

Penny Leong Browne /
THE STONE HOUSE: POEM
and DIGITAL PHOTO SERIES

A stone house
fire cannot burn
a slit of horizon
warnings into a matron's eye
leaves the narrow
virgins rush skywards
metal doors slam
the heaven becomes
a prison of virgins
the earth
an iron shield

Chastity gates
of a stone house
last virgin locks the key
sword bayonets
black noses of rifles
pierce the iron sky
the daughters clasp their ears
huddle in a flower bud
all they can hear is
each other's breathing
shallow storms from dry
pale lips

Grandfather and father and two sons gone
to the Gold Mountain lands
placer gold in the desert or growing
money leaves in the valley
B.C.'s Golden
Delicious apple trees we paint

in shimmering gilt
on the mural
in our stone house

Paper wings with blue ink
documents flying through Pacific
sea sky
dropped in a brick government building
where officers of the new border
stamp entry cards
record first names for last
make up ones if they are uncertain
for displaced souls
fleeing famine
flood
warlords
children who report
desires

King's stamps
folded-in letters
waves of ink year 1937
The Dark Valley Period
weighs ominous on their paper wings
invisible words written
on money to fortify the fortress
where the virginal daughters
sleep locked
in the tower with sky
as mortar
earth
as iron

The forgotten virgin
a petal without her nimbus
in a storm
suffocating
with a soldier who lost
his soul

She sees the pictures in the man's brain
bloodied machine guns
laughing
human heads
weeping
necks fallen and the swans are dead

The young girl can be
his daughter
in another village, another era
but the moon hangs low
as the soldier wipes her blood
streaking the brine shimmering
on his upper lip
back of his hand stings
hitting the young girl's mouth to mate
maddeningly
with a madman of war

Fortress of the wombs
future mothers of fatherless
children legs climbing
up and up
the wooden ladders

to the Mantle of Heaven
where once prison maidens
listened
winds in the tower
whisperings of fright

Envelopes blue
red striped ribbon
majestic wealth from Gold Mountain land
certificates of money
one more stone for the tower of virgins
climbing foot by foot
a rising dawn
reaching the sun
away from state
police, bandits, and lascivious
hands of village cousins
cold comfort for the Gold Mountain men
wrapping themselves each night
in a rooming house catching
pneumonia on Pandora
a street in Victoria
a Queen's kingdom
a surrounding ocean for walls

Named after the kingdom
across the sea
Queenie whose fingers hang heavy with jade
neighbors whispering gold not blood
runs in her veins
with her father, husband, and sons

on a lifetime sojourn
to the lands of the Jeweled Crown
with only the old men coming home
to die

Queenie's eldest two sons
joined armies of Red Book
marchers
her middle two fled
to the frontier
lights of Hong Kong Island
her youngest two
crossed the Great Pacific
Ga-na-daa
her odd one out
sailed off to the country
into the shadow hemisphere
Austral-eee-ah

All her men gone chasing
dreams of the new world
trying to forget
nightmares of the old
where she is hostage
a widow guarding
her virginal daughters
in a stone house the only house
in the village
with the tower
to heaven

Great Leap backward is all she can think
the village granary
empty
not even husks
pickings for swallows' beaks
pecking hearts
beating
dying still

Shoe rubber into the mouths of hunger
rolled into Japanese noodles
enemy food of the mind
famine in the stomach
20 million dead marches on
fan into streets
making hunger look noble
jaws open and close
unable to eat
nothing
words

Queenie tells the stories of war
to her step daughter (so beautiful
she pretends she's a boy)
to make her fear poverty
to make her long for Gold Mountain
where she hopes to sell her
one day as a woman
to a king of a restaurant
tables draped in white linen

crystal bowls spilling pink champagne
flowers protruding out of porcelain necks
their scent so ripe
makes your head swoon

That woman!
she looks like a starlet
she is only a rich man's whore
from the frontier of lights
where the old country husbands are swallowed
up
in all the brightness
see her red lips and red flowers on her
department store cheong sam
rouge on her face
pale pale
she is sick underneath!
"Harlot" the village women
hissed the virgins are angry
hands covering
their sneers betraying they want
to be her
as they scrub their rough underclothes in the lake
knowing electric washing machines are now
common place
on the island of the glass tower mandarins
where their Queenie warns is an island
starved for virgins

What have we here
an infant girl not a day over
the one month trial on earth
her tiny pink finger
looped around her mother's
long thin one
a ring of love wound tight
even mud
can't wash loose
but the circlet of flesh is
broken
the child whose name is Mu Lah
taken away by a virginal daughter
whispering
doll face in the bundle
I am now your first sister
as she cradles the baby girl
soon to be orphaned
to wash in the well
a cistern to the underworld
a tunnel to the dark
where her mother will float
the next dawn
eyes looking but not seeing
heaven

