

CHRISTOPER HOWELL

Edvard Munch

She came down the road
like a piece of the road dis severed
from itself by two legs and a shoe.
She carried a rat trap basket of brown
and brittle flowers: her companion, compass
and advisor of whom she asked, What
is the name of that bright red unseen bird?
This is East Prussia, perhaps, and the beaten
armies drag through the orchards leaving a trail
of dented canteens and coal scuttle helmets.
The soldiers walk right past her, they know
death when they see it: always the withered
flowers and haunted look of a girl
going nowhere and a road that stops
while seeming to go on. Always someone
lifting tea through its own steam
as he writes on a yellow pad.
Always the disgrace of his probing
and then the rain
dark as blackbirds falling into ditches
the girl would see if she could see anything
but rain. And what does the Kaiser have to say,
now? The soldiers are through listening
and after a while the tea is cold. The ragged child
picks a few flowers and asks their names.