

Cricket Box

by Katrina Dessavre

Tonight the autumn air is clear and still. There is no frost to compare to moonbeams; no wind carries lotus fragrance or rustles maple leaves; no rain transforms pine trees into parasols; the moon is too ripe to call a sliver, too thin to call full; and the wild geese have yet to start their southbound flight. There are only crickets, grinding out their melody in golden cages.

Later, he will ask me to sum up the evening in verse. As I sit with the ladies of the palace, listening to the shrill chorus that silences all other sounds, I wonder if I will have anything to give him.

All month has been like this. By day, I follow him on official duties and entertain his friends. I look respectable, respond to drunken requests for poetry, and try not to dip my loose sleeves in their wine.

After the day is over, I join their wives in the garden, glad that the crickets deny conversation. We sit on tall wooden stools, legs dangling above cloud-carved feet.

The ladies are restless. They open two of the cages, shake the crickets between their palms, and set them facing one another on the ledge that separates terrace from garden. The sound intensifies. The servants tell me it carries past the gate, into homes and shops now filled with more cages and crickets. Perhaps they too replicate these microscopic battles.

I wait until the ladies have left for the keeper to collect the cages. Before he strings them on a long pole, he takes the loser, legless and docile, and pockets him.

I ask him what he will do with the victor.

Breed better crickets, he says.

I ask him what he does with the female crickets.

Feed them to the birds, he says.

