

Winter

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The snow falls slowly in big broad flakes, straight down, falling down through the axis of the world.

It's been like this all week. The stillness of winter is not like other silences.

There are thin sheets of ice on the river, where the water all the rest of the year is the color of rust, as if, at the bottom, there's a graveyard of old cars and trucks; but not now. Under the ice is the blackness of a winter sky without stars. The ice has the sheen of white planets. Things come together in winter in ways that are startling.

Black water rubs up against crusty snow on the shore. There used to be a public beach here. We used to come skating here, but no more. The degree to which our water freezes has been changed. We don't know why.

The mills are like ghosts of themselves in clouds of hazy snow. Their blank stare has vanished, like faces of one expression only, turned suddenly away. The cable and wire mill shut down early today, and so did the plastics factory, and so did the cereal mill. We are on our way to a blizzard. The absence of the sound of machines is the absence of a pulse, but no one minds.

The hills to the north of the town are a low-lying reach of a range called Wachusetts. They are shaggy-looking things where the snow is trackless and deep. Up on the ridges, the snow is piled high in the firs, round and delicate, like blossoms of apple trees.

The lights of the town in late afternoon are yellow and watery. Black water keeps moving below the river's thin ice. If you listen, you can hear the rushing water of the dam and the spillway,

like trains in the distance which are always receding, always far away. They are always trains we have missed getting onto.

The traffic lights are set in the evening on yellow blinking.

Night comes down from the hills. There is a sheen through the snow of light and dark mixed: that's twilight. It lasts about five minutes. Then the darkness is made of the trees, sloping down toward the town with their arms out, throwing shadows off strong, dark backs. When night brushes up against houses, windows turn wavy and silver and loose, like platefuls of mercury.

We can see more in winter with the trees stripped bare. There's always that. We can see more. We go room to room turning lights on.

It's only early December. The snow is still new. We can remember how it feels to have April, to have May, to have damp green moss underfoot. Flower bulbs are curled up in gardens, and fetal and squinty, with thumbs that are frozen in the act of sucking. They'll come back. We say this. They'll come back.

Soon the daylight will mostly be gray. The worst of the winter is in front of us. The long months ahead will kick in soon enough with gloom and squabbling. We will stand in our doorways and look up at the sky with babies in our arms, or we will pause in our driveways with groceries, with cramps and fatigue, with frost in our veins, with teeth getting loose in the sockets, with the taste of the beginning of an abscess, with old dental bills unpaid, with not enough hours in the day, with snow inside our bones, with bones gone as hollow as bird-bones. We'll be screaming at our children with voices in the thin winter air as shrill as geese. It will seem that we'll never see the yellow sun of spring again, or tilt back our faces and get to feel it.

We're afraid. When night comes striding down from the hills, we might not say, in the usual manner, "We are hungry." We might find ourselves saying instead, *empty*.

There are ghosts in the snow. They move this way and that, as if their hair is the same as the icy, whip-thin branches of willow trees, which bank both sides of the river.

We don't have to hear the dead to understand they are there. They come up to us from the floor of our valley. They come up from stoves and old fires, from sickbeds, from stooping, from aching, from bending, from childbirth, from blood, from all we remember, and all we ever hoped for, and all we must never forget. There are smells in the air at the back of the snow: smells of cooking, smells of shit, smells of house-dirt that lingers in corners, smells of milk, smells of skin.

We know who we are. We are the same as the ones who were here before us, barely walking upright. We are the same as the ones whose bones are dust, and the ones with bones newly planted.

Babies ride our hips; we are rocking and rocking. We are perpetual motion. We are watchguards even in sleep; we never sleep; we sleep on our feet with our eyes wide open. We are too tired to talk, even on the telephone. It is not only snow that makes stillness.

But the woods are still with us.

Come up to where the dam is, come up to the rim of the quarries, where the cavities are, where the earth is re-filling the holes. Come up away from town through long rows of pines, where the bristly tops are canopied, like pillars that hold up the sky. There's a clearing, but pass here quickly. It's lonely here, with ragged edges of stumps sticking up from the snow. There used to be beavers. The pond that never had a name is all gone. It's dried up, and the stream that once fed it is gone, too.

Come out to the flatland instead. The ground is trampled-on, as if many other people had been walking here, just hours ago, or perhaps we've just missed them by minutes. The wind up here is as light as a whistle.

Come up to Steaming Meadow, like the other side of a coin, flooded now and then in the over-spill, as if the dam has tides like an ocean.

The muddy ground holds us firm to our ankles. We have boots on. Across our shins are the high, green sweep of swamp-grass. At the roots, the grass clots brownly, all boggy, as dense as manure. Under our feet there may be eyes in the mud as shiny as frogs' eyes. There may be eggs in the mud. We tread carefully.

We pass on into watery air, first to the outer brook, still running. The sound of the water comes like joy to the brain. Come up at last to the frothy white water of the spillway, and the granite wall of our dam.

We're a town with a dam. Our water fuels a whole valley. We're a town with a visible soul. We comprehend containment; we comprehend spilling over. Railroad cars will never creep again into the quarries, but the trestles are here. Seventy years of weather is on their backs. They point the way to the dam with long necks held high, like four giant iron herons covered with rust, watching all that goes on.

Our dam is ugly to look at but it is solid in the whitewater chaos. The wind comes roaring against it now in great lapping waves, and we stand here. It's like the end of the world. There is nowhere else to go. There is nowhere better. This is the place we rise up to--this platform of rock against water--in a holding pattern, like a plane on a runway, pausing, poised, revving up.

Winter is far below us, with its stillness swinging out in arcs through our trees and streets and houses, shifting and swirling, filled with falling snow. Below our skin we are percolating with willfulness. We are glad to be alive, no small feat. We look at everyone in the eyes. We won't shrink. Dullness won't be creeping over our faces like an extra layer of skin. We look at each other. We swear we'll make it to April intact. We tip back our heads. Here we are. We have thick winter coats on. We can stay here as long as we want. The night overhead is so keen to us, filled with stars that look cold, but are fireballs.