



Still Abiding Fire

Book One: Colin John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2013

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by

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Book One: Introduction

*We buckle up and watch the needle spin
as, prospects narrowing to straight ahead,
the coloured cavalcade of days begin*

*to take us through that shadow-world the dead
will dandle out before us, constantly
beguiled and shifting in each wind-tossed head.*

*And then it's light again, and we will see
some diner, garage or communal shop
tear up and blaze on past. A fence or tree*

*trails off companionably until we stop,
when clouds go on before us and the blue
of far horizons settles on some mountain top*

*whose climb is part of us, as though it too
rose out of adolescent lands, that space
we bear reluctantly in all we do.*

*It's then we think of young Battuta, trace
the Qarakhanids or the Golden Horde,
the whirl of dervishes to resting-place.*

*And think how Huanzang's journeyings accord
with wisdoms winnowed out of days' deceits
in scriptures recollected, versed and stored.*

*Or merchant totting up the day's receipts,
Pizarro marking out the lands he'd rule,
the Arab voyager in tropic heats.*

*Of how the caliphs fought with jinn and ghoul,
for faiths their followers would soon deform,
as barefoot villager returned from school.*

10. *Odysseus the most of all, that storm-
and-ever-shipwrecked voyager, who knew
how Circe conjures up in human form*

*our desperate longings, always will. The few
who pass unscathed have learned the jeweller's art
to carve the cameo from that quiet hue*

*of textured honesty, which does not start
with fervent breath beneath the counterpane
but larger purposes that serve the heart.*

*Within this wilderness of love and pain,
and deep immured in it, with no way out,
we fare as travellers who'd still retain*

*the sense of others slept with, and no doubt
a pride and tenderness, if mixed with shame
that no one's memory is long without.*

*Innumerable are those we cannot name
that come about us as some bar or room
is cleaned and emptied of us all the same.*

*And more so even when about us bloom
those longed-for miracles of limbs and eyes
which we too carelessly ignore, assume*

*were false remittances of breathy sighs,
repentances from dew-pressed sleep,
and not the soul at one with its disguise.*

Dante and Beatrice

Sent on reluctantly, compelled by fear,
they passed the incised warning overhead:
abandon hope all ye who'd enter here.

With footsteps faltering, by Virgil led
along the pathway to the steep descent,
they gave up sun for hell's dark fumes instead,

20. and came to Charon, when they no wise went
across the turbid waters of the Styx
as those in whom all hope of good is spent,

but turned off downwards where the lightning picks
out apparitions and the rasping sighs
that come from mournfulness no tongue depicts:

the innumerable and countless dead, whose eyes
see nothing of this world, not good, not ill,
nor mind's encompassing what breath defies.

Still clambering down, they ventured on until
they found great Minos guard a second gate
where winds' great buffetings left nothing still,

as though that retribution should dictate
a howling nothingness, while whirring round
were long, sleek monitors to castigate

the poor for living on disputed ground
that's home to enemies: a brilliant flare
and then the bodies that are never found

complete but only shreds of skin or hair,
a top ripped off, a hand, some infant's shoe,
collateral to need, with no one there

to tell the newsreels of the life that grew
to unwashed innocence, that played no part
in what the great ones of the world will do

to mollify their voters with the high-tech art
of being foremost, nor how strikes dispute
the empathy where all our laws must start.

The same that Dante knew, the same pursuit
of wealth and empery and sordid gain,
that no inanities can long refute.

30. So pass the unassuming, so remain
the foes to onward thinking, leaving youth
a looking backward on a locked-in stain

that cuts off prospects where there's little ruth
in choosing Emperor and not the Pope,
for all his breviaries must speak the truth.

But then that world of his must snuff out hope,
and generate a yet more senseless war,
as titles ended in the hangman's rope.

And that not speedily, for here one saw
a riotous multitude with mouths agape
to have the beautiful expunged with gore.

Across such nightmares still there passed the shape
of one whose modesty and smiling air
could make those dark Eumenides escape

from funnelled pestilence, which everywhere
must feast on sores like leopard's spots, the Cain
that rules in councils of the she-wolf's lair.

So ineluctably they took that world of pain
and downward went, to drenching hurt and dross,
beyond what documentaries here contain.

To one forever exiled, with his loss
of home and livelihood, there came the press
of someone who could take him safe across

those vile propensities, to there confess,
whatever part we play, however cast,
we must continually each other bless.

A rapt beholding ever, first to last,
a creature in a crimson dress to stay
unspoken to until nine years had passed,

40. and tell her love upon that forward day:
a wondrous miracle she seemed in white,
although attendants moved her on her way.

To him the apparition was a sight
most sacred, beauteous, of rapturous show
that made the shadows even blazing light.

