

Poems (in Winter) of Endurance and Celebration



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Materials developed for WordSPA by Kim Langley, M.Ed.

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Snow

Snow,
blessed snow,
comes out of the sky
like bleached flies.
The ground is no longer naked.
The ground has on its clothes.
The trees poke out of sheets
and each branch wears the sock of God.

There is hope.
There is hope everywhere.
I bite it.
Someone once said:
Don't bite till you know
if it's bread or stone.
What I bite is all bread,
rising, yeasty as a cloud.

There is hope.
There is hope everywhere.
Today God gives milk
and I have the pail.

By Anne Sexton, from *The Awful Rowing Toward God*. © Houghton Mifflin, 1975.

Shoveling Snow With Buddha

In the usual iconography of the temple or the local Wok
you would never see him doing such a thing,
tossing the dry snow over a mountain
of his bare, round shoulder,
his hair tied in a knot,
a model of concentration.

Sitting is more his speed, if that is the word
for what he does, or does not do.

Even the season is wrong for him.
In all his manifestations, is it not warm or slightly humid?
Is this not implied by his serene expression,
that smile so wide it wraps itself around the waist of the universe?

But here we are, working our way down the driveway,
one shovelful at a time.
We toss the light powder into the clear air.
We feel the cold mist on our faces.
And with every heave we disappear

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and become lost to each other
in these sudden clouds of our own making,
these fountain-bursts of snow.

This is so much better than a sermon in church,
I say out loud, but Buddha keeps on shoveling.
This is the true religion, the religion of snow,
and sunlight and winter geese barking in the sky,
I say, but he is too busy to hear me.

He has thrown himself into shoveling snow
as if it were the purpose of existence,
as if the sign of a perfect life were a clear driveway
you could back the car down easily
and drive off into the vanities of the world
with a broken heater fan and a song on the radio.

All morning long we work side by side,
me with my commentary
and he inside his generous pocket of silence,
until the hour is nearly noon
and the snow is piled high all around us;
then, I hear him speak.

After this, he asks,
can we go inside and play cards?

Certainly, I reply, and I will heat some milk
and bring cups of hot chocolate to the table
while you shuffle the deck.
and our boots stand dripping by the door.

Aaah, says the Buddha, lifting his eyes
and leaning for a moment on his shovel
before he drives the thin blade again
deep into the glittering white snow.

By Billy Collins, from *Picnic, Lightning*. © University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998.

The Marsh in Winter

If you stand and listen,
you will hear the voice.
Reeds sharp as rapiers rasp the wind.
Frost creaks in the trees.
Sunlight, ice-bright, falls from the sky.
Scattered cedars and junipers loom like shadows.
Sheathed in ice, a willow droops heavily
 across the path.

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Driven snow packs the creviced bark of cottonwoods.
Once-hidden bird nests now plainly marked
by a white cap of snow...

Out on the marsh, blue water shows through shifting ice.
Tall brown reeds, slim as dancers, bend in the breeze.
A hundred thousand cattails, each one lit
by the low-angled light of westering sun,
each brown seed head blazing
like the head of a saint.

By Timothy Walsh, from *Wild Apples*. © Parallel Press, 2004.

Those Winter Sundays

Sundays too
my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the
cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently
to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

By Robert Hayden, from *Angle of Ascent* © Liveright, 1975.



The Abnormal Is Not Courage

The Poles rode out from Warsaw against the German
Tanks on horses. Rode knowing, in sunlight, with sabers,
A magnitude of beauty that allows me no peace.
And yet this poem would lessen that day. Question
The bravery. Say it's not courage. Call it a passion.
Would say courage isn't that. Not at its best.
It was impossible, and with form. They rode in sunlight,
Were mangled. But I say courage is not the abnormal.
Not the marvelous act. Not Macbeth with fine speeches.
The worthless can manage in public, or for the moment.
It is too near the whore's heart: the bounty of impulse,
And the failure to sustain even small kindness.
Not the marvelous act, but the evident conclusion of being.
Not strangeness, but a leap forward of the same quality.
Accomplishment. The even loyalty. But fresh.
Not the Prodigal Son, nor Faustus. But Penelope.
The thing steady and clear. Then the crescendo.
The real form. The culmination. And the exceeding.
Not the surprise. The amazed understanding. The marriage,
Not the month's rapture. Not the exception. The beauty
That is of many days. Steady and clear.
It is the normal excellence, of long accomplishment.

By Jack Gilbert, from *Views of Jeopardy*. © Yale University Press, 1962.

Zero Holding

I grow to like the bare
trees and the snow, the bones and fur
of winter. Even the greyness
of the nunneries, they are so grey,
walled all around with grey stones —
and the snow piled up on ledges
of wall and sill, those grey
planes for holding snow: this is how
it will be, months now, all so still,
sunk in itself, only the cold alive,
vibrant, like a wire — and all the
busy chimneys — their ghost-breath,
a rumour of lives warmed within,
rising, rising, and blowing away.

By Robyn Sarah, from *The Touchstone*. © House of Anansi Press, 1992.

The Way It Is

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

By William Stafford, from *The Way It Is*. © Graywolf Press, 1998.

"Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.
Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.
Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love."

Reinhold Niebuhr

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