

Founded in 2005, Wilder Voice is Oberlin's publication for creative nonfiction and long-form journalism. We also publish chapbooks, produce artist's books, and plan events.

We welcome questions, comments, criticisms, curio, postcards, etc. You can reach Wilder Voice by email at wvoice@oberlin.edu or by snail mail to Wilder Box 43, 135 West Lorain Street, Oberlin, OH 44074.

WILDER VOICE

SPRING 2020: VOLUME 15, ISSUE 29

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IN MY OWN SKIN

MIRANDA PURCELL



Image by Katarina Mazur

I first became aware of my body in a middle school biology class. I wore a skirt and stood at a lab table. I remember hearing, and then seeing, a pencil roll towards me and land at my feet. A male classmate crept over on all fours and the moment he stopped by my shoes I realized he was attempting to look up my skirt. I kicked the pencil away, my face burning. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Shame filled me for days. I didn't want my body to be looked at. Especially not in that way. I hadn't even kissed a boy yet. I didn't want one to look at my underwear. I didn't tell anyone. I wasn't even sure if he had been trying to look up my skirt. What if it really was an accident? What if I had just assumed that he was looking up my skirt? Did that make me a pervert? Should I not have worn a skirt? I decided that the answer to all these questions was "yes" and wore pants for the rest of the year.

To keep my mind off my 14-year-old body being viewed as a sexual object, I threw myself further into track and field, where it was viewed as a machine. What was once something I did after school to kill time before my mom picked me up after getting off work soon became my raison d'être. I had a close group of friends on the team. We would run laps around the middle school field in a tight pack. Occasionally we would go across the street to the high school track. We watched the varsity girls run relays and sprints and hurdles and were reminded that we were about to join a nationally ranked program, and that training hard was the only way to succeed. The front runners on my team were allowed to join varsity, 8th graders competing against seniors in high school. When we saw them run with the older girls, we were constantly reminded of the rewards of strength, hard work, and dedication.

These values stayed with me when I made the varsity team as a freshman. We were expected to be at practice six days a week. If we missed more than three days, we were off varsity. My training as a sprinter consisted of a series of workouts, often drawn up by the sprinting coach, Schultz, and explained to us while we stretched. Stretching took at least 20 minutes. I learned to isolate my muscles, and I knew exactly how I needed to stretch each one of them to ensure that I had full range of motion.

Then the workout would begin. Sometimes we would do ten 200-meter repeats. Sometimes we would do extended fartleks, running the straightaway of the track and jogging the turn for two miles. Sometimes we would do a specialized practice to focus on starts. We

had weight room sessions after practice, lifting to increase our arm strength. There was one drill where we held a 15-pound dumbbell in each hand and pumped our arms for 30 seconds to strengthen our biceps and get us used to moving our arms faster. We would finish up every day with a core routine, six minutes of nonstop ab workouts that brought me to tears the first time I did them. But soon, they became second nature as we all crunched in unison.

I learned to relish the burn that I got from workouts. Sometimes, when our head coach, Levy, oversaw our practice, he would yell out how many times we would repeat a sprint. "Purcell, you can do five or six. Up to you." I would always do the extra one, desperate to prove myself. As we ran, he shouted out the seconds going by so we would know exactly how slow we were going. 25, 26, 27, 28, 29...

Racing was the time to prove myself. All the work I put in, ten months every year for five years was tested by the 30 or so seconds I was out on the track. Waiting for races to start, I would stand in a group of girls and wait for races to be called, clenching sweaty palms, steadying garbled breath. My bladder would press on my tight, high-cut spandex bottoms as the familiar nervous pee sensation grew. The rubber scent of the track was salty and dense. I would jump a few times, thighs to chest, and shake my legs out, feeling every muscle in my body move in the exact way I wanted it to. The official would blow a whistle. "On your mark!"

