

Interview with Ismim Putera

Ismim Putera (he/him) is the author of the poetry chapbook *Tide of Time* (Mug and Paper Publishing, 2021). His work can be found in the recent anthology *Tapestry of Colours: Stories from Asia* (2021) and many online journals. His poem 'Durian Blossoms' won third prize in 7th Singapore Poetry Contest and 'Jantina' was longlisted for the Malaysian Poetry Writing Competition 2021. His most recent publication is *Hallucinogenic Lines: Poems* (Melaka: SYFE, 2021).



MMOJ: Could you describe your journey in writing poems: When you started writing poetry? What keeps you writing poems? Do you have any vision of how you see yourself as a poet in a few years?

Ismim: I started writing poetry since 2010. Few years later, in 2013-2014, I uploaded most of my poems at *PoemHunter.com*. I found joy and encouragement from the online community. They gave constructive feedback on my writing style, delivery and even on grammar.

“Tide of Time”, “In the Eclipse of My Heart”, “I Saw You In My Dreams”, “Ants Are Drawn To Sugar”, “DNA: Dream and Action” are just some of the examples of my earlier attempts in poetry. My earlier works are mostly free verse with excessive emphasis on rhyming.

After three years of hiatus, I thought I needed to rekindle the passion in poetry. In 2018, I seek help and inspiration from Malachi Edwin Vethamani’s *IN-SIGHTS: Malaysian Poems*, *Malchin Testament: Malaysian Poems* and *A Bibliography of Malaysian Literature in English*. I was amazed by the persistence of established and emerging poets to uphold Malaysian poetry in English.

2021 marks a small pinnacle in my poetry writing journey. To date, my works can be found in more than a dozen literary journals. Among them are: *Anak Sastra*, *Singapore Unbound*, *Prismatica Magazine*, *Fahmidan Journal*, *The Remnant Archive*, *River Bird Magazine*, *Particles Magazine* and not forgetting, *Men Matters Online Journal*.

With the help of Mug and Paper Publishing, I have published two poetry chapbooks namely “Tide of Time” and “There’s A Candle in Your Heart” in 2019. My poems “Washing His Body” and “A Lump in Her Heart” have been included in *To Let the Light In: Anthology of Life and Death* (Asia Pacific Hospice Palliative Care, 2021). Most importantly, ‘Durian Blossoms’ won 3rd place in the 7th Singapore Poetry Contest and ‘Jantina’ was longlisted for the Malaysian Poetry Competition in 2021. In December 2021, I self-published *Hallucinogenic Lines: Poems*.

I will continue to write. I want my poems to flourish in both established and emerging literary journals. I want to write more about people, highlighting their plight and progress.

MMOJ: What are your preoccupations in your poems?

Ismim: My earlier works focused mostly on family, relationships, self-discovery and hope. Lately, I have sinfully ventured into exploring masculinity, gender relations, relationships and divinity.

Masculinity is perhaps the most challenging theme I have ever attempted and incorporated in my poems. Writing about manhood allow me to understand the art and science of manliness particularly in father-son relationship. Through poetry, somehow, I could vaguely outline my father’s love and sacrifices. His endless concerns and fragility are expressed in ‘My father kissed my mother’ and ‘And my father wants me to marry her’.

Exploring masculinity allows me to have a bird’s eye view on the physical and spiritual form of a man’s body. Poetry on masculinity is few and far between. I describe fragile masculinity in ‘My Face’ (Singapore Unbound, 2021) and ‘No Man in an island’ (Instincts #20). Concurrently, ‘Jantina’, ‘True Fahmi dan’ and ‘Adam’s Apples’ are fresh lyrical rantings on gender relations and dysphoria.

I still do not fully understand relationships. Hence, I write poems about them. Not only I fail to unravel their intricacies, and in turn, I end up entangled in imaginary webs of intimacy as vividly depicted in “A Monsoon Man” (*Omelette Magazine Issue 1*), “He Is the Farmer of My Midnight

Garden” (*Prismatica magazine Issue 5*) and “Washing His Body” (*To Let the Light in: An Anthology of Life and Death*, 2021).

Divinity never stops to intrigue me. I write speculative poems on gods, spirits, angels and religion just to spirit myself away. Sometimes I have to read those poems aloud in case they do not make any sense. Some sound like sea waves. Some sound like whirring wind. Some sound like a firework of fervid flames. But for whom the flames burn? I do not know.

MMOJ: Who are your favourite poets and do they have any influence on your writing?

Ismim: I was from the generation that studied 5 poems, 6 short stories and a prescribed novel for SPM English Language paper.

Shakespeare’s ‘Sonnet 18’ baffles most of the students at that time; same goes to Muhammad Haji Salleh’s ‘Si Tenggang’s Homecoming’. Still, I enjoy the richness of sensory details and cultural heritage in Shirley Lim’s ‘Monsoon History’. ‘If’ by Robert Kipling is a garden of moral values and Frost’s “The Road Not Taken” has always reminded me of the ‘two roads diverged in a yellow wood’.

Emily Dickinson is by far my favourite poet. Her narrative poem ‘There’s Been a Death in the Opposite House’ haunts me till today. I could hear her reciting the poem at the back of my head. Her poems are as mysterious as herself.

It is clear that my writing style is inspired by aforementioned poets. At a glance, they are rippled reflection of Shirley Lim’s sensuous sacrarium, Dickinson’s narrative nuances and Shakespeare’s romantic runes.

MMOJ: Do you think about your position as a Malaysian poet writing in English?

Ismim: Yes. I always considered myself as an emerging poet. My writing is still in infancy stage. My perspective is myopic. I have many things to learn. The only way to advance myself further is to write as many poems as possible.

MMOJ: Please choose one of your poems from either *Malaysian Millennial Voices* or *Year of the Rat and Other Poems* and share your experience in writing the poem.

Ismim: My poem 'Jantina' has made her way into *Year of the Rat and Other Poems*. The poem is one of the weirdest poems I have written so far. The poem highlights the plights of gender inequalities, microaggressions and discrimination against gender-nonconforming people.

'Jantina' is a metaphorical narrative poem inspired from a Persian painting. It starts off by a group of men entering an egg-shaped entrance hunting for a person. While travelling in the cave, the men execute unimaginable sadism and savagery. At the end, the men discover a place called the Fountain of Eternal Paradise. The person that they are looking for is bathing with seven virgin princesses.

Readers are free to interpret the poem in the best way possible.

Jantina

Ismim Putera

God wanted to know my gender
so he sent 100 men to cling onto my thighs
their faces peered into the dark caves
looking for that egg-shaped entrance
somewhere along the Valley of the Angels
a place where angels brought down revelations
and lights

In the dark cave men screeched
like blind bats choked on stalactites
that hung freely from the floor of my mouth
four vaginal walls crumbled down;
when they stripped vigorously, planting cactuses
in rows and murmured high-pitched hymns
and runes

The caves led them to the
Fountain of Eternal Paradise
somewhere along the Valley of the Angels
they saw seven virgin princesses were bathing
while singing loudly; I was at the centre of the circle
milking my chest to turn the pool
greyish white

(Source: Vethamani, M.E. ed. *Year of the Rat and Other Poems*. Petaling Jaya: Maya Press, 2022).