

A brief meal

i.

Today, I had an interview in Central with a man who had survived the Great Famine. When the famine began he was only ten, yet he remembered a great deal: people ate things only skinny pigs would eat; people were 'expressionless', in several senses of the word; many died of hunger - still, there wasn't a tear shed; and many more were stuffed with elaborate lies or unfounded knowledge from the Party: steel could be made by burning impure metals, sparrows were evil, Mao Zedong was invincible.

I told all the above to my mom when we were walking from Central to Sheung Wan for lunch. But she got impatient with the tide of people, well-dressed and self-important, appearing from a myriad of directions. 'So many people!' My mom groaned. 'Were you listening to me?' I asked, slightly hurt.

She was. She asked how I could bear such sad stories, weighty on my heart. I said I had nightmares: fresh, dead babies not properly buried, a collection of gaunt hands peeling tree bark for a few rice-less meals; hunger had the shape of a skeleton. My mom frowned. 'Remember, these things happened in the past, not the present.'

T
R
O
T

ii.

My mom is twenty years older than me,
which makes her forty-five. She's short.
She's also quite white, despite working
long hours under the sun six days a week.

Her daughter - me - has not yet developed
a tolerance for the sun: beams of sharp
summer sunlight still send her
fleeing home to hibernate
until dusk: when the heavily polluted sky
turns orange, sometimes as bright as
a new garment on a Khmer monk.

My mom is a messenger. On the Island
she delivers documents to companies
affiliated with her own. Sometimes her footsteps,
small and urgent, also cover Kowloon,
when her illiterate counterpart there
fails to turn up to work. My mom maps
her territory with two legs, a pair of old-school
sandals, an umbrella, and two bags filled
with papers she can't read. 'When I first
started this job fourteen years ago, there weren't
as many people on the streets as now,'
my mom continued.

Finally we found a restaurant with two empty
seats. For our meal, we only waited the duration of
a mimosa closing its symmetrical leaves.
We ate quickly, our exit hastened by other hungry
diners lining up. They refill their stomachs, gossip,
put on more powder, pay their bills, all in an hour.

iii.

Back on the street, under the unforgiving afternoon sun, hot air surfed through everything, noiseless. I asked my mom if she wanted to quit her job.
'You know, I'm only retiring at 65.' My mom looked at me; I saw dark half-moons beneath her eyes. There were no wrinkles on her forehead, but this was already a lie.

iv.

An absolute space of twenty years must intervene between now and my mom reaching that official, arbitrary age. Many things were uncertain about the next two decades: Would I give birth to someone appreciative? Could they talk about a starving past?

But this was certain: lunch time was almost over, and my mom, a small person, was determined to find her way through the crowds, hither and thither, like a swift swallow navigating a closing forest.
'Hong Kong is becoming saturated with people,' my mom commented, or complained?

T
R
O
T
H

The Famine, 1959-62

One said, he felt like he was a horse: wild,
Low, hungry, when he was chewing - chewing -
Chewing - chewing those endless biscuits of
Hard grass and tree bark.

One said, doors were unnecessary:
There was nothing to steal.
When she was four and a half, she witnessed this:
From an unfinished window (no nails,
No frames, no metal): the old granny
Who sold fish lay flat on the ground,
Her arms were swollen like pig's legs. Her round
Calves were like spiral paper lanterns, but bruised. An
Innocently remembered image unshed through time:
Fifty years, and those open and red wrinkled eyes
Still glare.

One said, people exchanged with neighbours dead
And lean children. One didn't eat one's own.
Trees were all white, branches to roots, in Spring,
In Summer. An unforgettable sight -
Tree bark gone; naked skin
Under the naked sky illuminated the desperate
Energy of hunger.

April 2008

TO
R
O
T

Official causes of death in a Chinese prison

- A exhausted himself arranging sunflowers.
- B drank too much hot water.
- C suffered a heart attack passing a toilet roll to his comrade.
- D lost his breath while playing hide-and-seek.
- E was poisoned from the ink in the newspapers.
- F stared too long at the air.
- G used high-lead-content hand cream (supplied by his family).
- H edited a literary journal named after a beverage.
- I said I too often.
- Singing in bed, J's throat burst.
- K drowned in a mud puddle.
- L was allergic to the fabric of the uniform.
- M died in a fight with another inmate.
- N lost balance and fell off the bench.
- O laughed.
- P died after squeezing pimples on his arms.
- Q simply failed to wake up.
- R's tongue was tied.
- Toothpaste squirted into S's right eye.
- T tripped on his own slippers.
- U said You too often.
- V died in a fight with another inmate.
- W thought he was the Party Secretary.
- X missed a letter from his wife; she's waiting for him with dust.
- Y collapsed after walking miles in his cell.
- Z also edited the literary journal that H edited.

