

Poet Snow

by Robert Reed

For years she had been their neighbor and that was all she was: a quiet, solitary woman with a passion for long walks that took her to every end of their little city. Everyone must have seen her, at least in passing. She looked to be in her thirties, and then her forties—a small skinny creature with long purplish-black hair, smart gray eyes and a Roman nose, with a face handsome enough to catch the notice of a few men but never so pretty that the local women regarded her as a threat. In cold weather, she wore oversized coats and high boots, and there were still plenty of winter months in that northern latitude. This was one of the new cities born during a very warm century—a community that sprang up in the midst of what had been a shaggy spruce forest and peat bogs. One hundred thousand people had migrated from the sultry, overcrowded south, drawn by cheap land and nostalgia for old-fashioned winters. It was an utterly modern city, diverse and clean, aesthetically united, and despite that unity, surprisingly lovely. The woman lived near the city's largest park, alone inside a tiny house. Yet her yard covered several hectares of rocky ground, and unlike almost every landowner, she had maintained the original spruce forest. That fact alone made her notable. People might not know who the walker was, but everybody understood what was meant when they heard the "Christmas tree place" mentioned—a dark blue-green woods surrounded by a simple split-rail fence, both the house and its occupant left invisible from every outside vantage point.

Her immediate neighbors knew a good deal more, of course. They saw her with some frequency, and over the years, they had managed more than a few conversations with the woman. Given the chance, she was nothing but pleasant. She could smile and make small talk, and if pressed, she relinquished little clues about herself. Her name was Brenda Liles, for instance, and she was an artist. Just what sort of artist remained a mystery. People eventually settled on the term "poet." Ms. Liles had used that word, or she hadn't dissuaded anyone who used it in her presence. But unlike several other local poets, she wasn't a teacher at the city college, nor did anyone seem to know the titles of her work or even under what name she wrote. Some speculated that she was just a strange woman wearing the arts as a kind of camouflage. But then her next-door neighbor managed to learn something incredible. The woman was indeed a poet, yes. But she didn't work with prosaic, old-fashioned words. And since childhood, nothing that she had written had actually enjoyed the honor of being published.

Ms. Liles's neighbor was an elderly woman originally from Haiti and then Orlando. Ruby was outgoing and persistent, and in some cases, relentless. Learning a little bit about Brenda, she wanted to know everything. One summer day, using the excuse of searching for a lost cat—a nonexistent cat, as it happened—the old woman was able to enter the property and find the poet in an unusually talkative mood. The two women stood in a little clearing in the middle of the spruce woods. Above them was an adjustable screen that absorbed the worst of the sun's heat, using that cheap energy to refrigerate the air below. Otherwise the spruce trees would bake and die. Brenda explained the technology with words that no typical poet would have used—soulless words about photons and microclimates and cool-weather photosynthesis—and then with a fondness bridging on true love, she admitted, "These are my favorite trees. The spruces are always the last trees to die before the cold takes all."

What a very peculiar creature, Ruby thought to herself.

Then she brushed aside her unease. Poets were odd people, by definition, and with that in mind, she summoned up a big smile while asking, "Are you working on something now?"

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is it?" But then she thought better, forcing herself into a patient silence.

The ploy worked.

Suddenly the artist couldn't stop herself. Years of hard, self-abusive labor emerged as a few decidedly unpoetic sentences. She said, "I'm using nanotechnological techniques to write an epic poem on an impermanent substrate. For now, my work exists in a computer. But later I'll use ice as my medium. Or more to the point, I'll use snow."

"Snow?" the neighbor muttered.

Hearing the word spoken by another made the poet smile. And then, answering a question that her audience would never think of asking, she remarked, "Life is impermanent, just as

art is impermanent. So why not gladly embrace the temporary?"

Now what in hell did that mean?

