

POEM AND SEQUENCE



Christopher Merrill

MORNING GLORY, SARAJEVO
for Ferida Durakovic

Let us stand in the spray from the waterfall,
Adding, subtracting—it is all the same.
The morning glory, like a guardrail, winds
Along the river bank, dividing us
Among the carriers of water and light.
The ruins multiply like lovers, restless
And divine. Our homeland? Dust. A city rising
Like words or mirrors from a waterfall.
A hand releasing songbirds, blossoms, breath.

from THE LAKE

(Editor's note: *a symbolic poem of 18 sections—a mock Apocalypse in the vein of Rachel Carson—of which six follow.*)

We won't return. Like seeds, awkward as auks
With broken wings, we'll float across the lake
Below the monastery, avoiding snags,
And snakes, and swamped canoes wedged in the reeds.

Our reign is over. Say we stopped one day
Outside the water mill to search for grain,
To study the footprints of our enemies
—The Gauls and ghosts whose languages had tamed us.

Our horses bucked and whinnied: we were lost.
And when we looked up from the star charts and psalters
We had believed provided plots and orders
For the millennium, the horses were gone.

The trees, too. And the lake. The water was blue
Until it disappeared. The sluice gate opened
Onto nothing. The mill wheel rolled away.
Even our words dissolved, *The Gauls and ghosts...*

Only their tracks remained—and a forest of snags
From which snakes wriggled, and the snapping turtles
Sundered from shells and water fell like leaves,
And the canoes were clouds streaking a sky

Of drying mud and reeds... Why did we sign
Our languages and loves away? What star
Should we have followed? Who are these deaf-mutes
Guarding our catacombs, like birds of prey?

*

We won't return. Proud as the passenger
Pigeons enshrined in banks and the Museum
Of Desire, we'll dredge the lake for our lost crowns,
Scepters, and words which might have led us home.

Like poisoned pods—that's how we left our mark
On the wetlands the drying lake created,
The swamps and marshes in which nothing grew
As long as soap and ashes saved our souls.

Our reign is over. Say we stalked our ghosts
Up to the monastery, through the emptied
Landscapes—save for the upright coffins that lined
The hills, like trees: we didn't cut them down.

There were loudspeakers blaring from the stairs
And stained glass windows: *Pray for the pilgrims laughing*
In the last chapter of the Book of Hoot.
Obey the revelations of the Rat.

The lions in the Colosseum: Nuns,
Remember them! What we remembered were
White horses lowering their heads, to drink
Water on the verge of vanishing...

And then it all came back—horses, and trees,
And lake. Mist rose in sunlight, and we thought
It was the first day of Creation... No.
Our ghostly reign is over. We won't return.

*

Charioteers, awake! The sun is rising,
Raking the moon and sun out of the sky,
And there are martyrs writhing at the gates
Of the Colosseum, praying for our souls.

A penitent will lead the horses past,
Black cats will scatter from the catacombs,
And women dressed in white will light the torches
Carried by slaves and senators alike.

Tinsmiths and tutors, captives and cavaliers
Who dream of water filling the arena,
Creating from the aqueduct a sea
In which mock naval battles can be fought—

All gather for the races and the plumes
Of dust the horses kick up, covering
The chariots, while the Barbarians
Assembling near the Forum dream of fire.

If the arena turns into a sea?
Water will wash off the earthen walls and floors
The blood of wild beasts sacrificed at dusk,
Sailors and saboteurs will steer their ships

Over the sunken pillars and labyrinths,
And a staged war will start, which will not end
Until the Empire falls... These are our ghosts
And Gauls, the ones who plotted out our reign.

*

Here in the Book of Hoot it says: *Beware
Of pilgrims laughing at the lionized
Martyrs and gladiators still adrift
In the dust and waters of the Colosseum.*

*Guard against pundits trumpeting the end
Of opera and outings on the Seine,
Horse races, riots, and religious wars,
Auks, Gauls and ghosts, slick annals of desire.*

*And pray for all the nuns who disappeared
The night they watched a noblewoman slip
Into the lake below the monastery,
Loosening her long hair, shedding her clothes,*

*Her blouse and bonnet, skirt and underwear,
Which floated for a moment like water lilies
About to close. She swam across the lake,
Climbed the steep bank by the abandoned mill,*

*And fell into the arms of the woodcutter
From the far north. Then they were gone. The nuns
Followed their footprints into the pure pages
Of a book unwritten in our dying language*

*Of love and loss. Coffins line the hills,
Not trees, and snakes are flying information.
The lake may empty in the dark, or freeze,
Or stay the same. But the nuns won't return.*

*

*And these are the revelations of the Rat:
No one aboard this ship, this ark, will drown
Without receiving last rites, a gold watch
Set for the afterlife, and acting lessons,*

*Which you will need to play the roles deaf-mutes
Assign you in your catacombs. They know
How to decipher the inscriptions engraved
In your death masks—lines you must learn by heart.*

*On Judgement Day they'll show you how to move
The rocks guarding your remains, before the earth
Opens and empties all the graves and tombs
In which those saved by soap and ashes hide.*

*Perhaps you will escape this version of Hell—
Bats with bony faces squealing and swooping*

*Through caverns lined with glowing canisters
Of fuel spent to harvest your desire:*

*Fission, fenced archipelagoes surrounded
By rising seas, sequoias in sawmills,
And well-attended funerals, and sizzling
On bone-white dishes: smoking meats and sauces...*

*The mutes will direct you from a vault
You may not enter until your watches stop:
There you will learn when your reign ended, how high
The seas will rise, and why this ship is sinking.*

*

These are the maps, star charts, and plot outlines
We never used, certain we knew the routes
To Sinai, Madagascar, and beyond.
Our reign is over. Judged. We won't return.

These are the pages—glued together, charred—
Of revelations no one may decipher
Before the floodgates open in the cities
The rich abandon to the innocent.

Here's water that will gush through theaters
And mausoleums, emptying the seats
Filled with men sleeping through the double feature,
And coffins moldering in walls, and the lake.

Here's brimstone that will burn through clouds, spilling
Ash over lovers riding horses past
The monastery fountain, believing nothing
Will change between them: *We won't drift apart!*

And here are the notes, like traps, set in tree stumps
Along the lake, summoning the last hangman,
The last woodcutter from Brazil or Nome,
To come down from the woods, don his black hood,

And go to work again: the gallows built
Behind the mill are lined with ghosts and Gauls,
Twelve heretics condemned in secret trials,
A noblewoman singing to herself.