

Aduni¹

Wong Phui Nam²
Malaysia

CHARACTERS

Aduni
Kai Jin, *husband of Aduni*
Kiran, *the Raja*
Kuntum, *nurse to Aduni and Kai Jin's children*
Hamzah, *tutor to Aduni and Kai Jin's children*
Head Servant
Bystanders 1, 2, and 3
Two Boys, *Aduni and Kai Jin's children*
Crowd

PLACE: Merang, a small kingdom on the northern edge of Nusantara.

TIME: After the establishment of Islam in the region.

SCENE I

A courtyard in front of Kai Jin's house. At the centre of the front face of the house is a very wide door with two leaves which open outwards. High on each side of the door, there is an open window protected by bars carved from heavy solid wood. At the right of the front face of the house under one of the windows, there is a long wooden receptacle for playing congkak. The nurse, Nek Kuntum, is seen standing

¹ "Aduni" is an adaptation of Euripedes' *Medea*

² Wong Phui Nam is a Malaysian poet and playwright who has published five volumes of poetry and one play. His poetry collections are: *How the Hills Are Distant* (1968), *Remembering Grandma and Other Rumours* (1989), *Ways of Exile* (1993), *Against the Wilderness* (2000) and *An Acre of Day's Glass* (2006). His first play, *Anike*, was published by Maya Press, Kuala Lumpur, in 2006.

near the front door. She talks to herself as she watches the children under her charge at play.

MUSIC: *Traditional Malay instrumental music.*

Kuntum (*Sighing*)

My poor boys. Undisturbed still in the bliss
of childhood, you run about here so happily.
You don't know it yet, but your mother
has turned on you, you poor things. She looks
at you and, in her madness, sees you not as her own.
She is the hawk that sees her brood
of blind, bald chicks as strange hatchlings
secreted into her nest and will peck their eyes out
before she kills them. In her insane rage
against your father, she eyes you, angry and ill with hate
and will do you such harm as I dare not think about.

She pauses and sighs again.

If only he had not stayed too long at Ayudhya
when his mission for Tuanku at the Siamese court
was done, lingered too long with that migrant family
of strange descent, some say of scattered survivors
from that rumoured city that died deep in Cambodia.

The tutor, Sidi Hamzah, enters the courtyard by a door on the left as she speaks. He makes her start. As they talk, the boys continue to play. They run about the yard as they play. As is usual with children at play, they laugh and shout happily. Chasing each other, they occasionally disappear round the side of the house and reappear again. Towards the end of the conversation between the nurse and the tutor, the children settle down to play congkak.

Hamzah

Why are you standing there,
all by yourself, staring and talking at the empty air?

Kuntum

Look at these children, Tuan. Kasihan.
They chase each other, laughing, and shouting,
but already they are orphans, abandoned

by a father who, for them, might as well be dead.
 That Kai Jin, a Chinaman, a devout Buddhist –
 at least that was how he showed himself to all the world –
 he had to bring home that strange woman here.
 He now flies the nest and feathers down a new one
 with another, who, as far as he is concerned,
 must also be a thoroughly strange bird.
 He seems to have a taste for strange birds, that man.
 But this is a tame one – one who, I am sure,
 cannot claw him into the same passion as the wild one
 he caught in Ayudhya could. Yet this man's blood is cold.
 He sheds his forefathers' faith as easily
 as a snake its skin, and for what? He would,
 conveniently, be a Muslim like us and, by that,
 shed also his burden of these boys and their mother.

Hamzah

You know as well as I do, all this he has done
 that he may marry Laila. Tuanku needs good counsel.
 Without a son, who is better to give him advice
 if not a son-in-law, Chinaman or no Chinaman,
 as long as he is Muslim.

He looks at her closely.

But you do not look well, Nek.
 Some sick fear or worry seems to gnaw at your gut,
 sucking you dry beneath the skin. Your face shows it.
 I am sorry to say it, but your skin is a dead brown,
 and pallor like white dough is showing underneath.
 What is worrying you?

Kuntum

You do not know?
 Aduni is crazed at Kai Jin with jealousy and rage.
 How deeply does he believe in our faith?
 More likely he believes in his place at court.

Hamzah

Laila is no bad looking girl.

Kuntum

Tuan Sidi, listen.

I fear the way Aduni looks at her boys.
Tears soften her eyes, yet they are not quite
a mother's eyes. There is in them something fearsome,
something that stalks the deep hill country in Cambodia.
She means her children harm, Tuan.

Hamzah

Why such rage?

Men have been known to leave their wives before.

Kuntum

A woman of uncertain descent, maybe a Buddhist,
maybe a Hindu, maybe something else. Who knows?
Above all, she is a rejected, ill-used woman
and has no place here. To come here with Kai Jin,
she had breached all custom and observances
of her people. She shamed her father when she defied him
and took up with Kai Jin. As they fled Ayudhya,
she had Kai Jin's men go to the city's back streets
and its low dens to arrange for paid assassins
to kill her brothers when they came after the lovers
in murderous pursuit. For what she has done for Kai Jin,
Tuan, she has nowhere to go, no one to go back to.

Hamzah

It is true then. I was not sure when I heard it.
I overheard the elders this morning, as they came
from the balairongsri talking among themselves.
Tuanku means to have the boys and their mother
sent from here. I just could not understand why.
She is an embarrassment, it seems, and her boys...
Ah, I see, they are wild chicks in somebody's nest.
There was much shaking of grey heads among the lot
and sanctimonious protests at Tuanku's harsh intent.
Yet, I think no one spoke up in council with Tuanku.

Kuntum

Surely Kai Jin will appeal to Tuanku.

Hamzah

You think so?

You do not know ambitious men. Such men will go after whatever they lust for, forgetting even flesh and blood, and surely, a merely inconvenient wife. Do you expect him to risk annoying Tuanku, to risk being plucked from the nest he has so nicely feathered with Laila?

Kuntum

She moans and then speaks in a low voice.

Our boys are then truly lost. Like a female Cambodian tiger that would gnaw off a paw caught in a trapper's noose, she would, I am sure of it, do violence to her children to hurt herself to hurt Kai Jin and so, satisfy a desperate, twisted sense for some kind of revenge and free herself from the swarm of angry thoughts that eat into her in flesh and spirit, driving her, mad and sick with pain, to confine herself in her airless rooms. She really does not care if she hurts herself as long as she can hurt Kai Jin by it. To break Kai Jin, she will readily wring her children's necks or have their bellies slit.

Hamzah (*Alarmed*)

It is best then to keep from her what Tuanku intends. Keep quiet, and let us not breathe a word of this.

Kuntum

Oh, why? Why? That Kai Jin. He is much to blame.

Hamzah

What man will think he is to blame for worrying a little too much over his own welfare? Our Chinaman takes care of himself before everyone, including flesh and blood. Yet you cannot deny, what Kai Jin has achieved since he settled here no Chinaman ever would even dare dream.

The boys by this time have now sat down and are playing congkak.

