

At Dawn, the Bird

(All NY Times headlines taken from the week of
the shuttle crash--the first week of February)

I. Possible Damage to the Wing

We were watching TV when the bird hit the window and fell to the patio with its wing arched unnaturally beneath it. "Is it possible that it's still alive?" I ask. My father shakes his head.

"Well..." he sighs. His face looks pained in the moment that the bird's body thumps against the window and drops to the ground--then it softens to grief. A small pool of blood emerges from beneath its body. I cock my head at the mystery of this bird that mistook our window for air. Your body grows cold already, Texas patio dove.

Penguins spend up to seventy-five percent of their lives underwater--even those on display at the aquarium. We watch them dive headfirst into the water like fat arrows, their arms sleek and thick at their sides. Fish, freshly killed and slick like steel, slip down their throats without a word.

In Chilean folklore, the penguin is not the only bird unable to fly. The Alicanto is a nocturnal sparrow that feeds on the veins of gold and silver. The weight of the metal is what keeps it from flying.

II. Tracking Shuttle, Many Saw Long Trail of Flames Instead

The Egyptians' bird of eternal life was what the Greeks would call Phoenix. Did it roost in treetops and cactus arms? Or did it fly, leaving trails of flames across the horizon? Did it scatter its ashes over the earth like the strewn answers to immortality; the clues to rebirth irreparably dispersed like the infinite pieces of a puzzle?

I used to fall asleep to locusts. Their plump insect bodies sang a long and unanswered serenade. They lived on the trees outside my window. They left crisp skeleton skins behind them, whose leggings still clung to the bark. I have never seen them land, though I wonder if they do it all at once, or in pieces. If they gather to one tree over time, or if they descend in swarms, settling over the branches like a shroud--a skin of screaming scales.

In Carlsbad Caverns, stalactites plunge earthward, stalagmites stretch heavenward. Like tapered tree trunks. Like lava. My voice trickles over the cool of the walls. Here and there, ends meet--a stalactite thinks it has reached the earth, and a stalagmite believes it's in heaven.

III. Shuttle Program: Fly or Shut Down?

In Japanese mythology, the Pheng was a bird large enough to eclipse the sun, and hungry enough to live on a diet of camels. Today Japanese crows--descendents of the myth perhaps--have learned to lay walnuts at intersections. When the light turns, the cars roll over the semi-soft shells, crushing them open for the birds. Seagulls drop clamshells from the air onto the seashore, then dive down to gather the meat. In Greece, eagles snatch tortoises between their claws, flying up with them until they are high enough to release over the rocks. There are things that even tortoise shells cannot sustain.

When a stalagmite touches a stalactite, they become something of an hourglass at first, then fatten into a column of dripping stone. Gravity takes hold. They have stopped reaching and have begun simply falling. The walls of caves are a pale yellow, and those that I have seen have been lit with bulbs that wire into nooks and shelves of limestone. Below, a pool of water laps against the rocks--or rather seems to rustle on its own, without moving. Like those hanging rocks that form from drops of water, the echo of the pool drifts upward, and down again--fills the space with its descent.

IV. At Dawn, the Columbia

A mother penguin, I am told, will only lay two eggs in her lifetime, and remain monogamous. Her companion recognizes her by the sound of her screams, and the beat of her wings. She keeps her eggs warm by keeping them from touching the ice with her feet, until they hatch after two months. Not far from the penguins, blue whales drift in colossal silence beneath the surface of the ocean.

Whales do not have vocal cords, yet they produce the loudest sound of any animal on the planet. Their deep calls are like elastic stretching slowly through water. They sound like love ballads, or spirits in limbo, like memory drifting away.

Whale songs are not the only polar spirits. Arctic myth tells of a bird called Anka who lived for 1700 years, after which it would burn and renew itself like the phoenix. It was said to have carried away elephants like eagles carrying tortoises; like the Native American Thunderbird, who was powerful enough to carry off whales--lightning streaming from its beak and thunder rolling from beneath its wings.