While a few races stick in my mind, there are many I do not remember. My breath and the blood pumping in my veins would overtake me and I usually lost my vision to black and white blurs towards the end of a race. Sometimes I would fall over after crossing the finish line. Once, I threw my body across to win. My right side was cut and rubber-burned for a week.

As I slowed down from a race, first to a jog, and then a walk, my vision would come back. I would look up at the board to check the times. Part of me would be happy for winning. The other part of me would be upset with myself for not having broken a personal record. I would consider what I did wrong. Maybe my start was off. Maybe I stopped driving too soon. I would turn around and see Levy, writing on his clipboard, not looking towards me. "Time?" he'd ask. "27.9," I'd say. He'd wait a while before responding, and I'd hover uncomfortably next to him. "K," he'd reply, and would turn away from me. I'd be hit with a feeling of failure and step off the track, cursing myself.

I quit track in the spring of my junior year of high school. The tendonitis that began in my knees in 8th grade had spread to my hips. Every time I walked my body cracked. If I took a wrong step, pain would shoot up my sides. My running wasn't where it had been two years ago. I spent nights wondering if I peaked at age 15. When I went to my coach to hand in my uniform, he asked if I was quitting because I was having problems at home. I said that I wasn't, opened the door of the gym, and left.

I barely ran my senior year of high school, choosing instead to focus on school and music and my friends. I noticed a change in my body quickly — because I wasn't running six days a week and working out, my muscles lost their definition. My thighs went from defined to fleshy. My bras stopped fitting as I re-went through puberty, which was stunted due to intense exercise. I became curvy. Part of me welcomed this change into a womanhood that I thought would never come. The other part of me was embarrassed by the size of me . I began wearing baggier clothing that would hide my boobs so I wouldn't get looked at in the street. I hated how my thighs looked when I sat down, stretching across the entire seat of the chair. My arms became weaker and flabbier as fat collected. I couldn't fit into most of the clothes I owned and had to buy new ones. I was uncomfortable in this new body that wasn't toned or strong.

During my freshman year of college, exercise took a backseat. There were friends to make and groups to audition for and parties to go to. I chose to restrict what I ate rather than exercise. When I ran for North Shore, we were given loose meal plans that ensured that we would be eating for performance. We ate around 3000 calories every day to help us build and maintain muscle. At college, with no muscle to build, I ate salads, French fries and ice cream almost every day. I wanted my Stevie selections to match those of my best friends, two five-foot, conventionally skinny girls who fit into every item of clothing they tried on. For spring break freshman year, the three of us went to California. While we were in Los Angeles, we shopped a lot, looking for fun vintage clothing. I remember tears rolling silently down my face as I struggled to put on yet another pair of jeans that didn't fit me, overhearing them exclaim how good the other looked. After a few days, I decided to stop trying on pants and instead watch them and give feedback. I wanted to be like that, and so the less I exercised, the less I ate. I felt worse and worse, and wasn't even losing weight.

I remembered cases of exhaustion on my team. One of my teammates was iron-deficient. Another had diabetes. I remembered watching my teammates faint in front of me and Levy running towards them, yelling, "has she eaten in the last two hours?" Even though I scared myself into eating more, I started feeling better. I went on runs again. I tried to ignore the nagging voice in my head that told me to go faster.

Diet culture has not been particularly rampant on campus during my time here. Diets are frowned upon, met with protestations like, "diets are so bad for your body!" and "you have a fine body, why would you ever want to lose weight?" and "Love yourself!" If you wanted to diet you were a Bad Feminist and a Bad Woman. Changing your body meant that you didn't love your body, and not loving your body was Bad. I was tormented by the angel and devil on each shoulder as I scrolled through Instagram and saw my high school classmates at bathing-suit institutions—schools in Florida where the most popular major seemed to be going to the pool. I would end up in a rabbit hole of model-girls who were my age or younger so frequently that I had to unfollow them all.

