Winter

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol11/iss1/8

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I picked up the phone and she said, “Hi.”
“Hi, how are you?” I asked, recognizing her voice.
And then she said, “I’m leaving now. I’ve got to go get gas and then I’ll come over,” her voice anticipatory and out of breath.
I said, simply and inarticulately, “Okay.”
I put down the receiver, my stomach falling along with my hand towards the cradle. The only sound was the hum of the heater floating somewhere in the room. I knew for sure that I would never hear the sound of her sweet, beautiful voice again.
And I felt I needed to write it down. As the words fell over the page, sprawling inelegantly, I felt them damning me, and, as if by the very writing, damning her too. Damning her never to reach my house; damning her voice to silence. And my face flushed with those thoughts.

There is a nothingness that is a person’s car trip, even across town. At first, only a voice on the phone, speaking words of expectation as to when she will arrive at your house. And from that point until you actually hear the knock, once or twice, and open the door to reveal a smiling face, she is lost in the nothingness of which only she is aware. You cannot see her driving along the highway in the soft, silently falling snow; you do not see the unsmiling, though not unhappy, face. Who knows of her actual existence in that exact moment except perhaps God? The other people in their cars, themselves lost in white nothingness, do not know her. To them she is just another car driving alongside, but meaning no more or less to them than they to her.

And it only changes when the car, no, the person in the car next to her forgets to check the blind spot on his left and changes lanes only to hear that crunch of metal, possibly a horn if she is fast enough, that foretells disaster. Only then are they more than cars traveling on the same road on the same wet night. Only then does the nothingness burst apart and become flashes of sparks as her car screeches and scrapes along the cement divider, itself already marred by the black lines of past disasters. The nothingness becomes flesh and blood, metal and glass and plastic, light and darkness; brash, arrogant color carelessly splashed across a canvas of black night and white snow. Then the nothingness is neatly fragmented into police cars, newspaper and television spots, funeral(s), tears and grief. Only then do I realize that she will not come. I will not hear her soft, low voice say that one word, “Hi,” as it did on the phone a moment ago, drawn out and cut short at the same time. I will not see her eyes sparkle with some hidden, inward light when she sees me, loving something I can’t quite see in myself. I will not hear her say, “I do,” before “God and these witnesses.”

And then the words of a hidden book present themselves: “How can
dust and ashes be proud?" What right do we have to assume we have anything to contribute? That we have brightened someone's day. Or made life more enjoyable for family or friends or strangers. That we have created or destroyed; made or broken; done or left undone; loved or left unloved. Let no one be mistaken: God will not be mocked. The harvester will reap what he has sown.

I sit at the desk in my cold, dark room, head resting in hands. Suffocating worry grabs and almost chokes me. That is the feeling, the feeling of complete helplessness, that drives many to suicide. Who wants to live in a world where one cannot control the environment or circumstances or what will happen to loved ones? We all know that it is not possible, yet at certain times we are still driven into that deepest despair, which is not so far removed from hope. This waiting causes me to pace the room, speaking curses intertwined with prayers. I grab my hair and furiously rub my scalp back and forth, as if trying to clear my head of the cobwebs that 3:00 a.m. brings. Now, lying on the ground as still as possible with shut eyes, I stare into the darkness that lies, unknown to her, behind my eyelids. Cold air flows freely in through the open window, pausing only to brush its airy filaments induced imaginings, I stand again and return to the wooden chair at my desk and lean it back against the ugly couch that sits against the wall. Glancing at the yellow glow of the numbers on the clock radio, I see not 3:00 a.m. as I had imagined, but only 8:23 p.m.

This reminds me of times that I fall asleep during the early evening. Those are the times when I wake up in a sweat at 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. and, thinking it is really 7:00 or 8:00 in the morning, I throw the sheet and blanket off and jump out of bed, heart beating faster than it should. Trying to remember where I left my clothes—drawer or floor?— I realize, with relief, that it is really night and I do not have to get ready for the day.

