



## *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.<sup>1</sup>

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 history<sup>2</sup>  
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 caudillo<sup>3</sup>  
placed the fleshy nudes under house arrest  
and banished Picasso's spontaneous fury<sup>4</sup>  
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*.<sup>5</sup>  
'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.<sup>6</sup>  
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*

