

IN-SIGHTS
MALAYSIAN POEMS

IN-SIGHTS MALAYSIAN POEMS

compiled and introduced by
Malachi Edwin Vethamani



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Introduction

IN-SIGHTS: Malaysian Poems is a compilation of poems by Malaysians which were either written or translated into the English language. It is probably the first volume of poetry that presents work that has been translated from Bahasa Melayu into English with poems that were originally written in English. The title of the volume, *IN-SIGHTS*, reflects the various pictures the poets paint of Malaysian life: its sights, sounds, smells and scenes.

In a country where homogeneity is often extolled, *IN-SIGHTS* is a celebration in diversity. It is a celebration of the many Malaysian voices that enrich Malaysian literature. These writers bring their cultures and individual beliefs into their poems and share them with us, and the rest of the world. These voices give us a variety of Malaysian perspectives and perceptions.

The publication of an anthology of poems is rare and infrequent in Malaysia. Though there are more opportunities today for poets these opportunities are still few and infrequent. Students in schools do read poems and literature students in universities, as part of their course requirements, also do the same.

IN-SIGHTS is a collection of poems for all readers. It is structured thematically: family, growing up, people, relationships, nature, conservation and landscape. The contributors for this volume of poems are both established and emerging poets. Their voices represent the differing generations, cultures, gender and perspectives.

Muhammad Haji Salleh's *words for father* opens this volume of poems. In a culture where children are expected to be seen and not heard, a child has words for his father. It is the voice of a young man to an aging father: ... it is time to rest now/ to

close your eyes on the world, to feel the luxury of the holidays/ that you never took Comforting words or are they? In the section on "Family", poets portray relationships between the different generations and deal with a number of family-related issues. The poems consider both celebrations and conflicts that family members encounter. This section closes with a dialogue between a grandfather and a grandchild, both considering the other's world in M SHANmughalingam's *Heir Conditioning*.

The section on "Growing Up" presents various portraits of the transition from childhood to adulthood. Shirley Lim's *Hands* and Hilary Tham's *Becoming A Woman* highlight the receiving of maternal wisdom while Bernice Chauly's *Picking Fruit* deals with a child's response to the death of a parent. Muhammad Haji Salleh closes the section with the recollections of childhood in *on a dry bund*.

A number of poems in the next section, "People", dwell on the arduous lives of Malaysians in relation to their occupations - the fishermen, the satay-vendor, the dulang-washer, the farmer and the maid. In many ways, the opening lines in Wong Phui Nam's *For My Amah*, "To most your dying seems distant,/ outside the palings of our cornern" reflect our relationship with these people. Yet, through these poems we get a glimpse of Malaysian lives as they are lived.

In the section on "Relationships", the poets present a range of relationships. Fadzilah Amin, in her poem *Dance*, uses the Malay dance *ronggeng* as a metaphor to describe the nature of the relationship. Cecil Rajendra's *Untitled Poem* examines what love is while Charlene Rajendran in *A Question of Rights* voices some of the concerns related to being single or marrying, for a woman.

The section entitled "Nature" presents both Malaysian

fauna and flora. In *To a Shrub*, Ee Tiang Hong celebrates the bougainvillea and Shirley Lim considers a *Land-Turtle*. Poems in this section also depict the forces of nature that is experienced in Malaysia. Muhammad Haji Salleh's poem *rain* presents the dependence of man on nature for survival.

The last two sections present poems on "Conservation" and "Landscape". The poems in these two sections bring to the readers' attention the need to take charge of one's environment. In both sections, the works of A.Ghafar Ibrahim are visual poems, *cross-word poem* and *The Wall*. These poems show us yet another way of capturing our experiences and our world. Omar Mohd. Noor's *three layers*, closes this section and *IN-SIGHTS*, succinctly portraying the ever-changing Malaysian landscape.

IN-SIGHTS is structured thematically and it merely suggests one reading of the poems. Readers will find other ways of reading the poems and this only goes to ascertain the multiplicity in the reading of any good literary work. Adrian Mitchell (1964) wrote:

Most people ignore most poetry
because
most poetry ignores most people.

IN-SIGHTS, a thematic anthology of Malaysian poetry, is an attempt to bring poetry to more readers and present poetry that considers a variety of people, their experiences and concerns. In so doing, give less cause for ignoring poetry.

Malachi Edwin Vethamani
University Putra Malaysia
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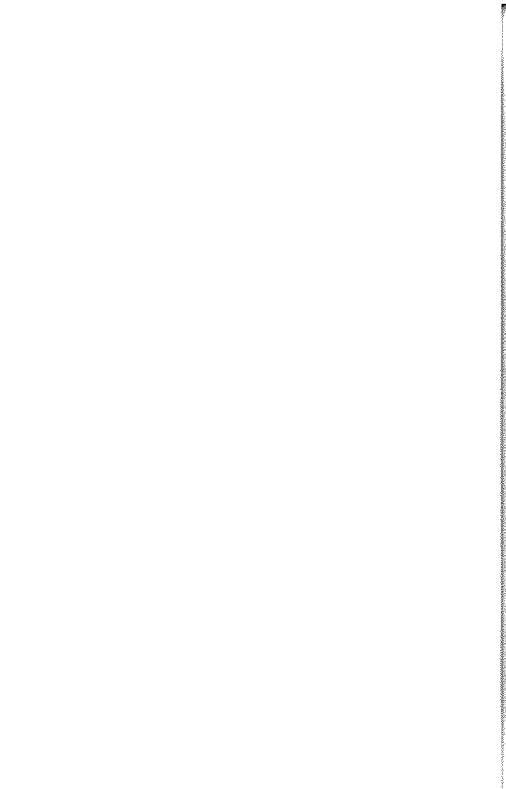
First and foremost, I wish to thank all the poets in this anthology. Without their poems, this volume would not have been possible.

Many thanks go to Collin Jerome who painstakingly re-typed many of these poems before we bought a scanner. Also, for the long days of talking about these poems.

Walter Hadrigan for reading the poems and giving invaluable suggestions and comments. Thanks for your honesty.

Too Wei Keong for helping in the final proof-reading.

