

The third *Birkensnake*, Dear Reader! Begin on page 1 with Gregory Howard's "The Dog," which follows a harrowed man-beast in pursuit of his master: himself. Page 7 finds Richard Froude exploring the use of clay and cloth made of ground fiberglass to restore a bone in "Cast"; the casting of bones has a different meaning in Nora Lange's "Encounter Beach," page 14, where the divinations of a group of women lure bulbous seals to shore to feed the sharks they lovingly call their children. Page 24 brings "White Knees," by Kate Wyer, a fantasy of grotesque proportion in which the razed buildings of A D Jameson's "In the End, Part I" (page 29) are replaced by sun-bleached skeletons stacked in rudimentary cairns in the cities of America. Between the elegiac architecture of



IRKEN
SNAKE
THREE

these tales lies, on page 26, Andrew Borgstrom's "Thank You for Being Her[e]," an epistolary romance lost before it even begins. Jessica Newman's account of the unsung creator of the Volcanic Pistol in "Smith and Nelson" illuminates page 63, brief as a bullet — but it is only after the sting of Ernie Reimer's "Resurrection Gun" on page 64 that you may move back into your life outside these serpent scales confident that what lurks in the bushes beside your home is just a cat. But perhaps, given Stephanie Mantz's observations in "Quicksand" (page 67), those bushes are now gone. It seems these pages are slowly ingesting everything around you. Is it not a fact, Dear Reader, that this slim volume appears to lengthen in the dark? Are you not curious if these words are measuring you out before taking you whole?

THE DOG

GREGORY HOWARD

The first thing that happened was the glass, though it probably wasn't the *first* thing. Other possible first things include a slow wind that moved through the house at night, small slugs clinging to the fogged windows in the morning, and a howling dog that couldn't be found. At least I think they were slugs. They *looked* like slugs. But when I told him he said, What glass? like he didn't know what I was talking about, like he hadn't seen it right there on the floor with his own two eyes, which I knew he had because I saw him look at that spot on the kitchen floor where the glass had been, where I had seen it, and where I had seen him see it, so I knew that he knew, even though when I said, What are you looking at? he said, Nothing. Come to think of it, maybe it wasn't actually *surprising*. Back then we didn't understand each other or at least he didn't understand me and maybe I didn't understand him, even though I often just spelled it out. I AM TRYING TO SEDUCE YOU, I would finally say, slowly and clearly, after parading around half the day in a red skirt, sitting suggestively on the arm of

the couch, or doing jumping jacks in the backyard. Didn't you notice the skirt? But I guess we had moved to get away from things like skirts and slugs and simultaneous dreams in the night. There is only one dream, he said, and it is a house. And I believed him, so I baked desserts and ironed shirts and answered the phone. Hello? I would say. Hello?

The glass on the floor, I said, the pile of glass swept up and left there. But he didn't answer, at least not at first, but instead stared into the distance for a while and then said, That dog is always in our goddamned yard, which was true. It could hop its own fence, the dog, and I'd seen it do so on more than one occasion, which at first was shocking, to see a dog hopping a fence that it shouldn't be hopping, very shocking, a high wooden fence like that, jumping up and over it, but pausing on top to look back, to invite me in, to plead with me, and then suddenly down the other side, disappearing behind that large forbidding fence, hiding God knows what. But there it was again, peeing on the azaleas. The yard is where we came to drink in the evening. Although sometimes I drank there at other times and without him, and sometimes I found him sitting there and not drinking, but rather just sitting with his eyes closed, can you believe it? I wasn't supposed to be drinking, but really there was nothing else to do. I had planned a sumptuous garden, but the things that I wanted to grow didn't grow and strange things I didn't want to grow grew instead, although I talked to them harshly, in the morning and at night. You're no good, I said. You're unwanted. But to no avail, and in fact they flourished, these weird spiky plants that I didn't want and hadn't planned for, they flourished, and I think they actually liked it, my talking to them like

that, which was, I don't think it's too much say, frightening, so much so that I didn't even want to look at them let alone touch them.

So when the dog came do you know what I did? I followed it. I followed it right down the alley, right to its house, a strange powder-blue affair with small windows and a wooden fence.

Look, I'm not going to lie. I was thinking of taking the dog. I was thinking: That dog is clearly unhappy, running around the neighborhood like it does, knowing and not knowing, running around but still returning, though without pleasure, without a sense of necessity. It must be awful to be a dog like that. So when I got to the door and knocked, lightly at first, but then louder and louder, I prepared myself by saying, This dog needs discipline! over and over in the way I used to say, You're OK, except that now I just did it in my head, or maybe under my breath. And the louder I knocked, the more emphatic I became, thinking, *This dog needs discipline* this dog *needs* discipline, until finally, when I had worked myself up into a lather, when I had agitated myself so thoroughly that I was practically shouting in my own head about the dog and its discipline and literally pounding on the door, it suddenly opened in the slow, creaky, menacing way that doors open when you are about to discover something horrible.

But still I went in. The house was cold and the woman was sitting dogless on the couch and looking right at me. In fact she was already looking at me when I walked through the door, which means she was looking at me before I even arrived, which probably means something, though the more I think about it the less certain I become. And for a while

the woman didn't say anything and I didn't say anything either because what do you say when you've entered someone's house? Where is your dog? Would I like some coffee? So we just stood there for a while, or I stood there for a while and she sat and we looked at each other. Then she spoke. She said, The desk is in the back. The desk? I said. You're not here for the desk? she said. I'm here about the dog, I said. Oh, she said. The dog. For a moment she looked helplessly around at the room and its furniture. Are you sure? she said. And the tone of her voice was so pained and so insistent that for a moment I wasn't sure. Maybe, I thought, I did want the desk. I imagined what it must be like. It was undoubtedly oak, old oak, faded, but with a fine grain. Worn — there it was — worn and necessary, with drawers full of waiting.

I already have a desk, I said. And you want a dog, the woman said. I said nothing. Let me tell you something, she said. You can have the dog. You can have him if you can keep him. Which seems like a good deal to you right now. You're standing there and thinking kind thoughts about the dog and less-kind thoughts about me. But the dog is a conundrum. You haven't really thought about it. You've thought about me and you've thought about you but you haven't really thought about the dog. Close your eyes and tell me what color he is. Never mind. That's not the right question. You want something. Now it's a dog, tomorrow who knows what it will be? A ferret maybe, or a washing machine. You want to save these things, these dogs, but what will you do when you've saved them? After you've saved them? What will you do when you have them? You haven't thought about that part at all. Did I mention this

woman was old? Because she was. Very wrinkly and very old. She had eyes like green olives.

Later I was doing the dishes and thinking and suddenly my hand hurt. I was dogless. I had tried to have the dog. I had lured it into the house to keep it, leaving it one treat at a time, here on the sidewalk, there on the steps, in the way that I would like to be lured, if it came to that, and I had put it first in the bedroom and then in the bathroom and finally in the basement, saying, You're a fine fellow, each time to make it comfortable. But it wasn't comfortable. During the day it would howl and during the night it would howl even louder, even though I gave it treats until it began to be sick. And then it would howl and be sick, one after the other, all over the basement until I put in earplugs and hid in the bathroom. I have to be honest: I didn't understand this dog. What does a dog want if not to be lured and then kept?

One night, in the middle of the night, I heard it walking around. Click click click went its little feet. So I got up to make sure it was the wind but there it was, walking around the living room as if it were lost—lost!—walking tentatively and shyly—it resembled a deer. And the basement door was open and the front door was too and the bright, too bright, moon was practically pouring itself into the house and the dog looked at me like it had the first time I saw it. It looked like a force. I wanted to say something to its tiny face. I wanted to say something maybe about freedom and loss. But before I could say anything it ran out the door and into the bright moonlight and what I felt was not sadness. But it wasn't happiness either.

So I was thinking of this and of the woman who I had

not seen since, even though I went back bearing a cup of coffee and knocked on her door, when suddenly my hand hurt, and I looked down to find myself holding a shattered glass. It resembled a translucent crown, which is what I said to myself right then: This glass resembles a translucent crown. My blood dripped into the steel sink, mingling with the water and spiraling into the drain, and suddenly I thought, We are made of glass. No, that's not what I thought. We're made of what glass is made of. It's always moving, glass. Even though you can't see it. It's flowing. Down, but sometimes maybe up too. You never know with flowing. If we had slower eyes we could see. Really see and not be fooled. Not by things like glass or movies or hummingbirds. We could see these things and know them. We could know them and call them by name.

CAST

RICHARD FROUDE

JONAH

When Jonah was a child, a disease spread from the mainland. As a strict precaution, and to prevent transmission to humans, over ten thousand head of cattle were culled. On television, farm workers dragged the carcasses into piles. They were planned to be set alight at sundown and burn through the night but the piles were much too large. Into the morning, plumes of smoke rose behind the hills.

From the school bus, the smell of charred beef was terrific.

This was not how Jonah imagined disease. It did not smell antiseptic like the hospital where his adenoids were removed. It did not smell sour like his father's breath on the morning he died. It smelt inviting. It smelt like something Jonah wanted.

*

At an urgent care facility in the city closest to the lake, just after two in the afternoon, a man checks in complaining of sharp pain in his ribs. He is driving home from work when a truck forces him to brake suddenly. It would be unremarkable, but when the seatbelt presses into his torso he feels discomfort disproportionate to the speed he is traveling. The doctor examines him. Sure enough, three ribs are cracked, and he is sent to a variety of specialists who will test his blood, examine his marrow, and weeks later explain in placid but somber tones that he is suffering from a rare and inoperable cancer.

