

## JOHN O'BRIAN / The Day before the Chinese A-Bomb

I want to look at *The Man in Yellow Boots* by George Bowering through the lens of a camera engulfed in a mushroom cloud. Bowering was an aerial photographer with the Royal Canadian Air Force in his early years, shooting film through a peephole in the wing of an aircraft. "It was always a movie of one thing, / a target," he remarked later (Bowering, "Taking Pictures" (1982), qtd. in Rae 143). In modern warfare, especially in aerial reconnaissance, photography provides those in charge with pictures of targets. It is a sighting technology that complements the deployment of troops and weapons of mass destruction (Virilio 1). When it was published in 1965, *The Man in Yellow Boots* also provided pictures of targets, but of a different kind than Bowering produced for the RCAF. By then the threat of nuclear war, one of the book's recurring themes, had made a target of everyone.

In her monograph *George Bowering: Bright Circles of Colour*, Eva-Marie Kröller devotes a chapter to *The Man in Yellow Boots*. She identifies four poems as being more politically charged than the others: "Her Act Was a Bomb," "The Good Prospects," "The Day Before the Chinese A-Bomb," and "Vox Crapulous (alternate title: J. Edgar Hoover)" (35). I would add a fifth poem to the quartet. Although Kröller characterizes Bowering's "Old Time Photo of the Present" as an elegy, possibly a lament for the death of his father and friend Red Lane, to whom the book is dedicated, it also reads as intensely political (Kröller 35). The elegiac is in dialogue with the political, and the poem oscillates between the two.

I shall clamber out filthy  
from the wreckage  
of collapsing universities!

There is not much time  
not much time...

...fingers pasting my picture  
in the photo album of death!

