

ISA KAMARI

# Pilgrimage

Translated from Malay by  
HARRY AVELING

Pilgrimage

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Malay poems in this edition first published in *Munajat Sukma*

by Pustaka Nasional, Singapore, 2003

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## PREFACE | Harry Aveling

In 2001, the prolific Singapore Malay author Isa Kamari undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca, also known as the Islamic Hajj. Two years later, at the urging of a friend, he wrote a series of 100 poems based on this experience, in the incredibly short period of two weeks. They were published in 2003 as *Munajat Sukma* and in three small volumes during 2006: *Ka'bah: 33 puisi tanah suci* (Ka'bah, 33 poems from the holy land); *Lorong Wahyu, 33 puisi tanah suci* (Path of Revelation: 33 poems from the holy land); and *Cinta Arafat: 34 puisi tanah suci* (Love of the Plain of Arafat: 34 poems from the holy land). Each of the small volumes carried a CD containing songs and readings of some of the poems.

The poems translated here include slightly less than half of the original collection. Overall, they are short, minimal in their use of language, and focus on Isa's inner responses to precise and significant events during his pilgrimage. For this volume, Isa has arranged the poems to form a sequential narrative of his journey.

To provide context to readers unfamiliar with the events of the Hajj, they are summarised as follows. They take place between the eighth and the thirteenth day of the twelfth lunar month of Dhu al Hijjah. In preparation for entering the holy city, all male pilgrims assume the common costume of ihram, two plain pieces of white cloth, and declare their intention of performing the pilgrimage. Women wear plain clothing, and do not cover

their face or hands. After donning ihram, pilgrims then enter the Holy Mosque and circle the Ka'bah stone structure seven times in a counter-clockwise direction; this symbolises the undoing of past sins. The kissing of the Black Stone is, ideally, a part of the initial circling of the Ka'bah but is difficult to do at the height of the season because of the crowds.

The scriptures tell that Abraham left his second wife, Hagar, and their son, Ismail, in the valley of Mecca at the instigation of his first wife. When Hagar had no more water, she ran between the hills of Safa and Marwa (about 410 metres apart) seven times, until a spring gushed from ground, the Zamzam well. For pilgrims, running between these two hills near the Great Mosque is a second part of the ritual of the Hajj, completed immediately after the circling of the Ka'bah.

On the ninth day of Dhu al Hijjah, the pilgrims stay in Mina, a valley about five kilometres from the Ka'bah, until after the dawn prayers. They then leave for the Mount of Mercy, Jabal al-Rahmah, in the barren plain of Arafat, a further 14.5 kilometres from Mina. Here they stand in prayer all day. This "standing" is the grand climax of the entire Hajj and the one absolutely obligatory action. After sunset, they depart for the plain of Muzdalifah, halfway back to Mina (9 kilometres).

On the third day, the pilgrims return to Mina and throw a minimum of seven stones at a pillar there, in remembrance

of the prophet Abraham's rejection of the devil's urging that he not sacrifice his son, Ismail, in response to God's request. On the tenth day of Dhu al Hijjah, or any of the following four days, the Feast of Sacrifice (Aidiladha) is undertaken, commemorating Abraham's obedience. This feast is celebrated throughout the whole Muslim world.

The pilgrims then shave or cut their hair to mark the end of their being in ihram. They proceed to Mecca, where they again circle the Ka'bah seven times, and walk between the hills of Safa and Marwah seven more times. Returning to Mina to rest, the subsequent days may be used for stonings of all three pillars there. They then return to Mecca one last time and repeat the various circumambulations.

After the Hajj, pilgrims are encouraged to visit Medina, and sacred sites such as the Prophet's Mosque and the Garden Raudhah next to the prophet's house. The poems carry references to persons and places close to the Prophet and great historical events such as the battles of Badr (624 CE) and Uhud (625).

Isa has described these poems as a mixture of the longing and hope of a humble servant before his Creator. It is my wish that they continue to speak to new readers in these English translations.



## *Ibram*

mimpi isteri  
aku akan kembali  
dalam perjalanan ini

setelah bercukur  
mandi sunat  
bungkus badan  
dua helai kain putih  
teringat tangis pertama  
keluar dari rahim ibu

solat musafir

niat ihram  
langkah pasrah  
serah menyerah  
    bimillahi tawakaltu a'lallah  
    walahwla walaquwwata illabillah

lambai isteri  
dakap anak-anak  
aku mula  
perjalanan akhir  
sebongkah tubuh dikafan  
tanpa harum setinggi

## PILGRIM'S ROBES

my wife dreamt  
about my return  
from this journey

I have shaved  
taken a ritual bath  
wrapped my body  
in two pieces of cloth  
relived my first cry  
when I left  
my mother's womb

a pilgrim's prayer  
the vow of my robes  
are steps  
on the path of surrender  
we surrender to each other