Instead of diet culture, Oberlin students participate in busy culture: two people coming out of the library comparing how busy they are and how little they've eaten because they have no time for food. "I totally skipped lunch today. I was sooo busy." My stomach rumbles just listening . It's cool to miss meals because you're 'busy'. Yet, if I call it the "homework diet," people get mad at me. So, I learned to shut up and continue putting unholy bites of my lunch into my mouth.

College hookup culture made me reconsider my body. Long gone was the machine it used to be. I had grabbable hips and often had to force unwanted hands off them. Even though I had a conventionally "desirable" body type, I hated people acknowledging my figure. People I slept with would say, "you have such a nice body." The eighth-grade science class flashed across my mind. I would respond, "stop talking."

I don't miss the injuries or my demanding and impossible coach, but I do miss running competitively. Training gave me a sense of control. It was in those moments on the track where I knew my body most intimately, where I understood every muscle and its function, where I knew that I was strong and capable. I'm trying to get back to that feeling. I was home recently and decided to go to the

track for a run. I wanted to get a few laps in, nothing fast, just feel the bounce of the rubber against the soles of my Asics. As I walked through the metal turnstile, I drew in the atmosphere of the complex. When we ran we were on exhibition. Having a body, I think, is being a constant, living exhibit. I'm still negotiating the terms of that exhibit. I stretch a bit, and I feel the familiar burn in my calves, the one that lets me know that in this moment, I'm in control. It feels safe. I step onto the track. Right now, the sun is setting, the best time to run. The air is cool. The track feels soft, and warm, and resilient.



Image by Eva Sturm-Gross



On a steamy August day in 2011, my classmates were preparing to go back to heavy loads of schoolwork and face the ticking clock in each classroom counting down to Gaokao, the Chinese college entrance examination. I was boarding a plane at Hong Kong International Airport, grasping a file folder with my passport, documents, exchange student guide, a map of San Francisco International Airport and a few pages of introduction to Louisiana. I knew Louisiana would be different from the America I saw on TV—skyscrapers, bridges, busy streets with burger joints and dim bars. "Louisiana is one of the poorest states in the US," I read. What would that look like?, I thought to myself. Surely still better than the poorest parts of China? Words from Obama's 2008 victory speech in Chicago, which I learned about on my Casio electronic dictionary as English practice, began to sound in my memory: "If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer."

I landed in America as part of a high school exchange program. Before that, I was studying at one of the most selective public high schools in Guangzhou. I cried on the phone to my mother for feeling dumb in Math and Physics classes, and felt small while my classmates were running Student Union, winning national academic awards, travelling globally and performing on world-class stages. I wanted to keep up with my peers, and that included studying abroad—roughly 150-200 out of the 1000 students in my class ended up getting a Western college education. I thought by going to America, I'd shake off all these pressures of always achieving and be appreciated for my personality, finally be free and happy. The magic words Obama spoke were soon to be met with a completely different, cold, harsh reality. The true America was about to unfold in front of me.

For the first 3 months in Louisiana, I struggled to fully understand English spoken with a Southern accent. But that did not stop me from doing many things for the first time: I read a corny English love novel, attended a dance party, taught my classmates Chinese history, performed a monologue in drama club—things I could not do in China due to the intense focus on studying. But there were also many nights I spent tackling American history, a much thicker textbook than my Chinese history textbook despite America's significantly shorter history. I was mesmerized by what America was "about".

Talking to Americans was just as eye-opening, in its own way. My rich, spoiled, white host sister rolled her eyes at friends I made: poor white girls who liked coloring and math, a daughter of two lesbians, Pentecostals who always covered their bodies fully, a Black teen mom, and other Asian exchange students.

I was determined to blend in as an equal to American kids. I wanted to break the smart, studious, nerdy Asian stereotype. However, my determination was not rewarded. Instead, I had my first taste of racism. As the only Chinese girl in town, I thought "exotic" was good. It was rare, after all. I even prepared myself for loads of eccentric questions. But at a point they stopped being just eccentric. The words I was looking for to describe questions like "Does China have internet?" were "racist" and "ignorant". But I was 16 and in a foreign country for 3 months. I didn't know how to use those words as weapons to fight back. So I kept the injury to myself.

