

Long ago, I heard a story about two water gods, which, even when it was told to me sounded so fantastic I scarcely believed it. Yet, I have seen have people jump into the air, spin themselves around three times and land on the edge of a blade the width of a dandelion petal, so who's to say what is believable or not?

According to the story, the two gods, one of water liquid and the other of water frozen met on a Sunday afternoon at a site more fitting for trolls. Down a mean spit of land overshadowed by a graceless bridge and bounded by a highway and a concrete culvert, snaked an ill-paved road: the only way in; the only way out. Still, many traveled this road willingly, driven by a quest to break their bodies' limitations and release themselves into speed. For on this improbable spit of land sat, side by side, were two neighboring facilities where would-be gods of water and ice, trained and dreamed of Olympian heights.

The ice was guarded by a mountain of a man, who, for the most part, watched over it from a cramped office crowded with shelves of moldering folders holding skating schedules. The story goes that on that spring Sunday afternoon, while the god of water (although, to be honest, he had not yet won his crown) plowed through the pool next door, the silent ice waited in darkness, free from the harsh fluorescence usually glaring down at it. But even in the darkness, the ice gave off an inviting, silvery shimmer, as if some primal energy pulsed within it. As if it anticipated an approaching goddess.

And then a phone rang and the caller asked the mountain of a man in his cramped office whether it was true that there was an ice rink next door to where Michael Phelps was training on his way to becoming the most winning Olympian ever?

Yes, the man answered, there is ice. And could it be rented for an hour or so? Yes, it can. The voice said “Good. She’ll be there soon.”

“Who?”

“Sara Hughes.”

And so, it transpired that Sara Hughes, Olympic gold medalist, in her white chariot that had been stretched until it resembled a limousine, rode under the bridge and down the spit of land to where the ice waited. According to the story Sara had come to interview Michael Phelps for ESPN, but that first she wanted to skate.

But I assert that Sara didn’t want to skate as much as she needed to skate. For Sara was an Olympian and, having achieved the summit of athletic perfection, her bones and blood carried the god within. And gods can grow restive unless they’re released. Yes, Sara had the responsibility of fulfilling her obligations to her television bosses, but she also had the urge to release the possibility of perfection.

And so, the story goes, Sara skated, swooping across the rink, vaulting herself into the air, spinning around three times and landing perfectly, her arms outstretched, her free leg straight, and the knee of her skating leg compressing like a shock absorber, and then releasing her up and ready for her next move.

And then, skating over, she entered to world of mortals, took off her skates and interviewed the god of water wet.

I wonder what she and Michael Phelps really said to each other that long ago Sunday afternoon. Beneath the TV chitty-chat, did they communicate to each other the irony of their situation — the stretch limo between the rickety old rink and the tucked away pool? Did he and she grin with the shared understanding of the rough, ragged origins of their journeys? The rinks

with bad ice, the pools with frigid water, the damp clothes, the cheap motels, the naps caught in cars, the vending machine meals, the morning practices, the evening practices, the week-end practices, the homework done on benches, the uncomprehending teachers, the school parties missed, the forsaken friendships, the aching muscles, the bad judges, the worst advice, the ruthless coaches, the conflicted parents, the resentful siblings?

That Sunday afternoon, in the shadow of that bridge, did Sara and Michael silently share the understanding of the singularity of their lives? How age would rob them of more than it does the rest of us, since they had reached the summit of physical perfection and had farther to fall.

And did they trade, too, that they never had asked for glory? . . . that glory had been bestowed upon them by an adoring world. They merely had quested for release into the fundamental element. . . water, where, freed of all plod, they could express their inborn gifts, the one encoded on their genes, giving her an uncanny inner gyroscope and him extraordinary musculature.

And did he and she share the rueful understanding that while they ruled water, water claimed them. In the shadow of that bridge, between the highway and the culvert, did they look at each other and silently acknowledge the price they were paying for gold?

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On frigid mornings, before first light, slender forms materialize out of the dark. Sleek and insouciant as cats, they drag suitcases across an ill-paved parking lot, and their breath wraps their heads in silvery mist.

These are the superior skaters. The ones with promise and coaches to help them fulfill it. These girls — they almost always are girls — live in such rarefied circumstances they might as

well be from another planet. Perhaps the Planet Achievement. Where the language has no expression for “less.”

Despite having a command of French or Mandarin, or whatever language will get them into a top-tier college, these girls have no vocabulary for “less.” They can’t imagine less — doing so might attach “less” to themselves. It’s not haughtiness that prevents them from seeing themselves as “less”: it’s age. They’re simply too young to imagine ever being less youthful, less lovely, less accomplished.

Slender and clear-skinned, they have teeth like odes to white alignment and limbs as supple as green willows. I watch them observe a meticulous casualness. No giggly enthusiasm punctures their self-possession, nor does spontaneity rupture their serenity. Perhaps all superior athletes employ this sort of feint. Perhaps it’s the only way they can pass as natives of Planet Earth. I wouldn’t know: I’ve never lived on Planet Achievement. Even if I once had all the advantages these girls have, I wouldn’t have been half the skater.

