

Juxtaposed

Minnesota. I am here, but how did that happen?
Here is blue and green and white. Song in the air: whippoorwill by day, cricket by night.

These are the things that matter most today.

And I've been here since some once-upon-a-time January, when the frost performed its constellation dance on my lenses and I stepped foot across the border. The air was cleaner than what I had known. The healthcare, better. The carillon—like a glockenspiel in the center of town—announced my arrival with two tolls of the bell. Any more would have drawn too much attention, so I'm grateful for the separation of church and state, and for the telling of time in standards other than military.

The cold was bitter: lungs crackled, skin ossified and the body's density was the greatest it had ever known. Still, labile, I arrived at this *here* I had read so much about.

And this place welcomed me the way an old house in the woods welcomes the weary traveler. And though the ice-ridden roads shone like black glass even from across the border, there was a measurable warmth in my arrival; in the candle-glow of the moon that January evening.

It is not enough to say that the sky wrapped its landscape around me like a winter blanket. Instead, I must acknowledge the silence of the city sound asleep, unstirred like a perfect cup of cocoa.

I escaped, one may say, the rat race (a city of students makes for nothing other than transient neighbors). It was a departure that seemed inevitable: me, with my arms open; the city, with its fists perpetually clenched. I left it behind because it was impenetrable—a stone to the knife. Because if I didn't I surely would have died (the tone here is dramatic because drama is exactly what it was). To be living among the dying meant I had no name—only a social security number, a t-cell count that plummeted like a trapeze artist at the end of his act, and a long list of medications that required me to know both the brand name of each, when speaking with others walking a similar path, and the scientific name, when speaking with my doctors. (I ask you, what good are any of those things when the world's most renowned hospitals are all located on the same street, far away on the other side of town?) I wanted access, to feel the tributary making its way to the river. The branch gently folding into the tree.

It's not that I didn't love that place (*to know it is to love it*, a friend used to say). It's just that the place didn't seem to love me—at least not in a monogamous way, which is really what I needed—really what any patient needs of its healer. I said, *Show me*, and the city said, *Find out for yourself*. So I did. In the country's oldest subway lines that smelled of pot and piss from five o'clock in the morning to twelve-thirty at night. In the parking garages always overstuffed like olives in a jar, and in the same chat rooms and the same piano bars where the same men always seemed to hang out at the exact same time.

The salve never fully healing the wound.

Boston had its share of seagulls: manic scavengers bedecked in white robes with name tags and stethoscopes, how out of greed (or was it the race to the finish line?) stone-cold they hovered. Open-eyed as they scratched and scribbled to take blood, and always from the same

veins. And I observed, out of the corner of my eye—my peripheral vision always better than my direct—like a child, autistic. Head cocked.

And the carcasses on which those gulls descended searched for love when the world had gone to sleep. Flirted with danger in the infested and haunted waters; they later died with something hanging out of their arms, floating like perfect whales subjecting themselves to the ocean's roughshod slaughter.

It could have been none of these, or it could have been all of them. What I remember is in bits and pieces. Take, for example, the patient who fell asleep while waiting to see his doctor. Or the cars bumper-to-bumper rushing through their routine before the next traffic light blinked again. Or the little boys swimming with each other in summer, unclothed with bodies smelling of chlorine and almost sulphur. And God as distant as Boston smiling down on children with clean knickers on Easter.

Yet some things I remember more clearly: my last Christmas there. The midnight hour; the snow in its finest flakes as it blanketed the city like a new coat of paint while everyone outside all at once, as if instructed to do so, stood still. For one tiny moment I could look at the street outside my window not as a place where men bumped into each other like toy soldiers not knowing each other's names, but as a postcard silent in its amber hue, innocent as Currier & Ives and nearly just as quaint. At that moment I chose to celebrate life: the birth of Christ Jesus (who came to cleanse me of my transgressions: those soiled linens on a sick man's bed); the birth of the Christmas Spirit who taught me that once a year I should place others before myself (and to do so any more often would be to deserve whatever kismet should follow); the birth of a new year uprooting itself like a sagging weed and giving way to a fresh, new crop.

Sadly, the soil remained infertile.

And so it became hard to celebrate such life. Hard with a friend shrinking before me like a magic trick gone awry, most undoubtedly his last Christmas, most undoubtedly his last snow, and me not too far behind. Hard when I found myself wearing ice skates I did not know how to use. Hard when my hands were untouched and locked away in a steel box, buried deep beneath the snow and forgotten like a disease for which there is no cure. And hard when I, as a snowman fully clothed and already beginning his melt, fell in love only with trees.

It was my first year without a tree. There was no North Star to guide me. There were no carols on that Silent Night to otherwise welcome peace to my barren manger.

No gold. No frankincense. No myrrh.

To leave that space was the only foreseeable.

So I came to this place out of purpose. Out of the body's struggle to not become undone. I came to this place with its blue-green-white knowing that there was a me that was here, and a me that was there, and that those twins had no choice but to juxtapose. That is why just after arriving in that once-upon-a-time January I wrote a haiku: innocent city/yet still the moon veils herself/behind a dark cloud. That is why just after arriving I wrote that Minneapolis, brittle-boned and wafer-thin, like the broken body of Jesus Christ given up for me, sneaked past my window that night as if he had reason to lose himself under all that cold ice.

(My wish, it turns out, was simple: snow.)

Seven days had passed since the journey began, each frighteningly emptier than the last. Boston had left me more broken than its fragmented skyline, but here a voice called from beneath the snow. Pulled me along and enchanted me by its lure, reminding me of all I had to lose in this yet to be chartered territory.

And hearing it, I stayed.

With the faith of a navigator with only a compass, or the last leaf hanging on to the last tree on the last day of winter, still I stayed because something, faint but audible beneath the snow, suggested survival.

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