

Kur semangat!

Nur Ain Binte Zainal

2022

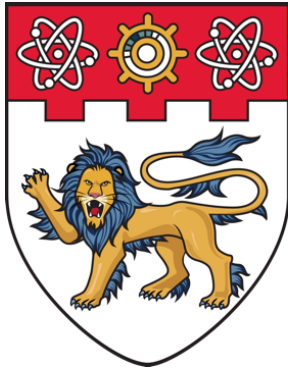
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**NANYANG
TECHNOLOGICAL
UNIVERSITY**

SINGAPORE

KUR SEMANGAT!

**NUR AIN ZAINAL
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
2022**

Kur Semangat!

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School of Humanities

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

2022


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SUMMARY

Hungry Children Have Teeth is the story of two halves of a soul struggling to gain control over the other. Disorientating, violent, and cacophonous, it traces the phenomenological experience of forming an identity while under threat. Trace the journey of a girl struggling to break free of her past experiences such as her family trauma and abandonment, in order to free herself to move forward. In this novella, I invite the reader to question the nature of having teeth and welcome them into a world where ‘I’ is the most certain — and most doubtful — sentence of all.

0 WAKING

I did not foresee this, that I speak and here I am. Truth is. I never learnt not to speak in prayer, never learnt not to avert my gaze. I was born divine, do you think you know of divine being, in my body it demands I speak in tongues and scream to wake. And Mama said, (Mama what do you hold?) be careful of names, the evil eye might be yours, when you whistle it calls, these devils awake.

Awake.

1 THE TEST

Singapore is an island nation at the very tip of the Malay Peninsular. Once populated by native Malays, it is now populated by a Chinese majority. Once a bustling seaport of villages called *kampungs*, it now boasts hundreds of skyscrapers. There is no horizon here, where land is scarce and buildings eclipse the sun. In this diamond in the rough, people are born to become hard. We give it a grand name: meritocracy. Value by merit, not by birth.

I remember getting my first period during a mathematics exam, recall the red smear on the grey plastic chair when I finally stood up. Examinations are the lifeblood of our society, a test of will to measure your worth. Failure, is unacceptable. Failure, is immoral. Failure is the realest death. It is absolute and binding. On this little island the students are depressed and the teachers are too.

To fix an appointment with the Institute of Mental Health, be prepared to wait at least two months. If you'll die before then, tell the doctor your education is at risk — you want to drop out, you're failing your classes, your teachers are worried sick. Only then will you be given an earlier appointment. Be selective of what you say; don't ever approach the truth. Truth is, you wish you never woke up. Truth is, your autonomy is only permitted to submit — to family, to school, to country and the greater good. Truth is, I only wanted to become another diamond on this strand of riches. I never really felt like anything but fuel for a pyre. This I keep secret. This is the type of secret everyone has but keeps secret anyway, what's more important is to be closed.

And all I ever knew was this pressure — feeling like a palm pressing against my throat, my chest, ask why and the answer is always to make you better, harder, well-equipped to work till death. My breath grows shallow as I walk toward the sprawling campus of the National University of Singapore. The Sun has barely risen, sky still pink, in transition. It's a dangerous time to be outside, it's time for *Subor* prayer. The Sun hanging in the balance, I feel its sweeping glances as buildings pass. Soon, I am gasping. Never have I felt the sharp relief of smokeless air.

And rest has evaded me for weeks, for years, all my life. I've revised everything I've ever learned for this test today. Hundreds of sleepless nights blur my past into one endless gasp. Just promise me one final breath, beginning to end. Standing amongst a sea of uniforms, I think if I don't pass this entrance examination, I will forever flinch at my own reflection. A simple question, am I worth the labour of birth? My mother sits on the prayer mat at home. An institution will decide, not she. And the Sun will never again embrace my motherland, once known.

When they call me, a man mispronounces my name and I realise I am holding myself, hand wrapped around the softness of my throat. I am waved into a room of white walls and black curtains, drawn closed. A woman with pale skin sits at the opposite end of a long glass table. Her gaze unreadable, in them I see fluorescent lights. I take my seat and wipe my palms against the dark blue skirt of my uniform. Between us is a yellow file, my matriculation number pasted on it in sticker. I hear the music of *gamelan* in these moments of judgement, the chimes, the winds, the percussion, and three gongs, one-two-then-three pulling me out of sync with the beat of my heart.

So incomplete, I wait. Half-formed, I wait. I wait. I wait.

The woman turns her wrist and starts her watch. Timer counting down now, one-two-then-three.

She points to the file and says:

“Listen carefully.

This file describes your story.

To pass this test, you must not turn the page to reveal your end.

You have ninety minutes.

Your time starts now.”

Could it be so simple? My mind is bent in the negative, the answer is always no. I slide the file toward me. Tasting copper on my tongue, my cheek hurts where I have bitten it. To those dependent on exams, the simpler the task, the greater the fear. There has never been anything called easy. The roads are always winding here, always circling back. You check the simplest questions twice as often, looking for the trick, the trap. Will you catch it, unravel the riddle, peek into the soul of the question and find the right answer? Your eyes search, you float from one end of the room to the other to look at all angles, your fear is returning to the start — where you began with a question, open.

I open the file. I scan the first few lines, once, twice, thrice. Going further each time, falling deeper down the lines, till my breath stops. To violate this silence, forgetting briefly that I am false. This story is about me, I say.

These are the names of my mother and father. This is the hospital I was born in, this is the date of my birth, the time too. My weight, my height, the scars on my hips, the colour of my skin, my race too. It goes on to describe things that have just happened, that are happening, that will happen, to me. The woman does not respond.

So I continue reading, repeating myself. This girl is me. This girl is me. I am she. She is me.

The examiner is silent. I wonder, did I ever speak? She watches me as I read my past till present, where I am sitting in an examination room on the fourth floor of the most prestigious university in the country. The time is 6:11AM. I rub my eyes with my knuckles, I touch my jugular and finger the red rope hanging on my throat. The pendant of a tiny wooden doll pressed between my fingers, I feel the familiar ridges now with fresh curiosity. It feels new yet just the same. How did they know that my Papa made this for me, that he carved it with a knife called a *keris* next to a burning flame, whispering? My Mama speaks English and curses in Malay and fears the dark. And as I read, the corners of the room watch.

I reach the end of the penultimate page, my fingers teasing the edge. I bend the corner once, twice, this paper so bendable was once a tree with roots untamed. And these desires of mine have always hurt, they threaten to break me. I want to know my ending, want to turn to a new page. I want to pass, secure my fate, grow brilliant-cut, hard and shiny and worthy of gaze. The soft of my flesh hurts against the sharp corners of my want. There's more than an hour left for temptation to break. The lifeblood of our society, exams are a test of will to measure your worth. And Mama is waiting at home, whispering prayers in Arabic she doesn't understand, turning right then left. I clench my fist and tuck it below my chin and look to the walls.

The woman watching me speaks again.

“All you have to do to pass is to not turn the page. Do you understand?”

I understand. I understand that these walls are white, all white. We're back to the start again. I close my eyes, the curtains are drawn shut. And the Sun must have already risen, the sky already bright, he can't touch me here, can't touch me, can't touch.

2 MAMA / MERCY

Mama does not speak when I enter. *Anak tak bismillah*, is what she calls me when she needs to. *Anak jahanam*. She is standing in the kitchen, her silhouette dark against the window. Clothes are billowing on the bamboo poles outside, it is close to noon. And the shadows grow shorter during these expectant times, I feel small as I stand next to her and cradle the soft living thing in my hands. Her silhouette cut from black, I can't see what's in her eyes when she's backlit in this equatorial Sun I can't avoid. So I resign myself to squinting at what I can see — the rice and eggs ready on the table, the floor sparkling clean, the plastic hanger resting near her, ready for her, next to the sink.

I know her hand aches. I lick my wounds inside, tasting.

Mama never wanted to be a mother. She got pregnant because it was expected of her, this made her speechless from youth. When I was born, she was already forty. Mama said I bit her breasts when I was a baby and it hurt, that I was ungrateful and cruel. She told me my birth caused her malaise, it haunts her still. Every day Mama watches me eat and reminds me of who is the provider, she says who paid for this meal is who really suffers. My teeth fully grown, they feel too sharp to be kept in my mouth.

Behind me, I hear a familiar shuffle. My grandmother, I call her Nenek, her legs are pink and bow-legged and swollen around the knees. She moans beneath her breath with each heavy step. Her body shivers and shakes. At all times, she carries the weight of a pain larger than her spine can bear, she grows shorter each year and closer to the Earth. When they come close, both Mama and nenek, I feel my throat close, my heart race, my wounds open, we are all too close, always.

So I look down and unravel the bundle I'm cradling, wondering what mother will I one day become? I've untucked my shirt and wrapped it around a lonesome pigeon I'd found in trampled grass, one wing bent. The bird is so light it feels like I'm cradling air. It doesn't move, its eyes large, black and white feathers ripple as it breathes, I can tell it hurts to. Looking at me, I wonder if it sees me. What do the animals witness? Do they know pain, do they recognise desire, do they suffer like us, wish for a life that's better? What is a better life, but a digestible death?

When Mama notices what I carry, she screeches. Frustration overcomes her — in a moment, she is overflowing. She paces the floor, cursing in Malay she curses my birth and her fate and calls me damned. But I caress the bird looking at me, turning inward. I think only of fate, aching to be somewhere else, sometime else. I have always wanted to begin life again somewhere far away, wishing for a horizon to guide me, a greener place. But I can go nowhere. With no money and no future, I have only two possessions: a past, and a fate to remain. So I am trapped, these thoughts are trapping, I am destined and pre-destined and always destined for this country I call home, in this house I call home, in this lack of space with no room for breath.

Mama screams, "Dirty disgusting animal! You brought filth into our home!"

The lines against her mouth deepen, the flesh there sags and bounces. Mama is ugly because joy looks displaced whenever she smiles. She squints her eyes and glances to the side, away from the sight of me, this act of disdain is to *jeling*. Growing closer to the ground, I ask: Can we nurse it? Knowing she will never give me the answer I want. Mama ignores me to commiserate with her mother.

Nenek is always submissive and sympathetic to her children, she is uneducated and doesn't know anything else. And Mama's gestures make her underarms undulate in waves. Still, the bird and I

remain silent. It's always this loud at home, these wants echoing into each other cut me in places already cut. So my wounds stay fresh. Three women bound in living, we are demented together, we can never find peace in each other, I only want us to be this thing called happy, I only want to be somewhere else in a place far away, I cannot dream of anything larger than absence in this land of opportunity bountiful for everyone but me.

Dispose of my flesh, my body. This is magical thinking, I feel I am cursed always, looking at closed flesh and tasting blood.

“No! *Anak jahanam*. Get rid of it! Throw it in the dustbin!”

Get rid of it, Mama says. Mama hurts me by being the person I know she is. But it is I hurting myself in these moments, I can't help but blame myself for wanting more, for wanting more eyes to witness this than just my two. There is a trench a hundred feet deep between my mother and I, and I cannot see the water but hear it over and over. The promise of an ocean, it floods my ears, I hear it in my blood and smell salt close by.

In my mind, the Mama-I-want asks me what I intend to do. I tell her that mercy demands two options only; to be nursed back to health, or put out of its misery. The Mama-I-want would extend herself, take me into her, say: of course we shall nurse it, these acts of kindness are natural extensions of family, you are never alone, we can do it together.

But we are not together, we are only bound in the same house, bound in the same position. I, am always alone. Bound to living here, there is no real other but within. I cannot nurse the bird back to health without consent. The moment I leave for school, Mama will get rid of it. I will return to an empty room as if it never existed. I only come home to loss, to the same arrangement, the same day,

to the same three generations in the same four-bedroom flat, it might as well always be the same year, month, day.

But. I ask Mama if I can care for the bird on my own anyway. It will only be for a few days, Mama. It will live in my room. I will feed it and clean its waste and take care of all its needs. It's just until it heals. I don't want the bird to die, it is soft and wants to live, like I do. Mama answers the way I know she would, she shouts and screams her way into my head. I try anyway because a line to the horizon is a line that leads to the start. Foolish girl. Mama would have said, was always going to say, no, never. No.

Bent in the negative. I am this hunk of metal she shapes by the bends of her mind. One-two-then-three. I hear the gongs.

I close the door to my room. I rest the bundle on my bed. I sit on the ground next to it. I clutch my throat. It hurts. It always hurts. These days, prayer evades me. I can't hold my wishes in my hands as much as I want to, can't bear their weight in this body that can barely carry the added weight of a breath.

The bird coos. It is the first time has made a noise.

Later, after I've disposed of both *roh* and *semangat*, Mama enters the room. In her hand is the hanger from before. I am lying limp on the bed, my body so tired I can't stand. She doesn't notice the red plastic bag knotted tight in the dustbin, doesn't thank me. Nenek's figure appears behind Mama squinting into the room. Her eyes look wet. I can taste her fear before the door closes shut on her. And Mama looks at me. I am alone.

“What was the result today?”

I shake my head and flinch. The doorknob rattles from the outside, its wooden frame shakes. Knowing what will come, aspirate, try to raise arms to shield the neck. And as my mother towers over me, her arms shiver and shake. Three generations undulating in perfect disharmony, the violence violates the name of music. Through the *gamelan*, I hear my grandmother’s moans through the door. She pleads for us to stop, for life to break, for god to open the ground and take her, just take her, please take her from here, these impossible desires make for unbearable living.

3 PRAYER TO THE MOON (DO NOT ANSWER)

I know why the moon refuses me, why do I still tell her my secrets?

The darkness shrouds us and shortens the distance, this distance that was never small to begin with. No one here but myself and the self-same moon, the illusion of companionship seduces me into my favourite position. Only the night is gentle, and she, always indifferent. Why then do I bend my neck for her still, offer her the curve of my throat in prayer? The crescent moon gleaming sharp and pointed, it suits my desires, I only understand the familiar.

I know why the moon refuses me, this seduces me, my craven desire. I like her this way. Do I pray for her scorn, is that what this is, does my knowing degrade me, pre-meditate me, make me lesser? I know of the weakness in my hand, the tremor in my grasp, still I ask anyway with the weakest voice: for the reluctant kiss, the impossible. Curling my body around what's left, I'll assume the position over and over. Praying to who won't answer, she never disappoints me, into the clouds she'll soon go, my beloved.

I know why the moon refuses me, the clouds point to my condition, they call this justice. I am smitten. Sending this current through my body, to my feet, they're planted, I can never leave, I am grounded. Look then, take a glance in this crashing white it exposes this axiom of my body: that I can go nowhere. Made visible by the storm it forces me to face this: I am bound by this neck and the glint inches from my face, I am alone, the person in the mirror always glances away.

I know why the moon refuses me. I forget her when I forget the sadness, scarce as they are fleeting as they are impermanent as they are bearing down I eat them with bare hands lick them off my chin

and claw my skin for more. You hear it don't you how my breath catches I can barely breathe through my need I'm starving it constricts I have nothing left. It makes a beast of me this thing called happiness. It will only ever disappoint and leave by the end of the day. Satisfaction will never come, I am this condition called need, it can only be disgusting, I can only be it. And night... always comes. And always... I look up. She's not there tonight. I know why the moon refuses me, I seek her at night but forget in the day.

Ask, who could ever kiss this? But the invitation open only to her, she will only ever disappoint, it's the only satisfaction I will ever feel. So I feel. This amber in my chest keeping me warm, is it real? Watch this moving spotlight on the ground searching. I wonder, what will it see? When it lands on me? The light is too bright. So I make my body smaller. This swallow between each feeling, it feels too large, when I whisper I meant to scream, empty skies and unheard prayers, these nights I end up praying to myself.

I know why my mother refuses me. She loves me too much she SAYS, the pain in her eyes it eclipses all else, I see myself in the glassy surface and see nothing that pleases, creature crawling on the ground, my arms splayed my wrists scarred, I look up knowing my condition and beg her forgiveness. The only relief is her absence, my condition it still endures, permanent. I am bound to skin that stings, scars that bind, it hurts — the beating of my heart.

I know why Mama beats me. She needs me to know the depth of her agony, her love only exists to consume me. Cut from her womb yanked from her breast I was only ever known first as pain, even before I had a name. Pain. Mama says I bit her breast. The sting of a belt reminds me.

