

Prologue: Delirium

*from Aruna and Her Palate*¹

Her name is Aruna, her age thirty-five and, since I'm not the most reliable of storytellers, you may want to rely on your own judgment as to her provenance, for from the name you may think her of Indian descent, though her *wayang*-puppet face suggests she may be Javanese, perhaps Sundanese, or even Balinese for all you know, and being any of those things doesn't mean you can't still have some Indian blood in you, and even though she isn't fat like Meh, world-class lover of doughnuts, or Cho, champion sucker for rice, she is plainly someone who is, like most women I know, torn between keeping a reasonably feminine figure and indulging her healthy appetite; and when I say healthy I mean this in the most objective, life-improving way, not in that nasty, double-entendre way you tend to reserve for people you secretly don't like, which makes her, all things considered, *plump* – yes, that's the word, that's what people call women who are neither thin nor overweight but nonetheless of a somewhat pleasant shape – and even if you are tempted to use the same word to describe, say, Koh Abun's famed roast duck, served in the bowels of Jakarta's Chinatown, or certain dried fruits after they are stewed, don't say it in the same breath; what I can tell you for certain is that she possesses an unusually observant eye; she takes note of everything, or if not everything then most things, and this makes her reticence a tad more acceptable in the notoriously catty social circles of Jakarta because, like it or not, there are not that many people in this world who are knowledgeable yet make no attempt to show it off, and even though you may discern something miserly, if not a little cruel, about her, a quality often acquired by those who have been forced to become an adult before their time, people are quietly attracted to her, or rather, to her persona, or even more, to that rare person for whom the act of talking requires much pause and consideration, which sounds like a contradiction but in fact isn't, because time does what it does, asking you to pay for its services, and often at exorbitant rates you have no time for; and that's not all, time is also snobby and inconsiderate, and it can upset or turn fickle the very thing it touches, causing commodities such as soybeans, chillies and garlic to vanish overnight from the market – just as the citizens of this big and broken city had witnessed at least twice that year – producing an often instant and crushing effect, such as rendering eating suddenly less pleasurable, our tongue

¹ *The Birdoman's Palate*, translated by Tiffany Tsao from the author's second novel, *Aruna dan Lidahnya* (Gramedia Pustaka Utama: Jakarta, 2014), was published in the US in 2018 by Amazon Crossing. The same excerpt of the prologue, "Delirium," was published in *Asia Literary Review* 29, Autumn 2015.

curiously shallow, our vocabulary even more curiously drained (no longer do you hear exclamations of “Yummy!”, “Divine!” or that ubiquitous phrase “*Mak nyus*”); in fact we become so shorn that we are no different from, say, an empty shotgun, or a bird that cannot sing; but such is time, dear reader, it is adept, above all, at playing favorites; it avails, more often than not, the wealthy or, in other words, those who don’t have much use for time because they rarely have to work (because they’re already rich) and thus have plenty of time on their hands in order to invent other uses for their time, which on average costs triple the amount people with no time on their hands are usually willing to pay, and I suspect this is why she, Aruna, who has little facility for any kind of flourish, but to whom such notions as courtesy and compliance are still important, has long decided that she will only spend what little time she has on things that make her happy, and to be fair, at her age such a desire is not as mystifying as it sounds, especially since those who don’t talk much are often perceived as unhappy, and being perceived as unhappy, especially at her age, is increasingly not a very nice place to be, if not downright insulting, bordering on unfair, because what is being implied is a weakness of will, a vulnerable soul, a – God forbid – *lack of personality*, whereas she is in fact completely the opposite, or so she thinks, because how could she not possess a winning personality if the only thing that makes her truly happy is food, the one thing we know is never the same thing to you and me – honey to you, poison to me, cum to you, death to me – but the one thing that to her, Aruna, is the molasses that binds all of life’s morsels, defines all knowledge, a universe formed long ago, before music, before poetry, before image, that deepest and earliest connection with the world before all turns cruddy and senseless, and one which morning, noon and night fills her head, fills and cushions, as if she were blessed with the ideal lover and the ideal husband at once, *inamorato* and father substitute, two things that she incidentally doesn’t have (because she has no time, is that not so, for things that make her unhappy?), bears her away from work, from family, from other duties, probes the insides of her brain instead for a sliver of an image, a burst of flavour, a speck of color, take the fine white strings of carbs that form a bowlful of duck vermicelli soup in the food stalls of Muara Karang, say, or a set of questions, best unanswered, regarding the sorts of emotions that may have gone, unwittingly or otherwise, into the unsurpassed texture of Bu Amah’s *nasi uduk* – is it jealousy, guilt, self-sacrifice or unrequited love? – and relentlessly plans culinary tours from one city to the next, starting with a plate of *rujak juhi* and ending with a slice of *roti kaya*, or starting with a nutty salad of *ketoprak* and ending with a steaming platter of *lindung cah fumak*, such that when other people are busy discussing stock market averages, zombie firms and ghostly banks, the fluctuations of the property market, new evidence in the latest mega-corruption scandal,

