

Pan Gu and the Bomb

The giant Pang Gu¹ raises

Hong Kong's sky.

His pelvis sharpens

mountain peaks,

his teeth bury porcelain

in island caves.

The coarse hairs he sheds

become banyan roots.

His clipped nails

turn to fish scales.

Pan Gu's breath whistles wind.

7 am, Sheung Wan station.

Pang Gu shuffles onto

the train east. Pang Gu sleeps standing up

sways from a strap

clenched in his broad, scarred hand.

Pang Gu pushes through

turnstiles at Wan Chai, 7:30 am.

Signs out his white

hard hat, 7:50 am.

3 pm: Pang Gu's bulldozer scrapes

metal. He lifts the shovel. An egg —

dark thunder head, lodged

in harbour mud: ANM-65 device.

Pang Gu blows his whistle.

It's a four hundred pound shell.

He has seen others:

six months, two years, five years ago

resting in the reclaimed seabed.

Post-Pearl Harbour, Christmas `42

to `45. Hong Kong occupied.

Bombarded.

That American downpour:

iron-sky, constant

as summer Black Rain

pummelling harbour,

shipyard. Steel helmets

of Japanese sentries

shattered, ship hulls

split. Metal shards

slit uniforms, skin sheaths

of occupying soldiers, Cantonese

food hawkers at foundry gates.

Such a bomb, even 75 years on,

could shatter compound eyes

of office towers. Sever spines

of truck drivers unloading deliveries.

Pang Gu pulls out his iPhone 6,

in the chipped Hello Kitty lilac case—

gift from his granddaughter.

He alerts the boss. Police cordon off

steel construction gates

with yellow tape.

Turns out this bomb is dented—
detonator cracked, fuse frayed.

Evacuation! Revolving tower doors
spit one thousand office workers
onto sidewalks every minute.
Workers queue for blocks
to flee on double-decker buses.

Pang Gu strolls to Johnson Road.
His granddaughter waits
under a banyan tree.
Dangling air roots tickle her scalp.
She shelters under
the lacquered green paper
umbrella of the tree. The lean steel
ding ding rattles by as the driver
yanks his bell. Pang Gu and his granddaughter
will catch the next tram home.
She holds out her sky blue pack
of schoolbooks. Pang Gu shoulders her load.

The bomb hunkers on its haunches:
excavated trench, nylon tent.
Less than half a block, the east-west highway
students closed four years ago.
Stretching bare legs on concrete,
dutiful, they memorized the dates of battles
that cratered Hong Kong.

After that protest, student debates
on the long fuse of history—outlawed
by Beijing in Hong Kong classrooms:
suffrage, Tiananmen—redacted.

Photos of youth lying in front of tanks,
will blur like leaflets
in a washed pocket.

How many more June 4ths will small,
smooth hands take memorial candles
from the leathered palms of old men?
Sit beside them in the dark?

Pang Gu snores in his cracked
black vinyl recliner. His granddaughter
in her faded brown uniform,
clicks the remote
past the channels Pearl, World.

On China Central Television
a PLA song and dance troop marches by
in sequined khaki.

The bomb ticks, talking in its sleep.

The Borrowed Children

by Kate Rogers

After Shirley Geok-lin Lim

My grief was asleep
until the students
camped out on the highway
that crossed the city,
swayed to *Imagine*—that song
I play my students
to teach the first
conditional, that song—
about hope.

My grief was asleep
until they did homework
on the pavement, danced all night,
eyes open in the dark.

My grief was asleep
until I saw my students gassed
by police who used to
take their hands,
lead them home when
they were lost.

My grief was asleep
until clouds drifted
down from the mountains,
submerged the city.

Two girls who loved words in
my classroom,
tasted fog on the road,

on the subway platform.
They couldn't breathe.

I saw thirteen year olds,
who wanted to speak
to their leaders
and be heard.

I saw eighteen year olds pushed
hard against metal barriers.

I could not sleep
when they were beaten
by gangs of men
who think children must
taste the bitter iron
of their own blood.