I lack the superior, inner gyroscope that enables them to leave the realm of normal and enter a demi-dimension of being. They skate with the perfect equipoise between walking and flying. And how they hunger for speed. Arms out stretched, tummies tucked, they command not only of their bodies, but the ice and air over and through which their bodies move. Unfettered from footsteps, they find grace. And unencumbered by distracting thought, they experience hyper-awareness. For the truly superior ones, time slows, sounds fade, and sights blur. All that exists is existence. Nothing else can compare.

But they themselves are not incomparable. Despite all their ability, the girls I see on frigid mornings already have passed their prime. The pack of the very select is training

elsewhere, at rinks in China or Japan or Colorado or Lake Placid, from where one will emerge to reign supreme.

Since I began skating in my early forties nine Olympiads have passed, so from my comfy couch, nine times I've watched a young girl smile through joyful tears, wave to the adoring crowd and remain totally innocent of the fact that she's my sacrificial lamb. Her extraordinary, inner gyroscope may have enabled her to skate as she did and her own competitive spirit may have driven her to the heights of Olympus, but it was the demand for perfection from millions of mortals like myself that cracked the whip.

An Olympic gold medalist she will be welcomed everywhere but at home nowhere. As lofty and glorifying as the mountaintop is, it's also very narrow. And when, in four years, the teary winner is replaced by another, today's winner will find no place for a goddess like herself. Alone in her glory, the gold around her neck, she'll find nowhere simply to be herself and almost no one like herself anywhere. Perhaps that's why she cries. Perhaps she sees what I do, the fading ghost of her triumphant self pulling her suitcase out of the rink.

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When Kurt was two years old and I was pursuing my Master's of Liberal Arts degree at Johns Hopkins, I took another course taught by Ralph Harper. From the middle of June to the end of July, we met twice a week in a cool, basement seminar room and studied tragedy. I remember almost nothing about what we learned, but I do recall the flowery see-through blouses worn by a dark-haired woman named Riccki, and Ralph Harper's plummy British accent rolling like the voice of God down the seminar table. And how Charlotte Rittenmeyer, the heroine of Faulkner's *Wild Palms*, abandoned her two young daughters to run off with her lover. I also

remember Charlotte's yellow eyes, a physiological abnormality I found as improbable as a woman abandoning her children.

But then, many year later, I see Faulkner's fiction made actual. Yellow eyes. They burn like golden sparks behind the amber irises of Dorothy Hamill. Dorothy Hamill lives in Baltimore, and during an ordinary public session, there she is. At Northwest Ice Rink, skating with the rest of the afternoon duffers. Fast but considerate, Dorothy darts among us mere mortals, always careful not to intimidate, thoughtful to not display a tenth of her skill. And when the session is over, she doesn't linger as sometimes better skaters do to show off a loop jump or Axel. No, that afternoon Olympic gold leaves the ice along with everyday clay. Except Dorothy's are the only eyes glowing yellow. Only hers radiate a perfervid certainty, as if lit by a secret knowledge embedded in her bones and blood.

Whether she is living in Baltimore because her coaches are here, or if her coaches are here because Dorothy is I don't know, but about the time I see her skate at Northwest two men enter the small constellation of Baltimore skaters. Tim Murphy and Nathan Burch: good cop, bad cop. They have a vision of skating informed by John Curry, who won the men's gold medal at the Olympics in 1976, the same year Dorothy won hers. Murphy and Burch had skated in a troupe Curry formed after the Olympics and they are in Baltimore to work with Dorothy in the hope of creating a troupe of their own.

Theirs isn't a style of skating as much as it is a skating method. An approach fundamental to execution. Edges, total and complete control of them, forms the basis. And, by extension, line. In competitions, skaters will forego beauty to power up for a jump or spin. Not so, the skaters Murphy and Birch train. From their fingers to their toes at all times, skaters trained by those two present beautiful shape-shifting forms. Every movement originates from a still core.

Arms are never raised; rather they lift from the ribs. Heads never turn unless they extend the line of trunk and leg. Nothing is superfluous. Everything is exquisite. And all is murderous.

To earn money to fund their troupe, Murphy and Birch teach edge classes to amateurs. In groups of four, we execute our edges down the rink, and then combinations of edges, and then combinations of combinations. The process is one of self-selection, with the least accomplished skaters always in the back of the pack. There I am with the rest of the stumblebunnies while others were already lining up for their next move. Being in the back of the pack is humiliating, but it also was where I know I belong. Besides, I never feel too bad as long as Tim Murphy is our teacher. Tim has an indulgent, gentle nature and a penchant for the music of Enya. Classes taught by Tim always end with our “Dead Tree” routine: Arms extended, free legs straight, heads high, and eyes fixed on a guide point down the rink, we skate to “Orinoco Flow (Sail Away),” a siren song springing from shamrocks and Irish mist. The loveliness of the music and the fact that I don’t look too bad as a dead tree makes me leave Tim’s class feeling like I haven’t made a complete fool of myself.

