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Colby College

“One must have a mind of winter,” Wallace Stevens writes in his poem “The Snow Man,” and I, ever drawn to dialogue, respond, “I do. That’s *exactly* what I have.”

“And have been cold a long time,” the poem continues.

“Cold? I’m freezing,” I say. I’m a Maine resident, after all, one with Raynaud’s Syndrome, a minor circulatory disorder that makes my toes and fingers numb easily.

“To behold the junipers shagged with ice,/The spruces rough in the distant glitter/Of the January sun.”

Stevens’ poem shifts, but I stay with these lines, busily disagreeing. The coldness of my home state hampers exploratory perception. Or it hampers mine. Ice on the roads, snow coming down. Best to stay in.

I don’t ski and I don’t skate, though I do shove my son down sledding hills. I have a pair of snowshoes, and I occasionally tromp around a field, while complaining that I am the only person in the world whose nose has Raynaud’s. In general, though, I scuttle from one interior space — my home, my car, my office — to another. Not that I can completely indulge my disinclination to go out, as I live 64 miles from Colby College, where I teach fiction writing.

I try to pack as much as possible into my two days a week on campus. Mornings of paperwork lead to afternoons of classes, then multiple meetings. I get nervous when I bump into a friend in the hallway — I’ve got the desire, but not the time, to chat. I’ve got a mind of winter, all right. I never look up and see anything.

Except...when I make my way down from my office and out the doors of Miller



Library. The library — with its cupola and clock tower — sits at the center of Colby’s hilltop campus in Waterville, Maine. I often leave Miller with only one minute to get to the neighboring building where my classes are held. And yet as soon as I step outside, I stop. I’m out in the cold and willing, or willed, to look. From where I stand — between the giant pillars of Miller Library’s portico (where unrepentant smokers do their unrepentant smoking) — the view is expansive. The campus quadrangle descends — by stairs, stretches of lawn, more stairs, more stretches of lawn — to the faraway street, and then far beyond the campus to the forest (where Colby has its nature preserve) and the more distant forest (which hides Waterville’s homes but reveals a lone smokestack). I might want to pause here — and think about the paper mill that once employed the town and polluted its air and river — but my view is drawn farther still to the hills in the distance, just north of the more famous Camden Hills. Sight stops here, but I always *sense* what is beyond: the open promise of the sea.

I’ve spent a summer in Switzerland, so can I say this is a stunning view? Not really,

but it is big and inspiring. It does something to my mind of winter, which is so short-sighted. Looking, I slow down. I take a breath. It’s the view — not the lesson plan in my hand — that makes me ready to teach.

I have been in attractive buildings in winter, but I don’t remember them the way I remember looking *out* of buildings in winter. I think of an ugly academic building in Madison, Wisconsin, which offers a starkly pretty view of the icy reaches of the lake it borders.

In winter, I want to be *situated* for a significant view. In the summer, I don’t really care. A summer view may give me broadness, but then so does a summer day. In the cold, I need help. It might come in the form of a window, but where I work, it comes in the form of a building setting itself on high, so that its denizens can discover (for isn’t this what an undergraduate education is all about?) the outside world. ■

Debra Spark is the author of the novels *Coconuts for the Saint* and *The Ghost of Bridgetown*. Her most recent book is *Curious Attractions: Essays on Fiction Writing*.