

NATHALIE HARTJES

A Song for Rudy

*If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton,
you may as well make it dance*

—
George Bernard Shaw, *Immaturity*

On any given day, Rudy's mother would share endless family histories. She would speak of weddings and funerals, births and passings that occurred generations ago as if they had happened last month. With a pencil placed on yesterday's newspaper, she would describe great aunts and uncles joining in matrimony, while adding details of the attached family. As she pressed the graphite down on the paper, she would summon the improbable travels of their ancestors into remembrance. Sharp lefts, crooked rights, or elements that would dwindle in a particular area would indicate the peril or opportunities that had prompted their travels. The constellations of relatives became galaxies, each star both the cause and consequence of its own existence. These drawings were never kept, and when Rudy urged her to preserve them, she would say: "What a silly thing, these records. Unless you see the hand that traces the line, you will never know its truth."

His father was a passionate floriculturist, who enjoyed the challenge of cultivating the rarest and most fragile of species: Middlemist Reds, Youtan Poluos, Flame Lilies and Golden Parrot Beaks. His garden was more than just a pastime: he treated its care as if it were a sport. He engaged in cross-fertilisation experiments, producing

lush bouquets of exclusive rarities, specimens even more frail than the plants from which they descended. His father's physique did not suggest a tendency for delicacy. Incredibly large, with hands like shovels, he appeared to be battling against his body all his life. Instead of curtailing his talents to the limits of his anatomy, he had mastered the opposite: he was a tender man, able to wield his limbs and extremities with great precision. In the days before the harvest, the lush variety of flowers radiated in gradient fields. The ingenious planting scheme his father had perfected allowed him to trace his cross-pollinating experiments by sight. Like his wife, he did not hold paper in high regard.

His sister was a social butterfly and something of an opportunist. In Rudy's eyes she was an alchemist, capable of creating value from nothing but social association. She knew how to capture luck merely by being in the same place as someone else. She treated friendship as a piggy bank, to which each pack member could contribute currency. She was cautious when someone risked jeopardising the communal value of a gathering, well aware that one bad apple could cause the group to lose its shine.

Rudy waited tables in one of the finest restaurants in the Menteng neighbourhood in Jakarta, located in the former Dutch Society of Arts. The venue exploited its colonial past and served dishes ranging from European classics to authentic local delicacies. The high-priced establishment attracted an international commercial elite, and much business was conducted over deep velvety reds and crisp sparkling whites. In Rudy's eyes, the glasses shimmered even brighter than the chandeliers. It was a place of decadence, and many unfinished decanters remained on the

table at the end of the evening. He made a habit of signing up for the last shifts; these requests were always granted, for never were the tables so pristinely decked for the next day as when Rudy was the last to leave the building. As a reward for his services, he treated himself to the left-over vessels on the tables. He studied each of these liquid hand-me-downs with great attention and savoured the subtleties of their finish. He trained his palette to perfection, and after just a few years of self-education, he had fully developed his incredible talent for detail and became determined to put it to use.

For this enterprise, Rudy turned his kitchen table into a work station. It stood right in the centre of the room, opposite the cooking island in the kitchen and facing the large living room wall. The table was a curiosity in its own right: clunky and with additional attributes such as shelves attached to rotating hinges along its legs, and drawers that could somehow fold out and upwards. It seemed like a thing more at home on board a 17th century ship, and if shrunk could be mistaken for a jewellery box, with double-layered drawers to hide its most secret treasures. These drawers contained paper, wax, ink, stamps, corks, silver foil, as well as white, red and gold thread. Within this treasury, Rudy could find everything needed to recreate the placards of authenticity so doted on by his trade.

The living room wall was covered from floor to ceiling with notes and sketches on little pieces of paper, each exactly the same size and pinned to part of a complex flow-chart. The chart took shape as a tree of strings that began a foot above the floor, its foundation consisting of three layers of labels stacked like bricks along the wall across a

width of four yards. The labels indicated no great value: they were bargains at best, with names such as Barefoot, White Truck, Ravenswood or Liberty School. As the strings took root in the lesser specimens of the grape trade and shot upwards, branching along pins and papers, conjoining with other threads, the notes became more detailed. A concentration of notes would appear along one stretch of thread, observations on musky tones or chestnut glows, herbaceousness or acidity. One line would generally stop and others would find their way further upwards, following crooked, unpredictable routes, merging with and diverging from other formations of lines. At chest height, labels of a different type suddenly reappeared. The sleek silky paper of contemporary production gave way to thick, crème-coloured insignia and schematic imagery of rolling vineyards. Names such as Romanée-Conti and Clos de la Roche were written in long, curly letters, titles which implied boisterous debauchery or which were spoken with hushed deference.

