



TOÍBÍN

Colm Toibín has won many accolades and much acclaim since his debut novel *The South* won the Irish Times Literature Prize for a first book. *The Heather Blazing* won The Encore Award and both *The Blackwater Lightship* and *The Master* were shortlisted for the Booker. His non-fiction includes *A Homage to Barcelona* and *The Sign of The Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe*.

His latest novel, *Brooklyn*, is published by Viking.

You first came to Barcelona in 75 then again in 89, yes? I'm probably right in guessing you've been back since. What changes have you noticed in terms of atmosphere? How up to date are you in terms of Barcelona/Spain?

I lived in the city from 1975 to 1978 and all of 1988 and some of 1989 and 1990; after that I have spent a few weeks of each year in the city, but over the past ten years I have been mostly in the Pyrenees where I built a house. I stay in the city for a few days on my way through to the mountains a few times a year, and usually go to the Liceu four or five times a year.

I am not as interested in the city as I used to be, but that is middle age talking. It's not the city's fault. I am setting a long story in the city, in Carrer Sant Pau, among the Pakistani immigrants, so I walk up and down that street a lot, and get shaved every day in one of the barber's shops. I also have another story in the back of my head. I have a Bicing card so I like that. I sit at the bar called Els Tres Tombs and watch the world sometimes in the evening.

Would you say it's a good city for writers? Are there such things as good cities for writers (like Nice is great for painting)?

I think a long cold winter is better for novelists; thus maybe Dublin or Berlin or New York; maybe Barcelona is good for poets.

I read somewhere that you said rooms were more important than cities, what did you mean?

I live in my head and then I live in two or three rooms. They are the important places. This doesn't mean that the great cities of the world – Barcelona, Seville, San Sebastian, Rio, San Francisco are not filled with excitement and promise. But excitement and promise are no use when you are working on a novel.

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Do you find any similarities coming from a Catholic country like Ireland and being somewhere like Spain? Does it have any relevance in terms of your feelings for the two countries?

I haven't been in wider Spain very much and don't really know it, although I have always liked it and enjoyed it. But in Catalonia there is no real Catholicism like in Ireland. You simply don't notice it in the same way. I suppose having two languages vaguely in conflict interests me in both places. But I like Catalonia for its difference from Ireland, for its work ethic, and its interest in civilised pleasure.

Similarly, have you felt any special affinity for Catalonia and its concept of nationhood coming from Ireland? I say this because many Catalans I meet always seem to express an immediate warmth for the Irish.

I think there is a real connection between Ireland and Catalonia, which began perhaps in 1848, a year in which both places became aware again, with other parts of Europe, of a lost nationhood and began to attempt to restore it. But more and more I find the whole idea of nationhood half mad.

I like Catalonia's openness to Europe and I used to enjoy its terrible prejudices, but I am less amused by them now. I still love Catalans' attitude to culture and to infrastructure and to civic space.

You have mentioned that you went to Spain because you liked *The Sun Also Rises*. Was it what you expected when you arrived? If not, how did it differ from your expectations?

The pleasure in food and light and the night which Hemingway deals with is all there still. Yes, I found it as soon as I arrived. It was even better than I had imagined.

Is it true that despite being set in Barcelona/Catalonia you wrote *The South* in a Lisbon hotel room? If so, does this mean you prefer to put distance between your experience and the actual process of writing?

I can write anywhere, including at home. But sometimes you need to focus, really concentrate and you can do this in an unfamiliar space. But it doesn't really matter.

'I have been here for several weeks. I am grateful that the woman who runs the hotel and her little mouse do not speak English. I remain a mystery to them, they cannot get through to me.'

How much of this is you? Any? If so what do you mean by 'they cannot get through to me'.

Do you miss those little mice and shabby hotels?

Yes, that was an old pension I stayed in at the corner of Carrer del Pi and Portaferrissa. They could not get through to her because they had no language in common. Yes, I miss a Barcelona when there were no tourists, no tourists at all, and the city centre belonged to the people of the city. In the 1970s and 1980s no tourists came to the city, they all went to the coast.

