

Samanta Schweblin,
MOUTHFUL OF BIRDS (tr.
Megan Mc Dowell)

UNDERGROUND

I needed a break, and a drink to clear my head. The road was dark and I still had to drive several more hours. The truck stop was the only one I'd seen for miles. The interior lights gave the place a certain warmth, and there were three cars parked in front. Inside, a young couple was eating hamburgers. There was a guy in the back facing away from me, and another, older man at the bar. I sat down next to him. The things you do when you travel too much, or when it's been such a long time since you've

talked to anyone. I ordered a beer. The bartender was fat and slow-moving.

"That'll be five pesos," he said.

I paid and he served me. I'd been dreaming of this beer for hours, and it was a very good one. The old man was staring at the bottom of his drink, or whatever else he might be seeing in the glass.

"He'll tell the story for a beer," said the fat bartender, pointing to the old man.

The old guy seemed to wake up, and he turned toward me. His eyes were light and gray, maybe the beginnings of cataracts or something; he didn't seem to see well. I thought he was going to tease the story a little, or introduce himself. But he stayed quiet, like a blind dog that thinks it's seen something and doesn't have much more to do.

"Come on, buddy," said the fat man, and he winked an eye at me. "Just one beer for gramps."

I said yes, sure. The old man smiled. I took out five more pesos for the fat man, and in less than a minute the old guy's glass was full again. He took a couple of sips and turned automatically toward me. I thought that he must have already told this story a hundred times, and for a moment I regretted sitting down beside him.

"This happened in the interior," he said, pointing at the drying rack, or perhaps toward an imaginary horizon that I couldn't see. "The interior, way out in the country. There was a town

there, a mining town, see? A little town, the mine was just getting going. But there was a plaza, with a church, and the road that led to the mine was paved. The miners were young. They'd brought their wives out to the town and after a few years passed there were already a lot of kids, ya know?"

I nodded. My eyes sought out the fat man, who clearly knew the story and was occupied with arranging bottles on one side of the bar.

"Well, those kids spent all day outside. Running from one house to another, playing. And then it happened that a few of the kids were playing in an empty lot, and one of them noticed something strange. The ground there was sort of swollen. It wasn't much, it wouldn't have caught everyone's attention, but it seemed like enough to him. Then the others came closer, and they all made a circle around it and stood like that for a while. One of them knelt down and started to scratch at the ground with his hands, and so the others started doing the same. Soon they found a toy bucket or some other thing that would work as a shovel, and they started to dig. Other kids joined them over the course of the afternoon. They showed up and pitched in without asking questions, as if they'd already heard about the hole. The first kids got tired and other kids took their places. But they didn't leave. They stayed nearby, watching the work. The next day they came back more prepared, with buckets, big kitchen spoons, gardening trowels, things they had surely asked their parents for. The hole became a pit. Five or six kids could fit

inside it. Their heads barely rose above it. They loaded the dirt in buckets and passed them up to the kids above, who, in turn, carried it to a mound that was growing bigger and bigger, ya see?"

I nodded, and took advantage of the pause to ask the fat bartender for more beer. I ordered another for the old man, too. He accepted the beer, but didn't seem to like the interruption. He stayed quiet, and went on only after the bartender had placed our new glasses in front of us and turned back to his work.

"The kids started to be interested only in the pit, nothing else could hold their attention. If they couldn't be there digging, they would talk to one another about it, and if they were with adults, they practically didn't talk at all. They obeyed their parents without arguing, without paying attention to what was said, and the only answers heard from them were 'Yes,' 'No,' 'Doesn't matter.' They kept digging. They got more organized about how they worked, taking short shifts. Since the pit was deeper now, they raised the buckets with ropes. In the afternoon, before it got dark, they all pitched in and covered the mouth of the pit with boards. Some of the parents were enthusiastic about the idea of the pit, because they said it was a way for all the kids to play together, and that was good. Others didn't care. There were surely some parents who didn't even know about it. Probably some adult, intrigued, must have gone there at night while the children were asleep, and must have lifted up

the boards. But what can you see at night, in an empty pit dug by children? I don't think they found anything. They must have thought it was just a game; that's what they must have thought, right up until the last day."

