## **EMILY PITTINOS**

## 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.

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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,

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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.

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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.