

## Tom Laughlin

### Before the Fourth Nor'easter

Today in the woods, the pine tops rest quietly  
against an empty blue sky.  
My booted steps follow  
a jagged trough of a trail  
left behind by skis and snow shoes,  
their early-morning elves nowhere in sight now  
and the distant chatter of chickadees and nuthatches  
hushing suddenly when I approach  
in a snowy conspiracy of silence.

In the blinding beauty of last week's storm,  
buckled, booted, and hooded tightly,  
I walked the center of empty streets,  
stepping into snowbanks when plows passed,  
the mile to my daughter's house  
to be welcomed inside by her mother, grandmother  
and leaping retriever, clearing snow-covered clothes  
for tea and family talk. But my daughter,  
too busy, stayed in her room.

Yesterday's news  
from my daughter's high school  
was of another "unexpected passing,"  
the family not wanting to share details  
the home room students gasping  
at an empty chair  
the sobbing from hallways  
the red-eyed teachers  
the unanswered questions.

My jagged snowy trail wanders  
around downed trees, over nearly invisible foot bridges  
past the bright white clearing of a vernal pool  
and by late afternoon downward toward unfamiliar land.  
As my usual return paths are buried beneath heavy snow  
I follow the elfin trail through a thickening shade of pines  
down a steep incline until the trail splits, then peters out.  
So I'm plunging deep now with each step  
determined to find my way back through these woods.

**Tom Laughlin** is a professor at Middlesex Community College in Massachusetts where he teaches creative writing, literature, and composition courses, as well as coordinating a visiting writers series. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Green Mountains Review*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Sand Hills*, *The Blue Mountain Review* and elsewhere. His chapbook, *The Rest of the Way*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.