

# Skating to Seventy

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[Sports Fiction & Essay Contest 2013 \(view all the winners\)](#)

First Prize, Nonfiction

On frigid mornings, before first light, sometimes I stand in a crumbling parking lot and watch slender forms materialize out of the dark. Sleek and insouciant as cats, they drag suitcases toward a low-slung building shimmied into the edge of a Baltimore golf course. The building is an ice rink, and the girls—they almost always are girls—hold a strange admixture of sleepiness and steeliness in their eyes. These are the dedicated skaters, ones with promise and coaches to help them fulfill it.

As they put on their skates they observe a meticulous casualness. No giggly enthusiasm punctures their self-possession. No spontaneity ruptures their serenity. However, their nonchalant affectation is flimsy—just a tad too thin to fully camouflage their twitchy craving. Despite having clear skin, teeth like odes to white alignment and limbs as supple as green willows, each and every one is an addict. Their drug of choice is speed. Only speed's rush can narcotize them to whatever they imagine is troubling their young lives.

On the ice, they enter a demi-dimension of being. Arms outstretched, tummies tucked, they command not only their bodies, but the ice and air over and through which their bodies move. Unfettered from footsteps, they find grace. And undistracted by thought, they experience hyper-awareness. For the truly superior ones, time slows, sound fades, and sight blurs. All that exists is existence. Nothing else can compare. Encased in a bubble of speed, they rotate their arms, set their shoulders and shift their center of gravity. While hurtling at twenty, thirty miles an hour, they adjust their bodies with the unhurried elegance of a geisha.

No wonder these girls conduct themselves with such calm self-assurance: they have mastered the theory of relativity. In fact, they embody it. Traveling over a treacherous and mercilessly hard surface, they express the co-dependency of speed and time. The greater their speed, the greater the distance they'll travel, and the greater time they'll have to ready their limbs to spin or fly.

Too old to be regarded even as an oddity, to them I am less than invisible. And this presents a problem: skating's protocols decree that lesser skaters give way to better ones—a protocol putting the responsibility for accident avoidance on whomever's weakest. It's a protocol that fixes me at the ice's edge, nearest the Plexiglas scuffed by hockey pucks. There, I go round and round, caught in the gyre of age and loss. Some of these girls were toddlers, others were not even born, the year I got my current skates, a gift from my husband the Christmas before my mother died. Now she is dead. And he is too. And still I spend my time on a sport at which I never was any good, circling round and round at the ice's edge, careful not to get my blade caught in the barrier, careful, too, not to get swept into the asteroid belt of young skaters. And most of all, careful, to avoid the empty center that sometimes draws a young girl with such force she'll spin herself into near oblivion. I watch as her spin loses momentum, slows, and then stops. And she throws up her arms in triumph, while her expression looks slightly confused, as if she's asking herself, What have I done? Where have I gone?

I could tell her. I could say to her, "Oh, Sweetie, don't you know? You answered the siren song

of speed? Years ago, I heard it too. Old and nearly broken now, I sometimes hear it still. Listen."

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On summer Sunday mornings, sixty years ago, here's what my mother did: Get up before dawn; dress my sisters and me; hustle us and our father into our second-hand Plymouth for seven o'clock Mass; pray; tell my father what to buy at the bakery; make a three-course breakfast; wash the dishes; dry the dishes; pack a picnic lunch, pack a beach bag; put a roast into the oven to slow cook for dinner for after we came home from the beach.

I grew up in Bridgeport, Connecticut, a gritty, industrial city draped by a string of beautiful beaches. Once we were there, my mother would snap us into bathing caps, wipe sand off the blanket, wrap us in towels, wipe sand off the blanket, hand out sandwiches, wipe sand off the blanket, dole out peaches, wipe sand off the blanket, pour drinks, wipe sand off the blanket. Sometimes, she'd stand at the shoreline and watch my father's arms slicing the chill Long Island Sound like the dorsal fins of sharks. Her own swimming was limited to the dog paddle—she preferred her water frozen.

