

PETER MATTHIESSEN

The Snow Leopard

Introduction by PICO IYER

PENGUIN BOOKS

THE SNOW LEOPARD

PETER MATTHIESSEN is the acclaimed author of numerous works of fiction and nonfiction. His accomplishments as a naturalist and explorer have resulted in more than a dozen books on natural history and the environment, including *The Tree Where Man Was Born*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award, and *The Snow Leopard*, which won it. His equally distinguished career as a fiction writer has produced a collection of stories and nine novels, among them *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, another National Book Award finalist, *Far Tortuga*, and *Shadow Country*. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

PICO IYER is the author of many books about travel and Asia, including *The Lady and the Monk*, *The Global Soul*, and, most recently, *The Open Road*, an exploration of globalism and the XIVth Dalai Lama.

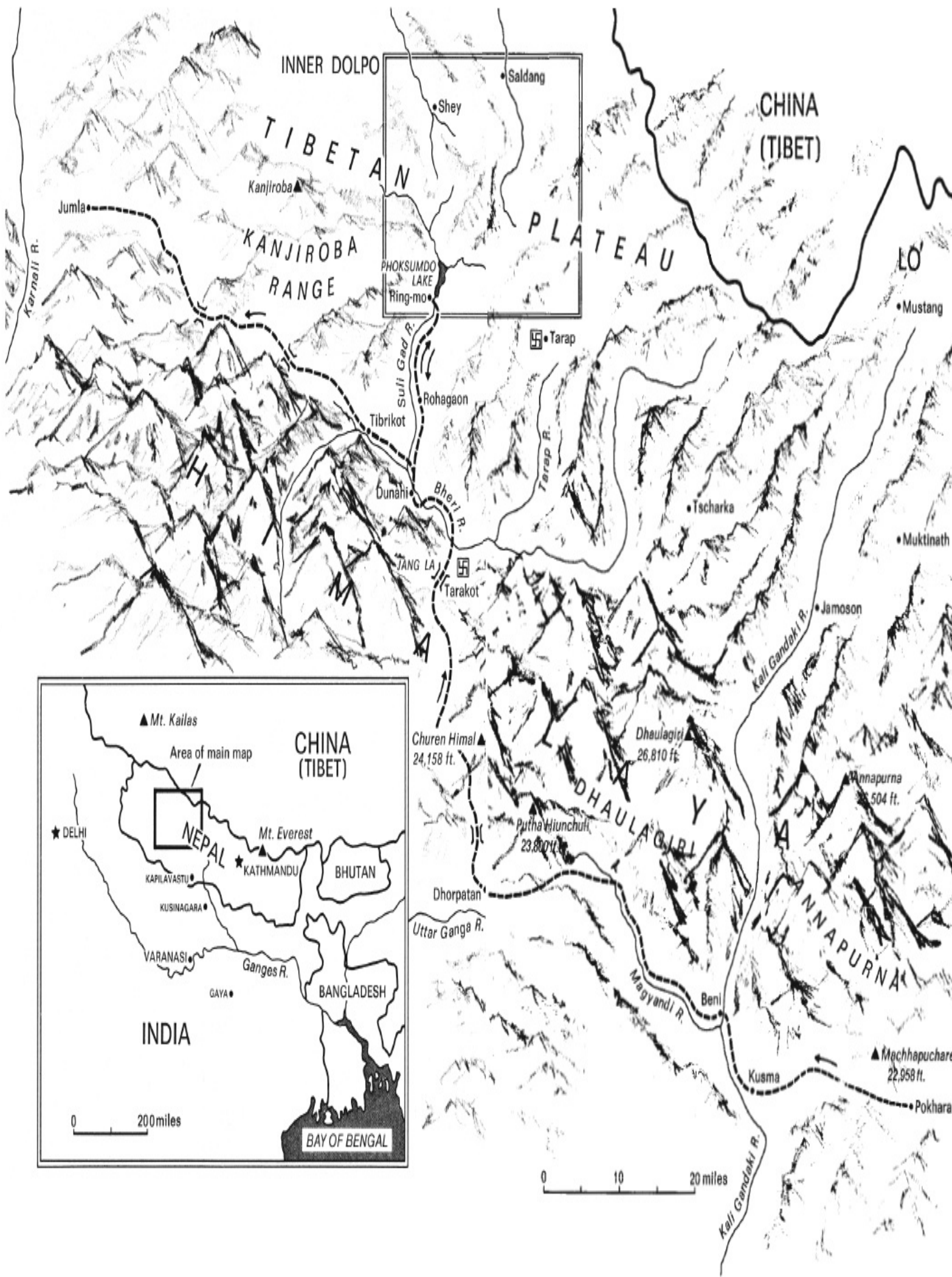
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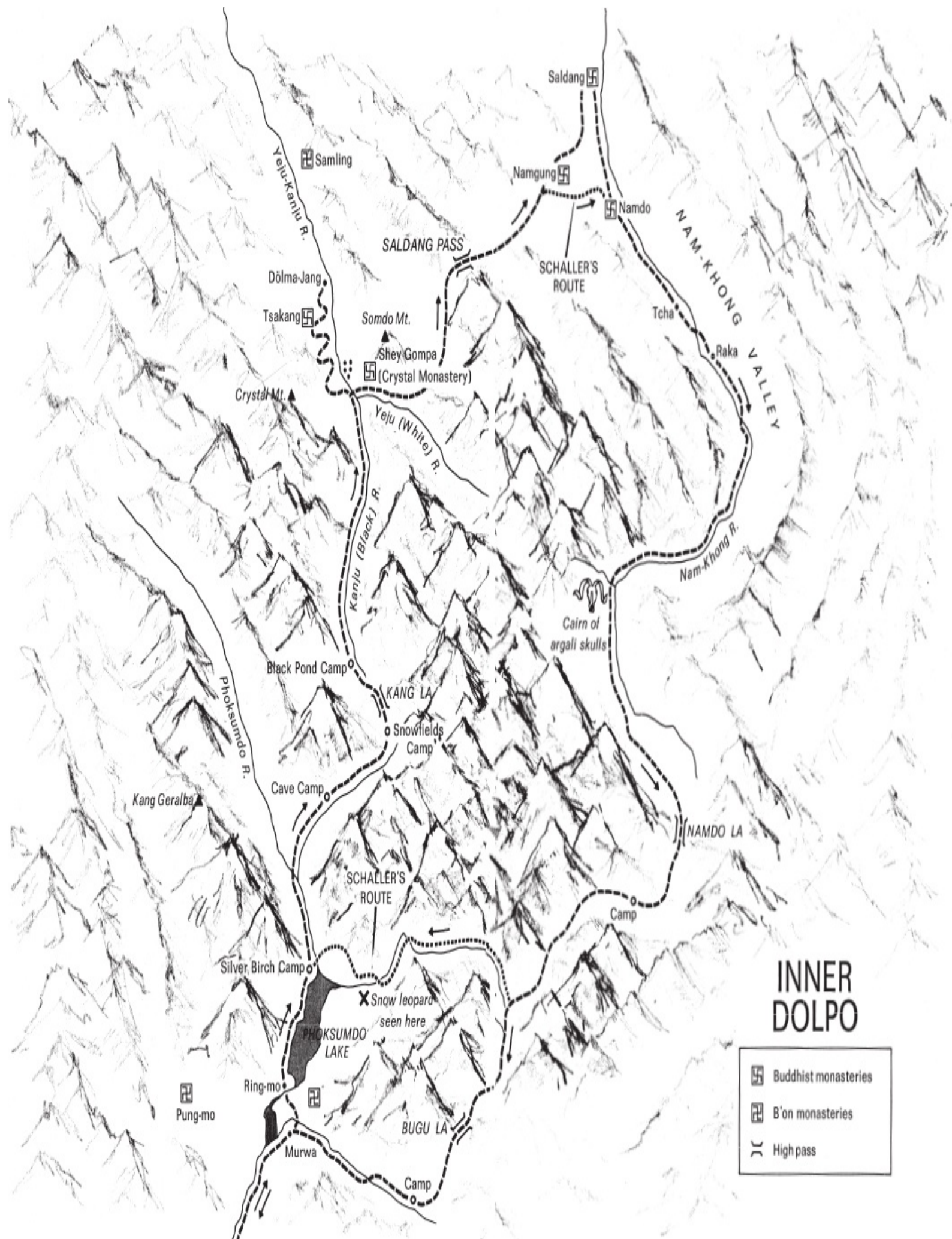
NONFICTION

