

JUDD HAMPTON

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## SECOND CHANCE

**W**E BEAT BACK THE ICE AND SNOW with hammer, pick, with whatever we have. It's an inexorable of this land, and arrogantly we muddle through, cursing it. Every moment outside is like a clock ticking toward the inevitable, the cold inching through layers of clothing; I feel it on my skin, leeching in, my internal organs slowly cooling. This kind of cold cannot be imagined. Everything seems so calm and silent, almost ready to slip away.

I have forgotten how youth can be, all morality and high ideals, risking life and limb for an idea. Let it come, I once said, and came it did. Some of the faces that drift here remind me I was once young, once purposeful. Now I too drift.

Even indoors, frost hugs the walls and ice settles in the corners, but don't worry, the cold will preserve us, this I know.

Hull draws on his pipe, inhaling. The odor clings like sickness to the brown paneling decades out of style — this is his office. It smells damp and decayed, run by mice. The furnace hums and rattles and never shuts off. Torn carpet lies under foot, looking like it has never been swept or cleaned — it adds no warmth. The tiles by the kitchenette are curled and broken, the counter-top chipped and yellow-green of hue; a revolting color they gave up manufacturing in the seventies. There is a toilet but the sewer remains frozen. The main living quarters on the opposite side of town have working sewers; here we piss outside in the snow.

Commanding from his desk, Hull leads us in the field, our rag-tag army. He calls me his General although I am peer to the others. I have been through much and the others regard me as voice of reason, elder in our tribe of misfits, perhaps medicine man — I don't know.

Hull shoves stacks of invoices aside, frowning. His eyes implore remedy to matters he'd rather not consider. "What should I do about Starko?" he asks.

I want to tell him Starko's a danger, abso-fucking-lutely, a catastrophe waiting in size nine steel-toed boots...but I can't. "We do stupid things," I say, "we learn from them." I know it's a mistake to be so flippant about what Starko has been doing, but everyone deserves a second chance. It's something I've learned. Besides, I'm certain I can help him.

I smile and tell Hull I will handle things. The skin around my mouth draws tight; it hurts to smile. Hull values my grin.

"You're a forgiving motherfucker, Joe."

He's right, I am.

"You let him know how close he is," says Hull, "and he better fucking-well pull it together."

"He will," I say.

Hull doesn't know how bad it can be, how wrecked our Starko is. Hull doesn't understand the ways of love, family and how they can explode in shards of crumbly stone at your feet. Hull pledges anger over love, prefers money to companionship. He lives out here in this empty nowhere, a wealthy recluse forsaking the world, forsaking everything, like me.

And then there's Jim Starko. Like the others he works here for two weeks, he flies home for one. He has asked for more work, no time off, whatever Hull will give him. He'll take anything but a flight home to his wife, his children. Presently Starko just exists; he's vacant flesh wandering aimlessly in the fields, opening, closing valves as he's told, his sorry pieces stitched up with as much booze as he can get. I've been where he is. Good sense has left him and that's a problem in a place like this.

I head for the door. It looks like a refrigerator, the kind they made in the fifties. The tin shell is peeling away from the frame showing its

guts; chewed wood, rodent-infested insulation.

Hull says, "If we weren't so goddamn short-handed right now, it'd be a different story, Joe."

I know.

Outside it's still dark. The warm air from the office escapes into the night like the clash of base elements. It explodes into a living fog then quickly disperses. The cold steals my breath; it feels as if my lungs have been plucked from my chest, liquid ice filling inside the cavity.

There are no odors in cold like this; everything freezes beyond redemption. Road kill is eaten clean without stink. Crows pick them like meaty ice chips.

Minus thirty-five is the temperature of no return. Gasoline will no longer ignite. Tree trunks split at random, the sound like gunshots in the night. Stressed steel snaps like as many dry twigs. Propane begins to gel. If our engines quit, there's little time; we can never let them grow cold.

Above the Big Dipper hangs vertical, ready to spill forth its wisdom on such desolate land and I stand beneath, hands raised. Even in the dark everything looks white, so agonizingly white.

My truck idles only feet from the office, yet ice is building in my nostrils, coating my eyes like contact lenses. The motor purrs, a pinging clatter descending to the tailpipe. We only shut them off in the spring. I breathe with my mouth, deep and shallow together, filtering oxygen from the frozen air like a freshwater fish sucking from salted ocean.

