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Eternal Beauty

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DAVID JIMÉNEZ

Translated from the Spanish by Andrea Rosenberg

ETERNAL BEAUTY

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Manhaisan hops up the stairs two at a time and pokes his wool hat, uneven bangs, and bright squirrel eyes out of the manhole. There's nobody in the street, nobody watching from the windows of the aging gray Soviet-style apartment buildings, nobody in the small pools of light that spill from the streetlamps onto the sidewalk. He stretches out his small arms to lift the heavy metal lid and drags it across the asphalt half a meter closer, trying not to make any noise. Soso has explained it all carefully: he should leave a gap small enough so that nobody will be able to come in without sliding back the cover. That way, if anybody comes when they're sleeping, the noise of the metal scraping on asphalt will warn them. But the gap should also be wide enough that they can escape quickly if they hear footsteps approaching. Manhaisan picks up two damp pieces of cardboard and sets up his bed on the widest pipe. He curls into a fetal position, trying not to roll off onto the wet floor, and squeezes his eyes shut, determined not to open them again until the first light of dawn illuminates their den. It's no fun being the scaredy-cat of the gang, but he can't keep himself from asking his friend Soso, as he does almost every night, if they're going to come tonight. Soso, annoyed, answers with his usual indifference: "How should I know? Do you think I know everything?"

Mainhaisan means "eternal beauty"; Batmonh, "always strong"; Erdenechimeg, "precious jewel"; Saibatar, "valiant hero"; Ijilbatar, "same hero"; Ysuntai, "abundance"; and Jebe, "arrowhead." Mongolians give their children what may be the most beautiful names in the world, but only once the children are two or three years old and seem to be here to stay—once Tengri, the Mongolians' sky god, has accepted them as his own. Manhaisan doesn't remember it, but it must have been hard for his mother to contain her joy when she saw him emerge from her belly with his round, rosy cheeks. As she pushed him out into the world, fearing that evil spirits might carry him off into the world of shadows, she probably shouted insults at him the way only birthing mothers on the Mongolian steppes know how, pretending that

her tears were tears of sadness, her eyes full of disdain, trying to make the spirits believe that the child was ugly and not worth stealing.

Manhaisan was born on camel skins in a yurt, the portable home of the nomads, in a nameless place in the middle of nowhere, a place where some say the Gobi Desert begins and others say it ends. His father moved the tent across the prairies according to whether they were blanketed with frost or with flowers. Seven years ago, everything was frost: winter stretched into April, and the family couldn't find the oceans of green grasses that had once intoxicated the hordes of the emperor Genghis Khan as he made his way to those nations fated to fall to his army. The horses died, food grew scarce, and there wasn't any milk for Manhaisan—or if there was milk for him, there wasn't any for his two siblings. The family gathered in the tent and decided that their only way out was to leave for the city.

But there was nothing for the Mongolian nomad in the city.

Manhaisan's family set up the tent on the outskirts of Ulan Bator with other nomads who had come from every corner of Mongolia looking for opportunities. Without work, food, or aid, the situation grew worse, and in the end Manhaisan's parents packed up their belongings again and headed back to the steppes. But they left their son behind. He had become a burden, so they left him in front of the Ministry of Social Affairs, hoping that some bureaucrat would help him, take him to an orphanage, and understand that his parents had committed an act not of cruelty but of love. That night, Manhaisan, only six years old, slept in the heating tunnels under the city for the first time.

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I first heard about Mongolia's underground children from the American photographer Paula Bronstein, whom I'd met during the destruction of East Timor by Indonesian troops in 1999. One of the images Paula captured was of a boy sleeping beside a manhole, huddled in the middle of the night a few degrees below freezing, too exhausted to reach his companions. Some children die like that: they fall asleep from alcohol, glue-sniffing, fatigue, hunger, or all of the above, and are found the next morning lifeless, frozen, in the same position. The story behind Paula's photograph crept inside me, and I knew that, as on other occasions in the past, I'd carry it in my head, pricking me like a thorn, until the day I could share it.

To my surprise, they're waiting for me in the Ulan Bator airport.

"You were lucky," says a hunched, gangly youth in the arrivals lounge, offering to take me to the hotel for ten dollars. "We're having very good weather this week."

