

Karim Kattan

**A LULLABY  
FOR  
MOONBEAMS**

## *Here After*

6 January - 13 February 2022

Curated with Karim Sultan

This piece, *A Lullaby for Moonbeams*, is an original work of short fiction by Karim Kattan, and was commissioned in November 2021 for the exhibition Here After at the B7L9 Art Station in Tunis. This text is an integral part of the exhibition, whose theme circles around ideas of 'the future', and the challenges it presents.

Original text by Karim Kattan  
Arabic text by Nadine Nour el Din  
Designed by Farah Ghezal

*Bye, bye, bye  
Sun of Elden green  
Bye, bye, bye  
To the king and queen*

*Hi, hi, hi  
Moons of Elden two  
Hi, hi, hi  
Moonbeams pink and blue*

*Hush, hush, hush  
Dip into the stream  
Hush, hush, hush  
What a lovely dream*

Can you hear me? Really? Hello, good evening. I'm so glad you came, inspectors. I suppose you are inspectors, yes? I heard you land. I figured — they're either here to listen to me, or to kill me. About time, either way... Welcome, welcome. I was just whiling the time away... This song is called, I think, "A Lullaby for Moonbeams." I learned it here. Shall I turn on the lights? I am used to living in the dark. Please, have a seat. There are chairs enough for everyone! You've felt already, I trust, in your bones, how tiresome this planet is. Let me have a look at you.

I'm glad you came, inspectors. I know we're a long way from home. I haven't had a proper look at familiar faces in a while. It gets lonely here. The forest outside that window it's...well, it's sort of infinite. I've gotten lost in there more times than I can count. I visit Habib there every other day, when I have the energy to leave the base. Some days I think it's just going to swallow up my little gray house. I apologize for the dust, one does not clean often, when one lives alone like this.

The others? Ah...so, you did not forget us. I remember the day we were dropped off, all five of us. Couldn't believe how fast the ship took off again, back up into the sky, far away from this forsaken planet. A flash, and it was gone, all traces of home vanished. And here we were, alone, on this graveyard of a planet. That was six years ago. To the day, maybe? I'm often tired but I can't manage to sleep much. Did you notice how dark the world is here, at the outer rim? Doesn't it feel that you are at the edge of the universe, that beyond, there is real nothingness? We know that to be untrue, but just look at how dense and compact the darkness is. Pitch. Like suicide.

Sometimes I forget how to speak our language. Where are my manners... Please, make yourselves comfortable. I have some water, some synthetic cheese. Probably a bit of wine we brought with us all this time ago. Let me look. My, my, my. With the lights on, these rooms are very dusty indeed. You know, when I look up where the sky should be, all I see is an onslaught of darkness, coming all the way from Elden, the capital city.

You can see it at the horizon, it's not too far from our base. Those towers, this is where it stood. Elden, they call it, like the planet, like the forest, everything on Elden is Elden and Elden is forever Elden. We used to be five of us. So, there are six rooms in this ramshackle science base. The sixth room was for the inspector who was supposed to come once every six months. Never came. We went offline so fast. Why did no one come?

This is my room, over there, and those are my notes, yes. I like the window above my bed. It's shaped like a porthole, see, and when you look out from it, you can see the moor, purple, and beyond it the forest, infinite, and in the middle the city with its huge, yellow towers like dust, and above us all this black sky of the end of the universe. There is an island to the east. It is also called Elden. There, you stop hearing the voices. Yes, the voices, inspectors. I suppose this is why you're here.

You know, I remember vividly our first days here. We were excited, this planet was like a playground. We were far away, and alone, but there was so much possibility. I remember there used to be a sun, then — where has it gone since? Why is it all black all the time?

