

*My Malay Sun Poems*  
from  
Perhentian Besar  
("Big Island")  
and  
Kuala Lumpur

by

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Silent breakfast  
hardboiled egg  
soft yellow, orange shades  
in the cooked yolk

squirrel hops through  
pine tree on beach  
in my sight  
then it is

in my writing  
my moment  
coffee like crude oil  
over ice

Dunhill rising,  
but cigarettes only  
on vacation,  
eating fresh papaya

watermelon  
and honeydew  
banana cut  
like tiny coins

kitten in the kitchen  
drowsing on a crate  
two mosquitoes die  
as I clap them

trying to control  
this much

Light rain on Big Perhentian,  
conductor just touching  
the violins to go softly

morning 7 a.m.  
balance the relentless sun  
from body burning

stuck on the island  
no distances to run  
no jogging paths

sit still--  
will it rain long today?  
But I don't mind the muffled rain

because it makes me write,  
see, cleans the world, leaves it  
bright for poetry.

Lightning with rain  
my breakfast table  
cold coffee again

glass ashtray smeared  
with soot, soft rain  
at first, peach fuzz,  
hard rain, full beard

Rain on porch of the café--  
shut the blind to keep  
the rain away  
some water has  
poured on the table  
now the view  
is shut out too

Rain falls straight  
then at slant  
light a cigarette in  
the mist  
under a Malay porch  
smoke goes up,  
drops meet it coming down

Hoping this moisture  
does not stop--  
is the rain  
a man or a woman?  
No matter.  
I only want it to  
keep coming.

Glistening spider in the sky  
web across  
the world's eye

Poetic moments  
have been called  
breath

But writing is  
thinly woven thoughts  
before death

My time is the dream  
of the life I wanted  
to see

Pages of this journal  
fatten in the  
humid beach air

Mother and daughter  
by the sweating ice cream  
freezer, daughter below  
begging to jump up to mother but can't

a man bends to pet the kitten  
then the mother joins them from above  
her paws hitting with a thud  
on the wood floor

as the two calicos parade  
through the café  
the man smiling to the crowd  
because the cats have made his day

Chewing pungent freshly cut  
ginger sticks from the bottom  
of my iced coffee.

A finger digs for more  
crunching bitter sweet  
pieces fill my mouth.

Then the ginger turns  
to pulp  
and so I spit it out.

Aging Malay woman  
white skull cap  
shuffles by

in slippers  
sits, rubs her feet  
stares at me

nods to sleep  
then  
one eye opens

to see me  
write  
of her

Litterbug Monkey

The leash is worth more  
than the monkey, it is said

monkey in front of the toothless,  
milky-blue eyed owner

who jokes with friends  
using a crooked limp finger

trash on beach  
cardboard apple juice

the monkey shakes it,  
tips it upside down,

drinks from the square box,  
darts its head from side to side,

quickly, then tosses the juice box  
back onto the beach.

They  
hover  
doing  
their  
human  
traffic  
reports,  
minute  
kamikaze  
helicopters  
that  
don't  
seem  
to  
learn  
from  
their  
friends  
and  
end  
up  
between  
hands  
like  
capturing  
wrong words

Three cats on the beach  
pass the woman playing  
an untuned piano  
in the dive shop.

Orange, black, white  
cats lie on their sides  
soaking happily  
in the sun.

Three cats on the beach  
feline triangle  
under the honeyed wrong  
notes of distant keys.

Muted rumble throttling  
in the distance,

muffled cocoon,  
my hotel room,

fan whirring  
a mosquito squeaks

into my ear  
crushed by a finger

while the boat grinds  
through the water far away

In the center of an  
intricate white wheel  
stretched between  
the edge of a bungalow roof  
and a tree

sits a black arachnid  
the size of a bat  
hovering in the middle  
of his circular  
tapestry

of sight, archer's target  
spider bull's eye.  
Next day after a hard rain  
arrows vanishing  
through the web.

