

The Bridges That Will Be Submerged

Carl Peterson

*P*urchasing is now a religion. I do not mean that we worship consumerism (this may or may not be true, but seems less provable than my argument, and less significant). Instead, I mean that purchasing now shapes every choice we have, including moral ones. The economy supplies moral alternatives in the way priesthoods once did. Once upon a time ideas were considered to exist outside the marketplace, unchanging and not for sale. Then it was felt that they had a marketplace of their own; that the best ideas, in fair competition, would vanquish inferior ones. But this early twentieth century logic was invalidated when the violence of war and totalitarianism proved that so called inferior rhetoric was indeed quite saleable, and when, in the wake of the disenchantment that followed, all marketplaces became globally integrated. Ideologies today must sell themselves in order to survive, like American microchips or Swedish furniture or Japanese cars. Ideas can only be sustained through purchasing, otherwise they evaporate from our cultural consciousness. This

may not seem like a radical notion, but it is when its effects are fully understood. No idea, morality, theology, or psychology is safe unless it is saleable. And this applies to histories, too.

Jon's father decorated their home with maps. He was especially fond of those that were outdated and inaccurate. The time before maps Jon's mind has obscured, the time when Constance fled the house, the harried gray Victorian standing between Fifth Street and a shallow birch grove that blotted out the boundaries among nearby backyards.

He was playing in the living room. He had the big map of medieval England down off the wall, still in its frame, and he tromped green soldiers of molded plastic across the glass that protected the artifact. He heard the staccato clack of the typewriter fall down the hallway from his father's workroom while the infantry executed an invasion of Wales. When Jon left for West Virginia years later, the map of England was one of the few he didn't sell. It hung over the mantle in his cabin, proof that a broader world existed outside Windfall. Back in the Victorian on Fifth, his father had told him not to take the maps off the walls, but his father noticed nothing when he was writing. Jon coordinated invasions, and he read his father's books, and he pried into places his father had verbally warded off. A particular favorite was the sour faced bureau in the living room. Its heavy doors were swollen by age and humidity, and they would not shut during the summer. His father's typing and pacing and snoring hummed in his ears while he sorted through the contents of this cabinet.

Of course, in later days, the letter he found nestled among the pages of a Wittgenstein biography in the bureau seemed particularly important. Although he hadn't seen the letter since that day during the summer between the fourth and fifth grades (the book being deprived of its epistolary marker when he spotted it on the coffee table a week later), he was fairly certain he could recall several passages verbatim across the distance of a decade and a half, including: "This is not about Hannah, Neil, or any of the others. At least, not in the way it seems it should be"; and "Your artistic community, if it can even be called that, isn't enough for

me. I can't draw from it like you can, parasitically. Anyway, they are leaving you now like I am. I've been watching it for years. You can finish your inward retreat in peace, which I think best"; and also, "If you aren't careful Jon may become a distilled version of you. Try to keep him from this if you can."

The letter was written on a sheet of typing paper. Although the words could easily have been made to fit on one side of the sheet, the script was scrawled loosely in order to fill both, as if to ensure that no other writing could join it. A week before his seventeenth, as he cleaned the house in preparation for his move to Windfall, Jon tried to find the letter among the mountains of papers in his father's possession. It was gone.

What do I mean by this? The histories we buy will destroy those we don't. The buying patterns we establish will dissolve what came before them. And the psychologies we choose will overwrite their competitors on the page.

Everything is a product. I am certain that the only demographic with power, cultural power, is a purchasing one. If we want to believe in something we must continue to buy it into existence, or it will be burned away and forgotten. Even scholarly interest in the cultural ideologies and topographies of the past acts like a currency in that slow end of the marketplace, the university. Higher education may seem like a small shop, disguised as a place of objective learning, but the truth is that the university is dependent on the market as well, dependent on the whims of college students and their tuition paying parents. Knowledge is not permanent. Knowledge is product that has to be restocked like milk or bagels or cereal. If there's no enrollment, the courses will go untaught. Nothing is static. Nothing is unplugged. Everything exists inasmuch as it is able to sell itself across the system.

