

Fall 1986

## Winter Love

Robert Wrigley

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## Winter Love

*from the diary of D.D. Pye (1871-1900)*

1

They talked about the cold, the cold  
each one felt warm in and believed,  
breath clouds so long before their faces  
when they spoke—months,  
indoors and out—that speech became  
unwieldy, frozen, cloud talk  
and vapors, a rim of ice  
on the lip of the morning blankets.

They made love then, and she rose  
and knelt above the chamber pot,  
a fog of them rising round her thighs.  
He threw back the hides and covers  
that his mist in the cabin rafters  
might meld and mix with hers.  
Love, when they talked, was what  
they said. Love, she said,

and he too, wadding rags in the heaved log  
walls, kindling in the swollen,  
buckled stove. The wood into flames  
unraveling was their music,  
and the low reports outside  
as trees exploded, frozen to their hearts.  
One morning the hens were dead,  
a frost-tufted egg in each cloaca.

2

We know, for all the dead  
weight of winter, they never wept  
to be back in Pennsylvania, but loved, and lived  
on the frozen deer he hauled back  
from the snow-locked meadow, one flank  
here and there worried by coyote,  
hacked away and abandoned.  
He never felt watched in the crystalline woods.

Over years now we see the blunder,  
the misfortune: a gorgeous homestead  
worthless in trapped-out mountains,  
giddy lovers awash in dreams. And winter,  
the steel of it driven through their lives,  
how it took hold when they touched it—  
a kiss of ice in the frozen world  
that held them tighter than they held each other.

Until the day the fire took the cabin,  
when the stove gave way to a last  
over-load of wood and they huddled  
on the tramped-down path to the outhouse,  
warmed in a way they had not been  
in weeks, until that day the diary we read from,  
in his crisp, formal hand, revealed  
only joy, and the color of her eyes.

3

The lovers, see them now, those first few  
miles in a snow so light it is never  
entirely fallen, but a kind of frigid fog  
swirling under the useless sun.

At camp that night, in the deep bowl  
wind-scoured round a fir tree's butt,  
there is terror in his words,  
a darkness malevolent and haunted.

And his love is numbed to stillness  
after violent shivers, her breath fitful,  
obscured to him by the wind-sough above them  
and the rumble of his heart.

He vows to change course. Damn  
the distant town and houses. He knows  
a spring that boils beyond the western ridgeline,  
and if its heat is from hell,

if he must move aside Satan to sit there,  
to lower his love in its curing waters,  
if he must carry her all the snow-clogged miles,  
"then so be it," he will. That is all  
we can read, but for one entry,

one line without date, one  
sentence scrawled dumbly, simply,  
as though the cold at last had killed his will.

4

"She is gone." Only that, and the rest  
of the story, pieced together by those  
who found them, she floating naked  
in the steaming waters, he hung from the spar  
of a spring-killed tree, his diary  
beneath his clothes, frozen there,  
a flimsy shield across his chest.  
Nothing more, but what we imagine.

Imagine the last morning how she could not  
walk, how piggy-back he carried her,  
wading through that sea of snow,  
feeling against his neck her cheek  
foolingly warmed by the touch of him,  
the sweat and grunt and ache of how he walked.  
Imagine his blackened fingers fumbling her  
out of her clothes, his scream

at those same fingers when he held her  
in the heat of the pool.  
How he must have swayed with her  
there, light in his arms  
and caught already in the slow, unceasing turn  
of the current—two lovers  
dancing in the hot and buoyant waters,  
below the cloud of steam that hides their breath.

*Robert Wrigley*