

RLS

(Saranac Lake, N.Y. Winter, 1887-8.)

The house nails spring out.
Cold papers the windows.
Venison, though cooked, rattles
its frozen entrails, and tree stumps
serve as footstools above the draft.
When Valentine, the Scottish maid, falls ill,
he clears the dishes,
and declares glass is not his medium.

He sketches difficult charades:
arctic explorers war darkness;
a great bear in a buffalo coat
(stiff even on its real hook)
terrifies a ruddy novice,
who marooned his wife
in Glasgow to find the pole;
the last trapper herds
south the eskimo insurgents,
a rat bite on his ear
(he once awoke and found it frost).

"Dr. Trudeau finds no tuberculosis."
Pole conquered, he eyes the map.
He foresees more west than West:
two days in dust, horse-thrown
(some such inevitable, he rightly quesses),
then a hurry across the Pacific,
where he clears sixteen jungle acres.

His ink turns ice.
Contraries throb his quill:
the Highland world he lives in,
the stroke that will kill him mid-sentence.

Francis Blessington