

Mongolian Death Worm

40 ONE—They say in the dry flats of Mongolia, underneath the burning sun, burrows the Unnameable. Four feet long, or eight feet long, or two feet long, a pale, pudgy worm the mention of which brings death. It is not necessary to touch it to be killed by it; some say it spits poison, others that it emanates rings of death, like a radio. That no one has ever caught one should be no surprise; that no one who has seen one directly can be found should also produce in you yawns of recognition. I have lost interest already, in these few lines. I have been pausing for so long after each period, and nearly as long after each comma, there's no reason for you to still be here. There's nothing more to learn about the worm.

TWO—I did once try to find the Unnameable, years ago, but there is no reason to go on about it, and nothing for you to learn by reading any more. The plains were endless, and empty, the sun pressed down with all its might on the sandy scraps of grass. My guides fell into torpor after seven days and refused to speak. I learned more from their horses, who were ribald and entertaining. One evening as the red sun burrowed into the crumbly hills the oldest guide shrieked and fell from his saddle, clutching his eyes. A great cacophony rose up from the horses' blustering lips and a rare species of bright red bat rose up from the grass. But that is where the Definitive ends. After that came nightfall. Speculation.

THREE—The riders I encountered in the desert had fabulously gaudy tents. Their horses slept in them, or stayed awake with bickering and wagers, but the riders would not sleep in the tents because they had no floors. When I asked what they were afraid of, they moved their fingers across their lips as if to signify a zipper, though I never saw a zipper in Mongolia. When, one bitter morning, we entered the tents to see why the horses had not joined us for breakfast and found them all dead, the riders quailed and zipped their lips. But I was unconvinced. Many mysterious things can occur in a tent full of horses.