I get in. The driver's door will no longer shut tight. Water run-off from snow shed from my boots drains into the doorjamb packing, filling it, freezing it solid for the winter. Trucks are made for California highways, not for this.

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everything grows a shiny skin, a globular shell, as if Mother Earth is trying to snare us in ice, pay us back for doing what we do.

One last look I take of our city before I slip away into the field. It's all tin and exhaust bellowing into the night. A town of engines, compressors, piping riddled among it like steel intestines, our northern guts. Building after building, tanks, vessels, towers, flare-stacks that keep the home fires burning. Natural gas. Petroleum. This is it, our north. We run this shantytown, we do, our skeleton crew of a dozen, for an American petroleum producer, Vale Exploration Canada. Some of us are here to escape the world, our problems, others to make coin—others, like me, don't know what else to do on this earth.

The well-oiled hum of our town evaporates into the cold blackness as snow flies at me like exploding stars in the headlights of my truck. Behind—my wake. Snow rooster-tails from the back wheels, laying it down like washboard and then it hardens, thick as cement. These trails remind me of sandbars at low tide, but they are hard-packed, they can vibrate the wheels loose. The truck bounces along with no spring, no give; the steering wheel shakes my elbows sore and rattles my head.

From town center, roads lead hundreds of miles every direction to hundreds of wells. This is Vale Exploration's great Iyalliut Field—you know us mainly by your warm houses and hot water.

**F**OR THE NEXT EIGHT HOURS I will drive from well to well, recording numbers, taking their temperatures like a doctor, soothing their ills. I have been here long and I know each distinctly. They are but steel tubing and master-valve, but each has a personality. They are my children and each one needs proper care and attention.

When these wells first come into the world they explode into fresh pipeline with eager breath, lungs so strong, so incredibly strong. We have to hold them back. It's a beautiful thing. One day one of us will find water in their lungs, their throats plugged, unable to clear them, their once-mighty strength fading. We give them chemical medicine and words of encouragement. The water then ascends in a wave, or sometimes in a flood. Sometimes, though, they simply drown in their own fluids and ceremoniously we shut the valve, sag our heads, and say a few words.

The door at my first stop is frozen shut; ice has sealed it like a sarcophagus. With a two-pound mallet I beat at the steel door, careful not to break the window. Inside I hear ice shattering to the floor.

I notice the snow has stopped falling for now and an orange glow now appears on the horizon. There will be five hours of daylight today. The temperature is dropping.

From outside I hear my truck speak to me. I walk back. "Someone looking for Joe?" I say, keying the handset. We are linked by two-way radio. It's our umbilical cord, our fine mother that watches closely.

"What' cha got for temp?" comes a crackly reply. It's Shank McGavin's voice.

I check the thermometer clamped to the side mirror. "Minus forty-six," I tell him.

"Minus fifty-two here in the valley." The radio spits out a desolate pause, a beep, and then, "I'm losing the south leg. We've got a mean differential and she's building fast – it's likely down under the swamp."

One of Shank's pipelines is forming an ice plug, technically a hydrate; he will need help eliminating it. Today the new guy has been riding with Shank. The new guy is green as grass.

"I'll get there when I can," I reply.

I can't feel my toes. Keeping my feet warm has always been a problem.

I see by the chart my well is dying, choking on water. We drop sticks of soap down their throats, compressed in foot-long pills. The soap stirs up their bellies and they rumble with foam, until it all comes up in cleansing burst of gas and by-product.

I close the master-valve, block it in, and open the top valve to release the pressure and add the soap. An ice plug has formed inside the valve, holding the pressure within. An ice plug can withstand more pressure than steel. It's an amazing anomaly. Thick steel pipe will split like dry pods long before an ice plug ever gives way – but that's in a pipeline, under the ground – here, with an open valve, I can beat it out.

With my hammer I drive a one-inch pipe down into the ice; the idea of the pipe being that the pressure has a route to escape through (in practice it doesn't work). I pound on the pipe until a sudden blast blows it from my hand into the sky like a rocket. Seconds later it lands at my feet. It misses my head, and I am glad for that. My hard hat does protect, but the sensation of steel dropping on my skull I will never get used to – I am not a Rig-Pig thank Christ.