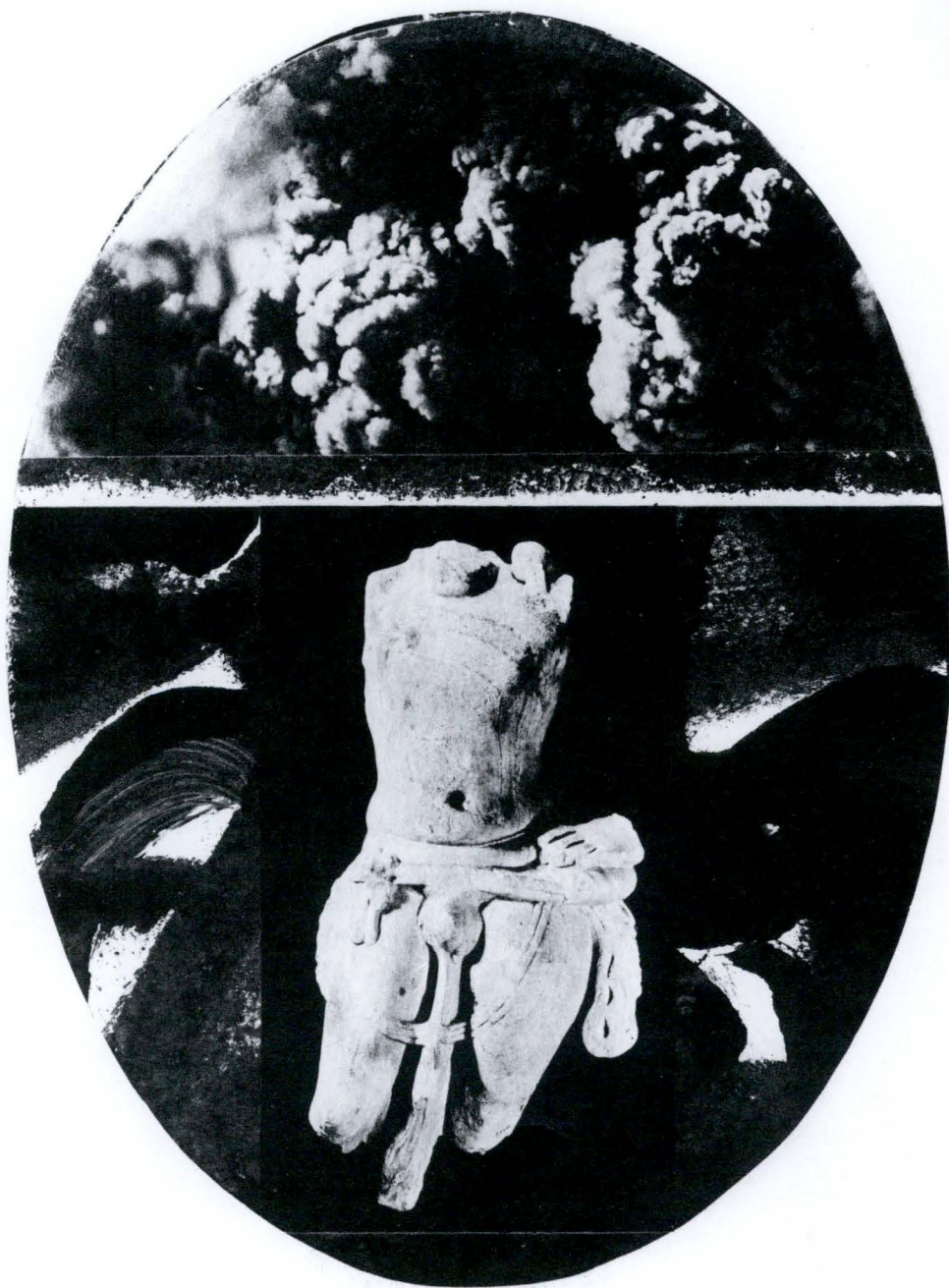
At the time he was preparing the book, Bowering was waging war against serial attempts by the University of Calgary to censor his work and teaching.<sup>1</sup> “Now listen, George Bowering,” the poet admonishes himself in “Old Time Photo of the Present,” “don’t write poems in an office / yell poems of destruction.” In 1964, there was a lot to yell about, starting with Western Canada. “Alberta is a terrible place for anyone who wants to say fuck without going to the firing squad,” he wrote in a letter to Sergio Mondragón and Margaret Randall, the Marxist editors of *El Corno Emplumado: The Plumed Horn*, who were publishing *The Man in Yellow Boots* as a special issue of the journal. In North America, there was no shortage of terrible places and of firing squads. J. Edgar Hoover was still giving orders to armed agents of the FBI in Washington, DC; President John F. Kennedy had been murdered in Dallas, Texas; Malcolm X was soon to be gunned down in the Audubon Ballroom, New York. The big gun that everyone feared, the one that could go off at any time, was the atomic bomb. The principle of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), in which Soviet and American firing squads faced one another while trying not to sneeze, was an uncertain guarantee against nuclear Armageddon.

There is an affinity between Bowering’s poems and the black-and-white photocollages that Roy Kiyooka made for the book. Reproductions of the collages are glued into the centre of the volume. These collages—there are twelve in total—also yell of destruction. A mushroom cloud occupies the top portion of Kiyooka’s first collage, spreading above an antique Japanese sculpture of a male torso, its wooden limbs truncated, like the exfoliating leaves of a doomed tree. In another collage, a parachutist tumbles into a void with his chute still unopened, his fall underwritten by a printed question cut from a magazine, “Do you have to be asked?” In yet another, Malcolm X lies dying of gunshot wounds, his white shirt ripped open at the chest, while to his left a figure is injecting heroin into his arm with a syringe. Crowds look expectantly up at the sky in yet two more collages, perhaps transfixed by a falling figure or an atomic explosion.

Kröller observes that the twin of collage is montage. She is struck by the elements of montage found in the poem “Her Act Was a Bomb,” pointing out that three synchronous but unrelated events are juxtaposed, two of them banal and one catastrophic (36).

1 Bowering comments on some of the censorship battles in letters published in the back pages of *The Man in Yellow Boots* (97-101). The letters are printed on yellow paper.





Roy Kiyooka, photocollage for *The Man in Yellow Boots*, 1965.  
Thanks to Kiyo Kiyooka for permission to republish the photocollages.



