

Five boards waiting

It's true, the simplest things
last, like trades or undone business.

We'd been talking wood, the linen boxes,
how wood becomes jewels and miracles
when all the trees are gone, how wood is
hidden in the blood, how wood is a dance.

There'd been a catalogue of deaths:
the end of piano duets, a coma in Crete,
a slip from a cliff rope, two cancers.

*

*Five boards, he said. Five boards –
I sent them to the wheelwright Chipping Norton way,
told him to use copper nails. That way I'll last longer.*

He'd stepped out of 'The Norman Knight'
the day before the dance, on his way to ninety,
curry sauce stains on his shirt of old man blue,
drips in his white beard, goose grass on his cuff
but still sharp, still the thing we're all after.

*I've had the best crop of wheat ever so I sent
five boards – one extra, just in case.
It's thirty years since I cut down the oak.
It was in the way. You couldn't do that now.*

I knew him as a singer first, farmer second.
I knew him when he told his wife to scarper,
took up with his secretary, kept things tax efficient.

*I'm still a working farmer, born in those trees.
I've built my land piece by piece. My grandad
was a farm worker. I'm worth three million,
still a working farmer, so no inheritance tax.*

A man in both sheep and arable, a hare
who can see what lies around the bend.

*I'd like, he said, some nice requiems.
I'd like, he said, some Handel or Verdi:
there's plenty of money in the kitty.*

Wool from these hills was carried
to the high, rose cities of Italy. The woolpacks
carried jewels and miracles, the thing
they were all after, the Gloucester fleece.

*It was, he said, the softest in the world.
It was, he said, the gold that built the churches,
the gold which bought the merchants of Campden
some nice requiems.*

He's off to America, to stay with a daughter

*I'll get my fiddle down from the loft.
I've got cats for strings, a horse for the bow.
I'll play a tune, fiddle my way towards those
five boards. Tomorrow, I'll dance on the Green.*

He has no undone business to speak of.