FAMILY



words for father

now you are ill,
the body has broken down
after the hot decades of labour.
now is sudden time
to rest with restless muscles,
to close the eyes of responsibility.

fate is not kind,
generosity made you no rich man,
nor too much kindness a healer for
heartbreaks.
after the years, the hot sun
over the dry whitening head,
the evenings that drained life out of you,
the debts of duty,
you are home, on a hard bed
out of sleep, when you need sleep most.

the sons and the daughters
are young, you have married late
and we are young to an old father
me, i have pulled out my wet roots
to follow a dry road
the way home is a long lane
lost in the undergrowth.
home was not the kind of love i seek,

not knowing its doors or windows,
being left only with a fragmented past,
which unwise affairs broke
through the brittle centre
i was too broken to care
though i know that not to care
was the sin of the rootless runner.

your eldest daughter married,
she does not understand
the web of male worries.
the other children are too young to know
your circular chase of disappointment.

now you are ill,
the good God return you the breath of your
youth
for you have been born to be young,
to stand and fight through the days
and the rude elements.
sickness that lay you down
is your traitor in the blood.
but father, it is time to rest now
to close your eyes on the world,
to feel the luxury of the holidays

that you never took
that have collected into one sickness.

now that you are ill,
leave the worries to the young,
the world is too difficult now,
too fast against the slow blood
of an old man
close your red eyes now
and go to sleep.
this illness will go with the heat.
when you wake up
we shall be around
to see the youth in your eyes
and body and voice.

Muhammad Haji Salleh

My Father

My father said, "Please finish your studies.

This is what I want you to do." Nervous,
I remember, as though he's raised his fist,
And I'm cowed again with misery.

And I will, father, to make your heart
swell,
Learn dead languages, music, numbers.
You'll have a daughter to show the
neighbours,
To wink at; to keep your years well.

When younger, my father had wanted
Everything, if he could afford it,
To make me happy, I am sorry
Then I had not learned enough to lie.

Shirley Geok-Lin Lim

Mother's Grave

We went to mother's grave
On a quiet sunlit morning
The fragrant kemboja blossoms
Welcomed us on mother's behalf

We stood beside the silent grave
The wild grass had grown tall
The two stakes marking the grave
Had crumbled, rotted by the soil

In memory we saw again
The tender love in her eyes
And how she lay in her last slumber
Her hands stiffly clasped

Her lips, pure and weary
Once used to caress my brow
I still feel her tenderness,
Though she lies deep in the earth

We erected tombstones for her
Cleared the tall wild grass
Then we said a simple prayer
And sprinkled rose-water on her grave

The smiling kemboja bade us
farewell
As we left the grave to its silence
May there be peace upon her soul
A poor mortal coming before God

Whatever we may do to serve her
Can never repay her gift of birth
And her boundless love for us
The peak of human nobility.

Usman Awang

Translated by Adibah Amin

Little Flower

Your arrival was unplanned
unscheduled, you burst
into the afternoon of
our already mapped-out lives

and Life was chaos
for a short while...
We had to shift beds
rearrange the furniture
to accommodate you
tiny stranger from nowhere

But it was worthwhile
already you illuminate
our humdrum mornings
with your gurgling smile
bubbly companion to your brother
little flower that blossomed in late October.

Cecil Rajendra

Note to Siti

Giving birth to you my child
is like being born again
the wonder of all wonders
again I've been defeated by miracle.

I feel I ought to apologize
for dragging you into this life
and not able to promise anything
except offering some lesson from my own
mistakes
that have taught:
A woman's good name is her treasure
a woman's faith is her saviour.

My child
we are just very little
among God's creation
but let us not belittle
our existence.

Your birth my child
is the rebirth of myself.

Zurinah Hassan
Translated by Nor Azizah

Grandmother

No one knows her exact age.
She herself isn't really sure.
She is very old. And apart from God,
she most loves the mats she weaves.
She takes the thorny mengkuang from the deep
jungle.
She knows the cruel sting of its thorns and the pain
of torn flesh as the thorns strike deep.
She has boldly drunk the ancient waters of this
love.
Grandmother clears the thorns from the green
leaves.
She passes through difficult days of smiling,
laughing like the water in which she boils her
leaves,
before she dries and straightens them.
She loves the dazzling colours of the forest,
learns answers to the riddles of life from the criss-
cross of flowers.
Knows the meaning of love and ordered devotion.
The mat is done. She flings it forward. It is
beautiful.
Lost in thought, she is happy. And grateful.
Then her customers come. Their sting
is worse than that of the mengkuang.
How deep the meaning of love.
How high the price of parting.

Kemala

Translated by Hafiz Arif

A Father's Words for a Lost Child

Come home,
come home, lost child,
your father isn't angry any more.
Whatever you did
whatever your shame
you were faithful to an unfaithful man.
He betrayed you.
He betrayed his love.

A man, my child,
knows no shame.
It is the woman
who is disgraced,
the firefly.
The firefly who lights the way,
who shines
like a rainbow.
The man knows no shame,
the woman is disgraced
because she is a tree
a garden.
An unfaithful man
can plant
black seed soil
from his black blood.

Come home,
come home, lost child,
don't wait for your man at the crossroads
don't sing songs for him in the street.

The man at the crossroads
will count your days –
he will make you a barren field
a stagnant pond
an empty garden.

Lost child,
don't hide in the city,
the city is a jungle
full of tigers and snakes
crocodiles and scorpions.

Lost child,
God watches over the jungle,
despite His anger.

My child, stay away from the wild jungle
you cannot hide in the forest.
He has fed you bitter grapes.
His whispers have carried you
into the wild forest,
where you'd never been before.

You were innocent.
He led you
to the kingdom of vultures.
He ruled the kingdom
ruled the forest
he ruled you.
The hurricane came.
Your body is black
your face black as soot
the sky is black
the earth is black.
Despite your shame
you are a river of frangipani blossoms
a burning flower
a firefly.

Suhaimi Haji Muhammad
Translated by Harry Aveling

Dialogue

(for my mother)

I

calm yourself, now, my son
though our field is flooded
this rain is from God
who pours down his blessings.

the sun will rise, it will surely be bright
listen
the frogs have stopped calling
tomorrow will be a bright day
our padi will ripen!

II

close your eyes, now, Mother
we are frail beings
struggling during the day
and worrying at night.

the sun must rise tomorrow
I will go forward
with thousand rebels of the peasantry
we have long died in loyalty
now we will live in defiance!

Kassim Ahmad

Translated by Muhammad Haji Salleh

A Family Dialogue

Son, for heaven's sake,
think of the future. Christ!
You were not born to dabble
in politics, meddle in
other people's business.
The family comes first,
remember;
charity begins at home.
Who will listen to your babble?
Who among your followers
will stand by you in trouble?

Father, the day will come
when love and justice
become a burden,
heaven a meaningless idea
unless we make it real,
unless we rise above ourselves,
stand up in every capital
of the world, incarnate
every tenet of our faith,
exalt our fellow men.