He gained his room at once, and would not go
about the populace and peopled town
but thought of what the heart should know:

that love has glory in its own renown,
and truth the splendour of the Lord's own stay
with us, as beauty needs but simple gown.

The heartaches stayed, of course, as did delay
of retribution, which as drooping star
forever is far off at end of day.

But still goes on before us, rising far
above this turning world, a holy dove
to mock the vain and fluttering thing we are

to inconceivable and boundless love
which acts responsive to a will that moves
the sun and circling choir of stars above.

*But yet more shamelessly appear those steep
and dark proclivities to forward joys
in life's fecundities proud bodies keep*

*in humid memory. No doubt as boys
we have no notion that their limbs are pledged
to subterfuges only, passing toys*

*to draw us deeper, where the path is hedged
by precipices where but chance forestalls
our fall, or so the sinful have alleged.*

*50. It is the eddying, dark blood that calls
and brooks no abstinence or needful pause:
the maiden dwells within those circled walls.*

*And there the dragon will unsheathe its claws,
and children's kingdoms that applaud today
admit no partisan or abstract laws.*

*The look, the laughter and the feigned delay,
that fragile butterfly that beats its wings
to open lovingly and bid us stay*

*are each imperative: the rapture sings
of declarations that we can't repay
for all that pain and sweet in everything*

*make man the miracle. What can we say
of his long helpmate or his sinful half
which, if he's sensible, he will obey*

*in all things down that dark and twisting path,
obscured, most difficult, the straight way lost,
with naught to mark out healthy grain from chaff?*

Romeo and Juliet

The place was Italy, where city walls
observed much pageantry and costumed strife
in swordplay, poison and continual brawls,

where sons of citizens must seek a wife
from daughters beautiful and well endowed
with wherewithal that makes for cultured life.

Engaged to Rosalind, fair Rosalind, whose proud
and nubile loveliness we have no sight
of, ever, in that gilded youthful crowd,

to Romeo on such a star-hung night
it fell as one in whom sweet voices bred
a radiance wherewith the lamps shone bright.

60. For there an innocent and gentle head
was bent to mystery and flowered thought
that soon from this harsh world of ours is sped.

And was so then, when prince and prelate's court
arrayed in damask pomp and studded gem
must mask in sumptuousness the power it sought.

That much was clear as day, but lost to them
engaged perpetually in lovers' vows
and so oblivious of stratagem:

where laws are only as the state allows,
and grow more nebulous as mortals know
the darkneses intelligence endows

with grieving consciences. The end will flow
through quarrels, betrothals, sword-flash, haste and flight
to that entombment Juliet will undergo.

And yet that snatched-at dawning into light
is measure of the world that's God's not man's,
as is the blessedness of holy sight.

True faithfulness will come to one who scans
his part correctly, fully — a thing as rare
as chastity among the courtesans,

but also given us, as on we fare
in hope and enterprise, as daily seen
as God's soft radiance that fills the air.

So Italy, where Guelf and Ghibbeline
support the Pope's or Holy Emperor's
equivocations of that in between

which makes for deviousness, and so incurs
the worst of villainies, that treachery,
for which — how many of them! — hell inters

70. in flaming pitch or freezing ice, which see
no hope of remedy or penitence
but long immersion, to the last degree

of suffering until we sinners sense
that life is what appearances profess
in this our interval to going hence.

How many principedoms with their brave largesse
in well-laced progeny and brutal laws
will soon see France and Aragon progress

to open conflict for the Emperor's cause
and Italy's fine cities, pillaged, burn
with that barbarity we know as wars.

How many captured or besieged will learn
how gallantry will turn to fierce 'insteads'
within those arsenals of unconcern,

where laughing girls will lose their maidenheads
and bloodily, if not their lives as well.
Relentlessly the tide of warfare spreads

to city, town and fields and upland fell,
when wolves are ravenous and none withstay
the full calamity the churchmen tell

as end they merited. They have no say
in what their social betters have to do:
it is the suffering who come to pay,

that have no preference or point of view
but live and let all others live, and be
as wise in tolerance as you would too.

Alas that men must lust, and destiny
descend to loot, for all that pious folk
chose situations where they will not see

80. how history passes, how the measures broke
the Constitution: still before their eyes
their man was reputable though never spoke.

So comes it conscience is consumed by lies,
by inexactitudes, by where it's at,
when that most precious to us slowly dies.

And afterwards? A world of TV chat,
of worked-at marriage and the brief affair,
the brochured holiday that's strangely flat.

But in imagination, how we care
for keepsakes, letters in their attic box,
the lock, ungreying, of that golden hair.

