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Estuary of Mud

Hidden thoughts among different tongues
Men of the same skin
Evanescence as one to a fertile estuary
Ruffling the feathers of the locals

Our ancestors had perhaps dipped their tongues
Into this confluence of muddied rivers
Leaving us a mouthful of distasteful bitterness
Our words – bloodied, sullied, impure

Petaling Street (茨厂街)

In Chinatown one sees hordes of immigrants moving about hordes may not be politically correct to describe them but that's how many of us view orang asing in the capital there is a joke saying Malaysia is made up of CIMB not the bank but C for Chinese I for Indian M for Malay and B for Bangladeshi everybody laughs because that's a tangible truth in the capital they operate souvenir stalls in a market close to one of the most congested junctions where cars park lawlessly at roadsides and pedestrians walk too close to the fume exhaling traffic selling contraband goods clothing weed paraphernalia street foods and anything you can imagine they pick up different languages from haggling with indons ching chong annyeong konichiwa orang arab mat salleh and the spot checks by the mata mata maybe they can become linguists also when they return as night drapes over the capital they cease to be a cog grinding unceasingly in kay ale there are tiny rooms above shoplots where they retreat or wander around less glamorous corner shops that sell muruku gold chains second hand watches chattering on phones using less fashionable wired earphones and less spoken mother tongues discussing details of overseas remittance or assuaging a worrying loved one will there come a potential date of return a brief respite for our incessant flights or a

new departure is already awaiting for us at the horizon immigrants dream of wings that can fly us somewhere to become somebody rootless unabsorbed and not understood by the land reminded me of the bust of yap ah loy incensed among abandoned deities remembered only in an infobox in history textbooks this estuary of mud remembers no one

*The phrase “*rootless unabsorbed and not understood by the land*” is excerpted from Margaret Shennan’s *Our Man in Malaya*.

168 Noodles, Pudu

Aluminium stall on a five-foot way
plastic stools and wobbling tables
tucked into the curb
its menu
red brushes
on a yellow, age-stained wall

Behind, a Chinese dobi
presses and washes, its machine -
servile giants crank manually,
eaters wordlessly sip their broth
camouflage themselves within the city’s
sprawling webs of highways and heartaches

On a white wall opposite where I sit
pigeons perch on narrow ledges
softly cooing in the heat
their red eyes observe the streets
not for nostalgia
but for scattered crumbs

The waitress busses around gleefully
says to me, in pidgin Cantonese
“lo kau pun”
as she introduces the noodles
but it turns out
to be nine-fifty, not six-fifty

Another immigrant blunder
too many tongues to learn here,
a new wave of drifters lathers the
Peninsula’s shore, washing away
transient footprints and aphasic ghosts,
the city is a silenced witness to a muzzled past.

Though layers upon layers of fresh paint
now cover the unsanctified blood of history,
discoloured memories resurface
in a raised arm,
a din off the street corner, or a moving mob
some occasions live on like relentless spectres.

*The phrase “*in a raised arm, a din off the street corner, or a moving mob*” is adapted from *Life After: Oral Histories of the May 13 Incident*.
