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that Witches ar turned in

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he Existence of  
Astral an

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MARYLYN TAN

# GAZE BACK

- Gold
- ☽ Silb
- ♁ Iron
- ♃ Mercu
- ♃ Jupiter
- ♀ Venus
- ♁ Lead
- ♁ Antimony
- ♁ Sal arn
- ♁ Sapp
- ♁ Pre



MARYLYN TAN

**GAZE  
BACK**

GAZE BACK  
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*For Daddy and Mummy, for fearing for me,  
and letting me do what I need to, all the same.*

If you're unwilling to undress  
don't enter into the stream of Truth.

—RŪMĪ

sorry about the scene at  
the bottom of the stairwell  
and how I  
ruined everything by saying it out  
loud.

—RICHARD SIKEN

*Litany in Which Certain Things are Crossed Out*

the moon is not  
a favor machine

—CACONRAD

*Width of a Witch*

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# NASI KANG KANG

I asked the internet about nasi kang kang

google said:

*some southeast asian cultures believe  
that virginal fluids, including menstrual blood  
have special supernatural powers  
and is commonly used by individuals  
and witch doctors in rituals*

google said,

*according to malay folklore  
a woman who feeds her husband or  
boy friend with nasi kang kang  
can have absolute control over him*

kang kang means to straddle  
squat, because you don't raise your leg to pee  
queef, because you're claiming property  
spread your thighs like a rumour            split  
the red sea so    you can  
keep your marriage together

like a shitty science experiment

take part in the water cycle  
above a pot of fresh-cooked rice  
let vapour condense at what  
*themalaysianlife.blogspot.sg* calls  
your muff

to rain upon the padi field  
of your philips rice cooker

the idea is  
witchcraft comes naturally  
to women

but which  
witch  
women

okay, but then *hor*  
my hubby say white rice too fattening *then how*

the caloric intake of nasi kang kang  
is half that  
of swallowing your pride

okay but then *hor*  
I sometime forget to wash my down there  
& sometime wash oreddi still very smiauly<sup>1</sup>  
I scared my boyfriend eat already  
recognise my chao chee bye<sup>2</sup>

the hot air rising from the cooker  
has tightening effect on your lovehole  
like brand new

so after the rice steam  
his one will also cock *steam*<sup>3</sup>  
he will stop calling your labia flaps  
roast beef after you use your

pleasure cooker

okay, but then *hor*  
nasi kang kang is fake one *then how*  
I asked SGForum. they asked  
ijit cai png<sup>4</sup>

---

1 A colloquial pronunciation of the word 'smelly'

2 (Lit.) 'smelly vagina'

3 (Colloq.) cock steam – 'erection'

4 Ijit – Chinese-Singlish pronunciation of 'is it'; cai png – 'rice with assorted dishes'

they asked  
steam rice where got kang kong?

I said sian you all multiracial society  
machiam like don't know other cultures *sia*  
like never eat lassi lomak until gelat before  
so not boleh.<sup>5</sup> cannot make it one. like that  
I ownself answer my own question

but then *hor*  
everyday I work until damn late damn *cui*<sup>6</sup>  
no time to cook no maid *how*???

themalaysianlife.blogspot.sg says:  
*for busy career women, useful  
improvisations to this recipe include using  
claypot chicken rice*

*just tar pau the rice  
and do the kang kang at home*

*no need to keep a pet dog*

---

5 machiam, lassi lomak and gelat are (predominantly Chinese) bastardisations of the Malay words macam, nasi lemak and gelak

6 'wilted; tired'

