Mysticism for Beginners

By Adam Zagajewski
Translated by Clare Cavanagh

The day was mild, the light was generous. The German on the café terrace held a small book on his lap. I caught sight of the title: Mysticism for Beginners. Suddenly I understood that the swallows patrolling the streets of Montepulciano with their shrill whistles, and the hushed talk of timid travelers from Eastern, so-called Central Europe, and the white herons standing—yesterday? the day before?—like nuns in fields of rice, and the dusk, slow and systematic, erasing the outlines of medieval houses, and olive trees on little hills, abandoned to the wind and heat, and the head of the Unknown Princess that I saw and admired in the Louvre, and stained-glass windows like butterfly wings sprinkled with pollen, and the little nightingale practicing its speech beside the highway, and any journey, any kind of trip, are only mysticism for beginners, the elementary course, prelude to a test that's been postponed.

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