



Source: Geoff Elliott, 'US brings Moscow into line on Iran', *The Australian online*, 09/03/06.

Tags: [animals](#), [dreams](#), [shape-shifting](#), [streets](#), [Shanghai](#), [death](#)

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The sole supplier of silence lives in a former warehouse in the suburbs of Shanghai. She sleeps all day like a cat. Her long hair twists into knots and her fingers clench and unclench as she dreams all the noise and chaos of the streets.

The honking of horns, shouts and cries, the rush of traffic, motorcycles, trucks and cars roaring; the slurping of tea, the waves hitting the shore, motorboats and tour boats, men and women singing karaoke at the tops of their voices; radios, televisions, mobile phones ringing, buzzing, vibrating; talking and laughing, the sound of bells, crickets, birds; disco music and Peking opera, patriotic songs and waltzes, loudspeakers blaring out music and speeches; hisses, whistles, screechings and scrapings, pops and pings and murmurs: all this she dreams.

When she wakes in the darkness of early night, she dresses as silently as she can. Her paper clothing rustles; the static electricity in her hair gives off the sound of sparks. She rides a bus into the city centre, listening carefully to its motor. She sits by herself in the back of the bus, hearing the gossip and laughter, the babble of infants, the smacking of lips, the sniffing, the coughing, the spitting. When she gets off the bus, a cat meows. She pays special attention to its location, but continues to walk slowly towards the sea.

As she reaches the Bund, she hears the subtle hum of electric lights. Her ears prick up and she swivels her head from side to side. There's a fly buzzing around garbage; a broom swishes against the pavement; water splashes, flung from a bucket onto the street. She finds a bench in the park and waits.

Her appointment with the fractured man is at exactly 10pm. He is never late. When he arrives, she hears the breaking of glass. A cat meows in the distance; then, another cat rubs itself against her left leg. Could it be the same cat?

In a flash, he is there, standing above her, sucking up the noise. Silence surrounds them, so complete that she can't even hear her own heart beating or the blood rushing through her veins. She always tries to speak, but it is as though she has lost language. No sound comes from her mouth, not even the sound of her breath.

He leans toward her and strokes her hair. This act makes her tremble; that he would invade her space in such a manner makes her furious. He has violated her.

As soon as he has touched her, sound comes rushing back. She lets out a howl. Only the cat, sitting at her feet, responds, folding its ears back and glaring at her with yellow eyes. The man is gone.

She sits on the bench and thinks about her life: the moment she knew she would suck up the sounds and give back the silence. She was a child of two, sitting with her grandmother in the park. She heard it, the silence. A cat walked by. Her grandmother was offering her a sweet bun. She remembers the taste of the red bean paste, sticky on her tongue. She looked into her grandmother's face and knew that no one would understand her. For years, she waited, licking at the silence, lapping it up. She pretended to be a normal child, very good in school, obedient, a good daughter, but never a wife.

Now, she is weary. These meetings are getting shorter and they make her sad. Nothing to do but walk the streets until dawn. She picks up the cat, stroking its soft fur. She carries it with her a few blocks until it struggles to get down.

The sole supplier of silence goes home to sleep. She drops her paper clothes in the garbage can, crawls into bed, turns out the light and dreams all the sounds of the world. At noon, she wakes. Sunlight streams into her bedroom, cutting across the middle of the bed like a knife. Her last thought is this: who will give them silence now? No one is there to hear the rattle in her throat as she dies.

A cat sits quietly in an alley, licking her back foot. She sits in a ray of sunlight; her black fur glistens. She knows a tunnel under the bridge where she can catch rats. She laps up some water and saunters down the street, looking left and right, watching for enemies, hoping for prey.

At exactly 10pm, she sits near a bench in the park. The fractured man arrives on time, picks her up and strokes her fur.

'You will be a better vessel,' he thinks. 'You will not object to my touch.'

Sound comes rushing back and the cat yowls. The sole supplier of silence walks toward a tunnel in the night, listening carefully for the distinctive clicking of the feet of rats. Yes, rats chattering in that tunnel over there. She stops to test the silence. Yes, now is the time to pounce.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ellen Zweig.*