

# New Poetry by Kevin Honold: “A Brief History of the Spanish Conquest”



RADIANT AS NOON / *image by Amalie  
Flynn*

## A Brief History of the Spanish Conquest

Tell me again of that fabulous  
kingdom where a single  
ear of corn is more  
than two strong young men can carry, where cotton  
grows untended, in colors never dreamed of,  
to be spun by gorgeous slaves  
into garments that lie  
cool as cornsilk against the skin and shine  
radiant as noon.

\*

How sordid and predictable history can be.  
Within sight of the prize  
but out of ammunition, they  
lowered three men down the volcano's throat  
to fetch sulfur for gunpowder.

This

was the vision  
prefigured in the prophet's eye:  
three men curled in a basket peering  
back across the centuries,

their dewy starving faces so  
desperate with hope  
as they dissolve in a yellow mist,  
felons set adrift.

\*

North by west toward the cities of gold,  
the soldiers in rags walked half-bent  
with hunger and dysentery, nursing  
grievous wounds sustained in hit-and-run attacks  
by moss-troopers talking Choctaw.

Beside the mother of rivers, the horses sickened and died  
but the soldiers, being less reasonable,  
proved less destructible.

At disobedient towns they dragged out  
chopping blocks to punish malefactors  
and departed in a shower of ash, their legacy  
a heap of severed hands slowly  
clutching at flies.

\*

But the much-sought golden cities sank below the horizon  
like the tall ships of fable. For the Spaniards,  
the age of miracles ended  
somewhere in southwest Arkansas. The palaces of silver  
turned Outlaw Liquor Barns, Triple-X Superstores,  
the stuff of vision a mustard-colored mix

of smoke, dust, emissions  
from riverside refineries and coal  
plants along the Mississippi where squadrons  
of John Deere combines like barn-size locusts  
roll in drill order over the dry land,  
half-effaced by squalls of chaff.

At night the fields burn.

Stray flames browse the blackened  
shoulders of the interstate,  
crop the stubble beneath the billboards.

\*

In the state park south of Hot Springs  
I fell asleep in a chair in the heat and woke  
to a titmouse perched on the toe of my boot  
with that peculiar weightlessness  
shared by birds and planets

and I searched without hope for my place in the book.  
Buzzards killed time there, their shadows  
slipping across the iron ground  
like fish in a shallow pool  
while Time gaped  
    at the spiders that battened  
    on the flies that  
swarmed the rotten  
windfall apples.

\*

Tenochtitlan.

At the imperial aviary, we found  
a pair of every kind of bird in the world:  
parrots and finches in profusion, brooding vultures,  
egrets, ibis is sacramental scarlet.  
Seahawks stooped and banked

through that hostile truce and we marveled  
at God's prodigality, His exuberant  
inventiveness, then piled tinder  
to burn the thing to the ground.  
Flames sheeted over the soaring

lattice dome like the fleet  
shadows of clouds. For a time,

the structure smoldered,  
a hissing wickerwork steaming as it cooled.  
Here and there, a bird crashed the skein of ash

like a rogue comet bursting  
the flaming ramparts of the universe.  
Charmed in place, we held our breath,  
beside ourselves, like couriers  
trapped in a snowglobe, blinded  
                                  in a tempest of embers,  
astonished at the work of these hands,  
the everyday miracle of destruction.