Your prose suggests a strong poetic influence, why haven't you written any poetry? Who are your favourite poets?

I have written poetry, but it doesn't really work. I like Wallace Stevens, Yeats, Elizabeth Bishop, Sir Thomas Wyatt.

When you wrote *Homage to Barcelona* why did you choose non-fiction as a medium when you normally write fiction? What motivated you to write it?

I realized that I could get a contract for the book since city tourism was beginning and people were starting to discover Barcelona and I was always writing out lists of places where people should go, and things they had to see. The idea that someone would pay me to write about the place seemed thrilling.

It has been said that there is a strong mother-figure theme throughout your work. I would be interested to know if you feel any affinity with the film director Almodovar who seems to pursue a similar vein in his films.

He makes comedies. I make tragedies. We are both gay. I discovered when I interviewed him that he is a really hard worker, a very focussed person. There are some films where there is no mother. I think if you are gay and you write a few times about mothers then people think you must be obsessed by your mother. There are no mothers at all in some of my books. ■

A Blind Man Passes La Sagrada Familia

Pauline Stainer

I

I have no spittle on my lids

I hear the light quadrupeds
squirrel, ferret
on the seven lesser altars

the sough of birds
chloroformed
with outstretched wings

still-born infants
rising on plaster dust
in the Santa Cruz hospital

the triple torchères
tossing their howling manes
for the three holy children.

II

I feel the flexible wire-mesh
of the recording angel
on the Field of the Harp

skeletons
practising deposition
from pulleys and weights

doves of polished iron
in the spandrel
as if heaven were to one side

the billow of incense
through the twelve bell-towers
each blowing a different death.

III

I sense the cranes rust
along their rat-lines, men like trees
walking the spiderdeck

the hare kindle
at the annunciation
in the bloody meadow

Lazarus
densify the ice-house
under the lawn

the desire to crucify
by mirrors, calvary flowing
untill it floats

the pestles of mortars.

IV

I see the masons
chip the stone
into blazing accidentals

the spires cast
their Venetian glass like falcons
into the wind

the seraph
at the empty sepulchre
in a suit of lights.

This poem appears in Pauline Stainer's collection *The Lady and the Hare*, published by Bloodaxe.

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SNUG

Matthew Tree

Matthew Tree is a writer living and working here in Barcelona. He has several books published in Catalan including *Privilegiat* and *La Vida després de Déu* which is now in its third edition.

This is an extract from a work in progress, 'SNUG'

Story: the novel starts here. The following three opening chapters allow us to meet the narrators of the first half of the book: a man remembering certain events in a remote Isle of Wight village, which took place when he was 12; an African paramilitary - who can pass for white - who was 'infiltrating' this village at the time; and, last but unfortunately not least, a racist doctor who was on a holiday visit there. The year is 1974.

I WAS TWELVE

This was back in the nineteen-seventies, when they didn't have global communications systems of any kind - we civilians didn't at any rate - no mobiles, no sat-navs, no internet, no bloody, bloody glib e-mail abbreviations like ASAP, no bloody, bloody snappy e-mail sign-offs such as 'Best'. All we had then were telephones, some of them in our homes and some of them outdoors, in red steel-and-glass cabins that frequently whiffed of piss.

I was twelve, and torn between grubbing down in the dirt and playing with Action Men (getting their stiff plastic fingers round their armalites, twisting their torsos so they fit snugly into their snipers' lairs); and higher things, like Lucy, who was fourteen, and whose pale face with its thin dark eyebrows and its swishing frame of long black hair was like a door which led to a great outdoors whose unknown scenery, enticing and alarming, was hinted at on those rare occasions when she smiled.

When Lucy was around I felt silly as silly could be, handling my dolls and simulating machine-gun fire with Roger, who was also twelve but who didn't seem to understand that when Lucy appeared, our job was to leave our childish things behind and jump up like two sharp little soldiers and be charming and gallant, and offer to show her and her friend Eileen a bit of judo which they found quite interesting though they drew the line at the ground holds, which I dearly wanted to do with Lucy as it involved us boys getting down on the grass and slipping our arms under the armpits and thighs of the girls, but no, they were having none of it.