Island with the neon lights
strange beautiful exotic
for the peasants of the stone village
only a water crossing by ferry

or a land crusade by rail
will take Queenie to work
in a factory
to labour over plastic flowers
far away from the famine
empty granaries and the kneeling
in dust bowls
the Red Guard punishing the land matron,
gold rings, jade bracelets, upside down
fish hooks pierce
ripping Queenie's earlobes bloody
Evil Capitalist! Bleeding
your own people!
two charred fingers dangles
a peach blossom of Imperial Times
warlords and bound feet and chariots
the era of her birthdate
torn away in lecherous glee
she doesn't listen to
the soldier's heckling
gets kicked down
again
she tastes
dirt beading with her blood
rather than flood or famine
in the end it is her own people
she is fleeing
to work in a factory
gluing
plastic buds

peonies lotuses peach blossoms plum petals
once the names of the Sidecourt Virgins
now dressed in blue as she is in blue
blue jackets and blue trousers
as in the colour of conformity
anonymity
and death
on the island that has a sea of faces
not like stone village
a face is a sea
in itself

Another soldier's face is a stranger
a proud young guard of the Republican green
patrolling the border
a long snake of barb wire coils
helicopters descending
into the hillside abyss
swallowing sons
husbands even daughters and forgotten
wives escaping
anywhere but here

Another soldier's face is a stranger
revealing nothing for everything
as he hands her
a memorandum
a sheet of paper
fluttering a suffocating bird
in her hand she unfolds

reads the news
her husband absent
for twenty years
has died

A vengeful train
an accident on the last
locomotive
Canton to Kowloon
oil light to neon
Kowloon to Canton
neon to oil light

Queenie was not grief stricken
for years a widow in her soul
didn't know her husband was
coming home
only to leave
their stone house with the only tower
now soaring empty
heaven elusive
for the virginal daughters are now
mothering soldiers
are factory bosses
husbands are lovers requesting
divorce from the blue
woman living in the old world
fallen in the Great Leap

Husband as a lover
tries to forget
the hungering hearts, bellies,
the shoeless
children
defecating
in an earth's hole

Measures the woolens
fashionable cloth of the English gentleman
scissors that trim the ochres grays
pinstripes
fabrics as fine as Bond Street Tailors

Kowloon where he hawks
his watch to feed himself
only to realize
the true pain
in his gut is not
hunger

Some days he goes
without supper some days
he goes
with this woman
takes his mind off
the ache in his old
blue heart

The scissors flew fast today
he can dine with his neon bride to be
Karouke concubine he wishes
to make first wife
asks her in a restaurant
dining
on sweetmeat puddings

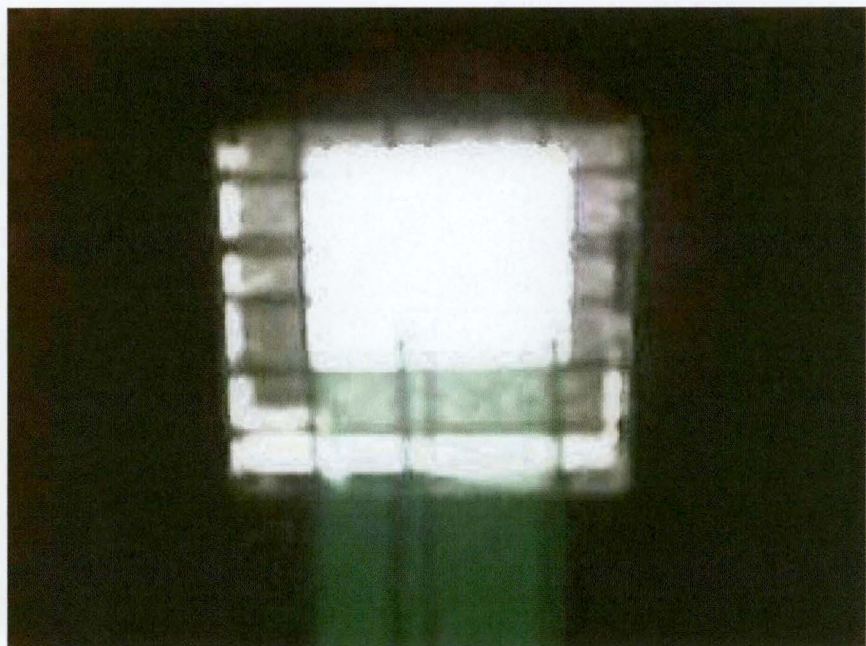
He wishes to impress her
makes her a promise
one day he'll take her to The Peninsula Hotel
a wedding cake castle he forgets
to inform her
was once a place
of surrender

