KYLE MANNING

Writing in Wintertime

Both my bare feet fit on the white line of a parking space—it's the only part of the pavement that doesn't burn. Sweat drops down my back, and I feel my hair plastered to my skin. Even the pages of my notes show it everywhere, stained by my fingers; the words smear from my general sogginess. I look over to the billboard of the local bank just down the street to see the temperature: 93, and scalding. Another towering bank sign, further down the road, reads 90. Hot enough, it seems, to make writing a fiction set in wintertime something terrible.

It's about a young student, about her and her walking. She walks away from campus in a snowstorm, dressed in an outfit I imagine is typical, but she's nothing more than that. Maybe it is December—maybe it was finals, and so excited to get out the door she left her rubber boots at the bedside. I write down words like "frigid" and "white sheet of winter" over the splotches of sweat. I never write the word "snow," never directly, but of course you can imagine it everywhere. The pen cuts through the weakened yellow paper.

I know that it's also about remembering, about what remembering can really do to a person, but she hasn't gotten there yet. For now, it is just her and the snow.

She keeps stepping in it. She crunches it, plows through it, pulls herself over it, anyway that she can manage. I feel like it's the entire pace of the story: crunch, thought, crunch, thought, crunch. It sounds itself in my head, every few words, the crisp of it growing harsher. Her toes are already numb. Tucked inside pockets, her fingers clutch a pen and a set of keys to keep their feeling.

I look around, a little too often. Passersby seem to think this is strange—even the ones I know, the random classmates or the people I've met in town. It's Sunday, which means there is a crowd of people downtown browsing stores they've browsed before. They're just as sweaty and hot; they should understand how being shirtless and shoeless right now isn't so bad. Maybe it's the notebook that throws them. Am I strange, if these two women pushing strollers think so? I wonder with my pen lifted. Maybe they would sympathize if they knew about what I'm writing—maybe one of them would help me out. They could let me know what it feels like to

wear a dress here in New England during a snowstorm in January.

I try to keep writing. The bottoms of my feet are already thin and weak from the sharp heat, and so I move them onto the much cooler sidewalk. I keep the pen down on the book. The lines come more quickly—and on the page, she falls.

She keeps on falling, her leggings getting soaked and starting to freeze. She has to get home, but the short-cut she usually takes is blocked, completely snowed over. In the apartment she rents there is an ancient radiator, a burning spiral of metal, and she thinks about it as she trudges and crunches along. This is her first year in Maine, her first winter, her first Nor'easter; she's an invader from dryer and warmer winds. In-staters make these jokes to her that she thinks are rude. She came here willfully, because the people she read were never from the desert.

I don't really know any of this, I guess you could say. I look easily into the thick air and think a little too much about that idea, "to know." I certainly am not from the desert, do not live in an old apartment with an old radiator, am not a girl, have never worn a dress or slip-on canvas shoes, have never been stuck out in a blizzard. I don't know the sight of snow for the first time. I am sitting on a sidewalk ledge in the buzz of Main Street on a Sunday. Girls pass in sun dresses with legs bare. I think of teenage movies, about summer parties and the dog days. I do not know; I continue writing.

As if all of this isn't unproductive enough, I keep looking across the street. There's a café there I go to often. It's filled with small tables and iced coffee and a shaded seat where I wouldn't have to squint against this sun. My friends go there every Sunday morning; They talk and joke and make as much noise as they can get away with. They will be gone in about an hour, and maybe then I could go sit down and pull out a few more pages. It would be nice—but then of course, that would be quite an easy experience. It would hardly be different at all.

My friends think this is a little weird. Perhaps they don't think weird—I've never actually heard them say that word—but they're always a little confused when I don't want to spend a Saturday doing the Beer Olympics or spend a weeknight watching bad movies. I do sit with them on Sundays, normally; we squeeze together tables and all sit around and talk about how hard it was to get up that morning, and it's a nice time. I sit for around an hour, and open up my book when I don't have anything else to say. But I never commit to anything, and

so when I woke up this morning with this girl trudging through snow, remembering something about her father that happened long ago, remembering differently this old memory that she had only ever thought of in the normal, old way—I knew I couldn't brush it aside. It was still cool on the walk over, and a winter storm wasn't so far to imagine.

I hope they do not think the worst, when I do things like this. I hope they all know how to look at something unknown. I want them to only see me, leading a life, and trust what they see as something real. They will never feel her fall through the snow, never completely see her trying to recreate the memories that have led her to what she is—but I think it is possible for them to imagine. Maybe they'll read it one day, and it will be possible.

