

*SAMUEL CLARE KNIGHTS*

*from* The Manual Alphabet



red face heaving fragile rib cage  
registering through my father's work shirt. My mother's  
pointed optics framing the mouth of a baby. "Is he deaf?"  
asked the nurses. Eyes reflected in a dry spoon on the  
formica, my fair skin held upside down. "Who will hear  
him when he cries?"

And so Saginaw's fields went untouched and the plain  
would plain further. I learned to speak from a map and  
a kind neighbor. My mother shapes my hand with her  
hand. To be the boy is to be the map.

The map had silver lines embossed in the pulp that started to warp. I could see graphite fields and everything drawn there. Horizon began with a non-sense of floor and I was only as good as the color of each morning. This sheen was common, written over the same place and unknown to a commoner, as lavender as concrete with the composition of tinsel reserved for dusk. When the map moves only things draped in its colors move with it. The metallic waves shimmer in the brown curl of the paper.

The place handed to me. By positioning fingers in certain ways, I thought I knew what they meant. Most of the time I would just point or make the shape. Created the sky by reaching out as far as I could on both sides and brought my hands low to cover it with clouds.

“Cow.” C-O-W. Sign for cow: the thumb and pinky as horns twisting on a temple. Pull the airy udder for “milk.” Each gesture possessed only the trace of a thing, in my mother’s hands I saw quick palms that bent letters to their form; but especially the O, ringed and void, that made the fingers curve in around the microcosm of our living room—where mine would crystallize a little bleached moon, only more like a shadow puppet that still shows the arm of the object that casts it—her hands were the same ones that, before orbiting, patterned an entire world.

The ice storm in nineteen-seventy-something. How the power was out and the house was a dull song. I would sign to my mother through smoky breath. The letter X hooking our sleepy oxygen. The cold moved freely. My fingers trying to regard the filigree in the corner window. I couldn't say what I wanted.



I made an S and shook it in front of my face. My name dropped from a psalm. A same self flecked over an apparition. My letter started to blur as it shifted to the end. The soft fist of Sam still humming in my palms.

Comic books until 4 a.m., the Deaf smoking all night after a workweek with hearing people. I stayed up late and watched *Saturday Night Live*. On Monday none of the other kids knew the bits and the teachers looked concerned. I would go into a haze at school, missing my name several times before the silence caught me. My teachers thought I was going deaf when really I was somewhere else. Placing layers of gray on gray on gray. I would jolt back after going too far only to find Mrs. Groll's mouth moving. I knew it was time to grab my coat. Arrowwood Elementary had an outdoor white geodesic dome that I'd walk under to get to the principal's office. I was taken with the sounds bouncing off the inner circle. Something my parents would never know.



The teacher asked us to write about what we wanted to be. I wrote in place, one letter on top of the other until a graphite mass formed. A black key hung on a black wall. I smeared my fingers on it and signed letters to myself as fast as I could: a bat vaporizing at my chest. My hand as good a voice as any.

The lake effect seemed normal. One day I missed the bus on purpose and walked across the field. A footfall cracking through ice, creating a long guide of where not to go. Before I broke the expanse I practiced on paper. Sitting in my room, making a slow tear through large sheets. I would listen for the fibers separating and look closely at an E's teeth unpulping.

Gary was the only one I could talk to.



For we are always

Gary.



the limbs

Speech is Gary,  
it shows.

Everything is  
eyes, window glass,  
lips, teeth,  
metal signs

—they're Gary, quite Gary.



Cars are Gary.  
gray is Gary, gloves are Gary.  
the road,  
all are Gary,  
everything is and everyone is  
out of luck who live here.

When my sister Jill was born I remember her arms and legs spelling endlessly. She looked like every letter at once.

The history of J is motion shaped by I. The pinky finger pulling the optic nerve, forming a contrail over the short curl of my mother and sister. How could I say their names otherwise? A Judy-Jill song for the color of any morning.



