A WINTER RIDE

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A WINTER RIDE

ESSAY & POETRY
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PHOTOGRAPHY
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BOOK DESIGN
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THE LIGHT OF THE LAND

It is the silence of the land out of which the land arises. It is in the humility of the land, the quiet rolling of the hills, where its primal voice lies. Montana's badlands offer the familiar shadows and angles of a Cézanne, the chiseled chiaroscuro of an Ansel Adams. But what is found here at the base of the Beartooth Wilderness really has little precursor in traditional art. It has no vocabulary to define a landscape that seems to have been imported from other worlds.

In this part of Montana, it is the ranch headquarters, hidden in the cottonwoods and aspens of a river basin, which organize the chaos of the hills into a civilized overlay of meaning. But it is just an overlay. Everyone who lives here is aware that our passing identity is superimposed over an unmanageable, unimaginable skein of forces which aren’t just local, but global in their scope. It is obvious that what dictates the end-of-the-world outwash, the pandemonium of boulders, the lurking time bomb of magma, of sills, stocks, and dikes, which all seem only momentarily paused before the land begins to flow again, what infuses the canyons with saturated pigments in the air each evening comes from gears grinding in the sky beyond the scope of human colonization.
What is at work here, on our exposed skeleton of cooling matter from the sun, with our discordant frequencies, the massive collisions of magnetism and air particles in the Northern Lights, is beyond the control of sheep walls and snow fences. The history that echoes here has nothing to do with roads, with cars or planes. The past which is on daily display flows inexorably through the immense canyons of the Hellroaring Plateau in Gothic netherworld voices which originate in an alien language.

In describing what has happened to the land here you have to invoke concepts like nuclear winter and massive sea shifts. This is the land formed by meteors, by the collision of continental plates, by magnetic fields in the exosphere that produce visible, harmless artifacts like the Aurora Borealis, but that have, more importantly, more deeply, shocked the surface of where we live into Maya Lin–like coulees, giant replicas of small plasma waves, into the sastrugi of the solar wind.
That is, the land here is shaped by magnetism, by gravity, by the flow of astronomical systems that push and pull matter into inexplicable forms, into the picturesque counterpanes which we call land.

But there is land and there is land. The more we live on it, the more we come to understand that we move through a world that is still Jurassic. We feel exposed to the sky here, to the great rages of intergalactic wind and fire, because the ranches here have been stripped of their skin, of their crops and forests, by forces from prehistory. We don’t just see, but we sense viscerally the underpinnings of the land, the violent molten surges, which are frozen in place around us, like a game of musical chairs where the music has suddenly stopped.

The night is the dream of the day. It is hard to imagine, however, that bright day has dreamt up the science-fiction paintings of fragmented rocks suspended over the canyons, biomechanical tidal waves that remind you of the dark cinema of H.R. Giger.
Even the colors of the light in this part of Montana are the apocalypse that Scriabin hoped to evoke with his music: we see the whirlwinds of space, the gamma rays and prismatic chords of the air here, without the usual filters, without the protection of artificial city lights.

Amber fields of grain, waving in the gentle summer breeze outside the Tippet Rise concert hall, are just placeholders for the winter gales which will eventually strip away the euphemisms of foliage and reveal the wizard behind the screen.

We live here in our own version of Tibet, on the roof of the continent, exposed to the dynamics of high latitudes. We live in a perpetual space storm, buffeted by supersonic particles, by the shock waves given off by solar filaments, the giant gas prominences which flare-up from the sun. Without knowing it, we are bombarded by the electrical fluctuations and magnetic cycles from trillions of years away by the Northern Lights (which are just shadows of the solar wind), by eruptions of energy funneled through holes in the sun’s corona. We might not describe it in those exact words, but we all know that something is going on in the strange orange light of evening.

We have to invent words to describe what happens every day. Science often invents words that lack the human scale of awe and emotion, so we turn to poetry, to the older rituals of Stone Age mystics and to tales which seem, around a campfire, to evoke the shudder of things we have actually noticed.
It is through these equivalents, these shadows, these eddies, these ghost stories, the metaphors and synergies of art, music, language, and science that we attempt to describe, to appreciate the mystery of the land through which we move.