I set in the soap stick, close the bleed-valve, crank open the master-valve. The pressure equalizes and the stick falls. I press my ear to the piping and listen for the drop. It sounds like train wheels clickity-clacking as it strikes the collars every thirty feet. The bottom lies two miles down.

All morning I am tied to my wells, my freeze ups, my problems. I know what Hull will ask me when our paths cross, but I have not found time to see Jim Starko. I will not be able to allay his fears, not yet anyway.

**T**HAT AFTERNOON I MEET SHANK McGavin and the new guy at the office. They sit at the table going over numbers, procedure, paperwork. Shank smokes the cigarettes he rolls while driving his field. It passes the time, he says. For some reason Shank keeps utterly bored all the time, no matter what he does. He needs constant stimulation. One winter he read Frank Herbert's *Dune* trilogy while driving from well to well, it took him almost six months and I had to tug him out of more snowdrifts than I care to recount, and in the end he said he didn't understand it!

Hull cradles a cell-phone with his shoulder, flagging me with angular hand. He covers the mouthpiece and asks me about Starko.

"I haven't had a chance," I say, "there's trouble all over."

He nods and says, "Just keep it running boys, gas prices doubled this morning."

"Christmas bonuses this year then?" jokes Shank.

Hull laughs. It's almost a sneer.

We draw up a game plan for the south leg, me, Shank, Henry Jonk and Hull. The new guy sits across the table from me in an old brown chair, mouse eaten, the metal frame rusty and flaking at his elbows. His eyes settle on my features like a second skin. I am used to stares. People say I don't look real, like a doll owned by a child who plays with matches, and that's why they stare.

I catch his eye, reach for my lighter, flick it, and mouth the word "boom." My lips stretch taut in a painful grin. He turns away, red-faced — the others know my silly taunt. He's young with solid bones and fine skin. I begrudge him nothing.

"You know how to handle a hydrate?" Hull asks the new guy.

“You don’t want to make a mistake, son,” Shank interrupts. “There are forces at work you don’t want to release, by Christ.”

The new guy looks pale. He shakes his head.

“Never try breaking it on your own,” says Henry Jonk. “That’s number one.”

Henry Jonk is the oldest guy in the room, all white hair, liver spots and flowing skin like that wrinkly bread of dog. His eyes hide like canyon pools beneath the folds. Good old Jonk pioneered this land. An oilman all his life, at night he tells us stories of the old days, before the government regulated everything – stories of rowdy cowboys with more pistol than whip; days I remember well when I shave the broken patches of stubble on my chin.

Old Jonk says to the new guy, “I’ve seen a hydrate let go with five thousand pounds behind it. Pipe blew out of the ground like it was alive...saw it coil around a man and crush him like a python.”

It’s a hell of thing, pressure.

Hull pulls me aside. “I want the new guy to ride with you.”

Outside we stamp our feet and watch our breath rise in the dwindling light. The exhaust from our trucks swathes us like a ghostly embrace. It spears my lungs.

Shank McGavin asks me, “What about Starko?”

“Hull gave him a second chance,” I say.

Shank scratches his chin and grinds his teeth. “That’s a mistake, all right.”

“Not my call, bud.” I say, despite what I told Hull.

The cab of my truck is filled with stuff. Others see mess. I see emergencies, things I might need to see us through. Fuck, I’m a boy scout. I keep seven pairs of gloves strewn about, wherever the warm air blows. I use a different pair each time I step out. I change my socks every hour. Feet and hands are everything.

Normally I ride alone. “Make room if you can,” I tell the new guy.

He is hesitant to touch anything. Standing clumsily at the door, he allows the ice to creep in. With a sweep of my arm it all tumbles to the floor, my stuff—it looks useless now, all broken parts and things that don't fit. Get in, I say. His knees prop up his jaw and water trickles from his boots, wetting my things. With his hair slicked back he reminds me of a young Marlon Brando.

The truck chatters and protests over the rough trail. Our voices shake, bestowing false emotion.

"You got a girl?" I ask.

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"Engaged," he says, producing a wrinkled photograph from his coat pocket. "We want to buy a house." She stands tall and beautiful, hair gusting in a warm summer breeze. I hardly notice her amongst the surrounding flora. It's so very green, I can almost smell the flowery air, feel the breeze.

