

Stream

June Yap

A grassy knoll with a view. It would become home to royalty, a handy perch to spy, a residence for administration, and a critical vantage point from which to defend. For everyone who passed through, who made their way to the top, it meant something. Each passage would leave a trail behind it, covering the mound with stories, layer upon layer. After some time, it almost seemed as if the hill grew a little taller.

The day was hot, and the afternoon stretched out before her, heat draped over each second, reluctant to let go. She had her back leaning against a pleasantly cool flat rock surface, her toes gently tickled by the water's edge. Tropical sunlight sift fine through the branches of trees, bathing the clearing where she sits. This was blissful. As blissful as it rarely got, what with the chatter in the house, and all the comings and goings. It was always full of people, moving around purposefully, with urgent and important matters needing attention, at all times of the day. A swirl of activity that mostly happened around her, as she tried to keep out of their way. There was nowhere to find a moment's peace, not even here for most part, busy as it usually was, crowded with the other women who spent all their time gossiping, plotting their little schemes and keeping an eye on each other. But today was different. Today she had managed to slip away on her own, to steal a few hours for herself before someone might notice she was gone. Here she could be alone for a while with her thoughts.

She hears a noise, a rustling of leaves disturbing the still air. Instinctively her hand closes around a handy palm-sized rock next to her, ready to throw it at... whatever, whomever, was approaching. She holds her breath as she tries to listen in the direction the sound seemed to be coming from. There still are harimau roaming, they say, although she had never seen one. The thought alone made her heart beat a little faster, it would be quite a story to tell if she did, even if she would have no idea what to do if one came swiftly at her bursting out from the undergrowth. She imagined she would not hear it approach, it would have taken her by surprise, and it would have been too late by the time she turned around to face it. If this was one. A tango of dragonflies buzzed inches above the water to the left of her as she strained to hear the sound again... Nothing. Perhaps it was something fallen from the trees.

She watches the water slipping across the worn rock surfaces, pooling as it encountered resistance, and quickly gliding on. Lulled by the ripples, she allows herself to relax, humming beneath her breath a song from her childhood. She missed home. It seemed so long ago since she was with her family, her brothers and sisters across the strait of water the other side of the pulau. But really it had only been a few weeks, weeks that appeared longer than they were. It is hard to tell time here. Time either creeps along or passes in frantic bursts. Mak said that she would be fine, that she would get used to being here, being away... so Mak said, as she helped her pack a few belongings to take with her, combed her hair, whispered things in her ear that she could not understand. Even if she wanted to go back, she would not know how, how to find her way down the hill, to the sea, back home.

She must have dozed off, her mind drifting as it tried to hold on to the memory of the faces of Mak and her siblings the last time she had seen them. The sun had gone behind a cloud. She wondered how long she could linger here, pretend it was her own, pretend she wasn't in fact here, but elsewhere. Somewhere far away. Or home. She wished she had brought something with her to eat, like the pomelo the boy who delivers *surat* from the other side secretly gave to her just the other day. He said he had picked it up along the way, but more likely than not, was stolen fruit. The last time he came around, he had told her that there was news of some foreign ships approaching. Not the usual *sampan pukat*, but bigger ships. He said that they had been bothering the fishermen, asking questions, and apparently these foreign men were not interested in fish at all... Not interested in fish? What did they eat then? Her thoughts wander off, recalling the sweet taste of the pomelo. She must have fallen asleep, allowed herself to be carried off in a dream, as suddenly she is jolted awake. An unfamiliar face appears in her mind, and she cries out a name.

“One day Colonel Farquhar wanted to ascend the Forbidden Hill, as it was called by the Temenggong. The Temenggong’s men said, ‘None of us have the courage to go up the hill because there are many ghosts on it. Everyday one can hear on it sounds as if hundreds of men. Sometimes one hears the sounds of heavy drums and of people shouting.’”

He lies down, enjoying the loamy smell of the earth, and the smell of grass which he always associated with the colour green. Grass actually smelt green, he thought. Overhead, the canopy of the trees framed a night sky stippled with clouds, as if frozen in the midst of scurrying off. The sounds from the stage sounded muffled at this distance, but the thrumming rhythm nevertheless beat its way across the cultivated lawn, buoyed by the wind, probably disturbing the insects and whatever forest life-forms inhabit the place. Like the ghosts... Ha! He should not scare himself. There were always these stories, wherever you went. Regardless where you were on the island, there would be a ghost story, one for every place, it was democratic like that. Army camps, old school buildings, housing blocks, and of course the stories taxi drivers told of non-paying passengers. Gave the place a ‘lived-in’ feel, he thought, and an almost pleasurable thrill to be slightly frightened. That is, unless one happened to be by one’s self, then it wasn’t quite as amusing.

