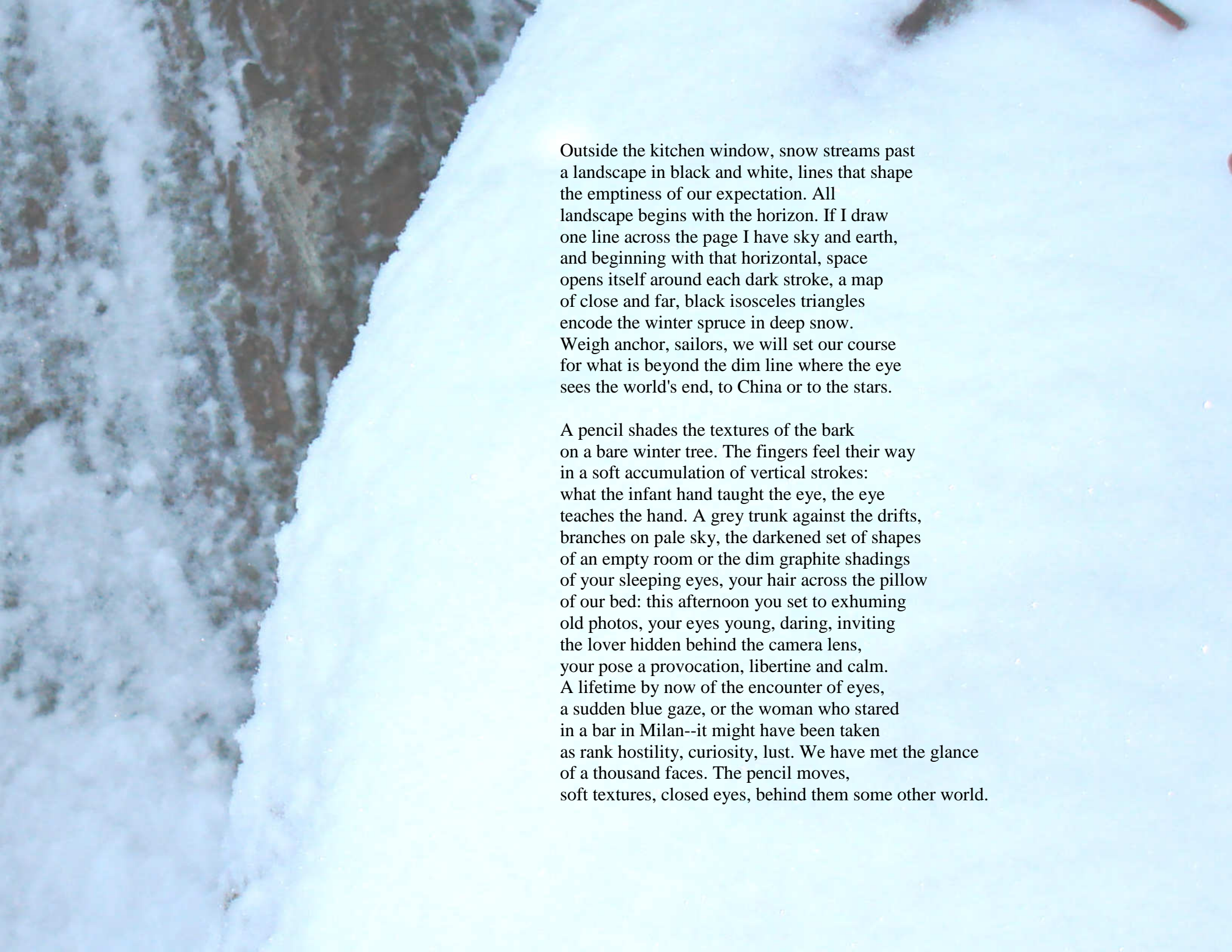


We wake to noise, the dim bumping of a plough
clearing new snow. Outside the window white flakes
stream downwind, a few turn in the air currents
close to the house. A soft whistle in the attic above.
Late December between Christmas and the New Year,
an interlude. We lie late in bed, doze, mumbling,
then sit by a wood fire reading poetry, housebound
by the wind and drifting. Pillows of snow load the spruce,
snow traces the lines of ruinous bare wild apple trees.
I imagine writing another kind of poem,
a long letter to my friends at the gate of the year,
a daybook that captures what's here and immediate--
the black dog plunging her face in white drifts
joyfully, again and again, or this morning's breakfast,
coffee and apple turnover eaten while I scribble
lines begun as I stood naked at a table
in a cold upstairs room, long wise lines to resist
neatness, rhyme, the too tightly worked,
to make a landscape of thought, incidental, slow.