Wildlife in America
The Cloud Forest
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Sal Si Puedes
The Wind Birds
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Sand Rivers
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Indian Country
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FICTION

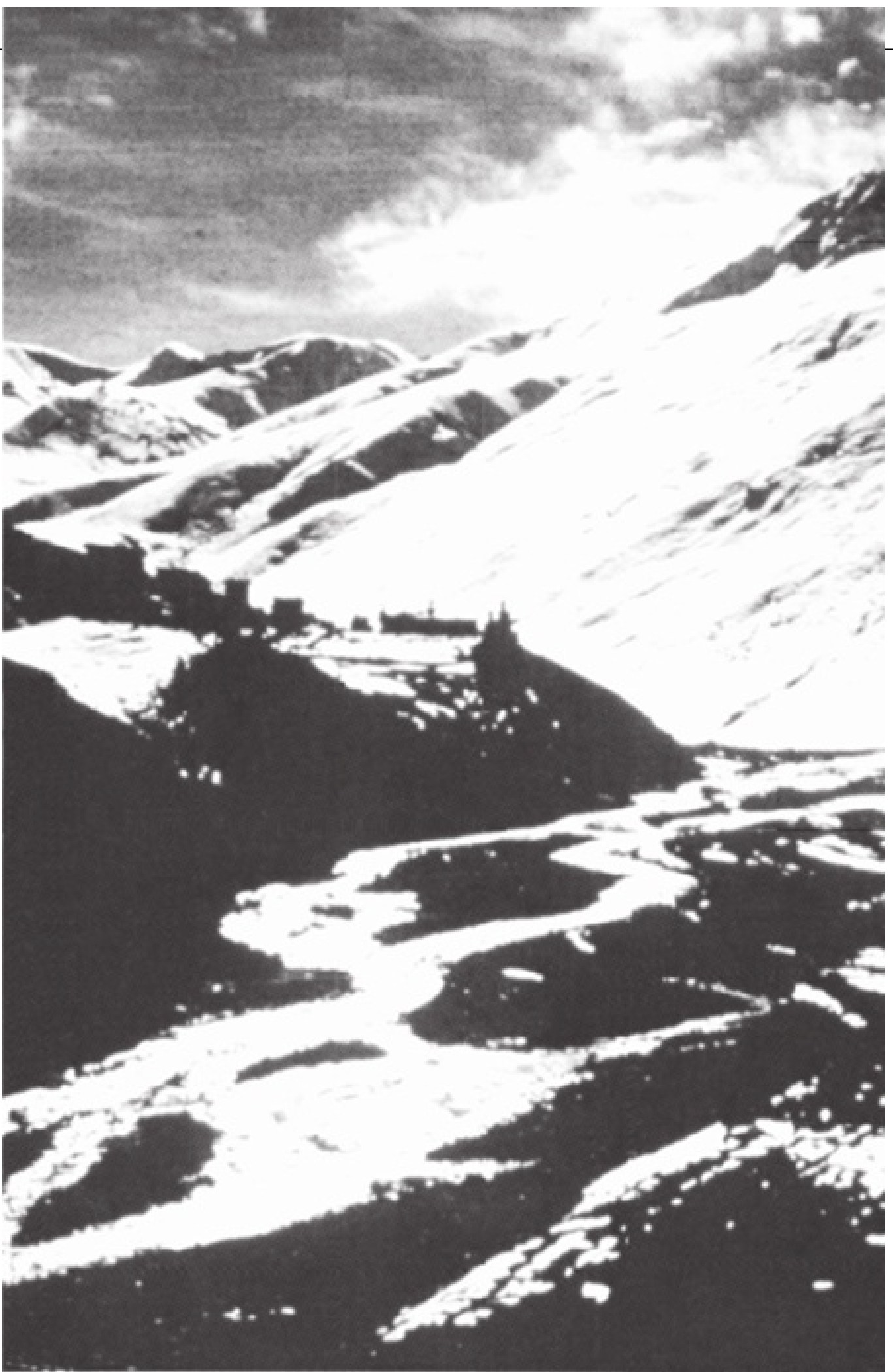
Race Rock
Partisans
Raditzer
At Play in the Fields of the Lord
Far Tortuga
On the River Styx and Other Stories
Killing Mister Watson
Lost Man's River
Bone by Bone
Shadow Country





INNER DOLPO

-  Buddhist monasteries
-  B'on monasteries
-  High pass



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For

Nakagawa Soen Roshi

Shimano Eido Roshi

Taizan Maezumi Roshi

GASSHO

*in gratitude, affection,
and respect*

This is at bottom the only courage that is demanded of us: to have courage for the most strange, the most singular and the most inexplicable that we may encounter. That mankind has in this sense been cowardly has done life endless harm; the experiences that are called "visions," the whole so-called "spirit-world," death, all those things that are so closely akin to us, have by daily parrying been so crowded out of life that the senses with which we could have grasped them are atrophied. To say nothing of God.

RAINER MARIA RILKE

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Acknowledgments

Especially I wish to thank George Schaller for inviting me to accompany him to Dolpo in the first place, for his excellent company during our journey, and for his assistance and good counsel ever since. Dr. Schaller has furnished the striking photograph that appears on the book's dust jacket and frontispiece, and has been kind enough to review the manuscript for errors of emphasis as well as of fact. Warm thanks are also due to Donald Hall, who was generous, painstaking, and inspiring in his comments at an early stage when candid opinion was crucial, to Maria Eckhart, who made sensible and constructive suggestions throughout the several drafts; and to Elisabeth Sifton, the book's editor at The Viking Press, whose dedication and warm, tough-minded, and incisive defense of the book against its author's meddling in the later stages made a great difference.

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The patient guidance of the three Zen masters to whom this book is dedicated and the various writings of such Tibetan scholars as Lama Anagarika Govinda, Dr. David Snellgrove, John Blofeld, and the late Dr. W. Y. Evans-Wentz have been drawn upon without restraint. Since I am no authority on Buddhism, I owe gratitude and thanks to Lama Govinda and to Tetsugen Sensei (with Taizan Maezumi Roshi) for generous and helpful comment on the manuscript, and to Robin Kornman, a student of Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, who inspected it for technical transgressions—fine doctrinal points, transliteration of Sanskrit and Tibetan terms, and other matters on which no two scholars seem able to agree. A number of inconsistencies doubtless remain, but I like to think these will not matter very much to those who understand why this book was written.

Finally, I should like to thank the many writers, poets, and explorers of the mind whose words have contributed to my understanding, whether or not they are identified here or in the Notes.

Sagaponack, New York
Winter, 1978

Introduction

LADDERS TO THE ROOF

The Snow Leopard begins, as many scientific logs do, with a map, and it ends with a set of scholarly notes and an index. It describes an expedition high into the almost unvisited land of Inner Dolpo, led by the eminent field biologist George Schaller, in search of the habits of the *bharal*, or rare Himalayan blue sheep. Its author, Peter Matthiessen, a “naturalist, explorer,” as his biography has it, takes pains to notice every “cocoa-coloured wood frog” the travelers pass along the way, to record the “pale lavender-blue winged blossoms of the orchid tree (*Bauhinia*).” When they pass human habitations, what he sees, typically, are “vacant children, listless adults, bent dogs and thin chickens in a litter of sagging shacks and rubble, mud, weeds, stagnant ditches . . .”