It was a question that might have been asked, but wasn't. Not by a busybody like the old cat-less woman, nor by anyone she spoke to in those next few weeks and months. But at least there was some hint as to what the poet was doing. Her immediate neighbors were amused, and perhaps a few were curious. But the curiosity passed, and through the next winter and spring and into the long northern summer, Brenda Liles was again little more than a familiar figure marching through town, her aging face looking more distracted every day. More focused, and more passionate. Then

summer was over, and the distractions seemed to pass. Suddenly she was smiling as she walked, speaking softly to nobody, using a quiet purposeful voice that instantly threw her sanity into question. That autumn, the local news monopoly received a holo brochure as well as a handwritten note. The note was from a nanoindustrialist with a taste for the arts. "She is one of yours," he wrote in a crimped, inartistic script. "Perhaps you would like to do a profile, before the event." The "event" was the subject of the elaborate brochure.

Calls were made to the sponsoring foundation, confirming the basics of the story. More calls were made to Brenda Liles, and then digital pleadings, and

finally, a handwritten card signed by reporters, on-camera talent, and several frustrated editors. “We would love to do a story about you,” the card claimed. “At your convenience, naturally.” But for weeks, the plea went unanswered. The story was nearly forgotten. And then on a chill day in November, the poet strolled into the main studio, wearing a long brown coat past its prime and tall dirty boots, her face looking exhausted but composed. “Now is convenient,” she announced. “If you want this interview, let's do it now.”

By the next day, the poet moved from a recognized if imprecise presence to become the most famous citizen in the little city.

"I earned this commission twenty years ago," she explained. "But the scope of my work and the necessary technologies ... well, there've been some long delays and large technical problems. Not to mention the simple old-fashioned difficulties in writing the bastard poem itself." It surprised some. But poets can have a genuine potty mouth.

"You'll be writing in the snow," the interviewer mentioned, referring to the brochure glowing on his lap.

"Is that what will happen—?"

"I'm writing with the snow," she corrected.

Then she grabbed the brochure away from him, turning to a chapter near the

bottom of its memory.

“Each flake is a word,” she explained. “Each word is written in a language of my own invention.” She spoke in deep mathematical terms, and then without warning, she boasted, “There aren't a hundred people in the world who could read this work. And of them, I doubt if five will understand any of it.” The interviewer stared at his very odd subject. He came close to asking, “Why bother, then?” But the poet continued talking, happily explaining how the complete poem would be one thousand and three words long, and due to the vagaries of the atmosphere and the chaotic drift of snowflakes, the essential flakes would assemble themselves in the

correct order, in the required set of lines, only five or six times on the entire canvas.

"The canvas," the interviewer repeated.

Then to help guide his audience, he said, "You mean us."

She said, "Yes," with an "isn't it obvious?" tone.

"This snow ... this event ... it's going to cover our town sometime in January. Is that the plan?"

"Unless there are delays, yes."

It was a foolish and laughable and utterly bizarre activity. But there was more to the story. Nodding, the interviewer mentioned, "This will be a major event, as I understand it. Much of

the art world will be watching us."

"The entire world will be watching." She was an artist and a performer, and on the eve of her first show, she shivered with anticipation. "Yes, this will be an event. A spectacle. Like nothing else before, and afterward, this tiny town will be nothing but famous."

The January date proved too optimistic. Key hardware was late in arriving, and one of the AI climate moderators proved to be lazy, clumsy, and generally incompetent for its job. There was talk that the snow would have to wait until next winter—a small shame, and how would Brenda absorb this disappointment? But she didn't appear sad or even worried. That was

the consensus derived from hundreds of sightings and dozens of casual conversations. The poet seemed calm and perhaps even happy, and she acted more willing than usual to carry her side of any conversation. January would have been ideal, she admitted. As spring approached, bringing the first waves of southern heat, her snow would prove more temporary than ever. But that was all right. She wanted to show the world how fragile genius and its art forms were, and that wouldn't change. The middle of February was her working goal, and the goal held until a random ten-centimeter snow fell three days before the event—in effect, spoiling her canvas.

Brenda and the city had to wait for the wild snow to melt.

Winter was nearly done when it was announced that tomorrow was the day. Brenda was seen on the news making final preparations, while the local meteorologists spoke with familiar phrases and minimal knowledge, explaining how the next twenty-four hours would play out. Snow required cold, obviously.

