

I BROKE IT ROLLERSKATING

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When I broke my ankle in three places, I was gliding. Down totem from backflip and perfect pitch is reverse roller skating. On that night I had just mastered it. My daughter goaded me, herself a rolling princess of matchless caution. *You're doing it, Daddy* made me fearless. I played down my backwards grace with some of the fastest forward ever. Forty years of skating hummed the ball bearings. No longer the kid who couldn't turn enough to make my own father smile, I could put one careless leg across the other. I thought my wife would speed up for my hand. The way I was going. Into a spin. A full stop. A collapse of neurons and tibia snap. Consciousness slithers into this moment. When it arrives, eternity is waiting. A troll under a bridge, his warted hands out for coin or story. For months I will be asked for a cast explanation. Prisoner of the cast — to the telling of its origin. A cast is like a baby. It confers license to others, their Gestapo questions probing for your papers. Others can be so fast forward. Bones, not so much. This one will take five screws and three months of raise it higher on the pillows, watch for that crack in the sidewalk, another crotch bath on the toilet, and how many pills has it been? The worst will be the omnipresence of this moment. It will never really go away this singular looping, muted screaming, praying and aching that is the other side of pain, its terrifying locus of desire. One learns in the supposed kindnesses of other people's questions not to remember it too vividly. Nothing is so keen. The torturous weight of the skates. No position for the foot that does not explode. The salted dust of the rink. That knot of blemished maplewood usually seen in

glorious passing, now a curb for lips. My wife's panicked eyes disappearing with my whisper for an ambulance. The place where my hands clutch grimy pools of sweat in the middle of this old Vermont rink, beneath that old Vermont lattice of sad ceiling fixtures, a wood pile never noticed, cobwebs on the disco ball and strobes, those ancient pipes in overalls of rust, nails studding the roof in sequins, each glimmer a reminder that ambulances take a while out here — a while of mental, endless, muscled struggle with the devil gnawing my foot. If only I could get a better vantage on it, beyond this supine version of myself. But that way too is barbed. That way stands my daughter, pale and agape, trying desperately to reconcile a head full of cartoons with this new caricature. When the paramedics finally arrive, she asks them if her Daddy is going to die. I hold her hand, and as they raise me up I prepare my story.