

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS
AND QUEEN ISABELLA
OF SPAIN
CONSUMMATE
THEIR RELATIONSHIP
(Santa Fé, AD 1492)

Columbus, a foreigner, follows Queen Isabella for an eternity without entirely giving up hope.

— *In what characteristic postures?*

Proud yet suppliant, the head held high but the knee bent. Fawning yet fearless; possessed of a certain saucy vulgarity, he gets away with it by virtue of his confidence-man's charm. However, as time passes, the ingratiating aspects of his stance are emphasised; the sea-dog raffishness wears a little thin. As do his shoes.

= *His hope. It is of what?*

Obvious answers first. He hopes for preferment. He wants to tie the Queen's favour to his helmet, like a knight in a romance. (He owns no helmet.) He has hopes of cash, and of three tall ships, *Niña Pinta Santa Maria*; of, in fourteen hundred and ninety-two, sailing across the ocean blue. But, on his first arrival at court, when the Queen herself asked him what he desired, he bowed over her olive hand and, with his lips a breath away from the great ring of her power, murmured a single, dangerous word.

'Consummation.'

— *These unspeakable foreigners! The nerve! 'Consummation', indeed! And then following in her footsteps, month after month, as if he stood a chance.*

His coarse epistles, his tuneless serenades beneath her casement windows, obliging her to have them closed, shutting out the cooling breeze. She had better things to do, a world to conquer & so forth, who did he think he was?

= *Foreigners can be dogged. And can also, on account of language difficulties, fail to take a hint. Then again, let us not forget, it is considered de rigueur to keep a few foreigners around. They lend the place a certain cosmopolitan tone. They are often poor and consequently willing to perform divers necessary but dirty jobs. They are, moreover, a warning against complacency, their existence in our midst reminding us that there are quarters in which (hard as it is to accept) we ourselves would be considered foreign, too.*

— *But to speak so to the Queen!*

= *Foreigners forget their place (having left it behind). Given time, they begin to think of themselves as our equals. It is an unavoidable hazard. They introduce into our austerities their Italianate blandishments. Nothing for it: turn a deaf ear, look the other way. They rarely mean real harm, and go too far only infrequently. The Queen, be assured, can look after herself.*

Columbus at Isabella's court is quickly burdened with the reputation of being a crazy man. His clothes are

excessively colourful and he drinks, also, to excess. When Isabella wins a military victory she celebrates it with eleven days of psalms and the sonorous severities of priests. Columbus crashes about outside the cathedral, waving a wineskin. He is a one-man debauch.

— *See him, the drunkard, his huge, shaggy head filled with nonsenses! A fool with a glittering eye dreaming of a golden paradise beyond the Western Edge of Things.*

'Consummation.'

The Queen plays with Columbus.

At luncheon she promises him everything he wants; then cuts him dead later the same afternoon, looking through him as if he were a veil.

On his saint's day she summons him to her inmost boudoir, dismisses her girls, permits him to braid her hair and, for a moment, to fondle her breasts. Then she summons her guards. She banishes him to the stables and piggeries for forty days. He sits forlorn on horse-munched hay while his thoughts run on distant, fabled gold. He dreams of the Queen's perfumes but awakes, gagging, in a pigsty.

Toying with Columbus pleases the Queen.

And pleasing the Queen, he reminds himself, may help him to achieve his purpose. Pigs rootle by his feet. He grits his teeth.

'Pleasing the Queen is good.'

Columbus ponders:

Does she torment him merely for sport?

Or: because he is foreign, and she is unused to his ways and meanings.

Or: because her ring finger, still hot with the memory of his lips his breath, has been – how-you-say? – *touched*. Yes: tentacles of warmth spread backward from her fingers towards her heart. A turbulence has been aroused.

Or: because she is torn between the possibility of embracing his scheme with a lover's abandon, and the more conventional, and differently (maliciously) pleasurable option of destroying him by laughing, finally, after much foreplay, in his foolish, supplicant face.

Columbus consoles himself with possibilities. Not all possibilities are consoling, however.

