

EIGHT

I ski along the edges of a field behind the American Legion Hall, Stuart Green Post. On the road beyond, cars whiz by, some headed off this Maine peninsula where I live, most of them going toward Lubec, the easternmost town in the contiguous U.S. Men in plaid wool jackets return from the hunt in pickup trucks, guns stowed on the racks behind their heads. In station wagons and minivans, women loosen winter coats, look in rearview mirrors at their overheated children, who are locked into safety seats and preemptive naps, their heads almost ninety degrees to their bodies. Here and there some single traveler listens to the local radio station in a beat-up four-door with a dog that thrusts its nose out the window. Every so often kids, packed six and seven into fuel-guzzling hand-me-down cars—Pontiacs, Impalas, Buicks—decide it's too nice a day to be held hostage after lunch in Algebra or History, and anyway one of them just lit up a joint. "Who needs school?" one of them says, as if no one ever asked such a question, certainly, not *their* parents, whose cars they're in now, cars that have been down the same road before. *Cars I've been in before*, I think as they pass. A little past noon; all these people driving by have specific purpose in their coming or going. I'm skiing counterclockwise, against time and obligation and memory, in a field where no one else skis.

It's one of those bright winter days, the kind where a high sun burns in a cloudless sky, the blue somehow cleaner. Light drenches the snow. Skiing helps me focus. Today I grapple with a question, the kind that must be answered to get a grant for writers, *a stupid question*, I think. After all, who really cares *why* I became a writer, or why writing is important to *me*? It's one of those odd coincidences, thinking about this particular question while I'm burning off the nervous energy that both fuels my writing and interrupts it because I can't sit still for very long. And though I resent having to answer this question, even I wonder why I chose writing instead of, say, mathematics or painting. Such a big question, up there with other impossible-to-answer queries. As in, "Why did I land in this century?" Or, "What would my life be like now had I not skipped all those math classes and become a physicist?"

To figure out why I embraced words, I need to clear my head, move my body through one lap after another. If I allow myself to entertain any thought, eventually all thought will disperse and there will be only the snow, the generosity of sunlight reflected off all this white, and the steady movement of my arms and legs. Around and around I'll go. Perhaps I'll even find part of an answer. Or at least today's answer.

The snow is fresh, which means walking to break a trail for the first lap, a good warm-up, but awkward since skis are designed to glide. The snow reaches the tops of my calves and I lift each thigh almost up to my chest to maneuver. Crunching around the field, I try to shed the image of what should win a prize for Best Silly Walk by imagining instead that I'm blazing a path across the arctic tundra. A ludicrous thought, but the word *tundra* pleases me because it suggests a vast emptiness. I want to picture this piece of land as it may have once appeared, not as a field shorn of trees

so long ago that no one alive remembers, but as a forest floor covered in a foot of snow. I can't visualize such a place, as if that kind of large wild is so far removed that it can no longer be imagined. And anyway, I scold myself, centuries ago on the tundra, people didn't ski laps to clear their minds, they skied *to* destinations. Or did they? Why do I always cast seriousness over the ancients, as if they never played, never contemplated questions beyond the practical? Maybe it's because I'm out here to...to do *what*? Harness my nervous energy? Cast seriousness over myself, hoping I'll trip over the answer—as if it had always been there—to a big question? Put off the writing I should be doing? If I'm lucky, the act of skiing will arrest my haphazard thinking, dissolve the mental clutter, allow me to return to my desk and sit there long enough to follow the cat's cradle of loops and lines that an articulated idea makes on the page. Ponder questions for which I have no cogent answers.

The sound of passing vehicles fades as I extend and retract my legs, generate momentum, and concentrate on the push-pull-glide of poles and arms, legs and skis. My breath is audible, the wind crisps my cheeks. It's not really a circle I've made but a rounded-off rectangle whose softened corners oblige me to slow down and reposition my skis in the tracks, and when I lift my feet to do this, I feel ducklike. I ski, it occurs to me, around a misshapen egg of my own creation.

Why *do* I write? It's not as if there's any immediate return or gratification. Only devoutly loving people read my work before it's published. And even when the words make it into print, the audience for literary journals, even the most venerable, are small. This is the art whose requisite solitude alternates between panic and nirvana, an art whose process demands time and energy so disproportionate to its outcome that answering a question as to why one practices it seems superfluous, a waste.

I pass clumps of high, wintered-over grasses. One tall, solitary blade claims my attention; its tip, bent to the ground by the wind, has traced circles in the snow. Perfect circles, not like the odd shape I have carved with my skis. Without a compass or a shape to guide the pencil, the human hand cannot draw a completely round circle; this tall grass is both instrument and center of its own circumferences. I like the stark geometry of the bent blade, how a dormant life might etch concentric perimeters around itself. It's somewhat like the way I ski, my mind enclosed in this ovoid boundary that my body sketched, on skis. Or like writing, only neater.