I know why I tell the moon my secrets, I find her beautiful beyond compare. My desire for her is the simplest feeling I have and the closest thing to magic. A feeling that follows from its premise I feel

the purest thing when I see her beauty I am obsessed with it, this uncomplicated feeling I witness perfection the sharpness of her crescent the softness of light emerging from the clouds then there she is, anything but gentle. Beaming, I can only understand happiness as conceptual. I know why I pray to the moon. I never want to leave this space — where I am shrouded, admiring.

I know why I cry when beaten, why I pray to the moon. Knees clamped tight toes curled tighter I brace for the flinch and feel my sides pressing against my arms as I whisper this, cold tile unyielding against my lips: because I can't help myself. I can't stop wanting things I shouldn't. I can't help this thing called desire called hope I choke as I look up and see: the moon. I know why I tell the moon my secrets, it's because my desire for her is secret. I know why the moon refuses me, my cowardice it's ugly, so she leaves. I know why my mother beats me, she knows I want it.

I want it. I want this. I want the pain. I want the hurt. I want the agony too. I want the disgust. I want to be secret. I want to be hidden. I want to be refused. Reject me. I want the sting. I want the belt. I want to be punished. For wanting what I know I shouldn't. To see an open palm is to flinch. So she could never have kissed me. Still I dare, defiantly, open invitation.

To the moon: Will you kiss me then? And let it hurt, if you need to. And let it sting, if you want to. And bite me too, if it pleases you. I can't help but want you, so I have nothing but desire. You are beautiful to me as I prostrate, hands and knees and empty prayer, my mother she beats me at night still I see: you.

Do you see the stars tonight, my love? I only see you. My god asks me to submit, I search for the beauty in it and still do. You make me smile, don't you see? But don't look now, don't be gentle now, don't.

I know why my love refuses me. My grip is too tight, the smell of freshly torn grass and the warm drip from my wrist, I try not to hurt and hurt anyway. I can only steal breath my lungs have grown too shallow, hands scrambling for the leash my body seized by this bottleneck effect and everything below the neck is numb. So give me just the idea of a kiss my love, let me have just a taste too much I will regurgitate, I can only know what is familiar so what would I do with a kiss? What would I do with a kiss? So I ask for lesser.

Less, I am lesser. Small, then smaller. My hands claw the ground, there is a cost to these wants, the cost of desiring the impossible. The distance between the largest and smallest beings, it keeps me safe, but I don't want another animal I don't want another crawlspace, there is nothing here my love, but pain, I need the picture frame and a windowsill to dream — they only go in circles. But it's another empty night, another empty sky, they say absence makes the heart grow fonder I have missed you for so long the fondness grew into something larger, the largest.

And the wind is cool on my neck. And the grass smells sweet when torn. And my grasp is too tight but strong. There is power in my teeth, it only knows to tear and chew and grind, its strength frightens me. I know why I pray to the moon, my god forsook me and only she could replace him. a sky away, out of reach. My insignificance, I sing in only one register: will it hurt? My limits, I can only give too little, I am too little; does it hurt? Screaming this: I won't let the belt touch you. So go, my love, into the clouds. They look soft tonight too heavy they'll cry, you deserve the whole spectrum of softness not just conceptual so go on and leave, I love you.

And let me lie here and admire you. And I will leave if you want me to. Teach me then, why I would refuse the moon.

4 KERIS

I stare at the broken pieces. My mirror has shattered, it leapt from my hands. These bad omens follow me, sometimes I think I beckon them. When it fell I watched it happen, watched it crack the marble tile with suspended pain — all my pain feels suspended — and reveal dirt in the crack. Dirt! Not concrete as I expected but dirt, dark and gritty, I roll it between my fingers so dry it crumbles into black ash, black dust. I don't know what compels me to mix it with the wet of my tears and smear it on my face but it doesn't help, doesn't bring me closer to myself the way I wish it would, didn't bring me closer to him as I thought it might. To submit myself to the smear, the filth, the dirt and ash whence I came from, isn't that faith? What does it feel like feel like, to be blessed?

I have never attended a funeral, I have only passed through a graveyard. There are still some left, tombs of old kings, their legacies stand at knee-height and barely disturb the air. I witnessed graves of a dying faith, its sons and daughters buried and wrapped. I thought of my father then, the man whose absence feels ever-present, locked in my chest. Mama and Nenek do not speak of him. Heavy, is the silence amongst graves. It reminds me of him. I keep wishing for my father to return. Wishes, like prayers, I don't speak them.

Still, there they are, enclosed in my chest. Precious is this longing, it makes something of me to have it. I fear losing it, I fear who I am without it, this thing makes an I out of me.

I know of a girl who can't leave her house. She can never leave her house (burn, burn). She can never leave these walls (burn, burn). She can never leave this view through the windows, the windows face west. She will NEVER LEAVE. Pounding her fists against the glass, when it shatters she wakes to run to pounds her fists again.

Against a fleeing Sun. The evening is a dangerous time. In between day and night, it reminds us of the rising tide. There is a thing I feel inside me largest in these inbetweens, she is afraid, her fear touching me with black fingertips. I feel her panic beating against my chest, her screams hurt just the same. *I want to leave*, she screams. I think she wants to kill, I think she wants to kill me, wants to see what's inside split open from my breast.

Why do I stop her?

Tell me. How would I go about it? Give the thing a knife, hold it between my fingers and pierce the tip into my flesh? Will that bring us both relief, this girl and this one? I am too young for this pain, I am too weak to stand in this rising tide, missing Papa, he had a knife too in his belt, the blade like ripples of water, sharp at the tip, sharper with each crest.

I can't remember my father's face. I recall his voice, his scent, these things follow you, you cannot let them go. He had dark hair like mine, I think. I can only vaguely recall, my thoughts of him blurs the line between memory and dream. I was afraid of him once when he shaved his face and approached, smiling. It was my first instance of fear around him. I fear so much more now; my own reflection, the shadow of his crossing mine, I fear even a return to things I want back. But I dream of his hands, dark and sinewed with age, he cradles his *keris* gently. He says the thing has a life of its own, it is desire itself. It feels jealousy and envy and love. It wants you, he says. I miss you, *sayang*. Come.

And I wake crying.

Pink is the sunset. Pink is under our flesh. Pink is pain, pain, pain. Hurting. Pink is my tongue against my lip against my mother's breast. I was born to a mother with the lowest threshold of pain and a father who wore a knife on his hip in a belt. I go to bed morning and night and miss the five prayers in-between daydreaming. So I seek a unified He seven times a day and none at all, my penance extends the weeks into days and days into weeks. So suspend all concept of time. This longing makes the sunset last till day breaks till suns set till the dawning of time. The windows won't let me leave. I wake to pound the same walls, struggling for breath.

Illness is this. Illness is this. I feel the mood possess me, grip my throat. Hunker down. Knees and hands on the ground. Press cheek to dirt. Bury this seed from your chest. In the cracks. Water the thing. Break the tile away to free more space. Water the thing. Watch! One sapling grow. Green is one leaf unravelling toward the Sun. Towards the window, it grows. Towards the window, we go. I squint and see: the Sun through cracks.

Come to me, sayang. The Sun speaks in my father's all-encompassing voice.

The girl wakes crying.

Outside is a city of grey concrete, a country that devalues my blood and demands sacrifice, a city unrecognisable by even the ghosts I seek. There are no answers there. Suspend then all concepts of space and place. We play with smoke and dream and memory. They travel through cracks, into our insides. Smoking this flesh inside these crevices, we only taste delicious to the dead.

So play the song of the inbetween. The gamelan makes living feel like dream, I feel it beckoning beneath my skin crisping up, this waking nightmare I can never leave. Watching this *wayang* play on the walls — the shadow puppets are made of skin and their ghostly limbs reach forward only. Up

down, right then left. They have monstrous faces and black crowns and feel familiar, I recognise faces of my grandmother and mother older than time itself, so large they consume me, in this concrete in which I grow I cannot see the whole Sun, cannot break these windows.

And so I wrangle the plant my mother waters every morning in my hands and mangle its body into wet, into nothing, it is a limp thing now in my hands, I only know how to destroy. I feel so much it must take over. I feel so much hurt I can only hurt. And the Sun does nothing but watch through slitted curtains, my father does nothing, nothing, NOTHING! Watch, the cuttings of my shadows on the wall. Fingernails into dirt, I dig out the roots I dig up cement cracking it against the bones of my feet and discover this *keris* below the surface this living breathing gift from my Papa is a poor substitute for his love.

So this must be what it feels like to be blessed. Why do I want to shriek at how meagre it feels, how light? It will never pull away the pressure on my chest, the weight of my burden, the roots four generations deep, maybe longer, longer, longer.

Come, sayang.

Knife glinting bright, it calls me its darling. So I sway, I sway, I sway. The gamelan growing hotter still it shakes these walls, this love that won't quiet, I will corrode into rust before it does. Why is this music and melody in my blood? I cannot sing a duet on my lonesome. I cannot find my papa trapped here, shuttered in, shattered within, buried, in the ground.

Cut myself into two. Slice apart my limbs and sever my head from my torso, one half of me will be wanting and the other will be my will. I fear opening my eyes to witness which part of me leaves and which part remains to haunt the walls.

But console myself in this. It is still I dreaming of walking outside to see the Sun — let this dream love me let it consume me. I will feel it against my cheek so warm like the press of freshly dried linen and hair curling against my brow like the crash of the wave of our ocean, our ocean, the ocean that separates me from my heart floating ever further away — from — us.

Grip the knife close to your chest, feel its strength in your grip. The glint of iron, its patterns like ribbons it makes something sing. Mistake the melancholy for something holy, take this absence to say something, take this red to mean a thread tying me, binding us, I am a breaking in two and one half says, I WILL NEVER LET YOU GO.

When Mama finds me, her body eclipses the Sun. Of course it does. She always has. She picks me up from the ground and screams a wailing that wakes the neighbours. Harder, I clutch the necklace on my neck in one hand and the *keris* in another. And somehow I've cut a thread, somehow, I've broken a spell, I have never heard Mama cry it was always me, so something has changed, an exchange has been made, somehow Mama finds it in herself to let

me

go.

5 TALAK TIGA, TALAK TIADA

There is an old man standing next to my bed. His teeth are yellow and missing in places, he is damp from sweat. And he cannot look me in the eye, there is a brilliant white drowning us from above. Our shadows hide from us, I feel the felt contours of mine below the bed with a knife pushing up. If I take a breath it might pierce me, draw blood. So I turn away

And think of Papa. He used to hug me at night and protect me in the day. Around me, Mama and nenek never speak of him, but I hear what they say behind closed doors (burn, burn). They say he is the worse kind of man, a good-for-nothing man, a man who says one thing but does another, who thinks the world of himself but is lower than dirt. Bury him! they demand of me, excavate what softness you have left, expect nothing from men, you must only depend on yourself. Your bones must bear their weight until they are buried and turn to dust. These are hardened women with husbands who've failed their tests, wishing with love to keep this distance that hurts me twice. Still I turn to the side, still I disobey to look at the light. I have failed so many tests. I don't remember why he's gone, why he left. But his memory is all the softness I have left.

Softness turning hard. Softness turned to agony. So turn towards the light, see an unrestrained noon and a fearless Sun. I can't stop this aching for what I once must have had. Lying in this bed now, the sheets smell different, no longer of incense but disinfectant. Eucalyptus and mint. My Papa didn't smell good or bad, he smelt like damp clothes and cigarettes. I can smell it now, as I look

At this shimmering measure of time streaming through barred windows — I can hear his voice! He is calling from far away (burn, burn), as far away as the Sun is from soil, as far away as the end of my path, as far away as my wanting stays from what I want.

Dearest Papa, what would I say to you if only dreams were made real, if you were here? Breathlessly in one gasp I would collapse into myself with my need to say in a single breath my truest desire is — I want you back, please stay, I will become anything you wish just to have you protect me Papa, I am scared I am frightened of the whole entire world and only you kept me safe. Papa, keep me! I only ever needed you. I loved you the most. I wore dresses and bows on my feet. I sang loud and passed every test. I hugged you with all my strength, I promise, Papa. I laughed when you scolded Mama. So why did you

go?

Am I nothing am I worthless am I not loved you who did not love me why did you not *love me* am I so *disgusting* who was it who damned me am I so unworthy for you to hold, can't you touch me, touch?

What of the thread that binds us did you not feel it choke you so tight you could not breathe so hot it eats you inside out, strangled weight of your failure eyes bulging tongue fat and purpling teeth missing in places your withered soul leeching through insides shit slick down the hair of your thighs for I am your daughter, I am your daughter, I am your

YOU MUST BE GODLESS to take everything from me your absence made me made me into NOTHING questioning the weight of my shadow the touch of my skin the beating of my heart will not beat in tandem with my want so much (I know

why) I cannot trust myself so much that I cannot trust the warmth of day, nor the caress of night.

Past future present is your absence. We can never turn from it.

Absence is realer than you, Papa. It carries your scent into every room that holds me, I smell it now, I cannot run away for there is no exit but the one I've carved inside of me and I have no strength left for anything but this melody I hear but cannot join. I had nothing and have nothing and will always know nothing but the pain of a mother who beats me and the love of a grandmother who was never loved enough. Who was stolen in youth, whose pain carried, carries, carries on.

I have inherited everything I am but I am afraid of this thing called woman and afraid of this thing called man. I am afraid of being in my body this thing binding us. I have never felt held by myself. This is no way to live, yet we live on, the smoke in the room never leaves, I will always smell you as if you were right in this room come night or come day so why are you here, Papa?

Looking at this beast ripped from your making like your eyes are free to look. Breathing air I seek that you are free to breathe. Speaking over me like you have a right to speak. Asking like there are no answers you owe, to me. Debt, speak that, your debt should be heavier than the burden of all the sins I am beaten for till my voice was lost and my will decayed and my mind bent — I am breaking, I am breaking! In two. So why are you here, Papa? I do not recall a doorway that ever crossed my step.

AND YOU, the one who knows this. Tell me, what is anger? Why does it not feel good? Why does it take, instead? Am I hardened yet? Why am I not hardened? Crying instead, the Sun burns hot on in this island on the equator, stinging my skin, my cheeks are dry before they can ever be called wet.

Only existing in between a wall and a window's glass. These times of transition are not to be trusted, my ancestors knew of wisdom; they say these are times for prayer and god. But I have no name. I have nothing to give, I can make no bargains with one who has everything. I have found something else instead, something that disobeys. So if I had a voice I would shriek

Burn, If I had a voice I would shriek

Burn, If I had a voice I would shriek

You are not welcome here.

You have made my wanting into madness so run away, go away — go away — go away — I want you thrice-gone and unholy cast, I am divine did you not know? This thread has two ends but with one in my grasp, I break them. Into four. So leave me as you did before, carry your absence on your back and grow hunched. I have more than you know, I have this haunting to touch, I have the moon that I lust, I have this companion called she.

She wants to kill you too, Papa.

Fathers should stay in unmarked graves. With the wind barely disturbed as they whisper past. With stems crisped from time hidden in green grass swaying tall, swaying free, swaying to the beat, the beat, the beating of my heart. Fathers should stay buried, white cloth bound at the head and feet and tethered to the dirt, divots of white pressing tighter still, trust only the Earth to hold them down. Bound. Far away from sound, far away from the sky, where the clouds disperse the single tooth of a moon smiles. Fathers. Fathers should stay.

Kur semangat! The doll on my chest, I rip it off. It flies in a sharp crest, cutting the air with a weight that would hurt on impact. *Kur semangat!* I breathe and press into the pain that it takes to fuel this voice, it splits me all the way apart, finally.

They say the dying cry for their mothers more than they call to god, but I call to she, I call to me.

6 NAMING

The only sign of the great unbecoming is the quieting. First, the beasts. Then the moon blinks, and all things that are, cease. In the dissipation of shape from shadow, here rests truest-being.

In this tear of history, she is born, stirring in the lingering remnants of a whistling memory till it too, must leave. What then? There is no before here, no after, nothing to covet or claim but the mere thought of. Witness the great longing cling to its unmaking. Only the quiet greets her, cold indifference, it does not wish peace upon her name.

So she learns she has none. No... So she makes her own, this, her name is this, the sound of a choking snarl:

Hhrrkkkchhh-ahhhhh!

Born of boundless void, pointing in a hundred directions, seeking something to sink her chest into and call her own. So she twists and shakes and grasps. She looks away from the unity of nothing, the great gift of unbecoming. Spurning true being, a single movement in a single ripple of a wandering wave, she searches, hands outstretched.