"I used to skate. I was good at it." I remember her on winter nights, another dinner, another day done, as she talked to her reflected self in the little window over her sink while she washed the dishes. "I used to skate. All day, I stood all day at GE. They never let us sit on the assembly line. Then, I'd walk home so I wouldn't spend my bus fare. It would be pitch dark and so cold. You wouldn't believe how cold. But, still, I'd go skating. I was good at it...I could do figure-eights." In a second her voice could soar to a screech, but when she spoke to her reflection framed by frilled curtains and the African violets on little shelves, it flowed rich as dark chocolate. "Some boy would take your hand. You wouldn't say anything. You'd just skate. You wouldn't talk. You'd just skate together."

Her sink was where she was the afternoon I got my first skates. The little light over her sulfurous and rare—two large fluorescent tubes in the ceiling's center usually lit our kitchen. She and I were alone—a sign it was a Saturday—my sisters somewhere. Maybe a matinee at the Hyway Theater. Maybe I wasn't with them because I had broken my eyeglasses again, and couldn't pay for a movie until my father had deducted enough from my allowance week after week to pay for new ones. If I was eleven, my mother was forty-two. A wife for twenty years, her life hadn't gotten any easier. Within three years in her late thirties, I had had polio, my younger sister had been born and my grandmother had suffered a crippling stroke, a confluence of worry and responsibility that had turned my mother's hair gray—a change that actually enhanced her dark eyes, but which she experienced as another betrayal, the promise of marriage, motherhood and finally her own youthful body all having turned against her.

Our house—two bedrooms, kitchen and living room—was heated by a coal furnace whose ashes my father tossed on our icy back stairs. Surely I heard footsteps grinding them underfoot, or at least a knock at the door, but, no, I remember none of that. I only remember my Uncle Leo standing by the door. And stiff-armed as a boy handing back a failing report card, he held out a pair of ice skates. White boots. Stacked heels. Silver blades. Second-hand from my cousin Carolyn. But beautiful. Very, very beautiful.

"Patsy," my good-hearted uncle blurted. "Patsy...I brung skates for Patsy."

My mother's lips and eyes narrowed—she didn't like surprises, especially ones pertaining to me, especially good ones. Something good happening to me unsettled her fixed constellations where my assigned role was to play the minor star to my brilliant sisters. In her own family she had been pinched and outshone by sisters on either side as I was in ours. And since she didn't like her life or herself very much and I was the daughter most like her, I was the object of her self-loathing. By the time I was eleven I was haunted by a chronic disconnect between being told she loved me, and what I experienced. And that long ago Saturday afternoon what I was experiencing was her unhappiness about my getting something my sisters weren't. At least, that's what I thought then. Almost sixty years later, I'm not so certain. Now I think maybe my mother's features contracted because she saw too much of herself in me and she knew I had listened too well... *"Some boy would take your hand."*

"You sure they won't fit Sally, Leo?"

From across the kitchen, my father's younger brother looked at her the way a brother sometimes does at the spouse of a sibling, and sees something utterly alien and confounding—an unthinkable mate for the fruit of the common womb. "No. They're for Patsy."

"Can I try them on, Mom?"

"Just one, Patsy. Just try one. If that fits, the other will, too. It's almost three o'clock. You have to get to confession."

"Two, Clara...she needs to try on two," Leo said.

And so nearly six decades of balancing on slender blades began for me. As soon as I slipped my feet into those high, white boots, I felt transformed. I felt I could see without eyeglasses and have curly hair without a permanent. I felt I could have what Cinderella had when she slipped her feet into her glass slippers. I felt I could have transformation.

"Stay on the rug by the sink, Patsy. Those blades'll cut through the linoleum. They'll cut right through."

But on that long ago dreary Saturday afternoon, I had to get off the rug by the sink—I just had to. I had heard her siren song, and tottering around her kitchen I took it for the anthem of my adolescence—I had to see how far I could go.