The man is Jonah's brother. For the next fifteen months, Jonah cares for him at home. He feeds him plates of avocado or mashed banana. He helps him urinate. He adjusts his position in bed with the lightest possible touch until even tiny movements cause excruciating pain, until Jonah can do nothing but watch as his brother's bones turn to dust. And Jonah dreams of a child, not of flesh and bone, free of this brittle frame: a wooden boy made in the image of his brother.

ANYA

A basic characteristic of malignant cancer cells is uncontrolled growth. This is a result of rapid division. The aim of chemotherapy as a treatment is to destroy cells that divide rapidly. Since many chemotherapy treatments do not

isolate the cancer, other cells that divide rapidly are also damaged or killed: bone marrow, hair follicles.

Anya's hair loss has nothing to do with cancer. Months after her second child is born, she begins to shed. The doctors say it is temporary, that given time it will all grow back. In the photograph she is in her twenties. She stands at the harbor, a scarf about her head. She is wearing a dark jacket, hands in pockets too high on her torso. Behind her: dinghies and a schooner battened down at the jetty. It is November. She is smiling.

*

Anya's hair never grows back. Doctors cite the initial cause as the stress of childbirth. "This is common," they say. In rare cases, hair loss may continue until the underlying stressor is dealt with or removed. "So it is because of my son?" Anya asks the doctor. It's very possible. He is a quiet boy, more withdrawn than his brother Jonah. And without possible recourse, Anya raises them together by the harbor. She never wears a wig. She works as a baker in a small shop off the seafront. Her sons grow older. After she retires they move her inland to a modern efficiency only minutes from the doctor. She is happy there and the doctor is kind. Her sons visit every second Tuesday.

THE SOVEREIGN

When a whale dies, its corpse becomes a city. It sinks to the ocean bed and sea creatures swim through it. It becomes their shelter. Decomposition is both life and a second protracted death that comes after death. This is the way people talk of The Sovereign: the way a city looks from a plane, his neck pocked by arable fields, his cul-de-sacs and hedgerows. When I was younger I saw no distinction between God and the sun. Buratino knows the same: it is not enough to be real. He was born for the clouds.

BURATINO

The wooden boy, son of Jonah, born of Anya's line, carved in the image of a man with broken bones. In the train station on the mainland: so hungry he steals the jug of cream from a coffee counter and drinks it in the public restroom, retching immediately, heaving in front of the mirror. Buratino, the schoolboy, the vagrant. Buratino, the clown.

The photograph was taken in a room he remembers. The wooden boy in grade school, his teacher a huge man, a former rugby player unable to fasten his top button owing to the girth of his neck. On the first day of school, he splinters a ruler against the blackboard. Buratino reads this as a statement of intent. He is the same teacher who in health class explains how the penis will in time grow longer and thicker. In a lesson on the Reform Act, a girl asks, "Sir,

what's a *brothel*?" and he tells her to look it up. A year or so later, when Buratino has passed into middle school, it is announced in chapel that the teacher is suffering from leukemia. He leaves work and dies. That month, the vice-principal shoots himself in the chest with an air rifle. The pellet misses his heart and he bleeds to death over a period of several days. Turn your head slightly to the left. That's it. Big smile. Click. And another. Big smile.

*

It is not how Buratino imagines a brothel to be: a series of full-length glass doors that open onto the street. Crowds of young men gather around them. Families walk by. A large golden penis spurts water into a decorative vulva-shaped pool. From behind glass the women beckon. They hold their doors ajar. Blow kisses. He joins a crowd. They cheer as he approaches the window. "Where are you from?" (because he has no idea what to do). "Brazil," and she pulls a thick curtain across the glass. She snaps a condom onto him, limp. Nothing is working. She is already at the washbasin when he comes into his hand.

*

His first trip to the warehouse store, it is Flag Day. There is a woman with orange skin and thick lashes standing by a table of discounted jean shorts. She is acting strangely, stroking the denim, unfolding the shorts, folding and replacing them. Buratino stands close to her and she touches his wooden arm, runs her fingers up until she holds his bi-

ceps for a moment. He follows her into the men's restroom and fucks her in the stall farthest from the door. She is standing with her legs apart over the toilet and her hands on the back wall.

Whenever he tries to remember the woman's face, Buratino sees only the wife of his dentist when he was a child. She has the same dark, wavy hair; her lips curl down too much so she is always scowling. The girl in grade school who asked about brothels, her name was Sophie. She once claimed that she saw the queen walk past her bedroom window. What did you do? I sang a song and waved a flag. What song did you sing? These things you should know about me.

ME

Once a month I leave the mainland to buy green coffee. This morning, the woman at the register spills a cup of thick blood just as I am ready to pay. It splashes over my neck and shirt. Behind me somebody screams. As the cup rolls off the counter I throw out my hand to catch it before it hits the floor. Some of the people in line start clapping. The woman at the counter explains that the blood is actually raspberry cordial and we all shriek laughing. In fact, I am screaming as I walk out the door, wailing across the parking lot, home with no green coffee and bloodstains across my arms and chest.

Every six weeks I see a blood doctor. He is also a cancer doctor so many of the others in the waiting room wear scarves over their heads or carry a cane. As I do not have a job and only rarely leave the mainland, I've begun to think of these people as my colleagues. The magazines in the waiting room have titles like "Heal Today," "Survivor," or just "Cancer." I do not read the magazines. I look at the posters of men and women cycling through the woods. The sun is always setting. A night is about to begin. Nobody knows what this night will bring or if a new morning will follow. But night never comes. It is always ready to arrive. It is always just past. This is the truth of the waiting room.

*

I don't know how I look in the photograph. Nor can I imagine the background. For a long time I thought I had memories like photographs but I realize now that they were memories of photographs. In one, I am on a beach. In another, a jetty, and the sky is grey. I grew up in a small house by a rail track overlooking a cemetery. I used to climb on the roof of the coal scuttle and wave to the people on the trains. My elementary school was a convent that shared a wall with zoological gardens. I saw tapirs, okapis, and a pygmy hippo every week until I was twelve. If I piled up all the lies I told when I was younger they would cast shadows on the sidewalk like buildings in Manhattan or Chicago. I don't leave the mainland much anymore. I am expecting no visitors. I have learnt the names of thousands of diseases but I cannot tell you mine.

ENCOUNTER BEACH

NORA LANGE

I learned about the intimacy travel package during a Creole cooking class. My cooking partner mentioned it just after her small dog jumped up on the counter, snatching both the sausage I had been cutting and a bite of my thumb. My partner consoled me: “Pope didn’t mean any harm. He was after the meat.” I didn’t own any animals, but the dog’s actions seemed reasonable, and so I nodded my head acceptingly. She leaned in and whispered in my ear that she’d been to a place known as the Cape as a part of a travel package that focused on intimacy, a package available exclusively to females. I agreed not to mention the dog bite and she continued. “The travel guide running the program is a delightfully sensitive man, capable of converting the most uptight of people.”

Immediately I excused myself and called up Margie to tell her that we had an inside connection to a discreet program. She was thrilled by the chance to leave town and be a part of a travel package, especially one that catered to those of us looking to connect. Margie and I had both moved

with our successful husbands to Palace Waterfall, a community of identical two-story houses that lined the Massachusetts Bay. The architects envisioned Palace Waterfall as a respite from a world full of naysayers. The advertisements suggested that the new community was to be a place of prestige and unity. Yet the people who occupied this development were unable to hear the sound of water even though it was located directly next to them. They referred to the sound of the water as “reverb.” A silent moment never passed in this community. I mostly kept to myself.

Jim picked me up from class and on our way home he talked to me about averages, and when I didn’t respond his eyes darted suspiciously up and down my figure. I clutched my thumb tightly to prevent excess bleeding, my hand resting on my lap wrapped in a paper napkin taken from my cooking partner’s purse. I felt chilled. “I need to tend to this,” I thought, although I felt little pain. It was only when we pulled into the driveway that Jim appeared to notice. Looking directly at me, he asked, “What’s the point if you suffer that easily?” and opened his car door to exit.

On the drive to the Cape, Margie talked about her children and said I should be grateful that I hadn’t any. She told me that she had grown up being called a mule. “How do you think that would make a person feel?” she asked herself in a voice sure of the right answer. I thought to ask her why a mule but didn’t want to be impolite. Margie put her hand on mine as the traffic on the freeway came to a standstill. Gripping it tightly, she said, “A seemingly lost woman holding a machete does more than suggest something.” I shook my head in a way that indicated my consensus. For the rest of the drive we listened to *The Real Thing*, by Tom

Stoppard, while Margie practiced her self-introduction for our fellow travelers, soon to be our close friends. It was early evening when we arrived.

Once settled in at the hotel, Margie and I went to the dining hall to meet the others in the group, who had begun assembling around a large table. Our travel guide appeared and, following a small bow, presented himself as our temporary man-slave, which received light laughter and applause. He handed each of us a yellow rose, explaining that it was a gesture of friendship. Luckily Margie had agreed to take on the role of interlocutor and introduce us both. She'd say her name and stick out her hand. The group seemed eager for contact and admitted to being nervous about what was expected at the Cape. Margie was flawless; she never erred reciting the bio we had diligently rehearsed, and her confidence seemed to have a soothing effect on everyone. I was grateful she was willing to volunteer my personal information, which allowed me to maintain my preferred state, silence. The food was bland but our travel guide assured us that it would improve as the program adjusted itself to the place. He explained that the locals, evidently our chefs, weren't "tickled" by visitors. They viewed visitors as cold, mindless thieves, out only for themselves. But as the program moved forward and began to discover, the locals would grow tolerant. Margie said she understood, concluding, "No right-minded person likes strangers in their backyard."