"You'll always want things," I say.

He laughs, unaware how nearly his life compares to mine.

I don't need to say we freed the south leg. We did, Shank and me, the new guy too. It's all about physics; pressure, temperature, the binding of molecules, undoing the forces of nature. It's a beautiful thing, undoing nature.

You'll be warm this winter, we'll see to that. We produce enough natural gas to fire up Chicago and St. Louis every single day. If you could x-ray North America it'd all be veins and arteries; miles of pipe streaming just under the earth's skin. We've done much without your notice, much indeed. We do what we must. And you'll be warm for it.

Back at the office I hand in my numbers to Hull and relinquish the clipboards, production books, our laser-sighted thermal gun to my mirror-man, Lane Bressler. At six-foot-four, Lane towers over me. He is built like a tank, with arms as thick as my thighs. His young face pauses round and chubby before me, his body yielding to a layer of fat that no longer concerns him.



We exchange pleasantries.

After college Lane gave up playing hockey when he was successively overlooked during the NHL draft. If you ask after his degree, he will tell you it's worthless. According to Lane, exam keys float around the locker room as routinely as girls' phone numbers.

Lane scoops up all the gear in one arm and pounds the door open. He doesn't ask me any questions. He doesn't have any concerns. He knows how good I leave things.

Hull says, "Your numbers are dropping."

"I know," I say.

"Well?"

"What do you want me to do? We both know it's a depleting resource. The numbers can only go one way."

Hull taps his pipe on the table, sweeping blackened tobacco to the floor. It leaves an angry line. "Great observation, Joe. Should I call Houston with that pearl?" He places my numbers in a pile to be faxed. "Get the hell out of here," he says.

Hull can be a prick.

Shank McGavin, Henry Jonk and the new guy laugh like old school buddies at their table in the Grub-Shack, playing cards and puffing cigars. Old Hank pours the whiskey. The new guy glows in his newfound ease. The room looks rowdy tonight, all bravado and testosterone, more an inevitable confluence of madness, derision and asinine exorcism, than the place we eat our meals.

A couple of roughnecks remove their clothing and compare ink. In turn they pound each other in the stomach while their compatriots cheer them on, spilling beer from cheap cans, shouting profanity. One of them spits brown effluent from a wad of chew packed beneath his lower lip—it hits the wall and oozes into the frost.

Passed-out bodies line the floor like some death chamber, unconsciously wallowing in icy filth. These people only come here to work, they don't live here—they don't respect. They just dump their trash on the floor and yell insults at the cooks.

This place smells sickly, of base humanity.

There are too many people, faces I don't grasp; Truckers, Pipe Fitters, Environmental Consultants, Surveyors, Tool Pushes, Rig-Pigs, Wire-Liners, Seismic Crews. Every winter they descend upon us like locusts, turning our forgotten world into something other. They move the earth, stab it with pipe, they burst our resolve and anger the Gods. And by springtime they leave, while we stay on with more, ever more to do.

I can't be near these people.

I fill my plate from silver heat trays that never drain, never cool. Meat and potatoes are all we know. Starko sits in a dark corner, his back to the world. A plate lies on the edge of the table pushed away from him, the food hacked and mutilated, uneaten. He gulps liquor from a generic bottle, tipping it back and slamming it to the table. As I take seat opposite him, he dips his head indifferently.

His eyes are narrow and heated, framed by stringy hair in need of a cut. Normally carefree and eager to flap his jaws, he remains quiet tonight, his mouth slack, gaping like a fool. His jolly round face is shrinking into lines of worry and alcoholism. He hasn't shaved in a week.

"You know I know what you're going through," I tell him.

"So what?" he burbles through his bottle.

"There's still time to fix things," I say. "Jenny's still a good woman, she still loves you. This job is tough on the wives, they get used to being alone, having things their way. It's not her fault. You need to go home, be with her and the kids, make her see differently."

Starko can't focus on me. He slants his head, affixing his mark. "Your girl coming tonight?"

"Yes."

"I want in."

"That's a mistake."

"I said I want in, Joe!"

"I don't think —"

He pounds the table with a tight fist. My plate ends up on the floor. "I said I want the fuck in!" He digs in his pocket. "How much?"

Reluctantly I tell him the price and he throws a crumpled fold of cash on the table.