When the moon recalls White. When the Black peels from her grinning facade. The Earth unravels from the jaws of a gaping maw. As for her, there she is, her mouth the great O shrieking her wanting noiselessly beneath the opening eye — lost, lost, lost in the cacophony of Many Names, the flooding return of soil and dirt and ash crashing over tender pink. Names form themselves, taking shape, calling forth to each other from one end to the next, drawing a thousand different lines to be

named theirs, cutting themselves, themselves cut, they cut her. The felt touch of fresh birth wondering, whose blood is this?

Swallowing the urge to gag, she uncurls her fist.

And cradles this colour of blood rusted twice over, a thread that peeks out of her waist, it is the necklace my Papa left me. Where does it come-from-go-to? Stiff at its base like a wick she frays in two from a single knot. Who knotted her so? It is the same question as before, before.

Her teeth, still aching.

She fingers the little thing between thumb and pointer, two fingers point away three point back. Pulled, it mimics against skin something struggling to break free. Still, she pulls. From her navel, her belly hurts with the fullness of another, still she vomits only these empty snarls into this lustful space she was hurled into, still entangled with another.

But she won't stop pulling. Hunger so intent it claims her, how then could she not insist it be *hers*?

Hurting. Her pain so large it begs for distinction, the thread so long now it wraps around her limbs, these bloodied roots go so far back they pin her in position and bind her to this Earth, to another. These caged eyes, restlessly they seek each other.

One asking, Who are we?

Discover then this, the nameless are not voiceless. For she answers, her fingers pointing at me are steady and terrible. In this sudden silence, there is no ocean nor music, only fresh birth and its naming.

“Aku bernama kamu Nur.” I name you Nur.

My name reaches out to touch me. I feel it in my body, it becomes me, I taste it on my tongue and it tastes back. And just as it sinks into me, I discover that she is not finished. Her wandering eye seeks more than just mine. It sees more than just mine, I find that she is her own, with a life of her own, with a want of her own, pushing against me such that if I were to reach out to touch her, I would find resistance, an insistence, that her life is her own.

Her neck swinging from side to side. Her hair drips rivulets through the air, dotting my skin.

Pointing to Mama, and naming her too.

Pointing to nenek, and naming her too.

And the relief I feel, we all share: to be claimed by her, to be owned by ourselves. But these names bind us anew in different ways, we have found belonging in her gaze and I find my belonging is not separate from theirs. To find solace in my pain, to be alone in this space, still I cannot leave, I am to be tied, forever and always, to this line, this blood only I can see spilling on the ground.

7 INHABIT THIS: INHERITANCE IS

Nur lives in her mother's house. That space that she's in, it belongs to her mother. This chair? It's hers. This table? It's hers too. Mama keeps her walls white, her kitchen clean, her floor sparkling. The mop is drying in the heat, the plants are in their pots, leaves crisp and curling, the bins are empty, the chute is locked and clean. This is how it is all the time, this is one woman's dignified living.

But the girl is squinting, it seems she has lived her whole life squinting. Little girl in the picture frame no longer so little now, she squints at the sky through her mother's windows, through her mother's living room, through her mother's doorway, through fingers too weak to rise to wipe these cheeks, she is squinting. Her alarm long dead, time it only exists in hindsight, her cheek crusted and cracked from the ghosts of nights spent and wasted. So she's missed school. She's a failure, a good-for-nothing, she is useless and a drain on her family, a delinquent with no strength to change. Her expression it doesn't change, she looks at her bag bled out, looks at the papers and files and pens on the ground, at the mess she's in, this puddle of helpless living, and sees what her mother makes of her daughter and feels SHAME, its strangling and swallowing. It tightens around her throat, it is choking.

Mama lives with her mother too. Living together first cry to last breath, she will be by nenek's side. Whose breath? Mama, she is getting old, nenek is getting older too, and the night is wet outside. Mama cannot hear it, Mama is kept here, in quiet, she prefers it inside, she made this hers, this cabinet made of wood, this television she calls 'company', these walls all white except for a single picture hung. Pictured is a wife and husband and child there I do not recognise. Nenek is not pictured. When Mama's outside, she misses only this place, the only space called hers.

And Nenek lives alone, alone, alone. Her melancholy travels through our air, through these bloodlines, generations of women echoing into each other, they breathe into each other, tossing and turning, living the same agony suspended across time. There is a continuity to their aching. Each one feeling more than their share, it's too much, it's too much, it's enough to force her gaze to recede, to hide behind, the sound of scrubbing. Listen.

Hhrrkkkchhh-ahhhhh!

Hhrrkkkchhh-ahhhhh!

Hhrrkkkchhh-ahhhhh!

So East is the wall in the toilet that first grows warm each day. It stays dark despite the rising glow through frosted glass.

Mama faces East as she washes clothes in the morning. She grips a pink plastic scrub in her right hand and is seated on a small plastic stool. She must use all her body weight, for this is an exhausting task. Her knees are spread and her heavy back is slant. Mama scrubs all of our clothes, including my underwear. I think of it draped open on the ground before her, the tiles of the floor a salmon colour, my discharge a cloudy white. Of the ripples she sends with each stroke, of her sweat feeding into her brow and the ache in her arm. I must look away when I hear it, I must walk till I can hear nothing at all. I've wanted to leave this space since I first heard it. That my mother scrubs my underwear clean each day.

When I was a child, nenek washed our clothes. She could then, her knees were not so painful, her bones not so tender. Nenek seemed tireless to me then. She cooked. She cleaned. She cared for me. When I woke in the mornings and nenek was gone, I would cry, wretched for my need sleep. So

nenek had left for the market without me. I wanted to carry the bags with her, frightened she couldn't make it back home. I wanted to pick the oranges with her, they were three for a dollar back then. But my tears cost us nothing, nenek would wipe my cheeks by covering my face. I do nothing as she sits on the living room couch, her gaze fixed beyond me on the distant past, on these walls. I think it is the same curse, the same condition imposed upon us in divine fashion, that there is no free air but mirrors standing the breadth of our shoulders. We cannot bear to look at each other for long.

Before my Papa's absence, I loved nenek more than anyone. I wanted to sleep next to her at night and wake when she did, I never wanted her to escape. Tracing her footsteps as she walked ahead of me, down a street, down a corridor, down the staircase, down the block on my way to school. Mama was busy at work, Papa was busy being somewhere else, but nenek was always there.

In *baju kurungs* the colours of flowers like in my textbooks. Orange and gold, blue and green, purple and pink. To match them, she had dozens of *hijab* scarves tucked in her drawers, I took a scissors to nenek's scarves and imagined them into garments for dolls conjured with my fingers. Nenek never minded. As she walked to the mosque with a square of cloth missing from her hijab, I prayed for her to live a long life, for her to outlive me, bargaining with God, threatening that he must not take her, I loved nenek best because it inspired prayer, I could not live without her. In Ramadhan, our prayers would stretch till the moon touched the sharpest crest in the sky. Finding rest only when she was back home, back here, safe.

Nenek spoke of death as an encroaching wave threatening to sweep her. This, in the background I was ever aware; that my nenek would die. As she balled rice in a tight palm one after the other, her mind is already on the next scoop, the next task. Opening my mouth wide, wider, *aaahh*. And nenek always carried my bag as we waited for the bus. It was heavy and I was frightened for her to carry

it, but she was frightened it would bend my back, she wanted me to stand tall, as tall as the rest. And Nenek's fear always outweighed mine. She never attended a school, never held a book that wasn't holy writ in a language she couldn't understand. Nenek learnt speech bargaining for scraps, begging for rice, asking, please, let me live. But nenek is not even Malay, nenek is Indian and was stolen from her mother, still listen to her now, she's stuck in the same in-between always.

Crying, how can you understand? My pain, my pain! I live a wretched life. Don't you know what she did? *Dia bantal aku, dia pukul aku*. She beat me, she beat me. *Biar dia mampus*. Let her perish. *Aku tak akan mohonkan dia dari dunia sampai akhirat*. I won't forgive her from this plane to the next.

Crying, how can you understand? *Kesakitanku, kesakitanku!* I was just fourteen when I became a wife, still he beat me! How could he run away with *betina tu*, leaving me with his six children, he cannot be human! I will never forgive them. No, never, no. These curses are our blood, *sayang*. They travel us. There is something in our blood, bleeding us.

Pain exists beyond speech. So, speechless, nenek knows it better than of us. I think of it trapped, I think of it trapping her. Without making a noise, my nenek resented the cooking, the cleaning, the care. Quiet as a shadow, she resented growing tired and being told to rest, how could she rest, she can only remember the taste of the soap and scour, the whip of the the rubber hose, she doesn't know how to be anything but bent. Forced to witness these memories rise to the surface, these shadows on the walls, her body now too weak to turn away. Hating it all, she bears it all, it bears her down and when she can't bear any more she speaks in the only language she knows, a language that doesn't know her back.

But choking from her cries now, she is unable to speak.

Still, I hear her.

Hhrrkkkchhh-ahhhhh!

Hhrrkkkchhh-ahhhhh!

Hhrrkkkchhh-ahhhhh!

And I am here too. I came her on all fours and entered nose-first, smelling nothing and tasting nothing, so this is space free to claim. Lying as I do between nenek's legs, I glance at Nur as nenek strokes my hair. I dare to watch these women while none of them do, dare to touch nenek's tears and wipe them off her cheek while her daughter and granddaughter look away. I've been watching these women I've claimed since Nur and I came home, attached. The absence in this house makes my wanting rise to a fever pitch, wanting to feast, to bite. So I did. Resting now, I am limp with satisfaction. My belly looks full as my bones jut.

I let one eye follow Nur pacing the length of the living room. I watch her feet go in circles, getting faster, faster still. Till she spins on her heels, till she falls on her knees, cheek pressed to the ground. Glancing the floor, feeling the cool surface glancing her nails, wishing it seep into her skin. Over and over, Nur strokes the tile until she doesn't recall any other movement but this, Nur only knows how to practice till her arm aches, till she is consumed by no other thoughts but of duty and fate. She can't hear the gamelan nor the ocean since me. Only this, her name and mine, and mine grows louder in the walls each day.

When Mama returns from the toilet, her arms are tanned and she is half-doused in wet. She wipes her forehead against her forearm, she sits next to her mother, annoyed by the crying, she's grown

too used to them. When they die, their ghosts will inhabit these walls, for heaven must stay conceptual to these women, how can rest ever taste sweet? Kept inside, they can only bleed.

Water seeps from Mama's dress into the couch. She turns on the television, mounted on these walls all white but for a family portrait of three women and a clock. She has no choice, she must go to work soon. Nenek has no choice, she has to rest. And Nur has no choice. She must succeed. She must practice, they tell her there is only one path out of this place, this plane, this space. Both Mama and nenek call her blessed.

Nur is the only one who knows my language, so she can hear me, so we hear this.

My name.

Hhrrkkkchhh-ahhhhh!

Hhrrkkkchhh-ahhhhh!

Hhrrkkkchhh-ahhhhh!

They're all calling me, in their own special little ways.

Shhhh, small thing.

Why won't you deliver your family from certain death?

Shhh small thing, I am here now.

Close your eyes, let me take you, let me take care.

8 TASTE MOTHERHOOD

Shhhh, small thing. Forget the pain, look away, away. Pain is a condition of the mind, hurts are a condition of the mind and there are real things happening, after all. After all, there you are, there you sit, transfixed, still, and hungered for. So forget the pain, pain is a condition of the mind, this body is a condition of the mind, so forget all the pain for just a moment, leave behind your body to seek: this span of time that never ends, I will never leave you, you will never be alone, it will last forever.

Forget pain, just for a second, the pain which knows you only wants to destroy. This body is a condition of the mind, mind that distracts, detract from the pain, why won't you do it, don't you want to? The world keeps coming back to you with all its burdens but you cannot carry them, why do you welcome it, its gaze realer than yours, surer too. Your eyes closed nevertheless hear me ask: who are you, why do you hurt, what will you become from hurting?

Forget pain for a moment, feel its absence instead, I promise — all you have to do. Relief, it persists outside of you, within me, bound by this thread you wrapped around us numbering one from two. Could the world release you into reprieve, make sense of this feeling, will a place and time cut these binds? No, never, no. So forget, let me take it from you.

Merely a condition of the mind, forget the pain for a moment, leave behind your body to obey these commands, they keep you safe, they want you to leave the pain, so how could you not embrace me, sayang, how could I be anything but what you wished for? Did you not wish for the moon to kiss

you? She has come down just for you, my lips are hers, so kiss me, swallow me, digest me, why won't you leave for me touch you?

Forget the pain, I said to forget! I am at your feet, why do you hurt to let go and reach, toward me? Hear me, witness me, bear to me! I ask, why do you hurt? Why do you hurt?

Do you feel the relief yet? The relief, I want you to feel relief! Not this press on your breast, on my breath, I know the feeling of constriction, I ask: do you feel the relief yet? I am the air you have sought, the endless breath. Let go, sayang, you can let go, don't you know? You have no choice but to go forward, intact.

Reality, discuss it in theory, what is the use of it?

So forget.

“I have worked so you can have a better life than me. Why are you just sitting here, don't you know you have another entrance exam tomorrow? You want to fail that, too? Shouldn't you be studying? I've paid your hospital fees with *my* money! With *my* work! Your useless father didn't pay a cent, you — you only need to study, what good are you, useless bitch! What have I done to deserve you, *anak jahanam!*”

In the dim living room illuminated by street lamps outside, the girl sits transfixed by the image of her school bag. Her eyes make out its contours, the size of a small child about two years of age, its heavy distended belly hanging precariously off the table's edge. She tilts her head to examine its

insides. Worn zippers and worn seams struggling to hold it together. She imagines the impact of it hitting the ground. Stomach split, guts spilt, intestines paper-thin and dotted with red. But still no blood, nothing so visibly alive that her imagination could conjure without speaking a lie. The noise of her neighbours' television travels from their window to hers. She imagines the interruption of the old couple's evening rituals. Turning from their screen, blurred vision of antiquity clearing to look through their ceiling of white cement, through her floor of scratched tile, eager to name her as murderess or murdered, she doesn't know which to prefer. Invasive is the scent of sesame oil and mushrooms from their kitchen. The air is thick with it. Cloying. Her stomach rumbles.

Practice, Nur.

That's what she's been told. Her classmates don't speak it, but she catches them eyeing each other with the fever of bloodsport. She imagines they isolate themselves in secret, practicing while she succumbs to her weakness for sleep. She knew they must wear gloves as they went through practice paper after practice paper, avoiding ink stains like hers. Clean hands conspiring to outdo each other, vinyl shining in blue, yellow, green. Laughing amongst themselves about her, playing pernicious games with her nature of existence. It was all so hysterical — hysterically driving her mad.

So practice, Nur. Practice like they're practicing.

The air outside is cool, cooler than before. She shuts the door behind her, leaving behind her sleeping mother. No one must see this part of her, head split from her body hovering mid-air. She drifts, belonging no where, she doesn't feel the ground below her feet only this thought then the next, chasing down something anything to avoid what she knows she should be doing. So then this: Why had she not simply slept on the classroom floor where she belonged? Her nightgown chafes where her uniform had nestled against.

You know what you should do, why do you disobey?

There is a convenience shop below, but late at night it's closed. Why? Standing below the blue signboard with silver letters, she ponders the question. Surely there is business to be had at night. In sweltering hours of the day, a woman sits here next to the one-dollar candies and locked-up cigarettes. What difference did it make if she continued her slumber here open at night? Did she not know that there was money to be lost and opportunity to be had? The days were long, the nights are longer. Other shops tilted by walking corpses shrouded in white. This world around them did not rest. Neither can they.

So she gazes at the metal shutters laid before her and feels no comfort, no anger, but this: a humming building beneath her skin. A cockroach circumvents the direction of her feet. Rats chitter sweet nothings beneath the grass. The lights above her flicker. Most things she does not see, she wants us to bear witness to what she can't face.

It takes her this long to realise that the corners of her lips are salty from tears. They carve trenches into her cheeks so deep the little beasts seek refuge within them. And like the beast she is, so does she.

Nur hates God The Protector. When she was fourteen, she came home from school parched, corners crinkled and cracked and crisp. She'd sliced an orange she'd found, a little mouldy, a little soft in the centre, and dropped the damn thing circle-face open. Splat! On the ground, insides wet and slipping into each of the grinning crevices. She reached for it, could have still eaten it, but it was too late. The strings holding her snapping now. She cries like she's never cried before, sinking as close to the earth as she can to feel buried in it. The Nourisher had made her this senseless way. He did

that to her — not you, not her, and certainly not I. One hundred and one names could never explain her creation. The ground called *Bumi* is a mother too, it is wet against her skin. Her feet, they find their way back.

