Subnivean (or Holding Back the Year)

I expected the snow, but waking stuns. 
A world of storm struck white—distance 
collapsed by an absence of shadow, the valley 
either acre or infinite. I must become so still 
to hear: a rustle, a hum 
that sounds human, though 
it couldn’t be. Not here. I never meant 
to be this lonely. Coated saplings, nearly invisible— 
they, too, become what they carry.

Once, hemmed in by a blizzard, 
I boiled snow to drink. I clutched 
a pillow case of pet snakes to my belly. 
They’d have died without my human heat; 
they are the only ones. 
Now, a scarf of breath. 
The slinking creature barely glimpsed. 
Bark once marked by velvety antlers— 
the newly budded made sharp by attack. 
The deer only multiply, though I hear 
they are starving each other to death. 
I’ve heard a snowstorm is only good 
for the path one can leave. Even sparrows flee 
the ice hour. Now my way is the only way home.

I’d be lost 
without my own bright footpath: tilled snow: 
cloud cover: moonglow refracted: the shotgun crack 
of a bough unburdened. 
Could I walk off the hours 
I’ve spent ashamed, attempting a life 
that would make the dead proud? 
What does it look like, 
how much does it weigh?
In the hall of iced cedars, it seems possible
to forget the spring. Forgotten: the lilac bush
that leans over the water, a widow maker.
Forgotten: honeysuckles that carry on
with their wafting, the dew I received
as a blessing.

Spring is only a spasm—
before long, the weeping cherry's hem of petals
fallen to nourish the earth.
Winter endures, the crystal casket
it grows around the world.

There—a gunshot, just a disturbance
through the trees—far off, an uncertain kill.
How awful, death relived at its slightest suggestion:
the trail a smooth passing, but then
the fallen animal.

A corpse is a corpse,
that way I did not see him—cold,
and colder. I've become

the one to cry adore me

in the direction of all there is,
the nearest flock startled into separate explosions.
It is always the birds who fall back together, freely
leaving the silence to roost.

How long have I followed tracks without realizing
everything stalks all else?

Animals, exposed, don't know
harmlessness. This land without mercy.
This whipping drift so dense
it may as well be the blizzard that blew me here.
There are kingdoms under snowpack, tunnels
unseen unless destroyed.
The knot of mice
breathes heat into the haven. A fox
listens for prey before tearing into the snow.

Winter rain arrives, pocks snowbanks, exposes
deer tracks, their piss. The holes left by hooves
are deep, flooded with bog water, its frozen mosses.
The river high and fast. Dead grasses,
cedar fronds dipped into water like wicks into wax—
bright bulbs of ice
I want to shatter. How much
of enjoying a place is destroying it? Marks made,
however unlasting, lasting. I’ve killed a creature
to see if I could. I can’t tame myself.
Or won’t. I flick snow from my jean cuff.
I could stuff a songbird into my mouth.

Once, I found a finch’s skeleton still
hanging from a glue trap. The dead
do not speak—to me
they’ve said all they can. Hours spent
ashamed, attempting. What will be possible
when I’m no longer sorry? I can want
until I’m blue. Blue dark cast on snow, the burn
of fingers coming, once again,
alive.

In this mind, I may trudge
toward the ravine of forgetting—
a stampede of velvet horses,
a dream too new to burn.

Forgotten: the giddy
sunflower field, the frog spared
beside the river. Encased in winter,
all too clear: a gasping body glows,  
a moon sinks on the end of a wire.  
I’ve come a long way  
to do my goodbyeing.  
What will it look like?  
How much will it weigh?

During grey days, I grew  
more afraid. I feared even the fear,  
the staying afraid.  
Why is it gloom  
produces the most angelic light,  
days cast as more precious  
in shades of platinum, the branches  
locking horns again, birch skin silver  
as scrim? More awful still to find  
this way of being is bearable, if only that.  
In our old garden, autumn stalks  
of daffodils may remain,  
braided before their decay,  
under the freeze. Imagine  
all the long-awaited releases.

Movement in the thaw. Warmth  
of movement without touch. There: a deer gone still  
beside the river. The iridescent eyes. The moment  
before she leaves me. Light snags  
in the rain, threads of light. I hear lightning  
can spring from heat alone. But not here,  
in the land of aurora, blush of green  
across the cloudless sky.  
What follows?  
Sweet water  
flowing down the bend. Sweetness made  
bitter by its passing. Made sweeter. Made. All of this  
made. A path long eroded made longer.