ALREADY / NOT YET

After 16 November 2020

I learned that the pantoum came from us. The pantun, a Malay verse form, is broken into two: the pembayang (hint) and the maksud (meaning), which reveals the poem's true significance. Connection can be found between the lines, the repeated words, the echoes that recur throughout.

From us, our history. And you, mak, the only connection I have left.

-

1

Do you remember my first word? I ask. No, you reply. We are communicating over WhatsApp. I have learned to deflect your curt responses, to ignore the space between what is said and unsaid, to react by choosing my words carefully. Not that you would notice. You are a chorus of capital letters and triple exclamation marks, as though to be understood requires emphasis, not empathy. You change the subject. Our conversation becomes one-sided—this screen, this distance between us, the only way we can keep in touch now.

Inside the womb, touch is the first sense to form; receptors begin to develop at around eight weeks. The body's largest sensory organ, the skin starts to take shape, fingerprints become permanent by nineteen weeks, a signature written in ridges of tissue. After thirty weeks, a full range of sensations, including pain, can be appreciated in every part—perhaps this is why we try to find the easiest way out. Not without risk: in 1988, your 34-year-old body was torn, my head distorted by delivery, our first moments together, made less traumatic through skin-to-skin contact. The wounds heal, the soft skull hardens. How long does it take to forget?

The last time we saw each other, I cooked a ready meal from frozen, which we shared, in silence, while watching the television on opposite sides of the room. You said you would be afraid to travel back so late, you told me I always leave things too late. You live in a house of glass, but never wonder who might be looking in. I booked my Uber, promised to see you soon. You said not to worry. Inside the car, I watched you, a single figure framed by the floor-to-ceiling window, how small you seemed, watched you become smaller and smaller, as I moved further and further away.

To think, my entire hand could only hold your little finger. Your face, out of focus, your body only recognisable to me by its smell and the sound that still resonates from within. You did not need to raise your voice to tell me who you were. You are what comes before your sentences; I am what follows.

A week before Christmas Eve, my brother's birthday, you told us both not to come home. You said we hadn't bothered before, so why bother now, why is this year different?

Some memories are just images. They exist before language, before I knew how to fit the words together, how to form some kind of meaning. I am told this is why I cannot describe certain feelings. One in particular

stands out: the light flickering through a revolving door, I look for you, your voice—there is no sound, though I sense that someone is screaming. My body plunged in water. Like ice on scalded skin.

In numerology, 2020 is a 4 Universal Year, because 2 + 0 + 2 + 0 = 4. It was predicted to be a year of stability, of practicality and hard work. I did not know the meaning of these words—though you gave up your life trying to teach them to me—until now. It is only when things break that we realise how much we need to hold the pieces together. How many times have you told me that you planned your pregnancies perfectly? I was born, just two weeks before my father retired. My father, who was always there.

Not that you were absent. Soon after recovering from me breaking out of your body, you broke it again. You worked nights, long shifts on your feet, letting other women lean their weight on yours. You cut your hair, your precisely tonged curls, to have more time to feed me. Just brush, you'd say, no fuss. You snacked on sunflower seeds in the car between home visits, always on call, always hungry. At the dinner table, the work still with you, my father would listen to your stories of blood and screams and birthing pools turning brown. You slept when you could, never without interruption. When I cried, it was for you. Breasts sore, back aching. Is this what a woman must become?

What's the point? you asked. The computer camera angled upwards, we could only see the top of your head, your white roots, moving in and out of view. You were wiping down the kitchen surfaces, wiping the plastic wrap around each packet of fruit, pineapple, mango, before placing it in the fridge. What do you mean? my brother asked. The point is we want to see you—It isn't safe, you interrupted—and maybe we regret not seeing you, and dad, before… Oh, yeah? you responded to his heavy silence. Well, too late. You don't have to say that, I said, like we don't already know.

Your mother had nine children, you were number five, with four siblings on either side. Your father's heart broke, for the first time, when you were sixteen. You quit school, instead you made money, which your mother hid for you under her mattress. With each paycheck, you gave your father a chance, your mother more to live. But the pound was stronger than the dollar, and you believed you could be a bridge. You grew up in between, little sister, big sister, half Malay, half Chinese, your childhood a crescendo to your country's independence, your language a hybrid, but everything you are: Singlish. You left in 1976. Your father's heart broke in 1978, for the last time. You were over 10,000km away, working in London, imagined filling the space under your mattress, so you could go home. Ten years later, you were still here, rocking me to sleep.

