Homing In

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The white leopard leaps from death’s mouth, cold, ice-clawed, indivisible from the snow that cloaks its lope through New England: it hunts the wino in his refrigerator-box bed, the widow crying in a floodlit yard as she pours kerosene on a heap of her husband’s winter clothes.

Throughout the snow-whipped hills it stalks them, the ones in cars idling in closed garages, the ones who weigh a quart of scotch against a handful of Halcion. And tonight the leopard homes in on something radiating out of my skull that curses snow, curses my wife for moving north and myself for not refusing to follow.

So many curses and if only one touches death, death opens its mouth and the teeth-colored leopard leaps. Anxiety, the therapist says, depression. The leopard, I say, it’s the leopard panting. When it closes in, the white leopard reverses fever to chill, turns rage into a desire to walk out into deep snow and lie down.

Sleep and maybe the leopard sleeps; laughter stops it like a shot. But a brandy glass set down hard on a kitchen windowsill brings it running: its highbeam eyes pierce the whiteout, the walls of the house: icy points, cold zeros on my ribs and heart. From the window I can almost see the huge white head. Since midnight I’ve been trying to fill insomnia with the mating plumage of snowy egrets, with that Carolina island anchored by yaupon trees full of egret nests: the country I gave up, its tiny heart-shaped rainbow clams buried an inch beneath the tidal wash, that resurrect
and rebury themselves by the million every minute of the day. Gave it up to go north and feel the nights lose heat and lengthen, the cries of geese freeze overhead, the porch crack at ten below under the leopard’s heavy pads. Upstairs my wife is crying: it’s cancer calling long-distance from Texas,

using the voice of her mother, or else another monster image of birth gone wrong. The white leopard’s listening, it knows about her eight-month belly. In the snow it paces exactly parallel to my pacing inside. It knows I know where every knife lies in this house. It’s ready to take us all to its white room in the ice woods.

I test the back door lock, flick the floodlight on to make the leopard shut its eyes and step back. When the light goes off again I wait, not moving, not wanting to inhale the breath that will move it one step closer. The snowy tail switches the clapboard. The white head rubs the window, testing it.