Opening Extract from...

Black Water

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MONKEY DONKEY OWL
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He woke every night at the same time, the small hours – when it was darkest. His upper torso jerked; his eyes opened. His hand flailed for the lamp on the bedside table but met the impediment of the mosquito net. It took a moment or two to lift the net and find the switch on the base of the lamp, then he would sit upright, breathing heavily, absorbing the paradox of having woken so hot that he was damp and cold.

The electricity supply was unreliable during the day but at night the light came on immediately. The net was made of tough, opaque cotton and surrounded the bed. It was like being in a tent: outside, out there. The blood would rush in his ears so loudly that he could hear nothing else for a moment or two. He would breathe deeply, trying to still his heart and listening, then remind himself that he was not out there but in a large and comfortable hut, with ornate wooden doors and a rectangular block held in thick brackets barring them shut.

The hut was halfway up the hillside but the sounds of the rushing Ayung River filled the valley, the clamour and clamber of water over boulders. The rainy season had ended late that year and the river was still full. Night did something odd to the sounds around the hut: it was hard to tell how far or close they were – the scud and scramble of squirrels across his roof, the thump of something heavier, a monkey perhaps, also on the roof,

or was it on the veranda? The veranda would creak, on occasion – it was supported by tall stilts and so impossible for anyone, or anything, to walk across it without making a noise.

Sometimes, he thought he heard a light scratching at the base of the wooden door. A river rat, perhaps? Did they come this far up the hill at night? He had seen several of them on his walks along the valley, black and quick, lolloping between the fat green leaves of undergrowth. At other times he would think, yes, there is definitely a creature on the roof. He would listen to the claw scratchings above him become more regular, and the *scrit-scrit* would turn into a *pit-pit*, pause, *pit-pit-pit*, which blossomed into the sound of rain. The clamour mounted rapidly then, until it was so deafening even the river became inaudible, water drowned beneath water.

In daylight hours, he liked to stand on the veranda and watch the rain, a wall of it so solid it seemed to fly upwards as well as down. In daylight it was beautiful – as long as you didn't have to go out in it – but during the hours of darkness the torrent closed the world down, masked all other noises: there was nothing but rain.

He had only been in the hills for a week but it felt much longer. The errors of judgement he had made still filled his head. Henrikson, that knucklehead, walking in like he owned the place. Well, at least Wahid and Amber had seen through him; and that journalist – he couldn't believe he'd let her play him – then, to cap it all, Amsterdam constantly questioning his ability. He went over and over his conversations with them in the hot dark hours when he lay awake, trapped in a maze of reasoning.

The last two nights, the fear had got worse. The noises on

the roof had begun to mutate. He would wake now, more violently each night, certain that what he could hear was the sounds of feet on floorboards, not outside on the veranda but inside the hut, creeping closer and closer to his bed. At such times, his fear would mount so rapidly that all he could do was lift the mosquito net and climb down from the bed and patrol the hut, restlessly, looking under the table, opening the cupboard in the corner, peering into all the dark corners where the lamplight could not reach. Then he would need to urinate, and he would force himself to slide the block from its wooden brackets and push one of the doors outwards. He would defy the darkness by standing there for a moment, staring out at the pitch black, the dim light behind him casting a huge shadow across the veranda, and he would step over the carved doorframe towards the rail, piss mightily out into the dark, go back inside, slide the wooden block across and check every corner of the hut all over again, as if someone or something might have sneaked past him, although this time the ritual was calmer, because he had invited an intruder by opening a door and so it was less likely to happen. He had proved to himself that he was not afraid. They only came when you were afraid.

Eventually, he would get back into bed and turn off the lamp, his heart stilled. The ritual search, the bravado of opening the door, had convinced him that his fears were groundless, nothing more than the irrationality of night. He would lie back and close his eyes, pulling the sheet over his shoulder. He would just be drifting back to sleep . . . And it would come, then, when he was at the point of sinking back into unconsciousness. Always then: the ghekko's honking cry, on the roof right above his head, only feet away, sudden and loud in its malevolence and echoing above

all the other sounds. Eh-*ur!* A derisive, taunting pause. Eh-*ur!* He would be upright again, sweating again, furious and terrified at its warning. Eh-*ur!*

He would cry out then, shout out loud, and bang the sides of his hut to frighten the creature away. Wasn't it dawn soon? Where was Kadek?