It's seventeen degrees below zero, but it's been a few days since it's snowed. Chinzorig is right: it's pretty good weather for the world's most inhospitable capital. Chinzorig is fond of this old airport where flights sometimes take off days or even weeks late because of snowstorms and maintenance problems with the Mongolian Airlines planes. His parents live nearby, and whenever he goes to visit them, he strolls through the arrivals lounge, waves to his old workmates, and looks around for a customer so he can earn a few dollars. Chinzorig has an advantage over the other taxi drivers because he's worked as an air traffic controller and knows the schedules and circumstances: he has only to look at the amount of snow on the roads or calculate the wind speed to know whether a flight will land or take off that day. One day, tired of watching government officials divvy up the flyover rights for Mongolia while workers like him took home a pitiful salary of a hundred dollars a month, he quit. He was just over twenty years old, with a job that anyone else would have envied, but in the control tower he felt like a stallion corralled in its pen.

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"And what are you going to do now?" his boss asked, convinced that only a crazy person would give up the security of a steady paycheck in such a broken country.

"Lots of things," said Chinzorig.

The first of those things was to buy a used car with the money he'd saved and start working as a taxi driver and tourist guide.

Chinzorig offers to take me to the underground children. "During the day, they work in the train station," he says. When we get there, dozens of little porters are awaiting the train's arrival beside the tracks, eager to transport the luggage of the disembarking passengers on their improvised wooden carts. The tallest are at an advantage because they can stretch their necks above the crowd and see who is getting out of the cars first. The smallest are able to dart among the others with their little carts. Everyone wants to get to the foreign tourists first. It's said they come from places where there is no cold, winter, or snow, places where people live in large houses and drive six-wheeled cars and, of course, have so much money that a dollar tip is no skin off their backs.

The Trans-Mongolian is coming in from Moscow this morning before heading on to Beijing, leaving the Gobi behind and winding through the mountains, valleys, and deserts that Genghis Khan traveled in 1214 on his way to the gates of what was then Zhongdu. The Mongolian Wolf met no resistance at the time because the Chinese emperor, Xuanzong, who had heard tales of the ferocity of the khan's warriors, appeased the visitors with carts full of treasure and a beautiful princess accompanied by five hundred servants who joined the invader's manacled army. The khan showed his gratitude by coming back three years later and destroying Zhongdu anyway. One of the witnesses to the fall of the city of Bukhara summed it up best, describing Genghis Khan and his men's approach to war in a single sentence: "They came, they sapped, they burned, they slew, they plundered, and they departed."

The Mongolian warriors, under the orders of the Oceanic Emperor and later those of his descendants, conquered everything in their path in the thirteenth century, sacking and subjugating peoples from the Black Sea to the Pacific Ocean, raising the largest empire that man has ever known and leaving in their wake a wave of destruction and death that would not be seen again until the Second World War. The Emperor of the Steppes, who had once declared that one of the great pleasures of life was "to scatter your enemy, to drive him before you, to see his cities reduced to ashes, to see those who love him shrouded in tears, and to gather into your bosom his wives and daughters," did not live to see the destruction of the empire he'd built. He would have been humiliated to witness how over the years it would be Mongolian women who were clasped against the chests of, first, Chinese invaders; later, Russians; and today, anyone with five dollars in his pocket. The young women on the dance floor at the Ulan Bator Hotel save up their money so that two or three times a year they can make the same journey that Genghis Khan did, to Zhongdu. They board the Trans-Mongolian, leaving the Gobi behind, and wind through the mountains, valleys, and deserts until they arrive at Maggie's, a small pub next to Beijing's Workers Stadium. There, you can see them dancing and approaching customers at the bar to whisper in their ear that a piece of the legend of Mongolia is for rent tonight.

On freezing Ulan Bator nights, when Chinzorig takes me to the nightclub at the Ulan Bator Hotel so I can see "the most beautiful women on earth," Mongolia seems to me like a man sitting alone in the corner of a bar, longing for a past that will never return and signaling for another round so he can

forget about the present, which gets more painful with every sip. The melancholy of the Mongolian people is palpable in every one of the bars we visit, in the Genghis Khan Hotel, in the bottles of Genghis Khan vodka plastered with a portrait of the emperor, in the packs of Genghis Khan cigarettes, in the money printed with Genghis Khan's face, and in Ulan Bator's wide Genghis Khan Avenue, which we fly down at top speed. Mongolians, drunk with nostalgia, live in hope that the legend will become reality, that Genghis Khan will reappear, reincarnated in a little boy born on camel skins, a boy like Manhaisan, perhaps, who will be charged with returning this land to the splendor of days gone by.