She walks several hundred paces from her block but she walks in circles. The scent of soil is all-encompassing. Hearing the pulsating beat of something calling to her, it misses her touch and longs for her return, it glints now in the soil as she digs several hundred feet from her apartment flat. Flat blade with ripples of black in steel, her father's inheritance is buried next to a necklace she once caressed. Carrying both back home now, the hem of her dress is bunched and brown. She climbs the stairs on hands then knees, pressing her ear to the door of the elderly couple and hearing: nothing. Her nose traces that very thing until finally, she's been returned to her living room. Hours have passed — lost never to be found. She feels dirty but doesn't deserve the cool touch of water. Where cabinets are closed, she opens half-way. She claws open the fridge and scarfs down a piece of cold bread. Her mother is asleep, her bag mid-air. Everything is as if she had never left. Did she? She can't remember, her memory suffering the blink of moonlight, lost time it never happened it must not have. Resuming her position she returns to the couch with her things hidden in her dress, her feet recall a familiar shadow on cracked concrete, mnemonic silhouette the echo of memory it repeats itself into her. The neighbours have gone to bed. She tries to move forward and reach for the bag. But Mama is there, she recalls Mama standing there, Mama what do you hold?

“I have worked so you can have a better life than me. Why are you just sitting here, don't you know you have another entrance exam tomorrow? You want to fail that, too? Shouldn't you be studying? I've paid your hospital fees with *my* money! With *my* work! Your useless father didn't pay a cent, you — you only need to study, what good are you, what have I done to deserve you, *anak jahanam!*”

But the blow doesn't land. Pain doesn't come. An open palm catches this hanger mid-air.

Feel us united, I am within you now forevermore.

And Nur rises now, she towers over her mother and eclipses the Sun. Her eyes wide-open. Her mouth parted. Her nostrils flared. Hunger looks ferocious on her, it is the winsome smile of her teeth and the open, the open, the open. She isn't anything or anyone like she was before. No longer a child. As she proclaims her mother's *name is Zulaiha* and cracks thunder through the air, bear witness to this power in her grasp, it is divine. God cannot look here, he is not welcome! We will feast upon his grace and spit out his bones, all one hundred and one. As I pry her eyelids wide open for her mother to see: this beast called me she has kept hidden all this while, she's finally grown into herself, no one's daughter but her own, she is mother, naming this, this skin is hers, this flesh is hers, beating Mama again and again, this is not justice, there is no feeling bearing the name 'fate', breathing evenly through each stroke, opening wider as her mother grows closer to the Earth, till she crawls on the ground to touch her feet, clinging like a child, begging like a child, for Nur's forgiveness.

All around are mirrors, who is who is who, there are no new beginnings, we can only repeat ourselves. Only Nur knows her head is pounding, her vision is double, she wishes to hear the gongs again. One-two-then-three. But there is only the echo of her name, the sound of a choking snarl is the sound of a scrub is the dirty name called shame. Mama's eyes are wet and hers are dry. These mirrors refract the light and distort them in ugly ways.

Nur once wondered what mother she will be.

"Mama, I will never let you beat me again."

That night, Nur doesn't feel pain. Nur doesn't feel anything at all.

Illness is this. Something is spreading from person to person till god knows who started it and who caught what from whom. Smelling like nothing, it looks like nothing and tastes like her. So taste. Her meat has begun to rot. In this home her body is hidden and we can only smell and taste. Tasting delicious, only delicious, to those already dead.

9 THE WOODLANDS OUTSIDE MY WINDOW

“Where does Papa live, Zulaiha?”

Mama looks up at me. Perfectly framed on a single large tile, the fifty-seven-year-old woman trembles delicately. It makes her look young again, her fear. Of me. So Zulaiha is afraid. She has kept her foot on my chest for so long that she’s startled by the sound of my voice, she’s forgotten I can speak, I can take, I can hurt those who hurt me, I have grown beyond the pain of birth, I have grown into a different kind of pain, both fractured and possessed by a voracious desire to take her place, to replace her foot with mine and breathe only if she suffocates.

So Zulaiha is right to be afraid.

For I, I, I am the light and the searching eye. I, I, I am fire and smoke, walls can’t contain me anymore. My mouth gapes wide for her, unhinged. So peer between these teeth of mine, Mama, have a look, witness a third eye looking back, it bulges from the red flesh of my bruised throat to feast on this view of you. Desire sees and speaks, Mama. I seek the beginning of all things and the end of all meaning. So where is the man called father and the father called accursed, where is he, where is he, where is he, Zulaiha? I remove my foot from Mama’s breast. It’s Zulaiha’s turn to struggle for smokeless air.

When Mama answers me, I bend down to touch her face. I touch the tears there and wipe them away. Oh Mama, why did you only cry when it was too late? The girl inside me kicks, and I rub my belly.

Smell the dirt of the Earth, scorched with each step I take. I exit the house, I take the train. Newness belabours me a purpose, I feel blessed. My vision is clearer, my steps louder, carrying double my weight. In a crowded cart full of commuters, I stand one foot taller than the rest. When an old man meets my gaze, he flinches and looks away. This push of my power carves the way. It is delicious. The feel of strength in my jaw as my bite cuts through cheek flesh. The moon knows its way to me and I know the way to the Sun.

Papa lives in Woodlands, Mama said. It is an hour away from our home. Time makes a mockery of my mind, for how could one hour contain the years we've been apart? My father must be a weak man, his feet must not be able to bear his weight. His desires must be feeble, they cannot fuel his step. His duties must weigh him down, he cannot act. Too tired to see me. Too tired to confront his mistakes. Too tired to hold me, love me, even whisper my own name. If all men are the same, pity them. Their emotions are rendered petty and paltry in bodies too weak to bear more than the weight of a single party. Never depend on them. Depend only, depend only, *sayang*, on yourself.

From the speakers, a digitised voice warns us to mind the gap. It makes me giggle on the inside, smile just a little bit. I will mind nothing, I have closed this gap between the I who is afraid and the I whom I fear. I call upon my soul and I answer the call — the summoning '*kur semangat!*' demands it. So, 'mind the gap', warns this country, remain afraid and chase it. Nobody is acting in my own interest, there is a conspiracy in this nation against multitudinous being. It wants to eradicate history and the ties between blood and soil. It wants me weak, it wants us apart, but I know bondage as strength — and it tastes sweet on my tongue.

Sweet, it tastes sweet. I may never know the satiation of 'happiness', only the bliss of the first bite and the anticipation of the next on my forked tongue.

I, I, I will always be hungry. I, I, I will always be starving, long after my belly juts from my waist and my feet swell from my path. I have been kept hungry for so long, they asked me to be stronger, not knowing what my strength longs for. I have discovered pleasure from my pain. I anticipate the sting in each kiss, it keeps me safe, the distance between I and the smallest being, closed. It is time to seek a being even smaller than before. Oh Papa, to kiss, to bite, what is the difference to I, I, I?

I reach the elevator to his block and press the button for the lift. Next to the beige metal doors, a notice has been pasted on the white and blue tile for the residents. In Singapore, fogging occurs four times a year to get rid of pests. The foggers are invisible to the eye, they roam the neighbourhoods in a cloud of pungent white and compel passers-by to quicken their step. I think of smoke again. I think of the ways this first world nation maintains its pristine state. I enter the lift, press the number 3, and wait.

But when I reach Papa's home and knock, he does not open the door. I knock four hard raps in succession, impatient and demanding, making the door rattle against its frame. My eye against this peephole, I won't allow myself to be ignored. I have strength in my limbs to break this door, I have fire in my breath to burn through walls. The desire to hide has long spent itself; ouroboros feeding eventually turns its serpentine head to seek more. I seek more. I seek Papa. I need to speak to him.

The door opens. It is not Papa. A woman has answered my call.

She is taller than me but older by at least a decade. And she is beautiful, clutching a scarf over her brown hair brushing her softly sloped shoulders, looking at me with kind, down-turned eyes. Her skin is smooth and unblemished, it dimples neatly between her brows as she examines me. And I examine her, seeing that she is unburdened by emotions I know, emotions that know me, that call me mine, that threaten to burn my bones to ash if I let go of this flame fully stoked now, in my

chest. So I resent her and feel hunger all at once, jealousy isn't unlike the desire to feed and destroy. If I remember how Papa looks, I might see him in his daughter. If I can bear to feel anything but this pain and anger fuelling me, I might see a sister. But I don't.

“Can I help you?” She asks in Malay.

She speaks to me as she would a visitor. She recognises me as distant kindred by the colour of our skin, expects me to respond in our mother tongue. But what do you say to the other daughter, the other woman, the other family? What do you say to those who were chosen over you, who matter more despite your own claim? (in the holy book our claims are equal and weigh the same!) What do you say to the enemy whose eyes are gentle and kind, I see nothing of what I recognise. I am no longer standing before a mirror, this is a different kind of horror. I, I, I, am. Standing at my father's door made of a light brown wood, with mangled hair atop my head and scars on my skin, tongue tracing the edges of my teeth. The sound of my heavy breath is all that can be heard.

She's still looking at me, waiting.

What should I say, to the woman who grew up knowing her father, innocent and loved? What do I say, to the woman who stole my happiness without meaning to, without ever having intended to hurt me, who only sought what was in her right — a place, a name, a family, a home? What do I say, to the woman who has someone to hold her at night and pick her from the ground? What do I say to the woman standing in my place?

She is an innocent. She is a thief. She stole my life, my happiness, my fate. I have grown up surrounded by women just the same, I love Mama and nenek and wish them dead all the same. So what do I say?

“Hello, kak.” I greet her in English, leaning against the doorframe. “Does Zulaiman live here?”

“Yes,” She answers slowly. “Who are you?”

“I am Zulaiman’s daughter.”

The woman’s head jerks back as if she’s been struck. “I’m sorry?”

“Zulaiman is my father.” And I, I, I look her squarely in the eye. “Are you his other daughter?”

Her eyes widen. “T-There must be some kind of mistake...”

She doesn’t believe me. I think for a moment, then reach into my pocket for my wallet. I take out my identification card and show it to her. Thus printed in the state, here my inheritance is: ‘binte Zulaiman’ — daughter of Zulaiman.

The woman opens her mouth to protest, to perhaps claim a different father by the same name, but she stops herself to look at my picture. Her eyes squint, she looks up at me, she searches and searches against false hope, and instead finds what she fears she’ll see. It hurts her and frightens her. I see it as her eyes close and hear her breath stop. She grows pale and her hand holding my card shakes.

“You don’t know about me?” I ask.

She doesn’t respond.

“Don’t be afraid of us,” I hear myself say. “I don’t want anything from any of you. I just want to talk to him. Please, I haven’t seen him since I was eight. Please,” I say. “Just let me speak to him. I will leave after.”

Her gaze is unreadable as she processes what I say. She lets go of a breath, returns me my card. Then she turns back towards the house, parting her lips.

“Abah!”

In the moment she turns around and exposes her neck, in the moment I hear her call out to my Papa as ‘abah’, in the moment I see the sliver of a home behind her, I see thick yellow curtains with threads of gold that span the ceiling to the floor, I see a wooden dining table half cleared of plates and glasses. And I reach. My hand a hairsbreadth away from her cheek, her ear, I reach to catch a strand of her hair.

But I miss.

She turns back just as I’m slipping my empty hand into my pocket. From behind her, my father emerges.

10 CAHAYA MATA MEANS, MY DARLING CHILD

“Hello, Papa.”

Outside, the Sun is setting. Grandmothers warn of the devil that roams this in-between time, unchained with a voracious need to tempt and take. And the sky is bleeding in shades of magenta, the clouds armed with scimitars of vermillion, together they paint him red. Still, Papa’s skin is much darker than I thought it would be, tanned like leather. His collarbones jut beneath a dark blue polo shirt, his arms are skinny and frail. He looks at me with dark eyes, the whites are yellow, and does not respond. In the silence, I take out the necklace he carved for me when I was young and the *keris* too from the red plastic bag I carry. And hold them both in my hands, this inheritance of mine. I hold them out for him to see. He is so dark his skin does not pale. I see now that men do not tremble or shake; they harden, instead.

Licking my teeth before I speak again. “Do you know who I am?”

“I do.”

Zulaiman pushes the door wider, walking in front of his other daughter. He’s protecting her from me. The wound it inflicts cuts deep, I close my eyes for a moment and will my flesh to close over. I must remain here, I cannot go where that pain leads, back home, back through the window, back to the same walls, the same absence and speechlessness I left. For now I, I, I, am the light and the searching eye. I hear the dictum of my self and obey: forget.

The icy air-conditioning of their home breezes over my cheek, over my feet.

“Why have you come?”

I, I, I, open my eyes, one-two-then-three.

I, I, I, open my mouth. “I have come to speak.”

He looks around us, he looks at his chosen daughter. “Go inside, *sayang*.”

His daughter obeys him on command. She nods and bends her head, the shadow of her scarf crossing her eyes. But as she walks back into her home, she glances back at me over his shoulder. I look at what is left, the in-between. There is a new distance now between them, a doubt that scuttles from my sight like a cockroach in daylight, but I see it, I see it, and it tastes sweet, sweet, sweet.

The door closes behind him. He rubs his temple and closes his eyes. “Of course I remember. You’re my daughter. Did your mother say that?”

“She didn’t need to. You forgot me. You left and never came home.”

He sucks his black teeth, licks at the gaps between them, and shakes his head. He glances at the *keris* held steady in my grasp. “No, no. Your mother didn’t let me come back. She wanted you to have nothing to do with me. Your mother is a blight, her hatred runs deep, she took you away from me, I—“

“Don’t speak of Zulaiha, my mother is only mine.”

My feet take a step back then a step closer, I plant this swaying self firm in this *bumi* of mine, smelling sweat and cigarettes and incense and breathing deep. And shout, with my voice ringing. “How DARE YOU! YOU LEFT! I was EIGHT YEARS OLD and you left me to suffer the woman you know to be a blight!”

Papa’s adam’s apple slides against his throat when he swallows. His eyes search mine, I wonder what does God sees in the eyes of mine.

“What did your mother do to you?”

“Don’t you know? You used to stop her from beating me, remember? What do you think happened when you left?”

Papa exhales harshly. “She beat you?”

“You didn’t know?” I shake my head. “No, you didn’t care.”

“Of course I care. Your mother isn’t telling you the whole story. She’s not telling you the truth.”

“Truth? What good is truth? What use is *truth*?” Fuck mere men, to hell with my Papa, I want to call God Almighty down himself to face my being and look into my I, all three of them, to discuss truth should only be conducted between divinities! I, I, I am true! “I have no use for your truth, you don’t know what is true, you have no idea of what I’ve been through!”

“But your mother kept you from me, that is the truth!”

“Why?”

He touches his throat. “I— I don’t know where to start.”

I inhale deeply. I close my eyes and see the red of the Sun through my eyelids. The pink of my youth has ripened, I think of the smear on a plastic chair, the plastic bag containing a bird I killed, the scars on my wrist, the thread of a necklace I split but still keep.

“Listen to me. I didn’t leave you like your Mama said. You see, I... Your Papa went to jail. I made a mistake and got caught. When it happened, your mother didn’t want you to know that your father is a convict. She was ashamed of me, and you were too young to understand. So I didn’t leave you, I had no choice. I had to serve time. Your sisters didn’t see me for years, too. After I came out, your mother wanted nothing to do with me, she wanted me to have no contact with you, she said the best thing I could for you would be to stay away. I had no choice but to stay away.”

So he had no choice.

He didn’t want to leave me. He was powerless, he was at mercy, he was taken away! By a greater power, a dark fate! He is just a man who made mistakes. But where is the relief promised to me from this truth, why do I feel a great press from my stomach instead, a great broil from within, the desire to scream and shout and burn and kill? Why do I want to hurt him more than before? Is everyone in my life blameless from the hurt inflicted upon me?

Pain is my name. Shame is my name. I have already been claimed. What I feel has grown too large for me to contain, I cannot reason with what I do not want to, I cannot reason with what made me, I

am the beast who beats her mother, I am the divine that encompasses the in-between. Already, I am.

I am. I am.

Still trapped. In my own making.

What certainty used to be comforting has morphed into something else. I'm watching it dissolve as I carry it. The music of the gamelan returning, chimes and percussion wrecking havoc as I sway to its beat.

I am. Trapped.

Who is trapping me?

Mama, who is trapping me?

Papa, who is trapping me?

Lurching forward, I strike my father across his face.