I flip another page—just one last thing, before I'm too thirsty to keep going. She reaches the house just fine, as it turns out it's closer than she thought, and after waddling through the door her roommate sort of freaks out. The roommate, another student who was born in this state, runs for blankets and a cup of tea, drapes the wet clothes over the radiator to dry. But she doesn't mind anything much, because the cold's numbed her in a way, and the pain will come later but right now she can't stop thinking about that one time when she was a kid, when her father told her on a truck-ride that no one from their family would ever leave New Mexico. Their skin and their eyes and the soles of their feet practically belonged to that dryness. What bullshit, she thinks now—what complete and utter bullshit.

She keeps remembering it. She re-remembers and re-remembers. She thinks of all the other memories, wrapped in blankets keeping warm. There is so much to re-remember.

It seems a good place to end. Packing up is light and airy; just a pen and a pad of paper that billows savagely. I savor the sections of gray sidewalk, while sprinting across the parking lots and driveways made of black tar. I think about when I'll have time to carry this on, or to clean this up; I think about whether or not, later on, all of these first-thoughts will still look like something. It feels good, though, right now. I can still imagine the sound of her crunch, the feeling of her foot in her shoe pressing down the snow.

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I don't remember actually how old I was, but I wrote my first poem in a black-and-white school notebook. The lines frolicked through words, and I remember an awkward chuckle when I rhymed "high" with "sky." I

was downstairs, reading it to my parents. Perhaps I wanted to show it off, surprised at myself for actually writing it. They were watching primetime baseball, which they watched often, and which I remember I stopped watching, at some point, so that I could spend more nights without my parents. My mother hit mute when I came in the room, and they turned in their spots on the sofa. Standing right before them, I read it. I don't think it exists anymore. I only remember the title, and a few words. It rhymed in couplets.

I can recall it better than I can most things I would write later. I remember the tone of my voice, and saying the first line. I felt strange about it then, too—not for the reasons I suddenly feel now, thinking back on old memories that may now be different, but embarrassed, because it felt like showing every inch of myself. It was that strange moment after creation, where the thing feels so beautiful and perfect, this poem such a complete reflection of myself that it had every inch of me in it, and reading it was like saying everything I needed to say. Eventually I could no longer stand to read it, overwhelmed that it was suddenly imperfect; a vague and silly reflection.

And while writing about this girl, who wonders what her father meant when he told her to always be on guard against people—even certain people who were close to them, even they can't be trusted, Nat—I now wonder myself what could have possibly gone through my father's mind as baseball gave way to poetry. I cannot help but begin re-remembering. I know that he and my mother sat there alone after I left the room; What they could have said, I can only think and think about. I know that they were not bad things—I know that my father is not hers, that they probably just laughed and thought that it was cute and then looked back to the screen to check the score. But I can never be so sure. I keep on remembering.

Over the next few days, I spend time hammering down the images of "Nat" and her trek through the snow while daydreaming at work or during my walks after dinner. Her roommate calls her Natalia, because that's how she introduced herself. She's there; she's present, helping me pull some of these things up. Of course I never once write anything about the poem that I wrote in my school notebook, or about my father or the baseball game on television, but in one way or another, they're there. Her own story is not so different. They're made up of the same things; the same way that two different mountains on two opposite coasts of an ocean can appear vaguely similar.

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By the end of next week the story hasn't gotten any longer, isn't much more than a few pages, but seems to shape itself every time I look at it. Each word and line suggests more and more. They begin to become blocks, as if I build the thing from stone. I have an urge to print it out, even write it down, to view it as it is without a computer screen getting in the way.

For now, I'm just trying to find my way to the end. I don't have any idea as to what it will become—she's still just sitting there, melting out in front of the radiator, content with her palms burning up around a cup of hot chocolate—but I keep on trying. I'll type out a paragraph, look it over, compare it to the rest. See if it is the right material, the right kind of stone. If it fits, if it makes sense within everything else and there is nothing to prove that it is not a stone, then it stays and it rests, and it maybe it will work.

Now, however, this way of writing doesn't seem to be working as I approach the story's end. Nothing I do will fit, and I keep brushing everything aside—first, she called someone, someone from her past to try and kind of verify things, to find out if she wasn't just making things up. She got on the phone with her younger brother, and nothing happened. Contradictions were everywhere, and nothing stayed. I stopped writing before she just hung up—because why would she care at all about what her brother remembered. He has his own memory of this, his own problems to solve. Her memories are everything; not because she's anything special, or because her brother's are less monumental, but because they are hers. What actually happened doesn't seem to matter at all.

