

## Getting Winterized: A Guide to Rural Living

*For Catherynne M. Valente, patron saint of first lines, and Amy Houser, for the visual.*

In response to yesterday's public service announcement about bookbears  
we spent Saturday hoisting milk crates onto the wires.

*Suspend your volumes from the ceiling,  
reminded the newscaster,  
still face resolute under her afro.  
Remain calm,  
smart suit reassuring, orderly.  
Everything is under control.  
Her hands folded, flat.*

This is the trick I use to keep people from noticing  
when my own hands tremble, so I wondered,

*is she is thinking of her bookcases  
toppling domino style  
dropping heavy fruit  
of hooks, Hughes,  
all the Sam Delany  
she found for a few dollars,  
will she count her damage tonight?*

In our house damage is slight. We are resigned to seasons,  
didn't need the reassurances, reminders, advice  
meant for the general public.  
It's only called an emergency now,  
since they migrated into the cities *en masse*—

clogging up elevators, shitting on terrazzo,  
terrorizing lapdogs, blocking sidewalks,  
leaving scraps of easily digested  
bestsellers unlucky homeowners  
buy again in a year or two,  
only remembering halfway through

how it turns out, whodunit, who she chooses.

The insurance industry decided  
the bookbears are an act of God, won't pay.

There's a class-action lawsuit pending  
in California someplace, some suburb  
that got hit early on, a scrappy librarian  
as named plaintiff. I hope she bleeds them dry.

Now at the New York Public Library they sell postcards of  
the little brass plaque telling how stone lions work,  
half magic, half scarecrow logic. Most things are.

When they started coming as near as Jackson,  
we strung the wires, put paper flowers up—  
plausible deniability, in case it was all foolishness.

Eventually you bought me two stone lions,  
called me Eleanor; I laughed

read you the le Guin story about  
tiny live teddy bears  
eating the glue from the spines  
of nursery libraries,  
escaping into the walls.

We threw things in any old way,  
I don't know if we were thinking.  
We were young, short-term then.  
Now we have a system,  
keep saying we'll make a spreadsheet—

still, something is bound  
to get bent, or scuffed.  
Neruda covers curled around  
ruffled corners of Alexie,  
torn covers of cheap paperbacks,  
dust jackets rumpled.

“Bear and tear” wasn't that funny  
a joke to start with.  
When someone says it now,

I remember the year you cried,  
holding the Rumi I gave you,  
torn clear in half—

how you buried it,  
threw a big flat rock in the hole  
so nothing would dig it up again.

You were so angry.  
I had no stories to soothe you.

That winter you brought home three gun safes  
from an estate sale. *Like new*, you said.

In the end it took six.

The crates take less time now,  
first editions, rare and beloved things  
all secure behind oiled hinges—

but the bookshelves are gap-toothed.  
I forget what we own, prowl the house, dissatisfied.

Last year in Wyoming a man shot one,  
a tourist who left six books  
on how to be successful in his cabin,  
found them feeding,  
panicked, grabbed his handgun.

The jury went easy on him—  
four years with good behavior.

*I couldn't believe he shot it,  
said the jury foreman to the press, later,  
but I believe he didn't mean it in his heart.*

Theories on the taboo abound, none definitive.  
No region uses them in local cuisine,  
most have a cautionary tale or parable, nothing congruent—

ancestors, *kami*, shapeshifters, usually tricksters,  
sometimes benevolent, sometimes leading you astray,  
almost always ready to belch back up whatever wisdom  
was lost in feeding—for a price. Surprisingly often  
they are a good omen, considering how rare books were  
when these stories first came to bear.

They don't attack people, this we know.  
Evolutionary biology is keeping mum  
on how a species of bear, or raccoon,  
or throwback mammal evolved to this preferred diet,  
where exactly the calories come in

when the paper is mostly left behind.

The creepy part is that no one

appears to have ever seen a dead one who can prove it  
or is admitting it. (The Wyoming bear lived.)

On late night AM radio people call in with stories  
about books left behind with strange errata,

litters of commas in books with too few,  
those with too many left better for their absence,  
a few letters always gone completely.  
There's a movie coming out next year

in which they're secret government experiments,  
Cold War leftovers escaped into the wild.  
I assume in the movie there's nothing left but  
America, since we figured out a while ago

that where you find people and books, you find bookbears.  
Or Hollywood thinks America invented books.

This pisses both of us off.  
I think you made your peace  
about the Rumi a while back,  
but I won't ask until spring.

At our kitchen window  
you are standing rapt, crook one finger at me: *Look—*  
a finger to your lips, as if I don't know to be quiet  
when there's a bear trail across  
what passes for our backyard—

hence gun safes, crates, lions, wires.  
I slip an arm around your waist,  
watch wobbly cubs with shining black fur amble,  
iridescent, a picture postcard  
of beast and snow and lowering light.

*I have slavered for books in my time,*  
I think, and realize from your face  
I said it aloud.

In the spring we cull discards, duplicates,  
read-once novels, old magazines.  
We scatter them like breadcrumbs down the path,

hope the bears follow, find our cache of remainders,  
the ones I sneak out of Dumpsters all year,  
you store in Rubbermaid to keep the dust off.

Technically these are felonies, but things

are different in out of the way places like ours,  
the feds have their hands full on the urban front.

Midnights I get tempted  
to check the remains, before  
they grow soggy with snow,  
look for stray punctuation, missing letters.

What I call *plausible deniability* is actually  
*It's dark and cold, and the woods  
outside our cottage are full of bears.*

Later I will smuggle fairytales upstairs—  
the tearing growls from the forest  
beg for bear tales, read aloud.