

Ma Jian: Red Dust

After an hour's descent I reach the desert. Sweat pours from my body and evaporates in seconds. My water is half-finished, and the lake has sunk from view. I must rely on my compass from now on.

The sun is still overhead. As I breathe the hot air in and out, my mouth becomes as dry as dust. The compass in my hand burns like the gravel underfoot. The dry noodles have reached my stomach and seem to be sucking the moisture from my blood. I long to reach the shore of the lake and plunge my head in its cool water. For brief moments, refracted through the heat waves on the right, I see villages, moving trucks, or a sweep of marsh. If I didn't have a compass, I might be tempted to walk straight into the mirage.

Four or five hours go by. At last I see clumps of weed rise from the gravel. The land starts to dip. I check the compass. Sujan should be right in front of me now, but all I see is the wide stony plain.

Suddenly it dawns on me that distances can be deceptive in the transparent atmosphere of the desert. The lake that from the pass seemed so near could be a hundred kilometres away. After all, what looked like a tiny blue spot is in fact a huge lake. It is too late to turn back now though - my bottle is empty. I have no choice but to keep walking towards the water. Where there is water there are people, and where there are people there is life. There is no other path I can take.

As the sun sinks to the west, the lake reappears at last. It is not a lake exactly, just a line of grey slightly brighter than the desert stones, not wavering in the heat haze this time, but lying still at the edge of the sky. I am on course, but my legs can barely hold. There is camel-thorn underfoot now and the earth is covered with a thick saline crust. The sun sinks slowly below me, then reddens and disappears.

When my feet tread on to damp grass the sky is almost black. I move forward in a daze. The ground gets wetter and wetter. Through the green weeds ahead I glimpse a cold sweep of water. Hurriedly I drop my pack and wade down through the marsh towards the lake. I have arrived at last. Let me plunge into your waters! I stamp to the shore, throw myself down and scoop the water into my mouth. The taste is foul and brackish. A fire burns down my chest and my stomach explodes. I roll over and retch and my mind goes black.

A while later I wake up shivering with cold. Instinctively, I start moving away from the lake. A briny taste rises from my stomach and sticks to the vomit on my tongue. I long for a sip of clean water to rinse my mouth and throat. My body and mind are frazzled but if I don't leave now I will die here on the shore. I try to crawl, but my hands give way. I fall and sink into the mud.

When I left Beijing I thought to myself, it doesn't matter where I go because I can dig my grave anywhere in China's yellow soil. But now that my life hangs on a thread, my only thought is of survival. I force my eyes open and try to see what lies ahead. A soft light falls on my brow. I crawl out of the marsh and see a full moon at the horizon, clear and round. I can almost touch it. I want to walk towards it, but stop myself. Its beauty is as beguiling as the lake's, and would prove just as murderous.

I scramble to my pack, pull everything out and rummage through the mess, ripping bags open, tossing things aside. At last I find a sachet of coffee granules in a small plastic bag. I stuff the bag into my mouth and chew through the plastic and foil. The granules are hard and dry. I swallow a few, and spit out the rest.

My mind begins to clear. I sense the need to pass water, so I hold out my bottle and wait. A few drops fall to the bottom. I swig them back and feel my blood start to flow again.

In the moonlight I sort through my belongings and discard everything unnecessary: books, magazines, clothes, socks. Then I swing on my pack and struggle to my feet.

I check my compass and decide to walk 10 degrees north. That should take me back to the Qinghai road. Li Anmei, the Qiaozi announcer, told me her parents live in Tuanjie village on the road between Gansu and Qinghai.

Apart from the echo of my dragging footsteps, the desert is silent. The full moon rises into the night sky. After a few hours of slow march I see a light in the distance. At first I suspect I am imagining it. I walk for a while with my eyes closed, but when I open them again the light is still there. I walk towards it. The light grows larger. It appears to be a lamp. I stop and rest, still gazing at the light, afraid that if I blink it will vanish. Now that I have a goal to walk to, I feel my body being pulled towards it.

Soon I can see it is a truck. A lamp hangs over the boot. I hear noises. My legs move excitedly.

Getting closer, I see a man hammering at the wheel. The sound bangs through the night air. It is a comforting noise. I do not shout, in case it startles him.

Then I spot the lid of a thermos flask set on the path ahead. I pounce on it and empty the water into my throat. My body trembles with life. Moisture seeps into my eyes. I crouch down and look at the driver. He is 10 metres away, sitting in front of his truck, staring right back at me.

"Thank you, brother," I say, putting the lid down.

Colette Rossant: Apricots on the Nile

The Khan-al-Khalili open-air market consisted of winding streets and narrow, dark alleys lined with stalls. Streets were named after what was sold on them: Gold Street, Copper and Brass Streets, Silk and Cotton Streets, Carpet Street.

