

the plum creek review



fall 2012

THE PLUM CREEK REVIEW

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front cover art: "Untitled" by Laura Hartmann

back cover art: "Envelope" by Rosalie Eck

Light

Whitman Barrett

When I was a child
I used to read *The Monkey Wrench's Handbook*
and plot the demise of
the bulldozers eyeing the playground
at the end of the street.
Then, later, in Ohio, I saw the bulldozers
as they eyed a creek under dappled light.
But I did nothing,
for I did not love the place.

Aro and Ohiro

Paul Miller-Gamble



Translating Duo Duo from Czech

Emily Wilson

How quickly I forget the words for “mother’s maiden name,” translate it as “birthmark.” My grandmother was a woman with seven holes in one ear and nine in the other. I suppose that when piercing is decoration, it cannot hurt. That when distance is forewarned, it cannot blister. What translation has come to resemble: bobbing in waves, I press my fingers into peaks and watch fluid mountains eroding faster than time. I translate my grandmother into past tense, though she is still living. My lover lives, too. Two years separate us, but I aim to hang the pair of our Octobers, globed and golden, from my earlobes, casting shadows on my neck, marking flesh for ornamentation. I can cup my lovers into two palms: those who’ve heard the story of the scar and those who cannot understand a willful submission to concrete. I do remember the words I used when I asked him to touch me as if he couldn’t recall the color blue. As if the planting of vowels into her last name made it easier to pronounce after the ocean was crossed.

two views of eight

Zack Knoll

i.

eyes:

creaking open like a door,
heavy and dry.
flecks of milky yellow
dust clinging to corners.

like rusty pipes,
clouds, weathered and orange,
breathing over pines:
eight a.m.

ii.

eight p.m.:

carolina blue rolling
off meager clouds.
sky, balmy and tired,
sinks into playground tar.

lids hovering like the sun over the horizon,
swollen with dusk's thick air
and the moan of cicadas:
eyes.

My Left Hand

Nicole Johnson



I am talking to all of you, especially me

Connor Stratton

Each pebble, each planet, gives off a recordable singing.

I have heard them.

Monastic the strangeness...

Jane Hirschfield

We riffed by the lake
the other night. Talked blue
straight into the sand.
Sandal scat.

We had blazed
solar eclipses out of blackened
marshmallows.

You said:

'Each pebble, each planet, gives off a recordable singing.
I have heard them.
Monastic the strangeness.'

'Who is this Jane Hirshfield,'
I said. 'And what does that even
mean.'

.

Every record comes with free stones.
I received a moon from a vinyl.
Threw it out—into space.

.

The waves struck
shore like brushes rolling on hi hats.
Our fire shrugged at every star.
Graham cracker crash
cymbals.

You said:

'Some songs are palimpsests.
We are always only the first layer.
I look neath the under.'

'Who is this Connor Stratton,'
I said. 'And please, stop singing.'

.

I sung once.
It was a ditty in a minor key.
Bemusing the plainness.

.

We got up to skip rocks.
Each tried to make the least ephemeral
ripple.

Bit into s'more,
flicked wrist, skipped
beat. Chocolate twelve bar
blues.

You said:

'There was a give that wouldn't come off.
We took five—
a 1 and, a 3 and.'

'I have never heard of you,'
I said. 'And
songs aren't stones,'
I said. 'Songs aren't even things,
and non-things are just happenings,'
I said. 'And those have rhythm but they
don't *have* rhythm, and notes can be destined for
dullness too,' I said, 'And who are you and don't you
see that you make rocks interesting and you make them sing
because you are the reader,' I said, 'because you are the you and who
even are you and how are poems so sure of themselves and why am I always in a
AND A 1, AND A 2, and a
you know what,'
I said.

.

I am arrogant.
I have never listened to a rock.
Every moment I become more ordinary.

Piñata Princess

Victoria Velasco



Roadkill

Wyatt Kroopf

Scene

A forest. The stage is bare. There is a dead animal downstage right. It appears to have been run over by some sort of vehicle. JOYCE and CASEY lie on a blanket upstage left. CARL stands over the dead animal staring rather blankly down at it. The lights come up and should give the impression that they are all beneath a canopy of trees with sunlight coming down in streaks and discs. There are no trunks of trees on the stage, but some branches can be seen dangling from above. JOYCE and CASEY are fully in the shade. CARL is in the sun. On both sides of the blanket there are orange peels and oranges.

JOYCE

Florida?

CASEY

Nope.

JOYCE

You're sure? I thought Florida was famous for them.

CASEY

It is.

JOYCE

But these aren't from Florida?

CASEY

They only use oranges from Florida for juice. No one eats them. Not even Floridians.

JOYCE

Where are these oranges from?

CASEY

Florida's your only guess?

JOYCE

Just tell me.

CASEY

What about you, Carl? Any guesses?

(No response from Carl.)

CASEY

Carl? What are you doing over there?

JOYCE

Oh, never mind him. He won't stop staring at that animal. Just tell me. Where are they from?

CASEY

California.

JOYCE

Ohhh. (Pause.) Duh.

CASEY

What?

JOYCE

Well, that's obvious. I should of just thought about it more.

CASEY

I guess.

JOYCE

I mean, when you think of oranges, you think of Florida, then California. So if it wasn't Florida, I shoulda known it was California.

CASEY

Yea, I suppose you're right.

JOYCE

I'm too eager. Don't you think?

CASEY

I don't know.

JOYCE

I make the most obvious guess, then I'm too eager to know the answer to even think anymore about it. I don't even have the patience to think of oranges coming from California. Isn't that sad?

CASEY

If you want to look at it that way.

JOYCE

Oh well. Anyways, those were some tasty oranges. Juicy. Thanks for bringing them.

CASEY

No problem. I have two bags full of oranges in my house. They're in season.

JOYCE

I know that. Carl showed me.

CASEY

How'd he do that?

JOYCE

Do what?

CASEY

Show you that oranges are in season.

JOYCE

No, he showed me that you had two bags full in your house.

CASEY

Oh. Right.

JOYCE

Isn't that right, Carl? (No response.) Carl! (No response. Joyce sits up.) CARL! Would you stop staring down at that animal like some kinda fucking pea-brained idiot!?

(No response.)

CASEY

(He sits up.) Carl, why don't you come join us in the shade? It's much cooler over here.

CARL (barely audible)

What's this?

CASEY

What's that, Carl?

CARL (a little louder)

What's this?

JOYCE

Speak up!

CARL (normal voice)

What's this?

JOYCE

For Christ's sake! It's roadkill.

CARL

This ain't a road.

JOYCE

Huh?

CARL

Do ya see a road around?

JOYCE

Well, no. What's that matter?

CARL

How can it be roadkill with no road? Huh? How do ya explain that?

(Joyce stands and walks over to Carl. She looks over the animal. Casey grabs an orange, takes a knife out of his pocket, lies back down, and starts cutting into the orange.)

JOYCE

(pointing at the animal) You see that?

CARL

What?

(Joyce leans down closer to the animal to point at a specific spot.)

JOYCE

That.

CARL

Yea sure.

JOYCE

What would you say that is?

CARL

Look like tire marks, I guess.

JOYCE

Now, how do you suppose that happened?

CARL

I reckon a car or truck or bus or some sorta vehicle ran over it.

JOYCE

And what do you call an animal that gets run over by a vehicle?

CARL

Well, uh...

JOYCE

Yes...

CARL

S'ppose ya call it roadkill.

JOYCE

Exactly! Way to put it all together, Carl.

(She walks back towards the blanket.)

CARL

Okay then, Joyce. What the fuck's it doin' out in this forest? Not out on the road where roadkill oughta be.

JOYCE

How am I supposed to know that?

CARL

I donno. Shit, just seems like you're some kinda expert on roadkill. What with all your blabberin' about it. I thought I'd try ya.

JOYCE

Well, I don't know. (She sits on the blanket and lies back down.)

CASEY

Maybe there was a whole car full of people whizzing down that highway a few miles west of here. And it was late at night. Real late. So late that it wasn't even night anymore.

CARL

And they'd been drinkin'.

CASEY

They were still drinking. Pounding back beers, right as they whizzed down that highway. Laughing so loud, they couldn't even hear the music they were blaring from their car stereo.

