

Exposure

A young man, 16 or 17 years old,
walks home alone after a party, passes out
in the snow. His body's found
the next day. It's nobody's fault.
He didn't have a death wish.
It was just
cold.

My mother's yellow '76 Corolla
has a rusted-out frame and a hole in the floor
where you can watch the road fly by
underneath. A piece of plywood covers the hole
but everyone wants to see the road. February,
one of the coldest days. A two-hour drive
from Haines Junction to Whitehorse. The plywood
can't keep out the cold, ice ferns flower
across the crack on the windshield. At 35 below
the tires become more square
than round, the vinyl seats brittle, the door bangs shut
like a hollow tin barrel. Full blast the heater
barely warms. We wear parkas and blankets,
my grandmother's scratchy handmade
mittens and toques she sends every year.
I'm 12. I've never been so cold.
My toes are pins and needles,
then numb, a dull ache,
a steady burn. I'm crying
by the time we reach Whitehorse,
stop to fill the car at the gas station. We drive
to Hougen's department store to buy the warmest boots
we can find.

No cellphones, food,
emergency supplies
or sleeping bags. We see only three
cars on the road. One is stopped,
a man and woman reclined in the front seats.
The next day we hear on the radio that a couple died
from carbon monoxide poisoning
in their car outside the city. It's
nobody's fault. They fell asleep
with the motor running.