

## A Generous Solitude

I balanced on the edge of the long drop. No –no Alpine cliff plummeted beneath me; no river snaked at the bottom of a gorge – I was in a cupboard-sized room with a broken lock at the end of a corridor in a straggle of buildings in Qinghai, China - the greatest danger: another guest barging in. The sensory assault of Chinese toilets was by now familiar, so with my head jammed against the door, I just closed my eyes and prayed it would soon be over.

We'd left the provincial capital, Xining, the previous day - a break to heal the ills of our suffocating work-unit in Shaanxi Province, where partner Michel and I were teachers: all it would take was five hours...five-hours and we'd be lost in peace and isolation in the infinite grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau, gazing across lonely Qinghai Hu: one of the world's largest saltwater lakes.

It took thirteen. Four of which were spent at Xining's Public Security Bureau after our bus driver performed a U-turn across four lanes of traffic. Then the 'development of the west' halted progress with an inconvenient road-widening scheme. Surrounding mountains were blasted to smithereens, showering the traffic with grit, while grinding engines hungered for the ensuing, honking gridlock. Finally, a few hours later, snowflakes slicing the headlights, we slid to standstill at a jack-knifed lorry. Our resourceful driver, Coke-bottle of decanted diesel in hand, sparked the grounded vehicle to life and motored us onwards into the night. After thirteen hours of passive-smoking, we staggered off the bus into impenetrable black.

The following morning, I was cramped in the smallest of rooms in a grimy guest house in Jangxiguo, salvaging some resilience for what next lay in wait. Gripping my pack, I stepped outside.

The snowstorm had gifted us azure skies and sharp, clear air. For miles, actually, hundreds of miles, the plateau stretched on and on – fringed with gleaming peaks and the endless steel of Qinghai Hu. Waves hugged the shore against ecstatic shrieks of gulls and geese. In front, behind and on all sides, there was...space...in incalculable quantities. Boundlessness unfolding all around, my ears strained for the hum of traffic or the clamour of a loudspeaker. But – no. This beauty was immaculate.

Our seclusion didn't last. Some boys tagged along, jumping on a dead seabird to show it could still squawk, then guiding us away from where the fierce dog lived; next a herder walked silently with us for a mile and as we cooked lunch, a local jumped from his horse to crouch and examine the mechanics of our stove.

Later, a 'plateau-pika' trapper, surrounded by hundreds of small desiccating mammals, explained how Chinese doctors would buy these mummies and boil them into a medicinal pulp to bandage on arthritic joints. Grasping a dead rodent by the feet, he demonstrated the flaying, peeling it like a banana. The fur was yanked off and discarded over his shoulder. With two mangy buzzards watching from a gatepost, he unzipped its belly and poked the tiny scarlet innards onto the grass. Ta da!

Lost in this treeless wilderness we hiked onwards, herds of yak parted in our wake, the stillness giving space for wonder at single sounds. And then it happened. A clutch of grey clouds clotted and swelled to consume the sky. The light hail, carried by the breeze, mutated into a vicious, swirling whiteout. Trudging blindly, we struggled on until a shape etched itself into view. Crouching in a dip was a small mud hut.

'Ni Hao!' Our shouts for attention were swallowed by the gales. In desperation I pulled back the tarpaulin. A woman appeared. Ushering us through the sculpted entrance into her two roomed home, she threw sheepskins on the floor inviting us to sit.

Window ledges and shelves, cut into the mud walls, had been smoothed, all sharp edges erased. Smoke from the mud stove curled up and out a hole in the roof through which snowflakes now fell and sizzled in the embers. The woman shovelled handfuls of sheep droppings onto the fire. Thick hunks of fresh bread, bowls of tsampa and scalding butter tea, were placed in our frozen hands.

Three generations lived here – none spoke Chinese. We shared biscuits while the men prodded our rucksacks, my pride on packing lightly shamed by the simplicity of their home. I felt humbled by the hospitality shown to us, these huge foreigners who might just demolish the fragile space with clumsy boots.

When the snowstorm passed, their broken-down motorbike presented us with a chance to repair and repay. Offering money would offend, but perhaps we should have 'lost' some yuan behind that sheepskin.

Walking to the edge of their horizon, our new friends still waving, we were nothing but pinpricks on their generous solitude.