*just get a man*

falling in love is a fistfight  
it is common to hear bells  
when you finally win the tinder match  
some will tell you  
there's not much difference between  
a wrestling & a wedding ring

for many career women  
there are pot lids like glass ceilings  
over their rice bowls

watering their wetlands to make sure  
they are wanted

these thighs were made for walking  
not waterlogging

I had a vision of a woman  
squatting over food  
like she was exercising  
her residential rights  
to the kitchen

my mother had a fridge magnet that read  
*THE WOMAN WHO  
BRINGS HOME THE BACON  
SHOULDN'T HAVE TO COOK IT*

but that's possible only after you  
hire someone to make sure  
the bacon cooks  
itself

it doesn't matter  
if your nasi kang kang is organically-sourced   vegan  
& gluten-free

it's not the  
emotionally-healthy option  
keeping body & soul together is  
much more than a campaign telling  
GOOD GIRLS TO SWALLOW

instead of starving yourself

eat your own nasi kang kang  
fall madly under your own spell

forget those who  
call you demon for you are  
self-possessed—

nobody needs a recipe to cook rice  
instead, gardening tips:

weed out self-doubt  
slash & burn those who  
tells you to be both curved  
& skinny as a sickle

pluck up every impulse to  
sink claws into flab  
& perish the thought  
you are hungry

only to please

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

GAZE BACK arose, most simply, from distress. This particular work of writing was borne out of disgust, loathing, disillusionment, and a certain embodied fatigue of being hyper-scrutinised, by the self and society, that is perhaps intrinsic to the contemporary female experience.

In GAZE BACK, I take a particular interest in how best to represent the disenfranchised voices that speak to me the most. I was concerned with how to give not only voice, but shape and depth, to subaltern representations of minority gender, of race, of sexuality, while still remaining cognizant of my own principle positions of relative privilege in terms of finances, racial dynamics, and cisgender identity as a person and writer. More specifically, in fantasising an audience, I found myself wanting to write for the parts of me that felt they were discovered too late, recognised too late, embraced too late.

I wanted to write for a female, Singaporean, fatigued audience, who might be sexually deviant, who was perhaps a sexual minority but in no way less valuable as a person—an audience that understands being cast out, the sorrow of the 'shame

of a / sinful body, of a receptacle-like body, a true / vessel' <sup>1</sup>, the disillusionment with institutions and organised religion.

The answer to how to erect and carve out autonomous zones, whether temporary or not, is one I hope to obtain with this work. My thematic concerns centre on those who refuse to be 'decent' women, that is, those who cannot be law-abiding, god-fearing, mothers, daughters, wives, virgins, nuns, those who have neither temperance nor mercy, who put their pleasure before that of others'. In linking the feminine to the deviant, or rather, more closely scrutinising an intrinsic association that cannot divorce one from the other, I am also thinking about other forms of unconventional sexual practices, such as sexual kink, fetish-play, and BDSM.

Kink (when practised correctly and safely) is often brought up as an exemplar of a feminist space in which women are able to access sexual agency in being able to dictate their preferences and experiences. This is a natural extension of the self-mastery that comes with knowledge of the self—hence, the exhortation to *eat your own nasi kang kang* (NASI KANG KANG, pg 16). It is important to note also that none of these spaces exist in a strict binary or vacuum: for instance, most mainstream portrayals of kink serve to perpetuate hegemonic—and tired—narratives of male domination and female submission.

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1 'CURSING THE FIG TREE', pg 45

The larger destination I started with in mind, therefore, was centred on the various ways in which femininity is policed, and in counterpoint to that, how one can liberate oneself from the validation presented in reward to the ideal feminine form and performance required of us by ourselves and the larger paradigms within which we work.

What are the ramifications of the alienation and othering of minority experiences? How can we break away from the default positionality of ‘white cisgender maleness’ that so often informs how we consume and interpret poetry, art, and all communication? And in the process of being complicit with or tearing apart from systems of brutal efficiency, where is the individual driven? In what spaces can the subaltern exist wholly and utterly as themselves, especially and even within a dominant, consensual concept of reality? Finally, how can we rise above and derive power from existing hegemony that others and places minorities in positions of disadvantage?

Representation of subaltern voices has little meaning to me if it does not strive for resolution or breakthrough. What further effects does existing in a marginal position have on feminine access to power and resources? Working on the assumption that the occult serves as a means of rising from restrictions both structural and individual, the trans-genre work aims to explore—and decimate—the boundaries between forms and subjects.

