

Believing in the Dog

Jerome Stueart

It's night. A man walks his black lab in the forest—and when the dog runs in between the pines, he's almost invisible. The only sound is the man's footsteps on the snow, the rustle of his jacket, his dog's breathing.

Normally, he enjoys this walk because it clears his head, even at 25 below.

Tonight is different. The temperature is supposed to plummet.

He doesn't mind. This is all for the best. Many great men have chosen to take their own lives when faced with something incurable. A dignified choice, he thinks.

Turner, the man's black lab, leaps out of the forest in a spray of snow and visible huffs.

I'm sick, the man believes. He tried to fight it when he was younger, but it got worse. All counselors he found were liberal; none believed in God or the Bible. He dumped them. They're just spreading lies, he thought. But the feelings never stopped.

The man turns onto a side path. The dog runs ahead, until he is a black dot that merges with the night.

The man wanders onto another side path, and then another. He is trying to get himself lost. *He got lost*, they will say. *You can get lost in these woods*.

The dog does not lose him. In that crisp air, the dog can find anyone.

The man finds a good tree, brushes away the snow and sits down. He's brought a thermos of blackberry tea. It's an ironic gesture—holding off the inevitable cold.

The dog comes to him out of the night, surprising, alive, breathing in his face.

I want the dog to be smarter than he is. I want him to look at his master and figure it all out. And I want the dog to get angry.

I want him to open his mouth and speak.

Yes, this sounds like fantasy, but there's a precedent in the Bible this man believes, a story of a talking donkey that warns his master.

"Jim," the dog says.

The man thinks the cold is getting to him as he stares at the dog. He'll drink more tea.

"Jim, go home."

Perhaps this is just part of dying, seeing your dog talk to you. "Why?"

The dog sits casually. "You're not sick. You're gay, that's all."

"That's all? I don't believe in *being* gay. I believe in God, and God says it won't work."

"What does he say about suicide?"

The man doesn't know. "I don't want to be something God hates."

"God doesn't hate you. He created you. God must have a purpose for you being gay. He certainly didn't create you so you could kill yourself. Go back home with me. Figure it out."

The man starts crying, big heaves. "Everyone will leave me," the man says.

The dog will look at him. "I won't."

God, I wish dogs could talk. I do.

Maybe if we spoke the truth, dogs wouldn't have to.