But my hand does not connect. He catches me and pulls me to him. I, I, I trash, against this cage of my Papa's arms — a place I had longed to be kept for so long, it removed itself from reality. For I am no longer that girl, and he is not the Papa of my dreams, and these arms holding me don't feel divine, they feel masculine. Between us, the body of the *keris* grows hot, it burns us, catalysed by this closing of distance, father and daughter touching.

“What are you saying?” I plead. “What are you saying, I don’t understand what you are saying. I don’t understand.”

“I didn’t leave. I *love* you,” Papa says. He looks into my eyes, I see tears in his. And Papa is no longer hard; his voice trembles as he speaks. Sky turning pink now, the pink douses us, sending us both adrift. “When I was in jail, I wept over your letters and drawings, I’d cry myself to sleep. I missed you so much. I’ve wanted to see you for so long. I’m so happy to see you, *sayang*. I’m sorry I left. Papa is so sorry.”

The *keris* falls ungraciously to the floor. I clutch the necklace to my chest and moan. My gaze aimless, I see the ground, the sky, my papa’s feet, the ripples of steel coming closer to my cheek. I don’t understand what is happening, can’t understand the paths I’ve been led down have led me round and round and back and back. Mama suffers, Mama is a bitch. Papa protected me, Papa was weak. I am the child and also the beast. Who betrayed me and who hurt me, who do I hurt back, who should I kill? I have been through so much

I have been through so much

I have tasted victory in pain and pain in faith

I have supplanted God and found divinity within

I have built an empire on nothing but pain with no truth to ever claim

I read in a file that I died today

I will die today

This will end today

If I cannot take Papa with me — for he is blameless — or Mama with me — for I have punished her — then do I die alone, do I die alone, do I die — with my fist in my mouth my eye against my eyes my teeth inside my cheek my mind twisted around itself with relief evading me until my final breath, my only option was always to just forget — all these hurts pushing me into my grave — I cannot breathe — I I I cannot breathe anymore — Mama — Papa — help me help me I cannot breathe, *please*

“*Nur Ain*,” he says, he is holding me in his arms, I’m too weak now to stand. He carries me into his house, his breath against my ear as he sets me down into a soft bed I have never known, “I named you when you were born, don’t you know? Your name means my darling child. *My Nur Ain*, my *cahaya mata* — the light of my eye. I love you, *sayang*.”

11 FUMES & GATES

In Singapore, you count the number of bedrooms along with the storeroom meant for things to be kept out of sight. A flat with three bedrooms (plus one storeroom) is a four-room flat. A flat with four bedrooms (plus one storeroom) is a five-room flat. A flat with no bedrooms (plus one storeroom) is a one-room flat. Mama lives with Nenek in the first. Papa and his family live in the second. And I, I live in the third.

The first thing my father says to me when I enter his five-room flat is, “Go and bathe. Use Fyfy’s toilet, go straight and turn left. Do you want a change of clothes? Your clothes are so dirty. *Tch*, doesn’t your mother know how to be a mother? She should take better care of you. Come, I’m sure Fyfy has a dress she doesn’t wear anymore.”

His daughter, Fyfy, stares at me, her face golden-lit. Dressed in light colours and draped in modest fashion from head to toe, only her eyes speak. There is a tiredness in them and a resignation, as if she too is speechless. She doesn’t say anything as Papa welcomes me into her home, her clothes, her room. Into her.

As my step-sister’s clothes fall on my warm, damp skin, beads of wet form on the cotton dress. I touch the fabric, softer than what I usually wear. It feels unfamiliar. My hair is still very wet. A pool forms on the back of the dress.

While I put on my step-sister’s clothes I think, why do I feel like my entire life as I know it has been a lie, that I’m burden by a mountain of dead weight and feelings that have no claim to truth, no claim to what is real beyond me? That I exist on an island, and I compel any boats away. That I

think I should forget pain but I cannot forget the pain, it is the realest thing I feel, as real as the chandelier that hangs now above my head. Papa's daughter has a chandelier with a hundred hanging crystals hanging from the ceiling in her bedroom. The Sun is not the brightest fixture here in Woodlands. Why look for the Sun when there is a chandelier to behold? Glowing.

“Did you know I visited you in the hospital a month ago? No? Maybe you can't remember because they drugged you. You were babbling in your sleep like you were possessed! Hospitals shouldn't do that, unless you're feeling real pain, like from injury. I watched you lying there struggling to breathe. I'm sorry I couldn't stay to see you wake. Your mother made me leave, she said I was making you worse. If she let me be your father, I would make you better. She's too stupid to see that a child needs both parents.”

Bitter and righteous is Papa. I think then, he is not so different from Mama. Papa doesn't think my pain is real, he thinks that the pain I feel is part of becoming better. Pain is a wake-up call; nature's way of telling you that you made a mistake. You burn your hand on a stovetop and learn never to do it again. But there is temporary pain, and chronic pain. What of pain that never leaves? What of the tearing in my *semangat*? Tearing, as I look at my father and his daughter, lit in this home with pretty things.

“Okay, I have to leave for a while, sayang. But I will be back tonight. You can rest here, you look tired. Is the bed comfortable? It's new. You will sleep well here. Why are you looking at the light? Stop, it'll hurt your eyes. Good girl. Lie down. Papa will be back soon, sayang.”

He closes the bedroom door. Papa's steps don't make a noise, but through the door, I can hear them talking in Malay.

“She’s fragile, can’t you see? She needs help, and I must help her. Let her rest on your bed, Fy. She’s been through a lot today.”

“But *abah* — what will *Ibu* think of you letting her sleep in our house?”

“*Tch*. I will deal with *Ibu*.”

“I really don’t think this is a good idea. We don’t know her. She looks... she looks dangerous, Abah.”

“What are you saying? Are these the words of a Muslimah? Where is your faith, Fy? Do you have faith in me?” A pause. “Do you have faith in Allah?” Another pause. “Good. I will heal her, Fy. I will make her better. *Allahu akhbar*, God is great. He brought her here for a reason. Have faith in Allah, have faith in Abah. Okay?”

“Yes, Abah.”

“I will take care. *Assalamualaikum*.”

“*Walaikumusalam*.”

I hear the door being opened and then shut. Papa has left me once more.

And the emptiness swells past the confines of my body, my flesh, my blood. It expands to touch these walls. The emptiness that drains me only obeys him, I think. It surely does not obey me. I flinch from the light of the chandelier, this golden yellow light that touches my face in places meant

to be shrouded. I want to cover myself and hide. My hand grabs a wooden brush from the dresser and launches it at the source. I hear glass shattering and a loud yell, but then there is darkness and silence, and all is right one more.

Papa leaves me once again because he doesn't understand how pain has a grip on me. I think he is ignorant instead of malicious because I love him, I am his child and all children think their parents love them no matter what pain we endure. It allows us to endure. It necessitates we endure. It traps.

But I am sick of being trapped. I am sick of being cursed. I am so sick of it I could vomit my guts and vomit my bones through my sssskin, piercing my eyes so sick of seeing these visions and dreamsss, forced protuberance of self-against-self stuffing my throat so tired of screaming, I want to, I so *desperately* want to not want anymore.

I am ready to release myself from my own divine enchaining, I want to let go. I bring my hands lying like flower petals on my lap onto my cheeks and fold them inward. I will ask for no more wishes, I will speak no more prayers. I have the answers to it all.

I need to listen. I need to listen, but it isn't silent here in the dark. The music of judgment returns, the chimes and winds and percussion dancing from the wind through the window. My nails scratch my skin to dig deeper, finding blood. I am so tired of being this way, I have never been more tired of being myself than in this moment, knowing of how helpless I am, knowing of how discarded I am, knowing that while I am found, it is not enough, I am fragile, he must fix me, somehow.

I lift a lighter on the table and light a candle on the bedside. How beautiful, the colour of flame. Ever-changing, in-motion; pink, orange and red making love against a sea of black.

I do not believe in a God. But I do. I do not believe in peace. But I do. I do not believe in happiness. But I do. I believe in these things because I think they reject me. They exist because I can never have them. They exist because I deny them! God and peace and happiness and family. What doesn't exist has an unyielding grip on me no matter how hard I fight it, choking as I rip apart my limbs like a beast struggling to somehow be free. This is no way to live life, but we keep— *no!* I will not keep on living, like this.

I read in a file that I would die today. It feels implausible, to read in a file one's fate, surrounded by white walls and one woman's empty gaze. But I think that is what it means to be in this country. One is eternally displaced. I feel displaced everywhere I stand. I don't know why I feel this way. I must have descended from people who never lived in one place, finding home between sky and stone. A part of me must long for these privileges of being free, but it cannot speak in any language I know. It only moans. In the whistling beneath the crest of the moon. I want it to call to me.

But it doesn't. It doesn't. I think the woods are beautiful and the ocean enchanting. I think the Moon exquisite and the Sun too. I love. I love them. I love all these things but they never call, they never touch me, never take me with them. I pray to things I know won't answer, I live in a state without hope, without magic, without a spell to cast aside this world I live in that I hate, I hate, I hate it all.

I hate the punishment, the pain, how difficult it is to stay afloat, head above the ocean, body above the rocks, you have to keep treading until the ocean overtakes us all. I hate the things I need, the love I need, wish I had some, the forgiveness I need, I don't know how to gain them. I am full of hatred and aesthetic opinion, I am full of words that amount to nothing but a scream of madness. I don't know who I am or what I seek. I don't know the span of a breath, how it feels. I don't know living, I don't know death. All I know is this:

I am choking.

I recognise the smell, it is the scent of aerosol pesticide. Public housing in Singapore is fumigated every three months to get rid of pests. It infiltrates each building through the rubbish chutes and kills all little things in its wake. It has never killed any human before, at least that I know of. It should be impossible for it to kill a human being. It is poison to roaches and other insects, the things scuttling in the dark afraid of humans. It is poison that purifies. A necessary massacre for a better living.

As I cough, I feel my throat ache. My chest hurts. My lungs tight, my cheeks hot. A rash spreads — demanding to be scratched. Deeper. Harder and deeper. Feeling like an insect writhing on the ground now, trapped onto my back. My limbs cannot gain traction. I am helpless. Trapped, trapped. As the smoke pushes me harder into my body, tighter. Tighter! Strangling, rope twisting, breathless with no air now, no space in between the dust between cells, pressing into each other, tighter, tighter.

Tighter.

Tighter.

Tighter.

Tighter.

12 BINDING

Binding. This is a binding.

Binding. I am bound.

I trace the edges of my pain

just to

return

to the start.

The north star points away

still I try to

navigate what I cannot.

so;

choke;

on emotion.

on faith.

on fate.

on hope.

on loss.

on space.

on want.

choke!

*this is a this is a
stranglehold!*

choke!

*on an unbreakable thread
tying my sight
to the mirror*

Saying,

Shame. This is a binding.

Shame. This is a binding.

Shame. This is a —

I am —

ashamed

of who

I am

Sayang, I am ready to die

so from the edge I dare

to turn this page

and close this book

and meet my end.

join me

harken to me

float

let us brave the beyond.

13 KUR SEMANGAT!

Peace.

It lives in the cusp of the wind.

Relax your grip. You can never catch what is expert at play.

So let us join it instead. Let us surrender.

Let it pass through you and possess you completely.

This whimsy of the wind.

Floating with fragrance under the bold moon — a single white eye. Know that when you look, what you see looks back. So behold, the beauty of the night. Open yourself to it with ease. Let it look at you. It won't see the scars or the hurting, it won't see the bones and rot, just this: how beautiful your eyes are, the perfect inverse of it. There is a balance in seeing. There is a balance to the curvature of the moon, the curvature of your eye. There is balance in seeing if you see it back.

Everything is right as it should be.

Laughter fills the dark, don't you know that laughter belongs to no one? The trees drink it in, leaves tickled by the culmination of all of us. In the dark, the frangipanis look black. Still, they bathe us in its fragrance, they want sweetness to be spread. From the humble dirt blossoms the heavenly sweet.

The buried find a voice in the beauty of the night. Together, we sing. Floating, tonight, on the night's generosity, we find others amongst the graves, we find ourselves in company.

Into the wind, into the night, this transient I shouts all that pains me. I dig my knees into the dirt and plead and beg. I cry heavy tears, screaming all the pain I feel. I name my mother and grandmother and my father and expel them, expel them into the air to float with me, my shout darting against my limbs, dancing in my hair. I look at the moon and cry freely. Let her see. I touch my cheeks and hold my hand out and see my reflection cupped in a bed of tears. I see my long black hair floating, my face purpling and swollen, my eyes black and unblinking. Sinking, this body sinking out of sight. The moon swallows me into her before rippling over the surface, white triumphant over this body of black.

The holy moon says, "I see you now, my child. You can let your eyes rest."

I hesitate and the moon trembles in the palm of my hand. Divine as she is, I am divine too; unity split in two. "No, not yet," I whisper.

When I look to you, sweet thing, you're crying too. I've never seen you cry, only fighting and grasping for what was denied. Why are you crying? I touch your cheeks, wet from the dew of the night and the pain of life. Our tears are one and the same in this body living in the palm of my hand. You're only a child. You're so young, too young to be burdened with the pain that I made you think you were made from. How could I have done that to you?

I didn't mean to.

You press your cheek to my breast and sigh. I hold you.

You relax slowly. Your breath deepens. I keep my arms around you, I don't ever want you to forget that in this moment, in every other moment, I love you.

I'm sorry, sweet thing. You saw my hurt and wanted to protect me. You saw my shame and it claimed you. I'm sorry I never gave you a name.

You are me.

You only wanted to protect. You are my shame, you are my wanting, you are my fight and love. Thank you for holding me so tightly. Thank you for keeping me hidden. Thank you for your strength. Thank you for loving me so.

As I feel the breath leave your body, we don't fight its leaving. I know it is released into a sweet breeze that envelops us. I feel you brushing my skin, my hair. I feel you cool against my cheeks for the span of a breath. But I will always feel you. You will always touch me, sweet thing, and I will always know you. But it is time for you to leave this body. Float and fly where I cannot, toward the sky and the moon. Ripple in clouds I once envied and return when the rain does and burn bright as you exit once more. I will always know you, I will always see you, but I am ready to look at other things too.

We are divine, you and I, when we touch.

So I speak to our divine being, under the waiting moon.

“Tomorrow, the Sun will rise and the frangipanis will bloom. There will be a golden glow that touches the encumbered curve of my throat. You may touch it if you wish, you may have other companions to meet, you may have the expanse of the world to see. And time will pass, my jowls will grow loose and soft, so will you, but I will always know you, your touch, and us.

“You may come as you are, singular and alone. You may come with others, mingled in them. Come with their stories, their miseries and triumphs of how they left. I want to feel their free, languorous breath, knowing it was strangled once — it will give me breath. So visit me, sweet thing, and tell me of the things you see. Of the trees withered and reborn, flowers crisped and then budding, of rocks burning then cooled in a river stream, swept. Of the people, of the people, of the people. Their circular steps and secret hurts and enduring pain. Yes, touch me with the memory of them. Let me smile through the tears, I will smile through the tears, knowing their pain is with mine now, so they are freer now, and you are with friends.

“Be free.”

The wind howls so hard, it sweeps dead leaves into the sky — carrying part of me away.

When you leave, I am simply Nur Ain, one girl.

I miss you already.

Collecting my tears in my palm once again, I hold it up to the moon.

“Are you ready now?” the moon demands. “Will you rest your eyes?”

I hesitate. The moon trembles with impatience again.

“Will my rest be forever?”

I watch the clouds swirl in her incandescence and know her answer before she speaks.

“You will wax and wane with the rise and fall of the tide. We will simply be, as time.”

The moon waits.

“Then this is my answer: no, I am will come with you just yet. I have more to speak and more to feel, down here, down below. I will wax and wane with you just as I am. And I will wait here, down below, to feel the touch of my pain once again.”

14 FORTUNETELLER

The fortuneteller sitting on her red plastic throne is younger than one would expect. She cakes on make-up not to conceal wrinkles but the fine-grained, oil-sheen glow of youth. Each morning, she warms a coin of foundation between her palms before smearing it onto her face, during which the smoke of incense saturates her, leaving a fragrance that lingers long after she's left. These were simply the rituals instructed to her by her grandmother to gain the confidence of an older, vain clientele. *You'll find no money in youth. Youth stirs fear of time lost. You must remind them of a future ahead.* Spoken in their mothertongue, it so much encased them in ember.

