

Five Pines

As I write I have lit a handmade pine-scented candle.

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It has been snowing nonstop. We are in liminal space. The routines of work and school have been suspended; we forget about alarm clocks, bedtimes. For days, my children stay in their pajamas, wearing snowsuits over them when they go outside. We build forts inside and out. For days, I see most of my neighbors, bundled, shoveling, helping stuck cars. Inside, every flat surface stamped with our hot cocoa mugs and the front room draped with gear in various stages of drying.

At night I walk. There is a quiet only a thick layer of snow can summon, a quietness of sound and movement. The sharp clear smell of snow is nothing I can describe but feels like calm. I walk taking in the whiteness everywhere: in the crooks of tree branches, pyramiding precariously on a bicycle seat. I cannot help but think of a line from e.e. cummings, “the snow carefully everywhere descending,” for the snow seems precise in how it lands just so.

Under the cone of a streetlight, I look up, now inside a shaken snow globe. Swirling bits of white ping my cheeks, catch in my eyelashes. With my head thrown back, I open my mouth; stick my tongue out like a child.

When I grow weary of streetlights-for they are unnecessary now, garish-I walk to a park. I step off the sidewalk into a field and pause: there is a deep mantle of

undisturbed snow as far as I can see. Because the sky is inky blue black, it is incomprehensibly bright. I begin to walk toward what has been my destination all along. The quiet is more palpable in this expansive field, broken only by my boots crunching a path.

As I walk farther away from streetlights and houses, a small panic flits through me. No one knows where I am or will hear me scream. The snow is too high for me to run fast. The snow-concealed stray bushes are now suspect, sinister in their intent. Images from *The Shining* and *The Grey* replace e.e. cummings.

I am immersed in the loveliness of newly fallen snow but am unable to fully relinquish myself to it. This drive to seek beyond the surface of things, of imagination, sometimes fabricates menace where there is none. I press on in the only way I know how: acknowledging fear and inviting what it blocks to surface.

At the far end of the field is a stand of five pines. I look up, taking in their height, fully expecting them to come alive like ents. Forming a loose semicircle, their horizontal branches reach for each other like arms around shoulders. I pause outside the arc they form.

Around the bases of trees, I am surprised by animal tracks. Again *The Grey* jumps to mind and again fear pounds through me. But I did not walk all this way through snow in single digit weather to turn back because of imagined fears.

Inhaling, I step inside. Together, the branches have formed an umbrella so the ground here is barely dusted with snow. I glimpse a scattering of pine needles and cones as I go to my favorite tree. I lean against the trunk.

Encircling it with my arms, they cannot possibly touch. I feel the smooth jagged bark against my cheek, marveling at what different beings we are. Trees exude a stillness of their own, astonishing when one considers life internally pulsing from root tips through trunk and branches to crown and externally articulating in sap, bud, flower, fruit and leaf. I breathe in what the tree gives and exhale what the tree receives, mindful of my dependence. It is restful, this hugging a pine in a snowy field, breathing. Gradually I realize the desire to remove my shoes.

This is church.

This is sacred ground infused with spirit if only we are willing to revere it.

I step away and scoop snow with my glove. Communion, consecrated by deeming it good. The dry powder dissolves coldly in my mouth. I am aware now that I am thirsty and the snow is quenching. This too is church: simple human need met by elemental provision in the presence of spirit.

Tears sting my eyes. I am humbled and grateful.

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As I write I have lit a handmade pine-scented candle. Because the wax has been toyed with, the wick is somewhat buried. It flickers dimly. But the flame will melt the wax enough to burn brightly.

~ Mary Silwance

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