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The first time I skated was with my friend, Sharon Ryan. Over the long Connecticut winter, the underlying water that ice needs to replenish itself had been used up by the little pond in back of the junior high where Sharon's father had driven us. So the ice had grown brittle and hollow, and sounded womby beneath our blades. Plus, it was lumpy and pierced with withered weeds, like hair on a hag's chin. I didn't care. In Carolyn's cast-off skates, I experienced something I never had before. Something playful, but not quite play. An utterly novel sensation of movement. I experienced a different dimension of knowing my body. A radical awareness of my self in space.

Ever since having had polio, I had lived with an almost complete absence of bodily awareness. I regarded my body as something outside of my self. Body couldn't keep up with the others my age. Body had a severely astigmatic left eye, a real handicap for someone who wrote left-handed. And Body had a left leg an inch shorter than its right. In many ways, Body was a flawed vessel for my real, inner life. But that late winter afternoon, in those second-hand skates, on that dried up ice I felt a dawning reconciliation between Body and me. A melding of our rhythms. A fresh embrace.

Other than that once with Sharon, I don't remember skating with anyone except years later with my sister Sally. I was already in college by then, and we were skating at night—Sally and her fiancé staying just beyond the light of the bonfire—*Some boy would take your hand*. Maybe between that afternoon with Sharon and that night with Sally I did skate with other people. But I don't remember doing so. I only remember skating alone. Sunday afternoons, riding my bike four miles to a pond in neighboring Stratford, then keeping one eye on the lowering sun, so I'd peddle home before dark. While my high school classmates were going to the movies together, or bowling, or simply growing up, I was putting my polio-stunted feet into hand-me-down skates and going round and round among a throng of strangers.

Maybe my body was trying to overcome the trauma of polio. Or maybe I was answering the siren song I'd heard from my mother and was enthralled by the possibility of slicing the ice with a boy. Caught by the promise of sweet synchronicity. In their hearts all skaters are Salomé. Among sports, few have self-display as an essential component like skating does. Other athletes execute, a skater must execute beautifully. The very tools she needs for balance, her outstretched arms and legs, accentuate her body's lines. The result is a dimension of exhibitionism beyond balletic grace. Elusive, a skater bewitches; emotive, she tempts.

Clumping over rough ice in Stratford's Longbrook Park, I felt I was only a pond-length away of some boy taking my hand. I almost could see his silvery breath, feel his hot hand through my glove. By the end of high school I hadn't found him, so I took my skates to where the boys were. I took my skates to Yale.

While our parents had insisted that my sisters and I have the benefit of college, for themselves higher education was foreign territory. They knew nothing about course loads, credits or majors. In fact, even in high school I wouldn't have thought of discussing those matters with them. My mother had never gone beyond the eighth grade, and my father was too busy supporting us. Both my sisters had been brilliant, but as a student I struggled. Chafed on either side by them, weighed down by guilt that I couldn't pay for college with scholarships as Sally had, I overburdened myself by trying to work and go to school.

For the first two years of college I rode the train every morning from Bridgeport to Albertus Magnus College in New Haven and worked weekends, a grueling schedule. Before my junior year began I wrote to the Dean of Students. Did she, I asked, know of any families needing a live-in babysitter—paying to board in a dorm was out of the question. The dean found a family whose father was a professor at Yale Medical School, and he and his wife had four children under ten years old. The night my father drove me to live with them, I took my clothes, my bike and my skates. And then on Sunday afternoons, when I should have been studying, I would go to the public sessions at the Yale hockey rink. In those pre-coed days, what was I thinking?

That some Yale man, for whose private enjoyment the rink had been built in the first place, would be skating at a public session? That he would be going round and round among all the mothers and their tumbling children?

By April that year I was spinning out of control: I was dating two boys, each so exciting that I was turning myself inside out for them; Mrs. Greenspan wasn't happy about the way I was taking care of her children; and my grades were abysmal. When I got a D on my midterm in American Literature, my mind cracked.

