

That Still Abiding Fire



Book Two: Colin John Holcombe

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by

Colin John Holcombe

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Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Omar el-Masri	3
3. Huanzang	4
4. Châu Minh Mai	7
5. Abdul Rahman Razak	11
6. Anthony Charles Lynton Blair	14
7. Heinrich Ludwig Arndtsfeld	17
8. Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone	21
9. Manuel Maleinos	25
10. Bernal Días del Castillo	27
11. Gonzalo Quezada	29
12. Huang Li	32
13. Colonel Ricardo Garcia	34

Book Two: Introduction

*How comes it then that thou art out of hell?
Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.*

(Doctor Faustus: Christopher Marlowe)

*The dinar rattles on the counting board,
and puts its golden indolence to use
in titles that our rulers waft abroad:*

*the virtuous king, whose pieties produce
the utmost sanctity, though still in force
are sword and sharia we introduce*

*to keep our vast communities on course,
within the bulwarks of their modest lives
lest falls from pride occasion wild remorse.*

2. Omar el-Masri

My work is scholarship, and one that strives
to see more plainly what the Prophet said
when not so weighted down with wealth and wives.

The occupations of this honoured head,
who hopes by quiet example to beget
a love of principles by which we're led,
were far beyond the blood-tinged Mongol threat
by chance, and chance alone, in Qwairawan,
but heard our Caliphate's bright sun had set

at last with Helagu. With that began,
as though a mighty dome had fallen in,
repeated questionings, and then a ban

on doubt so absolute that only sin
and wildest heresies could much explain
the blood-soaked levelling where faith had been.

And though submission was not easy, plain
it was the least resistance meant an end
to old Qahira, and in blood and pain.

But Sultan Qutuz, never one to bend
in outside blandishments, had made his sum
of consequences should he still defend

his lands and sultanate. He did. How numb
with fear we heard of Mongol emissaries
hung dead at our four gates, that onslaught come

the more ferociously — until we see
all band together as a new-bred sect,
the young and old in fervent destiny

and march. At Ain Jalut their course was checked.
Improbably, rough Qutuz saved our lives,
and though the further Caliph lands were wrecked,

we still had families, as bees their hives,
our mosques and schools and markets, making one
community by which the Muslim thrives.

But if a victory our faith had won
it came with carnage still and sharp reverse,
where even Qutuz had not justice done.

Our sultan fell beneath the Mamluk curse,
for Baibars killed him, and the faithful's view
was once more thickly hued, if not perverse.

And yet the moment helped, since all we do
is by His grace and kindness nonetheless,
and must be pertinent, in some ways true.

I went at length to Baghdad, to assess
the rumoured end of all our libraries there,
and more the populace's great distress —

and found but desolation, where the air —
note this was five weeks later, under truce —
still stunk of bodies, where the moon might stare

on emptinesses such as dreams produce,
that dreadful charnel house where every well
lay poisoned, beggars fought, and such profuse

thick smoke still curled from rubbish tips to tell
how books were treated in this new abode,
our thought inverted in one murky hell.

What brought this devastation? What had sowed
such rampant wickedness in sober men,
averse to principles and what is owed

to God in natural decency? For when
in piety they stand before His throne
their actions aggregate to citizen

who knows in faience tile and sculpted stone,
in hours of prayer and in long-practised breath
that all that's given us is inward grown.

For surely it is as the Prophet saith,
that He above is merciful, compassionate,
and in foreseeing does not urge our death —

as these most certainly had done, and made
whole streets of residential blocks collapse
for which the least responsible had paid.

I saw piled walls and yards that once perhaps
were schools and hospitals, where scraps of clothes
were witnesses to how we people lapse

from that right government that's given those
who know they live within each other's lease,
or otherwise it's as the whirlwind sows.

*We make a wilderness and call it peace,
that settled interests may benefit,
and never worship of the empire cease.*

Must man the wonderful be always split
between the lives of action, thought and prayer,
nor have sobriety in truth acquit

itself more honourably, for all there fare
much darkening malice in the statesman's smile,
and more, ambition, make the deeper snare?

*So pass the great ones from the earth, the while
go arts and industry: for ever rose
our institutions out of force and guile.*

3. Huanzang

It was to find the rightful words of those
who took their understanding on from thought
to life itself your loyal Huanzang chose

to leave the pleasant world of town and court,
of farm and prospect on this rural earth,
the long observances his masters taught,

and come a long way round on earth's hard girth
to seek of Buddhas lost in desert sands
where modes of thinking had their scattered birth.

Those steep and stupa'd, wooded, air-thin lands
of monasteries and silver-tinkled bells
that tell the monk his being understands

that all's ephemeral, the steps he'll climb
to power and privilege in a princely court
but come to obsequies and mouldering lime.