The excitement. Every night, Habib and I would look out from the porthole here, right here, and gaze at the purple moor and beyond it the forest forever and wonder at how it breathed in this purple air, the trees inhaling and exhaling, rising and falling. And I would look at the city, knowing that somewhere there lay my destiny. That somewhere, there, in the city, were survivors perhaps, uncontacted people. Emotions unknown, beyond our ken. We were excited, and happy, and I got along with most of my colleagues. Marcia, Lav. They provided a sense of safety, Marcia with her no-nonsense doctor's instincts. And Lavinia, who was like a mountain, her laughter the comforting embrace of the foundations of the earth. Habib, of course, is the one I miss the most. He had a softness, and his face was so angelic that it was impossible to imagine anything bad could happen to him. It is hard for me to talk about this. I even got along with Sifa. Yes, even him, despite our differences. It was a period of grace, those first days at the end of the world. We felt like intrepid explorers. Habib spent most of his days in my room, on my bed, writing out what he could of the languages of Elden.

Then, we started to hear the voices.

I often think about it. How things came to be the way they are. On the fifth day, or the sixth, I woke up as if haunted. Voices, voices, voices in my head, a thousand, a billion voices. All the dead, here, in my head. I panicked. I went to Habib. He wasn't in his room. I rushed to Lav. She was sitting up in her bed, her gaze lost in space, softly banging her head against the wall. "Can you hear it?" she asked me. What is this noise, where does it come from? Have you seen Habib?

Sifa was in the kitchen, sitting right here where you are, inspector, and he said he heard moans and whining, giggles, echoes of pleasures. Marcia was in her room, at her desk, silent, her wan face withdrawn. She couldn't hear me. I looked for Habib, growing more and more frantic. I found him outside, sitting by the tree (you can see it from the window, here, that tree over there, though back then it was colorful). He was smiling, as if listening to a joke. I sat next to him and hugged him until I started sobbing. "There are voices in my head, Habib," I told him. Me too, he said. I told him I heard songs. Unbearable songs, a thousand laments and dirges and lullabies in my head. "I'm going to die," I said. Habib stayed silent.

I really thought I would die. For weeks I thought I would never stand it. There was no respite, not one instant where the voices stopped. We would fall asleep when we were exhausted, and only for a few hours. And my dreams are all the voices. I never got used to it, but after a few weeks, I trained myself to single out some of the singing, to drown out the rest. The voices spoke in a variety of languages, that seemed to be dialects of each other, and that none of us understood. Habib was a linguist, he'd studied many languages cognate with Eldenian dialects, from nearby planets, and he started deciphering them.

You'll excuse me if I turn off the lights again. I think Marcia was the one to have figured this out. She was quick and smart, that Marcia. The voices grow stronger, the memories more lifelike, when we were surrounded by artificial light. I feel better now. I think I can light a candle. It should be alright. I am tired. I wonder, sometimes, about my family back home.

The voices and memories of Elden have taken over my mind and erased a lot of myself, but I remember, yes, that I had a family. There was a house, somewhere, by the sea, and also — friendly faces, smiles, sunlight on my skin.

Thank God for Marcia. She is also the one who first went off to Elden, the woods, and Elden, the capital. You know, Elden was a city-planet, one of those unsustainable fantasies of times past. Celebrated in the quadrant for its enchanting flora and fauna, and magical multicolored springs. That was the antiquity of Elden, before the calamity struck. Lav and Sifa, diligent as ever, divided the sleeping pills we had between all of us. This helped, the first month. After, even those proved to be useless.

Marcia and Lav suggested we look for cemeteries. It was a desperate bid to destroy the voices. Lav thought the souls of all Eldenians, were desecrated somehow, or their memories befouled, something in their very being contaminated. And so, their souls are here crowded, huddled, somewhere in the atmosphere or in the core of the planet or in the roots of the trees or the stones of the city. We had to liberate them, to free ourselves.

The capital looked like a forsaken city-planet from one of those pulp epics. Towers yellow as dust, our footsteps echoing in the streets. Empty hallways and empty avenues and everything crumbling, overcome with vegetation, and the voices of all the dead. A mausoleum the size of a continent. The planet is resonant with the memory of the past, and it needed an outlet. It has been floating alone and bereft, plagued with souls, for millennia.



