

4.10 David & the Underworld (for Bowie) (2016)

Our Brixton boy, our Lazarus,
when finally you arrived at the dark river
did your ferryman not quibble
at the price you'd set upon your life
as a fee for him to carry you across?
Did he not haggle for an extra obol
on each of those your sightless bandaged eyes?
But maybe he was unaware
of all the hoo-ha you had raised
on your departure,
maybe the Underworld Gazette
had failed to tip him off
how precious you, his human cargo, had become.
Poor Charon can't be blamed:
it was very dark down there – perhaps he
couldn't read the news: it was his duty anyway
and he could hardly have declined,
but if by now he's read the
acclamations of your life,
he must regret not haggling for
that extra coin or two.

And anyway, it seems
he may have missed a more important point:
only in the rarest cases
does history record the placing of
the coins on eyelids – as a rule the fare
was placed inside the open mouth:
if he'd been up to speed
he should have realised that you
were no ordinary customer, that you
were much intent on resurrection
on the other side, or were perhaps
already-risen from the dead:
he would have had to read the rules
again, his job description,
to be sure the Stygian Carriers
Union would permit the transport
of the not-yet-dead, and whether
just an obol – let alone a button –
on each eye-lid really would suffice.
So all in all it seems to me,
our Brixton boy, that you were
taking quite a gamble that
your well-considered plan
would pass the necessary tests
for entry to the underworld.
And frankly, now you're gone,
it's clear that we will never know!

Teddington – Jan 2016

Lazarus producer Robert Fox was one of the few people that Bowie confided in about his illness: 'Look up here, I'm in heaven', it begins, with Bowie lying on a hospital bed, eyes bandaged. Two metal buttons placed over his eyes, as if to evoke the Greek mythology of Charon's obol - the coins placed on a dead person's eyes as a payment for Charon, the ferryman, to carry the soul of the deceased across the river Styx to the underworld.