

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

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Scraps from the Journal of a Modern Settler

November 14th

Dead leaves scatter on the fading grass and the monotone sidewalk. The trees still hold much of green and the brown leaves fall with reluctance. When the gust roars down the street from the north or up from the river, and when it veers into the alley and rushes with mad impetuosity, every single thing from flower pot to cloudscraper shivers before hurtling to the ground or staying stubborn in its post. Otherwise it is still and the clouds hang breathlessly above in many heavy layers. The upright cedar bush and the finger-swollen yew bush remain constant in pale green and deep green though the buffeting of dust might erode vibrancy of hue. The blue sky can bring chills even as the sun is splendid; on the other hand, the clouds may portend greater chills but in the end they do not really bring that gelid touch which I expect in every moment.

I have heard expressions of horror about the winter. I believe myself to be prepared adequately in clothing, shelter and alertness. I went out three days ago with bare hands and they were frozen as I returned with shopping bags. I am learning from these incidents. I think I am keen to see the winter.

November 22nd

Yesterday the temperature was 3° below zero and all the city was grim under such a foreboding sky that the whitish skylights on distant roofs must represent the snow that should invariably fall from a thick whirl of cloud. But there is no snow today. The same sky appears but the streets are wet under a persistent shower that will not go away unless everyone has become accustomed to the thought of imminent snowfall. No, this sky will not scatter unless it has brought snow.

A streak of gleaming appears on elongated clouds, the sky is breaking up; then against a stubborn backdrop of deep grimliness appears an *arc-en-ciel* that circumambulates the city although it loses itself in midair. Across the winding river in the bordering distance a copse lights up in the bestowal of a forgotten sun, and the steeples and the chimneys follow suit as if they must lead the way in the lighting of this city.

The streets are still mightily wet and most of the city stays in shadow, for the cloud that is nearest the sun towards the mountain is reluctant to dissipate; nonetheless, almost before the eyes have again looked up, the sky becomes a radiant one and upon the drenched streets and walls sunshine pours in such wise that the city is liberated from the sentence of its hivernal subjugation. As the hour rushes towards the crepuscule, a moon is stamped with an awry posture towards the departing sun.

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December 24th

It remained grey today though it did not snow. The lights of Xmas extend a long way up St-Laurent Boulevard. They stand out warm and strong as twilight gains its ground from around corners and between houses. They stand in malleable curves that hang in twos and threes or they are fixed in rigid turns that contrast mutually in colour. Seeing them next to me trailing almost continuously up the street in scissor perspective, I am filled with the exuberance that comes from prolonged immersion in a festivity, the joy that is also infectious from the simple observation of its celebration. I should like to go into the great stores and behold the milling crowd at sixes and sevens in the tumult of its desperation to purchase the gifts that give its mind relief. Next to moulded and crafted walls of stone that cradle a church or a house in the evening, the lights cling as if in a compact of warmth whereby the plain stone is flush with emerald and rose-pink while the little filaments breathe in the long life of the stone.

January 14th

The first tempest of winter. The evening was full of incessant snowfall and the drifts were mounting. It was so cold that outside the lips froze even with the coils of two shaggy, heavy scarves across mouth, jaw and neck. The eyes and nose were smarting to such length that it became a burden to carry all that dripping water across the face.

The sidewalk was caking over and I could feel moisture at my feet in spite of my thick boots. I know now they are not suitable for this kind of supreme winter and I must look for other boots. Already, I have discarded my woollen mitts for much denser wear.

The snow fell thick and strong all through the day and even the near buildings stood in a haze. Smoke rose from chimney stacks without pause from morning to night. Snow mobiles and snow tractors came into sight more than once, but though the paths were more or less clear, the drifts continued to swell by the minute.

I am not shocked or surprised by the storm though I wonder how long it will go on. The forecast says two more days. I have a sense of the city passing through a natural cycle; nothing is out of order; it is only in the fitness of things that there should be such a fall. Although the city becomes humble in the face of the mighty inclemency of the elements it is still alive and waiting to burst forth with its grasp of the same elements in their less formidable manifestation. There is peace and contemplation in regarding even such a storm from the window and receiving the howl of the wind. There is a prayer, on the part of some, for those who have all the material resources but lack the psychic strength to face a storm with equanimity, for they sense the frailness of their minds and the despairing vulnerability of their selves all the more in this season.

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January 27th

It has snowed heavily in the last two days and I have stayed indoors. I am beginning to realize that a routine has set in for my sleep, my awakening and my writing. This is not entirely a satisfactory pattern of existence. My mind has adopted the day as its period of repose and the night as the time of activity. This inversion of routine has reinforced itself over the course of the few sunny days that followed the storm. I think the signs of its establishment lay in the somnolence that stayed with me even as I kept myself long outdoors and in a refusal to accept that the arrival of the morning was the arrival of the day. I have been staying up longer and longer to read and write under the lamp without caring about possible disruption to a circadian rhythm. It has seemed so natural to work into the small hours in the silence of the night. Anomaly in normal routine that grows as a natural process shouldn't matter since I am not an employee of fixed hours in a concern. The timely conclusion of my own chosen work is my priority.

Nevertheless it is not easy to accept that the night may not offer sleep and the day may bind you in sleep.

February 1st

Today I walked slowly along the foot of the mountain past the monument with a winged angel and then I turned to return down the other side of the road, past the walls of the hospitallers of Saint Joseph. It was snowing lightly and there was hardly anybody around. All the slope that is so grassy and so full of people in the summer is now beset with ever thickening snow that imposes the stamp of winter with more firmness than is really necessary. It sheathes the ground as if it had descended to gather in silent guardianship its own offspring which it is compelled to desert at other times of the year.

