

David Dennen
24 May 2006

The Winter I Left

Strip malls, McMansions, half-completed housing developments; piles of dirt and soiled snow. To recall the details of this bleak landscape requires a suspension of the spirit, an admission of the possibility that you may not, in fact, have a soul. But I lived in such a landscape for many long years, and when I do happen to think back on that life, inevitably I see her there, an unexpected spark of life gambling through the wasteland.

It is winter. Most of my memories of her are from the winter months. I drive up to see her; up I-90 across the state line, through several toll booths and miles of frozen plains. My car is filled with all my worldly possessions. She is one of the only people who know I'm leaving; I had asked her to come with me, but I know she never will; my illusions are gone; it is for the best. I knock on the door, the familiar hollow sound.

We are in a graveyard at dusk. There are two long flat grave markers side by side, the size of coffins. We each lay down on one as it begins to rain. We stare into the gray sky, drizzle falling on our faces. When the rain stops, and we get up to leave, there will be two human-shaped dry spots left on the otherwise dampened stones.

She is brilliant: dancers clad all in black, black stockings pulled over their heads, bulges in strange places—a grotesque perversion of the human form—move against each other, around and through each other; they combine geometrically in increasing complexity, while a fiery cello quartet plays; it is ridiculous, but painfully human in its distortion of humanity; the creatures are sad and noble—they war with each other, then lope together from the battlefield, carrying the wounded between them.

I take her to a motel off the interstate. She is still in her dancer's outfit and painted like a whore. The clerk at the desk eyes us suspiciously. She is still excited, post-performance, and because she hadn't expected me to be there. I still don't know what she wants. Dostoevsky once wrote that "inscrutable even to this day are the depths of the feminine heart." One hundred and thirty-some years later I find them inscrutable as well, but still I try to play my part to the best of my ability.

We wander by the lake at night, a lake so vast you can't see across it. To the north, lights flicker from the massive office and apartment buildings that tower above Lake Shore Drive. There must be thousands and thousands of people up there, thousands and thousands of individual lives suspended there in the night sky. We sit on a rock and stare silently out into the void of Lake

Michigan, engulfed in darkness. No light at all comes from the other side; it is as if we are sitting at the edge of the world.

I take the bus home after work, and in the unreal light of the station I see her like a ghost, like she was from some other dimension; but I know when I see this other/same person that there could be other people in the world who might matter. Unfortunately things become worse; so I bury myself in my apartment for a long period of time, reading philosophy from when I wake up in the morning until the time I fall asleep. Hours pass by and somewhere the sun moves across the sky, and I am oblivious to it all. Later I will be waiting. I will do whatever I have to do to get through the next hour, day, week, month. Wandering around the city I love, but believe I need to escape from. The next best thing to death is disappearance; sometimes we are too weak, but I will see through the world. Earlier, after climbing up off the floor, I looked into the mirror and didn't recognize myself.

So this is it. This is the last time I will ever see her. I came here because I was leaving, and I was alone. I want to touch her, to touch someone, to feel like I am real to someone; I want to believe that someone will miss me, will know that I am gone. But she pushes me away. Perhaps she doesn't know that this is the last time I will ever see her or talk to her. Perhaps she is already forgetting me, because now she is ignoring me for her friends. We are painting. I paint the Man from Underground pacing and pacing. Finally I get up to leave. It is time for me to go. "Are you leaving?" "Yeah." "Call me when you get there, because I get worried..." "Sure." We embrace. I know I will never call. I will drive. I will drive across frozen plains and ice-covered mountain roads. I will drive through snow storms and nights of endless darkness. I will drive and drive, forever leaving, forever trying to forget. But there is something every traveler comes to understand: no matter how far away you wander, how fast you run, you are forever condemned to awaken each morning as yourself.

Time goes by so quickly now. I look outside my window and try to absorb the green tranquility of this place. But life is the fool of time, and soon enough I'll be leaving again: leaving behind more work unfinished, more friends I hardly knew. Time will sweep away all my efforts, and all that will remain is a dry patch on a slab of stone where I once lay; but presently the rain will begin to fall again, or the sun will make its way out from behind the clouds, and then that too will be gone.