

PURGATORY

poems

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You are under the Arctic Circle, in a one-man submarine. Your nose itches, but there is no way for your hand to reach your face. You are wearing red wool long underwear made by a woman named Elsie who lives outside Portland, on the corner, in a small yellow house next to the church. She knits these union suits during the months that end in y. Elsie's husband was a lumberjack, until the fire of '05, and she makes every suit his size. Her hands move together like dancers, practiced in the art of sharing space. This intimacy is exactly opposite of the compression you feel inside this metal tube, as Elsie's loops tighten around you.

They replaced the switch with a dimmer. You lie on beige carpet, the color of champagne, and the black phone sits next to your head. Every fifteen minutes it rattles and the ringing moves through your skull and goes to sleep deep in your brainstem. The voice on the other end of the line is, always, your mother. It's midnight on the West Coast. She says your father is sitting upstairs with a loaded .45. She says she loves you—good night. The line goes dead, but her slur stays there, a ship, in the bottle of your head.

You stare at the electric coil, and wait for your watched pot to boil. You wear the first apron your mother made, out of the rocking horse curtains. Every time you take the lid off, the water is serene. Camel crickets skitter across the peach linoleum, and jump on a collision course with the backs of your bare knees. You wear white socks, the left one wet from the ice cube left to die just outside the freezer. You hold a baby spoon and tweezers. You realize, as you hear the roll of heat inside the thin tin pot, there is nothing to boil, nothing but insects.

There are six days until Christmas. Your car keys are made of construction paper and you can see the glitter glue used to connect them to your key ring, as they swing from your ignition. You are standing in the mall parking lot. Your car is on and locked. When the first reindeer falls, you turn just in time to see the antlers crack as the head splits open against the icy asphalt. Two hundred and sixty pounds of meat; a faint heart beat pumps blood out across the white lane lines, towards the shopping carts corralled for safety. When the second one falls, you are laying on your belly, underneath your car. You suck exhaust so deeply in, you think the blank eyes staring from the passenger side look just like dice.

The telescope only takes Sacagawea dollars. The air conditioner is stuck on high and hung from a cord in the sky. You are allowed to press your face against the glass, but it always tastes like Windex. Somewhere in your ear a dryer spins pockets filled with change. The rotation of the drum makes your head into a gumball machine being shaken by earthquake hands. In a phone booth offstage, your mother continually calls your name. The plexiglas around her is spray painted with gold stars and capital A's. Snow falls on the hour, but it looks like feathers. You watch them sway all the way to the ground where they mix with what must be, what must have always been, blood.

You wake up to the sound of the cradle rocking, of tree limbs falling. The crack and clatter. The creak and glass crash. Down will come baby, all begins with a groan, as if the tree was molting, as if suddenly the need to discard, to divest, to drop an arm occurred, and the joint let loose at the shoulder. The worst ice since '37, when barns were all that collapsed. Now power lines tense under the hanging weight and split their seams—wires come unbundled and dangle into icicles on both sides of the street. You get out of bed. Your house is 48 degrees and falling. In the dark, electric blue flashes slash the sky—transformers exploding on all sides. Everything you need is out of batteries. You think of picking up a kitchen knife. You put your face to the window, knowing even though an inch of ice covers all the cars, the chain link fences, the mailboxes, this is exactly how the zombie movie starts.