

HOW DO YOU KNOW SOMETHING?

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I recall learning English in the dark. Ms. Backenstoe had turned off all the lights, and she was pointing a flashlight at the block letters on the blackboard. It was our alphabet bonfire, that's what she called it. William, my classmate whose name I remember but whose face I forgot, was sounding out a word. His fat, kid lips stumbled over his teeth as he spat out the syllables—and the teacher shined the flashlight on him like holy illumination. That was the learning process Ms. Backenstoe wanted him to use, and I know that because she told us. Back around the Middle Ages, people did not read the written word without saying it aloud. That's what my professor said, but I don't remember which one. It wasn't until I was reading a book years later that I realized my eyes knew how to swim down the stream of words. I had memorized their structures, their components, the whole fish skeleton. I had turned the letters of the alphabet in my hand, looked at all the different facets of their diamond interiors. I had swallowed the hard rock of this language. Listen, my religion teacher asked us once: how do you know something? Откуда ты что-то знаешь? How far can you travel until you can't crawl back home? Sometimes I say Russian words aloud and wince at how my teeth handle their edges. I forgot how to say all the things that I haven't even said yet. The red button of the answering machine always glares at me, holding a message from my grandfather in its mouth. He could never read my poetry, and I still can't talk about it. I'll tell you this—*atashka* used to take my little hand and recite all his musical manuscripts to me. This I remember. Please understand, language is not always what you think, or what you say. My entire life has been a conversation with the past, so that I may grasp how to greet the present. How many ways can I say something so that I do not forget? I imagine my sentences arrive like flowers on gravestones, watered with grief and shining soft with the sun—sorry for all the sounds unspoken and the learning undone.