

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/4

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Snow Storm

After dinner on a Monday evening early last May, my older sister called me. Breath choked, she said, "S just died." He was her only son.

My phone pressed hard to my ear, my sister to my heart, as if I could take some of her grief, breathe air into her lungs.

S's blood had broken through his weakened aortic wall. Clutching his chest, he got up from the dinner table and lay down on the floor. Two hours later, he took his last breath.

I collapsed into myself. My keening was animal, volcanic. Time and the physical world disintegrated. How could he be dead? He was young and strong and in love, his 18-month-old son sitting on his shoulders. He was just alive talking to his pregnant wife.

I last saw S early on a June morning the year prior. He knelt next to his six-year-old nephew at the pebbly edge of the Snake River, his large hand holding the small one, as together they snapped the fly line over their shoulders. "Right there," S whispered, pointing the rod towards a quiet eddy tucked up against a boulder. The line went taut; a silver flash broke the surface of the water.

I snapped a photo. S's smile frozen in time.

A grief-shocked spring melted into a summer of gathering together to spread S's ashes in the mountains and rivers that he loved. The permanence of my nephew's death settled in that fall.

Grief became a measure of remembering.

Throughout the months following his death, I watched the capricious New Hampshire weather outside my farmhouse windows brush-stroke the mountain, fields, and forest in a myriad of moods, a cycling of beauty found and lost. And lost and found again. The daffodils bloomed and withered. Fat blueberries weighted the bushes in July, then shriveled. Bulbous pumpkins scattered in the garden before the frost rotted them. Spring thunderstorms were punctuated by rainbows and summer microbursts of wind and rain gave way to the whipped-up wind of autumn. The winter brought icicles that hung from the eaves, and blizzards that consumed the barren landscape.

And then, one morning, I woke to storm clouds settled low over our mountain saddle, which is slung along the ancient Wapack range. The world hovered in a fragile state – tentative, still, waiting. And I remembered that everything is impermanent, the familiar, transitory, our lives suffused with change and loss.

It started to snow around dinnertime. The first few flakes accumulated on the stone table out back. Over the early weeks of the year, as the days shortened, dinner had morphed into a farmer's supper by the fire as the last of the light faded into ink black. My husband and I held bowls of stew in our laps by the fire as the flakes started to whirl down in earnest, rid-

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ing the north wind down from the mountain and slapping the window panes. The fire smoked with every gust, stinging our eyes. Coughing, I got up and opened the door a crack. I stared for a moment into the cold and dark. "S is out there," I said to my husband as I shut the door and sat back down. This elemental awareness settled, and then, out of nowhere we both wept, convulsing silently.

I knew tomorrow would be transformed into a whispering stillness. A place reimagined. The edges of my grief softened. Perhaps the white world would tell me something. I could walk through Narnia's armoire door, sweeping aside my shamble of coats. The door would latch behind me and I would step out into a luminous world. A new perspective. A tantalizing promise of a transformed landscape in the morning. Exquisite, but fleeting.

Before bedtime we turned on the outdoor light to watch as fat flakes whipped sideways, splattering on the north facing windows. We banked the fire in case we lost electricity. When we crawled into bed, the wind had picked up, whistling down our bedroom chimney and rattling the windowpanes. I pulled the quilt over my head as I nestled close to my husband. The past and the present merged in the borderlands between awake and asleep, conjuring up vivid memories of past snow days.

When S was four years old, I visited his home in Vermont. Bundled in his suit, he flung himself belly first onto his sled. I pushed him until I, too, was prone in a drift, while he hurdled down the slope screaming with delight. I stood up and bent over, shaking the snow from my collar before it melted. Then I leapt down the hillside to help S.

"I do it!" he insisted as he pulled the sled back up the hill, struggling through drifts. He collapsed at the crest.

I felt the cellular memory of my own small self, bundled up, pulling a sled through snow that reached my thighs and collected inside the rims of my rubber boots.

Snow days are interludes in the ordinary task of living - a string of pearls connecting me to all the magical snow days stretching way back through my young adulthood and further still into my childhood.

I am a child standing in foot pajamas at predawn in our farm's kitchen, bacon sizzling in the oven. My siblings and I cluster around the radio waiting for the school cancelations on WBZ. I can still hear Joe Green in the BZ copter commenting on the traffic and the icy roads. Our school, the Academy of the Assumption, is sometimes listed under T and sometimes under A. The dog crawls out from under the Formica table, its claws clattering along the floor, barking. We have only gotten through all the D's but we kids twist our heads in unison, glare at the dog and chorus, "Sssssh-hhh!" pressing our forefingers to our lips.

"Out, out out!" my mother commands the dog, opening the kitchen door. Out in the field below the kitchen, snow blankets the sheep. They stand still, heads down, butts to the wind.

And in the quiet of the late afternoon, the front hall steams with piles of sodden wool mittens and cotton winter pants and kicked-off boots.

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S did not exist when I was a child. Or was he a wondering old soul waiting on the wisps of the wind at the edge of the world to be born into this family that loves snow? His existence, inevitable, cycling back into the oxygen hungry, blood pumping world. And I, now, in the old bones of my body, my heart thumping a bit harder, blood slow to reach my toes, I curl back into the long stringy years of myself, listening to the wind wailing the grief of the world, and find refuge in that small child place, awed by the wonder of snow.