Outside the kitchen window, snow streams past
a landscape in black and white, lines that shape
the emptiness of our expectation. All
landscape begins with the horizon. If I draw
one line across the page I have sky and earth,
and beginning with that horizontal, space
opens itself around each dark stroke, a map
of close and far, black isosceles triangles
encode the winter spruce in deep snow.
Weigh anchor, sailors, we will set our course
for what is beyond the dim line where the eye
sees the world's end, to China or to the stars.

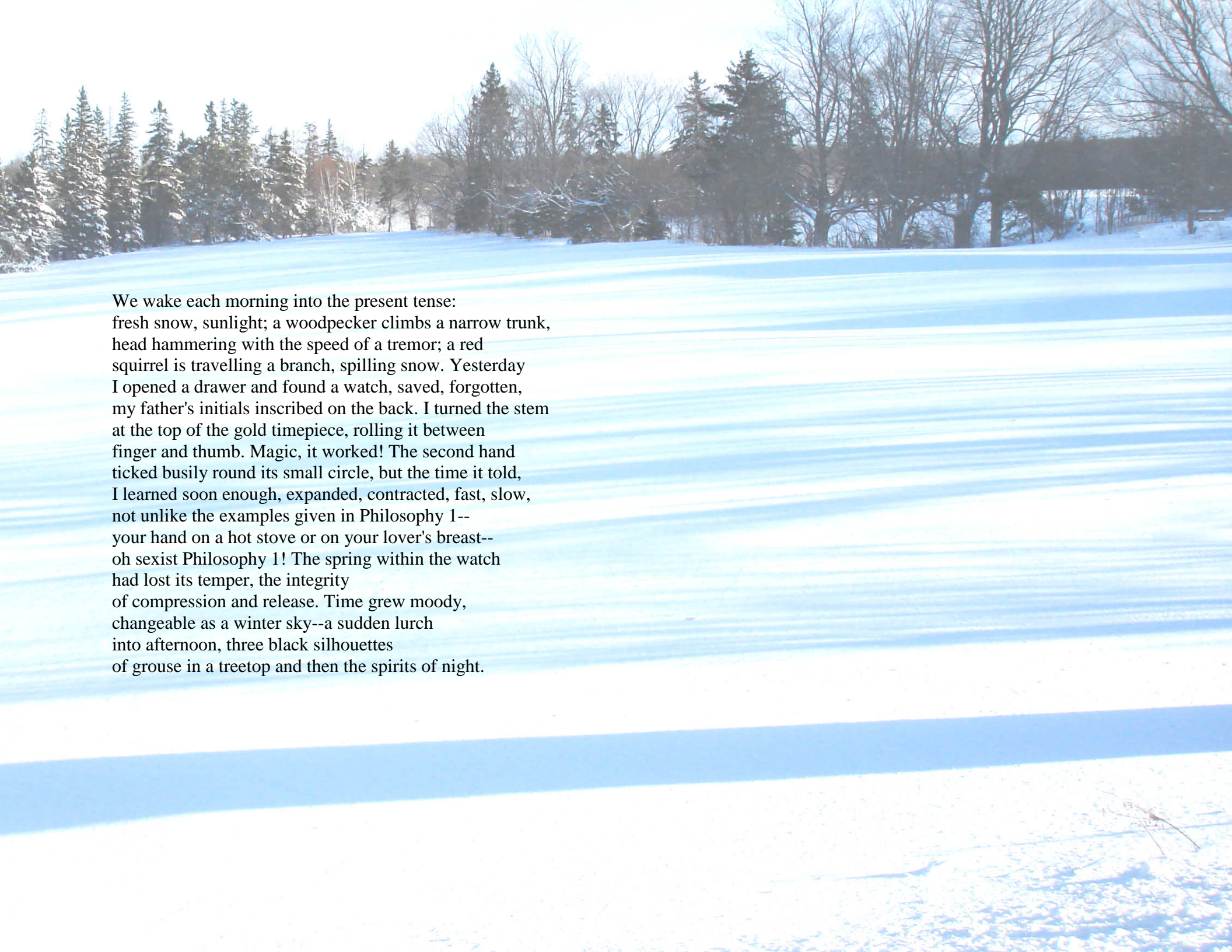
A pencil shades the textures of the bark
on a bare winter tree. The fingers feel their way
in a soft accumulation of vertical strokes:
what the infant hand taught the eye, the eye
teaches the hand. A grey trunk against the drifts,
branches on pale sky, the darkened set of shapes
of an empty room or the dim graphite shadings
of your sleeping eyes, your hair across the pillow
of our bed: this afternoon you set to exhuming
old photos, your eyes young, daring, inviting
the lover hidden behind the camera lens,
your pose a provocation, libertine and calm.
A lifetime by now of the encounter of eyes,
a sudden blue gaze, or the woman who stared
in a bar in Milan--it might have been taken
as rank hostility, curiosity, lust. We have met the glance
of a thousand faces. The pencil moves,
soft textures, closed eyes, behind them some other world.