When the introductions ended, I returned to my room to call home. Again Jim questioned me about my intentions in leaving for the Cape. "The house is unreasonably quiet without someone to talk to," he said. He sounded exhausted

from what seemed genuine loneliness. Certainly I was to blame for the poor planning. Shortly after I hung up the phone, Margie knocked on my door to ask if I'd like to join a preliminary game of charades. I politely declined. That night I dreamt of snacks: bags filled with whole boiled and salted potatoes that were force-fed to me by a drag queen. The drag queen shrilled at me to stand up straight, while savagely licking off her mahogany lipstick with her thick pink tongue. I woke up distressed, starving, a puddle of drool on my pillow, and luckily discovered a bag of trail mix tucked away in my belongings.

The next day at orientation our travel guide gave us an overview. "The Cape is a stretch of sand between tides that do not connect. Visitors return to this place and they do it often. It is believed that this, in part, is what sets off the locals." Our travel guide introduced the term *beauty vernacular* for the local speech and said that as visitors we must not lay any claim to it. As visitors we must create our own speech.

"This is how folks such as us manage to stay comfortable between all this water," he explained. "As participants in the program you will be required to create a uniquely effective form of communication. Communication is essential to the success of the program."

The travel package included a system of exercises and activities to ensure we would reach our goals. These activities were designed to identify pleasure and foster commitment, our travel guide explained; as a result we would become better communicators and closer to our bodies. After orientation, he divided us into groups, recommending we get to work and be prepared to present our findings to the pro-

gram. Margie and I belonged to Group B because we had arrived second. Our first assignment was to administer our own version of “vernacular testing” by attempting to form a consensus between sensations, pictures, and words. Our group went out to evaluate road kill in order to discover pleasure as it relates to horror.

The presentations occurred in the hotel’s meeting room, a formal convention room without windows and with many rows of brown plastic chairs. The room was painted a soft hue, and I imagined that it had been painted this way to soften the blows. The walls were lined with framed inspirational sentiments, yet many people had left this room unhappy, possibly penniless. Despite clear attempts at cordiality on the part of the hotel, the room possessed a deep emptiness. Before I could escape, Margie, our elected presenter, walked to the front of the room and presented our findings:

Group B has decided to call our test *Back to Life*. The experiment measured the depth of our desires based on our vocal responses when passing road kill by car. The *severity of want* was measured by the volume of our groaning. To this volume we attached value, since value is at the root of pedagogy and the body. Dead deer elicited the highest level of yearning; our sympathies grew wilder for deer than for any other dead thing splayed out on the road. Our groaning increased in both volume and frequency when we passed dead deer, and almost instantly our group reached out to comfort each other

by touch. Our desire was for these long, thin, strong, swift creatures to return. Return to life, to the forest, so that we might be relieved of the guilt of passing them by.

We received praise all around; even our travel guide called it the best test he'd witnessed in years.

Weekly massages were a perk included in the travel plan. Each participant was assigned a specialist who gave lessons about relieving tension in various parts of the body. It was required that we practice massage on each other. By learning how to receive pleasure, I learned about possibility. This exchange of generosity provided a way to become closer to the others in the program. In the evenings I'd try calling Jim and he'd never answer. He'd leave messages in the afternoons when he knew I'd be away. Struggling to connect was characteristic of our union and therefore I wasn't alarmed. In fact, I started to envision him out at the movies, taking long walks through the park at sunset. All of these he deserved, and I longed for his happiness. Margie and I became very close, spending the majority of our time together on the Cape. She slept in the room next to mine, which allowed us to talk late into the night when group sessions ended. We took to recounting the stories of our lives over glasses of pink wine and the peanut-butter-filled pretzels her daughter sent us in the mail. During the days we strolled along the edge of the bay in silence. Margie wasn't pleased with her marriage; she said her children begged her to divorce. We both felt that our mothers had never been taught to be happy, and I had the feeling that our grandmothers hadn't either. The Cape was a special place: one

devoid of apathy, that made us feel differently, allowed for us to feel. The local people were connected to the land, the water, and each other. These were clear, enduring moments we shared on the Cape, moments my mother would have liked.

The program assembled nightly in the lounge to tell stories. One night our travel guide delivered his rendition of Little Red Riding Hood, where the wolf's caught fornicating with the rotund grandmother instead of eating her. He made this recitation in the costume of the grandmother. Midway through the telling he could barely hold in place the pillows escaping from under his shirt, pillows jarred loose by all the heavy laughter. Our travel guide said that laughter and the body couldn't be more connected, that laughter was necessary in order to find intimacy. As he ended his story he removed his cargo shorts and proceeded to undress completely. He took his scarf and threaded it about the bulk of his balls, tying the remainder around his penis. After thus encasing himself, our travel guide ran off and disappeared into the darkness of the dunes. I tried to imagine the purpose of this lesson. Then it occurred to me that he might be a person living in a state of suffocation. Like any man might feel if he found himself trapped on board a condemned plane hovering above endless water with no floatation device. A few hours passed before everyone realized he wasn't returning, at least not any time soon. We agreed to get a good night's rest, and start fresh and early the following morning. I called and left Jim a message about the experience. I shared with him what I believed to be the point of the lesson. "Isolation," I said to him on the machine, "it does something maddening to an

otherwise stable mind.”

The next morning over breakfast in the dining hall, Margie, addressing the program, suggested we adjust to our travel guide’s disappearance and get back to work. His absence would admittedly be an inconvenience, as he was our travel guide. The alternative was to leave early and return home, which received hostile rejection. Eventually the program decided it would be best to continue building our vernaculars, assuming any day now our travel guide would return. Group C piped up, confessing their eagerness to divulge the details of their experiment. On that note the program dispersed and re-gathered in the meeting room. Group C presented their findings:

Group C has come up with the *inherited memory*. We conceived the idea while conducting a series of tests on the fish in the large fish tank on display in the hotel’s lobby. One by one, members of Group C inserted into the tank a different but commonplace object: pen, screw, or twig. Each foreign object repelled the fish in the same manner. When an object was inserted into the fish tank the fish would “cower” at the bottom, clearly in avoidance of the object. Or perhaps the fish were recoiling in anticipation? Group C posits that the uniform response indicates, even if symbolically, that these fish, despite their genetic differences, have inherited the same information. Leading us to conclude that knowledge is accessed from what we term the *inherited memory*: it could be any kind of information, like a

sense, bloodline, or landmark.

According to Group C, “inherited memory” was the source of all common memory, stemming from the histories we inherited, accessible to those continuing to survive. “Histories, when tapped into, cause a uniform reaction. Like the fish,” Group C said. I looked around the room and saw myself as one woman among forty women who had chosen this very same adventure, for the sake of desire, and I was nodding in the very same way.

Announced over the loudspeaker was the news that our travel guide had been discovered nearby in the dunes, asleep under a tree, naked and severely sunburned. He had been healing for a few hours now, but he wouldn’t be able to return and direct the remainder of the program, and therefore it would be ending early. There would still be a final party set to take place in a few days, to wrap up and send us off to our respective homes. Our partial refunds were waiting in envelopes at the front desk. The voice then apologized for the early dispatch and for any confusion the news might have caused.

On the advice of the other ladies, I gave up calling Jim. He also gave up, and the feeling in my bones wasn’t hollow or ghostly at all. I became aware of this sensation one morning while walking along the shore by the hotel. I hadn’t even noticed the absence of pain, of loss that I should have been feeling. My heart sank a bit, and I was puzzled, as if the life that had existed prior to this experience had been entirely unnecessary. But my mind was eager. Margie was by my side and the day was perfect. The gulls, as we began calling them, flew around in the sky as if surrounding

a carcass. Everything was abundantly alive. The air smelled rich, like sun, fish, and sand. I couldn't have borne a smell of another kind.

On the day of our premature departure from the program, I wrote Jim a letter. It had been a few days since I'd heard any word and it seemed only fair to share with him my decision to remain. It was clear that I desired the salty atmosphere and that this was a good way to end. If all that was good were to remain, I would need to say goodbye. I wrote that I imagined him happy when I pictured him now; that I hoped he would find space in his heart to forgive us for failing so miserably at this union.

The final party took place over brunch. It was a lavish and fully catered affair that included fresh fruit, pamphlets, bite-sized tuna sandwiches, a whole branzino, and seltzer water in an abundance of natural flavors. Following lunch, and in the spirit of our travel guide, a fellow participant passed out fortune cookies. Margie read me the fortune from my cookie, as I was reluctant to unravel it myself. It read: "Life, it's all carrot and no stick!" We laughed hysterically, but stopped when a fellow visitor went up to take the stand and address the program. I placed a boning knife in my purse in recognition of what was to come. And as our fellow comrade was about to recount the story of a wolf that had made love to a rotund lady, I excused myself and walked out to the bay.

WHITE KNEES

KATE WYER

The peanut butter would not come off the white tights on her knees. Seeing-eye dogs tried to lick her but she said, *Hey, this is mine*, and they backed off.