From where we stand, the sound of the penguins is muffled and far away. On the wall is written, "Penguins: the only birds that can't fly" and I think for a moment that it's a good thing these birds don't read either. Perhaps they don't know they don't fly. Or perhaps they are flying when they swim. Sometimes, I imagine, the air is just too stifling for them, and their bodies slip into the water like birds fluttering upward.

SOURCES:

Gareth Huw Davies, "Bird Brains" from *The Life of Birds* by David Attenborough, PBS program:
<http://www.pbs.org/lifeofbirds/brain/index.html>.

SeaWorld/Busch Gardens Animal Information Database (©2002 Busch Entertainment Corporation) at
<http://www.seaworld.org/infobooks/Baleen/birthbw.html>.

From ❖❖Unknown Forest❖❖❖: <http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Lair/4544/birds/>

February 9, 2003, Sunday
Sexy It's Not, but Big Science Thrives on Earth
By GEORGE JOHNSON (NYT) 929 words

Sexy It's Not, but Big Science Thrives on Earth

From across the restaurant, a man leans over and whispers in a woman's ear. She is resting her fingers on the rim of her glass. The only sound that whistles across the tables like dust is a double "s." Sss.Sss. Sexy, he tells her, and the "s's" sliver all over her wine glass.

Scientists say that living organisms can successfully migrate through the solar system. The theory that life on earth began this way is called *panspermia*. All over the universe are comets packed with life that slither at random through the atmosphere like tadpoles. Perhaps we began like this: our cosmic ancestors planted into the earth like seeds.

How did we happen to grow? What made us push upward, mold ourselves into the earth's dynamics, as though we were meant to be here—as though we were more than mere aliens. What does it mean to thrive? Flowers thrive under the right weather. Children with learning disabilities thrive under adapted environments. Communities thrive on accumulated wealth. Economies thrive like trees, subject to forest fire, deforestation, realty ventures.

Does the desert thrive on the sun? Do words thrive on ideas? Do humans thrive on love, on liberty, or on sex? on air, on water, on capital? on illusions or on nothing at all?

February 27, 2003, Thursday
THE SKI REPORT; Finding Uniformity in the Lexicon of Snow
By BARBARA LLOYD (NYT) 916 words

Finding Uniformity in the Lexicon of Snow

I.

There is a myth I would like to dispel. There are not 400 words for *snow* in Eskimo—or Inuit for that matter. There are really only a few that vary just like in English: snowy, snowflake, snowball, snowman. There is another myth I would like to dispel. Chewing gum does not remain undigested in our stomachs for seven years. It comes out with everything else, normally, in twenty-four hours (if we are lucky), if not in the next several days. Nor will I die if I salt my vegetables. Nor will coffee stunt my growth. Someday, I have decided, I will write a book of these little essential facts, with backing by illustrious doctors and scientists, Nobel-prize winners and other such well-respected men and women, assuring my readers of the pure nonsense in these claims-turned-proverbs that rule the elementary school playground.

II.

These things cannot be rearranged, cannot be repainted with starker clarity. Kindergarten. We scamper around Montessori-style rooms, round and low to the ground, stiff carpet-rugs and a circle outlined in red tape that indicates where to sit during group time. There we are, sitting around that scarlet circle, knees bent, watching popcorn explode from a little machine placed in the center. We leap forward at the emerging white puffs, and are scolded back to our places behind the tape. We ooh and ahh until each of us is given a little Dixie cup of popcorn to crunch between our teeth—to imagine it as the same hard corn we saw spill into the machine.

What was so special about that popcorn that we watched it burst in front of us like a snowy volcano, as though it furthered our knowledge of mechanics, or of the alphabet? What was so special about that popcorn that I remember it so vividly today, so many years later, the yellow kernels of corn forever turning?

III.

It is a beautiful day today. It is not snowing, although if it were, there would be only a handful of ways to say this in either Eskimo or Inuit. I am out in the street smiling at passers-by, wondering if they are aware of this—of the scant number of ways to say snow in that distant, frost-laden culture. I begin collecting myths in my mind like trash along the roadside,

until I am obsessed with gathering it all, and stuffing it deep inside a landfill. I am so full of it after two blocks of walking that I feel I must burst out the truth to every jogger, car, dog, and stroller that passes. And I realize that it is the myth of the *snow* that is at the bottom of it all. And I set my mind on settling the problem.