Kuntum (*Urgently*)

Take the boys in then, Tuan. Keep them away from their mother. Cubs must be kept safely apart from their dam who would eat them. See how good and quiet they are at congkak. O my pretty ones.

She raises her voice and calls to them.

Boys, time to go in now. Go with Tuan Sidi, and keep away and do not disturb Mother for she is not well.

Aduni's voice is heard from within, the voice plangent and obviously distressed.

Aduni

See if I do not get even... you... you wretched man.
You touched off so much happiness in me.
Now you have to kill it. My misery sticks in me like a dead foetus to rotting tissues in my womb.
I can feel the corruption feed into my blood to poison my sleep and my every waking thought.
See if I will not sow your love nest full of fire ants of affliction.... See how you two, you and Laila, how you are going to embrace in your hive of fire.... Fire ants at the honey in your crotch....

Kuntum (*Thoroughly alarmed*)

Hurry now, go. Go in with your teacher.

Hamzah (*To the boys, who look frightened by now*)

Come, let us see how much of the *Hikayat* you remember from yesterday. Let us go in. Hurry.

The tutor takes the boys out by the door at the left to his quarters.

Lights down.

SCENE II

The outer court to Aduni's rooms. The court is enclosed by a high wall on two sides. The other two sides are front faces of rooms in the house. Two or three large pots of flowering plants are placed along the foot of the wall. There is a long bench at the corner formed by the two sides the wall. The nurse stands at the door to Aduni's room listening to her wailing and moaning inside. Aduni keeps up her wailing as she talks to herself.

Aduni

For you I shamed my father, I had street thugs
skewer the life out of both my brothers, for I thought
I would have life from you, that paradise
was at your feet. But you have made of my mind
a chamber for self-torment, stoking the flames
of my having night and day to see you entwined
in bed with Laila, bodies bound in tight coils together
like mating snakes. You feed my anguish
with seeing into your curtained sweat-stained bed
for your kissing and groping. This too hot imagining hurts.
I cannot kill it. You should be scorpions, you two,
and kill each other for me, when you lock fast each other
in your poisoned embrace between the sheets.

Kuntum (*Speaking loudly*)

Aduni, what is all this wailing and groaning,
all this talk of serpents and scorpions? Don't you know
you have badly frightened the children? I hope Sidi Hamzah
can keep their minds off what they heard just now.

A few moments later, Aduni enters the court, looking pale but composed.

Aduni

You have never been given nor have you ever
given yourself in marriage; nor have you, like me,
bought yourself a man. I paid for him, that Kai Jin,
with my brothers' blood and our father's grief.
Yet like women who bought with rich dowries
their husbands, I am, for that bargain, a mere body,
a mere possession of that man, an object of his whims,
to be used or to be discarded as it pleases him.
Only women who have ever been given in marriage

as sweet smelling flesh to pleasure a man,
as breeding bitch or sow to stock his house
with litters of blind and whimpering young will know.
I know what it also means to be a discarded thing.
Men have power to throw away the women they marry
like so many bits of chewed over sugar cane sucked dry.
Tell me, what can we women do? Can we discard
a man of whom we tire? Ah, but you cannot know.

Kuntum

I am old. I have lived too many years
not to know about such things. But all these thoughts
of Kai Jin in bed with Laila? These are useless thoughts.
They have nothing for you but pain. So, cleanse your mind
of them and save yourself. Think also of the boys.
There has to be something you can do to help them.

Aduni

You truly cannot understand me. How can you?

Kuntum

Shhhh! Tuanku is here.

Raja Kiran enters. He is wary and feels a little distaste for the woman he is about to confront. Inwardly, he is also a little angry, but his anger is controlled. Aduni rises to greet him by kissing his hand in the traditional Malay fashion. Kiran gestures to her to sit. The nurse bends down with one knee touching the ground, head bowed and palms placed together and touching the chin.

Kiran

I have to come myself
in person and alone to say what I need to say.

The nurse moves to leave, but Kiran gestures to her to stay. She makes herself inconspicuous in a corner. Kiran clears his throat to speak.

(Slowly and tentatively) As Kai Jin is no longer your husband
you have no place here, not near the istana,
not in the city where I cannot be seen to send you....

Aduni

I claim him still as husband.

Kiran

He cannot be
if he is not to shame his name of bin Abdullah.
You cannot be let free to live in the city,
for, if you move house among the people
they may wonder if I have in-laws living in their midst.

He begins to feel a little more confident about what he needs to say.

Besides, you will contaminate them with your ways.
I will not have you confuse my people
with your ungodly beliefs, your incoherent mix
of Hindu-Buddhist beliefs and tantric practices.
The harbour area, that warren of low dives
infested by foreigners and seamen of every sort
who come to port, since no one will know you there,
it is the only place where safely I can let you go,
but that is not where you will want to live.
Leave our city then....

Aduni

What crime have I committed
that I am to be treated thus. You will have Kai Jin
be relieved of me? That is why you will have me gone?

Kiran (*Firmly*)

I want you gone... By dawn to-morrow....

Aduni

My boys, they are children.
You will have them become vagrants too with me?

Kiran

No, listen Aduni. Kai Jin no doubt will be relieved
not to have them stay around as embarrassments,
inconvenient reminders of his former life.
I would let them go too if not for the advice
of the ulama that they enter with their father
into the faith. I cannot let people of the faith
go into the world unprotected.

He sees no more need to hold himself back.

I cannot risk
 having Kai Jin fall again into the web of spells
 you spin. I am sure you had his soul so entangled
 the first time he laid eyes on you he submitted
 to being mated, turned captive to you,
 his devouring female spider. No, Aduni,
 do you think I will let you make a janda
 of my Laila even before the freshness
 of her marriage bed wears off?

Aduni

So, Tuanku,
 you are afraid of me, a helpless woman with no kin,
 no home? Do I dare do anything to Laila, to you?

She pauses, checking herself for what she has just said. She changes to a conciliatory tone. She speaks in a low soft voice when she resumes speaking.

I am sorry Tuanku, forgive me, I have forgotten
 my place, for that is not how I should speak to you.
 If my practices offend you, I will keep them out of sight,
 out of the hearing of any who comes down from the istana.
 I will adapt....

She falls on her knees and feigns remorse.

I know I did some foolish things.
 I accept that I am not worthy as Laila is
 of Kai Jin's bed. I accept what I cannot change.
 I wish her all happiness with Kai Jin. I am content
 if I have a place here to live out my days in peace.
 I have nothing to gain if I make trouble here again.

Kiran

Let me be forthright. I felt uneasy coming here.
 I am not sure if, even now, you are not spinning your web
 to snare my unwary instincts. Yet, now you do not seem
 quite the woman born of stories brought back to me
 by the servants and others at court I don't know.

Perhaps even Kai Jin.... Well, God only knows.

Aduni

God knows I do know my place.

Kiran

God knows if you are hiding a cunning patience
or showing a genuine contrition. A man or woman angry
and shouting reveals their mind. But not you, Aduni,
I cannot guess at the kind of thoughts
you mask behind that face. No, no. No more words.
Just go.