She heard women talking. She thought about how clean their hair must be under those nets. Their scalps clean. She heard a nurse say, *Well, you have to subtract eight pounds for the head because he can't do anything about that*. They laughed. The man in the wheelchair on the scale crossed his arms and held onto his elbows. *I need more pain medicine*, he said. The nurses rolled him away.

She rubbed soap on her knees. Bits of wet paper towel stuck to her tights. Her clipboard slipped into the sink. A dog pushed into a stall and began to drink from the toilet. Its tongue loud and lapping. *I remember horses eating sugar cubes from my palm*, she told the dog. It looked up from the bowl. Water dripped from its chin.

The nurses wore badges with color codes and carried tiny bottles of hand sanitizer. She dried herself off and returned to the cafeteria, her right shoe squeaking. Her clipboard read: *50 sandwiches, sliced in half. Pears in heavy syrup. Potato chips.*

She took the can opener and punctured a lid. Thick white pears escaped as she turned the handle. She filled up plastic cups.

A line started to form. She placed the cups in hands as the trays slid along the rails. Their dogs always looked her in the eye. She knew to look away.

THANK YOU FOR BEING HER[E]

ANDREW BORGSTROM

This is a fire:

When Grandmother ran out of Kool-Aid, she would pour the Tiger's Blood syrup left over from summer's snow cones into our glasses. The syrup poured over the rim and onto the blood-stained gopher wood.

I lit a fire with waterproof matches:

Grandmother washed the dishes in the bath and put them in the cupboard before getting dressed. Her flesh the color of fall leaves, withered and brittle, more attached to the linoleum than the bone.

This is a waterproof fire:

What is God? I asked Grandmother. She handed me an address and a room number. Grandmother never taught me

how to hit, how to fold my fingers at the knuckles into a fist but not to fold the second joint into the palm.

This fire is hot and not wet:

I showed Grandmother a biblical passage that contradicted her involvement in PETA. She showed me a biblical passage that contradicted my involvement in Christianity.

This is not a quilt:

I hit the man who lived behind the room number. I wondered if the man knew my grandmother never taught me how to hit. I wondered who taught the man how to be a face.

This is definitely a fire:

I cried because I wasn't sure why I was hitting the man, and because his face broke my fingers. I cried for both of us, and laughed for one of us.

I did not weave a quilt with waterproof matches:

Grandmother never taught me how to hit, but she taught me how to inherit arthritis and stomach cancer.

This is not a wet quilt:

I looked at my face in the mirror, at my face in her mirror,
at my face and her mirror. I forgot I used to want to be a
firefighter.

IN THE END · PART I

A D JAMESON

In the end, he said a great many things that he later came to regret.

He had been standing in the bookstore's basement. New in town. Not a regular there.

Nonetheless, he'd quickly figured out where they kept the bargain books.

He'd sussed it out. He'd knowingly tracked it down.

They kept the bargain books in barrels, massive barrels, crammed inside, mass-market paperbacks on discount.

Some of the books were missing covers. Most of the paperbacks were soiled, or missing pages.

He stood there alone, thumbing through them, reading snatches of phrases, words here and there. Enjoying the feel of the pocket-sized paper. The size of the books.

The overhead lights went suddenly out. They were feeble lights, weak and dim, providing barely any illumination. At first he didn't take any notice of their absence.

As though he could see well enough in the dark. As though he no longer needed light.

As though he had reached a turning point, perhaps.

But then the book disappeared before him. And then his hand disappeared before him. They went away, snatched up by a darkness, an all-encompassing inkiness.

An inkiness that had presence, washing about him and over him. So dark as to be tangible, pervasive, sensuous.

A thick, heavy medium he could sink into, relaxing, forgetting. An end in itself.

He supposed that the power had gone out, that a fuse had blown, or that the breaker had been damaged. The bookstore was old, and no doubt its wiring was fickle.

He tried to remember the way to the staircase, and how far it was, the direction stairs lay in.

They lay to the right, around a bookcase, around a few barrels. He thought. Pretty certain.

He started to move. He was starting to move when a voice in his ear told him not to move.

A voice nearby, a woman's voice. It said it was dangerous to move.

There are large gaping holes in the floor, the voice said. Beneath the floorboards. Large holes left from all of the water damage.

Behind his ear. Beneath his right earlobe, beside his right shoulder. The voice was close by. The woman was standing very near him.

He reached out and took her hand in his. Instinctively. Instinctually. He held hands with the voice.

The woman's hand was warm. It had blood in it, coursing inside it.

She squeezed his hand. Their palms pressed together, enveloped in inkiness. His right hand and her left hand.

And in her right hand—she had one as well—she held a small flashlight on a keychain. She switched it on.

She pulled on his hand, on his wrist. She led him, guiding him gently by his hand around the boards, to the basement's exit.

Following light. Together, behind the mottled beam that she emitted.

They went upstairs, still holding hands. The wooden stairs

creaking underfoot. They joined other customers leaving the bookstore, filing out into the street.

No one carrying books. No one taking the chance to make off like a crook. The people not thieves. Polite, good-natured, kind.

Swiftly filling the streets. Proceeding calmly in an easy-going fashion.

Everybody who lived on the street was filling the streets, was filing from darkened apartments, holding flashlights if they had them. Holding hands.

The street had gone dark. The block had gone dark. The whole of the neighborhood had gone dark.

The city entire had gone dark. The world had gone dark, had succumbed to an onrush of sudden darkness.

Shadows tangible, pervasive and sensuous.

A dark such as comes only once in a while, once in a decade, once in a lifetime. A dark like a bookend, demarcating a length of time.

A full sudden stop brought on by a shift in celestial clockwork. A precursor zone. Intermediate, wanting.

A kind of prologue, or intermission. A coda, even. . . .

They had come to the end of the current era, somebody suggested. They'd used up the time that had gone before, the days that had been allotted to them. They'd arrived at the end of an age.

Which age it was depended on who it was you asked.

The Mechanical Age. The Industrial Age. The Atomic Age. The Post-Atomic.

An inhuman epoch. An impersonal history, an atheistic age.

An inherited period that others had set in motion, that passed without comment from anyone living, that no one living had played any part in setting in motion.

A motionless age. It was high time, then, for a change. It had long been high time. The time was ripe for something new — they agreed that this was so.

Things couldn't continue the way they'd been going. Not given the impersonal, atheistic, inhuman way they'd been going.

Them making a mockery of themselves. A laughingstock. Jerks and asses, everyone, one and all.

Thank heaven, a new day was finally dawning. The Promising Era. This dark was the dark before the dawn, the darkest time, somebody suggested.

Earnestly. Convincingly.

Somebody had started to pass around candles, short flimsy candles, like the kind handed out at a vigil. Somebody somewhere had brought out a whole box, perhaps left over from a vigil.

A million man march. A million short, flimsy, brittle candles.

One of the boxes came around. He picked out two candles. He handed a thin, fragile candle to her.

People passed around bags of cuffs for the candles, little ring collars to slip on to catch the dripping wax.

People passed around matches. They shared their lighters.

They passed around food. People passed around drinks. Inside their apartments, fridges were no longer running. Computers and TVs had gone dark, had turned themselves off.

As the AC had gone off. The night was a humid one, a hot one. The forecast had called for occasional breezes, but it had been wrong. Occasional breezes hadn't come.

The drinks now were sweating in their hands. The candles were dripping in their hands, melting over their collars.

Men unbuttoned their button-down shirts. They took off

their jackets, their ties, their dress shoes. Women rolled up their short sleeves, tied their T-shirts up over their midriffs. They rolled up their pants legs, took off their sneakers, sandals, socks.

The whole world around them was dripping, melting. Cleansing itself, stripping down, preparing itself for the imminent Promising Era.

They'd met, he and she, at the end of an inhuman era. They'd met at the end of a failed age. A new one was just beginning, was sticking its soon-to-be-tousled head around the corner.

Some people played music. They brought out guitars and sat on their windowsills, strumming chords. Some people played checkers on the sidewalk. Some people unfolded their laptops, draining their batteries, checking for news, reporting that the WiFi had gone down.

Most everyone stood around and talked, sweating, fanning their faces with hands and with pieces of paper. Drinking, eating.

They talked, he and she, no longer holding hands but talking. Surrounded by other bookstore customers, neighbors, strangers.

The night still and languid, humid, sweating, yet still somehow passing. Snatches of music overlapping, fragments freely interwoven with mixed-up voices.

The night mostly silent, still. The common attitude hushed, even reverential.

Expectant. Patient.

The moon wasn't out, or was out and was hidden where no one could find it. Behind a stray cloud, or behind an old tree.

Behind the bookstore, even, or one of the neighborhood's many apartments.

Behind a crumbling warehouse, or factory one block over.

The darkness was thick, and silent, and pulsing, and lay all around, the candles clustered like little pinpricks raised two meters off the ground.

In time, the streetlights came back on. Small balls of light inside them lit and came slowly on, intensifying, glowing neon and blue. Back on in emergency mode, brought online by some small emergency generator somewhere. Reserved expressly for that purpose.

The lamps growing steadily brighter, replacing the darkness and pockets of candlelight.

The Promising Era advancing, surely and steadily nearing. Bearing a new light, neon and blue.

His candle had burned down by now, guttered out. He

dropped the remaining stub inside the empty bottle he'd been holding.

They'd finished their candles.

They'd finished their food. They finished their drinks. She blew out her own candle, dropping the stub inside the bottle, beside his.

They shook hands with everybody around them, fellow customers, neighbors, strangers.

