

George Szirtes
Snowfield

1.

Snow takes form: the shapes it makes mount up and vanish against sky, a paler more transcendent cloud, a broader emptiness, briefly dependent on whatever it clings to, fit for the hands to cup and pack solid. The quiet solidifies into a firmer block of silence that shuts off streets and gardens. Stillness. No wind cuts our faces. We listen out for whispers and sighs in the furniture but it is little enough this light layer: it doesn't change the state of the world or even Norfolk very much, only appearances and the curious stuff of illusion we require to operate things that we thought were clear and ours to touch.

2.

The *One Stop Shop* stays open. The stationer and gift shop, the butcher, the winebar, the pub: commerce happens. Money, white goods and grub, hygiene products, light fittings, the pensioner at the Post Office window. Cold fingers at tills, on the counter, in the pocket. We are a scene from a Dutch painting moving against a screen of well-worn properties: frozen ponds, windmills, spires and barns. Our rural sports are gazing and passing water. We are our own TV. Children are born, we listen to their bones growing, watch hair sprout. They move at amazing speed through slow-motion air. Our brevity is startling. We're outlived by trees and stones.

3.

Brief snow. It sits on the roof as though it had always been there and always will be. It seems permanent in its grave weirdness. There are reams of it to be read in invisible ink. It makes sad comical entertainment discovering its history of anecdotes, like an elaborate joke that is told over and over again. The dead and the old know it by heart as does the snow-covered tree in the flat field. As do I myself, or I think I am starting to learn it: that snow is beautiful, that it settles on us like a hand that is raised sooner rather than later, that we can sink into it as into a frozen bath, that each petal of its crystal flower is lethal and perfectly phrased.