CARL

Yea, and they was feelin' all giddy like dogs, so they stuck their big heads out all the windows, still whizzin' down the highway, with saliva pourin' off their tongues, which were waggin' in the wind.

CASEY

When BANG! The car hopped a full foot in the air, so high, that even as drunk as they all were, they felt it like a jolt. And the driver slammed the brakes.

CARL

An' suddenly, it got all somber and serious in the car. No one wanted to get out to see what it was that they hit, and they get started bickerin' an' gettin' all agitated with each other an' such.

CASEY

Till finally, they convince the drunkest of them all to get out and check. And he can barely open the car door cause he's so loaded, but he manages to get out with a little help. And he stumbles back the ten yards that it had taken the car to stop after the driver had hit the brakes.

CARL

An' he leans over it just like I'm doin' now. (He leans over it.) Then he gasps the biggest gasp of his life. An' can't stop mutterin' 'fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck' over and over again. So he goes back to the car, an' tells em all that they ran over a person. A youngish lookin' girl with tire marks right on down her spine. From her neck to her tailbone.

CASEY

Everybody starts hollering and panicking. They all figure that they oughta check the body just to make sure. Only thing is, when they go to check, not a single one of them can actually look at the body. Some were too drunk, and none of them had the courage to just look. So they sloppily form a plan, and toss the body into the trunk, and all squeeze into the car. And again they go whizzing the highway. And they find this forest.

CARL

So they carry it outta the car as far as the can. But the smell's startin' to get to all of 'em. Slowly creepin' up through their noses an' nestlin' itself inside. And in the same instant, that smell becomes too much for all of 'em. And all that guilt comes rushin' up through their nostrils, and they all drop the body. Right here.

CASEY

And scam. They all dart off in different directions. Not even thinking to bury it. Just hoping they can forget it in their hangover.

CARL

And if any of 'em had been payin' any attention, they woulda seen it wasn't no person. Just roadkill. And they'd all be able to blow that guilt right out their noses.

Atrophy I

Zack Knoll



Amsterdam

Connor Stratton

Your smile is bleary with goof.
Sweater dark with blue, with green,

with dirt. A peppered face.
Marijuana has languished you

on a bed today. The lids
of eyes grin shut.

The smile is faint, as sleep
crowds the head. You've worn

her old socks for days.
Lost all your other clothes

on the train, but kept your pen
and books. A love-gone brain.

You smile for dream language,
others' distant lips.

We deemed the sweater your snug
husk. And as I sit and cremate

my own spliff, I wonder: whose
body is disposable, and why

would anyone steal your shoes.

Amoeba Magnification

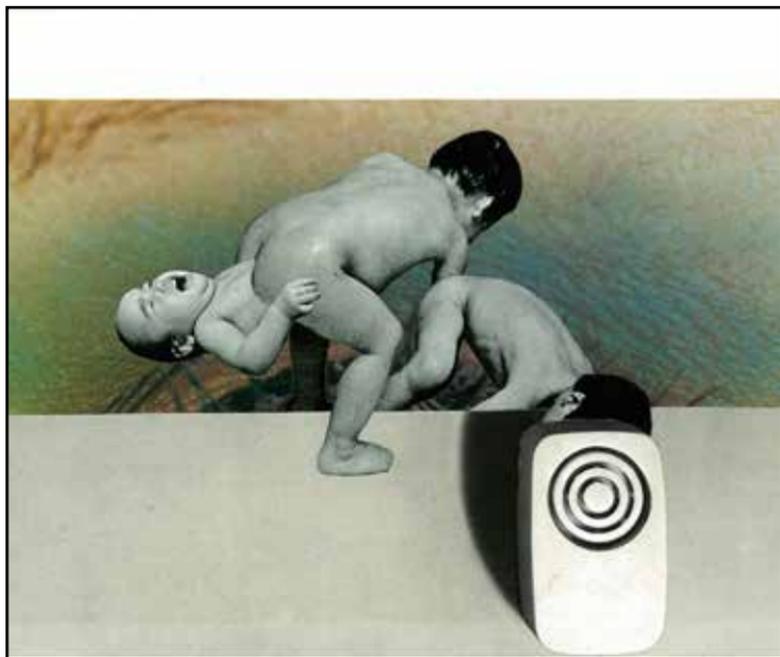
Margo Josephson



Watercolor, Pen, Ink

Untitled

Paul Miller-Gamble



Stir Fry

Nathaniel Marcus

Simmering,
I am any sensitive water chestnut, pale and pocked,
sautéed in a wok to crumble deep with company.

The heat here steals form, musses it across
oiled boundaries between. It sets nights alight: with insect-solid air,
in the bubbling rifts of cell walls, stirred and salted

Lips and their warm patrons. Even time is
crimped into September's balm grease,
with last spring hanging like a bog light,

the smell of blossom rot seems folded in. I walk,
part of the quaded chums, stirruped in sweat.
Cool in a library I watch for hours the dead glide

of white frisbees outside, the team practice and their transmissions
muted. They hatch the lawn like quick tossed salt, its brief
composure, a soft mineral grit twisting in air. The pan

crackles, and then it's just a taste. Everything just
part of a collection—summer's a rickets patient
and is pressing us all in its marsh palms as one last

wish: "please." So I come apart, with reluctance skin more readily
sifts into Ohio's flat tint of wind, and the dormitory, smile at collegiate
meetings doggedly looking for lips. New binders, starch, the tour of friends

tested by a heating coil. It all boils down, almost.

I do not lose myself in paste of embraces. A slow weekend's spice
will still the soy convection, parse it. Hours draw brown

into the view of tin vents from my room.

I spend more time alone, in the shade and
fanned, flouting season.

But in the corduroy of soft stasis

right before sleep, a plum sauce grace will occasionally descend
on me rich, holding the truth's oblong tang.

I forget that I hold pleasure in others, I need
pleasure shared and relished, a ley line
indefinable joy like sitting down to a meal together.

Embraces, these collective stirs don't have to be
sites of dumb loss, screened deep
in my depressive smoke.

We are happily discrete only with another grin to turn to.
And the burner knob
turns off.

Death in the Family

Jessica Tolbert

- I. My car scraped you and your bike alongside the highway,
in the grade below me over at the public high school edged off the median at
just the wrong second I was
yards away. The officer's hand warm
on my shoulder, the evidence in my favor
(too fast to brake to change course to alter, your companion swears
she saw me pause, it was noted that your diary read you knew someday you
would die.)

Day of the funeral, family wake
to apologize didn't change
the look on your father's face when he opened the door.

- II. The next decade with a hand on a physics book,
eye on a cascade of numbers how close
the seconds how far the
angle I allow the diagrams to reflect
in the shadow of windowpanes numbers careen across the page.

Aimless in the university library scribble
digits more familiar than even your face again again again forgiven by
20 some odd seconds again again again.

You should know I've felt pregnant
inhabited
carrying you along with me.

III. I'll offer you daily sacrifices
stock up on fresno chilis and red mustard
greens, Korean salted shrimp
sauce a little bright green minari.

I'll learn to make dishes that induce
a pain so clean I can see clear through to
the other side. I'll splash hot oil
on my hands
breathe through the scald.

Redford

Hannah Jones



Your Mother Loves You

Ryann Eastman

She'd have a better life if she had good posture, Margot thought to herself, her fingers tearing up the newspaper in her lap. The woman's heels clicked on the pavement and she adjusted the strap of her purse. If she just stuck out her breasts, men would like her more.

The woman looked down at her phone, running her thumb over the buttons. She didn't bother to notice the old woman fiddling with a newspaper on a park bench. Margot flicked a few shreds of paper onto the ground at her feet.

Her daughter had called that morning to say that she would be getting married in June, under an ivy laden trellis in her fiancé's backyard. She wanted to know if Aunt Sylvia's wedding dress was still in the back of Margot's closet, the one with the lace bodice and the little pink flowers sewn on the sleeves. She just laughed and her daughter hung up.

I should have had more children, she thought.

Her daughter was to marry a lawyer from New York, who wore pressed suits and considered golf an essential aspect of a good life. Margot had talked to his mother on the phone once and stopped listening when she described her son as "fervent, yet whimsical." A few weeks later, her daughter asked if she would approve of an engagement to the lawyer. Margot told her that she didn't care either way, which started the daughter's habit of hanging up on her.

