

“Suzy Wong: A Fragment of a Dream”

©Filiz Turhan, *The North American Review*, Fall 2019 (Vol. 304. No. 4)

Suzy Wong is a beautiful cat, a cat with such personality that when I envision her in my mind’s eye, I see a woman in a cat-suit, not an actual cat. She is a rescue animal from the ASPCA on East 92nd Street; Eric and I take her downtown in a transport box on the 6 train.

At first I had been indifferent to her because I had my eye on another cat who was adopted right out from under us by a family with adorably annoying children. I burst into tears when I realize what has happened and when Eric suggests we take the grayish one instead, I agree with a “yeah, whatever” attitude. After all, the only reason we are getting a cat is that we are students and we live in a disgusting hovel on First Avenue. It is not only ugly, dark and located above a rancid bar on a noisy Avenue, it is mouse infested. We discover this, and Eric discovers my paralyzing fear of mice, that very first night in the apartment, from the vulnerable vantage point of our futon mattress stretched out on the floor.

It is not until we are downtown in a pet supply store buying a litter box and expensive cat toys (that’s the kind of guy Eric is) that I fall head-over-heels, blindingly, crazy in love with this feline. She is still in the closed transport box and another customer in the store, a wizened gray-haired East Village granny, asks to see the cat in the box. Eric opens the lid and she peers in. The lady says: “wow, she’s a beaut,” in a gravelly voice that perfectly suits her looks. I glance over, mildly surprised that this second-string cat has elicited such an appreciative reaction from someone who, from the looks of her hair-infested cardigan, knows cats. The pet store guy echoes

the granny, calling Suzy Wong a “Blue Point Siamese/Tabby mix,” and he wonders aloud why such a cat would be a “throw away” at the ASCPA. I peer over the granny’s furry shoulder and down into the box where Suzy Wong is curled up in that perfect round way of cats. She is like two cats in one. The feet and tip of tail are black as night, but her torso fur progresses in an infinitesimal diminishing of pigmentation: dark gray, light gray, silver, white. Vivid blue eyes with the perfect kohl eyeliner of a feline Cleopatra gaze up at me. She purrs her greeting serenely in my direction, reverberating with a precise amplitude in the innermost part of my ear.

I break away from gazing at her to look at Eric. I fall in love with him a little more right there and then.

Suzy Wong is a good sport. She lives with us through seven different apartments. On First Avenue she monitors the suspicious activities of the pigeons nesting in the air-shaft; on Thompson Street she starts eating only pate-style cat food because she is missing one canine; in that other Thompson Street studio she begins nesting in my hair when I lie down to read or sleep; on East Thirteenth Street, she saves me from a rodent scampering past the back of my head while I’m on the floor doing sit ups (she just caught it in her mouth and trotted off into the other room with it). Everywhere we go, Suzy is a stalker of mice, methodical and masterly; she protects me from every evil varmint in Manhattan.

But her real passion is poetry. Suzy Wong loves poetry. Her favorite poet is Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

We are at home on East Third St., the last apartment Suzy Wong will live in until she departs for Eliot's *Heaviside Layer* five years hence. I'm a graduate student in English Literature at NYU, sitting at my desk from which I have a view of the Twin Towers off in the distance. Suzy Wong is curled up in my lap, cozy and delicious. I am reading *Christabel*, one of Coleridge's masterpieces, aloud. It's a fun poem to read, with great characters and an engaging story told in fleet-footed rhyming tetrameter couplets. In the poem, the title character, Christabel, goes out one evening for a solitary stroll to pray for her faraway lover (good intention, but obviously a rookie mistake). Along the way, she meets up with Geraldine, a lovely lady who has been kidnapped by ruffians and abandoned in the forest. Christabel, being a good pure innocent sort, offers to take Geraldine home with her.

Since it's late, they go straight to Christabel's bedroom and when Geraldine encourages Christabel to "unrobe" and get into bed, Christabel agrees. After doing so, she props herself up on her elbow to watch as Geraldine also undresses for bed; she lets fall her "silken robe and inner dress." We don't know exactly what Christabel sees since Coleridge quite literally resists telling us. Instead, he writes: "Behold her bosom and half her side--/A sight to dream of not to tell." This eschewing of direct narration is most apropos, since Christabel also cannot speak of what she sees since Geraldine puts a hex on her. She says:

"In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell,
Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel!"