Roy Kiyooka, photomontage for *The Man in Yellow Boots*, 1965.

All over America I know  
people are switching off the sound  
when Sophie Tucker appears  
on the Ed Sullivan reruns.

It is of course  
an honest gesture, severe  
perhaps. But in Las Vegas  
I saw an old heron woman

pull down the lever  
on a café slot machine  
and fifteen miles away  
on the desert, America

dropt a Bomb on Nevada.

The montage in the poem stitches the unconnected events together by means of conjunctions and enjambments between the stanzas, and the sequencing produces a chain reaction that culminates in the “dropt” bomb. The muting of Sophie Tucker, known to her fans as the last of the red hot mamas, on Ed Sullivan reruns leads to the arm action of the old heron woman in Las Vegas, and the lever on the café slot machine leads to the red button that detonates a bomb at the Nevada Test Site. The conjunction is between the forces of consumer capital and those of the military-industrial-complex. In Japanese folklore, the heron woman has transformative powers. The wife of a poor fisherman, she turns herself into a white heron to weave bolts of exquisite cloth from her feathers. When the fisherman discovers her at work, a spell is broken and she is free to leave.

The United States christened each atomic bomb it dropped on Nevada from 1951 to 1962. *Moth, Stokes, Climax, Wheeler* (one bomb, two bombs, three bombs, four). *Smoky, Sugar, Shasta, Diablo* (five bombs, six bombs, seven bombs, more). The United States did not, however, give a name to the bomb it dropped on British Columbia.<sup>2</sup> On Valentine’s Day, 1950, ice had caused three of the engines of a United

2 Information on the detonation was classified until recently. The story of what occurred is recounted in Norman S. Leach, *Broken Arrow: America’s First Lost Nuclear Weapon* (Calgary: Red



States Air Force B-36 bomber to fail while it was flying south along the British Columbia coast en route from Alaska to Texas. Following the emergency protocol established for aircraft carrying atomic weapons, Ship 2075 released its nuclear payload over open water. An Mk IV bomb, the same kind of weapon that was dropped on Nagasaki, was detonated in Queen Charlotte Sound approximately 90 kilometres northwest of Bella Bella, minus its plutonium core. The device consisted of 5,300 pounds of conventional explosives and 100 pounds of uranium casing. It exploded like a dirty bomb, dispersing radioactive fallout across the region. The crew had time to bail out over Princess Royal Island before the aircraft turned inland and crashed into a mountain in the Kispiox Valley near Smithers. Twelve of the crew survived but five were never found; the last survivor was located hanging upside down in a tree from the harness of his parachute. Despite a massive search, the aircraft was not discovered until 1953, three years after the accident. In the language of the United States military, this nuclear incident was a Broken Arrow, the codename for a nuclear weapon that has exploded or been lost but without risk of igniting a war.<sup>3</sup> It was the first Broken Arrow ever recorded (and likely the first dirty bomb as well), making the incident a foundational story in the history of nuclear failure. Bowering's poems and letters in *The Man in Yellow Boots* are also alert to nuclear failure. It is a dominant theme in the book.

When China first detonated an atomic bomb on October 15, 1964, it also christened the explosion. At the suggestion of the Lop Nur basketball team, at the nuclear weapons base in Xinjiang, the test was named *Tou Lan* or "Shoot the Basket." News of the successful test was immediately relayed to Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai by telephone, during which the reporting officer exclaimed, "We have seen the mushroom cloud!" (Lewis and Litai 188) Bowering did not see the Chinese mushroom cloud—it was not broadcast in China or abroad—but he did see the St. Louis Cardinals beat the New York Yankees to win the World Series on the same day. He wrote about the coincidental events, and two others as well, to Mondragón and Randall in Mexico City.

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Deer Press, 2008). Other accounts of the accident can be found in John M. Clearwater, "The First One to Get Away," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (Nov./Dec. 2004): 22-27; and John M. Clearwater, *Nuclear Weapons in Canada* (Toronto: Dundurn Group, 1999), 97-103.