A boy ran down the hill on the south side of the park, kicking dirt up onto his pants. His blonde hair was slicked back on one side with mud, and it dripped down the side of his face. He looked behind him as he ran, tripping over his feet and staggering across the grass.

Her friend, Florence Saunders, had asked for her help that afternoon at the hospital. She made her voice particularly

urgent on the phone, taking labored breaths after every other word. They needed another clown for the children's ward, as a group of second graders with chicken pox was coming in that day. Florence informed her that she had an extra red nose and pair of polka dotted pantaloons waiting for her. Margot had said that she was busy planning her daughter's wedding. After she hung up, she made a pot of tea, read the first page of the paper, and walked to the park. It was the only part of the city that she didn't hate.

The boy slowed his pace at the bottom of the hill. He was covered in dirt and Margot thought how, if he was her son, she would hose him down in the backyard with cold water. She looked down at her empty hands. On the ground between her feet lay the scraps of the first page of the Sunday Morning Edition. She put her hands in the pockets of her jacket and watched as the boy began to kick rocks down the path.

A girl stands on the edge of the porch, her feet hot on the wood. The unstarred sky stretches flat above her head, over all of scorched Arkansas. By the looks of it, a storm will come later that night. She curls her fingers into each other and her long nails bite against her palm. The boy sits on the steps, dragging his feet through the dirt.

"The whole country is on fire," he says. He too is watching the sky. It's like mud has been smeared into the clouds.

The girl doesn't want this country. She doesn't want a wedding, or children growing up to pick oranges in the summer, or a one story house with a tree in the yard and yellow painted sides like the boy has promised her. She doesn't want her sister's life either, hopping on a truck full of soldiers headed to California at God knows what price.

"It's a damned place to grow up," he says, unbuttoning the top of his checkered shirt. His pants are rolled up, the dirt caked onto his ankles from the walk to her house. "The Lord didn't have to make half the world a furnace."

"But he did," she says, like her Gran used to, sitting on this same porch, watching the same dark sky. It's to remind you of what's waiting.

She doesn't want a color television, or a silk dress, or an automobile to get from place to place. She doesn't care about Cary Grant, or butterscotch candies wrapped in wax paper, or pickling peaches for the winter. The girl stands on the porch, the sky swirling like earl gray tea above her.

The boy thinks she'll be a great mother. He told her the night before, after a dance in town while they sat in the dirt by the side of the road and drank from a jug of wine. He put a hand on her face, his fingers rough on her skin.

Now he says, "We could go into town tomorrow, if you'd like. Early in the morning, before the sun." He has a handsome face, like the pictures in textbooks about the first war. "Maybe go to the cinema. I've saved up."

She nods her head but she is looking at the sky. She doesn't want to look at him anymore, doesn't want to see the dry mud on his denims or the little blue flecks in his eyes. She stands there and feels like the sky. She is unstarred.

All she really wants is to feel the air out west, crisp and cold. A breeze through a country of water.

Margot went down to the theater, her hands closed into tight fists in her pockets. She walked the path along the estuary, watching the scullers slip across the water. A man wearing a long black trench coat sat beside the bushes at the bank and stared at her with round, red eyes as she moved past.

A sculler glided by her, shallowly pushing its oars into the

water. The dress that her daughter planned to wear to her wedding was sitting in the back of Margot's closet, dotted with little pock marks where mosquitoes had chewed the lace.

She often went to the theater on Sunday to catch a matinee, although she always hated the films. She couldn't stand the flashy special effects and done up actresses, but she loved the line of candy at the concession stand, the padded maroon seats, the people sitting quietly in the dark. She could only eat popcorn at a movie theater.

She stood in the ticket line behind a mother and her two young children. One of the boys was tugging on the string of his mother's black track pants and the other was reciting the list of movie titles out loud. The woman stared straight ahead.

Margot imagined her daughter standing in line at a movie theater, holding her child's little pink hand. The suit would still be at work, earning their cinema money and flashing a whimsical smile at a secretary in a short, gray skirt. It all seemed so effortless; the wink, the little girl's soft hand pushed into her mother's. Margot wrinkled up her nose and looked away from the woman.

"Damn it mother. You could at least say that you don't like him, or that you want better for me, or something."

Margot wondered what it would have been like to have a son. Perhaps she would have attended more baseball games and less music recitals, talked less and worried more. She would have a box of small blue and grey sweaters instead of polka dotted dresses and brightly colored hats sitting in her attic.

"You know there isn't anything better."

When she was a child, she was terrified of sharp objects and held on tight to Margot's hand whenever they passed a hardware store. She wanted to be a ballerina for a few years, before she did a report on Julia Morgan and decided to be an architect. She watched Saturday morning cartoons every weekend,

holding their orange tabby cat close to her chest. She cried when Margot refused to buy her clothes from the expensive store that all her friends liked and screamed when she wouldn't let her go to a concert downtown. She told her that she hated her for the first time when she was eleven years old, when Margot took away her stereo and wouldn't give it back. She stopped saying it at age sixteen, when she met a boy named Michael who taught her how to drink coffee and buy plaid shirts from second hand stores. She layered her short hair and stopped eating anything with butter. She told her mother that she was going to be a writer and Margot believed her.

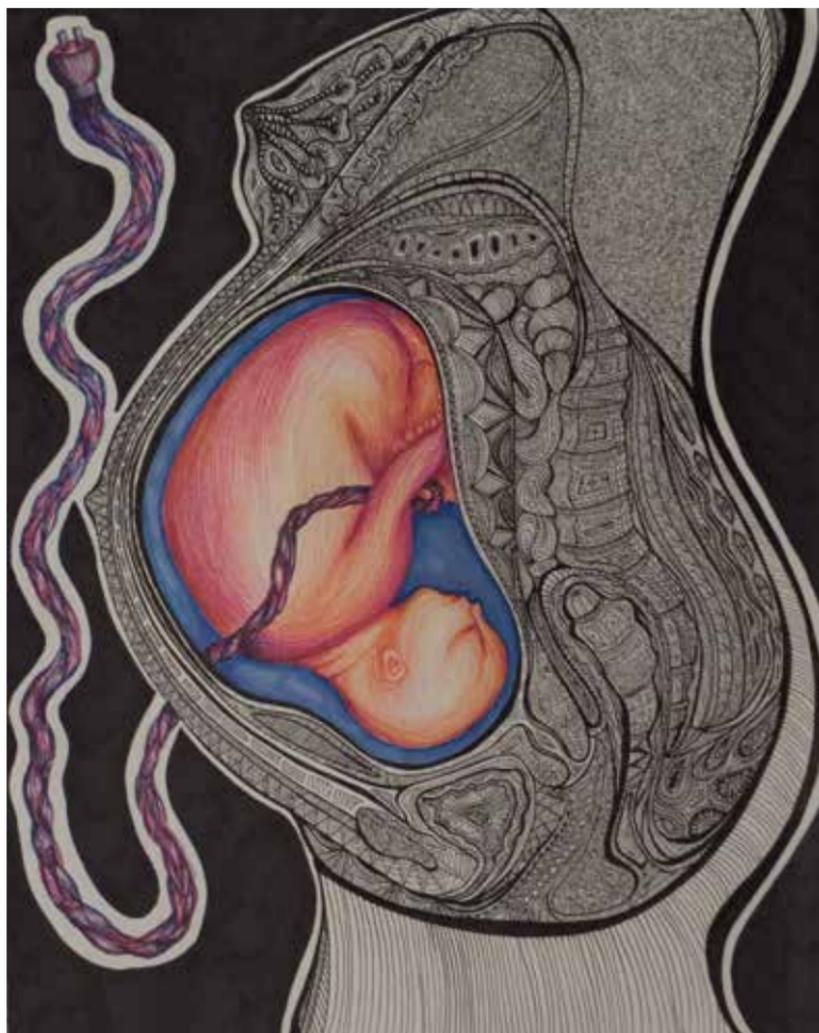
The mother held the receiver close against her face until the buttons made little square marks on the skin of her cheek. The line was silent and she knew that the daughter was crying. She thought of the little girl writing in her diary every evening and reading her stories out loud after dinner and researching publishers late into the night. She thought of the sky in Arkansas, of the boy pulling his foot through the dirt.

"As long as you're happy," she said.

The daughter hung up.

Who are the mothers?

