

# MEDIUMFORMAT

JULY 2021

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**Silent Loss**  
by ILONA LANGBROEK

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# Silent Loss

Ilona Langbroek

*My ongoing series, "Silent Loss" is about my family history, an unprocessed past in which loss plays a leading role. The loss of homeland and identity.*

I invite the viewer to become part of this memory of the Dutch East Indies derived from the stories of my grandparents. I want to reveal the unknown, to more or less break the silence. Silent Loss is about a long-lost identity that is dormant but still very much alive.





*Terra Incognita #3*



With my photos I portray the longing for a time, a country and a life from which several generations have been ripped away and sadness has dominated ever since. After Independence was declared in 1945, and after the suffering endured as Prisoners of War under the Japanese, the Dutch–Indonesian people were forced out of a country which for them was their homeland. They had to leave almost everything behind and go to a strange cold, wet place where they felt totally at a loss. Their misery and misfortune were not understood by the Dutch who saw them coming. For many it was not a home coming, but an introduction to a new country filled with strangers.

The story of my grandparents' generation was largely unknown to many people

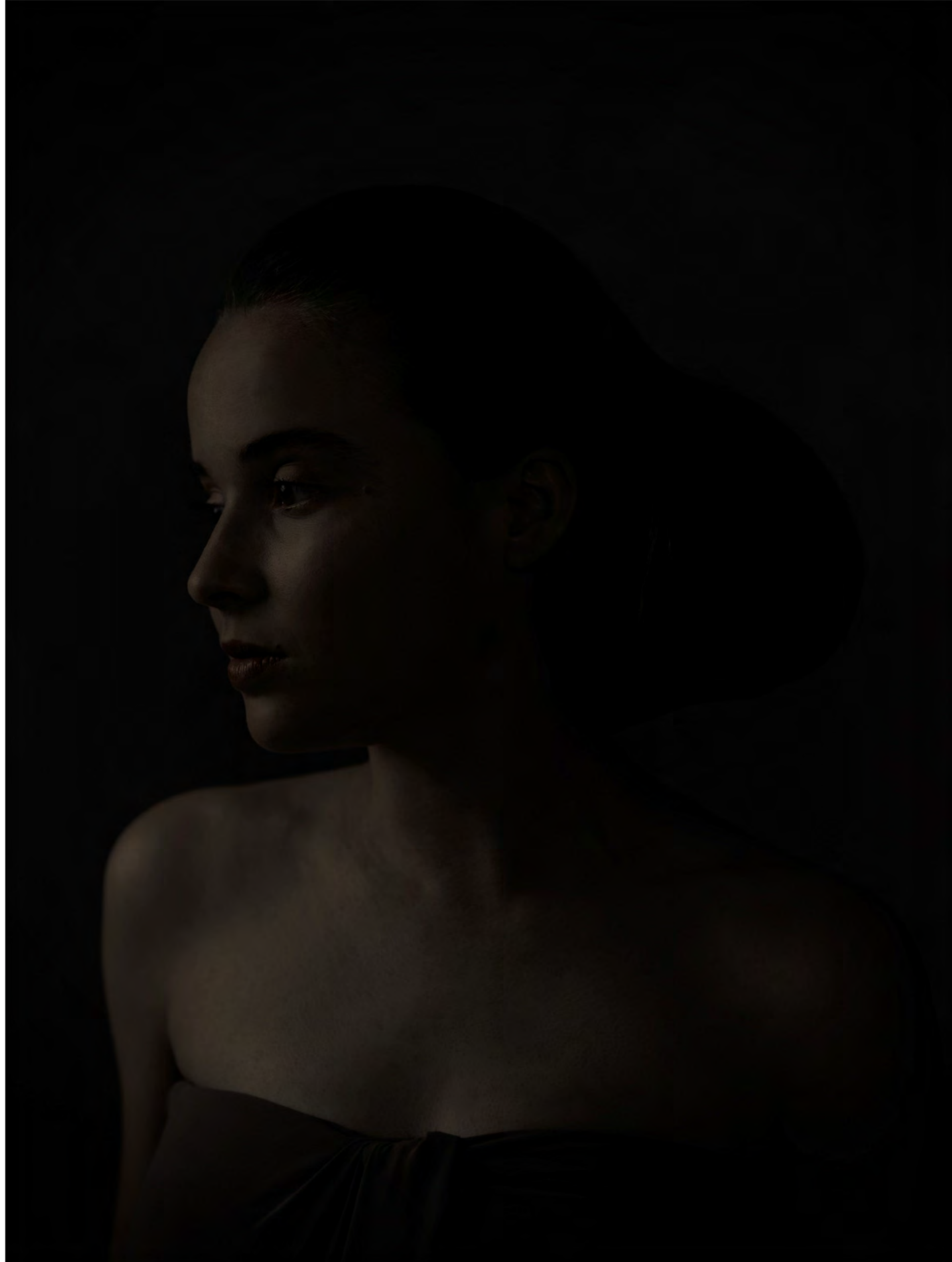
in the Netherlands but has come into focus sparked by the younger generation of Dutch Indonesians. Through my images I try express a deeper feeling that is an essential part of these stories.