Manhaisan and Soso have earned a little money from the travelers on the Trans-Mongolian and are walking along carrying two large bags of trash when we find them near the train station entrance. Manhaisan's expression is sad, almost pained. I will later discover that it has become fixed on his face, an intrinsic part of his physical features. Soso looks proudly ahead, more relaxed. The boys' cheeks are flushed with cold, their clothes are ragged, and as they walk, they glance around with wary eyes. Chinzorig speaks to them, offers them some food, and asks where they live.

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"There," says Soso, pointing to the ground.

They agree to take us to their shelter.

It's not a large chamber, some fifty meters square and two meters high. The floor is half a meter deep in water, and a wave of heat smacks us when we enter. On the coldest days, you can go from thirty degrees below zero in the street to thirty degrees above in the warrens beneath it, where the humidity makes the atmosphere even more suffocating. The rooms are not connected to each other and are part not of the sewer system but of the heating system installed under the city by the Soviets. The pipes, wide enough for the children to sleep on top of them without falling off, are connected to coal plants. The spaces where the children sleep vary in size and depth and were designed for maintenance access. Many of the pipes, which are full of boiling water, are starting to show their age, and occasionally one bursts. Then someone shouts, "Get out! Get out!" and they all flee the scalding flood. Sometimes one of the children dies and the NGOs kick up a fuss. The police respond by organizing a massive raid, rounding up a few hundred children, and locking them up in an old military barracks on the outskirts of Ulan

Bator, where they are often humiliated and beaten before being put out on the streets again. Manhaisan and the others have learned to fear the raids.

“Are they going to come tonight?”

The group has carved their names into the walls of the chamber: the territory is marked, warning other children that this shelter is taken. Some clothes on hangers dangle from one pipe, and on an improvised shelf—a hole in the wall—there’s a sliver of soap and a bottle of cologne that the older children use with all the extravagance of an eyedropper. The tunnel has two openings to the outside, one in the sidewalk and the other right in the middle of the street. If a child isn’t careful when peeking out, the prime minister’s motorcade of fabulous luxury cars could pass by at just that moment and take the child’s head with it. And no one could accuse the prime minister of forgetfulness: in their rush to take advantage of the recent arrival of capitalism and become fabulously wealthy, Mongolian politicians don’t yet appear to have noticed that four thousand Mongolian children are living underground.

Manhaisan’s gang is made up of five boys and a girl. Manhaisan and Soso are the middle children. They are thirteen and fourteen years old. Batmonh, a tiny ten-year-old boy, is the youngest. Erdenechimeg, eleven, is a wild, shy girl who crawls along the pipes with the agility of a squirrel and has beautiful night-dark eyes that are always hidden under her tangled hair. She never speaks, maybe because she doesn’t think there’s anything interesting to say to a stranger who’s entered her home without asking. Saibatar, seventeen, and his pal Ijilbatar, sixteen, are the veterans. None of them look their age: the years in the bowels of the city and the lack of food have stunted their growth, so they look two or three years younger.

The two eldest boys have gone with Batmonh to the black market, where they work as a team to pickpocket tourists and absentminded locals. Chinzorig is amused—until we go to the market to watch them work and another gang ends up stealing his wallet.

“These kids are good,” he says, happy that I, at least, have come out of it with my wallet intact.

The gangs of underground children share the work, and all the money they earn is portioned out to buy food, clothing, or vodka. The girls sell their bodies for five dollars at bus stops; the boys look for odd jobs and a bite to eat along the rails or, if no customers arrive on the Trans-Mongolian, sell themselves to one of the city’s drunks, who almost always stumble off

without paying. Life isn't easy for anybody on the streets of Ulan Bator, but it's even harder for the young people who live beneath them. Nobody asks Erdenechimeg where she gets her money.

They all know.

