

Winternight
Nellie Smith

We take off our skates at midnight,
sit down upon the ice
(in a circle,

so as not to disturb
the rhythms
of our ancestors)

someone produces
a candle,
another, a lighter

the fire lit,
an open, blinking eye,
we press close in

a band of ancients with bloody tunics,
frigid cilia surrounding
a hot, dying nucleus,

suspended over the
great, dark pit
of frozen water.

The sky tells
always
its own stories:

a bear
had slain a man
100,000 years ago

this man grew stars
for finger-knuckles
which, somehow

ended up in the sky.
The bear died,
regretting nothing,

and he is also up there,
hung like a puppet,
glaring with one eye...

and the crab,
after spreading his claws
to the verge

of the universe,
drops, crumbles
like dust, or old bread:

he has found
a goddess
but no god, only

a severed toe and
the residual:
a dull agony,

annihilating weight of
endless water,
brutal, sealed sleep--

We light cigarettes,
shift weight,
are silent.

A tiny, dark plane
blinks counterpoint
on its way to the sea,

streaks the faces
of hunter and hunted,
moves on.