And what remains of that but vague report,
a memory as glittering realms remain
in scattered obelisque and desert fort?

A look or word perhaps, a slight refrain
when song and singer both are gone, the bloom
of vibrant memory, the threadbare plain

the wind inhabits, or an empty room
when riotous marriage festivals are past,
which stands precursor to eventual tomb.

There are no true embodiments that last
but need some sensitive, receptive form
as shoes are thrown off from the cobbler's last —

to hold the world, to hear it, soft and warm,
which, like a child we fend for till its grown,
we nurture, keep from tempest, wind and storm.

Unless we give up what we cannot own
in binding clothes that shape our consciousness —
there's only emptiness, with sorrows sown

as thick as desert storms. All worlds regress
continually to vain and empty things
although we hold them through to less and less.

What can I tell you? That the mountain springs
fall recklessly to fill the settled lake
with quiet tranquillity the evening brings?

That bright reflections built of burnished steel
corrode to tarnished matter, stain and rust:
the putrefaction that we can't conceal?

I've climbed the rock-hewn steps, as climb we must,
towards a distant azimuth, but yet
accept that sanctuary is only trust.

I've been where incense-coloured temples let
new worlds of wonder bloom, exalt the rim
of earthly majesty we must forget.

I've known high monasteries when hymn on hymn
rose twinned with high peaks' yet more radiant light
as one by one the mountain tops began to brim

with such uncensored and unbound delight
that all Tibetan valleys in between
seemed brooding intervals of darkest night.

*The world is beautiful, has always been,
but while it tempts us it must also mask
the deeper consciousness that grows unseen.*

*So money shuttles on its sovereign task
of binding us to foreign ways, and ours
is but a family where we may ask,*

*and reasonably, for market trades, for powers
to buy what's needed in the daily whirl
of goods we mark up through our mindless hours.*

4. Châu Minh Mai

My name in Vietnamese means sparkling pearl,
or drift of fragrance in the falling rain,
in all things delicate, a little girl

who, yet more distantly, may hear again
her mother saying to her: far above,
the high moon watching us must also wane.

So choose, my child, my sweet, my little dove,
a simple countryman, when never die
the Mekong river lands, to which your love

will come as evening mists, where green fields lie
close, thick and comforting, and where the toes
can root their thoughts in fertile mud. The sky

will bring us rain in season; wind that blows
is moist and open-mouthed; our ancestors
will whisper kindly to us while there glows

the warmth of green within the bamboo floors
of granaries, and we can hear the fish
that glint and waver as the sunlight draws

itself to darkness and we eat our dish
of smells and quietness as the evenings bid
us help our countryman. We did not wish

a hurt to anyone. It's true we hid
our patriots beyond the reach of plane
or gun just as the Buddha would amid

our living consciences, when we attain
a sense that all are brothers. Smoke and heat
then come, and sudden soldiers. No explain

why buffaloes be killed, or why must treat
us all like criminals when no one spoke,
or tie our headman up and beat and beat

with rifle butts until his old bones broke.
The more I cannot tell of: mother say
the moon abandon us poor river folk.

Sparkling pearl, she add, must go away
because the shaming of her still offends
the friends who love her dearly. I obey

and work in factories, but my offspring sends
me off as thousands more from loom to worse.
It not respectable but bring new friends

who teach me slowly: how to never curse
the sense of being in a country drowned
in foreign ways, but make up, dress, rehearse

the walk of body that was lightly downed
with glistening innocence that boys before
they took to soldiering have maybe found

more like the modesty their sweethearts wore —
to make it ravenous, with jutting breasts
and traits expected in a two-bit whore.

And so my cleft I push at favoured guests,
do clever tricks for soldiers who will pay
for women vulnerable and quick undressed.

What do you want from us? You do not say.
Our needs are much as yours, our bodies too.
You think our shoes and market clothes defray

the hurt of being always soiled by you,
the brute invasions that we can't wash off?
Or what the villagers must know I do?

I go back once: they only smile and cough
avoid me like I have disgusting smell,
and make my body as some common trough

that every soldier drink from, village well
where all men put their snouts in: then was gone,
the village, family, though I could tell

how river wandered as before, and shone
in sun I knew, and silence intertwined
with light and patience. So my life go on

the same in Saigon city, where I find
a rich American, and dye my hair
and act as glamorous, but, though he kind,

he treat me like the flotsam everywhere,
the sweated paradise the body sells
with all the memories we do not share.

He leave for foreign missions, smart hotels,
a life anonymous, that wartime past
consigned to nightmares and to distant hells.