The guy went back to staring at his glass, and didn't say anything else. I sat there waiting. I wasn't sure if he was finished or not. A few possible comments occurred to me, but none seemed appropriate. I looked for the fat man; he was waiting on the young couple, who were paying. I opened my wallet, counted out five more pesos, and put the money between us. The old man took it and put it in his pocket.

"They lost their children that night. It was starting to get dark. It was the moment of the day when the kids returned home, but there was no sign of them. The adults went out to look for them and they ran into other parents who were also worried, and by the time they started to suspect something had happened, almost all of them were out on the street. They searched haphazardly, individually. They went to the school, to the houses where the kids played. Some parents went as far out as the mine, combing the surroundings, even looking in places the kids couldn't get to on their own. They searched for hours and didn't find a single child. I guess every one of those parents had at some point thought that something bad could happen to their child someday. A kid could climb onto a high wall and fall and crack his skull open in a second. Or one could drown in the reservoir while they played at dunking one another, or get a

cherry pit stuck in his throat, or a rock, anything, and die, just like that.

"But what disaster could wipe them all from the face of the earth? The parents argued. They fought. Maybe because they thought they could find some clue, they concentrated on the area around the pit, and then they lifted up the boards. They must have looked at one another in confusion, without understanding what was happening: there was no pit. The boards covered a protuberance, the kind of mound that's left after the earth is disturbed, or when the dead are buried. One might think the pit had caved in, or that the kids had filled it in, but the pile of dirt they had excavated was still there, the adults could see it from where they stood. They went to get shovels and started to dig where the kids had dug before. One mother cried in desperation:

"‘Stop, please!’ she yelled. ‘Slowly, slowly . . . You’ll hit them in the head with the shovels.’ It took several people to calm her down.

"At first they dug carefully, then more feverishly. But under the ground there was nothing but ground, and some parents gave up and started to leave the pit, confused. Others kept working until the next night, now taking no care, worn out, and in the end they went back to their houses, more alone than ever.

"The governor traveled to the town. He brought supposed specialists to examine the pit. They made the parents repeat the story several times.

"‘But where exactly was the pit?’ asked the governor.

"‘Here, exactly here.’

"‘But isn’t this the pit you dug?’

"The governor’s men walked all over the town, searched some of the houses, and never came back again. Then the madness began. They say that one night a woman heard noises in her house. They were coming from the floor, as if a rat or a mole were digging underneath it. Her husband found her moving the furniture, pulling up the rugs, shouting her son’s name while she pounded the floor with her fists. Other parents started to hear the same noises. They moved all the furniture into the corners of their homes. They pulled up the floorboards with their hands. They knocked down basement walls with hammers, dug up their yards, emptied the wells. They filled the dirt streets with holes. They threw things inside, like food, coats, toys, then they covered them over again. They stopped burying their garbage. They dug up their few dead bodies from the cemetery. It’s said that some parents kept digging day and night in the empty lot, and that they stopped only when exhaustion or madness finished off their bodies."

The old man looked again at his now empty glass, and I immediately offered him another five pesos. But he had finished; he refused the money.

"Are you leaving?" he asked me. I felt as though it were the first time he had spoken to me. As if the whole story had been no more than that, a paid story that was over now, and for the first time the man’s gray, blind eyes were looking at me.

Mouthful of Birds

I said yes. I waved to the fat man, who nodded at me from the sink, and we left. Outside, I felt the cold again. I asked if I could give him a ride somewhere.

"No. Thank you, though," he said.

"Would you like a cigarette?"

He stopped. I took out a cigarette and handed it to him. I looked for my lighter in my coat. The fire illuminated his hands. They were dark, thick and rigid like cudgels. I thought his nails could have been those of a prehistoric human. He handed the lighter back to me, and walked away, toward the fields. I watched him move off, without entirely understanding.

"But where are you going?" I asked. "Are you sure you don't want a ride?"

He stopped.

"Do you live here?"

"I work," he said, "out there," and he pointed to the fields.

He hesitated a few seconds, looked at the field, and then he said:

"We're miners."

Suddenly I didn't feel cold anymore. I stayed there a few minutes to watch him walk away. I forced my eyes, searching for some revelatory detail. Only when his figure disappeared completely in the night did I return to the car, turn on the radio, and drive away at full speed.