Some accomplishments, not to be mentioned aloud but always to be kept in mind: at twelve, National Student Essay Contest champion (\$5,000 prize); at fourteen, Holcombe High School diploma (4.0 unweighted G.P.A.; college classes begun that summer); at sixteen, college coursework completed (independent status granted that fall

for obvious reasons); at seventeen, full time teacher and researcher (exceptionally vivid case studies are available in a large number of communities in West Virginia where the coal has run out); at nineteen, enrolled in the graduate program of the Sociology department at the University of California, Berkeley; at twenty-three, first book of essays published with adequate critical response; at twenty-four, PhD (tenure track job secured one month prior to defending dissertation) followed by a twilight beach ceremony near Point Richmond with a lovely forward-thinking woman from the right intellectual circles, dying to explore the Midwest (in attendance: eminent sociologists, poets, and philosophers, from Berkeley, around the Bay Area, New York even).

Yes, everything is a product. And every attribute of a product is itself also a product.

Consider the egg. Egg producers do not sell eggs from cage free chickens because they think it's the right thing to do; they sell those eggs because there's a steady market comprising persons willing to pay a dollar and a half more for the peace of mind that no chickens were tortured in the production of their omelets. In fact, egg companies are likely to sell both kinds of eggs under different brand names, preaching to different niche markets. In this way, ideology becomes attribute and attribute becomes product.

He remembers playing with Timothy and Scott. The three of them wandered among the birches after soccer games on Saturday afternoons late in grade school. They whittled walking sticks. They ran down to the lake and dangled in fingers. The October water was cold, but nowhere near ice. It would be a couple of months before they could walk out onto Lake Reed, invent boot hockey games with other local kids. They clacked sticks against the rocks and ran back toward Jon's house. The sky a cheerless slate gray. Scott led the way beneath the clouded vault, through trees and back yards.

"What we need's a good tree fort. Your dad let us build one?"

"The birches won't work. No big branches."

"What about your house, Tim?"

"I could ask my mom."

“Don’t ask Mrs. Stevens anything on our account.”

“Yeah, mommy’s boy.”

“Mommy’s boy.”

“Am not.”

“What we need is a wilderness fort. Bridges going from tree to tree, way out somewhere. Like the woods behind the park.”

“What about Jon’s attic?”

The taller boys scoffed at Tim, blond and small with a poorly whittled stick, his weak hands barely able to force the knife through the wood pulp.

“The attic’s retarded.”

“Yeah.”

They dodged the Blotts’ big wolfhound as they skirted the property two down from Jon’s house. In the Nickell yard the grass was tall and patchy. Jon hesitated to invite the others in.

“Let’s walk over to Scott’s.”

“It’s a goddamn mile. I’m not walking that far.”

“We could go to my house,” Tim said. “My mom could come get us.”

Jon and Scott looked at each other. It was appealing. Better than staying at the Victorian amidst his father’s disarray, or going to Scott’s, whose little brother had a brood of his own friends to pester them and to hog the video games. Best to stray toward Tim’s. Time ran like syrup across these afternoons. Jon sensed them flowing by, one fall succeeding another with fleeting seasons between. October always captivated him. It was during October that he stopped sleeping.

This came during the month before his twelfth birthday. Jon didn’t sleep once the entire thirty-one days. Not in the Victorian. Not anywhere. By then, he was taller than Scott and Tim but lankier than ever. His chest felt tight. He would close his eyes and only grow more awake. He didn’t think his friends believed him when he told them he hadn’t slept.

