



Shuja Khan

a poem by C. John Holcombe

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One

It is the year six-ninety of the Prophet
and thirty of Qubilai on the throne —
who is weak, totters, would well be off it,
set his death-name on the stone.

But thick and heavy as the mountain dew
would burst the blood from the quriltai
should Du'a attain it, or old Qaidu:
he knows that — the crafty but weary Qubilai.

So they must bring me from riding at will
on the long green slopes of the great Tien Shan —
wind-brushed from morning, and lingering till
the clouds close over our allotted span.

Gap-toothed and jagged, peaks wind to the sky,
upwards the valleys give way to snow.
The wind here is barbed, brings tears to the eye;
sovereign and snowy the waters flow.

Around me gerfalcon and hawk: aloft and dive:
day long we worked up the deep blue skies.
Here one feels open, at large and alive;
blackness is deep beneath the eyes.

Why should I turn back, obey these commands?
Letters I had and in Argun's hand.
'Remember, Great Prince, this is Qubilai's land:
this is the seal of his countermand.'

My commission is simple, my lords: to gain
the secret incised in the viper's tooth.
Under the passes or over the plain
I seek for the Ilkhan eternal youth.

'Yours is the will 'o the wisp then, Prince.
Too many have ridden this far in vain,
and if it be that words won't convince
you, Tunhuang is also our lord's domain.

There you may question the grey-bearded scholars
bending at will over holy books.
Their thought comes afar as the spring's first swallows,
intelligence wizened as their looks.

Within the cliffs of a thousand Buddhas
beyond all error or disgrace,
all that is asked is as good as
answered in that distant place.'

Two

Genghiz who was khan of all
goes beneath the winter's thrall.
Wide the lands and great the cost
from the saddle gained and lost.

Always is the wind which causes
green and dearth and never pauses.
From the soft grey vault the rain
fills with sweetness steppe and plain.

Beasts are rutting. Then the foal
runs with lapwing and the vole.
Summer days, as numberless
as the flocks and tribesmen, press

on us to be horsed and gone.
Clouds with shadows drift, pass on.
The elchi ride from post to post
but gone is Genghiz and his host.

Among his sons, the five who'd own
his lands and treasures, the tented throne,
yak-tailed banners, cautious eye
he left to stalwart Ogodei.

From brother Tolui the throne went through
to Mongke, Qubilai. Hulegu
founded the Ilkhans, my father's line,
cursed with enmities, also mine.

The house of Jochi, the Golden Horde,
ruled by Toqta as overlord
claimed the Caspian and Azerbaidjan,
warred with my father, Teguder Khan.

Endless as summer, in Khan Qaidu,
Ogodei's grandson, the borders grew
more distant, more fluid. The Jaghatai hordes
conspired with the Golden and Ilkhan lords.

Teguder, my father, the illustrious khan,
ruler as far as Hindustan:
surely of lineage the most ill-starred:
garrotted in prison by palace guard.

When I am riding the world's far rim
rightly, legibly, over to him,
like flocks that windward crop and roam,
return at nightfall thoughts of home.

Three

And so I went forward. From high land the road
looped by the rivers that south by accord
collected in torrents, tumbled and roared,
and we at a jog-trot never slowed.

The valleys grew wider as night passed to day.
Each post found new quarters, horses, hay.
Like the peoples we passed were the stars in his sway,
the Qaghan whose paitze speeded our way.

At Kucha a change. No mountains, a haze,
turbid as oatmeal coloured the town.
The streets were oppressive, the orchards brown,
but here we had rest for five full days.

And here for the first time the Han people I met:
deft in their movements, leaving no trace
of thoughts in their features — a different race.
And with them there was nothing, no liking, not yet.

In moonlight we left by the Jade Gate road,
not riding but walking, and all about
were carcasses, tracks — which petered out
in detours we took, and it hardly showed

which way we had taken and doubled back
by stones or sharp cinder, by fluted stands
of dry reed and thorn-bush, by high dune sands
that slowed us by yielding, and levelled tracks.

A vast plain rolled out, was sombre, no looming
of clouds in the evening, no living thing
but voices from rocks, past all believing:
a wild shriek at first, then a steady booming.

