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Tragic Starfish

Addled by warming ocean,
the legs of starfish abandon
the central digestive system
and scatter in all directions
at once. Unable to feed,

they wither as if frost-bit
and die. You and I also
have shed excessive organs
and consolidated our remnants
around the simple fact of hunger.

On beaches littered with tilted
and broken ice floes the useless
legs of starfish mingle
with our stranded vestigial parts
like ingredients in a stir-fry.

Winter cold mocks that simile
but leaves a breathless moment
of certainly smiling on the glass.
You wonder how much longer
this disintegrating world will last.

Suicide bombers deny
their worlds ever existed.
Politicians crush the public
with bullying gestures too large
to fit on a wide screen TV.

No wonder our favorite organs
have abandoned us to attempt
a more favorable evolution
in a climate of curdled mists.
The ocean warms and warms despite

the ice floes. More small creatures
cough up their identities
and spew their egos in the sand.
You wonder if exhausting
the fossil fuel supply will help.

But the fragments of starfish
testify to our incompetence,
our inability to outlive
ourselves, and the muddled sea mist
chokes on its freight-load of doom.

Marx Predicted the French Revolution

Our class on the French Revolution
meets in the dingiest room
on campus. Cobwebs drape the corners.
A rat snuffles underfoot. Despite
the chill, a young woman sits
topless and pale as limestone.
The other students ignore her.

You whisper that she's Marie
Antoinette. The other students
grimace into textbooks that cost
twenty packs of cigarettes
or six bags of marijuana.
They've borrowed to pay their tuition,
so hope to learn to overthrow
the worlds of banks and bankers.

The professor, her hairdo a fist
of bedrock, storms into the room
and kicks at the rat, missing
but startling it. The half-naked
student frowns and scribbles notes
with a pencil stub almost too short
to control with her clumsy gestures.

The professor announces
that we live in a tragic land
in a tragic time. You agree
that the frozen river kinked
through the campus resembles
the digestive tracts of professors
like her, like us, who will die
soon of intellectual disgust.

The sun is a savage diamond
in the window. It washes the room
with a gilded expression. No one

cares that Marie Antoinette,
slouched in her desk-chair, has dropped
her head on the floor. It rolls
toward me, but I kick it away.

The professor claims that Marx
predicted the French Revolution
a hundred years before he was born.
She observes that the economy
under the Bourbons favored leisure
over agriculture, and that chefs
invented peppery sauces
to baste their broils of peasant children.

The topless student recovers
her head, wraps herself decently
in a shawl, and stalks from the room
in a huff of torn pages. You
drag me after her, abandoning
our expensive textbooks in order
to track that bit of history
before it returns underground
in a shudder of hurt feelings.

Life List

You ask if I keep a life list
for blue heron, great auk,
forty or fifty shades of warbler,
robin, bluebird, vireo, dodo.

Why should I check off birds as though
their flutters and cheeps responded
to some indecent proposal
made on my behalf by forces

derived from the earth's magnetic field?
You refer to a field guide
and binoculars. I possess
these appliances, but indulge them

only when the moment ripens
as some aerial confection
alights at the seed feeder
I've hung from a tall ash sapling

twenty feet from my back porch.
You can travel to the Hebrides
or Costa Rica or High Island,
Isles of Scilly or the Faroes.

You can hunker in hand-knit sweaters
at the rim of gray-green marsh
and peer at the quaking image
of a spoonbill in your spotting scope.

You can take notes on rare species
until cramp and chill numb your fingers.
I'm staying home to count
and arrange my books by color.

Slurping tea from a vulgar mug
and browsing in art books as thick
as my liver will ease me
to the very end of my life list,

where only three or four names appear,
none of them yours or mine
or anyone else hogging
a dimension we might want to share.

Shaped like Shark Fins

Watching football on TV
while the winter night collapses
like great airships deflating,
I wonder how you're handling
the deaths of your many lovers.

Boredom, disease, suicide—
they have toppled inside their skins
and scattered their wits to the winds.
Look how the bulk of these linemen
battering into mutual embrace

mocks the lust everyone shares in life.
Look how slowly the sacked quarterback
gets to his feet and shakes his head,
as if someone lovely had spurned him.
You aren't watching TV tonight

but are trolling through Manhattan clubs
to find men thick enough to follow.
Every TV in the city
has tuned itself to the big game.
But above the reddish layer

of human atmosphere the stars
prickle like a heat rash. Too bad
you can't read the angles at which
they slip into each other's gravities,
colliding, exploding and coughing

gamma rays shaped like shark fins.
That would place your dead lovers
in perspective. Some big fellow
scores a touchdown. He dances
and raves with joy. You also

will score tonight, surely, but bones
will creak and spirits will leak
from crumpled flesh and sigh aloud
much like those deflating airships
but with greater loss of pride.

Faces of Slate or Granite

Every winter brings faces of slate
or granite to bear on my dreams.
But last night Allen Ginsberg
focused his camera on crowds
that hovered at the edge of the frame
to savor his attitude and tone.

I asked if his photographs rang
like silver on stone, if they trilled
in the dark to stifle the senses.
He ran a rough hand through his beard
and agreed. Slouched on a folding chair,
he looked as he did in life. Maybe
in this flimsy mauve dimension
he's still embedded in life,
his pores open to the misty world.

Awake now, I review our small talk
and wonder if whatever's left
of the earthly, earthy Ginsberg
heard it. Crows bark in the cold.
Outdoors refilling the feeders,
I can taste immense distance plotting
to overthrow the world of culture
heaped up in my unread books.

A face of slate glimpsed in one
corner of an eye, face of granite
in another. Reason eludes me
despite plowing through William James
with prayer flags fluttering. Bloat
of mind and body impose on me
tentative rustlings that could be bears
emerging from their hibernation.

After funneling seed to flatter
chickadees and titmice I wring
my hands to release the cold
they've absorbed. But maybe
I should be saving that cold to shake
the hand of anyone dead, confirming
that in terms of cosmic planning
we inhabit one large angry skin.

William Doreski's work has appeared in various e and print journals and in several collections, most recently *The Suburbs of Atlantis* (AA Press, 2013).