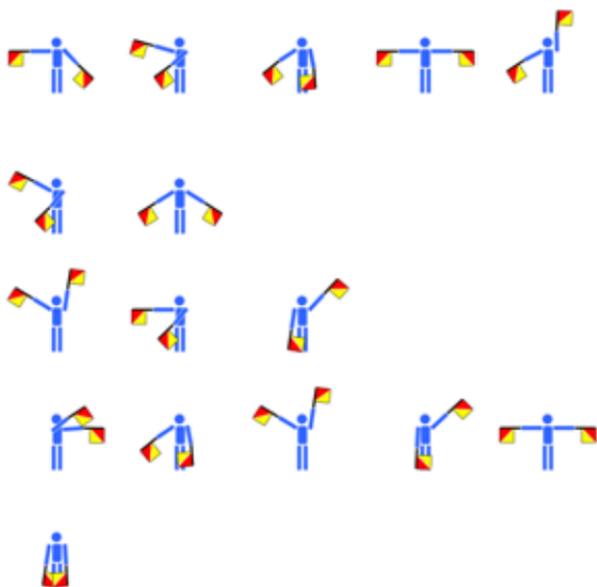
Sarah Lejeune



Micron Pen and Colored Sharpie on Paper

Semaphore

Kevin Smith



The Encredibly Enlightening Edventures of Hairy Max

Becky Koretz

Well, children, I know you've seen bears,
I know you've seen coyotes;
You've seen all types of shaggy hair
On all kinds of furry bodies—
But of all the hairy chests and backs
The hairiest of all was Max.

A wigmaker strolled around one day
When something caught his eyes
That simply took his breath away
And left him hypnotized:
The swirling hues of browns and blacks
Found in the body hair of Max.

"What beauty! O what strands galore!"
The wigmaker roared with approval.
"I must have it for my private store!
I'll arrange for its removal!"
To him there were no artifacts
More precious than the hair of Max.

With stealth and brawn like you've never seen
He dragged Max to his lair,
Who gaped at the cans of shaving cream,
The tweezers and jars of Nair.
But lo! – No amount of steaming wax
Could make a dent on Hairy Max.

The wigmaker frowns—his brow contracts
At the beard that will not obey.
He valiantly calls for his battle-axe
And with a cry leaps into the fray.
Look how he chops! He hews, he hacks
At the stubborn hair of Frightened Max.

Now bare as a cueball, bright as a dime
Poor Max slinks out to flee.
The wigmaker gloats, "This hair is mine!
It only belongs to me!"
The next day, still smug, he went out for air—
His jaw dropped; guess what he found?
Max grinning wide, more bear-like than bare,
All covered in luscious down!
Now what shall we learn from this dear fluffy boy?
What moral to extract?—
When something you love has been taken away
You can always grow it back.

Ethanol Girl

Matthew Gallagher



Mythology

Jessica Tolbert

[Cosmogony]

Explain to me how if we paint on freight trains our work
will travel the country in rusted frames, how the dammed
water beneath the highway won't afflict me with a pondscum
voodoo.

[Of Transformation]

I heard dog chains by the train tracks and was compelled
to run. You believed me at first but later laughed as we
u-turned and sped away.

[Messiah]

I was nauseous for a week.

[Totemism]

You have this need to expose yourself, the makeshift
meanings tattooed onto your arms and torso. By the second
time we met, under that bridge by the tracks, I had seen all of
them. Maybe I thought this was charming.

[Americana and Folklore]

The first time we slept together you told me you'd never slept with a Jewish girl (I wasn't sure what to make of that but I suppose in certain parts of the world everything is exotic.)

[Monomyth]

You explained a heroin slouch, a Dutch horror movie playing in the next room.

[Allegory]

mygod, it's hard to take such a silly act serious when some woman is carving off her husband's fingers in the other room.

[Talmudic Parable]

Remember the time you nodded off while driving, again. You should know better. I came over later. We were standing in your living room and I fumbled with your roommate's third-hand speaker system, Bo Diddley record under my arm. How are you gonna get to work now. You shrugged. I'll walk.

[Relationships of Descent]

The new car had burns around the window nearly as soon as you took it for a spin.

(I use that term loosely it rattled when you sped up and shivered when you braked.)

[Utopia]

We combed our hair, drove downtown. As we flew across the overpass you asked, what are your values, punctuated this with my name as if it were a serious question.

[Mythos of Spring: Comedy]

The time you made your mother film you standing on the roof with a water gun full of milk.

[Mythos of Winter: Irony]

You can see the self-pity on her face in the videos.

[Narrative Therapy]

You opened this one with a line about how you were using a lot at the time and your mother wanted to get involved in your life again.

There's another clip of her helping you set a stack of taxidermy birds on fire and some phrase that goes along with this, some explanation.

[Secularization of Myth]

It's almost midnight, we sit half-dressed in lawnchairs. You stare down the street like there's something important out there. Your reverie unsettles me. I clink some emptied beer bottles together to distract you.

[Blood Libel]

I lost my job, the summer grew scorching and bleak. I haunt Carrolton antique malls and the woman who beckons me to the back corner. A man looks for anything with an eagle on it, anything at all. The woman proffers a beer stein. Your birds are everywhere.

[Etiological Tale]

Tell me about the state hospital again, the stories you were saving, about your friend in the next ward whose brother tortured her with pinecones and hairbrushes. Your pretty face like it is when you want to be taken serious, eyebrows like that.

[The Mother and Father]

Tell me that story again, how you tried to run away and got halfway down the street, almost into the woods, when a nurse pulled up and said, Come on honey get back in. And you did.

[Of Time and Eternity]

I always imagined you in a hospital gown, silent.

[Of Memory and Forgetting]

You didn't say why you ran away. Unhappiness wouldn't be a new explanation for anything.

[Eschatology]

Say it again, that you're only telling me these things so I can tell them too when I'm famous.

Translation

Zack Knoll

there is no money in the savings jar because i took it all i said i took it all and she told me i better shove that crock of shit back up my ass and find her money so i went back to the store and asked if i could get a refund for that jug of milk and that box of oreos and the clerk told me i'd better not have opened them but i had opened the milk and i had eaten two oreos and they were excellent and i told him they were excellent and he said he was glad but he said he couldn't give me back my money so i walked home and told mom that and you know what she said to me she said i had better find her ten dollars because rent is due and her hands are so pruned from washing dishes that she cannot fucking bear to go into work today and earn extra for rent and i tell her i am sorry and that she can have some of the milk and oreos if she wants and she sighs real deep and long with a smile and we share the whole box and finish the milk but her pruney fingers just get more wet when she wipes away some tears after we finish and all of the lights go out



fig season

Thomas Rathe

I.

Louis Moore Sr. used to tell my mother and father
when it's gettin on towards mid august, you can feel the cool air
creep back into the nights.
i'd look up, hands thick with the smell of ground ivy
and mulberries and unripe pears, to the sound of his faded yellow ford pickup
crackling its way down David Lee road.

then nighttime the norfolk & southern would rock me to sleep in those hours
when i longed to hear the sound of my mother's feet on the creaky wooden stairs—
timeworn and carefully nailed together.

"go head and yank that ground ivy there bout six inches back from the fence."
bent at the waist, head full of thick steam come rising up out Burch's creek,
that shallow brown murk.

only the second week of august brings such heat
so broiling—ninety nine in the shade
and it surrounds me and i am dripping and i suck it down deep in my chest.

but then the six foot tall pokeweeds by the railroad tracks,
they shrivel and yellow and dry, worn out by the love and toil
brought in on these southwest winds.
and that nice Waynesboro drawl would have passed me by
but a pit in my stomach and a peach in my hand had me burning
to hear those rocks under those tires, kickin up dust.
or that trembling whistle—
and i would have lay there, nose to the ground, sobbing till the stairs creaked
at six am.

II.

i brought you a fig leaf the other day

five years after that night when he died and we kissed, then i watched it wither and wondered why you still love to pounce on me that way.

"those little dots on the bottom of the fig, see they're just hummingbird holes", assured an old old friend as he cut the tiny fruits in half, clean.