Suppose they'd set up home, with him well stocked
with tiresome platitudes and racist jokes,
and she more shrewish, with her hair close cropped,

What then? What daylight-irised air can coax
what was so vulnerable, so fair and tall,
from heaviness that cautious age evokes?

And so the silvered spectacle we call
a two-hour traffic of the crowded stage
is not the voyaging, the long-sea haul

to times and countries where our words engage
the lost horizons and the mounting cost
of numbing spectacles we can't assuage.

*From such presentiments, however tossed,
we come as pilgrims to our crowded place
in happiness for all the hard ways crossed,*

*but still denied that lasting sense of grace
that's apt to vanish, and acquire the mood
of sturdy truculence, and never face*

*90. the what and why we were. The years intrude
what this one felt, or what another said
in one-time courtesies, but also hued*

*in bitterness and scorn of what we've wed,
the lives betrayed, by both, and then the yearn
for as it was with every storm-tossed head.*

Scarlett O'Hara

The earliest settlements forever lost
in wind through cottonwoods or pebbled brooks:
a world of gentlemen, with guns embossed.

Their lands were God-ordained, and no one looks
for glossed intelligence in coloured folk
who went, if fortunate, for maids or cooks.

The which was natural: the Bible spoke
of true inferiors, the tribe of Ham
who hewed and carried, under their long yoke

of servitude, the image of the lamb,
with Christ himself instructing how to show
obedience and deference and 'Thank you ma'am'.

And everyone could see the world was so,
where those with titles, wealth or class
could treat dismissively the trash below.

And that contumely was the coup de grâce,
afflicting also the O'Hara clan
with hoyden naturalness and more a brass-

bound nerve. 'Why don't you know, she wants a man'
ran through the tag and laughter of that house.
She'll wear the trousers here if any can.

Her cousin Melanie, the little mouse
must act as though she'd put the worse-off first,
but Scarlett's not the one for playing spouse.

100. Why, fiddle-de-dee, she says, why are we cursed
to wait and dilly with such likes of men?
Her prospects go with that from bad to worst,

though still there's Ashley: how she sighs again
for someone wavering where she is strong.
'My own, my dear beloved, tell me when.'

He married Melanie: he got it wrong
and barely managed at the mill she ran,
to bustling enterprise did not belong.

But then the heart delivers as it can,
and dark, unscrupulous and dashing Rett
was scalawag of course, but more the man.

Not one for self-inspection or regret,
our Scarlett married, though the boy soon died:
'It seems our partners dance a strange duet.'

At that she put her grieving role aside
and in her widow's weeds broke each taboo
that, if not scandalized, was sorely tried.

Then burned around them all the south they knew.
With Tara devastated, slave-hands fled,
what is a plucky Irish lass to do

but scrimp and patch and work the fields still hers:
it is the land that lasts, that cannot fail:
a legacy that years will reimburse.

Invigorating though that be, a gale
of commonsense unlaced in deity,
she's out of bounds to Rhett, who's still in jail.

So then? Miss saucy southern-born will see
her future fashioned from another's beau,
her sister's rich intended: fiddle-de-dee!

110. She wed him, took the store and — don't you know? —
paid Tara's taxes, managed cash and men
until a stray shot laid her second low.

So there we are: a widow once again,
but now the independence she intends
to keep as Rhett negotiates the wildcat's den.

But she accepts — the talk of town — and sends
at once for jewellers, drapes and milliners,
or anyone that outrage recommends.

Why not? She thinks of all the slights and slurs
that once as Tara's girl she underwent;
besides, her dashing husband also errs.

Who knows what dive or drinking club he's lent
his reputation to or southern air:
fine gentlemen are rarely homeward bent.

But why with pride and bustle should she care
what her great brute of husband does for bed?
Her Ashley waits for her most everywhere.

And so the quarrels and the vile things said,
that hurt them both no doubt but don't inter
the part that rots as fish do, from the head.

And if, half drunk one night, he ravished her,
as much as house and lands and timber mill
she was his property and would defer

to him, and only him, not one who still
remains the ideal husband: yes, the scene
had Ashley loving her: she's sure he will.

A child originates, that's soon as been
and then the death of both-loved Bonnie Blue,
at which the animal is no more seen.

120. Between the ideal couple, well-to-do,
the distance widens, though they still appear
polite, as many do, and not untrue.

But Rhett, the scalawag, the profiteer
goes off to find some southern, other way
with' frankly I don't give a damn, my dear.'

And if tomorrow dawns another day,
the wreckages of all those bridges crossed
arrive as obstacles and mean to stay.

