

## Twenty Years in the People's Republic of China

Kate Rogers

I. January 1999

"There will be," said my new boss,  
"a Party plant in your classroom.  
Tiananmen never happened."  
I was sitting in her office  
at Centennial College in Toronto.

Arrival: Changsha, Hunan.  
Steel towers, red iron cranes  
gauze-wrapped. Each breath  
tasted of coal. The Great Helmsman  
Mao went to teachers' college here,  
wrote poems sheltering from the molten sun  
in a mountain pavilion.

For National Day my students  
took me hiking. To Zhangjieje—  
China's first forest park because I saw trees  
in the *Xi lanhua*—broccoli in our lunch boxes,  
in the brittle, bare whisk brooms  
leaning upright by the caretaker's hut.  
Wicker baskets of birds at the gates.  
The students helped me buy a small pheasant—  
feathers dry, brown as leaf litter—from a hunter.  
They climbed with me  
half way up Doupeng mountain  
where I released the bird.  
Its rapid wing beats sliced cloud  
from the sky. Some students laughed.  
"The bird will be caught again  
by a hunter," a girl insisted.  
Descending the steep slope two students  
asked what I knew about the Tank Man  
at Tiananmen. A tall boy said,  
"Anti-China propaganda."

II: January 2019

Nine months until I repatriate to Canada.  
I am on the Lantau trail neck deep  
in flush-pink petals parted for butterflies,  
Hong Kong's silver skyline hidden by the mountain.  
An eagle owl on a tall pine  
pivots his head after leaf rustle.  
I can hardly believe only one more spring  
on these mountain trails.

Outside my window, peaks across the bay  
cloaked in smog. I cannot risk travel to the mainland now,  
my poems about my Hong Kong students' protest  
umbrellas blooming in a mist of tear gas—seditious.  
Canadian diplomat Michael Kovrig  
waits in a cell where the lights never go out.  
He can't sleep, but his spirit still roams China.  
I yearn to walk the edge of Tiger Leaping Gorge  
in Yunnan, skirt its deep, dark mouth.  
I yearn to climb Emei Shan with the pilgrims.  
My yearning enters my dreams:  
I am holding the pheasant  
whose heart beats fast. I release it  
and over and over  
it is shot. A red-brown flurry  
drops at my feet on the forest path.  
Ribs poke through; the heart's in shreds.