Playing a disk of Shaker music recalls
an old obsession, thirty years ago: their plain
ways, the perfect lines of furniture, the pure life,
the rejection of ownership, all that haunted me
in the anxious days of an early marriage,
being a father. I wrote it out in iambics
and a four-line stanza, not without wisdom, I think,
no, not altogether. Even now, older, quieted,
I can be haunted by their precise acts, the gift
to be simple, that will to innocence,
wordless melodies, metres for dancing.
New Year's Day, the fields and trees still white,
more snow falling on the symbolic anniversary
of creation; the wheel of the world turns over.
We pause and rejoice. All things will be what they are
unless we can jigger away history's mistakes.



Coming back through the woods on snowshoes, the tracks
of rabbits everywhere beside the old logging road.
The animals, hidden by day, white lost in whiteness,
feed at night and leave these trails past bare trunks
or under an evergreen. Then a patch of snow
trodden and retrodden as if a dancing floor.
I stop to wonder what bred such celebration--
a few wild cherries, flame on the monochrome
background, shreds dropped on the packed snow
where the varying hare rose on its hind legs
to taste the sweet red fruit.




We wake each morning into the present tense:
fresh snow, sunlight; a woodpecker climbs a narrow trunk,
head hammering with the speed of a tremor; a red
squirrel is travelling a branch, spilling snow. Yesterday
I opened a drawer and found a watch, saved, forgotten,
my father's initials inscribed on the back. I turned the stem
at the top of the gold timepiece, rolling it between
finger and thumb. Magic, it worked! The second hand
ticked busily round its small circle, but the time it told,
I learned soon enough, expanded, contracted, fast, slow,
not unlike the examples given in Philosophy 1--
your hand on a hot stove or on your lover's breast--
oh sexist Philosophy 1! The spring within the watch
had lost its temper, the integrity
of compression and release. Time grew moody,
changeable as a winter sky--a sudden lurch
into afternoon, three black silhouettes
of grouse in a treetop and then the spirits of night.



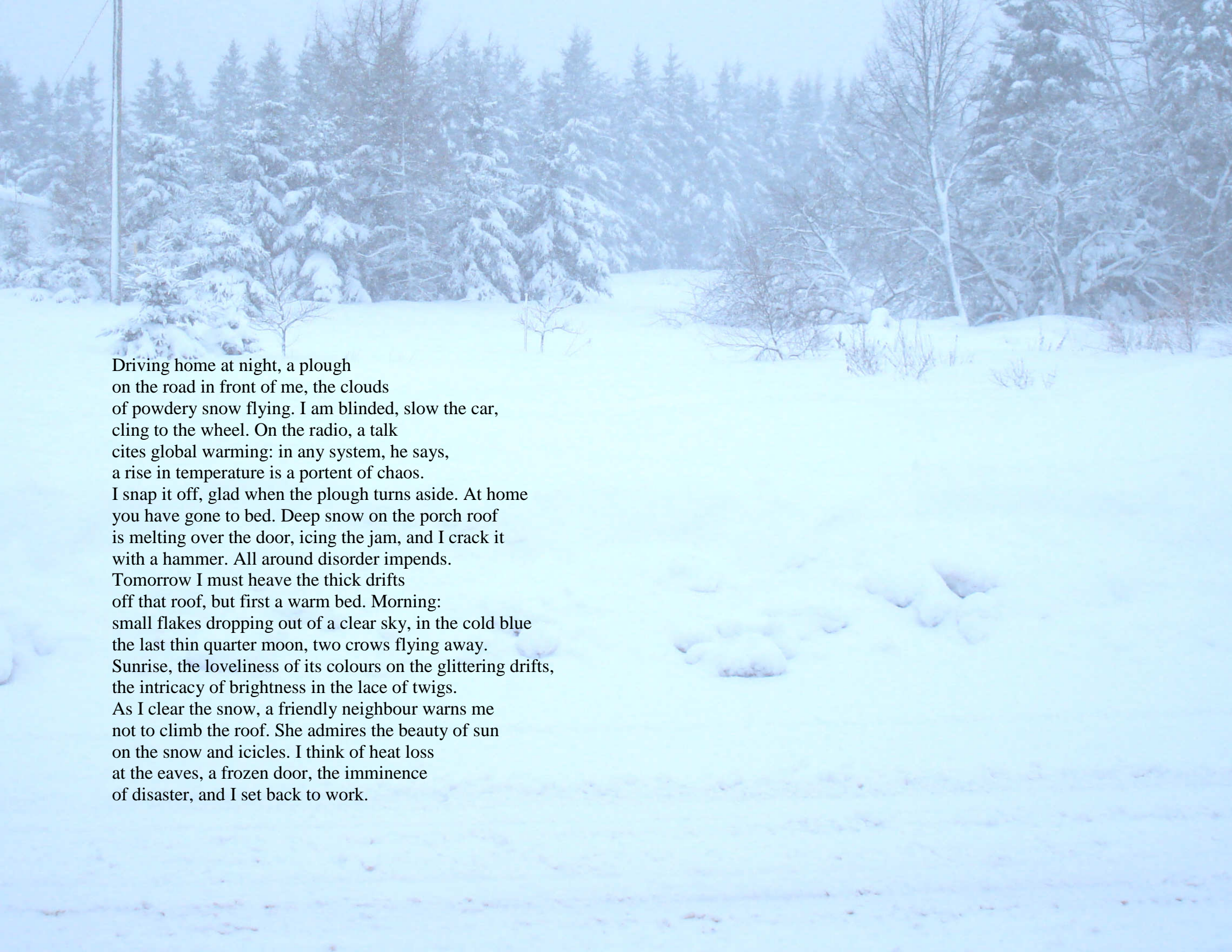
I lie awake, brood on the complications of family--
memory and apprehension, my father's face,
children, grandchildren, everything that can go wrong.
January of another year: some say this now
is the millenium at last, the beginning of Year One--
which has only logic on its side. Millenia
are not mensuration but digital magic,
the zeroes, click, click, click, click.
Decade, millenium--they are like the arithmetical
and arbitrary sabbath, while the lunar month
and solar year metre the universe.