Cats on the beach don't hiss,  
their beach a heaven of litter,  
sand for miles with  
no box, maybe nuns pray like this  
quiet expanses of silence, all theirs

Tapping a piano key  
like a dying lonely lady

in a Dickens' novel,  
sour sound

lifted to somehow  
become sonorous

without the thought  
of us

Sun burns, pale skin  
cactus body  
pain within

Skin peels  
freckles dot  
shoulders

I am aging  
more these days  
by myself here--

poetry my  
companion,  
prosodic lover,

free  
form  
mistress

Hammering is a  
distant clicking metronome  
fixing an outboard motor  
stuck in sand  
rhythm of  
the relaxing,  
tapping musical  
cadence  
with no  
band there

Sunbathing

Red ants under  
my eyes  
scurry around  
like veins

in bloodshot eyes  
our trisected boys  
our mobile  
insect triptychs

Even the litter  
here  
seems  
    in place  
indifferent  
            no signs telling  
it to go  
                    no do-gooders poking it,  
or putting it in bags,  
                    just cans  
            plastic bottles  
cigarette packages  
            under trees  
                    way back from the shore  
            none on the sand  
  
for some reason  
as if it knows not  
to push its limits

There are only small waves  
and the sand is like clay

no wasps from the sea  
coming to sting me

a place of dream,  
invisible water,

one hour cab ride  
in Kuala Lumpur

one hour plane ride  
one more hour cab ride

to the jetty  
one hour boat ride

grasp this place, son,  
it will soon flee behind you

in just days  
so lift up your eyes

for now, gaze,  
boy, gaze

Hammock  
netted blue  
camouflaged

'neath a pine  
litter in its purlieus  
hiding from sleepers,

sagging  
wants to be alone  
and empty

An oval face  
brown and fair

in white head scarf  
waits on me

I say, Coffee, black.  
A small nod of some

recognition.  
No milk or sugar, I add.

Plain, she says, nodding  
faster, getting it now.

I rise from the dolphin  
blue water

salt  
in eyes

fall  
to my

abrasive  
hotel towel

where a drop  
of salt water

slaps  
this page

Tiny fish  
translucent below

stealthy small  
submarines

only eyes seen  
from above

disembodied sight  
little pairs

of eyes  
float under

the surface  
constellated dots

watching me  
coldly

as the  
stars

I did some sprints in the sun  
(I think I did seven of them)

Body poured sweat from my skin  
I waded a second, then jumped in

Three Chinese girls in  
white face paint  
theater of makeup  
starlets on the porch  
of a bungalow  
at dusk smoking

cigarettes, gossiping  
after playing long  
in the sea  
divas in the  
dressing room  
discussing the show

No cars or roads  
only maroon shacks on  
cinder blocks

sounds of Malay  
soft chatter  
groups of tourists

cackle like geese  
a girl cries  
her mother runs

to her  
in flip-flops  
while a pinwheel

of many colors  
pink yellow red blue  
spins by a child's

plastic tricycle--  
small blue shovel  
at foot of water

left by a child  
forgotten by a mother  
does the tool

stay  
there or  
wash away?

I see no light in  
the landscape's  
distance,

only sea  
and mountains  
and me

watching  
a perfect  
horizon line

still clouds  
above--bodyguards  
in the air up there

On Government Trail  
you go up the small mountain  
like this: M  
Up, down, up, down

to the island's other side  
where locals laze  
under tent cafés  
with Tex cigarettes for sale

A somber couple  
walks on the beach  
without  
affection

On the hike back  
there is a shrill humming  
and whistling  
together

a black bird  
with white marks  
sees you, caws  
as if talking to you,

follows you while you keep  
thinking the jungle is  
filled with snakes you  
fear but never see

I can tell that  
I will hike again  
on Government Trail.

I  
Kitten sniffs  
a big black suitcase  
of a leaving  
tourist  
jolts back  
as if its small  
nose is shocked  
by some  
electricity

II  
A cat scratches  
claws on a stump  
bowing--praying  
paws to the heavens

III  
Kitten captures  
a mouse,  
gnaws on it  
like a child  
with a jawbreaker

White-pawed friend  
licks bottom of paws  
nearly topples back  
sideways

IV  
Kitten under my chair  
what are you doing  
down there, plops  
down on my bare foot,  
stares up, hello, I say,  
it darts away, and  
suddenly there are two  
on the porch that I see,  
then mother  
licking their heads  
makes three.

V  
Tiny cat rushes under  
table for shelter  
licks back clean

trots on  
determined  
prince of the kittens.

