UNA SERIE MUSICAL ESPAÑOLA

ISLAND OF CALMNESS

(for Caty)

Descending into transfer halls of the terminal we had little sense of Barcelona, like one grape tasted from the whole bunch draped on a street stall in Majorca an hour away by short-haul Aeroflot.

So unsurprising really, hearing the sweet call of one tourist to another in that island place, flocking from Bremen or Bonn. In dale and dell their Raybans and knapsacks flashing where Robert strode back from La Cala to the tall house on the slopes, Ca N’Alluny, by Deià, after his daily swim. Goodbye to all that! Exorcised on his island of calmness the war to end all wars. Still we recall those limestone ledges when, back in Barcelona, amid cram of yellow and black taxis, sprawl of tapas bars, we prepare obeisance before Mirós or Picassos on gallery wall; or the archly crafted apertures of door and window in each Antoni Gaudí hall. Until sated with the throng of art recall amid Las Ramblas hordes the words of Robert of the streaming hair, a bard’s
Welsh curse: at each step withal
may they catch their feet and fall!

1. A Spanish Suite  
2. The poet Robert Graves was a long-time resident of the Island of Majorca  
3. Major pedestrian walkway in Barcelona

EXHIBITION AT THE MUSEUM
OF CONTEMPORARY ART

(Barcelona, 2009)

Schoolchildren were streaming out
of the gates of l’escola primària¹
and the last visitors were filing into
the Museu d’Art Contemporani.
But in the wide courtyard strenuously
skateboarders still strove harder
than Gaudí or El Greco or Lorca,
it seems, to perfect their leaps of faith:
pirouettes and caballerials, their acid drops.²

When they fell, got up once more,
stiffly, limped to the sidelines
for respite. But again and again
made civil war across barricades
of brick escarpments of la Plaça
dels Angels³, their stairway to hell
or heaven. And all the while
the worshippers, the pilgrims of art
pushed past.
Evening at last.
In the plaza the chairs and tables of restaurateurs are brought out.
And perambulating purveyors of gelat⁴ or castanyes rostides⁵ pass and repass. But still, though remote now in darkness, the clatter and clap of the skateboards percolates the tinkling of glassware, the scrape of forks on plates. Mute you might ponder the day’s question, is there art in perfection’s pursuit?

₁primary school ²various skate board ‘moves’ ³Angels Plaza is outside the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona ⁴icecream ⁵roasted chestnuts

OBSERVING THE TIME MACHINES

I

(El Museu de les Ciències Príncipe Felipe)

Despatching its despatches like a noonday gun, Foucault’s pendulum performs for visitors to Valencia’s Ciudad de las Artes y de las Ciencias¹, poised for reflection in the riverbed gardens of the diverted Turia. Here the swinging demolition ball knocks down one and then another hinged post, displayed like some strange animated transformation of precisely arrayed Stonehenge. And we
watch and wait as our allotted years fall
behind us while we hurry on through all
the wondrous science we artful humans
have conspired to fill this hall of fame.

\textsuperscript{1}City of Arts and Sciences situated in the former bed of the diverted River Turia

II

(Valencia Estació del Nord\textsuperscript{1})

Those great years of holiday travel in trains
when historic wall tiles welcomed them:
the families from many lands, after
they’d steamed through endless orange groves.
The ticket hall plaques say “Pleasant Journey”,
“Buon Viaggio—where peasant girls hold fruits
and flowers, bright sails drift limpid streams.
In that age of steam, it seems Iberia’s wall tiles
offered Eden. And windows in stained glass
cast warm gules of light on marble floors.
This was the first coming of time machines
that, nowadays transformed, write signatures
of millennium travellers in vapour trails
high up in these chill autumn skies.
And electric intercity behemoths slide
silent in and out. We wait and watch.

\textsuperscript{1}the North Railway Station, Valencia
THE WAIT WAS OVER

_Madrid histórico._

Suddenly running of runaway notes
called me across paving stones
of Plaza Mayor¹. Might I at last stand
before a maestro of these strings?

Sure, I waited all those years to find
the adroitly hammering hands
of the player of my lost cimbalom
in its ancient tremulous demands.

Around the square, hosts of performers
tried with fierce intent to draw crowds—
be-winged gold-painted angels, armoured
knights, dictators, ghosts with shrouds.

Inanimate they sought to amaze
and only an eyelid trembled as coins
occasionally were dropped in hats.
But spurning stillness I turned to tones
while indifferent diners, spread out
at restaurants tables, clashed
their cutlery over plate after plate.

But I had no time for tapas, paella,
*cocido madrileño²* for I meant to hear
again my cimbalom’s strummed notes.
In darkness that was quite enough to bear.

1 Grand Plaza in the historic centre of Madrid

OLD GOLD AND TOLEDO STEEL
(Visitar la Cuidad Imperial1)

Steel of Toledo comes to mind now
as I mount in memory the steep steps
from Puerta de Bisagra2 to the city, poised
on its pinnacle above the River Tagus’ bends.

From out the Iron Age, steel in weaponry
was learned in live wounds and their blood
debts to Berbers and Visigoths, the secrets
of swords so fine they can shave heads.

And on that “Day of the Pit”3, who was left
to mourn the five thousand unsuspecting—
those dressed-for-dinner guests? Their heads
rolled into the deep pit in El Alcazar’s walls.

Bodies followed, despoiling finery
with bright spray of blood. Bin Yussuf3
sated no doubt would dine alone that night;
and so the steel upheld its promised might.
*El rio Tajo* still coursed swiftly on
round Toledo’s feet to carry away
remnants of that crimson stain. We stand now
on *el Puente de San Martí*n under Alcazar⁴.

But fresh clean waters rushing past our feet
cannot be the same. Nor this bridge also
where in the deep of night, a loyal wife
destroyed with fire the new-built edifice.

Her reason? Husband, builder of a new span
had come home distraught to tell he’d erred—
its complete structure doomed to fall. So she
ensured another would be built, unflawed!

Strange that, in one way, failures are atoned,
while in their magnitude gross evil actions
reveal where wielded steel still shames;
as those who cried: ‘*El Alcázar no se rinde!*’⁵.

Departing Toledo, pilgrims are sometimes shown
artificers who lay gold-leaf upon
finely wrought medallions of steel; and stamp
the gold as if the steel is better dressed.

¹ Toledo was known as the Imperial City ² the usual tourist gateway to the city ³ 9th century ruler of the city ⁴ imposing ancient palace of Toledo ⁵ We will never surrender El Alcázar