"You know that thing about all the words for *snow*, in Eskimo?" I ask someone. "There are over 400, right?" "No. There are not. It is a myth." "Really?" "Yes. You have been lied to." "Hm."

"There are truly well under 50, perhaps 10 words for *snow* in Eskimo." "Sorry?" "There are really not very many words for *snow* in Eskimo. Or Inuit." "Oh."

"I'm sure you've heard about all the words for *snow* in Eskimo?" "I guess. There are a lot?" "No. Not at all."

IV.

Grammar. Advanced kindergarteners learn how to pick out nouns, adjectives, and verbs--how to label them, color code them with designated shapes. Verbs are red circles, adjectives green rectangles, and nouns . nouns I do not remember. (Blue squares? Black triangles?) I loved this--the picking apart, the ordering and allocating--so many words whittled down to three simple categories. So neat. So indescribably neat.

On a field trip to the elementary school library, we see pictures of fingerprints. We also learn how to use the Dewey Decimal system, running our fingertips over the worn tops of index cards that line mini-shelves like soldiers. And we listen to the sounds whales make underwater, hear how the wheels of airplanes tuck in to their bellies once the plane is airborne, and the way detectives use fingerprints to find criminals. Fingerprints like snowflakes. Each finger on each hand of each arm of each body. Each swirl, spiral, and longing loop of ridged skin. Each soft pad, distinct. Different. These digit designs are my very own, the artistic patterns of my body, the ineffable lines and dimples that make me *me*.

V.

I fall asleep dreaming of Eskimos, that all look identical to the Eskimo doll I had as a girl, with the cheek I slightly gnawed as a baby. They are surrounded in snow. There is snow up to their furred boots, and snowflakes sliding down the arched walls of their igloos, and snow in the air, and snow in the sky, and snow all around from who-knows-where, freezing into infinite glittering scales of ice, each distinct like floating fingerprints. And I cannot help but be moved by this, by the eskimo's ice-house and ice-packed freezer, and the children's slides made of snow, and the snow that clings to moustaches, and the snow that sinks into boots and melts against socks; the snow that crunches and the snow that squeals when slipped upon, and the snow that sinks and crusts and mushes and gathers and drips; and most of all the snow that falls, that flutters, or rocks like leaves on their way to ground, or twirls earthward like hit planes, or sort of slinks downward in a semi-straight path, as though it were ashamed and were trying to fall unnoticed. There is so much snow in my dream in so many ways that I want there to be a word for every way, just as I want there to be words for every minute beautiful thing that does not have a word, but deserves one no less than a thing with a word. And like Adam, I want to name them: to bestow recognition on all the letterless beauty, however much of it there may be.

And then I wake up, the sun falling into blocks over my face from the square window panes above my bed. But I don't have a word for this, as the Eskimos do not have 400 words for *snow*, though perhaps it is not the words that count, but the fact that it is there--the snow--all around them, and they know it, or we know it, or someone knows it and sees it, and sees so much wordless beauty in all that *snow* that deems the myth worthy, just to make us think about it--about all the snow and all the words that fall from the sky like brief flurries of ice, for only a moment before melting into the earth, unspoken.

Records of What has Been

I once heard this story about two old men: twins in their nineties who were blocked inside their own apartment, who were discovered weeks after their death. Neighbors say they were surrounded by piles of old newspapers collected and stacked like crisp yellow towers all the way to the door that opened only a crack, and to the ceiling that chipped in rippling circles, like dried skin.

I wondered what they were doing in there, and if they counted the pages in their spare time, or chuckled at long-forgotten news items, or if they re-examined obituaries as they shook their heads and scratched names from their address books.

