

SINGGA PURA & PURA

Malay Speculative Fiction
from Singapore

Edited by

Nazry Bahrawi

SINGA-PURA-PURA:
Malay Speculative Fiction from Singapore

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A LITERARY MOVEMENT FROM DOWN SOUTH,

and yet, how is it that having read *Sejarah Melayu*—the mother of all speculative fiction—I have not written in this fashion myself or how is it that this literary movement can only hail from the South?

Truth be told, the Malays are no stranger to speculative fiction. Which other culture in the world can boast of a king who, having reigned over vast territories on land, then decides to plunge into the depths of the sea to explore other possibilities?

Asks His Highness Raja Suran in *Sejarah Melayu*, “Now that I know the content of the land, what of the sea and all its glories?”

The moment he descended into the sea was when the Malays began speculating all manners of their future.

Is it not traceable to that moment that a bored prince then came to Temasek, an island fertile for speculation? From the imaginary of our ancestors, extraordinary futures were conjured. Of the superhero with incredible strength named Badang and the relentless onslaught of the garfishes from distant oceans. These are not even all of it. *Sejarah Melayu* is miraculous on account that the Malays are told thereupon that the lineages of great Chinese and Indian kings can be tracked to their intermarriages with Malay princes and princesses.

That may be the reason why a handful hold the view that the Malays are the tuan, though from another perspective, it can also be taken to mean that Malayness is a trait common to all.

Yet where is the place of the Malays in Singapore amidst the vehement speculation by the non-Malays there? Lest we forget, the venture of speculation began with the Malays. If not for the Palembang prince named Sang Nila Utama who had encountered a creature akin to a lion after being forced to beach himself on the island in the wake of a storm abound with lightning; if not for this attempt at speculating, it could be that Raffles might not even have had a port city to discover.

Therefore, reading this anthology of speculative fiction by the progeny of Singa, from the pura down south, is nothing short of moving. Are we reading the new *Sejarah Melayu* to last the next thousand years?

Perusing this collection of stories spurs us to rethink what it means to be Malay (a civilisation whose most renowned text of speculative fiction is *Sejarah Melayu* as I have outlined), and to consider that the narrative strategies that you will encounter are just as enchanting as the tale of Tun Jana Khatib who, for magically halving a pinang tree was sentenced to death by the side of a locksmith's shop, but whose corpse then magically flew to the island of Langkawi up north. Now, does this not sound fitting as the literary movement that I am now describing from the South? Indeed, this enchanting tale hails from the pura Singa down below.

What more, readers will get to experience the agony of a tight-knit minority community. Several times over, the question of identity surfaces in multiple manifestations, mulled over and over in the pursuit of greater clarity. In the likeness of *Sejarah Melayu's* sensational strangeness, the stories channel the desire of the authors to make sense of an environment that has become increasingly demanding and ruthlessly competitive.

The bottom line of the matter is that, regardless of the new and notable technological and scientific breakthroughs they describe, these stories are all about the search for what is in essence human in space and the oceans, even if they appear pessimistic.

This anthology will transport you to other worlds. They speak of the limited choices available to humans made morose by technology, or they articulate the author's inner struggles within the limits of this form accorded to them.

I am, for instance, struck by the story “(A)nak (I)bu”, a creative piece by Tuty Alawiyah Isnin that speculates the future human self and the pain of elusive love, which meaning can only be determined by a psychiatrist-robot. Meanwhile, Pasidah Rahmat's “The Chip” explores the struggle for freedom in a world where humans are implanted with a nano-chip that binds them to authoritarian regulations.

These two stories alone have raised in me a thousand and one questions. Here are two Malay authors who exemplify what Margaret Atwood had said of this genre—speculative fiction that offers us a glimpse of what can happen.

The anthology that is in your hands now bears what is arguably the true definition of speculative fiction. It originates from a civilisation born out of speculation, from a pura built by a king who lives and breathes speculation. Without a doubt, you will find in here fiction fashioned from science, fantasy, mythology, superhero tales, horror and suspense, utopia and dystopia that we had chanced upon in *Sejarah Melayu* several thousands of years ago.

In this anthology, we come face to face with voices speaking in the tone of marginality, or read in another way: speculative strategies to overcome the worsening disregard for heritage and language. Almost every author discusses this, with the most evident being “Doa.com” by Hassan Hasaa’Ree Ali and the story “Mother Techno” by ila.

In the hands of Farihan Bahron, we encounter doubt about cryptocurrency, and embedded within is the core of his beliefs, though we are not subjected to their full brunt.

I have no intention of spoiling every single story here, but I will say that “Tujuh” by Nazry Bahrawi possess of a bite that lingers long after you have put the book down, even after a good night’s sleep, and when you wake up the next morning—the mark of Tujuh’s bite appears to be eternal.

In your hands is a literary movement. The authors have traversed far from Robert A. Heinlein who is enamoured by science fiction as well as transcended the New Wave movement initiated by Judith Merril. These stories appear to me as a fresh take on the genre. They are birthed from a community whose origin was pregnant with speculation in the first place. This is a collection drawn from traditional narratives, entangled in technological turmoil and scientific advancements, curated by members of a society with both utopian and anti-utopian impulses. Their speculations are knitted as tales of apocalypse or the possibilities of rebuilding that world torn asundered; they are no blockbuster tales of male and female superheroes, because they also speak of mystical forces that have long been around and the ability to re-interpret history for real.

In your hands is the inkling of a movement. Gabriel Garcia Marquez once helmed magic realism. But—yes, this is purely speculative—it might be because the South invented *Sejarah Melayu*, the mother of all speculative fiction, and this could be a new trend: this anthology is testament to the new stylish literary movement of Malay speculative fiction from the South!

Faisal Tehrani
Kajang, 2019

Beginning

nor

In the beginning, there was nothing but dark. God was asleep. After millions of years being asleep, God sneezed and woke Themselves up from Their slumber. From God's mucus came Sakatimuna, the great cosmic snake, at once releasing a chaos of sudden heat and light. God was frightened by what They had created. They looked at the rainbow snake in amusement but was also taken aback by the glimmer of the snake's skin. From God's curiosity of the snake's radiant light, the angel Gabriel came into existence.

