

Spring Ice

by Jo Deurbrouck

Fifty years apart, the river ice broke and the dog disappeared then surfaced, frantic from the sudden cold and tug of the current, scrabbling for purchase with the splayed claws of her front feet. Fifty years apart a man rushed from the safety of shore, compelled by love and the contract between two legs and four: You will give me everything, to the last beat of your heart. I will protect you.

The first man was my father at nineteen, coming of age in rural Montana and staring at the only thing that had ever loved him back without also finding him a disappointment. My father, awkward and tongue-tied and too tall for his weight, whose older brother was his opposite in all things, whose mother offered affection to this bespectacled second son in tiny, embarrassed sips, whose father seemed hardly to notice he'd produced not one child but two.

So when the ice thinned as he neared the dog my father simply crawled faster. He stretched an arm, hooked numb fingers into the handmade collar, pulled, felt himself slide toward the hole. He watched pale fragments drawn down into blackness by the current, heard a loud, deep crack as the dog scrambled out and over his body. He thought he knew what would happen next but it didn't and they retreated, together, to safety.

My father told me that story when I was a young man. I remember thinking this: He did what anyone would do. And this: Lucky for me he survived or I would not exist. Nothing more.

The second man was me just this morning. I was not raised in an emotional dust bowl. My father saw to that. Years after his death, I have a wife who sometimes dances for me in summer moonlight, a barefoot shadow on the lawn. I have a child who successfully begged a basketball hoop onto the barn wall and now begs to be initiated

into the mystery that is dribbling. I have six apple trees in the front yard, carefully pruned by me each fall, and this year already propped against the heavy harvest I can almost smell.

So when the ice began to pop under my spreadeagled body still twenty feet from her and then the opaque white beneath me changed to a soft, rotten gray and now I was fifteen feet away and then, at ten, the ice sagged perceptibly, I stared at my good dog with the same entreaty I saw in her eyes. Save us. Please.

My father hadn't told me about this part, the part he feared more than dying. He never said, as I suddenly wished he had, "Son, there are many kinds of strength. Different weather makes a different man."

So it was without his blessing that I retreated, alone, to sit shivering on the impossibly hard, thick ice near shore. It took her a long time to grow tired, and even longer to give up on me.