And moisture.

And in the upper atmosphere, a multitude of delicate events had to transpire in the perfect order, if the specially designed snowflakes were to form in the proper fashion before falling with the most effective velocity.

Overnight, an enormous dome was erected over the city and the surrounding countryside. It was invisible and extraordinarily durable—an elaborate hemisphere of ionized particles and nano-platforms, light-eating solar motes and state-of-the-art refrigerating smokes. The early March sunlight was diminished, and much of that blocked energy helped power the feedback systems that deepened the resident chill. There was enough moisture under the dome to build a five-centimeter snowfall, but that wouldn't be ample. The poet had originally proposed a damp snow of twelve centimeters—a very pretty old-fashioned snow, she had promised, augmented by the city's own

water supplies—and that's what the various press releases had repeated. But in January, and twice in February, Brenda had quietly increased her projected totals. When asked about the changes, she claimed that twenty-four centimeters was aesthetically sweeter, and she was trying to ensure that the spring heat wouldn't erase her work in a single day, and of course with a bigger snow, she was making it easier to find examples of her poetry hidden inside this wondrous event.

Her neighbors didn't particularly care. The artistic heart of this project had always seemed contrived and foolish, not to mention brilliant in all the worst ways. What they appreciated was the

attention from the worldwide artistic networks. What they enjoyed were those moments when savants and warhols were quoted as saying, "This is a great moment for giant art. Not since Addal built the fluorescent ink paintings off Hawaii have we had such a meaningful vision of truth and grandeur...." What people liked best were the video calls from the media and every kind of stranger—people around the world and the moon asking Brenda's neighbors, "What do you think about what's happening? What will you do while it snows? And how can you even relate to a mind like Ms. Liles's?" Every system was set and operating within the permitted norms. The dome had been

erected without incident, casting a convincing twilight over the city, and the chilly March air fell back into full winter. As promised, the snow began on a Friday evening, and it was steady and heavy, and from the beginning, it was wet enough to roll into balls and men. But except for a few vandalistic children, everyone was careful not to disturb what was happening outside the windows. They watched the centimeters collect, and they made digital records for themselves, and in the local holerooms, they celebrated this silent and pretty and utterly harmless event. It was art at its silliest, but if adults couldn't be silly now and then, what was the point in being alive?

At some point on Saturday, in the middle of the day, the poet posted new estimates about snow totals. Due to vagaries in moisture contents and the extra effectiveness of the cooling dome, thirty centimeters were likely, while the area near her home would reach forty, or perhaps even half a meter. Hardly worth the worry, and certainly requiring no panic.

But what concerned some were larger events happening elsewhere. A surge of warm spring air was heading north, ready to collide on Sunday with the great pool of dark chilled air. And more important were the rainboys. Giant lighter-than-air craft used to bring artificial clouds into dry areas, the

rainboys had started flying in the spring, gathering up fat white masses of damp air over the oceans, compressing them and impressing them with electrical charges, using the same essential equipment that built the cold dome in order to move moisture to tens of thousands of corporate tree farms and fish farms and steak farms and farm farms. Every year saw problems. One or two rainboys might fail in the same week, and it was possible that several might suffer troubles in the same month. But not in the same day, and it seemed like an incredible coincidence when three rainboys moving three closely spaced clouds failed together, almost in the same minute. Each failure was

distinct, and later investigations were less than clear-cut about the causes. Maybe it was just lousy luck. But whatever the reason, each cloud fell apart at its margins, bleeding its moisture into the warm spring air pushing north with a force and majesty that wouldn't stop until it reached the Arctic.

The old half-meter estimates of snowfall vanished before Sunday was half-finished. Sitting indoors, inside modest modern homes, people learned that in the next three days, if the models could be believed, the snows would approach a depth of five meters, or six. Unless the worst-case scenarios proved true, in which case as much as ten meters

of wet cold smothering snow would plunge down on their heads.

