

TAMING THE BLUE SHEEP

馴羊記

* 2021 Taiwan Literature Award

* 2021 Taiwan Literature Award for Best New Author

This dialogue between pilgrims – a Taiwanese naturalist and a Japanese monk – who converge in Tibet narrates the story of the mountainous former kingdom throughout decades of revolution, redevelopment, and environmental turmoil.

This dialogue between pilgrims – a young Taiwanese naturalist and a long-dead Japanese monk – who converge on the Tibetan plateau weaves multiple voices and narrative threads together into one complicated song of this storied, troubled region. Hsu Chen-Fu's arresting narrative style, which carries us seamlessly from the icy domain of the snow leopard to sites of urban redevelopment, decay, and former conflict redefines creative non-fiction in Taiwanese literature.

The autobiographical protagonist is a Taiwanese writer, photographer, and graduate student in the natural sciences whose soul is tied to Tibet. Hsu describes in brilliant detail the vast beauty of the Tibetan plateau during his first two visits, when he tries unsuccessfully to catch sight of an elusive snow leopard. A scientist's eye and a literary stylist's heart draw us completely into his own narrative reality. On his third visit, however, he is dogged by Chinese police at multiple turns, some of his books are confiscated, and he is eventually forced home to Taiwan.

One book that escapes the censor, however, is Ekai Udagawa's *Taming the Blue Sheep*, once the long-lost diary of a Zen monk who traveled to Lhasa to translate Buddhist scriptures directly from Sanskrit into Japanese. The diary, which tells the monk's story up until his death as a recluse in Tibet in 1945, paints a picture of Tibet as it once was – a diverse, deeply religious culture that fought as hard as it could against invaders on multiple fronts. Hsu weaves excerpts



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from Ekai's tale into his own investigation into Tibet as it was and is now, from the horrors of the Chinese military takeover in the 1950s through the Cultural Revolution and into the contemporary age of forced economic development. The polyphonic narrative weaves history, science, nature writing, and spirituality into a single narrative of change in the world's most forbidding inhabited region.

Hsu Chen-Fu 徐振輔

Hsu Chen-Fu is a published geographer and prolific writer of travelogs, short stories, and essays. He has written extensively about extreme environments, including the South Pole, Borneo, and the Tibetan plateau.

TAMING THE BLUE SHEEP

By Hsu Chen-Fu

Translated by Jim Weldon

Prologue

Stars

Five thirty, I come round groggily from my dreams. The early morning air is cold enough to freeze my breath.

Wearily, I sort out my kit, then I go outside. The deep blue sky still sleeps behind a deep blue mist. I recall that the time shown on my phone is Beijing standard; here, we'll be at least an hour behind by longitude and that matches the time suggested by the position of the moon and the color of the sky. I sometimes find myself wondering what fate it was that brought me to this place at this particular time; most likely it was when I nervously gave my friend M— a very rough draft of my novel, and her response felt like a challenge, "You write about snow leopards, but the problem is you've never seen a snow leopard."

Of course, a writer can learn about the snow leopard's physiology and ecology, its recorded and forgotten history by combing through archives; all the finer points of its appearance can be ascertained by collecting photographs taken from various angles (probably in greater detail than you could observe in the wild). That being so, what is it about seeing with your own eyes that accepts no substitute? My thinking on the matter slowly bent itself into a question mark, yet a vague sense of guilt also lingered, and I weighed up the possibilities of visiting one of the snow leopard's habitats in Central Asia, using the opportunity afforded by a gap in my studies to start collecting materials and to reach out to various contacts. Now here I am, recently arrived on the Tibetan Plateau, after overcoming a number of obstacles and with permission to stay at the research center of a conservation NGO while I conduct a seventy-two day study of the snow leopard.

Once you've spent any time at all on the Tibetan Plateau, you'll get into the habit of looking up at the sky at night. On the morning in question, the moon shone clear and bright. I checked the lunar calendar to find it was the twenty-third, a half-moon in its last period. It had risen at midnight so the early morning was when it reached its highest point. There was a British man called Terry among my traveling companions, a well-known expert on both environmental law and birds; I stood together with him looking at the sky while a Tibetan friend started our vehicle to give it a chance to warm up. Terry suddenly asked if I'd spotted one of the stars moving. I looked in the direction he was pointing to find there was indeed a point of light gliding in the direction

of the moon, where it went out of sight amidst the lunar glow. I was surprised and asked him what it was. He said, that will be the International Space Station.

It had never occurred to me before that men can already make stars.

Snow

We hung around in the valley the whole morning but did not find a single trace of snow leopard activity. Local herders told us they had seen one going along the mountain ridge only a few days ago.

Herders' eyes are hawk's eyes and their vision has the power to penetrate. Renowned field biologist George B. Schaller, despite having studied the snow leopard in Asia for many years, described it as a mystery cat that one might fail to see even when right beside one. The color of their pelts resembles a rock with a dusting of fresh-fallen snow, its spots a scatter of black poppy seeds. When a snow leopard lies still, it becomes a rock on the ridge-top, just another unobtrusive snowflake amidst the latest flurry.