It was a spring afternoon, beautiful with dogwood and old oaks sprouting new green. Sister Vincenza had returned our tests at the start of class, and I could hear her lecture on Henry James, but nothing registered. Her voice sounded distant and uninflected. At the end of class I walked across the campus. But everything looked exaggerated and cartoonish. Absurd. The other girls in their spring skirts seemed over-bright and sharp-edged. I felt detached from them and disengaged from my own mind. With every step, I was uncoupling from my self. Eventually I found my way to the school nurse. But when I tried to tell her what was wrong my voice sounded as though it was coming from someone sitting like a second head on my shoulder. Someone whose only awareness was the dimming light of her retracting self.

"Break down," I heard the nurse tell the dean of students over the phone. "Patricia has had a break down."

Eventually, my parents came and took me back to Bridgeport along with my bike and skates. And the college allowed me to take my final exams later that summer. I even managed to graduate the next year with my class.

Years later I would hear "break down" said about skates that are beginning to deteriorate. But that would be decades into my future, decades after the August Sunday afternoon I left my skates behind in Bridgeport and took a southbound train to be near where Sally and her husband were living and a job teaching in Baltimore.

A week later, the very next Sunday, a fellow teacher called me at the YWCA where I was staying. Would I, he asked, want to go out?

We went to the zoo. We watched the penguins. We went up a little hill. I slipped. He reached out his hand. I took it. I didn't want to let go.

For forty-one years I didn't want to let go.

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Bill and I were married in 1966, two years before the apocalypse hit. In 1968 America convulsed. In a seizure of self-destruction, it assassinated its leaders, erupted into riots, and burned its cities. Baltimore, the last to ignite, blazed the fiercest.

My reaction was to bury myself beneath two small children and a façade of desperate domesticity. But underneath I was burning, too. A low flame of frustration that threatened to ignite into full fury at any moment.

I asked my mother to bring my skates down from Connecticut—she never asked why, never said that a young mother had better ways to spend her time. Maybe she thought that with so much upheaval, balancing on silver blades wasn't such a bad thing. Or maybe she remembered her own sad reflection in the dark window over her sink—*I was good at it...I could do figure-eights*—and didn't want me to live my life sustained on a recollected girlhood.

But her own pattern of dutiful self-denial had been too deeply engrained in me to let me give full vent to skating's siren song. I hung Carolyn's old skates on a nail in our leaky basement's knotty pine paneling and sometimes would see my reflection in them as I passed with a load of laundry. Four, maybe five times a winter I would take them down and drive straight past an indoor rink five minutes from our house—too expensive—and go halfway across Baltimore to the temporary rink set up in a municipal parking lot. There, I'd go round and round, with all the other Sunday duffers, always thinking I looked better than I did, always chasing the sport's promise and not the sport itself.

When I turned forty I gave myself the present of "adult beginners" lessons at the nearby indoor rink. I replaced Carolyn's skates with another second-hand pair, and soon after that, on a Sunday afternoon, drove with some friends to get a brand new pair from a Pennsylvania distributor. I had a job in public relations at the University of Maryland by then, and the money I spent on those skates was money I had earned, but, still, they were not cheap. And neither were the lessons nor the ice time I spent to practice—Bill never said a word.

Despite growing up in Maryland's cold Appalachian panhandle, he had never even skied, much less skated. "Come with me," I'd beg. But he'd always say no. Then, one night, he gave in and came with me. It was worst than disastrous. He couldn't make it around the rink. Not even once. He started to crawl. On the ice. I remember him looking up at me with pure loathing. "I told you I didn't want to do it. Why didn't you listen to me?" Eventually a guard helped him up and he was able to cling to the barrier until he reached the exit.

Now, I wonder about what else I didn't hear him say, what else I just discounted, didn't take seriously. And I wonder, too, what he thought all those times I went skating alone.

Every Tuesday night and Sunday morning, and sometimes Saturday nights, I'd be under the rink's tacky disco ball, telling myself it was just a matter of practice before I could defy the pull of gravity and the drag of time. Our boys went to high school, and then college, but I was still under the disco ball. And Bill was home alone waiting for me.