It got worse when my white host sister started calling me "Chi" and laughed boisterously at me for looking "Chinese" during a Chinese circus show on a holiday trip to Nashville. "Is that your brother, Chi?" She burst into laughter. It was the first time I felt that being "different" meant "inferior" to some people. Nothing prepared me for this. Not "High School Musical," "Friends," or "Titanic," the few exposures I had to the idea of "America". Not even the early warnings about racism from people back home. I didn't know then what it is like in reality.

It took me many nights of tears to swallow my fear and finally be brave enough to say, "I can't do this anymore." When I transferred to another host family—a young white Baptist couple fond of the Southern conservative lifestyle—and a private Christian school, things were a little bit better. However, while she treated me politely, my second host mom still considered it "rude" of me to not attend church with them on Sunday mornings, despite my explicit disbelief in Christianity. Later I realized that they took me in to "educate" me about God. My difference made my classmates, teachers and host family all the more eager to spread the Gospel—the "good news"—to save me from "ignorance".

Secretly, I had wished my anxiety for the future could be resolved by believing in Jesus. But I knew the brutal competition of American college applications awaited upon my return to China. A white friend didn't understand why I had to go to some so-called "elite" and expensive college in the US rather than attend the local

University of Louisiana campus like her. I could try to explain to her what education meant to a Chinese family like mine, that it was worth it for my parents to send me across the ocean to seek a better, perhaps "elite", alternative. But instead I said, "I just have to."

Naturally, my college search became a search for the very opposite of Louisiana. I was looking for a crowd that would value diversity and champion tolerance, inclusivity, and love as well as empathy for the "different". With that spirit, I was immediately drawn to an online post about an elite liberal arts college in the heart of Ohio.

Oberlin stood out as my curiosity for the "other side" of America grew—an all-accepting sanctuary for marginalized, left-leaning intellectuals. It seemed that if I attended Oberlin, I would be surrounded by educated people from metropolitan areas who would have had interactions with Chinese people and also possess a fair amount of knowledge about my culture. I wouldn't feel unsafe because minorities like me, a Chinese international student, would be heard and seen. Being different would not only be accepted but celebrated.

For anyone who's idealized a romantic relationship and gotten their heart broken later, it is not hard to guess that my love story at Oberlin didn't exactly go well.

It started with my observations of the heated campus political climate. Quickly, I picked up the vernacular that students used in discussions and protests: POC, institution, status quo, colonialism, white supremacy. Activism moved me with its passion. It is something that Chinese society would never allow. Growing up being the "good" student, I naturally was attracted to the rebellious nature of activism in various forms—writing, protesting, slam poetry, visual arts, you name it. Politics changed the way I think about my relationships with others and the society I live in. I became a politics major and a news writer for the Oberlin Review, through which I could learn about people of different communities.

Yet it also didn't take long for me to sense that something didn't seem quite right. Oberlin's student body is 64% white, has a median family income of \$178,000, and is predominately liberal. While often openly siding with POCs, some white students told me they felt silenced as the POC community grew radical and shut down conversations with "it is not my responsibility to educate you."

People were afraid to speak their minds and confined themselves to their own experiences in public discussions. In my Intro to the Black Experience class, few white students participated in the discussion because it seemed to be intruding on the "safe space" for black students. I was the only Asian student and I also didn't raise my hand to speak. Not even once. I thought my job was to listen and learn, since I never lived that experience.

