



Winning Entries

Memoirs of a Photographer

St. Joseph's College, Alvin Yu, 15

“...That each [life] affects the other and the other affects the next,
and the world is full of stories, but the stories are all one.”

-Mitch Albom

The man trekked through the rocky wilderness of the Gobi desert on camelback. He was on his own – on his back there was a simple rucksack, housing his daily necessities. The man had one hand on the reins, and one hand on a camera; a bag was diagonally slung across his body, filled with all sorts of lenses specialized for different views and objects.

The man was a photographer.

Not just any other photographer, however. Some acknowledged him as the world-renowned Pulitzer Prize winner, while some detested him as the cold blooded man who photographed the instant before a lion pounced on an unwitting hunter in Africa: the same shot that earned him the Prize.

He had been in self-exile ever since, travelling to faraway, distant locations on a constant basis. The true reason for his exile was never clear, though speculations stated that he was suffering from depression.

The photographer reined his camel to a stop. The sun had almost ended its journey towards the west, emitting a brilliant shade of crimson over the land. The photographer smiled at the scene, positioning his camera for the shot. Almost instantly, the memories began to flood in: how he had gone to Africa to report on wildlife trafficking. How he had witnessed the lion creeping up on the hunter. How the hunter had stared at him, unwary of his own imminent doom...

His smile started to wane, his hands, made steady through years of photographing, starting to experience faint tremors. I cannot do it, thought the photographer. I cannot bring myself to take another photo. Taking photos would remind him of the indifference of human life he had displayed when taking the photo. Even with the cloth covering his

face, the photographer emitted remorse and pain. He stuffed the camera into his pouch, intent on ignoring the scene of the sun setting over the Gobi.

Then he stopped. In the lone distance, with rocks and weeds stretching across the landscape, he saw a lone figure sitting on the ground, beside him a tent and a burning fire. The photographer tugged gently on the reins of his camel to spur him towards the figure.

The sitting man addressed the photographer while looking at the sun. "It's sometimes overwhelming to comprehend that a thousand years ago, the vast army of Genghis Khan witnessed the same sunset when it crossed the Gobi. Some things never change, eh?" The man turned to look at the photographer. The man was a middle-aged Caucasian, adorned in the same attire as the photographer. His weathered face resembled that of a grandfatherly figure, and when he spoke, his eyes twinkled with understanding.

"Call me Aaron." The man beckoned the photographer to sit, patting the ground next to him. After hours and hours of riding, the photographer was grateful to sit on solid ground. Aaron stoked the fire by pulling out weeds around him and feeding them to the fire. "I see you're a photographer, young man. What brings you to this remote wilderness?"

The photographer untied the cloth around his face, revealing the chiselled, strong features of a young man, barely past his thirties. His eyes turned to gaze at the setting sun. "I was," the photographer's voice was brimming with spite and scorn. "I will never be a photographer ever again."

Aaron raised his eyebrows. "That face... I have seen you before. You were the one that won the Pulitzer Prize. That photo was controversial indeed..."

The photographer's expression was unreadable. He started to get up and leave, but Aaron caught his hand. "The temperature is going to fall below 40 tonight. If you don't want to die of cold out there, come inside and stay. Besides, someone who speaks the same language is hard to come by here. It's good to have someone to talk to."

The photographer hesitated. Then slowly, he got up and walked towards the tent.

* * *

Gusts of subzero wind blew across the desert at night, but they did no harm to the two men inside the tent. The lantern inside the tent flickered, casting ominous shadows against the tarp.

The photographer leaned back against the tent. He broke the silence. "Why are you here, then?"

Aaron flashed a quick smile, as if he had been waiting for this question. "So you want to know why? Then sit tight for a story.

"I travel here once every few years in memory of my...friend." Aaron hesitated before uttering the word "friend" softly. "She died years ago."

Suddenly the photographer did not feel at ease anymore, as if the temperature had fallen a few more degrees.

Aaron started. "We met at an archaeological site, here in the Gobi. I'm an archaeologist, you know – I was inspired by the ordeal of Roy Chapman Andrews, the early 20th century explorer and adventurer. He found invaluable dinosaur fossils here in the Gobi. We may be sitting on top of a fossil as we speak." Aaron's eyes twinkled at the mere prospect of a great archaeological find.

"The first time I met her I knew she was something different: the way she talked, the way she laughed, her knowledge – I fell for her instantly."

How love works is such a mystery, the photographer mused. He remained silent, beckoning Aaron to continue.

“It was a matter of time before the feeling became mutual. We started dating after leaving the Gobi, and so to commemorate our relationship we promised to travel to the Gobi once every few years. We loved the Gobi sunset – watching the sun go down with her at my side is one of the best memories I’ve ever had.” Aaron’s face was wrapped in nostalgia and happiness, as if he was back in the days when love was in the air.

“So what happened after that?” the photographer asked quietly.

Aaron’s smile vanished. As if on cue, the wind outside picked up its pace, rattling the tent.

“I started to feel some cracks in our relationship a few years in: she was always shying away from me, as if she had something to hide. I decided to retain our relationship, by planning to propose to her in the Gobi as a surprise.

“After I took out the wedding ring, her expression was one of detest and unwillingness. She refused promptly, knocking the ring out of my hands and announcing our break-up.

“The only thing I did was to stare in disbelief at the ring on the ground. Our relationship, gone, with a sweep of her hand! Ever since then I vowed never to return to this place full of conflicting memories.”

The twinkle in Aaron’s eyes had disappeared, replaced by an indescribable dullness. In the distance a lone wolf’s howl pierced the blowing winds.

“It was after a space of a few years that I heard of her whereabouts, when I found a letter addressed to me in my mailbox. It was in her handwriting.” Aaron fished out a letter from his rucksack. The photographer took the letter, opening it with his near-frozen fingers.

My Dearest Aaron,

If you are reading this, I am already in my eternal sleep. I entrusted this letter with my family, to be sent out a few years after I die. I imagine that you would have recovered from the pain of the rejection by then.

You may still hate me now for refusing your marriage proposal. It still pains me as I think of it now; there could’ve been other ways, but none as effective as this one.

I left you because I was diagnosed with cancer: I was in the final, incurable stage. When I learnt I was dying, the only person I could think of immediately was you, how you would react to this news, or how you would feel.

I decided not to let you know – I didn’t want you to see my health deteriorating by the day, bit by bit, until I died. That would be torture to you, which I didn’t want to see, as I loved you so much.

So I tried to exit your life, bit by bit, so you wouldn’t miss me when I left. How badly I wanted to say yes when you proposed to me in the Gobi! However, given my condition, refusing your proposal was better than you watching me on my deathbed.

I hope you can do one thing for me, Aaron: please, continue travelling to the Gobi for me. It was your dream to unearth fossils in the Gobi, I remember. Don’t cast away your dreams because of me.

I’m sorry that I can’t be the one sitting next to you, watching the sun go down. Maybe someday, when we meet again...

I end the letter here. I love you, Aaron.

The photographer looked up at Aaron. Two lines of tears filled with reminiscence and regret were visible on his cheeks.

“You’re the first person I ever talked to about my past. I never thought it would be this hard,” said Aaron, wiping the tears dry. “But at least I had the guts to fulfil her dying wish. Now I visit the Gobi once every two years.

The photographer spoke. “Isn’t that hard to do? Don’t you think of her every time you come here?”

Aaron gave a thin smile. “Oh, yes I do. That is difficult to overcome. But what matters is how you view that memory: do you dwell on it, or do you control the feelings and move on? These memories are painful, true, but how is one complete without memories?

“I can face my past with courage. What about you?”

The photographer conjured memories of his own past: his photo of the hunter. The depression set in like a punch – no, the memory is too powerful, thought the photographer. I cannot override the emotions.

He snapped out of his trance to find himself breathing heavily and sweating. “I cannot do this,” the photographer glared at Aaron. “I cannot even bring myself to use my camera again! I saw a man being killed in front of me – a killing that could have been prevented!”

The photographer was on a roll now. “The only thought in my mind was the fame that would follow when I took that photo – the fact that there was someone’s life at stake didn’t occur to me at all! It was after taking the photo that the guilt started to set in, the realization of the monster inside me! I’m now suffering from depression so great that no anti-depressant,” he took out a bag of pills with shaking hands, “can relieve me! I travel from country to country to leave the memory behind but to no avail...” The photographer’s voice broke, nearing tears he had suppressed for so long. The depression had finally taken its toll on him. His hands were shaking..

Aaron grabbed him firmly by the shoulders. “Listen. Calm down. Do not let the emotions take over. Get some rest, and let sleep recollect your thoughts.”

The photographer was in no shape to disagree. He closed his eyes and dozed off to the rhythmic swishes of the winds.

* * *

The photographer woke up to the first searing rays of sunlight. Stumbling out of the tent, he saw Aaron sitting in the same spot, eyes fixed on something in the distance intently. The rising sun sprayed a coating of golden yellow over the landscape, creating elongated shadows behind the objects it touched. Aaron was already awake, sitting cross-legged in front of the tent.

Aaron motioned the photographer to sit next to him. “See that lone bear lumbering in the distance?” Aaron asked in hushed tones. “That is a Gobi bear, or Mazaalai as the locals call it. This may be the only time you’ll ever see this creature: there are less than 50 left on the planet, due to the fluctuating climates and poaching.” Aaron spoke softly with a wistful smile.

The photographer stared in awe at the animal. This might be the last time I’m going to see this creature again, thought the photographer. A sense of admiration and passion began to fill his heart. So, in one fluid motion, he took his camera out of its pouch, zoomed in -

- and the distinct 'click' of the camera shutter preserved the scene forever.

It took a moment for the photographer to process what he had done. I took a photo. A smile crept across his face, like the sun that rose ever so slowly above the horizon.

Aaron grinned. "You never know what's going to be waiting around the corner, eh?"

Something in Aaron's voice prompted the photographer to look at him, a face basked in golden yellow. Aaron patted him on the back. "Sometimes you just have to face that memory. You just can't give up photography, can you? Then learn from your memories and move on. Use that memory to remind yourself of your morals."