"Who are you?" God asked.

"I am Gabriel, Your Majesty."

"Majesty?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"And who is she?"

"She will be the heart of the world, Your Majesty."

"Heart? But she frightens me."

"Perhaps then, some time away from her would make you love her better, Your Majesty," said Gabriel.

God thought this was good and said, "And so it shall be." Sakatimuna was taken out of God's sight. With Gabriel as Their right hand, God learnt how to be God and God learnt how to be good and worked on the rest of the Universe.

While God worked on the rest of the Universe, Sakatimuna continued her slumber. Sakatimuna had vivid dreams of beings like her, but with fins and tails that would swim in blue.

In her sleep, she whispered, "What is blue?"

These beings would grow legs then move from blue to red.

"What is red?"

Then from the red, these beings climbed up lengths of brown and Sakatimuna saw green! Some of these beings climbed even higher, grew wings and flew off into blue again! As Sakatimuna slept for millions of years, she saw from beginning to end and she came to learn of an emotion that would tug at her heart.

"S-s-s-sad. I'm sad." These words would pass through her tongue while she continued to slumber.

God had finally finished creating not just one Universe, but many Universes, and decided that it was time for Them to be reunited with Sakatimuna. Having separated Their essence into so many things, God was

no longer They but He, much like Gabriel. God needed Sakatimuna again for Him to become They once more. Gabriel was great company, but it was now time for God to work on a project of existence he would lovingly call Bumi.

After millions of years being asleep, the many skins the cosmic snake had shed hardened into a shell. Sakatimuna was still fast asleep and having visions of what she understood to be called ‘apocalypse’ when Gabriel’s radiant light awakened her. Her shock caused four legs to appear out of the hardened shell and a head similar to hers popped out. When Gabriel saw the accidental creature that Sakatimuna had given birth to, he thought it was good and wise. He called it Korma. Korma’s shell was green in colour and this too Gabriel thought was good. He decided that Korma’s shell would be the colour of Bumi once God was done with His creation.

“What are you here for, Gabriel?” Sakatimuna asked.

“God asked for what has been owed for a long time coming, dear Saka.”

“And what is that, my dear Gabriel?”

“Your heart, my love.”

“*Ada hati.*”

“Yes, you have heart, Saka.”

Sakatimuna, still sleepy and unsure of Gabriel’s request, went back to sleep. This time, she asked Korma if he could make space inside his shell for her, to be protected from the blinding radiant light of Gabriel. Korma, seeing that he was formed out of Sakatimuna’s skin, obliged her. Sakatimuna, haunted by her visions, cried throughout her continuing slumber. Korma, feeling suffocated by her tears, popped his head out never going back into his shell again. For the next 500,000 years, Sakatimuna cried in her sleep. From the blue of her tears, all kind of creatures with fins and tails appeared, much like her dream. From that same blue, there would be flashes of red. Hot, red, boiling—this was Korma’s blood.

Having been reprimanded by God for failing to take back Sakatimuna’s heart, Gabriel appeared to Korma. Korma understood it was time for the creation of Bumi. For the greater good and for God, he had to let Sakatimuna go. Korma gave consent. Sakatimuna, however, was still fast asleep.

With the speed of light, Gabriel smashed open the top of Korma’s shell and ripped Sakatimuna out of him. The cosmic snake yelled in anguish and this yell would be eternally embedded into Bumi as the ‘rhythm’ of life. Gabriel ripped her head to tail and her organs fell into the sea of tears that had collected in the remnants of Korma’s shell. Her organs, having reacted to Korma’s boiling blood, would form ‘land’, and on this land, the ‘soil’ was tinted red with her blood. From the ‘soil’, there were ‘trees’ that were green like Korma and as the trees branched higher, there was ‘sky’ and it was blue. Every vision of creation Sakatimuna had during her long slumber began to

take shape as she turned white, in death. All that was left was Sakatimuna's heart, still beating, in Gabriel's hand.

Korma, whose head was now unable to retreat back into his shell, could not see what was happening but felt for the very first time what Sakatimuna had felt when she used to chant "s-s-s-sad" during her long slumber. God finally appeared.

"Gabriel, fetch me the soil of Bumi."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

God mixed soil with the heart of Sakatimuna. With this mixture, God breathed into it. With that, the first two 'humans' were created. Though God could not be They again, the mixture allowed God to create both He and She.

"What are your names?" God asked the two humans before him.

"S-s-s-sad." Both humans said with the unmistakable hiss of Sakatimuna's tongue.

With that, the two humans plunged Bumi into darkness.

"Oh dear," said Gabriel. "We forgot to remove the anguish of Saka's heart. This will be something that they have to inherit."

"I know that," said God.

"What do we do now?"

"Erase their sadness. Put them in Eden. Eventually, they will learn of their inner sadness. With sadness, comes desire. With desire, comes creation."

"We have been through this, Your Majesty. With desire also comes destruction."

"With destruction, comes hope. And with hope, home is to be found."

When God said 'home', Gabriel saw the movement of human beings for millions and millions of years. He saw sadness, he saw desire, he saw creation, he saw destruction and he saw hope. He saw every single vision that Sakatimuna saw during her long slumber, from start to finish. Gabriel, too, felt s-s-s-sad. But Gabriel also saw 'home' at the end of it and felt that it was good. Really good.

"Alright then," said Gabriel. "Let there be light?"

"Let there be light."

Transgression

Diana Rahim

Her shadow had begun to rebel. She first noticed it one day while opening the fridge. Her shadow lagged. The usual perfect symmetry in movement and timing, so perfect as to be inconsequential, was disrupted. She initially attributed the event to exhaustion. She told herself her mind was probably not working up to speed after a long workday.

