

## Grant Buday / LABYRINTH

Beyond the stream they disappeared into the mist lying thick between the almond trees. I slumped back against the bank, beneath my favourite bridge with its smell of damp timber, alone with my flagon of Manchurian Dragon's Fire. The sun had not yet risen from behind the mountains encircling the valley. The only sounds are the waterfall's faint roar there, high in the rocks, and the water slipping past my feet.

*Why had I not been more suspicious? For now we've entered the old man's palace, eaten, been entertained, taken on debt. You old liar. Take this robe back, your robe and your slippers. Prying them from my heels I kicked them off. And, carefully, poured wine down my chest so pleasant and warm from keeping it so close. I watched it colour and spread. Lolling back on the rocks of the bank is how Georgio will find me this time. "Georgio!" I crowed.*

But no. Clutching my bottle I crawled out, and brushing the dirt from my ass and beard, I scrambled up the bank onto the grass. *I know how I should do it. Dump these clothes on his feet, dirty and wet, and naked, naked! Turn and leave. Let him play his games and make his offers to the next fool to wander past his mud-baked walls.*

I took a drink, it spilled down my neck and throat. Then, swinging the bottle, I danced! *A step we used to do in the spring. In Venice! That rancid clam smell of the canals, the wet stone of buildings in the fog and:*

Pease pudding hot, pease pudding cold,  
Pease pudding in the pot, nine days old.

*Seventeen years.*

*Look at these hands. Ill-chewed nails, fingers that practised flute. Seventeen years of collecting experiences like coins, turning them, holding them to the light. I might be wealthy had I stayed in Venice.*

The tears surged up again. I raised my fists. "And now you want to keep me here? Here!" They dropped down to my sides, the wine sloshing in the bottle. I wiped the groping of imagined fingers from

my shoulders. *And who was it the Khan's servants just buried in the almond grove unaware of me watching? His hair was pale as beach sand. We had not seen him. Or once heard rumour of another foreigner.*

I looked up. They had all disappeared, Orion and all the stars. *Sunrise used to be my favourite. Until I saw through the mask of pale rose hiding your true face. Never a pause to reconsider the beginning of yet another day?*

The final dribble of wine. I spat the muck of sediment and flung the porcelain bottle into the stream where it shattered on a rock. Wandering the hills and stumbling through the paddies outside the Khan's walls, I suffered my own acrid wine-breath. *This is where I end? A penniless drunkard?*

Then I stumbled upon them again. The monks.

Their shaven skulls and that unnatural smell of the odourless about them in their black-robed dance against a phantom opponent. Stooping as one, then rising as one, they held fists high, silent. *Are spirits so slow? So exact, to appear each morning in the guise of the mist beneath those almond trees, and pick up the battle from yesterday without end?*

I watched as they raised slippered feet and kicked, turned slow. Heard the sound of breathing, the twist of feet in the dirt. Pushing the leaden mist back, they advanced upon the spectre, warding off, and then striking downward as though slicing through a cloud.

*And all this we are to believe you learned from watching the battle between a swan and a serpent? To catch the fist as if it were an egg, with the most gentle of hands, and throw it back into your opponent's face, offering your handkerchief?*

Wading in amongst them I blundered: "Let me try! Turn, punch air — 'Snake Creeps Down,' you call this one?" But I staggered, and clutching at the sudden pain in my thigh, collapsed. I couldn't move, only shiver, like one of Amal Mu'haz's pithed toads.

A pair of hands set a cup of steaming tea nearby, and I felt the stoney ground pressing into my cheek. *Our monks, they never did this 'Tai Chi Chuan,' or moved with such grace as if through honey. They only shuffle down alleys, chins inside their cassocks, mumbling.*

\* \* \*

Awake since before dawn, a flutist, a player of the seven stringed ch'in, a man carrying a sonorous stone, and another with a skin drum, filed silently into the bedchamber. The flute and ch'in took their places behind the rice paper screen by the south window. The sonorous stone and the drum, behind the screen of indigo and yellow silk thread woven to the image of a peacock, at the north wall.

They waited.