The photographer gazed at the horizon of the Gobi, lost in thought. The depression was now an ebbing pain in his head. There is more to photography. He looked at the photo of the Gobi bear. A thought began to blossom in his head.

He would use his talent in photography for a positive cause: to spread the message of environmental conservation and protection, starting with this very picture of the bear. Call it compensation for his past regrets: the photographer didn't care, for it had been months since his life had a purpose, since he felt hope. Hope smothered his painful memories, like the light veil of dust that blew across the rocky Gobi desert, rejuvenating him, empowering him.

The photographer had one last task to accomplish. He took out the bag of pills in his pocket. He then dug a tiny hole in the ground, emptying the bag's contents into the hole and burying them. I am going to prove myself to the world. I have changed.

"You're a new man now," Aaron, his counsellor, voice brimming with relief. "Embark on your journey. Till we meet again."

The photographer shook Aaron's hand firmly and climbed onto his camel's back. Just before he pulled on the reins the photographer turned to take one last look at Aaron, at that unforgettable weathered face.

The image would stay in his mind forever, more vivid and sharp than any camera can capture.

* * *

The man trekked through the rocky wilderness of the Gobi desert on camelback. He was on his own, but he didn't care: he was now free of his demons. A bag containing his camera was slung across his shoulder.

The man is a photographer.

A Desert Meeting

Dulwich College Beijing, Jimmy Bowan, 7

From my carpet I can see beautiful rivers, the most astonishing valleys and far beyond, the gigantic mountains leading to China. To the west I can see endless rocks, no people, no villages or mountains and no rivers or valleys.

My name is Jimmy Bowan and I have been flying for many weeks on my carpet. Suddenly, far below, I see a tiny speck. I soar down like an eagle catching its prey to find a person with bright red skin, burnt from the sun. I carry him, asleep in my arms, to my cave.

After a few days the man wakes up and shouts, "Dragon's lair, dragon's lair!" I fly in again and say, "This is not a dragon's lair. It is my home."

"Wow! So much gold, platinum and jade. So many diamonds, sapphires and jewels of all sorts. You must be rich, like a genie," the man says, amazed.

"Yes. I am a genie," I reply, "You are in my cave and you can have three wishes."

The man asks, "First, may I have a drink bottle of ever-lasting water?"

"One drink bottle of ever lasting water coming up." I shout.

It appears in my hand out of nowhere. The man is shocked but he grabs the bottle and starts drinking, with drops of water dripping down his chin. The man starts to look stronger and taller as he drinks. His shoulders fall back and his skin becomes light brown.

I think to myself; I never knew my water had such magic! The man looks strong now. He has black hair and a long wispy beard. He wears a thick fur coat on his arms and his legs are strong and sturdy.

"What is your second wish?" I inquire.

"I need food," he demands.

From out of nowhere, a huge goat on a stick appears cooking and sizzling over a fire. The man tears at it, eating like a pig, ripping at the leg and chewing chomp chomp chomp. He takes bite after bite, and says, "Gosh this stuff is great."

With meat spilling out of his mouth he commands, "and for my third wish I need an army!"

In an instant, fifty thousand warriors on horses appear. They have thick, golden armour and sharp naked blades. They have bows behind their back with arrows stabbing out their armour, with two curved knives for each soldier. Their helmets and armour is stuck on so tight they need slaves to help take them off. The soldiers are on the most colossal, fast horses you could ever see wearing matching armour. They all shout and cheer.

The man says, "Good, now I want the same armour and horse as my army, but 15 times better."

I am surprised a man in an empty desert would want an army. As my carpet lifts me away up to the sky, I shout at the man, "What is your name?"

"Ghengis Khan," he yells back. "King of the Mongols!"

Wolf

Diocesan Boys' School Primary Division, Jason Tsui, 10

Mayday! Mayday! We're losing attitude! The captain frantically tries to radio someone for help.

"We're not going to make it! I'm sorry everyone."

The intercom came to life, throwing everyone onboard into a panic. Pained whispers of farewells and cries of hysteria were occasionally heard from the jumbled din.

They were falling fast; no one expected to get out of this alive. All their fates were sealed in this giant death contraption.

The impact was as if in slow motion. Most had closed their eyes, suddenly hit by a wave of serenity, with the occasional child wailing in fear and confusion. Even with their last breaths, parents here and there tried to shelter their kids from harm.

The plane collided with the ground. Their once light world surrendered to the darkness.

* * *

A ten year old, Kris, awoke with a groan to a cold, wet object placed on his cheek. Vision hazy, the boy had to readjust to the harsh sunlight that shone over him. Where was he? Was he dead? Heaven wasn't this unpleasant, was it? The lad squinted and looked towards the source which woke him up and shrieked at the sight in front of him. Directly in front of him was the terrifying gaze of a wolf!

Seeing that the boy was awake, the tan-coated wolf once again pressed its cold, wet nose to Kris's cheek before baring its teeth in its version of a wolfy grin.

Kris scuttled backwards in shock and fear. Wait, is that a grin? Getting over the initial shock, the lad bravely moved forward to take a closer look at the beast, before hesitantly reaching a hand forward to pet it. The wolf thrummed in response to the pets, scooting closer for more.

Establishing that the wild animal wasn't going to eat him, Kris slowly got up and looked properly at his surroundings. Only one glance was sufficient to render the young boy speechless. The carcass of the plane remained, mostly intact and lying on its side, while bodies and debris littered the floor around Kris. The aftermath of the tragedy. And they had landed right smack in the middle of a desert. The Gobi Desert to be exact. The boy knelt down again, slowly flipping over the battered bodies of a couple who were located the closest to him. The grotesque sight was too much for him. He let out a choked sob before falling to his knees. Those were his parents. And he was the lone survivor of the crash.

The wolf whimpered and nudged the grieving boy, who jolted out of his reverie. He stumbled over to the hulking mass of fallen plane, before proceeding to mechanically search the mess for anything remotely useful for his survival.

Grabbing what he could and his mother's pendant, Kris started walking away from what had once been, dragging his sore body and meager possessions in search for shelter.

The wolf gave a short bark before loping towards the boy and herding him in the opposite direction.

"Hey! What!"

The astonished boy yelped before stopping mid-sentence when he came face to face with the beady black eye of a massive sandy wolf, which was clearly the alpha. Intimidated by the piercing gaze of the alpha, the boy quickly turned to flee, only to be halted in his tracks by his savior, flanked by a snowy white and a chestnut brown. With his parents dead, lost in the middle of a rocky desert and surrounded by wolves, Kris finally gave up. Tears started streaming down his face. The lad turned slowly to the alpha male.

“Just kill me already! I know you will anyways! So why not now?” he screamed, hysterically.

Exhausted by the whole ordeal, he started to feel woozy, fatigue finally winning the fight to take over his body. His world went black a second time that day.

When he opened his eyes, his vision adjusted and he was once again scared out of his wits by a mouth full of sharp teeth. He screamed and he thought he had died and gone to hell, before remembering the pack of wolves that seemed to have adopted him as part of their pack. The tan wolf whimpered, reminding the boy of his presence. Kris looked at the wolf, ran a hand through the shaggy coat of fur, quietly cooing at the wolf’s cute antics, earning an indignant huff from the animal. He laughed, murmuring a soft “sorry.” The wolf looked at him and gave a lopsided grin.

“Say, since we’re starting to become friends, can I give you a name?” Kris enquired. The wolf gave a short bark of approval.

“OK then... let’s see... Josh?...nope... Tanner?... ewww... Kevin?... you’re right, that’s a horrible idea...Kk...Kaa... Ah-ha! Got it! How about Kai?” the wolf gave another approving bark.

“Kai it is then!” the lad proclaimed.

Just then, a howl was heard, and the newly christened Kai quickly ushered the boy out into the open, where the other wolves were assembled, ready to devour their freshly caught meal.

This was the first of many nights that Kris spent with his new wolf family.

* * *

Several years later, the whirl of an engine ripped through the air, sending the wolf pack howling in warning. It was a team of archeologists, in search of hidden treasures of the Gobi Desert which it had kept in secret for decades.

The caravan of jeeps stopped and a group of the scientists got out of their vehicles and scouted the area for any dangers. One of them came across Kris, who was shielded behind Kai. The scientist yelled, attracting his companions, who immediately rushed over to investigate. Kai bared his fangs menacingly. The archeologists scrambled around in horror before conjuring up a rifle and taking a shot. It hit the tan wolf in the leg; crimson blood streamed down pouring onto the sand.

Oblivious to Kris’ screams of horror and Kai’s whimpers of pain, the men proceeded to shoot all the wolves, drenching the sand with blood. It was a blood bath.

Soon it was over, and once again, Kris had lost his family. He was especially devastated by his brother and best friend’s death, whom had died in his arms.

The archeologists then brought the protesting boy, kicking and screaming back to their camp, and later brought him back with them to civilization.

But the damage was done. Kris was broken. A part of his soul had died in the Gobi Desert. He would never be the same again.

Home of a Different Kind

SKH Lam Woo Memorial Secondary School, Kwok Tsz Ching, 14

Najia hissed in frustration as the last of the cottontails vanished into the shades of the sand dunes. Swift and agile, she still was outwitted by the intelligent desert hares. She reckoned hunting was her second nature-----before she suffered from several ineffective attempts at shooting hares for supper. The day's hunt had not been fruitful; the desert was everything but generous. Stomach grumbling in protest, Najia started to trek back home.

The sky was a red dome securing Najia and the other peoples of the desert. Feeling the increasing ferocity of the wind, she buttoned her jerkin and made haste. Wearily, she squinted at the sinking sun behind those craggy precipices at the northwest of the desert. If she didn't make it back home before darkness roamed, the plummet of temperature could easily overtake her, not to mention the rage of beasts spying for preys. But for now while the evening beauty of dunes lasted, she allowed herself to immerse in it. It was the domain of beige, or as Ma would've put it, 'everything copper and clay'. True, the reddish brown colour of the dunes held an astonishing similarity to that of copper and clay, but never had Najia grown bored with the monochromatic scenery. She smiled to herself as she recalled her childhood memories: play-fighting with her siblings, under the caring eyes of the desert.

