Snowmen

When it snows on Friday, you build a snowman for the first time in your life. There is no snow back in California, but that evening, as you trudge back from the school’s convenience store, plastic bag of instant ramen clutched in one cold hand, the grey-black sky had speckled itself with pale, swirling flakes, and the thinning grass and bald trees are draped in white. Much of the snow is slush, churned to an ash-grey beneath students’ boots. But in the small courtyard next to your dorm there is a precious, pristine patch of white, the scattered boot-prints already filling with snow. And so you set to work there, scraping the thin layer into a pile with your too-thin sneakers, then dipping your fingers into that soft heap.

If you had grown up here, or if you had any friends who did grow up here, you would have known to wear gloves. At the very least, you could have—as your suitemate suggested later—wrapped an extra pair of socks around your hands. But you do not, so instead you reach your bare fingers into the cold, taking freezing clumps of snow by the handful. It’s not like in the cartoons. The snow is not soft, pure, or cottony; instead, the misshapen lumps you create are warped by the crevices between your fingers, and the pristine color immediately tainted by the extra dirt your shoes have churned up from the ground. Your hands soon begin to burn. Needles shoot through your fingers when you dig them into your gathered pile of snow, and pierce into your palms when you pack the snow together. You are forced, between increasingly rushed grabs at the snow, to place your half-formed ball down on a table nearby and rest your hands, waiting for the needles to pass. In those moments of relief, you desperately scrape the water from your palms, knowing that otherwise the wind chill will burn them further.

But you continue. At first, it had been only a passing fancy—wouldn’t it be fun to build a snowman? Just for the novelty? And the moment your bare fingertips first touched the snow, you knew your plan wasn’t feasible. Your breath had crept up and out of your mask and fogged your glasses, turning the world opaque. Nonetheless, you continue. You don’t know what mania has seized you, or what invisible force compels you not to flee to the warmth of your dorm, but you keep digging your nails into the snow. The first snowball you create isn’t big enough and you pack more snow around it. When the snowballs crumble when you try to stick one atop the other, you obsessively rebuild them. Once you have built one small snowman, standing awkwardly alone on that outdoor table, you build two more to go with it.

The sky is pitch-black. Your plastic bag of ramen is decorated in a fine dusting of white. In the distance, you imagine you can hear the laughter of other students, but it is only the wind. You have three small snowmen on the table before you. They are dirty and misshapen and opaque. You do not bother to give them faces, but you do find scrappy little twigs to jam into their surprisingly hard bodies, two for each. With their blank faces and arm-twigs raised upwards, your snowmen look as if they are worshipping something. The golden glow of the lamppost behind their table? The trashcan next to the lamppost? Or, on the other side of their table, you?

You go inside.

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Tonight, your suitemate has some of his friends over. They are polite guests by all means; unlike the people in the suite next to yours, they do not get drunk, yell, or run with thudding footsteps down the halls at 4 in the morning. They buy wine and cheeses and put the leftovers in your suite fridge, free for you to take now. Your suitemate has them over quite often, so you can probably recognize most of them already. Nonetheless, you do not know any of their names.

You do not pay attention to this week’s gathering, since you know that it will be no different from the others. There is a tall one in one of your school’s expensive blue sweaters, laughing at some joke your suitemate made. There is one in a pink dress and one in yoga pants debating some theory you haven’t read. There is one in a denim jacket, one in a leather jacket, and one in no jacket seated in a circle on the floor, discussing some TV show you haven’t watched. Startled by the sudden change in rhythm, you stand there awkwardly for a bit, silhouetted by the artificial golden hall-light behind you.

The half-eaten cardboard container of Chinese food in your hand grows colder and greasier by the second. After a moment, you remember that your suitemate told you about this gathering a few days ago, and enter, embarrassed, and shut the door awkwardly. Your suitemate looks away from his laughing friend for a moment, notices you, and invites you to join them. As he always does. It’s nice of him.

