



Source: Sabrina Tavernise, "Baghdad oasis 'falling to terrorists'", *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune* online, 24/06/06.

Tags: [workplace](#), [discomfort](#), [streets](#)

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Ice has gathered itself into paisley patterns on the surface of the window. There's a gap—a kind of air-lock—between the two glass panes. Outside, it's probably minus twelve. Inside, the thermostat reads 23 degrees.

His eyes switch focus, looking through the frosty crystals, past Avenue Mont Royal, and onto the softball field, now covered with snow. The field is dotted with footprints snaking diagonal shortcuts. Last night's fall has softened yesterday's journeys. They present gentle indentations, compared with today's crisp sharp cuts.

Down on the sidewalk, the mini tractor-plough has come and gone. This machine is a menace, mangling bicycle wheels and scattering young mothers pulling along their toddlers in plastic sleds.

He can hear the snow ploughs, at 5.00 a.m., grinding their way up every street, clearing just enough room for a single car to spin its wheels and fishtail out into the traffic. The heavy steel blades of the plough scrape across the bitumen, opening old wounds, peeling off great scabs of the road surface and leaving behind treacherous, axle-destroying potholes. These are patched by emergency work crews. He shudders, watching through the window, as the workers stand around. They work without scarves, without hats, in sneakers. A machine pipes the holes full of steaming tar. The tar plug is only a temporary solution. Soon enough, the water underneath will freeze, expand, crack open the surface, and the whole cycle will start again. When you drive, the roads feel like they have been bombed.

This city is ruled by snow ploughs, he thinks. Sometimes the 'blue collars' go on strike for better conditions. They drive their monsters through the CBD, blocking traffic in a lumbering four-tonne diesel-powered parade. The mayor calls them bullies! bandits! criminals! But there is little the council can do. A minor pay rise is nothing compared to the prospect of a ploughless winter.

Good on them!, he thinks. He likes the idea that shifting around Large Quantities Of Physical Stuff can still wield power. Not that he'd want to do the job himself. But still...not only does all that snow have to be ploughed, it also has to be collected by trucks, and dumped into huge piles in the middle of an empty field, where it will take until the end of summer to fully melt away.

All this freezing, melting, expanding, dumping, and heavy lifting seems a long way from his own, increasingly virtual, life. But like it or not, physicality creeps its way into this tightly sealed apartment. The heating is on all winter—it's included in the rent.

Toasty warm, he boots up the laptop and logs on in his underpants. He reads about New York's energy crisis. They're having 'brown outs' down there—they can't supply enough electricity for themselves, and are now importing it from Quebec. Locally, the Premier urges them to go slow on the heating, for fear that they also will run out.

He looks up from the screen. Somewhere, far off in the mountains, he imagines, water is still running, spinning the turbines that heat this little place. He gets up guiltily and turns the thermostat down a few degrees, then returns to the window.

The latest crisis, he notes, is garbage. For some weeks now, the trucks have cruised straight past the kerb. The pick up is on Tuesday, and he has been told to just dump his green plastic bags on the side of the road. But recently, trash collection has all but stopped. Each time the truck comes past, the bags have been blanketed with a thick layer of fresh snow. The workers won't rummage around looking for garbage bags—snowfall is not *their* problem. So week after week, a stratification of trash / snow / trash / snow builds up. The remnants of his meals, empty cans, snotty tissues, old newspapers: all cryogenically preserved. Like his neighbours, he does nothing about it—just keeps on piling up the bags. Surely *someone* will come along and take care of it? Dogs piss into the growing icy middens running along the side of the road. The steaming urine cuts into the snow and leaves mysterious frozen yellow tunnels in the filthy mini-mountains.

It's the small things, he thinks, which will bring us down in the end. Piles of garbage, backed up toilets, frozen pipes, blocked roads. He pads barefoot into the kitchen and turns on the tap. Clear water flows effortlessly into his glass. What's for lunch?, he wonders.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Lucas Ihlein.*