If I was honest then and did not worry about what Oberlin activists thought of my unpopular opinion, I would shout out that I didn't like all this one-sided self-righteous loud-as-hell noise. I was overwhelmed by the arrogant "it is not my responsibility to educate you" type of rhetoric that filled my interactions with liberal-minded Oberlin students. As an international student, I was not aware of the racial dynamics in the US at the beginning of college, and that is precisely why I wanted to learn. If you don't tell me what the issues are, I will never know. And the truth is, I WANT to know.

As opposed to the negative stereotypes of Chinese students and scholars imposed by conservatives—job-stealing immigrants or untrustworthy spies—the liberal students at Oberlin seem to have their own issues with Chinese students: Chinese students are seen as a wealthy and privileged crowd; they are the new "whites", compared to the struggling first-generation, low-income, and undocumented American students, who are often people of color. Indeed, most Chinese students at Oberlin pay full tuition and often come from affluent cities in China. Even at other US universities, Chinese students are often seen as "cash cows" or "walking ATMs" that "fix" the financial situation, contributing about \$13 billion to the US economy in 2017-2018.

Chinese, from time to time, is spoken and heard on campus. Oberlin has a campus culture where friendship stems from allyship, especially when it comes to how students find community through identity. Some Chinese students tend to cling together and share similar political views. It wasn't that I didn't have opinions; I simply tried to keep them within my Chinese-speaking community or close friends, rather than discuss them publicly, because I felt safer with those who were similar to me and might not challenge me.

When the tension between the US and China started to grow because of Trump's trade war and cybersecurity concerns, more negative rhetoric about Chinese students, pushed by American mainstream media, began flooding US college campuses. Chinese students

were labeled in international newspapers like the New York Times as academically unqualified "cheaters", "communists" unassimilable into liberal democracy, and "intelligence thieves" with ulterior motives. An East Asian Studies professor and advisor to the Oberlin Chinese Student Association suggested that Chinese students "break up" the "gangs" to avoid unnecessary and sometimes even unconscious hostility from our American peers, students and professors alike. Being a politics major, I was already hyper-sensitive to the political atmosphere on campus. I couldn't figure out why my very own existence at Oberlin had to be challenged this way, as if I didn't belong. It brought me down on many days.

Freshmen year, my mental health started to deteriorate due to academic pressure, and I was suffering the emotional distress of an unhealthy relationship which lasted into my junior year. When I finally got out of it, I was drained. My coping mechanisms completely crashed when I failed an economics class due to extreme pressure and fear of ruining my transcript.

My health went into a downward spiral. It was dangerously optimistic of me to think that medication could fix it all. I thought, naively, that I could go on taking challenging courses, until finally I lost all energy to keep up with schoolwork and struggled every single day to go to class. Lying in bed, unable to sleep, counting the seconds, was my loneliest moment at Oberlin. I remember feeling so helpless that I was reaching out everywhere to friends and professors and talking nonsense. Eventually, I was hospitalized and my father flew in from China to accompany me home after taking medical leave.

What was awaiting me at home, however, were questions, confusion, doubts and disappointments from my parents, relatives and even friends about the reason I "became" ill. A psychology textbook will tell you it was a combination of genetic and environmental factors. No one in my family had been "diagnosed", though my mother and her side of the family tend to be ill-tempered. So my parents leaned into the environmental factors after I tried to explain what happened to me: "You are too engaged with other people's businesses." "You lacked boundaries." "You are not a fit for politics and you shouldn't study it, it's too controversial and you cannot handle it." "You should not have gone to America, their epidemics of mental

illness made you sick." "You are not able to manage your emotions."

The worst and most hurtful comment I received was from my aunt: "you are ill because you are too spoiled." I don't know what that means. Is it that in my aunt's eyes, getting everything I wanted, Oberlin and a major in Politics, was too expensive and unrealistic for my parents to bear? She never said. My father called my mental illness a "rich person's disease," and claimed that no one could save me, not doctors, therapists, friends or God, if I didn't have the will to "power through". I felt deep frustration from my mother, who had always advocated for me to study abroad, as she began to murmur, "If I had known you were ill, I'd never let you go overseas."

