



IMAGES OF PORTUGAL

H. S. Toshack

Images of Portugal

H S Toshack

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Friends

It's good to have a friend,
Even if you're only a donkey,
Someone to stand over you
When you feel a bit wonky
And aren't up to being up
And the world looks down on you
Because you can't earn your hay today.



A Safe in the Mateus Palace

You ask me what it is?
It's a safe.
Somewhat lower and we'd have thought it a desk,
Those lacquered drawers for letters;
A little higher and it would pass as a tallboy
For the storing of personal attire;
Or better still as a sideboard
A shower-offer of porcelain or glass
At dinners and luncheons;
But no, it's a safe,
A sort of coffer.
This palace room
With its velvets and scrolls and deep rich hues
Is a preserved bloom
Whose roots ran in the vaults beneath these boards
Then through them into the deep rich earth.
And just as the vintage of each year
Was locked in bottle and cask
So each year a harvest of coins was hoarded here
In this most precious of puncheons.

Three Currencies

Only a dusty bar
By a bend in the dusty road
With, outside,
Faded red parasols and chipped white tables,
And a gloom within brightened
(Yet heightened)
By the tv screen
Up high at one end of the room.

Only a mid-day soap-bubble of the most inflated kind –
Desperate dolour and frantic fears,
Cheapened words and tears scattered loudly
And in tawdry colour.

But the eyes of the woman behind the bar where I stood
Glistened with the sheen of true silver.
I did not like bringing her back to the darkness
With the ring of escudos on wood.



Stoneship

Some houses
Do not just squat in streets
But are like ships
Riding a cobbled wave.

This house flies no flags, has no sail,
And no-one hails
From the taffrail of its balcony;
But a stonegrave shipwright
Had a hand in its making,
And though its stone-grey timbers have sat here steady
A down the years
As if aground,
And the surge of sound from the swelling town
Has not moved it at all,
One night it will lift anchor,
Stir its keel from the cling of the earth,
Haul off to some other place,
And berth against a quieter harbour wall.



Birds on the Telephone Wires

They are waiting for the last one to arrive
And settle
Although they have barely left room for him on the wires,
(At least in the sun),
These birds that are so yellow
(At least in the sun);
And when he does
And does
There will be a pause

Until the wires are stretched too tight
The birds are stretched too tight
The tension of their twittering too great;
And then the wires will twang
And whip the birds into the air
In curved lines that loop over the rooftops.
Then they will be reeled back in
Fall slowly into straightness
On the steel strands
And wait for the last one to arrive
Then settle.
And when he does
And does
There will be a pause

Until...

It was birds
Who invented
The wheel.

Burnt Trees

I don't know why they burnt the trees
Or even if someone did burn them
But they are burnt
(Although not down)
Burnt as far as the eye can see,
And the eye can see a long way
Because the trees are burnt,
And the brooms of flame have swept away the green
Over the doorstep of the horizon
Into the night.

Yesterday's burning left some beauty,
Of black on brown,
Straggle on straightness,
The bareness of things.

This morning's winds have blown back a dusting of green
Under the dawn,
A touch of tendril;
And not much beyond tomorrow
Greenness will have piled up
At the foot of the blackened trees.

Would that all burning were such.



The Mateus Palace

I'm not able to say much about this place.
It's far from grand as palaces go.
We've seen it often enough on the Rosé label
(That used to be the posy wine to serve at table didn't it
Having superceded Liebfraumilch
And smart hocks of that ilk
But it was overtaken by Valpolicello
Which I confess was too tart – not mellow enough for my taste –
Maybe you wish to jump to its defence
But I digress and must make haste to the end of my sentence)
Yet are still surprised
By its size,
Which is barely more than cozy.



North of Figuera da Foz

Last night
Something (but we couldn't tell what)
Tapped to come into our closed-up tent
And disturbed our sleep.
We felt uneasy (but we couldn't say why)
On this wind-cut beach
In the dark
In the deep dark of a wind-cut beach
Running along an empty bay.
And we kept the flap shut.

Perhaps whatever tapped had felt exposed as well.
After a while it went away.

We shall listen tonight.
If it taps again
We may open the flap
To look out.
But maybe not.