The rains of monsoon seasons yearly cast
their gloomy intervals on muddy pools
but still some essence of it always last

across the interval. For now by different rules,
our children laugh as leaves reclothe the trees,
and unreflecting, at our new-built schools,

learn all is possible. While no one sees
the gross deformities, or shell-strewn fields,
we still can speak of paths to destinies.

They say our factories now give better yields,
that western lives are not beyond our reach
if we have power that modern business wields.

And so, although I lost my son, I also teach,
re-educated, with my tunic neat,
as are my course notes, and my measured speech,

about forbearance, that my pupils greet
this world of passing and of senseless pain
as aberration, know no sudden heat

and stench of napalm runs, continual rain
of chemicals to let in toxic light,
repeated bombings in the free-fire vein

that left but one alive, or just, despite
what must be amputated, eyelids gone,
who now will never close her eyes at night.

*It is a world on which much absence shone
in proper argument or even facts,
and armaments, as ever flooding on*

*to new engagements, where the bomber sacks
the city equally as herdsman's home
but in rebuilding afterwards attracts*

*the new investment, as would conquering Rome
that never let its tax exactions stain
the favoured humus of its Tiber loam.*

5. Abdul Rahman Razak

I did not know how hideously such pain
could drill out nerve-ways, on repeatedly,
till like a drenching sweat the sense would drain

into my very consciousness, and be
the circuit for my howling state, that ball
I soon became of fierce anxiety.

I had a rough awareness of the wall
and manacles. I stayed there day by day
perhaps whole months together: I recall

some spaces, interludes where I would say
into a haze of smoke and blinding light
I was no terrorist, nor in the pay

of foreign interests, nor did I fight
for El Qaida, Taliban or anyone,
but was a goatherd tender who one night

was caught in tribal fights. I had no gun
they still they questioned me, for bounty more
then trucked me, manacled, in well-paid fun.

But one of thousands of us Afghan poor
inhabiting the harsh dry hills, who in
this strange, barbaric and unchosen war

must opt for independence. Who could win
this fight, I told them when they broke my teeth,
and more when US troops, I said, were twin

of rabid Taliban, that underneath
they both were renegades from those just laws
that He to us poor sinners would bequeath.

They hung me up and beat me till the sores
of slowly opening bruises showed the bone,
and then, half-conscious, over concrete floors

they dragged and propped me up, forever prone
to beat me to a pulped sobriety
that made my fabrications match their own.

They shocked my testicles and thrust in me
whatever hurt or ruined me the most,
but done by army codes, professionally,

till all was torment of a vacant ghost.
I should have died, but didn't, was at last
ejected from that Bagram army post.

I healed, but coexistence long is past
as villages are bombed to clothes and dust
and in one fiery cauldron all are cast.

I say my prayers as every Afghan must,
and smile, salute the soldiers, take their pay,
but never look to them for hope or trust.

Al Qaida come and threaten. We obey
and hide their weapons for them, and report,
till US troops arrive and have their say.

Sometimes we intimate that our support
is forced and temporary, that we are men
betrayed to foreigners for youngsters' sport.

There's time for ploughing, and a time again
to sow and thin out, weed our scattered fields,
to tend the bullock, pluck the fattened hen.

All life's precarious, but slowly wields
a power transcending these harsh things below,
and more than brute imaginings will yield.

We know war passes, but to hell will go
the politicians urging what they've done
to help their high-tech industries. They know

it's only faith that lasts, when there is won
from the Compassionate, One most high,
the peace the Christians call their loving Son.

All work is good in these hard lands that lie
athwart dry hills and wadis, plainness laid
beneath the colourless but tented sky.

*We own this piebald land: It was conveyed
to us by claim and custom ages back,
confirmed by notaries who never stayed*

*but as their governors told them, sign and pack
and leave this land of ghosts and ancient tombs.
The Sufi high upon his mountain track*

*is bowed in prayers and blessings and assumes
the shape of kinship, care and common lore
to bid you welcome to his whitewashed rooms.*

*Each day brings odours from the hard-packed floor
of goats and blankets and of men asleep,
that cosseting, warm smell of trampled straw*

*which in our half-washed clothes we ever keep
as our identity, or sense of self —
a spreading destiny although there seep*

*in us such large distempers, passing wealth
that's built on things eternal, ragged toil
to bring our small plots back to tattered health,*

*and not on power or warfare, things that soil
the heart of man, and which he should despise
with all the prestige got from drugs and oil.*

6. Anthony Charles Lynton Blair

He was a young man still, with soft blue eyes,
an honest, forthright face, though seeming cursed
to be the victim of repulsive lies.

'It's true', he said, 'I had a burning thirst
for fame however incidents might fall,
but in this surely I was not the first.

Suppose there had been weapons after all,
and cheering masses surged to greet each tank
that liberated them, tell me, who'd recall

the lapse of open government, the rank
but wise deceptions they have come to blame,
which are but statesmanship they ought to thank.

