

The Olympic Oval*Non Fiction*

The truth now is that we are all hanging out at the Utah Olympic Oval. It is New Year's Eve and my mother says it is like a dream come true for her. My nephew, her grandson, is a speed skater and has just finished his third race of the Olympic trials and made it into the next Olympic games. He has skated this race well, in front of a national audience, in front of the world. He is now ranked second in the United States, and of all the skaters in all the countries, he is ranked fifth. Second in the country is not bad. Fifth in the world is not bad. For a few moments, we have no idea who to be. What is second? What is fifth? My brother has pulled his son, the skater, from the media room at the oval. It is after the race and we are taking family pictures. He has his medal and his bouquet of flowers they give the winners. He gives the flowers to his grandmother. He is humble with his accomplishment. Great win, we say. You did it! It is an evolved belief system with all of us: you work hard for something, something will come. If you don't win, we believe that trying counted. Shyly he asks how we are doing and then goes back to the media area where he finds himself alone. The cameras, the reporters are gone. They have interviewed the number one skater and have left. My brother hurries out ahead of his son, ushers us aside, and tells us how the room was empty, how we shouldn't say anything. The Olympian walks back out toward us with his skates in his hands, head bowed. He asks where we are going, what we are doing. He's not sure what he's doing now. Back to the hotel room maybe? And we stand there and tell him that yes, we're all going back to our hotel rooms; we'll celebrate later, it's New Year's Eve, remember? We're all going out for New Year's Eve dinner. And that we are so proud, it's one for the books, we love him. He's number one with us, we tell him. We use the adages: We can't wait to celebrate, we're so proud.

We walk out of the Utah Olympic Oval into the diffused winter light. In an hour the whole family will rendezvous. We always say "whole family" as if there are so many of us, as if we populate the globe. In truth, we are twelve. We've made reservations. We're having New Year's Eve dinner together. We are a family that celebrates together. Tonight we have reservations for the twelve of us, this has been repeated, as if some sense of completion has eluded us until now.

We all take our separate cars back to the hotel for naps, or whatever it is that families do on vacations until crowding around for the next event. My partner and I sit in our hotel room and drink tea and stare



out the window. There's an airport across the street from our hotel, which they use only for army reconnaissance. The airport is unplowed, a single tarmac of snow. I look at the endless snow of the unused airport and remember how we spent New Year's Eve a year ago. My partner had a dinner party, a small dinner party. It was the third day after my first chemo. I knew nothing about third days after chemo, not about the low point of chemo that I was arriving at, nothing about the nadir, when your body becomes lead-like, your mind hazy, and all you want to do is sleep through the mild headaches caused by the anti-nausea pills. So we had dinner that night, a small party for friends, and because I was too tired to talk we turned on the TV and found a movie. I lay on the couch while Doreen and our friends sat down to watch *Rio*. When I was first diagnosed, we had many friends who said they would be there for us no matter what — and they were. In this case, it meant watching a cartoon about a parrot. We did not talk of what we usually talked of — of students, or law or politics, or cinema, or the latest restaurants or wines or dessert cupcakes, or farmers' markets or organic anything. We agreed that the parrot was quite animated, and I realized that maybe my life had changed.

There is a luminous gray over the deserted airfield. We have not seen a single plane fly in or out. It could be a good thing, since this is an army field. It could mean that in the larger world we are not in a state of warring emergency. We have noted a solitary fox out in the middle of snow between the lights that still stick up to mark the runways, and we have pulled the curtain back to watch the fox scamper back and forth in zigzags in the snow. Perhaps he is hunting. Perhaps he is entertaining himself in his solitary way. Many times he stops and stares off into the distance, perhaps toward us.

I have heard I should celebrate the New Year because cancer is behind me now, but I don't feel that way. I feel as if I was a person with cancer, and now I am without, and both of them were temporary states of being. I feel as if my body is re-acquiring its equilibrium, but that I could get knocked over again at any moment. Cancer, after all, is a cell perfected, a proliferation. It's a cell that has mutated to such a perfect degree that it cannot be stopped. It is me as the ultimate consumer. It is a metaphor of our age. It is no mystery to me as to why cancer rates are rising. It is the age of excess and rages of nature, and our cells know it.

I do not feel as if I have beaten cancer, as if I have throttled and strangled and mutilated the invader. Though I have used these metaphors of war sometimes, and indeed that is what I have done; I have eviscerated my own marrow, I have plundered what white cells I



had, I have cut out the invader from my breast, I have vanquished the enemy. It was a rough ride, and I have won — or so it would seem.

No one knows who to be in this hour, the last dusk before the dawn of the New Year. Slowly the phone calls come into our room — the Olympic skater is tired, perhaps he will go out with friends later, he doesn't know. He doesn't know what to do. He won't be at dinner. He is staying in. Then a call from his brother. He is sick, with a fever and a sore throat; he is staying home. Then a call from my brother, who is tired, and the calls keep coming, and suddenly there is no winner. We call and change our reservation for twelve at the popular restaurant in downtown Salt Lake City. We reserve, instead, a table for eight, then four; then we just cancel. There is not one among us who knows how to end the year, and to say what it was, this year of days and nights, and more to the point, not one among us who wants to say it — how we are winners, how destiny is ours — how we have vanquished the days that hounded us. From outside the hotel I imagine one can see each of us, staring out at the airfield, looking for the fox, who has disappeared in the shadowed edges of the airfield. It might be a good way to draw the year to a close after all, seeing the outline clearly in the darkness, of the fox who thinks he is in hiding.

Outside, darkness takes over; the shopping mall lights on the other side of the hotel add a phosphorescent glow to the sky. The phone rings. It is my father. He remembered there was a Thai food place in the shopping mall and he called — they serve beer and wine and sake — and he is going there with my mother for New Year's Eve. And so it was that we each decided to go to the Thai food place at the shopping mall, whose name none of us can now remember — only that we were there, in the restaurant of the shopping mall, with carcasses of big box-stores around us, and outside the snow pushed into mounds under the parking lot lights — and the one making his small cuts across the empty tarmac beneath the large dark night, now forgotten. We were seated at the long table assembled for us in the center of the Thai food restaurant, welcoming waiters surrounding us. The room seemed gold at its edges. There were lanterns strung on the bamboo walls and yellow curtains framing the windows and our bowls of noodles and cups of sake in front of us, and then awkward toasts to my health, to our Olympian, to the prosperity of family. The world seemed upright again, the indomitable forces were back.