His “feel free to join us” hangs in that golden air, between molecules trembling with laughter and light, in that wide-open space between you two. As always, you decline.

Down the hall into the suite their golden voices drift, then through the crack under your door, bouncing off of your shelves, lighting up your messy desk. In your room with the door shut, the lighting is poor and does not quite reach the alcove where your desk is nestled. You have a window, but you keep the curtain closed. All that lights the purple semidarkness is the blue glare of your computer screen, cranked up far brighter than it needs to be, the bursts of artificial light reflected in your corneas.

There’s a programming assignment due tomorrow, you tell yourself as the strangers laughed outside. You procrastinated it for an entire week already, always putting it off until that never-present “tomorrow,” fearful deep down that you lack the ability to complete it—and now tomorrow has come. You open the provided files and write a few lines of code. Then you tab out and waste the evening watching inane cartoons on Netflix instead. Episode after episode, season after season, always that sickly white “next episode” button—until you can no longer hear the voices outside.

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Outside, though you do not see it, the snowfall grows in intensity. At first, only a sparse powdering of white dusted the dark night sky, a few white flecks swirling against an endless black expanse. The paved footpaths were still slushy, churned to grey liquid by the footsteps of countless hurried students. As night falls, though, the snow keeps coming. One white fleck becomes two, then four, then a hundred. The air, once chilled in its stillness, comes alive with the dance of a thousand snowflakes, whirling the spinning molecules, churning the thick night.

Your snowmen stand stalwartly against the spinning white, their lumpy figures disappearing yet reappearing amidst pale nothing. The grooves of your fingers are frozen in their skin. The shivers of your body are marked in their flesh. Against the whirling winter, you imagine, they are the evidence of your existence. You had thought as much as you pressed freezing ice into their bodies earlier this evening: against the silence of that roaring eternity, they are the proof that you were here.

A gale howls.

There are still cheese wrappers and cracker boxes in your suite’s trashcan, and still unfinished alcohol in the fridge. On your suite’s couch still sits that packet of poetry someone had written, that your suitemate’s friends had read and annotated together. These, you suppose, are your suitemate’s proof of existence. Countless instances of such evidence could be found just across your suite: the blanket with a giant cat’s face he had left on the couch, the kitchen cabinet he had filled with spices, the black boots, now often stained with water from melted slush, that he left lined up neatly by the door. And outside, too: in the classes in which he participated regularly, in the debates he had with other students, in the staff list of the magazine he worked for that proudly listed him as one of them.

And further, too. Across campus, across the world. In every person he’s ever befriended. In every joke he’s ever told someone that they remembered, and still laughed about today. In every book recommendation he made that led to a curious trip to the library a few days later. In that simple ease with which he met people and got them to like him, got them to remember him. Got his name written across the world. And you know that, even if the snow fell in sheets and swallowed him tomorrow, somehow he would persist. In the marks he had left on the world, in those cheese wrappers in the trashcan, his existence would be confirmed.

Today, when you cut across the snow-covered grass to get to and back from class, your sneakers left winding black footsteps across the brilliant white. Tomorrow, you will wake up barely on time and do the same thing. With not enough time for breakfast, you’ll rush to class, slipping and sliding on the ice you’re still not used to, and sit through 75 minutes of lecture in a room full of strangers. Afterwards, you’ll make your way to the too-crowded dining hall, in which you’ll squeeze through throngs of chatting, laughing strangers in hopes of a table all to yourself. You never look up or say anything when you eat. Then you’ll go back to your room, shut yourself inside, and waste the rest of your time on Reddit, perusing years-old Internet arguments between digital ghosts. Outside, you’ll hear other strangers laughing as they walk with each other down the hall, and you’ll turn up the volume of the white-noise recordings you’re listening to until you can no longer hear their voices—outside, you’ll see friends laughing together, and you’ll shut your curtains.