Must I continually retain a name
synonymous with deviousness until
the close of history, an unending shame?'

Your office was to do the people's will
however various, good sense replied,
not send the waiting armies out to kill

the hapless citizens, thwart all who tried
to mediate and make a rational plan:
the evidence was doubtful, so you lied.

Professionals went and swiftly overran
the rag-tag army, and security
was therefore stood down, when at once began

the car-bombs, killings, that unending sea
of blood that local tit for tat enacts.

'Regrettable but naught to do with me.'

But statesmanship is virtue in the acts
it can't be certain on, where shades of doubt
will cloud the images and merge the facts,

where you have sold your soul and country out
for companies, for oil, for speaking tours—
all lost within that deepening, general rout

of common decency that ill secures
in sins contending for our human lot,
and makes of eloquence but running sewers.

Ignorance, miscalculation? Not
a bit of it. You knew ambition shirks
no others' killings for the fame you got.

'I used my contacts, took the usual perks
as anyone of sense is bound to do,
which makes for animosities, or irks

the good plain citizen or likes of you:
yes, yes of course. You're either in or out
and wants accumulate as rights accrue.

You know all that, of course, but still you flout
the plain realities, the obvious facts
that gives America its global clout.

Their writ goes everywhere, and so exacts
in time a penalty if one dissents:
what happens here is how our cousin acts —

to which I'm privy to, or was. Events
have consequences: trust me. Soon or late
the funding sources shape all governments.

You have your pomp and pageantry, your great
parades of homage to the land or queen,
your pride in history and the kindly fate

that gave you colonies, and what has been
your help and mainstay in successive wars,
but all are mirages, and what's unseen

is flow of wealth and privilege, how we cause
a currency to rise and have its hour,
the realms of faith a government restores.

All, all are underwritten by brute power,
the markets, CIA, the military,
and even academics in their ivied tower

adopt the safe approach to guarantee
their grants and tenure. *Yes, they sing along
to vast impostures which they referee*

*appropriately to clearly do no wrong
to institutions, nor to undersell
their status listing things that don't belong*

*to one true path, the hymn that doesn't tell
how liberal consciences were not reproved
by that Falluja made exemplary hell*

*when soldiers shot at anything that moved,
at ambulances, schools and helpers, broke
the laws their own good Senate had approved.*

*But these were lessons brought to foreign folk,
who learn that modern forces come in styles
that must be listened to when once they spoke.*

7. Heinrich Ludwig Arndtsfeld

I often look at her. My sister smiles,
as I do in the photograph, yet through
the shadows phosphorescing are the miles

of coarse buffooneries I can't undo,
nor resurrect the wasted lives that bleed
into the noontide blaze of light. Not few

but sixteen hundred of them, so I read,
that Operation Paperclip has lent
to proud America, that it succeed

in acting otherwise to that descent.
But where I went to one good home in Maine
my sister Emily long overspent

her scuffed forbearance, and could not remain
as untermenschen or the yellow scum
but serve as groundswell for a new campaign

of racial purity, as people come
slow day by day to see themselves undone
by slimed miasma from the east, the sum

of vile depravity that never won
a manly living in the Celtic realms
of damp and moss-draped trees, the lack of sun

for days on end, but where their sacred elms,
and blood-drenched pools were more than nationhood,
that one where primal nature overwhelms

mere rational thought. So to that shadowed wood
they went, to lights, and wire and torture shed
in trucks and manacled, for long hours stood

exposed to elements, each shaven head
alert to what their doctors could devise,
with loathsome details better left unsaid.

But I will name them lest their fearful eyes
be lost to us, and we forget their pain
and vast betrayal as each image dies.

Without good clothing some on ground were lain
whole nights together as surroundings froze,
and in vast boiling vats revived again.

Some were gassed or injured, desperate throes
of agony recorded: if not dead
were killed that cranial sectioning disclose

new points of deformation. Some were led
progressively to feel high altitude,
or with disease-infected offal fed.

Some were slow-garrotted, strung up nude,
or tortured, electrocuted, driven mad,
or perished miserably, denied their food.

How many of them, in uncounted thousands clad
in God's ebullient but passing days,
were touched with sentient goodness, glad

to be alive, to think, inhale and gaze
on this, His bounty of the breathing earth
whose least conception of assumes our praise —

unbounded, everlasting, where our worth
is what we can discern or comprehend
of He who ever was with us from birth

through cradle, childhood, what the stigmas lend
to God's own people, and the chosen race,
in which both pride and envy must contend

with chaste embodiments of bodice lace,
good Hamburg tailoring, lapels hand-stitched,
the well-cut uniforms that yet embrace

a million pestilences, each enriched
by usury, by backroom deals and vast
enslavements by the blood bewitched.

