

Rolls Royce in the snow



Up early, eating a banana, walking over to Brownstones with its pirated (almost exactly like Starbucks) logo to say hi to the painfully sweet and smiling girls, the same two who worked there three years ago. Three years from now they'll probably still be there. Got a coffee in the too thin cup that makes it too hot to hold with the top, which doesn't fit quite right anyway, so it always spills and I've crossed Chengfu Lu, gingerly holding the cup at arm's length, to the bus stop to get the 609. Basking in the sun, 10:30am, drinking that watery Brownstones coffee, smoking a cigarette, watching the endless stream of cars and scooters and bikes filing by with a gaggle of students and some elders on a crisp, clear, slightly chilly Beijing morning in late October. Got on the 609, luckily snagged a seat, and settled in only to get yelled at by the three different monitors alternately playing a shoe commercial, wherein a monkey flies down from a mountaintop pagoda to a red carpet in front of a shiny new office building to turn into a man wearing a tuxedo clicking the heels of the advertised dress shoes and epic nationalist propaganda shorts featuring opera singers atop the Great Wall caterwauling the wonders of the new China. Disembarked at Xue Yuan Lu and went up to the tutoring place on the 14th floor to meet Ray, a 17-year-old student preparing to go off to Toronto for college in a couple of weeks. Helped him with his SAT practice essay concerning his heroes Copernicus, Kepler and Tycho Brahe, talked about the engineering problems of the Citicorp building in New York, and taught him – off the record – the saying “Opinions are like assholes, everybody has one.” Ray really got a kick out of that.



After an hour and a half with Ray, said goodbye and ate some noodles in the office hunched over a desk in the corner, listening to the office girls' incomprehensible high-pitched gossiping before going out to the stairwell next to the inoperative glass-enclosed outside elevator to smoke. Back inside was told Mr. Li had cancelled his class and the rest of the day abruptly yawned in front of me, an existential abyss. What to do on a waning fall day in Beijing? Try to skate the ramp-as-sculpture included in the Chilean-Chinese art show at “Artbase One”, way out beyond the fifth Ring Road near the airport about fifteen miles away, that's what. Had only been there twice, coming from a totally different direction, but figured it would work because I'd seen the 944 bus stopping by the Fourth Ring Road near the school. That was the same bus I'd taken from Dawanglu by the Third Ring Road on the southeast side of the city to Artbase before so it followed that this 944 was the same one, even though it didn't seem logical that it would be here in the northwest and then go to the southeast before ending up in the northeast by the airport. But what the hell, why not give it a try, and because so many things in Beijing appeared to be completely illogical by some perverse inverted reasoning, it seemed to make sense that the 944 would take such a wildly winding route. Caught the bus, paid my two Yuan, got the torn-off ticket back with the colored pencil dash across it, settled in and watched the monotony of grey Beijing slide by the windows. Heading east, sniffing the garlic emanating from bodies and mouths, watching the cell phone game players and the serious reading students, and observed the majority segment of the bus population: – the sleepers. Heads thrown back, heads falling sideways, heads touching other heads, and easily, the most popular position for napping: the arm on the backrest of the seat, with the head on the forearm. The forward-leaner.



For a while I recognized the lay of the land. I knew the airport was roughly straight ahead, Dashanzi to the right, and the Korea sector to the left. But then the bus started taking turns and, going into unfamiliar territory, made even more

unfamiliar by eerily looking a lot like familiar territory. Long straight multi-lane boulevards, brand new apartment blocks, then dusty fields, high power lines, and earthmovers by the side of the road. Outer Beijing, a sea of sameness. Started losing sight, so to speak, of the vaguely located destination. I knew I was in the right general area, if you consider the right general area to be anywhere within a ten-mile radius. Day turned to dusk, passengers got off, and with only a few diehards left, the bus pulled into an empty lot-cum-bus station. Stepped down, walked over to the side of the road, and realized I had no idea what direction was east, west, north or south. The usual one story buildings, small little stores with colorful arrangements of brooms, mops and tiny plastic stools out front; eating places in what looked like a family's cinder block living room, an aggregate village of sorts facing a two-lane road where a constant stream of traffic chaotically hurtled in each direction. Bicycles, scooters, motorcycles, three-wheeled motorized carts, cars, and what seemed to be a convoy of lumbering cement trucks. Picked a direction by chance and began walking with the misguided notion that somehow I'd magically find Artbase out in this wasteland. Sounds of gutturally shifting gears filled the air along with an incessant bedlam of honking horns and vibrations, all at regular intervals building to a ground shaking roar as another cement truck passed by in the gloaming.