Every imaginable shade of brown and green sheltered the room from the outside. Bottles in all shapes and sizes were stacked against the high windows, and when sunlight attempted to pierce through, the kitchen was bathed in a mesmerising glow. You could imagine yourself inside a medieval Gothic cathedral instead of a middle-class, Wright-esque bungalow. Rudy enjoyed working here in solitude, and when the sun set, a shimmer passed over the counter and he could imagine himself underwater, swimming just below the surface; that moment when you can see beyond the waves, while yourself remaining hidden.

It was his appearance that had both prompted and facilitated his chameleon-like abilities. Of Chinese descent

but growing up on Indonesian soil, he had never quite belonged. Here it was no different, but here it didn't really matter. To the Americans, he was just that funny Asian kid who had somehow found his way into their circle. They found him "eccentric". He put their lack of specificity to his advantage. As welcoming as they were to him, they could be just as dismissive of those who looked like him. And so he took care to humour them and to tone down features of his own that contrasted with theirs. He soon proved an impeccable dresser, and effortlessly adopted the polo-shirt leisure code common amongst the West Coast's wine royalty. He punched above his weight, buying a car that would double as a costume.

To Rudy, the production of vintage bottles had never been a means to an end, but the end in itself. The perfection of his gustatory abilities was for him a matter of pride, one that could only be tested and rewarded within the finest circles of connoisseurs. He had not put his first cases of "Burgundy" to auction for want of money – he had to make a grand entrance to pierce the barrier that sheltered the elite. He felt a strong desire to test his taste buds against those of the rich and famous, and to draw closer to vintages he had as yet only heard table guests describe during his former employment. As Rudy acquired greater access to these treasures, introducing more and more of his concoctions to market became a matter of urgency, rather than of play. He regarded the kitchen as a workshop where he himself was artisan, but was now forced to set up a more efficient production line. Increasing the tempo of the manufacturing process, he started to entrust his secrets to paper and the tree of labels swelled. A colossal mass of evidence covered the wall.

When the time came for the police to arrest him and the papers yelled "Fraud! Chateau Sucker!", Rudy understood that he had not played the game, but that the game had played him.

This story is dedicated to Zhen Wang Huang, better known as Rudy Kurniawan, who is now serving time for wine fraud. When thinking about which tale could complement that of the artists completing their journey at the Piet Zwart Institute, Rudy tickled my brain once again. The documentary that first introduced me to his story, *Sour Grapes*, seemed to gloss over Rudy's obvious knowledge and talent. I wondered about his tasting abilities and assumed a strong understanding of genealogy and vintages.

However far apart the practices of the Master Fine Art lie, a common concern for relationships, inheritance, acknowledgement, and care ties them together. For this occasion, I have attempted to temporarily disregard the scandal and to place the beauty of Rudy's alchemy in full view.

I would not want to imply that artists are swindlers, but I would dare to suggest that all swindlers are at least part artist.

— Nathalie Hartjes

PIET ZWART INSTITUTE,
MASTER FINE ART 2015—2017

CONNIE BUTLER (B. 1988, UK)
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ANGELICA FALKELING (B. 1988, SE)
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Art Academy and the International
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She works with performances,
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TOR JONSSON (B. 1982, SE)
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ASH KILMARTIN (B. BOXING DAY
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ANNI PUOLAKKA (B. 1983, FI)
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ERIKA ROUX (B. 1991, FR)
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EOTHEN STEARN (B. 1987, UK)
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COOKED ELBOW

COLOPHON

This publication is made on the occasion of the exhibition *Crooked Elbow, Serpent Brain*, featuring: Connie Butler, Angelica Falkeling, Tor Jonsson, Ash Kilmartin, Anni Puolakka, Nicholas Riis, Erika Roux, Eothen Stearn, Viktor Timofeev and Daniel Tuomey.

Curator: Marloes de Vries

Performance programme: Charlien Adriaansens

7 – 16 July 2017 at MAMA, Galerie Kromme Elleboog, WORM_UBIK

Editor:

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Copy editor:

Chris Meighan

Conversation transcription:

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Graphic design:

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Cover illustration:

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Printing & binding:

Publication Studio

Published by:

Publication Studio Rotterdam

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Willem de Kooning Academy:

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Coordinator: Petra van der Kooij

Special thanks to the Master Fine

Art core tutors: Liesbeth Bik,

Kate Briggs, Sara van der Heide,

Bernd Krauß, Steve Rushton,

Jan Verwoert and Katarina Zdjelar.

We are grateful to all the guest

tutors and thematic project

leaders who engaged with the

MFA programme

The PZI MFA graduates gratefully

acknowledge study and production

financing and support from:

AAA stiftelsen, Stichting Bekker –

la Bastide – Fonds, M.C. de Visser

Fonds, CSN – Financial Aid for

Studies, Creative New Zealand

Toi Aotearoa, The Ian Potter Cul-

tural Foundation, Centrala Studie-

stödsnämnden, Fonds Kwadraat and

the Van Beek Donner Stichting.

Images courtesy of the artists.

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