

William Doreski

Prowling the Black Sea

Prowling the Black Sea north
of the Danube Delta, I spot you
sailing across the border
into your gray ancestral past.
I'm not afraid to follow.

Half my family also hails
from Ukraine, from a vast marshland
crawling with ghosts. A blue haze
obscures the shoreline. Patrol boats
ignore both of our tiny craft,

our sails flapping like lower lips.
Three other people share your boat
along with a picnic basket
big as a coffin. I'm alone,
as always, and dedicated

to speed, so overtake you
well before Odessa where
you probably expect to land
and picnic on the famous steps.
When I hail, your three friends turn

and fix the flower of their gaze
upon me. Two men, a woman.
The men look sluggish and pale
as if you recently unearthed them.
The woman could be your twin.

Her smile, tiny as a shaving cut,
rebukes yet encourages. She nods
and taps your shoulder so you turn
and flourish the death-mask you know
I dread. Convinced by this look

that my solo pursuit is pointless,
I cock the rudder, droop my sail,
and let your small boat skim away,
warping a seam of bubbles
in this antique and private sea.

This is Not a Poem of the Articulate Rain

Today the rain speaks in French, the French I failed to learn in high school. Also, the French I failed to learn in college. Also, the French I failed to speak in Paris. Also, the French I failed to speak in Lyons. Also, the French I almost spoke in Marseilles. The rain knows every language. Sometimes it comes down in Russian, sometimes in Mandarin, and often in Navaho or Lakota. Frequently it pours Spanish, sometimes trickles German, occasionally drips Swahili, although with an obnoxious British accent. I don't speak, understand, write, or lip-synch any of those languages. And I don't speak, read, or write any language well enough to compete with celestial incantations. The rain speaks in French because French pleases the sky this morning. Tomorrow maybe a clear day will produce, in place of speech, a high-pitched buzzing the neophyte might mistake for a cicada. Or maybe a dry but cloudy day will trill like a harp, uttering a few sharp phrases to rumple the dust.

A Postcard to Janice

At the market the man who works
the meat counter remembers you
after forty years. The ruddy smile
that toppled men in their tracks.
The childish figure powerful
as a question mark. I explained

the night by the river, the reek
of dead perch, slobber of current.
In a parked car someone lit
a cigarette. We explained ourselves
not as lovers but as strangers
trapped together on a spaceship

pointed at another galaxy.
We knew we'd die of old age long
before we got there. A gesture
so tentative we couldn't say
which of us made it. We postured
at the river's edge while the couple

in the parked car exhausted
their options. Six months later
you married a troll and suffered
until you bore a child you named
after a black hole at the edge
of the cosmos. Then you divorced

and lumbered into oblivion
where a third party married you
in silence in a Catholic church
that overlooked your basic
impurity because the priest
thought your smile too rococo

to ignore. The butcher smiles
through a claptrap of dentures.
"Like this?" We laugh together
while in the parking lot the dark
at the end of summer gathers
its skirts in a sudden huff.

Recycling and Recycling

The tire pile beckons. As I stand admiring it, my expression ruffled with desire, a sympathetic employee, who has witnessed so much self-effacement, offers a cup of coffee to ease my tender psyche. Because the day's so honestly blue I accept. As we stand around chatting about the falling price of recyclables, the expense of reprocessing asphalt, and the sadness of dead appliances, we observe with approval the dogged efforts of young fathers trying to teach their kids that recycling will save the planet. But then I defy the rules by tossing plastic bottles into the paper bin, newspapers into the metal bin, cardboard into the glass bin. A wine bottle contaminates the plastics. A chicken carcass smuts the mixed paper. A sofa sprawls amid broken electronic devices. A taxidermy rhino slumps into the demolition dumpster. Now at last my own gray self clammers into the tire pile, which reeks of thousands of unhappy miles.

On the Floor of the Moon

Lying on the floor of the moon,
airless and inclined to drift
for lack of gravity, I spot you
watching through a telescope
from your balcony overlooking
the park where everyone loses
virginity, wallets, and jewels.

No one loses anything here
on the moon because it's impossible
to bring anything but one's naked
and well-used self. The journey
costs nothing for senior citizens,
but juniors pay with their lives.

Keats didn't realize how near
the moon is, suspended on a string.
The craters that look so huge
from earth are as modest as birdbaths.
The seas offer gentle beds of sand,
on one of which I've flopped like
a flounder beached by neap tides.

Astronomers claim there's more
to the moon than a wave-worn shard
of matter caught in the corner
of the collective human eye.
The gap between us expands
and your telescope loses focus.

The fine texture of the moon
on which I lie so gently
depresses like a sand trap
into which anything might drop
and like virginity or a wallet
be lost until the seasons change
and our shadows fall elsewhere.

William Doreski's work has appeared in various e and print journals and in several collections, most recently *A Black River, A Dark Fall* (2018).