



On Earth As It Is

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on earth as it is

prayer as story, story as prayer

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photo by matthew simmons

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Lord, the storm woke me tonight, at least, that's what I remember.

Earlier, at nine or ten, while Marianne and I lay in bed, we looked up over our reading glasses, over the foot of the bed, and we watched the wall flex with the wind, the book case swaying—inhale, exhale—as the spittle of snow and ice flecks blinded the windows. She said, "It's getting worse," and I closed my book and removed my glasses and told her goodnight.

Now it's way past midnight and the gusts are muscular. It feels as if your very hand is squeezing our village. The snow and wind hum down our chimney with a tight vibrato. A finger of snow has slipped through the crack between the door and the doorjamb and I wipe it up and roll a towel against the jamb. I relight the stove. Smoke blows back into the house and a few particles of burnt burlap float in from the stove and land on the fur of my slippers. The sack smells of the frozen trout someone dropped off in our parsonage porch, and, had Marianne been awake at this threadbare hour, she would have scolded me for burning the sack; she would have heard the rattle of the windows and she would have scratched a hole in the frost to see out at the blurred streetlights and the vertebrae of drifts down the road, and she would have asked—*Was there no newspaper in the whole house?*—but in the dark I couldn't find any other fire starter. She's right when she says I always settle for the easiest route, choosing excuses over work. Besides, she might sleep through the day again, and if not, she probably won't remember the sack; although, nowadays, the value of a burlap sack is exactly the kind of thing she remembers, while the names of our grandchildren, the year, the propane oven, the post office box number, the typewriter ribbon, the shelves for the cups and dishes and the drawer for the silverware, these things she forgets.

Lord, I see those looks she gives me—those moments of no recognition, or worse, moments of fear. They are fleeting now, Lord, but; I don't know. The fire pops and I listen for Marianne. No sound comes from our room. She hasn't yet stirred tonight, hasn't yet walked to the kitchen table thinking it was time for breakfast. "Marianne," I usually say, "It's three o'clock." "At night?" "Yes, in the morning."

I add another log to the woodstove and scoop the last of the coffee into the percolator. The day might as well begin now. Darkness is all we have. Frosted windows, a leaky doorjamb, yesterday's

coffee grounds lying in a shadow at the bottom of a mug, the mug, which now, in December, looks black instead of its ecclesiastical purple. I miss color. When Marianne wakes up I will tell her, "I miss seeing color." It's not covetise, not exactly, and not discontentedness. We are in winter now. It's just that we both loved color. When we first moved to the tundra we drew pictures of the flowers in our journals and consulted field guides for their names—vibrant names—names, the book told us, of invasive weeds, but the weeds flowered as flowers and we picked them as flowers—fireweed, pepperweed, bachelor's button, hempnettle, hoary cress, fox glove, starthistle—purple, white, pink, yellow. Once Marianne picked some hawksbeard and tucked it behind her ear, and the winged seeds fell from the flower and caught up in her hair and cheek. She smiled, not knowing the spores were on her face, and I suppose I smiled too. Yet, in those days, I always had projects running through my mind and I probably turned around and tossed the weeds and thought about those projects and their very specific issues. Behind me the winged seeds were still on Marianne's cheek, the narrow leaves tucked behind her ear, the yellow petals hung up with the baby hair along her ear. In less than a minute a breeze would blow in from the ocean and the seeds would loft into the air and travel down the slope, spreading out over the expansive flats, where next year we'd maybe pick the flowers of a hawksbeard that had once been a seed on Marianne's cheek.

My slippers are still dusted with the half-burned burlap. The snow has again found its way under the jamb and past the towel and has begun accumulating another small drift. The house shakes every couple minutes. I remove the percolator from the stove. Lord, I used to know what to ask of you, and I asked and I asked, furiously. I prayed for wars, I prayed for alcoholism, I prayed for cancer, I prayed for the right sermons and the right words, I prayed for our son, his wife, the twins, I prayed for each generation, I prayed for every family of the deceased in our village for the past thirty years, I even prayed once for an injured sled dog. It seems, by now, I should have nothing left to say.

Lord, the storm woke me tonight.

Mattox Roesch is the author of the novel *Sometimes We're Always Real Same-Same*.

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