That particular night, the night he knew, the ghekko's call was so loud, so inevitable, that he didn't even bother to bang against the walls of his hut, just sat up, breathing heavily, put the light on and slumped with his head in his hands, as if to say to the ghekko, okay, you win.

It came to him then, what was going to happen. They were going to kill him. *Take a break for a while*, Amsterdam had said. *Go up to the hills, we have a little place outside of town, it's been used before. Have a rest, you've earned it. When we've talked to the West Coast, we'll let you know.* He had wondered, at the time, why they had to talk to the West Coast at all. They had sent in Henrikson, after all. If Amsterdam was certain he was finished they should have recalled him immediately. Why send him up to the hills – unless they wanted him out of the picture if the press ran with that story? Well, that was what he had thought at the time. Now though, in the dark of night, the decision to send him here took on a different meaning.

So, that was it. He had become a liability. He had outlived his usefulness, even though it wasn't him that had wanted to come back out here in the first place; they had had to twist his arm. How ironic was that?

This certainty was something new; something solid at last. He lay back on the bed and, for the first time since he had arrived

on the island, allowed himself to close his eyes and listen to the ghekko without fear.

The roof above him creaked, the night insects chirruped and hollered – but there was no rain. One thing he was sure about: they would wait for rain.

In the morning, he was woken by the dawn light and the cicadas' tuneless chorale. A dream had come to him in the night, just before waking, it felt like – he couldn't recall it, but was sure he had dreamt. There was an image in his head of a man in an open-necked shirt, smiling at him in greeting, and a feeling of fear and horror. The image made no sense. He shook his head to rid himself of it.

As soon as he started to walk around the hut, heavy-footed and exhausted as he was each morning, he heard the sound of Kadek on the veranda. He was never sure what time Kadek arrived but it was usually as dawn broke, in order to be there when Harper awoke.

He went to the doors and slid back the wooden block, a task that seemed so easy and natural in daylight he didn't even think about it. He pulled the doors wide open and stepped onto the veranda. Outside, it was grey and hot. The valley was flung before him: the hillside opposite his hut rose almost vertically, a vast steep wall of misted palm trees and in the distance, Gunung Agung, holy mountain, the volcano, its lower slopes wreathed in cloud so that it looked, as it often did, as if it was floating above the forest. His hut was *kaja*, it looked towards the mountain, which pleased him. Perhaps he was getting religious in his old age.

Kadek stood at the far end of the veranda as he did each

morning, keeping a respectful distance until bidden. He was holding a bucket of water.

'Good morning, Mr Harper,' he said, with the slightest of bows. And then, the expressionless statement: 'I hope you passed a peaceful night.'

Kadek's vocabulary was not wide but he spoke English with precision. His plain oval face was open and concerned and Harper had the feeling that the man knew nights were bad for him. He wondered what Kadek really thought of him. The hut belonged to the Institute and must have been used by other operatives but there was no trace of them, not so much as a few battered paperbacks in the wooden cupboard in the corner. As a result, Harper felt possessive about the hut, and about Kadek, although he was not naïve enough to imagine his feelings were reciprocated.

He wanted to say to Kadek, take a good look: do I look like a *bule* to you? He had spoken Indonesian to Kadek when he first arrived but they had soon slipped into English. It was often the same on these islands. In Europe and America, those demanding lands, he was a man required to explain himself, his thick black hair, his large black eyes. On the plane coming here, he could feel his skin colour changing mid flight: he got whiter and whiter the further east he flew.

He would have liked to discuss this with Kadek but he didn't want to embarrass the man, who probably thought that Harper looked pretty damn white to him and either way worked for a large and powerful organisation with some hard dollars to spend. Wasn't trying to befriend Kadek as insulting, in its own way, as giving him orders? So he did indeed behave like all the other white men who came to this island and all the islands on this

vast archipelago. Perhaps that was why he woke in the night. It wasn't fear: it was hatred, hatred of himself. It was the knowledge that if – when – the men with machetes came, he, like all the other *bule*, would probably deserve it.