Journal entry:

after the weekend siege of the snowstorm,
a clear night--the full moon rose at dinner
and set in an orange haze at the western horizon
as I made coffee for breakfast. We slept
under all that silence of blue light, saw chickadees
at the bird feeder in this morning's snow. James Thomson
in his long poem of the seasons describes a redbreast
driven indoors by a winter storm and found by the hearth.
The bird *picks and starts and wonders where he is,*
and erases three hundred years in a shake of feathers.
The chickadee, head cocked, a sudden flaring flight,
vanishes into the deep woods.

A photograph of a snowy landscape under a clear blue sky. A utility pole stands on the left, with a shadow cast long and dark across the snow. The snow is piled up in drifts, with some tracks visible. A small metal object is visible on the ridge of a snowdrift in the background.

The winter landscape is etched on the watching eye. After the storm has stopped and the wind has fallen, the snow lies in long elegant drifts where currents of air (like breath sharpened to a whistle, curling through the passages of a wooden flute, carried to the ear as music) swept round obstacles, house, shed, tree, and swirled into astonishing curves like the long arcs of the body--wind carrying flake after flake into peaks, and tunnelling hollows, double bends of some fluent unsolved geometry, edges crisp as pleats in cotton, a landscape that glitters in tomorrow's sun, white on white, all but translucent, until after a day or another day the sharp tops of the drifts are softened by sun, sublimation, the weight of snow, or revised by an hour's wind and flurries.

A photograph of a winter landscape. The foreground is a vast, flat expanse of snow. In the middle ground, there are several snow-laden evergreen trees and some bare deciduous trees. A utility pole is visible on the left side. The background is a dense forest of snow-covered trees under a pale, overcast sky. The overall scene is serene and quiet.

Driving home at night, a plough
on the road in front of me, the clouds
of powdery snow flying. I am blinded, slow the car,
cling to the wheel. On the radio, a talk
cites global warming: in any system, he says,
a rise in temperature is a portent of chaos.
I snap it off, glad when the plough turns aside. At home
you have gone to bed. Deep snow on the porch roof
is melting over the door, icing the jam, and I crack it
with a hammer. All around disorder impends.
Tomorrow I must heave the thick drifts
off that roof, but first a warm bed. Morning:
small flakes dropping out of a clear sky, in the cold blue
the last thin quarter moon, two crows flying away.
Sunrise, the loveliness of its colours on the glittering drifts,
the intricacy of brightness in the lace of twigs.
As I clear the snow, a friendly neighbour warns me
not to climb the roof. She admires the beauty of sun
on the snow and icicles. I think of heat loss
at the eaves, a frozen door, the imminence
of disaster, and I set back to work.