For my fiftieth birthday, he bought me a scribe, a device resembling a giant protractor that's used to etch figures onto the ice. Over and over the skater traces the figure's pattern until it's so firmly impressed into her muscle memory she can render it perfectly without the benefit of the inscribed pattern. Each skater is assigned a "patch" of ice to practice on. At the rink near where we lived, "patch" sessions were held at seven o'clock on Saturday mornings.

I never got past the most basic figures, but still, every Saturday, I'd be among the handful of regulars. I liked the monastic quiet, the fresh, frozen unblemished surface, the sharp, ozonic scent of the ice. And I liked the way tracing my pattern cleared my mind.

Our boys graduated from college, moved out on their own, and Bill and I sold the little house by the rink for another a little farther away. Still, every Saturday I'd get up to practice tracing a pattern on a patch of ice.

One Friday night as I was setting the alarm, Bill said, "I'll go with you. We can go out for breakfast afterwards." And so it began, a shared skating experience I never had anticipated. How many years did we have of that regular Saturday routine?...seven?...eight?

In winter, Venus low on the horizon, the coffee Bill had made for me warming my hands through my gloves. In spring, driving past Pimlico Racetrack, the thoroughbreds pounding out of the mist. Then Bill ducking out to Starbucks...and me thirty minutes later looking up from the ice and seeing him waiting on a paint-pocked bench. And then the two of us went to the tucked-away café for breakfast, and the grocery store. And finally, home, stashing my skates in the coat closet, unpacking the food...nearly eleven by then, another Saturday well begun.

To be sure, there were some horrible tumbles those years. Sally died. Then my father. Then Bill's brother. Then Bill had his first bout of cancer. Then my mother died. But those horrors actually made us closer. We grasped each other's hands and hung on until things settled down. We experienced those tragedies as if he and I were encased in an assumptive bubble of immunity that enabled us to play our roles as the strong ones, the ones to hold out a hand for others to cling to.

"You looked like you were having fun," Bill said one Saturday when I got off the ice. And I had had fun. Despite those devastating losses, we both were having fun. When we weren't taking care of a crisis, he and I were taking art classes, traveling, and enjoying the comfort of our Saturday routine.

But we were living like passengers on the first-class deck. Innocent of the fact that fate had already snapped an iceberg off a distant glacier and sent it bobbing in our direction.

And then it hit. Like a blade through the heart, it hit. An April Saturday, skating over, we were pulling away from the rink and Bill dropped "I don't feel like going out for breakfast." Since early March he'd been coughing and going to the doctor, trying different remedies, but nothing was working.

The next Saturday he couldn't get out of bed.

So, I went skating alone. Because I needed to follow my pattern.

Because I was losing my balance. Because I sensed my world was cracking. Because there was no cure for his type of lung cancer.

Caregivers are given all sorts of advice, most of it useless, but one bit I did try to follow was "Don't let them see you cry. It will only make them feel worse." Now, looking back at that time between his diagnosis and death, I'm not certain if following that advice didn't turn our last year together into a cartoon of cheerfulness. I would slap a brittle smile on my face and Bill would be beside me going to the rink, first with his oxygen tank. Then without. Then with it again. Those old familiar Saturday patterns, they gave us some comfort and enough strength to

conjure the false cheer needed to get through a another week of increasingly futile chemo treatments. But maybe the toll exacted by putting on our happy faces was too high. Maybe our energy would have been better spent living more honestly.

At the end of a Saturday session, someone slipped Frances Black's "All the Lies That You Told Me" into the DVD player and my brittle, cheerful façade cracked. Sobbing I huddled on the bleachers out of Bill's sight until I could wipe my eyes, slap my smile back on and go to him. But the truth is I wanted him to see me cry. I wanted him to comfort me. I wanted him to just stop dying and hold me. Forever.

The Thursday before Easter I skated at a mid-morning public session, and when I was through he said he wanted to go to lunch. "At Petite Louis. Let's go to Petite Louis," naming a tony bistro in an old-money Baltimore neighborhood. But my shirt was frayed and my jacket spotted. I was just about to say that I wasn't dressed for Petite Louis, when some guiding spirit pressed its finger against my lips and I said "Okay."