He nodded to Kadek. Kadek stepped forward with the bucket and poured water into the bowl on the small table to the right of the door, placed the bucket by the table, then lifted the towel that was hanging over his arm and folded it neatly next to the bowl, knowing that Harper liked his morning wash here, looking out over the valley. Later, he would pour more water in the *bak mandi* to the side of the hut.

'*Terima kasih*.'

'Shall I bring your breakfast, Mr Harper?' Kadek replied.

He stepped up to the bowl and splashed his face with water, then stood upright again with his face dripping. 'Thank you Kadek, if you could leave it on the desk. I'm going for a walk down to the river.'

Kadek gave another small bow, retreated. Harper pulled his T-shirt over his head, dropped it in a small crumple on the table, to the left of the bowl, and bent to finish his wash. He submerged each of his arms in turn, splashing water under his armpits, feeling, as he always did, the looseness of the muscles on the upper arms, muscles that had once been as taut as wire, or so he liked to think. He could pull his own weight up and down on a bar dozens of times in a row when he was a young man: not any more. He picked up the half coconut shell next to the bowl, filled it with a little water, rinsed it in case there were ants invisible against the dark grain of the wood and tossed the water over the balcony, filled it again and, bending his head, tipped it over his hair and the back of his neck, inhaling at the shock of it.

He dried himself with his T-shirt, then plunged it into the water, immersing it, pressing down on the blisters of air that rose in the fabric. A picture came to him, black water, long strands of hair, clinging like seaweed across his wrist: he dismissed the picture. Instead, he played the game of pressing at the bubbles of air beneath the T-shirt until they formed smaller bubbles, mobile beneath the thin material. Then he was impatient with the game and held the whole T-shirt down, crushing it between his fists. It was like drowning a kitten.

The path down to the river was narrow and steep. Black and yellow butterflies sprang amongst the foliage. It took ten minutes to descend but twice that to go back up, three times if you attempted it in the full heat of midday. After his disturbed night, it was calming to be walking in the grey, hot morning. His old boots – how many years had he had them? Expensive tan leather when new, from a shop on Oud Zuid, they were now so beaten and pale they were as comfy as slippers. The noise of the river rose to greet him, pure and deafening.

His favourite spot was a few minutes' walk from the bottom of the path, with a large rock that protruded over a pool. It was inviting enough to bathe in but he knew the ticks and parasites that lived there could be as deadly as the gangs of men who, he was convinced, would soon be roaming the countryside at night, just as before. On balance, he would prefer to face the men: and again, it came to him, just as it had in the pitch dark, his certainty, his own calmness in the face of it.

He sat down on the rock, withdrew his notebook and pencil from his pocket and in his neat but tiny scrawl, began to write. He had never needed to use code for his notes, that was how tiny

and dense his writing was, but in any case, he would tear this page out later. It was only a first draft, the first draft of a letter that he would transfer onto fragile blue airmail paper when he returned to his hut.

He wrote a few lines, then stopped. *Francisca*, *how will she understand?* But he had to write or at least try. His wife – well, ex-wife now – it would be yet another tragedy for her. She wore tragedy well, it suited her, but he felt bad all the same because he knew in some way, she would blame herself. That was what Francisca did. Then there was his mother, *Moeder*. Ma. Anika. At this thought, he groaned aloud. She was alone now, with her bitter memories, and him the only child living. She was still drinking herself to death in the old house but the harder she drank, the longer she seemed to live. When they told her he was missing, it might not even register, so far gone was she. He watched the cool water of the pool beneath where he sat on the rock and the insects zig-zagging above its surface and thought that, when they came, the men with machetes, they would be very young; no more than boys really, skinny boys with long fingers and wide eyes, red bandanas tied round their foreheads, faces smeared with paint. The black shirts would come later, when the militias had had time to get organised. Did anyone really believe Habibie could prevent that, with the Generals pulling the strings? The boys were more haphazard in what they did but just as deadly. Young men believed in violence, after all: it was their religion, all over the world, whatever god they nominally worshipped – and this time, three decades on from the last, it would surely be no different. He could picture the procession that would come up the side of the valley in the night. They would pass this very spot. He was fairly sure they would come

in this direction because the river path led directly to the edge of town.

