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Night Thoughts on the Grasslands near Ulaanbaatar. DR. SONG JIA JUN

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Leaning leisurely outside a herdsman's yurt, I sip mellow fermented mare's milk, savour handmade curd cheese to soothe my spirit, and ease the weariness of travel with steaming hot hand-held mutton. The evening breeze carries the pure breath of the steppe, time drifts gently, and all my fatigue melts away entirely. Slightly intoxicated and calm at heart, all worldly worries and mortal troubles fade quietly amid this boundless wilderness.

The sun dips westward, painting the whole sky with sunset glow. Crimson radiance stretches across a thousand li of grassland, spreading over the green plains like scattered embers,

merging heaven and earth into one scene, grand yet tender.

Breeze sweeps the open steppe, and all things settle into peace. Gentle birdsong drifts intermittently through the dusk; the lead ram guides the flock ambling back to the fold, their steps unhurried. Sporadic barks of herd dogs echo across the wilderness, as if reporting safety to their master, infusing the quiet twilight with warm mortal liveliness.

Outside the yurt lies a stretch of untouched lush turf dotted with wildflowers in scattered clusters, layered in soft hues and delicate in form. Grass blades hold fresh dew, blossoms exude sweet fragrance; when the wind stirs, the sweet scent drifts far and wide, cleansing my breath and calming my soul.

The last streak of sunset sinks into night, and soft dusk drapes the vast steppe. My thoughts wander freely with the falling night, blending into the quiet grassland beneath the sea of stars. The breeze brushes my cheeks and strokes my heart, smoothing the numbness and weariness forged by years, gifting me a peace and clarity I have never known before.

Lost in this distant reverie, a light tap falls upon my shoulder, pulling my wandering mind back to reality. It is my warm, honest herdsman host, calling me with a gentle smile. He takes my hand and leads me to the stack of firewood beside the yurt. Together we gather kindling and light a bright bonfire.

Flames leap high, spilling warm comfort. I sit around the fire with the herdsman's whole family and their two loyal sheepdogs. Dry firewood crackles softly; dancing firelight gilds their simple, sincere faces and chases the chill of the steppe night away.

The host picks up his morin khuur, and slow, melodious tones flow forth. His original piece Grassland Reverie unfolds, tender yet vast and faintly melancholic. The music sings of the steppe's ancient past, its simple present life, and hopes for peaceful days ahead.

I listen closely, savouring this unique sound of the grasslands. The bonfire warms my eyes, the melody enchants my soul. Down below, firelight lights our little corner of the world; overhead, a bright moon hangs high above crystal-clear stars. I close my eyes and let the melody wrap around me, shedding all restlessness and filling my heart with gentle warmth. Carried by the music, my thoughts drift across endless grasslands, over mountains and rivers, toward the far horizon.

The night grows serene, the starry sky boundless, and the wilderness unfolds like an earthly poem, a paradise on earth.

Not far away, a small river winds onward, its surface shimmering under faint moonlight as the current carries silver ripples forward. Breezes skitter across the water, stirring delicate waves. Distant frog croaks echo softly in the dark; they do not break the peace, only render the steppe night quieter, more ethereal and timeless.

Enchanted by the moment, my heart sinks deep into this beauty.

I am drunk on the breeze, the starlight, the fiddle tunes, and this tender, boundless night

outside Ulaanbaatar.

May I dream of the grasslands forever, never to wake.