

THE BOATMAN OF THE BADLANDS

by Daniel Passamaneck

The singlewide sits by the road
which leaves a lot of land in back
flat and blank like a pad of paper
random clumps of creosote
no crop no hill no sign of water
just a bunch of empty space
yet people rarely saw the boat

There he lived on beer and jerky
didn't often speak to people
did his shifts as quarry gateman
earned enough to stock his cooler
didn't ask a lot of questions
not the sort to get distracted
some might call him simple-minded
'count of all the time he spent
inside his boat

A 20-footer up on skids
sky-blue paint beneath the bondo
set way off behind the trailer
back about 400 yard
He'd cook and wash up at the house
but all the other time he had
was on that boat

Couple times I saw him at it
when I visited his place
to drop some papers off for him
kept that trailer neat and tidy

empty as a shed-off snakeskin
found a footpath heading north
so off I went and there he was
He was sitting at the tiller
eyes full of sky and I wouldn't have known
that he wasn't sailing
if I hadn't been standing
myself upon the thirsty earth
He just kind of drifted his focus to me
like I was a piece of the sea floating past
I said who I was, why I'd come calling
He attended to me promptly
Waved me off and sat back down
beside that tiller, parched and rusty
I suspect he slept there too
up on his levitating boat

Never had a workplace problem
Got reports to us like clockwork
Caught a couple kids sometimes
Once he came into the office
It were just the two of us there
So I asked him what he did
up on that boat
He looked away before he spoke
I really thought I'd pissed him off
But then he sort of raised his gaze
He got that look I'd seen before
and said I'm getting ready for
a little day trip
Where you gonna go, I asked him
Yonder north, he slowly answered
Oklahoma way, the 'handle,
Hear it's nice there
Asked him what he planned to float on

seeing as the only water hereabouts
is up in towers
He looked into the sun and mumbled
something about hoisting anchors
I just figured he was bonkers
Sometimes guys get over-lonely
get themselves some crazy notions
usually they manage somehow
No one gives them any bother
They don't bother anybody

I guess that's why I let it slide
when first I saw he'd come up missing
but once he'd been out for a couple of weeks
without so much as calling in
I thought I'd pay another visit
just to kind of check on him
His place was looking mighty dusty
so I walked that beat-down path
that trickled from behind his trailer
weaving through the creosote
the boat rack stood on rusted axels
withered rubber, sunbaked wood
it cast black shadows on the dirt
the boat was gone
no mess no marks no tire tracks
not a clue where it had got to
nor even that it ever was
just skids raised up like bony fingers
cradling the empty air.

I wouldn't guess where he's at now
but I am fairly certain somehow
he's sailed off Dakota way
heard him say once it was nice there