Through the thin walls I could hear my roommate in the other room playing GTA. He told me this morning that he'll finally beat it by lunchtime; I laughed and finished making my coffee. I could hear the neighbor's lawn mower, which always seems to run forever. I thought of lunch, of the leftover pizza in the fridge. The corner of the room, which is what I see when I look over the screen, suggests nothing, but I can always find some imperfections in the paint.

On my second try she did something about it, about this itching memory the cold walk has brought her. First she talked to her roommate—have you ever thought about the things your father told you? do you ever think about what they have actually done to us?—but that was useless, since her roommate is just another college girl with just as many memories of her own. Then, she called her mother. I couldn't find what it looked like; the tone of her voice, the phrasing of her words. Who was her

mother? Where in this flood, this perpetuating drive of a story, was she? I didn't know anything about her. I looked for so long, trying to find why I couldn't come to write about this person.

I look back to the screen. I need to press myself a little farther—either I am doing it, or I am not. I read and read and really read; I rediscover the page. She's there, but stumbling to make something out of what's been made. I start reading again, from the beginning, and try to find what doesn't seem right.

I do take breaks, occasionally. On a particular Saturday, I debate writing through the morning—but there are some strong winds, bringing in a breeze fit for September, and we can hear the howling of things outside as we make breakfast. I can practically see the coolness, the contrast to the last couple of sweltering weeks, just by looking through the kitchen window. So I leave the computer closed, put on my jeans and walk downtown. My roommate catches up, wearing a plaid shirt that whips in the wind.

At the café we share a table with a local family eating breakfast. We don't know them too well, but they're nice and love telling stories. Over hot chocolate and decaf coffee the husband, Tim, starts telling me about his own hobbies, since I've told him that I'm a writer. He writes code, for work and for pleasure. I have a silent laugh with myself, thinking that the way Tim views a document of code probably isn't so different from how I view a story. I wonder if he has ever thought about what he does as art.

Somehow he arrives at a story about his father, something ridiculous about how his father spends his free time, and after it's over we fall into silence. After a sip of his decaf, he asks me about my own father. He asks me what "my relationship is like" with him.

I tell him that is a difficult question to answer, but in my mind it actually seems simple. He is my father. There is our relationship. Tim expects me to keep talking, so I say some short generic things that seem natural. "He's a nice guy, just really quiet." I tell him how when my voice changed in high school, people never stopped thinking I was my dad when I answered the phone.

I realize I am not being completely truthful. There is, of course, more to the years and years of memories with this person that I am not saying. Tim nods his head conversationally and smiles. Maybe he understands; maybe he does not.

Then, after a silence that I almost feel uncomfortable with, I enter someplace unusual—I think of Natalia when

she was young next to her father in his truck, of the feeling of remembering that memory. It makes more sense than anything else I have to say. So I ask Tim, "Have you ever thought of old memories, and realized they are not quite the same now that you're older—now that you view things sort of differently?"

He thinks I mean misremembering. I tell him No. "I mean when you think of something really ancient—like you and your dad driving around in your hometown, for example. I don't know, maybe you're going to get the paper from the store, doesn't matter. And say your dad is telling you something serious—like a real mentor kind of moment. And all your life, you had those things in the back of your mind, just stewing there, thinking that they were these good, hearty, wholesome, or whatever, kind of ideas—but now, thinking about it again, it's not that way at all. You suddenly realize that he was, for example, arrogant and pessimistic, that that isn't the way you want to view life at all. You realize that if today, if some thirty-five year old guy told you what your father said to you back then, you would completely ignore him and think whatever about it. Do you know what I'm saying?" I rest my cup down on the table, and realize I've been gesturing with it wildly. It smacks the wood. "That was just an example," I say.

As I rattle all this off to Tim, Nat and her father sit in the front seat of a silver truck, driving around a dense neighborhood in New Mexico that surely is not mine. I should listen to him, she would think, a structure and frame for every thought that would come after. I think of her living years and years with that vague memory, like groundwork set in earth dug deep in her head. She's already changed—bending and curving along as she causes me to rethink things. My own things. She's caused me to tell her stories instead of my own, instead of—I try to remember—of reading a poem to my mother and father.

It's somehow different, now. She did something real. I can think of her and her father in the truck, can think of the bitterness between them and know that it is not my own. Finally, I just think of them, of whatever my parents were and whatever they might have become. I have known so very little.