Aduni remains on her knees and moves forward to clasp Kiran's legs.

Aduni

I beg you, I appeal to you as a father
who knows love for his child. In her name, let me stay
a while longer till I know where to go....

Kiran (*Pulling himself away*)

Stop wasting your breath. Just go.

Aduni

A man of faith, and you force me to go?
Just like this? For love and pity, let me stay –
only for one more day.

Kiran

Love, yes.

But you are a mortal danger to my child.
Because I love her, I cannot let you be anywhere
about her, in any place where coiled like a snake
beneath a warm stone or bathing in the darkness
of some hole from which you can suddenly strike out
at her, without warning, not even a low, faint hiss.
Pity? As defender of the faith, I surely cannot let
infidels like you, particularly a shaman, a witch,
to thrive and be a moral danger here to the faithful.

Still on her knees, Aduni feigns losing control after failing to touch Kiran's sympathy.

Aduni

O my father, my brothers! How dreadfully
 I have betrayed you. I have much need of you now,
 and I have no one else in the world to turn to.
 How I wish I can go home to you, to be with you.
 Oh, home... home.... How brightly the moon comes
 over the hills at home. How fragrant at that hour,
 the sun-scorched grasses....

Kiran

Enough, Aduni,
 of your regrets, of your put on sentimentality.
 Take them elsewhere with you, wherever you go.

Aduni

I will find a little comfort if I stay....

Kiran

Enough, I said.

He turns as if he is about to go. She quickly clings to him again in tears.

Aduni

Just one more thing, Tuanku. Please listen...
 just one more thing. I will lose my children
 in my going just as if death itself is taking me away.
 You are a parent. You know how grievous it is
 if you are to be torn away from your Laila,
 unable to see her, to comfort her in her tears,
 and not to have her present to you ever again
 from your own last day. Let me then have one last day,
 one day to hold my boys and cry with them,
 to tell them always to know their place
 and not to shame their mother, not to lay blame
 on her who leaves them not because she wants to.
 Grieving with my sons, what harm can I do you in a day?

Kiran (*Hesitating for some moments*)

I am a parent who must shield his child from harm,
 but I am no hard hearted man. Yet I feel almost foolish

to let your words touch me. I know I may well regret it,
(*after a long pause*) but you may have one more day, and
/then you must go.

If I ever find you lingering here or in the city,
I will have my men beat you away like a stray.

He frees himself from her and leaves muttering to himself.

I know I will regret this. But it is only
for one day. I can almost sense her thoughts.
No, absurd.... I am not being watched as prey....
Anyway, it is only to be for one more day.

The nurse comes out of her corner and tries to comfort Aduni.

Kuntum

My poor Aduni, no woman has ever been so despised
as you, Nak. As a woman, I grieve for you
and will think often of you after you are gone.
I will wander in my thoughts with you, when you go
hungry and friendless through jungles, into hills,
from hulu to hilir, looking for a simple people
who will take you in, people who will not bother much
about who believes in a true god and who does not.
I love your children as my own and will be a mother
to these poor orphans when you are not here for them.
You may set your mind at rest on this, Aduni.

*Aduni looks around to the left and right as if to make sure no one is nearby to hear
her as she whispers vehemently to the nurse.*

Aduni

Do you think I coiled my arms around that old fool's legs,
tying his knobs for knees tighter together
than jungle vines and crying all the while
because I hate to leave this place?

Kuntum

Sabar, Aduni, sabar.

You must not talk of Tuanku in this way. If you believe,
accept this as God's way of testing you.

Aduni

My heart has died to Kai Jin; I am become indifferent,
 not caring where I eat, where I sleep, even where I die.
 He has quite put out in me that life he lit
 when first I saw him Now I am just a used thing to him.
 Even a beast knows pain. You will see, Nek,
 even in *one* day, I will have time enough to return him
 and the other two such grief and pain they cause me –
 every tahl, every cupak, all in full measure –
 they will howl to heaven for relief to their bones
 from the sulphurous fires I will put in their marrow.
 You just wait and see, Nek, just wait and see.

Lights down.

SCENE III

Aduni's inner rooms. She is busy making preparations for her apparent departure. Kai Jin enters, striding in looking angry and startling Aduni who straightens up trying to hide whatever she is doing and stares at him.

Kai Jin

You... You... You have gone too far this time,
 breaking into Laila's rooms like a crazed musang,
 squalling and spitting, lunging and clawing at her.
 If not for the maids...

He advances on her and raises his hand.

I could kill you now.

She springs up at him not intimidated and speaking loudly.

Aduni

Kill me now! Kill me! Kill me, you ungrateful wretch.
 Did I save you from my brothers' hands,
 have them both killed that you may kill me now?
 I would have fought my own brothers for you,
 thrust myself before their knives to save your worthless pelt.

Kai Jin

Taken aback by her savage reaction, holds off.

You are lucky Tuanku has not heard of this.
He is a gentle, courteous man, but where his daughter
is concerned, he can be more barbaric, more murderous
than any lanun that has ever preyed in these waters
on Arab or Chinese when he metes out punishment
on any unfortunate caught for molesting his daughter.
Already he is angry that you called his daughter
a shameless stealer of husbands and that spirits
you summoned up would constrict her womb
so no bastard brood would be let out into the world.
Even I am now uneasy and nervous before him,
fearing a wrong word would set him off into a rage.
What if he hears about you and Laila... I dare not think.
Maybe he would have you thrown into a hole
and leave you there to starve until your limbs turn soft
as dough and your face dead white and mottled
like mushrooms we see in the morning
around the roots of old trees wakened by a night of rain.
He could have you taken from your stinking pit,
hauled to the jungle's edge and be left there.
Too weak even to sit up, you will be glad to die,
crying for relief in the maw of any tiger passing by.

Aduni

Yes, be the good son-in-law that you are,
rushing up to him with "Tuanku this" and "Tuanku that."
Isn't that how you wormed your way into the old man's heart?
No wonder he let you, an infidel Chinaman, to bed
his precious little daughter.

Kai Jin

Keep her out of this.

Aduni

You came in here because of her – to kill me.

Kai Jin (*Sighing softly*)

I have done what I have done for all of us –

for you, for me, for our boys. Though Tuanku uses me
 to take care of matters for him, both private and public,
 I have always felt insecure, being husband
 to an unbeliever and father to children
 being brought up with their heads stuffed with, god knows,
 what beliefs in unclean spirits, in strange gods
 and demons. You know how the others are at court.
 That old Sulaiman tries hard to plant and make the idea grow
 in Tuanku's head that I, an unbeliever, a kafir,
 moreover, from another race, should not be allowed
 to even enter and so defile the balairongsri.
 To all of them we are aliens and kafirs, at least I was.
 Our fortunes could change if others at court
 could make the old man's affections towards me change.
 I felt as secure in this place here as an ant
 on a leaf fallen and afloat on the currents of a river.
 You, me, and the boys together, we were as safe
 as a bunch of grappling ants writhing on that leaf,
 fighting to keep from drowning by the slightest turbulence.
 But I saw my chance with Laila. As the old man
 would not deny his daughter had she even asked
 for the head of the best among his fighting men,
 he agreed to have me be father to his future brood
 of grandchildren. I have, of course, to embrace their faith.
 What is faith but mumbling of some words?

