

It was cold. But maybe I was cold, and I simply added an extra 't' from the chill spreading from my feet to my legs to my fingers to my brain. Water lapped around my feet, all the way up my calves and just touching the tops of my kneecaps. Or perhaps I was submerged from my face to the bottom of my thighs, and the rest of me was hanging precariously out of the water, upside-down. The memory has frozen and chipped on the edges, moving with the water that surrounded either my legs or my chest.

My vision had been blurry, droplets of snow criss-crossing my retinas in dazzling sparks of delicate white. Floating down, down with a beautiful, cold, deadly grace. An eye, just one I believe, followed a snowflake that seemed larger than the others, about the size of my pinky-toe nail. It was made up of dozens of littler ones, getting smaller and smaller and smaller. My vision got smaller and smaller and smaller. I think my right eye was closed, swollen shut from the freezing wind flowing over the lake, or perhaps from something I don't remember. Regardless, I followed the snowflake as it danced in the sky, watching the twisting and turning and pirouetting. White death, it seemed, was not so far away. The snowflake - flakes - landed delicately on the frozen cover of the lake. They didn't break through, not quite heavy enough, but they sat there for a moment, contemplating. Perhaps they were thinking about how one day they would melt, along with the other tiny silver bullets that sunk into my skin and landed on my tongue and piled and piled in snow forts and men. They would melt along with the shifting plate of ice, melt with the icicles hanging on the shingles, melt with the winter coats and the hats and boots. Melt along with my bones as they slid, slid to the bottom of a dark empty lake no one knew, no one found. We would sink forever, or until we hit the lake bed, and then we would stop, resting in a cloud of dust, skin bloated and eyes bugging. Mouth snapped shut and lips blue and fingers clenched together and muscles tight and everything staying exactly as it was. The way my hair froze to my coat, my eyelashes flecked with snowflakes, and my skin bruising in the corner of my left eye. Or maybe they wouldn't find me, not until the river rocks washed my skin away and left only bones on the cold sandy stone.

River. It was no lake, but a river. Long and twisting and cold. And there was a rock, slippery enough that I couldn't climb but rough enough that my gloved fingers could find purchase on it. Rough enough that I could hang half-in, half-out of the water, my body seizing somewhat, my clothes freezing against my skin. Hanging on with every failing finger. Feeling my lungs go cold and my brain become slow and my heartbeat left erratic. Letting the numbness creep up my body, tendrils of nothing that stopped my legs from feeling. Hoping until the end that someone, anyone, a friend, a foe, a stranger, would find me and pull me from the freezing river where I had been left to die by someone who had no name or face, only a cold-hardened voice and big, strong hands, all the better to punch me with. And when my fingers slipped and my breath went out and my eyes slotted a blank film over the corneas an aching cry reverberated through the pine trees. It was all I heard before my heart stopped completely.