And when she spotted the wisps of smoke fifty paces away, her smile grew broader. Although dinner would be bland without hare meat, she was grateful for a bowl of hot stew alone after a day's hard work.

A buzzing noise greeted her when she finally stepped into the encampment of the nomads. A dozen tents scattered within the area; tall poles with colourful flags dangling from them stood regally. Najia put her knife back into its sheath before going indoors, and helped herself to some lamb skewers of yesterday's leftover. When she was sated she came out of the tent again, and her gaze rested on another group of Mongolians.

Dwelling with the nomads temporarily was the caravan: merchants and camels loaded with souvenirs for tourists. With a jolt, Najia realized that the desert actually grew with her. It was becoming more crammed as foreign tourists flocked the place,

resulting in the prevalence of commercial caravans: a single ride on a camel could cost up to 80 Yuan. The basic infrastructure of nomadic dwellings had also been improved and equipped by water pipe systems and postal service. Whats more, she soon adapted to the clicking of cameras by the directors filming documentaries when she was six; she found that part of the modern world had integrated with the unspoiled terrain.

'This is only natural,' she muttered silently, 'can't expect us staying as primitive as before, right?' She wished she could persuade herself that these changes were good; but honestly, she wasn't sure about that. Now that her home was more advanced, she started to grow strangely uncomfortable.

Najia heard the pounding footsteps behind her, and turned to find Ciao, her younger sister running towards her, holding a piece of paper.

'Najia! Najia here! A letter...from Brother!'

* * *

They all huddled around the bonfire: Najia, Ciao, Ma, Fa and several other nomads, anxious to know what happened to Yanxun, the eldest son of the family. Najia hadn't seen him for a year, and she missed him terribly. In his letter he told them how life was different from living in Beijing and in the desert: he received education in a government school but found he couldn't speak proper Mandarin; he gaped at his first sight of the television. He even mentioned he was having coughs because of serious smog there. The family couldn't believe that last bit of information and they thought he must be telling some kind of joke, because the air was fresh and clean here. The maximum pollution they've ever had was some rare days of dust particles sprinkled in the air. Najia learnt from Yanxun's letters that it was the city's industrial development which gave those fuzzy smoke, but she didn't think it could cause disease.

'But in Beijing life has never been more cozy: we have hot water baths every day, and comfortable bed sheets to sleep on. People in the boarding house are kind to me. The Management Committee has settled most of my belongings...' Najia continued reading the letter out loud. Two years ago the nomads learnt of a 'urban residence settlement' programme for desert dwellers who wished to experience city life, and the trials lasted for a year. If desert tribes found the experience enjoyable, they could choose to live in the city permanently, with the government providing subsidies to cease financial burdens. Yanxun, exuberant and curious, signed up for the course immediately.

'Don't worry, Najia,' he told a weeping Najia a year ago, 'I will come back for the desert, and I'll still be me when I'm back.'

Najia thought about it and at the same time finished reading the letter. She saw Ma was in tears, embracing Ciao tightly.

'I wonder...for just a tiny fraction of a second, that whether he...he sometimes thinks of us at night,' stuttered Ciao, her eyes watery, 'like the way we think of him now. And I see him too, in my dreams, like he has never really left us.'

I wonder if he still remembers the gazelles' migration, the feel of soft wind on his face, and the taste of mutton? I wonder if he is so fascinated by the new environment that he would forget the shape of the sand dunes one day? Najia thought. She crept into her sleeping bag, snuggled up and pretended to be asleep.

What she didn't reveal to Ma was that Yanxun wrote something more in the last paragraph.

'It's quite bizarre at first, living in a city...but all I want to ask is that do you want to join the programme, too? Just let me know when you've decided.'

* * *

Najia imagined what her future would be if she left the desert. She was keen to learn, and the voluntary teachers from UNICEF could not satisfy her cravings by simply teaching her how to read and write Mandarin. Deep in her heart she knew that there were more things waiting outside this world, and she wanted to pursue them badly. But she couldn't bear the thought that one day, she might be tempted to stay behind. She was afraid that she wouldn't be the same Najia, the true and nature-loving Najia when she came back.

She was scared that once she left the desert, it wouldn't accept her again as one of its daughters.

She cursed under her breath for her own ambiguity. It was a typical winter morning here, with women doing embroidery work, young men hunting and children frolicking. The caravan had also begun its trade. To kick off her day, Najia decided to hunt for a bit before having lunch. She brought her bow and started towards the dunes.

Even to this day, after fifteen years of residence, the desert had never failed to please her. The vast Gobi dunes spread before her eyes, and the holy ridges of the Tibetan plateau marked the boundary with grace and dignity. To the south, patches of green emerged: oases, paradise for short-lived flowers and cactus, as well as thirsty travellers. The breeze was chilly yet welcoming, not strong enough to wake a full-scale sandstorm thankfully. As if propelled by all these, Najia was especially patient this time. She discovered a polecat's den and made a swift kill with a pluck of her bowstring; she watched as a lizard tried to lick up the ants unsuccessfully. She even found tracks and paw prints of-----what she believed was-----a pack of Siberian wolves from further north. The sun was warm on her face; she hoped that Yanxun was also soaking in sunlight, just like her. Suddenly she realized what she must do. Najia hoisted the fresh-kill to her shoulder and made her way back to camp.

* * *

Yanxun's hands shivered violently, his eyes prickling with tears. His vision was blurred, but the handwriting on the letter was unmistakably Najia's.

Dear Brother,

I believe I'm not coming to you. Although I sometimes yearn for a new change, I forget what I already have in here, in the desert. You never realize you're in the best place until you are far away from it. Do you remember the clear night sky, and how Ciao makes up legends of the stars?

Waiting is a beautiful prelude for reunion.

We may not have televisions or comfortable bed sheets; but here in desert, I find a home of a different kind. It is one of copper and clay, but mostly it is because I feel the love strongest here.

Love,
Najia

New Tales of the Gobi Desert

Clearwater Bay School, Trinity Ro, 10

Sometimes I wonder how I got myself into this mess, it was such a long time ago. I wonder if I have been forgotten by my family like any sign of human life here is long since forgotten, swept away by the wind that seems to always be blowing. Maybe they think I am dead. Maybe I soon will be dead. I only have a small chance of getting out of here alive. It feels like I've been wandering around here for years. I don't know how many years, I lost track of the time, that always dragged along with me, minute by minute, second by second. I have no companion, only the never-ending mountains of sand all around me wherever I look.

When our plane crashed, I thought somebody would help me and my mates. But when no help came, our hopes died and so did my friends. It was hard to see them go when we stuck together bravely through the war and made it through together, as a team. But they each died and I was left alone. Sometimes, I wished I was gone with them and that I wasn't a survivor. But each time I reminded myself that I was the lucky one, the one that could make it through. That always gave me strength to make it through the empty, silent days. I have tried fixing the plane but it was no use, I would have to find another way of getting out of the Gobi desert.

When the plane first crashed, we had a huge stock of food and water that filled up almost half the plane for eating and drinking during war. But I soon noticed that I only had half a bag of food left and only one jug of water. Soon, I had a thought, I will need to find my food by myself, maybe try to hunt for animals.

I remembered my first go at hunting. I had kept running around, looking for animals while all along I should have not wasted so much energy. The sun was blazing, burning me. I was trapped in the heat of the sun, my feet dragging across the roasting-hot sand like two lumps of concrete. I had hunted, and failed. My energy was drained, my urging thirst and hunger couldn't be resisted because I wasted all my energy. I wanted to be back home with my family, playing with my kids or just lying around in a shady corner. But my family was long gone and until then, I never let myself think that.

I was lost in the darkness of a nightmare, one that would never end unless I could make it out of here. But I finally understood, there is no way out. What goes into the Gobi Desert, stays in the Gobi Desert.

I remember how I thought that it was my own fault. I had thought that I was stupid enough to think that I was doing something good for my family and myself when I left to join the army. Then thought of them pierced my heart. They are probably hating me now. I have left my kids, Michael and Lucy, so suddenly, without warning. I heard their cries of sorrow and my wife weeping as I strode out the door.

“Sorry,” I whispered out loud, “Sorry for everything”.

Even though I knew that whatever I said, nothing would be able to help them, it helped me to regain my strength and my courage. I swallowed hard and began walking in the opposite direction. As I walked I thought of how happy my family would be if I were able to be with them and my stride became stronger, I was filled up with determination. My pace became faster and I felt a feeling bubbling inside me. It was energy. I greeted it like an old friend. I walked and walked until I could not take another step. But I kept on going. I heard a little hissing sound. My ears sharpened. What was it?

That tricky creature had a camouflage, with the same light brown colour as the sand. Half of its body was buried in the sand. It was a snake! It raised its head menacingly, trying to attack me. I used a stick to pin it down and with one swift movement of my knife, cut its head off. I dug a deep hole in the sand and buried the snake's head. I heard that if you accidentally step on the head, it can still inject venom into you.

As I sat there regaining my energy, I thought about my parents. They had divorced when I was only a baby. Both wanted to start afresh and forget the past. Neither one wanted to keep me so I was left on the doorstep of the first house they saw. I wailed and wailed until the owner of the house saw me. She was a kind old widow and took me in. I remember her smelling strongly of blueberries. One day when I was old enough to understand, she told me of how her husband had died in a car crash and since she had no kids, she was left alone. We both wept bitterly. When the widow died of old age, my heart felt pierced, shattered to pieces.

I tried to hold back my tears, but I felt one slip down my cheek. After that, many more came and soon I was sobbing. I looked up at the dark sky, an inky blackness studded with stars. I wished. I wished that the kind widow would rest in peace with her husband. I wished that my real parents would one day get back together. I wished that I could see the happy faces of my own family. With these thoughts still floating around my head, I went to sleep.

