

Tammy Lai-ming HO

TIME KEEP

translated from the Chinese by Tammy Lai-Ming Ho

When will we finally understand time?
Do we really now understand time?
Solar bodies, seasons. In the 16th century
no one cared about

the accuracy of time. Nothing was urgent.
Everything approximate. Now,
every minute and every second
can mean the imminent verge of life

and death, and yet our clocks now
don't even tick, when we look
at their digital silent displays. We need
to look back to look forward:

Radiocarbon clocks determining the age
of the earth—human histories stored in bone.
I heard a new clock is being created
to measure civilizations. It ticks just once

a year. It will outlast us all.
I hope Earth can weather the damage being done
and time keep giving.
Can we be good ancestors?

The Chinese original of this poem was broadcast as part of the "Earthsong: Science-inspired Poetry Against Climate Change" event that took place at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow (#COP26) on Monday 1 November 2021.

時間保留

by Tammy Lai-Ming Ho

我們何時最終明白時間？
我們真的現在了解時間嗎？
星體，季節。十六世紀
無人理會

時間準確與否。無事甚急。
萬事俱略。現在，
每分每秒
能關鍵迫在眉睫的生存邊緣

與死亡，但是我們的鐘
不響不滴答，
都是電子的展示。我們要
往從前看才能向前看：

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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

OPEN SECRETS*i.*

My mother's eyes are dry but tears
sometimes find their way there.
The woman selling dead seafood keeps
wetting the lobsters with ice water

near the shore where tourists cheer and wave.
A paper kaleidoscope has limited
use but it is a birthday present, along
with a house and a plasticine key that is too big

and a red hand-painted card. The skin
does not heal itself fully when hurt; lifeless
flakes on the sofa, desk, everywhere black.
One copies a poem in dark sour ink,

the Chinese characters escape in rain.
An abstract ship sailing, not yet stranded,
blurry nests. It heads to the future, already,
the sky is ripening. Like a beard grown.

ii.

Please wait. We'll be with you in a moment.
The walls grow impatient; no more
breathing through the cracks of hope. How
many are still counting? Closed curtains

day and night. Rumours say if everyone
writes in shorthand or distorted
script, we might be heard, understood
as millions of distraught, distracted

masked mouths. There's a saltiness
in the books with titles that spell city, speech
and shock. Which part of the face
is the loneliest? We have come so far,

and not far enough. Stuffed animals
on delayed parades, some dressed like
frogs and ducks. Three-dimensional
time has gone on. Narratives are stuck.

iii.

I dream often of you in an unfamiliar
shirt or half-naked, your back beaten. You
are many faces but I know none
closely: and none are returning

home in an instant. Seasons
don't change when they are of grief
and tightened limbs that are paused.
They still invent new rules

drawn on harsh desks behind closed
doors and we use the same symbols
with conviction like the weathering
stones and umbrella bones.

Spotless, this year, is a fantasy.
Gallop images and sounds await
simultaneous interpreters whose headsets
are in disarray. Who is listening?

vi.

I am bad at graphs, charts,
and calligraphy that magnifies facts.
If Hockney is not an iPad artist,
I'm not a poet of protests

but someone who cautiously writes
about Hong Kong. The city's streets
are easy enough to navigate. Taxi
drivers say they can't fool

passengers. But I have seen roads
blocked and signs altered creatively
to send us messages. Love
is not only conditional, relative,

but a wilful white car in a storm.
Holes in the street, window panes
on curved buildings turned yellow
with slogans you know. We know.

v.

I sit hunched on a pavement
in Wanchai, too early for a meeting
about art, poetry, photography. They
have repeatedly drawn our attention

to neon signs that glow
but throw no shadows that footsteps
can make explicit. My fellow citizens
walk home after work, purposeful

but, in truth, directionless,
in anticipation of a sofa that lets
them linger maskless. I slalom
between moving cars and trip

over the wheels of parked ones.
Chewing gum blackened on every street
testifies to our troublesome existence.
If there's a tomorrow, it's already here.

vi.

There's a hurricane path
cutting through everyone's mind;
we're all a little insane now. An eel
trained to needle through penetrating

thoughts. People say our belts
are fastened too tight in this part
of the world; freedom is only free
when guaranteed. We frame

everything like Zoom windows;
restaurant tables partitioned
with makeshift dividers, on mathematical
principles. I'm convinced it's art,

worthy of permanent international
exhibitions. The food deliveryman asks,
'Are these coins clean?' Laundry day
comes again. Dust settles.

November 2020

THE ARGUMENT

Let them think we are foolish lovers,
cuddling in a car. Moon glows but stars
are nowhere. Will you remember
to keep the headlights on, until daybreak be our witness.
Morning dew on glasses. How time passes.

Let them think we are hopeless lovers
who forget the hour of the day, the day of the week,
the week of the month until we eventually remember
the forceful fucking of the clock, the changing hues
of the sky, the thickness of socks in our shoes.
Apprehension of living in sweet stretched moments.
They are sure we'll understand: two people are really two,
not divided one.

