Brink & Portal

In our boyhood, my brother and I would trek out to a small pond about a quarter mile from the back door of our foreclosing ranch house in Apple River, Illinois. It was the same back door that we used to count our steps to the pond from and it was the same back door that was covered in the sobering scratch marks of a dog that had died when my brother was three and before I was born. My dad would often say that my mother loved that dog more than she loved him. He would recount that she was more than broken up when it died which is a reason why, I think, she decided to have me. I remember my brother, who had a perfect memory from a very young age, speaking of a more cheerful woman than the one who would sit at the writing desk in our living room painting dolls all afternoon. He spoke of more cheerful dolls, too.

The pond that my brother died in was a five-minute walk from the back door that still had a big plastic flap in the bottom of it for Scotch to come in and out. My parents never mentioned getting rid of it, even though it'd been years since mud and paw prints had been tracked in through the little portal. If you were walking to the pond from that door it would take you five minutes, but if you had young legs that liked to sprint and you knew where to step (and which roots along the way were gnarled up to trip-level) you could make it in just under two. On the day that my brother died, I made it in just under two.

The winter that saw me turn nine brought the biting, icy weather that made our little pond a little rink. The simple square window in the back door of that long-gone home frosted over a smidge more each morning, the tendrils of the Illinois winter slowly wrapping around Apple River. In this way the ice crept closer to window-center each day and when the circumference of the dewy frost reached a Sharpie circle my mother had drawn in the dead of a winter long ago,

we knew that the pond was frozen over and it would be worth it to expend our sparse winter calories to make the trip out there. The day would come and in the unique ecstasy of a boy's sense of adventure we pulled on old boots and mismatched gloves, one of us always getting stuck with an orange mitten. We trudged through knee-deep snow with our skates dangling around our necks while carrying boy-sized shovels in our boy-sized hands. Our stomachs would be sticky and warm, full of Chef-Boyardee Ravioli, buttered white bread and whole milk – the staple 'something-that'll-stick-to-your-ribs' meal that my mother used to make.

The last tree along the skinny path that our youth had blazed so many seasons ago had a piece of two-by-four nailed into it. The two-by-four was a scrap from my father's attempt to build a deck beneath our back door to replace the worn concrete steps. It was a scrap from before my parents had run out of the money, sweat and time that building a deck necessitated. The two-by-four said "KEEP OUT!" in the handwriting of my brother at age ten. At that time, he had started writing his big E's like backwards threes and I thought that was just about the coolest thing somebody could do with a big E. I would practice drawing them over and over on the insides of my bed posts until I thought I'd got them just right – until mimicry became simulacrum. When my brother saw my bedpost one night after asking why I was keeping the light on, he called me dumb and soon after went back to writing his big E's like everybody else – rigid and unrelenting in their definition.

We'd have to shovel the snow away for the better part of a day before the pond became our rink. And even though there was only a little light left in the sky over Apple River by the time we'd finish shoveling and even though what little light was left was divvied up further still into little shards by the spidering dead branches above us, we'd squeeze in a first skate anyway and end up walking back when the little light had left us entirely. We'd trudge through black-tar-

dark and I'd hold onto my brother's shoulders, both of us stumbling over those now-hidden roots that were gnarled up to trip-level beneath the snow. Each of us giggling and yelling 'Boo!' while the shouts of my mother from the back door would grow louder and closer, calling us home.

We sprinted out to the pond from my back door and it's fumbling half-porch for the last time at the end of the summer that saw my brother turn thirteen. My mother would sometimes stand behind that little window of the door watching us, her stringy profile framed by the Sharpie circle. You could always tell when she was watching even when the only thing you could think of was the next step in your sprint and the wounded pride that would come with a trip. This day, my mother watched us as my brother's growing legs pulled him faster than I could go. My brother was getting bigger – much bigger than the three-years bigger that he had been since I'd been born and he was pulling away from me. There wasn't much I could do but tag along with my stumpy ten-year old legs and watch him as he grew faster every day. By the time September had rolled in with its last throws of the humid everdamp heat he could make it to the pond seven seconds faster than I could. Despite the fact that I'd made it there in just under two minutes that day, he let me know that it was still a full seven seconds slower than his time.

We stripped and jumped in the almost-fall water that still lingered with summerwarmth. My brother made fun of me for not having any hair on my body and I shoved myself into our muddy make-believe sea, trying to hide my bareness, slowly learning that shame is born of others and not ourselves. As I sat in that pond I listened to my brother talk of football. Over and over he spoke of football tryouts in a few weeks' time. He had started watching the Bears games with my dad the year before and after a touchdown or a field goal my father would clap him on the back, then let him have a pull from one of his Miller Lite cans - cans that had begun to accent much of the property that year. When I asked for some my mother would stop painting her doll

and intervene on behalf of my youth and my father would give me a “Sorry, kid” shrug followed by a “Yeah, *kid*” grin from my brother. Thus our trench grew and the divide between us stretched away from me. Clearing that trench required longer legs, stronger legs… not the legs of my ten-year old self.

The water was six-feet deep at the center and grew steadily out to just one foot at the perimeter where it mixed with tall grass and sloped into the surrounding earth. We would sprint from ten or twenty feet inside our path and see how far we could jump, trying to reach the center and beyond the center. One of those branches that divvied up the gunmetal sky of Apple River had begun to hang lower in recent years so as September slowly bore down the summer months into snapcold autumn we would make a game of stripping this dangling branch of its fiery remainders.

It was over before I knew that anything, let alone a life, could end so quickly. To me then, lives were long, intricate, sprawling things whose ends were unimaginable and unknowable, cryptic and indecipherable. Lives were palatial tapestries in India. It was later that I learned that lives are the mismatched aisles of clothing hanging at the Goodwill. It was later that I came to know that crossing the brink between life and death was no more than passing through a back door or a dog flap.

My brother ran. My brother leapt and reached for the branch, he grabbed hold of it and it broke. He tumbled into the water awkwardly and I laughed. He didn’t come back up when he was supposed to come back up. My memory has laminated these moments into one and when I sink myself back into that muddy pond water, into the mushy pale purple of my mind, I see it all as an instant – not a series of flickering seconds. A flash in a pan, over before you knew it had begun. My instinctual laughter at his blunder sputtered into confusion and tentative worry. I

remember being cautious not to give into a prank that he might have been playing. Then I thought that I wouldn't be much of a brother if I didn't jump in and that was a sound enough reason if he was messing with me. And so I jumped in. I dove down and found him sitting slumped, as if he was trying to touch his toes. My hands grabbed him under his broadening shoulders, I felt his sprouting underarm hair on my wrists and a twang of jealousy pinballed through me. When I pulled him he was completely slack and I knew then that he probably wasn't messing around. I hauled him all the way to the tree that had our "KEEP OUT!" signed nailed into it and I yelled his empty name into his empty ears. When was he going to open his eyes and laugh at me? Make me feel like older brothers make younger brothers feel for no reason? Make me sulk into the arms of my mother because I was still a child and he wasn't yet a man who could understand that simple fact. I hit him in the chest with my fist. I tickled his armpit. I wiped the shit-colored mud from his face with a mismatched sock. My tears poured out of me for fear of my father and of my mother. I stood and I ran. I ran as fast as I ever had to the backdoor of our little, broken home and it's fumbling half-porch, through that brink that had defined the boundary of adventure and safety, of brotherhood and family and into a portal that tore the definitions of all of those things down faster than the bank did our foreclosing ranch house in Apple River, Illinois.