

RE[a]D

by Marc Lowe

He sat down among the vast library of books and sighed: the revolution had ended, and things had quieted down to breathless whispers. He would begin his new life by starting to read again, by re-filling his head with learning, with something apart from the insipid propaganda of the government (and of the brainwashed people), the reductionist logic, the *a priori* assumptions, the truisms and the lies... He would start with one of these books—any of them would do: he craved *substance*, as one craves *sustenance*—be it a piece of bread with butter or a full-course meal—when one's belly is empty. Starting at the far-right section of the shelf that hovers at eye-level, he now withdraws a hefty volume with a dark cover and nearly indistinguishable lettering upon its spine, a title he does not attempt to make sense of. Seating himself in a reclining chair, he props the large book upon his lap, opens it to the front page, and readies himself for the experience of reading.

The first page, however, is blank. He inhales and flips to the second page, which is also blank. How curious, he thinks, flipping to the third and then the fourth pages, the fifth and then the sixth.

This must be an anomaly of some sort, a rare mishap! He wedges the side of his right hand into the center of the book, and then opens it. More blank pages, yellowed and dull. He stands up, tome in hand, walks back over to the shelf, and puts the unwieldy thing back in its proper place. Perhaps I ought to find something with a more legible title next time, he thinks to himself, and, skimming the shelf for alternatives, he hones in on a not-too-thick volume with a chocolate-brown cover entitled *The Darwinian Code: A Novel*. It slides out easily, as if it had been primed for his eager hands alone, and he once again sits down in the chair and settles in to explore the text. He opens the book to the *Table of Contents*, or to where he expects to find a *Table of Contents*, yet, as before, to his disbelieving gaze, the pages are blank, white as the white walls upon which no decorations can be seen, save a framed Modigliani print and an

unframed, torn Renoir, the latter spattered with what looks to be red candle wax. He cannot understand why there are so many blank pages. Looking to his left and right, to make sure no one is watching, he opens the back cover of the book, which would instead be the front if he were reading in Japanese or Arabic, confirms that the pages there, too, are blank, and then tears out three of them, crumpling them into a loose ball and shoving it into his right pant pocket. I will give these to my son, he says, nodding to himself. Then he takes out a pen and, cautiously eyeing his quiet surroundings, scrawls his name, the date, and the word "Nevermind" onto a random page before placing it back on the shelf (page 53, when counted from the front).

He has not yet given up on his search for knowledge-in-books, however. Indeed, he now gazes at a volume that sits atop a row of other, indistinct books (their drab, no-frills bindings all look the same to him): it is labeled, simply, *RED*, and its cover, as the title would imply, is red, a brilliant red that makes it stand out from the rest. This is the one; he can sense it: *this* is the book he has come here to read. He reaches out his hand to take the book, his fingers grazing the soft, slightly fuzzy cover, when a voice calls out from behind him. Stop! the voice commands in a guttural shriek. Do not move. You are under arrest. But the voice is only in his head; he has created it the way a writer creates characters on a page, and it is just as real to him as if someone were really there. I haven't done anything, sir, he answers the voice, which tells him to "shut up" and to "lie down on the ground like the dog you are." He obeys, quivering now, for perhaps the voice is real; perhaps the man has really come to arrest him for snooping around the library, which would have been an unthinkable transgression during the height of the revolution (although, ironically, the revolution produced thousands of great works, whereas now little of value is being published anymore). There is pain and the sound of bone breaking as the "voice" thrusts a nightstick (?) into the back of his ribs. There is blood as well; it pools up on the floor in front of the bookshelf so that he can see it from his vantage point on the ground. A heavy

hand reaches from behind him into his right-side pocket and pulls out the crumpled ball of blank papers he had planned on giving to his son; the ball of papers lands soundlessly in the pool of dark red blood, spattering some of the spines of the books on the bottom shelf.

You may read now, the voice says. The man struggles to his feet and, pain screaming through the side of his body where his ribs have been broken, reaches for the book with the bright red binding entitled *RED*. The voice disappears, as does the blood and the ball of white paper. He opens the book and drops his pen.