3 Had the accident risked starting a nuclear war, it would have been categorized as a "Nucflash." In descending order of calamity, the names of the four coded categories of nuclear accident are "Nucflash," "Broken Arrow," "Bent Spear," and "Dull Sword."

Oct 16/64...What a lovely day yesterday! The Cardinals batter the Yankees for the 1964 World Series, the Laborites knock off the Tories in Britain, Khrushchev is deposed as bossman in Russia, and the Chinese drop their first A bomb. What are the Americans going to do now a country they dont recognize has detonated the Bomb? Theyll have to keep it a secret from America, or walk around wondering, where did that noise come from? It cdnt have come from that part of Asia because there aint no county there, you can see for yrself. (Bowering 98)

The conjunction of political and sporting events that caught Bowering's attention might have excited him even more if he had known that the Chinese test was named by a basketball team. At the beginning of the poem "The Day Before the Chinese A-Bomb," Bowering repeats the events listed by him in the letter. Each event represents a cleansing, a throwing out of the old. "The Great Purge / begins today, the Cardinals are / World Champions," the final lines of the poem read. It took eight years for the United States to respond to the noise produced by the Chinese atomic test. By comparison, Canada had established trade relations with China as early as 1961, starting with a wheat sale agreement. President Richard Nixon met with Chairman Mao in February 1972.

When George and Angela Bowering left on a road trip to Mexico in the summer of 1964, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, first released by Columbia Pictures on January 29, was still playing in some theatres. Stanley Kubrick began shooting the film after the Cuban Missile Crisis had raised the stakes in the Cold War game of thermonuclear extinction. The nightmare comedy, an exercise in nihilistic satire, concludes with a vision of nuclear apocalypse unfolding to the refrain of "We'll Meet Again Someday," sung by Vera Lynn. "The greatest message of the film is in the laughs," Kubrick remarked. "You know, it's true. The most realistic things are the funniest," which is another way of saying that humorous things are sometimes the most horrific (Kubrick qtd. in Suid 232).

Bowering does not refer to *Dr. Strangelove* in *The Man in Yellow Boots*, but its presence is felt in both the atomic poems and in the letters. A note beneath "The Good Prospects" informs readers that the poem was written on the occasion of a meeting in Moscow to discuss a test ban treaty. The poem and the note are

reminiscent of a conversation in *Dr. Strangelove* between United States President Merkin Muffley and Soviet President Dmitri Kissov. “Now then, Dmitri. You know we’ve always talked about the possibility of something going wrong with the bomb. The bomb, Dmitri. The hydrogen bomb” (*Dr. Strangelove*). The good prospects announced in the title of the poem have turned to cinders by the end of it:

Because  
there may be  
half erected  
superstructures

left unfinished  
done  
with ash  
falling on them.

Kubrick gives his characters in *Dr. Strangelove* scatological names to match their personalities. The effeminacy of President Merkin Muffley earns him a colloquialism for female genitalia, the attraction of Dr. Strangelove to atomic devices a sobriquet for sexual perversion, the obsession of General Buck Turgidson with bodily functions a moniker relating to defecation.<sup>4</sup>

When Bowering writes to Mondragón and Randall “a last letter in case Goldpiss gets in as prez,” he is working the same ground as Kubrick (Bowering 99). Goldpiss, or Barry Goldwater, won the Republican nomination in 1964 despite calling for military action to overthrow communism that could have risked escalating into nuclear conflagration. Hence Bowering’s ironical comment about sending “a last letter” to the editors of the book. “I would remind you that extremism in defense of liberty is no vice,” Goldwater declared in his acceptance speech at the Republican convention (“Barry Goldwater’s 1964 Acceptance Speech”). Lyndon B. Johnson and the Democrats wasted no time in exploiting widespread public anxiety about the risk of an atomic showdown triggered by Goldwater. They commissioned a fifty-eight-second television ad of a little girl counting daisy petals. The girl

4 Margot A. Henriksen, in *Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997), 319-20, discusses the exaggerated names of the characters in the film.