Then we came. Soon, the voices also became memories. Each voice remembered, recounted its past, lived it again, over and over, in our minds. The planet itself, alive with its own pain, was pouring all the memories of all its dead in our brains. We were only five. Only five, to handle the charge of billions of lives. Sifa went off the handle fast. He was arrogant, you know, in that way people who believe everything will work out for them can be. A few months after we started hearing the voices, we awoke in the middle of the night, and there was Sifa in the kitchen, thrashing around, howling, howling, a knife in his hand, blood everywhere. He was yelling, "I can't take it anymore!" Lav rushed to him. "I tried to bleed them out, Lav, I tried to bleed them out." We couldn't stop him. He was the biggest and strongest of us all, stronger than Lav. He ran out in the night. We stood, all aghast. We heard a bang, echoing somewhere in the purple and blue landscape of Elden. We were terrified. Habib took my hand. Marcia and Lav went out to look for him. Habib and I stood there. They came back after what felt like hours. Never found him. As if he had vanished.

My job here? My job. I forget, sorry, it's been so long. Yes. I was a cartographer of emotions, a specialist of emotional archeology. Don't chuckle, inspectors. I was here mapping the mind of Elden. Sifa thought it was idiotic, too. He was a biologist. On our way here from our planet, he kept rolling his eyes at everything I said, when I explained what I did. But it's the most thrilling thing. I map emotions. I excavate what people saw, how they lived, what they believed, what shape and colors their hopes had. I then draw emotional landscapes of individuals, nations, planets. I attempt cartographies of these forgotten people. So that something,

their flicker, remains. When I get to it, when I discover the one ruling principle, the one major emotion upon which they have built their whole country, planet, existence, whatever it is, I feel a pleasure that is just — sexual, yes. The first thing I look at are the bones. You can tell a lot about someone from their bones. It's not, as you say, rocket science. I use a scanner, and observe the lines on the screen, shaping and rearranging themselves in colors and archipelagos of information and emotion. I have my scanner here. I was unable to use it. Like most of our instruments, it just stopped working.

We came here to understand how they had disappeared. The mysterious disappearance of Elden, thousands of years ago. Scientists back home were stumped. You know how hard it is to travel all the way here, and why everyone seems to give up right before the start of the expedition. Why did this civilization vanish? A result of a plague that came to them from the stars? Of interplanetary warfare, or, worse yet, some horrifying interspecies genocide? Their own hubris? Which of the usual reasons that spells out doom for a people was it? We don't know. We only know that one day they were here, and the next day there were not. We had come to figure out their demise; to identify it, to keep ourselves from coming to this end. To excise the rot that started spreading here in Elden to the rest of the galaxy. The rot... There are but a few colors, here: grey, and purple, and dark blue, and dust. Colors of grief, a whole planet mourning. It wails at night. Sometimes the voices stop, completely, and are replaced by the wailing of Elden. Have you ever heard a planet wail? It is unbearable. On days and nights like these, I am tempted to die. Why did no one come before? Why did you leave us here?

The songs...? Depressing stuff, songs about falling asleep and interspecies love affairs that end in death, and prophecies of planets crashing, of stars exploding, of Old Elden and Darkest Elden. All sung in elderly voices, on death's precipice, all excruciating and sad, and dull. I've been writing them down. Here you can find them, this stack, my translations. This is my life's work on Elden. I trained myself, as I said, to isolate the singing voices. And I've been recording song after song. Shall I sing you one? It's been six years, inspectors, if I focus, I manage to shut down the voices for a bit. Long enough to sing. Time makes everything survivable. This is what I was doing when you came.

Listen. Let the darkness come. A dirge from Elden Island, for widowers.

*My love has gone away,  
Into the purple darkness  
My love has gone away,  
Into the breathing forest  
My love has crossed the water,  
My love has crossed the land,  
My love has gone away,  
To the lands east of east,  
Beyond the water, beyond the forest,  
Beyond the city,  
Far away, to Darkest Elden,  
My love has gone,  
My love has gone...*