Then a week later, while taking a canned drink from the fridge, she noticed her shadow failed to pick up the can's shadow. Her arm's shadow was raised in parallel on the wall, grasping nothing. She considered the sight, her hand still holding on to her can of chrysanthemum tea. As condensation trickled between her fingers and her hand began to numb from the cold, she knew with absolute resolution that her journey out of this world, a world in which she did not belong, was beginning.

Her body was preparing itself.

*

As a child, she had grown up without a mother and with a father who longed for his departed wife to the point of madness.

Her father said that her mother departed from this world, but was not dead. That she lingered somewhere in a different realm amongst the incorporeal. He would tell her this as he sat by her bedside, thinking perhaps that a child may be comforted by such things. That she would not remember.

He never showed her a picture of her mother, or even described her. It angered him deeply to be asked about his wife. She had the sense that he resented having a daughter because it denied him full and total ownership to the memory of his wife.

Once, when she was nine years old, she had asked her father what her mother looked like. She knew her father would get angry, but she had felt fearless that night as children sometimes do.

Perhaps to spite his own child, he had replied her in a way he knew she would not understand. He replied her with a drink of tea in one hand and a cigarette in the other:

“Imagine a light that was not very bright to the eye, but very, very bright in experience. Then imagine that in that light, there was a face. If you look at the face, the body disappears. If you looked at her hands, her face disappears. You can only look at one thing at a time, because our eyes are not built to see her totally. Then imagine that it doesn't really make sense to call her “she” at all either.”

He took a drink of his tea when he finished, and looked at her with so much scorn that she walked into her room and cried. She had written down what her father said, hoping that one day she might understand.

What did it matter to her that she was a daughter of light? She was unloved.

*

For a normal person, losing control of their shadow would be a terrible and mortifying thing. The stuff of nightmares or absurdist fiction. But for her it registered as something common sensical, even expected.

It had been two weeks since her shadow began to rebel but it was doing so sparingly, as if it wanted to ease her into the full madness of what was to come.

The movement of shadows became a fixation of hers. During work lunches she would stare glassy-eyed at the tables, ready to catch the slightest asymmetry in her colleagues' shadows. And they, who found her pleasant but distant, never even noticed her unsettling silence and unflinching gaze.

Every evening, when the sun pulled everyone's shadows into lengthy dark limbs, she would scrutinise shadows. But day after day, across the tar, the grass, and the cobbled pathway to her flat, none of the shadows of her humanfolk appeared to behave abnormally. They moved in perfect rhythm, so perfect as to be inconsequential.

She could not help but ponder on the nature and her ownership of a shadow. If her shadow refused to pick up a can, or did not match the rhythm of her walk, or at times even turned away when she was turning forward, could she realistically still call it her shadow? If it has a will of its own, wouldn't it be logical that it is its own being? When did her shadow stop being hers? Or was it never hers at all?

In fact, since the day of her shadow's rebellion, she began to feel it radiating a profound tenderness towards her. It was a tenderness without cause but with an origin. It felt beautiful, but alien. It did not make any sense even to her, but she knew that her shadow rebelled, moved, because it loved her.

Once, when she visited her father, he had blown up into a terrible temper and moved towards her to intimidate her as he often did. She saw behind him that her shadow had reached towards his, and pulled it back. She had not noticed this sight until he had abruptly stopped, his face frozen in an expression of malice, and his leg poised to take another step. Her shadow's hand was gripping his shadow's head, as if it were a warmonger gripping the head of an enemy. She could see his hair's shadow sprouting from her shadow's fingers.

More importantly, she could feel it. The shadow's anger. It had history.

*

Though she feared it, she awaited the day when her shadow would liberate itself. When this happens, she knows that she would finally understand who, or what, she was. She would understand the root of her unbelonging, the core reason for her perpetual distance from the world.

She had always felt, since she was a child, that her life on earth was an error. She longed to leave this life if it meant there was another place where she was truly home.

There had been many explanations to rationalise this profound disconnect she felt. As a teenager, this feeling of being deeply different was decisively ruled as a phase of teen angst. Which teen girl hasn't felt—with either despair or pride—that she was not like other girls?

She knows the pain of difference that comes with being a minority, or being a woman, or growing up with a single parent. But this feeling of fundamental difference was not attributable to any of these things. The only thing that offered itself up as an explanation was that she held within herself a secret access to a world she did not understand.

Her friend Emily suggested once that perhaps she was experiencing a sophisticated kind of disassociation, where she no longer felt connected to not just her body, but this earth. An online friend even wondered if her persistent desire to escape this world could be considered “suicidal ideations”.

But she was not depressed. Once, while waiting for the end of her workday, she even did the K10 depression and anxiety checklist, ticking off boxes to questions like: How often do you feel worthless and how often do you feel nervous? She popped an M&M into her mouth each time she answered a question. Her score had been conclusive. She was fine.

She had the desire to leave this earth, yes, but it was not a desire to die. She felt estranged from this world, but considered this an absurdity, not a sadness. This world has not wronged her simply because it was not made for her. She had the wisdom to know that, at least.

But if you asked her what her deepest sadness was, even if it may not be debilitating, even if she could function healthily, she would say that once in a very rare while, when she was too tired, in a foul mood, and her mind driven to wandering, she could get deeply, savagely lonely.

The feeling struck anywhere, at any time: Once while she was about to board a bus, and was pushed crudely by an impatient passenger. Once while she was trying on her fourth pair of shoes in Charles & Keith in both sizes 37 and 38, and the sales assistant had practically thrown the box next to her feet. And every single time when looking at photographs of herself, there is only a blurred orb of light where her face should be.

She did not deal with feelings of worthlessness, or anxiety, or sleeplessness. But loneliness, she dealt with that a hundred times over. The only way the checklist could have captured this is if it asked the same question repeatedly:

How often do you feel lonely?

How often do you feel lonely?