As the stars wheeled through the sky, I had a nightmare. I dreamed that wherever I went, there was always sand running behind me. It became bigger and bigger and soon, it covered me. I was shouting for help but nobody came. I felt myself sinking into the sand. It went up to my face and I couldn't breathe. I woke up with a start. Or at least I thought I woke up. For some reason, I still couldn't breathe properly and I was covered head to toe in sand. Maybe I hadn't woken up yet. I tried repeatedly but each time, I failed. Then I realized the horrid truth, I was awake. It took me a few seconds to realize that I was in a sandstorm. I needed to get out or I would suffocate. I dug with all my might but I was trapping myself even deeper into the sand. I could feel my heart beating and my lungs heaving, then everything went black

My first thoughts were “Am I dead?” Then I remembered something terribly

important I had to do but I just couldn't remember what. A cold wind blew into my face. Breathe! that's what I had to do. It was a relief to feel the air in my lungs again. "I'm not dead!" I cried out with all my might. I stopped to listen to my own voice echo through the desert, piercing the silence. I looked around. The level of sand was a lot lower than before. Wait! What was that glint in the sand? I ran down to have a look. Was this a mirage? No! It was real, I can feel it! It's a well. Not an old rickety one, one with carefully placed stones and a nice crank and handle. I peered inside, there was an inky blackness that seemed to never end. But there was water, that was for sure. I carefully lowered the bucket into the murky darkness. The crank made a slow humming sound like a lullaby. I heard a splash. I hauled it back up. The water was a clear color, as smooth as glass. I put the bucket towards my lips and drank. Oh, what joy to have fresh water after drinking from cactuses. The water seemed to be the most sweet I had ever tasted. After I drank until I almost burst, I wondered why there was a well in the middle of the Gobi Desert. Were there more things underneath the sand that hadn't been touched for years? I had to find out.

I've found a camel just wandering around with no place to go. It looked so calm and quiet. I drew out my sword and ran after this king of the desert. It went from a peaceful and calm creature to a tornado of fur. The camel ran much faster than I could imagine. But I was ready. I was starving. No matter what, I need that camel's meat. I stabbed my knife into the back of the camel with all my might. Blood spurted out like all those times in the war. The thirsty sand soaked it up in a few seconds, staining the brown desert a bloody red. It gave a yelp of pain, but continued to run, leaving a trail of blood. I continued to run after it and was able to stab my knife in it's neck this time. It's head jerked back, it's eyeballs rolling. The camel made a lunge at me, it's long legs kicking. The dying animal managed to land a kick on my arm. I felt a sudden twisting pain that caused me to stop. The camel took this chance to make a getaway. But luck was not with it. It stopped abruptly and fell heavily onto the sand. Too much loss of blood. I pitied the dying animal, but hunger betrayed my morality.

I ran back to the plane to get a pile of wood and a piece of broken glass. I held the glass above the wood, as still as I could. After a long time, smoke started coming from the pile of wood. I gently blew on it and soon there was a roaring fire. Lighting a fire in case of an emergency was the first thing we learned in military school. I cut the camel into tiny pieces and stuck them on top of a stick and roasted the camel. That was the most delicious meal I ever had since I landed in the desert.

With the good meal of camel washed down with the fresh, sweet water from the well, my strength came back and I was determined to find out more about the well. I camped near the well in case I forgot where it was. I was tired and exhausted as I used up my energy in battling the camel. I then had a good night sleep. In my sleep, I remembered the poem I had said to my friends before they went to heaven. I had written them a poem of our friendship:

Our friendship lasted to the end
Because you are my friend
Through the hard times and the bad
Or when I was feeling sad
You always came
And I would always do the same

When I woke up I wrote out in huge letters on the sand and smiled. The sun was just rising and the landscape was beautiful. I saw the well in the distance and quickened my pace. Again, it seemed so refreshingly new, even after being buried for about three hundred years in sand. It was amazing, the sun's rays glistening off the marble stones. The weather reflected my mood, bright and sunny with a cool breeze in the air unlike the burning sun which roasted me alive. It was the best weather I had for years. Today I was going to discover what had not been discovered for years. I was going to answer my irresistible questions and find out the past.

I never thought that I would work so hard in my life. Digging in the sand of the Gobi Desert is exhausting work. My time is nearly over, and I want to do something I am proud of. I need to dig with my hands like a dog because I have no shovel. Sweat rolls down my cheek and drops onto the sand. The thirsty desert floor soaks it up. My hands feel raw and they are swollen and a meaty pink. The sun seems to be beating me, making me work like a slave. Find out the past and discover its hidden mysteries and past. I believe the land is like a living thing. I want to discover the previous people and what they have been through.

My hand has scraped something deep in the sand. I kept on digging, and soon found something carefully wrapped in tissue.

"Must be very important or precious to be wrapped like that," I thought as I took a little peek inside. I saw an old, ripped leather-bound book that was nearly falling apart. I saw the words 'My Diary' scrawled in messy handwriting. A part of me wanted to put it back in the sand and not look at such an important and personal thing but a bigger part of me wanted to look inside, maybe just flick through the pages and have a little peek. I carefully peeled the age-worn tissue back and opened it. As soon as I had peeked at the first page, I could not take my eyes off the page. My eyes were glued to the page. This is what it said:

Tonight is the night of my sister's wedding. She's only 9 but she has to be married off because our dad says that we don't have enough to take care of her and that her new husband will look after her. The wedding will take place in the middle of the desert. I don't know which one. She is being dressed now in a beautiful, red deel with golden patterns of dragons with a matching sash not only for good looks, but for more comfort for the ride on the donkey to the desert. She wore a large headdress which was decorated with numerous bits of coral and turquoise. Her hair was parted with the help of several bamboo pins. Her hairstyle was meant to mimic cow horns. Mama used to say that to Mongols, cows are meant to symbolise a free and nomadic life.

I wonder why they are doing that hairstyle because she is being forced to marry some unknown person. I don't even know why they have to force her to marry him. Papa says that it's because it's a Mongolian tradition and that they had wanted to join their families. But, personally, I think they shouldn't make children marry somebody just because they want their families to be together Bolormaa, my older sister saw then looks on my face.

Bolormaa sighs as she looks at herself in the mirror. She looks wonderful, unlike me. I have a red birthmark that covers one half of my face like I was finger painting with blood red paint and forgot to wash it off and touched the side of my face.

"Papa says that this marriage will be a new beginning for me, but I don't know. I have heard of many, many girls burning themselves because of their arranged marriages, Bayarmaa, and I am unsure of what to think of it. I can imagine how proud mama would be

if she were alive but maybe I'm just not ready." said Bolormaa, carefully choosing her words.

I nodded. Together, we sit in silence, each of us remembering the beautiful times when mama was alive.

"Bolormaa, I think you have to put on some more blush," called the makeup lady, breaking the peaceful memories of our mama's enveloping hugs where we would lose all our cares.

I was starting to feel a little tired as everybody prepared Bolormaa for her big day so I took a nap before the wedding. I awoke to the sound of loud cheering. I found makeup all over my face, covering my red birthmark that covered on whole side of my face. I felt a stiffness in my hair and, as I reached up to touch it, I realised that I too had a strange horn hairstyle. But only the brides wore horn hairstyles. I looked around, taking in my surroundings. The wedding had already started and I found my father carrying me through the crowd. Like my sister, I too was dressed in colorful silk. I looked like a mini version of her. People all around us were cheering for my sister and me. I knew why they were cheering my sister but why me?

"Bayarmaa, be a joyful mother, just like your mama always was," whispered my father as he hoisted me up onto the platform. I saw a young boy, about 8 years old, on the platform with my sister and her groom. Suddenly, everything made sense. I was the bride and the young boy was the groom. He didn't seem to be happy either. My sister looked at me and gave me a look that told me that she knew how I felt. She had never met her groom before and was looking quite uncomfortable as he put his arms around her. I just stared at my feet.

After I stared at my feet, I stared at my papa. He was smiling! I couldn't believe it! After he had forced me and my sister to marry some guys we have never seen, he was smiling like he had won some kind of award. I was overwhelmed with a burning feeling.

"I will not endure this child cruelty anymore!" I shouted to everyone and leapt off the platform.

I raced across the desert sending sand flying. I didn't know where I was going, but just knew I had to keep running. I ran until I could run no more and by then I was already far from the wedding.

I had escaped unharmed. I know my parents' dreams would be crushed but I'm going to stay here, the place with no rules or parents. My mama angel will look over me and protect me from any harm. I am now a free spirit of the desert, and I'm gonna stay that way. I don't need to think about the future, because right now I'm free, careless and don't have a worry in the world. Now I'm burying my diary because I don't need to think about my past. I hope whoever finds this will understand how I felt and look at this desert as more of a home and less of a prison. I hope that I will remain here forever and never go back to that different, cruel world.

I sat there, speechless. Her speech at the end made me look at this desert in a whole new way. A place without rules. A place of no worries. A place of freedom. I hope the best for Nabarun and that she didn't have to go back.

I am sitting here in the exact same spot as where she was standing. This wasn't great treasure or an old artifact but it had a deeper meaning. One that spoke to my soul. I laid down on the sand and gazed at the blazing sun go down. I thought about the amazing memoir I had just heard. That innocent girl being dragged into marrying an unknown person. I knew that the parents were only trying to keep their children safe but by the sound of things, they were making them endanger their own lives.

I'm lucky I can marry whoever I want to. That thought made me think of my family. I wouldn't know if they were alright or if my wife was still alive. But wherever they are, they will always be in my heart. I drew their pictures in the sand. While I was drawing their pictures in the sand, I suddenly felt something moving on my hand. It was a bright red worm, the colour of salami. It was as long as five feet. It looked like a giant sausage with no head or legs. It was difficult to tell its tail from its head, because it had no eyes, nostrils or mouth. Just when I was trying to get out my sword, I started feeling tremendous pain on my arm. I felt the world spinning around me.

I closed my eyes slowly and felt a whole bunch of weight lifted off my shoulders. My arm was no longer painful. There was a breeze blowing and birds were singing lullabies. I could hear water flowing down a river; I could smell the scent of ripe strawberries. And far far away, I saw a girl with a red birthmark across the side of her face. She was dressed in raw silk and a messy horn hairstyle. The silk was torn and smudged and most of her horn hairstyle had become undone. I watched her race across the soft grass. The free spirit of the desert, Bayarmaa. Suddenly, she came running towards me.

