

## PART I: PUBLISHED POEMS

### an advertisement

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

Anyone for the sharing?  
this rich-rounded but humiliated life  
which has not been tapped yet  
but guaranteed fully self-nurtured and grown  
with periodic adjustments including time  
at a psychiatrist and ward  
reading too much too soon  
asked too many questions with no built-in answers  
a tingling time

i am still strong  
still productive, after a year of negativity, 1965  
one year  
new vigour, new investment of  
words on paper  
with renewed and re-injected fervour  
towards a more prolific output  
come to my factory and  
buy and read more  
local Malay poems written in English  
for global communications  
my head asks me  
“What is the meaning of opposition in Parliament?”  
i answer  
“To have no courage to face defeat and walk out.”  
fortunately the German team  
did not walk out during the world cup final.

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## three layers

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

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 the 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.

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## the mosque

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

the mosque has become deserted  
only elderly people congregate  
for they still believe in hell-gate  
and they refused to be conquered

on weekdays it is empty  
on weeknights it is slightly filled  
for they have never remained still  
and they refuse to be spoilt by impiety

the mosque can only depend on them  
to worship in it  
the hopes in them still lit  
and they still cannot condemn

i always pass by it everyday  
ignoring the call made by muezzins  
i feel i can ignore it till when  
the time comes for me to pray

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## **e.e. cummings talked to me from his grave**

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

i died when the lebanon  
politico-military crisis needed  
a solution  
you were then a student  
with an absolutely empty knowledge of  
what 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964,  
1965 and 1966 would be like  
pardon me, may i take out the  
white cloth of fame that has  
followed me to the grave, it's too  
hot down here —  
the undertaker dug one foot too deep,  
a miscalculation, one foot of  
extra oblivion, a free gift,  
commerce exists even down the  
earth — a subterranean  
advertisement which no television  
camera has spotted yet, what i  
need now is a bath and a shave  
for my beard which is still growing  
my eyesight is better now  
i need my glasses though i  
still write my name  
with no capital letters  
  
death is a tunnel which has no  
exit, actually

haven't you people found a way  
to live peacefully yet?  
i hear the earth in america  
groaning and moaning and  
bleeding with blood profusely flowing from  
jfk, mlk,  
civil rights and lefts erupting  
in watts and selma and harlem  
dissenting americans dissenting with  
the americans on vietnam  
i can hear the vomiting of  
russian, american, vietnamese (both)  
planes even from here  
sometimes it rains poetry and prose  
down here soaking my fame  
which technically ended in 1958  
has anyone been called another  
e.e. cummings?  
i am struggling down here  
to be a whiteman  
maybe i'll learn to spell my name  
with capital letters at the back  
of each word

my left cheek is completely gone  
now. the bone disintegrating,  
the scar on my left hand is  
completely erased, i only have  
four fingers on each hand,  
how am i going to handle books  
and write poems efficiently

with four fingers?  
there's no rehabilitation centre yet,  
modern medicine hasn't come down  
yet, though i sometimes hear  
polaris submarines  
sending atomic waves, as if  
to chase me out from my coffin  
which is no longer a coffin,  
my bones are my coffin  
my soul has long gone, it  
deserted me on the very day  
i was born, obviously unfriendly,  
perhaps my soul has gone into  
your body, that is why i am  
talking to you now

i have to talk fast because  
the wavy worms are now coming to  
have dinner, i am their lunch,  
dinner and breakfast  
even the ants are complaining  
that there is not enough food  
because life-expectancy has been  
increased  
they are thinking of going to  
vietnam where food will be  
more abundant, meantime,  
they are artfully hoping for  
the great society to come down  
here — a subterranean version  
many are still looking for

the coffin or jfk, his fame  
tastes better but  
even the worms practise  
monopoly, there might be  
a gang war between worms  
and worms and ants

we're pretty busy down here  
last week we had a poetry  
recital by t.s. eliot relayed  
direct from his grave in london  
kennedy was bathing his wound  
and told us how he was  
assassinated, there's a stain  
in his bone still  
we have just had the first  
discotheque where those who  
have just died throng nightly  
the older ones had a meeting  
with abraham lincoln to listen  
to his version to his assassination  
i haven't met hemingway who is  
too busy being game-hunted  
we are waiting the arrival of  
steinbeck to show us his nobel  
prize  
also for the arrival of american  
soldiers whose bodies are stuffed  
with viet cong bullets and with  
tape-recordings of wailing and  
suddenly short-pocketed mothers