In the book, I utilise witchcraft and occult (literally, ‘unknown’) technologies as a vehicle to explore new ways of manifesting the embodied, esoteric desires of the self, whether because or in spite of the systems of hierarchy we are made to operate within.

Occult principles are useful for thinking about sexual and gender trouble, and indeed about power dynamics. So much of why witchcraft is vilified is the same reason it is empowering—one of the earliest quotes I encountered in my occult studies, and one of my most beloved, its source now lost to time, reads: ‘The secret of magic is, any fool can do it.’ What a threat to established orders, to institutions of power, that anyone could bypass the emissaries of the gods and attain transcendence for themselves!



GAZE BACK presents re-imaginings of the feminine ideal, elaborated in the idea of gender minorities existing freely only within spaces marked as taboo. The archetype of the empowered woman is so often seen in patriarchal culture and entertainment as occult, sexually ‘deviant’, or only in markedly ‘feminine’ or matriarchal spaces. We are allowed our powerful witch crones, but only as villains. Women free from male control are generally failures of femininity in various ways: they are sexually promiscuous, predatory or plain undesirable. I was fascinated by the idea of the feminine grotesque as power. Is male desire disempowering?

Can autonomy be regained by the ugly, the dreadful, and the strange woman?

The occult, for me, provides a rejection, or at least a counterpoint, to tradition and orthodoxy that frequently incorporates the historic marginalisation and submission of women. In this manner the avenue of witchcraft is utilised as a way for women to create paths towards agency and power in a patriarchy where men monopolise access to most of the resources. Working with the idea of the immaterial (that is, the intuitive, unpredictable, subconscious, emotional, illogical) as the domain of women serves once again to make femaleness the Other. In addition, immateriality dictates that it is so often only within the realm of the metaphysical or religious that a feminine presence commands respect, fear, or authority.

Thus I felt an exploration of the occult, especially practices indigenous to Southeast Asia and Singapore, and in particular practices of personal significance as empowering, was due. Let us look to the pantheons of goddesses (perhaps only respected because of the 'mother' role they play), to the limited respect afforded to the soothsayers, witches, high priestesses, hijra, healers, and mediums.



I struggled very much with making the book ‘worth the audience’s while’, which really meant, making it worth my own while. While negotiating the ever-present spectre of the audience’s gaze, I learnt to play with the dynamic tension of the author-reader relationship, and walk the tightrope between challenging the reader and creating pleasure for them. Furthermore, in keeping with the zeitgeist of identity politics while writing this book, the perennial question was what right do I have to be writing this? In the process of undergoing this book, my methodology and praxis was challenged, especially with regard to the possibilities of existence in liminal spaces. In writing *GAZE BACK*, I considered new utilities of form and content, breath and space, and was doubly conscious of my social and artistic choices—not least because of the care and incision in Divya’s comments, who oversaw the birthing of this manuscript. Moreover, these were framed in contextual terrain that was always highly personal—the local queer scene, the imported Catholicism, the varieties of English I have chosen to feature, the very particular geo-locations mentioned by name. I have had to think closely about what I have been communicating and attempting to disrupt, whether through form (presenting the reader with a flowchart, a grainy picture, a page of programming code) or language.

Ultimately, *GAZE BACK* is an instruction book, a grimoire, a recipe book; a call to insurrection—to wrest power from the institutionalised

social structures that serve to restrict, control and distribute it amongst those whom society values and privileges above the disenfranchised. I hope it discomfits and reassures in equal measure. I hope it is disobedient, difficult, and disarming. And I am grateful for the attention that you have shown it.

‘How dangerous can a book be?’ This quote was encountered, while writing *GAZE BACK*, from another poet. I hope to lessen some of the incredulity of that comment.

With special thanks to Professor Divya Victor for her immeasurable guidance and mentorship over the course of a year. She continues to inspire me to be louder, more disobedient, and to gaze back unflinching.

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