

## A Posthumous Letter to SBJ

*Antares Maitreya*

Magick River  
Kuala Kubu Bharu  
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My dear Salleh,

You left your body in the wee hours of October 29, 2020, alone in a hospital bed, with no family or friends in attendance (because of Covid protocols), and you were buried without fuss or proper farewell, no lying-in-state, as befits a literary giant, celebrated and cherished by those who knew and love you, and a few thousand others who only know of your greatness by reputation.

Nevertheless, it must have been a huge relief to finally be free of your mortal shell, to once again soar upon the winds of boundless inspiration, in the spirit realms of pure imagination. I know it couldn't have been much fun to be you, especially in the last decade or so, when you often sat and wondered if there was any point, after all, in expressing thoughts in words, and you began to question the value of the literary life, and even contemplated burning all the books in your library.

No worse torment than being a gourmet who suddenly loses his taste for food. No wonder you often shut yourself from the world, unable to force yourself to be sociable, or to even leave the house. But it was delightful to see your face light up and break out in a broad grin, whenever we connected via a WhatsApp video call, arranged by Anna or Adam.

*I guess it also didn't help that the gorgeous, doe-eyed, down-to-earth princess you married (who gave you a fresh start in life as literally the father of Adam and Eve) succumbed to religious fundamentalism in her later years, then to cancer and untimely death, when you most needed companionship and domestic stability. I'm sure it wasn't an easy ride for dear Halimatun either, being married to a larger-than-life literary swashbuckler, prone to swinging from the chandeliers of biochemical and/or neuropsychic flux.*

I especially cherish the memory of your last visit to Magick River on 26 February 2019, accompanied by Anna, Adam, Jing and Ridzuan Idris (resident of KKB and publisher of Rehman Rashid's *Small Town*). That's when you suddenly grimaced, lifted your *kain pelikat*, squatted on the riverbank, and released a spectacular, spherical turd. The look of utter relief on

your face will forever be imprinted in my mind. You had been keeping it in for at least a couple of days, no doubt.

You once told me, when I asked what prompted you to piss on Redza Piyadasa's surrealist exhibition manifesto ("Towards a Mystical Reality") that it was only because you were unable to do a Number Two\*

The scatologist in me truly appreciated the scatologist in you, Salleh — and I suspect that we share similar *eschatological* perspectives too, although we rarely discussed metaphysics. You acknowledged and affirmed the ultimate sacredness of everything — even the apparently profane, because you understood polarity and the value of diversity, and readily accepted divergent views in a pluralistic world (which irked more than a few of your less urbane contemporaries in the local literary milieu).

Live and let live was your credo, so what if some folks are so pompously ridiculous they deserve to be lampooned and laughed at, get their ego balloons popped by your Swiftian verbal pinpricks. Those who completely lack charm and talent will resort to sedition laws when their attempts at starving you to death do not succeed in shutting you up. Damn good thing, Salleh, the analogue era was much jollier and less politically correct, or you might have found yourself in hot soup ("Just make sure it's *bak kut teh!*", I can hear you quip).



L-R: Jing, SBJ, Ridzuan Idris, Adam, Antares, Anna Salleh (26 February 2019)

What year was it that we first met? Late 1974 or early 1975? You got out of the lime-green Renault driven by our sweet friend, Brigitte Neubacher (then attached to the Austrian Embassy) and we took an instant liking to each other. Your reputation had preceded you. I had already heard about your outrageous performance at Redza Piyadasa's exhibition (probably from our mutual buddy, Lat) and was absolutely delighted to meet someone of such iconoclastic verve.

*I don't think I had met Piyadasa at that point in time, but we subsequently became friends and he used to drop by at my hermit's abode and shoot his mouth off for hours. To his credit, Redza never held a grudge against you — indeed, I had the feeling he was somewhat in awe of you (he certainly regarded you as a bona-fide public intellectual) and was acutely aware, savvy soul that he was, that without your theatrical intervention, his surrealist exhibition might have swiftly faded from public memory.*

Our first close encounter was made even more memorable when Brigitte suggested we go to town for lunch and you directed her to a noisy, jam-packed coffee shop in Chinatown where we had the most exquisite *char siew* ever. I was truly impressed that it was you who introduced me to that particular stall. You were never one to be swayed by exaggerated displays of false piety. Notions of *halal* and *haram* were differently defined by you: anything dishonest, hypocritical, pretentious, corrupt, obsequious, dictated purely by social convention and rigid tradition, you viewed as *haram*.