Yet the herders are able to tell you that a snow leopard has just passed along that far ridge. Prior to my arrival at the research center, I spent several weeks traveling through China's borderlands, learning how to be a herder from Mongolian and Tibetan host families. When you spend time as a herder with no amusements and distractions you become more sensitive to everything out on the grasslands – the wolves, the vultures, the wind and clouds are all decisive factors in the survival of your flock, and you are there to keep a lookout for them. That said, my eyes remained far duller than those of the herdsfolk; sight, after all, being akin to jade, a thing that needs burnishing to display its sheen.

As midday approached we shifted our location, parking in a narrow mountain defile and climbing up one of its snow-covered sides to scan the far slope with our telescope. In spots like this with expanses of bare rock, you would often encounter numbers of silver-gray-fleeced *bharal* (the Himalayan blue sheep, *Pseudois nayaur*). They are the chief prey of the snow leopard in the wild, regularly seen in flocks wandering the steep and rugged high mountain country. A stable population of *bharal* meant a greater likelihood of snow leopard activity. If the flock went on the alert or began to move swiftly, it was perhaps because a killer was lurking somewhere close at hand.

Yet the valley was tranquil now, the frozen river a thread of silver running through the valley bottom, the occasional rock dove a fallen white leaf blown up by the wind. A lammergeyer drifted soundlessly along the line of the ridge like a fish swimming through the air; you could almost sense a snow leopard crouched quietly someplace looking out over this same scene, silently watching you with the wide pools of its eyes, and you entirely unaware. As the days went by, my mind had become completely caught up in these frustrated fantasies. I thought back to my first night at the research center: I hadn't been able to sleep properly, perhaps because of a touch of altitude sickness, perhaps due to the excitement, and my brain had set to work weaving a dream-world. I dreamed of three snow leopards playing like kittens on a rock, with me beside

them taking picture after picture, every shot near-perfectly composed and lit. Only after I woke with a start and grabbed the camera at my bedside did I realize that I had not in actual fact seen this.

Terry told me this was the place where they'd once spotted seven snow leopards in a single day, which gave me a sense of being on the borderline between dream and reality. Yet we saw no sign at all of leopard activity in the many hours we spent scanning the ridgeline. In the afternoon, the wind got up, as it usually did on the plateau; mist and cloud blocked out the light of the sun and the air temperature dropped sharply. Dark clouds in the distance suggested the likelihood of snow sometime soon. We opted for temporary retreat to await a more opportune time to resume our trip.

The peak times for snow leopard activity are usually early morning and dusk, so we took shelter in a herder's home until six o'clock that evening. Tibetans out in the grasslands rarely speak much Chinese, and to my shame I have failed to learn much Tibetan, so we were reduced to smiling foolishly as we drank our tea. I spotted some of the very few Tibetan words I do recognize scrawled slantwise across the wooden door, so I pointed and read them out loud:

མ་ཤིང་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་

The woman of the house laughed and said (through our friend who interpreted) that it was something her child had scribbled.

Om mani padme hūm, the heart mantra of Avalokiteshvara, also known as the six-syllable mantra, the most common incantation you will hear in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. I asked the woman: Did her child not live here? The woman replied that the child attended school in the county town and only came home during the holidays.

I wondered if the woman could imagine why we might come from so far away to the bitter cold of this plateau. I in my turn found it impossible to imagine whether the natural scenery here also looked beautiful in the eyes of a herder who had grown up in its midst. I once met a young Mongolian man who implored me to take him off to live it up a while in the big city, and I've met people from big cities all around the world who hunger for the wilds; two universes in mirror image, two dreams in complement (but there is no way for such dreams to interact). Yet when I found myself entranced by the little stream flowing like liquid glass past the door of this herder's home, still it seemed to me that between a childhood with a river and childhood without, the former would surely make for a person softer of heart.

As the sun set, we headed off for a valley we had not visited before. It seemed to be just the right environment for snow leopards and there was also a stable population of *bharal*. Besides Terry, my travelling companions included Wayne, an American expert who worked at one of the national parks in Alaska. These two highly experienced observers of nature were able to spot all sorts of hidden signs in the environment. As we watched a flock of *bharal* on the valley side, Terry said if there was a snow leopard nearby, the *bharal* ought to be nervous. "That's right," agreed Wayne. The pair studied the *bharal* for quite some while before both lowering their binoculars at the same time.

“Of course, you can’t tell if they’re nervous or not,” Terry grinned in self-mockery.

“Yep,” said Wayne.

The sky grew steadily darker. Some lammergeyers cut low along the valley floor. From the distance came a burst of shrill bird cry – the warning call of the Chinese gray shrike. Terry said it might be calling in alarm at a snow leopard but then again, maybe not, who could tell? When all had returned to silence, still we had spotted nothing. The light of the setting sun was too dim and the scene before our eyes was growing indistinct. Just as we were getting ready to call it a day, another sound came from our side of the valley that set nerves jangling again.

Ooo-ooo-ooo...

Terry’s eyes opened wide like a startled lamb and he pointed in the direction of the sound. “Sounds very much like one of one of the cat family.” He turned to Wayne, “And it’s the mating season now.” Wayne said nothing, just listening intently.

