

The Empty Room

No one paid attention to Lu as she made her way through the inner city of Beijing like the ghost of somebody who had done so many times before.

She glided almost dance-like along at a leisurely pace, yet she never got in anyone's way, adjusting her path and her movements to fit into the spaces that the people around her left. Perhaps this was why nobody noticed her; as she zigzagged and ducked, twisted and turned, she became one with the crowd. Never an individual person, she played the role of filler. Her body expanded and contracted in accordance to the available space around it, changed shape to compensate for the asymmetry that a group of human beings will always possess. Nobody noticed her, just like nobody pays attention to the individual droplets of water as they slide through the filter of a faucet. It was still in the middle of the day; the sun sat high in the sky and a shadow of sweat left its trail down the back of her white summer dress. Down there among hurrying walkers the heat was continually intensifying as the temperature made people sweat more, breathe heavier. Without stopping, Lu raised her hand to shield her eyes from the sun and looked up into the sky. A pale reddish brown, clouded with fog and dust. She was beginning to feel pleasantly dizzy.

Now seemed like a good time to initiate the next part of her routine. Slipping into a hole in the crowd, Lu slowed her pace, eventually stopping while people continued to move undisturbed around her. Today she had chosen a spot a little north of Tiananmen Square, behind the gate itself; a rather touristy place, full of different people from every imaginable geographical and societal area. Therefore, one of her favorite locations. She stuck her hands in the pockets of her dress, smiling expectantly – and opened up. It didn't take long for the thoughts to take over. They came rushing in, metaphysically shining in all imaginable colors and shapes, pushing to one another and fighting for the exclusive occupancy of her mind, and she welcomed them all generously.

The most invasive impression was the one of the greatness and beauty of Tiananmen. She turned to look at the gate, and once again she saw it for the very first time; she felt the awe of a foreigner facing something strange and unknown, as well as the vague pride of someone looking at the vividness of the colors, the complexity of the patterns, and seeing something his ancestors created with their own hands. And somewhere in the crowd she felt the thoughts

of a person who, as she regarded the gate, thought it was all very admirable and pretty but honestly didn't see much of a purpose in the construction apart from its aesthetic qualities.

As Lu gradually got used to the sensation of being in such an impressive, familiarly unfamiliar place, other, more casual thoughts took residence in her head. She found herself possessed by the mind of a young student wondering what kind of dress she should wear at the party tonight. She felt her eyes wet as an old man nearby began to choke up, moved to tears by standing in the very same spot his son lost his life in during the protests more than twenty years ago. The despair and grief clawed at her chest and constricted her breath, then was released by an overwhelming infatuation the moment a woman laid eyes on her girlfriend's smile. Her heart skipped a beat partly out of love, partly out of the thrill of secrecy. And now another thrill; somewhere the naked forearm of a middle school student brushed by chance against the one of a classmate he fancied, and Lu felt her skin tingle and shudder with strange and delightful new hormones; she giggled.

Now she moved north, away from the gate, further into the imperial palace-turned-monument-turned-tourist attraction, and the mosaic of thoughts in her brain followed her. She spread her arms and caught them in; like flies in a spider's web they stuck to her. At times she grabbed hold of only the flicker of a thought, a nonsensical fragment of a larger consideration. Other times, a whole mind wrapped itself around her, and for a brief while another person's entire being inhabited her. She felt aching feet, itching lower backs, faint heads, boredom and excitement. As she bought her ticket for the palace museum, she passively registered the salesman's sexual attraction towards her. She felt the mutual annoyance between two siblings. She felt the anxiety of an agoraphobic.

After a while of sliding from consciousness to consciousness, Lu arrived at the central hall, her head swimming and dizzy and her arms and back red and swollen by the heat. To escape the scorching rays of the sun, she fled into the dark enclaves of the former throne room. Oddly, not a soul was to be found inside, and the remnants of thoughts were being muted by the walls and distance between Lu and their owners. She gingerly tip-toed across the stone floor, letting her eyes get used to the darkness and her body to the coolness. Looking at the decorated throne glistening in the dimness, she felt nothing. The adroitly pained eyes of the dragon motifs that covered everything in the room brought forth no activity in her mind. Bored and empty-headed, she turned around to return to the stimulation of people outside and froze when she noticed a presence just a few feet from her. An Indian girl, her hair wrapped in a

headscarf, stood gazing at the display in front of her. Lu opened up more, reached out, but not a single thought was emitted, and then it hit her: This girl was dead. She must've had a stroke and died, rigor mortis having set in so fast that she had continued standing in that position, now just a particularly lifelike statue among the stone dragons, lions and peacocks.

Lu had only just accepted this undeniable fact when the girl moved. By an incidental move of her head, she caught Lu's eye and looked as horrified as Lu imagined she herself did. And so they stood, still as statues, half-visible in the darkness but the strange girl's mind entirely hidden to Lu. They stared at each other as if they were staring at nothing and everything at once, and then all of a sudden, the Indian girl spun around and fled. Lu continued to stare at the empty spot she had left behind, then stumbled a few steps back on unsteady legs, grasped a pillar and sunk to the ground. She sat there for a while as the fog left her mind and her limbs stopped shaking, staring through the darkness towards the square of sunlight that passed through the entrance to the hall. Her body seemed to flow to the sides and disappear in the empty room, and she got up and went back outside, opening up for more thoughts.