The noise ebbed and flowed, then retreated, built and cascaded, crescendoed and started all over again, a cacophonous totality that made me smile thinking of my private joke that living in Beijing was punishment for an unhealthy teenage obsession with Einstruzende Neubatzen, Test Dept., Throbbing Gristle and Whitehouse (to name a few pioneers in the field of audio torture). It was like all those outfits plus SPK thrown in for good measure simultaneously going all out at full volume. The real industrial music, nonpareil, ultimate noise layered and layered until it takes on almost topographical dimensions of valleys and mountains of sound. Along with the assault on the ears dust was everywhere. It looked like a snowstorm. More dust than I'd ever seen in my life at one time, getting in my mouth, in my nostrils, on my glasses, rising and then falling in the air, highlighted by the headlights' beaming. Later that night, like many nights, I would have to give my dust-covered jacket a shower. Walked and walked, two miles, three miles, hoping that by some miracle I'd find Artbase and be able to skate the ramp, though that ambition seemed more and more ludicrous as dusk turned to night. After an hour or so I saw a two-story building with an ostentatious rounded glass entrance and crossed over to the driveway. To say it was out of place would be expected, but then again it wasn't that out of place at all and as I stood there with the dust flakes coming down a brand new silver Rolls Royce sedan drove up and dropped off two kids who ran into what ended up being a country club with a golf course. Golf! Jesus, the Chinese really have gotten bourgeois. Across the way behind twelve-foot high brick walls the cement mixing plant could be seen, and when starting down the road next to it, it appeared to have no end. I saw the gate where all the cement trucks were coming out in a never-ending stream.



Further along, keeping close to the dying dust-choked grass and the pestilent sewage clogged ditch, I felt a whoosh and saw a bus going by and slowing to a stop a hundred yards ahead. Jumped on my board, pushed and pushed as hard as possible, panting and gagging on dust, and rolled up just as it pulled away. Needless to say there were no taxis in the vicinity, but there were a lot of scooters zipping by, the drivers and passengers getting whiplash staring at the foreigner carrying the weird four-wheeled toy. Almost caused multiple accidents. Kept walking, and now it was at least 7pm and getting cold. Came to crossroads

and tried to discern which direction greater Beijing lay, picked the road going off to the right and got passed by another bus that stopped up ahead. Missed that one too. There was no sign at that spot but I had to hope a bus would show up sooner or later. A migrant worker guy about fifty years old was standing across the street so went over to him and asked "Beijing?" He pointed to where I'd been and said "Beijing." "Xie xie," and I went back. I wondered what he was doing there and I suppose he might have wondered what I was doing there but there was no way for either of us to know the answer about the other. Fifteen minutes later a 939 bus came up going the direction I'd come from and as it approached I waved at the silent, still man across the road. He waved back, and I jumped on despite the fact I had no idea where the 939 was headed.



Finding the ramp was definitely out, but at least I might make it back to Beijing that night instead of getting stranded by the cement plant. The bus bumped along repeatedly catapulting my body into the air where I hovered for a moment before coming back down to get immediately bounced again. It was kind of

fun, and I was covered in dust, thirsty, tired and content. Looking out at the vague shapes of trees and walls and lights going by, completely lost, and it was okay. The bus turned left, turned right, went long ways without stopping, took on passengers, turned again, stopped again, a comforting rhythm, and then I noticed we'd somehow gotten onto the frontage road to the Fourth Ring Road. Just like that, back on track. Funny how that can happen. You're totally lost and disorientated then you turn a corner and there you are, suddenly feeling safe and near home. The bus was rolling smooth and picking up speed and I decided I'd had enough luck on the 939 so I got off at the next stop by the confluence of the eight lane overhead Badaling expressway and the eight lane raised Fourth Ring Road, across from the Foreign Experts Building.

Didn't have the right gear for swimming at the Foreign Experts Building pool so went around behind into a little neighborhood of narrow streets and decided it was time for a beer. Stopped in front of a small restaurant, hesitated a moment on the threshold, and then went in to sit down at a table near the window. As everybody in there checked me out, two young waitresses ran over (they always come in twos or threes) and breathlessly waited for me to say something, a look bordering on terror mixed with fascination in their eyes. The anxiety of cross-cultural communication. "Pijiu," I said, meaning beer, one of the few words I had total mastery over after a month in China. They scurried away and I stared out the window, playing with a set of chopsticks. A few minutes went by but no Pijiu, which seemed strange because usually it's pretty instant, there's your Pijiu. Made inquiring looks at the girls but they just giggled and retreated into the other room. Five minutes later still no Pijiu and then one of them came out and uncertainly put down a big bowl of rice, mushrooms, green things and some unidentifiable meat. Guess I hadn't totally mastered that word. Well, I was hungry and needed to eat so no harm done. Tried again, "Pijiu?" This time there was understanding and lots of laughter, and a big bottle of Tsing Tao promptly arrived. Eating and wondering what exactly I was eating, I sipped the cold, luscious beer as a couple came in and sat at the next table. The girls immediately gave them a menu - with pictures illustrating all the dishes. For Christ's sake. Why I didn't get the picture menu will forever remain a mystery. My thirst quenched somewhat, yet queasily full, at 10 pm I ventured out and started skating the three miles back to where it all started. No more bus rides that day, and when I got home my jacket got that much-deserved shower.