with their stories of the draft

paul tillich came recently  
and was ragged because of  
his theological beliefs  
i met a muslim who is still repenting  
for not having  
performed his pilgrimage to mekah  
he paid attention to his quran  
i, to my bible  
i asked him whether there's  
going to be a muslim-christian  
holocaust and he says that  
the true muslim is a true christian  
even bob dylan would sing to  
that, he had a peep at me  
as he fell off from his motor-cycle

i hope there will be a congress of dead poets  
where i can meet a malay poet  
from malaya

i must stop here  
it's bed time and i have to  
cook myself for the worms  
they object to badly cooked food  
they dislike my poems because  
i did not use  
capital letters.

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## malaysian sun misbehaves

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

here I lie under a cool malaysian sun  
resembling a mild-hot day in english july  
the coolness that prevails is the coolness among us  
after too long a period of strife and stress  
which have even increased the heat of the sun  
making it impossible to talk without spoiling  
the throat  
to work without scorching the mind which  
still lacks an air-conditioned plant

if the man's mind is the reservoir of invention  
why doesn't it insert a cool spot  
in the very chamber which creates and destroys

let's get back to the malaysian sun  
which is now trying to behave like a european sun  
perhaps the sun deserves more westernisation after  
rising in the east for too long a time  
perhaps concurrently with the first psychologist  
in the world  
Nabi Adam

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## despair by radioside

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

the despair that comes along  
with a profession of a moody nature  
having to talk while standing  
and holding white chalky that  
cause blisters on nervous hands  
reflecting a nervous mind  
that has become compartmentalised  
accommodating the various subjects taught  
despair by radioside  
wailing folksongs  
painting the pathos of mountain rain  
amidst a very sharp voice  
resembling that of a teacher about  
to lose his thin grip on matter and control  
and shouting to be understood  
by a class that has become complacent-in-ignorance  
further worsened by routines  
in timetable squares

jumping from cities to english  
proceeding to physical education  
taking me to the evening-end  
jumping down from buses straight  
into the waiting pages of attendance book  
recording regularly my arrivals and departures  
jumping to the pillion seat of a motorcycle

taking me to almost home  
jumping to a bicycle with a  
carrier clutching my burdens  
to balance the burden of despair  
in the nervous mind  
unable of jumping to anything  
incapable of distinguishing between  
friends and foes

despair asserts itself at dusk  
becoming intensified as dusks turn to darkness  
brightening the eyeballs  
to complete debility  
leaving only the ears open to  
anything worth listening to  
nose incapable of smelling  
despair has killed my senses  
making me a stranger in a known realm

face too tired to support spectacles  
hands too weak to write efficiently  
legs amputated by standing-teaching too long

what does the ear listen to?  
songs of doleful despair  
of a colourful nature  
shifting from the purple of sorrow  
to blue beaches having  
guitar strings as waves

and accordion as rising tide

the evening-cooked food  
succumbs to its own despair  
repelling the hungry mouth  
away from it

and someone invites me to have dinner  
at his house  
inanimate objects despair if given the chance  
as the radio is doing now  
its voice is irritated by the weather  
fearing that i may turn to another  
station with  
another voice of despair

despair makes all the seven days  
the same to all centuries

First published in *Poetry Singapore* (1968), no. 2, pp. 35-36

## too dry: the long drought in early 1968

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

the long dry season  
comes  
first with its cold morning wind  
blowing brazenly from an easterly direction  
cooling everything in its path  
depositing dew on lamp posts  
heating everything during the day  
depositing impatience and anger  
in the thoughts of the coolest men  
changing cold nights into hot sultry days  
finally leaving a flu-stricken town  
gazing at advertisements of Contac 500

the rubber trees look like old men  
deprived  
of the green of youth  
and the white of fertility  
an evergreen and perennially prosperous rubber estate  
becomes a scene in dry winter  
depositing its old and broken leaves  
on the unhealthy dry ground  
as young men deposit their sins  
in unknown places  
while growing old

the heat sticks in my throat  
making  
it hoarse and difficult  
while the chest catches cold  
brought by the piercing morning wind  
the cold sticks in my damp lungs.  
it's funny  
the outside is hot  
the inside is cold

it's too dry, too dry everywhere  
the humanity of a communist headmaster  
dries up to make way for  
a room at the top for himself and his communist entourage.

politicians yell louder when it's too dry  
we suffer hardest when it's too dry

First published in *Poetry Singapore* (1968), no. 2, p. 37

## poem-30

*(inspired by joseph heller's catch-22)*

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

Amran, the international tea-mixer  
always serving unwanted tea to playful friends  
who shout "coffee" everytime he comes  
with a teapot  
who shout "tea" everytime he comes  
with a coffeepot  
always frying goreng pisang<sup>3</sup> while  
staring at a psychedelic sketch  
carrying the title  
"it's clobbering time!"