Living through the agrarian seasons around which our own rituals of harvest—Christmas, Thanksgiving, Hallowe’en—are based, involves lying in wait. We live in storms. We long for symbols, for anchors, for meaning. We walk in our minds through miracles which haven’t yet happened. But we know they are coming.
SNOW NIGHT

We wait anxiously for the snow,
But wrongly so.
On nights like these,
Frosted trees ghostly white
In the winter ruin,
Lake blanched
Around by moon,
Rather than that lowering
Skies will open,
Flake by flake, the bet
Is why they somehow
Haven’t yet.
A Winter Ride
Fall is early this year. The bears have come down lower because of high snows. We had a grizzly cub at our place yesterday, nuzzling the grass. Meaning his mother wasn’t probably far away. Two baby buck elk were out sauntering around the same lawn, which they regard as theirs. They tiptoed gingerly quite close to the cub, which then waved up some 6 feet and made a short jump in their direction. Fear conquered curiosity, and the bucks bounced off, at which the cub lost all interest and resumed grazing. Predatory instincts had yet to mature, and the encounter was mostly innocent.

Fall is of course the dramatic foreshadowing of winter, tinged with cold nights, brisk mornings, a chill in the air. Part of the beauty of fall is that winter is on the breeze.
A Winter Ride
As much as I try to watch for the moment when the brutal
night world of rain turns to snow, it happens despite my will,
despite my watchful eyes, and suddenly there is so much snow
you cannot see anything else, and the magic point where roads disappear in white
is exactly where our land begins, as if surveyed. Beyond that, all is unreal,
magic, trees leaning down with dense spring rime, protected one more time till
from what we know will come in time.
Wigeons, tundra swans, snow geese swirl in migratory formations. Random flights are out. Bright purple butterflies land on Cathy more than usual, in their rush to prepare for Costa Rica.

The bucks from the grizzly incident later tried to move in, but are outraged that they might have to share the house with us, and, after snorting, pawing the ground, and giving us sufficiently intimidating stares, have moved fifty feet into the aspens.

Everyone wants to come indoors. Insects, mice. They ask nicely, but we remain oblivious to their small gestures.
A Winter Ride
The ranchers know the signs. Snowy owls sit like statues on the fence posts, flying like bats around the car lights at night. The cicadas sing in syncopated choruses around our post-concert parties, auditioning for a spot on the program. Which they already have. Marmots, absent in July, have reappeared and started luggng hay into the rocks down by the stream. Our local beavers have added a spare room to their stick palace on the river.

And when the wind picks up, as it often does, you know it’s eighty miles an hour when you start to hear the voices. Familiar voices, friends. Crowds of people, just outside the banging house. One voice raised up among the others. Your own mother. And then someone is coming up the stairs. In a locked house. Wood flaps on the roof. Sounds you’ve never heard before. The wind picks up to 95 mph. The air is alive with banshees. Your fear stands on end. The beloved dead of your life have come back. What presses at the window, on the walls, isn’t just wind. It’s flesh and blood. Or bricks and mortar. You have to believe it. It’s winter night in Montana.

And then, over the wild colors of dying leaves, the fog moves down, and small flecks of first snow flurry around a rainbow of aspens.
SNOW LIKE LEAVES

Leaves like Christmas Trees with lights like Light and sun like Sight, all creeping Through the yellow Eaves of trembling Meadow breeze tonight, Embody in The valley’s slight But stunning breeze

Expectable Antheses: The snow like leaves Drifts down the ice-ed- Up sheaths of mid-May’s fleshy sleeve Like a silent Acolyte: a Parenthesis On what the wry And happily Vegetable Eye predicts when That complacent Chloroplastic Freeze that woody Seasons slowly Freeze around us

Makes believe, this Aphid green and Limp-leaved eve, in Cinematic Congeries of Fahrenheit, whole Stream and fibers Of the sudden Winter blend that Leaves behind it, As it teases Out the prune Ice from the Summer’s create Heat, just those Perfectly white Freeze like the Crystal night Complete.
The clouds come down, too, cloaking the almost Swiss mountains in
cotton swabs, rolling over whole forests like juggernauts. The early quilt
of vapor is layered over by a darker mantle of heavier fog. The grounded
clouds develop folds as we watch, the way that waves roll in in sets, each
successive swell larger than the previous one. Undifferentiated sheets of
haze begin to develop cliques, billow and pockets that break out from
the darkness into animal shapes. The cowlike clouds in the sky now graze
on the land and move threateningly towards us.

