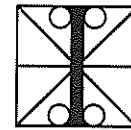


Moult

by Nin Harris



SHED my skin every seven years.

I never realise it till long after the act of shedding has taken place. I did not realise it the first time you did not recognise me.

This is a city of people who continuously shed their skin.

I can see piles of it everywhere these days. In pungent lorong-lorong damp from the monsoon. Beneath the shelter of rain-trees that grow along jalan-jalan that divert to creepy culs-de-sac. Mountains of moulted skin lead to roadblocks on winding roads that perpetually misdirect the driver into other winding roads because of road-works and renovation signs that pop up everywhere like mutant fungi. There, right next to the tokong someone placed underneath a mango tree. The sweet scent of the burning fuchsia joss sticks in front of the idols of the tokong do nothing to alleviate the overripe aroma of that rude pile of skins.



The first time I moulted was the first time I encountered Kuala

Lumpur as an adult. Bright pink minibuses took us through crowded streets at a breakneck pace. In those days it was not unusual to find me half hanging out of bus doorways, holding on for dear life to the nearest railing, ungainly in my too-large jeans nestling with discomfort upon my too-large form. That was my way of apologising to the hordes packed together inside the narrow vehicle for committing the dosa of being too large.

The first time I wore jeans was the first time I shed my skin.

I was taken by the secret song the city sings above the sullen bass of cars, lorries, and buses, the percussion of horns, and the ever-present chorus of voices speaking in tongues. I walked beneath rain-trees, angsana, cempaka, and semarak api trees at night with the bravery of the young. I was in love with the orange light of street lamps and the mystery of stories that could be found in the dark places beyond the circle of sickly illumination.

I shed the skin of fear that kept me caged in fluorescent-lit rooms to read my books and paint my dreams.

The superstitions of Kuala Lumpur revolve around trees, transients, strays, and politicians. These days the politicians have stolen the limelight from the vengeful owl-sisters. The owls who were beautiful women who were actually the langsuir or the pontianak, waiting to possess you from within and to drain you of your life's blood. They say if you catch her and plant a nail in the back of her neck, she will transform into a beautiful woman, and you can then take her as your wife.

If you hear a keening sound late at night, do not go out and do not look. Do not turn.

I knew all these things but I walked all the same. I had the bravery of one newly moulted, and besides, did they not only appear to men?

If you plant a nail at the back of her neck, she will do your bidding, give birth to your children, but do not take her dancing. Do not take her where the music drives her wild. She will run back into the hutan rimba, with your soul, with your lifeblood. Kuala Lumpur is a city that is also a secret forest, sebab itulah the roads will always change with signs like mutant fungi.

I shed my skin the third time far away from here. I had already met you after the second moulting. By then, the new skin had become old skin, several inches thick, and I was buried within a fortress of found memories.

You could not see underneath my skin and I could not blame you. I could not see myself as well. It is hard to see when your skin keeps growing; growing so thickly that it obstructs true vision, both inward and outward.

The skin would not allow me to know you, nor would it allow you to know me.

I ran away to another world, I forgot your existence. I shed my skin, and when the new-skin was newly birthed, I shuddered in the recollections of all that was visited upon me before I shed my skin.

I danced underneath fig and frangipani trees in the upside-down land of the Dreaming. I sang songs to the unseen ladies who clustered in the branches above, knowing them as sisters to the hosts I left behind. I painted paper lanterns which I paraded saucily in thin white nightgowns on forgotten lawns, dreaming the Dreams of one newly-birthed.

That is the bravado of new skin for you.



I saw you again upon my return to the rain-trees and the ever-present threat of vengeful owl-sisters perched on their branches. I bumped into you when that skin was not yet too thick, nor yet too tender, but I could not let you in. I never could, at any rate. You were not meant to know me. Not when the music plays, never when the music stops. You cannot catch me when the music plays, and I will leave long before the trail of music ends. You cannot catch me before I disappear into the woods. The skin that had hardened was a different skin.



Every time you shed your skin, the new skin is different. Stronger, more pliant, sometimes more fragile.



I am newly moulted.



Kulit ini rasa lain-lah. It is almost, but not quite unblemished with the scars of past trauma. It is soft, and feels too much. Kulit ini makes me lighter of heart and of feet. Kulit ini allows me to feel everything and makes me desirous of climbing those trees I danced beneath.

Kulit ini wants me to be foolhardy and brave yet again.

Kulit ini fears the darkness of the shadows beyond the penumbra of flickering street lamps, but has renewed curiosity of the stories that nestle there.

Takut, tetapi berani.

Kulit ini boleh dengar the unholy cries at three a.m. in the morning and recognize them for what they are. Kulit ini has hairs so fine and so sensitive they tremble the insides with the fear of what's to come, because there's so much more to lose.

Kulit ini does not obstruct vision, because it is translucent. I can now see the kulit that others wear around their bodies, sometimes covering their eyes, their ears, their nose, their mouth. I can see where piles of kulit have been shed.

I can hear music that plays all of the time, everywhere. This music travels within veins and pulses in-between platelets.

Irama yang kadangkala merdu, kadangkala nyaring dan selalu, oh selalu ngeri!



This fourth skin is different. This skin wants to know you better. This skin wants to dive inside you, not to eat your soul but to nestle, to find your hidden stories and your unsung songs. This skin wants to belong to you. This skin wants to stand by your side.

This skin is afraid of you, because it is too new and too sensitive.

You were not meant to know me, nor can you be allowed to drive a nail in the back of my neck. You were not meant to possess me and all of my skins.

I will only run away again when the music drives me wild.