For months, his father had been disappearing a few days at a time. Never regularly. But Jon would come home on certain Friday afternoons to find the Victorian empty. A storm rose up the first time it happened, after dusk, and the shutters on the house rattled while Jon sat curled in the corner of the sofa and watched a movie

on the bubble screened black and white television. He lit candles and read an old children's book about boys and dragons straight through three times. He had some sense that it was late, but the only working clock in the house was up in his father's bedroom, so he looked for other things to read. He found letters addressed to his father and read them. The sun came up, and Jon walked out into the fog, his nose red and his hands tucked deep in the pockets of his jeans. The fog filled the low-lying parts of town and he hiked through it, descending and then rising up out of its pools.

The house's clutter had begun to grow. His father's papers and books, once contained to the old man's bedroom and the study and the living room, had spilled out into the hallway in heaps. When he walked through the house Jon imagined the Victorian was his own brain, and he was a message being pulsed from one synapse to another, like a diagram in one of the science books he'd begun to read. His movement in the house was being hindered more and more. By the time his father's vagrancy hit its stride, some rooms had towers of books and typing sheets blocking their doorways to the hip. The science books told him if you didn't use parts of your brain, they atrophied.

He sat in Constance's former painting studio on the second floor, paging through a broad book of maps he'd found in the attic. It was Sunday afternoon, the first weekend his father had gone away. Sunlight angled through an arching window on the south wall of the studio. Jon sat cross-legged in the sunny semicircle on the floor. It should have been making him sleepy, he thought. Then he heard the screen door smack its wooden frame downstairs. A moment later, his father appeared in the hallway, his lower half hidden behind a rampart of hardbacks. He held a fishing pole with no line. Absurd. His father hated the outdoors.

"Where'd you go?"

His unshaven father looked at him a moment. He ran fingers through greasy gray hair. Jon leaned back in the sun and waited for an answer.

"Did you find anything to eat while I was gone?"

"Not really."

"I'll make us something."

“Where’d you go, huh?”

His father drifted away down the hall. Jon heard him rummaging through pots and pans in the kitchen, looking for the square skillet he used to make French toast, his peace offering food.

When October arrived that year, and Jon’s sleep dried up altogether, his father was disappearing more regularly. Jon read science books and paged through the book of maps that showed old surveys from around the state. If his father was home, turning on lights tipped him off that Jon was still awake, so Jon took to burning candles for reading. He stole a twenty off his father’s dresser one day to go buy more after school. When the month ended and he finally found he could sleep again, he discovered that he didn’t need more than two or three hours each night. He read more and more those days, making a game out of it, seeing how many books he could read each week, each month.

Culturally, how do we achieve these patterns? Many philosophers and social theorists suggest that neuroses develop within cultures in the same manner that they arise in individuals. Fixations on punishment, for example. Or fixations on revealing what is considered shocking only to stigmatize it. Or fixations on sex rather than violence as a barometer of moral decay. The reality, I would argue, is that these preoccupations are economic outcomes, derived from market conditions.

Consider the faithful. The burgeoning market in the past decade and a half for evangelical Christian music, books, and now films illustrates my point. The masses of church going Christians consider these products according to their ideological intentions rather than their utility as art or entertainment objects. The ideology is the only attribute of merit. As we know, attribute is product, and so these attributes shape their presence in the market. Similarly, we see evangelical groups boycotting or endorsing certain product lines because of moral associations. In fact, we may very soon begin to see product lines that are perceived by the public to have definable ideological traits. Pepsi becomes a liberal cola; Coke is conservative. Disneyland offers benefits to gay and lesbian couples and so is condemned by the religious right, which

prefers the rectitude of Six Flags. Ford is a pro-life truck; Chevy is pro-choice. Each product stakes its claim to the moral market.

When Jon was five months from his PhD in California, Deirdre rose up in his consciousness, a mutual acquaintance gleaned from the circles that straddled the academy and the town. She was small everywhere, except a mane of wild brown hair. Narrow shoulders and lips looking always wet. She wore pajama bottoms and thrift store blouses to parties, her hair split into a bushel on each shoulder. Or in a bun, her soft warm face reminding him of an English girl from the heath, a Brontë character with a spellbinding androgyny. Her last relationship had come to an ugly conclusion, with a women's studies professor almost as tall as Jon who was fond of black slacks and corduroy jackets that fell short of her long hips.