Aduni (*Sarcastically*)

How clever of you. How caring a husband and father.
 No serpent ever looked out better for its brood.

Kai Jin

Look, I have gained entrance into the old man's trust
 by which I can, onto his ready and receiving mind,
 sow such words as would grow into thoughts not his but mine.
 Even though his anger at you smoulders in his bones,
 I could have him think you would do Laila no harm,
 that, even a kafir, you have your place here,
 and your trafficking with spirits we should bear with patience
 as folk practices of people who have yet to see the light.
 Despite your going about weeping and calling down
 spirits to blight her virgin bridal bed,
 at my urging, he would have relented and agreed

to you remaining but nowhere near the palace grounds.
You would be allowed somewhere nearer to the city.

Aduni

Now I know why my father never saw you as the snake
you are, which slithered past his guard into our house.
You do have a forked tongue.

Kai Jin

 You stupid woman,
you still do not understand me. You have ruined
my plans, our plans, yours and mine and our boys',
setting up such a caterwauling in Laila's rooms.
Sooner or later, someone will tell Tuanku of it,
and he will be in such a rage from fear for his daughter,
who seems more precious to him than even his life,
whatever words I can speak in your defence
will only inflame him further as dry chaff blown into fire.
Though you have no more claims on me, serpent though
you call me, I will provide you with what you need
when you go out from here. Ask what you think is fair,
enough so I can say that I have you paid in full
for what you did for me and for whatever ruined hopes
you might have of me. I even have friends
among the Chinese merchants in every trading port,
to whom I can give letters asking them to take you in.

Aduni

Do you have anything to which you don't put a price?
So now you pay me off for pleasures I had given you.
I will not be a thing that you can buy, a whore
you can discard and pass on to your merchant friends
to be handled by turns among them with their filthy hands.
Keep your money and your friends.

Kai Jin

 I want only to be fair,
to provide for you as the boys are being provided for.

Aduni

Surely not by you. You did not know, did you,
that at the time you sold yourself into their faith,

you would have to take the boys with you?
 You would sooner have paid also to unburden yourself
 of them so they would not shame you, would not crowd
 your love nest by their offending presence
 as hatchlings of your folly, inconvenient reminders
 to Laila her children would not be your first children,
 and she herself would not be your first, since someone else
 has had you first.

Kai Jin (*In exasperation*)

Why should you be so aggrieved?
 You mined my body as much as I did yours.
 For every grain of pleasure I extracted from you,
 you also had your due from me. For all our digging,
 you should by now find me an empty exhausted mine
 with every vein of ore worked clean. The costs are too high
 for me to keep working the lease I have on you.
 Let us see things as they are and agree to cancel
 the mutual leases we have on each other.
 I am content to let you go. You should feel
 the same way about me.

Aduni (*In a rage*)

Get out! Get out!
 Crawl out of here! Get down on your belly,
 and slither out in the dust in which you were hatched.
 Get out before I trample your snake's head underfoot.

Kai Jin (*Sheepishly*)

Do not say that I have not tried to be fair to you,
 that I do not understand your need and tried to provide
 for you to make a good start wherever you plan to go.
 Do not regret you spurned my offers when...

Aduni

Go! Go! Get out!

Kai Jin leaves. As he is leaving, she speaks to herself.

This is not a man. He is cold... like a python.
 But I can hurt him, hurt him so badly
 it brings back to him what remains of how it feels

to be human. I can snare him in his pain.

Lights down.

SCENE IV

Dawn, the next morning.

Aduni sits on a large mat in bersila fashion. On the mat before her are placed a semi-circle of lit candles, a clay holder containing smouldering kemenyan, a tray holding several limau perut, a heap of daun limau and jasmine, several stalks of serai, and an open metal box containing kapur, pinang, and sirih. Placed also on the mat are a folded sarong kebaya sewn from kain songket on a silver tray covered with a piece of very fine gauze, a glass vial holding a perfume which she herself had distilled, and a keris laid on a piece of silk kerchief.

As the morning light enters her room, she snuffs out the candles one by one, puts them into a tin, and places the tin with the candles in a large shallow wooden box beside her. She then empties the tray of its contents of flowers and leaves into a rough clay pot and places the tray in the box. She adds fresh kemenyan to the embers in the clay holder and then picks up and carries the silver tray with its content of the gauze covered dress and the vial of perfume to a low table by her bed and leaves them there.

She speaks while performing the above actions.

Aduni

My preparations are now complete.

All my violent and angry thoughts at Kai Jin
have reached full term and will come into the light
of day in realised action in carnage that will bring grief
upon this man. I will so deeply wound him
as to sever him from the sense of all things else
than pain. Today I must seem calm when he comes.

I will mask as contrition the fear and trembling
that threaten to betray me for my hell's intent.

I too have words spirit-given that will find in him
fertile ground on which to grow implanted thoughts.

He will believe me in everything I say and do.

He will lap up my show of remorse for having broken

in as a musang into his beloved Laila's coop,
 for all the evil that I have said of him and Laila,
 and for spells to tie up like a dry sack Laila's womb.
 I will have him much relieved to have my blessings
 on the union between him and Laila
 and my prayers for her womb to be rich in brothers
 to our boys, in princes to staff the royal house.
 He will then gladly accept my belated wedding gifts
 of fine Thai silk and own-distilled perfume,
 which I give with such happiness as fills my eyes
 with an appropriate soft glistening of tears.
 My own two boys will be my bearers of the gifts.

She pauses and smiles to herself.

Ah, how he will howl with grief and fall prostrate
 and beat his fists upon the indifferent ground
 when he sees the hideous work they wreak upon that Laila.

She now picks up the keris and passes it over the smoke of the kemenyan several times, wraps it in the silk kerchief, and places it in the box beside her in a way that it cannot be easily seen. She continues speaking as she does this.

I will have my grief compounded with his
 and add more grief to it, for I will kill my sons.
 One can hurt even a serpent by killing off its young.
 Cold-blooded though Kai Jin is, I can, by destroying our sons
 thrust the pain of it so deep it draws blood even from his soul.
 I know a mother's grief, but his greater grief will be a salve
 to mine. Besides, I cannot let anything to live on earth
 that has my flesh woven into a common tissue with his flesh
 and my bones fused like an alloy of two metals with his.
 If so much of him pollutes the constitution
 of the boys, I will regard them as others' progeny,
 not my sons. Now I am ready. All I need do is wait.

Kai Jin enters in a huff.

