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Rough River

Loren Sundlee

You would have thought that a slow river
would freeze smoother, like a lake,
petrify into a slate you could write on,
where your skates glide without miracles.
But we found pocks and ripples,
corrugations like country roads that jarred
our teeth and ankles. Whatever escape
we might have dreamed, of gliding
over the channel that wound
through measured fields, that led
to endless adventure and cut through
the ship-shape souls of our parents—
whatever access into the incredible
we wished for was not there
in that frozen youth, where snow crusted,
and branches late in their cruise to the gulf
braked mid-stream to trip us up.
We shuddered through that rugged zero,
balloon breaths shouted *we're skating on death*.
Stories hovered of those fallen through.
When our knees and ankles ached,
and winter terrorized our toes and fingers,
we changed into stiff boots and slogged
home over plowed snow fields,
cursing the lumped furrows—
our rough praise for not sinking.

Discussion questions for poem *Rough River*:

1. How does the frozen rough river often compare with life in a rural area?
2. How does the dreamed escape and the actuality often parallel the lives of rural youth?
3. Do you have a sense that the skaters wanted a different life than the one they were living? Explain.
4. Do you feel a sense of satisfaction in the skaters for successfully overcoming rural hardship? Explain.