But that’s not the case whenever Nathan teaches. Nathan has more drive than Tim and less tolerance for incompetence. “It’s just skating,” he taunts after demonstrating a particularly difficult combination. “What’s so hard about it? It’s just skating.” Even highly accomplished skaters like Peggy are challenged. For me, Nathan’s classes are lessons in self-loathing.

“Why do you do it?” Bill throws at me when I came home whining. “Why do you keep putting yourself in these positions you’re not prepared for?”

Even now, I don’t have a good answer. Maybe having been squeezed between my brilliant sisters for so many years made humiliation feel like my natural state. On maybe I hoped that in the backdraft of the better skaters some of their magical fairy dust would land on me. Or,

maybe, as one therapist I had suggested, I never learned how to protect myself, so I was constantly exposing my vulnerabilities. Whatever the reason, week after week, I faithfully go to those edge classes.

And then comes the morning I realize that Nathan, for all his remarkable skill, is a mere mortal compared to an Olympian god. I am skating before going to work, or maybe it is one of my out-of-work intervals, but on the morning I am recalling only three people are on the ice. Myself. Nathan Birch. And John Curry. John Curry, Olympic gold medalist, Officer of the Order British Empire — that John Curry.

Nathan and Tim have recruited John Curry to skate in a show meant to promote their troupe, and even though they are staging it in a rundown little rink in the shadow of a bridge, they are perfectionists, and a shabby rink is no excuse for shabby skating. I am on the side nearest the bleachers, and Nathan and Curry are conferring in the right far corner. Then, Nathan suddenly peels away in a perfect spiral toward the opposite end. Giving a skater momentum enough to carry him down the length of a rink requires a tremendous initial thrust, but Nathan is a masterful skater. With his back arched, his head high, his free leg straight as a yardstick angled at the ceiling, he skates the rink's length with nary a wobble. Perfect.

But not perfection. Not perfection's embodiment — that's reserved for gods like John Curry. When he follows Nathan down the ice, Curry's spiral has something more refined, more intrinsic, more organic to himself alone. Something ineffable, but recognizable. In his spiral, Curry performs a type of instinctive, corporeal calculus enabling him to apportion his speed to his size: he flows down the ice not one millisecond faster nor slower than he should have. Nathan Birch is short, maybe 5'6" and he traveled down the ice like a swift, but Curry is taller and moves like an eagle.

He inflects his skating with solemnity. Bending into his spiral and addressing the ice like a Buddhist priest, he raises his free leg, not toward the ceiling, but to the heavens. None of his mannerisms have the contrived, artificiality of artistry for artistry's sake. Rather, he merely pays ice what ice was due: respect. Ice, after all, is elemental. Air, water, ice, the cycle endures.

But skaters don't. In those few seconds he spiraled down the rink, Curry skated as though he was raising his own perfection against the time his blades will slip out from under him. It was the 80's and Curry is infected with the AIDs virus and the drugs that could arrest that infectious scourge are still years away. And so on that morning the John Curry, Olympic gold medalist, Officer of the Order of the British Empire, travels from one end to the other in a shabby little rink in Baltimore, and, against the darkness, raised the vision of illusive, human beauty. And for those scant seconds that I witness it, beauty wins.

I don't know why I persist in skating, but I do know the sport has given me gifts. One is the memory of calling my father and telling him about being on the ice with an Olympian. Of his three daughters I think I'm the one appreciated sports the most — I remember, the October afternoon in 1951 when my mother and sisters were somewhere else, and he and I sat at the kitchen table and listened the play-off game between the Dodgers and "our" team, the Giants. We sat across the table from each other until the top of the eighth, when the Dodgers went ahead by three runs. “

That's it,” my father said, “that's the game,” before going down to the cellar to clear some space for coming winter's first coal delivery. But at the bottom of the ninth, the Giants rallied and Willie Mays was on deck. I called my father to come upstairs and together we heard “the shot heard round the world,” Bobby Thomson's game-winning homerun. The sort of shared witness that endures. Perhaps, when I told my father about being on the ice with John Curry, my

father was remembering the little girl at the kitchen table, the precious sweet fleetingness of that experience. I heard a smile inflect his voice. He was in Bridgeport, and I was in Baltimore, but I sensed a shared appreciation of my encounter with an Olympian as surely as if he were across the room from me. I had seen the best, and the best had been beautiful and that had made my father happy.

The memoirist Frederick Beuchner asserts that everyone with whom we've ever interacted has left behind some particle of themselves in us, and, because interaction is mutual, they also carry some sliver of us, even as they've pass away and travel forward through a different realm. And so my father, who died in 1996, took the memory of my calling him that day as well as some appreciation of John Curry, who had succumbed to AIDS two years before my father. Perhaps, floating around among the nanoparticles of the eternal mists, they've met each other. And maybe have shared how I had watched Curry swoop down the length of Northwest Ice Rink. A Godlike display over in an instant. And maybe lasting forever.

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There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, that Tara Lapinski, Olympic gold medal in 1998, as a toddler watched her first Olympics, and when it came time for the awards, little Tara pushed a cardboard carton in front of the TV, climbed up, and announced, "I'm going to win, too." And when she was fifteen, little Tara did just that.