Maybe, if a deadline’s close enough, that last-minute panic will set in and you’ll spend an entire evening desperately coding. Maybe you’ll stay up late enough to see the sun rise. It’s been happening more and more often lately—that sheer ease with which you lose track of time, with which you let the minutes and hours slip by in your quest to flee “tomorrow”—and before you know it, the sky is pink. Or maybe you’ll finish all of your work on time and retire to bed on time for once. What will you do then? Stare blankly at the dark ceiling above—unadorned, paint chipping. What are you doing on this campus of strangers? How many people’s names do you even know, and how many know yours? How many of them would notice if you disappeared tomorrow?

Yesterday, today, tomorrow. The day after tomorrow, you’ll do the same. The day after that, the same. You’ll go days without speaking to anyone at all. Perhaps you’ll see a group of friends bathed in the splendid warmth of each other’s company, and maybe you’ll come to hate them. You always do. The snow will melt, the pale buds will sprout on once-bare branches, and the thin grass-blades will peer their heads into the growing sunlight. The campus will come to life with throngs of students, delighted to be here with each other. For them, everything. For them, tomorrow.

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Imagine that, when you wake, the world is buried in white. The sky is a grey so faint it fades into bone, brilliant and burning as it merges with the bright horizon. Snow buries the stone buildings, the paved paths, the lampposts under which couples once kissed, transforming metal and wood and stone into blank, egalitarian ice. Perhaps a branch or two juts out from this pale sea, the thinnest, highest branch from some balding tree; the only spot of black in a white eternity.

You’ll force the door of your dorm building open and jump into the snow, laughing and shrieking in delight. The door you opened vanishes as soon as you exit, disappearing quietly into the endless white; your nose and the tips of your fingers turn pink from the cold and your breath mists in the stark air. You’ll run under frosted trees, pale light glinting off their bone-white leaves, sparkling on your crystal-dusted eyelashes. Frozen fractals will powder your hair and frost will blossom over your skin. And you’ll shout in joy as you tumble through that snow, as the ice fills your lungs and cracks your breath, as your cells and neurons and blood vessels unravel, one by one by one, because there is no longer any reason to cry: there are no strangers, no names, no tomorrows, no you—only the pale eternity that erases your footsteps remains.

It is the eternity that swallows the world. It is the frigid finality that embraces the world. It is the white mercy that reaches, inevitably, through all blood, bone, and concrete, and says: in the end no evidence remains. I cover the streets, the rivers, the mountains, the cities, all that ever was and all that ever will be. The world sinks inch by inch into me. Every footstep you leave is filled as soon as it is created. Snowmen melt as soon as they are born.

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The snowing stops over the weekend, and when Monday comes, the pale sun’s light grows stronger. When you check on your snowmen, you find that all three have already melted, leaving only a deformed lump and a puddle of muddy water behind. It does not bother you. By then, you are occupied with more pressing matters. The next programming assignment due soon that you again have not started, for one. The fact that your suitemate is planning another one of his get-togethers, meaning you’ll have to come back to a suite full of happy strangers once again. You keep wondering what you should write for your next class assignment, but come up empty; after all, you’ve never really liked anything you’ve created anyways.

You never told anyone about your snowmen. You never took any pictures, either. For one night, perhaps two, your snowmen sat quietly and anonymously on the table where you created them, a smudge of white in a white-flecked world. And, once the weather gets warmer, you know, the sun’s rays will annihilate that final lump of half-melted slush, evaporate that sad puddle seeping into the cracks on the table, and then your snowmen really will be gone. No evidence of their existence will remain.

Maybe some other students saw your snowmen on the table when they emerged from the dorm earlier. Maybe those students wondered where the snowmen came from, and you are born in their minds as the one who built the snowmen—in such a memory, you think, your snowmen are immortal. Yet here they are nonetheless, a mere puddle dripping downwards.

Still, though, you like to imagine the moment the sun rose on your doomed snowmen. Their last moments in each other’s company, before they begin to distort and deform, first into grotesquery and then into oblivion. You find yourself hoping that, as their bodies twisted and flattened, there was a brief moment in which they found each other beautiful.