

## Kubla Khan

*Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.*

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure-dome decree:  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.  
So twice five miles of fertile ground  
With walls and towers were girdled round;  
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,  
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;  
And here were forests ancient as the hills,  
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.  
But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted  
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!  
A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!  
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,  
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,  
A mighty fountain momently was forced:  
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst  
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,  
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:  
And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever  
It flung up momently the sacred river.  
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion  
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,  
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,  
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean;  
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far  
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The shadow of the dome of pleasure  
Floated midway on the waves;  
Where was heard the mingled measure  
From the fountain and the caves.

It was a miracle of rare device,  
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer  
In a vision once I saw:  
It was an Abyssinian maid  
And on her dulcimer she played,  
Singing of Mount Abora.  
Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!  
And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

### The Mad Scene

Again last night I dreamed the dream called Laundry.  
In it, the sheets and towels of a life we were going to share,  
The milk-stiff bibs, the shroud, each rag to be ever  
Trampled or soiled, bled on or groped for blindly,  
Came swooning out of an enormous willow hamper  
Onto moon-marbly boards. We had just met. I watched  
From outer darkness. I had dressed myself in clothes  
Of a new fiber that never stains or wrinkles, never  
Wears thin. The opera house sparkled with tiers  
And tiers of eyes, like mine enlarged by belladonna,  
Trained inward. There I saw the cloud-clot, gust by gust,  
Form, and the lightning bite, and the roan mane unloosen.  
Fingers were running in panic over the flute's nine gates.  
Why did I flinch? I loved you. And in the downpour laughed  
To have us wrung white, gnarled together, one  
Topmost mordent of wisteria,  
As the lean tree burst into grief.

—James Merrill

## Life is a Dream

A talent for self-realization  
will get you only as far as the vacant lot  
next to the lumber yard, where they have rollcall.  
My name begins with an A,  
so is one of the first to be read off.  
I am wondering where to stand—could that group of three  
or four others be the beginning of the line?

Before I have the chance to find out, a rodent-like  
man pushes at my shoulders. “It’s *that* way,” he hisses.  
“Didn’t they teach you *anything* at school? That a photograph  
of *anything* can be real, or maybe not? The corner of the stove,  
a cloud of midges at dusk-time.”

I know I’ll have a chance to learn more  
later on. Waiting is what’s called for, meanwhile.  
It’s true that life can be anything, but certain things  
definitely aren’t it. This gloved hand,  
for instance, that glides  
so securely into mine, as though it intends to stay.

—John Ashbery

### **The Angler's Story**

I let down my long line; it went falling; I pulled; up came  
A bucket of bad sleep in which tongues were sloshing about  
Like frogs and dark fish, breaking the surface of silence, the  
Forgetfulness, with what would have been brightness in any  
Other element, flash of wave, residual bubbling,  
But were here belches of shadow churned up by the jostling  
Tongues from the imageless thick bottom of the heavy pail.  
I could not reach into that fell stuff after them, nor fling  
Them back into night like inadequate fish; nor would they  
Lie flat and silent like sogged leaves that had been flung under  
Mud; but burbled of language too heavy to be borne, of  
Drowned inflections and smashed predications, exactness pulped  
Into an ooze of the mere desire to utter. It was  
My bucket, and I have had to continue to listen.

—John Hollander

## Vita Nova

In the splitting up dream  
we were fighting over who would keep  
the dog,  
Blizzard. You tell me  
what that name means. He was  
a cross between  
something big and fluffy  
and a dachshund. Does this have to be  
the male and female  
genitalia? Poor Blizzard,  
why was he a dog? He barely touched  
the hummus in his dogfood dish.  
Then there was something else,  
a sound. Like  
gravel being moved. Or sand?  
The sands of time? Then it was  
Erica with her maracas,  
like the sands of time  
personified. Who will  
explain this to  
the dog? Blizzard,  
Daddy needs you; Daddy's heart is empty,  
not because he's leaving Mommy but because  
the kind of love he wants Mommy  
doesn't have, Mommy's  
too ironic—Mommy wouldn't do  
the rhumba in the driveway. Or  
is this wrong. Supposing  
I'm the dog, as in  
my child-self, unconsolable because  
completely pre-verbal? With  
anorexia! O Blizzard,  
be a brave dog—this is  
all material; you'll wake up  
in a different world,  
you will eat again, you will grow up into a poet!  
Life is very weird, no matter how it ends,  
very filled with dreams. Never  
will I forget your face, your frantic human eyes  
swollen with tears.  
*I thought my life was over and my heart was broken.  
Then I moved to Cambridge.*

—Louise Glück

## Dirt and Light

Last night it startled me again—I dreamed  
of the corn maze through which we walked,  
almost a decade ago, in the presence  
of our other lovers. It was all burned down.  
Purple corn glowed in the fields enveloping  
the ruined maze, the woodlands washed  
by October sun. Instead of you, I found in the salt-white music  
of that familiar landscape an old piano, hollowed  
by the draft of time, and the handle of a porcelain cup  
in scorched soil. Relics of an imagined,  
civil life. Today, in the lemony light by your grave,  
I recited Merrill: *Why did I flinch? I loved you*, then touched  
the damp and swelling mud, blue hyacinths  
your mother planted there—  
ants were swarming the unfinished plot of earth  
like the black text of an infinite alphabet. I couldn't  
read it. There was no epiphany, just dirt, the vast curtain  
between this realm and the other. You never speak to me,  
I thought, not even in dreams.  
For hours, I sat there, mocked by the bees—  
*silly girl*, their golden faces laughed, *she still wants  
and wants*. A warm gust shook the trees,  
and a pigeon settled into the dusk  
of a wet pine, and then another.

—Aria Aber