



At Plaza de España, Madrid

You were their best, Miguel,
but you only got it right once.
Is that why they bronzed
the myths before the man?

De la Mancha took on windmills
instead of the bulls, and for that
he got more fan mail than Franco,
who believed his own scribbling
and crowned himself messiah
of the next siglo de oro.¹

So it's not the length of your lance
that matters but how you use it.

Franco couldn't make gold from lead
even with battalions of Sanchos—
their stagnate blood made it go off.
It was easier for the peóns to hate him
than to question the architecture
of his insanity. Now he's no more
than wet sand between their toes.

As I float on this placid lily pond
with the other fallen leaves, I see
Quixote urging his gaggle down
into their reflection. He knew
a direct order's the shortest line
between hunger and your dinner.
Lesser authors had more of a plan.

*cold water's the thing
that brings the mind
back*

They never get there, of course,
saved in the nick of immortality
like those who accept the wafer
and think they've really tasted
heroism—how Spanish of them!

Irony's what we have instead of God—
the knight behind the myopic mask.

You took up a pen to escape the war;
I took up battle to escape an uncertain
pen. But there was no perfection in it.
The spooks within are more malicious
than any pirate. And more distracting.

Things haven't changed a hell of a lot.

A Clean Well-lighted Place

*part of you died each year when the leaves fell
from the trees and their branches were bare
against the wind and the cold wintry light*

It's easier when you come back in winter,
in the half-life. The sun's more sympathetic
to grey and you can sip a cheap rosé without
regretting those stories you left too quickly.

the blood goes first

Chicote's—that table over there
is where I pretended to listen to them,
the ones who'd have written something
great if only they'd had what it takes.

*then the mind trails along stubbornly
always something left unfinished*

It took me a while to get the balance right—
enough alcohol to stay awake and seem amused
but not so much that the boredom crept back
before the hangover. Discipline, that's the key.

I still wonder if others felt the same, or if only
those who are addicted to imagination
feel so restless when the chatter goes stale.
And not a single one saw through my gaze!

Spain was an excuse for them, not a reason.
They arrived by chance and were waiting
for a gust to sweep them off to a new perch
where they could speak as if they'd known me.

*reporters who play at soldiers
soldiers who lose the will
to report*

i was both and yet neither

There's a wooden bust of me up on a shelf,
a few scraps of prose, a snapshot of a marlin.
The last owner thought it might be good

for business but it lured in more writers
than tourists. He didn't make a living
from cappuccinos though one waiter
did all right by telling how I wrote
A Moveable Feast between whiskies

over there. And they encouraged him
with tips, which I suppose was as good
as believing him, until he'd saved enough
to open up his own place at Plaza Mayor.

He called it Not the Hemingway Restaurant
and all the postmodern pretenders go there.
I can't understand a word they say
and the booze is BYO but it keeps off the frost.

when all you want is to get nothing out of something.

At the Hotel Florida

It was the only place I could relax
in Madrid. I didn't bother to tell them
who I was, and they had the decency
not to ask or to put words in my mouth.
They never confused style with substance.

It was the kind of place where you slept
with the door unlocked but always kept
a pistol under your pillow just in case
especially after the shelling stopped
and the women you were dreaming of
had dressed and crept away.

*they say every man chooses
his own hill to die on*

*the taste of earth
sour in his helmet*

I knew things had changed when I saw
the lobby, the bevelled mirrors, the crystal
chandeliers, and the friendly receptionist.
In the old days if you wanted a mistress
you brought your own. And no one cared
if you didn't or did, or tried to tempt you
either way. Even during the worst nights
of the siege.

When I signed the register *E. Hemingway,
Ketchum, Idaho*, she smiled and asked
'and is there no Señora Hemingway?'
'Two women did their best,' I answered
in Spanish, 'and others would have liked
to try their luck. I'll tell you about it
some time.' Her name could be Maria
I thought, looking her up and down.
And I knew I would be tempted.

I lasted that night on my own
which was pretty good considering
how long I'd been bunking solo.
But then you don't really miss it
once it's out of bounds and you ask

what the fuss was all about back then
under the sheets, in the sweaty neon.

*when you're wounded and dug in
you feel this urge to name
every rock*

I stood at the writing desk in my room
for hours staring at a sheet of paper
wondering if I could ever get it back,
keep the demons at bay long enough
to let a story take hold.

Then I heard voices in the street below,
a man and a hooker haggling over price.
He'd pay for what an artist would have
for free—what could I make of that?

*between the fire-storms
i have this rotten habit of picturing*

the bedroom scenes of my friends

I'd written a paragraph by sunrise
and ripped it up after café con leche.
The waiter was a bit too eager to please
and the antler coat racks left me cold
but I was back at the Hotel Florida
and the juices were starting to flow.



No Writers in the Prado

Their paintings never were in any danger
from Napoleon. His shrapnel hit the site
by accident and diverted it from history²
into art. For him one Louvre glimmered
as irrelevantly as the next. In his fight
to make the world safe for croissants,
shape mattered, not how flaky things were.

*you can pound them into the gravel
or drive them back into the sea*

*but what do you do about the marble
pillars they leave behind?*

Franco had no patience for art, but by then
the Prado was as untouchable as a cathedral.
Besides, where else would they have hung
his portraits-to-be? But when no Velázquez
offered his palette to the task, the caudillo³
placed the fleshy nudes under house arrest
and banished Picasso's spontaneous fury⁴
to exile behind bullet-proof glass.

*you can't write compose paint fast
enough to keep up*

with the killing

Maria was hooked by Goya's *Naked Maja*.⁵
'Does she remind you of someone?' I asked.
'My mama,' she said. 'Before she gave up on sex.'
I could see she wouldn't settle for counterfeits
for long. 'You must mean the body,' I said.
'They say the head was only superimposed.'
'If you say so,' she said, closing her eyes.

I couldn't help but notice the weapons—
how proudly the security guards bore them
just in case a terrorist tried to nab a poster
or a postcard. You could take them to a bar
and forget them as easily as an umbrella.

I could tell the kings were back in town.
Juan Carlos air conditioned the galleries

in memory of poor Alfonso the Unlucky.⁶
It was the least a fresh Bourbon could do
to upstage the commies and firm the crown.

Is it any wonder that writers get cynical?

A Sunday Stroll in Parque del Retiro

*you can see all the park from the windows
the iron fence the gardens the casual walks*

*the green of lawns where they abut the gravel
the trees flirting with shadows the many
fountains and now the chestnuts all in bloom*

Thanks to Franco even the anarchists
have an excuse to sun-bake here.
Or is it mustard gas that scatters them
under this granite ledge to Alfonso XII
whose horse climbs higher into the sky
than poor Rosinante could ever dream of?

*i promised to love you
but i had to find you first*

separate myself from the fiction

There's a young gypsy dancing flamenco
to a ghetto blaster and Japanese men
tossing in coins as she clicks her heels.
Maria drops her wraps to the ground
and struts into the ring. She's a matador,
the girl her picador and when the music
runs out they whirl on to the clapping
and I think I might fall for her again.

She leads me down to the Crystal Palace
to a slope by the pond where the reflection's
just right. And as we lay there she whispers
'we've been here before—I can feel it!'
I hold her close. 'What makes you so sure?'
I ask. She looks into my eyes. 'Fire and ice,'
she says. 'You fought so hard not to love me!'

*hate's the truth
love the desperate invention*

*you see that as you dance
between the bullets*

Across the water a black man croons in French.
He's alone and even the swans ignore him.

'All you writers who dabble in war,' he sings,
'are a lost generation. 'bout time you got laid!'

your fictions finally catch up with you