They walked hand-in-hand through the streets, in no hurry. They passed other groups out talking, singing. They waved hello and they nodded, sharing. They smiled at strangers.

They said goodbye to the former era, the bygone age. The Mechanical Age. The Industrial Age. The Atomic Age. The Post-Atomic.

The time holding still and yet still somehow passing. Minute by minute. Tick by tock.

They ended up soon enough back at his place, a ramshackle single-bedroom, a garden apartment roughly hewn from a musty, unfinished basement.

He lived in a bad part of town, not too far away from the bookstore, a spot in a former industrial zone. Near the city's large, sluggish, muddy river, in the lowlands.

In a neighborhood that must have at one time been very pretty, the edge of a wealthy, early suburb. Overtaken throughout the decades by the downtown's spread, by industrial rezoning, by urban blight.

In a decrepit brownstone, barely holding itself up, falling down at the end of a dead-end street.

It's a metaphor, he laughed. A figure of speech.

What does the river symbolize? she asked him. Teasingly. Half-earnestly.

Stagnation, he easily answered. And self-ruination.

They went inside, down the narrow steps. They had moved from one basement to another.

His place was unfurnished. He had a TV and a couch, and a carpet, a mini-fridge. Nothing more.

Do you have any roommates? she asked. No, he answered. He didn't have any roommates. He lived alone. He had been living alone in the city.

Before that, he'd lived all by himself in a different city. He'd lived far away, in a country that no one had ever heard of.

In a country, he said, where life was still occurring, where creation was still ongoing, a thing left unfinished. Every day that dawned there different, a brand-new day.

He had, after college, gone away to the earth's far end. To live by himself.

Did you make any friends there? she asked. Did you meet up with anybody?

No, he answered. He hadn't made friends.

Did you see anybody while there? she asked. Did you go on blind dates?

No, he answered. I didn't.

He'd had of course offers of friendship, of seeing, but didn't engage them. Those offers unopened, left littering his doorstep. None of those offers taken up on.

He'd bypassed all offers — frank suggestions from girls who were willing, who thought him exotic. Girls in black suit-like school uniforms that barely concealed shocking bodies, lean and dark. That barely covered their foreign bras, their native thighs.

Their forthright offers left dangling before him, unrealized, unravished. Unseized upon.

They'd failed to compel him, he said, to entice him. Despite his loneliness, they had failed to arouse his interest, his wit.

Why did you leave and move back here? she didn't ask him. She didn't need to; she'd already parsed it, already per-

ceived it.

He'd come back to make another try, to start anew. To give his country another go.

To tie up loose ends.

And are you? she asked him. Are you tying up loose ends?

No, he answered. The loose ends were still dangling loose around him, their fabric frayed.

He didn't do much of anything, honestly, nowadays. He didn't have any work. He didn't like to work.

He'd played a popular card game, professionally, a while back, while in college. He'd made some money doing that.

He'd always been good at games, at whatever popular pastimes he tried his hand at. Marbles. Cards.

He could play both ends, could play both ends against the middle. He didn't mind taking startling risks. He was willing to risk it all, to cash in, to go all in.

When playing marbles, he would play for all the marbles. He would play for all the cards when playing cards. He was fearless when playing. He had good instincts. He had sharp wits. He was intuitive, strategic.

For over five years, he had lived by the skin of his wits alone.

He had lived by the means of his wits.

Until one day, a while back, he'd grown tired of playing popular card games. Of intuition. Of strategizing, of risk and witty, unfailing instincts. Until he was no longer at all certain what he wanted.

He'd grown lethargic. He'd lost his vision.

He'd lost his ambition. He'd moved overseas, to someplace cheap. To an unknown country where the dollar was still enormous.

He took fresh stock of his resources and potential.

He still had his wits. He knew how to stretch his savings out, to make ends meet.

He could live very simply. Even after he'd moved back here, he still had some money left, enough for a little while.

Enough to meet his ends, for now. Enough to meet somebody nice in the basement of a used bookstore.

Enough to be able to afford to wander the streets for days on end, for weeks on end. Relentlessly aimless. Lacking guidance. Going nowhere. Knowing no one.

He'd nowhere to go, no place he particularly wanted to get to. He'd step outside and not know which direction to head in.

He'd wait for an impulse to overtake him, for inspiration to strike. But he'd stand there, unmoved, not stricken, not taken with anything in his surroundings.

He had too many options, none appealing. He could go either right or left. He could go straight. He could go back inside, and sit down on his couch. He could waste half the day, watching TV, playing his Nintendo.

He had no direction.

It was, he said, just like when he'd lived in the foreign country. There, he'd step out of his house and topple over, disoriented, unable to focus on a fixed point, unable to read that foreign landscape, to even tell which end was up.

He'd get hungry but couldn't be bothered to eat, to choose from the foreign dishes, none of them appealing. He couldn't be bothered to barter for deals in the street-side markets.

He'd head back inside, retreat inside to his bedroom, his AC unit, to watch TV, to try to understand what the people were saying.

His education, was how he justified it then. Nevertheless consistently uncomprehending.

Nowadays, these days, he mostly spent his time in cafés and in bookstores. Gadding about, reacclimatizing, just observing. Minding his business. Parceling out pennies for

unsweetened tea and used books with torn covers.

Idle and listless. Wanly pursuing what had turned out to be the next stage in his miseducation.

He said this without shame. It didn't embarrass him to not work, to have no purpose.

It didn't expose him. He still kept his chin up. He maintained a durable upper lip. He didn't shave all that often, but wasn't ashamed to show his face off, to make a display of it daily.

Have you been seeing anyone? she had wanted to ask him.

No, he answered. He never saw anyone, not anymore, not very often. He'd made few friends.

He kept to himself on most days, his head held high, yet somehow remaining hidden.

Not talking to those he saw around him in the bookstores and cafés. Not asking his questions.

Do you have questions? she asked him.

I do, he answered. I'm burning with many questions.

You can ask me your questions, she said. Before you burst.

He did so. He asked her the ones he'd been holding for

her, all this time. Such as: What do you do? And: How long have you lived here, lurking beside me in bookstore basements?

All her life, she answered. She was, unlike him, a city native, had suffered through a childhood languishing out in the suburbs.

A misspent youth. Time she'd never reclaim.

As soon as she could, she had gotten away. By now, she'd been living downtown for a while. Ever since leaving college.

Ever since college, she had wanted to be a writer. She'd written short stories. She'd written short poems. She'd published a few, here and there, in small journals.

No books as of yet. Right now, at the moment, she was working away on her first, a very short novel.

A very small book, which she had been working on now for a while. For far too long, when it came time to honestly say it, to admit it freely.

Giving up and starting over. Making small edits. Experimenting with different structures.

Swapping the characters in and out.

Her problem was never having time, not time enough,

enough free time that she could set aside to write. Not time in the way she really wanted.

For hours on end. For days on end.

It was only her night job, writing was, no more than a hobby at the moment.

What's your day job, then? he asked her. You don't want to know, she said. No, tell me, he said. Insistently playful, encouraging her to confide in him.

Odds and ends, she said. She ran random errands in the daytime.

Her schedule book somehow always full. Her date book crowded with errands and deadlines and appointments.

So delete them, he said. Blow them off. Use that time for yourself, for writing your novel. Will you do that? he asked. No, she answered.

She couldn't do that. She wouldn't be capable of doing that, of deleting a single thing.

Because she liked it, she said. She secretly had to confess.

She liked the days when she didn't have time enough to think. She craved routine.

Always running from rendezvous to assignment. From

assignation to assignation.

For the most part, she worked as a freelance copywriter. She was in widgets, caught up in their complicated promotion. She wrote their copy. She worked on their user manuals, how-tos for end-users.

She had lots of widgets lying around. I can get you a couple, she offered, can keep you healthy in widgets. Lousy in widgets. A lifetime supply.

I could use a few widgets, he answered, laughing. More widgets and gizmos. It's what this apartment has been lacking.

Back in college, she said, it wasn't the kind of thing she'd ever thought she'd end up doing. When she'd pictured herself in a trade. When she'd envisioned herself as a young woman, as a professional.

You'll do something else, he said. He squeezed her hand. I don't know about that, she said. I've been stuck in this widget thing for quite a while.

It's what I've been doing, am doing each day, she said. Every day, she wrote an endless amount of copy.

On a laptop in a café. In different cafés, wherever her daytime appointments took her.

You're a rascal! he told her. All of this time, you've been

hovering at my elbow. Teasing her gently. Gently laughing.

She had her own business card, she said, and that she could show him.

She showed him her business card. It was real. She really had one.

Simple and unadorned, like her. In neutral colors. Her full name embossed in small capital letters, first and last, and including both middle initials.

Keep it, she said. I've got boxes full at home. Small boxes, neatly arranged in a corner.

Barely earning a proper living. Barely bringing her ends together, making her ends meet, those ends she could reach.

She lived in another part of town, a different neighborhood, one more affluent. She rented a third-floor apartment in a house.

It isn't much, she said. It's really nothing more than a room at the top of the stairs. Even still, she could barely afford it.

Without a stove, with nothing more to cook her meals on than a hotplate. With barely a pot that she could piss in. Always cold.

With fickle steam heat that rarely came on, that clanked when it did so, waking her up.

With no room for a couch, or a TV, or bookshelves. Her only furniture an antique Murphy bed that, when folded down, filled the whole apartment.

The boxes of business cards neatly beneath it.

