these threads is a rather laborious effort because only steady hands can pick them delicately and precisely. Since they are rare, people only cook them in the harvest season with the rice from the field.

No longer living in her motherland, a woman from the south longs for the taste of this special dish. The warm, savoury, and fragrant saffron rice would warm anybody's heart in this autumn's cold weather. Tak dinyana, on one of her walks, she found a bed of saffron crocuses in the forest in the outskirts of a neighbourhood by coincidence.

With a heart full of hopes, she comes by every day to water the crocus. Imagining that one day in autumn, just before the sunrise, she could harvest the threads. Imagining that she will finally cook saffron rice and share it with people.

As she walks to the forest every day she bumps into a neighbour, a southern man. The man offers her food any time she needs it. "If you need anything, I am just a pebble's throw away", he says. "Oh, thank you for your kind offer. I will think about it."

On further days of autumn, we know that leaves fall perpetually. After counting the layers of leaves, she knows that finally the harvest day has come! So she walks to the forest to gather the saffron threads. When she arrives there, she is so shocked. Tak dinyana, all crocuses have gone! How saddening, she could have had the taste of home. But the chance is gone now.

"Who took those flowers? I am the one who cared for them. But.. am I the only one who waters them? This is a forest after all. Anyone could water them, anyone could have them", these questions are running through her mind.

Misery and sorrow. The sadness dwells in her. She becomes sick. She could not eat anything for days.

Walking outside, she sees the neighbour again and asks him if she can have the food he offered the other day. Then, she explains her condition to him.

He asks her, "Why can't you eat? On days like this, do not starve yourself". Then, she shares with him, "I lost everything I wish to have. But, last night I thought and prayed to God. Now, I realized that I do not own anything in this world. Not a flower, not a fruit, even life and death is not for me to own."

That evening, he comes to bring the food. How surprising, the food that he brought. A special dish she wishes to cook with the threads of saffron crocus. She asks him, "How could you find the threads to cook this dish?"

"My friend is a merchant from the South. He sells these threads from the South for a living. You should come to his shop in the town", he answers.

"This thread is something that I've lost", she remarks.

"You should have just told me from the beginning. I could give you for free, you know!" he exclaims enthusiastically.

Little did she know, those flowers in the forest are not saffron crocus. They are false crocus, colchicum flowers. They are poisonous, only a small amount can be a medicine for those who know how to use them.

Saffron crocus could not grow here, not in this climate.

Now, we go to the next parable.

Parable of the Falling Leaves

In the late autumn, a woman decided to plant crocus bulbs ahead of the spring time.

It is not saffron crocus, but at least the shape and colour look similar. So it may bring home to her.

She plants bulbs in the front yard of her house, as many as she can afford, attempting to make her front yard look like her motherland.

-----The falling leaves cover land.

“May these leaves decay and nourish the land”, that’s how her mother taught her. That’s how we pray for the nourishment of the land.

-----This nourishment is abundant.

Every day the new falling leaves make another layer, perpetually.

The woman’s crocus bulbs start to take root ahead of the spring time.

“The weather is a lot warmer than usual, that is uncanny. Maybe this is why they grow so fast”, she thought. The crocus starts sprouting this autumn.

-----The falling leaves cover paths

A man knocks on her door, bringing her the saffron rice. She feels grateful for the food.

She thanks the man for this, the share of longing for home. He then turns his back and is about to leave. As she is waving goodbye to him, she looks at her front yard and she realizes there are footsteps everywhere. The man has stepped on her sprouting bulbs. Some bulbs are crushed.

“Why did you step on my bulbs, sir?”

“I do not see any path. In here, the North, people can walk wherever they want. You should know that!”

“The path is there if you watch your steps”, she tries to reason with him, while feeling intimidated, trembling, and afraid.

“No, no, no, I do not see any path, I see the falling leaves. It is now the season for the falling leaves. How come a woman like yourself does not know that? How many autumns have you experienced?”

“You are living in the North now, the North has four seasons. Not like in our homelands of South, there we have two seasons”, he continues explaining to her relentlessly and then leaves with more footsteps everywhere on the ground.

She is shocked, once again, grieving for the loss of flowers.

----- The falling leaves cover land

----- The falling leaves cover paths

Not all the falling leaves fall into place.

Not all abundance falls into place.

This abundance is everywhere, overwhelming. It takes such patience to orientate yourself.

On another day, some remaining crocus bulbs continue sprouting. Another man knocks on her door. She opens her door and greets the person. Looking at the front yard, she sees footsteps everywhere. The remaining bulbs are crushed into pieces.

“Why did you step on my bulbs, sir?”

“I do not see any path. Here, in the North, anyone can walk anywhere they want. It is the norm. My land is a free land”, he says.