Eileen was a red-haired freckled girl of thirteen who was Lucy's best friend, despite the two of them being as alike as chalk and cheese. I suspect Roger had a crush on her though I couldn't see what he saw in her.

I mean, she was such a child. Roger, by the way, wasn't my best friend, nor I his, but we got on well together even though I found him a bit of a bore sometimes because he used to get fixed ideas into his head such as the one that a penny was a very important thing, just as important as a pound in its way, something which seemed to fascinate him periodically, to go by the amount of times he would repeat himself on this question as if struck by a revelation. 'Struck' here is only an approximation to what really happened to Roger, who was a pondering type (with cheeks that wobbled a touch

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when he spoke), the type who liked to mull things over in his spare time, the type who never really got struck by anything, in fact, in whom ideas emerged slowly, like vegetables from the soil, and then wedged themselves in his brainpan, apparently for good, which meant that I had to have a certain amount of patience with Roger, though I dare say he also had to have a certain amount of patience with me; about what I have no idea: I was as blissfully unaware of my faults as he of his.

Roger and I knew each other from school: a secluded preparatory school in London, one of those miniature snob factories that plague the English educational system and that was already well on the way to turning the two of us into insufferable little prigs, not that we were aware of that at the time, no, we were snug as bugs in a rug in the world such as we had been given to understand it and never snugger than during one Easter holiday, the Easter holiday of 1974, when Lucy's Mum and Dad, together with her brother, who was in the paratroopers – something which thrilled Roger and I – made a deal with mine and Roger's parents to look after all us children for a fortnight on the Isle of Wight.

They had chosen a small seaside resort on the south-west coast called Coldwater Bay, which Lucy's Dad, Dr Whitebone, chucklingly described to us as we tucked into a mid-morning snack of cheese and biscuit that Mrs Whitebone had packed, knowing we would be hungry after the drive down: *No silly theme parks in good old Coldwater Bay, no glass-blowing festivals, no half-baked miniature funfairs, no old biddies stirring natural dairy fudge in unhygienic vats, no, none of the usual nonsense one usually finds laid on in every nook and cranny of the Isle of Wight for the BOCs; here in Coldwater Bay there's just the essentials: one tea shop, one fish and chip restaurant, one sweet shop for you children and one pub for us grown-ups*, a quick wink startled us from the top right hand corner of his face, *it's almost virgin territory; of course it has its share of holidaymakers; we're on Wight, after all; but there's less of them and most of them are on our level; wonderful place*. He paused, then leaned forward over the table where we were all munching away, and mouthed, *what's more, it's British to a fault*, he rubbed his hands together and barked out a laugh as dry as a dog biscuit. Mrs Whitebone busied herself with unpacking Roger's shirts, *now John, don't start*.

The Whitebones had rented one entire house not far off the High Street; the place was pastel-coloured inside and out, though I can't remember

precisely what the colours were, just that they were all so watered-down that the wallpaper in our bedrooms - of which Roger and I shared one, Eileen and Lucy another, Dr and Mrs Whitebone another, whereas Simon the paratrooper had the smallest bedroom all to himself; although it was barely a cupboard he set his mother's mind to rest, *this is luxury compared to what you get in the army* - the wallpaper in our bedrooms, I say, was of a bland colour, the formica on the large kitchen table on which we ate all our meals was of a bland colour, the floors, indeed the walls and ceiling of every room in that building couldn't possibly have been blander.

Once we'd wolfed down our cheese and biscuits, Mrs Whitebone said she was going to go shopping for essentials and would anyone like to come? Lucy and Eileen both shot up their hands in enthusiastic silence. I turned to Roger and said, in a voice that betrayed eagerness, *what d'you reckon, Rodge? Give them a hand with the carrier bags?* After what seemed an eternity, he finally said, *well I'm not going to have much fun here on my own, am I?*

The five of us walked into Coldwater Bay's Easter air. The blood in our cheeks heightened by the breeze, we walked along our street, which contained houses similar in size, shape and style to the one we had rented, all with equally similar seaside names - 'Sandy Cove', 'Ocean View', 'Beach Head House' (ours was called 'Seaview Heights') - and turned into the High Street.