It will be night, of course, he thought, a moonless night. They will wait for rain to mask their tracks. They will come along the path, walking in silence, the rushing of the river and the downpour on the leaves loud in their ears. Before they begin the climb up the steep side of the valley, they will pause for a *kretek*, crouching down beneath the large leaves of a tree for shelter, sharing one perhaps, because they have no money and have to steal cigarettes from their fathers and uncles, something they do without compunction. Their fathers and uncles have never spoken to them about what happened before so they believe, like all youths, that they have invented bravado. Their fathers and uncles seem like foolish old men to them. Perhaps, as they crouch and smoke, the water dripping down their necks, there will be some giggling, the kind of cold giggling that boys do before they transgress: the kind he remembered himself doing as he bullied the smaller boys at school.

And all at once, as he sat on the rock above the pool, he thought, yes, at school, I was a bully. He had thought he was defending himself but actually, he was a bully. *Black bastard from Batavia*, that ginger boy two years older had called him – the final thump landing with extra emphasis on Ba*ta*via. But it wasn't the ginger boy that Harper had beaten up, that boy had too many friends. It was a freckled kid in his own class who did no more than ask, *are you part-something?* Strange how that should come to him now.

After their cigarette, he thought, the boys will begin the climb up through the undergrowth, the steep sides of the valley. They will use their machetes to push the ferns and creepers aside.

That's something that won't be covered by the rain – it will leave a clear trail of their progress that would be appreciated by any investigator: except that there will be no investigation. Nobody investigated Joosten, after all.

As they near the hut, they will pause again, crouching down, observing the dark bulk of the construction above them, listening to the clatter of the water on the roof. And now the adrenaline will start to flow in their veins, and the smallest and youngest of them will be overwhelmed with a need to pee, and the one in charge, his big brother, will be most frightened of all, and so hiss urgent instructions to the others, hiding his fear in his commands. Perhaps the *bule* will make it easy for them, the boy in charge will be hoping: if he roars, or picks up an object to fight back, then it will be easy to cut him down, because then they will be threatened and have no choice. The big boy is hoping this is what will happen.

And he, Harper, alone in his hut, perhaps he will be awake, thanks to the ghekko – or perhaps, just for once, he will be sound asleep.

They will come through the window. The shutters will be easier to smash than the doors – it will make a racket, of course, even above the rain, but out here that won't matter. It will be too late by then. There is only one window, and one door, and both lead out onto the same veranda. He will have nowhere to hide.

Will they send boys? Harper wondered. If they want him dead, better to send an experienced man, one of the black-shirted militia who knows what he is doing, there were plenty of them around last time although, like the boys, they tended to work in groups. But boys would be easier to finesse if, back home, they were going to portray his death as part of the general disorder that was going

on: that would be simplest for them. That was how he would do it, if he were them. There weren't any shopping malls to loot and burn out here in the forest, but people back home thought of whole countries as violent once they had seen a few television pictures. *Yes, poor Harper, wrong place, wrong time. Could happen to anyone*. Word would get around the office, just like it always did. *And I hear he'd got careless, the drinking, you know . . .* At this, the person talking would lift a cup-shaped hand halfway up to his or her mouth and wobble it. *Sending him back out there, after the problems he'd had, it was probably a mistake.* He had had many of those conversations himself, over the years. *Did you hear what happened to Joosten? They tied him to the wheel of his car and poured petrol over it. You don't mess with those drugs lords, you know.* Tales of bad things happening out in the field flattered those back home – look how dangerous our job can be, on occasion. It doesn't happen often, but it happens. Joosten had been known to smoke a bit. Harper had seen him do it. There was almost always some basis to the rumours. That's what they did in his line of work: took a thread of truth and wove a carpet out of it.

Once, when they were drinking together back in Amsterdam, Joosten had let slip he had a safe house: a flat somewhere in a foreign city, he wouldn't say where, not a country that their firm operated in. It was stocked with tinned food in case he needed to lie low for a while, and money and a false passport. Harper had left the bar that night shaking his head at Joosten's paranoia.