I wonder, then, if introspection is more a curse than a blessing, always analyzing one's unseen self, as if under a microscope, to find what may or may not be there. Is it always something truly unknown that is found? Another facet of the diamond, so to speak? Maybe not a diamond but an agate, rough and knobby—until it is cut and, bleeding, it reveals its beauty. But maybe it is nothing more than a piece of charcoal that is found, having written black obscenities on whitewashed walls that only remain until the next rainfall.

Winter has come and it is winter that causes this surreality to descend. It rarely snows here, but it is not abnormal for the bitter cold to take control of the ground like some ancient warlord, merciless. The ignorant wind will blow through the trees and continue on its lonely path, tossing stray paper and fallen leaves across the street.

Winter is a strange time; it consists of hard liquor and cigarettes, of divorce and adultery. These are romantic in their darkness, like great adventures and great wars are romantic. But what of one who has not experienced great tragedy? What of one who was entirely happy and content? But romantic conceptions become not quite as elusive within winter walls.

And then there is an aloneness that comes only in the winter. But aloneness and loneliness are not the same: This aloneness feels saturated and inundated with smoothly tangled cigarette smoke, like the labyrinthine hesitancy of an angel's hair. It is the aloneness of sitting on a porch, watching the mist rise from the long grass, leaving the brittle frost to fend for itself. It is the aloneness of that one thought which no one else would understand, were it to be shared. You smile to yourself over your personal discovery of some new truth, but you cannot share it without receiving a nervous laugh or a blank stare in return. It is also the aloneness of that certain nearly indescribable feeling which might be contentment in disguise: to be alone and utterly un-lonely. The sky is harder in the winter, not at all like the soft velvet of the summer sky. It seems to be polished onyx, black and hard. Those silver stars are pieces of glass embedded in the onyx, and I fear that if a star did fall, it might cut me open. The winter sky is clarified, like turning up the magnification on a microscope. The sky itself seems farther from us in the winter, and thus it is clarified.

Winter is full of the low sounds of an iciclic near-dissonance. It is not summer with its jangle and shimmer, and it is not spring with its cool symphonies. It is not even autumn with its multi-colored harmonies. Winter is all minor key hongs and harmonicas that send shivers down your spine. Winter is the tune that is at the same time both new and familiar. It is both numb and expectant.

And now my mind finds its way back again to the task at hand. It finds its way to the thoughts that chilled me in the first place. I am shaken from my momentary sabbatical and once again thinking now, only, of her. I do not know how long it has been, but it seems like I have been in this position of immobility for more than a few hours, knees locked in position and neck as if it had never moved. Her face appears in my head, surfacing in all the places we have been. I now know that if she were never to come back, I would be a prisoner. How can one visit the places where ghosts reside? And to do so willingly? To deliberately revisit the skeletons that hang neatly in your closet, like so many dusty Sunday suits? I do not think that such strength is within me. I feel that I would lay down and never rise. How easy it would be for a body to waste away, the metabolism slowly eating the fat and muscle from the inside out. But, perhaps, it would not be so easy. One's body does not give up so easily as one's mind. And maybe one's soul does not give up quite so easily as one's body.

The knocks (there are three) on my door erase all thought like the sun is really 7:00, 8:00, and, thinking it, now know that if she were never to come back, I would be a prisoner. How can one visit the places where ghosts reside? And to do so willingly? To deliberately revisit the skeletons that hang neatly in your closet, like so many dusty Sunday suits? I do not think that such strength is within me. I feel that I would lay down and never rise. How easy it would be for a body to waste away, the metabolism slowly eating the fat and muscle from the inside out. But, perhaps, it would not be so easy. One's body does not give up so easily as one's mind. And maybe one's soul does not give up quite so easily as one's body.

The knocks (there are three) on my door erase all thought like the sun burning through a winter morning's mist. I rise, heart striking the inside of my chest (I can see my shirt rise and fall with each beat) and blood rushing to my brain. I walk to the door and turn the handle and: She is there, like the fulfillment of an intricate dream that one does not remember having until some word, some smell, some sound brings it all to the front of the mind, like waves crashing and breaking on black rocks.