He couldn't remember the first occasion that Deirdre excited him. And it wasn't, he noted to himself, something so pedestrian as the fact that he knew she was attracted to women. He saw that, with Deirdre, each day was an identity to be inhabited. This fascinated him, her revelry as she sunk into a new role. Still, she tolerated few romantic men. His fixation on her, light, not gripping, a cupped hand in which she could land, like a bird, as he pictured it, slowly eased her over a period of months into the idea of a sexual relationship with him. She played the bird, and he was delirious that she gave him such attention, began to think he could convince her to keep it going indefinitely, not her interest in men but her interest in *him*, in the part he offered her. They married on impulse, feet buried in the sand while fellow profs and artists circled around, and when everyone laughed, especially Deirdre, he thought he was in on the game, too, and that this election made it something different. The sun sank low in front of them as they faced the waves and the Episcopalian minister spoke the words. She loved telling people how she was moving to the Midwest to become this heterowife for a while. He lied to himself often.

Deirdre had money from a deceased grandmother. She worked only when she felt like it, which was seldom. They moved to St. Paul and had plenty, between her inheritance and Jon's new salary from the university. It took them the length of that first academic year

in the small green house off Grand Avenue to make friends in the same kinds of circles that they had in Berkeley, the ones that crossed from the school to the town. But during the summer that followed, they started having dinner and cocktail parties nearly every week. Deirdre made an occupation of playing the hostess. She dressed up in elaborate costumes each time, delighted. Feather boas and fishnet stockings and a miniskirt. A sequined evening gown and her summer hair in curls down to the middle of her back. A railroad conductor's cap and overalls. A fraternity polo and baggy khaki shorts, her hair cropped short and dyed blonde. She fluttered in the warm darkness on their porch, through the open doored house, and out to the backyard, charming the guests as she'd charmed Jon with her dreamy sprite's face. He sipped red wine and kicked at the crab grass, making conversation with his department chair, or a local musician, or a young publisher and poet named Daniel Morgenthau, with whom he'd recently begun collaborating. Deirdre radiated amusement, her cut small teeth peeping out between soft lips. She drew energy from these parties. The house stood wide to all.

Four years in St. Paul. Ridiculous. He lied to himself fiercely. She wasn't losing interest. He prayed to her, to his own powers, to a demigod who might have cared, trying to make her stay. Even so, he began to feel the compulsion to produce a greater volume of new writing. He spent long hours at his office on campus, the place he found most conducive to work. It was as if he knew she would run, and so he began to avoid the green house. This was hedging his bets. He typed and typed, growing frantic now at the need to outdo his previous achievements. His writing, he believed, was his true intersection with the world. That intersection grew more tenuous with each week that he failed to publish another essay. Publication equaled progress. He would work days at a time, sleeping on campus, reading and writing, and when he arrived home the house would be empty, Deirdre out with friends, needing an audience if she was to continue her performance.

The last party took place the week that the late summer heat rushed out the door. At the end of the night, a little stoned on some weed Morgenthau had brought with him, Jon found Deirdre in the laundry room, leaning in to speak closely with one of her friends,

a red headed woman named Cynthia who was several years older than they were. Jon had seen her around before. She had green eyes and was laughing at whatever Deirdre had just told her. He saw, was it boredom? disdain?, flood into his wife's posture when he entered. Both women looked at him, and without saying anything he walked past them and grabbed a roll of paper towels off the shelf over the washing machine. As he left, he shut the door behind him.

The next day was the first of October, and she had her suitcases open on the bed when he got home from a morning walk that had taken him up Summit Avenue toward the cathedral. After she left, he wintered in the green house because it was easiest, the snow burying it until March. The front walk remained unshoveled all winter. A single track led from the back door to the freestanding garage on the alley, where Jon departed intermittently to go fulfill his teaching obligations. He found he no longer had trouble writing in the house.