"you'd think they'd suck out the innards,
but they're really after the tiny flowers inside."

and like a hummingbird,
i'd feast on flowers from Abel's fig tree
the second week of august and fly to the top of Walnut mountain
to catch a rare glimpse of the rolling piedmont.
then maybe i'd wander and i'd find myself one christmas eve morning
on that same mountaintop—
singing, standing in the tall grass
thinking about you and me and the curve of the earth.

i still see Louis Moore Jr. out on Black Cat road, sometimes
watching trains from the bridge. i reckon he lives alone back in that little hollow
at the end of David Lee road, father gone eight or nine years to brain cancer
and mother grown too weary of the world
and its august air that quiets the summer steam.

and i'm still looking for those tiny flowers, those tiny flowers
on the inside of the figs.
those tiny flowers strung together by these hot days and cool nights.

III.

maybe one day i'll find them at dawn,
hung up like streamers from the railroad bridge
on Black Cat road by those good souls
who saw their lives washed away not far from there—down the septic tank
in a bright burgundy slurry of figs and gasoline and old colony rotgut wine.
i think they'd dance in the breeze wrought by the norfolk & southern,
roaring down those hot lines of steel,
gone past the hollow full of quartz and pine needles
bound for some world full of light and sorrow
and creaky wooden stairs.

Dwellers

Zack Knoll



The Couple II

Zack Knoll



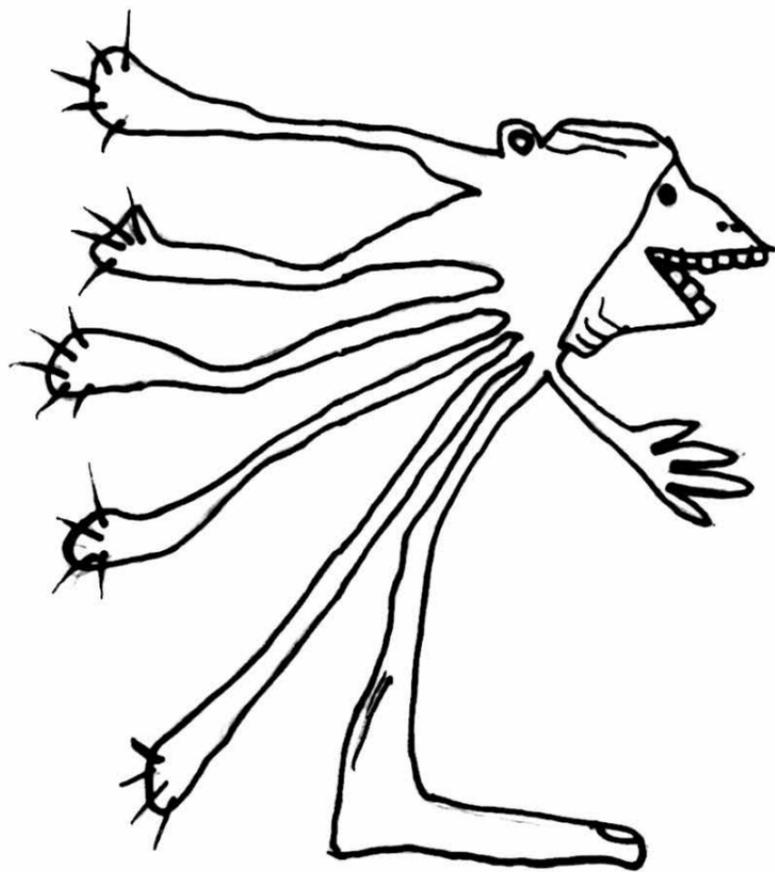
Monolith

Jonah Haven

You cannot stay
in my mouth any longer —
it is like love —
but Love rings in that other room
as if walls were the sea
and warmth was not you —
You could be resplendent
from our silence still —
singing violently White
if left unheard — yet wrung
down to your marrow, I set
our perigee — bare
so its life be known
and its death begins just —
then this tooth, my bone
tombstone permanence,
refused to decay —
and that room would not be
in our mouths much longer —
persisting instead will be
our infection
Stone — split apart,
ringing — lastingly.

Untitled

Laura Hartmann



Street Smarts

Lucy Weltner

" 'Why, that looks like that nice dull young man that tried to sell me a Bible yesterday,' Mrs. Hopewell said, squinting. "He was so simple...but I guess the world would be better off if we were all that simple.'

Mrs. Freeman's gaze drove forward and just touched him before he disappeared under the hill. Then she returned her attention to the evil smelling onion shoot she was lifting from the ground. 'Some can't be that simple,' she said, 'I know I never could.' "

- Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People"

"Here, let me do it." He pops a head off with a thumb flick, hands the creature to her, weakly wriggling. Isabel holds it at arms length with two fingers, watching tiny sweat-drops of sugar trickle over her hand, feeling the tiny shudders pass, smaller and smaller. She stares at it for a few seconds, sticks it in her mouth, sucks pensively, running her tongue over the gummy muscle.

"Thanks, Caesar," she rubs her tongue, stuck with melting lumps of sugar-blood, against the roof of her mouth. It is flavored with Africa: *On December 22nd, several years ago, chief Chalu'quatz confronted the Tanzanian government over the loss of native lands to industrial expansion and agriculture.* Ostrich plume grass nods back and forth, bending like the slow stretch of a rubber band. The men wear necklaces strung with animal teeth: the perfectly detailed teeth of honey badgers, fennec foxes, golden cats from mile spanning networks of burrows. One man wears feather earrings, held together with gold wires.

Chief Chalu'quatz's burnt brown calluses shine like the hand-worn patches of statues. The government envoy's tie hangs wearily, smelling strongly of soap and faintly of eggs, barely noticeable stain discoloring one corner. He swelters in the African heat, thin beads of sweat pooling between loose folds of skin. The sun drives sharp beams into the men's backs; a whydah hops in the grass, bright tail feathers brushing the dust. A man with a gleaming bone necklace steps forward, jaw muscles clenching - *The chief's son and heir, 25 years old, responsible for leading a band of thirty warriors in battle against the tribes of Tanzania's more fertile west valley.* The

heir's corded shoulders tense, a blackened bruise showing between two jutting shoulder blades, and there is something sad in the way he walks, strides spanning miles of sand, skin burning in the hot sahara sun.

She glances toward the classroom's front as the vision lingers and fades. She no longer remembers the pictures clearly, but the information is there: roughly seventy two men currently compose Chalu'quatz's tribe, inhabitants of the Eastern Tanzanian veldt, Raymond Osmond, representative of the Tanzanian department of the interior, sent to negotiate a treaty. The teacher, a determined, wide-eyed woman, urges with both hands, encouraging the class to discuss. Her high pitched voice describes the symbolic connotations of blood, roses, the snow, the sun. Isabel remembers the novel: strangers clad all over in clean ivory robes, the chiming of heavy copper bells, a scrabble board with worn wooden tiles. The main character - a middle aged woman, she thinks - spelled zygote, spelled quince, spelled larynx, laying each letter carefully on creased cardboard. The words taste sweet, syllables melting against her tongue, and she jots them down. The teacher grins an overcooked grin - "Who can tell me what stands out about this scene?" The main character - she doesn't remember her name - plays scrabble with a man, and fucks him afterwards. Is this important? She forgets, but nods slightly, so the teacher knows she means well.

The boys outside the basketball court wear heavy sweatshirts, shoulders slumped with imaginary weight. The sun tinges the pavement with white hot light, scattering heat shadows across the court's chalk markers.

"Brian," Caesar gestures toward a boy in a crisp new Brown hoodie and flapping, faded plaid shirt. The skin on his face is taut, drawn towards a peaky nose. A weasel face, Isabel thinks, smiling a thin smile.

"Pleased to meet you." His hand encircles her wrist, pale with tiny translucent freckles.

Caesar introduces her to each boy in turn; John, faded Cornell sweatshirt, burly and with tanned-brown; Kyle, lanky and red haired and

amiable; Tomas, younger than the rest, with delicately fanned ears.

"This is Isabel," Caesar smiles softly, drapes an arm around her shoulder, "I expect she'll be hanging out with us a lot." Isabel knows it's a question, grasps Caesar snugly above one arm. "Yes," she says, mouth warm and leaden. The air feels like leaden mercury, pulsating gently with the boys' hot breaths.

Brian reaches deft fingers into a worn leather bag, drawing out a boxy six-pack of intelligence creatures. The organisms vibrate gently, sweating bursting drops of sugar in the heat. "Shall we celebrate, then? To Isabel!" With a practiced flick, he snaps the creature's head back. The boys nod and shuffle in approval, Brian sucking the intelligence creature's broken head.

