

Lazarette on Peel Island

Not quite at the mouth of the river's snake
we built the leper's camp, an island
tethered to our shore by the old dichotomy:
on the one side pity, and on the other fear.
Or was it guilt on the one, and on the other
longing? An old tarnished coin, close enough
that from the mangrove's lap, the city's wealth
burned its red halo on the mosquito-coil horizon,
and the curious, standing on the sulphurous mud
could glimpse the damned moving among the trees.
On the one side, fever, and the other, thirst,
and which was which? We never knew. A stone
caught in the throat of peace. But that's all done:
all the huts are decommissioned now, some feral
goats, a rat or two remain, a shapeless fireplace.
Boats can dock there now, we can walk around.
There's always graves to see, crumbling into sand.
We're casting our lepers further out now, a lasso
longer than the eye can see, but the mind divines
the same strange divisions: thesis and antithesis,
the island camps of push and pull, with a physics
of sickness, attraction and ugliness, bay and isthmus.
We're like that gap of water: plagued here with ghosts,
punished there with loneliness, riddled by doubt,
not knowing which side feels pity, which side, fear.