Which passed. With spectres. In the fierce salt glare
vast figures stalked round us in silent thunder.
Hideous they were but as in hunger
we reached out for substance, and found nothing there.

At intervals water, but tongues weren't moistened,
but rather there hardened the vice-like heat.
Like old men we toiled, dead weights on our feet;
many fell out, their thinking poisoned.

For myself, drank horse blood, but this too dried.
Even I, of my lineage, I went lame,
camels and couriers, many the same:
only the fortunate completed this ride.

Four

Like termites the scholars, eyeless and small,
deep in their chambers, beyond footfall.
Spectral they sat by each painted wall,
mumbled and made no sense at all.

Can a man expect so little of life
that all he seek is one inner thing?
Whence comes his treasure, his flocks, his wife?
Whence comes his honour when campfires sing?

All that you worship, your calmness, restraint,
is envy of us at further removes.
Kindness to others is weakness and feint
when the whole earth floods under our horses' hooves.

'If the sorrow of man were as outward smoke
soon would his campfires cover the earth.'
Such were the words the old man spoke:
an insult on status, my princely worth.

Wise one, I said, the Ilkhan rules men:
that is his destiny. I am sent
to you who are subject. Listen again:
I tell you his bow must be newly bent.

A rustle like rain. The old man smiled.
'It is true, Great Prince, that much is spoken
of life that flows on, for ever and wild,
but these are conjectures, only a token

of what is forbidden. For who would deny
that power to the High One whom all obey?
But I ask you, Great Prince, what man can lie
in truth contented for even a day?

There is no practice, no sacred text:
imaginings only, support of the weak.
The lean, bitter truth in a world perplexed
is all of elixir one may seek.

Travel, Great Prince, at the Qaghan's pleasure.
Ask of his ministers if any be there
wiser in counsel that you may measure
the truth that's conjured from the air.

Ride on, Great Prince, we have nothing to give you.
Seek all, take all, drink the whole world in.
You will discover at last, if our words go with you,
life is the landscape further within.'

Five

We bridled, we rode. The red hills of sand
that levelled at evening as Tunhuang we left
rose in the morning as onward we kept
to the one course, the true course, and hourly scanned

the shimmers of peaks as hillsides were ranged
one past another in the tortuous haze.
We looked for a greenness with heavy gaze:
rimless the horizons that never changed.

Moreover before me, and only to me,
rising from dust kicked up from the road,
whether I galloped or abruptly slowed,
a phantom whose face I was not to see.

Sometimes in flickers for a day or two
when heat at midday burned the colours out.
Sometimes a presence when standing in doubt
we stopped at a sidetrack. I cannot say who

or what was the creature — imam or jinn —
sun falling behind me, or moon on the wane —
but always before me, half hand on the rein,
there drifted the torment, the mind I was in.

For days it would vanish and I'd be alone
with faces of rock that without disguise
assailed me and battered and bruised the eyes;
even the air seemed made of stone.

Month led to month. The land of Han
is girdled about by the hardships we had.
Yet out of his trouble, and cautious or glad,
man makes his talisman as best he can.

So that there grew, and more deeply rooted
for being the first that the days burned up,
a land of full plenty, the outflowing cup:
gifts to the faithful, the loyal saluted.

Roads make lives hard, but also lives straight,
as weapons are tempered when quenched from fire.
Our progress was constant, we did not tire
but sat down at evening and quietly ate.

But I of my party alone said prayer,
recalling the practice of childhood years,
knowing that the Compassionate and the Merciful hears
in tumult and private and everywhere.

Six

A large man, bloated. A politesse
clung to his features. To all he said,
faint as the incense, I answered yes:
the court in concurring bowed its head.

But I being Mongol stood erect
and watched unmoving as my Yuan lord
scrupled to give what we nomads expect —
the paitze and saddle and jewelled sword.

Palaces were mine, and women more
beautiful than is the first-year foal,
lands to hunt in — gifts as draw
unpractised fealty from the soul.

Many and most marvellous
the orchestras and sumptuous courts.
The world is empty and a thing of glass,
but still it colours with these thoughts.

Substance passes; it will seem
a shaft of sunlight what has been:
But if old men nod and old men dream
I shall tell what I have seen.

