

Dispute with Thomas Hardy

by [Sydney Lea](#) in the [May 20, 2008](#) issue

*The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing
Alive enough to have the strength to die.*

—“Neutral Tones”
(*Psalm 72*)

It won't last long, this snow that sheathes
the dooryard pine in April and lays
its feckless cover on the slope behind.

Crocuses, just tall enough,
poke their small blue noses through.

It's clear that they're alive enough to live.
April's gale is loud as bombers.

What's left of ice around the pond
in town is rough as predators' teeth.

The fisher fells the luckless squirrel.

There's much I too may try to cover.

For all of that I feel a gladness
in watching this omni-inclusive white
blot out the neutral tones that pushed
our brilliant poet to ponder death,
and love's deceit, its cruelty.

We've been together, my love and I,
near three decades, which have scudded by
like these sideways flakes. My lover-wife.

There *can* come pangs, but the freshets have started

to wander the brush and make their signs:

soon we'll find the trillium,
the painted kind, in that secret place
which I discovered springs ago,

and which since then I've kept a secret
from all but her—from even our children;
and the valley's white-faced Herefords,
while winter endured, dropped new calves,
which now, though mud clots up like blood,
shine clean as a man's most colorful dream.

What is this one's dream? That life go on
as ever. That all our lives go on.
No more than dream, of course. I know,
the planet heating up, the cretin
politicians waving swords,
as if, by counter-logic, war
might transform earth into something more saintly.
So many hard facts conspire against me.
To know that, though, is to make me cling
the harder to gifts that appear to be given

without my having to deserve them.
Flowers, beasts, the glinting trees.
My disposition, which has moved me here
to mute dispute with my great better,
in spite of all my darker doubt.
Inkling that something will soon come down
like rain upon the mown grass, as showers
that water the earth. Let us praise the Lord,
and every weather. Or the smile on the mouth
of my lover, which still can blind like snow.

Or the road agent waving from his bright-red plow
as it smooths the mud-clotted back lanes over.