In Part II of the poem, Geraldine reinforces the power of her bedtime hex by also giving Christabel the stink eye the next morning:

“A Snake’s small eye blinks dull and shy;
And the lady’s eyes they shrunk in her head,
Each shrunk up to a serpent’s eye,
And with somewhat of malice, and more of dread,
At Christabel she looked askance!—
One moment—and the sight was fled!
But Christabel in dizzy trance
Stumbling on the unsteady ground
Shuddered aloud, with a hissing sound”

Whereat, I say to myself, “Don’t look down, don’t look down. Keep reading.” I try to keep my eyes on the page and to continue reading. I pause long enough for Suzy Wong to sigh deeply and say: “That Geraldine is a bitch, but I can’t help loving her.”

I can’t help it either; I look down at the cat, and once I do, I’m done for. I slide down the well of those two deep blue eyes. She is so heartbreakingly beautiful that I can’t look away. I pet her soft cheeks, the custardy fur under her neck. She purrs, and I feel the vibration of the cords right under the surface. Her eyes start to close in that contented way cats have when their humans are servicing them thus. I marvel at the eyebrows, three long whiskers that fringe each marble eye.

We’re really having a moment, when she jolts awake and says, “Enough of that! Keep reading.”

“But you’re so fluffy and I’m getting sleepy,” I say.

“Stop complaining and stop slacking off. Skip down to line 403. Let’s see what Sir Leoline is going to do next.”

I obey her command and find the line where Coleridge describes the Baron’s reaction to Geraldine. Not only is she gorgeous and in peril, she is the daughter of his old buddy, Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine, with whom he had had a falling out years before. Sir Leoline is eager to redress the wrong, to take care of Geraldine and reunite with his friend. So, when Christabel struggles to tell him to get rid of the bitch (a word I usually deplore), he is offended and embarrassed by his daughter’s inhospitality:

“And turning away from his own sweet maid

The age’d knight, Sir Leoline

Led forth the Lady Geraldine.”

One can hardly blame the old timer for making this decision, given his limited knowledge. He had to offer the lady his *courtesy*, an important knightly concept. After all, he wasn’t in the bedroom last night and doesn’t suspect that Geraldine is a....what? Actually, we don’t know what Geraldine is supposed to be; no doubt some kind of witch or succubus. But Coleridge never quite got around to finishing the poem. Although the two parts were written in 1797 and 1800, he didn’t publish them until 1816, never completing the three other parts he claimed in the preface of 1816 that he had up in his head: “I trust that I shall be able to embody in verse the three parts yet to come, in the course of the present year.” (This promise was deleted from the preface of 1834). Despite the fact that he never set down those last three parts, there is enough of magic in the poem as is. Geraldine might be the succubus, but *Christabel* has sucked in many a reader lo these many years.

Even though Suzy Wong enjoys it very much, “Christabel” is not her favorite poem. It’s “Kubla Khan.” She insists that I read this poem aloud to her every couple of days. When I do so it is imperative that I stand in the middle of the apartment’s main room and really put my back into it. Suzy stands apart just a bit, listening attentively, critically, Diaghilev-style. As I begin reading, her tail immediately puffs out as if she’s seen a mouse thumb its nose at her:

“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.”

I do my best to deliver the final lines of the poem with verve:

“Weave a circle round him thrice
And close your eyes with holy dread
For he on honeydew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.”

I let the final words ring around the room, then turn to Suzy Wong and ask: “Well, whattya think?”

Suzy is licking the side of her left paw and draws it across her temple as if she’s bored. Then she lets me have it. “Don’t do it so menacing at the end, the poet is ecstatic, not apoplectic.”

“I was hoping to infuse the final image with that exact quality,” I sniff, a bit offended. “Yes, he’s ecstatic, and the people around him are both thrilled and terrified. Ya know, ‘weave a circle round him thrice.’ Keep the scary poet near enough so you can hear his amazing song, but not too close, in case he implodes.”

“Ah, yes! It is an amazing, perfect end, I must say. I do feel perfectly comfortable with the assessment of the poem as a complete *aesthetic* whole, whether one considers it a fragment or whatever.”