She had one bookcase, a small one, set into the wall. It was full of her books, titles wedged in together. Whenever she wanted to add a new title, she was obliged to take one off.

He squeezed her hand. It sounds lovely, he said. I'd love to see it. I'd love to see your Murphy bed.

Her hand still warm, still coursing with blood. He rubbed her arm.

He rubbed her head, rubbed his own head against hers.

They brushed their lips. They brushed their chins.

They made love very slowly on his couch, in the unfinished basement, rocking calmly. Gamely balling. Screwing from end to end for hours and hours on hind end, twisting together, then gently unraveling.

As soon as she'd touched his hand, he whispered, back in the bookstore, before he had even gotten to see her, he'd had a vision of her nude, lying back in the nude on a marble floor, the floor ice-cold between her shoulders, against her thighs. He'd fantasized, he'd gotten a vision of crawling in between her thighs, of sticking something deeply inside her,

a thing that she wouldn't soon forget, that would surprise her.

He wanted to see her eyes widen in shock, her nose and chin tremble. He wanted to see her clench her teeth, to make her head rock back and forth, to shake loose her earrings.

For years now he'd had these visceral tendencies, strong desires. Unfulfilled. Unacted-upon.

To his surprise, she shared them, those viscid desires. Those ten dozen tender needs.

She wasn't embarrassed to hear him voice them. She liked to hear them. She came back to hear them every weekend.

She came by on weekends. She visited him. She returned and she did whatever he asked her to.

Lying back with her eyes closed, backside itchy against the carpet. Uncomplaining. Freely submitting to his hand, his administrations.

His explorations. For the first few weeks he dominated her. He had his way with her, the way he thought he'd wanted. But in time their positions shifted, rebalanced, reversed.

She came to dominate him, to force him back onto the carpet, to order his eyes closed, to cause him to hush.

He lay back for her. He did what she wanted. Willing.

Eager. Filled with a nervous expectation.

She sodomized him with a candle, with a carrot stick, with her hand, with a sticky widget. You like to take it in the rear end, she knowingly whispered.

He grunted. Yeah. Yeah, I like to take it. He liked to be on the receiving end.

Inserting whatever items were at hand to be inserted. Marbles. Carrot wedges. Candles.

You're something, he said. You're onto something. Let's go out. Let's do something together.

Sharing their hands, their whispered wants, their ten dozen urgent, tender needs. Their noses and lips and chins. Their reversed administrations.

In the unfinished basement, on the cheap carpet, beside the couch. From now on tethered together, stuck together, stuck on one another, sticky.

Let's be close friends, she whispered to him. Let's be better than friends, the very best of friends.

I'll be your friend till the very end, he whispered to her. Cupping her body, tasting her tongue, her teeth, her chin. You can count on me. You can always come back to depend on me.

Together, they burned their tether at both ends. His rear end burning.

For hours on weekends. For weekends and weekends.

In the evenings, they returned to the bargain bookstore. They had this common history between them.

They had the used bookstore in between them. It lay exactly halfway between their two apartments.

On weekend evenings they would set out, he from his basement, she from her overpriced third-floor apartment, each walking there. They'd set out at roughly the same time and measure their paces, meeting to go down together into the basement.

They watched where they stepped. They minded the floorboards.

There are more basements under this one, she informed him. Basements and basements. Basements of basements. They continue down forever, bottomless.

Despite the danger, they turned off the overhead lights, unscrewing the paltry incandescent bulbs.

They used her flashlight. They looked at the poor books crammed in together, musty, unwanted, wedged in together on slumping, water-damaged shelves.

Pathetic. Neglected.

The floorboards beneath them softly creaking. Their hands interlaced, their palms pressing together. Their fingers interlocked and sweating.

They stayed close together, side by side, lightly playing the flashlight's beam across titles. They felt for the bookshelves, for the barrels, for the books.

He displayed his wit. He took this chance to showcase his famous wit for her.

He imagined new titles for each of the authors.

Lumpy Mongoose. Big Zeppelins Among Us.

The Curse of the Unfinished Nighttime Ballgame. The Screaming Amigo.

Stop, she gasped, laughing hard. Stop, stop. She laughed so hard that she couldn't stand up, that she needed to sit down.

He saw how, instead of sitting down on her hind end, she squatted.

These are only the old books, he said. These are only the old, used books. Where are the new books?

There were no new books in the bookstore, on none of the

shelves. No new books in the barrels. No new books in sight.

There will never be any new books, he told her. Not unless new authors write them.

You need to write them, he said. People will want new books. You need to finish your book, for the sake of human expectations.

Its needs and desires.

They browsed and they fingered, playing the beam of light aimlessly, gently.

Despite their long hours in the basement, despite her attention, she never bought anything. So why do you come to the bookstore? he finally asked her.

New words, she said. She gestured. I'm always in need of new words for my unfinished novel. She pointed the beam of light at the dozens of titles around them. I need their words. They've already taken all the words.

She grabbed a title, flipped it open. *Effervescent*, she read. Now there's a word. I need a word like that, a poetic word.

He picked up another book, flipped it open. *Effortless*, he read. That's a damn good word as well. You should put that word inside your novel.

I will, she said. Now I have two new words.

Effervescent. Effortless.

A novel needs so many words, she said. It isn't a thing that's short.

You need, at the very least, she said, ten thousand words, each one of them different. Arranged in all sorts of combinations.

And you need to know where they all go, which word goes where. Or else you end up in the poorhouse.

The next time she came to visit him, one weekend later, he smiled and handed her a present. Unwrap it, he said.

She unwrapped it. Inside was a beat-up pocket dictionary. Now you can have all of the words, he said. You can carry them all around with you.

Thanks, she said. But they're not arranged in the proper order.

That's your task, he said. That's your mission. You must find the proper order.

Show them no mercy! Keep your chin up! Don't be lazy! Keep your lip the way I keep mine!

He had a fine chin, a firm upper lip. His eyes got rather

teary in the morning. He woke up crying, more often than not.

He smoked first thing. He reached for a fag as soon as he could.

She put an end to that. She put a stop to that. She convinced him to stop.

She couldn't French-kiss him if he were smoking, couldn't bring herself to caress him, to embrace him.

Once he quit them, the smokes, the fags, she was his, without any reservations.

Her hands down the front of his pants in a heartbeat. Her lips on his ear, her licks on his earlobe. Her breathing heavy.

She was, he realized, as he learned more and more about her, as she opened up and relaxed, as she showcased her genuine personality, much wittier than he. And much more clever.

She had a subtle way with words, from years of long practice. From noting which words meant what, due to how other people used them.

Taking them down. Scrawling quick little notes in the brown spiral notebook that she carried.

Her penmanship tiny, impossibly small. Cramped letters collapsed in upon themselves, without any room left in

their tightened loops. She could take down a thousand new words on a page and still not fill it.

Shaking and thin. Her fragile body shivering, snuggled up against his.

She never had money. She never bought books for herself, or any food at all. She never ate.

He'd never seen her eat, not since the first night that he'd met her, no food, not once ever. He cooked dinner for her.

His fridge stuffed full, filled up with various odds and ends. With marbles, with unread used books. With cans of piss, with smokes, with steam, with a gas. With unidentified animal scraps.

With marbled meats, thick with fat, written through with webs of viscera and tendons.

He'd learned to eat crazy things in the foreign country he'd lived in. Odds and ends. Poor animals' chins and noses and lips.

He cooked a soup for her, "shark fin soup." He knew how to cook that exotic soup.

I find these things down by the river, he said, indicating a stack of what he said were shark fins. People leave them there, lying around.

She was starting to recognize when he was kidding. She was starting to realize when he was joking. She asked what was really inside the soup.

You don't want to know, he said. Just eat it. Just enjoy it.

She just enjoyed it. She simply ate it. Whatever the soup was, whatever it comprised, it was delicious. She wanted to eat it.

Not once in her whole life had she eaten such tasty soup. Don't say what's inside it, she asked him.

She gobbled down all of her soup. They shared the soup. They ate soup and played his Nintendo together, in the basement, on the couch.

Sharing secrets and tips and codes and strategies. Sharing memories of games they had each of them played when younger, at earlier ages, one another as yet unknown, with vast distance and ignorance still between them.

She asked him, What are you thinking about? Not a thing, he said. He wasn't thinking about anything.

They had moved, hand-in-hand, arm-in-arm, well beyond the early stages, well beyond mere wit. They had moved to pure presence, a patience, a zone that awaited beyond mere clever sayings.

He promised her many new things. They promised each

other such beautiful, brand-new things.

I'll follow you, he said, to the very end of the earth. To the be-all and end-all of the earth.

To the ends of the earth. To the means of the earth. To the earth's meaner parts, overseas, in countries as yet unheard-of.

I'll take you overseas with me, he promised her. To my foreign country, unknown by most. To be part of its daily ongoing creation. To witness ballgames played by teams you've never heard of.

She pressed up against him, cold, always chilly. The city they lived in was famously cold, was well known for its lengthy, harrowing winters.

Why do you live here, he asked her, here in this frigid climate? For surely the earth has much warmer places.

The foreign country where he had lived was always hot, was to this day hot. Was day by day getting even hotter.

Sticky humid. Sweat-inducing.

I'll share the long plane ride there with you. I'll give you the smatterings of the language I've still retained, he said. The phrases he still understood.

She liked these offers. She liked these suggestions, these

patient promises.

At first, they had meant to share nothing more than sex, but in the end they had shared something else.