My grandfather reads the paper off a computer screen, then e-mails articles to anyone with a computer, forwards commentaries, rantings, joke lists, anecdotes, historical fun facts. My grandfather doesn't talk to me much, though sometimes interrupts to bring up an old war story, whose point almost always escapes me. He is half-deaf from age, I suppose, or from a long life of fixing things, of being in the Navy, of learning to be a successful business man, of raising three daughters. One day he brings home a tiny black puppy, with a tail that curls, who sleeps beside a ticking clock in a cardboard box. As it grows, it figures out that the ticking is not at all its mother's heartbeat but an old travel clock, or perhaps it never really figures it out, but chooses an old man for a father instead of the heartbeat, and begins to curl up instead in my grandfather's lap in front of the TV.

The day I tell my mother I am starting anti-depressants, she is tossing vegetables into the blender. She asks, just before switching it on puree, "You know your grandfather's been on Prozac for years?" and I say no, I didn't know, and I go to sleep that night thinking of his house, of the dim glow of the tv, in the room with old Christmas cards, where he sits with

his dog, a bowl of popcorn on the table beside him, and enormous headphones encircling his temples to help him hear the sound of the gazelles on the Discovery channel.

I have never seen my father cry, which I am told is fairly normal. Where do fathers go when they cry? I wonder. And I wonder if my father makes noise when he cries, as I do when I am very sad--that deep noise that comes from somewhere in the chest, that falls from our tongues like thunder, like something unknown, or like a sound that never existed until that moment. I know he cried when his mother died, so many years ago, while my brother and I were told by our mother, his ex-wife, over ice cream after school. And I know he cried last year, when his father died in a car wreck, as I too cried, though I was in another country, where the sound of my sobs echoed unheard from the smooth tile of the hotel bathroom.

I was once in love with a boy like that--who never cried--who never slept alone, because he was afraid of waking up with no one beside him. At night I woke to the sound of his voice, speaking out into the air to someone, to no one. I would turn to him and mutter, "I am listening," because I didn't know what else to say, and he would kiss me on the forehead, and smile. "I don't need you to." Then one day in his kitchen, I heard the sound of ripping, of paper splitting again and again. And I walked to the doorway of his bedroom, watched him shred, top to bottom, all the magazine pages, photographs, and posters that clung to his walls. I watched his face, still and silent, his eyes reaching upward with his hands to pull the corners from their tacks, the strips of paper floating to his bare feet like leaves. "What are you doing?" I asked. "Stop," I told him, and I stepped between him and the wall, "Stop this." I took his wrists in my hands, and pulled them toward me, their veins taut, and I cupped his face and looked for an answer in his blank eyes. "What are you doing?" I whispered. "What are you doing?"

There's this boy I knew growing up, with dark curly hair and a house whose front yard slopes straight upward, whose floors are lined in gray marble. His father checks my eyes in a cold office with narrow walls and photos of elephants on them. And this boy has an alliterative name, like Evan Esterman, or Freddie Finkel, or Daniel Duchess. He plays every afternoon with my brother, and I feel left out because I am a girl and a sister and a little one. I come home from summer camp one year when my mother tells me what happened to this boy, who took his father's rifle, pressed it against his forehead, pulled the trigger. This boy, with dark curly hair and a front yard that slopes straight upward, whose floors are lined in perfect gray marble. And I have to just understand. Like that. Because suicide happens and life goes on and there are so so many things that we do not see.

I once heard this story about two old men, twins, who died surrounded in old newspapers. I knew nothing of these men, though I imagine them thin and bearded. I imagine them widowed and absent-minded, amused by these old paper relics of things they have lived and forgotten. I imagine them, somehow, for some reason, beyond sadness or need or desire, but filled only with a sense of so much history, of love known and lost and shelved in the shallow spaces between their ribs. I imagine them this way because I prefer to think of sadness as not existing where it cannot be seen, like x-rays of lungs and livers, like history books--unmistakable, words claimed and printed and promised.

I prefer not to think of all the sadness that cannot be seen, that whisks up in the beards of those old men, and hangs in the air like dust behind gazelles; that soaks into the tiles of hotel bathrooms, and vanishes into silence like the sounds my father must make when he cries alone. I prefer not to think of all the sadness that cannot be seen, that rises like submarines in our chests and piles inside locked doors like so many stacks of papers, records of what has been, what has passed without our knowing, without our approving or hearing or even wanting to know, but what happens all the same, like giant white waves of sadness that roll past, ebbing and unheard.