The first chill of winter is especially hard: that's when the great brawl for the best places to sleep breaks out. A group of older children has driven Manhaisan and his friends out of the larger, better-located tunnel where they lived in October. By the end of March, the underground realm is clearly divided into territories after brutal clashes fought with fists and knives. Venturing into foreign territory can mean a good beating, or even death. Saibatar has participated in a lot of these skirmishes and is respected among the gangs. He spent his first day on the streets in 1990, soon after the fall of the Soviets and the arrival of democracy in Mongolia. Moscow had propped up the country with 900 million dollars in subsidies per year, supplying its people with all their assets—including their ideology—over seven decades of rule. The average Mongolian, who under the Soviets had been guaranteed a job, an apartment, food, and a pension, was forced to seek a living as the overnight arrival of capitalism threw the country into turmoil. People lost their government jobs, thousands were evicted from public housing, and the subsidies from Moscow, which had made up a third of the national economy, disappeared. The Trans-Mongolian no longer pulled into town full of Soviet officials, agriculture and industry collapsed, and society split apart at its root, the family. The first children began to be abandoned or fled families shattered by poverty, alcohol, and violence.

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Saibatar's family, nomads from the Dornogov region, lost everything and decided to abandon one of their four children so they could feed the rest. They boarded a train, and when it pulled into the Ulan Bator station, they gave Saibatar a bag of food, a hat, and a coat and told him to wait for them to come back. He was seven years old. For two years, he lived in the same train car that had brought him to the city, making the trip home and back again over and over and waiting on the platforms for someone to come looking for him. He survived on food given to him by railroad employees until one day, on the platform in Ulan Bator, the other children asked him who he was waiting for.

"My father," Saibatar said.

"He's not coming," they told him.

He joined one of the gangs. He's been with them ever since.

As he tells his story, Saibatar tries not to cry in front of the others. He is respected and sometimes feared, the Prince of the Underground; he cannot show any weakness. Mongolian males are taught from the cradle not to display emotion, not even among their friends and family. A Mongolian man does not cry. Ever.

Saibatar has a girlfriend now. Ysuntai is a girl from the streets, fourteen years old, who sells her body at the bus station like all the others. That's where she and Saibatar met. On the coldest days of winter, the two go into the chamber, undress, and make love on the hot pipes, trying not to fall into the water pooled on the floor, huddling at the rear of the shelter where the light from the street doesn't reach. They "got married" two months ago, imitating the ceremonies that take place every day at the Wedding Palace near Nairamdal Park. Lit by a dozen candles, Saibatar told Ysuntai that they'd be together forever. The two of them have contracted syphilis, and they ask me to buy them some medicine in a pharmacy. When I return with a little penicillin, the only thing I've been able to find, Saibatar blushes and insists that he doesn't sell his body, that the disease is Ysuntai's fault. She nods her head. The Prince, down here in the tunnels, has a reputation to protect.

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Sitting on one of the pipes, Manhaisan, Soso, Saibatar, and the other children tell me what life is like underground. It's not just a refuge but a parallel world. Life down here has rules, which the children know well. Some of the rules are good and some of them bad, but in many cases they're better than the ones that govern the streets above. It's a world of loyalty to the gang, their only family; of sharing what little they have and helping each other in order to survive. These are principles that the world of adults seems to have forgotten but without which it would be impossible to survive below.

The street children of Ulan Bator could have been like so many others in Brazil, South Africa, or the Philippines, but the cold made them different. Their survival instinct brought them underground, and here, away from adults, they've built their own society. Those who live above them have forgotten they exist, and they prefer it that way. They know they've started living like rats, and as long as they're not seen, nobody will bother them. One Mongolian legend describes three worlds: the sky, whose kingdoms are ruled by Tengri, the Immortal Blue Sky; the middle world, the world of humans; and the subterranean world, where the spirits dwell. The children have made

the third world their home and live under the earth like nomads, changing their nests every season. They live on what the earth gives them—in their case, trash—fighting for territory and conquering the weaker groups.

“We are the nomads of the underground. Nomads like Genghis Khan,” says Saibatar.

“Yes, nomads,” Ijilbatar repeats, laughing.

Manhaisan and the others are sleeping. Though the lid of the chamber has been left as Soso instructed, neither very open nor very closed, none of the children has noticed that somebody else is here. The underground children can expect four types of visits. Of these, only one can be considered good news: a visit from Father Gilbert. Religion returned to Mongolia relatively recently, after the fall of the Soviet regime. The Russians had demolished most of the Buddhist temples and in their place built monotonous apartment buildings, factories, and Communist Party offices. Thousands of monks were driven from their monasteries and forced to lead a secular life, even having to wear Western-style pants. In a single political purge in 1936, seventeen thousand lamas were executed. For Buddhism, one of Asia’s major spiritual forces, that massacre was only the beginning of an evil century in which communist repression in Chinese-occupied Tibet and Soviet Mongolia would carry death to the temples of compassion.

