

C.K. Doreski: On "The Filling Station"

"Filling Station" [QT] offers a place to begin to delineate the problems of integrating unfamiliar or unavailable social and cultural milieus. A fussy feminine voice plots the scene. The poem moves from critique—"Oh, but it is dirty!"—to affirmation? "Somebody loves us all" without losing tone, as if to assert, despite its prissiness, its emotional range. Both assertions depend on the exaggeratedly finical persona-voice for recognition and clarification of the relationship between language-subject and object. The clarity of revelation requires the acceptance of the authority of this somewhat flighty voice. The first stanza encounters this diminutive, dirty filling station with a tone of amused disgust. This unctuous station offers no clean surface on which to step, sit, or lean. The caretaker-narrator worries about the public welfare in this place of discarded lubricants. The place seems deserted, vaguely disturbing, alien, provincial. The second stanza, however, introduces, or at least recognizes, the filling station family. Bishop had to delineate the oily surroundings before she could populate the station with presences that derive their identity in part from the obscuring power of the dirt and grease. Father in a "dirty, / oil-soaked monkey suit" and his "several quick and saucy / and greasy sons" compose the tribe. To underscore the masculine disarray, Bishop compresses judgment with depiction: "it's a family filling station, / all quite thoroughly dirty." The work environment begs for the tidying presence of a woman, a wife, or a mother. The station itself appears to be a resting place for men and dogs: the wicker furniture ("crushed and grease- / impregnated" and with a "dirty dog") offers that residential look. Bishop allows "grease-" to teeter at the end of the line, isolating and heightening the vaguely sexual connotations of "impregnated." The descriptively self-contained stanzas of "Filling Station" cause it to resemble "Sestina" more than any other Bishop poem. The theatrical positioning of props and people echoes the dominant image patterns of the piece. At one step removed, we glimpse the touches of those present: "Some comic books provide / the only note of color"—and perhaps someone absent: "They [the comic books] lie / upon a big dim doily / draping a taboret / (part of the set), beside / a big hirsute begonia." Surely there can be no sense of intellectual presence, or for that matter, even craft. Bishop sees neither mind nor hand at work in the debris. Upon what then does the poem turn? Perhaps because of the orchestrating falsetto voice, the poem depends upon noting the absence of an actual feminine presence. It asks us to sense the former presence, then to miss, the decorator of the filling station. This note of nostalgia exploits conventional expectations: Domestic scenes? it is now clear that domesticity is the standard to which the narrator has held this scene? require a woman, a wife, a mother here, even as "Sestina" does. A rhetorical cascade of questions suggests the extent of the narrator's tentatively withheld knowledge: Why the extraneous plant? Why the taboret? Why, oh why, the doily? (Embroidered in daisy stitch with marguerites, I think, and heavy with gray crochet.) The selective questioning and insider's conjectures (further emphasized by the parachesis of "gray crochet") link factual and speculative registers of awareness. The poem challenges the reader to offer any explanation other than a woman's sometimes presence. No longer the harsh ds of the beginning stanzas, the calming, lullaby-like ws and ss of the oil cans sound a peaceful and reconciling note as the poem drifts to a vaguely humorous and reassuring conclusion: [lines 34-41] There is an understood presence, a nurturing and artistic overseer to this otherwise casual business. It is on the care and the arrangement of objects that survival depends. The soft utterances of the oil cans (pouring oil on the world's troubled waters) gently mock and

soothe the high-strung automobiles that so cruelly embody the idea of cultural and social progress, a progress that has soiled this microcosm without entirely civilizing it.

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