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## Poems by Tamar Yoseloff and Peter Armstrong

Sean O'Brien

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As Gregory Leadbeater observed in the previous issue of the *Robert Graves Review*, poetry is a more various world than is sometimes alleged. Fashion and careerism tend to narrow the aperture. Over the years, I've encountered and enjoyed the work of quite a few poets who might seem to have little in common. If they are 'grouped', they're in different groups. They may not – and I agree with them – care to be grouped at all. They write poems. Let's read them.

Tamar Yoseloff is an American poet, teacher and publisher, long resident in London, the author of several collections, most recently *The Black Place* (2019). Her next collection will be *Belief Systems* (2024). Her long-standing and wide-ranging interest in painting and visual art is reflected in the distinctive design of the chapbooks published by Hercules Editions, which she runs with Andrew Lindesay, as well in her own work. 'The Painter in His Prime' wittily evokes the dark-toned and strangely voluptuous seascapes of the Belgian Symbolist Leon Spilliaert, whose work is now deservedly becoming better known here. With 'Levee', Yoseloff reads one of Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines*, not, as the work's imagery might suggest, with reference to the French *ancien régime*, but to the earthwork raised against floods along the Mississippi, which in turn has taken on an ominous and almost supernatural significance in the Blues. The third poem, 'Bearskull', reveals a vein of sardonic humour in its novelistic depiction of a mismatch.

Peter Armstrong has published several collections, including *Risings* and *The Red-Funnelled Boat*. A poet of North-East England, he has a powerful sense of landscape and

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history, inwoven with an abiding interest in Christianity. The pilgrim road to Santiago de Compostella figures prominently in his work, as here in the strange, visionary ‘Edward Thomas on the Camino Frances’. Armstrong’s ear is both just and surprising: listen to the sure-footed central passage of ‘From the Outlying Islands’, and then to the chiselled line of his elegy for William Beveridge, to whom Britain’s Welfare State owes its existence – a future undergoing cancellation day by day, ‘a turning you would miss | if you weren’t looking for it’.

## **Three Poems**

*Tamar Yoseloff*

### **THE PAINTER IN HIS PRIME**

i.m. Léon Spilliaert, 1881-1946  
(for Sean O'Brien)

The painter has been dead more years  
than he lived, which suits his disposition  
he found the corpse within when young

and carried it through brooding boulevards  
until it was dark enough to begin  
then he climbed inside the night,

the city his sick bed, its patients turned out  
to wander under sulphurous lamps,  
mourners at their own wakes.

A couple of wars, an epidemic; he's seen it all,  
his bulbous eye like a periscope  
rising from a dim sea.

## LEVEE

I brood inside my boudoir, skin like  
a chalk cross on the plague house door.  
This is the grave talking, where I've been  
holed up, feels like years. Once I was in  
the pink, but all flesh stinks when it goes bad,  
king and clown alike.

*If it keeps on rainin,*  
*levee's goin to break,* says the ol blues tune,  
been raining all afternoon, and no let up.  
A fine day for suicide, in my Sunday suit,  
fancy tie my handy noose, if I wasn't lately  
expired. No light through the trees,  
just more damn trees.

There's always work  
for the cold cook, whistling while he digs  
that ol blues tune, *when the levee breaks,*  
*mama, you got to move,* that's what he sings,  
loud and clear from the field of bones,  
*thinkin bout my baby and my happy home.*  
But the light's gone out.

No body's home.

(Preceding poems from *Belief Systems*, forthcoming 2024)

## BEARSKULL

My uncle was a recreational hunter.  
His house was crammed with the skins and skulls  
of his kills. Jackrabbits, bighorn sheep, wild cats,  
black bears. He fashioned ashtrays out of hooves.  
All his rugs had heads.

There's a photo of his wife, her pale hair  
falling over her face, a hint of a smile,  
with a grizzly stuck in mock attack behind her.  
The bear reaches out as if to hold her close  
in his furry paws.

She couldn't stand all those glass eyes staring:  
*it's either me or them.*

I lift the skull from the box with both hands:  
did the bear rear when the shot hit, his huge head  
swaying side to side, dead brush crushed  
as he fell? Did my uncle feel the chamber's release,  
the bullet forced towards the bear's heart?

The sky closed around them, bear and man;  
the air sang with the stink of meat.

My uncle never thought his wife would go first;  
she was so much younger. He paced the bare rooms  
she'd redecorated in French Provincial style  
with swirls of flowers and fruit,  
lost in his own house.

(from *The Black Place*, 2019)

## Three Poems

*Peter Armstrong*

### EDWARD THOMAS ON THE CAMINO FRANCÉS

Let's suppose you came this way, or your ghost,  
to walk beneath the milky way a ghost  
among ghosts, the Meseta your Downs writ large;  
this via Trajana for your Sarn Helen,  
this chalk for your Ickniel chalk and Arras chalk  
on which your body, still perfect, would be lying,  
more beautiful than all the reredos saints  
punctuating your way to Santiago.  
The war would go on around it, and then the peace;  
with April, seed would spring beneath,  
and think what Jesse tree would grow,  
what progeny inhabit its branches  
as you slept on, or walked on past Hornillos,  
past Castrojeriz, Calzada del Coto  
and lonely Calzadilla; how its leaves'  
wave-song would carry to this treeless plain.  
Or would you leave all that, tramping westwards  
with your hurts left at the roadside crosses  
like pebbles picked from one, and left  
a fraction lighter for the carrying  
at the next? – making sorrow that sand-grain  
to set down at Finisterre  
unsure by then what part was yours  
and what share was another's.  
Meanwhile you're pointing into shadow,  
the first for miles, where the spring rises,  
*Look* you say *Honeysuckle*, *Forget-me-not*,  
and the ghosts sing back *Madreselva*,

*Nomeolvides*; and so, trading name for name,  
stripping back the prose to poetry, coining  
as the need arises *Bloodless Thistle*,  
*Cardo Palido*, *Estella del Rey*, *Fantasma*

### AT THE GRAVE OF BEVERIDGE

What foresight or what irony  
settled you on this high plot,  
barely soil for burial,  
barely place enough for name?

The story is  
some sailor brought home cholera  
and brought the place to this:  
ghost-crofts, graves of houses,

all that makes for civil life  
reduced to this green archive.  
You've chosen well:  
all four quarters' weather serves

to show there is no covenant  
time or else rapine  
will not prove void.  
Here's fitting monument

to great dreams and their fall:  
an open secret,  
a turning you would miss  
if you weren't looking for it