*Those wider latitudes our childhoods lost
in tag or hopscotch hours than even then
were hardening into age's rheum and frost.*

*There is no buggy ride to back again,
the land is locked against us, everything
we ever had or hoped for is as men*

*will stare on what is gone, as hope must bring
some glint of gold beneath the unstirred moats
of matters hardly thought on, though they cling*

*the same, and do not leave us, which denotes
some lasting wonder in entrancing sights
of women pretty in their petticoats.*

Heloise and Abelard

From Heloise to her far Abelard:
My first, my last, my only dearest love:
forgive the time that's past, and disregard

the petulance in this forsaken dove,
and earnestness with which she makes in vows
what properly belongs to Him above.

It is with penitence that faith endows
with true significance and painful joys
that world to which our whole creation bows.

130. And there our sweetest music is but noise
that we in contemplation yet may find
a sense of surfeit which no sin alloys.

I speak of what is now but in the mind,
perhaps to you far off, but still to me
abundant and fulfilling, unconfined.

You now are famous, and that ecstasy
of hope and wonder still is what I lend
to cold devotions where I'm set to be
in diligence a cipher to the end
with night-time wakings, prayers and enforced fasts
that no communions here can mend.

They make contrition all the same: our pasts
contain this world and then the next. I know
that God's benevolence forever lasts.

And so, my dearest Abelard, I go
in sinfulness that's ever been
the source of inwardness I do not show.

So write to me who stay the libertine
for all your words and ever wise precepts.
From one small look remembered grows the scene

of hearing you expound the heights and depths
of God in majesty whose searing pains
the humble and the contrite soul accepts

as real, as necessary, indeed as gains
in their first paradise of earthly bliss
which our foul nature only blights and stains.

I gave myself completely and in this
have known not heaven or earth or any day
without the serpent in the garden hiss

140. that sinfulness will make the body pay
for its indulgences, that sun and storm
disrupt the senses in some fuller way —

as moon does water, when the heavens form
a star-hung canopy both close and deep
as mother keeps her nursling safe and warm.

But, like the lunar mansions, I too keep
my face toward your glowing happiness,
and if that's dimmed at all I also weep.

And so across the boundless distances
as when no letter comes from you, or what
you write is incomplete, does not profess

eternally your love for me, does not
perceive me as your ever waking self
in constellations that the stars begot

at our nativities, that inner wealth
with which the stars rejoicing ever move
and so more needed than unnoticed health.

But marked, stigmata'd on me, still they prove
how much propitiated in my thoughts
you are and stay with me at some remove,

that neither chastity nor prince's courts
nor silent cloister nor the haunt of prayer
when evenings' melancholy chill comports

with darkling worldliness I have to bear,
repeating with the knotted lash or strokes,
that left without you brings but nothing there.

No burst of springtime radiance that soaks
into the evening, nor a stubbled land
with fruits of autumn and the heavy yokes

150. of oxen hauling what comes first to hand,
rewarding faith and toil and husbandry,
that gap in giving which I gladly spanned.

For what? That little son they took from me,
the fruit of marriage and a mother's pain,
that growing handsomeness I shall not see.

Why do we write and write, and do not gain
a peace or remedy but darkest night
and long dependency? There will remain

beyond the citadels of earnest sight,
a city fabulous in hope, but real
with all uncertainties unclouded light.

*Who knows? No woman does, who much alights
on bland obliquity that's purely hers
within the thickets of her larger rights.*

*The shades of others hurt us; painful burrs
make all such progress but a hard way through
the brushwood coppice and the dense, dark furze.*

*The world is hard, and neither she nor you
feel half the heaviness that must foretell
the strange intransigence in all we do —*

*and know that all are trapdoors down to hell,
a dice-tossed snakes and ladder board that stack
the odds against our going up as well.*

Tristan and Isolde

Iseult, Isolde — run the many tales
as heroines have names, but all address
the wretched penury when guilt prevails

and we to feints and falsehoods acquiesce
to what's admitted but admired by none:
the body's stink of age and loneliness.

160. It's true that Tristan, the adopted son,
was ever foremost in the wildest chase,
in any trial or hardship always won.

And true his open-hearted, manly grace
betokened kindred royal blood. The king
was glad at such succession to his place.

But not the nobles. It's a grievous thing
to be displaced by such a haffling boy,
however prettily he joust and sing.

They were resolved the king employ
the man as emissary to Ireland's court,
that from a consort there they would enjoy

a son and regency. For what they sought
was grave uncertainty, an interregnum filled
with flattery and what that pleasing brought.

Besides, the upstart Tristan might be killed
since enmity prevailed between their realms:
and as their statecraft bid them, so they built.

And Tristan went, for duty overwhelms
all fear and compromise when one has sight
of beauty riding at the sea-tossed helms.

But yet the paragon Isolde might
be won by courage only, one who'd meet
the fearsome dragon and would slay in fight.