Kai Jin

It is just like you to have sent for me in the depths
 of the graveyard hours when I was dead asleep.
 You deal too much with night spirits and ghosts,

and you had to summon me like one. I am here now
at this morning hour, as your servant told me, at your wish,
though this would be too bright if I were a ghost.
Tell me, how much do you think you need?
I have told you, you surely cannot go from here
virtually naked of any adequate provision of cash.

Aduni (*In a low conciliatory tone*)

Kai Jin, I know now I was wrong. I was overtaken
by a blinding fog of confusion rising from the shock
of finding myself suddenly bereft of husband,
by helpless rage at Laila for taking you with such ease,
and humiliation of feeling myself a sparrow,
mousy and plain against the aura of her greater beauty.
I became much too blind to see that all you did,
you did for our welfare, not only yours,
but mine and the boys'. I should have been
the compliant wife, whose purpose in having been born
is to serve you in bed as well as in all other things
by your natural right as the man of this house,
and counted myself happy if I succeeded
in getting big each year with child who would bear
your name into perpetuity. But no, I had to be
the witch that I am, haunting the palace gates
and poisoning the air with calling out to you
and telling all – servants, grooms, Tuanku's fighting men,
all hangers-on who went in and out there –
that the palace was a golden mousedeer trap,
and Tuanku the great poacher, using his daughter
as soft bait to snare my man. Oh, how wrong I was.
I even boasted that I could conjure up such spells
strung full with words so acid they would eat through
the knot that you tied with Laila. I admit too
I did sow spells around the palace grounds
to string shut Laila's womb and confound
the royal house by closing it down as an empty hive
silent for the absence of princely heirs.

She suddenly goes down on her knees and clasps Kai Jin's legs.

Forgive me, Kai Jin. Forgive me for what I have done.

Kai Jin tries to draw away in speechless surprise.

I was just so much consumed with self-pride
 I could not accept that what I saw as your engrafting
 of yourself as a young branch onto the trunk
 of Tuanku's old lineage that now has yet to bear
 new flowers to make the whole tree fruitful
 would secure for us all forever his royal protection.
 I should have been happy and content
 to find shelter under his umbrella of state
 from ill-fortune's storms. He would not drive me
 out into the sun and rain if I only had kept
 my silence and my place, even as handmaid to Laila.

Kai Jin (*Finding his composure*)

It is too late. You had better leave
 before you are caught in the firestorm of Tuanku's fury
 when he hears about your assault upon his child.

Aduni (*Ignoring his words*)

I should have come rejoicing to the palace
 and taken happily upon myself
 to supervise the housemaids in setting up the pelamin,
 choose the colours and designs, and help sew
 the bed curtains and blinds for the bridal chamber.
 I should have then taken command of the kitchen
 in the preparation of the wedding feast.
 Though a non-believer, I would have asked to be allowed
 to stand in line with the royal kin to bless you
 at the bersanding...

Kai Jin

It is too late, Aduni.

Aduni

But not too late to make some amends before I go.
 As token that I have purged clean from my heart
 all thoughts of enmity and all ill-feeling towards you,
 please accept my blessing and my belated wedding gifts,
 a sarong kebaya sewn from the finest songket
 in all Nusantara, threaded with beaten Indian gold
 and a vial of the rarest of perfume for Laila.

I will have our children bear these gifts to her.
Let Nek Kuntum take them to her and show them
the proper ceremonial way to accept her as mother.

Before Kai Jin can respond she goes to the door and calls out for the nurse.

Nek. Nenek Kuntum. Please bring in the children now.

The nurse comes in with the children.

Come children. Come kneel and kiss your father's hand,
embrace him as one reborn into his new faith
and let him receive you into the fold and into your home
at the palace where your royal mother awaits you.

The children go up to Kai Jin, who is at a loss as to how to respond. As the children embrace him, she turns away and weeps, her body shaken by great sobs. She then turns to Kai Jin.

Forgive me my mother's tears. I will not be here to see them
grow up into young men and brothers to princes.

Kai Jin (*At last relenting*)

I am consoled that you have made your peace with me,
happy that you have removed the canker that otherwise
would have gnawed and hollowed out the heart
of my present happiness. Set yourself at peace,
for your children will be well taken care of.
They will indeed be brothers to princes, and in time,
will take their places in the councils of government.
Come, boys, to your mother and salaam with her,
embrace her and say your good-byes.

After the children embrace her, Aduni breaks down again and weeps.

What is it now?

Why, you look so deadly pale. You frighten me almost.

Aduni (*Still looking at the children*)

I look into the future and do not see their faces there.

Kai Jin (*Slightly uneasy*)

You are not hiding anything still from me?

Aduni

You are not a woman and a mother. You'll not understand.

She goes to the low table and takes up the silver tray with the dress on it and the vial of perfume.

Sian Ho, you hold this tray. And Sian Li, you the vial.
Nek Kuntum will take you to your royal mother
and show you the proper way to present these gifts.
Call her "Mother," and in all things be obedient to her.
Also say I think well of her. But come back
once more, for I still have what remains of this day
with you. My eyes will feed upon your faces
and my ears, your voices, still so clear like angels'.
I shall have you with me wherever I lose myself
from here. (*To Kai Jin*) Leave now before I weep again.

The nurse leads the children out followed by Kai Jin.

Lights down.

SCENE V

Aduni stands at the box where she had hidden the keris. She takes it out and unwraps it from its covering of silk. She then holds the keris in its scabbard high and unsheathes it to check the brightness of the blade. Still holding the keris, she speaks as in a light trance.

Aduni

Whisper again to me you ill-spirits,
enter into my inmost thoughts
that I may hear the darkness speak.
Whisper again that I may sense
in the echoing wells of the inward ear
promptings from the depths of hell.
In the catching disquiet of your words
the worst that is in me will wake,

demons lying dormant in deep dream,
they will come out into the light.
Cut loose from all bonds, all restraints
of instinct, tradition, custom, law,
they will scatter like hot fiends
to wherever there are those who thwart me,
those who crush me underfoot,
wreak upon them havoc and destruction,
commit such atrocities that even you
will be moved to avert your eyes.
Yet let me be the beast to go with them,
one amongst the horde, a mother
that will kill and eat with her own tears
her slaughtered young, if that is what
she needs do to kill her enemies off.
Come then, you ill-spirits, possess me,
sieve from my swirling thoughts seeds
that I fear will take root in pity
and bloom into a sick, abiding grief
for my babies – helpless, undefended,
no more than little pink piglets
pulling drowsily at my teats,
safe in not knowing that soon,
for their father, they have to die.

She stops to compose herself. Then a different mood comes upon her and she throws herself upon her bed.

No, no, no, no, no. What mother am I
that slaughters her children by her hand.
I fed them from my own blood in the womb,
and they grew their bones and flesh from it.
If I stab them, my own ribs will feel their pain.
If I slice their bellies open, are not the vitals
that flow out mine? I will surely gurgle in their blood
if I slit wide their throats. Yet (*Pausing and shaking her head*)
that creature cannot be let off.
Our sons' deaths in greater part will be his death.
Oh, misery, that I have to kill my children to kill him.