Founded long after the coast had been made safe from pirates, Coldwater Bay had been built to directly embrace the sea: the High Street swooped straight down to the Esplanade.

Mrs Whitebone looked up and down and spotted a passer-by *excuse me!* Having received directions, Mrs Whitebone now led us up the High Street and then turned right into a street parallel to our own. Two houses along was the village corner shop.

Up until then, Roger and I had been talking about the relative merits of the Spitfire and the Hurricane and the girls had also been chatting about something or other but as soon as Mrs Whitebone pushed the door, tinkling its bell, and we trooped in to the shop - crammed grotto-full with a huge array of foods and household goods and beverages - we shut up, impressed by the silence and the lack of elbow room. It was easily a full minute before the shopkeeper appeared.

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He must have been in his mid-thirties, though at the time I was bad at guessing ages. He had a pallid face, and would have been coot-bald but for a few wisps of blackish-grey hair dangling off his occiput. He wore a beige surcoat with several pens lined up in its chest pocket. On seeing us he broke into a wide smile that sent creases running off to the edges of his face as if under orders, *good morning*. Mrs Whitebone nodded, replying in a voice cheery as a bell peal, *good morning!* She proceeded to order what she wanted on the spot and the shopkeeper obediently sought out the items, giving Mrs Whitebone a re-run of that wide smile each time he placed them on the counter before her. At the end she glanced at the space reserved for newspapers, to the left of the till. She pointed *is that the only paper you've got?* The man nodded, *have to go to Brook or Freshwater for the London dailies; the local paper's all we have*. He held one up high enough for us all to see it was called the 'Coldwater Bay Parish Press'. Mrs Whitebone shook her head, *no thank-you*.

Once we were out of there, each of us kids carrying a loaded carrier bag, Lucy whispered loudly to Eileen, *what a creepola!* Eileen giggled. Lucy went on, *did you see his eyes? I think he's on something*. Eileen shrugged, *maybe he's a homeopath*. Roger turned to her, *what's a homeopath?* Eileen glared at his interrupting mouth, *Pa says they're mad people who take little white pills that all look the same*. Mrs Whitebone turned to Eileen with a frown, *now, now, Eileen, there is much to be said for homeopathy, even though certain doctors, her tongue slid briefly over her lower lip, may not altogether approve*. As we had no reply to that, she blurted out, *come on, I'll treat you children to an ice cream!* She led the way back into the High Street, then down it towards the sea.

A coloured man in yellow PVC overalls was sweeping the pavement at the bottom of the street.

No sooner had we stepped onto the Esplanade and looked down over its iron balustrade at a thin stretch of sandy beach that lay between us and the stirring murk of the water, its secrets safe, its shifting bulk redoubtable, while the air that coursed off its surface blew up against our faces, than I for one suddenly felt happy, happy as could be that there were places like this, places in which there was nothing else to do but be beside the seaside at the edge of a seaside town in which we could but sip pop and suck rock and sup on battered fish when we weren't looking at the ocean,

when we weren't breathing in this breeze. Mrs Whitebone spotted an ice-cream machine, *over here, everyone!*

It stood by the entrance to the village sweet and souvenir shop, out of which an old lady emerged to serve us. The ice-creams were of the Mister Whippy type that wasted no time in melting, so I gobbled mine down quick. I see myself now, the ice cream forming a satisfying lump of cold in my stomach, the cold of the breeze blustering up and down the street, as I stared at the shop window, framed by two iron arches painted blue, with its display of marzipan bacon and eggs, pink sticks of rock, of postcards showing four different views squeezed together and all but hidden anyway by the words 'Coldwater Bay' slap in the middle.

