

TOLEDO

1

Meeting place of earth and sky...
and of all those who fell here
by that finely struck local steel
in the hands of others - Iberians,
Visigoths, Moors, Jews, Castilians,
Nationalists, Republicans. I think
how their souls, once loosed, would
rise in unpropelled swaying, gently,
knowing that gravity must not pull
them down any longer, missing it.
The way to nothingness is only up, but
this hard blue dome of the southern
sky confines. They bounce, in
eerie suspension of the freedom
granted, bob back up, searching
for the funnel, the nexus, the passage.

2

This is the one. Crimped by the bend
of the Tagus and clay-baking
sun, the sun which pries open canyons,
heats brown hills, the rocks upon hills,
goats wandering in the brush. The eye
makes a small trespass to a pin-prick
pattern of distant olives, dissolve
to fields, mauve rocks breaking
through the same difficulty
tillable earth. To the west a live
strip of green, river darkening life.

3

The way up is the town: gray
and red stone and plaster,
boulders bracing this mountain
of shards and earthly offal,
walls upon crumbling walls, tiled
patios in narrowing streets. Hung
between the poles of the Alcazar
and the Cathedral, the city mounts

to meet a sky that spreads,
cloudlessly focussed by this crag
of a settlement. Toledo -
hard lessons on how the
solid meets the light.

4

The Cretan, Domenikos Theotokopoulos,
came late here, after Visigoths and Arabs.
His Venetian apprenticeship done, he paints
saints, the descent from the cross,
commissioned portraits of cardinals.
And in a church, friends mourning the Count
of Orgaz, in their lace-fringed tunics,
in brocade, fine court dress. Above...
the swirl of robes of saints, converging
to sweep us up to a still unseen third
world. But not with ease; we see
long bodies stretching to leave earth,
keeping their elongation of excess
desire even as they bend to help others
raise themselves. To the light above! Their
sinews, bone, hard and soft trappings
of robes and body tensed in too much
light: El Greco felt the nexus and stayed
in the city. He also painted it in a storm.

5

The Primacy of Spain: the glittering eagle
of a lectern, candles and the tinkle
of hidden nuns can't dispel the spacy
murkiness of this Cathedral.
But the chance! Pierced by light,
a high passage to the sky, ascendant,
fringed by figures of a rich tribe.
We are in a well, under impossible
ice. They must see us, these ornate
angels, patriarchs of the Transparente.
They fish for us. One even lowers
a lamp in outstretched hands. Who
is holding him? To the light
their flaming grace pulls us on up.

6

Their temple gone, the speech of the Jews
to the one God rose in unprepossessing
synagogues of brick and plaster.
In El Transito the lattice work lace
of alabaster, Mudejar arches rise
near the roof. Below, darkness, only
two circumambulating strips of golden
Hebrew. I make out words - the root of
praise, names of the Lord, blessings.
This is the fortress of perfect letters,
built by those who came with the Moors,
healed and studied and wrote love
poems in Arabic, and, in the year that Their
Catholic Monarchs felled the last Muslim
kingdom of Granada, in the year when
Columbus brought back from La Isla Española
the gold for a monstrance, in that
year of their Lord, the Jews
who did not convert were forced on
another upward, sideways, dispersing
journey — to the Rhine, to the other Galicia.

7

So the past is mustered
by the town; to tell
what it was to live
and be expelled,
leaving bones to replenish
olive fields; to praise
indifferent gods,
in black and white,
in darkneses whose need
is to be pierced by figured
shafts; with sounds,
the true sheen of cut;
to paint
the stretched thigh
of God.
These lopsided passions
the earth incites
and the city
stands
brazed and rising.