But what had the tiny girl seen that she recognized in herself? What seed within herself had she sensed? And what had been the source of her certainty — "I'm going to win, too!"

A great athlete, I believe, is like a sleeping child, who, upon awakening from her afternoon nap, hears someone playing Chopin on her grandmother's piano in the parlor below

and knows instantly her heart's desire. The music, like athletic achievement, is an external expression of a genius only the great ones possess.

The girls I see pulling their suitcases through the morning mist have talent, but not genius. Genius is reserved for Olympians. In his book *Genius, a Mosaic of One Hundred Creative Minds*, the scholar Harold Bloom says genius invokes the transcendent and extraordinary. Genius expresses something new, and after it nothing will be the same. And for those who possess it, genius is incandescent and undeniable. They simply cannot not express the god they sense within themselves – it's what they were born to do.

“I always knew that I had one thing to say in life, and one thing only: I believe that skating can be expressive,” John Curry wrote. “I think it is the only thing I shall ever have to say; but then perhaps there are people who would envy me even that. . . . Skating gave me the possibility of *saying* something. Rightly or wrongly I plodded on in that area.”

How interesting that Curry refers to himself as having “plodded on,” when any of us who ever saw him skate knew he flew. But “plod” is accurate, because genius doesn't suddenly burst forth like Aphrodite from a clamshell. Rather, it steadily accretes skills, like a pearl steadily layering nacre around a speck of sand. Year after year after year, genius grows, and those who possess it, are also possessed by it. Their bodies become instruments in pursuit of perfection, and to reach that summit no sacrifice is too great.

Without bitterness or rancor, Curry recounts his quest. How he grew up in Birmingham, England, and how his father died of tuberculosis when Curry was sixteen. And how he then moved to London and awoke at six every morning to skate all morning before going to work at the National Cash Register Company. And about how he went to New York for the first time when he was twenty to train with a man whom he thought would be perfect for him, only to find

the match was terrible. And of how he returned to Birmingham and sat alone in his mother's empty house for three days, trying to figure out what to do next.

He writes about returning to his old rink, and hiring a new coach there, and how everyone then snubbed him because he'd switched. And about how he came in fourth in the 1972 World Championships. And seventh a year later. And about how the judges advised him to quit . . . no one ever climbed out of such a hole. And about how, when a promoter said he was "finished" as a competitor, Curry held fast to the desire within himself and turned down a place in a glitzy ice show.

He writes about the international intrigue that pressured Easter Bloc judges to give him low scores. And about the astonishing calm he felt at the 1976 Olympics. ". . . It came together technically, physically and mentally, and it all came together so easily and so naturally that it was absolutely no effort."

The "no effort" in Innsbruck was, of course, the result all the years of nothing but effort – Curry was twenty-seven when he won the Olympics and had been preparing for that golden moment ever since the afternoon he was eight and his mother paid a coach to give him a lesson as he skated for the first time.

But, along with the lack of rancor in Curry's recounting is the striking absence of doubt.

While his family was solidly middle class, in addition to his father one of his brothers was tubercular, so clearly his mother had concerns other than John's skating. When his father died and the family's means became reduced, Curry simply set about adjusting to his new circumstances, never wavering. Having an astounding work ethic, he was as analytic as a rock climber assessing a cliff face. No detail escaped him. When one coach didn't work out, he got

another. Whatever differences he had with coaches were based on disagreements about technique, not personality . . . he had no time for such petty distractions.

When he approached Slavka Kahout, the trainer of Olympic gold medalist Janet Lynn, and Kahout turned him down because she was pregnant, Curry didn't bemoan his fate. Instead he took Kahout's advice and wrote to a coach based in Lake Placid, New York.

Lake Placid, the site of the 1932 Olympics where Sonja Henie won the second of her three Olympic gold medals, is a beautiful little village rimming the Mirror Lake deep in the Adirondacks. It's the sort of place inviting you to linger over morning coffee and evening cocktails, but I doubt Curry saw much of the lake or the village, nor do I think he especially wanted to. He was in Lake Placid to work with the Gus Lussie, the coach Slavka Kahout had recommended. On a patch of ice not much bigger than a McMansion's living room Lussi had him jump and fall up to forty times a day until he attained "lift" from his muscles, not momentum.

Curry was the reigning British Champion and anyone would have agreed that the little kid from Birmingham had done very well for himself, and no one could have faulted him for joining an ice show or even hanging up his blades entirely. Instead Curry undertook to retrain his body to jump according to a whole new method. And then further submitted himself to train under the great and exacting Carlo Fassi. But why?

The easy answer would be that he wanted to win the Olympics. But his account reveals a deeper sensitivity. Curry was the flag bearer leading the British team into the stadium for the 1976 opening ceremony in Innsbruck. Around him, his teammates were amusing themselves with sardonic, cynical jokes. But Curry didn't share their attitude; rather he writes, "I knew that once there, under the umbrella of the organization, one had a moral obligation to respect it."