Latiff, the preposition-mixer  
who would shout  
"wrong preposition"  
to anyone who speaks to him  
by changing  
"i live in jalan belakang masjid"  
to  
"i live under jalan belakang masjid"<sup>4</sup>  
or changing  
"you're under arrest"  
to  
"you're on arrest"

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<sup>3</sup> malay name for fried bananas.

<sup>4</sup> literally, "the-behind-the-mosque-road." jalan means road.

and thinks of writing a volume of volatile poems  
to be called poems without prepositions

Ancik, the international cigarette-borrower  
having no match and cigarettes  
borrows them and smokes  
ardaths, rothmans, players and consulates  
rokok daun<sup>5</sup> and local ganja<sup>6</sup>

all borrowed  
returns the puffs he makes  
to the lenders' noses  
while reading books on Islam  
while getting married,  
at present he is chewing  
dr. hamka and goes on  
greeting some girls  
he sees and gets insults  
in return

Suman, the gesticulation-mixer  
is always ready  
to gesticulate even when  
he is walking by himself,  
his gait is a gesticulation by itself  
a teacher both by day and night  
wandering away from home during weekends

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<sup>5</sup> local malayan cigarettes.

<sup>6</sup> a drug obtained from coconut leaves.



converting his car into a hotel  
his stout body shows his firmness  
about everything, particularly with himself  
and spits on his pupils' faces

Sharbani, the language-mixer  
talks in malay but curses  
in italian to look italian  
reads indonesian books to improve  
his three-word italian vocabulary  
which is only understood by himself  
and keeps saying that nobody understands  
and loves him  
amidst mixing "sh" to words  
by saying  
"ladiesh andsh gentlemensh  
wesh bringsh a folkshy-folkshy folk songsh  
forsh yoursh entertainmentsh"

First published in *Poetry Singapore* (1968), no. 2, pp. 38-39

## final

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

the final dinner being eaten  
the final cup of tea being drunk  
thoughts of finality wrap me  
around the chest,  
leaving traces of finality on the eyes  
long after i have left  
this place  
unnamed on the atlas,  
with thoughts of coming back  
one day  
the morning that will take me away  
approaches, as certain as a strict landlord,  
men have still not invented  
machines that can stop  
mornings from approaching  
and stop the sun from rising,  
in the finality is the beginning  
of years to come  
in the end lies another finality  
which will lead us to nowhere familiar  
to start again, some daunted, some undaunted,  
crawling on cushions of rocks  
struggling under obstacles put by  
finality  
finality always reduces the heart  
out of loss of love

First published in *The Flowering Tree: Selected Writings from Singapore/Malaysia* (1970)

## heads

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

the farmers  
cycle casually  
on their ill-kept  
and thin bicycles  
never ridden by  
bungling politicians,  
they wear a cloth cover  
to shield the burdens  
of their heads  
from being melted  
by the indiscriminating  
sun,  
allowing the  
well-fed teachers  
on their well-fed  
scooters  
to ride past  
wearing crash helmets  
to prevent the  
sun  
from melting  
their leisure hours  
always on their affluent heads

First published in *The Flowering Tree: Selected Writings from Singapore/Malaysia* (1970)

## **rain**

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

drops and showers of rain  
washing this dirty and dry town,  
birds hopelessly flying to wet shelters  
roads becoming wet and grey  
coloured objects bearing clearer colours  
platoons of raindrops play about  
on the schoolyard  
trees whispering to one another saying  
'what a lovely day for growing'  
vehicles overtaking one another  
splashing jets of water all around  
the naked flagpost,  
labourers go home wet and fresh  
and this curtain of rain  
obstructs the vision of drivers  
and cyclists wearing glasses

the sun is having a short vacation, happy  
like a teacher with a surprise-holiday,  
coming out soon after losing its patience  
while motorcyclists bow and shudder  
bearing in mind the dangerously slippery road  
a bus passes by  
followed by the shunting of a japanese train  
emitting steamed-diesel to the cold sky  
heavy lorries chase wetness from their murderous wheels  
1967 rain has arrived  
wetting everyone and everything equally,

my bones affected by it  
as bones of bending farmers get cold while  
planting padi depending so much on rain  
they thank God for their rain,  
they with their own fondness  
we with our own hatred  
of the rainy season  
that turns grey trouser legs reddish brown  
cooling umbrella tops brown  
walking in the rain unprotected  
releases good appetite  
the subdued sun began to show its anger  
by appearing on the wet schoolyard

