

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.