Curry had come to Innsbruck feeling at one with his god-within and fully aware that he was participating in an event bigger than himself.

For Curry, winning the gold meant he'd added another link to the chain of human achievement. Why did he do it? Because he could not *not* do it. Because John Curry had genius.

I am not a professed Presbyterian, but I enjoy the conceit of walking to Church past picket fences and brick walks of my neighborhood as if I were living in the days of old. And on, the second Sunday of Advent, when the liturgy was preparing our inner and outer lives for the birth of Christ, we rose to sing, "On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry," whose second verse begins "Then cleansed be every life from sin; Make straight the way for God within."

A tenet of Christianity holds that the true wages of sin are the costs exacted from our own spirits, corroding them until they're dim coals of what might have been. Hardening our souls, sin adds another bar to the cage restraining our God Within.

And we all sin. Letting distractions detour us from making straight the way our spirits urge us toward, we pile up routine and obligations on life's highway until that distant "straight way" has been long passed, and is recalled, if at all, as the exit we should have taken decades before. Perhaps that's why I so vividly recall the golden specs flashing in Dorothy Hamill's amber eyes and the perfection of John Curry's spiral. The summit of Mount Olympus is typically hidden in mists, but once in a while the mists lift just enough to affirm for the earthlings down below what they have always suspected but never perceived: that the summit is worth attaining. And so it is with great athletes: keeping straight, never doubting, always climbing, they give the unperceivable shape and the god within, form.

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Sometimes, around the holidays, young competitive skaters visiting from out of town will practice at a local rink — their bodies are such finely tuned instruments, they can't afford to break their training regimens. Back when Northwest was still operating I remember one such Christmastime. I was putting on my skates beside the mother whose teen-aged daughter waltzing over the ice with the pinpoint precision of a highly trained ice dancer.

“Your daughter's a beautiful skater,” I remarked.

“Oh, thank you,” the mother said. “We've just decided that we need to get her a new partner. We're hoping to get someone from Russia. The Russian men really are the best when it comes to ice dancing.” The mother dropped her remark casually, as if getting a man from a distant country for the sole purpose of having him ice skate with her daughter were as normal getting her a toy poodle. As if the tangled logistics, the huge expense and the risk that the partnership not working out were worth every bit of effort and not indicative of a dangerously narrowing focus.

The process of training a competitive skater is insidious and seductive, beginning with a child's evident talent, which are soon followed by private lessons. Which are then followed by more lessons with maybe another, more demanding coach. And then, some success at minor competitions, and, of course, custom-made skates. Then practices before and after school plus summers spent away at skate camps, followed by more competitions and separate coaches for spins and jumps complemented by ballet lessons and weight training and the addition of a choreographer and possibly a sports psychologist. And each year the commitment grows until there's no separation between the child and the skater. “Skater” becomes the child's identity. “Skater” becomes who her parents love.

But even for very good skaters, like the girl waiting for her Russian, the future holds only the possibility of the possibility of possible gold. The summit is so very, very high, and so much can go wrong on the way to the top — a year lost because of injury, two because of bad coaching, a conflict between a choreographer and coach, a poor choice of music for a program, a questionable costume. Even a sudden growth spurt that can erase a jump from muscle memory as surely as if it hadn't been learned in the first place. Meanwhile the vortex sucks her down ever deeper until the wider world becomes a foreign territory glimpsed out the window of the car driving her to another rink.

After Bill dies and Northwest closes I start going to rink where a dark-haired man who almost always wore a red sweater and a non-stop smile skates at regular public afternoon sessions. He zips over the ice, outshining even very accomplished skaters like Peggy, but without the intensity of someone in training. His name was Kris Kunzel (Sp?) and he and his twin sister Karin had been Swiss pairs champions and members of the Swiss Olympic team.

“Karin and I started on the ice when we were three,” he told me. “Our mother had skated. It was playtime, twice a week. Then, at six, three or four times a week, and the practices were long, and harder. By the time we were twelve or thirteen skating was the central thing of our lives. It wasn't a bad life . . . just different.”

“How different?” I ask.

“Well I remember at age fourteen, going back to school after a weekend and the other kids had been the birthday parties, or the movies, or sleep overs . . . I really don't know what they did . . . but my sister and I had gone to London and skated in a command performance for the queen.”

Kunzel's story encapsulates the rarified world of competitive skating: it's both broadening and limiting. Skating before the Queen of England, but missing the natural pathway through adolescence to adulthood. Kunzel is one of the lucky ones. When I meet him he has a well-established career in finance and when I see him last, he is skating with a beautiful blonde woman who scarcely can make it around the rink. No matter: he loves her enough to follow her to California and begin a life together.

At two-years-old, our son Matt had a relentless drive to explore limits and almost zero tolerance for disappointment. I remember sitting on the old tweed couch in our den on Ranny Road and sensing Bill's tension coiling beside me as we watched the creation of a disaster. Matt was building a block tower of blocks. One block more, just one, and everything would collapse. Anyone could see that. Except Matt. Selecting his final block, he stretched and placed it on top; the tower swayed one way, then the other, then crashed. Bill and I were ready to spring, ready to distract, to console, to help build anew. But no tantrum erupted.