Of course, we have to wonder if a culture, even driven as it is by these economic impulses, may still have a death instinct. No force guides a culture toward any particular cliffs, true, but neither does any force guide it away from them.

In St. Paul, after Deirdre left him, and in his perch at Scott's house months later, after Tim convinced him to abandon the green house and move back to Holcombe with his old friends, Jon often pulled a copy of his book out of the desk drawer and opened it to the last printed page.

About the Author:

Jon Nickell grew up in Holcombe, Minnesota, the son of well known novelist Neil Nickell. He received his B.A. in psychology from the University of Minnesota at the age of sixteen, and is currently completing his doctorate in sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. His papers have appeared in premier journals, both popular and academic. This is his first book of essays.

That had been the first printing. When it had come time for a second, the publisher had told him that along with any corrections

they were making to update the body of work, they could also alter his biography. So he'd emailed the publisher and said that yes, he'd like to send in something new.

About the Author:

Jon Nickell received a B.A. in psychology from the University of Minnesota and a PhD in sociology from the University of California, Berkeley. His essays appear regularly in literary publications such as Shored Fragments, popular magazines such as Harper's and The New York Times Magazine, as well as academic journals. He lives with his wife Deirdre in St. Paul, and he teaches sociology and anthropology at the University of Minnesota.

He read the two side by side, looked at his life sitting on the page, stamped out in ink. He felt they should both still be moist, that he should be able to smear either of them with his thumb. He wondered if there might soon be a third printing, imagining an email arriving from his publisher, congratulating him and telling him that people were dying to hear what he was working on next. And as for the bio, did he want to update it again?

While passing the months at Scott's house in Holcombe, as his collaboration with Daniel Morgenthau morphed into first a rivalry and then a feud, he began to have a recurring dream during the scarce hours he slept. In the dream, he was at Morgenthau's house in Minneapolis. The house was empty, but he knew people would be returning soon. He began to look through Morgenthau's books, rooms and rooms of them, and eventually he found a copy of his own. He pulled it off the shelf and began flipping through the familiar pages. He noticed that Morgenthau had underlined many passages and also written notes in the margins. To his astonishment, he realized that the passages Morgenthau had underlined were precisely the ones Jon considered to be the most trivial. And the margin notes revealed that Morgenthau had utterly failed to comprehend the book. He had missed the most obvious of Jon's points. Jon flushed. When the guests returned, he would humiliate Morgenthau by showing them all how obtuse the man was.

Then, in the dream, another thought would occur to him. What if he were to write a book solely for the purpose of misguiding Morgenthau? What if he composed a text designed to provoke his

rival's faulty analyses? What rubbish could he provoke Morgenthau into underlining? What banalities could he prompt him to scribble in the margins?

He left the house before the party returned. Immediately, he went about constructing this book. He toiled at it through great stretches of dream time, carefully sculpting its stupidity. He sent it to a publisher who he knew would eat it up. And then, when it was about to be published, he requested the publisher send a complimentary copy to Morgenthau.

After a while, Jon went over to his rival's house to see if he'd read the book. He found it on the coffee table, still in its padded mailing envelope. So he opened it and placed it in a conspicuous location. The next day he went back and snuck in again. It remained untouched. He would go back to Morgenthau's house again and again in the dream, checking to see if the man had yet fallen for his trick. But each time there was nothing, no marks on any of the pages. And the dream would continue like this until he woke up: checking and waiting, sure on each occasion that he was about to discover the results he wanted.

Even as past mechanisms unravel, they will redirect the course of those that replace them. A culture can only assemble and sell inhalers or ping pong tables or DVDs with directors' commentaries for so long before these products become entwined in the system, and if they eventually disappear, they will still leave a fossilized imprint. Or, rather, the culture will be forced to build on top of foundations already laid, and over time all our projects will take on a lean, the tilt of accommodating what's gone before. And this, too, applies to the products of ideology.