In this I'm one of them, the millions cast
in lime-pits, cinders or the glutted sands
where names or families will never last

the battery of sense, for none withstands
the small and ineluctable decay
in evening's dalliance with foreign lands.

Frivolity of frocks, unloosened stay,
exuberant breasts protruded, loved and kissed
are with the gaslight dimmed, then stripped away

to no particularity, that tryst
of candlelight with darkness merged to grey,
flat distillates of thoughts that now subsist

on state occasions where we numbly say
in all that universe of muffled cries,
what makes the usurer, and who will pay?

Yet in this growing older still the lies
and cover-ups of torture go to show
how false are any claims in freedom's guise.

At times I pray for her, but do not know
if she can want me in that higher place
or if the grief up there will further grow,

but still, instinctively, respect the grace
abounding everywhere if we have sense
of something shadowed in that trusting face.

How could we otherwise absorb events,
find purpose in this hurtful place, delay
a moment in our journeying to hence

we know not where, but as a tooth decay
that vaguely aches and goes away, the test
of common daylight then to stoutly say:

*What are the Visigoths? A distant pest,
no more than that, a tiresome people none
will see as yet more serious than the rest.*

*For still the people shop, and railways run,
and going peacefully about their ways
the honest citizens beneath the sun*

*will see no danger in, but only gaze
on others' incidents much like his own,
the checks and hindrances that all our days*

*must serve to make us as we are, that thrown
together in the flux of life, those much
perplexing intervals where we have sown*

*our hopes and fantasies, the things we clutch
at wildly, needlessly, though scarce discern
what passes seamlessly more out of touch.*

8. Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone

Born to easy ways, where I could earn
as much from market trades as soldiering,
it was His purposes that I would yearn

for abject lowliness, which then would bring
the heart's obedience and chastity
and kinship too with every breathing thing

that lives with sunlight in its own decree.
I felt the earth could speak and flowers nod
if I were only given cause to see.

That's all I asked, though earnestly, of God:
a small compassion for my fellow men,
and be in His sweet conscience firmly shod,

which surely stretches to the wildest den
of men like animals, that feed on roots,
on voles and carrion, and fruits again.

But I have worshipped with these troubled brutes,
unkempt and ravenous, with bloodshot eyes:
they prey in darkness on the forest routes

to stalk and pounce on travellers unwise
enough to take the unfrequented ways.
They glut on what they kill, but in a guise

so helplessly at odds with our Lord's gaze
of love and sweet humility that I
would find a word of His, or simple phrase

would bring them to my hand, and even nigh
to inundated us with the tears, both theirs
and mine. For God won't put such lost souls by

who are but nothing in this world's affairs,
ignored by commoners as church or court,
bereft of everything, with not a prayer

from wandering friar, indeed unsought
by bishop's crosier or churchman's staff:
most poor, most pitiful, of all things sought

deprived most damnably, of no man's hearth,
but yet of God's, to find a kindlier role
in shared community's much-travelled path.

With greed we hurt ourselves, the undone soul
will lose itself in waste and worldliness.
To see God's firmament, and see it whole,

is man as child, in essence little less
than God himself although in homely looks
his great unworthiness must still confess.

My life is poverty. I own no books,
nor Bible even in my brothers' cells.
The tongue I teach is breathy trees and brooks,

the radiant world that is, and ever tells
how long this hard earth sorrows, how that pain
is in our missions and the holy bells

that ring out on the Eastertide, and stain
the air with such glad tidings, yet the same
are far from reckoning. For God's good reign

is not of mitre or of scented flame,
nor copes and jewels, nor of the swelling hymns
that this poor world of ordure only shames.

It is the deep life always. As the evening dims
across the tonsured land of field and home,
of vineyard, town and wood, a sadness brims

as though to drown us, have the very loam
be inundated with the hopes of men
who seek redemption, not of Rome.

And so I told them: me, this citizen,
this plain unlearned man whom feeling broke.
Nor did the Holy Father say amen

but had me shadowed and detained. He spoke
of heresy and heresy's still burning fires,
and pain perpetual as the age-old oak.

What could I say, but that the truth requires
our troubled consciences to wake and see
how in such gluttony true worth expires?

I was not martyred, and at length went free.
Admonished, sanctioned as a holy fool,
was sent about my hair-shirt ministry.

So God was with me and my simple school
of honest workmen in this land of grace
which outward poverty must ever rule.

I felt Him fill that silent market place
when I was stripped, and treated as a sinner shorn
of dignity, indeed in deep disgrace

to all Assisi folk, as though reborn
as some wild animal, though I would preach
of only kindness lest we suborn

the simple honesty that lies in brother sheep
and wolf, compassionate, and merciful
that for our faithlessness will ever weep.