How do you expect the native to feel the alien when they've never set foot on another continent? It has never been equal. In conservative Louisiana, people saw me as this strange Asian girl who was far more interested in getting an A+ in American history than in knowing how to chill and drink at a party. They asked me unbearably funny questions about China and my ethnicity. I was made to feel that being Chinese was out of place, foreign. Yet at Oberlin, a liberal paradise, I was expected, as an international student, to know everything about both national and local political and racial discourse. No one wanted to slow down and explain anything to me. These perceptions and expectations are not the same, but in the end both made me feel that I simply could not fit in in America.

So I left America, a place where both conservatives and liberals alienated me for my Chinese-ness, only to come home to another kind of alienation from my own family, my own people.

Acceptance, empathy, understanding, respect, love... These are the things I crave, not just on a personal level but in the environment I live in. I am aware that these things don't come easily. Collectively, as humans, we have to learn to practice them together, across differences. It is unknown, scary sometimes. But I am not giving in.

PERENNIAL BY GILLIAN FERGUSON

I miss my home.
The familiar sound of the trains
Who lulled me to sleep.
The perennial blue eyes of my best friend
Who I almost fell in love with.
Once.

It was never that way growing up, of course. From preschool to graduation, Dreaming on the corner of 9th and Summer, Sitting together after school, near the bus stop.

One night.

After we came home from college
She fell asleep
After five hours of catching up
She was beautiful
And I wanted to kiss her.
My startling love for her
Expanding beyond friendship
Tumbling into the soft light of her living room
Strung out like a juicy secret
Momentarily perennial.

But I already knew
I would never be her type.
Then the sound of a train
Made her lashes flutter open.
And I still miss her.

ARTIFACTS

BEN RICHMAN



I looked through my uncle Burt's binders and plastic bags filled with stamps. They were scattered haphazardly in boxes in the corner of his soon-to-be empty apartment. He had died here only a few weeks earlier, entombed by beautiful hardcover books about art and history, commemorative plates and china, and hoaky tchotchkes from around the world. After his leg amputation he became disinterested in his own health. It was a background responsibility that ranked far below collecting memorabilia and purchasing books on the internet, which he squeezed into the small apartment where he lived alone.

Unobstructed sunlight pressed through the blinds, adding stripes of shadow and light to the brown boxes marked for storage. The tall bookshelf in the living room, which reached up to the ceiling, was now almost completely bare. There was an overwhelming sense that my family was intruding in a space that wasn't ours. I stayed focused on the stamps as my uncle's siblings rummaged through boxes in his closet, deciding what to keep and what to sell.

Hundreds of imposing red Queen Elizabeths, drawn with her nose upturned, lay next to Japanese cranes printed in baby blue ink. There were commemorative stamps honoring the "Legends of the West," with paintings of scruffy men in brown cowboy hats who probably killed buffalo for fun and died of tuberculosis. These rugged men, packed in their plastic bag home, rubbed shoulders with technicolor postage of James Dean staring nonchalantly ahead with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, and Richard Nixon shaking hands with an aged Elvis Presley, surrounded by American flags and eagles.

"I can take these," I said quietly. I was 14 and could care less about stamp collecting, yet they felt important to preserve. I remember my uncle's focus as he delicately cut out each individual stamp and glued it in its appropriate spot in his binders. That same stern face, focused on properly preserving his collection, could also stretch to fit goofy smiles and contort to punctuate absurd accents. He would try to get me interested in stamps that most people wouldn't look twice at as they pressed them onto envelopes stuffed with letters to distant lovers, old friends, and maybe a pen pal or two. To most people, these intricate stamps disappeared into the gray background of their lives.

It was during his deep immersion in the world of postage that the first warning signs began. It started as a pain in his calf that soon spread up to his thighs, and eventually prevented him from walking.

