

## Winter's Wake

A dense fog-like oppression hangs in the air, obscuring the view of the tree line in the distance. The canopies of the oaks blend into the sky, surrendering their shapes to the milky gray air. Barely visible, the tree trunks tangle together, an ominous sight in the background not unlike a jagged line of teeth. A wet snow falls. On the nearest tree, water droplets dangle from the low-lying branches, threatening to fall. The moisture in the atmosphere stains the bark on the tree trunk, making the light mossy brown a deeper and lifeless color. The snow, turning to chilled water, drips down the length of the tree and leaves distinct trails in its wake. The contrast between the white snow and the blackened trees is stunning. The snow, seemingly hopeful and bright, floats gently down from the overhanging clouds. Smaller flakes hang suspended mid air before completing their journey to the unforgiving ground. It is a calming sight. Inversely, the black tree bark looks dead, a reminder of the inevitable mortality that awaits us all. The trees are bare and there is no sign that spring approaches. Perhaps it never will.

A cedar tree seems to echo this sentiment and sags with the weight of reality. Divided into two main branches, it reflects the duality present in nature: death and life. The left branch symbolizes life as it reaches toward the sky spreading its smaller branches like fingertips reaching into the cold air. The right branch embodies death. It hangs lifeless toward the ground, snapped by a recent storm or by the inescapable desolation hanging in the atmosphere.

It awaits its fall as the rest of nature waits for the first signs of spring. The flower buds shiver and hunker down closer to the ground, dreaming of warmer weather. The birds - those brave enough to venture out - flutter aimlessly, dodging the snowflakes as best as possible before settling on a damp tree branch and bracing themselves against the cold. Even the ground rejects

this display of winter's power. As each flake hits the lawn, the grass swallows the moisture and uses it to fuel its growth in its rebellion against the cold. But that lone branch cares nothing about the possibility of warmer weather. Instead, it longs only for its final journey to the ground. The weight of its existence is too tiring. It wants to feel the wind rush through its downtrodden branches as it tumbles down. It wants to hear the snapping of its twigs as it embraces finality.

Yet hope leaks into the scene again as the snow continues to fall. The purity and grace of the snow is truly beautiful. Each individual snowflake is impossibly small and insignificant, yet somehow, off in the distance, the flakes seem to unite and rise and fall in unison. The interweaving dance of each flake is elegant and timeless, and while the tree focuses on annihilation, the snow suspends time and relishes each moment. Swaying on the light breeze, it reacts to some unheard music. To our ears, silence abounds, save for the rhythmic drip as water pulls away from the tree branches. In the distance, a bird dares to put forth its delicate song; however, the thick air absorbs the sound and the bird submits to the silence. The snow falls.

By this point, the ground has surrendered its hopes for spring and relented to the persistence of winter. Too weak now to rebel, or perhaps too hopeless in the face of this ceaseless storm, the ground allows snow to cover its hard surface. The snow, slowly but surely, conquers all. As the minutes pass, the snow covers the wet pavement and, by extension, its impurities. Snow is magical in that sense. It takes the world, so imperfect by nature, and cloaks its flaws. Under the developing blanket of snow, the cracks in the pavement and the man-made holes in the grass disappear. Snow is a natural force that reclaims nature from man. It hides the negative effects of human greed on the environment. The construction of the park next door halts, yielding to nature. The overwhelming sound of heavy machinery that has pervaded the last

few days stops. The mechanical hum and the smell of burning diesel fuel dissolve into the atmosphere. Snow has a leveling power. It allows Mother Nature to reclaim her hold on the land.

Snow makes people stay inside wrapping blankets up to their ears and warming themselves near fireplaces. For today, at least, less pollution will fill the air because fewer people will brave the storm. With most people cuddled in their warm houses and with the drone of industry stopped, the world falls silent. For a second, we can take a deep breath and let our lungs fill with the clean, chilled air. It burns, but it is a cleansing burn, like cleaning an open cut. Each day, humans carve deeper into the gouge they are leaving in the Earth. The pace of industry never slows and human greed never ceases - the cycle is endless. But on days like today, when silence fills the air, it is easier to take notice of how different the world seems when cloaked in white. Snow forces us to stand still; standing still forces us to think.

I draw in a deep breath and find pleasure in the sting of the cool air. I breathe easier in the cold, filling the full expanse of my lungs. Maybe it's the lack of pollution on a snowy day, or maybe it's that the cold makes me notice life and, by extension, death. I breathe because I can. In the distance, children run out into the snow and begin to build a snowman. Their creation does not harm the environment; it simply reabsorbs into the atmosphere as the sun rises. The smiles on their faces are telling. Their pink cheeks blush with the tinges of happiness. Maybe the next generation will figure it out; maybe there is hope after all. The snow continues to fall.