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The arrival of democracy meant a reprieve. The monks who had survived were allowed to return to those temples that were still standing, only to discover that they would have competition in their efforts to recapture their people’s faith. Close on the heels of the fall of the communists came dozens of Christian missions ready to fill the faith vacuum. The streets of Ulan Bator filled with Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Southern Baptists all hoping to introduce the Mongolians to God, who could guide them in this time of tribulation. The Vatican immediately reestablished diplomatic relations with Mongolia and sent a number of missionaries to the country. Father Gilbert, a Filipino priest, was among those chosen to join the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary mission.

No sooner had he reached his new destination than the young priest distanced himself from his colleagues’ efforts to convert the population and turn the country’s religious rebirth into a competition between Buddhists and Christians. Father Gilbert was made of other stuff: he was part of that new generation of missionaries who de-emphasized—and sometimes

neglected altogether—evangelization, instead putting his energy into more earthly work. When he arrived from the tropics in 1993, the priest’s primary objective had been to help the people of Ulan Bator. Only when asked did he explain which god had given him the strength to devote himself to such a task. Instead of spending the money that came in from Rome throwing parties and holding meetings with other religious groups to discuss how to attract new faithful to the flock, the priest began building a children’s shelter in the Bayangol district, near the train tracks. Over the years, Father Gilbert’s home became a bastion of hope in the middle of a depressed city, the only safe haven for the children of Ulan Bator.

Every Wednesday, then, the priest says, “Let’s go!”, gets in his van, and goes from manhole to manhole with hot tea and cookies. He offers shelter to those who want it and asks the children if they hurt anywhere, body or soul, as he has medicine for both maladies. His Verbist Care Center has clean beds, hot water, and a group of volunteers who try to make the children feel at home, if only for a little while. The problem for Manhaisan is that his home is underground. Father Gilbert believes—and with good reason—that children who have been on the street longer than six months are difficult to reintegrate into society. He focuses his efforts on the younger children and those who have ended up on the streets most recently. “They come here and they destroy everything; they’re totally feral,” he complains affectionately whenever the wildest of them pull some mischief in the children’s home. Manhaisan remembers having been in Father Gilbert’s shelter, but he escaped through a window, unable to follow rules, sleep between white sheets, and eat with utensils. In a way, he’s a bit like Mowgli, the young boy raised by wolves in Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*. And yet he would much rather it be the Filipino priest, living proof that there are countries where winter does not exist, now banging on the manhole cover in the middle of the night.

But it’s not Wednesday.

If it’s not the day for pastries and hot tea, then it could only be one of the other three types of visits that the children receive underground. None of the three is welcome. One of the rival groups could be looking for a fight, but the children’s burrow is small, and it’s unlikely that a larger group would have it in its sights, as winter is ending. It could also be one of the gangs of wealthy youths, many of them the scions of government officials and well-connected businessmen, who from time to time come out to amuse themselves by beating up the street children. “Sometimes I dream that they seal up the man-

holes and we're trapped down here forever," says Manhaisan. "I'm scared of them." The third and most frightening possibility is a visit from the police. I never hear the children complain about the rats with which they share their shelter, the filth, or the damp. They talk about darkness, hunger, and especially fear—and of all their fears, the police are by far the worst.

The officer shouts down through the hole and orders the children to come out. One by one, the members of the gang are deposited in the police wagon. It's raid night, and a few dozen ragged children have been rounded up. The police generally hold them in cells at the station overnight, and anything could happen between now and daybreak. Usually they're beaten, stripped, and humiliated before being released with a warning not to show their faces again anytime soon. But sometimes the beatings are so severe that the children can't go back to their maintenance vaults for weeks. Some of them disappear for good. The girls are systematically raped and return to their holes in shame, like on those days when the bus station customers refuse to pay. They have been robbed of the one thing they had left, the dignity that in hopeless places is also for sale. After the raids, the girls have to buy their freedom again, and when they return to the shelter, nobody asks them how they were released.