Travellers from the United Kingdom have been banned from entering over forty countries, including Singapore. You are alone for the first time in four decades. I wish there was a way to make you see: I feel it too. Cut off, untethered, which could mean free—but somehow means the opposite. Stay home, they say on the news. But where is home, if your home doesn't want you?

Another image: your back to me. What did I do wrong? I came home from the hospital in Mickey Mouse pyjamas, my old clothes cut into pieces, pulled from my flesh, you couldn't watch, the dark skin left crinkled and bleached, changing the topography of my two-year-old chest. This is the burn that no one in my family can name. You would later call it my fault, you told me to wait, I didn't listen, and anyway, the scar would fade. It doesn't—how many men have since kissed the strange whiteness at the centre of my breasts?—but I understand. You were telling me you were sorry, you wanted to take the pain away.

On that morning, the sun still rising, I stood by your bed. You told my father to hold my hand. He squeezed, until I felt it too, hot and tense, his pain burning into my palm. I'm here, I said. It will be OK, I lied. I had no idea what I was doing. I held on tight. You moved the wet towel in soft strokes down his back. Isn't that nice? you said. You moved the wet towel between his legs. Isn't that better? Your presence comforting,

your voice soothing. With a sigh, his hand loosened, his head relaxed into my lap. OK, you looked at me, let's turn him over. I nodded, nervous. We roll him, you said, OK? I tried not to look scared. You were like water, your hands doing the hard work for him, you did everything. All I had to do was hold on.

-

2

No, you reply. You highlight this one-word answer with an image, an emoji, one finger pointing up in response to my question: Do you remember my first word? You tell me my first word was learned from you, the image of your finger pointing up, trembling: No. No. No. I would reach for a glass, a flower, something breakable, something I shouldn't touch—but first look to you. I would recreate the image, repeat the word. You didn't have to tell me twice.

There is a photograph of me with my father in the back garden of the first house you bought together. You knew a family needed a family home. You didn't know about London council estates, or why such a thing would make the house so affordable. It was a fairy tale, from another time, to have a house with its own front door, its own garden. Even now, thirty years later, I have been dreaming of these things, of somewhere with outside space. In the picture, we are surrounded by my father's favourite flower: the rose, a symbol of love, which, when faded, must be removed to allow new buds to grow. This is called deadheading, a practical word: cut off the dying parts, keep what's left alive.

In December, you asked me to take your photo over FaceTime. A strange situation to be so far away, and yet see you so clearly. You, who taught me once, did not know what to do, I had to guide you. I tried, but you kept speaking over me. You waited all morning for me to call. You woke up early, draped a white bedsheet over the doorframe, created a tower of kitchen stools and Tupperware boxes, placed your laptop at eye level. And waited. All morning, you said a second time. You have been worrying about so many things. The Photo-Me booth at your nearest Tube station. The support bubble that would allow me to see you. The six months left on your passport. Nothing is certain, you reminded me. In December, cases in our country rise, anti-Asian hate spreads, a 15-year-old British boy denies responsibility, the image of the Singaporean student's swollen, purpled eye resurfaces. You always told me to prepare for the worst.

My father did not know how to use a computer, but he did know how to use a pen. At school, I was first taught to write in pencil—a much easier thing to hold and control, more forgiving, with fewer smudges, mistakes can be erased like magic. You wanted me to be the first in my year to put ideas down in ink. So, my father showed me: the connections between characters, when to lift, when to let the words flow. Under the British Empire, he was told professional correspondence required cursive—the fair hand, to my father, a lost man of letters, the police detective turned postal executive, put complex thoughts in motion—the term derived from Latin currere, meaning to run. And between the lines, the joins that hold all letters together, ran the minds of many worlds: Arabic, Bengali, Greek, Roman… Following his lead, I copied these old ways with words, took my father's old fountain pen to school. What happened? my teacher asked. I had changed too much of the little I should know. As if his history wasn't my own.

I have been writing your emails for you. A religious exchange, you send me two hands locked in prayer—read and approved—which could also mean thank you, a show of your appreciation. After all, you put LOL at the end of text messages, not to laugh, but to send lots of love, as I help you tick off your to-do list. This is how you cope. One thing ends, then on to the next thing.