Jon found his father dead in the study's office chair a few weeks before he finished his college coursework, a few weeks before he turned seventeen. Resting on the desk in front of his father was the typewriter, the page in its grip barren.

An aneurysm. Jon met with his professors, made it clear he would not go live with Constance in New York. They helped him gain his status as an independent, and one of them told him about

a program where he could teach in a rural town with just a college degree, no teaching certification. Despite his young age, Jon would probably be permitted to join. His credentials were strong, and the organization was desperate.

He emptied the Victorian, holding a yard sale and then beginning to throw out everything that didn't sell. The garbage men picked up a bin full of papers and books every morning for a week, making an extra stop to accommodate him. He threw out maps and manuscripts. He dragged old furniture to the curb. The most curious artifact he found was the fishing pole his father had brought home after disappearing for that first weekend, back during Jon's adolescence. No line. No tackle or lures. No other gear of any kind. Just the rod, permanently bowed after leaning against the wall in his father's bedroom for more than five years.

Constance did not come back for the funeral. Jon's father left everything to him, although the house was his only substantial asset. The day after the service, he entertained the thought of torching it. Instead, he listed it with a realtor; it sold in five days. A letter arrived in the mail directing him to the coal-mining town of Windfall, West Virginia, and a classroom full of first graders. He packed two suitcases and shipped the rest of his salvage to his new cabin on a dirt road heading up to the hollers west of Windfall. During his final afternoon in Holcombe, he stood on the porch with Scott and Tim, who had driven over from the high school after soccer practice. Scott firmly shook his hand. Tim wondered aloud why Jon had to leave Holcombe so far behind.

Jon had to teach two days after his arrival in Windfall. He met his students when the buses pulled onto the cracked basketball court behind the cafeteria. Almost none of them brought anything with them in the form of supplies, just stepped down out of the bus sneezing or smiling or pushing the person in front of them. Before he got there, the first and second grades had met as one group of forty-eight, led by Ms. Rental: wispy hair, stained sun dress and creased green boots. Jon took the twenty two-kids Ms. Rental marked as first graders.

During the evenings at the cabin a mile outside of town, he

read straight through into the night. The trucks pulled up the road around supper time, filled with fathers heading home from work. After dark, the trucks blustered back down again, this time with teens bound for a dance or the movies or drinking by the river. Jon was younger than many of them. Later in the night, the trucks pulled back up past the cabin again, headlights sweeping across the front windows in the same arc each time, like the quick pass of a searchlight. There was a rooster farm a few hundred feet up the road, and when dawn showed the cocks let loose their calls from where each was tethered to a small tent of its own. He would still be reading, usually, preferring to sleep for the hour or two immediately before going in to teach. He read books on human development, language acquisition, and twentieth century philosophy. He read novels, too, and stacked them separately near his bedroom door. Two hundred seventy books per year for two and a half years. He taught the first graders, and by night he kneaded his mind into the shape that pleased him.

I am confident that rebirth will come to anticipate, perhaps already has come to anticipate, the death that precedes it. The culture is locked in a flickering cycle where knowledge of the act prefigures the act itself. Preorder your faith today and we will ship it to you when it arrives. Members receive twenty nine percent off.

Of the three times Jon remembered seeing his mother, the second was when he was sent to visit her in New York the summer he was fourteen. He rode the bus for two days at his own request, and she gathered him up at the depot in the city. It was all city, big and anonymous, blunt and reproachful. The buildings rose. In the cab, he craned his head upward looking through the window, eyeballs rolling back until they hurt.

Constance lived in Nyack. The cab took them to Grand Central, where they got on a train that brought them north to the Hudson River valley. She had a house with another painter and a sculptor. Jon got the pullout bed in the living room. With a foot and a half of space between them, Constance and Jon walked down the hill

toward the river and ate at a pizzeria in town. He was to stay for two weeks.

