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| Kathrina

Haji Mohd Daud | Brunei



[caption id="attachment_36547" align="alignright" width="339"]



Kathrina Haji Mohd Daud's short story received

7,273 votes. This image was captured 1 September 2013 at 11:59 pm (Singapore SGT).[/caption]

[caption id="attachment_35683" align="alignnone" width="240"] Kathrina Hj Md Daud, Brunei
Kathrina Hj Md Daud, Brunei[/caption]

I am a bird

A short story by Kathrina Haji Mohd Daud, Brunei

I migrate with the seasons. I fly away from the monsoons and the heat of Brunei in September, using wings of metal to alight into London Heathrow, where I am searched and questioned, heaving a sigh of relief when my bag, which is stuffed secretly with harmless contraband, sugared cuttlefish and tins of corned beef, white rabbit sweets wrapped in edible transparent plastic, makes it docilely through customs and immigration. When I first arrived in London, the grey cold of the air outside the airport was a revelation – clear and crisp and burning through my lungs. These days, I make sure I am wrapped up against the chill, and I can make my way from baggage to the coach station with my eyes closed.

In the summer, the Junes and the Julies, when the academic year is over, I fly away from the dry heat of England back to the heavy humidity of Brunei. As soon as I step off the plane into the terminal building, the air compresses and exhales droplets of moisture. The lines here are slower-moving, less anxious. My heartbeat is steady and home. My bag will be heavy, with Marks and Spencers biscuits, Harrods trinkets, requests from Mothercare, all the chains that we do not have. As I step outside, I know my family, my parents, will be waiting for me, waiting to greet me with smiles. I will have chosen light clothing, airy, weightless, a barrier against the weight of the air, and of expectation.

In the months and seasons in between, I will use my legs to walk – walk – walk everywhere. It feels sometimes that I have walked the length of England on my way to school, to the bus stop, to the grocery store, to the train station. I marvel at the white-haired men and women who seem to think that walking at their age is natural, a necessity, who have no expectation that their sons and daughters will go to the grocery store for them, will replace their old legs with the service of their own. In the spaces between, the Decembers and the Marches, I fly tentatively to new places – the Spains, the Frances, the Italies and Hollands, and my eyes are dazzled by tulips and paintings which blend into each other, always the same Virgin Mary and baby Jesus, the white-and-pink complexions daubed onto canvas, immortalized into smooth white marble. I don't see my own brown skin anywhere in these Masterworks, or even in the newspapers in England, the Daily Mail and the Guardian. I see black and white and sometimes dark brown – usually Pakistani or Indian – sometimes designated as “South Asian” but never Southeast Asian. The missing syllable is a missing me.

So this is why, when you ask me to marry you, when I look at your light brown hair and your brown eyes, and your pink-whiteness and your lovely strong bones and jaw, and my heart breaks with the loving of you, I say, “No.”

You ask, Why? And your face is confused and betrayed and I can hear your heartbeat shock into speed and heat, the way mine does when my visa is scrutinized at the borders of your country.

I could tell you that I have loved you, have loved the loving of you, but that when I dream I dream of a heat that warms the bones instead of the skin. That when I picture you in Brunei, I see you confused and lost and increasingly angry when the queues become slower, the explanations vague, and there is no number to call when your pizza comes more than an hour late and you cannot return your socks for a refund and there is a directive from the ministry which you disagree with.

When I tell you, I could only love you in England, I also mean that you could only love me here, as well, but I cannot say this because you would not understand, you would argue, and tell me that love conquers all. We speak in English, and I cannot tell you that I know this is not true.

I saw the truth while I was in the air, when I looked down past my metal wings and saw the dark heavy solidity of land stopping the movement of the vast ocean, and there was a moment when I could not tell, not from up there, whether I was coming or going.

which I could not tell, not from up there, whether I was coming or going.

Solid piece which touches the heart and ignites the memories. Well written Kathrina! You definitely deserve to win! <http://t.co/23uSrsuiTz>

— Reeda Malik (@anakbrunei) [August 20, 2013](#)

The shortlisted stories have been selected by a panel of judges appointed by the Ubud Writers& Readers Festival. The views expressed in the shortlisted stories are strictly those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). The copyright of this story remains with the author.

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