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Laughter's Last Chance

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Maginnes: Laughter's Last Chance

LAUGHTER'S LAST CHANCE

AL
MAGINNES

I did not plan to be awake
watching a comedy special,
my book frozen in my lap as I pretend
I only looked up, curious about how
the TV managed to turn itself on.
A stand-up comic slouches around
a microphone, and he's hitting them
where they live, going for it, laughter
rolling constant as water, low,
rippling, then quick and loud
as white water over rocks.
When he finds a couple down front
and riffs on them for a few beats,
the laughter takes on new appetite,
even a bite of rage. The camera holds
the couple's stricken faces, their game
attempt to laugh along. I've seen this.
The ones singled out are always
adult versions of class presidents,
jocks and prom queens who never
gave the time of day to the comic
in high school. Now it's their turn
to sit and take it. There were no cameras
in seventh grade, but the laughter had teeth.
For half a year I was the one
shoved into lockers, mocked until

the thin soup of tears came burning
from eyes I no longer trusted.

I never knew why it started or stopped
any more than the one after me
or before me knew. The difference is momentum.

The comic knows just when and how
to change direction. Kids do not.

When the soft wires of school whispers
flooded with the attempted suicide
of a classmate, another pariah,
it was easy to believe.

The water pooling in my front yard
after a pipe burst brought a battalion
of city workers to see if it was
my problem or theirs. When one tried
to measure from the center of the water
to the curb without getting his feet wet,
as though touching water would spark
some electricity latent in the body,
I laughed with his co-workers
at his duck-footed ballet, as readily
as I joined the crowd when
its attention turned from me.

The girl reappeared, healthy,
unaware of the rumors.

The pipe got fixed. Whatever wounds
we got or gave in those days
before counseling and zero tolerance
we shoved away or swallowed
and showed up again. The show
always goes on and it always ends.

The couple drives home. She goes to bed;
he gets the sitter home, fixes a drink,
sits in front of the TV.

Another comic berates a crowd,
and he watches, happy, like me
to join any laughter not aimed at him.