Earth-Mother

We are all cloud-watchers, fire-gazers and poets,
Seeing form in featureless things.
We often exceed what the facts allow,
Erring after our own need,
And in our minds' eye we make of the world what we will.

But some shapes cannot be denied:
No-one could gainsay this granite head
Nor soften its hard lines into happenstance.
She speaks her own scarred words,
A gargoyle mystagogue
Uttering through the thin vein of her mouth
The toil, the strong pain of birth,
Grimacing in retrospect
At what she is now too old to bear,
Looking back with stone-sight into the soil
Through which she has thrust her face
And in which,
Deep from the sun,
Her labour still goes on.



Old Man on a Balcony

He's gone in, now,
But he was there a moment ago,
Leaning and spitting.

And as he leaned and spat I thought so what?
There's not much wrong with that.
If an old man can't stand outside his balcony door
Atop the sinking evening
And watch, below the water line of the day's last warmth,
The world go home,
What can he do,
And what's a balcony for?
And if he claims the few square feet beneath him as his,
What of it?

At dusk the Dukes of Mateus stood aloft
And measured their domain, each row in turn,
In lines of vines lit softly by the falling sun.

Here, when the shadows slide up the cooling wall,
The old man marks his by the reach of his spit.



Rocks in a Grassy Field

A farmhouse loaf as big as a farmhouse,
That's what the further rock is;
And the nearer isn't much smaller
(It looks even taller,
Since it's nearer to me
Where I stand
In the grassy field).
Half of the far one
Has keeled over.

Baked in the sun, it was,
Not in any oven,
Crisped with the grass in the heat of the sun.
Was it ice that opened it like that?
Born in the earth's early light,
Was it browned in the heat of the day
And sliced in the cold
Of the night?

Santuario de Fatima

The dogs of Fatima bark all night,
The pilgrim dogs of Fatima
Scrabble in the refuse for a Bone of Truth,
A Revelation of Rosbif,
A Mess of Meaning.
Their voices echo in the moonlight
Across the vast and empty square
Where in the heat of day
The masses stand like rows of corn,
Swooning in Hope of Manifestation,
And ripple their responses to a wind of words.
The dogs know better,
That the full belly is the only salvation,
And intone their credo to the moon.

The bells of the clocks of the churches of Fatima
Also ring roundly through the night,
Telling the hours and the same tale,
Helping the shopkeepers sleep soundly,
Giving thanks for the miracle that is Fatima.

The bells
Of the clocks
Of the churches
Of Fatima
Ring all night,
Telling the concessionaires
And the dogs
All is well,
All is well,
All is well.



A Wooden Door

It's a hard choice to make,
To say who should come in and who stay out.
That's what a door must do;
And a door must not betray its wall.

A door cannot sleep,
Must miss no call from the landing for entry;
A door cannot soften,
But may seize up
Through saying no too often
As this one has done.

It is also here as a sentry to keep out the sun
Which has worked through the years
To wear it wide open
With promises of warmth and light
For the cold dim room inside.

This door has held tight and stood staunch
But has lost in the standing.
It may have been green once

But most of its boards are now bare
And dried thin.
It is patched here and there
And there's a gap at the bottom of one post
Where the rats have chewed to get out
(Or the sun has gnawed to get in).

It will stand for some years yet,
Provided at the end of each day
The shadows pour towards the stair
And across the wall
And give the wood time to cool
Against the next day's glare.

But a door that has resisted so long can forget
That its task is to open as well as to close,
And much of worth can be kept out
By a door that stays grimly shut.

A Man's Head

I watched a man's head last night,
I, to one side and a little behind,
Through the window of one of the cafes that lined the street.

He had sat down slowly at a table just outside,
And had stooped slowly,
Since he was a tall, tall man,
Under the awning to get there.
And his head,
Since he was a tall young man,
Was large as heads go –
Ten inches or so from front to back
(Seen from the side and a little behind
As I was).