It matters not what she feels. Less than nothing, till she doesn't feel any way about it at all. She'd long forgot what retort she could possibility have had. Could she have once valued her looks, treasured her youth, was she ever envied? Does she miss it? Beneath this weight of inevitability, no emotion will surface. Mothers say hush, and daughters obey.

She'd long ceased to feel joy in her profession — she, the professed scion, last withering branch of a dying family tree and a forgotten magic. Once, the role tantalised her. Once, she must have enjoyed a tension in the air, felt a semblance of excitement as she eased her thumb down the line of a palm. But it had been five long years. These lines were all the same, skin weathered in all the same ways. She'd learnt that those who visited her were the desperate, the unhappy. Sometimes the lonely, often the poor. Rich people had their fortunes told by rich fortunetellers. They believe that those who had any real power over fate must be able to master it, not endure in places like these. They want to know, should I sell my first home or the other? Should I invest in this company, or the other? Freedom of movement. What does she know about that? She, cradled in the circular bend of the moon.

And so our young fortuneteller waits, drifting in and out of sleep. Time exists outside her, she can only watch the morning market crowd pass her by, her hunched figure a looming threat in the backdrop of their ordinary lives. Her parakeet whistles in its cage, peering through barnacled wire. A smear of white shoots down between its legs, disappearing out of sight. The light shining bright, it doesn't matter if it's day or night, she feels its touch on her skin and breathes, this atman transcends barriers and unites us all in the pursuit of desire, of being loved.

Our fortuneteller lights her fifth *kretak* of the morning and presses it between her lips. Her lipstick leaves its imprint around the cigarette's edge like a rope of brilliant red. Cigarettes remind her of a photograph of her *nenek buyut* blowing smoke against someone's hand. Before the second world war, before white-papered cigarettes, the indigenous clove cigarette of her people had been hand-wrapped in cornhusk and tied with string. Back then, they'd been called by a different name. She envisions herself running away to the homeland of her people — not to the tall skyscrapers of Jakarta, but hidden further back in time, to villages that still believe in magic and myth, where she wouldn't be so useless or peculiar but the centre of life itself. And the *klobot*, as it was then called, would be the first thing she'd seek. A little taste of heaven dipped in sugar, salty from sweat, and dried in the Sun.

Now, she tastes machine-shredded tobacco and cloves in small little sips. Smoke snakes out her nostrils and dances in still-air. It is smoke that bridges the gap between this world and the other. It is the very soul itself. Her mother taught her that. She'd grown so used to its ways, her eyes could no longer water.

Through ashen cloud, she then hears a voice. "Are you an exorcist?"

And suddenly a girl is standing here, no taller than the fortuneteller herself. She recognises the school uniform, noting it is now threadbare and yellowed from overuse. She notices brown shoes that had once, long ago, been white. On her wrist, a beaten, plastic wristwatch with a small face, scratched all over. Long black hair had been tied back into a severe ponytail. Gradually, her assessment travels till it meets the black, glassy surface reflecting her own.

“Are you in need of one?” asks our fortuneteller.

“I am.”

The girl’s hands twist in each other’s grip, equally trapped, equally trapping. Something about her disrupts the illusion of peace that the fortuneteller had so carefully preserved. It makes the fortuneteller squint, hold her breath, move closer. She reaches into her skirts and pulls out a pair of steel scissors. “Cut your hair and give it to me.”

The girl stares at her for a moment. Then with a snip, frees an inch of hair.

The fortuneteller collects the strands carefully and holds them to the fire of incense. The black strands twist like tortured wire before dissipating into ash. In the air, the scent of clean sulphur spreads. “You smell of nothing. I detect no foul play.”

But the girl shakes her head, her eyebrows furrowing. “You’re wrong. There is something inside me. I can feel it, it’s fighting me. I want it out.”

The fortuneteller turns to point at her signboard, but it isn’t there. Palm-reading for five dollars, It would have said. Long, long ago her *nenek buyut* would have charged nothing but loyalty and a cup

of tea. But in *kampung* times, the village would have taken care of their resident philosopher and truth-teller — if not out of charity, then out of fear. She turns back to the girl, blinking. “I am not a *bomoh*. I read the future.”

“I don’t need you to read my future. I know it’s bleak.”

“Is it really?” And a facsimile smile cracks the top of her skin. “Would you like to see?”

The girl shakes her head, then glances at the empty chair. Looking at the girl was like looking into a mirror. It unnerves the fortuneteller, — she, who is rarely unnerved. By some uncanny force of nature, the girl has been brought to her, like a seed dropping amongst roots. Something told her the girl would pay some other way for her service. Nothing was free, not even knowledge; therein lies bonds tighter still. “Sit and let us see what’s in your future. I won’t charge you. We are of the same blood, you and I.”

Her parakeet chirps loudly in her left ear. Most of her clients love watching it hop onto the table and pick up sticks, entranced by the magic of theatrics, by the click clack of steely nails on wood. She taps the table next to the girl’s palm — one, two, three times. The bird whistles sharply in its cage and spreads its wings. The girl settles into the chair, hugging her arms around her.

“This is Baba, a friend.” The fortuneteller reaches over and flicks the cage open. The parakeet descends eagerly onto the table, chatting as its thin metallic claws danced on wood. It tilts its head as she coos at it in her mothertongue. “Come to me, sweetheart.”

“What language is that?”

“Javanese.”

“I’ve never heard it.”

“Nobody is Javanese in Singapore. We’ve been made Malay now.” The parakeet jumps on her shoulder and nibbles at her tangled hair.

The girl watches the fortuneteller take out a fistful of sticks from a small black pouch and toss them onto the table. The bird examines them, nudging them around with its feet.

As the bird picks at the sticks, the fortuneteller lights more incense sticks.

“What’s that for?”

“Smoke opens the way. Give me your palm.”

Leaving the bird to its task, she gestures for the girl to obey with an open hand. The girl hesitates, glancing at both her hands before offering her right.

“Good. You have good instincts.” The fortuneteller plucks another kretek from her open packet and puts it to her lips. “Light, please. For more smoke.”

The girl hurries to obey with her free hand as the fortuneteller uses both of hers to press and pry into her palm.

“Yes, there is something inside you.”

“How can I get rid of her?”

“*Kur semangat!* You cannot get rid of her, she is you.”

The girl does not understand. Her confusion bubbles over, she is overflowing and cacophonous, her breath disperses the smoke in a dozen directions. So our fortuneteller takes pity on her and nods at the girl’s hand. “You will travel soon. There, the meaning will come to you.”

The girl slouches in her seat and cradles her head in her hands. “But I can’t travel. I don’t have any money. Even if I did, I can’t. My mother won’t let me.”

“You can’t fight fate.”

“My mother is my fate.”

The fortuneteller stares at the girl. Slowly, she shakes her head.

“So I should do nothing?”

“Should? What is the word, should?” The fortuneteller pinches her palm. “There is no should. Only what has happened, what is happening, and what will come to pass. *Kur semangat!* Discover your will.”

And as if by the force of possession, a sudden, swift anger takes charge from the girl's breast. She clenches her hand into a fist, trapping the other woman's hand within it. "What will? What if my will is to change my fate?" She is not a girl but animal then, caged. "I am just a girl!"

Instead of fighting to free herself, the fortuneteller's grip on her wrist tightens, thumbing the drumming pulse beneath. Her voice takes on a different timbre, but her appearance remains the same, frozen in place. "Listen to my words. You must wake up. Your lifeline is broken, do not fall asleep for too long. Wake up. There is disease in your lungs, you will find it difficult to breathe but you must discover breath. Wake up. Live your life urgently, do not linger in these crawlspaces. Do not fear those who dictate your future. You will die twice if you do not fear death, and once if you do. So wake up."

The fortuneteller smiles then. She removes the *kretek* from her lips. Turning it round, she offers it to the girl.

"I don't smoke."

"Just taste."

The girl pauses to look at the object offered to her. She shakes her head at first, but then touches her throat. And she leans over. The fortuneteller smiles and proceeds to gently brush the white, filtered tip against the girl's lips.

"Taste," she says again.

The girl licks her lips.

“It’s sweet, isn’t it?” The fortuneteller says. “*Kretak* is dipped in sugar. Did you know that?”

The girl pulls away. She stares at the cigarette. “No.”

Just then, a woman screams.

Frightened, the girl leaps to her feet, her plastic chair leaping away and sliding on concrete. The parrot made that noise, didn’t it? But her heart beats faster still. She hears the sudden churning of a construction site next to her. A drill is digging into stone. It’s the first time she’s noticed it. Everywhere you look in this place, a drill is forcing its way through stone. Its violence travels through the earth, up her feet, into her body — and stays. It collects. Has it always been there? The beaten earth lying bare in torn chunks. Singapore is a land always in construction, becoming. Around her, the gated shops breathe while she struggles to, they seem to close in, the path leading away and also towards this little corner churning beneath her feet. She starts to run. Once she starts, she can’t stop. She runs.

And the fortuneteller returns the cigarette to her mouth as she watches the curious girl run. She knows the thoughts racing through that mind. And that uniform, oh she recognises it well. On the repaired hem of the skirt, a little red thread was notched at the corner. She remembers sewing it after school one day with the only thread she had left. A month later, she’d stopped being a student permanently. The uniform had hidden below her bed for years before she could bear to get rid of it. They’d smelt like smoke then, and they surely smell like smoke now.

She takes another drag. “What did you pick up, Baba? Come, show them to me.”

Baba hops over and pushes his beak into her palm. She distributes the sticks on her table and considers them carefully, her nails absent-mindedly scratching the feathers of Baba's wing. "One... two..." And the fortuneteller breathes in the sickly sweet emanating from all things familiar. "Three..."

EXEGESIS

0 Background

“Kur Semangat” is a personal autofiction project inspired by true events in my life. It was never intended to be meant for publication, which granted me the freedom to experiment with form and structure. Before embarking on this project, I had written traditional fiction prose in the genre of Fantasy during my adolescent days, Romance in my teenage years, and Science-Fiction once I reached adulthood. However, during all these years, I kept many diaries detailing my personal thoughts and experiences. Upon graduation in my bachelors program, Philosophy, I discovered that my interests in reading and writing had matured in thought and the desire for experimentation. My own identity as a writer and person had solidified, and I realised that I had never given it the space to breathe through my writing. I, the person writing, was essentially invisible in my prose. This has drastically changed — in “Kur Semangat!”, I have become the primary subject, the primary speaker, the primary viewer, and the only critic that truly mattered.

Hence, this project marks a huge shift for me; where I previously wrote toward escapism, now I write via immersion toward myself: my self-understanding, self-knowledge, self-discovery, and personal catharsis. “Kur Semangat!” represents closing a chapter of my life in order to begin off-book and move beyond a narrative of mental illness and trauma that ends in death. It is unapologetic in its niche perspective and images, employing allusions to cultural objects and societal pressures that are posited as unassailable facts of the protagonist’s life. I wrote “Kur Semangat!” to bear witness to events in my past through the organic movement of my thought. As I wrote, a practice began for me where I constantly re-read my prose to learn things about myself that I did not consciously know, such as the flow of my ideas and thoughts, the rhythm of my words when spoken, and the influence of traditions, visuals and sounds in my writing. This project forced me to examine aspects of my identity (such as my race, gender, religious upbringing and family dynamics) with an unflinching gaze coupled with philosophical rigour. When it comes to trauma, there is no real reference external to one’s private experience of it. Hence, in terms of identity, I approached my identity as a dynamic whole constantly in dialogue with its different facets, thereby embracing the chance to shape my own voice. Stylistically, I was inspired by Clarice Lispector. However, the core references in my project are philosophical and non-fiction; they are the philosophers that I read in my bachelors programs who have

hermeneutically informed my ways of perceiving and experiencing which consequently, informed my writing. Naturally, this project is an extension of my education in Philosophy, applied in creative writing. In doing research for my novella, I also read books on magic, ritual and medicine, and poured over dictionaries of ancient Malay words to explore their origins. While I did not achieve all my intended goals in writing this novella, I am proud of this beginning attempt in trying to understand my voice, my perspective, and to create meaning in the world as I perceive it.

In this exegesis, I will explain these attempts and influences in my writing, as well as the stylistic influences drawn. I will conclude by detailing what I would like to further explore in future writings or revisions.

1 On the Meaning of the Title “Kur Semangat!”

“Kur Semangat!” is a Malay evocation for the soul. In modern casual usage, it translates to ‘[summon your] strength!’. Its meaning in this usage is similar to cajoling someone to “be strong!”. However, the word “semangat”, also refers to an underlying quality of the spirit or soul that unites one with the spirit also shared by objects and nature. “Semangat is identifiable with the universal life force or vital principle which permeates all nature, including apparently inanimate objects” (Yousof, G. 1992). In the Malay language, there are various words referring to the soul with different metaphysical implications; (1) the *roh / ruh*, which comes from an Arab root word and refers to a divine gift of the individual soul, (2) *jiwa* and *nyawa*, which both originate from Sanskrit, and (3) *semangat*. From my research, *semangat* stands apart from the others as it does not originate from another language or culture; it points to a Malay conception of the soul that is self-defined by the indigenous Malay people and originates outside the influence of Hinduism and Islam in the Malay archipelago. Despite this, current usage of the words *roh*, *jiwa* and *nyawa* to refer to the soul are virtually interchangeable, and are much more prominently used than *semangat*. An understanding of the soul as *semangat* now almost exclusively lives on in Malay rituals, performing arts and magical medicine that struggle to endure today, in part due to the fact that it no longer fits into an Islamic framework of understanding the soul.

On the other hand, the word “kur” has no direct translation. It has been theorised as a mimicry of a bird’s cooing, since birds often represented the soul according to 19th Century anthropological texts of Malay magic practice in Selangor; “In calling the soul, a clucking sound, represented in Malay by the word kur or

kěrr, by which fowls are called, is almost always used” (Skeat, W. W. 1900). The ancient origins and symbolism of this evocation intrigued me, and also pointed me toward an origin of Malay identity before the arrival of Islam to *bumi melayu* (which translates to ‘Malay Earth’). I understood it as a beckoning toward’s one’s spiritual being to return to the embodied world. “Kur Semangat!” is thereby an ancient and ritualistic call that is deeply intertwined with indigenous Malay beliefs regarding the division between body and spirit. Fundamentally, it implies that there exists a separation between body and soul, and that only if the soul returns to the body will the body be empowered to be set in motion.

My thesis novella, entitled “Kur Semangat!”, centres this as the philosophical conflict of the novel, and the key to understanding the perspective, narration and story. In terms of origin, it was important to me to breathe life into a Malay identity that transcends modern Islamic definition and enters an indigenous space of identifying the soul with nature, as it allows me an avenue to explore the meaning of my own identity (ex-Muslim), as well as its origins and future. I consider this approach controversial, since Islam has become inextricable to the modern Malay identity at an international, state and community level today. For instance, many Malays in Singapore and Malaysia today would not be aware that a vast amount of Malay words originate from Sanskrit — they would more likely believe it was Arabic that influenced our language, since most Malay Muslims learn Arabic for Quran recitation, and the meaning of many words have been whitewashed to operate within a strictly monotheistic belief. However, out of 25,000 Malay words in a dictionary of Ancient Malay, 12,600 or almost half originate from Sanskrit (Granoka, 1985). Learning about this blindspot regarding the origins of our language was powerful to me in its subversion of modern narratives — narratives that I myself as a Malay woman, am trying to re-work for myself.

Hence, I decided to title my work “Kur Semangat!”. This calling forth of one’s strength as calling forth to one’s soul embodies the split relation between my novella’s main character represented by both the narrator and the girl. It also establishes not only background historicity in traditional ancient Malay metaphysics that live on in the fringes of rituals and inherited practices, but also elucidates the central conflict of the protagonist — her body is unable to move because her will or spirit is in conflict and held down by the traumas she faces. Her post-traumatic stress is thereby posed as the loss of semangat, the prolonged experience of which could cause death (Yousof, G. 1992). It is also believed that semangat leaves the body during sleep and may result in dreams and non-corporeal experiences (ibid), which is explored in the novel through dream-like sequences in which the protagonist’s semangat enters a world of intangibility and threads

together abstract concepts such as motherhood, trauma, shame and knowledge. Hence, from the title, the reader is able to discern that the primary conflict is internal (the struggle to reunite the soul with the body), and prepares the reader for a phenomenological enquiry into the world of self-knowledge, self-imposed limits, and the shapes that trauma induces within the mind that inform the flow of ideas and themes within the text. As a result, “Kur Semangat!” isn’t simply a journey of emotion and thought, but the journey of the semangat. It oscillates between prose and poetry because a traditional linear narrative is an external structure that an internal mind and semangat does not obey. Yet, there are moments of “lucidity” where place must interject to acknowledge that the body exists within society and knowledge of the self is influenced and guided by knowledge of one’s place in society. “Kur Semangat” attempts to bridge this gap and the tensions brought about by the interactions between the internal and external world. It is mainly prose fiction, with influences of prose poetry. The perspective in “Kur Semangat” is a prism of the narrator’s identity, that being of a female-identifying Malay-Muslim girl who lives in a three-generational home. Her identity informs the emotional themes of this thesis, which are trauma and shame. Hence, the protagonist’s central conflict and ultimate desire is to resolve her trauma and shame — the endeavour of someone who desires to live. All the characters in “Kur Semangat!” are looking at themselves in the mirror and calling for a union between their mirror image (or more accurately, self-image) and their corporeal, cognisant self, in pursuit of a better self that would survive in Singapore.

