

Poundland

Came we then to the place abovementioned,
crossed its bristled threshold through robotic glass doors,
entered its furry heat, its flesh-toned fluorescent light.

Thus with wire-wrought baskets we voyaged,
and some with trolleys, back wheels flipping like trout tails,
cruised the narrow canyons twixt cascading shelves,
the prow of our journeying cleaving stale air.

Legion were the items that came tamely to hand:

five stainless steel teaspoons, ten corn-relief plasters,
the busy bear pedal bin liners fragranced with country lavender,
the Disney design calendar and diary set, three cans of Vimto,
cornucopia of potato-based snacks and balm for a sweet tooth,
toys and games, goods of Orient made, and of Cathay,
all under the clouded eye of CCTV,
beyond the hazard cone where serious chutney spillage had occurred.

Then emerged souls: the duty manager with a face like Doncaster,
mumbling, "For so much, what shall we give in return?"

The blood-stained employee of the month,
sobbing on a woolsack of fun-fur rugs,
many uniformed servers, spectral, drifting between aisles.

Then came Elpenor, our old friend Elpenor,
slumped and shrunken by the Seasonal Products display.

In strangled words I managed:

“How art thou come to these shady channels, into hell’s ravine?”

And he:

“To loan sharks I owe the bone and marrow of my all.”

Then Walt Whitman, enquiring politely of the delivery boy.

And from Special Occasions came forth Tiresias,

dead in life, alive in death, cider-scented and sock-less,

Oxfam-clad, shaving cuts to both cheeks.

And my own mother reaching out, slipping a tin of stewing steak
to the skirt pocket of her wedding dress,

blessed with a magician’s touch, practiced in need.

But never until the valley widened at the gated brink

did we open our lips to fish out those corn-coloured coins,

those minted obols, hard won tokens graced with our monarch’s head,

kept hidden beneath the tongue’s eel, blood-tasting,

both ornament and safeguard, of armour made.

And paid forthwith, then broke surface

and breathed extraordinary daylight into starved lungs,
steered for home through precincts and parks scalded by polar winds,
laden with whatnot, lightened of golden quids.

by Simon Armitage