

## Mordecai Marcus: On "Desert Places"

The speaker of "Desert Places" also feels lost and tries to orient himself by the stars, but his circumstances and tone are very different. He goes rapidly past a field, awed by the swift descent of snow and night and disheartened by the smooth white cover over the last traces of vegetation, which presents a temptation to yield, as does much else in the scene, for everything seems gathered in. He participates as he yields the snowy field to the woods, envies the animals in their protective burrows, and feels so absent that he does not even count as part of the scene. "Unawares," used as an adverb to modify "includes," shows that the loneliness acts without thought. The speaker generalizes about the scene: its loneliness will intensify long before any relief arrives. The snow cover will thicken and be covered by night, and will lack physical expression and anything to say, "benighted," describing the snow, puns on both the fall of night and spiritual ignorance. In a slyly abrupt transition, the speaker scorns an unspecified "They" who might wish to scare him by pointing to empty spaces even more frightening than this field--the far reaches of the universe, presumably empty of consciousness. This passage may allude to Blaise Pascal's famous description of his fear when contemplating the infinite spaces between the stars, an emotion that helped restore his lagging religious faith. The "They" who would make such efforts to scare people must be scientists and ministers, the latter anxious to demonstrate God's power and potential refuge. The "nearer home," where the speaker has successfully faced such terrors, is the inner self, as in the phrase to strike home; its "desert places" are moral and spiritual wildernesses. As many critics have noted, "scare," usually applied to children's casual distress, is an understatement emphasizing the speaker's deeply experienced stoicism.

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