

## **The Temperature of Cruelty**

by Jean Janzen

We think of the beaten baby  
dead against the darkening stain  
on the bed, soldiers pulling out  
fingernails, the prisoner dangling  
for days. But also the years  
of bitterness in a family, the cold  
turning of the shoulder, the look  
that erases you. What is  
the temperature of cruelty?  
Fire? Boiling oil? Or the great  
weight of ice, gravel shearing  
rock in a slow grind. Or  
that April frost, so lacy  
and beautiful, whispering  
and biting the orchard to death  
in one slow night, when all  
the blossoms blacken, and all  
that was possible withers and shatters in the wind.

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