July 2011

Have you heard the news?

Someone said to me:

*Everything seems surreal
in China. Have you heard the news?*

But surreal is the norm there.

Kafka couldn't have dreamt it as well
as the people who live it.

I read that one March,
dead baby girls were found
in a Chinese river. Washed ashore.

Some had tags on their tiny feet
bearing their dates of births, their weights,
their mothers' names.

*Yes, everything is surreal
in China. I've heard the news.*

August 2013

TOP SECRET

BEIJING STANDARD TIME

Beijing Standard Time is used across 9.6 million square metres. The sun rises around 10am in Xinjiang, China's westernmost province.

'And thought is as free as the sun[.]'

— Louis MacNeice

Do you own the sun?
Perhaps you do—you do dictate time.
Everywhere across this vast land,
your time is *the* time.

45

People so often discuss
how Chinese written characters
were simplified by Mao.
Do they know time, too,

was simplified?
Five zones reduced to one.
One time for 'national unity'
One zone for 'everyone'.

Little sacrifice, or inconvenience
for those in Beijing,
a city which imagines
that others orbit it, day in, day out.

But in some areas
the sun sets at midnight,
and only appears
again at ten.

No wonder those distanced
from the capital
perceive time their own way—
independent of Beijing Standard Time.

Can you blame them? Following
nature's law is only natural.
And besides, the day is long,
and the emperor is already asleep.

55

THE BOOKSELLER

There is a small city like all cities
in which booksellers seldom make the news.
Then one day this all changes when five
go missing, one by one.

People care a little, not too much,
about the first four: after all, they vanished
elsewhere. So long as the fire
does not burn too near, it's all right.

Then the fifth, who once said:
'I am not worried. I have avoided
the mainland for years,'
fails to come home to his wife.

The citizens know for sure
that something is not right.
The disappearances breed fear,
anger, even rumours of whores.

Some remove books banned
across the border or close their doors.
Others, trepidatious yet defiant,
continue to sell, print, write.

ONE STONE, TWO BIRDS

It came to me as an idea
for how the PRC can
explain away future disappearances
of dissidents:

Make them volunteer
on Chinese Central Television
to show their patriotism
by sailing the South China Sea.

Then when they never
come back, are never heard from
again, say they have vanished
in the manner of the crew

on the Mary Celeste.
Blame is best placed on mystery,
on supernatural phenomenon,
especially when there's precedent.

Tell the world that until
their bodies are found,
their restless spirits will
haunt the South China Sea,

its fish stocks, its coral reefs,
its oil and gas reserves beneath its beds.
A sea haunted by accursed Chinese ghosts
will truly be a Chinese sea,

for eternity and eternity
and eternity.

LEFTOVERS

The Chinese understand leftovers.
 How food can be made over into other food.
 How whatever's left in the pot can be reused,
 cooked into something random, humble.

That women still unmarried
 in their early thirties or beyond
 are called *sheng nu*—
 literally the 'left-over ladies'.

And why 61 million children
 have been left over, left behind in villages
 by parents seeking work in cities,
 living in cramped spaces, eating leftovers.

SIGNS

Peter Brook once wrote that
 a man walking across an empty space,
 witnessed by another,
 is an act of theatre.

If Brook were to come to Hong Kong
 and cross a crowded Kowloon street,
 see people sandwiched
 between boards
 pointing pedestrians
 to nearby pubs, hot pots, beauty parlours,
 he probably would also think:
 This is theatre.

These men, these women,
 part-sign, part-human,
 find no appreciative audience
 for their discreet plays with no reviews
 but many revivals.

