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Ode to February

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It must have been a winter resident of upstate New York who set Valentine's Day in mid-February. Because this is our time of year when we really need a lover to wrap around our arms and legs, snuggling up, nibbling chocolates, blossoms on bedside table.

Notwithstanding this conditional single day, February is a downer. Can't blame it on Covid; February is always a nothing-28 days, so arrogant it demands we endure it for an additional 24 hours every four years. I'm speaking not politically, not ecologically but weatherwise. Weather is what demands almost all my energy after two months asserting itself indoors and outside.

February is an utter vacuum that sucks up everything delightful about winter and obliterates any hint of sweet fragrances that might follow. I glare at spindly, brown branches crowding the hillsides daring them to sprout a single leaf again.

I admit, January's winter can be pretty. Soothingly silent too; nothing matches moonlight on glistening snow. We've had glorious sunny mornings when we're deceived that the entire world is at peace, blanketed in gentle fluff.

Almost daily, if a bald eagle doesn't swoop low over the river, I spot one perched high above threads of running water.

I meet a neighbor at my library who eagerly opens her phone to share a snapshot of meter-long icicles hanging from her roof. (We used to break them off and suck at them. Do kids do that today?)

It's fun to hear children gleefully leaping into the drifts, with 'Rover' clumsily stumbling around them. Despite the mess they trail indoors it's a deserving break from Covid confinement.

But that's all I concede. There's treacherous ice under those narrow pathways of packed snow. An uninterrupted slab of ice is firmly embedded into those steps, around the car, along the walk, up the curbside to the pharmacy, grocery store, post office. My car, if accessible at all, is spattered with mud and salt, inside and out.

No stranger to this climate, I prepared for winter: ordered a face cord of firewood early so logs would dry by December; hauled garden stuff inside; plugged door hinges with felt

strips; inspected the roof; stretched plastic across single plate windows. Yes, everything's secure.

But this—this– can't go on past February. I felt heartened a week ago, noticing a change in the arch of the sun. It rises over the eastern hillside at 8:30 now, an hour earlier than last month, and I follow its glow above the edge of the hill behind me until it slips away at 3. This surely signals winter's end.

But no. Our nights seem colder as we move through this endless February. A blizzard arrives every four days, a nasty reminder it's not over, not for two additional months, maybe 10 weeks. Perhaps longer.

We can't let down our guard—can't step into the winter sun without bundling up, without mittens and a hat; can't put away those extra blankets or clean out the mud room; can't not repair the humidifier.

I see a flash of red on the tedious white. It's a rose-breasted grosbeak! Perhaps the red crossbill? A squawking bluebird distracts me as I rush out to top up the birdfeeder.

From Facebook I grab a photo of a crazed looking snow-he/she, an ideal companion to my Valentine ode to February.

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BN Aziz whose anthropological research has focused on the peoples of the Himalayas is the author of the newly published "Yogmaya and Durga Devi: Rebel Women of Nepal", available on Amazon.

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