Would you believe the khan's ten queens,
alike imperious and beautiful,
with all their courtiers and their go-betweens,
drifted as a miracle

of perfumes in embroidery —
as though within their fifteen layers
of silks the body's brilliancy
glimmered through their withdrawn airs?

High walls there were, and lakes around.
Vast hills were built and highlands razed;
great parks in flower; in shaded ground
the tiger slept and chambok grazed.

Sometimes drifting days along
the water city of Hangchow,
we were silent in the song
that inward haunts me even now.

Scandalous it was to me at first,
such vapid luxury, such unwon praise,
but in this dusty world I thirst
for long-gone, full and happy days.

Seven

But still with honour from all I sought
the wisdom professed by Qubilai's court:
rough fellows mostly, but still my peers;
and here I had sojourn for two long years.

With journeys of course. I went south and east,
through hot lands and wild lands and never ceased
to question in temple or in spirit grove
the answers to patterns the adepts wove

out of the earnestness of my youth,
Arghun's commission to have the truth:
a prince-philosopher, but always flowed
Qubilai's banners when out I rode.

Yet, I don't know, but a fondness grew
for women so formed of that silken hue
of laughter and softness about the face,
for settled existence, an ampler pace.

And even out hunting, when evening drew near,
after excitement for panther or deer,
I would look forward as music lingers
for the long, cool touch of a woman's fingers.

Perplexed and yet happy, for who can deny
the riches of Cathay fall soft on the eye:
colour and music, where even the drums
fall sombre and quiet when morning comes.

Treated as foremost, of the Qaghan's kin,
many the favours that beckoned me in:
treasures and women were cast in my way,
and over them all was the Lady Wei.

A Toba princess, footloose, fey,
with eyes that mocked you all the day.
Swift her mind as wind to stray,
her smiles to hold you by their play.

A girl more beautiful than all
the others, disputatious, tall;
adroit at talking or the dances,
such her gestures, such her glances!

Whatever the thoughts she woke around
me, I was by council firmly bound.
And yet with others I too found
her sweetness scented all the ground.

Eight

But strife made its passage. In the far northwest,
always unruly, the Chaghatai heirs
broke with their mandate, the Qaghan's bequest,
made as to settle their own affairs.

Balkh they invested, imposed new taxes,
as though they were sovereign in our domains.
Over our sunset their fat moon waxes:
high in the heavens our old moon wanes.

And I to go riding with costly gift
of incense and silk and the Lady Wei —
she the inducement the encampment lift,
borders accepted, they do not stray.

If so, a hard stroke I will admit.
In councils no warning, not a sign —
except in that audience, the small eyes lit
amber a moment, meeting mine.

Ambitions scattered, I made excuses,
immediately, as I saw things plain:
princess or kinsman, we had our uses —
move, manoeuvre, to check or gain.

We were gone a month later and if she wept
or laughed at this I have no notion.
Always her high-winged eyes were kept
vacant or in to their own devotion.

We followed for months the selfsame course
I'd taken arriving those years before —
a jostling of carriage from a thousand horse,
and after the water, the army of straw.

Slowly we trooped through the Tarim plain;
upwards again to the roof of the world,
then down from the snowline, to wind, sleet and rain,
rough gusts of tempests that howled and swirled.

And how shall I tell of the high Parmir —
gloomy, huge valleys, a slush of snow?
The bare walls of rock, an eagle's flight sheer,
a horse if it stumbled had nowhere to go

but down to the boulders in rivers below
that hissed and twisted like a living thing:
a strange scene this was as we plodded slow,
I and the princess throughout that spring.

Nine

A voice out of season! As we descended
the great crumbling cliff-faces to the plain,
languid but mindful that prospects drained,
bubbling to nothing as our journey ended.

She gave me her leave, and the myriad flowers
clothing the rocks gave a welcome ring.
Around us her maids were laughing and sweetening
the banterings we tossed through those carefree hours.

Was I then happy? I could not say
but thought not at last, for in my mind,
darkening, I saw how the path inclined:
always athwart me her future lay.

Try for the last time to speak my heart,
boldly, plainly, as I had in the past?
Hazard, be hopeful of one short cast?
I saddled two horses and we drew apart.

'Then mountains should hear us', she said, and trekked
up slope and down while the waters leapt
aflash with the sunlight. Her laughter left
pools in my thinking, with sadness flecked.