The nurse returns with the children. As they enter, Aduni sits up.

Kuntum

Everything has gone well, Aduni. After some hesitation and a little urging by Kai Jin, Laila most graciously accepted the gifts. The boys behaved very well. They did everything exactly as I taught them. In fact, Laila was so pleased with the dress she held it to the mirror to see how its colours would suit her and dabbed the perfume on her hand and sniffed it. Finding also that she liked it, “flowers of paradise,” she said, and applied a little of it to her neck.

She suddenly notices Aduni’s face and manner.

No, Aduni, you are not thinking those thoughts again! They slip like a serpent’s tail out from your glistening eyes. Look at your face in a mirror. See how you frighten the boys. No, don’t stare so fixedly at the ground. And wipe your cheeks. You should be at peace now, having settled with Kai Jin.

Aduni

My sorrows like poison have coursed so far into my blood they induce such a heavy mood in me I see darkness on this bright day, and I must weep.

Kuntum

Women have been left widows before.

Aduni

It is not for him I weep, but for my children.
(*Addressing the boys*) Come here children, come to your mother.

She takes her children by their hands and then clasps them to her, holding them a long while.

The warmth I draw from you now is your presence that I will hold close to me in what remain of my days.

She cups the face of each boy in turn with both her hands and gazes at it.

I shall remember you as you are now, not growing old, your angelic faces not ruined by the corruption of the world. Why are you staring at me with this uncertain half-smile?

Kuntum (*Coming forward to lead the boys away*)
Come children, kiss your mother good-bye.

As the nurse takes the children to the door to the left, Aduni turns away and weeps silently. The children stand by the door and watch her. The nurse shakes her head and sighs.

Aduni (*Speaking softly to herself*)
No, I cannot do it. Holding their faces, thinking of it
numbs my mind. I regret already what I have not yet done.
I cannot stanch the life bleeding from the open wound
that grief cuts in me though they are not yet lost.
What shall I do? What shall I do?
My ill-spirits baulk, they hold me in a dazed vacancy.

The nurse eventually leads the children out. Left alone, Aduni bends over and lies half-body on the bed. A few moments later, the nurse rushes back into the room.

Kuntum
O Aduni, you really have done it!

Aduni sits up with a barely suppressed smile.

Terror and confusion are now loose in the palace.
I know you, Aduni, and yet in false hope,
I have made myself blind to what I know.
They scatter like ants exposed to the light and air
in the broken clay cells and chambers of a toppled mound.
The royal anthill has been breached, and you
with your anteater's long tongue have probed deep
and mortally hurt the royals in their nest.
Tuanku and Laila are dead. If you wish to save
yourself, go now before it is too late

Aduni
No one will touch me, you'll see. But tell me
what is it you say I have done?

Kuntum
You planned it,
you should know. Maybe to let you see

the terrible suffering you have caused, I'll tell you anyway.

She pauses to catch her breath.

When I took the boys back to the palace to their new quarters,
I heard a fearful hullabaloo break out in Laila's rooms.
The noise was so dreadful I thought a demon was loose
and making himself free with the women there.
So I rushed over to where the screams were coming from
and found Laila writhing on her bed. She was turning blue,
struggling like a fish out of water to suck in air.
Her maids were frantically crowding around her,
one trying to sit her up and massage her,
another patting her back, and another furiously fanning her.
They were calling out to her, setting up all together
a greater commotion than if a musang in the night
had slipped into Pak Li's chicken coop.

Aduni

I am to be blamed
as the musang this time too?

Kuntum

There was a little quiet
when Laila regained her breath awhile. But as she sat up,
the dress, which she in the meantime had put on,
wrapped and tightened itself around her body
as if some spirit had given it the breath of life.
It clung to her and began to eat into her flesh.
Even as it stripped off her great swathes of skin
she could not cry for the pain, for she began
to choke again perhaps from the perfume
which she had sniffed and found so sweetly wonderful.
She thrashed about upon her bed making little gurgling sounds,
saliva dripping from her mouth, eyeballs rolled up
till her eyes showed only whites. Now total hysteria
seized the maids. It was indeed Setan himself had come
amongst them making them jump about
with arms flapping helplessly at their sides and screaming
as their mistress was being devoured to the bone.
Then someone ran out to fetch Kai Jin and Tuanku,
but only Tuanku came. The moment he saw his daughter,

he rushed to her crying, “Anak! O, anakku!”
in such a voice so broken and pitiful I never dreamt
I would hear out of him. Sitting on the bed’s edge,
he cradled her on his lap and rocked her gently
as if he was singing her a lullaby.
Then he became aware his child was dead
and there was nothing he could do. Still weeping,
he tried to lay her down but found the dress,
now fully wakened into life, was clinging onto him,
cutting redder welts into him than a Portuguese man-of-war.
When he tried to tear the fabric off, he tore off
with it whitened strips of flesh that seemed softened
by being doused in a kettleful of boiling water.
How the old man howled and screamed,
until death gave him cool relief, I shall never forget.
How could you do what you have done, Aduni?
Both Tuanku and Laila do not deserve their suffering.

Aduni

You let the children be there all the while?

Kuntum

No, I could not let them be disturbed by such horror
and had them taken back here by a serving man.

Aduni (*Standing up*)

All that I intend is now set in train.
I cannot stop now what I have begun.
I am fully resolved to set it on to complete its course
from its beginnings to the very bitter end.

*Taking the keris from its box, she goes towards the door followed by the nurse
clinging to her dress and shouting.*

Kuntum

No, no, Aduni, don’t do it.

*Aduni goes out. A few moments later, Kuntum is heard from another part of the
house shouting.*

Children, run! Run!

Aduni

Take your hands off me or I'll slash you.

Kuntum

Aduni, don't. Don... O-oooh!

Children are heard screaming in terror.

Children's Voices

Mother, let me go. Mother, don't. Don't hurt me.

Aduni

Come, children, come to Mother. Mother loves you.

Children's Voices

Don't hurt us Mother. Don't hurt us.

After the children's pleas are no longer heard, Aduni re- enters her room slowly, holding her blood-stained keris

Aduni

Now I am ready to go on to my end.
I am ready to go on to my homecoming of fire.
Those flames will cleanse me of my pain and grief.
They will bathe me in a searing bliss of knowing
that on this day, I will have made him face his furies
bred out of remorse, grief, and pain that draw in close
about him a barren confining space that is his hell.

SCENE VI

An orchard on the palace grounds, where Kai Jin has been called away to direct the men who caught a large python as to its disposal. Kai Jin is present with the men who caught the python.

Kai Jin

Do not kill it. Leave the snake there in the sack.
This python has enjoyed its last goat, for the last time
fattened itself on the large bounty of Tuanku's estate.

Head Servant

It is cunning almost like a man, Tuan. It knows its way around people, slithering into these grounds only at night when no one can be looking.

Kai Jin (*Pointing to one of the men*)

Go fetch Tok Mat.

He will have his uses for the creature.

