



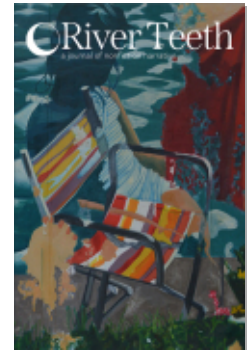
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Gregory Martin

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The Boy Who Fell Through the Ice

Gregory Martin

It was a cold gray day between Christmas and New Year's, and we'd driven out from St. Paul to visit Christine's relatives on White Bear Lake. The adults were drinking coffee in the kitchen. Christine was three months pregnant with our first child, boy or girl, we didn't know. We were twenty-nine years old. Shouts and laughter erupted from the basement, the teenage cousins playing ping-pong. The front door opened and in stepped a boy, maybe nine or ten, drenched and ghostly pale. His lips were blue. He'd been playing hockey alone on the homemade rink near the shore and had fallen through the ice. He stood there shivering, teeth chattering, balancing on the blades of his skates on the rubber mat. Icicles had formed on his wool hat. Piled to his left and right inside the doorway were damp snow pants and jackets, boots, mittens and gloves. He was a neighborhood friend of one of the younger cousins and lived nearby.

Christine's aunt said, "Strip down and go sit by the fire." She meant the fireplace in the living room.

The boy nodded and did as he was told.

No one went to get a towel or blanket for the boy. No one called his parents to tell them what had happened. I looked at Christine. She had a strange smile on her face that took me a moment to decode. It was a smile of approval, a Minnesotan smile that said, *He fell through the ice. No need for theater.*

The conversation picked up where it left off. I went into the living room. Steam rose off the boy's damp hair and bare shoulders as he hugged his knees before the fire in his tighty-whities.

"You O.K.?" I said. I was shaken, unsettled. I was going to be a father.

The boy nodded without looking at me.

I stood there and watched him. I went back to the kitchen.

One of Christine's adult cousins said, "He's fine."

* * *

The years have passed, and I am fifty-four years old, middle-aged, streaks of gray in my dark brown hair. My two sons are grown and living on their own. I still have—have always had—a boyish face, an eager, optimistic temperament. I appear—have always appeared—more innocent than I know myself to be.

The boy who fell through the ice has stayed with me. I see him now as a character in a Zen parable about parenthood, about fear, uncertainty, helplessness, acceptance, and letting go. The older I am, the longer I am a parent, the more it has to tell me.

As I watched the boy sitting before the fire, I saw the algorithm of grief, the chalk-covered blackboard of tragedy. I saw him skating 20 feet farther from the shore to retrieve the puck, the ice cracking, opening, the thrashing and churning in black water, the panicked shrieking unheard, the gasping and clawing before finally he settles to the bottom. Maybe by dinner time, he is missed. He has not come home. Someone says they saw him last on the shore putting on his skates, and by this time, a scrim of ice has formed where he broke through, the jagged outline of the hole remaining. I sensed this possibility, its terrible nearness, as I looked at the boy, and for the first time, I felt the fear that every parent comes to know and from which there is no escaping. The thinnest of membranes separates one world from another. My children would fall through the ice. The sharp intake of breath, the startled astonishment of the living. They would make their way inside, somewhere, and sit by the fire. No one would tell me. I would not even know.