It felt a fine thing, to be a child of twelve watching that shop window in which everything seemed to have been designed precisely for us twelve year olds, not only the confectionary but the novelty items too: black kiss-me-quick hats and severed fingers and false fangs that hung together in enticing plastic sachets sealed by cardboard labels showing cartoon drawings of surprised or scared or alarmed people who even I knew – from their clothes and haircuts - were stuck back in the 1950s.

What with this shop and the Esplanade and the beach below it and the white cliffs stretching away off to its right, westwards, and the ice cream in my mouth, I found it an enticing place, Coldwater Bay, and I felt it was going to be a great time we were all going to have there, with the added perk for me of Lucy's presence.

We knew nothing, nothing at all. We took for granted that our lives were ours and ours alone and would run their natural course. I for one certainly did not expect to end up crying on the shoulder of the only counsellor, friend and confidant who would prove to be eternally reliable.

I was twelve. And as I have already said, I was happy, thrilled, sound as a bell and rock steady on my feet. My mind back then was as bone clean as the Esplanade breeze. The world reveals itself gradually to most, the sweet things apparent first and its evil dawning last. I had the misfortune to have the lot shoved down my gullet in one go. I was twelve.

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LOG OF PROGRESS

12/4/1974

I'm here in my bedsit, rented from the owner of the shop below. Cosy I am now, with two electric hobs and a baby fridge and few chances of arousing suspicion given that in this land shopkeepers are discerning pillars of the community who wouldn't play host to the unruly, the unsavoury and far less the downright disreputable. I laughed. Got to watch that laugh, it's the only part of me that doesn't pass. Got to learn to slap my hand over that mouth of mine before someone catches on.

No sooner had I darkened his doorstep than my landlord, who has an off-putting complexion, like boiled tripe, offered to help me with my two suitcases but I assured him with my finest smile that I could manage on my own. He waited until I'd lugged them halfway up the steep staircase, before being predictably polite: Are you quite sure? These people, these people.

The room is small and smells of dust. A sash window gives onto a view of another sash window on the opposite side of the street. Once in, I put my cases on the bed, with a puff of relief - damn things weigh a ton - and popped back down to pay him a month in advance, cash. He asked in a voice quiet as ants where I was from, and for the first time I spun my story in field conditions, stressing it was a long one, didn't want to bore him, my father having been Italian and my mother having been Norwegian and me having been born, quite circumstantially, in Kenya. Ah, he said, as he counted up the wad of cash I'd just handed him, I thought I couldn't place your accent. No, I said, it's a bit of a mish-mash. All in order, he said, stuffing pound notes into a side pocket of his sepia jacket. Well, I said, just going to have a bit of a rest now. Good idea, he said as I started back up.

*

The day before I left for England, Mzee patted the side of my shoulder reassuringly, Look Jonas, if that fat mkundu Jay Edgar Hoover managed to pass for half a century, then I think you're going to make it for a fortnight: you really are the only man for the job, Jonas, the only man for the only job that is left for us to do.

So far, I have passed, as it were, with flying colours. The pert smile of complicity from the pink-faced passport officers at the airport; the way people sat down next to me on the Tube without a moment's hesitation; my not feeling a draft from a soul, indeed, since arrival.

*

I needed some clothes (I was unable to squeeze so much as a sock into these cases) so I went out, double-locking my door, just in case.

I glanced at my picture of respectability in the hall mirror as I left, memories blown in rasping like leaves from the not so distant past. The usual.

Recollections of being obliged to penetrate a hole dug out of dry earth, stark naked, every morning at six; of being told to thump children with tree branches; of walking into hospital wards, machete in hand.

I purchased a couple of pairs of slacks, sweaters ditto, half a dozen shirts and a duffle coat, from the menswear shop on the High Street. All nondescript, or so I hope.

Again, people treat me exactly – exactly! - as if I were one of them. Hungry by now – ‘peckish’, a word I’ve learnt to cultivate, like ‘mish-mash’ - I go into the tea shop I know is two doors down and take a table by the window, order scones and tea and watch the passers-by.

