

ARTS & LETTERS

CAMPO SANTO.

By W. G. Sebald. Translated by Anthea Bell. Random House. 221 pp. \$24.95

The German writer W. G. Sebald died in an auto accident in England in December 2001, at the age of 57, when his powers were at their height. He was a professor of European literature at the University of East Anglia and had lived in England for more than 30 years, yet he continued to write in German. The appearance in English translation of three of his books in the 1990s, *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn*, and *Vertigo*, won him fame. By the time a fourth, *Austerlitz*, was published, in 2001, he had become the sort of writer about whom addicted readers make nuisances of themselves: "Have you read Sebald? You must!" You must indeed, but this new collection of essays and occasional pieces written over several decades is not the best place to begin. The book will be of interest to confirmed Sebaldites—who will register, for example, the author's high regard for Franz Kafka, Vladimir Nabokov, and the genre-defying British writer Bruce Chatwin—but it's not substantial enough to make converts of newcomers.

In an interview shortly before his death, Sebald said that "the moral backbone of literature" is the "whole question of memory," and added that "those who have no memory have the much greater chance to live happy lives." Sebald is a skilled anatomist of memory and memory's weight, of our haunting by history and the past—in his case, European history, small-scale and large-, and, in particular, and unavoidably for a German born in 1944, World War II and its aftermath. But the approach is oblique, the manner never sensational. Precise details accrue within the context of what feels like a reverie or dream, and, time and again, the attempt to embrace the past proves as frustrating as trying to grab hold of a ghost. Yet Sebald cannot help but look backward, for "what can we know in advance of the course of history, which unfolds according to some logically indecipherable law, impelled forward, often changing direction at the crucial

moment, by tiny, imponderable events, by a barely perceptible current of air, a leaf falling to the ground, a glance exchanged across a great crowd of people."

Though Sebald's most noted books are sometimes called novels, they rest uneasily within the boundaries of the genre, with their elements of the reflective essay, biography, autobiography, travel chronicle, and even picture book. The author places odd visual aids throughout his texts—photos, drawings, documents, maps—usually grainy and ill defined, there but barely there, as if they might do a ghostly fade right before your eyes. You expect the visual elements to bring clarity to the narratives, but they do nothing of the sort. In fact, they add yet another elusive layer.

The best portions of the new collection are four excerpts from a book on Corsica that Sebald began and put aside in the mid-1990s. (The collection takes its title from one of the four.) His Corsica is a place of wild beauty, home to—what else?—centuries of ghosts. These Corsican pieces sound the authentic Sebaldian note, curious and mournful and wry, as when the author enters "a desolate graveyard of the kind not uncommon in France, where you have the impression not so much of an antechamber to eternal life as of a place administered by the local authority and designed for the secular removal of waste matter from human society."

"In the urban societies of the late 20th century," Sebald writes elsewhere in the same essay, "where everyone is instantly replaceable and is really superfluous from birth, we have to keep throwing ballast overboard, forgetting everything that we might otherwise remember: youth, childhood, our origins, our forebears and ancestors." Forgetting is an immense wave rising continually to wash over us, and Sebald's books are a bulwark against its advance. The four major works named above are essential. This collection is not, though once you have read the rest, you may well turn to it, to hear once more, however faintly, a noble and seductive voice that was stilled much too soon.

—JAMES M. MORRIS