Yet even as the reader feels every pebble on the journey, and takes in every precisely recorded altitude and temperature, she catches, perhaps, the sound of a different kind of journey beginning to unfold just beneath the surface. “I climb on through grey daybreak worlds towards the light,” Matthiessen writes at one moment, and a little later he is in the realm of “snow and silence, wind and blue.” The journey seems increasingly to be to places not on any map, even as the team climbs and climbs toward its final way station, at 18,000 feet, near the Crystal Mountain. By the time the travelers get there, in fact, it is not the writer who is speaking to us so much as the sharpened skies, the deep blue silences, the startling clarity of a world of snow and rock. “All is moving, full of power, full of light.”

It is as if the authorship of the book is distributed among many beings, starting with the one in the foreground who is himself made up of many selves: a self-taught, serious naturalist who spent most of a year driving around the United States to produce a defining book called *Wildlife in America*; and a student later to be ordained as a Zen priest, whose everyday business it is to see past all the projections and delusions of the mind to the hard rock of the world that lies behind them. The book is clearly crafted by a journalist of the old school, whose range is so large that he can illuminate his way with references to Blake and Heisenberg, to Sufi and Native American lore; and yet in those same sentences it is being written by a seasoned novelist, whose job is clearly to transcribe the nature with us as well as without and, in fact, to see how the two are linked. And most of all—and most unusually—much of the journal-like narrative feels as if it were written by no controlling or directing hand at all, but just by the elements all around, so as to take us into that state when we’re fully absorbed, transparent to the world.

The haunting beauty of the book—what comes to make it a modern classic—has relatively little to do with the fact that it describes a land that few travelers had seen in 1973, and even catches a sound, the voice of the blue sheep, that, Peter Matthiessen suggests, has never been recorded before. It comes rather, from a rare mix of discovery and loss. The drama, the excitement of any classic record of an adventure comes from giving us the heart-pounding sense of traveling to some state, inner and outer, that few people have had the chance to see before; and yet what gives that a larger resonance here, and places it inside an elegant frame, is the sense, too, in every moment, that excitements fade, that everything moves on, that even the epiphanies and discoveries that seemed so exhilarating yesterday will soon be forgotten as the world flows on. You can’t hold on to anything.

The sensation is uncannily like that of traveling out to one of the great, many-storied buildings that stands alone against a mountainside across the Himalaya. You step into a chapel on the ground floor, and make out frescoes barely visible in the faint light, smell centuries of melted yak butter, see

the sun coming in great shafts through the dust to light up ancient Buddhas. Outside are short, steep ladders that lead to the next terrace, and the next. You climb up, past kitchens and schoolrooms and treasure halls and toilets, and finally you come to a flat rooftop from which you can see nothing, across a wide expanse, but the far-off snowcaps, the blue skies extending in every direction, the frayed prayer-flags snapping in the wind. You've entered the higher, clearer dimension that *The Snow Leopard* makes its (temporary) home.

I have been reading Peter Matthiessen's silver classic for more than a quarter of a century now, and every time I do, like any classic, it gives off a different light, growing as I do and shifting to meet the needs of every moment. As a writer on world affairs for *Time* magazine in my mid twenties, confined to a small office in midtown Manhattan, I was touched most by the sense of opening horizons, the journey to a place I'd hardly dreamed about. As a traveler who followed the book to Tibet and then Nepal, and later Bhutan and Tibet again and Ladakh, I found the places that I visited seen in a high and clarifying light. And then, when I started to write myself, I began to appreciate the way it tells so many stories at the same time, and does what only the very best of the writers of discovery—Pamuk, Kapuściński, Naipaul—do, which is to offer at once the story of a real, meticulously described trip, and also to outline a kind of ageless fable.

I was so moved by the book, in fact, that I left my comfortable office and went to live among the Zen monks of Kyoto, and there what I began to savor most acutely was the sheer physicality of the climb recorded, which returns us to an immediacy that lies behind the world of thoughts. The author crops his skull as he sets out, and occasionally walks barefoot as he leaves the world of roads. We feel the blisters on the climbers' feet, the leeches at their shins. I can see, all too clearly, the wet boots turned to "blocks of ice" in nights that descend to -20 degrees Fahrenheit.

The writer himself is stripped of all comfortable images of himself: he is reduced at times to scrambling on all fours and at one point finds himself, he mordantly notes, laboring under sixty pounds of lentils. This is a journey not away from reality but deeper into it, the better to feel its sting. At one extraordinary moment, the porters seem to be keeping themselves steady along a precipitous ledge by placing themselves in a trance.

And yet even as you feel the pinch and pull of this stripped-down life, another world is pricking at the corners of the sentences. Matthiessen has come to his starting place in Nepal by way of Varanasi, he tells us, the ancient Indian city where dead bodies are committed to the Ganges. On the team's first day out of town, the author encounters a corpse. Soon after that, "I nod to death in passing, aware of the sound of my own feet upon the path." We read, tucked into one tight-lipped sentence early on, that his wife, Deborah Love, died of cancer the previous winter.