She saw that and teased me. Under her play
I then the innocent, the moon-sick girl.
She was the Qaghan ready to hurl
a kingdom to havoc or counsel away.

I cautioned her, caught her, but then her eyes,
lifting their shutters, looked with a wild
wanton beyond me, deep as a child,
open in wonder, without disguise.

Just for a moment it was, but I was caught.
A small thing it was, but the empty sport
of chasing and dalliance, attendance and court,
all in a moment were brought to naught.

I spoke, and was speechless. What could I do?
She looked at me, mocking, her laughter returning.
Then with strange sweetness, the body yearning,
she looked away sharply and inward drew

her hopes and bright magic. 'Great Prince,' she said,
'think of me kindly when years have shed
lustre on passion, wherever it led.'
Princess . . . then nothing. I bowed my head.

Ten

All this is obvious. Must I assert
that nothing I did but as my commission
demands in the palace or poorest yurt?
To the laws of Genghiz complete submission.

On then to Balkh with our banners flying
into the thin, blue desert air.
The princess was quiet, with her state complying.
We rode in great pomp, and found nothing there

but orders and plumes of the new Ilkhan.
Gone were the Chagatai. Arghun was dead.
This is your ruler, one Geikhatu Khan:
deliver the princess to him instead.

Honour to him whom honour employs!
Requital was this for the hopes I'd wed?
The polluter of women, of unweaned boys:
to this I must bow and she be led?

She joined, the princess, the twelve men who rode
out while the veiled half-scrap of a moon
hung over campfires and sombrely showed
a landscape with pitfalls widely strewn.

Pursuit fell away. Not to be roused,
was the idle, malodorous, fat Geikhatu.
But never for weeks, as we rode on through
mountain and steppe-land, were our daggers housed.

Dust in our eyes, and the Princess Wei —
side-saddled, taking as best she may
the jolts and fresh starts of this strange affray —
stared on the future where comfort lay

steady and luminous as the sand-soft hills
that dwindled behind us. Swift as a blade
we cut through detachments that stayed our wills:
from conquest and title I'd not be swayed.

First we rode south into Khorrusan,
then traced in detail the shining length
of Sind with its waters, where Geikhatu Khan
collected his taxes but little strength.

They met us in village or on mountain slopes.
We who were few became a thousand strong,
men whose allegiance was as their hopes:
embittered, a bristling, mutinous throng.

Eleven

She rode in a litter and there were tents
morning and evening to take her in.
But if she had servants none were her kin;
no one to soften the bare events.

Sometimes successful, more often not,
I rode, retreated, skirmished, fought:
whatever the travail, all came to naught.
I was richer that year by not one jot.

Except in the faithful: from every town
or wayside we stopped at the people trooped out —
the rich, more the poor, the idle, devout:
the crowds but increased as our fortunes stepped down.

From south to the Gulf to far Mashad,
for four long years we circled about.
Captains of thousands I was leading out
and then a mere rabble was all we had.

And all these troubles the Princess Wei
bore without quarrel or discontent,
but only at odd times the daylight lent
a tiredness to features, a first touch of grey.

So that sadder and older she would sometimes muse
on a long ride home to the Great Khan's court,
would mention the years, and what years had wrought,
not yet to absolve me, nor accuse.

Remember, my princess, when you are queen,
ruler of lands where the indolent haze
clothing the cities is loud with your praise,
you will be gloried as any have been.

'You jest with me, Prince. Now laughed at, hated,
regarded as dust in the hard days driven,
baggage to even mere serving women —
this is the fortune to which I'm fated.

Speak hopes for women of more general lot,
but not to this Toba who near now and far
is princess and consort and morning star —
must I believe you, who know it's not?'

I pledge to you, Princess, if, sharp as a knife,
hardships assail us they do not last.
The tide at its ebb point but changes fast.
Walk proud in our greatness, this robe of life.

Twelve

Genghiz who was khan of all
goes beneath the winter's thrall.
All his chattels, all his force,
wives, his treasures, fields of horse.

Over the Oxus the marigolds,
each in clusters, dips and folds;
over the waters the eyelids sink;
dark the sunset, black as ink.