counts unevenly from one to ten before a male voice, reversing the order of the numbers, counts decisively down from ten to one. As the numbers decline towards the inevitable atomic explosion, the camera zeroes in on the girl's frozen face, producing a series of still photographs that belong in "the photo album of death." "The Daisy Ad," officially called "Peace, Little Girl," aired only once before being pulled as too inflammatory, but by then the damage had been done.<sup>5</sup>

During the lead-up to the 1964 elections, Malcolm X addressed a chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality, at the Cory Methodist Church, in Cleveland, on April 3. In the speech, called "The Ballot or the Bullet," he cautioned African-Americans to exercise their right to vote judiciously, arguing that if they continued to be refused equality and justice by white America it might be necessary to take up arms. To emphasize the gravity of his message, Malcolm X called up a nuclear metaphor. "Whenever you got a racial powder keg sitting in your lap, you're in more trouble than if you had an atomic powder keg sitting on your lap. When a racial powder keg goes off, it doesn't care who it knocks out of the way." Among the white Americans with an atomic powder keg on his lap, and with a particular loathing for Malcolm X and African-Americans, was J. Edgar Hoover. Bowering addresses Hoover's hates in the poem "Vox Crapulous (alternate title: J. Edgar Hoover)."

In "Vox Crapulous," the rawest poem in *The Man in Yellow Boots*, Bowering adopts the voice of the racist Right to satirize J. Edgar Hoover's anger at losing ground in his battle against African-Americans, not to mention his battle against Jews, socialists, gays, and beatniks.

J. Edgar Hoover hates beatniks  
and perverts and niggers and  
Brazilians and socialists and  
presidents from the lunatic Left  
that is Harvard University

J. Edgar Hoover didn't go to  
Harvard University full of Jews  
no doubt and even now niggers

5 "The Daisy Ad" was made for the Democratic Party by Doyle Dane Bernbach and aired on Monday, September 7, 1964, on NBC.

and if not Brazilians at least  
Fidel Castro was there and

Kennedy was there and birds of  
a feather and Martin Luther King  
wins the Nobel Prize and the foreigners  
are supporting the niggers who  
are liars the biggest liars

The liars were not Martin Luther King or Malcolm X. The biggest liar of all was J. Edgar Hoover himself. Recent scholarship has shown that he had black ancestry and was only passing as white (Mathúna).

Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965, just as he was beginning to speak to a meeting of the Organization of Afro-American Unity in New York. Kiyooka was working on the collages at the time, and he clipped a photograph from the newspaper of Malcolm X lying on the floor of the Audubon Ballroom bleeding into his white shirt. He used the clipping to make a collage that parallels the emotional force of "Vox Crapulous." The collage also parallels the force of Malcolm X's speech on the built-up frustration that "makes the black community throughout America today more explosive than all the atomic bombs that Russia can ever invent." Malcolm X predicted race riots and mushroom clouds in the same breath. To complete the collage, Kiyooka used a magazine clipping of a sepulchral white sheet and a newspaper clipping of a man shooting up. The sheet fills most of the lower half of the oval format and reads as a shroud for the black leader and the junkie. The collage is the only work in the Zodiac series made entirely from photographs.

"Vox Crapulous" and the other politically charged poems in *The Man in Yellow Boots* occupy a pivotal place in the volume. Their themes of prejudice, death, and nuclear threat are the same themes that Kiyooka takes up in his photocollages. It seems to me that Bowering and Kiyooka successfully bring the work of writing and the work of photography together in the book. There are references to language in the photocollages and to photography in the poems; no hard and fast lines are drawn between the two. Bowering and Kiyooka both traffic in fragments—fragments are the way we see in the modern era—confident that the fragments will add up. We do not need photographs and other material forms of visual representation to produce

a set of images of what is described in the poem “Her Act Was a Bomb.” We can see the flickering television set, the old woman with her hand on the lever of the slot machine, the flash of the bomb’s explosion. The imagery is vivid. For the same reason, we do not need language to understand the relationship of a mushroom cloud to a limbless sculpture in Kiyooka’s photcollage. But the juxtaposition of the poem and the photcollage in the same volume resonates loudly.

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