

Ice: the third week of January 2011

It was the bitterest, meanest, darkest, coldest winter in anyone's memory, even in one of the forgotten neighborhoods of Chicago. Light and warmth seemed gone for good; mountains of gray snow and sheets of ice destroyed the geometry of sidewalk and street. Neighbors fell silent, listening beyond the *clang-scrape-chunk* of their own shovels for the snowplows that never arrived. The wind blew for so many weeks that people forgot what it felt like to walk in a straight, easy line. Life hunched over. Death whispered and whistled from around each corner. Those with homes hated to leave them, and those without wondered why they'd ever been born.

On this particular January afternoon, gusts battered the city and a temperature of zero nipped at flesh and stone alike. Suddenly: a squeal of brakes, a shout, and a thud; wheels spinning through the dusk; a blue bicycle crushed beneath a truck; a shopping bag spewing green peas, tomatoes, and oranges across snow.

At 1:11, a man was having lunch when told to notice the time. At 2:22, he was placing books on shelves and rolling a cart through math-straight channels of words. He glanced at his watch, nodded, and smiled. By 3:33, he was shrugging into

his jacket, noted the line of threes, nodded again. Pulling a black sock hat over his ears, he paused inside the lobby to write for several minutes in a small notebook. "What's the rhythm, Langston?" he murmured to himself as he left the building. "What's the rhythm?"

At 4:44, the police received a 911 call from a phone booth in the South Side neighborhood of Woodlawn. A muffled voice reported an accident involving a bicyclist and an unmarked delivery truck. When a squad car arrived at the scene minutes later, the street was deserted. There were no witnesses to be found. No one could remember seeing the young man that afternoon, but there were his bike, his groceries, and his pocket notebook, which was discovered beneath a nearby car. He had vanished three blocks from home.

The truck was also gone, leaving only the slash-print of tires in snow.

Packed ice allowed no footprints. Nor was there blood.

Gone. Four miserable letters. What does the word mean? Does 4:44, a measurement made of fours but shown by three, mean a family of four is still four, even when one is gone? Can a soul hide in a three that belongs to four?