"He's growing up," Bill said. He was right. Matt may not have mastered block building, but he had mastered something in himself. Play, psychologists tell us, is a child's means of exploring the world, and, in that sense, play is practice for life. As we mature, we begin playing with others, and so our games become more complex and more organized, which helps us develop inner resources of cooperation, creativity, perseverance, courage, strength, commitment, and, yes, competitiveness, qualities we'll eventually take and apply in the "real world." At least most of us will. But there are those who never leave the playing field, or the pool, or the ice. They behind stay and play. In short, they work at playing. To express the God Within. Or to appease the Demon Inside.

If there is a skating equivalent to a tragic hero, it's Christopher Bowman. Wonderfully attractive, supremely talented, Bowman died on Jan. 10, 2008 of an accidental drug overdose with a blood alcohol level of 0.12 percent plus traces of cocaine and marijuana in his system. Christopher Bowman, two-time U.S. Champion, World medalist, and Olympic contender was found in a rundown hotel outside of Los Angeles. The man who once had spun through the air three times before landing light as a leaf weighed 261 pounds. He was forty-years-old. He had been skating for ninety percent of his life.

"I was heavily into cocaine use for over the years," Bowman told the writer Christine Brennan. "I did everything. I mean, I was a human garbage pail. You name it and I try it because to me, I was invincible. I could literally do anything. I was like, I am Olympic athlete, you know, take me to Disneyland, take me to the world

"When it came time for the event, maybe two weeks prior, I was always very paranoid that I was going to test positive and disgrace my country. That was the most important thing. My life was already a disgrace, as far back as I can remember. Where I grew up, how my life existed, was a disgrace. But my skating was not. That's how it was separated." (Brennan, 204-5)

For Bowman, the extraordinary talent he'd been given became a burden not a gift. And his regarding his life off the ice as one thing and his skating as another represented a psychic split. A piece of clever rationalization and a psychological fallacy: an athlete can't live outside of his body: none of us can. He thought he could live his life however he wanted, while keeping his skating inviolate. But his life was lived in his body and his body was the instrument of his skating, and in destroying one, he annihilated both.

Jan. 10, '08. Dr. Levine . . . the tumor has gotten worse, may try Avastin, 50% larger than last time and in lymph nodes.

The above is my diary entry for the day Christopher Bowman died, and if his death fazed me at all, it was only as a single snowflake in a mounting blizzard. By then, eight months after his diagnosis, Bill was feeling worse, our options were narrowing, and Bill and I both sensed time was running out.

There are few places as starkly real as an oncology center. Despite cheerful staffs, comfortable surroundings, and free juice and snacks, everyone knows that every patient is engaged in a life or death battle. No athletic competition can compare with that. Not in intensity. Not in the courage, forbearance, bravery, or determination. Compared to oncology centers, Olympic stadiums are playgrounds and athletes are playing at being grown up.

I wonder if Christopher Bowman didn't know that. I wonder if he didn't find something ridiculous in all the effort being devoted to something so essentially ephemeral. I remember how, at the end of his programs, Bowman would throw his arms over his head in the traditional victor's pose and grin at the adoring audience, but always with a trace of mockery in his eyes, as if to say, "What are you cheering about? It's only skating. It isn't real life. It's only a game."

Indeed, it was. And he played it as well as he could, until the end, when the momentum turned and life played him.

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Two years after Bill died I visit Mount Olympus. In a bereavement group for widowed persons I had met a woman named Carolyn who asked me to join her on a trip to Turkey and Greece. We leave on May 8, two years and twenty-four hours into my widowhood.

When I get into the car for the airport, Carolyn looks at my grim expression and asks, “You all right?”

“Fine.”

But Carolyn knows I am far from fine. I am far from anything. Grief’s initial pain had ebbed, leaving me feeling like a hollow husk masquerading as a fully functioning human. Earlier that spring, thanks to a recommendation from Herb Smith, the neighbor who had broken my heart when he sang a hymn with his wife, I had begun teaching at McDaniel College. And during the semester break I had been a fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Both outward indications that I was getting on with my life. But “getting on” would have meant I had some sense of direction, and I no more knew where I was going than had I been dropped on in the middle of Mongolia without a compass. Measured against the forty-one years I’d spent spooned in the comfortable contours of marriage, twenty-four months and a single day, scarcely is enough time to figure out who I was, what I wanted, and why I should give a damn about anything.

I’ not even unsure whether I had permission to travel. The sense of adventure I shared with Bill in flying off together somewhere makes me feel I’m betraying him by going without him, especially to Turkey. The evening we had learned that my mother was in the hospital in California, Bill and I had just gotten home from a meeting about an archaeological dig off the Turkish coast. We had been hoping to be part of the team that would be excavating there in the summer, but the call had quashed those plans. After my mother’s death, he and I traveled, but never to Turkey. And here I am, piling into a car with an itinerary that includes Istanbul, Cappadocia, Ephesus, and Izmir. Am I being disrespectful to his memory? Or trivializing his

death? Or maybe being just plain foolish — I don't know Carolyn that well, and had never even spoken to her friend, Aysha, who is going to be our guide in Turkey.