Ooo-ooo-ooo...

We all dashed off excitedly in the direction of the sound when it came again. It was even clearer this time, coming for that stretch of mountainside just there, close by that herd of yak making their way home. Just as we started to feel we were about to see something, the sound came once again, only this time sweeter and more lilting.

Aaah-ooo...eeee...

We stopped, looked at each other, then burst into laughter. It was the cry of a herder driving his herd home at dusk.

Fire

*One lamp can dispel the darkness of a thousand years;
One mantra can destroy the karma of a hundred kalpas.*

Fire Maxims 29

The research station was a simple structure made using several shipping containers set beside a river. When our day’s excursion was over, this is where we would return to ready a meal, fetch water from the river, type up reports, or to read the sort of books that require patient concentration. Sometimes, if the snowfall was particularly heavy, we had to get up on the roof to deal with leaks, and when we had some spare time we looked into how you might install a pump and water piping. Where possible I sought to rotate between physical and mental labor, to let my body and soul take turns to rest. It was a process of self-improvement I believed could enable a person to find their best mode of living in a range of situations.

Coming into April, it was still pretty cold up on the plateau, so we gathered dried yak dung to fuel our stove and keep us warm. Yak dung burns with a gentle heat and a light like water, with that pleasant muffled sound water gives off as it comes to the boil, soft and gentle as a kiss planted on your ear.

I had not been aware previously (or rather I had not experienced for myself) how critical fire is for life on the high plateau. Only after one winter's night in Hulunbuir of temperatures below thirty Celsius that I came to realize there are places where losing fire means losing your life. Fire itself has something of a harmful and rebellious nature; you might be burned by it, but you can also use it to fight the cold and dark. In Alai's novel *Fire From Heaven*, a Tibetan shaman named Dorje, well versed in reading the wind and woods, passes through a village whose pastures lie waste because they are overgrown with brambles. Dorje directs the villagers to burn the waste so that new feed grass can sprout again. During the Cultural Revolution, Dorje is imprisoned as an arsonist just as at the same time a fire from heaven like some oppressive dream consumes the high plateau almost entirely.

In the high cold regions, it's easy to get lost in a whirl of speculative contemplation when staring into the fire, as if there is something profound in there too besides the flames. I thought of John Meade Haines in *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire*, the book he wrote after twenty-five years living in Alaska, a work of silence suffused with the aura of death, asking what things a person might do in such a remote and lonely place. First off, you can watch the weather, look at the stars, the snow and the fire, and a lot of the time you are free to read. But when you need to go outside to fetch firewood or snow or to pour away dirty water, then for a while you must leave behind your walls and your books and your head filled with dreams. Then your spirit soars because of the stillness and nearness of the night. That is a good way to live.

So you too will frequently leave the fire and go outside the research center, at which time habit will make you look up at the skies, and for a moment you will be immersed in the stillness of the high plateau. It is a stillness unlike the silence of a soundproofed room, that stillness that comes when there is no one for miles all around, even in those places you cannot see and or hear, only enhanced by the sound of wind and snow. At such times, if you stand long enough, you will be drenched as if by rain in starlight from the wide vault of the night sky.

When later the weather grew warmer, we rarely lit a fire. One night when it was particularly cold, I was getting ready to go and collect yak dung to light a fire but my friend Samten, looking troubled, asked me not to. He said summer was coming and there would be a lot of insects in the dung, so you couldn't burn it. It would be a sin greater than could be repaid in a lifetime of restitutions to allow insect-kind beyond number die in a fire.

I abandoned my plan to make a fire but couldn't help asking with interest how Tibetans made fire in summer.

"We live in town now," the young Tibetan replied, "Don't need to be lighting any stoves."

Footprints

Heavy snow had fallen overnight and the plateau glittered in the early morning light. I followed Samten, heading into a deeper part of the valley. Behind us we left lines of footprints, deep and

wide; if you put ours next to those of some other animal, it was plain to see that the creature that made our tracks was not at all adapted to the snow.

“Hey, quick, come here!” Samten called to me from the distance. I hurried over to find him pointing excitedly at the ground. “Snow leopard print!”

I got down close to admire the print – large, broad pad with four oval toes, about the size of a human hand, a flower carved lightly in the snow. Last night’s snow had fallen right until morning, so a fresh print like this told us an adult snow leopard had recently come down from the mountain to our right then walked a short way along the valley bottom (perhaps halting a brief while), before heading away to our left. It was possible that it had spotted us as we struggled our way through the snow, though perhaps not.

My mind felt strangely befuddled, encountering a snow leopard in space but missing out on the meeting. Yet it was certain that a snow leopard stood at the far end of this trail of prints. We set off at once for the ridgeline to our left, first pushing through a hellish thicket of thorny pea-shrub, then traversing a precipitous and precarious scree slope. As you looked at the tracks extending on unbroken, your concerns for your own safety were overtaken by a sense of extreme admiration for the leopards’ ability to move so lightly across this land.

A sudden loud noise down by our feet, and two dark masses leapt up. I came to a startled halt but then realized we had flushed a brace of partridge. These delicately-striped birds often nestle in small groups on the snowy ground. If you approach, they sit tight at first, silent and still like a coiled spring, until you come closer than they can bear, provoking them to clatter into flight with a loud cry.

