

Interpreter of

Winds

FAIROZ AHMAD

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Interpreter of Winds

1

That afternoon, under the light, a spider that had just hatched scurried up the table. It stood on tiptoe and waited. Moments later, it stretched its abdomen, producing fine threads of silk. The spider allowed the column of rising air to warm its threads, caressing and delicately undressing them. I watched all of this silently, but did nothing. The spiderling then flew from the table, its threads propelled by the soft updraft. The wind brought it places. Sometimes to the top of the world. In 1924, a British expedition team discovered a spider on the crown of the Himalayas. That was what he liked to tell me.

“The histories of our world,” he once told me, “are shaped by winds. The history of Egypt was altered by it. Let me tell you the history. It begins with a king who lived in a Palace of Glass.”

It was a story told many, many days ago, before he entered his deep sleep, hence carrying with him the fragmented histories of the world into his dreams. Sometimes, I wish he would tell me less of his histories but more of the role that faith plays in them.

Since then, I had roamed the edges of the marketplace every morning, finding items to bring back to moisten his lips, so that even in dreams, he would remain nourished to complete his histories. But ever since he had remained still while time moved on, my memories of him had begun to diminish. As his beard began to overrun the uneven landscape of his face, I started to forget how he looked like, save for those pink lips which I moistened every morning, and whose slight quiver at the wetness of my touch told me he still lived.

There is a history, they say, which is recited only upon the impending loss of a loved one. They say it is a story of love decorated with the trappings of a scholar obsessed with his scholarship. Some say it is a story of scholarship. An obsession with scholarship decorated with the trappings of a love story. Listen.

2

The History of Amir Hamzah

This is a history they used to tell in the Malay lands, when there were still kingdoms and when there were still kings. There once lived a scribe in the Kingdom of Darul Ta'zim who was considered to be the greatest penman the Malay world had ever seen. His name was Amir Hamzah and he was the royal scribe for the King of the Abode of Dignity.

It was not long after his appointment as royal scribe that the kingdom declined and became a British colony. It declined not because of trade, for its trade with both the Old and New Worlds were flourishing. It declined not for want of military

might, for no war broke out and no blood was shed. It declined because it had allowed itself to be mapped by the British.

One day, the new Lord of the Kingdom summoned Amir Hamzah and said, "Her Majesty has sent an expedition team to the Malay World to collect curiosities from the colonised lands. In the ship from which the expedition sailed in, I have seen the *orang utan* from Borneo, a man running *amok* from Pahang and the *Singapore Stone*." I, however, would like to give Her Majesty something less vulgar, something that would suit her more refined tastes."

"And what do you envision this gift to be, Lord Campbell?" Amir Hamzah asked.

"In the Abode of Dignity, there exists the greatest Malay manuscript ever written. It is said to be four hundred years old. Each page is gold plated and each character etched on that page is made from ink ground from the bones of the nightingale. I, however, have made a promise to your former King that I will protect this manuscript. As such, I would like you to replicate the *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiah*. This copy will be first presented to Her Majesty the Queen, and then displayed at the British Museum."

Thus, Amir Hamzah took on the arduous task of replicating the *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiah*. Many weeks later, his good friend, Abu Bakar, saw Amir Hamzah sitting listlessly by his desk. "O Amir Hamzah, why do you look sullen? Why are you not

completing the task given to you by Lord Campbell?” his friend enquired.

“My dear friend, I have fallen in love. I have fallen in love with the princess. While she is no longer the royalty she once was, she still demands of royal things from me. She demands that my expression of love be known and yet not known outside this Kingdom, and that once known, it will have to live forever.”

“My beloved friend, she has set upon you a most perplexing and impossible of tasks. It is wiser that you focus instead on the task at hand, upon which you will be rewarded handsomely. Once you are rich, you will no longer have to trouble yourself with such things.”

Amir Hamzah took one long look at the manuscript and said, “You are right, friend. From today, I will work day and night to finish this manuscript. It will consume me, just as how the poetry of Majnun consumed Leila.”

Upon its presentation in London, the Queen rejoiced at the beauty of the manuscript although no one in her court understood its language. After the Queen lost interest, it was given away to the British Museum. Visitors gaped at how the gold edged pages glittered under the ray of the morning sun, the symmetry of the lines and how the ink echoed the texture of the paper. But the public, too, soon lost interest in the manuscript.

Many years passed by. One day, a returning British official from the Malay land, who had

immersed himself in the most archaic languages of the Malay world, noticed something peculiar in the text during a visit to the museum. The introduction to the text bears the following words:

“I, Amir Hamzah, have been tasked by Lord Campbell on 17 March 1824 to replicate the manuscript known as the *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiah*. I have understood that this exercise is merely to satisfy the curiosity and whims of the Queen of the land of the English, whom I have not, and will never meet. It has also occurred to me that if this manuscript is to be displayed in the museum as a curiosity, then it does not matter what is written in it. I have therefore decided to pen an ode to my love, for she posed to me the most challenging of tasks: ‘To make my love to her both known and yet not known beyond the shores of the Malay world, and that once known, my love will have to live forever.’ One day, dear readers, and many years from now, you will learn our language and acquire the ability to interpret our texts, just as you have learnt to map us. One day, when that happens, you will read my ode and pry the secrets of my heart. And the secrets, once out, shall live forever, protected and encased in the everlasting memoriam of knowledge you call the museum.”

3

Seventy-seven days after he fell asleep, I met a camel at the market place who told me, “All of us have ruminated long and

Acknowledgments

Writing is an act of solitude and this inevitably means you need to be given the license by your better half to spend many hours of your life, and over long periods of time, in your quiet space, and be given the freedom to be lost in thought. Gloria Arlini granted this license, which was miraculously and thankfully, regularly extended.

A work produced in solitude eventually have to face reality. A number of people have graciously and generously taken time away from their very busy schedule to provide comments and improvements—a metaphor stretched too far, a mistake here and there, a sudden change in pace, and so on. Nur Safiah Alias, Muhammad Farouq Othman, Chen Yuxuan and Intan Wierma Putri; they all have helped make this work better. Finawly, a special thank you to AB. Widyanta from Universitas Gadjah Mada, for correcting my usage of Javanese terms in *The Smell of Jasmine after the Rain*.

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About The Author

Fairoz Ahmad is the co-founder of the award-winning social enterprise, Chapter W. Based in Jogjakarta, the organisation works at the intersection of women, technology and social impact. He is an alumni of the US State Department's International Visitor Leadership Programme, the premier exchange programme for emerging leaders in the social sector, and a recipient of the National University of Singapore's Outstanding Young Alumni award.

Fairoz graduated from the University of Oxford with a Master of Public Policy (Distinction) under the Chevening-Oxford scholarship. He currently lectures in Temasek Polytechnic on research methods, community development and sociology. Prior to this, he managed the World Bank and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation portfolios in the Singapore Foreign Service and the Ministry of Finance.

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orbit is a setting off and a returning home; reads that seem small in size but will knock your socks off in the span of a train ride. Books that are tiny portals to meaning— for yourself, and to all around us.

Often an unnoticed caress on our faces, winds are voiceless and formless. How do we interpret them? What mysteries can we find in the whispers of winds? From a Dutch occupied Java where a witch was murdered, a dog who desires to be a Muslim, to a day in which all sense of music is lost, the mundane is aflame with the uncanny.

In these stories, Fairoz Ahmad invites you to take a closer look at ordinary objects, as they take on a life of their own and spin gossamer threads. This book is a celebration of the little charms and enchantments of our universes amidst struggles and eventual helplessness.

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