There is a tug of war between city and country. As a country boy I
always feel that there is a clarity to the air in the mountains, and that we
feel restored and inspired by it.
A Winter Ride
SNOW LIGHT

In the graying, vague November day,
In the grimy specificities
That push the sun away
From certain unspecific cities,
In a nightmare of realities
I dream, possibly the purpose,
Filled with failure and disease,
Of unsettled states like this,
Of that moment in a forest when
The unclear world is real again.
We live in anticipation. Not of summer’s fires and sweat, or of spring’s mud, or even of fall’s dying embers, but of winter’s impossible extremes. In a way, fall is part of the countdown to winter. Each frost, each night that decimates another layer of leaves, is a tingling foreboding of the hardship, the storms, the vast blanketing of winter.

Winter isn’t something that passes. It isn’t the brief, flashy fireworks of autumn. It seems like an entire year of lowered skies, of Thanksgiving turkeys, of Halloween pumpkins, of skating parties, of sleighs on hills, of ski trips through valleys hazed with clouds, of howling nights and mornings sparkling with the diamonds of new fallen snow.
A Winter Ride
Winter is roadways turned into unnavigable mythic sheets by mists. It’s familiar trees made into monstrous forests by icicles, by nests of snow. It’s film and fine, grapeal and flea. It’s the layers of the snow pack from depth hoar through rounded grains and sun crust which every climber knows to measure before venturing out onto a potential avalanche slope. It’s the fifty-three Inuit words for snow, such as pukak, powder snow clumped like wet salt crystals. The Inupiaq dialect has auniq, ice riddled with methoholes, and siguliaksraq, crystals which form just before the ocean turns to ice. Jules Verne’s novel Off on a Comet has a scene when a rock thrown by a little girl turns the waiting sea into a sudden ice field.
Winter in Montana is an endless wilderness of lethal winds, zero visibility, horizontally blowing blizzards up on Froze-to-Death Plateau, the province of the extreme climber. Down below, it is windows laced with glaze and skies turned the kind of silver gray which whispers “Christmas,” which makes us think of fires in the hearth, carols, wrapping presents, and sledding with the kids.

There are dark afternoons where the clouds are thick with night and the air heavy with the sheer calm of the holidays. There are evenings when the full moon glows through cotton wads of clouds and softly falling flakes are lit by the porch lights.

Any calm, though, is momentary. Montana isn’t the orderly progression of white taking over buried villages and popular ski resorts, the way it is in Colorado. Montana is unpredictable, unfettered nature, ice storms today, floods tomorrow, snow devils, and monstrous winds descending uncontrollably from millions of acres of mountains and vortices. In our hidden corner of the state winter descends from the twenty-three million acres of the Yellowstone ecosystem. It’s the land of the grizzly, wolf, and eagle, although there’s room for all the endangered species, human and animal, meek and frightening, who flock here for sanctuary.
There’s an altruism to the season, where people think up things they can do which are just plain good. It brings neighbors close. The world calms down, muffled by mounds of snow. The practical world of barbed wire, rusted tools, broken tractors, garbage cans is hidden under a blanket which excuses us from school, from having to think about fixing things. We have a doctor’s note from nature.

Suddenly we understand Doctor Zhivago, those endless steppes, Lara’s song in the Julie Christie movie, or Keira Knightley’s lost glances from the more recent film. The wind that blows across Montana today is the same wind that blew across Siberia yesterday. We share the dreary monotony of Irkutsk, the frosted lives of solitary Russian ascetics which produced The Nutcracker, Swan Lake, Battleship Potemkin, Oblomov.
Here are the silver suns, the invisible mornings, the iced roads, the
impenetrable snowfields, and the desolation that was so essential to
Dutch Masters, to the Hudson River School, and to the Gothic painter
Caspar David Friedrich especially, that spectral sense which the poet
Allen Ginsberg described as “burning for the ancient heavenly connec-
tion to the stary dynamo in the machinery of night.”