*Where he who fasts will feel the gentle pull
of someone like him, but beyond such needs,
as Sufi's clothes are made of homespun wool.*

*No more than that, for each possession breeds
a hunger to outdo his fellow man,
that cry of conscience he no longer heeds.*

*Today a business brief, computer scan
to tot up totals at the discount rate,
with each competitor an also ran.*

*When lost is brotherhood, fulfilling state
of caring always for the least of them,
for men like animals beneath the weight*

*that providence will seemingly condemn
them to, their crimes begotten of a place
they have no knowledge of, in root or stem.*

*The manners and the clothes that grace
their foreign-educated, new elites
that form, if gradually, another race*

*that swaps the jurga for the boardroom seats,
their worn-down sandals for their hand-stitched shoes
and homes in tripled-guarded, gated streets,*

*who talk of worker's rights but always choose
the trade agreements with the better folk
that have the contacts they and theirs can use.*

That need not be. Must I again invoke
the humble decencies, how feints and lies
undo the comradeship of which the Gospels spoke.

In saying otherwise a little dies,
and in such purposes the candle ends
snuff out in smoke and scarcely muffled cries

the simple truths that woken conscience sends
us sinners in those fiercely roaring hells
as over all this earth the thinking wends.

*So were the pilgrimages, holy wells,
the visitations and the doubled fears
no grace or absolution wholly quells.*

*There is a holy city, one that nears
us daily as we think on grace and loss
and one we reach at last through endless tears.*

*And so it is, and no doubt ever was,
where each will know it as their conscience span
this heavy world of ours, its hurt and dross.*

9. Manuel Maleinos

I was in principal an upright man
administering this old Jerusalem
as custom guided and my duty ran.

My tasks were various. Not least of them
was care and succour of the poor, to do
as heart must prompt us, think, and not condemn

the Jews and Muslim errors, pray it's true
that all our disagreements here with Rome
were only passing clouds upon the hue

of radiant Christendom, which is our home,
the holy land in which our Saviour walked,
where all these differences prove fertile loam

for compromise, however much be talked
of hopes of one true faith. But if that's blocked,
ensure the ship of faith be stoutly caulked

against the shifting treaties plainly mocked
by Kilij Arslan and the Seljuk powers,
that with good troops and craft were plainly stocked,

but used with scarce more foresight than were ours.
The Prince of Antioch intrigued as will
the sheep with sheepdog that the wolf devours.

So still they came, the strange Faraj, until
the fractious Holy Lands had felt their zest
for drinking Ma'aran blood, as shortly will

our good Jerusalem, the holy, blest
down all the years of scholar-studied text,
which Christ's own life and teaching had expressed.

The army halted by the city walls, perplexed
that strange inhabitants should keep them out,
and so made promises: let none be vexed

by threat to person or their goods, or doubt
that God's own warriors will keep their word.
The gates then opened, and began the rout

too horrible to tell, for undeterred
by cross or chivalry or high renown
or human decency, there then occurred

a flood as fugitives were hunted down,
raped, garrotted, butchered: conscience cold
to such barbarities. O what a crown

of sharpened sorrows must our Lord behold.
Yet Rome gave thanks, and great cathedral bells
across our Christendom were roundly tolled.

And I no better than the infidels
by these same conquerors was driven hence.
This former patriarch by village wells

must beg for pittances, whose least offence
was to God's majesty, to say amen
to piety that underlies our human sense.

*My faithful conqueror, apply again
the hangman's noose, the sword, exactions, fire:
that all receive their shock and terror then*

*and turn on inward where a vague desire
conflates with darkening loss, and do not dwell
on large imbroglios where hopes expire.*

10. Bernal Días del Castillo

With diffidence, and knowing all too well
what seems impossible, a madman's dream,
or some enchantress with Amida's spell,

I set these recollections down that seem
so far from principled and castled Spain
to be but monuments to self-esteem.

But yet I saw them, vividly retain
its capital, Tenochtitlán, as press
of many peoples, temples, gardens — vain

it is to speak of their proud gentleness,
or poorest of them fairly dressed and neat,
and richly coloured too, which I confess

would shame our European courts. Each street
was kept immaculate, and every room
was aired and decorated, smelling sweet.

Much produce also of the field and loom,
and in a single market place more food
than Europe's largest armies would consume

Contented all of them, they went bright-hued
in patterned cottons, feathers, and in short
it was a paradise if rightly viewed

as souls in fealty to a foreign court
through riches unadmitted or unknown.
In this we came at length to what we sought,
indeed was destined for us, as I've shown
to your high majesty. Conquistadors
took heed to have these worst of heathens grown
more sensible of our true Christian cause.
For these were soulless animals, when beasts
will know some dignity in savage laws.

