



VINTAGE

LOVERS IN THE AGE OF INDIFFERENCE

XIAOLU GUO

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About the Book

The lovers in the age of indifference are tough romantics from every corner of the planet: a marriage splinters during a game of mah jong; a depressed fiancée is lifted by a mid-air encounter with a Hollywood legend; a mountain keeper watches over a lonely temple but is perturbed when, finally, a visitor dares to arrive.

In this engagingly maverick collection of stories, writer and film-maker Guo zooms into tender and surreal moments in the lives of lost souls and lovers, adrift between West and East. Her personal, provocative and charming fables capture the sense of alienation thrown up by life in the modern world, and we join her characters in their search for human contact – and love – in rapidly-changing landscapes all around the globe.

About the Author

Xiaolu Guo was born in a fishing village in south China. She studied film at the Beijing Film Academy and published six books in China before she moved to London in 2002. The English translation of *Village of Stone* was shortlisted for the *Independent* Foreign Fiction Prize and nominated for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Her first novel written in English, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* was shortlisted for the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction, and *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, published in 2008, was longlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize. Xiaolu's film career continues to flourish; her latest feature, *UFO in Her Eyes*, was released in 2011.

Also by Xiaolu Guo

Village of Stone

A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers

20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth

UFO in Her Eyes



For the last ten years, on the journey from east to west,
from country to country, these stories have embedded
themselves in my body.

LOVERS IN THE AGE OF INDIFFERENCE

Xiaolu Guo

Chatto & Windus
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THE MOUNTAIN KEEPER

THE MOUNTAIN KEEPER is nameless. People just call him the man who watches over the mountain.

He might have come from Cangzhou in Hebei Province, or maybe from Anyang in Henan Province. He could be from any corner of China that manufactures migrant workers. He is tanned but slightly emaciated. He is young but his expression is tinged with indifference and apathy.

He has been more fortunate than his fellow villagers. They have come to Beijing to build highways or lay concrete on the 5th Ring Road. Burnt and boiled by the blazing sun, they dig holes and haul rocks. And he is perched high in the clouds under the shade of leafy trees. The city dust and the construction noise are like his home town – too far away to touch. He is the Mountain Keeper.

Every day he sits on the summit of Red Snail Mountain. Surrounding him are trees, nothing but trees. Every morning he ascends the tranquil and lonesome mountain and gazes down at the Beijing suburbs below. He is perched so high, as high as an eagle, with Huairou County lying stretched out beneath him, the colour of sand, the smell of cement. He surveys the lands below; watching everything but seeing nothing.

The Mountain Keeper wonders at his mountain's name: Red Snail Mountain. Why is it called that? There are no red snails up there, he thinks, there aren't even any black snails. Snails live in gardens or rivers or streams, don't they? Or do they hide away in rocky crevices? Maybe the

mountain is home to the spirits of the red snails. Spirits that haunt the Red Snail Temple nestled on the mountainside. Enclosed by broad walls and sheltered by wild bamboo groves. It's an empty, desolate place. There are never even any monks around.

Once upon a time Red Snail Temple was a place of legend. The Mountain Keeper talks to himself about it sometimes. Looking down through the blanket of smog smothering the ground below, he sees the green paddy fields covered in soil. He can hear the sounds of distant car horns but he remains lonesome. He was told in his training that Red Snail Temple was built during the Eastern Jin Dynasty. The Eastern Jin was more than 1,500 years ago; the Mountain Keeper can't start to imagine what things were like back then. Did the rich journey in sedan chairs? Did servants fan their masters with swan feathers? Did imperial officials wear peaked caps and high boots? The Mountain Keeper loses his thoughts in the ethereal clouds.

During the Mountain Keeper's training the Park Ranger had told him with a grave face that the history of the mountain was hugely significant. If he wanted to work there he would have to memorise key facts so that he could pass his knowledge on to visitors. The Park Ranger then started to read from his book of mountain data: "Red Snail Temple was built during the Eastern Jin Dynasty in AD 348." You must remember to mention Eastern Jin, otherwise sightseers will come and ask you and you will look like an illiterate.'