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They all know.

These "cleaning operations" happen two or three times a year. Bruised and humiliated after their night in jail, the children return to the underground and forget their suffering by freely indulging in alcohol and sniffing glue, as if it were a holiday or the new year. One by one, the members of Manhaisan's gang pass the pot of glue around, put it to their noses, and inhale deeply, closing their eyes and furrowing their brows. At first it feels like a worm has crawled inside their skulls; it throws their heads into disarray, scratches the walls, and eats away at their brains. "Camel shit, camel shit!" shouts Saibatar, and they all laugh and leap in the puddled water. A shot of vodka makes the worm disappear, and the head melts, becomes a soft, velvety cloud. Then Soso, Saibatar, Ijilbatar, Batmonh, and Erdenechimeg are able to leave sad Ulan Bator, soar toward the steppes, laugh, cry, and hallucinate. They can mask their lives with other, better lives. Eventually they pass out and dream about the singers and actresses whose photos, sliced from magazines they find in the trash, decorate the walls of their underground

chamber, proof that there is also life under the streets of Ulan Bator, in the Mongolian third world.

The only one who is unable to leave for a better world during these binges is Manhaisan. He's always been a frightened boy, timid and introverted. It's often difficult to get him to talk, and he sometimes suddenly, without anyone's asking him, expresses a heartrending wish—"I don't want to be scared anymore"—that brings you a little closer to the reality of this rat-infested sub-city. Of all the children, Manhaisan is the one who has been least able to adjust to life underground. He doesn't know how to hide his bitterness. He's not ashamed to cry—he does it all the time—not ashamed to complain when his stomach is empty or to admit that he misses his mother, whom he remembers telling him stories about camels and wild dogs in the family yurt. The others have adapted, but every moment of this life is painful for Manhaisan. His face blackened with dirt and his hands battered, he sits down on a pipe apart from the others and sobs again.

"The children who live in houses want to kill us. They say that one day they're going to close off the maintenance vaults and we'll be trapped forever," he says, returning to his worst nightmare.

"Which children?"

"The ones who live in the buildings. They come and insult us, beat us with sticks, and throw things down into the hole."

"And when they come, how do you defend yourselves?"

"We don't do anything. We let them hit us."

"Why?"

"Because they live up there and we live down here."

Not four seasons but two. Hot. Cold.

The pale colors of the Gobi, a million square kilometers of solitude in the heart of Asia, turn purple with the play of light and shadows on a late summer afternoon, as if Tengri, the Immortal Blue Sky, were toying with the pale hues of the desert. As the land thaws, the steppes reveal the hidden green of their prairies, and the city, stripped of the melancholy of winter, doesn't seem quite so gray anymore. You travel to a country during the cold season, and when you return with the warmth, you no longer recognize it. It's a different country.

With the arrival of summer, the children emerge from their dens. All at once, everything seems easier in Ulan Bator. Any place—a park or a vacant

lot—is a good place for sleeping. More tourists arrive at the train station, and it’s easier to earn a little money toting their luggage. For a few months, Manhaisan and the other children leave the underground world of the spirits and join that of the adults. If only there were a way to make the hot season last longer. . . . Often it’s gone so quickly, it’s as if it were just passing through. In October, when freezing temperatures return, the children battle for the best chambers again, the Gobi is painted once more with stark desert colors, and many people stay home to follow the romance between the poor newspaper seller Estrellita Montenegro and the millionaire Miguel Ángel González in *Dirty Face*, the Venezuelan soap opera that’s broadcast on Mongolian television every day, in a special five-hour block on Saturdays. Mongolians watch the show without subtitles or dubbing because there’s no money for translating the hundreds of episodes; they follow it as if Spanish were their native language. They are learning Spanish without being aware of it, and many, believing that Estrellita and I must be from the same country, greet me by repeating her name or imitating her melodramatic gestures. When I enter a restaurant and greet the patrons with the local *Sain bainuu?*, I hear in response something like, “¿Por qué no me amas? [Why don’t you love me?]”