Beginning the letter to Francisca had convinced him that his calm during the night was due to more than exhaustion – he was sure, now, what was going to happen. What was it, to know you were going to die? We all carry that knowledge inside us, he thought: it is the one thing we know for certain.

The black and green water in the rock pool – how cool it appeared. How good it would feel, in the rising humidity, to slip his old boots from his feet and dabble his toes in that water. Up in the hut, Kadek would have placed his breakfast – rice and a little *sambal*, some chicken maybe and some fruit – on the desk by the window. It would have a banana leaf laid over it to protect it. Kadek would have opened the shutters, to air the room, and folded back his crumpled bed sheets, smoothing them neatly. He should go back. There was the letter he really should write, even though it would be full of untruths and he might not get the chance to send it.

He rose from the rock, stretched his arms upwards, performed a few loose movements from side to side with his hands on his hips, and turned to climb up the path.

*

It had already begun before Harper got there – that made it easier; it was well underway in fact. He was with Benni, that fat gangster. He liked his sweets, Benni, which was why he was down to three teeth, one front tooth and two incisors. Harper had spent months cultivating him when he got to Jakarta, on his first visit, back in '65. Benni was said to have good connections with the military and like all the gangster-militiamen was fervently anti-Communist. The stallholders and shopkeepers in his area were terrified of him but whether or not he dined with Generals was another matter.

They were in the small front area of a disused bar down a narrow alleyway in Pasar Senen. It was mid-afternoon and the sun blazed outside. There was a garage or storeroom of some

sort out back where a man was being held. He had been there since dawn; a Chinese merchant who sold bolts of cloth from a shop next to the picture house on the edge of a nearby *kampong*, one of the cinemas the PKI had closed down recently because they showed decadent Western movies. Benni's friends had lost money because of the cinema closures. The Chinese merchant had no proven connection with what had happened next door to his shop but he hadn't paid his protection money in a month.

Harper gathered this and other details as a group of them stood together in the front room of the bar – he and Benni had been lunching nearby when Benni's driver had turned up and said they needed the boss. Six of Benni's men plus the driver were gathered round and Harper got the gist, though they were all talking quickly and at once. The men were excited, competing for their boss's attention. 'BB! BB!' they kept saying before they launched into their résumé of the story so far. The man was a Communist agitator who had been holding meetings in the back of his shop after closing hours, one of them seemed to be saying. Another mentioned a pile of chairs. The man was a liar, another interjected. He was worse than a *nekolim* . . . At the word *nekolim*, Benni clapped Harper on the shoulder and gave a gap-toothed grin and the other men looked at Harper for a moment until Harper gave a short bark of a laugh and suddenly the men were laughing too. Then they went back to talking at once. Most of them had been drinking *arak* all morning, Harper decided. They were his age, mid-twenties, or younger, apart from Benni who was maybe ten years older.

Benni's face became still as he listened further. In his meetings with Harper so far, he had been jovial and hospitable, giving him lunches and imported whisky, but when he was with his men,

Benni liked to affect an air of seriousness. Then, without saying anything, he strode towards the back of the bar, his men following anxiously. Harper decided to wait where he was, wishing the bar was still operational. It was the first time Benni had involved him in his daily activities, which was good, a sign he was beginning to trust him – but he would hang back until he was called, let Benni initiate his level of involvement. He rubbed his palms together quickly and tried to ignore the small thumping in his chest.

The others disappeared behind a door that clanged shut, leaving a metallic silence in its wake. Harper went to the front of the building, which was open to the alleyway, and looked down at the cement step to see if it was clean enough to sit on: it wasn't. The alleyway was lined with drainage ditches that smelt of shit and piss.

While he waited, a very young boy wearing nothing but a dirty T-shirt came and stood opposite him and stared, fearlessly, three fingers of one hand in his mouth and the other hand supporting his elbow, little round stomach protruding. Harper stared back at him. After a moment or two of appraisal, the boy turned and ran, kicking up dirt, shouting out something high-pitched and triumphant, as if he had fulfilled a dare.

The door behind him clanged again. One of Benni's men was standing at the back of the room, gesturing. 'Mr BB says come.'