"Have you ever tried like this?" Deftly, Caesar grabs one from the sixpack, dangles it in front of his face. It looks like a tiny translucent duck, loosely shaped beak and vague nubs of wings. Spindly feet twitch, swinging back and forth in tiny increments. Caesar pins the tiny bird against his nose, snorts in quick bursts. Slices of muscle, transparent as fingernails, dissolve slowly, syrupy flesh sucked up Caesar's nose. The legs kick in tiny death throes.

"That's disgusting..." John laughs softly, under his breath. "Can I try?" She watches the flesh melt slowly off tiny bare bones.

Brian carefully flattens a spent cigarette between finger and thumb, creasing each corner like origami. "Does it feel good?" he asks, a grin slowly spreading across whitened cheeks. "Caesar, you're crazy. Crazy, brilliant asshole."

She looks at the remainders of the sixpack, those left gently bumping against the box's cardboard walls. She glances towards the high noon sun, beating forcefully on the concrete. "Fuck off, Caesar," she says, smiling, half-slapping his outstretched arm. He flicks her hand playfully away, grinning a loose-fitting smile. The air feels hot and fresh at the same time. Caesar leans down, sucking the remaining syrup off his fingers.

They walk home in the bright afternoon, leaves spread in wide

arcs across the sidewalk. Caesar's coat burns with concentrated sunlight. He drapes an arm delicately over her shoulder, warming her with borrowed heat.

They were alive as a clam or a fruitfly is alive - no thoughts, no emotions. "No nervous system," Caesar confirmed, one hand gesturing broadly towards his brainstem. "Simple as that." After all, they were made in a lab, engineered by scientists melding long strips of synthetics.

At dinner the next day, her father discovers a few six packs stashed inside the hidden bottom pouch of her bookbag. "Have you been eating these at school?" Frowns slightly, adjusts the folds of his plaid jacket, gazes at the living intelligence shifting restlessly in the box. "Shouldn't you be listening to what the teacher's saying?" He leans over the cardboard carton, carefully reaches down one finger, gingerly touching the top of an intelligence creature's head. His finger comes up daubed with sticky white grains.

"They're not sentient, you know," she guides his hand away from the box's contents. "Just bundles of instincts, stimuluses and reactions." The news burbles softly in the living room, grey haired men talking in low voices. Her father stands and stares for a few long seconds, as if assessing her own bodily wires and strings.

"They say Earth's population is still small enough that every living person could stand on the island of Zanzibar, and there would still be room left," Caesar told her the day they met. They sat across from each other, in the corner booth at the coffee joint beside the school.

"How big is Zanzibar?" His arm fell across the Starbucks table, grazing her painted fingernails. She lifted her cardboard cup with the other hand, taking a brief sip. The coffee's heat cleansed her mouth, acid-washing her tongue's sensors.

"1554 square kilometers." His fingers danced over the table's greased plastic, enveloping her delicate wrist. "If everyone can fit into such a tiny area, you'd think world leaders could arrange some sort of

universal gathering, for all the world's people to meet and discuss. A summit for people with the commonality of living on Earth. A summer camp for the world."

A beam illuminated the restaurant corner, and for a second she watched the scene from above: just Caesar's hand in hers, smelling of soap, clean and simple.

"I bet you've never tried Intebian." With a slow flourish, Caesar lifts a perfectly square wooden box out of his bookbag. "European, founded in 2040, best quality control of any major intelligence producer." Thick varnish coats the box, letters delicately carved into the soft wood. Running a careful finger over the box, she notices each letter is spaced the same distance apart. Three inches, maybe four.

He looks at his shoes, face twitching in minute bursts of excitement. Hundreds of stars illuminate the ground, and she makes out shapes in the darkness, shadowed splotches of mud caked over Caesar's old Converse. Outlines of fabric show against his skin, detailed pockets of darkness barely recognizable as socks, shoes, pants. His skin is puckered, hairs standing up in the humid air. He wants me, she thinks suddenly, and it seems so sweet and searing and obvious she traces the shadow patterns with a bare finger.

Caesar's hand twitches, reaching towards the inlaid wooden letters. "Intelligence technology will change the world, someday. Imagine - everyone will understand everything. A universal basis of information." He smiles loosely at the sky as her fingers explore the crevices between layers of sock. She doesn't mention the mass farms in North Korea, tens of thousands tuned into 24 - hour broadcasts of dictatorial pep talks and military parades. His breath smells densely sweet, like vaporized sugar, and she remembers the spare six-pack thrown under the backseat of his old Ford. Caesar plucks a fat creature out of the box, moonlight glistening against the tiny drops of syrup wetting the animal's body. White flesh bulges on either side of Caesar's fingers, sagging downwards like unbaked pizza dough. "Take it." She outlines a final circle around

Caesar's ankle. The creature weighs damp and heavy in her hand, like living fog.

The Intebian smells of old leather and book glue, sugary sweetness mingling with sharper tastes of dust and wood polish. She can tell immediately the intelligence creatures are not only good quality, but free range, allowed to roam some high caliber library in Denmark or Switzerland. She remembers her fourth or fifth grade class visited an intelligence factory farm, foot square cages stacked in perfect grids. Blobs of sticky white syrup-sweat dried against the bars, dribbled along the metal cage floors. Tiny screens embedded in the concrete walls flashed and mumbled, a different channel for each hundred cages. Intelligence creatures pressed against newspaper lining the remaining three walls, thick digestive acids bleeding through strands of paper. The creatures' innards were translucent like microbes on a coverslip, stomachs outlined in light as they absorbed the information.

Mind fogged as the Intebian wore off, Isabel remembers the bottle of mid-quality scotch stolen from the pantry liquor supply. "I brought something...to drink with the Intebian." *In the late 13th century, members of early European societies ingested small doses of the poison amanita muscaria mushroom, using it both as a hallucinogen and a test of strength...* An identification plate displaying a bright red capped mushroom appeared quickly in her mind's eye, fading quickly as the Intebian wore off.

"I don't drink." Caesar grasped the bottle with one hand, eyes fixed on the sky's expanse. "Don't smoke, either. Clouds your head. Fucks up your mind, you can't think straight." One handedly, Caesar twists off the cap, teeth parted in a crazy smile. For a few seconds, the scotch hangs soundlessly in the air; suddenly Caesar's arm spins out wildly, the bottle flying in crazed circles. "Feed it to the plants," Caesar laughs crazily, and she wonders if somehow he is already drunk, absorbing droplets of alcohol from the night air. The scotch flowed in powerful pulses, gurgling black across swathes of stars. The liquid bleeds into the dust, splattering the ground with black shadows. Suddenly, she is covering him with kisses, lips hurriedly searching for every inch of skin,

neck, chin, face. He tastes like soap and grass, earthy and clean at the same time.

"That was a hard test in physics today." Isabel studied, scattershot, for an hour after her meeting with Caesar the night before. Now they walk arm and arm through shafts of sunlight draping the high school hallway.

"Yeah." Caesar's shoulders are slumped, bookbag draped casually off one arm. "Physics is challenging. Plus Mrs. Lupin's a hard teacher."

"Forget equations of motion - if I ever need to figure out how far a ball will roll, I'll just roll it and find out myself." Isabel checks her phone, and Caesar stares into the middle distance, adjusting his glasses with one free hand. "I think I must have gotten a C on that test. What grade do you have in that class, anyways?"

"I have an A," he says, thin eyebrows gathering around his nose. He nudges her away for a second, kneeling down to lace a dirty Converse. "I don't know how, though. Fuck that class. You know, some midwestern Native American tribe - the Huron, I think - believe we come equipped with a map of the universe behind our eyelids. So whenever you close your eyes, the shapes you see drifting around are real galaxies and nebulae and stars, all seen from incredibly far away. I think about it sometimes, when I'm faced with a hard test." Tightening his shoelaces, he glances back at Isabel, almost shyly. She tastes an edge of sweetness on his breath - pleasant, not cloying, like flavored toothpaste. Coming down, she thinks, with sudden clarity, *coming down coming down*.