“... And step on the living crocuses, too?”, she replies.

She feels her body crush like the bulbs. She feels like her guts are coming out through her throat. *Isi perutnya seakan ingin keluar dari tubuhnya.*

About a month ago, Megan asked me an essential question at our meeting here in Werkplaats. She asked me what the limit of a conversation is for me.

Then, I remember the conversation with Khalid when we talked about freedom of speech in the Netherlands. He says freedom of speech is important for democracy, but it should go together with respect. As I understood from him, freedom of speech is an important tool to address things that are unjust and not right, so we can find a solution together. But words without respect, coming from prejudices, push both sides away even further instead of opening up opportunities for reflection and transformation. Polarization, I am supposed to say.

So, to answer Megan's question, I said, “The limit of conversation to me is as long as there is mutual respect. If I could still tolerate the other person’s values. However, I also realize that this tolerance is a reflection of my own values, what I stand for, what I believe in.”

As for now, to end “The Parable of Falling Leaves”, I would like to borrow the last line of Kafka’s parable titled “Rejection”.

“Hadn’t we better just go our separate ways home?”

Humming "Indung, indung, indung, sayang..."

Since we are talking about paths... Do you know the path that is formed by repeated walks of people when they find a route that is more convenient to them, the most practical route? In English, they called it the desired path, in Dutch they called it een olifantenpad, the **elephant path**. Hannah brought this up to me in our conversation in Werkplaats a while ago.

And then it raises a question for me. The elephant is not native to this continent, Europe. Their habitat is in Asia and Africa. I wonder, how do they, the people who invent the phrase, know very well about the path of elephants?

They must have been there long enough to know about the elephants' life.

The Two Gardens

Some people have their garden very neat, everything is done very precise. The distance between every tree is measured the same. No falling leaves can be found.

Some people have their garden untidy. The greeneries and weeds grow anywhere they are destined to be. The falling leaves are everywhere.

Only birds can decide which garden they want to build a nest in.

In Molenwijk, the robins like to visit Wipmolentuin, a community garden behind the Wipmolen apartment building. These birds like to play under the shade of the beech tree. This makes me curious, what brings the robins to Wipmolen garden? My curiosity brings me to Annie, a woman who initiates this garden.

Annie moved to Molenwijk from Friesland 32 years ago. Back then the neighbourhood was chaotic and dirty, with garbage thrown from balconies between the plants. She didn't want to live in such an environment, and realized she had a choice between grumbling about it or doing something about it. She decided to do the latter, but she couldn't do it alone.

A rising flower makes a garden

Een ontluikende bloem maakt een tuin

Sebuah bunga tumbuh menjadikannya sebuah taman

After finding some other fellow residents to help, she went to the municipality to inform them that they would maintain the garden behind the Wipmolen. The city official was sceptical, saying he didn't expect her to keep that up for more than a year. She insisted she would, and asked if the official would like to live behind a garden overgrown with rubbish and nettles. Since he did not, why did he think she would?

In the end she received garden tools from the city, which she still has, and a basket of flower bulbs to plant for the first 5 years. And this garden still stands there after 30 years.

Every Monday when the weather is good, she works in the garden with her neighbours Heleen and Annie. If someone in the flat is sick or has a birthday, Annie often picks some flowers from the garden to give as a bouquet. The neighbours appreciate that, which also makes them less inclined to throw garbage between those flower plants. She likes to be able to chip in to make people happy. Annie takes me and Ivan, who helps as interpreter, to the Wipmolen garden after we have a conversation in her living room. She leads the way to enter the garden. "Follow the path", she says to us. She shows us the pink rose among other plants. Rose is her favourite flower. I ask her if I can come visit the garden tomorrow to take pictures and she says that everybody can visit the garden. She also invites me to join her in gardening on Monday.

The next day, I come to the garden with a camera. I want to take a picture of the rose. If we have a photo of the rose, we can see the rose even in winter. I think a photo of a rose will look best if I see it from the front angle where we can see layers of petals, blooming like a crown. I come closer, closer, closer to get the most beautiful picture of the front angle. Then, I walk around the rose attempting to capture all possible angles. Until I stand behind the rose, I aim my camera higher so I can capture the rose with the tall beech tree together. The view of the rose from behind shows how the flower is connected to the stem, it is not the same as the blooming crown that looks prettier to me. But from this angle, we can see how this flower grows in between apartment buildings in Molenwijk.

While trying to find the right angle, I become aware of my steps. Then I realize my steps are traced on the exposed ground in front of the rose. I was not on the path before and I did not realize that.

--- **The falling leaves cover paths**

Leaves in many shapes and different colours overlap in many layers. I did not see the path.