Eastern Jin is Eastern Jin, the young Mountain Keeper thought, what's so hard to remember about that? He never really saw what Eastern Jin had to do with his mountain, but every day he walked past the temple's peeling walls and whispered daringly: Is it really over a thousand years old? Is it really home to ghosts and spirits?

When the Mountain Keeper was little he'd learnt an old poem from his school textbook:

No matter how deep the water
As long as a dragon dwells in it.
No matter how high the mountain
As long as a spirit rests on it.

If there really are spirits on mountains, he thought, then on this mountain, where there isn't another soul to be seen, the Keeper is God. Who says that a sentinel can't become the spirit of a mountain?

The young Keeper tries to console himself as he sits alone, peering up at the spiralling stone steps that lead to the peak. Each day he wakes hoping to see a visitor on his mountain - a human being, a deer, even a raging wild beast. But not even the wind keeps him company; even the wind is sleeping. Sleeping since the mythical era of Eastern Jin, and still nothing has woken. It is a deceased mountain, he thinks. Why is it even still considered a tourist destination? Why are people still made to pay two yuan to enter its gates?

The young Keeper dozes briefly. He wakes and, between the pillars of the third pavilion, he watches the sun creep behind a cloud. Again, he dozes for a while, and then, with great effort, lifts his lids slowly. The sun has escaped from the cloud's clutches. He thinks he hears a noise. Could it be the sound of the sun travelling across the sky? It is an unfamiliar sound. Can it be a person, a visitor on his mountain? The mountain keeper opens his eyes even wider: it's a woman. A blue sun hat covers her face. She is breathing heavily as she climbs the steep steps. Bless Buddha, a woman! Oh, let her be a good-looking young woman. And if she's wearing skimpy clothes then all the better. The Mountain Keeper silently says his prayers, hopes that he will be given reason to offer thanks at Red

Snail Temple. In all his time as guardian of the mountain he has never been inside the temple to pray to Buddha. He hopes he hasn't offended the gods. He feels sudden, slight pangs of regret.

As he laments, the guest makes her way up the steps. Her face is shielded from view by that blue sun hat until her eyes come level with his. Oh Buddha, it really is a young woman. With soft hair and a childlike face and bright eyes. She is pretty. She could be wearing a little less but her legs seem slender enough under that skirt. The Mountain Keeper is ecstatic. The day could conjure nothing else to make him happier. The reason for his entire existence becomes clear to him as the young woman walks past, tantalisingly close.

Clip, clop, clip, clop. She keeps on walking, straight past him. She doesn't lower her eyes for a second, as if she's being pulled up the mountain by an invisible kite flying high in the sky. She passes him as if he is a rock; a rock with no feeling and no story. She takes off her sun hat and mops her sweaty brow. Then she raises her head to look up to the very top of the mountain, and starts to climb again. It's as if she's forgotten there's anything but sky in the world.

The Mountain Keeper turns his head and stares, horrified, at the clambering woman's back. It's the first time all day he's turned his head to look up. Well, when there's no one there, what is there to turn your head for? There is nothingness at the top of the mountain. There is only down, down the mountain to the city, to Beijing.

A freak gust of wind blows up the valley, bending the mountain's pines and bamboos into an enormous crescent wave. Fearful, the Mountain Keeper looks up at the thin body above him. She sways fiercely and her hat hangs in the air then slowly surfs across the sky away from her. The young woman stops dead as if the wind is calling her back. She drops to sit on the stone stairway and gazes down the

mountain. Her pale face shadowed by a passing cloud. Another gust of wind brushes past her. She suddenly starts to cry. The mountain is desolate, the wind strong. He can hear her sobs. He is shocked.

The Mountain Keeper hides himself in the darkness of the pine trees. He doesn't want to let the crying visitor see him. On that paralysed mountain, on Red Snail Mountain with its Red Snail Temple but no monks and no red snails, he watches her sitting there, crying alone. And he is bemused. But what can he do? He's just the man who watches over the mountain.