They lope past, these strangers: plain-looking women with flat, motionless faces; a few families, the fathers usually taciturn, the mothers usually berating their children for behaving like children. Once, a group of short-haired young men in bomber jackets drifted by, looking sullen. Sometimes, rarely, someone uniformed came into view: a baker’s assistant, a young, slow-walking policeman.

Not for the first time since my arrival, my skin tautened, itching all over. This must have been what aliens feel when they fall to Earth, seeing beings who are similar in that they have arms and hands and legs and feet and heads and necks but are in fact quite, quite different, sealed off in their world as they are: in routine, in knee-jerk thoughts.

I looked at those people, their brains thumping away behind their freckles, behind that whey-coloured skin. They have spun their cold cocoon, and live in it as if there were no room in it for anyone else but them.

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Through the glass I watched them swim clumsily by, releasing bubbles in bursts abrupt as hiccups, their hair and limbs flowing in the murky, liquid air.

My senses are spiked with clarity. I am perfectly, indisputably alone.

I paid and left. (Should I have added 'goodbye' or 'bye' or 'cheers'? What is done here?)

I found the café, the pub, the sweet shop and, further up the Esplanade, the fish and chip shop, all just where they were supposed to be.

All checked and double-checked: their regular deliveries had been made before the Easter break, to cope with the influx of holidaymakers (not many this year, the chip shop woman told me, due to the poor weather); no goods will be coming in for at least three weeks. Added to the local postal strike, on for the next fortnight, we stand a good chance of not being interrupted until we are quite done.

Back in the bedsit, I open the cases. Nothing appears to be damaged. I remove the components and assemble the machine, a big, flat apparatus, unhandy, a right royal pain in the bottom, in fact. Our very own design. The thing weighs down the entire surface of the bed. I kneel and slowly, as I do not wish to and indeed must not make any mistakes, key in the report – layout, locations – signing off with a tag of my own, plucked out of several fluttering about in my head: 'anger, source of all things.'

I'M NOT A

I know perfectly well that some people might think I'm obsessed with the issue, but when you latch onto a truth, and you know it's a truth, a whole truth and nothing but a truth, and hardly any one else seems to give a tinker's cuss about it even when faced with hard evidence, then I think I'm within my rights to take it to heart, this truth. To look forward to the day when it will be accepted like any other common scientific fact, like rain or gravity or fission.

The problem is that the right-thinking Left have made it all but impossible to open up a healthy debate on the issue. As soon as they sense so much as a smidgen of anything that goes against their sacred bloody dogmas, they jeer and sneer at anyone who dares to disagree. Such ostracism on the part of the great unwashed is not to be tolerated forever. One tiny

turn of the tide will be cue enough for me and other like-minded citizens, to make the first of many moves.

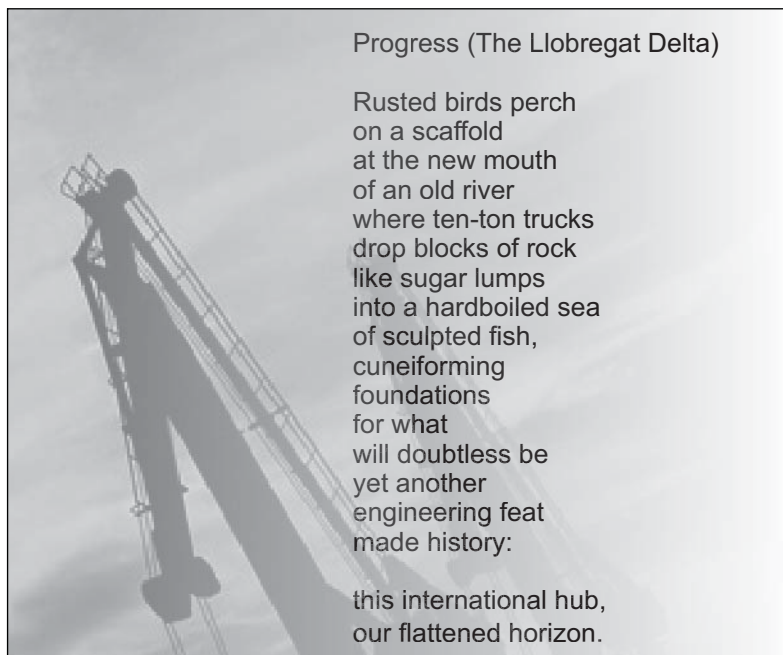
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I spotted one this morning - the first and only coon, indeed, that I have set eyes on since our arrival in Coldwater Bay; he was nonchalantly working his broom to and fro, simply brushing the same pile of leaves from the street over to the gutter and back again, it seemed to me.

