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If I Do Not Reply

Shearsman Books

Part Three: Are You Becoming Critically Endangered?

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Writing Despite Inarticulateness

Not because of censorship. I fear
no knock on the door before dawn,
nor the expressions of concern
from friends. But rather the sleep-deprived
nights of thinking what to do,
what can my generation do,
and the next, and the next.

The trees that were planted
will not die unless wilfully uprooted.
The songs sung by birds of freedom
continue to exist, in some form,
in this universe. But the time taken
from those wrongly imprisoned
murders something in all of us.

Can we stop and think,
and not only about shoes, sushi,
electronic cigarettes. Drinks,
artisanal or otherwise. Think:
what this city means today,
and how in less than thirty years
it may be no more. No more.

At This Moment, Everyone Is a Revolution

i. Some People

Some people shed their petty personalities like snake skin, only to grow a new layer that is a strengthened version of the old. On the other side of the river, it is no longer the same river – some people accept this as fact, others secretly question it because they don't understand. One week always flows into the next and a chorus of international cameras can't reverse time, can't change some people's minds. Some people take turns to bleed for what they think is worthwhile. There are those who succumb to flattery, delighted at being called intelligent, having a good poetry ear and perfectly timed. There are those however who loathe praise, every hyperbolic word is perceived as a carefully constructed insult. In a neat room no one is foolish enough to throw the first piece of trash on the floor. In an already tarnished room, some people readily fantasize smashing its glasses and concealed windows. When some people find out they are in a novel, they demand to be given the ability to create tears, to genuinely cry. Some people sell lies. Some fabricate them as though in a party line. Some live in lies like living in a sealed showroom. Some people look on. Some take action.

13 June 2019

ii. The Fall

A note of demands on behalf of the whole city that has been battered, tortured, frustrated by the inhumane and tone-deaf government of Hong Kong: "No Extradition to China. Make Love No Shoot. Total withdrawal of the extradition bill. We are not rioters. Release the students and injured. Carrie Lam step down. Help Hong Kong." What must have gone through his mind as he fell? That he was there, and then he was no more. What does it say about a city that drives one of its own literally off a building, in public sight? We have tried and tried to make our voices heard. Some sing hymns. Some forgo food. Some make signs. Some cry in silence, trembling, nursing a lingering heartache. Do we all have to imprint notes across the city, on its mountains and

bridges and lampposts and shop fronts and park benches and walls, for us to be finally heard? The bell tolls for us all.

15 June 2019

iii. *We Are What We are Made of*

Beginning from every day
tears are shed: their tails are puffs
of smoke. Beginning from yesterday
walls are covered in squared colours,
street names changed. Beginning from then
poetry can mean, be, and stay. Beginning
from June 2019, people
in a city look at each other:
million faces, million thoughts,
united in water, practice, slogans.
Beginning from now,
there is no turning back, no stopping.
We are what we are made of:
desperation and unbeatable will.
This is the beginning of the open
secret that we don't ever quit.

25 July 2019

iv. *The City I Live in*

On weekends, people walk the streets in the fierce sun
on the brink of fainting –
grey sweat comes down to their ankles
when a river of heads chants add oil.
At least one in seven people choose to boldly speak
a forbidden language of signs, posters, and videos;
of hope, metaphors, malls, and proliferating
Lennon Walls. The city I live in is no longer
only office buildings with glass fronts

or identical shops that sell identical
things. It is a city of diverse limbs
that each know their direction –
wherever they are needed, they go.

27 July 2019

v. *This Moment*

At this moment an airplane is landing. The pilot
makes the usual announcement
before explaining to passengers about the peaceful
protesters at the airport dressed in black.
He switches from English to Cantonese
to say the most heartfelt words.

At this moment a family is going to Disneyland.
A little boy is oblivious to teargas and rubber pellets,
thinking only of Mickey Mouse and Winnie the Pooh.
May he grow up to never know
the fear of being caned.
At this moment

train stations are transformed into battlegrounds,
blood of citizens on floor
like abstract calligraphy. The trains
take no one to nowhere until someone
makes some right decisions.

This moment a people is angry. They carry
on with their lives barely. How many more
days to endure for a government to listen
and show remorse?

At this moment, everyone is a revolution.

28 July 2019

vi. Anecdotes for The Future

0.

Sometimes a typhoon
is not just a natural phenomenon.
It coincides
with a movement.

0.

They would claim
they are not tyrants,
only realists, patriots.

0.

Dark night. Fireworks horizontally
deployed from a moving black car,
weapons with ringing sounds
and colours. Smoke
gets in the eyes of protesters
in the town where I grew up.

0.

A gun's mouth can point
Middle fingers of the police
are raised
All that is steel or sturdy
can become youngsters'
makeshift shields
Our full bodies are alert

0.

Near dawn, strangers
in their separate rooms, on different
sofas or looking out of their myriad
windows, collectively sigh or cry.

0.

The disobedient citizens
are determined to be,
to be disobedient,
in all parts of the city – flowers
blossom everywhere. All
walks of lives, all hues of hair,
cut open our regular existence
to forge a new Hong Kong.

31 July 2019

Laid Bare

Once upon a time we were ignorant
of tear gas inside MTR stations
and in fact, of tear gas.
We marched on planned routes
and the next day, returned to work,
school, and naïvely conceived normality.
Now it is no longer possible
to feign innocence: Blood
of protesters shed on the streets,
thick and clearly witnessed.
The flaws that make our society now
are the flaws of tyrants.
Fearful but defiant trapped birds,
we are in a deadlocked situation,
but still tuned to the tone
of freedom, dreaming of breathing
free, sighting streets of regular traffic,
each others' faces.

12 August 2019

The Eye

A crater, a window, an entrance to the soul, a lone well, an empty dish, a lamp to the body – is collectively mourned; heartbreaking and haunting. A young woman lost an eye in her beloved city, the result of certain people already having turned half blind. One eye open, one eye closed: only surveilling, seeing selective sights, scenes and sins. Hong Kong was once lost, and then found, and lost, and will be found again; a cycle of blood, sweat, and tears.

12 August 2019

Neighbouring Sounds

What is the hour of the day
when most people are awake?
Awake to the sounds of cars honking,
being directed to other routes.
Someone smashed three glass doors,
while in the distant world
forest trees, not trash cans, are burning.
Waves carrying naked, dead bodies
to the shore. But they don't make a sound.

The hour when people
are woken up to the city anthem played
in various instruments, and nobody
is deprived of her triumphant music.
Bullets travel at speeds greater
than the speed of sound – a sonic boom reverberates.
Some muted voices ride into the night,
never to resurface as before.

There are cycles of wakefulness
around the world. The ticking of this clock
descends upon us. Hongkongers
are awake, awake, awake.

Thursday 17 October 2019

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