I set a goal of eight laps. The roundness to that number, its snowman shape, its harmony of double rings please me. Eight laps equals a mile of skiing in the middle of my writing day, just enough to clear my head, distill the frantic thinking that would make me get up and pace if I were inside. *I should be at my desk writing*, I think, but here now is one of the soft corners of my egg-shaped track, and I concentrate on negotiating the slight curve and so let go of that thought. This is only the third lap.

I should be writing. *I am* writing, I snap back. Here on the field, my mind rambles along the edges of a question I'd never really considered. Why did I choose words? Why allow them to seduce me with their complications and messiness? Mathematics might have meant a more ordered life, limned of the austere beauty of numbers. Painting would have provided real color, the vegetable odor of linseed oil or the bright wet smell of gouache. Dance or music would have brought me into the

immediacy of movement, the luxury of harmonics, the never-ending calculus of space and time. I pass that tall blade of grass again, and the very candidness of its angle strikes me as something I should attend to, along with the way it rises then folds, how it bends to the ground with the pressure of nothing but wind. I need to remember this image and its frankness until I can go inside and put my hands on pen and paper. Panic surges in my chest. What if I lose all these thoughts about that blade of grass? How would I reclaim them? I chant internally the words necessary to hold the idea: *grass—angle—circles—frankness*. At the same time, I wrack my brain to remember the name of the poet who said she chose poetry because on any given day she could hold only ten lines in her mind at the same time. I'm about to start the fourth lap, only now I'm not sure if it's the fourth or fifth because I've been repeating those words, *grass—angle—circles—frankness*, and scrunching the envelope of my memory trying to recall a name. Now I've lost count of the laps I've completed.

The shudder of panic subsides as I struggle to identify this next lap as the fourth or fifth. I have a goal after all, eight reasons to be out here, and since I'm pretty solitary and sedentary, my only competition is myself. An image from the film, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, flashes before me: a young man running and breathing hard. I sympathize with his loneliness. Is that why I chose words, because of the loneliness that comes with shaping them? Could I be that melancholic? Or does yearning for solitude—so different from feeling lonely—invite me to keep company with my own mind?

Enough internal chatter! More important right now to calculate laps. I don't want to cheat and say *five* (though I would return to the house sooner if this was lap five), nor do I really want to ski nine laps (*I need to go back to the house*, I think now. *Anyway what does it matter if I do only four laps and quit to write?*). By the time I've come round to the starting point, I realize I'll never know how many laps I really skied today. The point, I remind myself, is to keep going. I call the lap I've just completed number four, and as I head into the fifth, I repeat *this is number five* about thirty times to internalize it.

As I approach the end of the fifth lap, what I've come to call my daily message of clarity appears overhead: two young eagles, and not far behind (but not too close either), three osprey. While their punctuality is a comfort, their arrival twice a day every day since the end of summer always startles me, makes me scramble to look around, as if something momentous and vital, like a lost species, might materialize from a tree or bubble up from the roof of the house. Today I slide to a stop and look up. The raptors fly in wide circles above me, make several passes, then loop back. They're making figure eights. Flying low enough for me to distinguish the white from brown in the mottle of juvenile feathers, slow enough to trace the fierce curve of each beak. I stand here, mouth open, sun hot now on my face, and for an instant I forget how I came to be standing here, though I recall that I was about to enter my sixth circuit around the field.

Several more eight-shaped loops and the birds head toward water, flying above the tall pines and cedars that canopy the path down to the cove. I'm grateful for the gift of eagles and osprey, for their aerial dance, but I'm no clearer than when I started, no closer to answering my question about why I chose writing. Maybe I

should let it go; maybe today's message of clarity is about daring to leave an unanswered question alone. Perhaps writing chose me.

I resume skiing, focus on retracing the contour of a giant, crooked egg I marked in the snow. The sun splinters in the crystals that fly up, and the fluid forward-backward movement of my thighs and arms absorbs me. I finish the sixth lap, glide into the seventh and then the eighth. Around and around on the snow-covered field. I follow my breath as air enters my nose and crackles through the little hairs inside, glides down my trachea into bronchial tubes and alveoli, crosses over to capillaries and moves through arteries until it reaches my heart, which pumps it out to feed my working muscles.

I stop in front of the tall grass. Eight distinct circles surround the single blade now, all different because of shifts in wind speed and velocity that have bent it at varying angles. Some of the grooves are deeper than others, traced and retraced, a sign of persistence, I think. Or is it something else I sense in those repeated, deeper circles? Loneliness? Utility? Resignation? It's none of that. The grass angles to the snow and signs itself there, a primitive act of writing, unbidden and pure and—I'll always wonder about this—unintended. It has fashioned perimeters and moats to enclose itself, a safe narrative in a world of wind that bends grass to the ground.