

Two poems by Stephen Romer

Armistice

The unnatural
shopper-and-traffic halting
silence.

Wizened scarlet pennants
shiver and rattle once.

The air is sootfall
a glowering tree-line
drawn to attention
and monochrome
between branches.

A sickly afforestation
to the East
the 'sacred acreage'
that 'altar copiously asperged'.
A yearlong harvest

has arrested nature
who else swallows
all things up,
Assurbanipal of Nineveh
his engines.

XI/XI/XI

The jolly octogenarian
with a face like Louis de Funès, gone scarlet
behind his trumpet
this ninetieth anniversary of the Marne
is known as *une mémoire*.
His father led the village fanfare
now blaring out the Marseillaise
in the blanched church,
cold and too big for our gathering...

Cold as the chapels
of Père Lachaise, preceding the crematoria,
cold and grandiose, it's a kind of genius.

He draws me in, the newcomer,
for a bit of friendship, *nom de dieu!*
Dans l'instruction publique, il pârait?

Thus I am enrolled in the Republic.

After 'eighteen, the village declined,
artisans, wine merchants, masons, butchers,
marriages, alliances, neighbours.
So-and-so's father lost his toes,
trench feet in the Ardennes. Widows
and orphans. Over the river
is a windowless village called *Veuves*...

* * *

Ivy crowds the gable, wisteria
burrows beneath the tile
and breaks the roof, the place is ruined.
A hollow in the bed marks where she died.
In the freaks and squibs of November light
a thin wind shakes the creeper.
It whimpers through a planted forest
of withered saplings.

The eleventh hour the eleventh day
how far can colour drain away
and still remain colour?
The blueish tinge of birth and death
and the *poilu's* frozen gills
has seeped into the world,
with words like *blême, blafard, blanchâtre...*
Corridors of a military hospital
for men whose faces have been blown off,
nurses descending like gulls or ghouls
in their long white robes and veils
ministering to the noseless
wheeling the cripple in his chair
through a courtyard with ambulances.

White-smocked doctors at Berck,
kindly-stern,
the chafing of prosthetics.

Exsangue, the horrified angel
with the staring eyes, and her fingers
on her lips, saying "Hush!"
in the chapel of remembrance.

Around the monument
the wind pierces and the struggling leaves
on the tops of poplars fly away
Mort pour la France, as every name is called
in the roll of glory.
The bloodied tricolore
is topped with a spike.

* * *

How talkative they are! So much to remember
and no one very much to listen,
an aged genial gathering, facing up
to the unpromising municipal grey.
Over a glass of *champenoise*
a brother-in-law chatters on
gobbets of his canapé
landing in my glass
-how the girls would cycle
daily to Amboise
before they built the HLM...

Unfathered, unbrothered, unhusbanded,
the girls in their scarves, brave smiles
on bicycles, heading off
and homing with the angelus,
that is ringing now, calling us
to the immutable, sacred hour of lunch.

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Stephen Romer teaches English at the University of Tours. He has published four collections of poetry: *Idols* (1986), *Plato's Ladder* (1992), *Tribute* (1998), and *Yellow Studio* (Carcamet, 2008). The latter was shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize. He edited *20th Century French Poems* (Faber, 2002). His most recent book is a translation of Yves Bonnefoy, *The Arrière-pays* (Seagull, 2012).