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TRACKS

This is what I hear: the sounds of water. Tap water rushing out a faucet, ocean water lapping onto shore, lake water stirring, swirling, playing with itself like an only child, river water shooting over rocks and roots. The way a track's thin white lines and the wide spaces in between wrap around the bend before straightening out again, reminds me of how a wave curls into itself and then stretches out across the sand. And in my mind this pattern curves into straights, straights into curves, it goes on and on.

With its circular almost oval form, a running track is designed with ease of motion in mind. It could never be triangular or rectangular or even square. Those shapes, with their hard corners and sharp edges, are cold and dangerous.

I slow down to find the track whenever I drive past a high school. Out airplane windows I notice tracks: a red, black or sometimes even green or blue stamp on the earth. From the sky lane lines, starting lines, and finish lines disappear. And like borders and boundaries I wonder why they're needed.

I visit tracks where my travels take me - big cities, foreign countries, small towns . . . home. I go there and sit and stare. I go there to remember. And for a time I'm soothed by the steadiness and the rhythms of those before me putting in their laps. Making circles themselves: one foot then the other rising off the ground, led by the heel, arcing over the ankle of the other, and gently touching down before rising again. Like a cyclist pedalling his feet. Loop after loop, up and down, round and round.

When I'm out running myself circles surround me; circles appear from everywhere. The turns I make are soft and round. With my ups and downs I trace semi-circles above ground. My body, my Self, tumbling, falling, catching itself, just rolling along. My fingers softly cup a scoop of air. My eyes open before me the course I'll coil. And my legs, their cylindrical joints - ankle, knee, hip - revolve around their constant path.

I see more circles. Blood cells carrying oxygen to working muscles. My open mouth breathing in. My lungs filling with air: inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. Each breath a round, a beat, a journey. Like a squeezebox filling and emptying, opening and closing, or a second hand sweeping round a clock's face, or maybe a spinning top, or a wild dancer gyrating in my dreams. My dreams . . .

I'm learning the formula to measure a circle's circumference in Mr. McKay's 10th grade geometry class. I'm rolling myself dizzy down the Moran's front lawn with Steven Moran and his little sister Elizabeth. It's my first communion and I'm wearing white gloves, a blazer, and gray flannel pants. The thin white wafer Father McCarthy places on my tongue dissolves before I detect a flavor. I'm climbing so high on the swing in our backyard that I imagine how it would feel to rotate completely around, one full revolution, but I get scared and stop pumping my legs.

Or I'm back in Boston or somewhere else taking the lead with one lap to go. Or it's my 21st birthday and I'm at home with my parents watching on television the Olympics from Los Angeles. And here's another dream I've been having lately. I'm alone in front of my computer writing a story about

running. It begins: "I see a track, a running track, circular but almost oval, designed with ease of motion in mind."

Or maybe it begins like this: "I fix my eyes on the shoulders of the runner in front of me as each step becomes faster, as each step becomes harder."

Or like this: "My arms are wrapped around Trevor's waist and he's whispering into my ear something I can't believe I'll do."

Or maybe like this: "It's Christmas or Easter, I don't know, and after grace we lift our heads and unfold our hands and pass plates of hot food - string beans, roast beef, potatoes, and rolls - round and round the table."

It's last month or last year and Pat, Sean, and Matt and I are jogging laps at Irvington high school. We're all over 30 and we move so much slower. Sean is telling the story about a race he and I ran more than 10 years ago in a small town in Finland. We both finished well behind the winner, but we enjoyed the evening of sauna, beer, and sausage afterwards. That leads to more stories. Matt remembers the time he and I ran past a fruit stand in the Bronx and grabbed an orange and sprinted away. He says how he has never eaten an orange since that tasted so good. I don't remind him that I dropped mine and we had to share his. He loves that memory and I want him to have it. Pat is laughing softly to himself and I know what he's thinking. The time Ralph Sanchez's dick popped out of his jock at nationals and flapped around for an entire lap before he finally stopped and tucked it back in. These are my best friends. We bask in the same specks of light and fall under similar shadows. After a while Pat says, "Those are some real war stories, huh," and we all share a smile and nod.

It's another day and I'm writing more stories about having been a runner, wondering who will care. I think, Maybe my son, if I had one. He could read about how his father almost became an American hero. Matt has a kid and so does Sean and Pat really wants one. He just has to convince his wife who is very serious about her career. We sometimes joke about whether our sons will be runners, too, although I'm not sure it's what any of us want. Running is still what we share, even after all these years. I suppose it'll always be that way. I'm not sure, though, if that's enough for me anymore.

My brothers and my sister have kids. Annie's older brother has a kid, but not her younger one. She and I are still talking it over. It's another one of those moments where I just don't know what's best; don't know what position to take: the lead or tuck in and follow? I've been feeling that way a lot lately. Like my head, it's barely above water and I'm gasping for breath. That's when voices, music, prayers, a crowd cheering, a crowd clapping, any sound at all just becomes one round note after another entering my ears. Rings on fingers, belts on hips, domes, car wheels, rosary beads, knobs on appliances, pebbles, pens, donuts, bagels, plates, faces, the sky, the earth, the sun, the moon, the globe, the stars, the planets, the universe. Creation. It's all one giant circle. It's all I see: a track. A running track, circular but almost oval, designed with ease of motion in mind. It's that simple, a running track. A place where people exercise. And all we do is go round and round, round and round, one circuit then another.

Jim Denison