

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

Christopher Kostyn Passante
Garnet

SNOW, GOOD SNOW, AS CHRISTMAS SNOW, AS SNOW of childhood. Of brothers and sisters and snowmen and sledding hills. Of fathers coaxing hardpack from groaning eaves, breath frozen in beards. Of mothers bundling babies for prams, fingers fluttering like winter wrens. Of Ian—Garnet's last McVey—bone-stiff among his buried kin in the grave he'd dug only days ago. And of Ian stepping into that grave, lying his body down, folding arm over arm, waiting with short breaths for his shivers to baptize him from this life into the next.

Unjust, is it not, for such beauty to be what now enfolds him? Good snow clinging to bending boughs of white pines, fiddling brittle branches.

Everything that lives must die, you say. But we are as precious as any life, destined or damned. Child, wife, and now, husband. Good snow comes only to melt again, to replenish Garnet Lake, to make loam of forest floors, to drift into balsam-scented sky, pleasing in our youth, mingling in summer swelter, building clouds, thunderous clouds, storms and cyclones and hurricanes, and, with hibernal tilts, more good snow.

Snow that inters the sins of the world—even Ian's. Snow that severs sledge roads, buries firewood stores, collapses root cellars. The overnight tonnage atop roofs bends beams to jam doors and windows unopenable come daylight—those portals not already deep beneath drifts; the only other, chimney stacks, choke as we swallow the cabin whole.

She'd pleaded more than once. Let us leave of this place while we can, husband.

Hushhh, my love. There is a fortune in garnets beneath our feet.

Ian studies his hands. His father's and grandfather's hands. Slabs of hard flesh. Woodsman's hands. What has he left to hold? For anyone who's held snow in bare palms intimates the sting, the burn, the tearing of flesh. And why does Ian—still strong in his middle years—surrender among his kin? In succession, he spaded the snow, then the stubborn earth for, first, his firstborn, then his second, and, then, his wife. Tears freeze eyelids shut. Wails and heaves muffled by the pack and the falling snow to the depths of six feet, maybe less. The ground, here, frozen, hard, compact, ideal for amphibolite, gneiss—rims of hornblende, feldspar, biotite. The fresh gash into the metamorphic layer bleeds acidic, citric notes that mingle with us among the ozone.

The woods quiet now save for our pelts, tap-tap, is a good sound. Tap-tap-tap on metal roofs, bristle bush, fair plains, frozen lakes. Tap-tap on Ian's breast, the bundled breast, of bundled wool, from lambs, huddling close now beneath the steel corrugate tilt, one last bale to nibble. And geese, their desperate blare aloft, and Ian closes his eyes. The sting of remorse. The singe of sin. The silence of regret.

The bleating lambs. The desperate geese.

Tap-tap.

Hushhh.

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And hushhh through the night. Through bite of cold till numbness comes, the poor man. The everything man with nothing. The king among his jewels. Jewels surrounding, jewels piercing the night sky, jewels catching the first light of dawn.

And Ian awakes deep among the silverlight, the monochrome of morning, blanketed in his grave, solid and stiff, and his first words are not words but whimpers as a baby cries from the womb into the cold, pale world anew.

Above, the lambs no longer bleat. The desperate geese have found open water. Shafts of sunlight through the pines and sifted rainbows sheen wafting from the boughs above.

And he whimpers.

The beams reach deep into the depths where Ian lay, unable to move, in the warm earth.

Around him, gleam garnets.