Various as the herdsman's eye
rises Tengris in the sky.
Fresh as greenness after rain
horse and herdsmen crowd the plain.

Genghiz is buried on hill Kaldun
under the heavy sun at noon,
under the starlight and the rain,
where the pewit and the crane

scratch and scatter in the shades,
among the grasses, in the glades,
over which the clouds precess
empty miles and miles unless

in steeps, the rivers, happy places,
fields of battle, in the faces
of children running all the day,
the wolf at hunting, wind at play,

at evening harnessed in the flames,
brightly trophied are the names:
of kinsmen slaughtered, riders lost,
the fields of conquest, all the cost

that was and is the hard campaigns
in days of glory, where the glory stains
the Golden, Chagatai, Ilkhan lords.
Even him no place affords

but alms and shelter — this Shuja Khan,
ruler in time of all Khorrusan:
light as a thorn-bush rolled about
this way, that, when winds are out.

Horses crop and young foals scatter,
the path of conquest no great matter,
vague and unsteadily go instead
the strange devotions through this head.

Thirteen

Though always we moved, for the most part she sat
taking in little as days unfolded.

No matter to her what place we were at:
a shadow, a wraith, out of silence moulded.

Her mischief and laughter had long since gone.
I knew that and she, 'For all has been',
she said, 'a delusion, a thing to dream on.
Smiling, I leave you, I who was queen.'

No sighs, no speeches, no funeral oration:
the figure beside me one morning lay chill.
A small town it was, no special location:
we buried her quietly when the air was still.

Left of her hopes was a small piece of jade
she clutched at, a buckle, a talisman kept
to speak of her fortune when the last stones were laid.
Bridling, I rode: afterwards wept.

And yet I still fought, won battles again
till Geikhatu died and the new Ghazan
converting to Islam made peace with my men:
in detachments they melted, in a month all gone.

Even my best, my own bahadurs
the grizzled, most loyal, the veterans of wars.
Dry grass is our fortune which the wind hardly stirs.
I settled and waited for the Mongol laws.

For months there was nothing, no detachments came.
I wandered at leisure but mostly alone,
and still what I saw was ever the same —
mountain and steppe-land, desert and stone.

Her ending was such as all might applaud her,
but I for a long time desperately grieved.
Madrasas I joined of the darwish order,
remembering my childhood, almost believed.

Went even to Ghazan, though burdened my tread,
for tribute took only rough beads instead.
For a long time he held me, raised me, and said,
'May Allah sow wisdom on this grieved head.'

That's all that there was. I wandered away,
mumbling my blessings, the last of my race:
an old man with a donkey, hobbled and grey,
wanting his dreams and a sleeping place.

Historical Note

Shuja Khan and his Toba princess are fictions rooted in historical fact. When the story opens in 1290 (690 A.H.), the Mongol conquests initiated by Genghiz Khan have been extended and consolidated by his large family. Iran and the Middle East are ruled by the Ilkhans, descendants of Genghiz's grandson Hulegu. China is ruled by Genghiz's grandson Qubilai (Coleridge's Kubla Khan), founder of the Yuan Dynasty and nominally Great Khan (Qaghan). The northern part of central Asia is occupied by the Golden Horde, and the southern part by the Chaghatayids. Local wars were common, and neither the Golden Horde nor the Chaghatayids paid much attention to the far away Chinese ruler.

Despite such family quarrels, the Mongol innovations still held firm — emblems of authority (paitze), teams of horsemen for government correspondence and intelligence (elchi) and election of new leaders at a tribal gathering (kuriltai). Originally Shamanists (Tengris is the great spirit), the Mongols were attracted to Daoism with its search for eternal youth, but later converted to Islam in the west and Buddhism in the east. Searches for spiritual enlightenment were not unusual in this period of upheaval, and Qubilai was following traditional practice in dispatching Chinese princesses to strengthen alliances with barbarian rulers (Marco Polo accompanied one such mission).

Jeremiah Curtin's *The Mongols: A History* (1908/1996) and R. Grousset's *The Empire of the Steppes* (1939/1970) may still be the most readable accounts of the period, but Svat Soucek's *A History of Inner Asia* (2000) and F.W. Mote's *Imperial China: 900-1800* (1999) summarize the immense historical research since.