

CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 27 *CutBank* 27/28

Article 33

Fall 1986

Winter Love

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Recommended Citation

Wrigley, Robert (1986) "Winter Love," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 27 , Article 33.

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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