

## How Far Away the Ground

Tibet is a dogcatcher's dream. At monasteries, whole stray populations are fed by monks who believe the dogs are reincarnations of monastics who failed to live nobly in previous lives. They lap up thin tsampa, barley gruel, laid out in stone bowls along the kora where the pilgrims pray. They sleep in the sun until its heat is too intense, then curl into the crevices of stones carved with the long fingers of Tibetan script.

Tourists are warned to wield pockets full of rocks to ward off savage dogs on the pilgrimage paths. But the dogs we see are always wary, uninterested, or sleeping, more timid than Tibetan children, who grab our arms and walk with us, pleading for pens. At Samye monastery, I can hear the pilgrims all night stomping and singing. At the edge of daylight, when I emerge from the guesthouse, I find only dogs where the circle of pilgrims had been—alert, sitting upright, as if in wait for scraps from their masters.

In our country obedient dogs guide the blind, and we're not inclined as the pilgrims are to carry a clump of ground meat around to toss to the fallen monks who suffer their latest incarnations. But outside of Lhasa, behind Sera monastery's southernmost boundary, we watched a dog crawl out onto a dry drainage pipe jutting from one of the monastery buildings, whining as a dog will do when its leash is tangled around a tree. I had stopped to take a photograph, thinking it an odd perch, some curious puzzle he'd gotten himself into. Looking through the lens, I saw the dog wrestle his hind legs free from where they anchored him to the building and paw at the air with his front legs.

I stopped watching just before he stumbled from the pipe. I closed my eyes and squeezed them shut. But I will never forget the sound his body made when it hit the shallow ditch below, the full weight of a living thing.

The dog started howling. He dragged his back body along the deepest part of the ditch as if the pain were something chasing him. He got himself upright in the front and shook as if he

was terribly cold before he collapsed again facing the whitewashed monastery wall. Three pilgrims who'd also witnessed this shook their heads and wandered off with their walking sticks.

James took my hand, and at first I wouldn't go. Couldn't. I could not imagine leaving him. The dog's yelping dug into me. It stalled my heart.

But we did leave. To interfere, to try to save him, I realized, was out of the question. He had had a look in his eye that only a dog with a monk's heart could. He knew how far away the ground was. We heard his cries until we were far above the fires and crossed a spring, where a young monk poured water onto a bald man's head and gave him two mouthfuls to drink, where an old pilgrim and his wife approached us, pointing to their throats, and we gave them our last two lozenges.