

'Ribbons of light, all different colours like a rainbow, not in an arc but blown across the night sky, or fluttering like the spread gossamer wings of arctic angels.' That's what he wrote. In a letter. All the words neat and sitting on feint-ruled pencil lines across the white page. I could hear music when I cut open the envelope. That was strange, words making sound even before I read them.

William was lonely. He'd been gone for close on a year when he wrote the letter. Time spent in the ungentle company of men. He talked about tearing a hole in the fabric of things to get to me, to be beside me and warm in my bed. Far from the world is what it felt like, that music I heard. Cold as snow or ice, and cracked. Not real, except for the sound of it in my head, and a lonely William wanting to be where he was not.

It was a game, this writing of his, playing with words. I could imagine him rehearsing what he would write. Saying it over and over until he had it just so, and what he said hanging in the air as though words spoken could have a material existence. Then William setting his pen to paper and writing slow as slow to get everything neat. He had to keep the ink warm using candles and a tin plate for the bottle to stand on.

I heard violins in the music then. Straining. Something I'd heard before. I can't remember where or when, but something had gone wrong and the music had seemed to put it right, smoke curling like a letter 'g' in the air. Maybe not smoke, but an exhaled breath, for it is almost as cold here as it is where William is.

William talked of snow in his letter and everywhere so white it hurt his eyes and burned his skin. He talked of the end of silence, in a place so desolate and so blank you would have thought silence must be all that there is. Noises so ever-present that William thought they might be in his head, like the ringing in old men's ears. The howling of the ice and the crack crack of it and the wind moaning and the men in their sleep moaning too. That's what he said. So white and so loud and the cold so hard that it could snap fingers; and so sharp it cut men's thoughts into pieces and the pieces dropped into the snow so that they could not ever be found again. You see how he is with words.

One day, he said, there were white bears, rearing big as trees, like angels with their arms raised to heaven. William's ship was caught fast in the ice, held tight like a giant fist closing its grip on them. William shot one of the bears dead and would have shot the other if it had not just as suddenly thinned to nothing. It was as though it might have been no more than a ghost of the first bear, except that it had ripped a bloody gash in Patrick Temple's chest and torn out the man's heart. They cut the dead bear into parts that could be eaten fresh or cooked over the fire. There was meat for the men then, and the skin of the bear they used to make a blanket for William's bed.

So much snow, and cold enough to freeze tears or spit or screams. But William did not say it was bleak, not like a Monday at home in December can be bleak. Rainbows and angels and music, he said, and I thought there was another magic in that place when he wrote of it. If he had called on me to follow him, I think I would have found the means. Back at the start I would.

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