After her next class, he stands waiting in the hallway, skimming the research posters lining the corkboard walls. "Hey, Isabel." He puts his arms around her as the door to the classroom swings shut. They walk silently for a few seconds. "The mass of the sun is 1.989×10^{30} kilograms. The mass of Alpha Centauri is 2.188×10^{30} kilograms. That's a lot, isn't it?" He walks silently past worn wooden doors of classrooms, eyes fixed on the hallway's end. Isabel tries to imagine the hugeness of 2.188×10^{30} kilograms, imagine the

star's mass sprawling outwards behind her flapping pink skin eyelids. "A lot for just a little pinprick of light, right?" Caesar descends the stairs carefully, lowering each foot through an endless abyss of time and space.

Caesar lives just outside of downtown, on a street of hundred year old Victorians and big spreading trees. His house is gray with mammoth black shutters and a heavy oak door. Curtains embroidered with spreading yellow flowers always hang in the windows. The flowers blend in nearly perfectly with the dark orange curtains, three-petaled with tiny semicircle leaves. From the street, the design is almost invisible, yellow thread disguised by the sun shadows on the window. Isabel only visited Caesar's house twice, both times tracing the raised thread flowers of the curtains. Caesar's father works ten hour days as CEO of a multinational company selling replaceable silicon parts for computers and televisions. His mother is an artist. The first time Isabel visited, Caesar's mother pushed a vacuum intently across the floor, thick carpet flattening in long rectangular stripes. Isabel thought of an image from a history-themed pack of living intelligence, showing a terse, plain clothed farmer driving a roped plowhorse across a rocky field. The second time Isabel visited, neither of Caesar's parents were there. They climbed the expansive ornamental maple and sat together on the roof.

Later, they drive ten minutes into the industrial section of town, to graffiti sprawling concrete buildings. "Fuck the System," Caesar sprays in huge looping letters, then, "Rats against war," and "Impeach for peace." Spinning a red spray can in wide arcs, he marks the concrete with loose, crazy spirals. She doesn't have any ideas for slogans, so she works methodically with a little black paint can, tracing the slopes of individual crow feathers, the velvet strokes of cat fur.

He produced an old fashioned news magazine from a trench coat pocket; tiny, newspaper - style print, accompanied by darkened photographs of marching soldiers and grim senators. "What's that for?" Tomas asked, the boys gathering around Caesar in curiosity.

"I bought a pack of blanks." Caesar smiles secretly, lays the magazine carefully on the pavement. His backpack bulges with the frame of an intelligence six pack.

Staring intently at the magazine, Caesar carefully cuts tiny squares, removing individual words from the magazine's pages. The other boys lean towards Caesar and the stack of magazines, big sweatshirts sagging in the heat. Throwing scraps of paper down one by one on the hot concrete, Caesar lifts one hand up towards the hunched circle of boys. John and Kyle back up a few steps, watching Caesar's hands dart back and forth between piles of papers. The looseness of their hoodies melts college names into nonsense masses of letters, Cornell becoming Corn, Princeton Printon, Duke Duk. Brian lingers a few paces away, dribbling a basketball, hand ducking in and out of the black shadow under the net. She remembers Brian is widely known as the smartest of the group, an AP student, foxy face absorbing dates and essay assignments. Caesar squints an eye half shut, leaning over the pavement as the live intelligence shifts back and forth inside the bookbag. For a moment, Caesar's face - lips tensed in a vague half smile - reminds her of the Tanzanian boy chief's, fired bronze by years of sun.

With a flourish, Caesar sets down each word to a completed sentence - "Alfonso Pinochet," he declares, "pressed a live chicken into Albert Einstein's fragrant dick." He laughs, a harsh, dry crow call, drawing the boys closer. John and Kyle join in with low raucous belly laughs, digging big hands through piles of letters. Caesar smiles, glancing outside the circle of sweatshirts, and draws her towards him. The hollow beneath Caesar's neck feels damp, slick with a thin transparent layer of sweat.

They work quickly, Caesar assembling neat piles of clippings, Kyle and John carefully taping together sentences, Brian feeding strips of paper carefully into the box of live intelligence. Tomas darts back and forth, observing and commenting, big ears twitching like a bat's.

They crash John's den, walls papered by sports posters and dartboards. "My dad's mancave." He launches a dart at the wall. "Let's get

these things cooking.” The voice of the television reporter fluctuates as Kyle flicks the volume up and down. “...here at the Baltimore aquarium, the senator pays a visit to one of the world’s last remaining whales in an effort to lift the country’s morale during wartime...” Kyle throws the controller on the couch, scattered with magazine pages and beer bottles.

Caesar launches rubber darts at the TV, obscuring the man’s face with red plastic. “What a fuck up.” He sinks a metal tipped dart deep into a corkboard, leaning heavily against the wall. She doesn’t know who the man on the TV is; strolling out of the red block of Caesar’s darts, the senator grins and shakes an attendant’s hand. “John’s right. Let’s set these up,” he draws the carton of live intelligence from his backpack, strips of magazine paper reduced to clumps of pulp stuck to the box’s edge. She can just make out the solid forms of paper dissolving in the creatures’ stomachs.

Caesar consumes living intelligence with practiced efficiency, snapping the creature’s neck with a quick thumb flick. “Do you want one? They’re a little strong.” He inhales a creature’s stubby foot with one quick breath. She heard once that living intelligence fed less information becomes more concentrated, the available information digested into strange potent visions. Caesar finishes his second creature and leans against her shoulder, breathing in thick sugar clouds. “Hahaha!... this one is insane!...Is this Caesar’s?” John shouts from the kitchen, voice echoing briefly. Brian shoves three intelligence creatures into a leather backpack. Rumors say Brian’s dealing now, not just concentrated intelligence but actual hallucinogens, the kind that wash away people’s brains with vivid, all consuming dreams. Caesar nudges closer, whispering a mashed together mix of syllables. She eases a creature out of Caesar’s half clenched hand, sugar crusted in the creases between each knuckle. She sees George Washington transform into a vampire and have carnal sex with a teletubby. She sees Vladimir Putin defecating on the moon. She sees herself trip over the edge of a scarred crater, spiraling over and over into the widening hole. Her stomach sways violently back and forth, liquid straining like a sea of swimming fish.

A second intelligence creature, glowing with widening haloes of blue and red light, sits sprawled atop a creased sports magazine. "Take me home," it squeaks from a tiny dark mouth - opening, "Isabel! Take me fucking home." She strains downwards, clutching the creature in one wobbling hand. In a few seconds, she felt the soft moist shape of the creature folded safe in her pocket.

"Come on, let's get out of here. My car's out front." Caesar's car is an ancient 2000s Ford striped on both sides by long, horizontal key scratches. She lets herself into the front seat, rusty door groaning against its hinges. Her stomach flip flops, and she leans against the door, watching dust motes dance across the air like tiny animals.

Ten minutes pass before she realizes the Ford is leaving town, paper tiled roofs giving way to long rectangular buildings. Mile-long fields of dust line both sides of the road, dotted with tiny triangular warehouses. The car's front bumper blocks strips of dimming sunlight.

They run over a hawk on the way. There's a flashing, dusky shape and a harsh thump, like driving over a plastic bottle left in the road. Caesar jerks towards the side of the road, tires straining with rust. "Fuck," he says quietly, slamming the door, walking towards the corpse with jerking steps. The hawk's body is a fragile casing of feathers and flesh and translucent bones. "Fuck. It's dead." Caesar leans over heavily and motions Isabel towards the road. She comes out of the car tentatively, feeling the ground tilt abstractly beneath her feet, and walks towards the bundle of flesh and feathers. It's the first time she's seen a hawk, outside a zoo - its feathers coated in road dust, beak serrated with tiny teeth. It looks smaller than she remembers, more like her father's old parakeet than a predator.

Facts pass freely through her head, the living intelligence nudging knowledge in and out of her conscious mind. *There are seventeen classes of edible grains recognized by the United States Department of Agriculture. In order to qualify as "whole grain," the marketed product must contain at least four of these grains, unprocessed in such a way that...* There is a fleshy knot under the hawk's left wing, full and smooth like the lips of a second mouth. She presses one

finger over the pink lips, and a dense ball of yellow oozes to the surface. She wonders what the pink mouth's purpose is, if the hawk uses it to eat or hear or store things, like a built-in pocket. A shiny black bug crawls out between folds of a wing feather.

Caesar throws up on the edge of the sidewalk, a few teaspoons of dense, clumping liquid. "Let's go, it would have died anyways," he says, sitting down finally, pressing a single, brown-barred feather into the Ford's ancient plastic cup holder.