“Very bad things, those,” said Samten once he had recovered his composure. A *tulku* from his hometown had been out riding and when a partridge jumped up out of the snow, it startled his horse so it ran off out of control and the *tulku* fell off and was killed. So when Samten was a boy he had a special hatred for these birds, and if he saw one, he would try to kill it. I said, surely your parents would scold you for that. They would if they had known, Samten replied, which is why I always did it on the sly, and if I killed one, my mates and I would roast and eat it.

I knew a fair few snow leopards had also died at the hands of herders, in what people called “revenge hunting”. A major overlap exists between snow leopard habitats and animal husbandry activity, and if sheep and cattle out at pasture make for easier prey than wild animals, they will become an important source of food. When a leopard gets into a pen at night, they often kill to excess out of fear, and when the herder comes the following morning it will be to find fresh corpses strewn around in pools of fresh blood. In grief and anger, the herder will take up their gun and look to put a bullet in the most beautiful of all the cats. From the leopard hunter’s point of view, not only are they reducing their own economic losses, there is also the startlingly high price the pelt and bones will fetch on the black market. Conflict of this sort is however more common in Mongolia, where the herds are mainly sheep, than on the Tibetan plateau, where yak and *dri* predominate. The yak is often able to fight off the snow leopard itself, and there is also the mental anguish Tibetan folk feel about killing any living being. In the ever-turning cycle of rebirth, any soul might be a loved one of yours from some other incarnation, be its body as large as a great

beast or as tiny as one of the insects. It is as if every time a bird hurts its wing, it leaves a scar on your mother's body.

We stopped walking and examined the tracks in the snow again. Only moments ago, the snow leopard had halted here a while, pacing in a circle before lying down, pressing down the surface of the snow. Shortly thereafter it headed down into the deeps of the valley bottom. This was what the snow told us.

What things can the snow remember? Things like the seasons when the leaves and fruit fall, or what animal has recently passed this way. The languages of the fox, the musk deer, and the snow leopard are all different; the snow can tell them apart quite clearly. Once, as I was following a set of vehicle wheel ruts in Hulunbuir, the snow told me that two lynx, one large and one small, had come by the previous night. At the time it seemed to me that if I kept on night and day with such inquiries, eventually I would find the lair where the lynx rested up in the daytime. But the reality of it is your footsteps will never catch up with theirs; the tracks are like a dream that remains vivid in the moments after you have just woken but fades away, always fades away, when you try to remember, until the snow forgets it all, like so much dust and smoke on the wind.

In the end our quarry had headed into a hidden copse on the far side of the valley. I lay low behind a boulder for a long time, camera at the ready, seeking out a pair of blue-grey eyes in the landscape before me. Sometimes it seemed like I was holding a hunting rifle and when I pressed the shutter, something would die; and if that happened, all the many tracks would at last bear grieving witness to their own demise.

Bone-Eater

For a period of time, I would accompany the young research assistant Y— into the altitudes that are the snow leopard's usual habitat, and follow the routes the cats mostly likely used in search of excrement samples for our studies. Enormous lammergeyers would often fly past at eye level.

The lammergeyer – what most people call a vulture – is the most common raptor on the Tibetan plateau. During sky burials, when the monks light the pine and cypress branches, these birds, dark and massive like some metaphor for death, somehow hear the news and come flying in to the burial platform from the valleys all around to wait quietly until the cutting up of the corpse was complete. In Tibetan culture the flesh is merely a vessel for the heart-mind, presenting one's body that has lost its heart-mind for other living beings to feed upon is your life's final act of charity.

This was why Y— and I would feel a little uneasy if the numbers of lammergeyers circling overhead increased: it meant for sure that an animal had died somewhere. We'd just finishing checking over one of the peaks and had collected a number of samples when suddenly Y— beckoned to me from up ahead. "Come and take a look, they've landed over there!" I went over to see a dozen or more lammergeyers gathered in a ravine in the distance, with a number of magpies prancing about among them too in what looked like something of a stand-off.

Both myself and Y— were keen to investigate the situation, but the way down to the ravine was exceptionally precipitous. If you dropped a rock it would roll down a dozen meters. We hesitated a while before deciding we would try to make it down. We descended sidelong in what was essentially rock-climbing fashion, stopping when we occasionally hit a flat solid ledge to scan all around with our binoculars. If what waited down below was indeed a hunting kill then perhaps the hunter was still nearby, its eyes fixed on us from somewhere.

We had gone some distance before we could finally make out the corpse amidst the shadow, a twisted and mangled *bharal*, no gloss to its fleece, eyeballs clouded and sad. The scene overlaid itself in my mind with the memory of another experience of witnessing death on a Mongolian friend's pasture in the Tsaidam Basin. That morning, my friend walked out among his flock, looking all about him until he settled on a big ram. He grabbed it by the horns, straddled it, and with some effort dragged it back to the yard gates. He gave a hard twist and the ram fell onto its back. Having covered its eyes with a strip of red cloth, he took out a small knife usually used for eating meat, picked his spot, and sliced an opening no more than twenty centimeters long in the ram's belly. He stuck a hand straight in, puncturing the diaphragm and snapping the aorta. It all happened so rapidly, so naked and stately that it made even my breathing seem slow. The ram's head twitched a few times then it died. There was very little blood from the wound, just enough to stain a few tufts of fleece, so that it looked like a rose placed on the ram's breast.