At lunchtime, merchants sitting on stools outside their open stores greeted my grandfather loudly in Arabic. He, in turn, inquired about their health or their family. Often he would bring a bolt of cloth from his store as a present for someone's daughter who was getting married.

My grandfather loved Egyptian food, especially street food, such as ful medames, a traditional Egyptian dish of stewed brown fava beans, and he was a regular at Aboushakra, a tiny restaurant located near Gold Street.

Its walls, vaguely illuminated by exposed bulbs, had been painted pink years before and were now faded to an indescribable color. There were long tables covered with paper tablecloths and surrounded by cane chairs. As we entered, the owner greeted him loudly, "Ahlen wha haslen Pacha!" ("Welcome, Pasha!"). Quickly a table would be cleaned and set for us.

On Fridays, with ritual-like fervour, we began our meal with hot ta'miyya-a - falafel made with broad beans - spicy, moist and dark green inside, and crisp on the outside, covered with roasted sesame seeds. These were served with fresh, toasted pita and a tomato salad mixed with sliced red onions in vinaigrette. We then enjoyed an order of grilled, tender beef kofta - meatballs on skewers.

Pink and green ceramic bowls of tehina - a lemony sesame sauce - and a dish of pickled vegetables graced every table. I was very fond of these garlicky pickles, ate too many of them, and invariably ended up with a stomach ache.

My grandmother would rail against my grandfather as soon as we returned home: "How can you let her eat so much? You know she always gets sick!" He would promise to be more vigilant, of course, but would continue to indulge me every Friday.

Charlotte Hobson: Black Earth City

The human overpopulation was equally intense. There were at least three and often closer to six people to each room, in which the occupants slept, worked, had parties, ate, drank, sulked, wrote letters, cooked, smoked and hung out their washing. In Room 179, which Emily and I shared with Ira, a kind, velvety-eyed girl from a town in the Voronezh region, our belongings were thrust under the beds and into two thin, coffin-shaped cupboards by the door. The fridge chugged like an idling truck. The Voronezh-made television, which Ira turned on as soon as she woke up, crackled and buzzed. The brand-new orange wallpaper peeled gently away from the walls and the rug we bought from the Univermag gave off puffs of red and purple powder at every tread.

Less than a week had passed since I'd stepped off the train with our group of 30 British students into the pale sunshine of a Voronezh morning. The clock had struck nine as we looked around us at the yellow station dozing in the dust.

"On time exactly," the Komendant, head of the hostel, had smiled, as our luggage was loaded on to a cart. "Our railway system has not yet adjusted to our new political situation."

We followed him over the tram tracks, up the street, and into a yard in which stray dogs were picking over a pile of smouldering rubbish. In front of us stood a squat, flat-fronted block: Hostel No 4. The entrance hall was underwater green; against one wall sat a babushka whose metal teeth glinted in the half-light. Heaps of rubble lay in the corners. On the fourth floor,

halfway down the corridor, Emily and I were shown into a long, low room, empty but for three iron bed-frames. The stink of the rust-coloured paint that had been splashed over the ceiling and the grimy lino floor rose up to meet us, along with a stale, sweaty smell. There was a pause.

"I'm sure we can improve it," I ventured.

Emily did not reply. At last I glanced at her. She was laughing: her silent, hysterical laugh that possessed her so completely, there was no breath left even to wheeze. I could see what she meant.

A few days later, however, term began and the place was transformed. Ira arrived and our room filled up. Out in the bottle-green corridor, a crowd appeared, chatting, cooking, scrounging cigarettes, offering KGB telephones or medals or icons for sale. At any time, half of them were drunk and the other half had a hangover. Occasionally there were scuffles; sometimes the Komendant walked past in a lordly way and was bombarded with requests.

It was a cosmopolitan place, housing more than 20 nationalities. The majority still were Russian, yet on our floor alone were Syrians, Egyptians and Armenians as well as British, and one Italian, sent half-crazy by Russian food. Downstairs were Angolans, Nigerians, East Germans; New Yorkers visited from other hostels, and Venezuelans, studying forestry, Georgians, Uzbeks and Cossacks. A bubble of languages rose through the smoke and pungent smells of 10 dinners cooking in one kitchen; 20 stereos roared out different tastes in music. If it were not for the determined ugliness of the place, we might have been in an Anatolian bazaar. There was no doubt that it had a certain filthy charm.

Peter Hessler: River Town

The next morning I caught a taxi north of Yulin, where the Great Wall ran through the desert. Tourists rarely came to see the wall here, because it was unrestored and the northern Shaanxi roads were so bad. There was no mention of the wall in my guidebook, but I had a Chinese map of the province that marked the ruins clearly.