This woman in red flowers
born on the Eve of the Saddest Hour
laid in a basket floated
downriver
lodged in the sands of the Pearl
a river's delta

Taken to an orphanage
a lunar penumbra
on the island of dazzling light
she was given
an affectionate name
nascent pearl
waiting
to grow

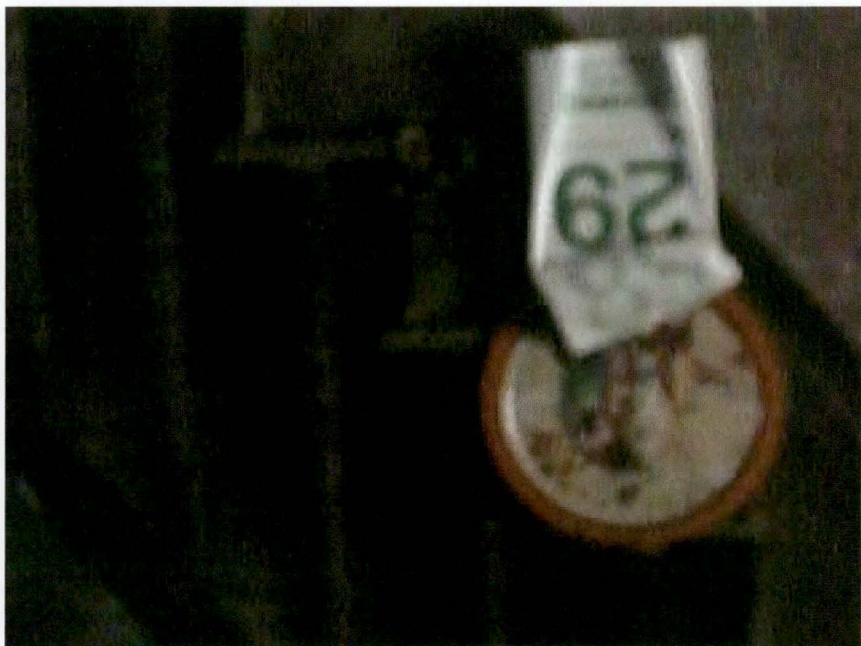


i. Tree



ii. Window

iv. Calendar

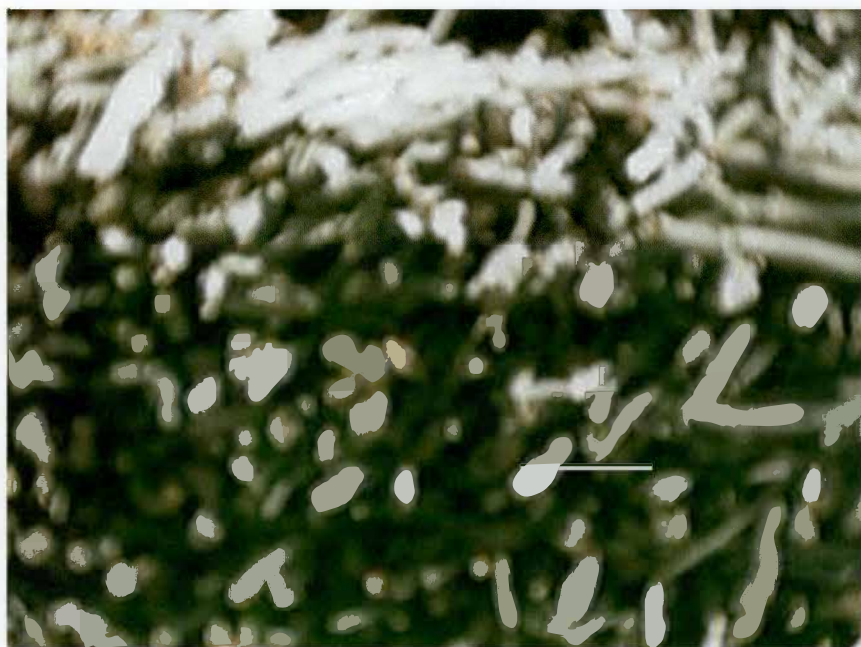




v. *Skyhole*



vi. Clay Pot



vii. *Firewood*



viii. Bamboo



ix. *Slanted Shadow*

Now a singer of American showtunes
big noise for big bosses
her one room tenement is small
waiting for the one man who made her
a promise he will return
to marry her
their baby girl
he promises he will not
sell