I once caught a snake and held it as close to the point of nothingness as possible. It spiraled in the air: a letter bending toward me. What thought created its consonant? Strung such scales together only to tatter? Could such a contortion be its namesake? Was the word “snake” drawn purely from shape? Its sound? Or all of it at once? The curves combing a repeating letter in the grass until revealing on concrete. Did it also account for this town? Its drooping tree lines and slow bite? Saginaw?

Saginaw is sadder than I am able. The city shifts on the color of its memory. Around me the fields are thick with ice and the colors of ice, thawing of motors, work, sounds fall. One idles. In the cut of the cold you could shatter. Out there lies the library veiled and lost in letters. It all muddles. The whole riverside down to the water is industry, it sags in the smoky air over streets lined with mailboxes: 48601, 48602, 48603. Birds bearing some yet-to-be color sing faintly under another sun, someone else's sense of undenied light.

I would watch my father talk to himself, dust vacillating, his hands slicing through, setting everything into a different motion. He made lists in the air. I could see the transparency of the water bill, fear of losing his welding job, thoughts on the new USPS application. Bill signed, "Tell him" and how the post office clerk wrote DEAF with a thick marker before tossing it in the pile. I was often locked out of the house, would bend the storm screen back to get through. Once he asked if I broke it. I snapped an N through my fingers and watched him stomp into the kitchen.

Q bulbs from a factory spire. The billow compounds my vapor and forms hypnotically. Everything licked with the silver curl of a ghostly letter and must, of course, move opaquely so with everything else. Sometimes, especially on overcast days, no matter where, I feel the place. The non-heroic belt of slow fields churning in a microcosm, in which a light dulls, grating and the color of grating. Over it all drift clouds like great manufacturing hands ready to pluck a life.



The doctor told me Bill had kidney disease. I turned to him and signed it. Turning back to the doctor I said, "I'm donating my kidney." The doctor wrote in his file. Bill tapped my shoulder and signed, "say you what?"

When we got home I told Judy. Her fingers bent and plowed the air in front of her face.

I could hear Judy getting home from work. I would stare at the flip clock. The motorized cylinder churns two camps of circles in small draws by way of a reduction gear: the dasher at a ratio of one revolution for each hour, the plodder at one for every twenty-four. It is 1:28 a.m. and the wheels move gently, the faster disk connected to an ecliptic of sixty plastic leaves. I stick my finger in the clock to force two neighboring leaves open—they spill a verse. Dropping a leaf increases the dream by one. The book flips vertically, its sheets blurring a memory. One page falls each minute, to reveal a new digit. The slower disk bridges a similar fall of leaves, only there are forty-eight. These leaves have hour numbers: two for each numeral to represent absence or presence. One leaf weakens every thirty minutes, at 25 and 55. Minute leaves 45 through 59 have a small stem. At forty-five minutes past, you can hear the stem lose a branch that depresses into the hour wheel realm, catching a falling L at its proper time.



In some little gray thought I recognized a green idea that had not occurred before: Leave. It lulled through the expanse of an index finger and thumb, actualizing in a drive around the outer rim of town towards the expressway. Cornfields erasing what's already been erased, burning the shape of the sun after you look away.

& work the letters by hand, & refrain, & writhe an I until the graphite bonds, & write in the dark to let the lack pencil itself in, & let things be only because they are, & flesh them out.

& put to an end. & move out of the glassy roll, & break from an absence of noise, & not care for a bland thing, & be short of a version I no longer want, & be one kidney away from never leaving, & be a river, a god, & be almost forgotten, & imagine where nothingness comes, & imagine, & learn Chinese or any lucky number, & know the way a flat cut severs, & feel the metal wheels strain against rails, & hear an epiphany of trumpets out of tune, & bend a paperclip into a perfect line, & take the perfection & guide it into electricity.

**&** could have been a blur of knuckles filtered by a desire to multiply zero. I felt like an in-between & after, a twenty-seventh letter, some corrupted symbol of a boy's finger hovering over a map, measuring omission from one vaporous morning to the next, everything handed down, Bill & Judy piecing it all together somehow. I could have been a reflection if I stayed: mirroring