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Letter to Nancy Steele from Alaska

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LETTER TO NANCY STEELE FROM ALASKA

High above the low, smoky-blue
February clouds, a single-prop plane
whines through the afternoon
toward another falling sun.
The city streets, we with rain
and soft half-melted ice, teem
with weekend traffic. Paradise
is Celsius one degree.

I'm told the ravens here
live ninety years or more.
Unashamed, they congregate
to feast on refuse in the street,
strutting through the gutters
beside booted, scurrying feet,
twisting their scuffed necks
to point one angry haywire eye
at any sign of intrusion
from any passerby.

They long outlast the fireweed
that blazes in the hills,
the handsome magpies with long
delicate tails gliding low
across a thousand summer fields.
They survive on terror and legend
and shout with a cracking voice,
saving their finest songs
for the orchestra of their wings.

Stunted Sitka spruce grow dense
beyond the edge of town. Their limbs
are green, no sign of snow, their trunks
more slender than a thigh.
Here and there, a grove of birch
thrusts ominous

black and spidery boughs
from trunks as pale as cream.
In the moonlight on a clear
cold night they ring
like the ghost of a deathly chime.

Standing in the roadside shadow,
half lost in the shadows of trees,
bewildered or amused, an old cow moose
nibbles her winter grass
watching the rushing traffic
headed for Eagle River
or for Chugiak. Her great ears
slowly turn at a horn or at
a diesel stack. Wide, her nostrils
flare with every massive breath.

The last timid rays of daylight
limp across the peaks. Another plane
falls into night with a shriek.
I remember the insane flat roads
of Iowa, the legends that went sour.
I remember the heat of the south,
the bright autumn-in-Montana tamarack.
The night falls thick and black about me,
cold as a raven's wing. The rented sheets
are cool across my back. I sleep
to dream unsettling dreams, hoping
all these aching, aging bones can make
the next town, somehow, home.