Ee Tiang Hong

At the Door

Mother, why did you let
the poison seep down,
blacken leaf and stem
from overhead course down the roots
to pinch and disarrange
the bulging knob
that was to find its shape
to be my head?

Why did you let
the poison seep through,
befoul the streams that join together,
from beneath well up as spoilt blood
to stain and soften
the hooked tail
that was to lose itself
for the forked ends of my limbs?

Did you not sense me,
image my face, my dumb form
before I melted back
into the glistening bunched gel,
red grapes shot thick with ash,
as I, expelled,
made my way out in my sac
filming over so soon with death?

Mother, tell me about your world.
Tell me if you found
the light of day so harsh,
the sight of all things
intrude with such sharp anxieties
upon your heart
and in the night, in sleep,
if you stumbled upon such upheavals,
your dreams could not connect
and you would let your hand to smudge
such trceries, filaments through which,
delicate and sure as crystals forming,
I was to emerge;
let your hand
disturb where no disturbance should-
random places, clear springs of life.

Wong Phui Nam

A Figure Forgotten in Hours Not-of-Need

You are not the purest of women
but you toiled for your children,
throwing morals coyly to the wind.
How else could we have grown up
with cushioned settees to sit on
and hot cuisine to nourish our hungry souls?
I'm reminded of a time
when I refused to talk to you
and miserably moped to the floor
my tale of spite.
You took me by the hand,
said how little I knew hardship,
and we cried.
Now, in helpless moments,
I think of you,
a figure forgotten
in hours not-of-need,
but a comforter of the past
who caught cockroaches with bare hands.
Sons grew from your breasts
to yearn for the breasts of others
and daughter, when married, belongs to the in-laws;
but behind your tears of loss
lies the meaning of resilience.
And though it's a sin to grow old

and to lose your dearest treasures,
you stoutly go your humdrum way
while I curse the drudgery of life.
I'm still afraid of cockroaches.
But when I think
how little love I've shown you in return,
I sometimes cry.

Kee Thuan Chye

Family Portrait

We strike a familiar pose in my family in
times of need;
we wear a distant look on our faces.
We scour the horizon in search of nothing in
particular,
though we know it is sometimes better to
look inward.

But the eyes of the needy are usually cloudy,
and their minds wanting.

We purse our lips,
our eyebrows furrow,
we run our palms over our heads
and sigh intricate sighs.
We have all learned to say in our hearts,
"Tomorrow will be better,"

But we've been saying that for lifetimes.

Ajmal M. Razak

Manji

your handsome face
now worn and weary
lined with irreconcilable grief
your hands calloused and thick
always smelling of sweet chappati
your breasts heavy and sobbing continuously
cradling the head of your son
trying to wrench one last breath
from his cold lips

your cries are lost
in the sea
of flowers sweet spiralling
heady incense
and the luminous veils
of grieving
punjabi women

(manji is the Punjabi word for grandmother)

Bernice Chauly

Heir Conditioning

Grand dad did you breathe
before air cons were invented
was it hard staying
alive without modern inventions?
Grandma weren't you flustered
as you fluttered with paper fans?
Could you communicate before
faxes and long distance calls
became basic necessities?

Grandchild we lived
before your age. Because
of our ignorance,
we did not know
pollution, stress, traffic jams
destruction of forests, streams and
hills
we feared God and nature
now nature fears you and
money is your new God.

M SHANmughalingam



GROWING UP



Hands

My mother taught me.

Use right hand to mix rice and *sambal*,
cool white paste and blistering chillies
so fresh they burn the tongue like shame.

Use left hand to wipe the backside,
thick yellow paper squares we cut
once a week for cleaning ourselves.

Two hands to serve tea,
thumbs behind, fingers curled,
in a ring of obedience.

Shirley Geok-Lin Lim

The Voice

I hear the voice
of silent evening, a song forming
You, as my sweet child
weeps,
this moon hides behind a cloud
the night grows darker
a dog barks on a distant island -
is that why you're afraid?

But your weeping
invites me to be a mother:
are you the small bird with a broken wing
who cannot find his way home,
the eagle who has lost his nest?

There is a beauty in your night weeping,
its sad river crushes a mother's loneliness
and sends ripples through the shadows,
the whispering clouds tease your tears.

I am a woman, becoming a mother,
watching lotuses flower in the pools of your eyes,
be strong
my handsome darling,
once the storms pass
love will come again.

Siti Zainon Ismail

Translated by Harry Aveling

Existence

must I always
be compliant
as a swing
door

opening to those
who would enter
and allowing out
those who would exit

i am like you
once in a while
i must stay shut
with the word:

no

A. Wahab Ali

Translated by Muhammad Haji Salleh

Picking Fruit

when i was a child
my parents were angels
who fell to earth because
they wanted to love
i was their fruit
ripe for the picking
always in season

then my father died
his angel's wings were
carried away
further and further
until they became white foam
and merged with
the ocean spray

i died with you
my young soul screaming
like unripe fruit
in the hands of
the fruit pickers

Bernice Chauly

Becoming a Woman

When I was twelve, my mother initiated me
into the mysteries of becoming a woman
with a pound of rice-paper, the unadvertised
kind made from stalks and leaves, the stubble
after the harvest.

She taught me the art of crumpling,
stretching, folding the sheafs into
a likeness of Modess-factory-rejects.

“You will bleed
at a special time of the moon.”
she told me. “Use these
to preserve modesty and the secret
of your femaleness.”

Her mother’s way she passed to me
with the few words she had received
at her initiation.

Each full moon I cursed the tides
within my body. I abandoned
tradition’s rice-paper.

I have forgiven the moon since
our children came, spores of sunrise
in their newborn hands.

HilaryTham

The Hills & the Sea

In a village
between the hills & the sea
He grew up
between the hills & the sea

His earliest music:
the susurrations of the waves
the antiphony of mynahs
in the coconut-trees

His childhood obsessions:
Hiking & fishing & swimming
Sprinting across the cinnamon sand
Digging for cockles
Exploring the bush
with catapult in hand...
all this and more fed on
the myriad mysteries of hill and sea

Yet in later years
- much as they shaped the man -
he could not speak
the untamed majesty of that sea
or the humped silence of those hills

Caught now between
the mountain of despair
&
the lagoon of tears
of his discarded village people
How could he speak
of the hills or the sea?

