

Ink Play

by Katrina Dessavre

Lying on a high seat in the south study, this is what I see: a banana tree neatly wrapped in a coat of thatch; a small egret picking through withered grasses; a straw-hatted old man removing dead lotus leaves from the water. My mind wanders beyond this courtyard, past the three rings of pounded earth and wooden poles, past the eleven gates, across the drawbridge, and up, towards the northern peaks, where my friend lives among clouds. He gathers firewood and I watch the chill of early morning frost cover the old silk-floss paper in front of me. The egret flies off. I lodge my aimless thoughts in the criss-crossing of bamboo branches, now protesting against the cold with an occasional snap, and pick up the brush.

Ink is a plaything, my friend used to say. Layer the leaves like stacked lances; arrange them as neatly as bird wings. For the joints, think of a crane about to rise. Work quickly. The falcon swoops when the hare leaps up.

If I could find him now, following footprints obscured by leaves heaped up on bare slopes, I would tell him he was right to leave a place where these words employ useless men painting bamboo for fifty years. I would tell him that I have never achieved one perfectly satisfactory stroke.

The old man pulls his basket of dead leaves out of the water, leaving stems to meet their reflections. They bend and cross like the scribbles of a madman.