I remember everything: that Petite Louis was noisy. And that the woman next to us had paired a seed pearl necklace with bib overalls. And that afterwards Bill and I went to a toy store to buy a birthday present for our grandson Tommy. And that Bill couldn't get out of the car.

And that the next day instead of going to Tommy's party, we went to the hospital because Bill couldn't breathe. And that it was Good Friday, so the oncology unit was closed. And we had to wait in the regular emergency room area. And that the fluid in Bill's lungs was thicker than it had been the time before.

And that he and I dropped our façades of cheerfulness and spoke about what needed to be said. Until Bill spoke the one word that said everything. "Cremation."

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The fount of figure skating's beguiling grace is absence. A depression forged into a blade by some long-forgotten smithy is the source of skating's possibilities. Until that anonymous smithy created a blade with a groove running down its center, skaters had been limited to the rigid linearity of medieval hunters who tied reindeer bones to their boots and stalked their prey down frozen lakes. But once a groove was impressed into blades, skaters were liberated to swoop and fly. In essence, absence made grace on ice visible.

Bordering the groove are the blade's edges. Blades are less than a quarter of an inch wide, but edges are a fraction of that. Knife-thin, edges are what a skater actually balances on. There are four in all: one edge on the inside of the groove, one on the outside—two for each foot. The groove is called a hollow, and it presents the skater with a conundrum. Ice is hard and slicing it dulls her blade's edges. So she must decide what she wants: security or speed. Skilled sharpeners always ask a skater how deep she wants her hollow, because, just as a deep valley is bordered by high mountains, a deep hollow will have edges with more surface area, just have high mountains do. More surface area cuts the ice deeply and gives the skater more security. But more surface also presents the ice with more area to resist. And more resistance means less speed. The issue here is millimeters of metal.

Should it stay? Or should it go? Everything—medals, careers, fame—can depend on how much is ground away.

On what isn't.

To spend years and years on as unforgiving an element as ice, raises the questions of when does dedication become obsession? And when does obsession become lunacy? To depend on what isn't. To spin your body though space like a planet without a centering sun. To make your mortal body the instrument of higher-order physics, when is the line between normalcy and madness crossed?

Three months after Bill died the rink he and I drove to all those Saturday mornings closed its doors for good. Closing it made sense: the place was hopelessly shabby and deteriorated. Plus, the people who had run it had grown old. So had I.

I was sixty-five. My skating would never improve. I could have broken my neck. Hanging up my skates would have been perfectly reasonable.

But, of course, I wasn't perfectly reasonable. I wasn't even marginally sane. That first summer and for a long time afterwards I cowered in my hollow. For me nothing existed but the existence of absence. I wanted to lay where I'd fallen and offer my wrist to a passing blade—lunacy.

For the survivor, the death of husband or wife is more than the death of a spouse. Gone, too, is the life lived with that spouse, the rhythms fixing the set-pattern of your days, the unspoken regularities of your entwined lives, the silent affirmations of your shared assumptions. All are gone. As you circle through your days your hands may reach out, but your fingertips will touch nothing. And that nothing will be more real than anything.

In the first months after Bill died nothing felt as it had before. Familiar foods suddenly had strange flavors. Noise couldn't find its appropriate register. My reflection in the mirror belonged to someone else, someone whose face was collapsing downward like a slow avalanche of flesh, its upper lip protruding over its lower, its chin retracting. I moved without purchase in reality. Familiar places, *our* places, were too painful to revisit. And new places were too threatening.

The old rink's closing was just another loss. I have no memory of driving home from it for the last time. Maybe there was no "last time". Maybe, I simply didn't go again, but always thought I would. Nor do I know how long my skate bag sat in my coat closet. I can't even say why I eventually took it out and began driving to the other side of Baltimore to the rink shimmied into the edge of a golf course. Maybe I hoped skating's quintessential rhythm would reset the pace of my heart. Or that I'd regain my balance. Or get out of my hollow.