the mysterious death of the wife of the Tanah Abang mobster boss, the pros and cons of decentralization, climate change, paedophilia in schools, the rivalry between hospitals, public road and work place safety, who's better, Messi or Ronaldo, Barca or Real Madrid, she is busy thinking, in almost embarrassing detail, about the affinity the zucchini shares with salt and olive oil, or the aubergine's undying love for garlic and chilli paste, or accumulating seemingly useless fact-nuggets about food which, if tossed occasionally, and ever so casually, into the innately problematic mix that is the dinner table, can make the tosser seem more interesting than she really is ("Roasting teaches you most of what you need to know about the meat you're dealing with."); "Meat must rest after roasting to preserve its juiciness. How long? It depends on the meat."; "Venison – ah. It's the one meat you should neither overcook nor over-rest. Or else you will drain it off its juices. The meat will be tough and dry, the taste bland. Its fibres cannot absorb and hold liquids that long."), and it is such tiny tantalizing thoughts that can fill her with a sudden sense of purpose and send her off on a supermarket spree, buying three types of granola and three types of salsa because she can't be bothered to choose between them, or cooking the same pasta recipe over and over again until she arrives at breadcrumbs of the best consistency to sprinkle upon the pasta; thoughts that, if we are honest with ourselves, make us happy because they are not just about us, they are, rather, about everything else that lies outside us, for isn't that precisely the point, talking or thinking about food is never just about food, it is often the best way to write about everything else as it seems to codify and conceal all manner of needs – absolution, recognition, love, revenge, fear of abandonment, fear of rejection, sex, lack of sex, same sex, lots of sex, no sex – and so in the end we can always say: ah, but doesn't the city look different, with the aroma of this wicked garlicky broth swimming in my head, or, I don't fucking care if this city, with its eternal stench and cheap shimmer, its homeless poor and its filthy rich, is cursed to hell, I'd still rather live here than anywhere else, I'll *die* if I don't have access to proper *sambal* for more than three days, and it is at such a moment of reckoning that the city does cease, as if by magic, to look like the city you've learned to hate yet cannot leave, because to leave it is to remove a chunk of yourself, a chunk that, like a tree, is only known to the soil that gives it life, a city that nonetheless sanctifies all corruption and deems impure those who are honest about their lack of religiosity, a city that chokes on its own smoke and carbon dioxide for a living, a city that wrecks all that you've learned in your sleep with its nosiness and insomnia and puts you on trial every day for crimes imagined and foretold, for hopes firmed and frayed, a city that for all its sins knows how to keep secrets, including yours, so much so that she too, Aruna, as staunch a realist in specific matters such as love and marriage (or, more aptly, the impossibility of the two) as she is a peaceable student of the dream world,