This fly lands on  
the "A" of my

Georges Simenon  
INSPECTOR MAIGRET

novel, crawls over  
to the "S",

maybe it knows  
the rest?

Two young  
Malay boys  
gallop by  
on a tandem  
motorbike  
weaving  
sidewalks  
between  
bungalows,  
they stop  
and rake  
and talk.

I mowed  
lawns  
for old  
ladies  
as a boy  
myself,  
highly  
doubt  
anyone  
wrote a  
poem  
of me.

Walking back from the café  
after chocolate pancakes

and ginger tea  
I find the piano empty

sit and open it  
play some blues, jazz,

some perfect fifths--  
a crowd gathers,

a man asks me where I'm from,  
my son plays sax, he adds,

keep playing please.  
I create on the keys,

find one out-of-tune key  
that I skip at first

then hit with purpose  
as my small audience

of admirers  
grows in the warm night.

(Little do they know  
that I can barely play.)

A toothless man rakes  
sand, combing the hair  
of the beach, his gloved  
hands grasp the rake,  
reach around his feet,  
push and pull the sand,

this man, he stops  
to chat to a café waiter  
who folds his arms  
and listens,  
the rake goes  
in a circle,

he's the center  
of a clock,  
the rake becomes  
a second hand  
soundless swishing  
tick and tock.

Yellow plastic  
rectangle  
with address  
hole for silver hoop,  
key to door of bungalow

sits on my favorite  
café table  
by the empty glass  
of lemon tea--  
from nowhere!

a stunning, thick  
grasshopper  
meaty as a green  
lizard crash lands  
by the lighter

near the pack  
of Dunhill reds  
with one cigarette  
left inside  
upside down, lucky,

it scares me  
with pleasant surprise  
then flies just  
a few feet off  
to hide itself

on a flower stem  
its own green color. . .  
I grab my key  
leave my things  
and nap inside

my cool room . . .  
Hours later  
when I have returned,  
the grasshopper  
has not moved.

Synchronized  
twirlers of

the oars  
two people

floating  
along

drill team  
girls with flags

cheering the  
game on,

the blue sea  
under them

just  
sliding by

In skeleton suit  
it flutters by  
black and white  
dressed for  
trick or  
treat  
the  
wings  
bounce  
lightly  
through the  
air, the softest  
glider of them all

Landing with the  
gentleness of  
breath on a  
strand of  
lights  
it  
just  
stays  
there for  
one moment  
or two and then  
makes delicate flight

The road is a small one  
interstate on a tree  
a limb for all ants  
in their linear traffic  
jam; they are, however,  
quite polite and remain  
in single file moving along  
like their famous marching song  
silent, no horns, all the while,  
never crashing into a pile.

Petite lavender flyers  
day time dotters of the air  
spots of purple motion  
floating dandelion wisps.

around in circles everywhere--  
ideas in my head flicker  
this way and I wonder at  
how they so quickly fade.

Two children,  
Malay girls, sit  
on a table,  
one in a sarong,

the other  
collecting  
plastic bottle caps,  
blue and white.

The sarong turns  
into a blanket,  
and she takes  
herself a nap,

caps of bottles  
clicking like  
checkers before  
a match.

Some boys in  
backward  
baseball caps  
cut limbs  
from a  
coconut tree,

filling a cart,  
they will push  
together  
across  
the sidewalk.

That tree is filled  
with sultan fans,  
green nuts  
like clusters,  
gargantuan  
grapes.

Around its trunk a  
metal belt  
wrapped around,  
and one boy slaps it  
with his hat.

He jumps to  
reach up, then  
they push the cart  
away. I quickly  
sit and write  
what I have just seen

wondering what  
the poem will mean,  
but I've seen that it  
comes to not too much,  
an ordinary scene.

I should not really  
count my poems  
but my pen has lost  
its ink.

At the gift shop  
I find a new one,  
just 2.00 ringgit,  
but no cashier.

I begin to flip  
back in this book  
to see how much  
I wrote, but

before I finish  
counting, she comes  
back and I pay,  
and then return

to writing poems,  
thinking I will count them  
all some other time,  
just not today.

The grasshopper is the insect writer,  
it inks right on your hand--splotch  
of language, written from the mouth.