The cabbie took me to a big Ming Dynasty fort that stood five miles outside of town, where Yulin's irrigated fields ended and the desert began. From the fort's highest tower the view stretched northward for miles. Occasionally, the barrenness was punctuated by a slice of green where water had found its way - a stand of trees, a lonely field - but mostly it was just sand and low brown hills and a vast thoughtless sky.

At nine in the morning the sun was already hot. I looked out at the empty landscape, at the hard low line of the horizon, and I realised why they had built the wall here. Even if there had been no Mongol threat, the terror of the land's monotony would be enough to make you build something.

The wall ran east and west from the fort. Westward it continued to its final stopping point at Jiayu Pass, in the mountains of northern Gansu province. Eastward the ruins ran to Zhonghai Pass, at the shore of the Yellow Sea. All told, the distance between these two endpoints was probably more than 1,500 miles, and Yulin was somewhere roughly in the middle; but the wall had never been fully surveyed and nobody knew the exact length. I stood there at the

desert fort, looking out at the heat waves shimmering above the sandy hills, and I decided to go toward the ocean. I tightened my boots and walked east along the ruins.

Most of the wall was just a 3ft-high ridge of packed earth that had been worn down by the wind and sand. Every 200 yards or so I passed the ruins of a signal tower - a crumbling 20ft-high pile of dirt standing uselessly under the burning sun. I followed the wall through a brick factory, and then it swung across an irrigation canal and through a cornfield. A mound of sand swallowed the ridge, and I skirted the dune until I saw the next tower rising in the distance. A field of poplars had been planted nearby, the trees thin and brittle-looking under the Shaanxi sun. The Great Wall sank to a foot-high mound, and beyond that the lone and level sands stretched far away.

It was a ragged, patchwork landscape, and the green swathes of corn and clusters of poplars spoke of hard work that, in the face of the dunes and the dead brown horizon, appeared likely to be wasted. Likewise the ruined wall was a testimony to another sort of wastefulness, because the Ming rulers had built the fortification against outsiders who would have been better handled through diplomacy. And the size of the thing - both its pathetic smallness and its amazing bigness; the fact that I could step across it easily and the fact that it stretched for 1,500 miles - all of that showed how far the Chinese could go with a bad idea.

Richard Sterling: The Fearless Diner

In the sepulchral dining room I took a seat near the entry. As I waited in the thick, dim gloom, I wondered what ghosts might look like. I could almost hear the echoes of tinkling crystal, the clatter of china, the hum and buzz of conversation as deals were struck, information was exchanged and successes and failures recounted.

I suddenly became aware of the old waiter standing beside me. The menu he brought me was English to the bone: meat, fish, boiled potatoes. At the waiter's suggestion I ordered steamed sole. As I waited to be served, I realised that there were others in the room. On the far side were an Indian man and a Chinese woman. I couldn't figure how they got there without my noticing. I had sat near the entry so I would be aware of anyone coming or going. They were sitting shoulder to shoulder and were in a whispered and animated, but deliberately subdued argument.

When the sole arrived I found it bland, insipid, uninspired; fit food for ghosts. "This is like eating death," I thought. "I need food for the living." I caught the waiter's attention and the old bag of bones shuffled over my way. "This is . . . very nice," I said, referring to the meal. "But isn't there anything on the menu with a little bit of . . . spice?" "Pickled eggs, sir?" he suggested.

"I was thinking of something spicy hot."

He excused himself and disappeared into the kitchen. He soon returned to say, rather apologetically, that "Cook is fixing himself and staff a bit of Malay curry if . . ."
"I'll take it!"

He returned with a blue Chinese porcelain bowl filled with cubes of snowy white potato and

toasty brown peanuts swimming in a thick, red-flecked yellow sauce. A sheen of red chilli-scented oil floated on top and a sprig of green cilantro graced it at the edge. He set it in front of me, ceremoniously turned the bowl 90 degrees, then shuffled quietly away.

The vapours rose up and stung my nostrils. The smells of chilli, garlic and ginger were sharp and powerful. The buttery smell of peanut and the mellowness of turmeric combined with them as they formed an almost visible wreath around my head. I ignored the spoon and picked up the bowl with both hands. I sucked at the creamy sauce. Savoury spicefire rushed through my mouth, tiny beads of sweat popped from my brow, and my pallet sang: "Alive!" I had sucked in a small piece of chilli so I bit into it and it burst into an explosion of flavourheat. I swallowed and the glow went down to my gut and it screamed: "Alive. Alive. Alive!" I took up the spoon and scooped curry into my mouth and chewed. The capsicum struck my taste buds and they resonated like tiny tuning forks, each one a different tone, all together in harmony, a resounding air that kept the ghosts at bay.

As I reached the bottom of the bowl I tipped it up and let the last tasty, searing bits slide into my mouth. Had the bowl been shallower I'd have licked it. The curry was so hot my mouth throbbed with a burning, life-affirming pleasure-pain. I felt like the only man of flesh in a cold charnel house.