

## Our creature of winter

---

Edward Hamlin

i.

These mountains are dead cold,  
brutal in winter,  
inhospitable to all not dignified  
by hearts warm enough to weather  
the ice and isolation.

Poets and deserters,  
misfits and cranks,  
vagabonds,  
fugitives,  
ecstatics,  
psychotics,  
freebooters,  
militiamen,  
zealots,  
all these one-off adventurers  
scatter through the bleak scree  
fields and hunker in crevasses  
when the winds turn fatal, sour  
and ballistic, those who die  
frigidly preserved  
for the unsuspecting climber  
or next eccentric to pass.

ii.

In the perfected world of Plato  
our poets would live in cities  
cheek by jowl with stonemasons  
and senators and prostitutes,  
plying a deeper thought experiment  
as the business of the world surges forward  
or backward at the whim of the Zeitgeist.

Yet for every poet on the ground in Athens  
or Manhattan or Mumbai  
there is one here in the cold mountains,  
stranger, lonelier,  
less fit for the common round of life,  
even more dangerous  
to himself and others.

Han-shan on his cold mountain broke  
the seal of a short form  
never understood by poets of the court,  
a dangerous act with a whiff of gunpowder  
about it, too much joy concentrated

in too few words:  
In the city it might have been illegal  
or outright obscene in its candor

Zarathustra too needed an aerie  
to find his tongue:  
What would we have lost  
had Nietzsche not been one of those  
diehard German hikers?  
A heart under exertion  
pounds through the strophe  
threatening to burst from its burly cage

Milarepa took to the mountains  
as a second skin, donning them  
in all their Tibetan rockiness  
to chant thousands of verses  
serene, acute and free.

Which of these harriers  
was not a touch mad?  
The thin air frees something  
tethered and tight,  
a leopard of intellect  
decorated with strange markings  
who pads his way with guile  
through the hostile terrain.  
It has always been this way,  
an oblique process rooted in biology  
more than in culture,  
the devolution of all that keeps  
us safe and sane.

iii.

The real danger comes with spring.

Terrors of winter, mortal cold,  
isolation and a certain implacability  
of survival  
nourish the perverse sage,  
invite the muse,  
deflect inward  
the outer shape of things  
until they are resolved  
in the poet's acrostic.

So it is the arrival of umber mosses  
quickly greening under chilly snowmelt,  
the return of the birds and blueflies  
and the revelation of lichen  
hidden by glare ice  
that threaten the process of creation  
for all but the maddest of hermits  
ventilating their hearts on the edges of fields

as the days lengthen  
and the poetry slows:

It's now that Han-shan goes roving off  
to find his friend Shih-te,  
ready to drink and shout out the verses  
the winter has engendered,  
one loner badgering another

Zarathustra descends into the city  
bursting with revelations  
but with little hope for man,  
a pocketful of poems  
and exhortations

Milarepa sings his songs  
to shepherds in the high pasture  
and returns to his ruined home  
to sit on the bones of his mother  
and meditate for seven days...

And so the poet's season nests  
concavely into the hand of  
nature's season, quickening  
as the outer world slows, warming  
as the high scarps freeze, flowering  
just as summer colors die.

Alone, fervid, odd,  
exiled to frozen mountains  
by strangeness and bliss,  
the zealot executes his rituals  
while the world waits dully  
for news of a thaw.  
Yet when the thaw comes  
our creature of winter  
is nowhere to be found:

Only a vagabond remains,  
loose in the high mountains,  
simply grateful for the dread spring.

October 2005  
Chicago