Sun Sun approached the sleeping figure in the massive bed. With a choked gasping he started backward! Kublai Khan's eyes were wide open, and they had rolled back into his head. His mouth was twisted, his hand a stiffened claw upon the bedcovers. A tiny shriek and Sun Sun was at his side, but — the Khan was rolling over, turning his back to the old servant and murmuring in his sleep. After a few moments of wringing his hands and peering about, he slipped from the bedside and motioned to the musicians, who at once touched their instruments, beginning the Khan's awakening music.

Curled on his side beneath the vast indigo quilt with its gold embroidered dragon, Kublai Khan, awake long before they even entered his chamber, stared out the window, thinking: *Rumour that I am sickly will spread. Good.*

Black tea with ginseng arrived, served upon a lacquered rosewood tray. Kublai sat up in bed. His eyes were clear, and his forehead amazingly unwrinkled for a man of eighty years. The musicians continued to perform subtle trills, entering the day into the room. Feminine hands slipped lids from boxes, releasing red and black butterflies. One settled upon the hill which was the Khan's toe. He sipped loudly, and watched the butterfly fan its wings in the cool breeze coming in the window bearing the scent of arbutus and rose.



Sun Sun stood attentive. He hesitated, wishing to ask: *Did the Khan have a nightmare? Or was the ghastly pose a seizure? Should he call for the physician?*

The Khan let him wait, musing: *Sun Sun, your sole deceit is to steal a plum from my tray when I am not looking.* He shifted his toe. The butterfly moved off. Then he considered the old servant; toothless, cowering beneath his scrutiny. *Certainly it is not disloyalty on your part, Sun Sun. Not that. Someone sets a half cup of wine before you and you tell all. And not a thought to your own gain!* Kublai recalled the morning that Sun Sun stubbed his toe on the porcelain wine bottle, one of the dozens carefully laid. *It was you, Sun Sun, you who plucked the last bottle from my carp pond and guided me to my bed. And that same day it was all over the city that I was in drunken mourning over the death, the day before, of my third wife. Poor girl. So awkward moving about on bound feet. And to fall from my very own window? And there I was. Waiting with drawn blade for any who would think me vulnerable in my grief. But after all my planning, none were so easily lured.*

*What will I do tomorrow? Another seizure? Or a trace of pork blood dribbling artfully from the corner of my mouth? And the next? Slip away for the entire night, and then be discovered at dawn, bathing with the fallen leaves in the garden pond?* He felt suddenly enthusiastic. "Sun Sun! Get this tray off me!" Then he opened his arms wide. "A fine day!"

Sun Sun nodded, "The Khan well pleased?"

But he did not answer. Instead a look of concentration came over his features, followed by a low sound. He averted his face and wafted the covers. Then, reaching out, he beckoned Sun Sun to come closer, and slipping his fingers around his neck, drew him near. Kublai gazed off, out the window, which stretched from the marble floor to the ceiling. "Has he made a decision? Will he stay?"

"No . . . again he drinks . . . All night!"

From where he sat, the Khan saw across the garden and treetops, all the way to the wall. Narrowing his eyes, he followed the moving figures of the sentries on duty there. Knowing none of them personally, he could nonetheless recognize the manner of each, how they held their heads, turned, paced.

"Does he take women?"

"No."

"Men, or boys?"

"No."

The Khan considered this. His attention settled deeper through the multiple facades and personas in a repertoire developed through years of deceit and survival. The musicians finished, but his fingers remained locked around Sun Sun's neck, who stared down at the eye of the dragon on the bedcover.

"Across the earth. No army. No money. How many years he has travelled?"

"Seventeen."

The Khan removed his hand from the servant's neck. Sun Sun remained in the same pose, blinking his eyes. But the Khan had forgotten him. His gaze was directed out the window into the distance. Then it occurred to him, though not the least flicker or shift of his eyes would have betrayed him:

*The Venetian is an outcast.*

He motioned Sun Sun out of the room. He waved his arms, shooing the musicians away. Flinging back the covers, his feet touched the

floor and he began doing knee bends, listening to the satisfying crackle of his joints. He paced the room without the aid of his cane, his reflection appearing for a moment in the carp pond each time he neared the window. Then he poked his head out and smelled the over-ripe winter apples and rotting pomegranates. *A balcony would be so nice.* But his was a life spent whirling round to catch his own shadow advancing upon him, and experiencing the clutch in his chest at the unexpected rustle of paper. He turned away from the window, the carp surfaced with a soft *plash* and settled back.