He looked straight forward,
As if in a cinema,
As if in an early cinema with the magic images flickering on the screen.
He made comments to a friend out of the corner of his glass,
And I could see,
Sideways,
What he could see straight ahead,
The crowd
Neon-lit
Black-and-white
Pass by on the silent screen of the street;
And as he talked
Out of the corner of his wine
The twenty or more feet of drifting crowd
Were drawn in through the pupils of his still, dark eyes

(as if the film projector were sucking the whole bright scene back again along the line of
its narrowing beam and in through its lens),

Were kept, cooped, in the large head of that tall young man,
Twenty feet into ten inches;
And when I considered twenty feet and more
For more than twenty years
Reeled into that small large head,
I thought this must be the greatest magic of all.



Over the Edge

We have drawn this water from the deep earth
(One hundred and forty metres down in fact
I found when we had to get the pump fixed)
And when we remade the pool
(After the old one cracked)
We opted for a cascade at one end
So your sense is
When you are in its coolness up to your waist
That what we took from the well is given back again
And all that pours sleekly over the edge
Falls back to the darkness whence it came.

That's an illusion.
What pours over the edge is caught in a sort of sump
And sent around once more
So the water you now see in the pool
Is the same as what was in it yesterday
And the day before that.

But though there's no leak there's a flaw:
Some is lost,
Some must be lost to the air and the burning sun
So some must be found;
And the pool is topped up through the week
By pump and pipe and spout
From one hundred and forty metres
Down in the ground.

Don't jump to the conclusion, though,
That one day
It will all run out.
Thankfully, there's a greater circulation in play
And a larger pump.

Bull Fight

I suppose I ought to disapprove,
Condemn the baiting of these baffled beasts,
Or be sickened at least by the crowd's thirst
(In the cooling sun of the late day)
For a heated mix of gore and glory;
And yes, I am on the bull's side,
First and foremost,
Humped and surly though he is;
And I want the burly picador who's fixed the odds
To be unseated,
Spilling into the dust for all his tricks,
Tight satined rump over tricornered hat,
And have his glitter dulled by the thump of it.

But this is less a story of death in the afternoon,
I must confess
(Once we're quite sure there'll be no killing),
Than of fun in the early part of the night.
No real harm will be done;
And the bull will go back to the farm.



The House of the Winds...

...I think this was called.
We must have got that from the Michelin Guide
Since we talked to no-one about it,
Not that there was anyone to talk to about it when we were there:
No sight nor sound of anyone indoors,
The street bare of people
And not even a stray dog around.

I can't check the name of the place (since I gave the Guide away),
Whether that was it or why it was if it was.
And the Guide wouldn't say anything in any case
About the open window,
Why it was open when there was no glass anyway
And the air was free to flow through all floors
So what was special about that room?

Ah, that is the room the winds blow through,
And that wide-open window is the one that draws all memories
Into the gloom,
Where they swirl for a while
Then drift off into the void.

It stole our thoughts from the street where we stood
And read the Guide
And forgot what it said
And lost the name of the town
And the time of day;
And I can't now recall what we talked about then
Or if we held hands as we walked away.

Writing Poetry

The toilet cistern
On the other side
Of the thin wall
At the head of our bed
In the small hotel
In Vila Real
Won't be hushed.
It trickles on
For goodness' sake,
Filling,
Long after the loo has been flushed,
And keeps me awake.

For much the same reason,
My head needs fixing too.



The Woman in Black

The woman in black is everywhere I go.
I saw her first twenty years gone
On the slopes of the Engadine
And on a mountain summer's thin bright day.
She was short;
Her back was bent,
Curved under the curve of the great scythe
She carried to the fields
(But were there fields so high?
And could she have wielded
So severe an implement?)
And her face clenched against the sun.

She is always old,
Always to be found
Where things are culled,
Bought or sold.

Yesterday she was in Pinhel,
Bending not under a fell blade
But over a frayed jute sack
Filled with fruit.
I did not see her face.

I am not surprised to find her here today
In this new place,
Where much is passing from hand to hand;
But for once she is not alone,
And does not
(As far as I can tell)
Either buy or sell
What has been grown or what spun.
Instead she stands and listens with care,
Fronting with broad brows
A cascade of words about who has
And who not
Done,
About this man's fear
And that man's hopes.

Whenever I see her
I think that at the ending of the day she will decide
Who will and who will not be called
To march behind her scythe
On the wide bright mountain slopes.