## The Sharks Fear Me

Past  
the  
point  
mask  
suctioned  
to  
face,  
snorkel  
filling  
with  
salt  
water,  
dogs  
and  
parrots,  
then  
three  
black  
tips  
circle  
us,  
sharks  
very  
close

to me. The guide  
from Maldives said,  
"Oactually, dey are  
more afraid of you  
dan you are of dem."  
How do you measure  
fear? The guide  
points at the black  
tips underwater, as  
we float, the sharks  
go by,  
underwater  
bouncers.

Lunch at a table  
legs sinking in the sand  
plastic chair  
tenuous on the ground.

Open-air café  
on the beach  
baby on a table  
lying on its back.

Orange cat pandiculates  
waiter with no shirt,  
old man islander  
braided hair

long white beard  
takes our orders silently.  
Watch the eagle  
float above,

wings yellow  
as it moves  
gliding slowly  
too hot to flap.

Sip the mango shake  
Chicken fried rice comes  
Books for rent at the  
cashier. 23.00 ringgit.

Head back up  
the beach  
hot, hot afternoon,  
don't go away too soon

Guest at the Dive Shop

Defying gravity  
velcro lizard  
vanilla and  
beige scurries  
down inside  
a corner  
just like  
water rolls  
down a  
drain pipe  
and disappears  
into a  
hole at  
the bottom.

Ode on an Empty Swing

Long empty swing  
not moving  
hanging from a branch

by two thick ropes,  
do you hope that someone  
will sit and move

you forward and back again,  
or do you like to be alone,  
like your hammock friend?

Scarf over face  
bent body  
half broom  
swishing  
over the sand

on the porch,  
the broom is  
knocked clean,  
the sweeping  
begins again.

The choir up on Government Trail  
(I am hiking here once again)  
knows only one note,

high-pitched monks droning  
in their canopy temple,  
what they do is not song,

nor whistling but a threnody  
of these, wistful, intense,  
monotone sopranos of the trail

in the forest, never tiring  
of the same meditation,  
no modulation,

blanket of sound,  
sheet of noise,  
white scream.

Visual bugles of lights  
below the ceiling fan  
shout fanfares of brightness  
onto the bed as I write  
alone in my room.

When I wrote this  
on the page with a pen,  
the five lines above  
were in the shape of a fan--  
but now I've had to add

some verses because typing  
is not the same. So I  
really wish you  
could have seen  
that original page.

Lunch Under a Tent  
after the Boat Ride  
Back the Jetty

A young woman cooks  
soup under a yellow steaming  
tent, ladles broth  
into a plastic bag,  
twirls the top, the bag  
spins and closes, is  
sat on the counter  
like a fat baby.

Cab Ride from Jetty to Airport

Caramel cows  
lounging in yards  
like lions

unfinished cinder  
block houses,  
taxi on the left side,

stays in the middle  
passes all,  
chocolate goats

nibble trees,  
a cow looks up  
slowly, motorcycles

with boys ride  
the shoulders,  
colorful laundry

on the lines,  
motorcycles with  
old women,

also one with a man  
and small baby  
in his lap,

vendor with a raw chicken  
for sale on  
side of the road

girls in white pants  
with blue head scarves  
walk by a shop of hanging nets,

to the airport  
bleeding  
sweat.

From My Taxi Window

She stands  
below a tree  
in her yard  
and shades  
her eyes  
to stare into  
the leaves,  
our taxi passes  
her, pretty fast,  
from my window,  
she goes past.

Back in Kuala Lumpur  
after five days  
on Perhentian,  
skin peels as if  
it were onion paper  
on my back.

Three teaspoons  
of Davidoff instant  
coffee, KL Tower  
from my balcony,  
I stare at it  
and sip.

Hop a cab to  
to a hiking trail, my  
birthday, whiskers  
on cabbie's chin like  
sugar crystals  
on a horse's nose.

Voice crackles  
then goes off,  
report of war  
or reading lines  
of poetry, could  
be anything, voice

clicks off, snatches  
of language not  
mine, Malay dispatcher  
speaks static messages,  
sending taxis around KL,  
voice in a box

haikus  
of  
information,  
destinations

I'm lost at the hiking trail,  
FRIM, Forest Research  
Institute Malaysia.