Cecil Rajendra

on a dry bund

i cycled on a dry bund
back
to my childhood.
its world was open and green:
thick nipahs half-cut,
wild and dusty jeruju
caught trouser cuffs or calves,
fierce beluntas spread out their thorns
to the swamp sun,
and the channels in mud
slowly find their courses to the sea.

memories return again,
the acrid berembang on a child's morning tongue,
gentle sweetness of young nipah fruits,
grease from dredge
and the smell of engines,
they give life to my citified senses.

Muhammad Haji Salleh

PEOPLE



For My Old Amah

To most your dying seems distant,
outside the palings of our concern.
Only to you the fact was real
when the flame caught among the final
brambles
of your pain. And lying there
in this cubicle, on your trestle
over the old newspapers and spittoon,
your face bears the waste of terror
at the crumbling of your body's walls.

The moth fluttering against the electric bulb,
and on the wall your old photographs,
do not know your going. I do not know
when it has wrenched open the old wounds.
When branches snapped in the dark
you would have had a god among the trees
make us a journey of your going.

Your palm crushed the child's tears from my
face.
Now this room will become your going, brutal
in the discarded combs, the biscuit tins
and neat piles of your dresses.

Wong Phui Nam

My Clever Pupils

i

my teaching is dull today,
i can see dullness being powdered
onto the faces of my pupils
making them turn to one another
trying to find a more active lesson
they always expect their malay teacher
to provide them interesting lessons
about broken promises that have neglected them
about the ignorance enveloping their kampongs
about the disappointments killing their parents,
thinking that I am an antidote to ignorance
but experiences have not made me any cleverer
for they are nothing but reconfirmations of
past inabilities and past mistakes

ii

to break from the nausea that is monotony
we sometimes laugh, make jokes about one another
we play, trying to outdo one another
we become silly, trying to show that
mistakes must be made before one can become clever
but, i still have not been able to
make them realize that the pursuit of genuine education

knows no holidays, only rest can temporarily impede
learning

i have also told them that education is a cat
that follows us from birthdays to deathdays

iii

a bright and precocious girl questioned me
about what to call a woman whose husband is dead
i said widow
somebody unattentive said window
(a learning laughter was heard)

iv

i hope they become what they want to become
as long as they are not thieves, robbers and philistines
as long as their coming manhood and womanhood
do not become the fuel for the technological fire
burning us, making us useless and spent *kayu bakar*.

v

i know they wish me well, too
but none knows that teaching them
is an extension of the deferred education
which i have always been seeking

vi

i do not know
what they and i will become
because
the premature answers
are well hidden
in the disappointing amenities afforded us

vii

when i am about to die
i could bang my chest once and only once
i could say to myself, an autoboast?
i was their teacher and their pupil

Omar Mohd. Noor

Dulang-Washer

The dulang-washer, squinting like a witch,
Squats with rag-wrapped head and begging-bowl.
The sun mocks her with false gold.
Still she bows her head acquiescently.

How will she die? In memory of movement,
And monotonous rhythm of search
And discarding. Changeless streams and gravel
Will dim her sight, exchanging gold-dust
For rocks in her head. No glamour of departure
Enshrines her travel, the shift
From landscape to landscape a meager drift.

Shirley Geok-Lin Lim

The Midnight Satay-Vendor

he cuts a sorry figure, the solitary vendor
among the sleeping bungalows
pedalling up the stubborn
aristocratic slopes of jesselton heights

satay

satay

satay

i can see him wiping his sweaty brow
can smell piquant in the air the aroma
of chicken and *cincang*
as he fans the fire
beneath the sizzling rows of skewers

at home in the *kampung* a wife and children
await the meagre day's collection:
some *ringgits* and a few *sen*
that go nowhere
in these days of *inflasi*; and the election
too, with its promise, come and gone

but life must not stop for the likes of him,
so at *pasar malam* and along the night's inclines
wiping his migraines off his forehead
he returns to the embers,

his children amidst their *kurang ajar* yawns
prepare tomorrow's *ketupat* and cucumbers

satay

satay

satay

i wish at times I could trade places with him
the midnight vendor, if only as a game
surrender for once a so-called elegance

but education tells me I am *halus*, he *kasar*
for don't you see I'm a shakespeare-*wallah*
with this degree that clings to me like a vise
and a middle-class airconditioned nose?

Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof

three beserah fishermen

three small souls in a frail old sampan
in the bowl of the sea
between the teeth of the waves.
between the sea and home
there was no choice
against the big winds
and the capricious sea.

the wind has no heart
nor the sky nor the sea,
and the heart was for words of prayer;
time, between the stretches of a red imagination
was a promise of hope,
for the heart knows its logic
and the pains of the whipping winds.

what of the wives, sons and daughters,
the tomorrow, the eye of the day,
the rice and the fish, the school fees?
on the land how heavy the soul is loaded:
to survive was as difficult as to die,
to go down into the bottom of the sea-dish,
the bare dish:
to swim into time and hope.

the early morning nets, the boats,
the friends, the chattering gregariousness,
and the see-saw
on the fulcrum of the shore.

the harsh land pushed them
into the uncertain sea
deep into the eclipsing experience of death,
but yet to be responsible is to love
and to love is to live,
to be rich in life.

do not make this wind our hangman
the sea where our souls are soaked
and our hearts are buried,
where they cannot find us.

Muhammad Haji Salleh

Grace Rozario (1898 - 1976)

Now at the ripe age of seventy-seven,
The fruit has grown old;
But at this age you will know
That life isn't just living from day to day.
If it is loving in a simple way,
You'll discover that life has Life,
And if treated well,
It'll be like the full blossom of a flower:
Before dying, its seeds will be budding
With a new-found meaning;
But now the fruit has grown old,
And has to drop to leave this world.

Dear world,
If I were never to see you again,
It would not matter; you see,
I've had more than my share of Life.
Now it's my turn,
Now it's time for my soul
To move all the way up to heaven
To meet a gracious God.

Leonard Jeyam

Father Utih

I

He has one wife - whom he embraces until death
five children who want to eat every day
an old hut where an inherited tale is hanging
a piece of barren land to cultivate.

The skin of his hands is taut and calloused
accustomed to any amount of sweat
O Father Utih, the worthy peasant.

But malaria comes hunting them
even though he offers a million prayers
and Mother Utih calls the village medicine man
for magic formulas, curses repeatedly chanted.

The medicine man with his reward goes home
with money and a pullet tied together.

II

In towns the leaders keep shouting
of elections and the people's freedom,
of thousand-fold prosperity in a sovereign state
a golden bridge of prosperity into the world hereafter.