She is an absolute monarch. (Her husband is an absolute zero: a blank, couldn't be colder. We will not speak further of him.) She is a woman whose ring is

often kissed. It means nothing to her. She is no stranger to flatteries. She resists them effortlessly.

She is a tyrant, who numbers among her possessions a private menagerie of four hundred and nineteen fools, some grotesquely malformed, others as beauteous as the dawn. He, Columbus, is merely her four hundred and twentieth idiot. This, too, is a plausible scenario.

Either: she understands his dream of a world beyond the world's end, and is moved by it, so profoundly that it spooks her, and she turns first towards it, then away;

Or: she doesn't understand him at all, nor cares to understand.

'Take your pick.'

What's certain is that *he* doesn't understand *her*. Only the facts are plain. She is Isabella, all-conquering Queen. He is her invisible (though raucous, multi-coloured, wine-bibbing) man.

'Consummation.'

The sexual appetites of the male decline; those of the female continue, with the advancing years, to grow. Isabella is Columbus's last hope. He is running out of possible patrons, sales talk, flirtatiousness, hair, stream.

Time drags by.
Isabella gallops around, winning battles, expelling

Moors from their strongholds, her appetites expanding by the week. The more of the land she swallows, the more warriors she engulfs, the hungrier she gets. Columbus, aware of a slow shrivelling inside him, scolds himself. He should see things as they are. He should come to his senses. What chance does he have here? Some days she makes him clean latrines. On other days he is on body-washing duty, and after a battle the bodies are not clean. Soldiers going to war wear man-sized diapers under their armour because the fear of death will open the bowels, will do it every time. Columbus was not cut out for this sort of work. He tells himself to leave Isabella, once and for all.

But there are problems: his advancing years, the patron shortage. Once he decamps, he will have to forget the western voyage.

The body of philosophical opinion which holds that life is absurd has never appealed to him. He is a man of action, revealing himself in deeds. But without the western voyage he will be obliged to accept the meaninglessness of life. This, too, would be a defeat. Invisible in hot tropical colours, unrequited, he remains, dogging her footsteps, hoping for the ecstasy of her glance.

'The search for money and patronage', Columbus says, 'is not so different from the quest for love.'

— *She is omnipotent. Castles fall at her feet. The Jews have been expelled. The Moors prepare their last surrender. The Queen is at Granada, riding at her armies' head.*

= *She overwhelms. Nothing she has wanted has ever been refused.*

— *All her dreams are prophecies.*

= *Acting upon information received while sleeping, she draws up her invincible battle plans, foils the conspiracies of assassins, learns of the infidelities and corruptions for which she blackmails both her loyalists (to ensure their support) and her opponents (to ensure theirs). The dreams help her forecast the weather, negotiate treaties, and invest shrewdly in trade.*

— *She eats like a horse and never gains an ounce.*

= *The earth adores her footfall. Its shadows flee before the brilliance of her eyes.*

— *Her face is a lush peninsula set in a sea of hair.*

= *Her treasure chests are inexhaustible.*

— *Her ears are soft question-marks, suggesting some uncertainty.*

= *Her legs.*

— *Her legs are not so great.*

= *She is full of discontents.*

— *No conquest satisfies her, no peak of ecstasy is high enough.*

= *See: there at the gates of the Alhambra is Boabdil the Unlucky, the last Sultan of the last redoubt of all the centuries of Arab Spain. Behold: now, at this very instant, he surrenders the keys to the ciadel into her grasp . . . there! And as the weight of the keys falls from his hand into hers, she . . . she . . . yawns.*

Columbus gives up hope.

While Isabella is entering the Alhambra in listless triumph, he is saddling his mule. While she dawdles in the Court of the Lions, he departs in a flurry of whips elbows hooves, all rapidly obscured by a dust cloud.

Invisibility claims him. He surrenders to its will.

Knowing he is abandoning his destiny, he abandons it. He rides away from Queen Isabella in hopeless anger, rides day and night, and when his mule dies under him he shoulders his ridiculous gypsy-patchwork bags, their rowdy colours muted now by dirt, and walks.

Around him stretches the rich plain her armies have subdued. Columbus sees none of it, neither the land's fertility nor the sudden barrenness of the vanquished castles looking down from their pinnacles. The ghosts

of defeated civilisations flow unnoticed down the rivers whose names – Guadalthis and Guadalthat – retain an echo of the annihilated past.