My father knelt before you on the bathroom floor, murmuring alhamdullilah, as you cut my brother's umbilical cord yourself. He was born two weeks early, in 1992, Year of the Monkey—still, you acted like it was deliberate, you knew what you were doing, your hospital bag by your side. When it happens, it happens, you would later tell us, like your god played no part, you recreated the scissor action with your fingers, crouching, putting your hands below, ready to catch the life that came from you once again.

On Christmas Eve, I arranged to meet my brother at his new house share in Hackney. We both wore masks, we could be mistaken for the same person, I thought, with the same eyes. I nudged his arm with my elbow. Happy birthday. Thanks, he elbowed me back. We walked down Northwold Road, bought two takeaway coffees, on our way to the park. It's strange to see it like this, I said, as we passed by The Crooked Billet, lights off, windows boarded. Yeah, his eyes looked down, he sighed. Everything empty. As a gift, I had printed an old photo of our father, from his old life in Singapore: the black-and-white image of a man, around the same age as my brother now, with the same eyes. Encouraged, my brother showed you the photo over video call. You looked, saw me sat beside him, asked if this was what we called social distancing.

You always called my brother a mother's boy—as a child, he would cling to you—though the name chosen for him offered a more independent proposition: Arabic for honourable one, nobleman or, in my father's words, a prince. As the firstborn, you would hold me up as an example (I did as I was told, as good girls should) and set an almost radical one yourself; still, I felt secondary. You were busy, my father said you worked so hard. You were angry, my father said to give you space. You were exhausted, my father said to let you rest. I knew my place. You taught me that: your son is your son until he takes a wife, your daughter is your daughter for all of her life.

For all of my life, I have been preoccupied by the need to make a place my own. A room with the door shut. A blank page. A space before the start of a sentence. What if I could be the call, not the response, say to you, this is my place, perform a balas pantun—but would I wait for an answer, a reward or a punishment? In your language, one word can mean so many things. Door closed, you never knocked, you told me to keep it open.

The internet arrived in 2001. We had moved to a new house, exchanged council land for a private estate, two bedrooms for more rooms than we needed—and yet, my brother and I would soon outgrow it. You asked your friend's husband to set up the computer, which you wanted your children to use for homework. We played Disney games, browsed the Encarta CD-ROM. You were so grateful to your friend's husband for his help. You wanted my brother to be a man—how else would he learn? Not from my father, you said, who stayed in the kitchen, reading his newspaper, came upstairs only to ask if anybody wanted a drink. You would tell us this story, so many times, ask: Why was he not interested? I would wonder why it mattered, what a man was supposed to be.

In 2016, a 9 Universal Year, a year of endings, you told me: If it's love, it will work out. I hated you for it. And yet, I said: We'll see. The world was full of men that said things they didn't mean. Men that told my father to go back where he came from, told my father to vote to take back control. In 2016, the lies won. I'd left Los Angeles, changed my flight via New York, returned to London on Independence Day. You had leant me the money, with interest: Why did I look so sad? I never told you the whole story. How could I? You, who still believed in love, but had never talked to me like you did. His rose, not your favourite flower. His poetry, not the words you wanted. His offers of help, not equal to your hard work. Why do we stay? For two years, I kept going back to Los Angeles, back to the man who lied to me, kept saying: We'll see.

I remember reading the newspaper aloud to you, audience to my Moira Stuart, taking my time to shuffle the sheets between stories, my mouth pronouncing every word, moving in a different way to your mouth. My news desk: the glass coffee table I broke, years later, dropping a knife from the plate I tried to hand to

you. Between us, its smoked reflection shattered, you screamed seven years bad luck, before telling my brother to pick up the knife. Even more bad luck, you shook your head. My brother stepped into the mess for me. Because, you said, lowering yourself into the chaos, only someone else can break the curse.

Like the day you let me drive you to the hospital, let my father lean his weight on yours, and I realised what you had been hiding. You had been shielding since February, turned the spare room of your two-bed flat into a decontamination zone, told my father not to cross its borders. For six months, he stayed within the boundaries of his bed, only venturing to the living room when pushed, unsure why he had to hide, what he was allowed to do, where he would be safe. You would send us photos: my father with a tray of tea and toast, a bowl of Weetabix, tell us: There, he's eating. Withhold the days when he wasn't. We couldn't read the blood results, but you could, you said to wait for the MRI scan. One step at a time. A week later, the doctor visited you and my father at your flat. I told you to video call, leave the laptop open, let my brother and I listen, ask the question for you: How long do we have left?