"You kill my mama," she suddenly said.

I am startled. There is no difference in the people I have killed.

"You kill my mama," she added insistingly.

"I ... I don't know what you're talking about!" I stammered nervously.

"You set fire to our house", she said, her deep brown eyes looking straight into mine.

Blazing fire and people shouting filled my brain. I saw children and mothers weeping while men made desperate attempts to put out the fire. People were surrendering and the mayor of Ulaanbaatar agreed to let us have their land. After the surrender, we soldiers were having a merry time while people were mourning the death of friends and family.

I looked down at my shoes shamefully. How could I have been so selfish and celebrate while many people had to suffer. Bayarmaa still looked up at me and I saw her eyes fill with tears.

"Honey, come on, hurry up, your school bus is coming!" yelled Mrs Wong.

"OK, I'm coming," moaned Michael.

"Remember I'll meet you up at the Parent's evening tonight."

"Yeah, I know. You know what? Mr Li told me that I got an A for my history class. Oh I really wish dad was here so that I can ask him to buy me a ticket to the museum!"

The mum and son looked at the picture of their beloved hanging on the wall and remained silent for a while. It was a hot morning in July 1965.

In a cold winter in 1995, Michael, leading a group of archeologists, found the skeleton of a man in the Gobi Desert next to an old, battered diary. It was estimated that the skeleton was buried in the desert some 30 years ago. There were traces of Mongolian death worms living in the southern part of the Gobi Desert.

The Adventures of Tom Goblin

King George V School, Ethan Gomes, 15

Tom Goblin, a journalist from London Times, lives in Oxford with his dog Harry and his cousin Edward. One day Tom and Ed were in the basement looking through the old boxes stacked in the corner. They find a strange wooden box with Chinese Zodiac animal carvings.

Tom and Ed's grandfather Bob was an explorer who travelled to Asia. They remember their grandfather's tales of strange lands, people speaking different languages and eating strange foods. Ed says "There are some treasures of gold in the box." and he opens the box. There's a smell of dusty herbs, an old photograph of Grandpa Bob with a tribal man and a piece of silk cloth with drawings that looks like a map.

"Oh no! What happened to the treasures?" said Ed. "Tom, It's just a piece of old dusty cloth with strange drawings." Tom looks at the cloth with a flash light and says "Ed come and look at this. It looks like a map of Mongolia and China."

"What's this marking? It looks like a cave. Maybe there's a secret treasure?" said Ed looking at the map. They go to the internet and look at Google Maps to find the location of the place. "Hey look Ed; it's a tribal village near Yumen, close to the Altun Mountains in the Gobi Desert. Tom calls his friend Yang Lee who lives in Beijing for advice. Next day Tom and Ed pack their bags and head for the airport to catch their flight to Beijing. They arrived at 7:00am at Beijing International airport, tired from the long flight. Yang Lee is waiting with two cups of Starbucks coffee. "Morning guys, hope you had a good flight. Hurry, we got to catch the 10:00am bus to Yumen."

It's a seven hour bus trip to Yumen and we should be there before sunset. They talk about their jobs and family to pass time. Soon they all fall asleep. The bus reaches Yumen at 6:00pm and they head for a small motel for the night. In the Gobi motel, when Ed opens his bag "Guys we have been robbed. Someone's stolen my mobile phone and camera, when we were sleeping in the bus."

The next morning, they ask the reception to rent a car that will take them to the tribal village. It takes about 4 hours to locate the village, which is near the Altun

Mountains far away from the city. They go to the village chief Urman, for help. The village chief doesn't like strangers and tells them to go away. But Yang Lee shows the chief the box with the photo and the map. The chief is shocked and surprised to see the box and the photo. He remembers his old friend Bob who lived in the village a long time ago. Urman tells Yang that Bob was a kind and helpful man who was also the doctor in the village. The roots were used to make medicine for scorpion and snakes bites. A long time ago when Urman and Bob were hunting in the mountains, Urman was bitten by a snake and it was Bob who saved his life.

Ed whispers to Tom and Yang "Guys we can be rich if we take the roots to London." Yang tells Urman that Tom and Ed's Grandfather died 5 years ago. Urman invites them to his house to have dinner with his family. They had rice, roasted chicken and berries. Urman is a simple and kind man and they feel that if they tell anyone in London about these roots, people will come and steal them and destroy the environment of the village. They decide to bury their grandfather's box in Urman's garden to keep Bobs secret safe with Yumen tribe. Urman is happy his friend Bob's spirit has finally come back home to the Yumen tribe. Tom and Ed say "Goodbye, grandpa we will miss you always!"

Desert Danger

Kau Yan School, Rebecca Gittings, 8

The Gobi Desert is often called one of “Earth’s miracles.” This enormous desert covers about 500,000 square miles of northern China and southern Mongolia. The Gobi is a unique mixture of sand, stone and rock and is famous for many reasons. It is where the first dinosaur eggs were found, and is also home to many unique species of animals and birds.

Recently, these animals and birds have been endangered by environmental pollution caused by industrialisation in the Gobi. For example, scientists estimate that there may be as few as 20-25 Gobi bears remaining, all living in an area called the Great Gobi Strictly Protected Area.

But while the Gobi is a treasure, it can cause many negative effects if it grows too large. That is the biggest problem the Earth is facing from the Gobi Desert right now.

The Gobi Desert is currently expanding by five to eight metres per year. There are more than 4,000 villages around the Gobi Desert threatened by desertification. As the Gobi expands, it brings serious sandstorms to Beijing and other cities.

There are many reasons for the desertification of the Gobi. These include climate change, overgrazing, overhunting, deforestation, mining and the depletion of water resources.

There are some trees that slow desertification, like the saxaul tree. The Chinese government has tried to control desertification by planting a barrier of trees around the Gobi called the Green Wall of China. The Green Wall of China includes more than 64 billion trees.

But this cannot stop desertification, because it only addresses a few of the causes. If we really want to stop desertification, we also need to solve all of these problems.

To solve the problems of overgrazing and overhunting is the responsibility of the people living in the Gobi. They have to stop taking so much land for their cattle, and they should also stop hunting so many animals. To solve the problem of mining is the responsibility of big companies in big cities. They have to realise the damage they are doing and stop mining so much.

To solve the problem of climate change is the responsibility of the whole world. This does the worst damage and also harms many other parts of the world. Even if we live on the other side of the world, we still can help to stop desertification by changing our lifestyle to become more environmentally friendly.

Let’s hope the whole world will work together to solve the problem of desertification before it spreads even further across Asia.

New Tales of the Gobi Desert

Peak School, Carolyn Rong, 9

The Gobi is a desert spread between Mongolia and China. It covers hundreds of thousands of miles. Reading through the vast amount of information about the Gobi, I have come to a better understanding of its ecology and the joy and sorrow of its people.

Gobi: The Waterless Plains

When some people think about the Gobi, they imagine a scorching sun bearing down on lifeless sand dunes. Life does not exist here as the Gobi is uninhabitable.

The truth is not far from that. In the past, the Gobi was home to the Khans, who conquered most of Asia and Europe. They never lost a battle for nearly a century. They were formidable and invincible. But their bravery was partly motivated by their search for more fertile land.

Even today, the harsh environment is still taking a heavy toll on its inhabitants. In 2009, Mongolia had one of its coldest winters. Millions of cattle didn't survive the murderous winter. The nomads struggled in a fierce battle of survival, with hardly any food or water, watching the death of the most important part of their livelihood.

Trekking through the Gobi today, do not be surprised to come across human skulls and skeletons of cattle. Death loves to loom around and this is one of its favorite places on earth.

Gobi: The Treasure Land

But then, there is the other part of it. If you look really carefully, you would see the Gobi is actually full of life. Digging into the sand, you may see water drops sparkling under the sunshine. Plants, big or small, creep up between the rocks. Snow leopards, wild horses and asses roam the land. Cattles graze leisurely and follow their owners obediently. Beautiful sunset announces the arrival of the night with tinkering stars decorating the pitch-black sky.

But that's not it. Underneath the rocks lie precious resources like gold, copper, oil and gas. People from all over the world come here to look for their share of fortune.

In the distance, you see a Ger, the traditional round, portable tent made of wood lattice and heavy felt panels. The family dog is sniffing around with a sense of suspicion. Inside the Ger, there is a hearth in the middle, used for cooking and heating.

There is an altar with photos of this happy family.

A mother and daughter are sitting on a blanket, enjoying their tea and afternoon snack. The mother is drinking goat milk tea while her daughter nibbling on a piece of arrts, a fermented sun dried goat cheese.

In the middle of the open space, the father and son are enjoying a ride together, not on the back of a camel but on their brand new motorcycle.

Gobi: Blessing or Curse?

The Gobi was supposed to be a beautiful place, with all its resources. People come in flocks to mine. But as the economy grows, the environment suffers.

The air and water is contaminated with uranium from the mines. Cattle are now producing deformed babies. Cattle are living beings! How cruel is this to the mothers, producing a two-headed calf! How can these people survive? With so much radiation in our resources, will humans mutate too?

Mining not only harms crops and animals, it also drains away water. This means even less water is around for the people.

Many people refuse to admit the cost of mining. Some even say the water in the Gobi naturally contains traces of arsenic, selenium and even uranium. Watching the huge trucks moving the treasures away, I can't help wonder, to the people of the Gobi, is this the blessing or the curse?

Bibliography

The Telegraph, The Gobi: Mongolia's Desert Playground, Nigel Richardson

Asia LIFE Magazine Edition: October 2009

Earth Island Journal, Mongolia's Gobi Desert Increased Mining Raises Pollution Fears

Encyclopedia Britannica High for Kids

Metamorphosis of the Gobi

Sha Tin College, Chan Yi Lin, Elin, 13

What is the first image that comes to mind when you hear the words 'Gobi Desert'? I have always thought of the Gobi Desert as an amazingly hot region, where the scorching sun blazes 365 days a year. It is also an exceptionally serene place, where the stillness of silence can be both comforting and haunting. All you can see is fine golden sand and shapely sand dunes that stretch into infinity. All that reflects off the view are rich ancient memories, with its purity and archaeological treasures untouched by the poisonous elements of modern civilization. Sadly, all this is but a mere picture in my head.