In winter the constellations are closer, more brittle. The earth’s surface
more closely approximates the impossible climate of space and the
solar system, and you can feel the celestial gears slowly turning in all
their earthly disguises: gravity, magnetism, flickering magnetic curtains
of colored light, time itself. Miracles which we do not really understand,
although we have words for them and we guess at what rules might
govern them (and us).
A Winter Ride
Schubert based his second song cycle on the poems of Wilhelm Müller, a psychological journey called A Winter Ride through a barren wasteland of mock suns which parallels Müller’s emotions. Literature in 1827 was filled with young European men craving solitude (often in America): Goethe’s Young Werther, Chateaubriand’s René, Rousseau’s Julie, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein’s monster sought solitude in the “everlasting ices” of Arctic ice floes. It is that Romantic landscape which has been lost to the urbanization of our time, but which is still intact in parts of Montana, especially in winter.
Winter skies and falling snows carry with them the airiness of eternity; they carry the emotions we associate with the idea of North, the thrill of Christmas lights, the anticipation whipped up by Christmas stores in Munich, by Charpentier’s Christmas Mass, by John Luther Adams’s Four Thousand Holes, the way the mind opens to the sky, to the promise of all that snow-holiday time at our command, at the thought of being snowed in, the way deteriorating weather brings a rush of adrenalin to the climber, or the way blank spots on a map enthrall the explorer. Images of sleigh bells, of reindeer, of Christmas morning flood into the world, unaltered from the first time we felt them as children. Müller invokes frozen streams, icicles freezing layer by layer, failed lovers disappearing into a snowbound desolation, as we bring our own icons of bleak and isolated wastelands. As fire is unfurling from a log, snow is darkness unwinding from a cloud, as crystals sublimate and sinter around dendrites, as clouded pearls form around grains of sand. Our history is compacted in winter as the roiling sky is compacted with clouds.
Schubert’s and Müller’s winter ride, their Winterreise lives on as the skies move down in Montana, as we feel close to the anomie, the despair, and the glory of the cosmic gears which control our lives invisibly, in ways too small or too large to be seen.
Today we pause to hear the solar rage
Of wind around the stars,
To watch the world’s massive gauge
Align itself with ours,
The way that winter wanders
Down a young girl’s long limb
And shines a worried light
On her simple skin,
On the season’s grieving night,
Anguished wails of storm transposed
Into sleeping adult fears,
So that our snows and songs and ghosts disclose
All the planet’s human gears.
As Müller’s wanderer travels into the hinterlands mourning his alienation from society, I snowshoe through the Tippet Rise Art Center, just north of Yellowstone in the Grove Creek ranching valley where the isolation and clarity of the northern light in this tabula rasa landscape is a catalyst for things impossible to see. You have to feel them. Insights emerge from the mysterious underlying mechanisms of shadows, encouraged by the winter sun playing around the angles of the sculptures on the high fields. The night sky moves a bit closer; I hear the songs of the winter wind whistle around the eaves of a shed, and suddenly feel the visceral impact of the land. The bleak, seminal Winterreise of Schubert and Müller, their dark ride of the soul, becomes my own dark film, these photos of Tippet Rise: Tippetreise.

A Winter Ride
Against the armageddon of the sunset, the end-of-days’ rage of atomic fires whose source is masked by dark hills, lumbering black clouds stalk the land. They don’t hover in the sky. They’ve come down to earth, foam up like cauliflower from the fields, misshapen mushrooms that walk the orange pastures like Martian spacecraft from The War of the Worlds, vast cumulonimbi that rise up 5,000 feet, outlined against the lofty mothership of cloud which crowds the entire sky. The horizon is so large in Montana that it usually has room for four or five competing weather systems, but today the region is socked in, probably for hundreds of miles around the Yellowstone ecosystem. Giant sheets of rain sweep the drumlins, riding towards us as fast as the wind that drives them. Rain funnels reach down like arms to the hills, seven of them supporting the sky like tornado stems. None of this is normal. The sky is surreal, dangerous.