Happily, Carolyn and I soon adjust to each other, and Aysha proves to be a marvelously caring companion for two battered widows, but I experience everything through the refracted light of loss.

One morning I find myself alone in our hotel's dining room in Istanbul while out the window the busy Bosphorus shimmers in the morning light. The whole heaveho of history seems to be passing before me. All the millennial-long effort to stoke, steer, transport and trade pulses in the sunlight, and Bill isn't there to enjoy the sight.

And in Cappadocia, after spending the day touring improbable underground cities hewn out of rock, we are enjoying some wine an outdoor café when I notice a snowy white baby camel staring at me from across the square. Its unblinking eyes shine with doleful wisdom and painful innocence. As if its marrow carries a fathomless knowledge that the little creature had yet to experience. Turkey displays the world's stunning variety: all the spectrum of life from the aroma of coffee to cities hewn from stone and adorned with frescos celebrating long-forgotten saints, an enormous scope that Bill would have appreciated so. My sense of his absence in Turkey is melancholic, but in Greece it becomes acute.

Ayshe stays behind in Turkey, and Carolyn and I join a bus tour through Greece. At Olympia our guide assigns our rooms and tells our group that in twenty minutes our driver will bring our bags up to our floor and leave them for us to collect by the elevators.

"I'll get the bags" I tell Carolyn when the time is up.

"You sure you can handle them both?" — Carolyn is seven years younger than I am and, as a black belt in karate, considerably stronger.

“I’ll be fine.”

I leave her in our room and go down a hall with windows awash with late afternoon sunlight on one side and the dark doors of our fellow tourists on the other. I round a corner and almost lose my balance.

There they are: the husbands. The dutiful spouses. The good men. Amid a jumble of suitcases the responsible partners are stooped to a matrimonial task naturally assigned to “husband.” course husbands get the bags. And of course the wives wait back in the rooms. Bags are heavy and men are strong. And women waiting alone in hotel rooms need to believe in their man’s strength. And their men do, too.

A ten-year-old could have handled those bags — they all had wheels. Plus none of those husbands is youthful. But roles must be played: sticking to the script comforts us, gives us a sense of predictability, tells us where we fit.

A widow of two years, I look at those men and feel I don’t fit in anywhere. Worse, when I wade in among them I feel like an interloper. None of them makes eye contact with me, and when I find Carolyn’s bag in the middle of the jumble, none helps me wrestle it to the edge. Maybe I am, an uncomfortable reminder that one day they’ll find themselves with no one waiting for them behind a closed door. Or, worse, that their wife might have to wrestle with suitcase while they themselves travel in a totally different dimension. I finally find my bag, and grabbing Carolyn’s with onehand, and mine in the other, drag them down the hall, their little wheels click clacking at my heels. “Alone. Alone. Alone,” I heard them snipping. “You are so alone.”

When Bill died my diary took the form of a daily letter to him. Not true epistles – my daily entries lack the insights and confidences I’d share if Bill were actually reading them – they serve as a spillway for my worries and as catchalls of daily observations.

Fri. May 21, 2010

Dear Bill,

Today we went to the Museum at Olympia. Oh, Bill, how wonderful it was. Anyway, I couldn't see the Olympic site because it was pouring rain. Really, really raining. I just walked back to the hotel and even though I had a rain poncho, I was soaked.

I move through that museum in my dripping poncho and gaze at the displays, trying to burn the memory of just one object into my brain, a mental counterpart to the tiny plastic dolls I used to diaper with a tissue and elastic band and stuff into the pocket of my Catholic school uniform to comfort myself whenever Mother Elizabeth was flying into one of her rages.

Not one of those museum treasures had stuck in my memory; I do, however, recall the experience of the museum itself. Every element – its subdued lighting, the spacing of its displays, the subtle colors of its walls and floors – contributed to an atmosphere of reverence. Not exactly the hushed ambience of a “sacred space,” but close enough to promote contemplation.

The ancient games, after all, honored Zeus, the first god among equals, the ruler of the sky, the giver of laws and justice. His forty-two-foot golden and ivory colossus dominated the site, and athletes, as well as their trainers, fathers and brothers had to swear an oath that they would not sin against the games. (Swaddling, p. 39)

Athletes were esteemed for having arete, a term combining honor, valor, conditioning, prowess, skill, pride, determination, purposefulness and daring. Every aspect of the life of an athlete with arete had been developed so that he was fully alive in mind as well as body. And, having burnished his spirit and physique to such a degree, he became fully human. So fully human, in fact, that he assumed the godlike ability to enhance those basking in his aura's glow.

But arete represented an ideal. The ancient Olympic games were held over a thousand-year span, an impossibly long time for competitive, driven humans to uphold an ideal, and the records reveal that, while they were rare, instances of bribery, cheating and misrepresentation did mar the games. In short, some sinned.

At Olympia, a smaller and perhaps more significant shrine predates the temple of Zeus. The Pelopion was dedicated to Pelops, a mere human who became a hero with almost immortal status. He attained that status by cheating.