The past of the Dutch–Indonesian people is mainly an oral history, of which there exist only few images other than snapshots. With my photographs I try to fill the void between stories and emotion. With images I try to make these stories more accessible to anyone who is interested in their cultural background and identity. My “visual history” is a history that we share with each other in the Netherlands, but which until recently seemed to belong mainly to the earlier generations of Dutch Indonesians.









*Memories/Fujifilm GFX 100S + GF80mmF1.7 R WR at F2.8, 1/125sec, ISO100*

The influence of Indonesia on our country's past and present seeps through several generations and is, although not realized by many, firmly anchored in Dutch culture. After all, for four centuries the history of both countries was intertwined. For better or worse, the relation between the Netherlands and the former Dutch East Indies has left its mark until today.

After the forced migration to the Netherlands, the immigrants' pain was simply too much to bear and was generally concealed. It simmered below the surface and the silence occurred even between parents and (grand) children.





*Memories #2/Fujifilm GFX 100S + GF80mmF1.7 R WR at F2.8, 1/125sec, ISO100*

My photo series “Silent Loss” is about the blending of the Dutch culture with the Indonesian and the violent changes forced on both by the Second World War. I depict the experiences of a time in a distant almost magical country and a life that no longer ex-

ists. I have tried to create poetic photos with a metaphorical imagining of memories and fantasies. The stark contradiction: on one hand a mythical country filled with warmth, splendour and beauty but on the other hand, of violence, oppression and war.



I grew up with the Indonesian traditions of mysticism, magic, animism, and the silent power. Because the colonial Dutch Indonesians are disappearing and their oral history is slowly fading, I started to look for images

to express the nostalgia of these stories. To convert the precious heritage into images, I searched for objects and locations connected with this past.

For instance, the subseries “Longing for Insulinde,” was photographed in a 250-year-old country house (nowadays a museum) in the Netherlands, decorated with hand-painted wallpaper imported from Asia to the Netherlands during the VOC-era (Dutch East India Company) in the 18th century. Due to the fragile nature of this wallpaper, it was not easy to get permission to photograph in this beautiful mansion. But in my opinion the results show the long wait was well worth it.



*Longing for Insulinde #1*

*Fujifilm GFX 100S + GF80mmF1.7 R WR at F1.7, 1/60sec, ISO500*

*Next: Longing for Insulinde #3*

*Fujifilm GFX 100S + GF80mmF1.7 R WR at F1.7, 1/60sec, ISO400*









*Longing for Insulinde #6/Fujifilm GFX 100S + GF80mmF1.7 R WR at F3.2, 1/15sec, ISO640*





*Longing for Insulinde #5/Fujifilm GFX 100S + GF80mmF1.7 R WR at F1.7, 1/60sec, ISO400*



Pre-war Dutch East Indies literature was also a source of inspiration for me such as books from the writer Maria Dermoût. Her poetic narrative style reflects an awareness of beauty but also of cruelty, of enchantment and threat, of mystery and magic in the Indonesian archipelago.