How often do you feel lonely?

and she would tick off:

All the time

All the time

All the time

*

In the fourth week since her shadow rebelled, she had a dream. She was a fisherman caught in a storm, being whipped in the dark froth of a sea. Her capsized boat groaned, before finally snapping in the distance. When she tried to mouth a prayer, she felt herself pulled down viciously by her legs, and water rushed into her open mouth. She had the feeling of being torn apart from herself.

She struggled for a long time. As the hours and her energy wore on, she perceived an approaching light, which upon reaching her, peeled her spirit from herself. She saw her physical body nearing the shore. With blinding effort, she willed her spirit to return to it. She succeeded for a second—her eyes shot open and she saw that the sea was calm. There was no storm. Her boat was unwrecked.

All those hours, she was fighting against a primordial sea beyond the physical realm. It only lasted a moment, that moment in her world, before her eyes were violently shut and she felt herself pulled again into that deeper, spirit world.

Once she stopped resisting, the chaos gently ceased. She found herself surrounded by the presence of unbearable beauty. How could she explain the way so many natural laws were overturned, and how they seemed perfectly logical? Here light had the fragrant smell of jasmine. Water was a light gold, as if she were treading layers of the softest, lightest silk. She had no need for breathing.

Behind her, light's scent signalled its approach. She turned and saw a face. A face that was not very bright to the eye, but very, very bright in experience.

The being before her, she could see, was stricken with desire and grief. She could tell that the being was female, for she was blindingly beautiful, and

wearing a seraphic yellow dress, with a sash of golden brocade. Her hair seemed to fall forever over her shoulders, pinned on the side with an intricate, golden brooch. On her ears were earrings made from ivory. The being opened her mouth, and she felt herself pulled into it, falling as if in a fevered state.

She woke up then. Her room smelled of jasmine. Her shadow, she realised, was missing.

All her life she had wanted to know a mother's love. Her mother's love, it seemed, was strong enough to transgress the natural laws that ordered they remain in separate realms. She was willing to pull her daughter to forbidden places, was willing to let her daughter experience severe suffering, just for a glimpse of her face.

*

For all of the fourth week, her shadow was missing. When she visited her father, she even tried to rile him up. It was her hope that in igniting his aggression, the shadow may appear again to protect her, just like it did before.

For two hours, she peppered their conversation with laced insults.

"You're so messy, you can't even take care of yourself."

"I'm so glad I don't have to stay here anymore."

"Eat like this some more and you're going to ruin your insulin levels."

"No wonder nobody wants to marry you till now."

But no matter how many times she tried to press on the painful parts of his being, he remained unfazed. He would only look to her as if in partial fear and in partial anger, but would not reply. The only time he spoke was when he asked her to make him a cup of tea.

When she left, she found herself on the verge of tears. Where had she learnt to practice such cruelty? As she shut the gate and was preparing to walk away, he spoke.

"If you have ever dreamt about her, and you found yourself drowning... that was me. That was how I met her."

He closed the door then, and on the door she saw her lengthening shadow.

That night and all through the fifth week, she began putting out a plate of glutinous turmeric-coloured rice and sheaves of mayang pinang at the corner of her room. She sang lilting lullabies she remembered hearing in her childhood dreams, which she never heard again after adolescence.

She sang them as an invocation, in a language that she was never taught and could not understand, but knew instinctively how to speak.

She slept deeply that week and would wake up from her lullaby dreams with a soft but all-encompassing light that robbed her of vision. Near the conclusion of these dreams, she would feel as if she were floating out of a celestial space and dropped gently back into the world. It would take up to half an hour before she could see again, and always she would turn to look at

the plate of turmeric-coloured glutinous rice at the corner of her room. Untouched and unremarkable.

*

On the sixth week, while she was at her desk processing a deluge of administrative forms, she was suddenly overcome.

The next morning she found herself in bed, waking to the sound of her handphone's vibration.

Babe are you okay? You feeling better?

It was her colleague Siti. She texted Siti back to ask what happened before heading into the toilet. She realised she was having a terrible fever and had to grip onto the sink to steady herself. Washing her face and brushing her teeth, she felt a little more grounded. She considered her reflection. For so long now she had been dwelling on her obsession over shadows that she had been remiss of the world of the apparent. She had not looked at her own face: her eyebags, her collection of pimples under her chin, her tired and dull skin.

She rinsed her mouth a final time and left the bathroom. Turning her gaze to the corner of the room, she noticed that the plate of turmeric-coloured rice was not there, and was still missing. She sat on her bed, her heart feeling as if it were a pebble falling into the deepest well, sending echoes of its distress as it journeyed down.

Siti had replied her message.

You were wailing and crying badly. We tried to calm you down, but you just kept crying and could not listen to anyone. Then suddenly you said, "I never should have given her up," and you fainted!! I was quite scared... but Mimi sent you home and called your dad—

She heard a knock on her door, and saw her shadow creeping back from under the gap, moving slowly until its feet reached her feet. She should have been afraid, but she walked, no longer shadowless, to open her bedroom door.

Her father was sitting at the dining table, considering the plate of coloured rice. He turned to her and pronounced simply, "It's not going to work. I have already tried everything."

She ignored him, only asking in return if he knocked on her door. He shook his head no and got up to leave. He did not say goodbye, only pointed lazily to the kitchen.

"I made you tea," he said, before turning to leave.

She walked him to the door of her studio apartment. As he slotted his feet into his worn slippers, she saw her shadow graze the hand of his shadow.

*

As a young girl, her memories were saturated with the sight and sound of her father's longing. This longing was most potent when he was by the sea. Almost every day until she was about six, they would go to the beach. For a couple of years, he would make the effort to go through the motions of making it look like a normal act of parenting. He would bring a ball for them to play with, some snacks, and sometimes a kite. He went through the tasks apathetically. He would kick the ball lazily, and not once did he aid her while she struggled to get the kite off the ground. He would spend half an hour with her before he would tell her to stay on the shore while he went for a swim. He would head into the water with one hand gripping a potpourri of flowers, and the other a fistful of coloured rice. They would leave a trail as he swam further out. He would disappear for hours at a time.