First published in *The Flowering Tree: Selected Writings from Singapore/Malaysia* (1970)

## **the interview**

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

i was doomed from the beginning;  
not knowing anyone  
who was on the board of interviewers  
with wide powers to kill or nurture scholarship  
  
it started with a humiliation  
becoming a satire in the middle  
ending in a farce which is common to all interviews,  
revealing the malice of the board  
  
leaving me no better than i was  
before the beginning,  
once interviewed, twice turned away

First published in *The Flowering Tree: Selected Writings from Singapore/Malaysia* (1970), p. 95

## moon-hiding tree

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

a lean and tall ketapang tree  
blackened by light-stealing night  
stands weakly in my garden  
dirtied by dust,  
moon-hiding tree,  
preventing the sighting of a slim  
moon  
as if to avenge the loss of its colour  
by spreading its skinny disjointed leaves  
to prevent my seeing it

First published in *The Flowering Tree: Selected Writings from Singapore/Malaysia* (1970)

## freewalking

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

walking in the morning  
holding leisure in one old hand  
and freedom from office rules in the other  
really making use of his morning leisure  
free as a capitalist is  
of financial worries  
i feel like  
a pavlovian dog summoned to work  
when i look at this old man  
with two old hands, freewalking,  
on my way to work

First published in *Westerly* (1971), no. 3, p. 50



## rain, broken light and music

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

Dewy raindrops splashing on the ground  
and the twang of guitars accompanying folksingers  
help me to spend a peaceful time, dead  
at the coming of morning

dripping drops magnifying their faint sounds  
as if striving for better auditory attention  
as each illuminating song dies  
a door slammed heavily bangs  
a new song begins, intending to illuminate

reflection from the ordinary bulbs against  
the window panes blanketed by mist  
broken my names written, forming a patch  
obscuring full reflection,  
purely accidental

it is drizzling, rain moving  
like a fish being fried.

First published in *The Second Tongue: An Anthology of Poetry from Malaysia and Singapore* (1976), p. 15

## my clever pupils

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

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

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 bakau.

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 auto boast?  
i was their teacher and their pupil

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## **shut**

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

i shut  
the door  
to close  
myself  
from the  
noisy outside,

i pray  
in the mirror  
reflecting my prayer  
to make up  
all the unsaid  
prayers.

## not even a word

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

i helped you when  
you were a stranger  
walking aimlessly on the lined  
palms of my unsure hands,  
mistaking roads  
and mistaking lines

you bought a small and under-equipped hut

now you are safe;  
later, you went away,  
not even a word

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## **a window curtain**

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

this flowery window curtain  
shields me  
forming a barricade  
against noisy germs  
coming from irresponsible mouths  
with brain-piercing and irresponsible voices  
this window curtain prevents  
the music that is poetry and folk songs  
from being humiliated  
by the noisy germs  
that are outside  
and the outside is mechanical and popinjayish  
and the impatience of man-made thunder  
this curtain  
keeps me  
to myself  
when caring becomes too painful

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## the male gossip

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

he saw me committing the same crime he committed  
with two friends,  
yet spreads my wrong-doing  
as if to obliterate his  
the next morning my friends knew  
the crime i had committed,  
robbing glances  
that was the first time i robbed a glance

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## a quarrel between night and day

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

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 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

First published in *An Anthology of Malaysian Poetry* (1988)

## **i am only this**

*Omar Mohd. Noor*

after twenty eight years  
being ethereally uncertain and stranded  
at an unmapped and unlocated place called doubt  
i have come to only this  
i am only this  
neither here nor there  
this stranded feeling  
is omnipresent  
encompassing me  
still encompassing me although i am twenty eight  
the ashes of deferred promises  
accumulate, becoming  
a hill of unfulfillment  
adding further confusion  
in a head shaken by an explosion of the nerves  
that are called sensitiveness  
i am only this  
weakly standing in between success and failure  
the shoots of talent want to grow  
on the top of the hill of failure  
where dust  
    heaps  
    shoots of talent  
    mountains of dreams  
    confusion  
    tremors  
    explosions

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