The man told to fetch Tok Mat leaves by the right side of the stage.

Head Servant

There may be a few young ones still about.

Kai Jin

Kill them if you catch any. Tok Mat has no use for them. One large hungry serpent living off Tuanku is enough.

Head Servant

What do we do with this one before Tok Mat arrives?

Kai Jin

Throw the sack into that dry well over there. Let it simmer in that gullet going deep into the earth, in digestive heat and darkness as its victims did.

The tutor comes rushing in from the right of the stage, stopping to catch his breath before he speaks. Kai sees him.

Why are you hobbling and cawing like a broken crow?

Hamzah

Kai Jin! Kai Jin! That... that she-devil you brought home from Ayudhya, she has killed her cubs...

Kai Jin

Hah?

Hamzah

She has killed her cubs.

Kai Jin

But I have just made my peace with her...

Hamzah

Nek Kuntum says the tigress wept as she set upon them, crying with the pain and grief as only a mother feels. She blocked the screaming children into a corner of the living room, and while barring one from escape by pressing him with her body into the corner walls, locked the other with one arm around the throat and with the other, she sliced open the struggling infant's throat with the keris that she had in hand. Then she killed the other.

Kai Jin

And Nek Kuntum?

Hamzah

Aduni stabbed her as she tried to hold her off the boys. The old woman crawled over her blood and smeared the walls as she tried to get up on her feet and stumble out propping herself with one hand against them for support. Your erstwhile wife has now shut all doors and windows against the clamour of people gathered at your house. She broods now in darkness and silence like a wounded dragon over the remains of its dead prey.

As Kai Jin's legs give way, the tutor rushes to steady him.

Kai Jin

I have let myself
be seduced blind by her again. Was it her spells,
or was it that I did not clearly see her cunning,
misreading it in the beauty of her face as innocence?
Have I not got over her yet that I could so believe her
as to let her send my two sons as gift-bearers to Laila?

A sudden thought strikes him.

O-oo-oh, the gifts! The gifts, Hamzah!

Hamzah

Too late, Kai Jin. Too late. I have not told you yet,
Laila and Tuanku are dead.

Kai Jin

But it was only a while ago that I left her...

Hamzah

The dress that you sent her melted the flesh off her bones,
and Tuanku, as he held her, could not break off
from even her exposed bones and died,
a fly liquefying in the solvent acid of a monkey-cup.
The perfume was a distillate of fragrance,
a poison smelling of unearthly lilies that fuses shut
the throat of anyone who breathes even a little of it in.
I cannot tell you more; your sanity will not take it.

Kai Jin's composure breaks. He sits down on a large rock for a while to recover himself. He then rises slowly to his feet.

Kai Jin

We have to go. (*Turning to the servants*) Deal with Tok Mat when he comes.
Come Hamzah, let's go. Hurry, though I would rather turn
from the horror to which you now lead me.
Fool. Oh, fool that I am, I saw only myself
as in an approving mirror, every which way I looked.

Kai Jin and the tutor leave.

The servants continue to discuss the disposal of the captured python.

SCENE VII

Outside Kai Jin's house. The nurse and a small crowd are gathered before its closed doors. An excited murmur of the crowd – as some among the bystanders in it mill about – is heard as a low noise.

Kuntum

Open the door Aduni. Do not shut yourself up in there
with unclean spirits. Get out quickly, get out.

Bystander 1

She is in grave danger in there.

Kuntum

Get out Aduni, before it is too late.

Bystander 2

I heard strange noises in there,
a woman weeping, then someone talking,
maybe even laughing.

Bystander 1

And the violent sounds
of furniture breaking. Then the chopping of wood.
The house is indeed infested with spirits.

Bystander 3

Those are not spirits in there. Only a woman gone mad
from much abuse by her husband.

Bystander 2

Those were not human noises that I heard.

Bystander 3

That was indeed a woman gone mad for lost love.

Kuntum

For the last time, open the door, Aduni.
At least let us come in to help you out.

Kai Jin rushes in followed by the tutor. The crowd quiets down, turning their attention to Kai Jin. The nurse and the bystanders stand aside to let him go up to the door. He pounds on it, shouting in desperation.

Kai Jin

Aduni! Open the door.
Open the door. My sons... I have to see my sons.

Aduni

Go away. Let us be. Leave a mother to prepare
her children for the time that is soon to come.

Kai Jin

Let me come in for my sons. That is all that is left
for me to do.

Aduni

Go away. I am trying to sing
my boys to rest.

Kai Jin (*Having stopped beating on the door*)

I have come only for my sons.
That is all I that is left for me to do.
I feel no anger, no rage against you, Aduni,
nothing, not even pain or grief or sorrow.
All of what I should feel has turned cold,
congealed solid into hard, smooth marble.

Aduni

Why do you come crying to me about this?

Kai Jin

Laila and Tuanku are dead.

The crowd reacts, murmuring, then becoming quiet to hear him as he continues to speak.

They are dead, Aduni.

I should not have to find in my bedchamber
a bride dismembered into a confusion of bones
still hanging with torn rags of flesh
and skulls half-covered with clumps of hair
on a crumpled bed-sheet turning black
for the blood stains drying into the white fabric.
At the sight, I went beyond shock, beyond self,
beyond an ordinary sense of knowing who I was.
You may number me now as one among the dead.

*There is no response from Adun. There is only the sound coming out of the house of
a woman crooning in Thai melodic mode as if to put young children to sleep.*

(In a pleading tone) Let me come in. Let me, Aduni,
let a man too dead to desire anything
but to comfort the frightened spirits of his sons come in.

The crooning stops. There follows a few moments' silence.

Aduni

To know your dying is comfort enough for them.
While they were still on this side of the world,
did you come into their room to soothe their fears,
when they woke in the night in terror from bad dreams
or from wandering ghosts that roused a nightlong howling
among the neighbours' dogs? They have no need
of you now. They are consoled that you too are dead.

The crooning from inside the house resumes.

Kuntum

Aduni, Kai Jin as the father needs to recover
his children to give them burial according to our faith.

Hamzah

We need to prepare them, to render them whole,
intact for burial in expectation of the day
of the body's resurrection. Let them be gathered up safe
in burial so they may be present on that coming day.

Aduni (*Responding*)

If Kai Jin believes that, let him prepare himself
for his own proper burial. My children stay with me.
They come with me through cleansing fire
and they will be purged of all dreams and earthly terrors.
They will be set free where all that is not spirit is burnt away.
The faith of my people will see them home.

Kuntum

That is a grievous sin, Aduni, denying these boys
their right to burial in hallowed ground.
You shall suffer eternal punishment for this.

Aduni

I know of no such thing as sin, only ignorance.
Your ignorance has held them in bondage to false hope.

Kai Jin (*In a contrite tone*)

All that I had ever wanted was to be secure.
I saw I could make myself forever safe through Tuanku,
and I worked round to him by way of Laila.
Children with Laila would be my blood grafts
onto Tuanku's house. I would be the large branch
growing out of the body of the royal tree
securely grafted. Even if there was a violent storm,
I would not be shaken off the crotch
where I would have been notched securely into the grain.