So Tristan did. Near died, but with the feat
accomplished, claimed Isolde, as he ought,
for lord and king — but one who'd not compete
with Tristan's comeliness, her mother thought.
She brewed a potion, sent it on as well
as those two travellers to Cornwall's court.

170. For that they then embarked. Around them fell
the bright day's stateliness. They sat and laughed,
and drank unwittingly the loving spell,

which brought on all that followed. But one draught
was all they needed to be tangled fast
as rose is grafted into briar's haft.

So came luxuriance and, though aghast
at each one's recklessness, they went their way
as sails in billowing led on the mast.

So onward furthered all that cloudless day
with gusts of warm wind round them buffeting,
they watched the waters in their sunlit play

rise up in waves, oppose, dissolve and fling
themselves in froth and molten sun-filled drop:
they felt the happiness in everything.

They ran their fingers through each frothing top
of waves, and watched the fish glint deep below,
the gannets circling round them, squawk and drop.

They were so young and innocent, and though
much sorrow waited in the sea's dark pound
on rocks, there was no joy they would not know.

They woke in time, refreshed, and no doubt found
the world was similar but not the same,
now edged with abnegations all around.

Their fault eternally, but that is tame
beside the tawdriness their love would bring:
but neither was for conscience then or blame.

She, the voyage over, wed the king,
while he, the loyal subject, had recourse
to frank imaginings, a fearful thing.

180. But love's impetuous, must take its course,
and worse, imperious, when all they did
was cold adultery, without remorse.

The king divined or didn't, sometime hid
to test his wife, or what is worse, to spy:
an act his royal status should forbid.

The story differs as to how and why
they were discovered sleeping, clothed but near,
how made a naked sword between them lie.

New trysts and tangles then appear.
Some say she held the king the summer long
but lived with Tristan the remaining year.

Some say he married to undo the wrong,
in Brittany perhaps, but with a poisoned blade
reward for gallantry that came along.

It was the queen he called on first for aid,
when wife, a virgin still, keen felt the slight,
and made a vengeful but unequal trade.

Isolde came, but in the dawning light,
the rival at her ailing husband's side
could see, she said, the sails were black not white.

For her, the beautiful, rejected bride
it was the first and last deliberate lie,
but also fatal, for the husband died.

No doubt the holy angels will know why
such penances are made for mortal men
as sins within a faultless body lie

to hurt or wake us never knowing when
our souls are called for, nor what place they go.
May God believe us when we cry 'amen'.

*190. As gusts of memory that take us back
to some forgotten childhood's put-by hour
that still we pay for in the almanac*

*of things we should have done, for hurts that glower
behind the spitefulness we do not show
but nonetheless will hold us and empower.*

*Hell's not some world of afterwards, of woe
and everlasting brimstone, fire and pain
where, headlong, sinners to their sorrow go,*

*but these far realms around us, in the stain
that dims the brilliance of our sight of them,
that childlike honesty we can't regain.*

Odysseus and Circe

Storms I tell of and the deep-sea swell
that brought us voyagers to Circe's lair
in perilous misfortunes that befell

the homeward traveller who had to bear
his comrade's foolishness and Neptune's spite,
those dread embodiments of brine and air.

My journeying's well known, and I alight
on certain, well-known passages that show
how near to hopelessness would seem my plight.

Man needs some inner purpose, lamp to glow
throughout the territories that he must roam
beset by those who'd rule us here below.

Mine Penelope and that sweet loam
refreshed by seasons and the rain that sees
the evening fretted with the smoke of home.

All sights that he absorbs and by degrees
makes his, inherently, as things that show
as winds' possession of the slightest breeze.

200. We came upon an island good to know
it seemed, with vines and fig trees, fruits, and fed
by springs that fell and sparkled far below.

But I, most cautious, sent my men ahead
who were to reconnoitre, watch, and tell
if we with this rich prospect were misled.

We were. One Eurylochus came pell-mell
back to warn me that my trusting men
were changed to animals in some fierce spell.

Encountering, he said, a wooded den,
they'd found strange apparitions, no doubt wild,
that only growled to warn them: quiet again.

Each came up to them like a trusting child,
thrust out a long-haired paw as though aware
they were at threat or sensibly beguiled

by some admixture to the scented air
that made the wolves and pacing lions tame
but kept the den, he said, a dangerous lair.

And what there seemed soon was. For promptly came
the denizen, or keeper of the place,
with looks to set the wizened heart aflame.

She had a pleasing, slow and sovereign grace,
and bid them sit and feast and drink their fill,
and stay with her at least a little space.

Eurylochus, as though expecting ill,
refrained from eating and had drunk no wine
though loudly roistering with them, laughing till

he saw their manly gestures intertwine
with smooth-faced oafishness and troubled eyes
as bit by bit they turned to brutish swine.