So even as the climb proceeds, we realize that the "path" that Matthiessen has referred to is an inner as well as an outer one. The area where the travelers are walking is, as it happens, only thirty miles from where Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, was born. And so, almost inevitably, the author is traveling into the very philosophy that the Buddha began to outline (and his late wife began to introduce to him), an understanding of reality and suffering. The Buddha himself was a "wanderer," we're told, whose path took him into the "unsentimental embrace of all existence." His first major awakening occurred when, slipping out of the golden palace where his father tried to keep him, he got his first glimpse of sickness, infirmity, and death.

Matthiessen is no "seeker," he assures us—and we sense that he's much too unsparing and precise an observer to entertain any notions of a never-never land. And yet, as the landscape begins to clear out—no roads, no watches, no reminders of the modern world—he is better able to see, incontestably, traces of another realm. "From the forest comes the sound of bells." The river the travelers cross is

named after the Hindu goddess of destruction. At every step, Matthiessen is carrying “a dim, restless foreboding” and an occasional glimpse of “the lost paradise of our ‘true nature.’”

It is not worth the while to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar, Henry David Thoreau famously declared, after completing his long journey to a place only a mile and a half from his home—it’s no coincidence, surely, that this same Thoreau was the one who helped to bring Buddhism into America by cotranslating the Lotus Sutra from the French in 1844. And it’s not worth the while to go round the world to count the cats in Inner Dolpo, especially if, like Matthiessen, you’re not a professional field biologist. Yet as he climbs, you begin to see that the real, elusive animal he seeks out—or one of them—is within. And as he starts to think back to his wife and to address head-on the questions and tendencies in himself that he might try to duck at home, we notice that this author is not about to gloss over anything in the inner, as well as the outer, landscape. At one point he is tempted to push his loyal friend Schaller off a cliff; at another he sees himself as just a “haunted animal.” He even confesses to one of the greater afflictions among those in search of truth, which is the hope that he will come upon some great revelation or teacher, which those in the game call spiritual ambition.

At another point, piercingly, Matthiessen recalls his eight-year-old son back home, and quotes a letter—a heart-tuggingly sweet and charming letter—from the boy, Alex, who signs himself, “Your sun.” When Matthiessen had decided to take off into the Himalaya, his little boy’s response had been “Too long!” and he had begun to tear up in spite of himself. The eight-year-old has already lost his mother, suddenly; now, he might reasonably feel he’s losing his only other parent.

Matthiessen tells his boy that he’ll be back by Thanksgiving. Yet as the journey progresses, and as we climb toward the intensities and challenges the book so beautifully records, we notice that the days are flying by and there is no hope of him returning in time to spend Thanksgiving with his son. Hostage to the needs of the expedition, and putting the requirements of the group before his own, the traveler has had to stay away even longer than imagined and returned to his son (as I learned later) two weeks after the promised day. Sometimes we have to move away from that which we love most.

I have met a few readers over the years, especially mothers, who remain upset by that moment, and choose not to recall the fact that one of the hardest things about the Buddha’s devotion to the truth is that he had to leave his beloved wife and son behind. Yet what moves me, every time I read the book, is that Matthiessen elects to include in his story a letter and a moment that will show him in a highly unflattering light. Most travelers are guilty of a kind of infidelity when they leave their homes and loved ones, their other lives, in order to undertake a long and perilous journey—and almost all of them (I know as someone who writes about travel myself) choose to keep out from their records the less exalted, human trade-off. We like to present ourselves as conquering heroes, or lone wolves taking on the world in all its terror; we will use any literary device we can to keep out of the text the ones waiting for us at home, or the truth of what is always an uneasy compromise.

Matthiessen, by contrast—and this is part of the honesty and unflinchingness that I take the book and the climb to be about—tells us whom he’s letting down. He notes, un sentimentally, that he and his late wife had come close to divorce only five months before her death. And as the climb goes on, he keeps thinking back to Alex and Deborah, more and more, sees his boy dressing up (as a skeleton) for Halloween, is suddenly taken back to him even when he hears a woodpecker. And part of the tension of the book, at least for me, comes not in wondering if the team’s provisions will run out, if the passes will be shut off by snow, if the porters will return—though all are real and vivid dangers—but in seeing what it is Matthiessen will find to bring back to compensate for his sadly delayed return. The sweet letter, included where a less forthright author would omit it, ensures that this will not be a tale of ordinary heroism.

The Snow Leopard is a liberating book, I am tempted to say, in part because it is not about everyday goodness. It features some of the most transcendent, light-filled moments in modern prose, and yet it is, in the same breath, and at every turn, about anger and pain and fear, and its protagonist is as impatient and far from Buddhist tolerance on his way down from his transcendent moments as on his way up. In that sense, it's a journey into humanity, which Matthiessen is wise enough to see as lying on the other side of the mountains from sainthood (courage, as they say, refers not to the man who's never scared, but to the one who's scared and yet braves the challenge nevertheless). In all these regards, and as part of the doctrine of hard realism, it is only right that the door to the Crystal Monastery is locked, that the lama that Matthiessen has been longing to meet for so long turns out to be "the crippled monk who was curing the goat skin in yak butter and brains" that he walked past, and that it is after the mists clear and his soul is cleansed by the Crystal Mountain that he writes, "I feel mutilated, murderous; I am in a fury of dark energies, with no control at all on my short temper."