I have seen these spouts over the Pacific, flying between the Hawaiian islands. Here’s a poem that, rather than looking up at the stems of these vapor flowers, looks down on them from a plane.

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How lofty clouds impose
Their shadows on a distant sea,
Where flaring cirrus throws
Its weight around with gravity,
Planting on the ocean’s glass
Pantomimes that seem the same
As what we see on country grass
Or shone on fields with perfect aim,
A commonplace phenomenon
On lazy summer afternoons:
Of transparent sky and beaming sun -
Meadows peopled with the heavens’ ruins;
But, looking down from
Where the racing grades are matched,
We see that nature’s copies come
With certain misty strings attached,
As our higher point of view
Shows a smoky sort of light
Against the water’s background blue
Like a loose tail on a kite,
But blurry and shimmering, skew,
Like a moving strand of sun,
Umbilicals that jibe
And coil below the plane
And link these flowers to their base,
Although in fact the opposite is true
(As plants their higher masters trace,
And water fakes what water vapor drew),
The world so upside-down here
That our 737 seems to swim
In a waving cor/ he/sphere
Like fish in an aquarium;
But still, it’s good to see -
If only when the lowly eye
Stumbles on infinity -
That the roots of earth are in the sky.
Distant meadows and groves hide behind the mist like Romantic paintings. Barns soften against the land. Behind the mountains that block our valley, higher, snow-lined peaks loom darkly up in high basins.

Graupel pelts the car as we drive, melting on the windshield into legs of precipitation. But we have seen the bear prints that hit the glass before the wipers eliminate the evidence. All around the house drops of something more than rain patter on the roof. The wood of the barn is dark with moisture, dark as the sky with the coming winter. We make our own myths out of this Dostoyevskian lowering, as we used to make paper snowflakes with our children on ski vacations.
PAPER SNOW
on my father’s death

January skies can bend
Like a wrinkled paper sheet,
Snow clouds doubled end on end,
So their opposite directions meet:

Just as scallops on the drapes
Form dimensions from a pleat,
Or the way a blizzard knits warm shapes
Out of layers of sleet,

So we scissor shadows into light
And cut our profiles on the sill,
Twisting evenings into night
Beside the window’s frozen grill.

From little more than pages
We sketch convincing fakes
In thin, beginning stages,
Of fathers, dolls, or flakes

That we now unfold to show,
Sprung like frost from last night’s snow,
And hang up finally on the stair
To line the walls with cardboard air.
The skies have been filled with sun devils, parhelia, glories. Harbingers of the descending sky ice crystals fill the evening air. Filter the moon through water drop facets which have to be precisely slanted at twenty-two degrees to produce such prisms.

Interestingly, twenty-three degrees is the angle of repose, at which snow clings to a slope. At any greater slant, it slides. Our lives would appear to be controlled by these precise equations hidden in snowflakes, or buried in plain sight in a halo. As Martin Rees points out in Just Six Numbers, if certain formulas varied by even a thousandth of a point, galaxies would not form, we would not exist. These human-friendly equations govern the most mysterious parts of the universe, such as gravity and magnetism, about which we understand very little. But as vague as they seem, the rules that govern them, just out of our sight, just around the corner of the horizon, are precise. In other universes, where the rules are possibly different, people would not exist. So our own cosmos is almost premeditated, calibrated to produce, at the far end of precisely detailed algorithms, us.

The sleet rhymes with the feeling of sky and night, and strikes an inchoate chord in us.

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RIME

snow pours down in tufts
and settles in the field,
erasing all the river bluffs
and penciling the windshield
with its latticed flakes,
coupled in the massing skies
to cover up our cold mistakes
with the small disguise
of clouds, blank as paper
in the wordless dreams
whose microscopic crystal vapor
underwrites our cosmic schemes,
agreeing on a human flow
before it appears to us as snow.
The rules of winter also produce Currier & Ives snowscapes, snowglobes with flakes swirling around ice-skating children, dressed in bright red and green Christmas clothes. Adolescent Christmas presents.
embroideries of the sky
rootless in the glare
drifting down in dyes
shaken out of air
branches bowed
gentled by the trade
of leafy draperies
for the drifting braid
and frayed solutions
of the globe
suspended in the breeze
the day resolved
its robe
in lifeless freeze
its spring destroyed
by empty canopies
summers fading
settling in a void
where skaters
lightly under limbs
glide with furls
and crescents greyed
in the tumbling shade
a world bent
by crystal traceries
ornate as presents
under Christmas trees.
But behind the benign portraits in icy lace, smoky evening blizzards in
by bottles in endless groves advance, howling supercells of unimaginable
power, uprooting trees until none of the land here has anything at
all on it. Nothing can grow here, except spurge, whose roots descend
fifty feet underground.