Mere witless simpletons, who gazed at priests
in open wonder, but indulged their zests
for riotous spectacle and sinful feasts.

We hacked them down with swords, we cut off breasts
and members, made their bodies bloodied logs,
and then their womenfolk perpetual guests

at our bordellos where a foreman flogs
and flogs them till they learn to smile. And when
we hunted them with baying packs of dogs

they fled up hill-paths and fell back again.
We speared them, shot them through with arrows, hung
them up on meat-hooks, or in a pen

insisted that they fight each other, young
and old, the boys with girls: it was the same,
and if they howled too much we cut off tongue

or feet, or fingers, all: for we were game
to have them toil for us, to run or crawl
until obedient, and work-force tame.

*The president seemed vexed, his Texan drawl
was checked a moment, then he smiled:
I guess you folks know next to sweet damn all.*

*You think it matters what you have compiled
of facts and affidavits, witnesses,
the small-town pieties we may have riled,

the working families who now get less
and less, the out-of-work, the shiftless bums
the outraged editors who daily press

for explanations for such kingdom comes
as muzzled press reporting, terror laws,
the stop and search, the shootings, crack-head slums

that desecrate these shining shore to shores
of vast, inherited, unequal wealth,
the immigration turned to running sores.*

*It don't the least damn matter. Lies and stealth,
the prospects glittering beneath what's said,
that greed that motivates financial health

are what we need. The rest has long been dead.
One nation strong, united under God,
is just the usual hogwash you've been fed

and need to be. So let us cattle-prod
them on till loans and mortgages ensure
we get no trouble from this awkward squad.*

11. Gonzalo Quezada

Let good Gonzalo greet you, once a Moor
but then a prosperous name, well known about
each rich Toledo bourse and trading floor.

I had a daughter: beautiful, devout,
and brought up in right Christian fellowship
that holy fathers even couldn't find her out

for all they saw high beauty's full-blown lip,
the lifetime-long remembered blaze of eyes,
and languorous hauteur of the sauntering hip,

and so would think of her, but she was wise
enough to smother that and aim to be
aloof and counted as a rich man's prize.

And so she was. In quiet humility
she kept the state on which all virtues call:
reserved, munificent, though each could see

how soft that measured step would fall,
the face that could inflame the blood of kings,
where eyes, as Spaniards say, conversed with all.

How comes it that a fevered madness sings
about the stony lands of Aragon
or high Castile? Or sanctity that brings

these all-compelling, strange decrees? Be gone
you Christian converts on whose late disease
our Lord's benevolence had one time shone.

We were to leave the land which centuries
have seen us love and cultivate, had built
great schools and libraries in, prosperities

that set great store by honey, grain and milt,
by vine and olive groves, an industry
ingrained as rivers lay their unseen silt.

Most were only poor, content to be
a much-abused but uncomplaining folk
where Church and State expunged the memory

of how we'd toiled for them. Although I spoke
through good acquaintances to men at court,
to priests and magistrates, that unjust yoke

was laid on all and equally. I thought
her high-bred husband might protest the ban,
or plead the sanity for which I fought.

But no. In truth the troubled days began
for his Angelica, and also mine,
the lawful wife he turned to courtesan,

her dowry forfeit to him. By design
or fear of law, or all the sorry rest
by which all sinful purposes combine,

he cast her off. The Prophet's way is blest
in Berber lands, I thought, but though in need
we hardly came ashore as honoured guest

as custom indicates. So I concede.
No, more as locusts or a plague abroad
that pressed at mosque and gate, where we would plead

for simple charity. The Prophet's sword
is just as absolute in Muslim lands:
as apostates we came to our reward.

To death: immediate, by many hands.
Who sunk our ships. Or cut us down. Or led
the thousands out to die in desert sands.

A few survived; the hardiest, those bred
to trade or commerce, those with airs
and looks that might still grace some stranger's bed.

And there I lost Angelica. It bears
no telling how the two of us were sold,
as things contaminated, public wares.

I work in market wharfs, but am too old
to fairly reckon up each groat or drachm,
or weigh the cinnamon or varied gold.

Whatever is most wretched, so I am:
forgetful, sometimes brooding why was done
a thing so evil. God of Abraham,

of your good Prophet, of our sweetest Son:
so tell me why your mercy never shone
on us, and why such good was overrun

with hurt for my Angelica, a daughter gone
to who knows where, but still condemned
for reasons God himself is silent on.

