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

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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,

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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.

Kevin Clark

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