It is in that context that the most powerful character in the book is the stealthy, unassimilable presence among the party known as Tukten. A Sherpa among the porters, a spirit that no one is entirely comfortable with, a man who has the feel of a sorcerer and is accused of being a thief, Tukten is the most slippery and unsettling presence in the mountains, and his air of threat sometimes seems more charged and intense than that of the elements themselves. And yet, for all of that, he is the author's shadow and, you could say, familiar. He is "somehow known to me, like a dim figure from another life," and the two of them seem linked, always aware of where the other is. Milarepa, the great poet-saint of Tibet, was said once to have converted himself into a snow leopard to confound his enemies; reading Peter Matthiessen, we begin to suspect that a snow leopard has chosen to turn himself into Tukten, who always remains solitary and unknowable, "the most mysterious of the great cats." What moves me on rereading the book is that Matthiessen calls Tukten—twice—"our evil monk," the "our" perhaps the most unnerving word of all ("This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine," as Prospero says of Caliban).

Tukten appeals to Matthiessen, even perhaps teaches him (more than does the obviously wise but matter-of-fact lama of Shey) by taking everything in his stride, as the way things are; he will look unmoved, Matthiessen says, on "rape or resurrection." Not the least of the charms of the book is that the author, who never gives himself the last word and who shows himself in all his foolishness and unfairness, is constantly learning from the people around him—noting how Schaller happily devours his last ration of chocolate, even as the author is protectively holding on to his, registering how a Sherpa, when his pack falls into a river, greets the catastrophe by laughing aloud. The lessons of the journey into the Himalaya, again, come not just from the famously uplifting mountains but from the fallen yet steadfast, practical, down-to-earth people who walk among them.

The central feature of the practice of meditation and hard work known as Zen is that, as Matthiessen says, it "has no patience with 'mysticism,' far less the occult." Nor does it have any time for moralism, the prescriptions or distortions we would impose on the world, obscuring it from our view. It asks, it insists rather, that we take this moment for what it is, undistracted, and not cloud it with needless worries of what might have been or fantasies of what might come to be. It is, essentially, a training in the real, what lies beyond our ideas (and they are only ideas) of good and bad. "The Universe itself is the scripture of Zen," as Matthiessen puts it, and the discipline initiates its practitioners in the clear, unambiguous realization that what is, is; the world (enlightenment, happiness) is just that lammergeier in the sky, this piece of dung, that churning river, all of which have life and blood as our perceptions or ideas of them do not.

In that regard, *The Snow Leopard* records a journey into real life and into the life that lies on the far side of our notions, our ceaseless chatter. Up near the Crystal Mountain, creating a home-made meditation shelter for himself (he says earlier that sometimes he is pushed to do Zen practice just

because it is so cold), Matthiessen enters at last a moment that seems to open up unendingly. “These hard rocks instruct my bones in what my brain could never grasp.” This involves, as he writes of the Buddha, a deeply unsentimental embrace of all existence: prayer flags are “worn to wisps by wind,” the lama is dressed in “ancient laceless shoes” and a jacket “patched with burlap,” feasts in this barrenness consist of “sun-dried green yak cheese.” And yet, one feels, for those few days, in a “world above the clouds”—not having seen a mirror for weeks—the author enters a world that can’t be argued away.

It can be so exciting—such a breath, quite literally, of fresh air—to enter this world, as real as a blister and yet an allegory of sorts (when he takes leave of Schaller, all Matthiessen can see as he moves away is “the black emblem of a man against the sun, as in a dream”), that it is easy to overlook the extraordinary care and craft that underlie the book. And that is fine. William Shawn’s *New Yorker*, which sponsored most of Matthiessen’s natural expeditions, including this one, trained the writer in drawing attention to the world he was reporting, not himself; Zen does much the same, making the ego seem small and laughable in the context of the natural truths all around it. The point of *The Snow Leopard* is, much more than in most books, to lose sight of the author and his language so as to feel the silver light of the mountains, the blue sky opening above, the silence and the clarity.

Yet look more closely at the text, and you enjoy a different kind of wonder, akin to the one the author feels in reading every fig tree and macaque. Early on in the narrative we read of how rain “comes and goes.” Roughly fifty pages and many lifetimes later, the sun “comes and goes.” This stands, we realize, for the changeable condition of the elements in the high mountains; everything is ephemeral. Yet we also notice, if we’re paying attention, that the phrase itself keeps coming and going through the book and, a little later, “tears and laughter come and go.” It hardly matters that “coming and going” is almost the first principle of Zen, the phrase you find in every Zen master’s haiku; the point is that the words themselves tell us not to take the mood too seriously. “I don’t trust my inner feelings,” Leonard Cohen tells us in a late song, having lived as a Zen monk on a lonely mountain, “inner feelings come and go.”

“There is no wisp of cloud—clear, clear, clear, clear,” Matthiessen writes at another point on the high mountain, and one realizes that a less confident writer would have tried to decorate or vary the sentence, would never have had the courage to repeat the same simple word four times, as if to take us to a place where all words give out. “It is the precise bite and feel and sound of every step that fills me with life,” Matthiessen writes elsewhere, and the reader might notice how it is the precise monosyllables—the strict bark of “bite and feel and sound”—that fill the prose with life and bring us very close to the earth.