By the time the wind has dropped, she has gone. The wind steals her cries too. But why has she come to his mountain? Is she a tourist? Why has she paid two yuan to climb to its peak? Maybe she was at the temple burning joss sticks and then decided to climb to the summit at the last minute. But why is she alone? Why is she alone on the top of the mountain crying? And why didn't she say anything to him? Maybe he could have comforted her. Maybe if she'd seen him she wouldn't have cried. The Mountain Keeper considers notion after counter-notion, and looks skywards as the setting sun slips beneath his shoulders.

His thoughts abruptly turn panicky; what if something has happened? He stands up and looks down the rocky stairway - no one. He runs to the northern slope and starts down in fright, checking the undergrowth as he goes and occasionally glancing up at the overhanging tree branches. Each time he comes to a cliff edge he stretches his neck over the precipice to make sure there are no bodies in the valley.

All the way down he sees no sign of her.

The Mountain Keeper closes the gate and hangs the open lock on its metal frame. He stands there a while as if waiting for someone he knows. When the second gust of

wind blows the bamboos, he puts the key in his pocket and turns away.

When the Mountain Keeper wakes the next morning his eyelids are heavy, his hair is full of sand. The sun is much brighter than it was yesterday. It's an effort for him to put a shirt on and walk out of his house. He feels aged somehow. Overnight things have changed. He senses that he feels something but he can't recognise what it is. And there is the woman. Woman, he murmurs to himself, is an impossible being. He stands there surveying his place. Mountain remains mountain, dirt remains dirt and peak remains peak. A rose-coloured cloud is floating towards him, he feels like he has become one of the mountain's many solitary rocks. He looks up at the mountain's peak, imagining the same young woman from yesterday sitting in the shade of the third pavilion. She dries her tears with her sleeves. Then she raises her head, peering down at the mist floating through the bamboo trees. The Mountain Keeper thinks of the lonesome temple abandoned in the woods. Suddenly, he feels like going down there to pray, to pray for his mountain.

WINTER WORM SUMMER WEED

A YOUNG TIBETAN sits on the sand by Zha Ling Lake. He is skinny, about eighteen, with a buffalo-skin satchel hanging from his bony shoulder. The throbbing sun scorches his thick dark hair. The dreamlike lake is silent before him, a steely blue. The Kunlun Mountains reach up beyond the lake, iced snow coating the tops, peak after high peak.

The boy is from Maduo County in Qing Hai Province. His name is Guo Luo. In the summer he climbs the mountains to harvest famous herbs known as Winter Worm Summer Weed. He is a professional Winter Worm Summer Weed gatherer. This herb is well known for its nourishing and beneficial properties, but actually the plant starts out as an insect. In winter it is a caterpillar, a Winter Worm. Come summer, the caterpillar has died and its remains are absorbed by the earth, becoming a worm-like herb that looks like a strange weed. This is ground up and used in medicinal soups and tonics. Even people who don't use traditional Chinese medicine will use it in their Sichuan hotpot, boiling it in the dregs of spicy chilli soup. Its exact merits are unclear, but it is thought to improve the flow of your chi, the balance between your yin and yang, between the cold and the fire in your bodies.

At the end of summer, the highland snow comes quickly to the mountainside, and Guo Luo can no longer gather the herbs. Instead he travels across the county's vast sand pastures and catches rats.

People eat rats in Maduo County. Stir-fried with coriander and ginger. Guo Luo can make a handful of yuan to survive by selling a summer's worth of herbs and a winter's worth of rats.

Other young men like Guo Luo, weathered and thinned by the sun, squat by the edge of the lake. Their fingers gently fondle the recently-collected herbs. They watch old fishermen hauling their catch onto the decks of the boats. Wooden notices are staked out around the lake, put up by the local government. Big red characters warn: 'This lake is government property. Fishing is illegal.'