When victory brightly shines
the leaders in cars move forward, their chests thrust forward
ah, the beloved subjects wave their hands.
Everywhere there are banquets and festivities
delicious roast chicken is served
chicken from the village promises prosperity

Father Uti still waits in prayer
where are the leaders going in their limousines?

Usman Awang

Translated by Adibah Amin

Little Girl

Her body reminded me of
areca palm in quiet country
tall and thin
in heavy storms
broken branches fall around
but the palm stands erect
awaiting the morning sun.

So it was with this little girl
thin as areca palm
year after year meeting her father
across the barbed wire of prison
imprisoned these many years
courageously fighting oppression
steady and faithful.

This little girl surprised me
calm and smiling broadly
politely turning down my help
'I don't need money, uncle,
just paper and books.'

Young in age
her soul matured by experience

not everyone grows strong this way
a unique steadiness that charms.
When I expressed sympathy and sadness,
feeling sorry for her,
once again she smiled and said:
'Don't be sad, uncle, steady your heart,
there are many children like me in the world.'

I became quite still
she calmed me, this little girl
pacifying waves of emotion
forbidding pity for her bitter experiences.

Is it not shameful for a grown man,
wanting to help suffering prisoners
to receive counsel from the child of one in prison
to be brave and steady?
Ten children like this
will destroy the purpose of a thousand prisons.

Usman Awang
Translated by Adibah Amin

Malacca Song

Khoo Cheng Kim, old Malacca friend,
I remember the house
Your father built in Tranquerah,
The seashore kampong
With custard apples lumpy and odorous
Pomegranates plumping to the sand,
With guava wind in high branches
Where we perched to watch
The tide slide over dark silt,
Mudhoppers scattering like startled hooligans,
And the sound of the neighbor's pestle
Pounding, pounding
Her noonday spice.

Where starfruit fell and bicycles leaned
We were lazy princesses,
Humid afternoons, raindrops on tin
Roofs played a gamelan,
What stirrings and sorcery in gossip,
Hard knobs of breasts bruising
Under starched school uniforms,
Your fierce servant grumbling
In her kitchen of soups
And your mother taking off
Her spectacles to scold us
For thinking only of boys.

Chin Wong Ping

The Flute Player

His sadness
fills our soup bowls with ancient blood,
the pain of every artist
falls from the end of his flute.

Friends,
see his tears,
his fingers trembling with love,
playing endless songs
for the few rupees
dropped at his feet.

A taut
quivering
thread.

A poet:
sorrow running
through the veins
of his songs.

Siti Zainon Ismail

Translated by Harry Aveling

Old Friend

Old friend,
I thought of you
today while driving.
Strange
you should appear to me
on I-69,
amidst stubby
cornfields,
between my sighs
and Redding's crooning,
thousands of miles away from
your world:
our new experiences
and newer failures and
frustrations have flung
us on less firm ground.

Why have you come here now?
Somehow you were never one for
visits or calls,
and we drifted apart years
before I left shore.

Strange
that a wafer-thin memory
should lodge so long in an old mind,
like lees in an aged vessel,
spilling images and emotions of
another time and place
on a cold highway.

Ajmal M. Razak

RELATIONSHIPS



Dance

We are like partners in the ronggeng,
Approaching nearer, nearer and nearer;
But just when one would think we'd meet at last,
We turn away, reverse our steps, withdraw.

And like the ronggeng too, my life seems now,
With steps mechanical, repeated, meaningless;
Arms swinging back and forth, expressing nothing,
Feet pacing up and down the floor, going nowhere.

I am tired of going through these ronggeng motions,
Long to break this impasse of reserve;
If only at one point our hands would clasp,
What rich variety of movement and gesture could be ours.

Fadzilah Amin

Offerings

I came to you at sunrise
With silvery dew on sleeping lotus
Sparkling in my gay hands;
You put my flowers in the sun.

I danced to you at midday
With bright raintree blooms
Flaming in my ardent arms;
You dropped my blossoms in the
pond.

I crept to you at sunset
With pale lilac orchids
Trembling on my uncertain lips;
You shredded my petals in the sand.

I strode to you at midnight
With gravel hard and cold
Clenched in my bitter fists;
You offered me your hybrid orchids,
And I crushed them in my despair.

Hilary Tham

Untitled Poem

Love is not a frantic mouthing
on railway platforms
Love is not I love you, I love you, I love you
scrawled on air letter forms
Love is not pawing each other
all over the dance floor
Love is not making out
like it was a public show
Love is not the grand gesture
Love is not the bowing overture

Love is the silent, silent panther

Love is the touch of fingertips
in the dark
Love is the hushed stroll at dawn
through the park
Love is eight fingernails
screaming down my back
at two in the morning
Love is that smile
exchanged unnoticed
at a crowded meeting

Love is riot, and love is ripple
Love is whisper, and love is whirlpool
Love is
 what love was
 what love is
 what love will be
Love is what love is

Cecil Rajendra

A Song of Silence

when my lover closes his eyes
the sun sets
waves fade
and a small boat
vanishes behind coral reefs
leaving only silence
and dark rocks.

Siti Zainon Ismail

Translated by Harry Aveling

Parting

one morning
we parted
in the midst before the sun
with dreams
and strange remembrances.
with the finger
and the heart
that readily surrendered
we parted

one morning
we parted
in the midst before the sun
with promises
and strange hopes
with the self and the day
that readily surrendered
we parted.

Latiff Mohidin

Translated by Muhammad Haji Salleh

Friends

We wander hand in hand through time,
looking for a familiar tree
or landmark to tell us
where we are going.
We have been here before.
These are shadows
of things we have seen before.
And life is the voice in your eyes
asking an ageless question.
Soon, your lids will droop
from weariness,
and shall be alone
holding a shadow's hand.
I will no longer feel
your presence or
your absence.
And in time,
as the reel winds faster,
I shall not feel myself.
I shall not feel myself
dissolving into shadowland.

Hilary Tham

The Other Love Poem

a sailor is in love with the waves
and eventually like the waves
he becomes a hopeless lover.

a poet is in love with words
and eventually the net of words
traps him from meaning.

the sea is an infatuating spread
the jungle a passionate net
but the sea will not confess its secret
the jungle will not confess its secret
and the self becomes
a summit of mystery.

all creation is a medium
to a recognition of the creator
yet how shall I write a poem of love
so that the medium
does not hide the purpose?