A man pats seat on his  
motorbike, hop on.  
*Terima kasih*, I say,

as he drops me at  
the trail head,  
fuzzy fu manchu wooly

worm oozes down a  
eucalyptus, while  
yellow butterflies

butt heads, tiny  
rams bumping around  
in the air.

Cicadas hiss,  
                  whistle  
like a forgotten  
                  boiling  
                  tea kettle.  
A man sings in the  
                  distance  
                  wailing  
*Oh whoa oh whoa*  
                  *aaaah*  
                  *ooohh.*

Crown Shyness

Bashful trees  
will never meet  
at the top.

Respectful arbors,  
bowing in deference,  
or *maybe* floral snobs?

Crazy Menu at Malay Tea House

Sipping daun jumba  
guava leaf juice  
Malay coffee  
tongkat ali  
ubi jaga, soya

rendang tok perak  
marinated beef in  
shredded coconut milk  
glutinous rice  
wrapped in palas leaf

jackfruit ice cream  
on a stick  
hyssop tea, beremi--  
on the menu says it  
is "known to have

therapeutic uses  
for the brain,  
respiratory, cardio-  
vascular, gastro-  
intestinal and

immune system of  
asthma, insanity,  
and epilepsy."  
(seems like strong tea  
to me)

Contemplating at Malay  
Tea House after Lunch

No mammals here  
only birds,

no people either  
only words

that drip from  
my pen and come

to life, pen  
etching slowly

with artist's  
knife.

Trying to Find a Taxi  
from the Forest

The bamboo snakes  
up side of trees

red ants in four  
segments, not three

up and down a pole,  
eucalypti colors

impressionism  
of trees, green, brown,

tan, striations  
of these, Munch-

painted background  
but no silent shout.

Birthday dinner  
in Kuala Lumpur,  
Arjun questioning  
me about my marriage

to the language, says  
he cannot write, I  
tell him that words,  
for me, are life,

what the tongue  
and hand can do  
together, my moments  
each day filled

with mindful attention  
to things overlooked,  
an homage to time,  
tribute to the sweet

letter of expression,  
but it is only at  
dinner with friends  
that I really come

alive, since alone  
I am merely silent  
with my pen, but then words  
always come back, live again.

After dinner,  
an odiferous  
cheesecake sits  
in the middle of  
the table, durian  
fruit, the smelliest  
of them all, pungent  
sweetness rises  
to my nose, a literally

rotten birthday cake,  
for which I am full  
of thanks, we all  
dip in fingers and  
lick with tongues.  
Tomorrow afternoon  
I must be gone, will  
miss my friends  
who gave me this brief home.

Pantoum:

*Malay Form for Last Malay Day*

50.00 ringgit, how will I spend,  
English breakfast with the ex-pats,  
or perhaps a book at the airport?  
A new journal since this one's almost full?

English brekker with ex-pats,  
no, withered, pink men with cigarettes.  
A new journal seems right though,  
because I still have three planes home.

Old pink men, sad on their stools,  
empty of promise, staring frogs on rocks.  
I have a train to catch in a bit,  
drink some more instant coffee and chat.

Empty of longing, I stare at KL Tower,  
yes, a book at the airport, I feel,  
I have to be on my train at 4:00 p.m.,  
my last 50.00 ringgit, coming to the end.

On the KLIA Express Train  
to the airport, the famous twin,  
bridged towers to my right,  
receding, skin flaking,  
unshaven for a week, 28  
minutes to go, then check  
in and wait, back to email and  
missed calls, and petty nudgers, a  
crowded world, for now though  
a pretty quiet train  
lulling me back, forward.

Halfway to JFK  
the plane goes  
slower now, hovering

over Greenland,  
a long trip that  
needs to end.

A woman elbows  
me after downing  
two red wines.

It will drag on a bit  
more, 3:44, more to fly,  
to land, to customs,

hail a taxi, hit the  
train from Grand Central,  
stare in the distance,

worries returning  
like slow drops of rain  
before a hurricane,

but home is in me,  
calls to me, the last  
walk from Greenwich

train station, sweaty,  
unshowered. My cat meows  
loudly over and over

at my door,  
so I set down my bags,  
bend down to her

to scratch  
under her chin  
and say

how I saw your  
friends on a beach  
that was very far away.