



Still Abiding Fire

Book Two: Colin John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2014

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by

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by Colin John Holcombe

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## 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 this 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 threatened 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 themselves 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 elders 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,  
and underlying 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.*

*They 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 in 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  
and 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 our 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 hardest, 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 apports 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.