

Street Smarts

“ ‘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 tribes of Tanzania’s more fertile west valley.* The heir’s corded shoulders tense, and a blacken bruise showing between two jutting shoulder

blades, and there is something sad in the way he walks, strides spanning miles of sand, 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 of 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 creature's 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... A 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 nebulas 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 times ten to the thirty kilograms. The mass of Alpha Centauri is 2.188 times ten to the thirtieth kilograms. That’s a lot, isn’t it?” He walks silently passed worn wooden doors of classrooms, eyes fixed on the hallway’s end. Isabel tries to imagine the hugeness of 2.188 times ten to the thirtieth, 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 to 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 secretively, 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 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. Whats 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 sixpacks 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 As and Bs, applying to several large state schools, and, encouraged by her parents, eventually choosing Michigan State. She heard Caesar was enrolled 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.