"If a man of the grasslands doesn't know how to slaughter a sheep," My friend said as he dismembered the ram with his knife, "that's a real source of shame."

In the matter of a few seconds, the heart had stopped beating and consciousness had flown away like a scattering of mist. I looked into the ram's eyes with their pupils shaped like keyholes; now the dwelling places of the soul were just a pair of lifeless glass beads. In that brief moment I had watched with rapt attention, what was it that had departed his body?

My friend dealt with the various wet and sticky organs he extracted from the ram's belly with slapping sounds like waves on the ocean water. He said to me that this method of slaughtering a sheep "is as painless as a bullet to the head". No evil things from the moments before death such as great terror, grief and despair were left behind in the flesh, so the sons of the grasslands who grew up eating this sort of meat tended to be the better sort of person. When I later recounted this to Samten he was not impressed. He said that the Tibetan way, reciting a sutra then stifling the animal was even less painful. Their sole point of agreement was that the Hui method of slaughter by cutting the throat and letting the blood was the cruelest. Of course, Hui people think theirs is the truly kind method.

No living being with the experience of various ways of dying has come back with its memories to tell us which is the more painful, nor could I say if the rotting corpse of the *bharal* we are looking at now still has some good or evil thing lodged within. Mist and cloud fill the far horizon and the wind has lost itself in contemplation – there's a big snow coming. My knees ached unbearably due to an excess of physical activity, so I stopped for a rest, keeping my distance from the body. The lammergeyers, magpies, corpse-eating beetles, flies, and bacteria were all busy transmigrating the departed in the own particular ways, reincarnating it as a bird's blood, a

beetle's heartbeat, the breath of the land, a cycle without beginning or end like the conservation of matter.

I took some photographs then walked a long way before I made it back to the foot of the mountain. One of our herder friends who had been exploring an alternate route happened along just at that moment. I was about to tell him about the scene we'd just witnessed when he spoke first, "Did you see the snow leopard just now?"

We didn't.

Don't tell me you saw it.

Oh, please.

"It was right there!" He pointed towards the road we had taken to get here. "The leopard came down from the peak while you were over there, it took a look around then disappeared again."

It felt like a bullet to the heart. That whole afternoon Y— and I were lost in a dejected mood that mixed excitement with self-pity. Perhaps it was the leopard that had killed our bharal; perhaps it had long since spotted us and left while we were collecting samples and the lammergeyers only came later. Perhaps it was behind us watching as we clambered down into the ravine. Perhaps.

Whatever the case, it was bound to have seen us and if it had wanted to, it could have killed me in the same way as any other prey it hunted. There is no record of a snow leopard ever harming a human. All our leopard did was watch in silence with its eyes like deep pools as we struggled around the mountain like pilgrims making a *kora* circuit.

It amounted to a silent rejection of me.

What can you do? You are always waiting by a tightly shut window on a night of big rain, rushing to the train station to make an appointment you've forgotten, worrying away in your mind at a promise you can't keep. You have to get used to heartbreak day in and day out, and keep waiting with your heart in pieces, as if you believed that someone you missed out on when you were young is stood just around the corner, and if you keep rushing from one intersection to the next there's a small chance you might turn around lost time.

Vestiges of Light

After missing out so many times I started helping out in a project which was guaranteed to let me see snow leopards – using my computer to sort through and file the pictures of animals taken by our camera traps. So if the picture showed a snow leopard, I would tick that box in the filing tab.

The infrared cameras we'd set up as part of this project were often sited close to monasteries, as these were the places snow leopards were most often seen out and about. I once asked a research colleague if this was because the sites chosen for monasteries just so happened to be the same sort of places snow leopards preferred for their range or if it was something about the monasteries themselves that attracted the creatures. "Well," my colleague thought the question over, "That I can't say for sure."

Apparently, back in the days before they confiscated guns and banned hunting, lots of herders would kill bharal, marmot, and Thorold's deer for food, or catch male musk deer to cut out the glands that were worth so much money. Yet no matter how poor, a pious Tibetan would never hunt on a sacred mountain or in the demesne lands of a monastery. So even in those hungry times, the sacred mountains and monasteries provided a place of shelter for the wild creatures, preserving populations large enough to allow future restocking. Monasteries enjoy enormous power within the social order of Tibetan communities, so we were often obliged to interact with senior lamas to ensure the placing and collection of our camera traps went smoothly (it was the sort of kit that is easily damaged or stolen). One time we had gone to work in Golok and had planned to meet with the *tulku* of the local monastery, but met delay because a relative of his was in the hospital, so we were forced to wait it out for several days in our hotel in the town of Tawo. I spent the time going through thousands of photographs adding thousands of tags. In the lens of the camera, fleeting glimpses of snow leopards, steppe cats, fox, and Thorold's deer turned into vestiges of light that could be inspected time and again. As I worked my way mechanically through this mass of files my mind would occasionally turn to a mural of the Wheel of Life I had recently seen on one of the outside walls of the main hall at Labrang Monastery. A bluish-black Yama, Lord of Death, embraces the wheel of rebirth; the wheel is divided into six parts, each painted with scenes from the six realms of *samsara*. Although the animal realm is one of the lower three, the scenery depicted in the mural had for me an enchanting power, as if it depicted a Golden Age of wild beasts when the dodo, mammoth, Javan tiger, sea cow, and ivory-billed woodpecker still roamed, as if it was a primordial wilderness before the coming of Man, a world beyond the description of mere language.

