

The world in gentle collapse

In Charles Ferdinand Ramuz's novel *Présence de la mort* (1922; retitled *Into the Sun* in this new translation by Olivia Baes and Emma Ramadan), the Earth's axis has shifted and the planet is hurtling towards the sun. This is a timely novel: the news of our impending destruction is met with denial, and the locals in a lakeside town in Switzerland are cynical: "[T]he newspapers weren't selling anymore, so what do you expect?!" But *Into the Sun* isn't merely prophetic; it's also full of wise reflections on nature, the quotidian and the futility of coping with real disaster.

Subtle changes in climate are observed: people wipe their foreheads more often, little droughts take hold. Ramuz's narrator – at times caught up in the turmoil, elsewhere detached and godly – declares that the world is ending for a different reason; because, he suggests, people have always, and wrongly, looked "without seeing". Now the blinkers are off, and an ontological instinct kicks in "to tell you, list for you, count for you ... dear things that are in front of me".

People start making up for lost time and the quality of their observations strengthens – previously unnoticed steamers pass by on the water, "smoke unspooling from their chimneys like horse hairs coming unspooled at the quilters". Gradually, the reality of what is happening sinks in, the Earth's fate is accepted and there is mass hysteria. Attempts at rational, collective action fizzle out and are replaced by random acts of violence. Baes and Ramadan capture these contrasts well, not least in the bright doominess of their title. They have rejected the original ("*Presence of Death*": too heavy-handed) and gone for something that captures the human instinct to turn a blind eye to the inevitable. An air of adrenalized familiarity prevails throughout the book, cleverly finding its way into the most innocuous-sounding phrases: "suddenly, as on every night".

Ramuz's narrator thinks a lack of imagination is behind the hysteria. The scale of the oncoming disaster is too much for most people, who can't "imagine beyond what they are". And it's not a question of intelligence. Rather,

"something has stopped beating in the arteries" of the world, and the outcome is inconceivable: "when I sought to imagine something beyond it, it was still the world that I imagined. When I sought to go past it, there I found it again". Punctuated by confusion and fear of an incomprehensible fate, *Into the Sun* frames the world's end as a gentle collapse.

Notes

- The article notes the world is going through changes as if "into the Sun". The question is whether or not people can imagine something beyond it — and have the strength and courage to have the Sun's beauty reflected in their eyes.