When he came back, his skin weathered, his arms emptied, he would be on the verge of tears. Only once did she try to console him, running up to him and gripping his hand. She had asked, "Why sad, Ayah?"

He burst into tears then, and hugged her for the first and only time in her life.

"They should not have brought me back. She shouldn't have let me return. I thought if I had you she would come back. She should have just let me die." The violence of his sobbing, the strength of his grip, and the brutality of his grief terrified her to tears. But when she began to cry he sobered up, forced himself to stop crying, and pushed her gently aside. They went home that day and did not return to the sea for a whole month. When the month passed, he no longer brought the toys, or spent time with her. She would simply sit on the sand, or sleep on a stone bench, while he swam straight into the sea.

In the mornings of her childhood, she often sang unearthly lullabies. They came to her mouth unbidden. He would stare at her transfixed, his mouth moving silently in an attempt to repeat the words from a language that flowed out of her mouth like water. But he could never do it. The language seemed to be threaded together with sonic qualities that did not make sense. His attempts would always end up with him in a near fury.

Once, he even raised his hand to hit her, shouting, "Why do you keep singing these songs? You're driving me crazy! Your mother taught you these songs to torture me!"

But before he could even hit her, he fell back as if pulled sharply by the scruff of his collar. She was not even in primary school when that happened. Her father's anger terrified her. But no matter how many times he blew up, she never stopped singing those lullabies.

Sometimes, when unsettling shamans came over, her father would command her to sing to them. She could never do it, because the lullabies were not her doing. Beyond the fact that it was not within her control, some

part of her did not want to collaborate or unwittingly reveal anything to her father. Some part of her wanted to sequester the magic safely wherever it belonged.

Once, a shaman brought forth a bowl of water to her and asked what she saw. She stared a long time at the still water, before she saw it begin to ripple gently, and show the profile of a beautiful woman, with a hair brooch in the shape of intricate flowers, and eyes weighted with the sadness of the wise. The face had turned to look at her and she heard it sing a lullaby.

She said she saw nothing. Afterwards, she overheard the shaman tell her father that he ought to think about what his child would bring to his fate in the future.

Some time after she turned seven, her grandfather made a decisive move. He ordered her father to follow him to a religious healer for a week, and left her in the care of her grandmother.

When her father came back, he was pronounced to be healed. Her grandfather told her that her father had been beset by evil. That he longed for a being that was not of this earth. That he made a complicated story to deny that she was a child out of wedlock. After he said that, he had smiled at her, pinched her cheeks and said, "It's not your fault. You should not suffer because of your parents' sins. You are just a pure child."

After that week was over, she never sang her lullabies, had any dreams, or cried.

Her father began to pray consistently since then. He taught her to pray and would remind her to perform her prayers. He fasted on Thursdays and donated to mosques. He stopped going to the sea, and though it took years to remove the proof of those haunting years, his deep tan from the daily swims eventually faded. But though he lost the longing for his wife, he did not lose the neglect and simmering spite he had for his child.

Sometimes, during their quiet dinners, he would lose his temper without warning. He would always blame his temper on her.

"You are here to test my faith," he would declare, before leaving the table. She would clear the table alone, her heart a little more used to bruising.

*

After the episode at her workplace, she stopped offering the rice. She stopped offering the mayang pinang. She stopped looking to her shadow. At work, she even began to talk a little more to her colleagues. She decided to sign up for a cheap yoga class offered by a residential community centre and planned to attend the first lesson the coming Friday.

During the nights, she would make her dinners and watch sitcoms. She would scroll through her Facebook timeline and share cute videos of animals. She performed normalcy.

Day by day, she felt herself fall into a state of deprivation. The more she tried, the more she felt herself unravel. But she knew if she did not continue to foster her humanness, she would continue to lean over a precipice. She had goaded too much, went too far, and now she was trying to mend the ruptured laws with sheer pretence.

On Monday, the beginning of the seventh week, as she was pulling on her yoga pants, her shadow lit up into a figure of light and pulled itself from her body. She watched as it morphed into an outline unlike her own and walked along her bedroom wall and into the bathroom.

For some reason, her dedication to her performance of normalcy still made her put on her dri-fit top, before she walked into the toilet. She did not see her shadow, but heard the beginning of her childhood lullaby.

It was not in any human language, but for the first time she understood its meaning.

On the first day, hug your mother, swim to shore.

On the second day, shed your light, and leave the shore.

On the third day, praise your mother, plait your perfumed hair.

On the fourth day, forget your mother, bathe in rivers of milk.

On the fifth day, remember that you are a child of blood and light.

She turned to find the source of the sound from her bathroom mirror, and as she awaited the sight of her reflection, she saw instead the face of the being in her dream. The moment their eyes made contact, the whole room fell away into a quiet light, and the scent of jasmine suffused her heavy breathing.

Her mother extended her hand, slim bangles of gold falling gently in the movement act of reaching. She took the hand and felt herself melt, as if drained of blood.

She found herself now on a white-sanded shore, wearing a dress of green silk, with a sash of yellow brocade. Hand in hand, they walked into the seductive, rippling water. As her feet touched the water, she saw in her mind's eye the image of her father snapping his eyes open from sleep and knew that he had seen what was to come. Her mother had given him warning, and by now, he would know the day that was taken back had come. Before she was drained of memory, she was reminded of the image of making tea for her father.

*

We were together for forty years. But why would that mean anything to you, a being for whom time has no meaning? When you pulled me under, you did it as a being that did not understand that our world is a place where the existence of deprivation means we do not simply take what we desire.

Finitude is the source of wars, but also the bed on which we design our behaviours. We do not simply take what we desire.

For forty years you pulled me into your world where the rules in mine were useless. I no longer felt my body unless you touched it. I would open my mouth and speak nothing, hearing instead the hum of my feelings. In lust, my hair would erupt to the length of my body, and my eyes refuse me the vision of you. My spirit, you said, could only bear so much.