I slipped into dreams of S - time warping and elusive.

I woke – the light white and impenetrable.

I looked out the window. It was a full-on blizzard. The north wind whipped down from the upper field, drifting the road. Breakers curled and foamed, frozen and suspended in space. The snow obliterated all traces of last night's plow except a bank that T-boned our driveway. The present moment shimmered with possibility. There was nowhere to go. The walls of our old farmhouse no longer constricted, but pulsed with coziness. I cooked an elaborate breakfast and lingered over coffee.

My husband went outside with his measuring stick and plunged it in the snow. He came back inside, flakes gusting in with him as he stamped his feet and quickly turned and pushed shut the kitchen door.

"17 and 1/3 inches," he said.

I found my snowshoes in the barn. I pulled on stained ski pants and zipped up my purple down jacket, a goose feather escaping from a hole at the elbow. I grabbed it from the air and stuffed it back in.

I snow-shoed out the back door into the field. The stones on the wall looked like a gaggle of talking heads draped with slouchy caps. The farmhouse disappeared behind me, obliterated by snowy dust devils. I trudged towards the woods, each step, heavy. Then there was only white. I recognized nothing. Hemlock and pine branches hung low over the trail. I gasped as a shock of cold cascaded down my neck.

The wind quieted and the sky lightened. Ahead of me stretched an unblemished world. As I plunged each long wooden shoe into the white expanse, I regretted the destruction of this perfection. I struggled to free the end of my snowshoes, my panting arduous, shattering the stillness. I lost the trail and went down to the river, following it to the bridge where I knew I could pick up the trail again. The storm tapered off and the sun came out. Blinding sparkles like dancing fairies skimmed across the surface of the frozen river. Then I saw tiny wings, whirring, iridescent and shimmering. Something touched a branch bent low and it popped up. If I stood very still, I could feel the heartbeats of a thousand beings hidden under tree roots or deep in the hollow of a tree - of many trees – hemlock, oak, pine, maple. A lone chickadee landed on a hemlock branch. It bounced gently, spraying a white mist.

I saw something dark indented in the snow. I bent down for a closer look. It was a dead mole frozen at the base of a maple tree. Why had it emerged from its underground burrow and deep networks of tunnels into this cold world? A fox or bobcat would soon consume the tiny corpse, a vital find in these frozen woods. I stood there, my mind's eye wandering down to the burrows deep beneath my feet.

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"I know I will die young," S told his wife. He mentioned it multiple times over many years to his mother and then to his wife.

"No, you won't," they said.

"I will die young," he said.

Now I stood in the sheltered nook of the old maple, where the snow merely dusted the ground and the wind had been broken by its broad trunk. The maple's limbs stretched skyward, skeletal fingers clattering as the wind picked up, the weak extremities breaking off, its sap having migrated to the roots to ensure the old tree's rebirth in the spring.

Where do we go when we die? Or does "go" reflect our limited perceptions, like do and come, words that are linear and constrained by rising in the morning light and slipping into bed after a day well-spent. Perhaps our souls, beyond the confines of coming, doing and going, settle deep into the bosom of the world, waiting to manifest themselves again.

"S said things as a child, wise things," My sister told me. "He understood what was happening to his physical body before the doctor did."

My fingers were very cold. I clapped my hands together to try to bring circulation back. I pulled off my gloves; my fingers were white. I stuck my hands inside my coat under opposite

armpits.

I felt the cold wet shock of stray clumps melt inside my boots. My life became elemental.

The day in May that S died, there was a late and sudden Wyoming spring blizzard.

After two hours in the local hospital, bathed in the garish emergency room light, the seconds and minutes ticking away, he and his wife named their baby. Then, an ambulance took them to the local airfield. His wife waited on the tarmac while they loaded S onto the evac flight. Suddenly, the airplane shook violently as several medics attempted to restart my nephew's heart.

In that moment, as she stood alone on the tarmac, the weight of their baby pressing into her pelvis, their son asleep in his crib at home, a gust of wind brought a snow squall, obliterating the runway and the radio tower. She knew her husband had died.

"It was as if his soul was carried away in the swirling snow."



On a winter wooded hillside, I stood at the edge of nothingness, the pause in the world before rebirth. My heart flooded with this moment.

"Let it be," I thought. I grasped at an elusive flake. Its' perfect symmetry dissolved the moment it touched my fingertip; my own existence also microscopic and brief.

I took a deep breath. I felt my blood working its way back into my toes. They stung as the tingling brought them back to life. My fingers also warmed.

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In that moment, existing seemed enough. I looked down and saw a rabbit's pawprint.

I heard a woodpecker in a nearby tree and beneath that, under the snow, the muffled gurgling sound of the brook.

The angle of the light morphed into late afternoon. The promising warmth of the mid-day sun vanished into the descending chill of day's end.

As I started home through the woods, the muted breath of the natural world provided a salve. I walked on hallowed ground. The seasons would turn but that moment, there I was. That was enough. That was magic.