Let them think there's no future in store for us,
that we are not prepared to give anything substantial.
Let them think the man cruel, the woman too much.
They know not the extent of our bonds—
yes, one piece of flesh; and all sorts of ignorance,
impracticalities, remembrances. We are in love.
What else can be expected?

Let them think we talk sweet nothings.
Shall we love a little more, sweet nothing?

WHERE WERE YOU LAST NIGHT?*for Steven Digman**Where were you last night?*

In the city centre. At a book launch.
The writers read too long, the microphones
were loud.
I drank some wine, didn't eat.
I wanted to smash those piles of books.
They looked too neat.

Where were you last night?

In the woods, catching unicorns.
The white rabbit guided me.
Fireflies danced with dying bees.
I laid a deer next to her mother
where there was scent of cedarwood.
I watched them fall into a deep deep sleep.
Were you the hawk across the great lake?
Your eyes kept me awake.

Where were you last night?

Waiting, in a pumpkin chariot, to be rescued.
Waiting, combing my hair in a castle,
to be rescued.
Waiting, in a Danish river, to be rescued.
Waiting, in a picture, to be rescued.
Waiting, in a glass coffin watched by dwarfs,
to be rescued.

Where were you last night?

In mourning. In the rain. Behind walls.
On a diet. On the game. In treatment. In love.
In denial. In arrears. In tears. In dependence.
In light of. In Fidel. In the right place.
In the mood. Over the moon.
Under the knife. In my mother's body.
Coming into being. Elsewhere.

Where were you last night?

Moscow. It was snowing. The flakes on my
face were hotter
than burning coals. The snow was hotter
than your worst fever. A snowflake fell
in my eye—
I have lost sight forever.

Where were you last night?

In the Chelsea hotel, standing for one night.

The man whose name I don't remember did not snore for we didn't sleep. He whispered Mina whenever he thought it was appropriate.

In the pub, I had given him my friend's name.

He said he liked my shoes;

they reminded him of his piano teacher.

He was ten. She was thirty-two.

Where were you last night?

At home. In my own arms. Home is my own arms.

My own arms.

TRANSLATED

The next world, if there is one, may not be free of boredom.
You prefer to be a door than a wall, open
to new interpretations, defying what people think

homonyms can do. We are collectors of moments—
cataloguing them, giving them novel names.
Do I inspire rebellion or obedience?

Once things are damaged, we fix them,
but are they still the same? So many art terms I should know,
and nothing is untranslatable, you insist.

You are always risking morality and fidelity.
If you demolish me, you promise to relocate me
in your notebook, in another language.

You said you need stress in your life, then I show up.
Your face has many symbols of prejudices.
Some people are textually repressed, you taught me.

What makes a beard attractive?
What makes an old notice board noticeable?
For you, every word is another word, and surprises are tender.

You have begun to write poems
that speak of cats and bamboo scaffolding
and Kowloon and time travel. Are there

things that, in your absence, can be used
to reconstruct you? You remain relevant,
making love in several languages.

You have worn grammar to deflect insecurity.
Many singular events form a translation. Your fingers
are a source of power, for

assertive translations are arousing.
How many people can own the rights to your work
at the same time? How many your heart?

You said I boost your memory
when I hold grudges and repeat accusations.
Texts recreated by you are famous.

The joy and pain of knowing that words matter.
You forbid me to speak to any other translator.

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?

Saturday 22 October 2022

POEM WITH CANTONESE SIGHT RHYMES

How not to weave knowledge
into sheer hatred?
To be lenient about bad situations
with pure sentiments?
To slowly make the worst possibilities
disappear and to once again enjoy
the sun in open spaces,

hoping and pretending we're
memorialising? Are we remembered?
I'm afraid of the faint beating
of the heart of home, now loud
only in our vivid memory. Those calligraphed
banners wielded by marchers
are now objects of terror. We touch

many walls: walls of neglect
and indifference, to exchange
for rivers of when, why, and what?
Still steely, despite our frustrations
but graveyards of emotions will open
this lunar month and again.
We've created many angry ghosts

20 August 2021

POTENTIAL LAST WORDS: A SELECTION

Half a pint of love. Have I been trying hard? The clouds today seem so beautiful. What is wrong with my toes? The incessant cries of the devil. You really dislike potatoes? The silent letters mustn't be omitted. Can I chase after the paper planes? My children are not learning. Are you sorry now? Everything is so far out. Is the city getting better? You are all whispering. What will you do with the heat? Don't put me in an urn. Should I have regrets? That night, the river was very still. Will you tell my mother I hid it in her closet, the old one? Rosebud. Is this real life or fantasy? Please finish my translation. Why are you staring at my face? I have to make it secretly obvious. Is it already June? I am not ready to go. Who wrote that poem about raging? I saw blood everywhere but they said it was thick dirty water. Can you remain hopeful? Put down your fucking phone. The job is not done yet? I have no enemies. Do you hear the people sing? My life is finally mine, mine. He is still exiled? Open the blinds and look out. Am I indeed mortal? They did everything to keep us asleep. Promise me you won't lie to me again. I only have one son and he's stillborn. What are they calling China? Be not afraid. They still tell that false narrative? I am in love with another man. Are there squares within squares and circles? I have no last words.