The novel by Louis Couperus, "Old People and the Things that Pass," inspired me to make the photo "Love Lost." It's a bleak, but extremely interesting psychological family saga about two old people who carry with them a terrible secret of what happened 60 years earlier in the Dutch East Indies. Even in the twilight of old age their lives are still dominated by what happened long ago during a nocturnal tropical thunderstorm. Their passionate love turned to fear and remorse and

their lives have since been burdened by the ghosts from the past.

Not only literature but also the philosophy of nature brings me new ideas. The first is the 17th-century botanist Georg Everhard Rumphius, who is known for "The Ambonese Cabinet of Curiosities." This book contains a description of shells, corals, minerals and precious stones of the Moluccas. Also, the "Herbarium Amboinense," a richly illustrated catalogue with an extensive description of almost 2,000 flowering plant species, mainly from the island of Ambon. The double white orchid (*Phalaenopsis amabilis*), first described by Rumphius as the *Vliegende Duive* (Flying Dove), is today the national flower of the Indonesian Republic.







So, in my present-day photos I have chosen to express this atmosphere of nostalgia and sadness, but also of poetry and beauty. Using a strong contrast between light and dark, I create a twilight zone as a metaphor for the diminishing past. I have chosen not to approach my subject in a documentary way.

By doing so I realize I am creating my own story, but I try to remain true to the history of a fading generation. In the end, it is not just the story of my grandparents, but the story of an entire generation forced to leave their country never to return, which is the story of so many refugees in our world.



*Exotic Luxury/Fujifilm GFX 100S + GF80mmF1.7 R WR at F13, 1/125sec, ISO100*





*Snowdrops*



My project “Silent Loss” took shape in my final exam year at the Photo Academy in Amsterdam (Fotoacademie Amsterdam) in 2019. The goal set for my exam was to choose a project that was close to my heart in order to get to the core of who I am as a person and to show this to my viewer in photographic images. My teacher told me that it was not just about a beautiful photo, but about the deeper layer of emotion behind the photo. At that time, I started photographing purely intuitively based upon my memories of my grandmother in the past: how she looked, her accent and tone of her voice. The items she loved, all with a certain

shiny appearance, but also the colours of her clothes, smells in her house and of course her stories. But this was not enough. I wanted to dig deeper and started doing more research by reading books, watching documentaries and searching out old photo albums. I interviewed people from previous generations to hear their personal story and get closer to my grandparents' lives in the Dutch East Indies. It took quite some time, at least a year, to refine my ideas and work them out in detail by means of mood boards. From there I started to search for the right props such as clothing, jewellery, models, etc.





*Trance/Fujifilm GFX 100S + GF80mmF1.7 R WR at F2.8, 1/125sec, ISO100*

I do not work with professional models but I always try to find the right person whom I can associate with the generation of my grandmother. I look at physique, skin tone, body language and posture. Maybe subconsciously even a bit as I see myself. I don't let models pose; I prefer more natural movements and posture. Before the shoot I discuss the purpose of the image I want to create so they can add their own feelings.

I have chosen to create the soft lighting used by painters of the 17th century Dutch Golden Age, such as Vermeer, Rembrandt or the Italian painter Caravaggio. In my studio I use Profoto B1X strobes as a two-light set-up with one key light and one fill light. On location, if possible, I prefer using daylight but when not sufficient I use studio lamps. I use the Fujifilm GFX100S and the Fujifilm GF 80mm f/1.7 R WR lens.





*Ranunculus in white vase*



My work in post-processing is intuitive. The final image is created step by step, layer by layer, pixel by pixel behind the computer using colour toning, curves and dodge and burn to create my own feeling in the photo and capture the right atmosphere.

I am always seeking for perfection. Because I wanted to convey the mood of 17th century paintings, I switched from full frame to medium format photography to create

cleaner photos with more detail and less distraction. The details in the shadows and highlights are important; the increased dynamic range of the Fujifilm GFX100S leads to photos with more tonal and colour information and fewer burnt-out highlights or closed shadows. This detail is important, as my photos are often printed in large format, 180 x 135 cm.

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