TWELVE

Dawn blew in a foot deep. Outside, each boy smiled hard, showed his teeth. The sun broke late but quick, every unmarshalled street gleaming like virgin country. Three girls danced in place at the bus stop, their faces bobbing above mists of breath. Each in turn watched the four of us march up the block. The county plows hadn’t reached the corner.

A single car crunched by, then footsteps, breath. Jim was the biggest. He wore no hat, a thin jacket. He had hair on his chin. When he started, I knew nobody could ever stop him—

that’s what I told my father and the police
That’s what I first told myself. I didn’t say it was why we hung out with him, the glow. How snow colored his face, then ours, as if soon we’d break from jail and just run.

It was like the tank in the old war movie, I said hours later, my father propped over tepid coffee, my mother standing cross-armed in the kitchen. A lucky grenade takes out the crew but the tank doesn’t blow up, it just keeps rolling. My father looked down. The girls had laughed at the first snowball,

then kept laughing even as they fled back into the park, closer to the unfrozen river. I stopped for more snow—and when I looked up, Jim had caught one of the girls in the face, a perfect pitch and she’d gone down. Her popped jacket buttons were black spots in the snow—like rabbit shit, I thought.

I couldn’t tell my father how I’d whooped, then ran after, hurling fastballs at the backs of the other two. My father didn’t grow smaller, only further off, each word I spoke a step away. When I bent
for more snow, I heard the high, throaty
breathing of the girl Jim had knocked down.
No other noise but the river could break out
of the snow-muffled forest. A beautiful red
line ran from the girl's nose to her mouth
to her cheek, then began again like a knife-cut
on her white blouse. Soon the other boys ran up
staring at her. I couldn't tell my father
how I'd felt when Jim yelled to strip her.
I could have sworn she'd laughed once as she
rose to run, slipping wildly, then crying.
I told the police, too, just that: she laughed . . .
And with the boys then upon her she stopped.
They were stunned still for a second when
she wailed like the dog I'd see hit
by a bus the next year, her long, long
"No" emptied into the white branches
above them. Then, Jim smiled like an adult,
like my father home drunk from the office
that time, his back to my mother's plea.
I heard the screaming from their bedroom,
then watched from my window his car pull
into that snowing night. Breath curled
from Jim's lip. I told my father the whole
thing became a movie right then. I wasn't
frozen exactly. The last snowball dropped
from my hand and I just stood there, Jim
on the screen stepping slowly toward the girl.
A droplet of sweat burned in the snow
at my feet. The girl went quiet, her head
shaking every few seconds. With each
step Jim took, she stepped backwards. My mouth
opened silently. I did not take
a breath. Without looking up at me,
my father asked why I didn't try
to stop him. They continued: three steps,
four. Then, like a dancer, she paced back into air—and was gone. Jim stood on top of the high bank for several seconds. None of us moved. In the distance, adult voices were approaching, and Jim turned, his smile only a glaze across his white eyes. He looked at us all, then walked slowly off. I exhaled. My father rose from the table, asked my mother, Is this a dream? She said nothing, turned off the light. A streetlamp glared from the corner. In the kitchen window, snow fell through naked limbs.

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