--- **The abundance is overwhelming, I need to orientate myself.**

On Monday, while helping out Annie and Hella in the garden, I ask Annie if I can step off the path. She says I can. It makes sense because I help to tend the shrubs and other greenery that spreads over the whole garden. I told myself that I need to watch my steps so I will not step on the plants. While being there, I feel the garden immersively. I realize that I breathe among living beings.

I share with Annie my lines of poems:

Do you know that there is no scarcity in heaven?

Is that true that there is no scarcity in heaven?

Who told you that there is no scarcity in heaven?

She responds by asking me a question:

“How do you envision heaven?”

“I think of a vast landscape with fields of grass, trees, blooming flowers, and abundant fruit.”

“What about you?”, I asked. “How do you envision heaven?”

“I think heaven is above us, in the sky. I think of the sun, the moon, the stars, clouds, and rain”

“Hoe zie jij de Hemel voor je?”

“Ik stel het me voor als een enorm landschap met grasvelden, bomen, bloeiende bloemen, en overvloedig fruit.”

“En jij?”, vroeg ik. “Hoe zie jij de Hemel voor je? “

“Ik denk dat de Hemel boven ons is, in de lucht. Ik denk aan de zon, de maan, de sterren, wolken en regen.”

To me, heaven is earth-like, but without scarcity

To her, heaven is celestial, the universe that keeps expanding.

On Friday, 18th November, I visited Annie and asked her again about her vision of heaven, **then she said, heaven is when people help each other, in this world we live in. When someone does not have food, they will not think of heaven. They need someone to help them, they need a neighbour to help them. She said her answer is inspired by a poem.**

At 11.36 before noon, Annie shared the poem with me and Ivan. This poem was also an eulogy according to her.

Sometimes you meet a human

Sometimes you meet a human
with whom you can be
as you are:
Uncertain and small
Someone with whom you find safety
and know that despite your mistakes,
you are beloved.

Sometimes you meet a human
with a warm-feeling heart,
there you feel sheltered
in suffering and grief.
In feeling knowledge that,
without asking,
you will be assisted
carrying your worries.

Sometimes you meet a human
who asks your warmth
and to whom you bear
your deepest love.
This creates harmony,
makes it good to live:
What was gifted to you
you may pass on.

By Zuster Christa,
Ons Blad, summer 1984, Apostolate of Prayer, Nijmegen.

Soms ontmoet je een mens

Soms ontmoet je een mens
bij wie je mag zijn
zoals je bent:
onzeker en klein.
Iemand bij wie je veiligheid vindt
en weet, dat je ondanks je fouten,
toch wordt bemind.

Soms ontmoet je een mens
met een warmvoelend hart,
daar voel je je geborgen
in leed en in smart.
In aanvoelend weten,
zonder te vragen,
word je geholpen
jouw zorgen te dragen.

Soms ontmoet je een mens
die jouw warmte vraagt
en wie jij je innigste
liefde toedraagt.
Zo ontstaat harmonie,
is het goed om te leven:
wat jou geschonken is
mag jij verder geven.

*Zuster Christa,
Ons Blad, zomer '84; Apostolaat des Gebeds, Nijmegen.*

*** Saras gives rose prints to the people in the room.

I want to pass on what is gifted to me to all of you who have come here today from many different paths.

As for the path around here...

Annie and Hella will renew the path in Wipmolen garden. In January, they will receive new wood chips for the path.

Muhammad and his colleagues, the municipality gardeners, will take care of the paths in Molenwijk all year round.

There is a 15 years old hydrangea, hortensia in Dutch, in Wipmolen garden.

Muhammad does not know the name of this flower, neither in English or Dutch. In Sudan, the vegetation is different than here.

What if this world is actually a very large garden where we all reside inside the walls under the roof?

Those plants that grow between us and our neighbours.

The path that we need to take care of to be able to visit each other. "To let someone inside your garden, it has so much to do with trust," Toon told me.

Now I know, I have to care for my path, these stories are my path, my way to make sense of this land. I will take care of my path every day, and build new ones when it is needed.

Let me end this reading with a Betawi folk song "Keroncong Kemayoran". Orang Betawi is native to Jakarta. The city I come from.

I do not sing so often on days like this, but Khalid likes to play guitar on Wednesday in Molenwijkkamer during our coffee table talk. So, I sing sometimes.

"Keladi dalam lemari

Yang baik budi yang saya cari"

The tuber inside a chest, the ones I look for are the compassionate hearts

Dear Agnes, thank you for your encouragement. I have said it all :)

Dear Emily, thank you for believing in what I do. I have done everything I can :)

Colophon

The script includes selected lyrics from a Betawi folksong 'Keroncong Kemayoran'

and a poem 'Soms ontmoet je eens mens' by Zuster Christa, published on Ons Blad, summer 1984, Apostolaat des Gebeds, Nijmegen.

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