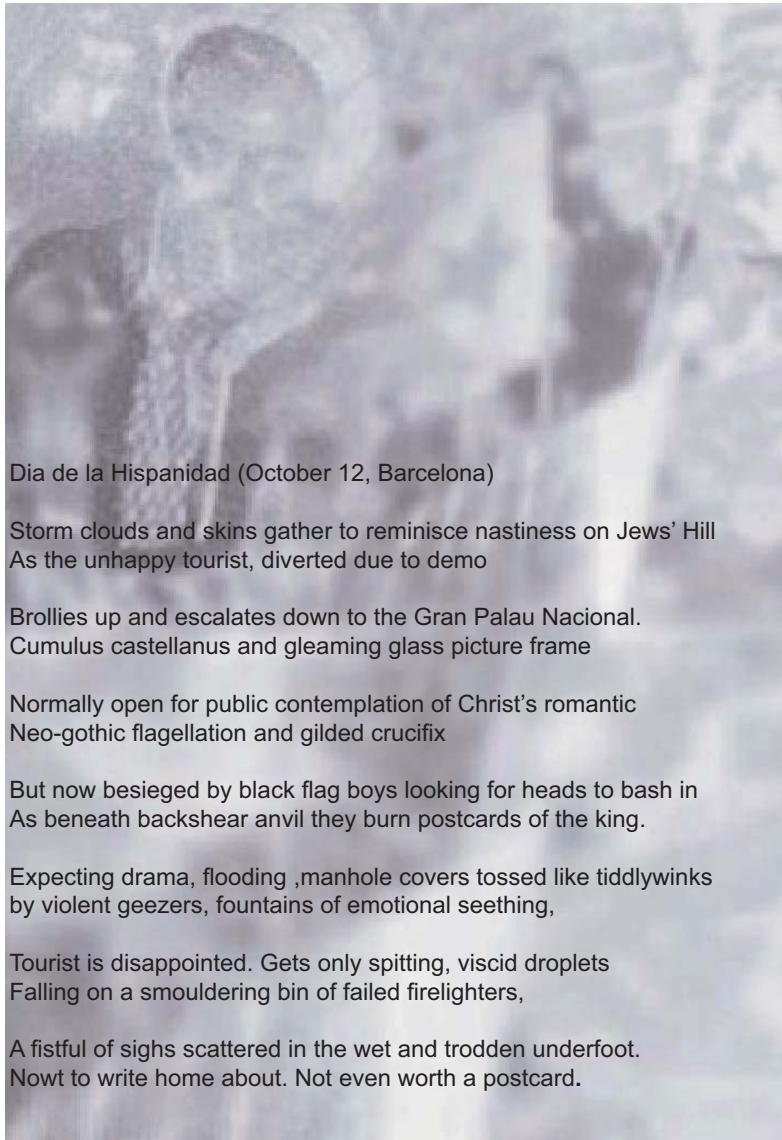
How can people remain oblivious to the obvious: that people like him are simply not people like us? Is the lumbering fecklessness of his type not glaringly apparent? Is it not blatant from a simple glance at their opaque eyes, vacant as baubles? From those sudden smiles that break out from their habitually sullen faces for no apparent reason? Is it not clear as bloody day that there is nothing there to address, is it not apparent to all but the blind from birth that the womenfolk are not much more than peripatetic incubators and that the males have the best part of their medulla oblongata between their legs rather than their ears?