While the coming of winter is romantic, anticipatory, the arrival of winter is
disturbing, nauseating, frightening, a horror movie with winds that pull off
roofs, gales that sweep mountains of snow into valleys so that roads and
sheds disappear. Ranchers know to build their headquarters shelter by
knolls, but a way out from them, where twenty feet of snow regularly is
broomed down into vales. You build in the lee of hills, but also away from
the raging snow mounds that suffocate horses, that strangle cows. There’s
plenty of room in Montana to site buildings out of view, out of harm’s way,
out of the weather.
Like the muskrats that are busy accumulating provisions of sticks and reeds, you bring everything into the barn, so the pipes of the tractor aren’t frozen solid. You plug the ignition into a warming wire, which wraps flat around it. But that doesn’t help the hoses, the tubing, the metal levers which are still frozen all winter, which no presumptuous key can fire up. Without the barn, nothing starts until late spring. The monsters are upon us. It’s too late to run, to change your mind. Winter is here, and you are committed to it.

Only the ferrets seem to go about their bitter business without giving a thought to the coming sparseness.
There will be spasms of normalcy, of late fall sun, of grasses that stretch in the temporary warmth, snow having been blown away by the Chinooks. But then the revenant returns. The sky howls out of the burning clouds, the light collapses onto the glass. For six months, nothing grows. Nothing moves. No one leaves the leaking sieve of the house. The snow demon descends, and darkness reigns. This is not the exquisite Sehnsucht, the nostalgia for a cool breezy afternoon with s’mores bubbling around a log fire in the Norwegian stove. This is Stephen King. No room for error. The Erl-King will take your family. Run to the coziest part of the house, and tremble under the covers as the cold drifts under the doors, the walls buckle with drifts, the TV turns to static.
One day the world will return. School, dancing, parties, friends. But not now. Now you have been locked in the freezer. The day has disappeared. If you aren’t as tough, or as desperate, as you think you are, you had better, the first time you sense even a partial thaw, move to Boca. The world of AstroTurf, of indoor-outdoor carpeting, of Carl Hiaasen, of Elmore Leonard. Because this is the Terror. The beast outside the door. The night fires of the cannibal sky.

The wind makes a lonely sound around the eaves of the house. It tries to get in like the mice. It streams the doors, blasts through the weather-stripping on the windows, sneaks under the doors. Clumps drop from ski lifts, until it snows in our unconscious, in our sleep.
Snowdrops

Great archipelagos up high,
Satellites of snowfall on the trees,
Orbiting our island in the sky
And suddenly unleashed by breezes,
Fall slowly through the air
Like exploding galaxies of white,
Floating past our lift chair
To land on pillows for the night,
Engraving in the shadows on the ground
Replicas of their former world,
Planets that our wind has downed,
Sculptures that the earth has hurled
From, suspiciously, a tree limb
To the winter’s passing floor
To advertise an old museum
Behind the forest’s open door.

A Winter Ride
The countdown to winter is Romantic. We make the blackened boughs and bowing drifts into our own myths of Christmas, of crystal bowls where idyllic German villages are inundated with magic at the shake of a wrist.
SNOW ROOM

Shake the little plastic dome
And Hansel and bucolic Gretel
Disappear in miniature foam,
Pseudo flakes that come to settle
Over leafy PVCs
Which our childlike make-believe
Wants to see as storm-tossed trees
On the verge of Christmas Eve,