Que sera, sera. A hopeful song you sang to me since birth. A hopeless cycle of mothers and daughters, of a future that is not ours, that we cannot see. And yet, you still tell me what I need to get there. It has been almost twenty years since you got down on your hands and knees, to collect the broken pieces, the shards of glass, as I said I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. Which was precisely the problem. I'm sorry, I whispered. Over and over again.

My brother makes such beautiful music, he never needed a grade to prove he had a gift. But what are we in this world without a piece of paper? A certificate, a passport, a story written down—even then, so much is lost in between. For almost twenty years, we lived in the same house, then you moved to the flat numbered 47. When it came to downsizing, you knew how to be practical. Gone: my father's vintage stereo, his sixties records, still in pristine condition. Sold: my upright piano, where my father let his fingers free when no one was watching. My brother still remembers the notes. What do you hold on to? Just before Christmas Eve, my brother's birthday, you changed your WhatsApp profile to a photo of my father. You had your reasons, you told us both not to come home.

On that morning, the room still dark, I stood by your bed. My father clutched the discoloured Tupperware box to his cracked lips, dark bile dripping down his cheeks. His hands, disappearing, he could barely lift the container to his face. You ran over. I'm sorry, I said. I was too late. I had let my father catch his vomit without my help, he wouldn't let me, I stood there helpless. It's OK, you said, took the Tupperware, brought it closer to him. You were prepared, you held the damp facecloth to his forehead first, cool, calming, his dry skin scorched with the fever, then wiped away the liquid already congealing under his chin. Why does it smell so sweet? I asked. You said nothing. Held his body up, rubbed his back. My father pointed towards the ceiling, his finger trembling. You whispered: What is it, bapak, can you see the angel? I watched as my father's mouth opened, forming words without a sound. La ilaha illallah. He will meet his maker, you told me, in the end, we all go back to where we came from.

-

3

No, my father says. Wednesday 4 November 2020. The camera angled upwards, I can only see the top of his head, your white roots, moving in and out of view. To be understood requires emphasis. You try again: She wants to come home, she wants to see her bapak. No, my father says again. Stay there, stay safe, don't get sick, inshallah. In the space between what is said and unsaid, you look to me.

When your mother was dying, you were over 10,000km away, working in London, worrying about so many things. My father, my brother, me. My father tried to hold you, told you he was sorry. He wanted to take the pain away. Only someone else can break the curse. I booked the flight for you, so you could go home.

As the world waits for a new US President, we wait for a diagnosis. Thursday 5 November 2020. Ascites. Fluid in the stomach. Of unknown origin. Words the doctors use when asked where did it come from, where did it start? To know would involve more tests, putting my father's 92-year-old body through more than it can take. Even the name of the condition is hard to say out loud. Evil at its root: a malignancy, something that spreads uncontrollably. So, when my father confuses his disease with another beginning with C, why are we surprised? Only you can be a bridge, beautiful and direct, your voice soothing: Bapak, cancer is not covid.

Like your mother, my father was adopted. Their origin stories replaced with pieces of paper, certificates stamped British Subject, new identities written in cursive. Running their island, men that said things they didn't mean, travellers from the United Kingdom.

Lockdown in London, UK. Sunday 8 November 2020. I drive through the dark, streets, everything empty. The spare room, once your decontamination zone, becomes my isolation chamber. Together, we agree that my brother will come, take my place, as soon it is safe for me to enter the rest of the house. You send off my PCR test, we wait for the results.

You always told me to prepare for the worst. I'm sorry it took me so long to listen. I did not know the meaning of these words until now. You, who still believed: If it's love, it will work out.

My test comes back: Negative. Wednesday 11 November 2020. Finally, the chance to hug you, to hold my father's hand. It has been eight months. As I kneel by his bedside, he tells me stories I have never heard before, of a family from Bombay, cotton traders and sailing ships, an uncle who raised cattle. Lembu, he says. The Malay word for cow. Susu lembu, what is that? my father asks. I play along: Cow's milk. And susu kambing, what is that? my father asks. I say I don't know. Lamb, he said. Language his favourite pastime. Will he ever taste these things again?