The first thing she said to him at dinner:

“Jon, I absolutely have to have time during the day to paint.”

He nodded.

“Eight hours.”

“Okay.”

“Do you want to see the city?”

“Sure.”

“You can take the train and see whatever you want. Neil says you’re very responsible. I trust you on your own. I’ll give you a map.”

“Okay.”

“For dinner, we can eat anywhere you want here in town. Sandy and Duke might eat with us sometimes. Duke makes sculptures. Do you like those?”

Running through his mouth were pepperoni spices and swirls of Sprite. He swallowed. Anyway, those weren’t the first things she said to him. When she met him at the bus depot platform:

“Well. Let’s see you.”

She had made as if she were going to touch him, moving in close, but then didn’t. He had been growing a lot recently and kept growing afterward. This was the only meeting where they stood at eye level with one another. Again she moved in, as if to straighten his collar, but stopped herself.

“How is your father?”

He shrugged.

She asked him again that night while they ate their pizza.

“How’s Neil, Jon?”

“Writes all the time.”

“He usually—”

“All the time. He sleeps in the study.”

“I see.”

“I’m tall enough to drive the car to get groceries now. The cops who park in the lot at Cub Foods know me.”

“He said he took early retirement from the university.”

“Yeah.”

“He said in his letter that you aren’t sleeping.”

“I sleep.”

“How much?”

“I sleep.”

“How much, Jon?”

He told her.

“What do you do with yourself?”

He shrugged and started a second slice.

Constance wasn't joking about painting all day. She packed him on the train in the morning and he wandered the hot June streets until catching the 6:10 back northward. Duke tried to get him interested in sculpting in the evenings. Jon played along. Sandy spoke seldom. On the second night, Constance showed him some of her paintings. They were New York colors. He looked for Holcombe, but the greens were different and the blues were altogether gone. He thought maybe the Victorian would be drearily rendered in the background of one canvas or another. Maybe a painting of a boy. But Constance preferred the scenery surrounding the brown Hudson.

During his days in the city, he went to museums and walked through Central Park. His father had given him plenty of spending money, and Constance gave him a little more. Over the weekend he stayed with her, the two of them drove with Duke to Boston. Jon sat in the back reading a book. He remembered little of that other city. The second week passed like the first: museums and sculpting lessons and meals at restaurants where neighboring conversations were louder than their own. Then he was back at the bus depot.

The last thing Constance said to him then:

“I'm sorry your father let—let things get like this.”

He nodded.

“Try to sleep, Jon. It's no good to go without.”

As history is repeatedly bent to fit inside new packaging, it will become warped. Eventually, it will be unrecognizable. Because of this, our culture exists without history, or, rather, with many histories, all of which mean nothing. Histories now resemble something like what they must have meant to ancient man. They are tales told by the fire, possibilities, each one layered over those from the previous night. Entertaining to think about. Our culture

chews up histories and leaves their unsightly remains to be dealt with when day returns. Our culture is about process. Digestion. Histories now are not used the way modern man used them. Histories now are fuel.

“I saw you found the book of county maps.”

“Yeah.”

“Where was it? The attic?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you see the old Frisk map of Lake Reed? That was the first one that covered the whole area around here, I think.”

He nods. Knives and forks slide through syrup sogged French toast.

“Funny to see the lake change like that. They say it used to be mostly marshland before James Holcombe came along.”

“Where’d you go, huh?”

His father thinks for a minute, gets up and flicks off the stovetop range. The skillet’s handle creaks as it starts to cool.

“There are bridges, Jon, that you’ll want to build someday. To places you’ve lost contact with, you know?”

Jon drags his fork through a pond of syrup while listening.

“There’s nothing else to do but build. Even if you think it might be the last time you’ll try, you still try.”

Wind catches the screen door at the front of the house and swings it open. Both of them hear the hinges wrench as the gusts push the door back a little farther every few seconds.

“You’ll understand sometime.”

“Where’d you go?”