For forty years I was ageless, forgot the colour of the sky, or the need for water. I prayed the way you taught me, you often told me my people were cruel to think your people Godless. When we had a child, for forty days we traversed a mountain for a perishable flower. We bathed her in a river, and named her Cahaya.

Then just as you had pulled me into your world with the simplicity of desire, you returned me with the cruelty of boredom. Our child had been no guarantee of fidelity. To be cruel, I grabbed her just as you pushed me to my mortal body.

You returned me to my body as a 22-year-old man, only four hours in earth time since you pulled me under. When Cahaya washed up to shore, she was tearless. A scar gave her the mark of a philtrum and her skin took time to be rid of its transparency. Seeing the blood within her run, I almost wanted to return her back to you.

For seven years I have sought you to return to you. For seven years I subjected my body to the brutality of the sea. When I treaded water, my legs threatening to give way and my throat parched with saltwater, did you ever pity me? Or were you already making love with another man, abandoning his body on another shore?

The religious healers told me I had to return Cahaya and that no being from your world had ever crossed over to live here. My theft had angered you deeply and was a terrifying breach of faith. My future in Paradise is now entirely dependent of God's forgiveness of my transgression. They told me one day you might even come back to take her, and that the day will bring me to danger.

I want to tell you that my people were at least a little right. How Godless it was for you to be angered at my theft, when you had stolen my very spirit and certainty for paradise. How Godless it was for you to make me willing to risk the integrity of my soul.

And yet in dreams, when I see the back of your head, the length of your hair calls for me to touch it. The brooch calls for me to undo your knot. And always, as I walk towards the sea to approach you, it is drained of all water, and the sky, drained of all light.

Prayers From A Guitar

Nuraliah Norasid

It was a strange day when Ustaz Hazrali Mohd came home one evening and did not fulfil his isyak prayers.

The living room floor had been cleared of its standing furniture since maghrib—coffee table against the television stand and the single armchair against the adjacent wall beside the three-seater sofa.

The sejadahs were laid out as per his prescription, and by requirement, his wife and young daughters, aged 8 and 10, were already wearing their pristine white prayer shrouds.

His eldest offspring, a teenager growing into a young man of 16 in less than two months, was seated, legs folded in under him on the lone sejadah directly in front of the three female members of the household. His taqiyya-crowned head was bent studiously over his Quran, solemn as was expected of him, though perhaps more so at salah times. The boy wanted to pursue further studies in Al-Azhar university and become an asatizah in the future, but for now, he first needed to do well enough in his 'O' Levels at the madrasah he was attending.

Taking centre stage at the head of this small congregation was a large, and opulent sejadah. The window-like design at the top of the prayer mat was pointed, like the needle of a compass, towards the direction of the Qibla in the Holy City. It was clear by the placement of the mat, its orientation and the thicker and the plusher make of its cloth, that it held space for the “head of the household”.

Hazrali's wife was the first to greet him when he came through the door, taking his hand in a salaam that she brought to her nose and lips, her Quran clutched in her hand through the material of the shroud. Normally, Hazrali would have been satisfied to see her such, especially after the unnecessarily teary and emotional episode from her after he'd brought up his wish to take on a second wife—a young woman he had met during one of his sessions at the mosque and who needed, what he believed was a great deal of religious guidance. God forbid that he let another impressionable woman lose her path in this confusing modern world full of Western influences and ideas. That he was moved by her large, dark brown eyes, long lashes and the smooth, unmarked texture of her fair skin he could not say. And after the solemnisation ceremony, it would no longer be a nagging and persistent problem. His children followed suit in greeting him and showing him the due respect—his son with sobriety and his daughters quickly, none meeting his eyes.

As they settled back in their places, his wife constantly shushing the girls into being respectfully still and quiet, Hazrali walked past the common bathroom, forewent his ablutions and made his way down the narrow hallway to the master bedroom at the end.

It was a warmly decorated place that his wife kept immaculately clean whenever he was away doing God's work in the office at the religious council. The walls were painted a pale green and above the queen-sized matrimonial bed, were the words "Allah" and "Rasul" in embossed, gold Arabic lettering against black velvet backgrounds, each in their individual frames of lacquered wood and mounted side by side. On the low table by Hazrali's side of the bed was a Quran bound in green leather, with the lettering—also in gold—stamped on the front. The Quran was hand-printed and hand-bound in Turkey and had been a gift from his wife back in their early days of courtship, when she, under her father's rather lackadaisical care, had been allowed to travel the world on her own.

He did not pick it up as he would on other days. Did not take his place at the head of his family to commence the final prayers for the day. Instead, he padded over to the built-in casement wardrobe that spanned the entire wall along the length of the bed. He opened the doors belonging to his wife's section and uncovered a curtain of black—all her day-to-day outdoor robes, from chadors he had bought for her on trips to the Middle East to jubbahs that she had purchased on outings to local Muslimah boutiques.

He parted the curtain and began to push at still more excesses of black cloth that threatened to swallow him into a nullifying and suffocating abyss. Call it a whisper from God or intuition, but he knew that she still kept it, all these years in spite of everything he had taught her. And then, at the back of the wardrobe, nearly perfectly concealed by folded and rolled stacks of the coloured clothes she barely wore anymore, were audio equipment—some cables and a single stereo speaker crowned with a row of silver knobs. In a case, leaning on its side, just barely fitting into the already large wardrobe—a specific request on her part when they were renovating the house about seventeen years ago—was a rectangular guitar hard case.

He should have known. That not even the years of lessons and guidance could take the music out of his wife. Not the sermons about the trappings of ignorance, or the ways music promoted zina between man and woman. Not the stories from the hadith he would have her read that told her of how the Prophet had spoken of God's command to him to destroy all musical instruments. Not how the beats and thumps of music, tribal and base in their nature, would distract her from her prayers and daily rituals of the faith.

Not how the entrancing sway of the song's ancient call would prevent her from reaching that transcendent state of holiness and purity she would need to enter heaven with him. It all still meant nothing to her.