In restaurants, in homes, in public buildings, and of course at the train station, everyone feels Estrellita’s misfortunes as if they were his own. Travelers stand transfixed by the show, which plays on the televisions in the train station waiting room. The children watch whenever they can get away with it, laughing uproariously at the love scenes. Even out on the steppes, people weep over the joys and hardships of the newspaper seller. Television has become one of the symbols of the brutal change that the nomads have experienced since the Soviets arrived in 1924, and especially since they left. The men of the prairie, vestiges of the oldest nomadic society on earth, can now travel to California beaches, watch the World Cup, and attend Victoria’s Secret runway shows, thanks to televisions connected to enormous satellite dishes powered by solar panels, which are themselves connected to old car batteries.

And all of it in the middle of the Gobi Desert.

When Mongolians turn on the television, they see not the progress of the United States or Europe but evidence that they themselves are falling behind. The screen shows a false world of abundance suggesting that the best pastures are to be found in the city, where you can get fermented mare’s milk just by crossing the street and entering a store. The nomads wonder whether their way of life, the Genghis Khan model, still makes any sense. Their lives

have always been tied to the earth, the yurt, and the animals, but especially to the absence of fences and barbed wire, because nomads need space and the freedom to move around looking for better pastures and a more benign Tengri. Mongolians did have one thing in common with the Soviet colonizers: neither believed in private property.

Television changes Mongolians' perception of their own happiness. Their desires, needs, and ambitions are transformed. The teenage girls want pale skin, shiny hair, and a wasp waist. They ask their parents for shampoo and mud masks for their skin. They cry because they can't be like the girls on television. The young men no longer aspire to take care of animals and ride the steppes; they have no desire to walk in their fathers' footsteps. They'd rather have a job in the city. Television has awakened in them dreams that are new and unfamiliar. And sometimes false.

For the new generations of city-educated politicians, the nomadic life is a backward one. They want to parcel out the land in small private tracts to increase competition, and to develop small, industrialized cities where now only livestock graze. Urbanization, consumerism, and the growing wealth disparity have marginalized the nomads. The Mongolian landscape has changed so much that people now race across the steppes on noisy Russian-built Planeta motorcycles instead of the horses on which their ancestors conquered the world. The exodus of the youth has begun. Leaving a trendy Ulan Bator club one night, I come across a scene from the American Old West: a group of teenagers have tied their horses to the trees outside the club while they gyrate to American rap on the dance floor. They've ridden hundreds of kilometers, leaving the yurts where they live with their parents, to spend the weekend in the capital.

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Chinzorig tells me that we have to travel outside of Ulan Bator to see the changes that are upending Mongolians' lives. My air-traffic-controller-taxi-driver-tour-guide has always dreamed of saving enough money to buy an all-terrain vehicle and take tourists to see "the majestic mountains of Khentei, Khangai, and Soyon; the sacred rivers of Kherlen, Onon, and Tuul; the blue lakes of Khuysgul, Uvs, and Buir; the great Gobi and the sand oceans of the south," and the steppes that the Mongol poet Natsagdorj saw covered with crystal and glass in winter and a carpet of flowers in summer. It would still be two years before Chinzorig's "lots of things" eventually included that all-terrain vehicle and a tour company, Golden Square, whose mission was to reveal

the beauty of Mongolia to nonbelievers like me. All Mongolians are nomads at heart, and Chinzorig, though he's one of the most urban Mongolians I've met, enjoys living in yurts in the middle of nowhere, traveling across the Gobi, engaging with the people of the countryside, and showing the best of his country to people not lucky enough to know it yet. Chinzorig speaks perfect English, has travel experience, and is ready for anything. I ask him if he doesn't want to get out of here. Doesn't he want to leave for a country with opportunities?

"Leave?" he says. "Leave the best place on earth, with the most beautiful women and the most loyal friends? Every time I leave, a deep yearning pulls me back again. I don't know how to live anywhere else. Believe me, it may not always seem like it, but Mongolia is the best place on earth."

We drive north across the prairies, and every few kilometers Chinzorig asks me what I think, whether in Europe, Asia, or America I've ever seen anything more beautiful than these snowy valleys, the horses galloping wild across the steppes, and the vast plains turned to mirrors of ice, mirrors into which these people proudly gaze. Mongolia is no longer the man sitting alone in the corner of a bar trying to forget, but the dazzling singer who lights up the night, dressed to the nines, with her hair loose and a friendly smile that invites you to sing along. Chinzorig is right: Mongolia is a beautiful country. Truly beautiful.