Kuntum

How shameful that he has to say this here.

Hamzah

That man has much to unburden from his soul.

Kai Jin

I said I did this for us all; I now confess I did it
only for myself. Scrambling for a secure toehold
upon my self-engendered insecurities,
I kicked from it, as it were, a pebble loose
and dislodged an avalanche of consequences
fatal to the very thing I sought to hold me safe.
By my well worked-out calculations
that lopped you off from my protection and care,
I know I have drawn out that punishing fiend in you.
But too late, too late. I should not have cared,
should not have given anxious thought to being safe.

The crooning from inside the house begins again. By this time, Kai Jin, who has come away from the door and looks weak to stand on his own, is supported by the tutor and the nurse.

Hamzah (*To some of the men gathered in front of the house*)

Batter that door down, or we will be standing here all day.

Two or three men lift up a tree trunk lying nearby and as they prepare to ram the front door open, one leaf of it is partially opened to reveal Aduni standing at the opening. The interior is too dark for it to be visible from the outside. A low murmur rises from the crowd. The murmuring dies down as Aduni begins to speak.

Aduni

Stop! Do not come any nearer.

(Turning slowly to point at Kai Jin)

So there he is now, limp like a dying fish,
the snakehead that I smash on my grinding stone,
not worth even a few coppers dead in the fresh market.

All eyes turn towards Kai Jin. One or two in the crowd are heard saying something indistinct.

Know that I paid for him, all of you out there,
who would dare come in. I paid with my father's shame,
my brothers' lives, my home, my country,
the memory of whose forests and waters
is all that is left me in this foreign place.
He traded me for Laila. Do you know for what?
Did you not hear him? He confessed he needed
all that Tuanku could provide to hold him safe.
He gave me up as if I was unwelcome dowry
and at my own cost – the loss of home, of refuge,
and my part of comfort and joy of the marriage bed.
Worst of all, I had to cede to your community
of belief, as Tuan Sidi here may confirm, my sons,
whom I received as blessings from the gods,
for whom I paid with much spillage of blood
and unbearable pain. I cannot give them up.
That would be to consign them to the realms
of existence condemned by ignorance
to be nothing but in an eternal round
as hungry ghosts or beasts or men or jealous gods,
deprived, as promised by our ancient traditions,
of release at the end of life through cleansing fires
as spirit in ascension to the sun.

Kuntum

The woman has surely lost her mind.
Never in my life have I heard such nonsense.

Hamzah

Be quiet, let's hear what more she has to say.

Aduni

Come to the door, children, your father is here.
He has come to see you before you go.
Hug him and say you love him, but say
you can never go where he wanted to take you,
for you will not be rotting bodies in the ground.
Tell him also, Mother's rage is wholly gone.
All those fires that ate into her heart
went out with the consummation of her intent
to visit such savagery upon him
as to shock him dead – and dumb as a stone.
He has forgotten even how to cry.
Hug him but do not say you forgive him.
All about me are ashes that soon will grow cold.
I am bled clean, drained of all anger,
but there is no remorse, no pity for him, no forgiveness.
And I taste no sweetness from what I have done.
It is time to go now, children. Be not afraid
when the flame-bearer gets here. I will have
the door wide so you can see him when he comes.

Aduni pushes wide both leaves of the door to show the bodies of the two children dressed in their ordinary clothing, laid out on a wide low table placed transversely to the door and covered lightly under a jumble of pieces of wood, paper, and cotton fabric. A similar jumble of the same materials is stuffed under the table. Aduni goes behind the inner side of the table and picks and holds up an unlighted torch.

The crowd is taken by surprise. The hubbub among them is played not too loudly over the sound system.

Kuntum

The woman has gone completely out of her mind.
Do something, Tuan. Hurry, retrieve the bodies of the boys.

The tutor lets go of his hold on Kai Jin. As he gestures to two of the men standing nearby to go with him towards the house, Aduni lights the torch from a covered fire in a brazier near her which is not visible from the outside. She raises the torch high over her shoulder to threaten the tutor and the two men trying to approach her.

Stop. Come no further, unless you wish to go
with us upon our journey.

She pauses as if to listen to something.

Do you hear it, children?

Do you hear it, the faint roar of fire.
It is the chariot sent from the sun. Hear how it races
like the wind down the distant mountains.
There, I see him now, Agni, brighter than the one
who sent him, and fiercer, for he is close and closes us in.
How clear he looks, he with the horses, like flame.
Come close to me, children. Be not afraid.

She puts the torch to the wood, paper, and cloth at several places underneath the table on which the bodies lie. The crowd reacts in consternation. A red-orange light begins to glow from underneath the table as if a fire has been started there. The whole interior of the room then begins to glow. The glow spreads gradually, becoming brighter and brighter. As the glow spreads, the crackling of the fire is heard in increasing volume.

Kuntum (*Shouting*)

Stop her! Do something, Tuan Sidi. Stop her!

Hamzah

Save the boys! They must be saved for burial.

The bystanders including Hamzah himself make tentative moves to rush up to the door, but eventually they find themselves too frightened to move too near the burning house. The rest of the crowd watch helplessly, gradually becoming still, fascinated by the sight of Aduni now standing by her children's bodies with a red-orange spotlight being slowly turned up on her as if the fire is beginning to engulf her.

Run to the istana for the fighting men.
They can rush her and retrieve the bodies.

Kai Jin (*Moaning*)

How did I ever let things come to this?
I cannot cry now to a God to whom
I vowed but never meant to submit my will,
and I shut myself out from my fathers' faith
into this life, this burial as spirit dead,
compacted into this dense and constricting earth,
this grave, this still subsisting breathing flesh.

Aduni (*With the spotlight on her growing more intense*)

Come now, children, get on the chariot.
The flames will not singe you. It burns only those
of mortal flesh. You are no longer of them.
Enter the fire now. It cleanses from spirit
all traces of the dross of mortal craving,
the seeds of which you would have caught
even in your few human years. Put on the flames,
wrap them around you like protective mantles,
and do not look back for I will be with you.

(Pause) I have much need for atonement.
My murders cannot but weigh heavily on me.
But our ancients promised expiation by fire
and that, by plunging into the centre, the very maw
of the sun, where, because my anger
had grown such deep roots into my soul,
I will have to spend a long season of anguish
in slow annihilation of the self that I had been
in this life-time that now has come to an end.

*Remaining standing and still holding the torch in one hand, she raises both her arms
and looks upward to the sky.*

The redemptive fires of the heavens await us.
I claim now our ancient promise of renewal in fire.

*Shouts of "They are coming," "The men from the istana, they are coming" are
heard above the hubbub and the crackling of the fire.*

Hamzah

Too late! Oh, they are too late!

© Copyright 2008 Asiatic, ISSN 1985-3106

<http://asiatic.iium.edu.my>

<http://asiatic.iiu.edu.my>

International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)