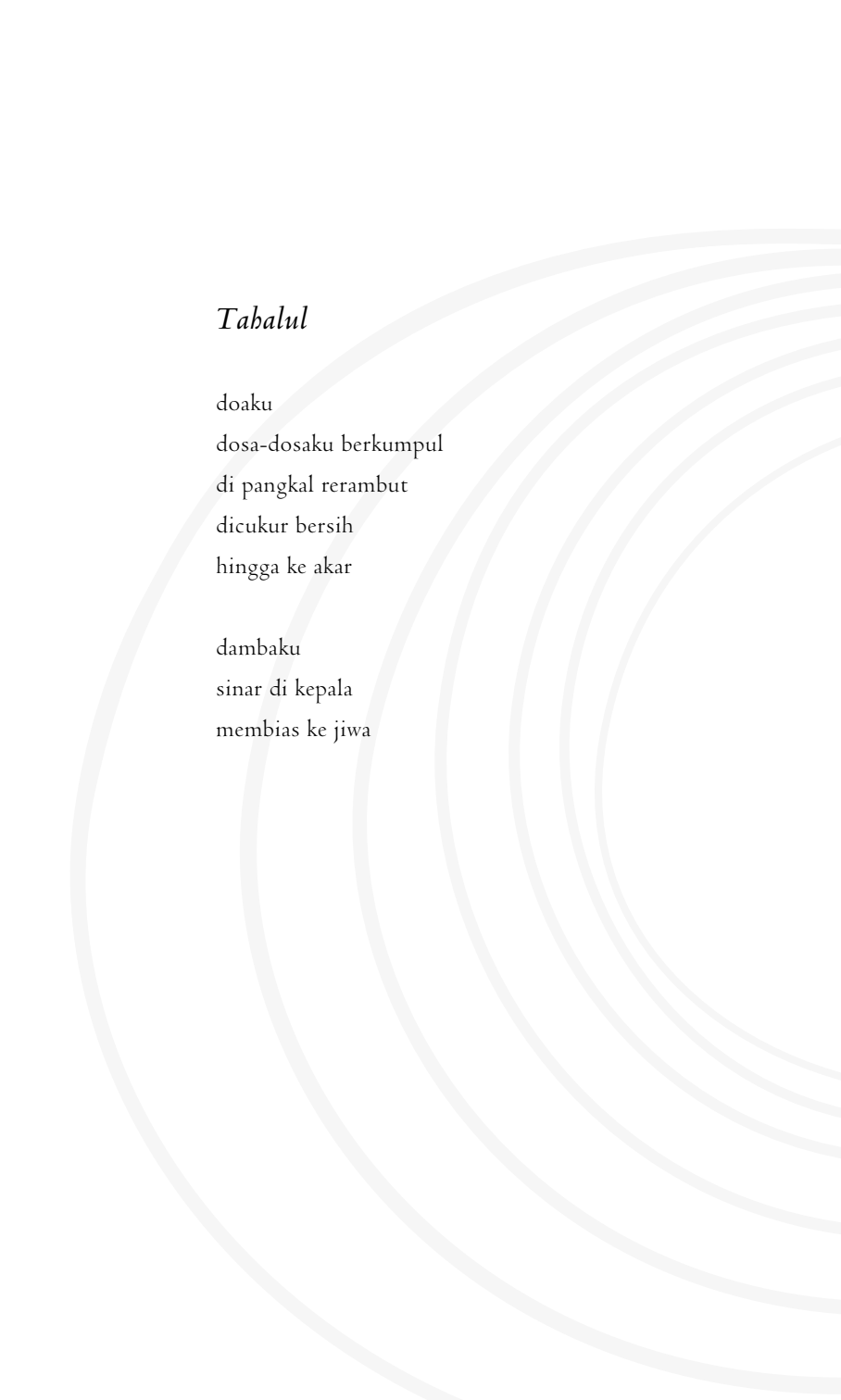
*bismillaabi tawakaltu*

*a'lallab*

*walabawla*

*walaquwwata illabillah*

I wave to my wife  
embrace my children  
and begin  
this final journey  
a body  
wrapped in  
the plainest  
of cloths



## *Tabalul*

doaku  
dosa-dosaku berkumpul  
di pangkal rerambut  
dicukur bersih  
hingga ke akar

dambaku  
sinar di kepala  
membias ke jiwa

SHAVING

my prayer  
is that my sins  
should gather  
at my scalp  
and be shaven  
away

my desire  
is that the light from my head  
shines in my soul

## *Perkuburan Baqi*

butiran seko  
untuk sekawan merpati  
malaikat atau wali  
mengawasi perkuburan  
tanpa nesan

tanah  
hanya tanah  
terasa hidup mencecah  
keabadian akhirat

tiba-tiba aku bertanya  
adakah nesan itu penjara  
yang menjerat roh  
pada dunia

aku cemburu  
pada khabar  
jemaah pernah terhidu  
semerbak tiada tara  
melingkari udara kenderaan  
sepanjang perjalanan pulang