But Man always brings language when he goes to each wild place that will ultimately be changed by him, and we also need language so that we can keep some vestige of all the things that have passed and gone. Those vestiges will then strike with precision the soul of some sensitive person distant from them in space or time – in the sudden collapse of a snowdrift; in a lump of dried dung; in the sound of the fire; in a flicker of light; in the striations on a rock or in the pale shadow of rainclouds far away, and they will make that person tremble and weep. Like it says in the nineteenth of Kafka's *Zürkau Aphorisms*, which I often spend time contemplating:

Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers.

This is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes a part of the ceremony.

The Bird's Mantra

There is a small patch of rhododendron in the hills close by the research center. Samten told me that when the rhododendron blooms it means the cordyceps season will soon be over; and when you hear the cooing call of a certain bird, it means it has come time for another purple flower to bloom – the iris.

Later, when I heard this bird's call out in the mountains, I realized Samten meant the cuckoo, commonly called the *bugu* bird in Chinese. The thing that impresses ecologists most about this bird and, for Tibetans, symbolizes good fortune is, without doubt, its capacity for deception. The cuckoo does not build a nest or rear its own young, but instead employs a brood parasitism breeding strategy. When a female cuckoo finds a reed warbler or other similar small bird to act as host, it will hide out nearby, waiting for the parent birds to leave. Then it will sneak into the nest (some believe the cuckoo's plumage mimics that of a raptor, allowing them to scare the parents away), carry away one of the hosts' eggs, then lay one of its own, after which it never returns. The cuckoo egg usually hatches earlier than those of the host; as soon as it hatches, the chick will push the other eggs out of the nest. This does not stop the host parents seeing the interloper as their own progeny and nurturing it with all due care.

It was now June and I had lost count of the number of times I had just missed out on seeing a snow leopard. As I came down the mountain that day, weary in body and spirit, I saw a cuckoo for the first time. Seen from a distance it looked very much like a pigeon. It was making its signature "cuckoo, cuckoo" call in the gathering dusk. Singing its monotonous song there all alone, it seemed intent on waking the sleeping beds of irises while also desperately seeking a lover.

"Do you know what their call is about?" Samten asked me. I said they were probably looking for a mate, so it was like a courtship song. "Is that so?" the young man said. "We have a story about it. They say this bird constantly is chanting a mantra at a piece of wood, and if you can find that piece of wood and wear it, you can make yourself invisible." Samten smiled shyly, "Not that anyone's ever found it. They say it's impossible to find."

I expect pretty much everyone has, at some point in their childhood, wished they could make themselves invisible to the world for a time. We long for those places where it seems you can evade the relentless pursuit of time: attics and wardrobes, a public toilet, that alley you pass on the way to school, or some underpass that no one has ever been through. It's as if you could hide yourself away and avoid all that stuff in the grown-ups' world (though how you wished you were grown up yourself back then). If there really were such a mantra of invisibility, could it let us escape for a while into our own daydreams? That could allow us to go unseen, concealing our breathing and leaving no footprints; letting the rain fall through our eyeballs and soak into the earth; letting the moonlight flow through our bodies and scatter on the carpet of iris blooms. If I drifted on the wind to a mountaintop, perhaps I might see a snow leopard sleeping soundly; I could listen to its breathing and its dreams, touch that white pelt, soft and more beautiful than any other and beloved of my soul. (That is not possible. Thus spoke Samten.) And it really is impossible – even if you were free of all knowing and desires, the world with its myriad fine tendrils would still drag you back to reality, to be just one small detail in this landscape of chaos. Time comes rushing up from behind and all childhoods will turn to old age in the end.

"Maybe it was just the snow leopard who found that piece of wood," I said, "Which is why I never get to see one no matter how I try."

"Oh no, that's not possible," Samten spoke with great confidence, "No chance it could ever be found, none."

Daydream

A call came from the office to say they were going to arrange for a car to come a little later to take me back into town. It was to be my final evening at the research center. My work was all done, I'd packed my bags, and I was lying on the grass outside with Samten, discussing the shapes of the clouds.

The character of the mysterious photographer Sean O'Connell in the remake of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* has come to mind often during these past few months. He goes on a trawler off Greenland to photograph fishermen at work, stands on an airplane wing to capture the eruption of an Icelandic volcano and finally ends up on the Afghan border seeking out the snow leopard in the Himalayan mountains. When the main character comes all the way from New York to finally catch up with him on a remote mountain peak, eager to spill out all the woes and grievances he nurses in his breast, O'Connell suddenly shushes him and points at the viewfinder of his camera – the beast has appeared in their field of vision. The pair take turns to stare down the viewfinder at it until at last it goes away, but neither ever presses the shutter.