210. In this I recognized the sea-god's guise,
but Hermes then produced the needed flower
as antidote against her fearsome lies.

He knew of Circe and too well her power
to make a man become but brute desires
that all encounter at some evil hour.

But such magnificence I met, such fires
within the eyelids wavered, met and crossed
to make the interlude that now transpires.

In wine and Circe's soft embrace were lost
the love of homeland and of everything
that lay beyond the stormy seas we crossed.

A woman's body is a wondrous thing,
and more was Circe's with her wiles aglow.
I knew the intervals that love would bring

in haunting softness to the heart, the flow
of contour lengthening out from limb to haunch
and mischief that those hooded eyes would show.

I knew what kiss or tenderness would launch
a thousand sallies on that smiling face
and that deep giving's urge she could not staunch.

I knew too well that nature: every place
was saturated with her subtle spell
and deep attraction, which I could not trace

in look or lineament, or even tell
what need it was that held me to the heart,
or if a happiness was there as well.

Yet men have destinies, and each one's part
is as the flower to blossom, fade and die:
I knew my journeying would now restart.

220. Yet hurtful to me was her tear-wrenched sigh,
her earnest hope to stay me, understand
the inward wailing like the seagull's cry.

I came to Ithaca, my favoured land,
and found Penelope, and freed by force
what none of those false suitors would withstand:

the love of homeland, our true inner course
that leads to home and wife and what we own,
contentment surely from a blameless source.

And yet there dwells within the lands I've known
the well-wrought bodies and the reachings for
the scents inherent in each sun-blessed stone,

the cry of osprey and the ocean's roar
that throws the pebbles up and in its salt-
bound headiness revives the long-lost shore

that we were young on, strong, and not at fault
for callous tardiness that age condones,
or shameful compromise the years exalt

to earthly gains. For in my very bones
was Circe holding till the sweetness came
as that long rush of sea in pebbled groans

will strew the nature out of us, our name
in endless visitings, by which we men
are not impregnable nor long the same.

*For truth's a process, and we don't condemn
the dross within the blazing fire, for all
it cloud the clear-cut splendour of the gem.*

*But talk of obligations, put and call,
the edge of honesty in which we speak,
the godliness that taints the over-tall.*

*230. But there are presentations so oblique
to facts, to commonsense, so otherwise
to all we hold to that the errors week*

*by week amount to gross and blatant lies,
both hedged and calculated, firmly set
as smiling falsehood under candid eyes.*

*I set them down lest future years forget
the true perfidy by which we gained
the drones, the torture and perpetual debt.*

Laila and Manjun

If she was beautiful, he was not blest
with piety that anyone refer
to him as promising, above the rest.

But Laila looked at him, and he on her
and nothing Manjun did or Laila said
could make them from that strange compulsion stir.

With matters so, the school at length was led
to have these two good persons kept apart
and not intoxicate each other's head.

It's not the lungs alone or beating heart
that tenderly to carried breath belongs
but thoughts from which all sorrows start.

Since Majnun for another's being longs
and knows not parents nor what day it is,
let him be kept away from siren songs

and be returned to what is wholly his:
his name and patrimony, proper place.
There wasn't one his parents didn't quiz

throughout the land, or go at lengths to trace
across the cultivated Persian lands
that would some seat of learning grace.

240. Each came and placed that learning in their hands,
advised on books and prayers and abstruse spells
that no one uninstructed long withstands.

But Majnun's self-absorption only swells
with self-creation through another, proved
by sin the Merciful alone dispels.

The father, pious always, then approved
a haj or pilgrimage, to have at least
the dark possession of that jinn removed.

They went. Before the holy stone increased
their importunings: *Manjun, quench this coal
and from this influence be fast released.*

He tried, repeated on his earnest soul
that she was naught to him, though as he prayed
she rose before him as a living whole.

At last he stopped, and those harsh sorrows laid
before the Merciful whose sobering thoughts
are those by whom our sinful steps are stayed.

*Before the mullahs' council or the courts
admonish me, I'd gladly make redress
and pay the penalty the law exhorts.*

In this the people round him heard him press
the essence out of love's long-sorrowing draught
where lust must yield to sorrow's gentleness.

At that how bitterly the parents laughed,
and said that dangerous and ill-advised
it was to leave the festering arrow's shaft

in one so hurt. Exhausted and chastised,
all parties made a vague betrothal plan —
for Laila kept her room and only sighed.

250. Marriageable, she would no other man
consider, look at with those wide dark eyes
and kinsfolk's wise objections overran

with pleas, entreaties: it seemed not wise
to countermand so obdurate a sight,
but wait for heart to change, and temporise.