A gloomy calm took him. He contemplated the fish, and fingered the jade cicada hanging at his neck. He wondered: *Is this melancholy a weakness of age? The inevitable arrival of philosophy?* But there was a jewel in his lidded eye. The frail shoulders possessed something greater than bodily strength, and he smiled again, deep in his secret self, laughing, thrilled even by his own decay and the ceaseless advance and turn of events. Kaidu, his half brother thirty years his junior, awaited in Djang-ti, drumming his fingers, plotting his opportunity. While on the other side, laughing with toothless mouths, opening their arms to receive him, an endless line of dead ancestors.

\* \* \*

Concealed by the wall, the Khan peered out the window. He sniffed the approach of rain. Winter was being driven south by the winds of Mongolia. He shoved his hands into his armpits, and hugged himself against the chill. *The concubines? Wade into the heaps of belly and thigh to be warmed?* But the thought of being touched was loathsome. *Where is my pipe?*

He looked around.

"Sun Sun!" *He is late.* On his knees, Kublai searched around; looking beneath the bed, pulling out drawers, checking the nooks and holes carved into the walls during the long hours of his private paranoia. There was a tentative tap at the door.

He received the day's calendar, cast by his astrologers. Sun Sun trailed him into the room as he turned away, absorbed in the chart:

Autumnal equinox, two days hence.

Neptune and Venus approach Saturn.

Water looming close by a Bull with Fire and Positive Fire.



He was silent. Slate grey clouds dulled the garden view. Sun Sun cocked his ear to the low echo of thunder murmuring up through the soles of his feet. The Khan thrust the chart back into Sun Sun's chest, and clasping his hands behind his back, paced the room. His cloth slippers scuffed the marble floor. After some moments he looked up to see the servant still there. He levelled his eyes at him, then, as if suddenly remembering, took an exaggeratedly deep breath, threw his arms wide apart, and winked. "My two favourites, they're here?"

Sun Sun swung open the huge door and stepped back to allow two women to enter. One was old, the other no more than a girl. The Khan stepped forward rubbing his hands in delight. He ushered them toward the bed, and turning on Sun Sun: "Get out."

When the door closed, he put his ear to it, and satisfied, turned to the women. The older one had already let the silk robe fall, and pulled wig from head. A man. From beneath his elaborate wrappings he produced a leather sack, opened it, and busied himself with the contents. The Khan lay down on the bed. The young woman began massaging the soles of his feet, kneading them and pressing in with expert thumbs, noting changes from the day before. The man, the Khan's personal physician, scrupulously shaven and perfumed, leaned over him. He listened to his breathing, and charted the shape of his eyes, comparing it with the diagrams of the past days. They took his pulse from various points. Turning him onto his stomach, they shaped tiny mounds of mugwort, and placed them at strategic meridian intersections on his back, then lit them so they should smoulder and produce heat, to enervate the *chi*. Kublai submitted. The mounds became too hot, he gestured with his boney arm. "Get them off!" Then, "Well?"

Stiffly, the physician set his wig back in place. The nurse arranged his robe for him, and then, kneeling beside the carp pond, she decorated her own forehead with beads of water, dampening her hair and tossing it to just the right degree of disarray.

"Well?" he demanded, lying there.

He exhaled and met the Khan's eyes. "You must relax." He picked up the spotted old hand. "Already they grow cold again."

Kublai pulled it back, brooding with his chin on his fists. "What can be done?"

"Exercise the *chi*."

But he had heard all this before, and grew impatient. He sat up. "Join the humble at dawn in their reptilian dance fighting imaginary enemies?"

The physician was a man of immense dignity, and guardian of hidden lore. "Surely a man who can weave desire, or loyalty where there is none, can create an enemy, a battle, or even —"

"Get out."

\* \* \*

In his bedchamber, the Khan held the curtain aside and watched the pale winter sunset. He recalled a rhyme:

Ten cups to practice the sling,  
Ten cups to knock from the wall,  
Ten cups to drink and sing  
To long dead ancestors in the Nirvana Hall.