A white-out as an act of will,
Not much different than the world
Currently outside our window sill,
Except that what is therein swirled,
Although invisible, is genuine,
Or at least we’re inside looking out,
Whereas being outside looking in
Leaves some room, perhaps, for doubt.
Whichever side of the window you’re on, real winter hasn’t yet arrived. You can still go outside. The dusting on the yellow aspens is tragedy without tears. But deep winter, when it comes, can be desolate. No one really wants to go outside at 40 below zero. Everything blows away, including the snow. The Montana windscape around the Beartooths has been in a gradual descent to desert for hundreds of years. In 100,000 years, sand and silt will be the only things left on the land. There are pines in the sheltered swales, but nothing up on the rolling hillocks except the occasional blasted krummholz. The foothills still have trees, for now, stands that have survived the wildfires and the beetles.
And when the vast cosmic gales come whistling down the canyon to seal the fate of the warm world, to seal the last of the seared leaves in the cryogenic coat of immortality, then the doors are closed on idyllic picnics, on carefree treks, on spontaneous concerts in the high alps. The summer is immortalized by cold, bronzed in blowing dirt and sheets of ice. The planet freezes us to save us.
ICEMAKER

Just before light,
Dark boughed nightmare
Stood in sky
Rime in air
And void made real
By ice somewhere,
Ghosts made flesh
By godless cold,
The whole world
Turned to mesh
By the pure abstract
That gives us white
And black.

Gorges in the mist,
Heavens abyssed,
Chiaroscuro
Roams the dawn
And outlines snow
In sepiachrome
That at daybreak
Disappears,
Overwhelmed by sights,
The sun too sheer,
Too full, to see
The freeze invisible
In a smear of lights.

A Winter Ride
Snow muffles animals from the cold, nuzzles ferrets, bears, and moles alike. The snow forest descends, the cheatgrass bleaches into frost spokes. Krummholz hardens its roots against the freeze. The sun slinks along the horizon, conserving its ascendance for spring. Days shorten.

I’ve always felt that when it snows, even cities turn into countrysides. My favorite place in New York City is Central Park during a snowstorm.
I never think of cities in a way that’s real — so much twisted steel and blackened spaces swirled like skin on skeletons, wrapped around a thousand muntins, too dark for glints of grace, or the soft round shadows of a young girl’s face —

but tonight, the vast impassive robots lost in mist and curled with snow, the world rises up around the blots of grey,教训 over all the glare with miracles of air made flesh and sky come down to bless our base and careless race —

and splintered from the dim and linking carapace, from aliens in human clothes, the dwindling, low, but electric flow of space appears at last to mask the engine of our frozen past with flake and lace, and the fog and white of growing storm our monstrous sin, our metallic grief, disappears into a warm and briefly finite place.

A Winter Ride
It will soon be too cold to snow. Only the wind is free, scouring the naked land, whistling and roaring, slapping roofs and entering houses through unseen gaps as though there were no walls. Fallen leaves leach the soil, creating podzol. Here only tundra and lichen woodlands can survive the acid land.

The landscape is frozen as it is, ready to thaw in the late spring just the same as it always was. The same blades of bent-grass, the same dips in the tundra, the same swales in the meadows carved out by melt-water. One day the heartbreaking summer we take for granted will return, its pennants flying in the trees, the needles of its trumpets glistening on the breeze. It’s hard to believe, this fish tale of rebirth and triumph, in the early days of the eternal Fishtail winter, which for more than half the year, after only a few months of growth, display of fireworks, will cloud the land with fog and impassible drifts. Lavish summer has been the exception to the desolation of a blank universe, which is more than 99.999% empty space. If you remove the placeholder space from our bodies, everyone on the planet would fit in a sugar cube. As Hamlet said: “O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.”
Entropy is energy divided by temperature. It is the laziness of the void. Once begun, it is irreversible. Entropy in action looks a lot like winter. Nothing moves except the bleaching sun.

Beaten down by the long winter until we no longer believe in spring or its recuperative powers, each year we are as fooled by the first blades of grass that peel out of the seemingly endless snows as we are continually surprised by the resilience of the human spirit, despite the sudden reversals of spring.
SNOW SHADOWS

Our valley just was springing back
From winter's crippling despair,
A planet hidden in its snowpack
Blazing better orbits in the air,
When a storm erased those starlike schemes
With an importunate encore
Of last month's crystalline extremes:
The world returned to what it was before,
Flat and grey and destitute,
Forests frozen in the act
Of growing summer fruit,
Their field day frosted but intact.