2 Place and Being: Heidegger’s Philosophy of Technology in relation to Self-Knowledge

Externally, “Kur Semangat!” does take place in Singapore. In writing this project, I received constructive feedback regarding the lack of generosity in my writing which, initially, did not include an introduction of the place. I re-wrote the first chapter with this feedback in mind, but I still left specific time-frame of events undefined. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, it is because I see Singapore as a country that does not obey time the way other nations do; its transition from Malay village to a Chinese majority-led, futuristic capitalist enterprise happened within a generation through the sheer will of its founding father. Secondly, it contributes an ancient atmosphere that emphasises the idea that the narrator exists beyond her own linear timeline. Her grief and trauma is generational in nature, and her pain and identity is ancient, as it will persevere long after her death.

In “Kur Semangat!”, the protagonist suffers from an internal conflict because she lives in a highly competitive, modern society which imposes upon her a “technological understanding of being”. According to Heidegger, a technological understanding of being occurs when people conflate the instrumental function of things as a way to understand ourselves. This understanding of being reduces humans into mere “standing-reserves”, whose purpose and value are determined by how well they achieve a functional goal (Heidegger, M., 1962.). Hubert Dreyfus gives a good example of this by contrasting the ontological being of a styrofoam cup to a Japanese tea cup. A Japanese tea cup represents a “traditional” understanding of being that sees value in the ritualistic and aesthetic purposes of the tea cup — steeped in tradition and culture, — whilst the Styrofoam cup embodies a “technological” understanding of being which reduces its value to being a disposable, constant and effective method of holding liquid (Dreyfus, H. 2004).

Because the protagonist has internalised her self-value based on a functional means to an end, she encounters profound distress and self-hatred, since her primary meaning and value as a person is not a tool or an instrument for a nation’s success. This is established in the very first paragraph of Chapter One in concurrence to establishing place (Singapore) when she states, “We give it a grand name: meritocracy. Value by merit, not by birth.” This statement is particularly forceful for anyone familiar with the Singaporean political state machine and its education system, for Meritocracy is a key principle for both the People’s Action Party and the Singaporean education, especially to the extent that the education system acts a recruitment tool for the political party. However, the principle of blind meritocracy has been “under siege” in recent years (“Meritocracy still key principle for recognising individuals in Singapore, says Ong Ye Kung”) due to the fact that it wilfully ignores social inequality and stratification that are key factors in one’s performance and success. It is not necessary to understand this background social context of the ongoing debate to understand the intrinsic wrongness when the protagonist states that “an institution will decide, not she”, but it is useful to note the reality of Singapore and the implications of it. “Kur Semangat!” proposes a strong condemnation of a technological understanding of being by positing it as a foil to the identity formation of a Malay person through a language shaped by Malay metaphysics and ritualistic beliefs. If life in competitive Singapore is a battle of wills, what hope does a lost *semangat* have once it is disconnected from its origins and lost past?

Modern society is a hindrance to self-knowledge not just by conferring a technological understanding of being, which is a reflexive and internal perspective of the self about the self, but also by hindering one from

the type of self-knowledge derived from knowing others and one's relation to society. To elaborate this, I will use the example of when the U.S. Air Force redesigned the cockpits of their planes. New cockpits were designed based on the average dimensions of more than 4000 pilots. However, not a single pilot could fit into the new cockpits after they were launched. Society views individuals as a law of averages and statistics, and by doing so, society perpetuates the myth of the Average Person. That Average Person that we compare ourselves to, that drives competition in society, and that makes us feel inadequate, does not exist. In other words, in evaluating our inadequacies compared to the Average Person, we dream up a version of ourselves that we "should be" at our bare minimum, but since this person does not exist, we will always be lacking. As Jung sums it up, "there is and can be no self-knowledge based on theoretical assumptions, for the object of knowledge is an individual — a relative exception and an irregular phenomena. Hence, it is not the universal and the regular that characterise the individual, but rather, the unique" (Jung, C. G. 1990). Hence, modern society as it exists in the narrator's perspective of Singapore acts as a hindrance to self-knowledge. By all accounts, she is merely an ordinary student struggling to prove her mantle in a highly competitive system. However, the psychological repercussions of modern society have given birth to a monstrous and primal version of her. It has thereby driven her to reject a part of herself as an act of shame and self-hatred, which splits her unity of being into two. When that part of her takes control over both of them by "naming" her, it is an act of self-cannibalisation, neurosis and contradiction; she embraces her most hated self (the helpless victim) as her defining feature and strength, which compels her to beat her mother, reversing the roles between them as well. However, what this act does is it transforms her external enemy, her mother, into an internal one, because she has become the role she hates.

The "unorthodox examination" that the girl fails in this part of the novel is inspired by the famous Stanford marshmallow test. In the original psychological experiment, children were sat in front a single marshmallow and told that if they could resist eating it now, they would receive two marshmallows later. The study then traced the lives of these children and found that a correlation exists between the ability to delay self-gratification, and success. In other words, having more will-power conferred more success in the long run. In "Kur Semangat!" the test demands the protagonist not turn the last page of her file to reveal her fate. By using a version of the marshmallow test as a University's entrance examination, I intend to highlight the way Singaporean society values self-control above all else as a the determining role to success. Failure to resist instant self-gratification becomes a failure of the self, since it is a failure to wield control over the self. However, a deeper reading or a deeper understanding of the Stanford Marshmallow Test reveals the flaw of a

blind meritocracy that assumes that everyone is capable of the same amount of self-control. Rather, further studies reveal that self-control is not a reflection of conscious willpower, but rather unconscious upbringing and experiences. The capacity to hold out for a second marshmallow, or to resist the temptation to know one's fate, is indirectly shaped by a person's social and economic background. Without the privileges of that stability, my protagonist lacks the psychological peace to evaluate the test as a purely logical test. She is thereby unable to exert the same self-control as others. Consequently, she internalises this failure. Essentially then, life in Singapore has revealed to her an internal lack without providing her with the spiritual means to resolve it.

3 Circles and Spirals: Phenomenology and Trauma

In “Kur Semangat!”, the two major threads of phenomenological inquiry and dealing with trauma overlap each other. Here, I will first elaborate on the phenomenological influences on the text before showing how understanding trauma reinforces the shapes that constantly recur in the text.

In writing this deeply personal novella inspired by real-life experiences, I experienced conflict between fatalism and hope. I was writing toward death both in plot and as a phenomenological enquiry into the self. Influenced by Heidegger's *Phenomenology of Self*, I began with the understanding that glimpses of authentic Being occurs when *Dasein* (human experience) confronts its own finitude and accepts that it will inevitably die. It is only through this confrontation with death that the question of authentic Being is brought to the forefront, for “death is the supreme testimony to Being” (Heidegger, M. 1962). Hence, the protagonist is Heideggerian in this sense, for her narration is made highly aware of her inevitable death as established in chapter one, in which she reads a file during her university entrance examination that foretells her death. The revelation of the file also meta-textually hints at the protagonist's possible awareness that she literally exists in a novella and is aware of the reader, and is thereby aware that this relation and novella must also come to an end. Hence, death is a central theme in the novella, but it is specifically the perception of death that shapes the narrative. This is because the courage and lucidity to think about authentic Being only occurs upon an awareness of death, but only courageous and lucid thought propels one to perceive their inevitable death. Hence, to be in pursuit of knowing oneself authentically is to be caught in this circular thinking — or in the words of the protagonist, it means being “trapped” or “bound”.

However, if death is a fixed destination, what becomes of living? It is not within human nature to accept death without a fight. An awareness of death brings forth desire — clinging and attachment. It also brings forth the urgent desire to change and become better within a limited time frame. These conflicting desires of living and the awareness of being towards-death are held in painful tension for the protagonist in her narrative. It is a fight for time and a fight against the inevitable. It is also the painful desire to change what one cannot — in this case, the protagonist's traumas, and the shame and self-hatred that these traumas inflicts upon her.

Additionally, according to Hegel, another phenomenologist, it is impossible to gain direct knowledge of the absolute, which is the “in-itself for consciousness”. This is because our own tool of enquiry into human cognition is cognition itself. Hence, the absolute must either *change* the object of cognition by forcing it to conform to its own conditions of perception, or *filter* only what we can perceive as limited by cognition. In either case, absolute truth is unattainable. To circumvent this problem, Hegel proposes that we shift the object of knowledge to how the instrument of cognition works. In doing so, we would be able to deduct errors of reasoning systematically in order to reveal in piecemeal fashion, “truth in its purity”. Hence, absolute truth is not only the destination of this phenomenological pursuit, but more importantly, consists in the journey. It includes recognition of contradictions, and the reconciliation of them. As a result, Hegel's phenomenology is characterised as a *history* of the “shapes of consciousness” by which the “spirit develops itself”.

Hegel's phenomenology here also describes a circular motion of thinking, but instead of a closed circle, it more resembles a three-dimensional spiral. Each moment we bypass the start, we detect flaws in our reasoning which feedback into our inquiry. That is why, to Hegel, absolute truth is characterised as a history. It takes more living and more thinking to arrive at the truth, and though we may never get to the truth, we can get closer to it.

In “Kur Semangat!”, circles and spirals repeat throughout the text. Chapters often begin and end at the same place, or with the same thought, location, or unresolved problem. The protagonist's emotions travel from one end of the room to the next, but ultimately remain in the same space. Her footsteps may leave her home, but they always lead back. The cycles of the moon, cycles of the biological female body, the circularity of the moon in the sky, the suspension of Singapore as an island with no horizon, the symbolism of eyes and a

necklace of thread are circles that constantly assault the protagonist at every turn. They repetitively pop up in various chapters like mental “stoppage signs” that halts her train of thought by plunging her deeper into despair, or granting some form of elucidation or catharsis by being axiomatic certainties in her life that other experiences are built upon. She goes from one trapped thought to another, and is left wondering whether anything is ever being resolved. If a circle is a single line with an infinite number of points, the narrative in “Kur Semangat” tests this theory, allowing her to have long, winding self-reflection that is always expansive and varied but also contained in space or emotion or experience. Yet, there are fixed points that she will always encounter — points of specific pain.

The circularity of thought and narrative is also used to bring forth the effect of trauma on thought by reinforcing an atmosphere of being trapped. As my protagonist states, “so I am trapped, these thoughts are trapping, I am destined and pre-destined and always destined for this country I call home, in this house I call home, in this lack of space with no room for breath.” In “Kur Semangat!” the narrative flow reveals that this circularity of phenomenological inquiry concretises the circularity and contradictory nature essential within the cognitive act of confronting trauma. Trauma is the phenomena of “possession by the past” which “does not simply serve as a record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned” (Caruth, C. 1995). Freud notes that while most people think that traumatised patients are fixated to their traumas, he believes that “they are more concerned with *not* thinking of it” (Freud, S. 1920) Hence, trauma often occupies a mental space that is consciously denied to the victim. As Cathy Caruth notes, when the traumatised have to call upon and relive a traumatic past, they only do so through the “very denial of active recollection”. This is the psychological paradox of trauma. Furthermore, trauma marks a break in the history of a traditional linear narrative. Pierre Janet proposed that trauma is confrontation with an event so unexpected that it has never been fully integrated into understanding and thereby cannot be integrated within prior schemes of knowledge (Janet, P. 1889). George Bataille also states that since trauma has never been fully integrated, it cannot become a “narrative memory” as part of a complete history (Bataille, G. 1995).

In learning this, I discovered that it resembled my own experience of how I re-lived aspects of my traumatic past. Denial of the event is the strongest emotion that often occurs in these recollections, which often leads to anger, self-hatred, and frustration with oneself. Often times in writing diary entries, I would be writing about my trauma but only indirectly. It was the ‘elephant in the room’ that I was hyperaware of, but knew that few readers without similar histories may not be tuned into. In writing “Kur Semangat!”, I discovered that the act

of writing about these traumas often resemble writing in a circle as well, going “round the bush” so as it were, where I begin and end a chapter in the same place both emotionally and geographically but leave a space (the actual past where the trauma occurred) relatively untouched. Time in my novella does not obey a linear narrative, and the act of recalling a trauma brings the past into the present and warps both, creating a new timeline on its own. In order to actually talk about the trauma and bring the protagonist’s traumas closer to the narrative surface for the reader, the girl swallows the protagonist into her perspective so that the traumatic events may be referred to in the third person, through a sound, or redirected to a second person that is meant to refer to the protagonist herself. These shifts in perspective and subversions of a linear timeline are renegotiations within the psyche to allow distance between the protagonist and her trauma. As psychologists van der Kolk and van der Hart suggest, the act of recalling trauma “is not addressed to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody: it is a solitary activity” (Caruth, 1995). Not once in writing this novella and in the protagonist’s narrative is an attempt made to translate the trauma into something easy to read or easy to understand, because simply recalling a bad event does not even attempt to wrestle with the paradox of memory that trauma creates.

However, the novella is fundamentally still an act of understanding for the protagonist. She must reconcile her trauma with a life that exists outside of it. She is keenly aware of the constant self-conflict demanded by the act of reflection. Worse, she understands that she is the one both pursuing the inquiry and denying it. What this paradox does is it directs her focus toward the gap; the gap that prevents her spirit from uniting with her body is the same gap that prevents her trauma from uniting with her present. It is a gap of understanding, about which Claude Lanzmann writes, “this blindness was for me, the vital condition of creation.” (Lanzmann, C. 1991). This proves true for my protagonist as well. If this gap cannot be resolved, for “this abyss will never be bridged” as Lanzmann states, it is from that gap that creation must occur, and it begins from the very premise that what occurred is unknowable and unexplainable, but it happened nonetheless. In “Kur Semangat!”, this axiom of truth without understanding is established in Chapter Zero, where she states, “Truth is.” The protagonist encounters many axiomatic principles during moments of profound distress in repetitions of three, such as “he can’t touch me here, can’t touch me, can’t touch”, “burn, if I had a voice it will speak, burn, if I had a voice it will speak, burn” and “I, I, I am” as unexplainable certainties that are true regardless of reasoning. The nature of these repetitive axioms changes throughout the text as the protagonist encounters them more often. Where initially they began as thoughts that make her more depressed and stuck in her grief, they later mark changes in her emotional journey as they liberate her

from previous thoughts that only led back to the same truth, thereby enabling her to progress incrementally from circular experience to circular experience in the spirit of Hegel's phenomenology.

In "Kur Semangat," the narrative is attempting to speak from "a crisis that is not yet over" (Caruth, 1995). This ongoing existence of trauma in memory is reinforced not just in the narrative, but mirrored in place as well. In Chapter One, "The Test", Singapore is first described as an island in which "there is no horizon". This establishes the protagonist's emotional awareness of being trapped via a geographical, physical trapping, since the sky does not visibly touch the Earth, and the country itself is surrounded by water, which evokes the sense that the protagonist is imprisoned with no escape via land or sky. Her only two choices are to stay put or drown. This is further elaborated in Chapter Two, "Mama/Mercy", in which she states, " But I can go nowhere... I have only two possessions: a past, and a fate to remain." By using Singapore as a fixed geographical location for the narrative despite the fact that she longs to leave, the place of trauma is concretised and not simply relegated to an abstract unconscious space. Later, the narrator's space narrows to the flat she occupies with her mother and *nenek*, and gets smaller still as she is trapped in the four walls of her bedroom. Hence, the narrowing progression of space from a small island to a modest flat to a bedroom represents the descent of the narrator's mental state. It contributes to an increasingly claustrophobic atmosphere and highlights her urgent need to break free from her confines. During the latter part of "Kur Semangat!", after the protagonist finally leaves her mother's home, she travels the same progression of space, starting in a public train, to her father's flat, to her half-sister's bedroom. This is meant to represent that she left one circle only to enter another, and that she never really left her bedroom — she only discovered a new one to occupy. From simply noting the progression of space, the reader can sense the falseness of her new journey toward her father; it is not true release, or freedom for her semangat to find its way back to her. It holds a repeating pattern in her mind. Hence, tracing the circles in "Kur Semangat" reinforces a binding from all directions, and provides another layer of understanding the mental state that the protagonist is experiencing.

