

Fall Semester, Large Midwestern University

Across acres of parking lots we walk
in thick silence, the first snow
this year, the first ever to stick

on the Southern California clothes
of the kid ahead of me. Hunched
monkishly under a skater hoodie,

hands in pockets, he bears no backpack,
just a folder clamped into an armpit.
Drifting past islands of lone, bony trees

in an asphalt sea, he's long gone,
driving all night for waves and sunshine
by late morning, if he had a car.

He turns west for the freshman dorms.
Cloud-break rays burnish his face,
caution and a pilgrim's humility

brace him for winter this far inland,
this far north, the shadow he knew
by feel back home faint as breath.

I should follow his shuffling footprints,
promise him that snowlight will balance
the distance of cold with dark's closeness.

Look, I'd say, the sun always fades
like this, the final sliver of a citrus
cough drop in your soon-sore throat,

like campfire embers—driftwood if you want—
raked over those frozen mountains, dying fast
and too far away to warm your hands.

— *Kevin Klein*

This poem won first place in the 2024 BYU Studies Poetry Contest.