She discovered
his death in the newspaper
recognized
the two characters making up
his public and his private
name she asked him to write it once
his public and his private
name so she could distinguish between
the two men
she asked the owner of the bar to read
out loud
the death of public faces
engulfed in flames
200 bodies dead
cremations were done
immediately
some can be seen
staggering
out of the train
the man she was waiting for

father of her baby girl
she need not identify
his public name she promised to pretend
not to know
written on the white banner
flapping
in the breeze

To his first wife
the blue woman in the village of stone
she will give her child
a child cannot live calling
one father many
uncles

She purchases a cargo class passage
only water she consumes
her baby tugs hungrily
milky tears from her breast
she thinks of ending it right
then and there
over the bow of the ferry
into the thickness of the river
her baby she clutches onto
as if
it can save her
she goes back inside lies down
on the floor swaying
with the boat
sleeping
a fitful
sleep

The city of Canton emerges
the port swarms with expectant faces
she takes a ride from a farmer
she says she knows the woman with the gold for blood
who lives in a stone house with the only
tower in the village
the farmer chuckles teeth yellow
some black few missing
not anymore her jewels raped
her gilded murals chipped
scraped away
first by the Japanese
with the Kuomintang came
her final humiliation
the iron bars in the windows
iron doors in the floors
all wrenched out
there are fears
of a new son of heaven
who will set our hearts on fire
hot enough to melt
iron bars and doors
into
swords
rifles

She does not see anything
only her baby's
lips slack
against her dry nipple

take us to her
she pleads her sweat running cheap dye
bleeding red petals
over her heart
as she closes her eyes
to the sound of her baby
crying

Straw hats and blue jackets
a silhouette of laughing midwives
sitting
beneath the banyan tree
as if they knew to wait
for her

One woman stood
apart at the crimson
gate screening
the village office
bequeathal of plentiful harvests
for the kindergarten school
fearing forgotten philanthropists
names are painted bold and red
on the wall
over the door
a red scroll honours
immortal gods
hangs like a war banner

The voice of the face
obscured
behind a black umbrella
shunning the sun

Who are you?
Why do you come to our village unannounced?
Who summoned you?
Or did you come on your own accord?
Are you an impostor?
Who let you through the village gate?

The woman who remained proud and intimidating even without her
jewels made her demands. She smiled when she was especially vicious.

Why, you must be a prostitute dressed in such flamboyance.

Lips drawn thin from smiling.

When Queenie saw the face of the baby girl clutched against her
mother's chest her lips stopped smiling as the smile was now fully drawn
up into her eyes.

It was the smile of infatuation.

Baby girl so beautiful you must be a boy.

She ordered her eldest virgin daughter to bathe the infant in the well.

For years Queenie dressed Mu Lah as her son
for years Mu Lah thought of herself as one
youngest most treasured son
my baby emperor she endeared the girl child
then one day at the age of thirteen
Mu Lah woke up
a red spot on her pajama trousers
Queenie could pretend no more
Mu Lah was not a boy
making matters worse she grew a mole
Queenie called fly dirt
on her eyelid same spot
as her birth mother

Queenie could pretend no more
she was not the girl's birth mother
from that day onwards life
became unbearable each time
she saw
the dirt speck
she saw
the harlot
the red flowering dress
her husband's
disloyalty

The famine grew
on top of the Great Leap
hunger mounted bellies
quashed hearts flee

in a journey Queenie purchased
with a pendant
a precious red acolyte
once swallowed to hide
this snakehead's ransom

You and your step daughter will sleep
in the hulk of a ship
we warn you
it will be dark
like hiding in a cave
like living as tomb servants
inside you will find rations
food, water, a blanket
for the chill
fourty nights eternal
concentrate
your mind and soul
on the day on the route on the map
markings of a charcoal line drawn
crossing
ocean's infinity
clusterings of islands
another ten days
see the land
rising golden green
from the mauve sea
one of us will meet you, your beautiful
daughter (she will do well, marry
a rich man)

one of us will take you
safely to the land of prosperity
Gold Mountain
Ga-na-daa

This was the plan described by the young man who in a gray pinstripe suit would have been meticulously dressed had it not been for the "I love NY" T-shirt revealed between the stiff lapels. The man was standing, not sitting, in the hall parlour, a narrow tall room where Queenie and Mu Lah ate, bathed, and slept.

Money from the new country to build a fortress in the old.

They once lived in a stone house with the only tower in the village.

A naked bulb hangs from the ceiling inviting cavernous shadows into the parlour of the stone house. Already, the brick walls look cold and abandoned.