And Majnun similarly was counselled right:
just be responsible: she shall be yours.
So Majnun promised, and the day dawned bright.

But love's rich overflowing's ever cause
for disappointment. On a schoolyard pet
Majnun first hung a flower, then kissed its paws.

The boy was mad, and well they'd paid their debt
to tolerance, and wanted no more part
of lunacies a marriage must beget.

And so they left, and Laila lived apart
from Majnun's family, though still she felt
no doubt the same upwelling of the heart.

Of course in time she told him where they dwelt
and equally he followed on despite
the pains and hardships that the journey spelt

and with a camel driver travelled day and night,
until, emaciated, in a mosque he lay,
where Laila came and tended to his plight

till that miscarried. *Here, and to this day,
we're cursed continually by this fool boy:*
Her parents moved her on without delay.

Of course they did: a daughter is a joy
eternally, as every father understands,
and worth the stratagems he must deploy.

260. But here, in this hard land of foreign sands,
the far Sahara, now the lover found
but waste and rock and wind-dried stands

of tattered thistles, where the ground
glowed incandescent, and the tawny smoke
of dust-storms whirled about them, far around.

No lion menaced him, or jackal broke
the code that bound him as a holy man
who seemed rejoicing at his heavy yoke.

Odd strangers came, a passing caravan,
and Laila also, maybe, it is said,
and where her uncurbed grieving then began.

She saw a thing so desiccated, wed
to desert elements, to wind and sun
as is the thorn-tree broken out of rocky bed.

He hardly noticed her, and there was won
no answering softness to her tears
or approbation should she ever shun

her parents' call to marriage that the years
were roundly ripening in her hopes instead
beyond the press of lengthening thoughts and fears.

He was not one alive. So Laila wed,
perhaps lived happily, for all she thought
continually of Majnun on his stony bed.

So passed the years, and what was sought
in love eternal was betrayed to trust
in mere proprieties and what they brought.

They served their time, were buried. Their soft dust
was then commingled, and unwavering love
passed on inscrutably, as pass it must.

*270. We read and ponder, travel, have deplaned
a thousand times on facts, whatever is
most necessary, yet we have maintained*

*no searching commentaries, nor do we quiz
the suntanned gravitas, and for ourselves
probe deep the honesty that can't be his.*

*The murk of vague discrepancies that shelves
to threatening entities we do not heed
for all it muddies as our conscience delves:*

*those jinns are ever with us, them we feed
in gifts, in trade donations, in the choice
of books we purchase or the papers read —*

*they all are venomous, but have no voice
except we breathe our own life into fact
and make the worst of villainies rejoice.*

Marilyn

So Marilyn, dear Marilyn, who made
the bubbling blue-eyed bombshell such a hoot
in all the comedies she ever played

as dumb and unaware her swelling fruit
in lips and eyelids and developed bust
might in a moment burst to birthday suit.

That Marilyn of adolescent lust,
the tramp of seedy bandhalls, coke and drink
when both the Kennedys betrayed her trust,

from which idolaters can never shrink
from questioning the unsolved way she died,
her strange associates, compelled to think

of murder, overdose or suicide —
each book digs up some strange and darker find,
which, for the godly, means that doubts reside

280. within a commonplace and prurient mind:
who sleeps with whom and how the pattern sifts
out what is worst from worse though ill-defined.

She had the gamin's genuine acting gifts
of soft projection while still underneath
the body was less easy in its daytime shifts.

The frank development, the perfect teeth
of chorus girl and so the hint of vice,
the ripe abundance in its autumn's sheath

that like a maize-god spoke of sacrifice,
absorbed the worshipper but with a gaze
that smart suburbia would not call nice.

And was so always from the earliest days,
that doubtful child attributed to Mortgeson,
that Norma Jean her mother couldn't raise.

The homes, delinquency, the moving on,
the long if intermittent use of drugs,
the independence that's too briefly gone

to gross voluptuousness: the figure hugs
a Magdalenian tomb's embrace
in mother buxomness with heavy dugs.

And die she did, and left a shifting space
fast filled with rumour, though with nothing proved:
the last great image of another race

when giants filled our early years, and moved
in their Neptunian and hidden way
with traits propitiated, not removed:

the fear of falling in each casual lay,
the body's shameless giving down a path
of urgency we cannot halt or stay,

290. that brings us nowhere, not to inner hearth
of pleasure, manhood, nor the varied act
by which we win or lose our other half.