Skating is fundamentally curvilinear. Even when she's simply moving forward, a skater will etch the ice with outwardly arcing lines resembling the fronds of a fern. If she's doing it correctly a forward-stroking skater crosses her hollow with every step she takes. Her feet may look like she's stepping, but she's actually pushing—her momentum comes from the foot she's not skating on.

Skating forward properly—forward stroking in skating parlance—is one of the first things a skater learns. Balanced on her right outside edge, she pushes with her left inside edge. To change feet and skate on her left outside edge, she must shift her center of gravity. She must cross the hollow of her right blade in order to push with that blade's inside edge. In essence, her body bridges the absence in her blade. Good skaters perform this calculus at thirty miles an hour on a surface as hard as plaster and as slick as greased steel. And they look beautiful doing it.

Back when I skated at my old rink, I began and ended my sessions with forward stroking—stroking at the session's end always feeling more relaxed and confident than it had at the beginning. Once, as I was getting off the ice, a woman my age remarked, "You look so good...You looked so still." I could have kissed her.

But when I started at the new rink, even the fundamental of forward stroking had deserted me. The human body moves by virtue of its proprioceptive nerves that detect the movement of muscles and joints at the subconscious level, but my subconscious was entombed in my consciousness of loss. In my skates the nerves of my soles sputtered with misfired electric intentions, but nothing fired back. Having no sense of who I was, I had no sense of where I was. Mind and body were in free fall.

With my left toepick, I'd pump myself as if my right skate were a scooter. Three, four times, maybe more I'd pump around the rink, not caring how I looked, but knowing, too, that in the hierarchy of loss, dignity isn't even the medal round.

But I kept going back. Sometimes to the midday public sessions. Sometimes to the early morning free style ones, where I'd see the young skaters materialize out of the mist. And, eventually, in a year, maybe more—my neural pathways wakened to the task of keeping me upright, and I could stroke around the rink, never gracefully, certainly never quickly, but with momentum enough to keep my balance. And my shadow on the ice began looking less hunched. And in the Plexiglas protecting the bleachers, my outstretched arms looked less like the broken wings of an injured seagull.

This year, I've been working on regaining my back outside edges. Nearly seventy, now, it's scary to move backwards while balanced on an edge as thin as a knife's. Like a diviner I peer at my tracings, trying to find what I've done, where I've been. But my tracings are so erratic they present no discernible pattern. I console myself with credit for being on the ice at all. For trying to find a new center of gravity. For trying to regain my edge.

To support a skater's ankles, skating boots are stitched with multiple layers of leather and padding. And this year I've noticed that stitching in mine is beginning to come apart—"break down" in skating parlance—the same term that kind nurse used about me so many years ago. It seems impossible that almost a whole lifetime has slipped away since that afternoon. But now, I realize that time has been to me what I am to the young, insouciant skaters: invisible. Unseen, time slipped past me without my so much as feeling its hot breath on my cheek. After a few short years, life becomes a matter of breaking down. The best we can hope to do is slow the process. And to pray that it's kind to us.

It's time for my skates to break down. They were gift to me from Bill the Christmas before my mother died, which makes them thirteen years old. I could put them away without feeling pierced by the sense of betrayal I experience when I put away other tokens more clearly sprung from our entwined lives—albums from our trips, pictures from our painting classes.

Skating was always my thing, not ours. And if I put my skates away, the regret I'll feel will be for the time I spent on a sport for which I have no talent. Time I might have spent otherwise.

On the other hand, maybe I'll just buy myself one more new pair.

Foolish?...yes, but at seventy certainly some indulgences are permitted. The leathery smell of new bright white boots alone can be worth the price. If I do buy them, given my age and how little my skating will demand of them, those skates will be in fine shape, practically new, whenever I leave the ice for good.

Maybe they'll find their way to some little girl who will think they're beautiful. Who, as soon as she puts them on, will feel herself transformed. Will find her balance. Her center of gravity. Her inner eagle. Arms outstretched, head high, tummy tucked, she'll move over the ice like an angel.

And wherever I am, I'll reach out my hand. And feel the warm touch of grace. The grasp of heavenly motion.