

THE DEEPS

BITMAP winter How many
people live in this house?
Clustering objects indicate
as much as they indict. She's here,
roaming through the rooms
 braced by the white crush
against the panes. She
and the house rattle plenty.
At the crumb-strewn table
she squints to count the colorless
humps parading into the distance
beyond the window like all the times
she's named Not Now. Her breath strikes
like flint in the air, like static
in the pelt of a bear.

HE admires the timber
of his own thoughts reflected
in the text he finds in his hands
and relishes the idea of his mind
surrounding a reservoir, like a forest.
This is the kind of trip he takes,
ambushing the uncanny
coincidence of his own capture.
He sits content. Out into the other room
he flings a few remarks, none
particularly addressed. The luster
of the lamps in each corner illuminates
four distinct paths to his chair.
 Absolutely present.

THE night shifts sinister.
The light from the house leaks out,
pushing into the narrow blue aura
around each window, yellow wan.
After that all color ceases. Each breath
is the breath of preparing to speak.
Each sentence held back an ache to crack
the domesticated shell. It's as if
an illustrator has come through with a fine-
nib pen, to hatch and crosshatch everything.
She raises her eyes to look for the chink
that permits the sudden scent of spicebush
berries and puts out the tip of her tongue
to carry the flavor into her mouth.

LAST January in the bleak
symmetry of a snowy field
they attempted to spoon
some of the daylight into
a specimen jar, collect
the debt winter owed them.
To settle up, if possible,
with a glint or two put by.
A preserve or residue.
In fact, they do this every winter.
They've never needed to use it,
never unscrewed a single jar, gasping
as its wide mouth spilled out,
stupefying them in sudden spring.

Thaw comes when it comes.
They wait.

SHE'S in one room, he's in another
and the environment is total winter.

Why is this important? Because
without boundaries such as rooms
and the barricades of winter and ice

they might mix like unlucky elements
and ignite.

SHE leaves her room to go check on the jars
in the pantry. He looks up as her chair
scrapes the boards of the floor
where he's always been glad there
is no rug. She sort of wants a rug
there, but hasn't bothered. "Listen,"
she says. "Do you hear...?" "Only
the great muffle of layered weather,"
he answers, after a long pause. "The roosting
silence of all but winter's stubbornest creatures,
the slowly advancing groans of spring."
"Yes, exactly," she says. "I wanted to make certain
you were listening to all this noise."

HER speech bubbles trend softly pink
despite her wishes otherwise in the atmosphere
of the cold room. The room is cold
because she let the fire burn down, on purpose
without knowing why. He pokes his head
into the middle room, the deskless room
with a table in it and two upholstered chairs.
“What?” He looks annoyed and she’s glad
about the configuration of his eyebrows.
“Nothing.” She flurries her features
into blank drifts of snow.

HE comes fully into the room.
Now they will really get somewhere.
He hates being interrupted, which is naturally
why she finds so many reasons to break
and enter. After a while, they'll swap tactics
so that he's the one clearing his throat,
or stepping too hard on the third stair,
or dropping something on the tile floor in the kitchen
and letting it bounce. Whoever stage-whispers
Shit! first triggers the rest of the scene.
And the rest of the scene takes the rest
of the night. Sometimes he'll make a mistake
and sometimes she does, and they speak
the same line at the same time,
each having both parts memorized.

HERE are some of the things they've said:
I feel alone even when you are here.
I feel better when you are gone.
I feel the wind has come into the house
because you invited it. I feel myself unraveling
except for this one thick knot I think
you're at the middle of. I think
we should talk about this later. I think you've
said enough already. I feel terrible, I'm sorry.
I don't know how. I want to do better.
I know you didn't mean it. I understand
what you're saying. I want everything
we talked about in the beginning; nothing
has changed. I've changed my mind
about a lot of things. I'm realizing
I could do better. I'm aware you mean it
when you say that. I feel a draft; are you
writing something new? You always
make me laugh.

IN one of the rooms they keep three drums.
In one of the rooms they keep a set of plates
and a set of cups, plus several spoons.
Three forks remain. (What happened
to the others?) In the hallway they've hung
some photographs without frames,
using push pins. Their decorating efforts
are always tainted temporary, perhaps because
they move a lot or often talk about moving,
further and further out. At the end of the hallway,
on the door to the largest room in the house
where they spend most evenings but rarely
mornings, they've hung a map, a portion of a map,
cropped to show only ocean, a vast green
place ridged with mountains, furrowed
with trenches hypothetically deep.

ON a strip of masking tape beneath
the map he has written a caption:
“The ocean covers 72% of the planet
and we haven’t explored much of it.”
Under that she’s affixed a small yellow post-it
that says, “We know more about the surface of Mars
than we know about the structures under the sea.”
They often conduct conversations in this manner.
She keeps the post-its in her pocket.
He wears the roll of tape on his left wrist.
“For instance,” says the note she leaves
on the bathroom mirror, “the spherules
they’ve recently discovered have already been named
blueberries. They are rich in hematite.”
Later, when he is finished shaving he might reply,
“It’s going to take a while to work this out,
so the thing to do is keep an open mind
and let the rocks do the talking.”

:: THE stars like pinhole apertures between them
and what they long to know :: the clouds between them
and the stars :: the falling snow between them
and the clouds :: the house between them
and the falling snow :: and between them
in the house the rooms divided :: and between them
in the rooms the way her breath hangs visible ::

She's trying to remember who described the house
as a dark red bruise. He looks up from his notebook
surprised by the phantom feeling of pine needles
under his palms and under the soles of his boots
as he walks, that thick giving they do.

IN the morning she follows the continuous
strip of tape that leads from the foot
of the bed down the stairs through the hall
across the table into the kitchen out
the back door where she finds her boots
and yanks them on to follow the knee-deep trough
in the snow to the outbuilding where
the door's left swung open where he must
have been working all night to chip this hole
into the clotted ice where there's a metal hatch
open and a ladder going down, down, and on
the rim of the vessel a final strip of tape:

Bon Voyage.

HE'S run out of tape. Pocketless,
she's forgotten her post-its. Anyway,
she has no words with which to wonder
where he's gotten the thing, or ask
where they are going. He thinks
of confessing he doesn't know.
But they do not speak. Loaded
like two rounds in the chamber
of the swiftly sinking bathyscaphe,
they do not interrupt the deep as it approaches.
Almost imperceptibly they beat
to the quickening pings.