*Illusions are not born of sober fact
but live their lives beyond us, through a screen
of thin-spun fantasies that yet exact*

*their penalties each time we know we've been
a self-deceiving, less than open whole
in lives we hate but cannot contravene.*

*So lies are calculated, what we stole
from clothed propriety or common sense:
the shining goddess with the tinsel soul.*

*One therefore bought with forty silvered pence,
the always dubious, the shamefaced glimpse
that brings no answering depth or recompense*

*but quite the opposite, the look that skimps
the woman of her larger, better self:
the well-connected counsellor who pimps*

*his client's name about, and that by stealth,
who greases palms and smiles, oblivious
of injury to some deep inner health.*

*So all's disposable, at least to us
who feed on tittle-tattle, slurs and lies
in ways the mainstream papers much discuss.*

Radha and Krishna

The woodlands darken and, absorbed in thought,
comes Radha, lingering though keen to wed
her waiting avatar in honeyed sport.

So many dancing there, by Krishna led,
and unafflicted by the love-god's pain,
at which the worldly friend to Radha said:

300. But who from reckless falling would refrain?
It is an ecstasy that none will blame,
that joy of having with the love-god lain.

So proud, deliberating Radha came
to taste of Madhava and then concur
he was commensurate with local fame,

and find, as warm malaya breezes stir
the wild kambalda and ketaka trees,
that dancing Madhava was gone from her.

Not wind or moon or sandal paste can please
the one who's solitary, provoked by cares
as is the lotus by the chilling breeze.

But Krishna laughing at his honeyed snares
is ever dancing on with practiced ease
from shadowed leaves among his forest lairs:

the great progenitor, perpetual tease,
but also urgent, ardent, well disposed
as wind's possession of the love-sick trees.

He pleads, he whispers till at last reposed
upon what charmed and wheedling word attains,
and so whatever cowgirl had supposed

was ever in his black-hued gift. He deigns
in all dissembling but enchanted form
to aid his followers dissolve the chains

that hold them blindly to their fields — the norm
of what we're told we are, no doubt, but still
vague apprehension of the coming storm

when rains will lash us and the lightning fill
our nerve-ways to the finger ends, as some
divine, imperative and cosmic will.

310. So Radha gave herself, her body dumb
to tell her consciousness that inner fires
besought her constantly, and would become

her sole imperative, to which aspires
that waiting otherness, though far to seek
through life's entanglements and close desires.

So lean the all-ways powerful on the weak,
ensuring poverty is ever near,
and not enlightenment that truth would speak.

*The vast, accumulating dead each year,
the hunger, overwork, the suicide
the threat from landlords and the constant fear*

*of sprays and fertilizers misapplied,
the grape and citrus fruits that do not set,
the sterile cotton seeds new strains provide.*

*The taxes, penury, increasing debt
that makes their husbandry but dwindling gains
and independence but a foretold bet.*

*The vast miasmas that await the rains,
the bullocks working in a million plots
and overburdened as the battered trains*

*that take the city workers past the knots
of bright-clothed villagers , industrial slums
where pressed humanity is fetid, clots*

*in drains and sewer-ways, or fairly hums
as flies that propagate in open sores,
the brute relentlessness that overcomes*

*the creeds, the missions and the rural laws,
the UN technocrats who show them how,
but serve a multiglobal, western cause.*

*320. Unwise austerities, the figures now
are best regretted, overwritten, lost
beneath the endless passage of the plough*

*between the solstice and the autumn frost
across the hard interiors that do not feed
their populace but likely add to cost.*

*For what? For enterprise or so we read
in business summaries from business schools:
to earn the articles we do not need.*

*Yet still it's commerce, and that commerce rules
the crossways of our scattered earth, and lives
are not for sensitives or squeamish fools*

*but for the thrusting with their trophy wives,
the world of ministries and bankers' hours,
with practices at which our news contrives*

*to never see the fault of western powers,
the burnt-out villages, the wasted fields,
the thousands that a single day devours.*

*The over-weaning power that banking yields,
that tight-drawn web of debt that none escapes,
the craft of tariffs and inflated yields.*

*The beatings, electrocutions, brutal rapes,
the fear of others from which torture starts,
the lack of evidence, deleted tapes,*

*from which our sense of justice ever smarts:
the criminality, Pavlovian lies
by which we web-indulge our private parts.*

*Those murky inner worlds that terrorize
us day and night with acts we might just do,
those gross confessions that we can't disguise*

*330. but be a party to, a breaking through
to vile perversions that we might enjoy,
but always furtively, then flushed from view.*

*But not entirely, for those sights employ
embodiments that our poor thinking serves
for what is not a tame, galvanic toy,*

*but all we have: this mass of muscles, nerves
and organs, tracts and fibre ways, with skin
to hold the organs in their heavy curves.*

*We navigate the darkened wastes of sin
with ever dangerous and brute desire
to share with others that fierce joy within*

*and find, before these failing things expire,
at least an intimation of that deep
invigorating, still abiding fire.*