

:fiction

synonyms for snow

by Susan Paterson

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Arctic. Glacier. Snowflake. There are many ways to pronounce the cold. Here they are, then. How will she explain this? Will he know it when she begins? Across the table they face each other. He reaches towards her over the flat wooden plain. His knees press against hers until she shifts in her chair.

It's been days since she first decided. There were unavoidable delays: the desire to have been mistaken, to press a final moment from the old template, assisted by a drunken night out in Northcote and the way he soothed her as she lay in bed, fractured by a hangover.

She had approached the situation with deliberateness, as if deciding involved a single action she might execute in one definitive manoeuvre, rather than a process comprising myriad contradictions and emotional hairpin turns. She knew that making up her mind would require her to stand apart from it all.

When she'd come out of the clinic two days earlier, waiting in the loading zone of a concrete car park for a friend to meet her, cardigan wrapped around her shoulders in an attempt at nonchalance, at nondisclosure, she'd felt she had been dredged. She'd wanted nothing more than to get in the car, not to speak a word, head home, climb beneath the covers of the made-up bed and forget what she had done. Instead she lay all night on her friend's couch and stared at the ceiling. She avoided blinking so that her eyes would dry and so the tears wouldn't spill.

There was a story she read in the paper the next morning, still lying on the couch, about a place far in the north, where winter is considered mild if the temperature reaches minus-forty degrees Celsius. Schools stay open and people go about their daily business. Love affairs are conducted beneath insulating layers of clothing; lives span many years in the face of extremity. In festive times, sculptures are carved out of ice in snowy public squares and lit from below. The cold manifests a carnival: luminous, giant-sized figures of history and myth, animals and frosty tableaux pellucid on the whitened landscape.

Minus-forty degrees: such unbelievable cold. But the men and women she read about loved the climate, not knowing of any warmer. The story told of one particularly cold winter, when the temperature dropped so low that birds froze and simply fell from the sky.

This was it. This was the image she would use.

She called him then. He picked up the phone, and she waited for him to speak.

Where have you been?

I've been staying at a friend's.

You should've called me. I was worried.

You'll see me soon. Let's meet tomorrow for coffee.

Do you think that's what I meant? Do you think that's enough?

Imagine it, she says to him then in the café, her hands moving from his grasp and reaching for the edges of the table. You shuffle along in thick furs, your body entirely covered except for a small gap through which you navigate the path with your eyes. Tiny icicles are forming already on the tips of your lashes. Light snowflakes fall with a sharp crystal edge. You count the time you will be able to remain outdoors before your body will start to slow and thicken and freeze.

You count precisely. It is important. The slight stretch of exposed skin around your eyelids and across the bridge of your nose stings like a million needles are pricking its surface. You sense acutely the rush of your blood as it fights against solidity. You walk with a sliding shuffle, a practised yet necessarily awkward gait, across ice and frozen ground. And then, narrowly missing you, suddenly lands a bird, its eyes wide and fixed, its wings stiffened at unnatural angles. It lands with a flat and final thud at your feet: a small missile from above, by chance missing your head.

I'm imagining it, and it sounds awful, he says. A pause.

No, she replies, touching his sleeve with the flats of her fingers. No, it's not awful at all.

Hoarfrost. Black ice. White ice. She has to tread carefully. The ground has become slippery. Winter has come and looks stubborn. She knows he wouldn't understand if she told him what she has done, nor that it's not the whole story, merely a conclusion to something long left unspoken. She knows she couldn't have made the decision had he been involved. He should be grieving for his loss, but he is unaware. She is grieving for them both.

She feels she's standing atop a distant lookout, viewing him dispassionately and seeing all he entails. Free-wheeling words, flagrant touches. He makes small gestures with a grand outlook. Even the way he holds his coffee cup boasts of confidence, of certitude. She sees what he looks to is expansive, endless, but for her it's closed.

She once dreamed of being an Inuit girl, living in a house made of ice. The reality of cold never once touched upon this dream; fingertips never frosted, eyes never watered. The snow was a beautiful world of enchantment. She could wrap herself in animal fur and cover the skin of her everyday self. Carve and sculpt her shape from the ice. The cold was never cold; the idea of it didn't exist.

Hoarfrost. Black ice. White ice. She has to tread carefully.

If I were an Eskimo, she says to him against the dim rush of the café, I might enclose myself in the fur of a seal and relish the fleshy slap of a fish hauled out from beneath the ice, and barely know of the sun.

If you were an *Eskimo*, he replies, you'd live one half of your life in the dark, get around on a sled pulled by dogs that pee in the snow, and your toes would turn gangrenous due to your appalling lack of circulation.

