

Moving Day

SLEEP WAS CHRONICLING DISTURBING NEWS: visions of heavy beasts on the move. Like a seismograph, my body was registering the reverberated details of a drummed earth. I had the growing impression that the hooves were close, very close – all around me, in fact. It was a clear incentive to awaken.

The guy lines to my tent were being jostled, and its nylon surface moved with a flow of shadows – phantoms sent dancing from multiple fires. Some of the contorted forms made sounds of heavy breathing, while others issued deep-lunged snorts. Now and then the shapes spoke with words of unknown meaning. I lay awake and watched the exhale of my breath disappear through the muffled light and into the tent's darkness. My right arm left the warmth of the sleeping bag in search of clothes, the ones infused with the familiar touch and weight of frozen condensation. The pile was located by my right elbow. I sat up, shivered, and dressed.

Outside, the night air was disturbed with movement and taste of animal. While relieving myself a few paces from the tent, I heard howling from some faraway place threading back and forth across the darkness. The wolves' communiqués, although barely discernible to my ear, set off dozens of large dogs that patrolled the encampment. The hair on their necks and backs stood at attention. These brutes were the kind that took guarding assignments seriously.

Overhead, a metropolis of cosmic energy washed the night sky. The display was detailed in a clarity I had never witnessed except here, but here



Mongolian Bred
(detail)
watercolour and etching
15 x 11 in
2005

was 15,000 feet closer to the mysteries of the celestial world than usual. I was on the eastern side of the Zanskar chain in the central Himalaya. Near to the east lay Tibet, to the west Pir Panjal. Himachal Pradesh sprawled off to the south, and somewhere in the northern darkness towered the fierce Karakoram.

With the aid of a flashlight I packed my stuff and broke down my tent. Mine was the last to come down. In a wide circle around me, flickering orange lights, like an uneven row of church candles, outlined small dark figures huddled close to each fire. Fuelled by animal dung, the fires' smoke hung suspended, unwilling to leave the warmth of the flames. Closer by, emerging in and out of the shadows, the cleft hooves of my sleep stood loaded and ready. It was four a.m.

I carefully crossed the stream to Lobsang's camp. Twelve hours earlier the site had been his and his family's home; now it was two shallow pits lined with rocks. I shook by Lobsang's tiny open fire with my thighs locked tight, clinging to the memory of a sleeping bag. Lobsang and I, his family, and forty-four more families were waiting for some sort of call or signal that would indicate the first light of dawn and the start of our move.

The timing of the move (packing throughout the night and leaving in virtual darkness) I never did get. However perplexing that was, I reminded myself that these people should know how to move; they were the Kharnakpa, a two-hundred-person tribe of the legendary Changpa, nomads of the Himalaya.

The place we were leaving was called Spanchen, a small glacier-fed river valley that was barricaded on three sides by low mountains. Although it was fall, remnants of the previous winter's snow and ice still clung to the north-facing reaches of a few of the surrounding peaks. Apart from that, the terrain consisted of a boundless outcropping of barren rock in a turbulent sea of sand and sediment – all blown and faded like worn leather.

Spanchen is part of the broad area that the Kharnakpa roam. Even without formal ownership, this large area, referred to as Kharnak, is vigorously defended by the Kharnakpa. The other half-dozen nomad tribes in the region have similarly defined areas they move in. Kharnak, like most of the other nomad territories, is located in an isolated region on the eastern side of Ladakh, which is part of the eastern portion of India's most northerly

Shepherd
watercolour and etching
11 x 14 in
2002



state, Jammu-Kashmir, often referred to simply as Kashmir.

Ladakh's nomad tribes, practically the area's only inhabitants, live on the western edge of the huge central Asian massif called the Tibetan Plateau, an area Ladakh shares with Tibet. Ladakhis and Tibetans call this area Changthang – the land of the Changpa, or nomads. It is a massive area that, due to its altitude and remoteness, has stayed cut off from the rest of the world throughout its history. In reality the Tibetan Plateau or Changthang, at least where the Kharnakpa are, is less a plateau and more an endless stretch of rugged ranges, deep canyons, and ragged bluffs.

From its early origins through to the present day, Ladakh has always had a close connection with Tibet. By 100 AD, Ladakh and all of Kashmir was the established centre of Tibetan Buddhism in the Himalaya. Although presently Ladakh's political autonomy has been greatly eroded, in the 10th century it was strong enough to exist as an independent kingdom, separate from Tibet.