HOW THE NARRATIVES OF HONG KONG ARE WRITTEN WITH CHINA IN SIGHT

1. Call me One Country, Two Systems.
2. It is a truth universally acknowledged that the democracy fighters in Hong Kong must be genetically modified by the West.
3. Hong Kong and democracy—it was love at first sight.
4. An order from the PRC comes and never leaves.
5. Many years later, as the Hong Kong people remembered the 'generosity' of the Chinese government for not shooting them or overrunning them with tanks, they would be forced to cry in gratitude.
6. China, non-light of my life, non-fire of my loins.
7. Happy cities are all alike; every unhappy city is unhappy in its own way. Hong Kong is unhappy because it wants happiness too much. It believes that the right to vote for its own leader would contribute to its happiness. It believes.
8. democracyriven, past Mongkok, Causeway Bay, Admiralty and Central...
9. Hot days in September. Some rainy nights in October. Tick-tock tick-tock tick-tock the clocks were striking and Big Brother was watching. Let him watch. Let the whole world watch.
10. It was the best of times. It was the age of wisdom. It was the epoch of belief. It was the season of Light. It was the spring of

hope. We had everything before us—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest Chinese authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

11. You are about to begin reading the story of Hong Kong, "One Country, Two Systems", when you realise that such a story doesn't exist. Keep the 'country', remove the plural marker in 'systems' and replace 'two' by 'one', then you are truly beginning to read the story of Hong Kong. (One and one is always one.)
12. Someone must have slandered Joshua Wong... for one evening, without having done anything outrageously wrong, he was arrested.
13. Whether Hong Kong shall turn out to be the hero of the international fight for democracy, or whether it will be utterly defeated, the pages of history must show.
14. It was a broken promise that started it. The students returned to the streets day after day. And the voice on the other side of the border responded with contempt, scorn.
15. Through the facial masks, between the crooked handles of umbrellas, people could be seen fighting, in their own way, which is the best way.
16. 689 was spiteful.
17. In the beginning there was the Party and the Party was with the Country and the Party was the Country.
18. There is a spectre haunting China—the spectre of Umbrellaism.

19. The Hong Kong people said they would fight for the city's future themselves and they would bring umbrellas.
20. They say the past is a foreign country and people do things differently there. We say the past is always upon us.
21. Hong Kong was born many times: first, as a fishing village; and then, as a British colony. After that, it became a Special Administrative Region. And then one summer, it became very special indeed.
22. Where now? Who now? When now? Hong Kong now. We now. Now now.

Licking Graffiti on Cement Walls

i.

The dream I had before waking up this morning:

A cat jumping up to the sky
and using her mouth to grab a bird
in flight. Both of them
fall to the ground, impaled
on nails. As they die,
they are panting, breathing out
feathers.

Their fierce eyes stare
at the immensity of brick structures
on Junction Road, Kowloon Tong,
standing like ancient dolmens.

ii.

In another dream

I am buying fishballs
from a streetfood shop
in Sham Shui Po. Suddenly
teargas smoke engulfs everything,
and even the pieces of food
want to wriggle free
from their skewers.

Two youngsters
walk towards me to offer help.

In my dream, under their plain masks
are the faces of mere infants
forced into playing the role of
protesters.

iii.

In one dream
I am sitting
in an upturned 7-11 umbrella,
gliding in the sky, away
from toxic teargas smokes,
in a part of my city
that could be anywhere.
But the umbrella is pierced
by bullets and it plummets.
My blood on my inner thighs
stains the umbrella, as though
I am having a miscarriage.
My palms disappear
and I can't reach my phone,
can't raise my hand
to call for help. I think
of leaving behind a mental note
but I have no words.

iv.

I dreamt I was inside
a coffin
flowing in sewage.
I could see a flash light
that flickered &
stopped.
Then I was no longer
in the coffin but lying
naked on the ground
of the cavernous inner
courtyard of the Tuen Mun
public housing building

where I grew up.
I had become a ghost.

v.

In a dream I woke up from
after having intense pain
in my right calf,
everyone's face is covered
with dripping blood. Some
are singing or praying,
but no sounds come out from their mouths.
Some have hands
that are no longer shaped
like hands. Some have broken
collarbones on which industrial face masks grow.
Some lose their sense of smell
and lick graffiti on cement walls.
We have become a city of freaks.

Maybe

Maybe when three sparrows
line up neatly on a swing in Yuen Long,
whoever looks on patiently enough
will win the Mark Six.

Maybe goldfish bought in Mong Kok
are telepathic and share the secrets
of their new owners. 'She is lonely.'
'This one is lonely too.'
'Nobody in the family talks.'

Maybe in the small hours
the letters on Lan Kwai Fong street signs
rearrange themselves to thwart
drunk English professors.

Maybe the stray dogs in Tin Shui Wai
are soldiers who died heroically
in the Battle of Hong Kong
reincarnated.

Maybe in the many nearby ghost towns,
ghosts do roam
and send old-fashioned good wishes
to abstract relatives in distant homes.