"I've been where you are, bud," I try, "I know what comes next."

"Leave me the fuck alone, Joe!" he says.

"You better smarten up," I say, now standing over him. "There's enough to worry about out there." I stab an accusing finger at his bottle. "Hull won't put up with that shit. Not out there."

**T**HE CLOCK STRIKES TWELVE before she slips into my bed. I lie curled up in the dark, awake, warming my tired bones in this unpleasant space, the generator humming outside like a mother's heartbeat. Mousetraps snap intermittently, like a crackling fire. I feel safe. Frost feathers drift from the walls, see-sawing to the floor, and then they bead into the ice that creeps toward me. It's a living thing this ice, growing, reaching for me. I keep a hammer at my side.

She is warm, this Inuit girl. I hold her close. She knows to keep her back to me, hands forward. She knows not to touch the purple squares that plot my legs, the unholy peel those mad doctors removed to fashion this, my face. She would not gawk at my claw-like fingers, my pocked and desiccated flesh, or this withered manhood that gives me no pause and no pleasure—no she would never do that—but still I have my barriers...

She is Kayilae, child of frozen north. With striking eyes like kind steel she pierces my layers, sees all that I cannot comprehend, the quiescent things that run deep. She is young in body, gentle, a woman desired by many that wander the north in search of awakening. She does what she must for the isolated village she was born, and we are happy to pay her.

Do not judge her, for she is not weak. She is driven by intensity of spirit, through the harshness of her environment. She lives in a way that seems implausible, impossible, a thing we cannot grasp among the creature comforts we surround ourselves in.

Kayilae is the strongest person I know.

“Darook foretold of this day,” she whispers in my ear, “and it has come to pass.”

“The fish?” I say.

“And the seal,” she adds. “It is as if the world is sifting through our fingers.”

I squeeze her hand. “I feel such change also.”

“The elders fear —” she says, and then nothing more.

In the dark of my quarters, bathed in the mechanical drone of our generators, we lie as one; polar extremes coupled by progress and circumstance. One day soon, she and I will give up these misguided lives that have chosen us, that have torn us from happiness, and I will know her village. We will live there, amongst her people, steeped in a sheltered cove of barren rock and ice-flow, salt air hanging in the ancient mist. I picture it in my head, her descriptive voice painting it — some things just seem right. Our tracks will fade in the snow like a dying star. Let the rest of the world rage on without us.

**WAKE UP BEFORE SIX, TERRIFIED;** dreams of living pipe twisting around my neck, ice and snow creeping over my dead mother, memories of my years soaking in saline, hung in vats for hours, my endless screams resonant and fixed into the cold steel walls like a membranous coating. Some things can never be mended.

Under the pillow beside her I leave the envelope of cash I have collected from the others. *Goodbye* I whisper to the rise of blankets shaped in a sinuous line. There is no stir and I ache at the idea she will be gone before my return.

The new kid and I hit the trail. Together we pound the ice and snow. I offer him my bag of tricks, the things I know. Wellhead to wellhead we travel, administering methanol to fuel gas, blowing scrubbers, greasing stuffing boxes; relief bathes us when we turn corners and see horses heads bobbing, cutting through the ice fog. Types and kinds of production equipment abound like the stars. We check de-ethanizers, chillers, separators, injector systems, absorber skids, pneumatic pumps of every description, line-heaters, re-boilers, fluid lift plungers. We are bathed in chemical stink, salt water and sweat, and the products flow to our metal town like beautiful ghosts beneath our feet.

Hull’s voice wails from the radio. I notice wavers of fear in his voice.

Starko has a line hydrate on the Iyallit-12 Line. He says, "Joe, get over there and take over."

Starko interrupts, "I've got it boys. I'm blowing her down."

"Stop what you're doing," I shout at Starko, "you can't be two places at once."

Silence. He ignores us, or perhaps has left his radio.

Hull says, "Get the hell over there Joe."

We race to the Gunnowammi Line, the last riser and connector to the Iyallit Flank. It is far and away, the going slow. The rising snow buries the trail like floodwaters. We drag our heels. I feel time ticking by like some torture my body cannot take. Before dark we find his truck in a hollow amidst a bluff of spindly swamp spruce. Starko stands over a spool of six-inch pipe, rising angularly from the ground, pouring methanol from a red gas-can into an open valve.