Pelops had fallen in love with the fair Hippodameia, but, Hippodameia's father, Oinomaos (Handbook of Greek mythology, Rose 247), decreed he'd give his daughter only to a suitor who beat him in a chariot race. Twelve tried and twelve had failed at the cost of their lives. Then came crafty Pelops. He bribed a stable boy to insert a linchpin of wax into Oinomaos's chariot wheel. The wax melted, Oinomaos's chariot lost its wheel, and in the resulting crash Oinomaos lost his life. Crafty Pelops then covered his tracks by drowning the stable boy.

The games, it would appear, have a darker origin in the human psyche than the elevating spirit of *arête*. A darker urge we're driven to externalize and even celebrate — at Olympia the animals sacrificed to Pelops were black rams, tokens of atonement appropriate for a figure associated with the underworld.

Games are said to be ritualized warfare. And perhaps that's true. Perhaps they're a means of releasing not our God, but our Devil Within. A way of venting the urge we've tried to suppress ever since we first clubbed the other guy in order to get his woolly mammoth. Maybe that's why we festoon our competitions with almost liturgical regalia. Maybe we're trying to sanctify our most unholy propensities. The music, the chants, the banners, the team-colored

clothing, the communal food, all of them fostering a sense of significance in a desperate attempt to nullify our devilish selves. With every hit or sack, every triumph of chance over strategy, or of strategy over brawn, our Devil Within finds a socially acceptable release.

In ancient Greece, when someone died, games were played — some scholars believe funeral games were the true roots of the Olympics. The practice was so imbedded in Greek culture that Homer presents the competitions Achilles hosts in honor of his fallen friend Patroklos as a given, much as no one today questions why fans paint themselves purple or wear hats shaped like cheese. Absent a definitive explanation, we're left to wonder how boxing, or jumping, or chariot racing were supposed to assuage the pain of loss. Some scholars posit that they were a reaffirmation of life in the face of death. (Ancient Greek Athletics 27)

Or perhaps, funeral games were painkillers, antidotes for shattered hearts. When thought becomes unbearable because our only thought is “loss,” what better place is there to retreat into than our bodies? To lose all awareness in the blessedly thought-obliterating experience of bodily pain. And the sweet Elysian anodyne of exhaustion.

Every weekday Northwest Ice Rink had a public session from eleven to one, a time that eliminated any school children, and a time that made strangers stand out among us regulars. At one session I notice two men who have with them young boy about ten. The men, who are old enough to be the boy's grandfathers, and wear khaki slacks with open-necked dress shirts under heavy windbreakers. They have good haircuts, round, healthy faces, and the sort of complexions men have when they're familiar with a duck blind or a golf course. The boy, too, wears khakis, and his hair, which is brown, also had a good cut. He looks like the sort of kid who does his

homework without complaining and who remembers to walk the dog. He looks like the sort of kid who should be in school on a weekday.

All three have their own skates . . . hockey skates, not figure, but when they get on the ice they skated to no purpose. They just go round and round without the slightest hint of competitiveness that hockey skates usually summon. The men display no one-upmanship between themselves nor toward the boy. I'm not certain of the boy's name, but he looks like a "Jack." He had attitude of self-reliance and focus that "jack" suggests.

The men are acutely aware, almost solicitous of him. "You okay, Jack?" "You cold, Jack? Want to take a break, Jack?" But Jack doesn't want to take a break. He just keeps going round and round. He isn't a bad skater, but could have improved with some instruction. And judging from his earnest expression, he probably would have taken the instruction to heart, too. But no instruction is forthcoming. Instead, the men gave him almost tender encouragement . . . "You're doing great, Jack. Way to go, Jack. That's the stuff, Jack."

I stop near one of them, and our line of sight triangulates on Jack who's skating toward the hockey game clock. With the helplessness of someone who cannot contain himself any longer, the man suddenly turns toward me.

"His mother just died," he blurts.

"What?"

"His mother, she died . . . just this morning, a few hours ago. His mother, she died."

That of course explains everything: Why Jack wasn't in school on a weekday; why the men were so tender toward him; and why Jack skates round and round. He skates because he's

desperate for speed, for gulp of cold of air to cool his raging heart, for the feel of his blades slicing ice. He skates because he's learned the horrific lesson that these bodies of ours are such puny vessels for the majesty of our spirits. No one, not even an Olympian, can win against Kronos, the Titan who sets the clock saying when our game is over. And when that happens, when the hands stop and we leave the field, who's to say if we skulk home in defeat or wear a laurel wreath? Maybe we're the only ones who can judge how well we competed. If we confounded the odds-makers. If, we assessed our chances accurately, played by the rules, executed as well as could be expected, and didn't let our teammates down.

I look at Jack and realize for him the game has just begun. He has been pitched lower than any child should be, but he has the advantage of time. He alone will determine whether he spends it going round and round, caught in the gyre of loss. Or if whether he finds an inner strength to triumph over his pain and goes on to play the rest of his life with *arête*.