\* \* \*

The next morning, before the musicians, before the sunrise, the Khan sat in the torchlit glow of his library. On the shelves the works of Confucius, the Tao Te Ching, the Book of Odes, Li Po's poetry. All dust-laden, unread. Kublai bent over the stained, torn pages, executed in alternately swift, and then awkward hands. Written from Khanbalu to Byzantium, in snow, in dust, the thoughts and observations of Ghengis Khan. Through his own eyes, those of his aides, as told to scribes after thirty days in a saddle when delirium had set in and horizons were magnified by heat waves, having survived on the blood, taken hot each morning, from the shoulders of their own horses.

Allowing the manuscript to slip from his fingers, he swallowed dryly, remembering his grandfather.

\* \* \*

The room was vast.

Circling, the wind gained momentum, pushed hair into eyes, chilled fingertips, and bent favourite roses to the floor. Seated upon the chair, all morning, all of the afternoon, Kublai Khan buried in his Dragon robe, sat half facing the small table. Birdclaw hands protruded from his sleeves and gripped the arms of the chair. On the other side of the table sat one of his wives. Her face was white and



dry, like paper. At long intervals he looked over and his eyes darkened, trying to remember, *Who is she?* Wrapped tightly in flowered silk, caricatured feet propped on the delicate stool, patient as a porcelain figurine.

The tea had long grown cold.

The white cups with their blue trim were chipped. He looked down and watched the faint rise and fall of the gold threading in the five-clawed dragon on the shoulder roundels of his robe as he breathed. But his vision blurred through his eyelashes, and he suddenly discovered himself tipping forward, slowly forward feeling the weight of his head hanging on his neck. There was the burble of digestion, and the aimless meander of his mind.

Later, when the light had made imperceptible changes, something scratched across the floor. A leaf. It sat there, caught like a spider. Then the wind took it again, lifted it high into the air, dropped and skated it across to their right. Their heads turned in unison until it disappeared, circling around behind them and they looked back to their left to see.

Remembering his hands, the Khan reached for the hammer hung by the bronze gong, and struck once. He squinted his face into a pained grimace and, dropping the hammer, put his hands to his ears to blot out the skull-piercing reverberation.

His wife looked at him. Her breath whistled in her nostrils like cavern wind, dry, painful. "More tea," she whispered, and then forgot.

Sun Sun appeared.

One foot sliding forward, the Khan pointed with his chin and finger. Sun Sun followed with his eyes, emitting a nervous giggle. But as he stooped for the leaf, the wind snapped it up and away, leading him around the room, cloth slippers slapping on the floor, breath growing hoarse as he reached out.

But the trickster wind took it off the tips of his fingers, and finally dropped it at the woman's feet.

They all stared.

Hesitant, Sun Sun approached, delicately picked the leaf from her toes as the Khan leaned forward, watching.

The servant threw it out, off the balcony. But the wind rushed up and laughed it back inside. Sun Sun turned to watch. The wind grew louder, and more leaves were blown in like a flock of confused birds swirling up and settling near the walls. One landed on the table, sat, tentative as a butterfly, and before the Khan could touch, was off. Sun Sun stood in the midst, hugging himself against the chill. The curtains stretched out nearly horizontal, like fragments of spider web in the breeze.

More leaves piled in. In drifts rounding out the corners and heaping at their feet. Holding onto the chair with one stiff arm and his shoulder thrown back, the Khan stared around at this intrusion, this. . . .

His wife held one, touched it with her fingertips, tracing over its brittle surface. Sun Sun turned his head to hear the strains of a song. Raising himself up, listening, the Khan heard the sound of the wind, rippling over the steppe. The leaves deepened. After her fingertips, she touched it to her lips, pressed it between them feeling the delicate crispness, pushed it further, tongue on dry, and chewed, allowed at last inside the glass ball, and soon they would be lifted and turned upside down and the leaves would settle like snow and blanket them in a layer of white.

The leaves deadened sound.

Struggling inside his throat to protest, knuckles whitening with the effort, Kublai Khan pushed himself up from his chair. He waded toward the window sweeping aside the leaves now risen past his stomach. Ignoring Sun Sun who stared dumbly, he slid the window shut, pinching out the wind. It rushed in repeated surges against his back as he leaned upon it, breath difficult, gasping. *Cold water, he realized, to stay awake.*

He looked at his wife, buried to her shoulders in leaves, asleep.