The next day, she wakes up after noon. The sun burns a white patch on her blankets. She remembers the drive home, Caesar's leg tensed stiff against the gas pedal, breath emitting in fast sweet gulps. Shadows of telephone polls settled over the Ford's stained flannel seat covers, Caesar's hawk feather smelling of pus and death.

She digs her hand through the folds in her coat pocket, crusted overnight with dried syrup. The creature is curled in a deep crease, stubby limbs poking out at odd angles. It shifts rhythmically back and forth, like a dog dreaming of running. Its bulbous head drifts up and down. She finds an ancient fish tank in the back of her closet, left over from a failed third grade attempt at goldfish raising. The intelligence creature moves suddenly against her coat fabric, and Isabel realizes she can't tell whether it is awake or asleep. Last night she dreamed of whirled planet shapes, spiraling in drunk circles around a foreign sun. The sun is a desert, blanched white with scrubs of dust brown plants. Tan-furred animals twitch weakly, buried under mounds of sand. The sun's surface is scattered with protruding heads. She picks up the intelligence creature gently, in both hands. Carefully, she lifts it out of her pocket, lowering it slowly between the fish tank's smeared glass walls.

It was one or two in the morning when Caesar's lips pressed hard against hers, folding himself down her throat, down between the flesh passageways of her neck. Her hands ache, each individual finger joint stinging. She rummages fast through stacks of folded papers, digging through recent homework assignments, tenth and eleventh

grade essays, deeper into middle school, then childhood. Last night she reached through a tumor into the flesh of a dying bird, fragile ribs pressing against feathers, too thin for a hawk. A fabric husk of a hawk, throwaway skin and layers of used up feathers. A project, written on stiff yellow construction paper, dating back to second or third grade. *My ancestors came from Poland. They crossed the ocean on a boat to get to America.* A paragraph long "essay": *My Favorite Things*, by Isabel Saund, illustrated by Isabel Saund. *I like animals. I like my friends. I like ice cream and cake. I like riding my bike.* Her stomach feels used up, sagging like a cloth bag. A picture, from first grade, maybe even kindergarten: *My Family*. Circle yellow sun, stick figure people, overlong arms dragging through the carpet of grass. She stuffs wads of old projects against the fish tank's back wall. The words bend and crumple together, messy, drunken letters sprawled on yellow and red construction paper. The intelligence creature nestles against the words, already absorbing. *You must be hungry*, she thinks, then wonders if living intelligence ever gets hungry.

Her five year old brother Kevin bangs through the door to her room, slamming it with wild force. "Hi. What's that?" Eyes immediately drawn to the tank in the corner, the fragile white blob pressing against her papers.

"Some living intelligence. I'm keeping it - " she stuffs the remaining papers in a drawer - "as a pet."

"What's his name?" Kevin's face presses insistently against the glass.

"It's just an intelligence creature. It doesn't have a name."

"It's a pet." Kevin's pudgy face puckers in annoyance. He's been taking some kind of psychiatric drug, for "outbursts," but it only seems to make his face muscles twitch more than usual. "Can I name it? Gilbert." Gilbert was a fat, bulge-eyed cartoon animal of indeterminate species, hero of Kevin's new favorite television show.

"Fine. Good. Its name is Gilbert." Isabel dropped a scrap of paper in the fish tank, saying Gilbert but thinking *Caesar, Caesar, Caesar*.

They say his father just formed a partnership with the company. They say Brian arranged the heist, hoped to sell the goods later. They say Brian reported the crime to the police, denied all involvement. They say it was a solo job, planned weeks or months in advance, store security expertly bypassed. They say he had already consumed two entire six packs before being apprehended. They say he planned to overdose. They say when the police caught him, he just consumed a six pack of specialty living intelligence fed from the pages of martial arts textbooks. They say he fought the armed men beautifully, like a crane, like a tiger, like a wildcat, with the grace of all the dead animals in the world. The police questioned his girlfriend, Isabel, they say. She didn't know anything.

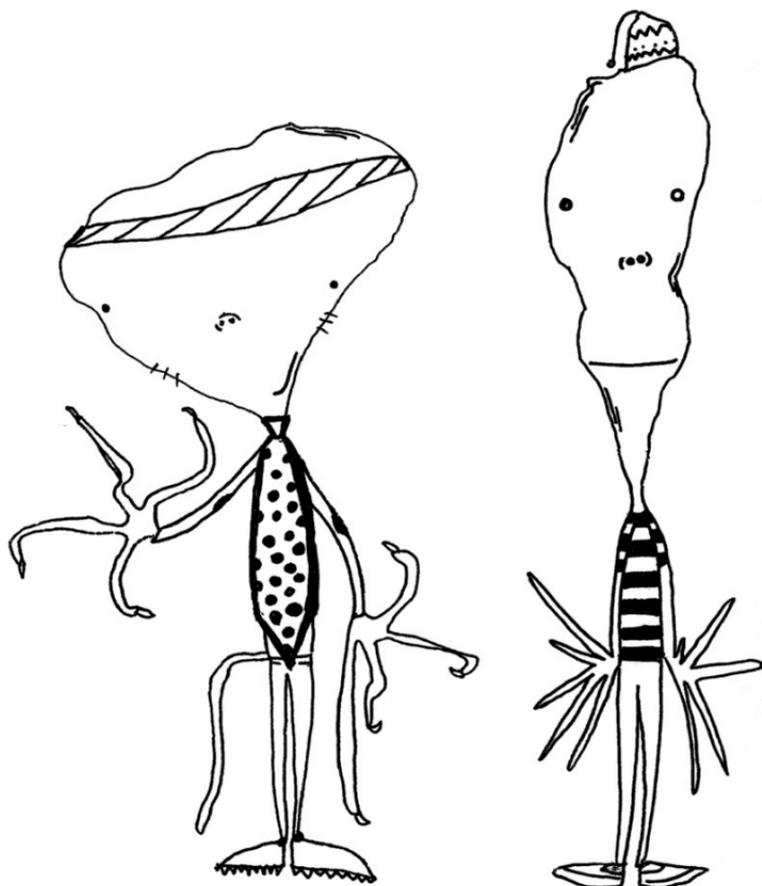
The day she hears, she eats Gilbert. He squeals a tiny eep, the sound of clogged machinery, as she rips him in half. Goopy strings of syrup coat her fingers, and she puts her entire hand into her mouth. She crushes his body flat into gummy paste, tasting the sour pulp of half-digested paper. *Isabel Saund is seven years old. Her favorite color is red. She likes riding her bike, eating ice cream with her friends, petting her dog Ralph on a sunny day. She pushes the sweet grainy syrup against the roof of her mouth, driving her tongue up again and again and again. Isabel's dad works as a politics teacher at a college. Her mom is a secretary. Pressing harder, she mashes Gilbert into a tiny lump. When she grows up, Isabel Saund wants to have one house in every country, and own one of every pet in the world. She stands in the bright square beneath the window, feeling thoughts melt in the morning light. Isabel will be burned clean by the sun, bare and polished as the surface of Mercury. Her excess flesh will be consumed by heat and flames until only a stick figure remains, sprawled on a strip of green, holding stubby hands endlessly, happily with a line of family members.*

In the months leading up to the trial, Caesar's parents enrolled him in a private school, forty five minutes outside town. After two or three weeks, Caesar was seen with a new girl, hanging off his arm like a second backpack. Isabel finished the semester with A's and B's, applying to several large state schools, and, encouraged by her parents, eventually

choosing Michigan State. She heard Caesar was enrolled in an intensive therapy program for juvenile delinquents. She heard another rumor he was in the hospital, recovering from an overdose of mixed living intelligence and cocaine. She takes living intelligence less in college, only occasionally at parties with friends. In her senior year, completing an undergraduate thesis on ecology, she worked with a team of researching biologists at the Detroit zoo. The group of researchers observed the communication methods of endangered birds, specifically different types of eagles. A young golden eagle, wings glittering gold in the sun, lives in an expansive covered aviary near the zoo's entrance. She wonders how it feels to be strong and healthy and the last, the very last of your kind. She wonders about the Tanzanian chief's son, clad in leather and fur and the teeth of golden cats.

Untitled

Laura Hartmann





Ruthie
Hoyland, CT 06492

Rosalie Eck 0739
D.C.P. #0739
135 W Lorain Street
Oberlin, Ohio 44074-1188

4108199

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