

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

William Vaudrain
A Fall of Snow

The highway leads out of Anchorage and winds for 359 miles north to Fairbanks. On any given day these roads, first the Glenn and then the Parks Highways, combine to make a beautifully scenic drive with the breathtaking mountains of the Chugach and Alaska Ranges providing the backdrop for the six-hour- or- more trip. Visual overload is a possibility considering all there is to see, including (weather permitting) the majestic Mt. Denali towering above it all at 20,310 feet. I was on one of my annual trips to Alaska during February break, and I had a chunk of time to kill before plans to meet a friend later in the day in Palmer. I figured I'd take a drive up the Parks Highway for a while and see what I could see.

It was too bad that on *this* particular given day in February, the snow had been falling most of the morning, and the color of the day was a dull grey. All that beautiful scenery and wonderful mountains were hidden behind a wall of falling snow.

I had spent an hour heading north crawling along at thirty-five miles per hour, peering ahead into the greyness as the wipers worked to keep the windshield clear of the big, crystalline flakes. I was following in the tire tracks of a military convoy that had passed me just south of Willow. It was most likely coming from Fort Richardson in Anchorage and headed to Fort Greely in Fairbanks, and I was grateful they were headed in the same direction I was. The visibility was limited to thirty or forty yards before the tracks trailed off into a world of grey.

I was somewhere between Palmer and Talkeetna and needed to find a spot to pull over and drain those three cups of coffee I had with breakfast. The snow berms thrown up by plow trucks along the sides of the highway were five to six feet high, and up to that point the occasional rest areas hadn't been plowed out. Another rest area sign loomed out of the falling snow and, straining to see some break in the berm on my side of the road, saw that this one *was* plowed out and just in time. I pulled into the dark green shadow of a grove of spruce trees which offered some shelter from the falling snow. I turned off the engine, got out, walked off into the brush and took care of business.

Once back at the car, I stood there, just looking and listening. I filled and lit my pipe. When I struck the match on the box, I looked at it as it flared up and the sound it made stood out in what had been absolute silence. There were no sounds to hear. No sound of traffic, no birds, no sound of the wind in the trees. Actually, there was no wind at all; this was not a snow *storm*. It was strictly a snow*fall*, a darned heavy, smothering snow*fall*. Couldn't see the mountains, couldn't see the sky, just gray falling silence. Everything was snow covered, and any movement was muted by what had already fallen from above with plenty more still coming down. I noticed, too, the flakes were huge, as big as quarters, light and fluffy. It was as if white silence was falling from the sky. This thought gave me pause and stirred a memory. To break the overpowering hush, I gave a fitting nod to Jack London. I spoke out loud, "It's the *White Silence*", the name of one of London's short stories of the far north.

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The four words filled my ears and challenged the silence, but it was a feeble challenge, and they just hung there, getting frosted with snow until they slowly drifted to the ground and disappeared under more accumulating silence. I spoke no more. I just leaned on the car, enjoyed my pipe and reveled in the total absence of sound for a few more minutes. Checking my watch, I saw I still had an hour until I had to meet my friend. Just enough time to turn around and get there on schedule.

I noticed the snow had started to let up considerably, and there were even a few tatters of blue faintly showing through the ceiling of grey sky.

The harsh “kauk” of a raven echoed down from high up in one of the pines. As it took flight, it sent a shower of loose, fallen snow cascading silently, branch to branch, to the ground. Imperceptibly, the distant whine of an eighteen-wheeler insinuated itself into my range of hearing. As it approached it grew louder, and, as it roared past the rest area, it broke the spell. Just like that, the mood was gone, and I knew I should be too. I tapped the ashes out of my pipe and got back into the car.

I started the engine and slowly pulled out onto the southbound side of the highway. Ahead of me, a shaft of sunlight cut through the thinning cloud cover and pointed the way back to Palmer.