But the land was tired of the cold,
And the sky's ecstatic pursuits
Bit by bit took limpid hold
Of the fragile but persistent shoots
And finally wrung out ice's glare
From the morning side of every tree
(As the light was concentrated there),
Leaving on the dark side the debris
Of the desperate, passé storm,
Spared from melting by the shadow
Which sun itself had given form,
A picture of the tree in snow.

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Saddened by the betrayals of winter, almost unbelievably, a butterfly flew in front of me, the first butterfly of the spring, emblem of death and betrayal in Thomas Mann and Vladimir Nabokov, and yet the harbinger of life.

The First of May this year was a day when snow turned into fields, when fields and snow shared equal honors, half white, half hay. As glaciers carve fields initially from hills, so fields are carved by sun each summer from glaciers. Snow thousands of years ago makes fields what they are, and then each year repeats the miracle.
SPRING SNOW

TV said the winds were mild -
Prognosis clear: no hint of snow,
Just April and its sun-dripped nodes,
Winter's dirty garbage piled
Up by the sides of roads,

A planet too much in the know,
Too sylvan, too committed to the spring
For such backward steps, although
Sky this silver seems as latent
As my childhood years ago,
When snow was just an accident.

But now, of course, the air squalls
White with cloud, visibly particulate,
Flocc'd with flakes so small
They slip into the wood like sprockets
Past which a movie moves.

The way that stick men
Flicker on a sheet proves
That simple steps can blend
The iced and shaken liquor
Of the hand's atomic beat.

No wonder that the skies
Caught our satellites
 Entirely by surprise.
 Most ordinary nights
Reasonably keep such swirls

From us, those that seem
Useless to the human world;
But now and then a dream
Shakes the sleep and hurls
It into steam and pearls.
Broken with the fissures of cold winter, the crevasses of expectation, the earth is ready for the cracks opened up in the snow by the spring sun: the fissures of winter become the melt lines of spring, little arroyos in the snow. We become part of the storm: its sleet sifts our emotional states like sleet through the sieve of the sky.
SNOW SUN
Down blowing hills and broken skies
The future of our meadow flies
The history of our landscape runs
Through Christmases of snowing suns
That freeze in place the Kodachrome
Of our snow globe’s swirling home,
An igloo where the floating frost
Catalogues the winters lost
(The irreversible parentheses
Of years more desolate than these),
Desperate human storms and rifts
Which the brilliant blizzard sifts
Through chasms and through sieves
Where the coming summer lives.
The long hibernation of the bulbs produces brighter, hardier flowers, ready for the high mountain air. Like peeling our gloves off in spring at the end of the ski season, a flower stalk grows out of the hard soil. Our fingers warm like children in the sun, and we emerge as meadows do at last from volcanos, as eager as babies to face the lighter world.
SNOWFIELDS

Our alpine bowl that glaciers made
From weak spots in the molten rock
Now shares the spotlight with a blade
Of grass, growing from the sudden shock
Of sun that carves a spring
As well as fissures in the snow;
Grabs that made our valley ping
All winter on this high plateau,
Summer buried with the flue,
With all its seeds of love and birth -
But today the fruits of holding grow,
Secrets that we peel from earth,
Flowers that the waiting season yields
As mountains turn today to fields.

A Winter Ride
A Winter Ride
About the Author:

Peter Halstead studied piano with Vladimir Harvis in summer camp, Russell Sherman in Boston, and Irma Wolpe in New York, and organ with Charles Courboin at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York. He spent much of his early life traveling in Asia, Europe, and the Caribbean, and has played concerts in the Himalaya and the Chugach.

With his wife Cathy, he is a co-trustee of the Sidney E. Frank Foundation, which funds projects in the arts, education, and climate change. They are also co-trustees of the Tippet Rise Foundation, and co-founders of the Tippet Rise Art Center in Fishtail, Montana.

Cathy and Peter have two wonderful daughters and two adorable grandchildren.