

Stingray

By Samantha Stewart

He went to his death telling the story of a stingray
that had got to his heart
alone at the water dipping his frailing body in
against the waves
He had a way with ritual
what he did, he did
again and again until he died
and, to me, his doctor daughter
he told the story of a stingray that got him
stung his heart 'til it weakened each year
'til the last year when it
stopped

I read up and asked around
encouraged him to ask more cardiologically
logical people than me
it was possible but so is everything
including a slowly failing heart
a slowly failing body
even one that wakes early
pushes itself up against stairs
prays, writes, listens, eats the same breakfast
and answers emails with the same serious and quick intent
love, dad

I knew it was okay he died because everyone does
but his heart—how did one so strong become so weak
I never believed it was the stingray
until last week when I dove in the water with a friend
who is keeping me strong after death
with cold water and company
who came up crying, yowling
and breathed herself to the beach and across the sand
I ran like a paramedic for the car
and helped her drop into the near boiling tub
as she groaned and panted
in a certain labor

I remembered the strands of father leaving my body
when I crawled out of the water and my brother said he's gone
it's dead I heard thinking of the graying reef
I had just seen, pa's gone
we had never called him pa but something was lifting from my body
a reverse birth and I wailed
and today I knew a stingray had nipped at him
a tiny underwater reaper years early
giving my dad time to warn us
he was going.

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