

The Ice. 1867. by Amanda O'Callaghan

At the Serpentine, John watches the men gather in the centre of the lake. They form themselves into trains, whistling and calling out, snaking across the ice, thousands urging them on. *Faster. Faster.* He tries to imagine what speed feels like, the rasp of the skate blades at his feet, the frosty air slicing across his face. John steadies his barrow on the grassy edge, the curve of oak beneath his hands. He will have to move soon; the cold is numbing. But today, the weight of everything seems immense. He pictures himself from a bird's height: this leaden sky, this freezing London day, all the lakes and ponds crusted with ice. And a man standing at the edge of the crowd, tethered to the earth by a wooden barrow. He will not come back here, he decides. Not until the winter is over.

At night, when he dreams, he is out on the ice. Racing. Flying.

#

"It's nearly as busy as the Serpentine," John calls down the slope.

It's a beautiful day at the Regent's Park. One of the ice men is breaking up a discreet corner of the frozen lake with a small axe. John knows this is for the waterfowl. He's seen it done many times. Clustered on low-hanging branches, dozens of birds watch the axe fall, wait for the lap of dark water. The ice man straightens, takes in the large crowd on the far side.

"Too busy," he replies, "and too warm," before bending to his work.

John looks with gratitude at the clear afternoon sky. Like all costermongers, he fears rain most of all. The way a run of wet weather can bring him close to starvation. Bright days like these, with the sun warm enough to make him tip back his cap, loosen the knot of green silk at his throat, fill a small, private space within him. It's not joy. He knows that. It's not some giddy pleasure like

the shrieks of delight from the skaters. He can't remember ever making that sound in his life.

Perhaps when he was a child, he wonders. He has no memory of it. But it is something, this cloudless winter day. It brings a lightness to his step. There'll be customers, taking in the unexpected sunshine. He'll have a dry coat as night comes down. And a hot meal tonight.

Something pleasing stirs in him, settles deep inside. He carries the feeling close to his chest, like a talisman.

John pushes his barrow along the high edge, where it's driest. Glancing into the small metal brazier as he walks, he sees the chestnuts are almost ready. "Hot chestnuts! Penny a bag!" he calls. His voice seems to float away, unnoticed. Leaning on the barrow, he watches for a moment, feels the familiar pang of envy. He's relieved to see no racers on the ice, but there must be three hundred people out there, maybe more. Gliding, turning, a young boy with straw-coloured hair twirling on the spot, another skidding to a halt nearby. The light is starting to fade. Out in the centre, men John's age are playing bandy, their sticks clacking hard, the cork puck carving through the air. He can hear them yelling and laughing. A woman wrapped in a black fur stole passes close to him, perfume trailing in her wake. She tuts in disgust as the young men's profanities streak across the ice.

John turns the barrow towards the lake, descends into the crowd. Noise everywhere. Orange sellers with their shallow baskets. The skate-hire men calling their trade. Mothers, wives, sisters, watching at the edge, some smiling, some with anxious hands plucking at collars and sleeves.

He sells a few bags. "Take care now. Nice and warm," he says, passing them over.

Despite everything, he smiles to himself. January was always the dead month, the cold month, hunger weighing him down. With Christmas holly and ivy long shrivelled, and piles of scented apricots with their baby-fine skins just a dreamy summer vision, this mania for skating had saved him. He will get used to the longing, he tells himself. He will call in a strong voice—"Chestnuts. Hot Chestnuts!"—and he will forget the whoops of joy far out on the ice, the way the skaters fly past him, free as birds.

Soon, it will be dark. They must be hungry, out there, John thinks. And starting to get cold. He could sell the last of the chestnuts. In the distance, beyond the skaters, he can still make out the creamy forms of the waterfowl, waiting in the trees. He feels the pull of the lake, eases the barrow forward, grips the handles for balance. He's surprised at how steady he feels, on the ice. A thin dusting of snow, the last of this morning's light fall, catches beneath his feet, holds him. Nothing but perfect white underfoot. His heart soars. Slowly, carefully, he makes his way toward the laughter.

#

It's quiet now. Most of the flares around the lake have gone out. The freezing night is mending the cracks. Tomorrow, at first light, men will come with axes, and the crowds will mass again, calling for their loved ones. There are bodies in the water. Dozens. The Tyburn current, pulling beneath the ice, plays with their limbs. The smallest of the boys glides freely below the sheeny covering, his straw-coloured hair waving. A baker's tray hangs partially submerged, one of its leather straps snagged in a tree branch. In the shallows, vivid as buttons on a pale shirt, a row of oranges, frozen.

It will take a week to retrieve all the corpses. All but one will be laced into heavy skates. With the last of the bodies, divers will bring up a small metal brazier, wrested from the sucking clay.

In the distance, something will startle the waterfowl. They'll lift their wings, and fly.