Overhead, the arabesque wheelings of the patient buzzards.

Jews pass Columbus in long columns, but the tragedy of their expulsion makes no mark on him. Somebody tries to sell him a Toledo sword; he waves the man away. Having lost his own dream of ships, Columbus leaves the Jews to the ships of their exile, waiting in the harbour of Cadiz. Exhaustion strips him of his senses. This old world is too old and the new world is an unfound land.

'The loss of money and patronage', Columbus says, 'is as bitter as unrequited love.'

He walks beyond fatigue, beyond the limits of endurance and the frontiers of self, and somewhere along this path he loses his balance, he falls off the edge of his sanity, and out here beyond his mind's rim he sees, for the first and only time in his life, a vision.

It is a dream of a dream.

He dreams of Isabella, languidly exploring the Alhambra, the great jewel she has seized from Boabdil, last of the Nasrids.

She is staring into a large stone bowl held aloft by stone lions. The bowl is filled with blood, and in it she sees – *that is, Columbus dreams her seeing* – a vision of her own.

The bowl shows her that everything, all the known world, is now hers. Everyone in it is in her hands, to do with as she pleases. And when she understands this – *Columbus dreams* – the blood at once congeals, becoming a thick and verminous sludge. Whereupon the Isabella of Columbus's weary, but also vengeful, imaginings is shaken to her very marrow by the realization that she will never, *never, NEVER!* be satisfied by the possession of the Known. Only the Unknown, perhaps even the Unknowable, can satisfy her.

All at once she remembers Columbus (*he envisions her remembering him*). Columbus, the invisible man who dreams of entering the invisible world, the unknown and perhaps even unknowable world beyond the Edge of Things, beyond the stone bowl of the everyday, beyond the thick blood of the sea. Columbus in this bitter dream makes Isabella see the truth at last, makes her accept that her need for him is as great as his for her. Yes! She knows it now! She must must must give him the money, the ships, anything, and he must must must carry her flag and her favour beyond

the end of the end of the earth, into exaltation and immortality, linking her to him for ever with bonds far harder to dissolve than those of any mortal love, the harsh and defying ties of history.

'Consummation.'

In Columbus's savage dream, Isabella tears her hair, runs from the Court of the Lions, screams for her heralds.

'Find him,' she commands.

But Columbus in his dream refuses to be found. He wraps around himself the dusty patchwork cloak of his invisibility, and the heralds gallop hither and yon in vain.

Isabella screeches, beseeches, implores.

Bitch! Bitch! How do you like it now, Columbus sneers. By absenting himself from her court, by this final and suicidal invisibility, he has denied her her heart's desire. Serves her right.

Bitch!

She murdered his hopes, didn't she? Well, then. In doing so she has laid herself low as well. Poetic justice. Fair's fair.

EAST, WEST

At the dream's end he permits her messengers to find him. Their hoofbeats, their waving frantic arms. They plead, cajole, offer bribes. But it's too late. Only the sweet self-lacerating joy of murdering. Possibility remains.

He answers the heralds: a shake of the head.

'No.'

He comes to his senses.

He is on his knees in the fertility of the plains, waiting for death. He hears the hoofbeats approaching and raises his eyes, half expecting to see the Exterminating Angel, riding towards him like a conqueror. Its black wings, the boredom on its face.

Isabella's heralds surround him. They offer him food, drink, a horse. They are shouting.

— *Good news! The Queen has summoned you.*

= *Your voyage: wonderful news.*

— *She saw a vision, and it scared her.*

= *All her dreams are prophecies.*

The heralds dismount. They offer bribes, plead, cajole.

— *She ran from the Court of the Lions, shouting out your name.*

= *She will send you beyond the stone bowl of the known world, beyond the thick blood of the sea.*

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— *She's waiting for you in Santa Fé.*
= *You must come at once.*

He stands up, like a required lover, like a groom on his wedding day. He opens his mouth, and what almost spills out is the bitter refusal: no.

'Yes,' he tells the heralds. *Yes. I'll come.*