

A Return to Exile

The first time the rain sauntered in my life  
 was two years ago, when I studied in Leeds, drizzle as light as fleece  
 sprayed on me from the sky, which was so different from the tropical rain  
 in Malaysia where heavy droplets often struck me to the skin  
 no wonder the Caucasians could stroll outdoors without a raincoat

Without an umbrella, my British mate was walking to the Parkinson Building on a rainy day  
 “When will you return home? It must be a long flight back to China.”  
 his concern friendly yet unsettling was instantly sprayed on my heart  
 but could I really tell myself apart from my friends from China?  
 how our eyes were eyed, how we had rice with Hanyu Pinyin  
 how we were sanitised with an oriental fear during the COVID outbreak  
 as though the multiple Is were split from a single I  
 a single source, like the rain

That always falls from the sky, wherever it may be  
 but does it always condense from William Wordsworth’s clouds?  
 shall it return to Shu Ting’s sea or Muhammad Haji Salleh’s river?  
 from South China to Southeast Asia, from a boat braving the tempest to a plane  
 thrusting towards the West—a multifaced inheritance: farmer, tin miner, cook, businessman  
 and me, trying to return to history, trying to imagine how the rain feels like

In China, a faraway kingdom for the retired British colonial master  
 and the Malaysian Chinese, the chauvinists chided and claimed  
 we should return to China—a land that would be upset by our hybrid culture  
 accented with an intense odour as distinct as the durian

Or the strong Nanyang petrichor, that will jolt George Eliot’s roses  
 pitter-patter, pitter-patter, the rain hitting on my zinc rooftop on the equator  
 as rhythmic as my fingers tangoing on my keyboard  
 every drop a return to exile flooding generations of desolation  
 across regions and time, an exile that shall remain even after  
 the rain to the tomb of our minds returns

(29 lines, 332 words excluding title)