

1975

First Story

Steven Orlen

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First Story / Steven Orlen

Thick snow, the path, an evergreen
hung above an ice-locked stream,
and home through the woods he found
a hand upthrusting from the snow.
His dog growled. The hand was frozen blue.
He was afraid to tell his father
whom he told all his eager secrets,
and afraid to touch the stiff, curled
fingers or enter the cave of palm,
but numb with winter he returned
to sit in the widening circle of story:
*A man lay by a northern stream,
lost in trout-depths, feverish.
His gashed leg refused to heal.
That night the wolf returned to snarl.*

Sunday, when the others knelt in church,
he pressed the blue fire of palm
to his, and bound their hands in prayer.
He passed out in the pitiless snow.
The tree let down its branches
over a boy who could not stay away
from the dead and the soon to be dead,
and an owl from a story book sang
of another world, the underground:
*It snowed, and the stream froze up,
and dark clouds hid the stars.
In his dream, they were friends,
wolf and man, under a shell of dark.*

Far off in the upper world
the miraculous living moved,
and nothing ended but the day.
A father storied his son to sleep;
children woke, and went to school.
And the boy moved through them, a ghost,
counting the unborn nails of his hand.
He heard the cold voices urging
him back to the woods, alone.
Under the tree, a story was ending:
And when he died, steam rose

*from his flesh, the wolf moaned
and ran, the body slipped under snow.*

Then spring, and the snow loosed
over rock to unveil a man's body.
He watched them wrap it in a sack
and saw that the eyes were blind,
the mouth too dumb for grief or story.
But their hands had locked, friends
one whole winter, until the stream broke
and blessed him with its cold skill.
He heard icy veins roaring underground
and didn't know the dead could live
so long, nor pain, nor numbness end.

For These Conditions There Is No Abortion / Primus St. John

They say the tongue is only *Praexis*.
It is only a surge forward
Between spring and God.
Months later,
God is gone. Our spring is upon us.
We learn the names for children,
They don't want us or our child.
We are just sophomores and curses.
Like Aristotle
I believe plot after plot
Means something.
It is a formula evening:
The sun is red
Night is someone beyond blue
Her belly is living and dying
And we don't sit close anymore—
Even in the lunchroom.
Her eyes are smooth stones, falling
I am a man,
Therefore I am falling.
She says today she has learned a word
For folks like us,
I am about to say sorry
She says *pathos* . . .