

“A Bird without Wings”

Nomadic Culture on the Mongolian Steppe

The Mongolian countryside is vast and empty but hardly desolate. From the backseat of my host mom’s black Toyota SUV I see humans, horses, cows, sheep, and goats, but no sign of wildlife. No foxes or rodents or birds, a minimum of water, and very few trees. At one point we cross something that is clearly a narrow river, according to Google Maps, but only appears so on one side of the car – on the other it looks like a half-completed marshland. Goats tend to buddy up with sheep, and when they do, they prefer to crowd around the only patently dangerous place for miles in any direction: the road. We drive through a dozen flocks of them, flocks that scoot across the pavement or lip at clumps of green grass among the rocks.

A man on horseback appears in the distance, the dark brown of his trousers and deel blending him and his horse into a single shape. I watch as he moves a small herd of cows toward some indefinite destination, but otherwise there appears to be no one around to watch over or control the movement of these animals. There are no fences up between them and the road. In fact, the one time I do see fenced-off pastureland, it looks absurdly out of place. Why separate this piece of ground from that one, when the steppe will keep your herds for you? All vestiges of civilization that are so commonplace at home – including fences, road signs, telephone poles, bridges, a construction crew, even solid, immovable structures as we get further from the city – surprise me, and each time it takes me a moment to realize why. On the Mongolia steppe, anything suggestive of a stationary life or modern civilization is shed in favor of simplicity and solitude.

The nearest land is largely green, the middle distance ranges from dark sepia to a rusty brown, and all of the farthest hills and mountains are hazy and blue. I have no idea how tall any of them are, and although it does a disservice to call them hills, the term “mountain” is a skosh grand. Some of them have shallow puckered valleys running down their sides, and some are littered with massive stones. In Scotland, those valleys would be white with melting snow runoff and shrouded in mists, but here they are as dry as the air and open to the bright sky.

The rest stops in the Mongolian countryside look like colorful Old West border towns, and the settlements, with their maze of corrugated walls, have a prison-like air. One of the settlements we pass – Ulaanshiveet – has something that is surely coveted on the steppe – a tiny stand of trees perhaps eighty feet across.

SARAH MOHLER – WRITING SAMPLE

In her memoir about her experience racing in the Mongol Derby (“the loneliest horse race in the world”), Lara Prior-Palmer said of traditional countryside-dwelling Mongolians that “they don’t feel the need to stamp the ground with grand buildings... Towns are an illusion that things hang together somehow.” Geographically, I’ve actually gotten a little closer to home out here, yet it feels like I’m the farthest away I’ve ever been. I’ve never in my life seen so far without a permanent building or a tree giving shape to the scenery. There’s a strange sort of claustrophobia out here for me, possibly because the expanse of the Mongolian countryside leaves nothing between me and myself.

The ostensible purpose of my trip to Mongolia is to tutor my host family in English, teach a couple of writing classes and lead the English speaking club in Ulaanbaatar at the local EdX school, which prepares high school students for study abroad opportunities in the United States. I was introduced to Cultural Homestay International through a writers group acquaintance, and when I discovered that Mongolia was one of their offered destinations, I allowed myself the luxury of thinking I had the sagacity and wherewithal to try spending a month of my summer on the other side of the world.

Mongolia is one of Cultural Homestay International’s most affordable destinations, but that is not why I chose it. I have come to Mongolia, and especially into the wide and empty countryside, further from my Western idea of civilization than I have ever been before, to see the horses and experience first-hand the oldest surviving horse-based culture in the world. The reality, I learn with difficulty, is substantially different. The hospitality is very real, but the importance of the horse I find to be lacking. The romantic ancient dependence on the hardy Mongolian ponies that helped Chinggis Khan build his empire appears to have shrunk almost as much here as it has anywhere else in the world. Horses are prevalent; I have not counted the number of herds that pass us by the roadsides and off in the distance, nor am I ever really sure if these horses belong to anyone or if they are as completely wild as I imagined they would be, but the number is far more substantial than back home in Ohio. However, the day-to-day life of the Mongolian nomad in the 21st century appears to be much more dependent on the sheep and the cow – for meat and milk, respectively – than the horse or even the lowly goat. Despite the vast and seemingly incalculable distance between a family settlement and the nearest gas station, motorcycles are as prevalent as horses for the horse’s traditional roles: traveling and herding.