Teapot, Broth, Body

My city is a famed teapot.
Inside, it's darkly stained –
the colours and flavours of past
sovereigns and leaves. Every
new brew already decades old,
telling of disappointed prophecies.

My city is a boiling broth –
an everlasting stew of local bones,
foreign teeth, and ancient poison.
It's been years, this gruesome
business grinding freedoms into
fresh, urgent phantoms.

My city is a body with several tongues,
too clumsy to all fit in a stunned,
shut mouth. Words that emerge,
come out in fits and terror. Its heart
has no suburbs; all year round
it's a burning, rioting season.

19 October 2022

Removed and Rectified

you read from a distant life
it's almost back to normal
calligraphy meets glass tubes

meets flames meets memories
bright above the heads
of those who know customs

and those who stray for a while
like a garage dog or a shop cat
all things advertised: bridal

medicinal, gambling, pawning
lust in multifaceted incarnations
life is almost back to normal

on strict government orders
neon signs, glamorous, decadent
continue to come down

local trade and visual history
backdrop to at once futuristic
and nostalgic filmic wastelands

loudest and most towering
that once stood out now hang
on museum walls or reproduced

in miniatures in living rooms
from a distance your regular bus
going under the signs

you remember now takes others
to their own lopsided homes
no gatherings allowed

reading copy—please do not circulate

on strict government orders
to divert its route
regular people's feet

can't make more hopeful manifestos
for a while you read from a distance
life is almost back to normal

21 October 2022

Are You Becoming Critically Endangered?

Do you collect shiny objects? When alarmed
what plea do you make? Why do people
in your city have a penchant for joking?
What is a group of you called, as in:
a siege of cranes or a lamentation of swans?

Can you be shot legally? When was the last
time you congregated in large numbers
to unlearn self-censorship? Which factor
is the most important in determining
your carbon footprint?

Do you deploy infrasonic rumbling
to communicate with others? Are you
as a people a symbol of anything
universal? What prominent mythologies
are associated with your city?

Can you put two systems together?
Is it true that collectively you have great
long-term memory but sometimes
you opt for feigning amnesia
out of insecurity about security?

How do you vote within your packs?
In times of contention, which groups of you
have a remarkable ability to convert
themselves into warriors, revealing
tough scales, beaks, horns, or words?

Whose antlers are used to make handles
of umbrellas? If you roar to mark or defend
your territory, how far can your roar
be heard from? What help is available
for someone suffering from a phobia?

Are you social animals, like penguins,
living in colonies? How long does it take
to empty your city of its essence and ethos?
What percentage of democracy
have you explored and mapped to date?

If you were to give your mouth a name –
such as Aristotle's lantern – what would
that be? Approximately how many years
does it take to rebuild demolished piers?
Who are your power-driven predators?

How many broods of young
can your government imprison? Is your city
now one of the largest global producers
of migrants? How many heart and time
zones must your city contain?

22 October 2022

Art

For some, the art of leaving isn't hard
to master. The one-way plane tickets, the house,
possibly a backyard. The city loses something

each day: freedoms; its finest lawyers, writers,
scholars who will one day look back
at this broken ship of a town

with loving nostalgia. The art of staying, however,
must be mastered regardless of how, for those
whose roots evidently know this is the land

where their bones shall be ground to dust. The
mountains have seen their ancestors. They own
this city, this realm, even the bittersweet summer

sun. Some wonder if the harbour will smell
the same. The trees? How long will it take
before mail is confiscated? When will coins

and banknotes erase Hong Kong? Will we
speak a different tongue and become
a placid province? Going, going, gone.

after Elizabeth Bishop

If I Do Not Reply

If I do not respond, think:
it must be because of the mountains.
The signal is poor here,
and all my portraits are gone

except those of me
looking angry, lost, and young.
A face from decades ago,
ancient, with no irregular lines

impressed on my forehead.
I miss my collection of random
books like an illiterate person
misses his education.

If I do not call, it's because
my blood has darkened
from I don't know what. If
I pray it's not to a god

but to the sun that brightens
generations before it dies, burnt
through the eras, the changing
codes and modes of morality.

If I do not reply, think:
it's because I have given myself
to the man-made weather.
The sea as a thick closet,

the sky is a blue ceiling, even
the trees welcome me as a rotting
singing bird. If I do not say
anything, believe me,

it's not what they tell you.
I have disappeared into a body
of mirrors, only reflecting
other mirrors, of this life.

6 February 2021