The reality is quite different. It might come as a surprise to many of us that the Gobi Desert is not filled with sand. It is, as a matter of fact, very rocky with some sand and a lot of rocks and gravel. The Gobi Desert has a total area of 1,300,000 square kilometers, which covers 33% of Mongolia and parts of northern and northwestern China. In recent times, the Gobi has been expanding, which is commonly known as desertification. At a rate of 3,600 square kilometers per year which equals to almost the size of Kent, Britain swallowing villages along its path and turning farmers and nomads into environmental refugees. Worse, its rapid growth is also sending ahead lots and lots of devastating sandstorms. On the other hand, the Gobi region today has a thriving mining, oil and gas, as well as tourism industry.

The Gobi Desert is no longer the stereotypically poor area we once knew. The Mongolian government has made substantial efforts in collaborating with international petroleum and mining companies to convert their presence into economic development for the country. Similarly, the Chinese government has been actively drilling in its portion of the Gobi Desert in Xinjiang. As a result of the booming oil and gas drilling industry, the desert region is actually advancing in its economy, with generally better income, infrastructure, education and healthcare for the people living there. As the Chinese economy advances, its need for natural resources also increases. One of the many oil and gas companies with a presence in the Gobi region is China

Petroleum & Chemical Corporation ('Sinopec'). According to the information listed on its website, Sinopec owns nine oil and gas exploration blocks in the Tarim basin, with a total exploration area of 28,500 square kilometers. In 2003, its geological reserves are estimated to be at 2.501 billion tons of oil, while prospectively, there might be an equivalent of 7.7739 billion tons of oil available. Four oil and gas fields in Tahe, Xidaliya, Yakela, and Dalaoba are under development. There are 648 wells in total, 536 of which are in production, thousands of Chinese workers had been employed and given a financially secure future.

Not only is the oil and gas industry bringing great benefits to the Gobi region but many copper and gold mines as well as coal mines, opened in the Gobi in recent years, are also driving the desert economy. Included among them are Oyu Tolgoi (copper and gold) and Tavan Tolgoi (coal), which are considered two of the world's richest mines. Rio Tinto, a world-renowned Australian mining company, has predicted that 36 million metric tons of copper and 1,275 metric tons of gold to be produced by its mines in Mongolian Gobi for the next 40-50 years, generating over \$8 billion per year. Being a joint venture and with the Mongolian government taking a share of 71% of the income, this project will account for more than 30% of the Mongolian GDP, thus giving an obvious boost to the local economy. 87% of the 18,000 workers in the mines are Mongolians. Clearly, adults are benefitting in the form of employment and higher standards of living, while the future of children and the less educated are also more promising as a result of the \$146 million contributed by Rio Tinto towards schools and training programs. Thanks to all these industrial activities and foreign direct investments, Mongolia achieved the world's fastest economic growth in 2011. To reach its target of tripling its economy by 2020, Mongolia has even more ambitious plans to become a major player in the production of shale gas, which has known deposits in the Gobi Desert.

With rising prosperity, Mongolia has become particularly appealing as a tourist destination, particularly for the desert region. The Gobi tourism industry has developed rapidly, with hotels, resorts, and other supporting facilities springing up here and there. More local tour agencies are appearing, and more tourists are arriving to have a taste of the 'romantic' desert life. On July the 19th 2013, a luxury hotel 'floating' on the sand in the middle of the Gobi Desert opened for business. Visitors can slide down 110-meter-high sand hills which are angled at 45 degrees. As visitors enjoy the adventure, a loud roaring or booming sound can be heard, giving the phenomenon the well-known name of 'singing sands.' Overnight, the desert was transformed into a giant theme park. Of course, in the name of luxury, these hotels must have all the indulging facilities, such as a large swimming pool, a gym, a spa, and round-the-clock air conditioning, that any other high-end hotels around the world would have, and more. As more people enjoy the Gobi, grander construction projects are on the drawing board; more events, such as marathons and endurance races will be set up in the Gobi to promote the desert and attract even more visitors. With Xinjiang's first high speed railway, a new 1,776km line crosses a vast expanse of Gobi Desert will begin operation in 2014, giving tourists easier access in and out of the Gobi. This certainly sounds like another economic miracle for Mongolia and the Gobi Desert.

Despite all the global attention Mongolia is attracting, all is not well in this once-isolated small country with an image of blue skies, happy nomads, and freely-roaming cattle and sheep. Negative ecological consequences are rearing their ugly heads as a

result of all the human activities in the Gobi Desert. The extensive drilling and mining has caused massive amounts of sand to be trapped in the atmosphere; hence sandstorms are happening more often, bringing with them more sand than ever before. China is also a key victim of the process, with Beijing experiencing some of the worst sandstorms in history in recent years, rendering the sky a toxic concoction of smog and dust and zero visibility. As mentioned earlier, desertification is occurring at an alarming rate in the Gobi Desert. Underground water is depleted. Overgrazing has destroyed the biodiversity of the land. Plants and animals are dying or displaced, leaving many species special to the Gobi on the verge of extinction. Years of deforestation means there are insufficient trees acting as a barrier to prevent the sandstorms from travelling far and the Gobi from spreading. It is important to recognize that all these events are closely intertwined. Desertification occurs when an area is left bare and exposed to the great desert itself. The booming tourism industry described earlier is placing even more pressures on the fragile environment. A vicious cycle ensues and the whole ecosystem becomes unsustainable.

Luckily, the destruction has not gone unnoticed. Years ago, China initiated a project known as the Green Wall of China in the hope of halting the advance of the desert. The goal is to plant a 4,480 km shelterbelt of trees across the border of the great desert in two phases. The first phase of the 73-year afforestation program came to an end in 2001. Since then, international experts have been carefully studying the effectiveness of the 'wall' in slowing the migration of the Gobi. Phase two is currently underway, with the government expecting it to be completed 2050.

However, afforestation alone is not enough. Instead of exploiting our planet and depleting it of its natural resources, humans must learn to respect and work with the environment. If the new industries continue to be the driver of the new age of the Gobi, the insatiable demand for electricity and water would ultimately be a serious disaster for the local community. Since the Gobi is a desert after all, why not take advantage of the flaming sun and the powerful sandstorms to produce renewable solar and wind energy? Even though China has already started a number of these projects in the desert, more must be done to ensure the viability of the mighty Gobi. With the desire and determination to protect our environment, we can work together to turn the Gobi Desert into a sustainable and, simultaneously, a fast growing region in the world.

Someday, I wish to visit the Gobi Desert. I longed to witness the pristine beauty of the desert - a version of the image that I have so steadfastly held on to. I firmly believe the day will come.

Someday.

References

Walking Home From Mongolia, Rob Lilwall, Hodder & Stoughton
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gobi_Desert
<http://gobidesert.org/content/facts>
<http://news.sky.com/story/743814/gobi-deserts-growth-threatens-villages>
http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/m/hebei/2013-11/25/content_17129772.htm
http://english.sinopec.com/about_sinopec/subsidiaries/oilfields/20080326/3030.shtml
http://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/14/gobi-desert-nomads-drop-herding-for-mining/?_r=0

<http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/10/energy-hits-new-rocks-in-mongolia/>
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-21850604>
<http://www.greatlearning.com/imyc/news/copper-mining-in-mongolia-stretches-research-and-presentation-skills>
<http://www.riotinto.com/>
<http://www.theatlantic.com/infocus/2013/08/a-lotus-in-the-desert-chinas-xiangshawan-resort/100575/>
http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/m/xinjiang/urumqi_toutunhe/2013-11/25/content_17130036.htm
<http://blogs.terrapinn.com/total-mining/2011/11/10/mongolia-dubai/>
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/monitoring/media_reports/1199218.stm
<http://www.worldchanging.com/archives/000252.html>
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/03/business/energy-environment/03renew.html?_r=0&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=all&adxnnlx=1387605946-0S32UGzCu7078UFyBKbiDw
<http://www.gobisolar.com/index.html>

A Resplendent Rock-built Legend

SKH Lam Woo Memorial Secondary School, Yau Shun Him, 15

Existing as the fifth largest desert and being composed of five different ecosystems, the Gobi Desert is undeniably a unique and intriguing place to many of us. Unlike other deserts across the globe, namely the Sahara Desert and the Arabian Desert, which are mainly made up of sand, 95% of the Gobi Desert is found as rocky terrain. Despite its extremely arid and tremendously varied climate, the vast area of the Gobi Desert, spanning about 500,000 square miles, has housed hundreds of plant and animal species like the snow leopards and Saxual trees. Not only has the Gobi desert contributed to our ecology, but it has also facilitated the economic and cultural development in ancient and modern times. Without this indispensable and lively desert, the life of the human beings would have been different from stem to stern.

Covering a boundless area and a splendid array of terrain, the Gobi Desert embraces five ecosystems like the Eastern Gobi desert steppe, Gobi Lakes Valley desert steppe and so on and so forth. Apart from the breathtaking view, the Gobi Desert is also notable for its extreme and fast-changing temperature. The daily temperature difference could be as wide as 90 Degree Celsius, ranging from -40 Degree Celsius in winter to 50 Degree Celsius in summer! What is more, it is also exceedingly parched in the Gobi Desert owing to the blockage of moisture by the Himalayas, which makes the desert a rain-shadow area. It is therefore unquestionably a legend that so many plants and animals, which make the desert full of lives, could still survive under such extreme climate. Then, you may ask, when and how was this unique and fabulous legend formed? Could we look for some clues in the elongated river of history?

Ever since the discovery of some dinosaur egg fossils, it has been suspected that the Gobi Desert was formed millions of years ago due to the drying up of water sources like lakes or rivers. Thus, the earliest history of the Gobi Desert could probably be dated back to hundreds of thousands of centuries before.

