

Ackerman, Diane. 2011. *One Hundred Names for Love*.

70 A newborn's brain contains billions of neurons, many still incomplete. They bush out furiously until about the age of six, when the violent topiary work begins, and twigs are severely pruned, some strengthened, others discarded, until the brain fits both its skull and its world. Another big burst of landscaping takes place about ten years later. How does the brain decide which wiring to preserve and which to dissolve? By keeping what's useful and killing the rest, it seals its wand-like connections into place. Magic ensues. How does it guess what may be useful? Whatever it used the most. Hence the antiquity of lessons learned by rote, the skullduggery of abuse, the longevity of bad habits. Think or act in a certain way often enough, and the brain gets really good at it. Children tend to recover much better from brain injury than adults, whose brains are already intricately thatched and patterned. And children's brains are wired quite differently from adults', with mainly shorter connections among neighboring neurons. Elaborate long-distance pathways, linking remote areas of the brain, may give adults the edge when it comes to digesting thorny information, seeing the big picture, making difficult decisions—that baggy ghost we sometimes call *wisdom*—but an adult's complex wiring is also vulnerable in many more places and easily sabotaged. Even when very young children have had the entire left hemisphere removed (to calm uncontrollable seizures), their right can run the language shop surprising well.

But adults? *Like cross-country skiing through crusty snow*, I thought. The first skier, plowing the path, needs muscle, but the following skier doesn't have to work quite as hard, and the next in line finds the going smoother still. Each trip packs the snow firmer, deeper, reinforcing the furrow, until it's easy to sail along with little effort. *Learning*, we call it. Skiing through deep snow. The brain hurts from the effort, but the more it traces and retraces its path, the swifter the travel.

79 The left [side of the brain] is the chatterbox, the storyteller, the fictioneer, the con man, the liar. It's superb at list-making and alibis. It values a grid of rules (and in their absence will gladly invent some). It lines up pieces of information in logical ways, nice and tidy, before drawing conclusions. The left relishes reality, adjusts to the world it finds, and whistles a happy tune. The right, on the other hand, is Munch's terror painting *The Scream*, a cauldron of negative emotions. A wizard of insight, the right intuits an answer first, and limns the big picture, before it moves on to the details. It excels at reading facial nuances, fathoming music's spell, feeling words. It's not enough to catch the information ferried by a sentence. We also need to glean the speaker's intentions, beliefs, and emotions. The right hemisphere adds hints, leading us beyond the corridors of literal meaning into a labyrinth suffused with irony, strong emotions, metaphor, and innuendo. Pinpointing a noise in space, the right decides whether we need to respond, and if so, how intensely. Juggler, puzzle-solver, and artist, the right feels quite at home with fantasy's mirage.