

Golden Boy

When Daedalus fastened those home-made wings,
first to himself and then to his golden boy,

he warned how wax would melt should they soar
too near the sun. 'Fly close by me', he said,

'and we shall flee this tyrant of a Cretan king'.
The architect of the labyrinth was not the last father,

lofty designs in ruins, to lose a son to death, exile,
estrangement, even madness, and be taunted ever after

by albums that frame a boy, blank pages for the man;
shrivelled blooms, a makeshift cross, a roadside ironbark;

the unrelenting silence of birthday telephones;
the risen sun's first gilding of the Icarian Sea.

Heart's Desire

You urge me. Go. Hasten to Spain.
Return to my heart's desire. Heed
the fandango's beat. Dwell not

on your capricious health. Tarry,
and be infirmity's wall-flower.
'I'll still be here', you say.

Imagine me, prowling the Prado,
knocking on Unamuno's door
in Salamanca, catching whispers

of Lorca in Andalusia, resting
on Belchite's abandoned stones,
wandering the maze and *Mibrab*

of Cordoba's mosque, placing a palm
on pardon's portal in Santiago,
pausing by graves only the brave

dared name, listening to Spaniards
talk politics in a *taberna*,
my book on a table, an empty chair,

bread gravel in my mouth, oil
rancid on my tongue, the wine
vinegar to un-kissed lips.

Bright Star

The Sun Also Rises is an earnest movie but without Papa's text it's not quite Hemingway. Flynn steals it. By '57 he's not top of the bill, not Captain Blood, no swash, not much buckle, not Robin Hood, tights too tight, but a perfect washed-up playboy, boozy, broke, sagging in the middle. Flynn cared nought for Method, wouldn't need it for his *Lolita*, but died before clinching with Kubrick, when his Beverly was 17 and one month.

A month counts in a teenager's life when her man's gone 50 and he's got a wife someplace else, and a heart that's grown too big, and the old buccaneers are all paid off, and Marian's into a matron turned, and tall ships rot on make-believe's back lot, and frost invades the merry glades of Sherwood.

Belchite, October 2011

Belchite's dust's inside my clothes; it's hard to shake it out.

I've come to touch the burning stones
at Aragon's unshaded heart, to listen
to the murmurings of ghosts,
to stub my toes on someone else's ruin.
A crumbling pueblo, larger
than my imaginings, smashed, scattered:

shells of houses, some grand, most humble,
two forsaken plazas, several *edificios* hallowed unto god,
three riddled towers the gunners failed to fell;
all things man-made unroofed, gaping at the sky.
They say some who watch by night
inside a broken church

hear shouts, moans ascending from the rubble;
the damned imploring god to stay
the barrage from the heavens.
Others say these vigilants succumb to sleep
and in dreams hear screams pouring
from souls more savage than the wrath of any god.

Belchite's dust's inside my clothes; it's hard to shake it out.

During the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) Belchite, in the province of Aragon, was taken by Republican forces and counter-attacked by the Nationalists during August and September 1937.

Neurosurgery

She'll be dead now
The woman with bright curly hair
The one I saw in Admissions
She and her man and her boy and her girl
All of them well turned out
Blending in an understated kind of way
And I cannot forget her glorious hair
And how next day her crown was part-shorn
And how two days later a strip of plaster patched her stitched scalp
And how the day after her man was talking on his mobile
Bad news, I heard him say
And when I walked past her room I saw
Her boy slumped on a chair as if he'd been punched
Her girl perched on the bed grasping her mother's hand
Her man rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet
All of them estranged from speech
And then I returned to another room to sit beside another bed
And I took a woman's hand in mine
And gripped it
Hard
Too hard
Much too hard

A Note for My Daughter

for Penny

After I am ashes wait
until your tears have dried.
Choose a day when the wind blows hard
and take the urn (or box or bin)
to some convenient lofty site
(a handy rooftop will suffice) and there,
without ceremony, words or prayer
fling my dust into the flying air.

No declarative stones or lettered brass,
no rosy plot for ruminations,
but in gusts and zephyrs, puffs and squalls
you may remember me
and smile,
your every breath my name.

Trainspotting with Robert Lowell

Some medical man shot electric charges through the mind that composed *the old white churches hold their air/ of sparse, sincere rebellion; frayed flags/ quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic*. I read Lowell before knowing of his ‘manic depression’ and nothing alerted me to ‘madness’, a disordered state of mind. There’s despondency, despair, dead-weight of all-too-distinguished forebears – hardly surprising if (though not in his words) *the Lowells talk only to Cabots, /And the Cabots talk only to God*. – but always there’s an acute, bleak honesty *knowing/ each drug that numbs alerts another nerve to pain.*, and the glint of sharp observation, *These are the tranquilized Fifties, /and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime?*. He’s a trusty guide through dank tunnels, the ones without snaking sunlit detours, *where the bones/ Cry out in the long night for the hurt beast/ Bobbing by Ahab’s whaleboats in the East.*, and much to be preferred to some unrelenting optimist, roaring ‘Butter side up!’, bullying us to ‘Always look on the bright side’, welcoming every flicker in the gloom, never thinking it’s *the light of the oncoming train*.

Stickytape

'Stickytape' has always been my word for it, not 'Adhesive Tape', as enunciated by a better class of user, never 'Durex', tainted by the protective proclivities of the English, while 'Scotch' mocks highlander thrift necessitated by English butchery and odious betrayal by lairds turned overly fond of sheep, 'Sellotape' sounds pallid, and some say 'Transparent Tape' but only pedants insist on 'Transparent Adhesive Tape' which nonetheless lists the qualities making the stuff ideal for repair of books, a cosmetic procedure where drifting surfaces are dragged back together and perhaps more pleasingly aligned, although, as with humans, the contents still rot and crumble inevitably to dust, neither book nor being to be judged by its cover.