



# A WINTER RIDE

PETER HALSTEAD







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ESSAY & POETRY  
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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 winds), 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 fables which seem, around a campfire, to evoke the shudder of things we have actually noticed.







It is through these equivalents, these shadows, these eidolons, 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.









## FALL

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 reared up some six 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.







## SNOW POINT

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 eye,  
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 feel  
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 race 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.







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 lugging 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 stairway. 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 hair 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 freeze

Expectable  
Antitheses:  
The snow like leaves  
Drifts down the iced-  
Up sheathes of mid-  
May's fleshy sleeve  
Like a silent  
Acolyte: a  
Parentheses  
On what the wry  
And happily  
Vegetable  
Eye predicts when  
That complacent  
Chloroplastic  
Frieze that woody  
Seasons slowly  
Weave around us

Makes believe, this  
Aphid green and  
Limp-leafed eve, in  
Cinematic  
Congeries of  
Fahrenheit, whole  
Swirls and fibers  
Of the sudden  
Winter sleet that  
Leaves behind it,  
As it teases  
Out the pinnate  
Creases from the  
Summer's innate  
Heat, just those  
Perfectly white  
Pieces as 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 cowl-like 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.







#### 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.







## WINTER

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 foreshadowing 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 Hallowe'en 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.







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 firn and rime, graupel and sleet. 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 meltholes, and siguliaksraq, crystals which form just before the ocean turns to ice. Jules Verne's novel *Off on a Comet* has a scene where 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 connection to the starry 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).







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 sun unfurling from a log, snow is darkness unwinding from a cloud, as crystals sublime 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 closer 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.





## WINTERREISE

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 I 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*.











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.



## CLOUD STEMS

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, alive,  
Like a moving strand of rain,  
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 coral hemisphere  
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 layerings 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, parhelions, 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.





## 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.





SNOW DOME

embroideries of the sky  
rootless in the glare  
growing out of cloud  
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  
dissolved  
in lifeless freeze  
its spring destroyed  
by empty canopies  
summers fading  
into history  
settling in a void  
where skaters  
lightly under limbs  
glide with furls  
and crescents greyed  
in the tumbling shade  
a world bent  
by crystal tracteries  
ornate as presents  
under Christmas trees



But behind the benign portraits in icy lace, smoky evening blizzards lit by bonfires 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 wheat, 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 glaze. For six months, nothing grows. Nothing moves. No one leaves the leaking sieve of the house. The snow demon descends, and darkness rages. 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 strains 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.







## SNOW DROPS

Great archipelagos up high,  
Satellites of snowfall on the trees,  
Orbiting our island in the sky  
And suddenly unleashed by breeze,

Fall slowly through the air  
Like exploding galaxies of white,  
Floating past our skilift 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.



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  
Steel 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 flakes,  
The freeze invisible  
In a smear of lights.





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.



## BLIZZARD

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, towers  
over all the glare  
of distress and rot  
with miracles of air  
made flesh and sky  
come down to bless  
our base and careless  
race -

and splintered from the dim  
and slinking 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 in the fog and white  
of growing storm  
our monstrous sin,  
our metallic grief,  
disappears into a warm  
and briefly finite place.







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 joints 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, of display, of luxuriant 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 slouching 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.



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: it 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,  
Cracks that made our valley ping  
All winter on this high plateau,

Summer buried with the floe,  
With all its seeds of love and birth -  
But today the fruits of hiding grow,  
Secrets that we peel from earth,

Flowers that the waiting season yields  
As mountains turn today to fields.







# A WINTER RIDE

Essay, Poetry and Photography: Peter Halstead

## About the Author:

Peter Halstead studied piano with Vladimir Padwa 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 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.

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