THE GRAVEYARD

grains of wheat  
feed two doves  
angels or saints  
guarding  
unmarked graves

earth  
is only earth  
but I feel life  
reaching out to the eternal

suddenly I wonder  
if the tombstone is a prison  
binding the spirit  
to this world

I am jealous  
when I hear  
that one of our group  
can smell a wonderful perfume  
around our vehicle  
all the way home

## *Masjid Rahman*

dadamu  
memaut darat dan lautan  
menegap hasrat dan pegangan

tanpa ceracak menaramu  
roh makkah dan madinah  
hanyut dibawa ombak segara  
citra jeddah menyilau jiwa  
lembut menjemput maya

ya rahman  
ya rahim  
aku takut kembali  
setelah menemukan  
diri

bayang masjid di permukaan  
ketika senja memaut usia  
kudakap sebagai ingatan  
dunia sekilas perhentian  
bersantai di pantai

MASJID RAHMAN

your courtyard  
covers land and sea  
holds our hopes and beliefs

if they did not depend on your spires  
the spirits of Mecca and Madinah  
would drift on the ocean waves  
the image of Jeddah would bewitch us  
gently inviting us to false realities

ya Rahman  
ya Rahim  
I am afraid to go home  
now that I have found  
myself

I embrace  
the reflection of the mosque  
on the water  
at twilight  
the world is a brief stay  
a day at the beach



ABOUT THE WRITER | *Isa Kamari*

Isa Kamari (b. 1960, Singapore–) is a prominent figure in Singapore’s Malay literary scene. He has gained critical acclaim for many of his works, which range from novels and short stories to poetry and essays. He is also a musician and has crafted scripts for television and theatre. In 2007, his contributions to the nation were officially recognised when he was conferred the most prestigious arts award in Singapore, the Cultural Medallion; he is the first non-full-time artist to receive the award.

In 1997, his short story “Pertemuan” won the Hadiah Sastera, Anugerah Persuratan, a Malay literature award given by the Malay Language Council of Singapore. He received the award for the second time in 2001 for his essay *Milik Siapa Bumi Yang Satu Ini*. He has received numerous awards for his other works, including his first novel *Satu Bumi*. Released in 1998, *Satu Bumi* was translated and published in Mandarin and English in 1999 and 2007, respectively. It was also selected for the launch of the National Library Board’s nationwide reading initiative READ! Singapore in 2005. Another of his novels, *Kiswab*, was shortlisted for the Singapore Literature Prize in 2004.

2016 also saw three of Isa's novels, *Rawa*, *Tawassul*, and *Menara* translated into Mandarin, Urdu, and Turkish respectively.

Besides the Cultural Medallion, Isa was presented with the distinguished Southeast Asian Writers Award (also known as the S.E.A. Write Award) in 2006, and the Anugerah Tun Seri Lanang in 2009.

*Tweet*, his first English novel, is forthcoming late 2016.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR | *Prof. Harry Aveling*

Harry Aveling, PhD (NUS) DCA (UTS), holds an adjunct appointment as a Professor in the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics, Monash University. He specialises in Indonesian and Malay Literature, and Translation Studies. Prof. Aveling has published widely in translation theory and is the author, with Teri Yamada, of the entry on Southeast Asian Translation Traditions in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, 2009.

He has translated extensively from Indonesian and Malay, from Vietnamese Francophone writing, and co-translated from Hindi. In 1991, he was awarded the Anugerah Pengembangan Sastra by the Federation of Malay Writing Societies (GAPENA) for his contributions to the international recognition of Malay Literature. Among his major translations are *Secrets Need Words: Indonesian Poetry 1966-1998* (Ohio University Press 2001), short listed for the NSW Premier's Translation Award 2003, and *Saint Rosa: Selected Verse of Dorothea Rosa Herliany* (IndonesiaTera 2005), winner of the Khatulistiwa Prize for Poetry, Jakarta 2006.

His current research relates to the work of the Singapore Malay author Isa Kamari.

Besides his supervisory work at Monash University, he has taught courses in Translation Studies at the University of Indonesia, Jakarta; Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta; University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City; and the Vietnam National University, Hanoi. He was a Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Center for International Studies, Ohio University, for Spring Quarter 2011.

Prof. Aveling is a Fellow of the Stockholm Collegium of World Literary History, Stockholm University, representing island Southeast Asia. He was Foundation President of AALITRA, the Australian Association for Literary Translation, from 2005 to 2008, and is currently Immediate Past President of the Malaysia and Singapore Society, a regional subgroup of the Asian Studies Association of Australia.

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In 2001, the prolific Singapore author Isa Kamari undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca. Two years later, he wrote a series of 100 poems based on this experience which was published in Malay as *Munajat Sukma*. The collection was subsequently republished as a triptych of chapbooks in 2006. *Pilgrimage* is a translation of a selection of these poems.

Arranged by Isa to form a sequential narrative of his journey, Harry Aveling's English translations are a conduit for new readers into the deep recesses of the pilgrim's mind and soul. Through the poet's inner responses to his faith, this collection allows English readers to enter the world of another language and religion.



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