"The entire world will be watching," Brenda had promised months ago. Those words were remembered and chewed upon and discussed and denied. But then it was Monday and the snow was already deeper than any person was tall, and the sun was up but invisible, while the cooling dome was refusing to dissipate, and inside forty thousand homes, quiet voices said, "She meant this to happen."

To one another, and to themselves, people said, "This is what our neighbor had in mind from the beginning."

On her own initiative, Ruby fabricated a holeroom that would admit

only those living close at hand. Then she invited her neighbors to a Monday evening meeting. Almost everybody showed; where else did they have to be? But not Brenda. Since yesterday morning, the poet had steadfastly refused every one of their phone calls and e-mails, the same as she was ignoring the interview requests from every media outlet. Yet she remained inside her house. She had to. The dome was highest above her spruce woods, and the storm was squarely focused on her.

"This is a willful and enormous mess," Ruby said, her voice tight and excited and very much scared.

"What we need to do is decide what we're going to do. About Brenda, and

about everything else, too." Maybe a hundred homes were represented. People who hadn't looked at each other twice in the last year were now sitting inside the illusionary room, speaking with quick careful voices, and listening too. They were every sort of person—professionals and investment-riders, retirees and tradespeople. Most were physically fit, and many enjoyed the winter sports, their basements and garages full of the very best equipment available from a modern sporting goods department. A small fleet of snowbuggies stood at the ready, and smart-skis for everyone, plus snowshoes and self-heating clothes, shovels and snow-throwing machines, as well as a

small hill's worth of salt. Power wasn't a worry; every house had its own fuel cell generator. But the crushing, smothering weight of the snow scared everybody. What was essential had to be done first, and not everyone had the tools and backbone to help. Teams were created. Strong men and determined women dressed for the Arctic and stepped out into the impossible snow. GPS monitors let them navigate. They gathered what they could of their machinery and each other, and then working fast and hard, one house at a time, the teams stripped the worst of the snow off the groaning roofs. By Tuesday morning, another two meters had fallen. But the houses were safe, at least for the time being. People

rested until noon, eating like lumberjacks and managing little naps. Then the second part of the operation began. Dozens gathered at one of the main intersections—faceless, almost shapeless bodies wearing masks and stiff coats and heavy trousers and boots already half-filled with packed wet snow. Snowshoes were mandatory. Otherwise, their bodies would sink to the crotch, if not deeper. Only the voices betrayed who was who. One voice was easily recognized, asking everyone else, “Are we all here?”

It was the old woman. Half a dozen burly men said, “You shouldn't be here, Ruby. What are you trying to do to yourself?”

"First of all, this was my idea," she reminded them. "And second, the poet is my neighbor. How can I be anywhere else?"

The sharp tone cut off any arguments. Besides, there wasn't time to spare. They had to do this hard thing as quickly as possible, and they had to leave themselves with enough energy and focus to return home afterward, then again, somehow scrape their roofs clean.

"All right," their ringleader declared, waving a heavy mitten. "Let's do this!" The landscape had been made frighteningly simple, flat and gray-white and barely lit. Almost every landmark had been obscured, and new waves of snow were crashing down on them,

choking off vision and muting every sound. At some ill-defined place, the group left the street behind. But no one was sure where that happened or where they had shuffled over the buried split-rail fence. Then the snow sprouted mounds and pillars and neat little pyramids. Under each was a spruce tree, its blue-green boughs twisted and smashed by the relentless mass, while draped over the half-crushed trees were the shreds of the canopy that had always kept the woods cool in summer, and safe. The smallest men broke the trail for the others. A two-hundred-meter walk absorbed most of an hour. Then the trees were behind them, and the little house revealed itself as a position on the GPS

monitors and what looked like a small, very tidy igloo. The first shovel cut deep, finding snow beneath the snow. They formed into a rough circle and began digging with hand shovels and mittens, and after forty minutes of intense labor, they had excavated a good-sized pit. Still, there wasn't any roof. A few mentioned what everyone was thinking, that the house had already collapsed under the full brunt of the storm. Regardless, work came to a standstill as everyone gasped and shook their aching arms, ate trail mix and drank from water bottles kept warm under their coats. A few listened to the news on satellite radio. This freak storm and their personal plight was the most important

story in the world today. An army of soldiers and civilian workers was being mobilized on the edges of the disaster, but it might be too late. Every distant voice agreed that thousands of lives were in jeopardy, while pundits and legislators tried to outdo each other, describing the kinds of vengeance that would be necessary for a crime of these titanic proportions. The radios were silenced.