You understood better than most that the Source of Life, Prime Creator, Allah, Call It What You Will, cannot be defined or confined by doctrine or dogma — that the creative impulse cannot be constrained by social mores and pseudo-morality, tribal totems and taboos be damned. This was what made you a cultural hero for some and for others, a social misfit. No one dared to nominate you for literary awards or ceremonial honorifics, not knowing how you might behave when invited to the palace.

In a world governed by hype and public relations, only the Madman and the Poet can experience true freedom. Kahlil Gibran, for one, and William Blake, for another, would have cheerfully raised a toast to you, Salleh Ben Joned, as an esteemed colleague — and it wouldn't be with rose syrup, no way.

You explained to me one day that your name derives from the Arabic *saleh*, meaning sacred or holy. That's why you titled your first poetry collection *Sajak-Sajak Saleh: Poems Sacred and Profane*.

You had an innate knowing that holiness is akin to wholeness, and that wholeness is akin to integrity, wherein one acknowledges and embraces the totality of one's unlimited being — even, or especially, the parts deemed salacious or sinful by the publicly pious but privately perverted. And that redemption comes from reconciliation and reintegration, never harsh judgment and condemnation, for the unrighteous tend to fear a punitive deity while the righteous invariably put their faith in a merciful God.

On another occasion you hinted at something which took me a while to fully comprehend. Your scholarly research had unearthed the obscure fact that the Koran alludes to the Sacred Feminine as *Al Ghaib*, meaning The Unseen, The Hidden, the Mystery of Mysteries and Holy of Holies. There is a mystic in every poet, and your excitement at this revelation was matched only by the enthusiasm with which you disclosed to me that *Al Ghaib* was, in truth, a veiled reference to what in Western esotericism is called the *Vesica piscis* — the Primordial Vulva, the Black Hole from which issues Life Itself. Then you added with a hearty guffaw that modern Malays appear to have a decidedly distorted perspective — indeed, an entirely profane one — because they call female genitalia *kemaluan*, which suggests something shameful and scandalous.

It also explains why you deliberately misspelled the location of Universiti Malaya (where you lectured in English for quite a few years) as “Lembah Pantat” instead of “Lembah Pantai” on your infamous name card which you gleefully handed out at parties — the one where you declared yourself a holder of a BS degree from Buffalo University and which included the tagline: “Why be a man when you can be a suckcess?”

Well, Salleh, you were certainly no pusillanimous biophobe (someone living in constant fear of being assigned to eternal perdition for breaking any number of priestly rules). On the contrary, you perfectly qualify as the quintessential biophile — a wholehearted lover of life whose spiritual core was aligned with your passionate human ego and your brilliant artistic temperament. Walt Whitman would have bought you a jug of beer just to enjoy a no-holds-barred extended conversation with you (although he might have had trouble getting a word in edgewise). For that matter, so would have Chairil Anwar, your Indonesian counterpart, whose writings profoundly inspired you.

I never did get around to asking you to show me your identity card and that bothers me slightly, because you are the only Malay I know who has opted to use the Hebraic form of *Ben*, rather

than the Arabic *Ibn* or the Malay *Bin* (meaning “son of”) in conjunction with your father’s name. You admitted to calling yourself Salleh Ben Joned just to annoy Yahudiphobic local *sasterawan* in particular and jingoistic bigots in general. But how on earth did you manage to convince the bureaucrats it wasn’t an act of subversion?

In any case, you did it and shall evermore be fondly remembered (and read) as Salleh Ben Joned. Congratulations!

In eternal friendship and with all-encompassing love,

Antares Maitreya  
Ceremonial Guardian  
Magick River

\*Speaking of scatology, I am reminded of SBJ’s ebullient and hilarious review of *Kisses in the Nederends* (a Rabelaisian novel by a Tongan writer named Epele Hau’ofa), written in November 1992 and provocatively titled, “Kiss My Arse – In the Name of Common Humanity.” It may well have inspired national laureate Shahnnon Ahmad to produce his 1999 political satire, *SHIT*.

Those interested can access SBJ’s review at: <http://www.magickriver.org/2016/02/kiss-my-arse-in-name-of-common-humanity.html>