

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

FROM THE OUTLYING ISLANDS

They end up at Torcello,
leaving everything behind
-Baedeker, Hemingway,
the ways they now saw
flooding over;

 and it's less
the spectacle of judgement
(that glorious damnation,
the endless glamour of the saved)
than, turning east,
the mother's infinite
knowing grief

 that sends them back
comforted, or something close
to lose themselves
where the land is just a sliver
and the world is nine tenths blue