

Serendipity

COMMUNICATIONS

Karen Mathieson, Owner
Karen@SerendipityCommunications.com
Office line and voice mail: 503-297-3262
10940 SW Barnes Rd. #145 Portland OR 97225-5368

February Sign

By Karen Mathieson

The cold has a character today.

A dispassionate surgeon, it slices through layers to one's core,

Exposing the hidden, pulsing processes of life.

I yearn to rise, to walk, to stamp my feet in their thick boots.

Instead, I remain kneeling to read a story in the sand.

Small, near-handprints pressed down here in the night.

We can follow the pathways of the tiny brain alerted by scent or sound,

Some impulse we cannot discern drawing the track aside with a hint of food or danger.

Come, says the teacher, look at this with the sun behind you. The sun?

I unkink my joints, take a clumsy step across the popsicle sticks measuring the strides.

There is no sun here, only a gray and water-heavy coverlet of cloud.

Then, dropped down again beside the sign, I see each creaturely impression

Deepen, revealed by the hidden star.

We move down to the water, where pockmarks appear and proliferate on the steely surface.

Light rain is rapidly becoming wind-driven sleet.

Here another animal has hoisted itself up the bank, leaving chill buoyancy for clambering search.

A sibilant line follows the returning track,

The branch first dragged then floated toward a companionable gnaw.

The sleet is graupel now, pellets of styrofoam bouncing into every crevice of clothing,

Stinging scant inches of skin. Our beating mittens summon blood in vain.

Some of us gather, a dispirited herd, at the final signs of passage.

These look like the paw prints of a pet—save for no mark of claw—

Yet they have moved with another species of intelligence.

Here is no hither-thither eagerness, no release of caged energy.

This is the trail of a predator, purposeful and straight,

Banking metabolic fires until the chase, the pounce, the kill.

Long after we have left the river, I see that stark line of survival.

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