Zurinah Hassan

Translated by Muhammad Haji Salleh

A Question of Rights

Whose right is it, I ask you
to tell me I should marry;
not to be pleased with singlehood
make sure I find a spouse?

Whose right is it, I ask you
to show me whom to marry;
decked in fine jewellery
make sure I pay a dowry?

Whose right is it, I ask you
to tell the man I marry
I want him for companionship;
make sure he will respect me?

Whose right is it, I ask you
to show the man I marry
just how to be my equal;
make sure he will not beat me?

Charlene Rajendran

Rays of the Sun

How would you like to be the rays of the morning sun
As they burn away the darkness of night
Tentatively learning, touching, seeking, probing
Through unknown depths and unexpected bursts of feverish
haze?

How would you like to be the rays of the noontime sun
As they sear through every hidden crack and crevice
Lunging and plunging, and plundering
Earthen wells which greedily open their hot lips to feed on musky
damp?

And how would you like to be the rays of the setting sun
As they burst into dark depths and the gurgling sea
Leaving trails of molten gold and satiated fire
Streaked across the wide open sky in a gasping kaleidoscope of
frenzy?

Hyacinth Gaudart

NATURE



rain

suddenly they came, the mid-year padi rains,
falling slanted among the dried lalang
and into the branch-drains of the brown canals;
the big regular drops falling at their own rhythm
became the overwhelming sound of an insistent tempo.

it woke up the child in the sarong cradle
and the old resting father.
water has come. he looked out into the sheet of rain
descending along the atap eaves.
the rivulets carried the flattened straw
and the dust of the drought,
in their dark grey flowing threads
slithering to the depressions in the ground.

thin dry ducks quacked
splashed by the strange rain
and chickens ran from under the trees.

it was the beginning of an answer,
pak usin's dark skinned muscles quivered.
rain slapped the leaves and bent the young coconuts,
shook the drought of its death-dust
and swept the remains of harvest rubbish.

for this season they collected hopes again,
carried them under cover from the heat to this day,
the rain fell and wetted their praying throats.

Muhammad Haji Salleh

To a Shrub

Bougainvillea,
I admire the wild poise and the grace
With which you droop your slender arms
Like a spray of cool fireworks in mid-air;

Glorious perennial,
With what delicacy your leaves,
Cluster, and conceal fierce thorns
Disconcerting hungry goats.

What happy combination
Of the hardy and the beautiful
Impresses eye and mind
Through drought and monsoon.

Gay shrub,
I never tire of your tireless beauty,
Your beautiful endurance,
Your crepelike blossoms softer than silk,
Your odourless indifference.

As in a wild dream
You flaunt in the heat of sun and sand
Myriads of crimson lips,
While I gaze at your glory
With a desire unrequited
In this sweltering shade.

Ee Tiang Hong

Tree

A tall tree in a field
with leaves, flowers and fruits,
hidden roots holding it high,
fed by water and minerals.

Visited by birds, bats, insects and mankind,
yielding the delight of its ripe fruits
to pilgrim visitors seeking shade,
a brief sleep and strength of body.
Sometimes a hungry wolf lay in wait
for a passing lamb, or a goat,
devouring the soft flesh
to live a little longer
on God's good earth.
The tree passed many tests and trials
stood firm
against gentle breezes and raging hurricanes
rising tides and fierce floods,
tall and straight.
One day the branches broke, twigs cracked,
the fruit rotted and fell,
the roots tore
and the trunk dropped to the ground.

The tree returned its Life,
the four, transitory, elements,
to the source of life.

Only one
lives and never dies-
You!

Kemala

Translated by Hafiz Arif

Angsanas

quiet
in a lonesome
park
twilight sadness...
and then
all of a sudden
a radiant

s
h
o
w
e
r

of
 angsanas
to keep me
 company.

Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof

Waiting

casuarina tree
dies awaiting
north wind
at river's edge
north wind
at day's end

old crow
awaiting death
casaurina tree
at river's edge
casaurina tree
at finger's end

Latiff Mohidin

Translated by Adibah Amin

seeds

these seeds in the hope-bowl of my palms
i wet with the new water of the new season.
in my grip i feel their skins burst and slap my hands,
their yellow shoots creeping into my blood stream.
now as i let them drop singly into the warm earth
they are already plants in me,
growing and feeding on my blood and my sweat-salt.

and as i patiently wait for them to emerge
from the night of the earth-womb,
i feel the youth of my blood return to my limbs
and i re-live this seasonal love affair.
the evenings and the mornings quench me,
and i grow with them,
inevitably aging, bearing fruit
and jumping back into life,
to repeat the life-cycle of my blood.

Muhammad Haji Salleh

Offerings

and now nothing remains
save the perfumed
memories
that hang uneasy
on leaves of frangipani:

belated drops
of swelling rain
burning
for the laps
of a tranquil sea

someday
when dewdrops bloom
into flowers
among the wind-blown
offerings
i'll find my way
to the temple
of your altars.

Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof

A Quarrel between Night and Day

night proposed to day
i'll take twelve hours
and you take twelve hours
day had to accept it
for there was no alternative
or night will take twenty four
hours of fear of dream-thoughts
fastening us to deep darkness forever

but night cannot be trusted
it wanted the stars, moon and
all the citylights
leaving only
the sun and one stray star
astray in early daylight
while day laughs at the wet sun

that is why I fear the night
always bringing dream-thoughts
making one hungry in the chest
the next morning,
a bad prelude to a working day
with only one forty minute break

Omar Mohd. Noor

Land-Turtle

A land-turtle: the fine gold tracery
He drags about, webbing his green belly,
And turns to every giant child and dog
A hard back like a mud-splashed chip of log.
Crawling to no place particular, taking
His time, to his particular undeflecting
Desire. And if you must meddle with his
Travels, the bright little face disappears
In comic alarm; some say modesty,
Though I have thought I had caught in his button eyes
A dismissal too uncomfortably like contempt.