I am aware this is an over-romanticized fictional character. Still, I would really love to become an auteur of the same type – a rover, headstrong and uninhibited, in love with the world and responding to that love by seeing the lost things of the world as my own, willing to devote my lifetime to retrieving something or fighting back. Such people are profoundly conscious that the only way to seek out the past is in memory, which is why they use words and images to try to create a space for recall. But time moves on and the things you have slip through your fingers, until all you hold in your hands is the empty shells of memories. By the latter stages of my trip, I had long since abandoned any hope of making a record of the snow leopard as a photographer would, catching one glimpse would be enough, one sighting in the far distance and I would have been well satisfied. Then perhaps I could have said goodbye to the Tibetan plateau without regrets, bid farewell to what had been the best and most beautiful time of my life, and all just because of this place.

I got up and started collecting stones which I piled into a small tower, then I pulled Samten to his feet and said, "One more time." Previously we'd competed trying to hit a piece of wood with a thrown rock, which I won; later it was who could throw a rock the farthest into the Dza Chu river, which produced no clear winner. This time he knocked the tower down first, so I lost and there was not going to be another chance to make a comeback.

The car that had come to pick me up was already waiting by the gate. If we ever see each other again, Samten, we may well be much older, both embedded in the far more complicated and confusing wider social world. Will we have become the sort of people we now despise?

I sat in the car taking me away and the young man waved goodbye to me from behind. I looked to the horizon and the setting sun emerged and the plateau was engulfed in an ocean of golden light, a few Daurian jackdaws perched in silence on the treetops. At last my eyelids began to slowly droop, ever so slowly; it felt as if I was waking from one dream and falling into a new one.

Chapter One: The City and Its Timescape

Setting Out Again

After I got back, I had planned to do the standard thing and carry on with a Masters' degree in something related to ecology. But just before the application came due, an emotional impulse I couldn't quite put my finger on welled up inside me and pulled me into the unfamiliar academic terrain of sociology. After an internal tussle, I decided to apply to the geography department, which straddled both worlds.

When I saw my name on the list of accepted students, I imagined I would dutifully give up on my mad notions of seeing a snow leopard, but as I browsed my diary of the trip my heart raced and I lost myself again in the dream-like words. Some memories are simply that bit stronger than others, like a spotted butterfly that lands between the light and shade – you can't be sure what significance it is endowed with, but there it is, right there.

A mere month after my program started, I put in a request for a leave of absence. My advisor knew my mind was still roving around up on the Tibetan plateau so didn't nix my suggestion; instead they took down a copy of Matthew Desmond's *Evicted* from their bookshelf and handed it to me. The book, which recounts the stories of eight evicted families, is written with full academic rigor but also touches the heart like a good novel. I realized there are two ways to write about the inner lives of others, and if you are not going to rely on your own imagination, you must listen carefully when they tell their stories.

In autumn, having arranged my sabbatical, I was feeling somewhat lost and frustrated but also eager to be born again as I flew alone to Xining, the provincial capital of Qinghai, from which I was preparing to make my return to the high plateau. I spent a night in the city, then made my way to the train station at noon the following day, where I queued up, got my ticket punched and went out to the platform. I fantasized about music from a travel movie playing in my head the minute I stepped onto the train, but I heard nothing save the mechanical female voice from the public address system: "Calling all passengers, this train is the direct service from Xining to Lhasa."

I clambered up to my narrow top bunk, number sixteen, tucked my backpack behind my pillow and put my passport into an inside zipper pocket. In unfamiliar places, you always have a sense of thieving eyes trained on you from some hidden corner. I was immersed completely now in my own little drama of wild imaginings; I watched the scene outside the window start to move and felt the carriage rock, it felt like this time I was about to drift off to somewhere very far away.

I was awakened rudely early the following morning by two uniformed inspectors who wanted to make a security search of my luggage. I played along resignedly like an obedient citizen, cooperating without demur. As a result some books I had in my bags were confiscated, including one about the Lhasa unrest of 2008, oral testimonies from exiles in India, and a biography of the master tangka painter Amdo Jampa. I guessed that some nervous type had reported me after watching me reading in the corridor the previous day. It's worth noting that the inspectors

allowed me to keep my copy of Ekai Udagawa's *Taming the Blue Sheep*. Since it was written in Japanese, they hadn't spotted its sensitive content; I'd been very lucky.

That was a rare and precious volume I had obtained from the venerable book collector H—. After many years partnering him at Go, the old fellow gave me permission to choose whatever book I liked from his collection as a gift. Although everything in my upbringing suggested I ought to refuse, I decided I would refuse good manners instead. After much hemming and hawing over my selection, in the end I decided against taking a lithograph of a sunbird in Palestine from an early work by the nineteenth-century British ornithologist John Gould and instead picked *Taming the Blue Sheep*.