You can enjoy *The Snow Leopard* without responding to any of this, and yet, if you are so inclined, *The Snow Leopard* offers a kind of handbook into how precision and attention work, and how language, at its best, disappears inside the very things it describes. Perhaps my favorite moment in the entire work comes when Matthiessen writes, “I grow into these mountains like a moss. I am bewitched,” and then, after the two short, simple sentences beginning with “I,” there comes a great, rolling sentence that takes in the “blinding snow peaks and the clarion air, the sound of earth and heaven in the silence, the requiem birds, the mythic beasts, the flags, great horns, and old carved stones, the rough-hewn Tartars in their braids and homespun boots, the silver ice in the black river, the Kang, the Crystal Mountain.”

In the very language, in other words, the “I” is subsumed in all the great forces around it, and everything becomes a single breath. Better yet, none of the immemorial presences that swallow up the I are without their shadow sides (the “requiem birds,” the “black river,” the Crystal Mountain, which

has just been described as a “castle of dread”). We recall how, in the midst of his transports, Matthiessen writes of a “doomsday sun,” a “silver bird of night,” even the “whisper of the shroud,” so that we never forget that one of his main companions on the journey is Death. The sentence enacts the very fading of the I into the mountain.

I could go on and on finding examples of how, in its sentences, this rich, dense book teaches us to be observant, to stay close to the ground, to think of the reader before the self (and yet in doing so not to bypass the self and all its crevices and dark spots entirely). But this is an introduction only to grace that the reader can savor for herself.

As the book concludes, I think the reader has learned something about the nature (you could say the folly) of expectation and the beauty of that truth that all expectations and ideas often cover up. We see the snow leopard’s prints, we feel its presence everywhere, but we realize that the sighting of the rare animal isn’t important at all (the author has begun to sight the rare animal, more germane to his purposes, that is himself). We see that teachers may come where you don’t look for them—in yellow-eyed men who seem to be demons—and that the temples that are full of all wisdom in ancient lands are locked. We realize—and this, I think, is the most important point of *The Snow Leopard*, and begin to bring us back to Alex—how much every trip that really sustains us is in fact a journey home. The author, setting out, feels constantly the presence of some “inner garden” to which he’s lost the key; but the time he comes down, something has been put to rest—or clarified, if only for a moment—and the author has, perhaps, something to bring back to his boy that probably he could never have shared with him if he’d stayed home, more conventionally “good.”

Most of all, he—and surely we, too—have learned that there are no happy endings, or endings at all; everything is in constant movement, and even the understandings that seemed so immortal near the Crystal Mountain are soon far behind as “I trudge and pant and climb and slip and climb and gasp dull as any brute” (every word a monosyllable again, one realizes). Matthiessen appears to have learned nothing at all as he descends, pissing on a dog who attacked him a month before, failing to recognize a family he’s already met, still cursing at others, not only himself. The people around him “hawk and piss and spit” and as he wanders back through the seasons, from winter to autumn and then into summer, back into the world of clocks, he is greeted by “fresh frog mud” and “sweet chicken dung.”

And yet something has been registered, one feels, if only a deeper meaning in the enigmatic koan his Zen teacher had given him before he left: “All the peaks are covered with snow—why is this one bare?” The trip in search of the elusive animal that the author keeps just missing has taught readers something that, for some at least, becomes a place, or a truth, they never leave. And just before the end, at last, the story of Deborah Love’s death is fully told, and in the telling is accepted. In the precious days Matthiessen spends close to the Crystal Mountain, sitting still, the “sound of rivers comes and goes and falls and rises, like the wind itself.” And in the years since, readers and leaders and books have come and gone and fallen and risen, ceaselessly, and yet beneath all that, the mountain, the image of the leopard, the beauty of this modern classic continue, silently, to endure.

PICO IYI

Nara, Japan
November 2007

The Snow Leopard

prologue



In late September of 1973, I set out with GS on a journey to the Crystal Mountain, walking west under Annapurna and north along the Kali Gandaki River, then west and north again, around the Dhaulagiri peaks and across the Kanjiroba, two hundred and fifty miles or more to the Land of Dolpo, on the Tibetan Plateau.

GS is the zoologist George Schaller. I knew him first in 1969, in the Serengeti Plain of East Africa where he was working on his celebrated study of the lion.^{1*} When I saw him next, in New York City in the spring of 1972, he had started a survey of wild sheep and goats and their near relatives the goat antelopes. He wondered if I might like to join him the following year on an expedition to northwest Nepal, near the frontier of Tibet, to study the bharal, or Himalayan blue sheep; it was his feeling, which he meant to confirm, that this strange “sheep” of remote ranges was actually less sheep than goat, and perhaps quite close to the archetypal ancestor of both. We would go in the autumn to observe the animals in rut, since the eating and sleeping that occupied them throughout the remainder of the year gave almost no clue to evolution and comparative behavior. Near Shey Gompa, “Crystal Monastery,” where the Buddhist lama had forbidden people to molest them, the bharal were said to be numerous and easily observed. And where bharal were numerous, there was bound to appear that rarest and most beautiful of the great cats, the snow leopard. GS knew of only two Westerners—he was one—who had laid eyes on the Himalayan snow leopard in the past twenty-five years; the hope of glimpsing this near-mythic beast in the snow mountains was reason enough for the entire journey.