When Harper entered the room, a filthy storage place with a low ceiling and one high, barred window, he saw in the dim light that there was a Chinese Indonesian seated on a low chair, with a table in front of him and his hands tied behind his back. It took Harper's eyes a moment or two to adjust. It was hard to tell the man's age. His face was covered in blood, and part of his scalp

had been removed: what lay beneath was gleaming, wet and bare. His head was slumped a little to one side, as if he knew that he was going to be killed anyway, whatever he said – which was true – and had simply given up, resolved to endure what must be endured before his final moments.

Benni was standing in one corner. 'Come, you come stand next to me,' he said to Harper in English. 'Stand next to me, watch for a bit. He sees white man, he thinks someone. He thinks maybe, things maybe okay. Maybe he talk.' Harper understood that his presence was, in effect, to extend the man's torture. Perhaps they were hoping that by accident they had picked up a Commie after all. He might give them names. Nothing was as valuable as names, back then in '65, as Jakarta simmered higher and higher, everyone was collecting names – they were a lot more valuable than the plummeting rupiah, which was worth so little now you had to walk around with a duffel bag of the stuff on your shoulder if you wanted to buy a beer. Even he, Harper, the man with access to the hardest currency of all authorised by his organisation, even he was dealing in names.

The man had raised his head as Harper entered. He was staring at him, eyes wide in his bloodied face. Harper stared back. He tried to communicate that there was no hope, that the man should simply go back to wishing, waiting to die, make his peace with whatever god he might worship, say goodbye in his head to his family. The man lowered his head.

This seemed to enrage one of Benni's men, a small moustachioed type who stood nearest to the Chinese merchant and who was, Harper guessed, Benni's number two in these matters. He snatched a pair of bloodied scissors from the table in front of the man and began to wave them in the man's face and scream. It

occurred to Harper that this was a test, that Benni had invited him in here to see how he would react – Benni was, after all, under the impression that he was recruiting Harper rather than the other way around. He glanced at the other men. They were all striking various poses around the room – two of them were mimicking the man with the moustache, staring at the merchant, teeth bared, faces gleaming with sweat. Two others were leaning against the wall, arms folded, staring, trying to look as hard as possible; one of the others was turning restlessly to and fro. The last one, the driver, who was about eighteen, Harper guessed, a tall boy with sloping shoulders, stood close to Harper and Benni, motionless but with his arms raised and his fists clenched, his gaze flitting this way and that, as if he were engaged in a high-speed race on a dangerous road and needed to be hyper-alert. Some of them had been drinking but they were all, all but Benni and himself, possessed by a kind of pseudo-sexual excitement. It came off them like a scent. Harper guessed these boys didn't get much, if any. This kind of activity had to do instead.

The man with the moustache carried on screaming, his face contorted, his voice high-pitched, and Harper found this screaming more unbearable than anything. *Just die*, Harper thought, looking at the merchant, *just close down, make your thoughts leave your body*. He wondered if it was possible to make yourself die, *in extremis*, to will it to happen but of course it wasn't. Dying was a giving up of will. You could no more will it than levitate.

He wanted to think about something other than the bloodied man in front of him so he thought about his own end. He would like to be able to see the sky, he thought. A perfect death would come in an arbour of some sort, with trees and flowers around, with a woman beside you who loved you and laid a cooling hand

on your forehead. Your last thought as you slipped into unconsciousness would be that you were loved; the air full of sunshine, a blue and infinite sky.

Not somewhere like here, alone but for the people who wanted you dead. Not this darkened room, with dank walls and a stinking dirt floor and a little grey light scarcely strong enough to illuminate the faces of the people who were about to kill you. Not like this. *Not circling in water, either, unaware – how's that for fresh air, Bud?*

The thought that he pushed to the back of his mind, as he stood and watched a man in pain and did nothing because his handler at the embassy had told him to win the trust of a filthy gangster who may or may not have good contacts with the military, was that he would never know what the look on his own face was like in the minutes before he died. He would never see it mirrored in a loved one. It felt like the most profound of premonitions, that there would be no witness to his departing, or no benign witness, but it was only three decades later, sitting on a rock above a green pool on a beautiful island, with a notebook on his lap, that he remembered it.