Shirley Geok-Lin Lim

Bamboo

you grow perceptibly
faster than any living thing
with your subterranean rhizome
copiousness (sagesse of culm
parent passing it all on
to the young)
flowering every hundred years
and then dying

moonlight down sleek shafts
slides in a high wind
sasa, kumazas, moso
papery leaf susurrations,
green tensile
strength that lasts
artists learn from you
simplicity

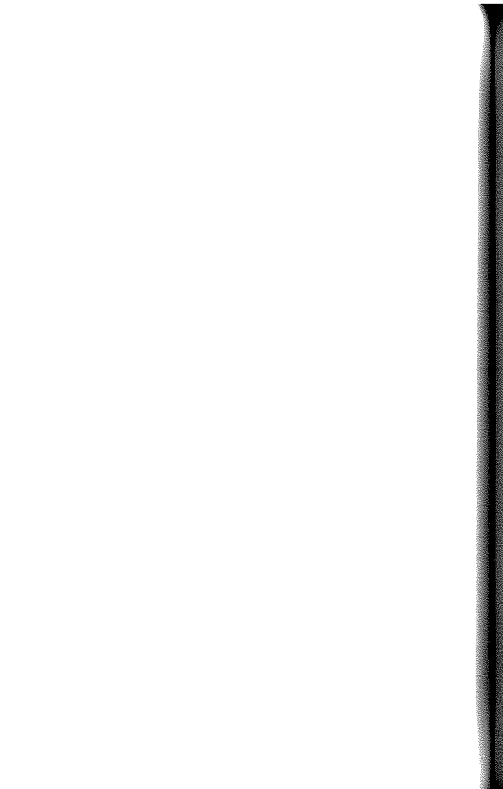
we love your valuelessness
when raw
your allroundedness
we eat, thatch and die in
mast, flute, torture-stake
one thousand two hundred
and fifty species in warm

moist places
and no special difference
between the sexes

Chin Wong Ping



CONSERVATION



RE: Construction To Whom It May Concern

Dear Sir
or Madam,

i)
All the places where I grew up
have been torn down
because they said
there was no space
and we were
becoming modern.

Why must they build
a police plaza in Pudu,
where my grandparents
'grew old-man's darling'?

Why can't the state mosque
not be in Bukit Palah,
where I climbed the
frangipani tree?

Why should the mega-mall
be at 218 Ampang
where I used to play
swinging 'moneyplant'?

why do my memories
all have to be
only in my head
so I can't show
my children
and their children
and so on?

ii)

All the places
where I used to dream
have become towers
because they said they must
build high
and keep the flag flying
for everyone.

The race course
was meant to be
a park within the city.

The playing field
was meant to save
some space for greenery.

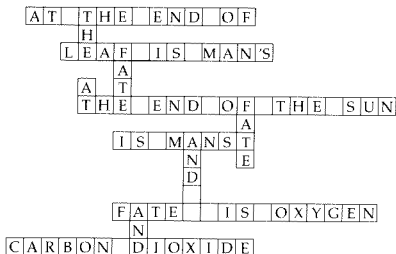
The forest reserve
was meant to run
the cable car for fun.
Why must the flag fly
so high where no one
with feet on the ground
can see or touch
or wave it?

iii)
I look forward
to hearing from you soon.
and thank you.

Sincerely,
A City Girl
@Urbanses.my

Charlene Rajendran

cross-word poem



SEMENYIH 1

Abdul Ghafar Ibrahim

To the Turtle

you who suddenly
marooned here
with mouth full of blood
and sand
in this territory
on this beach
your longings
for the sanctuary
has come to an end

Latiff Mohidin

Translated by Mansor Ahmad Saman

Death of a Rainforest

i wrestle with a rhinoceros
but no words will come

i hear tall trees crashing
wild birds screeching
the buffalo stampeding
but no words will come

i hear sawmills buzzing
cash registers clicking
entrepreneurs yam-seng-ing
but no words will come

i hear of press conferences
of petitions, of signatures
of campaigns & lobbying
but no words will come

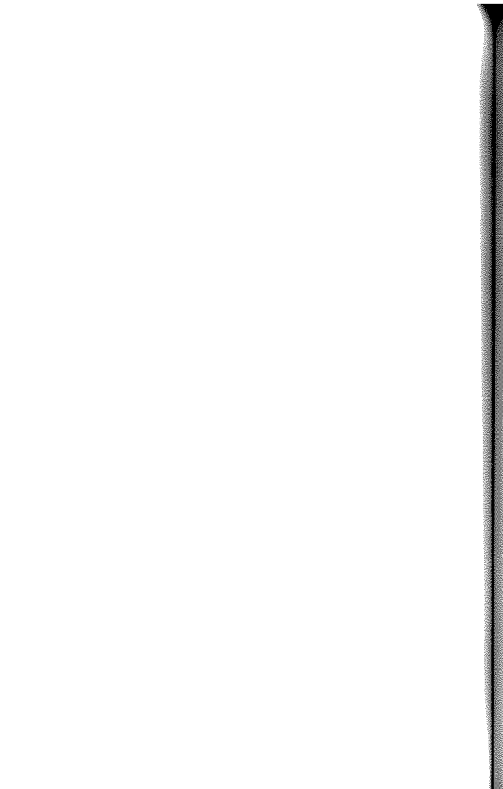
i hear the rain pounding
into desolate spaces
the widowed wind howling
but no words will come

the rhino is boxed & crated
merbok & meranti are gone
above, no monkeys swing
from no overhead branches

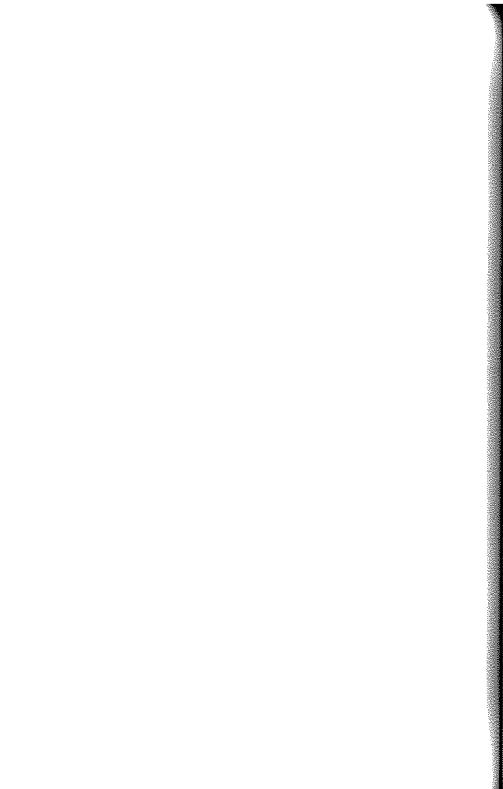
below, a pangolin stumbles
around amputated trunks
an orphaned butterfly
surveys the wounded jungle

yes, no words can fill
this gash of malevolence
but a terrible anger squats
hugging its knees in silence.