He dug at the piles of clothes and shovelled them out with his hands until he was able to grab the case, lying amidst the clear tied-up plastic bags containing her amplifier, wah pedal and knots of black cable with copper ends. The hard case met the floor with a wincing ‘thump’. He undid the metal clasps that held it closed and lifted the cover to reveal the instrument encased in dark grey foam within. It was hers, he remembered, from days back when she was a free and spirited young woman—days before he had told her about the idolatry of musical instruments and the state of ignorance they brought. Before he had led her by the hand into prayer and proper, undistracted worship of God. Before the transformation into the wife he had today, first from clumsy fashions of hijab, worn only during the religious classes she attended at his behest. It took her a longer time to give up her adornments—the big hoop earrings and chunky necklaces—and still even longer to stop wearing make-up. But she came around. To be the woman God had intended all women to be.

When he thought that he had successfully ‘tamed and trained’ her, there was the guitar—well-loved in its casing, with not a spot of dust on it. He wondered briefly when and how she had shipped the guitar to the house. He would have known. He always knew.

For the first time in their life together, he felt no urge to demand an answer from her.

Instead, he lifted the guitar out to feel its weight in his hands, the sturdiness of the stalk, the gloss and polish of its body, and the heavy strings beneath his fingertips.

He would not know where to begin, being as musically untalented as he was. His father had forbidden all music from the household. Took him out of secular school at Primary One, in fact, because he could not get his firstborn exempted from music classes.

He attached the strap and slung the guitar across his body before hazarding a few cautious strums. The note came softer than he expected. To his untrained ear, he was not able to tell if the guitar was out of tune, or if the note was even correct.

He felt the strings reverberate, feeling the sting on the cuticles of his fingers as he strummed, making him wonder how anyone could play on the instrument for any extended period of time.

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It was an inexplicable thing for a man of God to come across an angel. She had met with him after he deviated from his usual Friday prayers at the mosque. For a long time, the mosque had stood alone in a sea of grass, a beacon to the lost, its minarets tall and pure in the horizon. He chose to drive the extra mile and attend this mosque for the quiet that its solitude brings. Friday congregations there were always smaller and there was space enough

to soak in the imam's voice as he delivered his sermons. He liked what the imam had to say after the latter had gotten the khutbahs out of the way. He liked that he was not elbow-to-elbow with another man as he listened.

But soon, concrete structures of build-to-order flats rose in the open grass once the secluded area around the mosque became an up-and-coming new estate for new families and new lives.

On that fateful day, Hazrali was about to take his place on one of the long prayer mats in the mosque when he heard the guitar riffs, loud and extended, coming from the set of blocks east of the mosque. As it did not sound like it was emanating from within the confines of any home, Hazrali could only deduce that it was coming from one of the sheltered open spaces that were sparsely scattered around the estate. Now that the new flats had done away with spacious void decks—to prevent illegal gatherings, perhaps—these shelters were the only spaces available for residents to hold their block and birthday parties, or weddings. And most days, Hazrali could not denigrate the holders and beholders of such celebrations, for they mostly happened over the weekends and the ones held on weekday evenings had to keep to strict rules when it came to noise levels. Especially after the mosque management sent feedback to the Town Council about the noise from parties disrupting their classes.

That day, however, the guitar riffs penetrated to his very bones, grating at them. The high-pitched whines made him wince.

It perplexed him that no one else seemed as bothered by it as he was. He stood there long enough, glaring at the wall to the far right of the mosque, until the imam's call of "Allahhuakbar" made everyone sujud in unison. Everyone but him.

So utterly riled, Hazrali picked his way past the prostrating bodies on the floor, holding up his jubbah so that he was able to walk quickly without tripping on his hem. Outside of the mosque, he plunged into the housing estate to seek the source of the guitar sounds.

It did not take him long, for the perpetrator had situated themselves in the centre of the shelter nearest to the outer walls of the mosque. It was as if the sounds had beckoned him—a challenging voice that goaded and guided him towards itself.

When he came up to the shelter, he was at first surprised to find that instead of some unruly teenager or an obnoxious Mat Rocker with long straggly hair and a loud disavowal of his religion, he found a woman who looked to be in her mid-twenties, wearing a plain black T-shirt that hung loose on her slim and boyish frame, with tattered jeans that looked like they were cut for a man instead.

She stood turning the knobs on her guitar, her other equipment scattered and cables pooling around her bare feet. Her eyes locked with his when she eventually looked up. They were strange, unforgettable eyes—the right was

obsidian black while the other was a pale—*pale*—grey, so pale to be almost white.

Instead of remorse, instead of shame or even some sliver of concern at how she had disturbed the peace of the neighbourhood, she only smiled, distantly and politely, before looking down again. Her right hand rose above her head—there she held a guitar pick—and, closing her eyes, she moved to bring it down again across the guitar strings.

“Don’t you know that there is a mosque right beside here?” Hazrali spoke up, his tone firm and lecturing. “There are prayers going on now. Don’t you know any shame? Don’t you have any respect for prayer time?”

Hazrali knew this was a mode of communication that worked on many girls and women—it was quick to bring on guilt. This was how he spoke to his wife and his daughters. This was how he had spoken to those girls in the off-shoulder tops and short skirts loitering outside Tampines Mall not too long ago. He was convinced a few of them had even changed for the better that day and had taken themselves to the mosque nearby for lessons. It was the little things that he was glad to do for the community: to guide the strayed along the path of the righteous, to uplift their hearts to the only proper way of worship.

He expected the same guilt and shame from this young woman. However, she only removed her guitar from around her by the strap, set it down, curved bottom on the floor, and leaned her weight on the neck of the instrument.

“You can’t listen without a ticket,” she said, calmly.

Hazrali tilted his head slightly, unable to comprehend what he was hearing.

“You can’t listen without a ticket,” she said again even more slowly, this time straightening up and eyeing him with the mildest exasperation.

