

Tammy Lai-Ming Ho

# If I Do Not Reply

Shearsman Books

## On the Day of the Eclipse

The sky doesn't open. Uncharged light bulbs explode into glowing fragments. There are three ways to recognise the smell of a sun-shaped onion: boiling, peeling, and crying. Some people look directly at the eclipse and imagine themselves fainting; they dream of thousands of arrows pointing towards a giant clock face, its numbers written in pre-digitised Chinese. ONE (一) is the smooth back of a wet elephant. TWO (二) is a training step for infants. Some say their names or birthdays coincide with the natural phenomenon and ask: Is the moon a sun in another macrocosm? Poets wonder if they should write poems, photographers click their shutters from a distance. A pregnant woman accidentally sees the partially covered sun will give birth to a healthy son. Can the sun really be stolen, eaten and spat out, by an ancient dragon? The seconds and minutes are being counted: all worlds collide, all instances. An invisible and unwanted timeline for this city, like mysterious corpses, washes up in the harbour, cannot be debunked. Tomorrow, once again, the sun calls on us in bed. We make it stand still for a moment, we make it run.

*21 June 2020*

## Allegories

Picture the ocean, those who believe they are destined for it until they are missing or go mad. The gradual merging of land and water, at first subtle, then final. On neglected streets in odd cities there are still walls that have retained memories of the long third day. Imagine being a mollusc enlarging its shell to accommodate the growth of its body, carrying the burden of self-protection when pushing its way across its pitiful lifespan. Despite attempts at humanity, each island of us can be deluged under the sea wearily weeping, which lasts merely seconds or a whole century.

Far from the ocean, rocks grow metaphorical legs and move to unsuspecting rivers and streams. They break down during this audacious journey and are prepared for further parting. When they reach the ocean, they are broken and broke. The battering waves grind and mangle them like a practical joke into sand. In each grain is a history, a struggle. Examine it with curiosity, with composure.

Under the sea, at night, at dusk, howling grand geological events cause tsunami waves. They build up heights, higher and loftier, faster and in tremendous conviction, whenever they travel inland. When the land is submerged, remember I have warned you about water's seductive persistence. A recital is now going on, past midnight, across years of two animals. Do not be surprised at waves coming back, unending, unextinguished. Do not.

*12 February 2021*

## 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.

## 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.

## NOTE: Read the Word “Note” Aloud

*Note: This is not the actual cover of the book*

They removed the offensive artwork  
and the title, which appropriates a slogan  
currently deemed obsolete. *Note: Some pages  
are reluctantly left blank* The writers and artists  
and lawyers and professors who contributed  
the material were no longer in a position  
to grant us permission, either by choice  
or due to death. *Note: On account*

*of the authenticity of “the event” being challenged,  
the same said event was redacted* This erasure

applies also to poetic names of streets  
which must now be metaphorical, anonymous:  
miles through the snubbed streets, chaotic  
classified scenes unfold in streets  
that are themselves arteries threatened  
to be folded up, goods and gods thrown  
onto the streets, grievances on the streets  
continuing into and beyond October.

*Note: There is a Cantonese note of Cantonese  
contempt in some Cantonese witnesses’*

*Cantonese verdicts* A valid proof  
that the language is versatile, versifiable  
and not an error in printing. *Note: No pages  
should be on display or reproduced*

The aforementioned event is a historical  
placeholder, a splendid anomaly, defined  
by a bold tone of definite pitch  
made once by the people’s voice.

*14 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

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*

## Salpetrière

My heart, away from the pulse of a peeling  
home, has gone on strike.

It has at least slowed down –  
*Have there been any sudden deaths*

*in the family?* I breathe through  
a large white tank like a scuba diver

back on dry land. Time is now measured  
by the shadows on a bottle of hand gel.

I've never seen so much blood  
in test tubes, each bearing a label

with my date of birth, a long barcode,  
and my Chinese name in English.

*Are you Mme Ho?* How to be wheeled  
down silent corridors when your desire to test

the echo of your voice is strong?  
How to be a mannequin sprouting

needles and patches of swollen  
skin? How to be still and balance

a perfect jar of urine – a sequel  
to a painting by Magritte? In a darkened

room, the floor is flooded with blue light;  
I'm an alien resting in profile. The sounds

of a heart, an adult heart, mine –  
the size of two fists. There's no illusion

of another's heart. My past and present  
converge, miles of translatable

beating, blooming – I'm at once  
a baby and dynasties old.

*Monday 3 October 2022*