allows herself to put her faith in different lights, secret alchemies, folk story and heresy, imagining herself on the back of a giant dragon, riding joyously into the mist while the un-dead and the ghosts of her past cheer her on, the holy and the damned, touching all the loved things she can finally touch and know, seeking first-hand, as is her wont, the taste of two whites, one from cauliflower the other from squid – the crowning glory, she was told, of a certain restaurant in the heart of London, and how the two can magically blend and produce what a certain English critic calls, not unbeautifully, a “new purity;” or what possesses, for that matter, the French, so scrupulously seasoned in the art of pleasure, to be waving their tinned anchovy at us and calling it *umami* while hundreds of small streets in Tokyo in which the secrets of the fifth sense have resided, modestly and unobtrusively, for centuries, or how a piece of fried egg in a modern tapas bar in New York comes to cost four times its more modest version in a market in Barcelona and ten times the version the average person whips up to feed herself, whose quieter fame may come, in Aruna’s rather special case, from the use of real butter, fresh and creamy and not your average Blue Band margarine, thanks very much, and from her patient insistence on not letting the middle part crack and the edges burn, because such is the principle of egg-making – consistency is key, there has to be a standard, and even though we can play around with food, substituting peppercorn with nutmeg, tamarind with *belimbing wuluh*, peanuts with cashew nuts, we know ginger is ginger, turmeric is turmeric, lemongrass is lemongrass, each a republic of its own, just as we know that each egg dish that comes out of a person’s hands, poached, boiled, fried or scrambled, will never be the same, just as every performance is final, it can never be repeated, and in the end it is this, the damning finality of it all, that more or less defines us as a person – what kind of people are we, Puritan or liberal, dogmatic or flexible? Which do we like better, Kudus-style *soto* or Lamongan-style *soto*, the Padang food at the restaurant chain Sari Ratu or Sari Bundo? – thus steering some of us, like Aruna, onto the enlightening path of Food, because isn’t it quite simple, really: Food demands neither observance nor allegiance, is neither vicious nor jealous; it possesses no clear theology, it doesn’t ask you to perform animal sacrifice, wear a headscarf, offer incense and recite sacred texts, it doesn’t denounce lovers of other menus and call them profane, it celebrates all the senses rather than tough-mindedness, it borrows and absorbs from here and there, it accepts the transient and the dissonant, eludes singular definition, and occasionally serves up a slice of heaven on a plate, and so this is how her love comes about, her love of Food and everything that has to do with it, the kitchens that produce it, the recipe scribes that immortalize it, the chefs that create it, the restaurateurs that institutionalize it, the table attendants that serve it, the food lovers that savour it, the critics that assess it, the food writers that celebrate it, and she,

Aruna, increasingly finds that she can only live among those people, people who can catch the gingery scent of *wedang* from afar, who can pick up the seventh aroma in a glass of red wine, who can tell from the texture of coconut cream whether it comes from an old or a young coconut, who go ape over the different varieties of wild honey, who know how to choose an apple and what grape varietal is best paired with sticky rice, mango and coconut cream, who see a poster of Macedonia and think not of poverty and a long drought, but instead, a bowlful of salad filled to the brim with cucumber and tomatoes as plump as cherubs, who hear the word “Venice” and imagine not water lapping at their legs and knees, but instead the bustle of the Rialto Market, with its small boats piled high with seafood and vegetables, punctuated by opalescent flashes of fish and molluscs of every kind, who know that they are happy when their tongues caress *pandan* and palm sugar, when their noses take in the sticky, sultry scent of *gulai* curry, when their throats and cheeks shiver at the enfolding warmth of milky carp soup, people who live to eat and in so doing chance on finding optimism, hope, magic, a succulent recipe, an unforgettable restaurant, a delicious fuck, sweet-smelling nights that open up worlds of half-dream, people like Bono, a.k.a. Johannes Bonafide Natalegawa, a talented young chef who has done time at some impressive kitchens in America, and precisely because he’s young and talented and has done time at some impressive kitchens in America, he’s also the most infuriating guy in the world, and Nadezhda, yes, that’s her name, not the baby version of Nadia, or Nadya, or Nadja, but Nadezhda, and that’s how you should say it, fully, roundly, broadly, as if you are coddling a liquor-soaked, Alpine-bred apricot in your mouth, Na-DEZH-da, contributor to a lifestyle magazine, super-beautiful, impossibly chic and a writer of countless articles on restaurants around the world, and because of that thinks herself the most cultured, the most extraordinary of all creatures; creatures, in other words, who make her, Aruna, happy, who loosen her tongue, light up her hearth, breathe life into her words, and with whom she can sit down at a table and eat anything, anywhere, anytime, in the way you can only do with friends and not a partner, because friends know not to hope too much and know how to love without tying you to a life sentence, and know how to return her, Aruna, into her own aloneness, an aloneness that returns her, ultimately, to Food, and *that*, dear reader, that existence is to her the summit of man’s value, and, because every story, in the end, craves a subject and a lead, it is in such a spirit that this story is told, with Food as subject and her in the leading role, and with everything emanating from a small office in a corner of Jakarta, in which a great many things are decided and in due course change her life.