Cecil Rajendra



LANDSCAPE



T H E W A L L
 tHe wall
 thE wall
 the Wall
 the wAll
 the WaLl
 the waL L A W E H T
 I
 cannot
 escape

Abdul Ghafar Ibrahim

The Kampongs

Ujung Pasir, Ujung Pandan, Bandar Hilir, Tanjong Kling
footprints in hot sand leading to shadows
beneath shimmering casuarinas,
corrugated in tin roofs sheltering the stunned
children sprawled on pandanus mats,
smelly goats scavenge among battered
tin cans and sour cabbages until the small
roar of waves beats down its curtain
of tepid greyness to remind
us again of the coming rains.

In the coffee shop, men with arms around knees
chew betelnut, shoot vermilion
streams of saliva into gaudy enamel spittoons,
the bus turns around and stops for panting
wives lugging home pomfret-laden baskets
down winding lanes hemmed by hibiscus bushes

and coming round on a wobbly bicycle
you call for Auntie to let you in
to her airy verandah where, cross-legged
on the cool plank floor, she is combing
her daughter's oily hair for nits
to squeeze to death.

Chin Wong Ping

Kuala Lumpur! Kuala Lumpur!

Hello, Kuala Lumpur, Happy Birthday!
O you've grown, how you've grown!
what with your skyscrapers
your flyovers, your toll plazas
your tree-lined malls
your flashy shopping complexes
snooker centres, noisy pubs
psychedelic discos, traffic congestions
sweaty queues, outdated roundabouts
and frantic rushes under the midday sun.

Kuala Lumpur, Kuala Lumpur
I love your *nasi lemak* in Gombak
your roastduck from Pudu
your mutton curry at Brickfields
your *Bak-Kut-teh* in Kepong
your *nasi briyani* at Kampung Baru
your sugarcane water at Cheras
your flower nurseries at Old Klang Road
your *Angsana* trees in Jinjang
your incense at Leboh Ampang
your *pasar malam* in Petaling Street
your Hainanese chicken rice in Jalan Sultan
and the lusty bargains along Batu Lane.

Kuala Lumpur, Kuala Lumpur
beauty or beast, what are you?
who are you, human or divine?
who knows what secrets in tall buildings
what juicy gossips and rumours in coffeeshops
what greed masked behind orchids
what slummy squalor behind concrete facades
what shady deals in the Golden Triangle
what fake massages in your exclusive clubs
what manicured conspiracies
what wheeling-dealing in hotel lobbies
what racial slurs and curses in backlanes
what supercilious pretences at cocktail parties
what murders and swindles at planning
what bribes wrapped in hibiscus smiles
what hastily negotiated favours
what lusty tigershows performed
what dirty weekends enjoyed within sight of flame trees
among modern, expensive ramparts?
Kuala Lumpur, Kuala Lumpur
are you a city of
hope or despair
joy or frustration
warmth or loneliness
love or hate

plenty or poverty
ordained heaven or manmade hell
strength or weakness
firmness or caprice
the aged or youth
angels or devils
floods or draught
shit or gold
farts or perfumes
glory or shame
hills or valleys
vibrance or imitation
deserts or springs
truth or lies
colours or blandness
sages or fools
light or shadows
bigotry or tolerance
thinkers or robots
courage or cowardice
dissidents or sycophants
care or selfishness
independents or suckers
pageantry or burlesque

strife or peace
clarity or haze?
Kuala Lumpur, Kuala Lumpur
O I love Chow Kit Road
Sungei Besi, Sentul, Dato Keramat
and all your other parts
but are you a conscionable muddy estuary
or merely a Babylonian lump
or Philistinian mud?

Fan Yew Teng

Visiting Malacca

Some one lives in the old house
Gold-leaf carving adorns the doors
Black wooden stairs still stand
And wind like arms of slender women
Leading to the upper floors.
It is as I remembered,
But not itself, not empty, clean.

Some one has scrubbed the sand-
Stone squares and turned them red,
The marble yard is stained with rain,
But it has not fallen into ruin.
Weeds have not seeded the roofs nor
Cracked flowered tiles grandfather
Brought, shining in crates from China.

Some one has saved the old house.
It is no longer dark with opium
Or with children running crowded
Through passageways. The well has been capped,
The moon-windows boarded,
Something of China remains,
Although ancestral family is gone.

I dream of the old house.
The dreams leak slowly like sap
Welling from a wound: I am losing
Ability to make myself at home.
Awake, hunting for lost cousins,
I have dreamed of ruined meaning,
And am glad to find none.

Shirley Geok-Lin Lim

Kuala Lumpur

Lift up your eyes unto the new landscape,
Focus on the scaffold
At the end of a terrace,
The shophouses, the multi-storied flats.

New bungalows in bold colours
Thrive like anthills. Everywhere
Brick, lime, mortar, plank attest to
The hand of housing trusts

Who raised the capital,
Felled the trees,
Burned the *lalang*,
Fixed the lease,

They being what you call
The real pioneers, builders
Not of grand illusions
But concrete things -

Shops and offices,
Business paradise,
Where Progress, Peace, Prosperity
These cars, these buildings symbolise,
Where men are ever going places
Inspired by enterprise.

Ee Tiang Hong

the traveller

for i am only a traveller finding my way
among the streets of your new town,
i have other places to go to.
i shall someday work out a map of this city
and traverse it on foot, someday.
for i am only a traveller, and cannot stay longer
where there is no home.

take my love while you can, take my hatred,
take my weathered hand if you will,
for i shall have no home here,
among the dull hard buildings
where the heart cannot stay.
for i am only a traveller
on my way, to somewhere further than here.

this is the city that broke my heart,
that stole my feelings from me;
this is the city that took away my love,
that told me i must go away.
i must go, somewhere.
somewhere, where they can know me;
can recognise that i am a man.

some night when the city is asleep
i'll walk out quietly along your cruel streets
through the suburban edge and into the dawn forests.
somewhere, perhaps near where the sun rises,
i can sit down,
and sometime perhaps, i can tell myself,
here, i am a man.

Muhammad Haji Salleh

Three Layers

there are three layers of rural areas
the first became towns and cities a half-generation ago
the second now becoming towns
with yellow electricity and greyish pipe-water
here some of the characteristics of jungles are intact
the third is still a jungle by itself
only the electricity of the sun permeates it
the stars compensate for the lack of light
by shining extremely brightly
as they never do in towns
which mock their services.

Omar Mohd. Noor

The Compiler

Malachi Edwin Vethamani obtained a Bachelor of Arts (Hons.) in English Literature, Diploma in Education and Master in Education in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) from the University of Malaya and a doctorate in Literature in English from the University of Nottingham, England.

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