As time went by, this 'legendary' desert managed to sustain and expand its area to mantle part of the area of Mongolia and China. Other than serving as a dwelling for

various species, the Gobi Desert commenced to contribute to the economic development of Asia as early as the Tang Dynasty. The Silk Road, which was the main route for China to carry out trading and business activities with other Asian countries or even European regions like the Middle East and the Balkan Peninsula, began to develop during the Tang Dynasty after Emperor Taizong had defeated and colonized a number of China's neighbouring countries. Merchants at that time had to travel across the Gobi Desert since it is situated right on the way of the Silk Road. Riding the camels, which lived in the Gobi Desert and could resist prolonged sun-shine and dehydration, merchants could then transport the goods to other places via the Gobi Desert. Consequently, the Gobi Desert facilitated economic development by boosting trading in ancient China.

Furthermore, the Gobi Desert acted as a catalyst again to promote cultural exchange between China and other countries in Tang and its following dynasties. Besides being engaged in business activities, many Chinese could travel to other Asian countries and many Asians could travel to China. Some of them even migrated to other places in Asia. When people reached a different place, their home culture would co-exist with the local one. The diversified cultures may then combine and form a distinguished hybrid by preserving the wisdom and merits of different cultures, proven by the fact that there were a lot of Persian textile products in China and the technology of printing was transferred to China's western neighbouring countries. The inflow of products from other places allowed more choices of high-end products for Chinese at that time while the printing technology paved the way for the development of education in China's neighbouring countries. Doubtlessly, the prosperous cultural development brought mutual benefits to China and its neighbours and thus enhanced the quality of life of the people at that time and in the following dynasties.

As vital and irreplaceable as the Gobi Desert may seem, it was still not commonly known to westerners until numerous explorations of the Gobi Desert were completed by western people. Between 1700s and 1900s, there were countless explorers like Lorenz Lange, Grigory Potanin and many more who visited the Gobi Desert, attempting to take a peek behind the veil of the mysterious Gobi Desert. With their commitment and perseverance, they eventually succeeded to show the Gobi Desert to the world and enrich people's understanding towards it.

Throughout many different eras, not only has the Gobi Desert been toiling to play the role as a habitat for various species, but it has also given impetus to the development of tourism in today's China. Every year, there are hundreds of thousands of tourists who are attracted by the stunning and enchanting scenery of the Gobi Desert. The green and energetic oasis, the white and squeaky-clean snow fallen on the desert, the lovely two-humped camels and other alluring tourist spots have provoked interest of numerous tourists every year and thus played an essential role in promoting the economic growth of China.

As mentioned before, in addition to economic contribution, the Gobi Desert has helped to maintain cultural diversity and cultural exchange through constant and ceaseless contact between people of different nationalities. Hence, for the same token, the Gobi Desert has kept on fostering cultural exchanges as tourists may get to have some understanding about the lives of Chinese dwelling and may be able to appreciate the picturesque landscape there. What's more, they may get in touch with indigenous Chinese there while travelling and get their culture transmitted and stemmed in China. For instance, the food culture is likely to become more diverse when both Chinese and

foreigners share the delicacies and cutlery which are unique to their own countries. Similarly, the indigenous people and the tourists could also affect the clothing culture of one another—the foreigners might include the element of silk in their clothing while the locals could choose to put on sports shoes and stone-washed trousers. When the different cultures co-exist, lives of people will definitely be enriched.

Providing water and fertile land in certain areas like the river bank or oasis, the Gobi Desert has helped a significant number of people make a living too. Not only could the locals carry out cultivation and set up pasture to raise animals, but they could also obtain different resources like firewood for cooking and warming their home. Only with crops, water and other precious resources provided by the Gobi Desert can the people survive and lead a simple but stable life.

Constructive as the Gobi Desert may seem, this legendary and useful desert may vanish owing to a plethora of thorny problems it is faced with. Believe it or not, the Gobi Desert is now exposed to a couple of severe problems, including the excessive agricultural development and the concealed harms of the development of nuclear power.

To commence with, the problem of excessive agricultural development in the Gobi Desert is certainly a hard nut to crack. With the surging demand for food, people endeavour to boost the amount of crops yielded and raise much more animals by mistaken methods of farming and rearing than before. Some may even increase the crop yield at the expense of the fertility of the soil—over-cultivating the land. The soil, which is supposed to be left fallow for a number of years to allow it to replenish the nutrients lost during the growth of crops, is now used to grow crops incessantly. What worsens the situation is the fact that some tactless farmers do not fertilize the soil in the farmland regularly. Gradually, the fertility of the soil will decline and the soil will become infertile. The soil may then become not arable and the farmland is thus permanently destroyed. Not only will the ecology of the desert be adversely affected, but people there may also have to face the problem of food shortage.

Overgrazing, in which people raise more animals than the ecology can afford, could lead to serious soil erosion and damage of ecology too. When the quantity of animals surges, it is inevitable that more vegetation like grass will be consumed. When the rate of the consumption exceeds the rate of the recovery of plants, the desert will begin to lose its vegetation, especially that in the oasis. Lacking the stems of plants which hold the soil tightly and cohesively, the soil, sand, and dust in the desert will turn loose and become easily blown up. Soil erosion arises in this case. Whenever there is rain or wind, the top soil and thus the nutrient in soil will be easily carried away, resulting in a decline of the fertility in the soil. A vicious cycle appears then—the diminishing amount of vegetation will cause a lack of food for the wild animals and the livestock raised by the nomads. Many of the animals may not be able to survive ultimately, which could also lead to the shortage of food for the locals. In the long run, famine is extremely likely to happen.

Another by-product of soil erosion is that it could cause more frequent sandstorms in the surrounding metropolis of the Gobi Desert or even the whole world. When there are strong winds in the desert, the eroded soil will be easily carried away from the desert by the wind. It means that the sand and dust could reach everywhere with the help of the wind. It is suspected that the frequent sandstorm and continuously low visibility in Beijing may also be due to the soil erosion in the Gobi Desert. With the sandstorm and low visibility, the environment, transportation, people's health and so on are tremendously influenced, as reflected by the delay of airplanes and the skyrocketing

number of people suffering from respiratory diseases in China.

Apart from excessive agricultural development, the large-scale development of nuclear power in the Gobi Desert and in its surrounding areas also poses a torrent of threats, no matter to the organisms living in the desert or people across the globe. The issue of the nuclear development is de facto two-folded.

Firstly, many countries like Russia and France are interested in the rich mineral reserves in Mongolia, notably the reserves of radioactive metals like uranium. They are keen on cooperating with Mongolia to mine the radioactive metals in the Gobi Desert so as to acquire more resources. However, mining of uranium and other radioactive metals usually involves opencast mining, in which the vegetation has to be removed and the surface of the land has to be completely destroyed. Not only will this deteriorate the problem of soil erosion, but it may also lead to pollution problem like air pollution and noise pollution during the process of mining.

Worse still, the Chinese government signed an agreement with a French corporation in 2010 to establish a huge nuclear fuel reprocessing and recycling plant in the area of the Gobi Desert. Notwithstanding the profit that could be generated by operating such a plant, the concealed risks of it have already outweighed the benefits. There is always the possibility of leakage of radioactive waste, regardless of how low it could be. Given that there is leakage of radioactive waste, not only will the animals, plants and people living in the Gobi Desert suffer, but so do their future generations and people across the globe too. It has been scientifically proved that long-term exposure to high radioactive levels could cause the mutation of chromosomes, which could lead to cancers, deformity or physical impairment. The Chernobyl Disaster is the best evidence to justify this argument—there have been over 75,000 cases of Chernobyl-related cancer and deformity or impairment of infants even until now!

Seeing the enormous problems that the Gobi Desert is faced with, the Gobi Desert seems to have changed from a legendary and beneficial place to a dying patient who is suffering from some ailments whilst bringing others troubles too owing to his own ailments. Conserving and preserving this 'legend' may be a matter of indifference to you. Nevertheless, we, as readers as well as members of the global village, literally need to contemplate about some ideas to tackle the mentioned problems for the sake of continuing of the legend of the Gobi Desert and improving everyone's quality of life.

To alleviate the problem of over-cultivation, the Chinese government should and could educate the people about the importance of a sustainable farming practice, which stresses on the essence of fallowing. The authority could also provide the farmers whose farmlands are left fallow with subsidies, both in the forms of money and food. By educational and financial inducement, it can effectively and efficiently reduce the number of farmers who carry out over-cultivation. While for overgrazing, the government could set up a reasonable limit on the number of livestock a family can keep. Anyone who is found to have kept more than the quota may be fined so as to discourage people from keeping too many animals, that exceeds the affordability and jeopardizes the sustainability of the desert.

Other than this, soil erosion is also a severe headache for the government. Concerning the lack of plants, the government could expedite the process of legislation about setting up a 'conservation zone', in which any agricultural and economic activities are stringently prohibited. After that, the government could start planting some vegetation again to serve as a windbreak. Not only could the plants hold the

soil cohesively with their roots, but they could also act as a barrier to block the sand and dust brought by the wind. With the government's persistence and commitment to rejuvenate the places where soil erosion is commonly found with a 'Green idea' and to minimise the harms caused by people to the soil, the problem of soil erosion would be mitigated gradually.

Last but not least, when it comes to the issue about the development of nuclear power, we, as nationals of China, should and could voice out our opinions bravely and loudly so that the demerits of the proposal of developing nuclear power in the Gobi Desert could be heard by the government. We should urge the authority concerned to reveal the plan about the development of nuclear power and entreat the central government to consider terminating or modifying the plan in view of protecting nationals' lives and the ecological system in the Gobi Desert.

While seeing ones striving for a better Gobi Desert or even a better China, were I one of the officials of the central government, I would gradually cut down on the use of nuclear power. Minimising the mining of radioactive metals is a plausible and sensible means to reduce reliance on nuclear power. The government should and could request the mining company to submit an environmental impact assessment before carrying out any projects. The government could also hire a team of experts, including biologists and environmentalists so as to visit the proposed mining position of the mining company to judge whether the place deserves further conservation. By doing so, the detrimental effects of mining radioactive metals could be greatly reduced.

