

CRISTOBAL COLÓN REPLACED AS GOVERNOR OF NEW  
WORLD COLONY, SHIPPED BACK TO SPAIN IN IRONS  
--Headline

1500 A.D., Another Atlantic Crossing

The dream-- or was it weariness and wine  
Inventing scenes of gargoyl fantasy?  
Convulsing heart, an ague in the brain.  
Cathedral bells and stabs of fiery tongues  
But nothing holy. Nothing sure or whole.  
Vignettes of naked natives, cursing Spaniards.  
Canary Island trees kowtowing west  
Like supplicating crones, trunks forming arches,  
Hair flung down foretokening the ground--  
That vision loomed so many times before,  
Asleep, awake, a simmer in the soul.

Half-thoughts in swirling idiom, a stew  
Of Latin, Portuguese, Castilian steeped  
In seaman's argot. He wondered where he was.  
In a sullen yawing cradle, child again,  
Or ill across a horse ignobly sprawled?  
The Admiral, rising, bumped his head; the dusk  
Revealed his place. His hands reflexed, he heard  
The linking metal, felt its weight and wept.

The caravel was under way across  
A bias-running tide. The bulkheads groaned  
Disrhythmically; he languished on his bunk  
To drain the tankard pressed between his palms,  
His hard-won palm-lined shores lost from his grasp.

The master of the ship released his bonds  
Which he, Colón, the colonizer, true  
To God and Sovereigns, loftily relocked.  
Let Isabella witness this injustice;  
Chains would be his scepter, calumny his crown!

By day, his silence broken only by  
His iron expletives against the rails,  
He watched the tropic birds dive whitely hungry,  
Longed to hold a quadrant to the sun.

The caravel embraced the blue winds-- his.  
His route, his reckoning, unknown before  
He shaped the course. Now every idle sail  
In Christendom would fill with jealous greed  
Of westward-bearing amateurs who sought  
The East, the scoffers and the scholars who  
Believed but had no spine for unmapped risks.

The monarchs would restore his station soon,  
 They must. His words would open, clear their eyes.  
 He would return; his mission was Cathay  
 And still Cathay: This salt of Genoa,  
 This commoner who lived by wool and wits  
 And charts to touch Cipangu's fringes, claim  
 Them for Castile, was Destiny's own son  
 Ordained by God. He would not founder now  
 So close her gold reflected in each stream,  
 So near he breathed her lotus-perfumed twilights.  
 Next voyage, her silk and spice, her lace-carved tusks  
 And more would ride his holds low in the sea.

By night he made the stars his rosary,  
 Lamenting long to heaven's porchlights, pride  
 Still preened, comparing all his griefs to Job's.  
 Or softly humming sailors' lusty songs,  
 Rattling his shackles like a tambourine.

His thoughts ran constant as the sand in glass,  
 Pouring out the hours, turned, repeated.  
 And had he governed badly? Providence  
 Almighty was his guide. He had no choice  
 But execution of insurgents who  
 Defied his law. The gall of Bobadilla  
 Seizing private papers! And his house!

The captain was uneasy in these waters;  
 He sought and took his prisoner's advice:  
 Northeast to catch the stronger westerlies.  
 This time of year Madeira was the landfall--  
 The only words Colón spoke on his journey  
 Of humiliation back to Spanish judgement.

The Admiral of the Ocean Sea could walk  
 The quarterdeck between arrested sleep.  
 At leisure, he reviewed the zodiac,  
 Philosophy and legend. Knowledge changed  
 A man. A man could also alter knowledge.  
 While proving others wrong, teredo worms  
 Of error/doubt could enervate his own  
 Accepted stock. But one thing never changed:  
 The Evil One beset all chosen men  
 Proportionate to greatness. Take the jinns,  
 Those cursed spawns of Islam loose on earth  
 To foul supplies and water, cause a plague  
 Or agitate the settlers' discontent.  
 Or pour malevolence in ears at court....

Misfortune falls on triumph like a fever.  
 Nor yet is either over, guiding angels...  
 I rally at this terrible amount!

--Glenna Holloway