JULIA CALFEE SPIRITS AND GHOSTS

JOURNEYS THROUGH MONGOLIA

Introduction by Antonin Kratochvil

SPIRITS AND GHOSTS
Journeys through Mongolia

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Journeys through Mongolia

Edited and with an Introduction by Antonin Kratochvil



To the SPIRITS
who protected and accompanied me on my journeys;
may they continue to do so

...And here were forests ancient as the hills, Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover! A savage place! as holy and enchanted...

-Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Kubla Khan

ONGOLIA: a country many of us have little on. Mention it to the majority and you'd be lucky if even the names Genghis or Kublai are spoken. At a stretch, it may bring back a memory of a color spread in a travel magazine long ago, or similarly force an account of the decorative costumes worn by the herdsmen of the Gobi, but for the most part, nothing. For many, "Mongolia" is just a word, and a space sitting between a former and a present superpower, in that of Russia and China. Little is known of this vast land, less stirs the mind of this relic that once was, and today hardly a thought can be cast to the enigma that is Mongolia.

My travels in photography have taken me to two Mongolias. In 1993 I journeyed to the country itself to shoot an essay on Ulaanbaatar's street children. Ulaanbaatar is Mongolia's capital, and the street children are the casualties of its collapse. Back then what hit me was the vacuum the country was reeling from. When the Soviet Union finally withered, the roots that had stretched into Mongolia withered too. The vacuum was the cooperatives and factories, installed to power its centrally-run economy, which had turned fallow and become broken-down through neglect. The vacuum was the urban expansion, its socialist-realism housing, and modern infrastructure that instead of exemplifying the success of its political philosophy embodied the stereotypical Orwellian nightmare: pollution, poverty, and more important, the loss of identity for a people whose ancestors once held the reins of the world's greatest empire. My images were saying the same thing, capturing the vagabond kids that inhabited the sewers. This was the vacuum, and the social experiment gone wrong; here was the place I journeyed to that first time; it was the first Mongolia.

I'd seen this societal free fall before; I'd lived it in the Czech Republic. The injection of ideology into the minds and habits of people, and then when it failed...nothing, just a hollowed-out colony, and just a group of living ghosts.

If my grasp of Mongolia wasn't enough, the actions of its people left no doubt: outsiders looking in were unwelcome! There were warnings. Prior to my arrival in Ulaanbaatar, a BBC cameraman had been severely beaten—he'd been looking in for too long. In some cultures shame goes hand in hand with appearance—like hope, it is let slide. Not so the Mongolians. There was suspicion everywhere, with scrutiny and disbelief aimed toward any stranger. If you weren't photographing reindeer and their keepers, throat singers, or dinosaur theme parks, you were looking in, at them, spying on their misery, and mocking their pride. I was fortunate to get the material I'd come for, and more fortunate to leave unscathed, if not a little uneasy from the ghosts inside their abandoned world.

In 1997 I met Julia Calfee. We'd been put together as student and teacher at a documentary photography workshop. Julia stood out from all the other students because of the images she'd brought. They were of Mongolia—a rarity for any photographer. The handful of brightly-colored shots I saw did little in the way of photography but the subject was unique. That summer a transformation took place: the conformity and structure that had restrained the message and aesthetic so evident in Julia's work turned into a passion for shooting gritty, off-the-cuff pictures. Added to this was an appreciation for working in black-and-white. This was the way I saw the world, and somehow it had rubbed off. I'm not sure how it happened, or why so quickly. I'd like to think it was my instruction, although there seems to be more to it. By the end of the workshop Julia had completely understood, and made the leap.

At the end of that summer she set out for the place in her pictures with a new understanding. With every homecoming, momentum gathered. Her understanding through experience was showing in the way she worked, and the Ziploc bags full of shot film proved it. The pictures were improving, but to see in this country completely she needed to go beyond its exotic facade. Twice more she went, and each time I called on her to look deeper. It worked. Her arrival a year later from the wilds of the country's plains, traveling beside a shaman, showed that this journey had pushed the project into another dimension. This time she had brought with her a country I'd only read about, unlike my images of its victims, and unlike *National Geographic*, Julia Calfee had revealed the supernatural and the shamans who bridge the void between the worlds of the living and that of the spirits. For me, it was the other Mongolia.

The land that sat amongst the contact sheets was mystical. Dark tents with candle-lit offerings tell of the Mongols' beliefs in the past that so governs their present. Animals, and nature blending into an energy so primitive it fills the soul entirely. In black-and-white the images had form and feeling, and were free from all color and its literal effects. Julia had found a road into Xanadu, but that wasn't enough. Mongolia was made up of many parts, each needing representation if the project was to address the questions that would bring truth as its final answer. To me, it seemed obvious that the division within Mongolia had come, on one side, in the subject matter I'd shot over half a decade before, and in this portal that Julia had returned back from. To compare the contrasts would go some ways to tying together the ancient with the present, the loss and the damage, and of course the spirits and the ghosts.

It has been a five-year commitment to this book. In that time I've watched its progress meander, and change moving quicker at times than at others, but never stopping. Julia never wavered, but kept on and pushed through. She remained uninhibited in her efforts and opened up to her subjects at every instance with every instinct. In putting the body of work together she has had to witness the jails, the dilapidation, and the cities, which in the culture of these nomads represent hell on earth—that was my job, to help her see this, to help her examine the human fallout and measure its tragedy, and to teach her to walk amongst ghosts.

As photography goes, especially photojournalism, her style is very contemporary, mixing blurs and shifting focus through the objects in her images, persuading you of a message or drawing out an emotion. And yet, with all this, the images remain direct, taking aim, giving the impression you exist in what sits open in front of you. The people within her pictures have been handled respectfully, as have those without any. Never has she lain in wait for a facial expression to illustrate a predetermined attitude such as anger, madness, or hostility. Julia is honest that way, shooting only the reality—not the agenda. But it is the landscapes where I think the unique shines amongst the unique. The cityscapes, the slender passages through low mountains, and not least of all, the desolate steppe. The landscapes speak from the manner in which they've been taken, uncluttered so that the emphasis is on little else but the land. In a way their emptiness allows the viewer to transpose what the other images in the book have inspired-it could be the sweeping hordes of Mongol soldiers, or a hunting party of bowmen and their enormous camps, moving with the seasons, the food supply, or the war to come. These landscapes move you to imagine this, and that the Monkh Khoh Tenger (Eternal Blue Heaven), which once reigned over the earth protecting the Mongol people, is hearing their wishes and receiving their communions. In Spirits and Ghosts, the landscapes symbolize the mystic.

This book is the work of a novice. It is the result of an awakening of a dormant talent. In traveling through Mongolia she has opened up, discovering perhaps as much about herself as the country itself. I was fortunate to travel along, like I said, in the contact sheets and amongst each frame, with every new twist and turn. I followed. I was a guide from my home in New York, steering her desire to its natural conclusion—the two of us were both doing something never done before, traveling together only in different ways.

—Antonin Kratochvil January, 2003

JOURNEYS THROUGH MONGOLIA

URBAN SCAPES	8
STEPPES	42
JOURNEY WITH A SHAMAN	74
SPIRITS	92
GOBI DESERT	102
GHOSTS	118
SKYSCAPE	158







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