From the end of the southern crossing that takes one to that consuming swell upon the foot of the mountain, the dim light seems to play tricks upon the eyes, for the snow can colour itself in an ashenness that announces its grieving or it can spread upon itself a Prussian blue that heaves in the contentment of repose. In beginning to walk up past this sea of silence and white, one is conscious of an immensity that is grim even if it conveys the idea of clinging and protection. One is awakened by the slaps of the flakes in the air and the propulsive fury of winds coming from more than one direction. I embrace the flakes and the wind with a reckless liveliness that I perhaps believe will salve all distress.

February 16th

How it begins one does not know. Perhaps it is created by the actions and thoughts of the live vessel in which it froths and fumes in a silence that might capsize or crack the vessel. Perhaps it rises from the pores and cells within the receptacle as magma bursts through the ruptures in the earth. Does it come on as a natural consequence to a headstrong imagination? Or does it follow a routine that requires it to find a release every now and then?

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Perhaps the moment of its birth was a freak or a caprice for the day. But then it persisted and stood out for more than a few moments. These moments should not matter among all the other moments sensible to the consciousness. But they carried a certain distinctiveness. There is twilight every now and then but this one of today not only brought a remembrance, it also lasted longer than desired. There is no reason. No reason that may be set out to be contemplated as reason. The head is bent low but there is nothing to muse upon. Nothing. Nothing that may be rendered in words or depicted with brush and stroke. I remember being in a world of my own that did not have to do with wonders present to the eye.

I am not tired. I am certainly not tired of the avidity with which I consume the sights that come before me when I go out into the city. I am not spent but I did not reckon with myself. Today, for those moments, the light in the brain was gone and every thing was hanging wilted and shrunk, bereft as if eternally of spark and current. I want to believe the spark will not go away. But something tells me the light is quite likely to remind me of its absence again.

March 14th

The ice, the snow and the hybrid that have clung so steadfast to the city are on the retreat. The sun is gaily prominent. Not that the danger of a snowstorm is finally gone. In the Parc, branches have been rotting into seams of jet under the transparent ice, which itself is cracking up and showing its white substance at the junctures of splits. Where some of the ground is bare, clumps of long yellow leaves of the colour and appearance of straw hold fast to the ground; they show no effect of the press of snow upon them for months, prepared again to expand and flourish in the style of past seasons.

I wake up in the morning but I am bent with what I bear. I try to keep my eyes open but find myself closing them into myself. *The light reminds me of its absence.* I listen to the echoes. Another wave comes and I listen again to the echoes.

April 11th

Leaves are many that are sprouting on the brown earth next to my window, the earth that looks adamant-steel to the eye and bears no witness of the wet mass of marble that hugged it for months. I can make out the beginnings of the *pissenlits* that will flower in the middle of copiously verdant grass and shower forth a barrage of fluff in a few weeks. Everyone is ready to come out into the open. Along the branches of the Manitoba maple and the American oak, colourless buds have formed in the manner of inflorescences, which are more prominent on the latter; they fall to the ground and are crushed, and in their stead dirty petal-like jibs spring out, which will transform into the first leaves of the trees. There came a trilling from somewhere that sounded very strange; it was a spring bird that refused to go away at the height of day, making at even intervals ringing notes in baritone that seemed to come from an ancient and pon-

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derous gong, if not from the revived bellows of an organ. Outside, in the yards and beds, the smaller flowers are showing through, holding close to the earth as if they would go no farther.

A week ago the sky was spotted with a skein of geese returning from the south. They made an advancing milky furrow in the fabric of the azure. They were flying with purpose back to their home.

May 3rd

The mountain lies in advance of the sun, which is lighting up the firmament from behind. The greater halo of the sun looms over the mountain and enacts an intimate ceremony of initiation towards another journey. There is new green upon the mountain; it binds to the soil in clumps and it gleams under the light. One is eager to participate in the journey because it is strongly affirmed. Every ceremony as seen around must be happening for the first time even if one knows it has come many times before. White spirea is tumbling in tresses from bushes and hedges. On the grass the blue petals have deepened enough in colour to shine in their filaments and suppress the verdancy in which they grow; they are contrasted against flowers of equally stark pink and red hoisted in their own beds. Dandelions are thrusting pompously in the grass; the fuzz will blow from their midst in such quantities as not only to make people wheeze but also to imitate elfin mattresses as it settles in downy cushions at the sides of the streets. While it scatters out, the fine, intricate frame in which it was held is cast naked to the wind to be whirled around until it bites the dust. On the sylvan slopes of the Oratory raised by Father André the red maple is turning into its characteristic tinge from a silken pastel blend of orange, yellow and red. With its smooth bark the Norwegian maple is in flower in the presence of lingering yellow buds and leaves beginning to blush to red.

There are young smiling faces that sit still in the sun on a rise and watch the vehicles go along Sherbrooke Street. Next to them bushes are stirring into leaf and colour. They wear uniforms of plaid design. They are school pupils of a college named after the city, which has its premises in an old seminary that was enclosed in a fortress in times gone by. The trees in this location show the lightest but the most resplendent of green as they come down from the mountain, while the sky above emits ripples and creases that seem to have their source in the same mountain. And farther down, as trimmed hedges leaf in brown and yellow in a quiet frenzy, small trees and big plants within enclosed property adorn themselves in sombre tracery and globules of fruit.

Those contented, watching faces make me happy. I guess this is absolutely what I wanted to see after my winter. *The light is not likely to be so easily absent again.*