

Percy Janes First Novel Award

Dane Gill, Gander

Anson in Antarctica (an excerpt)

Near the end of our journey, when all seemed lost — and all was lost, ultimately — Anson, in furs and an icy beard said to me:

I wonder what they'll put on our headstones?

Headstones? All the way out here?

They'll bring them out on sledges, Anson said.

Yes, I said. But they'll be smart about it. They'll use cats instead of dogs. Three hundred mangy cats hauling our two headstones.

Maybe they'll just have the one for us to share.

We laughed so long and hard at this that I thought we may be exhibiting signs that frostbite had finally reached our brains (it had long ago overtaken our toes, heart, and soul). It wasn't our last conversation, but I remember it more vividly. The retrospective irony should have soured this moment in my memory, should have ruined it forever, but I still smile when I think of it now and it never brings me anything but an unusual joy. I think of dear Anson with much more frequency (and even more inaccuracy, no doubt) these dying days. He was my greatest and only sincere friend.

After I came back home from Antarctica I eventually tried resuming my life, and made some effort to leave the expedition in the past, taking solace in domestic routine. It is only now, with most of life lived, with my back bent, my legs useless, and my hands aching, that I am able to fully relive those moments, to look at myself as I was then, truthfully, when I was young and so goddamn certain of everything and yet careless with everything. I think, too, that I've managed to convince myself over the decades that if I were to drag these memories up to the surface and reexamine them, I would somehow tarnish, as if they were hallowed artefacts in a national museum encased in glass. But the time for harbouring these precious memories, like my time for everything else, has come and gone.