In the distance, on the slope of a hill, we see a yurt and decide to stop. In it live a young couple and their five-year-old son, Jebe. Just like Manhaisan's parents years ago, they are desperately looking for a place to pasture their animals, and they've ended up less than a hundred kilometers from Ulan Bator, dangerously close to a life that isn't theirs and a place that has nothing to offer them. The year before, Mongolia suffered a severe drought, followed by harsh frosts and a winter with icy winds and temperatures forty degrees below zero. The Mongolians call this phenomenon the *dzud*, storms that ravage the grasses, starve the animals, and make life miserable for even the toughest nomads. It is the magic of the seasons in its most brutal form, when it shatters dreams. The *dzud* turns the plains of Mongolia into an immense graveyard littered with the lifeless bodies of thousands of animals, frozen solid. It must resemble the scene encountered by the first travelers to visit Zhongdu after the city had been laid to waste by Genghis Khan. It is said that as he approached the city, one visitor wondered about a white mountain

visible in the distance. The locals told him it was the bones of Zhongdu's residents, piled up by the warriors of the great khan.

In defense against the gelid monsoon, some families pile dead animals around their tents, building a wall of carcasses to protect themselves from the bitter winds that lower the temperature another twenty degrees. The *dzud* usually pummels the steppes once every five or six years, but the new century has brought two years of *dzud* in a row, and, though the Mongolians don't yet know it, two more await them. Their animals dead, their children frail, thousands of nomads are crowding into the outskirts of Ulan Bator in their yurts. The men, jobless and unable to adapt to their new lives, turn to alcohol to defeat their depression, joining the ranks of drunks who have made Ulan Bator the city with the most alcoholics per capita in the world. Some end up taking their own lives, lives they no longer recognize. Every day, another child joins the dark world of the maintenance vaults underground.

The young nomad couple invites us to have some tea. The tent's entrance faces south, as tradition dictates; it is round like the sun and made of felt. To the left is a place reserved for guests, and at the rear is the *khoimor*, where valuables are stored and the elders sit. There is also a small altar, a stove, and photographs on the walls. Beside the yurt is a satellite dish connected to an old television that picks up international channels. Gounkhu, the husband, talks about the hardships of winter and asks us about life in the city. "It's hard," Chinzorig says, without mentioning that as we left Ulan Bator, we saw hundreds of yurts packed together in the barren wastes. We head back uncertain as to which direction—the city or the steppes—the young family will choose. I prefer to think that they'll turn back. They almost certainly won't. Will Jebe end up living underground like Manhaisan, longing for the days when he ran free over the white-encrusted steppes of the cold season and the flower-speckled oceans of the hot season?

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Back in Ulan Bator after our outing across the steppes, Chinzorig picks me up at the hotel and we go out to look for Manhaisan and his gang. They're not home. We go back later, but they don't return to sleep that night, even though it's snowed in Ulan Bator and the temperature has dropped again.

"They'll be here tomorrow," Chinzorig says, seeing how worried I am.

We don't find them the next day, either. For two days we look for them in the streets, in the train station, in the black market, and downtown. We ask

the other underground children about the gang. Nothing. I remember the last day I spent with them, when a group of locals, who'd never offered them a piece of bread or a cup of warm milk, insulted them upon seeing them with a foreigner. "Don't talk to him, you're an embarrassment to Mongolia. What will people think?" said a woman carrying grocery bags. "Somebody should call the police," said another man, more out of arrogance than pity. That afternoon, we filled the chamber with food and Coca-Cola, and for the first time I saw Manhaisan smile.

It's time for me to leave, and I'm sorry not to have seen the children at least one more time. Chinzorig calls his old workmates from the airport control tower and asks them when my flight will be taking off. It's snowing in Ulan Bator, and we've got hours yet. On our way to the airport, we stop one last time at the home of the children of Genghis, in the third Mongolian world, two stories below the Immortal Blue Sky. There's nobody on the street, nobody watching from the windows of the aging gray Soviet-style apartment buildings at the end of the block—and nobody in the maintenance chamber. The entrances have been closed off. Maybe they came back, heard footsteps, and slipped stealthily through the gap that Manhaisan had left neither too open nor too closed, fleeing from the children of wealthy families or the police. Or maybe they decided to leave for another place—nomads of the underground, after all.

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This essay is a chapter in David Jiménez's forthcoming book Children of the Monsoon (Autumn Hill, 2013).