This place probably was no exception. Although given the amount of activity happening round the clock — the music performances that ran late into the night, the old folk doing Taichi in the wee hours of the morning, determined corporate-type joggers chancing upon the stray underaged couple naively thinking they could find some privacy here, stumbling out from behind the undergrowth, blinking blindly unaccustomed to the early morning light. He would be lucky if he met anything non-human. The largest and most vicious creatures he would encounter here would probably be grasshoppers. Damn, he thought, haven't seen one of those in a while... These were the consequences of living in an urban jungle rather than a natural one. Were there even birds here any more? Not that he could tell. Although they would probably be asleep and this would hardly be the place with all the commotion from the concerts.

But there *could* be bats! He peered darkly into the dense foliage above, and wondered how one was supposed to defend one's self against fanged projectiles hurtling full-tilt through the night, that one could not see till it was too late. Human beings are such easy targets in the dark. Fears unfortunately fuelled by one too many bad vampire movies. But the likelihood of

bats in the city limits? Probably not, even if this was, as far as he could tell, the last real greenery in the town area. The park management would have removed them somehow, scared them off with paperwork, sanitised the place for public pleasure. The bats stood no chance. In any case there weren't any fruit trees to feed on. Or, at least he hoped he wasn't lying under a fruit tree. Hit in the face by fallen fruit is something one does not plan to have to experience... There seemed so much to look out for overhead. Great, now he was having an anxiety attack over plants and small unfamiliar creatures. This is the sort of paranoia that gives birth to monsters, hybrids borne of overactive-imaginings, the likes of triffids. But it must have been a pleasant place before, that is without all this activity, he thinks, absently picking apart a flower that happened to have dropped beside him.

He startles. Distinctly thinking he heard someone call him. His real name, not the made-up one he gave that girl who was dancing with her friends near the stage. God, it was noisy down there. It was quite a miracle she caught anything he said. Or rather, shouted at her over the sound of the band. But now he was sure it was his name he had heard, above the music in the distance and the crescendo of the crowd cheering the lead singer who seemed to have decided that the muggy weather demanded a sacrifice of clothing. It was a female voice and it didn't sound like it had come from inside his head, or that he was imagining it... He looked around, hoping he would not find anything, anyone. This place was giving him the creeps. Maybe it was his friends calling to him, probably from behind a bush, hoping to get a good laugh scaring him. He stood up, and brushed grass and twigs off his sleeves and pants, checking for stains. None. Good thing he was dressed in black. He should go look for his buddies, perhaps they were back from buying drinks. He was thirsty, a beer would go down well now, bloody humid it was out here.

A slow warm wind passes, carrying a damp leafy scent from a deeper part of the hill with it, an old organic smell, triggering a memory. Our primary memories are of smells. Human beings have not come so far after all... He vaguely recalled someone mentioning that there used to be a stream around here. Now, who was it? Oh yes, his history teacher... He couldn't remember the rest she had said then about the stream... or was it a river? It seemed beyond imagination. Oh well, time to find the friends he came with... He hurries down the slope thinking, what does it take to get a drink around here?

“Colonel Farquhar asked ‘Why is it called the Forbidden Hill?’ and the Temenggong replied, ‘There is a story dating from the kings of ancient times, that it was on this hill that their palace was built. So it was forbidden for any man to ascend the hill except at the ruler’s command or summons. For this reason it was known as the Forbidden Hill. Behind it is a stream known as the Forbidden Stream, for it was the place where the consorts and the wife

of the king used to bathe, and no one was allowed to approach. ”

“This spot on the ground is the site of the very ancient city and fort of Singapore, whose sovereigns, upwards of a thousand years ago, gave laws to Java, Sumatra and their adjacent islands and a great part of the Malay Peninsula. No remnants of its former grandeur exist, not the slightest vestige of it has ever been discovered... This place once so great, once so powerful, is not a petty fishing village, until our coming here unknown in modern history or geography...”

Raffles failed to receive the news cancelling earlier instructions to develop a new trading centre to the south of Penang, which resulted in the founding of Singapore. South of the island is another island where it is said warriors would duel to the death. Their spirits, they say, continue to wander there. In Singapore, one of the more popular local literary genres, is the ghost story.

Harimau: tiger

Pulau: island

Surat: letters

Sampan pukot: trading boats

Quotes from *The Hikayat Abdullah*, Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (translated by A. H. Hill), published by The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, first published in 1849; and *A History of Fort Canning*, Firbank, L.T., Colonel, OBE.