The author, born in Japan in the early twentieth century, was a highly respected religious practitioner in the Nirvana School lineage. Having read and mastered the cosmic vastnesses of the complete Tripitaka, he was struck by the limitations of the written word, and since this was also the time when questions were being raised by scholars about the authenticity of the Chinese translation, he resolved at the age of forty-six to make his way to Tibet in search of the ancient original texts. *Taming the Blue Sheep* is the diary he wrote during this journey. The original draft was lost for many years, until a *tertön* ("treasure-finder") monk from Sera Monastery, prompted by a dream, found a rough copy boarded up in the walls of a house in Lhasa. This he posted back to Japan, where at last it was published to the world. The book tells us that Udagawa lived in seclusion in Lhasa for many years until finally one chill morning he wrote the lines, "Words are all used up, I shall depart on a long journey."

Spirit clear, the ascetic walked out of the door and down the streets of Lhasa, on and further on, until at last he was lost to sight in the sunlight and dust; where he went no one knows. This book, a lucky survivor in so many senses, became my teacher and companion on my own journey.

After leaving Lhasa, I drifted about until I ended up in a little place called Malok in Qinghai where the local herders invited me to see the New Year in with them, but the police came and expelled me. Back in my own home in Taipei three months later I thought of this parting as I stared blankly at the disorder of my luggage and wondered if I would ever get the chance to go back there again before I die. After some days in low spirits, I adapted once more to the pace of city life. I went to see my advisor and told him I wouldn't be having anything to do with China for the next few years. I was due to start up my studies again very soon, where we had moved on to debating interspecies relations in an anthropocentric world.

After my editor heard I was back in Taiwan he wanted a chat about how things had been with me, so at my suggestion we met up at a Belgian bar in Gongguan. I like Belgian beer, especially the monastic style made using the traditional methods; not only do they use flavorings well, they also add different syrups so that the beer ferments again in the bottle. The result is a pretty high alcohol content cleverly concealed behind a complex palate and a strong carbonic tang; as you drink you shed your emotional armor without really realizing it's happening. Two men whom one couldn't really call friends meeting up is by nature something of an awkward occasion and I was calculating that the drink would help lubricate the apology I intended to make, since

the collection of short stories I signed the contract on all those years back was still not happening and I suspected I was never going to finish it.

My editor, however, didn't seem to have this on his mind. He had drunk a fair amount and gone red in the face and all he kept repeatedly suggesting was that I write down the tale of my time in Tibet. I thought about the other day when I looked at the scattered pages of my diaries and rough drafts and decided that while I couldn't bear to throw them out, they were in no state to be published; my only plan was to hang on to them until they accompanied me to the crematorium. So while at the time I said fine, I'll give it some thought, really it was only because I would have been embarrassed to say no and I was basically lying to the man.

Sat at the bar, we fell silent, pretending to be thinking what beer we should try next. We'd already had a few light and pale ones and tried some of the sharper beers, so the barkeep took advantage of our indecision to recommend a bottle that came without a label. It contained a dark brew and had a golden cap, with an embossed ring around the neck in the classic style – could this be the legendary Trappist Westvleteren 12? Let me tell you about this beer: it's brewed in the town of Westvleteren in the western part of Flanders according to the strict rules and methods of the monks of Saint Sixtus Abbey, and the production is kept exclusively to be drunk in the abbey itself. Since it's not brewed commercially, very little is made and even a single bottle is very hard to come by. It has long monopolized the title of "king of beers" thanks to its exquisite, well-balanced flavors. To rework the popular comment about that most enduring of mathematical problems, the Goldbach conjecture – if Belgian beer is the king of beers and abbey beers brewed under the Cistercian seal are its crown, then Westvleteren 12 is the shining jewel set atop that diadem.

In Taiwan, one could expect to pay a minimum of twelve hundred dollars for a rarity like this, but my editor agreed to open the bottle without hesitation. The barkeep took up his bottle opener with all due trepidation, there was a pop, then a drift of white mist from the neck of the bottle followed by a spreading aroma of dark dried fruits, honey, and a touch of pear. The deep amber liquid was poured into special chalices, a dense creamy head forming on top, the experience like watching a work of art come into being. I don't know if you've ever had it happen to you: you have before you a bottle of really good booze that has taken some getting and you feel a moment of extreme sorrow and regret, whether or not you have opened it yet. Still, that was no time to be hesitating, it had to be up with the glass and take that sip – the fore notes, middle notes and aftertaste, the aroma going from front to back of your nose, in just a few seconds a complex and detailed chart of flavors was laid out before me – the notes of malt toasted until just caramelizing combined with the alcohol content of just a shade above ten percent to a perfection of balance. For some reason, the moment evoked a sudden sadness at the fragility of youth, as if when you awoke from the dream you would find yourself suddenly old.

"All right then," I said, "I'll get the Tibet story written before I go back to graduate school."

When I write it down it seems like I'm a man with no principles, but that's really not the case, much as I know any further attempts at explanation will come across as sophistry. So let me stop here and let the preface to *Taming the Blue Sheep* serve as the introduction to this account of my travels. Since it is a book full of enlightenment but copies are very hard to obtain, I have made

bold to include some excerpts in my own clumsy translation interspersed within my own writings, to allow my readers some slight glimpse of how things were in those times.