*Those left-wing thoughts, from which have stemmed
such waste and self-indulgence: labour must
at least be flexible, and wisely hemmed*

*in by its competition, hard but just.
In all we implement or would explain,
such textbook principles demand our trust.*

*No social program should be left to drain
the vital cash-flows, nor may mortal man
be counted anything but loss and gain.*

12. Huang Li

That middle kingdom, where the race of Han
must tend continually the ripening stands
of wind-loud paddy, where the rivers ran

meandering through the dappled willow lands,
the long millennia of daub and thatch
where fear and penury with equal hands

retrieve the harvest of each tiny patch
of plough and planting's endless dream
of self sufficiency — that never match

in this harsh world where middlemen but seem
oblivious of our hurtful press and toil,
and foreigners contrive to cheat us, scheme

to take our sweat-soaked goodness from the soil
by usury, by faulty weights and false reports
stir up the enmities that now embroil,

they say, whole cantons where the western forts
look down on Arab trading marts, those wily lives
that teem with enterprise and prescient thoughts.

We send our effort out, though town contrives
by taxes, falsehoods and by foreign ways
to make disposable our hard-pressed lives.

We killed them. Willingly. With wild amaze
at thoughts so hideous, we cut them down
with sticks and knives, and had their markets blaze

that I can see them even now. Each town
or village was consumed by fire, and what
we could not strike we'd simply chase and drown.

All, I have to tell you. It was not
a moment's madness but a steady tide
of practiced lawlessness lest we forgot

how much they cheated us, and looked aside
when hunger struck us, and some wasted child
or mother rotted in the countryside.

It was a duty for us, grew more wild
in wilful savagery, and we'd devise
humiliations for the lifeless things defiled.

I will not detail all we did, those ties
to rational decency that we had lost,
that only darkened under smoke-rimmed eyes.

In time the Manchus came, at dreadful cost
put down the insurrection, shot the rest,
the good and evil in one furnace tossed.

*It seems but yesterday, and unassessed
lie still these fields of fertile green and mud:
we make no frank confession of it lest*

*we mitigate too much the cleansing flood
that underlies each one of us, that raw
and deadly thing that makes its way through blood*

13. Colonel Ricardo García

It is regrettable, señor. The war
on drugs you foreign governments must wage
to keep our barrios swept clean and poor

must give fatalities, long page on page
of them reported from this border town,
though not the misery or mounting rage

that you in measured prose can then set down
for Sunday reading, where statistics say
their lives are different and will never drown

in smack or ecstasy or purple K.
They'll not be hunted through dark sewer ways,
or forced and brutally to pay and pay.

The rest, señor, must stay alive, to gaze
more fervently as family or wives
fend off or circumvent that threatening blaze

of drug dependency, which barely strives
to keep the mules, sicarios and traffickers
apart from our close cousins' well-heeled lives.

Though youths turn animals or integers
past any rational human sense of aid,
a mention in the mainstream media incurs

the wrath of 'us the beautiful' brigade
of son, or congressman, or neighbour's chick.
They do not see the car or frock is paid

by women cut up when the condoms stick,
by rivals slaughtered, chain-sawed, beaten, struck
repeatedly until their entrails flick

out greasily across the floor, the muck
of bodies boiled to zipper studs and slime
or tossed at sundown from the unmarked truck.

Whole districts boarded up or burnt by crime,
police posts detonated, children shot,
and narcofossos run on overtime.

*But thanks to your fine banks results are got
post-haste to London, Basle or Washington,
or where it's wanted, and so clean forgot*

*is primal misery, not undergone
by numbers winking through to bank or bourse,
on which the sun of effort briefly shone*

*but now turns deeper on its silent course
to wealth, to domination, onward there
to fame and Oscars and to wild applause.*

*And seed and fertilisers, rationed air,
the food and water which we all must use
to go about daily lives, the abstract care*

*the state apportioned us, who cannot choose
our fluoridation, vaccines, colourings,
that flood of chemicals which must infuse*

*our organs, brains, capillaries—the things
that go on modulating and, we fear
will make us cabbages who would be kings.*

*They go on metastizing year on year
into the warp and inlay of our lives,
described and regulated by the peer*

*review of specialists that strives
to be impartial, in a brotherhood
from which, and naturally, sound thought derives.*

*We say the words as well-bred people should,
who do not mention what they know is right,
but claim the oversight's misunderstood.*

*So self-preserving always and, with bright
new consciences reformed, we headlong go
past ancient distillates of noonday light*

*to murky underworlds that empires know
in ranks of cavalry amassed at dawn,
and battle fields where far-off losses grow*

*proportional to the moody body shorn
of deep licentiousness, become instead
the blood of sacrifice, the myrrh and thorn.*

Note

Omar el-Masri, Châu Minh Mai, Abdul Rahman Razak, Heinrich Ludwig Arndtsfeld, Manuel Maleinos, Gonzalo Quezada, Huang Li and Colonel Ricardo García are all fictitious characters, but the incidents they relate are not.