They were rhymed together now, bargained together, close together, holding one another up.

She had come to depend on him. He had come to depend on her.

They had come to depend on one another.

They shared their fears.

He had his fears, some irrational, some somewhat more rational.

There were sharks in the nearby river, he said, river sharks that could thrive in the fresher water. They swam in from out of the ocean, in search of the unsuspecting, the unwary.

He could hear them at night, on the other side of the wall. Their sharp fins scraping against the plaster.

She didn't argue. She didn't mouth one word in objection. Instead, she pulled his couch away, out into the center of the room.

That helped him a little. But nevertheless, his fears persisted. The walls were too thin, too weak to support the

brownstone building overhead. The ceiling would cave in. The walls would collapse one day and cave in.

His basement would flood, would flood and fill up with river sharks.

I'll end up inside of a shark, he said. He'd get chewed up, gobbled up and digested. He'd end up as nutrients, structural parts of a shark's right fin.

Serves me right, he said. Can't say that I don't deserve it, he said.

She said something soothing and soft and calming in response. She shushed in his ear.

You're safe, she said. You're in my arms now, safe, she said. Don't be afraid.

She rocked him to sleep. He nodded off.

He woke up lying in her arms, his head in her lap. Her legs crossed cross-legged underneath him. He had drooled all over her shins.

She was scribbling small notes in her notebook, her miniature observations. Are you writing about me? he asked.

He'd end up, he knew, as a word in one of her stories. His full name would end up as one of the many hundreds of words constituting her novel.

A word meaning *piss*. A word meaning *sticky*. A word that was equal to *depression*.

Don't be ridiculous, she said.

A word meaning *cute boy whom I love despite his having drooled on my shins*.

Her legs having cramped, having gone to sleep underneath his head. She having not minded in the least.

I need a word like that, she said. In point of fact. For the opening chapter.

Drool being an unguent, a lubricant. An emulsifying agent. A catalyst.

It gets things going. Throughout human history, throughout time, drool's been the start of many a thing.

New ages. New customs.

Brand-new eras. New cuisines.

She had to get going. Their weekend was coming to a close.

The evening shadows were drawing near, were thickly gathering.

Their weekend was ending. Soon he'd have to walk her back to her apartment.

She started crying. She cried real tears.

I hate my apartment, she said. I hate its lack of space and its clanking steam heat. I hate its third-floor nature, its no space for furniture proper, its Murphy bed that lowers and smothers everything.

She wept. She shook, her body racked with violent weeping.

Hey, he said. Hey, hey. Hey, look at me, he said.

He took her hand in his. He took her into his arms.

He said some reassuring thing, something reassuring. Why do you live out where you do? he asked.

That spot was good for her business, she answered. It was what she'd wanted, what she had once thought she had wanted.

Once, long ago. Once upon a lost time.

He ended his next sentence to her with a proposition. You could move in with me, he proposed.

SMITH AND NELSON

JESSICA NEWMAN

Moon dousing the aluminum through and through. Scraps of pillar and beam. The unrolled film of plastic bags all knitted and torn back.

This is where they would live. The dirt scratched raw. Everywhere a tangle.

They would haunt, let nothing be built there. Pilfer and break. All the foreman's nails disappeared. Buyers would fear the ghost of the place. How it angered—no sudden noise, no late-night working, keep the moonlight. Buyers would feed stories to their youngest children: do not walk the lot alone.

They slept beside rubble, woke with bodies pocked by stone. They ran their hands across this stubbled flesh.

Hold fast to me, one said.

The other said nothing, did not let go.

RESURRECTION GUN

ERNIE REIMER

My feet don't hurt so much any more, and I'm feeling warm. Warm like ice on an arctic bed. Ice in all directions. That speck on the horizon, is that Tulugaq coming back? I'll sleep now.

A mosquito whines and disturbs. A mosquito? On this frozen ocean? An engine.

Tulugaq is prodding.

"Go away," I slur with a tongue like dead meat.

Tulugaq shouts and punches.

When Tulugaq gives up and walks away, I sink gratefully back toward oblivion.

Tulugaq is kicking now and he's holding the rifle. He levers a shell into the chamber. Is there a bear? He points the muzzle at me. I am not a bear, Tulugaq. Am I?

Flash-crash, Tulugaq fires, and I scramble up on my wooden blocks and run.

Crash, again. The snow puffs at my frozen feet, and I run harder.

I'm still running when I hear the mosquito whine of the engine and turn to see Tulugaq, pacing alongside me on

his snow machine. He's holding the rifle and laughing. In Frobisher Jenny said, "Tulugaq's eyes crinkle at the corners when he laughs, you know? And I trust him." What was Jenny telling me?

"Wake up, Slim," Tulugaq shouts.

We started from Frobisher with two snow machines. Jenny introduced us. Somewhere past Pangnirtung, while we waited out a three-day storm in a tiny snow-house, Tulugaq said, "Slim, you thrash around like a seal stuck on a harpoon." When we dug our machines out of the snow, mine wouldn't start. Tulugaq said, "You treat her bad." I had to ride on the qamutik, holding onto the wooden slats with frozen fingers while Tulugaq slammed over the hummocks.

I must have fallen asleep. I woke up rolling on the ice. I jumped up and ran. Then I walked. It was mild for February, thirty-five below. I sat. Tulugaq would notice eventually. He'd come back. When we left Frobisher, Jenny said, "Are you two trying to kill each other?"

Tulugaq is pacing alongside on his snow machine and laughing.

"You shot at me . . . you asshole . . . you could've . . . killed me."

"You were already dead." Tulugaq raises the rifle over his head. "I resurrected you."

Tulugaq learned his English from the priests. They gave him a number, but he had to make up his own name.

I writhe on my hospital bed. My throat is torn. My skull is crushed. Knives pierce my belly. My feet are a torment. I

want an end; I want death, but every time I slip away, *flash-crash*, Tulugaq's gun kicks my heart awake and it flutters in panic, beats and refuses to fail.

The nurse leans over to reinsert a tube. Tulugaq died before we reached Pond Inlet. That was fifty years ago, before Pond was renamed Mittimatalik. It was an accident. "It wasn't my fault," I try to tell the nurse through a mouth full of tubes. Tubes in every orifice. I want to die, but Tulugaq paces alongside the bed, holding the rifle. He's laughing, but his eyes aren't crinkled at the corners.

QUICKSAND

STEPHANIE MANTZ

She wore hats. Big hats that she tilted to the side of her face, always to the left side of her face. She lived in a house that was run down and she mostly kept to herself. Sometimes she was seen at night, walking, always wearing high heels and her hats. People would talk about her, as people in small towns do, and they would say things, usually at parties, usually at small get-togethers, quick-paced walks around the town. There was a faded blue water tower standing on the bad side, the wrong side of town. This side of town meant cement and it meant weeds, and it meant litter, but not a lot of litter, just the normal amount. This side of town meant chain-link fences and it meant a joke of seeing how many chain-link fences you could count, and then it meant not being so funny anymore, the joke. Driving through this town you notice the green sign that reads *Peabody*, and then the water tower above the power lines that reads *EABODY*. No, it is not a mistake or a mix up; a fight between some who prefer *Ps* and others who don't. The *P* washed off, some sort of storm or magic, and if you

ask people in the town when this happened each will give you a different date.

This woman, the woman in question, the woman who wore the hats, this woman lived on the wrong side of town. She lived in a house that was run down and had a small front yard with a big sidewalk, but no litter. This woman did not have litter because this woman was not the type of woman to attract litter. She lived on the wrong side, but she was mostly clean. Litter-free. She was the type of woman that other women hate, but only because they cannot be like her. She was the type of woman that was living in a town in a house by herself while all the other women were middle-aged and living with their husbands and their children.

Sometimes the children ride their bicycles into that other side of town, the bad side, the side of town that would be across the railroad tracks if there had ever been any railroad tracks here, but these residents do not believe in trains. The dirtiness and the awfulness of having babies and then having to watch these babies stare at their mothers with spittle coming out of their pursed lips and constipation set in their twinkly eyes as they repeatedly force out, "Choo-Choo," this is why these residents don't have trains.

The children ride their bikes, against their parents' orders, down this street on the wrong side of town and they grip their handlebars and look straight ahead, a child can only be so bad, and they fly, up and down this street all afternoon. They think of how lovely it is to feel this free, this open, some even go so far as to take off their helmets, remove their grips. Years later when two or three of these boys are men and are thinking about cheating on their wives, thinking about buying a convertible, thinking

about blowing their brains out, they will think back to this moment in time, riding their bicycles, and they will become nostalgic and they will trick themselves into believing that this was the only one singular time in their lives that they had ever been happy.

The woman, sitting inside of her house, this house on the wrong side of town, this woman never did pay any attention to these children. She did not yell at them to put their helmets back on or to get out of the street, she did not bake them cookies or offer them lemonade. She never seated herself out on her front porch and read her newspaper, bestowing upon the children knowing glances every so often. There was no interaction.

It was the Sunday morning newspaper, the newspaper that came out on Sundays. It was in this newspaper, this newspaper with its useless stories and its misspelled words; it was in this paper, in small bold print, that the people in this town learned about what had happened to the woman who wore hats. As the story goes, this was a tragedy. It must have been the summer of '68 or '72, maybe even '86. Since then the town library has burned down and there remain no records. The fire was started by a kid or someone's uncle. All anyone really knows for sure is that the person in question was definitely drunk. Or perhaps the story goes that they definitely were not drunk.