SARAH MOHLER – WRITING SAMPLE

The life of a nomadic Mongolian horse herder is beautiful and symbiotic, but it is one that is losing its foothold: not because of urbanization, but because of climate change. Its landlocked location and high altitude make it especially susceptible to the catastrophic effects of our most industrialized nations.

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Before we had left the capital city of Ulaanbaatar, where my host family lives, my host dad Gan and 13-year-old host sister Uka both said that there would be horse-riding on this trip. I'm incredibly relieved to have my oldest host sister, Duku, ten years my junior, alongside me. I've come to depend on her, perhaps too much, for efficient communication with the rest of the family. Uka's English is surprisingly good for having had only a year of instruction so far, but her vocabulary is understandably limited.

The drive is interminable. I have never driven across the United States, but I have heard stories about the ceaselessness of the experience. After a 14-hour drive through three or possibly four provinces, it is about 2 a.m. when we finally make it to our rest stop. The last 45 minutes of the drive are spent creeping down a road that reclassifies my definition of "darkness," murmuring to one another and repeatedly rolling windows down in order to peer more closely at every sign we pass in the pitch-blackness, then rolling them back up to keep out the frigid night air. At least, that's what three of us are doing. Wee Hulka, six years old, is fast asleep, sometimes on me and sometimes on Uka, and I am silently spiraling into a frustrated, exhausted daze, resigning myself to an eternity of wandering the Mongolian countryside in intermittently freezing darkness while my restless leg syndrome spasms the lower half of my body every several seconds. (If I have learned anything from tonight's drive, it is this: I would survive exactly five minutes of psychological torture, if ever I found myself in possession of information that would call for such a thing.)

I stay the night in a ger for the first time ever, sparsely but colorfully decorated with four beds, a central stove, and not much else. The locale is what I suppose in the United States we would call a campground, and the proprietor takes it upon himself to stoke us a fire before we turn in, because even though it is the beginning of July, there are no major bodies of water or landscape features to draw in the day's heat. The night air is peaking just above forty degrees.

The pitch-blackness in which we arrive at the campground belies the surrounding landscape, as the following morning I awaken to find a stunning view of Terkhiin Tsagaan Lake ringed almost completely with undulating ridges and bathed in a

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generally peaceful air, one that makes peeing in a hole within an old wooden shed (a luxury, in fact, on the Mongolian steppe) entirely worth it. The day's travel takes us nine more hours away from Ulaanbaatar, through the Tarvagatai Mountains, which offer the greatest departure from the flatness of the steppe that we will see on this entire journey: conifer-shrouded hills threaded through with shallow rivers and some of the most erratically jolting terrain we will drive through. We encounter a blessedly paved road from which we eventually turn to follow a dirt track that bumps and joggles us for two and a half hours. Through this, Hulka and Uka somehow fall asleep on me in the back seat.

We arrive at Duku's grandparents' 3-ger settlement, in the southwestern arm of the Khövsgöl province, in the late afternoon of our second day of travel. Uka adjusts to steppe life almost immediately. She dons a navy blue silk deel with a matching sash and announces that she's going out to milk the cows. Apparently this is something she does every time she visits her grandparents, which I find endearing but also comically incongruous for this teenager who loves BTS and Disney films, and dreams of marrying an American man and becoming a flight attendant and/or CEO someday. I follow her out to the cow pen, where I see something I recognize as so quintessentially Mongolian that I wonder if it's a rite of passage of sorts: the twelve-year-old attempting to ride a calf as it skitters around inside the pen, and holding on with a tenacity that would be admirable if the volume of his giggles weren't matched by the agitation in the entire group's frantic dashing and darting. Uka climbs into the pen and points to the herd of cows making its way toward us. "Teacher, you go back. This is danger." She pantomimes the horns of a cow presumably goring me to death, so I agree to retreat to the ger and wait until it's safe. It seems safety is not something to trust when dealing with Mongolian cows.