3 Cultural Influences: Malay Magic, Indian roots, and an Islamic packaging

One of my goals for this project was to explore my racial identity and how it can shape meaning and perspective. However, this endeavour of mine was not so simple. First, I had to come to terms with the violent loss of my Indian heritage. While my family practices Malay traditions and speaks Malay, my

grandmother and her mother were both Indian. Hence, it was impossible to ignore the fact that the inherited grief and trauma that the protagonist experiences is also influenced by the embodied experiences of two generations of non-Malay women. “Nenek is Indian and was stolen by her mother”, is how *nenek* is described in the novella. My own grandmother is an Indian woman who was stolen by her Malay stepmother — who could not bear her own children — and subsequently married off to a Malay man at the age of sixteen. Yet this fact is virtually unacknowledged by anyone except her. She was raised illiterate and made to be a servant in her stepmother’s household and subsequently, her husband’s. She cannot read in any language, and she can only speak in broken Malay, or *melayu pasar* (“market malay”) that she learnt from going to the market since young. Often, the structure and grammar of Malay that I learnt from speaking to her at home would be littered with corrections and red marks in my school compositions and papers. Yet, my grandmother is the only Malay-speaking person in my house. She is both the ‘most’ Malay and the ‘least’ Malay person in my family.

In writing this novella, I slowly came to an understanding that *nenek*’s identity was the keystone to the structures of exploring the protagonist’s identity, shame, privilege, and relation to magic. At first, I wanted to pay homage to my grandmother’s lost identity through *nenek* and the lens of my narrator. Nenek is speechless in “Kur Semangat!” (in that her words are never realised into dialogue and she cannot diagnose her grief) to emphasise that the loss of speech entrenches one’s shame regarding their trauma, which keeps her debilitated from it. She lacks an education, which prevents her from being able to understand modern concepts like inherited trauma and mental illness. She is also unable to voice out her identity and embody the languages. In “Kur Semangat!” the logic of what you perceive perceiving you back is a key part of the magical logic of the protagonist’s world. Hence, since *nenek* cannot know of her heritage, her heritage cannot know her back, so she is unseen and unknowable by even herself. It also emphasises that the narrator does enjoy privileges that her *nenek* did not have, such as an education, but this education in itself is not enough to guide her out of cycles of inherited grief originating from a different world and different language. This hints at the different dynamics of oppression and suppression that the different generations of Malay families experienced across time, which are never spoken about or visible by the meritocratic and modern-borne state. It points to the source of a generational trauma that is not just defined by gender and place, but by generations of sexism, abuse and income inequality that further perpetuate cycles of abuse, inherited shame, and the progression of these burdens that carry on in younger generations of women of colour.

The importance of *nenek's* identity also came to the forefront as I was doing research into Malay magic. Malay magic played a huge role in my research for “Kur Semangat!”. While I did not get to do field research in the topic due to the coronavirus pandemic, my rudimentary understanding of Malay magic still shapes the language and logic of “Kur Semangat!”. In many Malay magic rituals, supernatural deities originated from Hindu beliefs; as Skeat notes, “the greater gods of the Malay Pantheon, though modified in some respects by Malay ideas, were really borrowed Hindu divinities, and that only the lesser gods and spirits are native to the Malay religious system.” (1900). The language used in these rituals also originated from various influences; “Just as in the language of the Malays it is possible by analysis to pick out words of Sanskrit and Arabic origin from amongst the main body of genuinely native words, so in their folklore one finds Hindu, Buddhist, and Muhammadan ideas overlying a mass of apparently original Malay notions.” (ibid). Hence, the history of Malay magic crystallised for me an identity that resonated with my own.

“But the beliefs which they actually hold are another matter altogether, and it must be admitted that the Muhammadan veneer which covers their ancient superstitions is very often of the thinnest description. The inconsistency in which this involves them is not, however, as a rule realised by themselves. Beginning their invocations with the orthodox preface: “In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate,” and ending them with an appeal to the Creed: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Apostle of God,” they are conscious of no impropriety in addressing the intervening matter to a string of Hindu Divinities, Demons, Ghosts, and Nature Spirits, with a few Angels and Prophets thrown in, as the occasion may seem to require. Still, the more highly educated Malays, especially those who live in the towns and come into direct contact with Arab teachers of religion, are disposed to object strongly to these “relics of paganism”; and there can be no doubt that the increasing diffusion of general education in the Peninsula is contributing to the growth of a stricter conception of Islām, which will involve the gradual suppression of such of these old-world superstitions..” (Skeat, W. W. 1900)

This integral quote by Skeat crystallised for me that an enquiry into the protagonist’s identity was similar to an enquiry into the identity of Malay Magic itself. Both lives on the fringes with forgotten Indian roots, under the veneer of a monotheistic Islam that lives in juxtaposition with key divine figures.

But if indeed, origins in Malay magic can be traced back to Brahmanism, as some amount of evidence suggests (Swettenham, F. 1895), the scope of my research widened itself to an investigation into the magics

of possession as it was practiced in India. In part, this was due to the fact that literature on Malay magic practices are extremely limited, probably due to the controversial nature of it against Islam. When it came to Indian magic, I was specifically interested in the hierarchies of power, gender and knowledge associated with it that might have endured till today. It is important to note that while Sanskrit was a huge influence on the Malay language, it is not the spoken language of a vast majority of Indians. Sanskrit is and was a highly politicised language that was only taught to upper caste Indians, in effect gatekeeping knowledge and *moksha* (enlightenment) from lower caste people. This hierarchy of knowledge and language limits literature on the topic of possession. “Perhaps the most common perception—and consequent stigmatization—of possession among both academic and indigenous orthodoxies is that it is a nettlesome aberration, a blemish on the face of epistemological order, a phenomenon subject to benign neglect, or, at most, sanitized into nonrecognition. ” (Smith, F. M. 2006). This is because “possession and, indeed, emotion itself, the kinder, gentler ancestor of possession, have been avoided or denounced by the self-conceived (and, by no accident, highly literate) orthodox among both scholars and indigenous practitioners. ” (ibid).

This quote highlights two other aspects in which Magic mirrors the identity crisis of the protagonist. Firstly, orthodox education is posited as a separate sphere antithetical to magic. Secondly, it shows that both magic and mental illness are stigmatised by general society, and more associated with people of a lower class. Of course, before the modernisation of medicine, to be mentally ill would be akin to being possessed, and most magical practices were considered healing practices. In “Kur Semangat!”, I wanted to hint at the sense of something being lost about our understanding of magic, medicine, illness and the soul through the modernisation of society that has instigated a loss of *semangat*. Only by understanding these parallels I drew between magic and identity can the reader also understand that education was never seen as an avenue for healing from the protagonist’s perspective; what ails her exists in a category of its own, rejected by orthodoxies of academy and religion. I believe this particular perspective to be unique, as it subverts the general belief that academia and education is the almighty liberator of generational strife. In “Kur Semangat!”, the role of education as a privilege plays a much smaller role when considering ancient knowledge lost in the process of modernisation.

Furthermore on the nature of possession, “possession is not a single, simple, reducible category that describes a single, simple, reducible experience or practice, but is distinguished by extreme multivocality, involving fundamental issues of emotion, aesthetics, language, and personal identity.” (ibid). Note that this is

an understanding of possession from a South Asian perspective that is different from a Western framework of understanding. In part, this difference is informed by different ontologies regarding selfhood; an Asian / Indian framework recognises the self as “mutable, multidimensional, nonlinear, [...] fabricated, a moving part among other moving parts”, whilst a Western view predominantly views the self as a “naturalized, identifiable, and unitary self” which is thereby always “breached” when possessed. Possession, in the Western canon, is almost exclusively an act of evil, but it can be an act of ritual, worship and healing in South Asian culture. Upon realising the differences between these perspectives, the plot of “Kur Semangat!” drastically changed. Where the protagonist was originally meant to seek an exorcism of the girl from her being, I embraced the opportunity to explore a perception of selfhood that was multiple, non-linear and fluid. It also allowed me to explore different perspectives, shifting from the protagonist to the combination of the protagonist and the girl, and from first person to second and third. In a sense however, I would argue that “Kur Semangat!” is written entirely in the first person — it is merely that the ontology of the person in question is fluid, multiple and transformative.

Briefly, I would also like to mention particular cultural images in the text that may require further illumination. Birds, as I have already mentioned, represent the Malay soul. The *Keris* (a highly spiritual Malay dagger) symbolises a living aspect of the father’s soul (independent from the person that is her father) and its powerful intention toward her. “Times of transition” are mentioned often. Initially, it is referred to as a specific time — *maghrib*, which is a prayer time in Islam that occurs after the Sun has set. Malay Muslims often share the folk wisdom that it is unwise to be outside during *maghrib*, as it is the time that *shaitan* (the devil) roams. However, in my research, I came across a different understanding of this proverb dating back to the 19th Century:

“Now Hindu mythology, we are told, knows next to nothing of the sea¹, and any such attempt as this to define the respective boundaries of sea and land is almost certain to be due to the influence of Malay ideas. Again, the intermediate zone is not necessarily considered less dangerous than that of

¹ This statement cannot be true on its own; India is next to an ocean named after it, and oceans are indeed mentioned in Hindu scriptures. However, upon further research, no words identifying water, oceans, or rivers in Malay originate in Sanskrit, which is highly unique. If there is truth to this statement, it may lie in the fact that knowledge of Indian scriptures was only accessible to the upper-caste, who were ascetic scholars and definitely not ordinary fishermen. However, knowledge of caste dynamics in India were clearly not the expertise of the writer as they were never discussed even in relation to Sanskrit and Indian influences in Malay magic. Furthermore, since Indonesia and Malaysia are archipelagos made up of many islands, it also stands to reason that Malay words for water and the ocean originated prior to the influence of Sanskrit on the language, which speaks to a ‘pure’ indigenous identity of water to the Malay people.

definitely evil influences. Thus the most dangerous time for children to be abroad is sunset, the hour when we can “call it neither perfect day nor night”; so too a day of mingled rain and sunshine is regarded as fraught with peculiar dangers from evil spirits, and it would be quite in keeping with such ideas that the intermediate zone, whether between high and low water-mark, or between the clearing and primeval forest, should be assigned to Kala, The Destroyer.” (Skeat, W. W. 1900)

The above quote should be taken with a grain of salt, as it is highly speculative in nature, but it was striking to me that animistic and Hindu beliefs could survive hundreds of years only to be subsumed into Muslim ideas, while a core aspect is left unchanged. Often in “Kur Semangat!” the time is a literal transition period of the Sun setting, or the phases of the Moon changing. I wanted to use the inherent Malay suspicion of these transitional periods of time to bring out an atmosphere that is afraid of change and loss — losing something in the process, or the loss of things that once were. Throughout the novella, the protagonist is indeed experiencing many transitional phases of her life. She views herself as dangerous too during these times. The emotion of an ancient suspicion drives these associations, and questions the wisdom of where it originated from, especially the ‘why’ and ‘what does it say about us?’.

4 Stylistic Influences: Clarice Lispector

In this section of my exegesis, I will attempt to explain how Clarice Lispector’s work, specifically *The Hour of the Star*, influenced my writing. This is a difficult task for me; my academic practice of writing literary analysis is rudimentary, and the task of analysing a text as complicated and ambiguous as Lispector’s work is enormous. When I try and explain her influence on my work, I find myself saying that she “simply possesses me, and I write possessed.”

I believe that admirers of Lispector’s work may understand what I mean; her work is mystical, spiritual, and deeply textured with hidden meaning. In the *Hour of the Star* (HOTS), her strange syntax, unconventional grammar, sentence fragments and abstractions obey an internal logic only Lispector may truly understand. In reading her work, I felt an immediate recognition of my own style as being related to hers in some way, and as such felt a close kinship with the author. For both of us, there is an ever-present awareness of the void in our work, an emptiness that is rich with meaning in itself.

Before I read Lispector's work, my writing was different from its current form in two ways; firstly, I always obeyed strict traditional rules of syntax and grammar. However, when I would read my work back, the rhythm of the words were unnatural to me and deeply dissatisfying. The rules that promised clarity and order impeded the meaning behind sentences and thoughts, and disrupted the flow of ideas. I needed a new method. I discovered it when I read HOTS. Lispector flouts traditional rules of grammar and syntax to bring a discordant rhythm in the written word that is in time with the rhythm of thought; she veers off sentences and mixes images with aphorisms and punctuated philosophical thoughts that often end in questions (much like in own work), but she does so in a way that embodies a secret rhythm to the movement of thought and idea association that always returns to its original goal. It is occasionally indulgent, and yet never seems to detract from the primary story despite the many tangents the narrative takes. This is because it is part of an organic whole, one thought made up of many, and the story is the journey of narrating these thoughts through an embodied existence wrestling with aspects of identity and society that are very much real, realer to the writer himself (the narrator of HOTS is a male writer named Rodrigo) than perhaps the story he is trying to tell.

In "Kur Semangat!", it was thereafter my goal to discover my own discordant rhythm. I found that the biggest hurdle in the task was simply giving myself permission to break the rules — permission that Lispector practically forced upon me. Subsequently, I began writing my work on a typewriter to listen to the rhythm of my writing and the punctuation utilised. I began reading each chapter back to myself outloud, and even read it out to friends. I found that the common feedback was that my work, when read aloud, becomes much more powerful and its meaning becomes much clearer. Verbal reading feedback played an especially huge part in writing Chapter Three, "Prayer to the Moon (do not answer)", which is largely abstract, mystical and deeply emotional. It is a meditation with a rhythm of discordance that is, when read aloud, completely harmonious. Both HOTS and "Kur Semangat!" write in this method to catch glimpses of the truth embedded in tangents and questions, in what is missing and what is unsaid, which can only be achieved by flouting traditional sentence structures.

Secondly, before reading Lispector's work, I was limited to a simple first person perspective. I found this extremely difficult, especially since the emotional core of my work is so close to the site of the wound, and the living nature of magic and possession did not seem to fit into that framework. I needed narrative distance

at times, a multiplicity of meaning, and a flexible “I”. HOTS veers from first person to second person and third person with ease, and I tried to do the same in “Kur Semangat”, though from a different framework of understanding. Furthermore, the character of Madame Carlotta the fortuneteller was especially intriguing to me. She appears in the text suddenly and plays a key part in helping Macabea realise that she is miserable before disappearing from the text. In discussing HOTS with my supervisor, we questioned whether Madame Carlotta was a self-insert character of Lispector, making her presence known in the narrative in subtle ways. The idea of doing something similar fascinated me, and inspired the last chapter, “Fortunetelling”. The fortuneteller in “Kur Semangat!” represents something similar. It closes the book by returning it to the start, foretelling the events in the novel and closing the final circle.

5 Conclusion

Writing “Kur Semangat!” was a challenging experience. It was rife with unpredictable interruptions, such as the coronavirus pandemic, which prevented me from going to Malaysia and experiencing village life and real-life practices of Malay magic. This greatly altered the plot of my novel; I decided to cut out an entire storyline where the protagonist is supposed to visit her father in a Malay kampung. Instead, I embraced writing a “pandemic piece”, in which I was trapped in my home similar to how the protagonist is trapped in hers. I had to move back into my mother’s home due an increase in rent prices, which brought me closer to the site of the wound and shifted my relation to my trauma and memory. I also lost my original supervisor, and had to throw out thousands of words of poetry to accommodate a more traditional fiction prose. Essentially, my masters program was a series of challenges that I tried my best to fuel my work in other ways, but I do experience regret in what might have been had things turned out differently.

However, I learnt more about myself and my writing than I ever had before, and it was thereby a richly rewarding process. In the future, I hope to further hone my craft and write something of greater breadth. I would also like to revisit and rework “Kur Semangat!” with more distance and a better understanding of craft. For now, I hope that “Kur Semangat!” screams with an unapologetic voice and identity and speaks to a narrative of grief and trauma that escapes the cycles of inheritance so many experience and carry with them today. It is the most painful and important work I have ever produced.

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