

9–26 November 2011

## The palace of tears

Andre Dao

People ran through the streets, shouting to the smiling faces poking out of windows. Anyone who opened a door to get a better look was swept up in the joyful procession. Alex shut the window with a gentle click but the voices were hardly dulled. The muted television flashed images of people astride the Wall whilst others went at it with sledgehammers. Ignoring the flickering pictures, Alex poured herself a drink and sank into the faded couch.

---

She'd been on the cusp of puberty when the city was split in two. As people slowly began disappearing over to the West, she wondered if their bodies were changing too. So when Mother took her aside one day after school, she was ready to go. But when Mother spoke it was not at all what she had expected.

— I have to go away for a little while, to the West. I would love to take you with me darling, but I can't, not yet. But I promise it won't be for long.

Alex spent the following week being sullen, tramping around the neighbourhood streets until well after dinner time, when she would come home and eat the now cold meal without a word before retreating to her room. Mother only cried twice during that week—once while Alex ate her dinner in silence, and then in the doorway of Alex's bedroom the night before the departure, her silhouette in the door frame betraying her silent sobs. Alex had felt a powerful urge to spring out of bed then, to run at Mother and envelop her in her arms. But something held her tight in bed,

and before she had a name for it Mother had turned away and closed the door, and she was left alone in the darkness.

The next morning, Mother wore her best blue dress, even though winter was approaching, and Alex put on her own, slightly darker, blue dress. The four of them, Grandfather and Grandmother, Mother and Child, walked through the chill October air towards Friedrichstraße station. She had heard the other children at school call it the Tränenplast—the Palace of Tears. As they turned the corner on to Friedrichstraße, they saw a squat, square building that would normally have been unremarkable—and really, it was just another ugly building in a city that was still being rebuilt—except that its huge windows sparkled in the cold October sunlight like a transparent jewellery box.

As they got closer Alex thought she could see right through the empty building, right through to the other side. But this was only the first of the Tränenplast's many optical illusions. As they reached the heavy double doors and pushed them open with a sigh, she saw that the floor descended like a sunken pool, so that from the outside one could not see the long line which barely shuffled towards a series of opaque glass booths at the end of the hall. She realised with a shiver that upon entering the building she too had joined the ranks of the invisible; that the casual passerby would not know that she, Alex, stood like all the others holding loved ones' hands. And it seemed terrible to her that one could not know, from the outside, that the knots of hand-holding were severed at the opaque booths, and that every face in the hall was tear-streaked. Worst of all, one could not know that the remaining loved ones stood crystallised long after the departed had continued underground to board the train West.

Seeing all this, Alex gripped Mother's hand even more tightly. She knew that she must stay quiet in this place whose only sounds were the heavy thud of stamping from the glass booths and the drip drip of tears falling on to cheap linoleum, but the words came tumbling out before she could stop them.

— Why don't the doors have handles?

But Mother said nothing and there they waited, the line barely moving and the thudding rubber stamp becoming duller and duller, until the

only sound in Alex's ears was that drip drip of tears. With each drop her body tensed in anticipation of the next, until she found herself watching the individual tears on the faces of mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters, and time itself moved as slowly as a tear welling to fullness in the eye before its own mass is too great and its surface tension breaks and the drop rolls down the cheek. She felt a terrible sense of breathless anticipation between each drip as she willed gravity to pull the ballooning drop down off the cheek faster just so that she could breathe again: for now she understood the unbearable weight of silence hanging there, suspended.

And then Mother was hugging her, kissing her, holding her; their tears mixed together on her face. Mother was standing in an open doorway without a door and she was waving slowly and almost smiling.

— See — there's no door, so they can't close it — and one day soon I will come back through and we'll cross over together, darling girl.

But in their matching blue dresses Alex thought they looked too similar. That was not a doorway at all but a mirror; that was her hand moving up and down, as if to wipe something away; that was her face, almost smiling, twin rivulets of tears streaking down her cheeks and hanging like stalactites for a moment before falling.

---

Outside, the celebrations continued unabated, but Alex could not join them. She remained transfixed by that last image of Mother in the Tränenplast, knowing that if the Wall came down and East became West or West became East then the structure holding that memory together — she had always imagined it to be utilitarian like the Wall itself, cold metal scaffolding and grey cement — would collapse. And along with that last image of Mother would go the possibility of her return. For what she had come to realise over the years — after countless clandestine meetings with Western operatives and secret messages back and forth across the border, always in vain, at least when it came to the information she wanted: Mother's whereabouts — the terrible truth she paid dearly for every day, was that there was no other side at all; that the Wall was not a barrier for keeping East and West apart but a seam which held the two hemispheres

together; that Mother had not ‘crossed over to the other side’ but fallen through one of the cracks in the seam. And if they pulled down the Wall then the seam would be perfected; the cracks would disappear. So she returned to that moment when the doorway stood open and Mother stood waving and everything was possible because nothing had yet happened, for Mother was wrong – as soon as she stepped through that doorway the door did close, on all the myriad possibilities of life in the East. And so Mother had chained herself forever to the terrible promise of A Better Future. Alex had learnt through bitter experience that the West wasn’t through the doorway – it was the doorway itself, the image of hope and transcendence and moving on.

Alex got up from the couch to make herself another drink. As she stood at the bench mixing the liquid with a finger, she remembered that the Tränenplatz had been blue tiled, and that the clear sky filtering through the big windows above them had given the whole place the impression of being underwater. She had often imagined, as a child, that the steady drip of tears had hollowed out the sunken pool, and thinking now of that mirror image – the woman and the girl, even then already resembling each other – she felt submerged by the weight of all those tears and the realisation that now she must be the very picture of her Mother standing there, almost smiling.