On that Sunday morning, the morning that this particular newspaper came out, the newspaper boy had slept late and, for no reason that he could think of, he had also wet the bed. In telling this story to his fellow playmates he would always add in the bit about sleeping late, it made him appear aloof, but he would always leave out the part about

wetting the bed. That just made him appear like a baby. It was just beginning to be light outside when the newspaper boy woke up and found the back tire on his bike flat. So he was forced to walk. Strolling up and down through the straight streets of Peabody he thought that there was something strange in the air. This something strange could perhaps be tied to the massive manure factory that was located the next town over, but no one ever told the boy this. He was a sweet child but not a good storyteller, too much of a weakness for the dramatic.

As the newspapers settled onto the front stoops the sun was up and people inside their houses were just beginning to drink their coffee and think about the church service that they had almost just attended. Wives were standing over the stove, pretending to be thinking about cooking a large breakfast, children anxiously believed, while husbands figured out the truth. Cereal bowls were set out. As the men went out with their cups of coffee in their hands, some already spiked with whiskey despite the early hour, they were surprised at how nice the weather was, and then they found themselves surprised about that thought.

Some were sitting on the couch, others on the toilet when they read the headline; one man had gone back into his bed. No one spilled their coffee or screamed for their wives. No one had to sit up any straighter, or pay any more attention to what exactly life meant. "Woman Dies in Quicksand." The story was short; there was no follow-up on page three, four or five. Sometimes the town newspaper had upwards of six or seven pages, but this year when little Tommy had gone to the state fair he just hadn't been able to bring home anything good. The woman's name was

mentioned and there was a small picture, black and white, grainy, it showed a line of trees surrounded by a thin strip of flapping police tape. The picture could have been taken anywhere where there were trees and a police squad, but the caption informed the reader that the misfortune had taken place at "The Old Marshall Lot." Calling it "The Old Marshall Lot" was misleading. The lot was not old, nor did it belong to the Marshalls. There was a family living there now, going by the name of Hirschberger, they had built a replica of an old-style farmhouse. Everyone in the town knew of course that Jews weren't farmers, but had decided with the newfound trend of political correctness that they guessed perhaps these Jewish people could do whatever they wanted.

The photo in the news story was of the large stretch of field behind the Hirschberger house; it was a wooded lot, fairly expensive. Fairly expensive, the lot contained trees, a stream. The wooded lot was lush with autumn-colored leaves. Couples were known to bring blankets out and give themselves to each other here, swearing eternity under the stars until school started.

The town was confused. The men read over the article quickly as they shifted pages, but found that they could not get that picture out of their heads. That picture of nothing they could not get out of their heads. Out of their heads they could not get that picture of empty. Mothers would bang their shopping carts against each other as children tucked lollipops into empty pockets. Get-togethers now consisted of dressing up in ironed clothes only to sit down for hours and muse over what could have happened. The article gave no details and no one could get ahold of

the Marshalls for any kind of statement. Someone dialed the Marshalls' number and could not get an answer. The Marshalls were not talking. It was eventually remembered that the Marshalls were vacationing in Florida, a retirement retreat, and also that it hadn't even taken place at the Marshalls' house. Years upon years later it would be remembered that there was no one by the last name of Marshall who even lived in the town of Peabody, and so, for some months after, everyone would wonder who they must have been trying to talk to.

The last unexpected death remembered in the town of Peabody had been of a transient, a wino who you would sometimes see walking behind the fence that surrounded the main parts of the town. He would always walk with an umbrella and a brown bag. He would always walk with a cane and a suitcase. He would always jog listening to music. He would always stroll while taking pictures. He was found face-down in a water pipe. The newspaper told the town that the cause of death appeared to be homelessness. Homelessness or poorness, the newspaper told the town. In small print the newspaper reported that homelessness or poorness or blackness was the cause of death, but everyone knew that that had been just a misspelled sentence. The town had not been confused about this.

The woman who wore hats, the strange woman who wore hats and high heels, the silent woman who wore hats and spoke to no one, the dead woman who had once worn hats had no family that anyone could find, and so funds were raised by the local church and grocery store to pay for her funeral. The town bought a casket; black, very classy. There was no body. At the funeral, people wore their best,

a few cried. Handkerchiefs were brought out; small tears were squeezed, their makers looking around first, left to right, front to back. Yes, this was sad, see? From the front of the church the preacher spat about an angry God and the rain that had not been coming down for months. He asked for an *Amen*, and then for some money. He was granted neither. At the house of the woman, food was served. Vegetables, a cheese tray, there were no utensils.

Everything inside the dead woman's home was beige. Inside the house of the woman who was dead, the walls were lightly colored. Everything was brown in the abode of the deceased. The walls were bare, a few tasteful paintings of flowers or a house with a garden. There was one of two children sitting by a pond playing with geese. People walking through this house were disappointed. They had wanted something. They had needed to find something. They had been expecting to find something that showed she was different. Different was what they had been looking for.

A lady, searching through the woman's drawers for colorful little tablets full of awkward-sounding names, found a necklace identical to one she owned. A man sticking his fat fingers beneath the mattress for a gun, a rope, an ice pick noticed the same sheets he had in his own home. A grandmother on her hands and knees in the closet, old appendages swiveling around, looking for dead animals, sacrifices to some unknown god, only found her own brand of pantyhose. Everyone made their way back to the crowd. A single line was made, and shuffled through rooms. Things were touched, and remembered; neighbors inspected the dustiness and the mundane.

People began to get angry. One man forgot to remove

his shoes and ruined the carpet. No one said a word. As the women exited, they dropped their sorrows off at the fridge. Rectangular, square, and circular containers filled with lasagna and goulash meant to feed an army of starving men would now go untouched. The empty house would survive for weeks off faintly tinted Tupperware smeared with angry last names. None of this would be returned, but no one knew what else to do.

The rain had finally begun to fall. On a drunken Friday night a few men left the bar and wandered back to the place in the picture. No one said anything as the men exited at last call. The yellow police tape was still there, as it had appeared in the picture, flapping slowly, giving up. Water was driving onto the men's backs and the men's shoulders and the men's faces as they walked around the yellow tape. The men walking around the yellow police tape were being soaked by the rain. Chilled to the bone were the men walking. One of them found a woman's high-heeled shoe. It was red, shiny. Without knowing why, he slipped it into his jacket and continued walking, the bulge making an uncomfortable feeling in his side, in his heart. Each man was unsure why he was there; and yet they all stayed. In the distance, through the woods, the men could see the outline of the faded blue water tower.

Eventually, one by one, stating that their wives would be mad and worried, everybody took off for home. Finally, at almost daybreak, the men started off for bed. In due course, as goes the story, the men turned from each other and shuffled back. Stumbling into their houses that night the men

woke their wives, shaking them desperately, harshly. Staring into worried eyes, they found they had nothing to say, and the women were not in the mood anyway.

The next fall, school started, summer was over. Children were forced this year to attend a safety class. Notifications had been mailed directly to the homes on cheerful flyers explaining to the parents exactly what was being done with their offspring. No one had any more opinion about the woman in the high heels. The woman with the hats and the high heels, no one could remember. No one thought about that woman. The class consisted of stations filled with older ladies from the next town over holding out bright pamphlets. Children learned what to do if they were ever attacked by bees, or how to escape from a car that had just rolled into the lake. Demonstrations were performed of what to do if you were on a diving excursion and the ocean top suddenly caught on fire from an oil spill. The conversations around the dinner table now centered around the knowledge that quicksand was denser than the human body. The little boys and girls eagerly told their parents that it would be almost impossible to drown in it. In fact, the little boys and girls told their parents, it wasn't even real.

That autumn something was wrong. That autumn mothers no longer felt like serving their roast beef and the YMCA had to shut down classes that taught yoga and knitting. Phone calls were put out; the school stopped. Everyone decided that they were safe enough.

Birkensnake 3 was edited by Joanna Ruocco and Brian Conn. Cover by Chemlawn, table of contents by Art Middleton. Each story copyright 2010 its author. Set with L^AT_EX. The font is Day Roman, designed in the 16th century by François Guyot and digitized in the 21st century by Apostrophiclub; the italic is from efont-serif, by the Electronic Font Open Laboratory, which seems to be Japanese; the decorative initial in the table of contents is from Eileen, by Dieter Steffmann. We take submissions year-round via Submishmash at birkensnake.submishmash.com/submit. All other correspondence to birkensnake@birkensnake.com. We would love for you to send us submissions and other objects by mattermail, but the fact is we have no suitable address. This and previous issues of *Birkensnake* are available in various forms at birkensnake.com, and you can see more of Chemlawn's work at thekidneypress.com. We would like at this point to thank the many people who will contribute to the production of this issue, but because at the time of this writing the issue has not yet been produced, we have to guess who will contribute, and thus run the risk of omitting to mention someone who might unexpectedly, two weeks from now, spend several hours helping us fold pieces of paper in half. It's a chance we have to take: thanks to Michelle Carriger, Carrie Collier, Jason Corace, Deb Dormody, Andrew Oesch, Alec Thibodeau, and the accommodating inmates of the Dirt Palace (dirtpalace.org). Thanks to the writers whose work appears here. Thanks to antihistamines, the digital age, deception, altruism, Gary Gygax, and Providence College. We really have nothing further to add but have decided that we want to fill the last of the page. *Birkensnake* is printed and bound in Providence, Rhode Island.

