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 protraits 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 chancel! 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 darknesses 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.