I saw the students link arms
and call,

Do You Hear the People Sing?

My grief was awake,
and I was weeping for
my own loss.

After the tents and umbrellas
were cleared, and cars
took back the road I accepted
Cantonese in my English classroom,
stopped joking about being
the language police.

My grief was awake.
For fifteen years I'd borrowed
children to fill my heart
for the ones I'd lost:

the termination my lover
replaced with a puppy
the day I returned to our house
alone in a taxi;
then the fetus lost
on a mountain path.

My punishment will be
to lie awake, count the students
I've taught instead of sheep,
so many asking questions
unwelcome in the country
they inherit.

My punishment will be
to leave this city,
but never stop dreaming
of the children I lost.

I am a ghost

The taxi driver
who drives me to Hong Kong
airport tells his dispatcher
a Sei gweipo
(damned white ghost)
is in his cab. Winks at me
in his rear view
when he sees I understand.
At the terminal
he muscled my bag
from the trunk
so I tip.

My first night in Toronto,
I rise off the mattress
into the air.
Limbs swimming, I touch nothing.
The hand I raise to my face
is not there.
White ghost!

Sheer as the hotel sash curtains
I pass through the glass door
to the subway,
slip under the turnstile

without paying.

Queen Street station

platform level

I hover beside a face

in the blue tile mural:

Nellie McClung, Methodist

Suffragette! In a red frilly dress?

Passengers in the first subway car

ignore the man in a black beret

fervently stroking his violin.

I pluck a loose white strand

from his horsehair bow.

College station I gust out of the train,

swirl stray leaflets on the stairs,

transparent

to the homeless man on the top step,

his eyes flat white coffee.

Luminous, I surge

down Yonge

to my alma mater,

casting no shadow

on the brooding statue

of Egerton Ryerson.

More than 25 years ago

I sat at his green brass feet—

that educator who planned

for Indigenous youth
to dig gardens, hang laundry
for white ghosts!

I waft past the LED billboard
that flickers news
like a migraine
in my periphery
at Yonge and Dundas.

I weave the diaphanous
veil of myself through
the grimacing chrome grills
of cars herding pedestrians,
the storm sewers
west to Spadina,
through the plate glass window
of Sang's Great Seafood.

I will myself into my pale pink flesh,
smile at the waitress.

I've forgotten all the words
for food in Cantonese
except *fan*: rice
and *sai laan faa*: broccoli.

I let the ghost speak
out of my mouth,

Siuje? Little sister, Miss—I ask,

May I order, please?

Unreal cityⁱⁱ

Fog blurs

the Bloor Street Viaduct

the faces, the souls

crossing. A nose ring,

a bare knee, torn jeans.

Here, Ondaatje's nun

is carried off

by wimple wings

over the railing.

It's been twenty years

since I passed this high

above the Don Valley.

Now there are Plexiglass barriers

but I still fear the drop

the jostling gusts

the quivering leap in me.

Black Swan Tavern.

I slide onto a vinyl stool

order a Muskoka Ale.

A stranger raises his glass

says he knows me

from somewhere,

but he doesn't.

Outside Book City,
Chester and Danforth,
a woman is propped
against a sapling Maple,
cross-legged
on a folded *No Frills* box.
Her eyes leak. A grimace
carves her cheekbones
as she holds out
a dream catcher.
A few pennies scattered
in her money hat.

I meet a friend
Yonge and Finch.
A year ago, right here,
a white ton of ambush—
weaponised vehicle
crashed onto sidewalk
cracked bone-twigs
pulped muscle
crushed skulls.
Now my friend and I watch
every passing van,
tensed for swerves
in our direction.
Her class ran late that day.

Her students were safe.

She shows me

the small stone of luck

she worries in her pocket.

She shows me her nails, bitten to nubs

the edges crusted with blood.

As we stand there

the light turns green

then red again.

ⁱ Pang Gu is the giant who helped create the earth. He is described in the Chinese Taoist creation myth. That myth is frequently taught to Hong Kong school children.

ⁱⁱ From TS Eliot, "The Wasteland".