She lowered herself into a rather unladylike squat and began to rummage through her guitar case. That went on for a while before she stood up again, this time to hand him a cut strip of flimsy pink paper that looked like it had been crumpled up a few times over. Printed on it was a name: Nazariah. With a note below stating that the ticket admitted ONE. Venue: Jannah.

Hazrali whipped his head up, properly incensed.

“Do you think this is funny?” he demanded.

Nazariah only slung her guitar back on her shoulder and turned the knobs to tune it.

Grasping the ticket in his fist and crumpling it further, Hazrali took a step towards her. He intended to strip her of that damnable guitar and have her pack up her equipment, if not to bring her forward to the imam of the mosque himself to report her insolence. But Nazariah brought her hand across the strings, sending a loud riff through the speakers, reverberating off the domed roof of the common space.

All the world disappeared. The cool tiled floor suddenly gave way to a field of green spreading from Nazariah’s bare feet to stretch far into a distant

horizon of clear blue sky and the stray cumulonimbus cloud. Hazrali stopped in his tracks as tall, wild grass grew up to his waist around him, their tops blooming with vibrant flowers in every colour he could imagine.

The equipment had disappeared from his view, hidden beneath the grass, but Nazariah stood—suddenly and impossibly—much taller, the tops of the grass coming up to her knees. A forest rose up behind her: coniferous trees of temperate regions amongst tropical ones like those in the diminishing jungles of Singapore. Just behind the first chords of the song she was playing, grew the sounds of rousing wildlife—the chirping and trilling, the opulent calls from one treetop to the next, the creaks and rustles of unseen creatures escaping, seeking and finding. And just, only just, sounds like murmured voices, coming in close to envelop him in a cloud of strangely comforting sound before retreating again as if to disappear into the grass around him. The trees were tall, looming over him at the height of the skyscrapers in the business district. As a forest, they continued to grow, upwards and around him with every twang and riff from Nazariah’s guitar, until they enclosed the two of them in a circle of grassy clearing.

Then the extant noises began to melt away until nothing but Nazariah’s song, the chords running and jumping, remained.

Hazrali watched as Nazariah played, remembering the song from somewhere. *Remembering* the closed eyes, the swinging movements of the head as it seemed to follow the climb and descent of the music. A performance somewhere, to an audience of several attendees of a seminar (on what, he forgot) and a whole host of white hotel chairs. Yet, in that moment at that time, none of it mattered.

As Nazariah played, a song he came to recognise as an electric guitar rendition of Johann Pachelbel’s Canon in D, Hazrali noticed the audience she was gaining. They appeared first like wisps of smoke or covers of pale morning mist, slithering between the tree trunks and in the gaps of foliage on the forest floor and the canopy that was closing in a lattice above him. As the music picked up, so did the wisps took shape to become personages of indescribable and indecipherable features. All that Hazrali could make out of them were their tall and stalwart postures, shoulders straight as if padded or armoured. The wisps that made them billowed behind them in arcing tendrils.

Scattered amongst and dwarfed by these sentry-like beings, were more solid forms. Hazrali recognised some of them to be human like him. Others were humanoid, some stockier, altogether resembling apes though with more upright postures and hairless skins covered in what he could only imagine were reptilian scales. He saw others with excessively elongated torsos and limbs, pronounced swaybacks, and legs with inverted knees. They convened in mixed clusters to where Nazariah stood playing. As alien as their forms were, Hazrali recognised in their upturned faces the expressions of rapture, of raw, untethered emotion; as if he was recognising those same expressions

in his own reflection. Even the sentries, as they maintained their watch along the treeline, showed movement in their very form: their tendril-wings waving and peaking in time to the music. As Hazrali continued to look around him, he saw that the treetops were populated with creatures, with the likeness of birds and various manners of rodents and primates, all their coats in colours of which he had never seen on Earth.

He turned back to Nazariah who had her mismatched eyes closed. As her song fell, she bent low over her instrument, clutching it close without missing a beat. Then as the song began to rise again, tendril-wings sprouted from her back and reached upwards towards the bit of sky with the exuberance of the peaking song.

In that moment, Hazrali felt his throat close up. His chest swelled with a buoyant mix of emotions: sadness and regret, but also marvel and ardour. He found himself closing his eyes, nodding and tapping his feet to the beat.

As the final riff faded, Hazrali opened his eyes again. The forest and the tall grasses were gone, and he was in the common space once more, the floor cold beneath his feet even though he was wearing sandals. He could sense no life around him. No human passing by. No face in the windows of the surrounding flats. Even the mosque showed no activity. The sky was beginning to darken into dusk, indicating that maghrib had already arrived. Nazariah, her guitar and equipment were nowhere to be found, leaving him with a profound sense of loss in the discomfiting silence.

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He had stumbled out onto the street, where some semblance of normalcy had been restored. Traffic was slow-moving along the side roads leading towards the housing estates. People were on their way home, heads bending over phone screens, earpieces sealing them in a film of solitude to quiet what, Hazrali had suddenly learnt, was a loud and opinionated world. He himself had driven home distractedly. The calls from his office remained unanswered and he did not respond to the texted requests asking him to confirm his speaking participation at an upcoming talk.

After parking his car and taking the lift up to his floor like a man moving on autopilot, he was now in their master bedroom, holding her instrument in his hands. Smooth, long, and obviously kept in good, precious condition. All of the daily human grind and everything he thought he cared about seemed so frivolous and, in some ways, irreverent.

Either the sounds from his searching or his attempts at making music from the instrument must have alerted his family, for they crowded the bedroom doorway. They stared at him—his daughters with curious grins and wonderment; his son with confusion; and his wife, her mismatched pale and obsidian eyes, taking in first the guitar and then his face that now bore the excited expression of a child with a new discovery. And with it came the

memories of her past life filled with found souls, the glorious wildlife of a never-ending garden, and the sombre but caring faces of her brethren, flooding her being and raining her countenance with the waters of realisation, and a long-forgotten wonderment.