Without a shadow of doubt, it is of paramount importance for the government to develop some alternative energy resources like hydroelectric power, solar power or even generating electricity with food leftovers. In spite of the relatively high cost of using solar power or hydroelectric power, the resources for generating electricity is renewable and the pollution during electricity generation can be minimised, whilst for electricity generation with food leftovers, it is absolutely feasible and advantageous. There is an extraordinarily huge population in China. Hence, it is believed that there is an innumerable amount of food waste being disposed of every day. Not only does it waste the food resources, but it also adds an immense burden to the landfills in China. Therefore, using food leftovers to generate electricity not only can save other energy resources, but it could also make the amount of solid waste plummet, which is hitting two birds with one stone.

In a nutshell, there has been a lengthy legend about the Gobi Desert, which could be dated back from the Tang Dynasty to this time and age. The Gobi Desert has been striving to facilitate economic and cultural development ever since the emergence of the Silk Road and continues to create its own tale from time to time. Nonetheless, as time goes by, there are a couple of thorny problems that have to be eliminated. I do hope that every individual and other parties like the government and non-governmental organizations could sink their teeth into easing the problems that the Gobi Desert is now facing and improve the conditions of it. The saying that 'two heads are better than one' should have a grain of truth in it. Only through commitment and cooperation could the current problems of the desert be eradicated.

Everyone, please act beyond words now, if you also want this resplendent rock-built legend to carry its tale on and on, from eternity to perpetuity.

The Secret

Ching Chung Hau Po Woon Primary School, Sin Sheung Ka, 8

Deep in the earth
With the worms and the moles
lived a secret –
small,
oval,
brown;
at the end of town.

Came show bees,
frost-flowers,
tipple-tail happy rain:
but deep in the earth the secret snored,
again and again
and again.

In his airy palace
King Sun smiled;
he knew
of the secret!
and he laughed,
gleamed
waltzed in the sky!

From deep earth
Where are slithery silvery silvery worms,
there came a shoot;
And down in the moist dark deep,
Where are sleek brown beautiful moles,
there came a root:
then out in the tipple-tail happy rain
the secret grew,
a leafy brain.

The secret wasn't like you;
It was like me.

You can guess what the secret was?
Yes, an oak. A tree!

Sands of the Gobi

Hong Kong International School, Megan Simonson, 11

In the black, just one of the pack,
millions surrounding me.
I'm buried so deep, from danger I keep,
I will never want to see.
Wedged in tight, without a glimmer of light
the desert feels small.
The muffled wind would sigh, from above I heard no cry.
Who could imagine what soon would befall.

All grains of sand are exceptionally bland,
I'm just one of the same.
I am brown and rough. My outside's tough,
it's common to have no name.
My world is still, and nothing has gone downhill,
experiences far from rife.
Life was never difficult, my days without a jolt,
I live for nothing else in my life.

Then the wind came, vibrating, screaming its shame,
I felt something shift.
My fellow grains, eyes wide - going insane.
The world around me started to lift.
Then I'm up there too. I floated, I flew.
I was now aware of my size.
They warned me in my nook, I don't want to look,
but temptation wins, I open my eyes.

It comes at me, the beauty I see.
I gasp, and I stare.
Colors a blur, there's more I am sure.
For once, I myself feel bare.
I shiver from cold, for the wind is bold,
it leads me around.
Hundreds of golden dunes lie, opposite to sky,
now I hear a gentle sighing sound.

Trees and shrubs stand tall, The Great Green Wall,
separating humans and the Gobi desert.
On the landscape so vast, you probably wouldn't last
just you and your yurt.

Feeling freer from up here, down I peer.
I start to respect my size.
If you're there down low, you wouldn't know where to go.
Above, nothing seems to minimize.

The whistling wind sings, folds its giant wings,
and places me on a dune.
Now I look up to see, on the mountains, so many of me.
Different patterns, all synchronized in tune.
For a while I sit staring, at the designs preparing
until the wind's breath rises,
and with perfection, I get a different selection
of shapes and sizes.

Now I look around. I hear a dry, wispy sound.
To my right, they sit.
Dry, crackling grass, leaning over in a mass,
showing the sharp seed inside it.
To the wind I think, blow me before, in horror I sink.
Through the needlegrass I fly, still free.
I blow through the night, a pleasant sight,
for stars as far as I can see.

The sunrise has fired, but I am very tired
from the long journey I sleep,
on a blanket of golden sea, maybe meant for me.
Later though, I wake with a leap.
By my side is a puddle of drool, the size of a swimming pool,
and I see a hoof pass over my bed.
Camels at a steady pace, but to me, they're in a race,
then one hits me, right on my head.....

In the black, just one of the pack,
millions surrounding me.
I'm buried so deep, from danger I keep,
I really want to see.
Wedged in tight, without a glimmer of light,
the desert *again*, feels small.
The muffled wind did sigh, from above I hear no cry.
Who could imagine that this would befall.

Roam

Creative Secondary School, Irene Wu, 13

Dunes as high as mountains,
yellow as gold, brown as oak.
Burns like a fire, freezes like ice,
as deadly as a python.

The sky, blue and grey,
stretched across above the desert.
Dotting the sky, white and floating,
Clouds of cotton candy.

Roaming these lands, a lady of twenty-two,
fighting for survival, with the natural horrors of this land.
With black eyes like a tiger
that widen and narrow as they see the world around them.

When she runs, black hair flying,
she is as soundless and as graceful as a panther.
For she was banished from ill-graced country
and lived to get revenge.

Her face, tight and angular,
complete with a scar running down her jaw.
She, having only a waterskin and a dagger,
runs alone, day by day.

All who try to find the borders of this death perish,
only she had not. Living on other animals,
lizards, snakes and mice alike.
Cactus quenched or a lonely lake.

Better to die, many had said,
but she ignored them as she went.
For she never liked the country anyway,
and was hungry for an adventure.

So to say, no one expected her to live,
and provided her only the dagger.
Nothing else, no provisions.
Sent off into a deadly land, so deadly a soul could die.
Alas, she was starved,
every minute, every day,

but she survived, nonetheless,
and continued her lethal journey.

Once under the sun,
she had chased out a lizard,
skinned it, ate it, poison.
She retched for a day, in sand, sand, and more sand.

After a hard-fought year,
her exhilarant journey finally came to a stop.
Not a total stop,
but she wasn't alone anymore, for...

One day she was hiking up a sand dune,
and over it, she saw
a land dotted with huts,
a sight she'd never seen before.

She hid, for a while,
Looking around and peeking at this
lonesome village wedged in a shady valley.
She hoped she would find a friendly bunch.

As she expected, the people there were
as tough as she was,
as quick as she was,
but not as lonely as she thought.

About 80 tough travellers lived here,
children and elderly alike,
for they were so unyielding,
you couldn't tell the difference.
She could tell they were invulnerable,
so climbed back to the dune,
and charged down the slope and
yelled in defiance.

All of them heard her and rushed to defend,
but saw she was kneeling,
holding up a dagger as an offer,
They held her up, and welcomed her.

Finding out it was a nomadic tribe,
she forged a new name, a new identity.
Her old one was Sea,
and from then on, lived as C.

A Nation's Journey

Heep Yunn School, Che Sin Ting, Steffi, 16

The scorching sun beamed down the cloudless sky
Casting shadows around my eyes
Yet the two toed creature kept its steady pace
And glided through without a race
The mountains of silky sand lay endlessly ahead
One could not possibly see the end
The beam mercilessly scorched my skin
Sweat and tears trickled down my chin

It's been thirty three days since we left home
To travel the Gobi's silky road on our own
The green that once stood between land and sand
Was taken down by blinded men
Machines - they called them - things I'd never seen before
Through the wood and water they cut and tore
Nor did they listen to our tear-filled cries
As they tore along our fragile lives

We had warned them of nature's unfailing power
To punish those who greedily devour
Yet they shook their brainless heads
Laughed heartlessly as they ate our bread
We had no choice but to leave them to their destined doom
As we set off to find a new land to bloom
Faraway we heard their distant screams
As the storm of sand buried their tainted dreams

We wept for the loss of our self-built kingdom
As we traveled the road with painstaking rhythm
Yet the tears may as well be our compensation
To differ us from the men's condemnation
Our dry leafy lips tasted the small dose of relief
As the drops of water sane our remaining belief

The scorching sun beamed down the cloudless sky
Casting shadows around my eyes
As the two toed creature kept its steady pace
I wiped the bitter tears off my face
The mountains of silky sand lay endlessly ahead
Yet I swore I would not let this be our nation's end
I shook my eyes awake from the colourless dim
And replaced it with a watchful beam

Then I saw what I had never seen before
My forgotten dream to wander and explore
The mysteries and myths that hid in the desert's core
Riddling the scabbing scars we bore
My dried soul began to yearn for a chance to begin
Another life to breathe its everlasting green

With my grandfather's words my soul started to heal
Those simple words no pain nor grief could steal
"Without your consent no suffering can rob away
What you hold dear to heart and close to stay."
The Gobi's voice seemed to speak the same
Showing me life in the sandy flame
The creatures of the desert that lived free
Found life where we thought no life should be

We huddled close in the desert's freezing night
And watched as the sky painted a mesmerizing sight
With countless stars shining in their brightest shade
To accompany those who from home had strayed
As the nights passed we started to learn our lesson
In the Gobi's skies we found this hard journey's reason

Yet even with our eyes watching and faith renewed
Another shade of reality itself revealed
The days became harder with exhaustion gnawing within
The scorching sun wouldn't cease to graze our skin
And those who lost their strength along the way
We watched helplessly as their lives faded away
Yet they whispered the same words in their very last breath
Promising to give our nation their blessing in death

It's been fifty eight days since we left our home
To travel the Gobi's silky road on our own
The difference between a mirage and a well
Our dulling eyes still couldn't tell
Yet we held on to the last string of hope
Tying a knot at the end of the rope
We believed that we would someday find
The Gobi desert's piece of mind
With this unfaltering faith we treaded on
But in our hearts the battle's won
The scorching sun beamed down the cloudless sky
But there's no more fear in our silent eyes

Gobi Desert Poem

King George V School, Catrin Anderson, 14

More surround more tonight
Clouds fly
Animal life almost there
Tree over sky