Nomads were believed to be the first people to enter Ladakh from Tibet with their herds of sheep and goats, a couple of thousand years ago, although exactly when is unknown. Some occupied an area above the 16,000-foot pass called Chang-La, and thus were given the name Changpa (*Chang* meaning north, *pa* meaning dwellers). The high altitudes they occupied came to be called Changthang (or “where the northern dwellers roam”). These first arrivals would have been followers of an early form of Buddhism called Bon that combined aspects of both shamanism (a belief in the ability to communicate with spirits) and animism (a belief that all things in nature have a soul).

Ladakh is the only area in India that could accurately be termed sparsely populated. Even though they are now under the political rule of a Hindu-dominated India nationally, and the state rule of a Muslim-dominated Jammu-Kashmir, the customs, food, dress, and physical appearance of Ladakhis, including the Kharnakpa, are Tibetan. Their language, Ladakhi, which is spoken by all the Tibetan Buddhists in Ladakh, is similarly related to Tibetan.

For two thousand years – in cold temperatures and heavy snows, in thin air and long droughts, between wars and invasions, and through modernity and encroachment – the Changpa have continued to travel the mountains of Changthang with their animals. How long the Kharnakpa have existed as a separate tribe of the Changpa is unknown.



Yagang, September 15, 2005
watercolour
6.5 x 9 in

The Kharnakpa dwell at a latitude roughly the same as Los Angeles, California. However, they are at an elevation of 15,000 to 16,000 feet above sea level. (Jet airliners fly at about 30,000 feet.) They are located two hundred kilometres from the Tibetan border and a surprisingly close eight hundred kilometres from Delhi. But in such an implacable fortress as the Himalaya, the Kharnakpa have as high a degree of insulation from the outside world as any people on the planet. Two parallel mountain ranges – the Ladakh to the northeast and the Zanskar to the southwest – surround and further guard their solitude.

AT 4:30 A.M., STILL WITHOUT ANY SIGN of morning light that I could see, a call went out across the valley. In unison, a grand stirring commenced over Spanchen's pitch-blackness. The entire tribe of Kharnakpa – each person and every family with their possessions atop their yaks, together with their dogs and horses – got up and started moving, as if one.

I was startled at the precision of it and even more perplexed, given the hour's lack of light. A military regiment could hardly have been more disciplined. All my personal stuff had been taken and loaded on a yak that was going, I hoped, in the same direction I was.

As I ventured a few paces away from the dancing shadows of the fire, I started laughing aloud: it was like walking with my eyes closed, I had no idea where I was going. My feet stumbled on rock outcrops, bits of unidentifiable things, and stuff that had the feel of fresh dung. The multitude of hooves that pounded the dry earth sounded like dead leaves on a tree, rustling in the wind.

Soon after we started, I heard the movement of something to my immediate left, but I didn't know who or what it was. A loud snort close to my ear fogged the side of my face. By the deep reverb from its exhale and the weight of its step, I assumed it to be a large male yak. I wiped my face and left my hand to protect my eyes against a possible goring from the beast's sharp horns and swinging head. Seemingly startled too, it bellowed in annoyance as its hooves clomped a hurried change of course.

We moved down and out of the valley of Spanchen and into a much grander river basin. We turned west and gradually the procession was silhouetted against the grey, east light of predawn. Fifty horseback riders, the newborn and the aged, nursing mothers and young men, assorted dogs and





Nomadic
oil on canvas
44 x 76 in
2005

small children emerged out of the land's darkness: two hundred people and a thousand yaks in a scene as old as the thread of human history.

The caravan moved at a slow but steady pace. At daybreak the sun's rays were caught in clouds of wind-whipped dust on the lee side of four thousand trudging hooves. A tapestry of nomadic life gradually came into view – archaic, textural, and tied tight to the quickened pulse of hope and fear. The sound of singing, whistling, and coaxing was countered with snorting, barking, and baying. Blackened cauldrons, kettles, burlap and silk, grain and rice, old Tibetan Buddhist prayer books, rich multicoloured carpets and blankets, yak-hair tents, brass ladles, wooden poles, butter churners, and other valued possessions were bundled and roped to the massive black forms of the male yaks.

Our route followed the invisible boundary line of the great divide – the planet's upper edge where humans and Mother Earth part company. Along the expanse of the Lungmoche Valley, stretched across two kilometres, a dark river of life flowed through desert sand – humans and beasts, bones and blood, parchment and wood, leather and silk. Our destination, about twenty kilometres away, was a place called Yagang. For the month to follow, it would be home for the Kharnakpa and provide a new fifteen-kilometre radius of lean grasslands for their animals.