In reality, they live in a scorched land where, in summer, brightness burns into retinas, and melanomas form on defenceless skin. The earth cracks, painfully

parched; fish lie on their sides in the bottoms of desiccated rivers. The sun is too hot; it is malign. She shuns the sun. It irradiates her body, overheats her blood, makes her tired. As a child, she loved its warmth in the same way she desired to

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live in an igloo. But the sun is becoming hotter, or there is less protection from it, or she is becoming less resilient, or all of the above. Soon, it is possible that all the glaciers may recede and the ice will melt and there will be few places where igloos and fishing through holes in the ice can survive.

She knows she is complicating the story. But it's easier to create fanciful edges than to expose the heart of her retreat. He believed she could intuit full sentences. He'd said this over a tin of peaches, struggling with the can opener that was stiff with rust. They were in his kitchen, having spent the weekend together, and were embarking on their first breakfast as a couple. She had expected something slightly more elaborate and was unsure if the simplicity of the tinned fruit betrayed an early descent into the prosaic or a naïve reassurance of his sincerity. Both options were at odds with her proclivity for elaborate protective metaphor, but nevertheless she took his words and proceeded to build sentences around them. For a time, desire seemed straightforward.

The decision to move in together was simple enough. It was the loss of boundaries that was difficult. She didn't want to mix her cooking dishes and utensils with his in the kitchen cupboards. She stacked his and moved them to one side, stacked hers on the other. What if they could no longer tell whose was whose? she thought. When she found the plates and bowls and pans were commingling and she could no longer remember who owned the whisk with the black handle, she could see that it made more sense that way, but it still made her uneasy.

It was over the shattered remains of a wine glass that had slipped from her hand during a pre-Christmas barbecue that he told her he loved her. And she told him she loved him, too. She remembers having to shield her eyes from the afternoon light that streamed brightly over his shoulder as they stood in the

backyard surrounded by friends and family and people she didn't know. She wondered if the two of them were also strangers, to each other, beneath the love. But she smiled and ran her hand through his fringe to lift it from his face.

Out in the bar that final drunken night in Northcote, they sat as a couple in the booth, gulping their wines and mimicking the posture of each other's body. She did so self-consciously. She wished for anonymity. The doctor had confirmed the positive test that afternoon, and she pressed the enormity of it into a tiny space beneath her ribcage so as to keep the fear confined. Not now. Not me. Not him. She could sense the intensity between them building again, and began to dread the way it spread and dispersed her. She found herself desiring the precision of ice sculptures.

She has done something unforgivable, and in doing so has made up her mind.

Rime. Rain. Hail. The way his eyes are hazy when he looks at her, just now, as the waiter delivers another coffee to the table and he picks up the cup without pause. It's the skiff of sleet in her words. A blizzard has been building, and it is obvious that he is blinded by the icy gusts. He didn't see it coming, and she cannot stop it.

Please understand, she says. I can't do this any more.

Her explanation is hollow, she knows. But she can't piece it all together. Was it just about her not being ready, or was it about him, his blinding belief in their future that she couldn't live with? It's not that she doesn't love him. It's not that he's offering something that doesn't tempt her. But he makes assumptions out of a certainty she finds alien. She worries about loneliness, and not just when she's alone. She knows she shouldn't feel that way. Perhaps it's better to make the choice rather than one day having it presented to her. She has done something unforgivable, and in doing so has made up her mind.

He looks at her. His gaze is steady and firm, but he drags a hand down each cheek, pulling at the skin beneath his eyes. You're not making any sense, he says. Last week we were drunk and happy and fucking. We were going to travel together. You said you wanted to fall in love.

When I fall now, she thinks, I don't want to be ablaze, burnt out, headless with heat; I want simply to frost over and drop silently from the sky.

She wishes for a northern space. A safe space. Here she is, pulling out her compass and watching carefully for the direction of its magnetic needle, creating a frosty flurry in the air about which she can cry *Snow storm, danger, ice on the road, must head off now, goodbye.*

Stay, he says. His simple imperative verb calls to her for elaboration. Stay a bit longer, he says. But all she can think of is turning to that wide plain of white. How many ways can she say it?

The cold has become a familiar mantle, comforting.

As he presses her to stay, she sees him again using a rusty can opener on a tin of peaches and saying 'I love you' over broken glass. She wonders what it is like to feel so entitled. For a moment she wonders if he is right.

It barely seems possible in the heat of the café, but her arms have goose pimples, and fine hairs stand erect on her skin.

I'm sorry, she says. He touches her arm, and she shakes her head. Pulls on a cardigan. She kisses his lips gently, but with the firmness of hail coming down against the ground.

She can't stand to look at him. She doesn't know what else to say, so she leaves him sitting at the table, their coffee cups looking up at him like two empty faces.

There are places so cold that birds freeze and fall, straight out of the sky. Where frosted trees arch like ghostly spines in the quiet of a snow-laden landscape.