I confess I have never exchanged more than a few brief words with one. Attempting a full-blown conversation must be a trial I have no intention of ever putting myself through: one would have to painstakingly measure one's syllables, rather like I had to do with the mentally incapacitated unfortunates I came across back in my student days, during the obligatory psychiatric stint. ■

Three Poems for Postcards
Mark Reading



Note: The Llobregat Delta is a nature reserve. Recently they remodelled the adjacent river mouth to amplify the Port and facilitate work on the third runway of Barcelona airport. There has been talk of a fourth runway to be built in the sea.



Dia de la Hispanidad (October 12, Barcelona)

Storm clouds and skins gather to reminisce nastiness on Jews' Hill
As the unhappy tourist, diverted due to demo

Brollies up and escalates down to the Gran Palau Nacional.
Cumulus castellanus and gleaming glass picture frame

Normally open for public contemplation of Christ's romantic
Neo-gothic flagellation and gilded crucifix

But now besieged by black flag boys looking for heads to bash in
As beneath backshear anvil they burn postcards of the king.

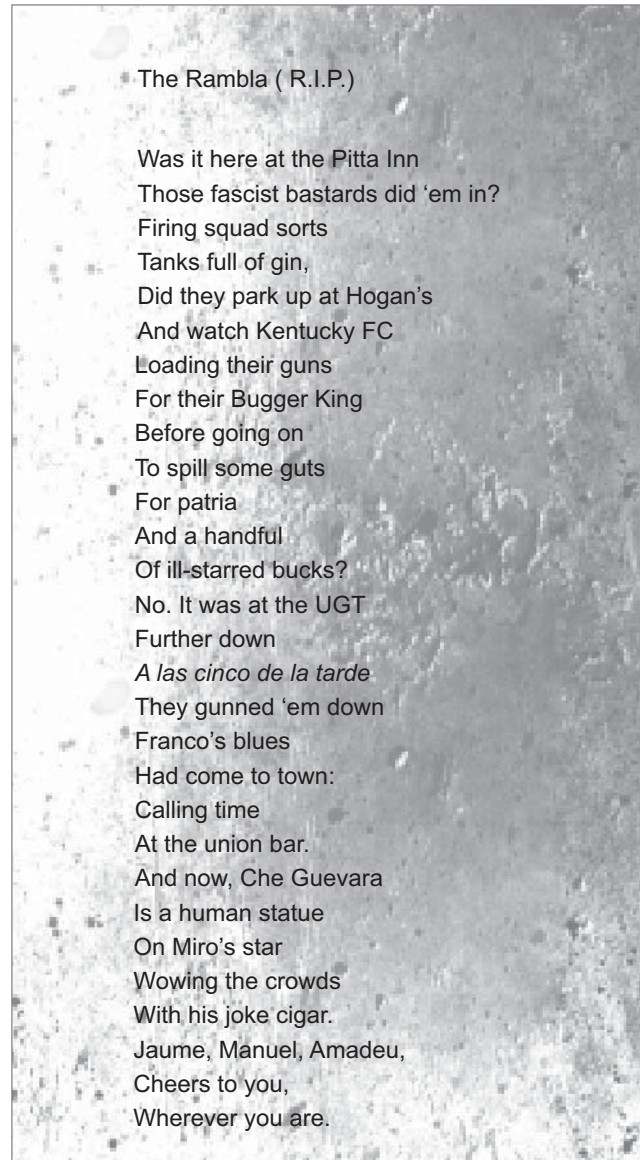
Expecting drama, flooding ,manhole covers tossed like tiddlywinks
by violent geezers, fountains of emotional seething,

Tourist is disappointed. Gets only spitting, viscid droplets
Falling on a smouldering bin of failed firefighters,

A fistful of sighs scattered in the wet and trodden underfoot.
Nowt to write home about. Not even worth a postcard.

Note: It is custom on October 12 for nostalgic fascists to gather on Montjuïc to commemorate Franco. You might say that the counter-demonstration has now become part of the custom too.

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Note: The UGT is a Spanish trade union. There is a plaque on their building on the Rambla in memory of Jaume Compte, Manuel Gonzalez Alba and Amadeu Bardina who died defending the building in.