Smoky charcoal mixed with sweet-salty kecap manis. Satay sticks in the back garden. The second house you bought together. It's a photograph. You, smiling, holding my brother close.

My brother calls me on FaceTime, keeps me company, tries to be brave. Thursday 12 November 2020. I take my laptop to the bedroom, turn the screen towards my father. Beyond the distance between us, in front of his screen, my brother waves. My father, his hands already disappearing, waves back. My brother picks up his guitar, makes such beautiful music. My father murmurs alhamdullilah, tells my brother he has a gift. I'll be home soon, he says. I hope we still have time.

Another image: the last time the four of us were together. Before we knew about the cancer, before covid.

Friday 13 November 2020. The district nurse arrives, distributes the paperwork, the medicines, the sharps box, so many contaminated things across your bed. My father shuffles his bare feet, as far away as possible, unsure where is safe. Levomepromazine is plunged into his stomach, he settles. The district nurse leaves.

You ask: What's the point? For six months, you have shielded him, put yourself at risk. You rearrange the bedsheets, wipe the surfaces, organise the box of medicines, store the sharps box, let my father sleep.

My father always listened to your stories. A blank page. A space before the start of a sentence.

Saturday 14 November 2020. The room dark. The sound of your voice, hushed, urgent. My father coughing, retching. I stand in the doorway. You hold the Tupperware box for him. Watery, dark red. You help his hand find the tissue. He tries to wipe his mouth, keeps missing his lips. I want my coat and my trousers, he says. Why? you ask. I want to go to the road, over there, he points. There is no road, but you ask if you can go with him. No, my father says. No.

First word. Call and response. I am what follows.

Sunday 15 November 2020. My father has been restless for hours. He is staring at the ceiling, pointing, eyes wide, mouth open, trying to talk, the muscles in his mouth losing their hold on the words, his throat dry. You are in the bathroom, preparing, running water, cold, facecloth. I whisper my name, a type of rose, his favourite flower. Eyes turn to me. Kiss on my hand. Keep what's left alive.

Cut off, untethered.

Monday 16 November 2020. My brother stands by the bed, our father's body. He kisses the forehead, now cold, then falls to the floor. I should have been here, I'm sorry, he whispers. Over and over again. I tell him it is not his fault. We waited, we did everything we could, to stay safe. But now, I ignore all of it—the distance, the year of practicality and hard work, the image of a finger, pointing up, trembling. I reach out to something breakable, something I shouldn't touch. I hold my brother close. Our first fatherless moments together, made less traumatic through skin-to-skin contact.

-

4

I do not remember my father's last words. Instead, I remember facts like levomepromazine in the stomach, or that touch is one of the last senses we lose when dying. Strange how quickly the mind forgets, how the body tries to find the easiest way out of pain.

I remember, ten years ago, the four of us, sat around the glass coffee table. You said: Everything is sorted. You had already prepared the money for our father's funeral, for your funeral, filed what we would need: your bank details, your marriage certificate, your passports, your will. When I started crying, you asked me why, you said not to worry. It was a 3 Universal Year, a year of heightened emotions—and I didn't want to think about it. You were not dead yet. I didn't understand what you needed, but my brother did. He sighed, stepped into the mess for me. It's OK, mum, he said. We'll be OK.

I remember that four is a word that sounds like death in many languages, including your mother's. So, when my father fell in love with the flat numbered 47, you were at first unsure. There is a word for this fear:

tetraphobia. A different word to thanatophobia. But maybe, you said to me, it would be OK. Because seven is lucky, sometimes. Now, I see, it was a compromise you could accept, for him.

But where is home, mak, if your home doesn't want you? My language has so many rules, a written history. Your language belongs in the present. In Malay, verbs are not transformed into past or future tense; instead, time is denoted by indicators such as sudah/belum (already/not yet). Sudah makan? you would ask. Belum makan, I would reply, having not yet eaten, knowing you would feed me either way. The fridge always full, in anticipation. Like a family, prepared for the worst. What if I put these ideas down in ink, what if I could be a bridge?

On that morning, the room filled with light, I called to you. Your hospital bag by your side, you checked for the signs—breath, eyes, pulse. No response. Only an hour before, I helped you bathe him, let him lean his weight on me, as you dressed him in his favourite pyjamas. You pressed his signature cologne onto his sunken cheeks, a symbol of love. My father raised his eyebrows, exhaled. You did not need to raise your voice to tell me who you were.