Notice, inspectors, the song mentions a Darkest Elden, a land of the dead often mentioned in song, that is different from this Elden, the land of the living. And yet, now, here, the sun never shines. Perhaps this is Darkest Elden... I digress. After Sifa killed himself, it hit us all: there was going to be no end to this, unless we fled the planet. We all agreed that we should use the emergency escape shuttle which we hoped would at least fly us to the nearest station in a matter of weeks. I remember. We walked towards it, and already we felt relief. Lightheaded. I could already imagine the voices growing silent as we broke the stratosphere and then, I giddily hoped, we would be beyond the malevolent rumble of this planet. No need to tell you what you already know: the ship was destroyed, as if the resonance of the planet, its field, what have you, had corrupted it. We couldn't even send a signal out. We were stuck. We came back here. This was the last time I felt hope. Habib came into my room that night. He sat in a corner, rocking back and forth. It wasn't much later that he roamed off into the woods, one night. I went after him the next morning when I noticed the note he left me. Looked for him days and days. I would set out in the morning and roam the woods until nightfall. Crying, whispering, calling out, Habib, Habib, Habib, my beloved.

He was gone. We were left even lonelier than before. Marcia, Lav, and me. In the morning we would go out in the woods and walk until we were exhausted. When we were truly at the end of our rope, often the voices would calm down, subside, become faint whispers, like tinnitus. We walked and walked, explored everything there is to find here. Often, we went to the city. Marcia said we might find something, anything. Eldenians were a spacefaring civilization, something must be left, she believed.

She was resourceful. Like Sifa, she truly did believe that things could work out. It was beyond her imagination, to think that we were trapped in the nightmare of a ruined civilization, on a blighted planet, with no way out. When I look up where the sky should be, all I see is ... I think the Eldenians practiced some form of black magic, maybe worshipped dark gods, unimaginable beasts that rumble in the earth. They are the ones I hear wailing, feeding on the souls. This is why they are trapped here, and us too. At the mercy of the beasts.

I'm lucky, I guess, to be visited by song. Habib never confessed what he heard, but it pained him. Marcia remembered horrors, lived them all as if they had been her own, pain, torture, cruelty. Her eyes haunted by fires. She awoke and fell asleep with the sounds of sadistic laughter, of sneers, and of pleas for mercy. Lav heard every instant of death any Eldenian had every experienced. She heard all the gasps, sighs, cries, stunned silences, drooling prayers. The moment where the soul just — whoosh — escapes the body. When we give up the ghost. Oh inspectors, you chuckle again, but I've started believing in the soul again here on Elden. Anyway. Where was I... Let me tell you. We did have some reprieve. On this windswept island, at the far east of the forest. Elden, it was called, too. Elden island. Lav was the first to go there, alone. Never came back. That was the third year. Six months later, I set out to Elden myself. Found her, her mountain of a body crumpled right there on the beach. I hope she enjoyed the silence until the end. When I look up where the sky should be, all I see is ... static. I think I am haunted by song, and not by anything worse whispers of doom or cries of pain, because I am weak. I am the weakest of them all.

I wish I could have stayed on the island, but I had to come back to the base. There was no food, no shelter, nothing, there. Lav surely would have known how to survive a bit, but me? I draw maps. That is all I do. And I wanted to be close to Habib, to that glade in the forest where, I knew, his soul was trapped. So, I came back. As soon as I left the island, the singing started again.

When I look up where the sky should be... Shall I sing a love song?  
This I only hear when I visit the city.

Listen, to the lights of Elden.

*Like a resplendent light  
on High Bridge  
Your face brightens my nights.  
Even a thousand years hence  
The memories of those sweet summer evenings  
Under lanterns red, yellow, and blue  
Watching purple boats leave the harbor  
With you by my side  
Even a thousand years hence  
Never shall I....*

...

... I am tired. Sifa died on the moor, a hole in the back of his head. Marcia died in the city. She hung herself. I remember finding her body, swinging softly, a splash of color in this the dust-colored ruins. Lavinia died on the island. I trust, in peace. Habib died in the forest. Did I tell you how I found his body, his mangled remains, and his face ravaged beyond belief? They died years ago, all of them, but their souls are here.

I am not dead, because I do not want to be trapped here. I was waiting for you. I'm so glad you came, inspectors. Please take me away from here, so I can die in peace. But I am tired, I think I should rest before I die. Yes, yes, I think it's time for me to sleep for a bit.

When I look up where the sky should be, all I see... ah, inspectors. Good night, good night, moonbeams pink and blue. I see only the shadows at the edge of the world.