Suzy is referring to “Kubla Khan’s” status as a contested text. The famous poem was written in 1797 but not published until 1816 with the equally famous preface in which Coleridge explains that he composed the poem in a dream brought on by an “anodyne” taken for a “slight indisposition” (in the manuscript copy of the poem he specified this as two grains of opium); when he woke up he found the whole poem right there in his conscious mind. All he had to do was sit down and write. He began to do so, but a “visitor from Porlock” interrupted him on business and when he later returned to his desk, he found that the rest of the poem had vanished from his memory. He published the poem as a fragment of a dream; indeed, the poem’s subtitle is “Or, A Vision of a Dream. A Fragment.” Despite this, the poem is commonly read not as a fragment, but as complete poem, and for both Suzy and me, bearing the mysterious alchemy of perfection.

Suzy dies in February 1999 at the animal hospital on East Ninth St. It is a cold day, the sky too brilliantly blue and the trees too perfectly frosty for such a cataclysmic event. I think of Othello's lament after his murder of Desdemona:

“methinks it should now be a huge eclipse
of sun and moon and that th'affrighted globe
Should yawn at alteration.”

Too much? I don't think so. I can feel the foundation of my Earth tilt as I see Suzy's life drain away and feel that the entire East Village should raise a voice in protest. My only consolation to the loss of my poetry-loving feline is my imagination: I am pregnant with my first child and I can already imagine myself beyond the storm of grief of losing Suzy to the joy that awaits me in six months. Suzy has a mysterious illness which, pardon me, causes her to have explosive diarrhea, and as a pregnant person, I just can't be cleaning cat fecal matter off the bathroom walls and floor daily.

When she first gets sick, we bring her to the vet for testing. While they probe and prod, take blood and x-rays, they send us away to the Bendix diner where Eric and I choke down some grilled cheese sandwiches and coffee, too mopey to even look at each other. But all that testing done, the results are “inconclusive.” Something is causing her to explode after every meal, no nourishment on the inside and a look of hopelessness on the outside. We bring her home after the tests, still groggy from the anesthesia. Suzy is stumbling around the apartment, unable to walk a straight line or jump onto her favorite window sill, but also unable to lie down and sleep. Periodically, she squirts out something vile from her butthole. My gorgeous, refined feline is reduced to a level of indignity no one should have to endure. Eric and I follow her around the

room hoping to catch her should she fall, or shove newspaper under her bottom before she marks the Turkish carpet forever.

Finally, whatever demon has been prodding her along retreats and she is able to lie down with her head stretched out on her paws. “Well,” she sighs. “I really feel like dog shit.”

She doesn’t close her eyes but keeps staring ahead. “Coleridge suffered a lot before he died. I never experienced the pleasures nor the pains of laudanum as he did, but I must say, this is really beyond the pale. Still, I don’t want to go, and I suspect neither did he when the time came.”

She sighs in dejection and asks for the end of Coleridge’s sweet meditation on love and loneliness, the “conversation poem” entitled, “Frost at Midnight:”

“Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while the night-thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.”

The “thee” of the poem was Coleridge’s little baby, Hartley, sleeping at his side. Although Suzy is no human parent of a human child, it seems like a benediction anyway. I perceive her letting me go.

Suzy spends the rest of the evening on duty...although we have lived in this apartment for five years and never once seen a mouse, she can hear them in the walls. Suzy sometimes spends hours a day staring and sniffing at a line between wall and floorboard, letting her own feline odor permeate through the wood to fend off attack. On her last night of life, she sits in the corner of the living room, eyeing the wood, daring the albatross to show itself.

One year later:

It is about five in the morning. I am sitting on the futon couch in the same room where Suzy Wong had exhaled her final reflections on Coleridge, with my six-month old baby girl on my lap. Since she likes to nurse for a long time, I get a lot of reading done; luckily, I do not experience the hazy mommy-brain some women report. Instead, I am as sharp and insatiable as the baby is. As she sucks vigorously, I read aloud to her. The first book my daughter hears is Anne Brontë’s *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (no particular reason). The second is Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon*. The baby prefers long novels, but she also responds well to poetry, as long as it’s Keats, that is. Her favorite poem is “La Belle Dame sans Merci.”

“And that is why I sojourn here,

alone and palely loitering.

Though the sedge is withered from the lake,

and no birds sing.”

As I read these final lines, the baby finishes her breakfast. I lift her up and she smiles at me that awesome smile of a fat, satisfied baby. She says, “What a beautiful melancholy poem.”

I’m about to respond, probably something amazingly heartfelt about the poem or about how much I love her. But before I do, I am interrupted.

Just then a fucking mouse scurries across the floor. I throw the Keats at it, missing by a mile, as I wail impotently, “Suzy Wong!”