Again, shovels were jabbed into the snow, and two minutes later, the blue-black solar tiles on the intact roof burst into view.

A pair of diamond-bladed saws started to whine and slice.

When the hole was large enough, a

limber young man slipped into the dark attic. With a flashlight and some considerable experience in construction, he examined the trusses and floorboards. Then he popped back into view, shouting, "It's pretty close to busting, I think."

"Can you hear anybody?" Ruby asked.

"I don't hear much," he confessed. "Except the groaning boards, that is." The hole was widened. Saws and more tools were passed down, and then a woman and second man scrambled in after the first man. But they forgot the rope—a buckytube thread wrapped in nylon, suitable for a thousand different jobs. Ruby grabbed it up, and she slid into the attic with a spryness that startled

everyone, including herself.

"You need me," she told the anonymous masked figures. Fiercely, she said, "I'm the only who's ever been inside this house."

A lie, but nobody dared call her on it.

They walked the length of the attic, feeling the house shake and moan around them. A fold-out ladder and hatch lay under the insulating aerogel. A simple latch was easily broken, and they climbed down to a darkened hallway. No one was home, it seemed. They searched both bedrooms and the kitchen and the little living room, and finally, they found the stairs leading into the basement. A ruddy light burned somewhere below.

The larger man went first, one hand holding a fire ax. Reaching the bottom of the stairs, he paused and blinked, and a moment later, as the wailing scream began, he dropped the ax, missing his own foot by nothing.

A woman was screaming out in the gloom.

The man cursed and grabbed up the ax again, holding it in a vaguely defensive stance. The scream became a choked little voice, and the voice chanted, "No, no, no, please." Ruby stepped past everyone. The basement was an elaborate workroom filled with bottled AIs and other simulation tools. She crossed it in a few strides, the rope still coiled in her hands, ready for every job.

You could never tell when you might need to tie something up or secure it from falling. That's why she had brought the rope, and that's why she forgot about it now. She was staring at the poet, marveling at how tiny the woman seemed when she was lying on the floor, in a fetal pose, milky hands thrown over a face ripped by anguish and terror. "Just don't make me suffer too much," Brenda begged. "Have mercy. Kill the artist, but please ... don't make it hurt too much...." The old woman stopped short, stunned now.

Unknown to the intruders, half a dozen cameras were focused on them, piping images to Brenda's official holeroom. Two worlds were watching as Ruby

stood above her neighbor. And then, finally, the wise old woman began to understand what this was about.

She laughed, abruptly and with great sadness.

What else could she do?

Ruby giggled and sobbed and knelt on creaky knees. "This never had anything to do with poetry in the snow," she told Brenda. "That was just a convenient disguise, wasn't it? What you're doing here ... it's some kind of foolish, contrived performance art ... isn't that it...?" Her neighbor squirmed on the floor.

"The fragility of art and genius. Is that what you hoped to show here?" Brenda gazed through her spidery fingers.

"Oh, you poor darling." Ruby dropped the rope and offered both hands, adding, "I feel so sorry for you, you know."

"Don't you want to kill me?" Brenda asked. And then with an almost sorry tone, she added, "I'm attacking your city, your homes. I am a goddess with a cold rage. The Witch of Winter and Despair. Why even come here, if it wasn't to murder me?"

Everybody was laughing now.

"Honey," the old woman purred, a gray-black hand coming out of its mitten, touching the sharp white cheek. "You are very strange and probably mentally ill, and you aren't much of a poet, either. But really, even together, those still aren't good enough reasons to kill anybody."