But these fishermen pretend they can't read. And maybe they can't, who knows? There is always someone fishing, even in broad daylight. It says it's illegal, but the local officials don't bother them. Who would listen, anyway? If you live on the mountain, you eat from the mountain. If you live by the water, you eat from the water. How else can one live?

The people living in Maduo County were originally nomads. When they first came to this place, the lands by the mountains and the lake were vast fertile grasslands. But their herds grazed so much that now there is no grass, only sand and dead roots. The land has become a desert, a rat-infested desert. Rodent holes appear every three steps, and whole colonies every five. The rats burrow underground and feed on the remaining roots of grass. The locals complain about the rats, blaming them. 'The rats have decimated the plateaus.' Guo Luo and the other herb gatherers kill them – it can even be fun. He doesn't have a professional weapon, he'll grab any nearby stick to kill the rats. Locals use rat skin to make bags and cases. In restaurants, chefs have four ways of cooking rat: braised in soy sauce, heavy-fried, steamed, or stir-fried in a smoking wok with red chillies and spicy salts. A mouthful of rat can be as tender as the best beef fillet.

Tibetan is Guo Luo's native tongue. He has learnt Mandarin and even picked up some English from tourists who travel to the lake with the beautiful mountain landscape. His features are delicate, his face almost feminine despite the sunburnt skin. His eyes are bright. He moves like a little prince of the mountains. When he climbs the mountains with the others, it is always Guo Luo who returns with the most herbs. It is as though the weeds offer themselves up to him, begging to be taken. His reputation is such that when Guo Luo descends the mountain, buyers are waiting by the lake to ask his prices. Middlemen buy the herbs in bundles and scurry back to the nearest big city, Xi Ning, where the herbs can be sold to pharmaceutical companies at a profit.

*

As he walks down the mountain Guo Luo carries three bunches of herbs in each hand. His eyes are on the faraway mountaintops, covered with eternally thick snow. It's as though it has never melted, even in all the eighteen years of his life. He pictures the snowline where the white winter lotus used to grow. The white plant was hard to see against the snow. Guo Luo would ride his horse up the mountain to pick the lotus and then sell the flowers to the government pharmacy in the local town. Now the lotus has almost disappeared, picked to extinction. No point riding up to the snowline now.

He stands still, empty and drifting in the afternoon, bored. Every afternoon is like this – the same clouds, same lake, same mountains. He pulls his eyes back from the mountain to the road below. He can make out rows of white hats, a green flag flapping at the lead. A tour group is coming.

At the head of the group is the female tour guide from Maduo Tourism Bureau. She is about thirty but wears her

hair as if she were younger, in a girlish ponytail. Her chubby curves stretch against a tight pink sweater, her body like an overripe pear tree laden with blooms. She is sweet to Guo Luo as if he were her younger brother. Each time she brings tourists to the lake, she lets him know what to expect. 'There is business coming, Guo Luo. They are crazy for the herbs.' This time the group is from Singapore; the last lot were Japanese. She tells him to raise his prices. 'They're superstitious, they know this county has the best Winter Worm Summer Weed herbs.'

Guo Luo watches her usher the crowd of white hats towards him. He tilts his chin up to the sky and whistles. A scurry ensues, like a pack of rats descending, as his herb-picking companions flock from every direction. The tourists are a group of middle-aged women with money. You know the kind. Fearful of robbers, they carry their money in black leather wallets around their necks, cheap purses strung with shiny silver and gold chains. On this occasion, Guo Luo and the boys do very well.

The tourists stop coming at the end of the summer. The snow quickly covers the mountains. There is no autumn here, and Guo Luo has no work as the herbs are buried deep under the thick snow. He wanders around, nothing but sand and rats and occasional clumps of ugly flowers shaped like steam buns. The rats move like Guo Luo - they scurry impulsively from one hole to another. He hits them at random. He doesn't know what to do with the coming winter.

One day the female guide reappears, even though it is nowhere near tourist season. She is excited, her cheeks are rosy.

'I have good news! I'm being transferred to the Tourism Bureau in the city, and the bureau said I could have an assistant. Do you want to come and be my assistant?'