



The reader will be introduced to things here that are not common to most of us. The country of their origin is Indonesia, more specifically, the small island of Ambon, 1440 miles east of the capital, Jakarta. They were transmitted to the present time by means of the creative word: two seventeenth-century texts written by a natural historian who was also a poet, and, written by an elderly Dutch lady, one of the most magical novels of the twentieth century. But before examining the unique symbiosis of a man and a woman who lived more than two centuries apart, I will have to inform you, though briefly, about their lives.

Above: From an anonymous painting now in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The figure is Frederick de Houtman (the first Dutch governor of Ambon), ca1617.

Rumphius, who was born Georg Everhard Rumpf in Wölfersheim, Hesse (Germany), in 1627, never saw one of his books in print. He entered life in the midst of the Thirty Years War, the worst disaster visited upon Germany before the twentieth century. He enjoyed a fine education for that day and age and had the good fortune that his mother's family was well connected and linked to the prosperous republic of the United Provinces, better known now as the Netherlands.



Pecteilis susannae,
courtesy of J.B.
Comber.

In 1645, eighteen-year old Rumphius joined a mercenary force that was meant to go to Venice, but after a series of adventures, he found himself stranded in Portugal for almost three years. In 1649, he was back in Germany, but in 1652, he signed on with the VOC or the Dutch East Indies Company, the first multinational corporation of the modern era. He arrived on Java in July of 1653 and that fall sailed for the Moluccas as a soldier in a military campaign. He was stationed on the island of Ambon and never left it for the rest of his life. In 1657

Rumphius switched from the military to the civilian branch of the Company and made rapid promotion during his thirteen years tenure on the coast of Ambon's northern peninsula, Hitu. Sometime during those years he lived with or married a woman called Susanna. We only know about her because he named a lovely variety of terrestrial orchid after her since Rumphius wanted "to commemorate the person who, when alive, was my first Companion and Helpmate in the gathering of herbs and plants, and who was also the first to show me this flower." Rumphius' label has survived the ages for the orchid's modern binomial is *Pecteilis susannae*.



The only confirmed portrait of Rumphius drawn from life. Rumphius' son, Paulus Augustus, drew this portrait of his father sometime between October 1695 and July of 1696 in Kota Ambon. Rumphius was sixty-eight at this time.



The tree itself they call *Pausengi*, and its crown sticks out above the water. Its branches are inhabited by the wild Bird *Geruda*, supposedly a Griffin, which flies over these Lands at night, grabbing an Elephant, Tiger, Rhinoceros or other large Beast in its claws and beak, which it then carries to its nest. Currents from every direction are pulled toward this tree, and the Ships that are dragged along by them, must remain there forever, and the people must die of hunger or become prey to the *Geruda*.

This is why the Javanese, and all those who live on the southern coasts of the Great Islands to the East, as far as Timor, do not dare to go further than three miles out, where they'd be out of sight of Land, for if they notice that the current is taking them somewhat further and to the South, they will betake themselves to their rowboat, let their ship drift, and row towards land, for fear they will be pulled to the abyss of Pausengi, wherefrom [sic] no one returns.

And they even insist that some Javanese have experienced this and reported as the truth, that they had been there in their ship and that the *Geruda* transported them back to Java while they hung on to its Feathers.

They call the fruits of this tree *Boa pausengi* or *Boa sengi*, supposedly the famous *Sea kalappus* which, going against the current, is sometimes tossed onto the beaches of Java and Solor. And they have such a recalcitrant power, that they crawl quite a ways Inland to get to the woods, so that people will not find them, unless they are first discovered by dogs, who will stand and bark at them.”

Rumphius did not believe this tale because during his lifetime Abel Tasman sailed south of Java between 1642 and 1644 and encountered Australia without being sucked down into an abyss. Yet there remained the physical evidence of these extraordinary coconuts. Like a good empiricist, Rumphius was consumed by the desire to know their provenance, at one point, in a totally different context, expressing his frustration that no one dared to dive for the *Kelapa Laut* that reputedly grew on the bottom of Sumatra's Lampong Bay (ACC, 184).



Tree of Life-from the royal palace archives of Pakubuwono XII, Sultan of Surakarta, Java. Photo by Greg Asbury.

It does not matter that Dermoût rearranged the sequence of the sentences in the two totally separate texts. Her poetic instinct was infallible, for the point she wants to make is contained in a sentence from the description of the pelagic snail, a statement of fact that acquires even more resonance after the beauty of the creatures has been lodged in the reader's mind. The sentence is: "Wondrous to see such a fleet of easily a thousand little ships sail so agreeably together."

The point, as the professor tries to tell his assistant, is that when "Rumphius dictated this, he was blind, blind as a bat, my friend; his wife and daughter crushed under a collapsing wall during an earthquake, his house that burned down later on, burned to the ground with everything in it, all the work of a lifetime, except for a few hundred pages, all his drawings, and then he can write 'such a fleet of easily a thousand little sails, wondrous to behold.' It makes us, you and me, such ungrateful dogs" (VW, 264).



Fort Belgica on Banda Neira. Gunung Api (fire mountain) is in the background. (Photo courtesy of Bart Eaton).



Restored Fort Amsterdam on the Hitu peninsula, Ambon, in the town of Hila. Rumphius was posted here (1660 to 1670) early in his career with the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC). (Photo courtesy of Bart Eaton).

Rumphius is finally recognized as the master, the *guru*. Although I hesitate to use that word, since it has been degraded in the Western world, it befits an Asian context. What he teaches is that we should see beauty even if one's life is a disaster, even if malignity rears up and strikes. In other words, we should try to transcend the now, overcome the constrictions that society and the human condition have forced upon our souls. Rumphius' work had a material side to it: he always tried to find medicinal benefits in plants or animals. And yet the jellyfish has no material value, is useless to apothecaries. But Rumphius saw the beauty of the animal and, as Schopenhauer (1788-1860) wrote a century and a half later, things will increase in beauty when we are conscious only of them and not of ourselves. The pure objectivity of perception can make us happy.¹⁸ Here we have the connection with the notion of *pusaka*, for the beauty of a jellyfish is free, gratis, for nothing, it is literally priceless. That is a great benefit, for life is always difficult, but one should be able to warm one's soul in the glow of beauty, as Felicia does at the end of *Ten Thousand Things*.