Twelve years before, on a visit to Nepal, I had seen those astonishing snow peaks to the north; to close that distance, to go step by step across the greatest range on earth to somewhere called the Crystal Mountain, was a true pilgrimage, a journey of the heart. Since the usurpation of Tibet by the Chinese, the Land of Dolpo, all but unknown to Westerners even today, was said to be the last enclave of pure Tibetan culture left on earth, and Tibetan culture was the last citadel of “all that present-day humanity is longing for, either because it has been lost or not yet been realized or because it is in danger of disappearing from human sight: the stability of a tradition, which has its roots not only in a historical or cultural past, but within the innermost being of man. . . .”² The Lama of Shey, the most revered of all the *rinpoches*, the “precious ones,” in Dolpo, had remained in seclusion when a scholar of Tibetan religions³ reached the Crystal Monastery seventeen years ago, but surely our own luck would be better.

On the way to Nepal, I stopped at Varanasi, the holy city on the Ganges, and visited the Buddhist shrines at Bodh Gaya and Sarnath. In those monsoon days of mid-September, the brown heat of India was awesome, and after a few days on the Ganges Plain, I was glad to fly north to Kathmandu, in the green foothills of the Himalayan wall. That day was clear, and among the temple spires and tiered pagodas, black kites and red veered on the wind. The dry air at 4000 feet was a great relief from the humidity of India, but in the north the peaks were hidden by thick clouds of the monsoon, and by evening it was raining.

I found GS at the hotel. We had not met in a year or more, our last correspondence had been in midsummer, and he was relieved that I had turned up without mishap. For the next two hours we talked so intensely that I wondered later if there was anything left to speak about in the months ahead: we shall have no company but each other, and we do not know each other very well. (Of GS, I had written earlier that “he is single-minded, not easy to know,” and “a stern pragmatist, unable to muster up much grace in the face of unscientific attitudes; he takes a hard-eyed look at almost everything.” He was also described as a “lean, intent young man,”⁴ and I find him as lean and as intent as ever.)

The rains prevailed throughout the last three days in Kathmandu. GS was desperate to get under way, not only because he loathes all cities but because winter comes early to the Himalaya, and these

rains of the monsoon would bring heavy snow to the high passes between this place and our destination. (We later learned that the October rains set an all-time record.) Months before, he had applied for permission to enter Dolpo, but only now, on the final day, were permits granted. Last letters were written and sent off; there would be no mail where we were going. All excess gear and clothing were discarded, and traveler's checks exchanged for small rupee notes by the dirty packet, since large bills have no currency among the hill peoples. With our Sherpa camp assistants, we packed tents and pots, and bargained for last-minute supplies in the Oriental rumpus of the Asan Bazaar, where in 1961 I had bought a small bronze Buddha, green with age. My wife and I were to become students of Zen Buddhism, and the green bronze Buddha from Kathmandu was the one I chose for a small altar in Deborah's room in the New York hospital where she died last year of cancer, in the winter.

In the early morning of September 26, in a hard rain, with a driver, two Sherpas, and all expedition gear, we packed ourselves into the Land Rover that would carry us as far as Pokhara; two more Sherpas and five Tamang porters were to come next day by bus, in time for departure from Pokhara on the twenty-eighth. But all arrivals and departures were in doubt; it had rained without relent for thirty hours. In the calamitous weather, the journey was losing all reality, and the warm smile of a pretty tourist at the hotel desk unsettled me; where did I imagine I was going, where and why?

From Kathmandu there is a road through Gorkha country to Pokhara, in the central foothills; farther west, no roads exist at all. The road winds through steep gorges of the Trisuli River, now in torrent; dirty whitecaps filled the rapids, and the brown flood was thickened every little while by thunderous rockslides down the walls of the ravine. Repeatedly the rocks fell on the road: the driver would wait for the slide to ease, then snake his way through the debris, while all heads peered at the boulders poised overhead. In raining mountains, a group of shrouded figures passed, bearing a corpse and the sight aroused a dim, restless foreboding.

After midday, the rain eased, and the Land Rover rode into Pokhara on a shaft of storm light. Next day there was humid sun and shifting southern skies, but to the north a deep tumult of swirling grays was all that could be seen of the Himalaya. At dusk, white egrets flapped across the sunken clouds, now black with rain; on earth, the dark had come. Then, four miles above these mud streets of the lowlands, at a point so high as to seem overhead, a luminous whiteness shone—the light of snows. Glaciers loomed and vanished in the grays, and the sky parted, and the snow cone of Machhapuchare glistened like a spire of a higher kingdom.

In the night, the stars convened, and the vast ghost of Machhapuchare radiated light, although there was no moon. In the shed where we lay down, behind a sort of inn, there were mosquitoes. My friend, dreaming, cried out in his sleep. Restless, I went out at daybreak and saw three peaks of Annapurna, soaring clear of low, soft clouds. This day we would depart for the northwest.

westward



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