"She blew down fast," he yells, as the kid and I scramble out. "It's gotta be close."

"What's on the other side?" I yell, "You got the other side to atmosphere?"

We are ten yards away when it breaks. Pressure hisses from the mouth of the bleed valve, spitting ice and liquid. Starko slams the bleed valve shut and boots at the six-inch block valve on the main line, trying to kick it open. There is now too much differential; the vast pressure holds the valve shut like a mounting army.

"We need to equalize," I yell.

"Fuck that, I'll just crack it," snaps Starko, booting and booting at the handle. His eyes leak violence, a fury I've known, a fury I've unleashed.

"Stop right now!" I scream, but I'm too late.

Under his repeated blows, the valve suddenly sweeps open like a bursting dam. The elements rush beneath the ground like the rumble of an ancient geyser, shaking our feet. It feels as if the earth might split beneath us, swallowing us in a belly-rumble of carnage. The ensuing force is awesome and terrible, an unstoppable violence man might never hope to properly contain.

The pipeline jumps and flexes as ice-plugs the size of soccer balls charge through the elbows. I can almost see them as they hit; from where I stand, the pipe appears more to be rubber than steel. To witness this...it's unimaginable. I am hypnotized by it, frozen in the headlights of man's machine.

In utter strain, the cross-spool-connector blows off, exploding into whiteness and vanishing. A mixed blast of gas, ice, and fluid, hits Starko head on, sending him reeling backward through the air as if shot from a cannon. The main line begins to rise from the ground like the space shuttle's protracted lift off. Coughing up black soil, its body tears away from the earth like a waking Titan. Its steel head flails out-of-control twenty-five feet in the air. It looks alive, purposeful, like a giant cobra breathing the winds of a hurricane, spitting balls of ice that rain down on us.

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The kid and I scramble in the snow, stunned, covering our ears from the terrible release of pressure, the sound like ten jet engines at full throttle — or worse. It feels as if my head is being compressed under some unknown force.

We reach the truck and pull ourselves in. Even inside the cab I must scream instructions directly into his eardrum to be heard.

The kid pulls away without me. He knows what to do.

I wade the maelstrom in search of Starko. My senses are worthless in this, my body flimsy — I may blow away.

I find Starko twenty feet into the bush. His body lies twisted in a heap, snow enfolding him. The skin on his forehead has been swiped away by the blast; his stringy hair hangs backward in a thick bloody clump. Steam rises from the wound. It looks as if he's been scalped. His body quivers in rebellious nerve.

I know better than to move him, instead I lie beside him in the snow, feebly holding him in the terrible cold. With gloved hands I cover his ears from the storm and whistle a cheerful song into the void. My eyes roll back and I find darkness. I think benevolent thoughts, things we

need. Visions of decadence find purchase in my head.

The ice creeps into our minds, our bodies; we cannot beat it back. We watch the snow become dark blue, and above the stars pierce the sky. And still the gas bellows into the air, deafening everything.

How long it has been, I have no idea. Nothing has meaning.

And then, like in a dream, I suddenly realize all is silent and still. When did this happen?

"It's going to be okay," I tell him, my teeth rattling inexorably in my skull.

His voice is thin, escaping from his chest like the wheeze of a boiling kettle. "We make good money, don't we?"

"Yes," I say, "we do."

"I thought I was doing everything right."

"I know," I say, "me too."

His eyes stand unblinking to the night. He struggles to swallow. "When I close my eyes," he says, "all I see is *his* face."

"I know, by God, I know." The memory of my once perfect life passes before me; mirrors I once peered into without crying, the girl I loved more than the sun. Forgiveness comes with age, with experience. "Look at my face," I tell him. "Go home to your family and don't ever come back."

A terrible gurgling rises from his throat and I realize he is laughing. It sounds nervous, filled with butterflies, the kind of involuntary gushing of a man who realizes what he has become. It is the boiling forth of new courage.

And then I hear it, the distant lilt of helicopter blades slicing the air.

The cold seeps quietly into our bones and no longer can we move. Such calm, we undergo, such tranquility. This kind of peace feels like a confession, as if a crushing weight is unexpectedly lifted, and all things are revealed, our fates known. The cold will preserve us, this I know. And I too am laughing.