He ignored the physical signs of calamity, not wanting to deal with the growing pain, allowing it to become the gray background of his own life. He was indignant at his siblings' insistence that he go to a doctor, or even get health insurance. My family's nagging only pushed him farther into apathy, along with my own whiny eight-year-old voice, which pestered him to stop smoking outside my family's Passover Seder. He would always brush me off, saying something along the lines of "mind your own business."

Then, all of a sudden, it was too late. After he died, I sifted through the hundreds of stamps, with beautiful prints of colorful plants and birds, as well as cultural icons, glistening in glossy ink. They still seemed proud and dignified, but there was a cold loneliness hidden within them. I made sure to pay attention to the details in each one. The stamps demanded attention, a demand that was ignored by most, but not him.

A stoic Lenin reclined in an armchair with an open book in his lap as he looked down at us from the top of Burt's bookcase. His authoritative glare seemed to follow my sister and me as we decided what to take from the souvenirs, which ranged from a Russian doll of communist leaders to British tea cups and kitschy snow globes. He originally had plans to travel Europe after he graduated college, but canceled those plans when his father got sick. Eventually he got a job with the Virginia Food Stamp program in order to be close to his parents, and stayed in Virginia for most of his life. He was sent to Russia in 2002, ten years before he died. It was there that he gained a fascination for Russian culture, which was reflected through the stacks of books on Russian history and the many Soviet knick-knacks, which filled bookshelves and end tables. To Burt, there was no such thing as dipping his toe into a subject. If something sparked his interest, it became his life's devotion.

"It was a CIA- and State Department-run program to help the post-soviet Russian government create a food stamp system so that people wouldn't starve to death," my dad said on the phone. He punctuated this with his signature nervous laugh, which was always reserved for awkward silences. Burt spent most of his time traveling to Russia for business and stayed in his sister Phyllis' basement over the summer. It was those summers where our stories overlapped.

I also often spent my summers at my aunt Phyllis' house. I was too scared to go to sleep away camp so my parents would send me away to various family member's homes just to get me out of the house. Phyllis' gaudy "McMansion" always smelled like cleaning supplies, pastrami sandwiches, and noodle kugel. There were many activities at her makeshift camp: playing with my cousins' dog Colby, (whose uncontrollable slobber would soak the shirt of anyone he came in contact with,) swimming in the pool in her backyard, and, my favorite, joking around with my uncle Burt. With him I had the unique opportunity to spend time with someone who didn't talk down to me. In between flinging me into the pool and making jokes about my aunts' oversized handbag and large pink hair curlers, he would give me small insights into his mysterious world. I remember him towering over me as I sat restlessly on the floor by his legs.

"Chto ty khochesh' delat'?" He said in Russian. He sat across from me in his sister's living room. The room was ornately decorated with her own collection of items. Clown figurines were placed carefully on shelves next to colorful 1920s-style Barnum and Bailey posters with elephants and acrobats. My aunt Phyllis cherished these items, though they often scared my sister, who feared clowns.

"It means what do you want to do?"

I repeated it slowly "Shto-tee hoe-chesh di-el-et."

"Net."

"Ni-et."

"That means no."

"Suka."

"Su-ka."

"That's a bad word you call someone if you're angry."

"What does it mean?" I asked with 10-year-old amazement.

"I can't tell you."

"Please tell me."

"I'll tell you when you're older." He changed the subject by making up a song about all the things in my aunt's purse, which included spilled mayo and a swarm of ants.

He continued moving back and forth between my aunt's house and Moscow for 5 years before his leg pain got more severe. His narrowing arteries were left untreated, causing the infection to spread. They waited to treat him because he didn't have health insurance, pushing him aside once he finally made it to the hospital. The only option left was amputation.

"Can you give me a hand?" He paused for a moment as he rolled through his sister's kitchen in his wheelchair. It had only been a few months since he left the hospital and he still sometimes felt phantom pains in the space where his leg used to be. "Actually, I could really use a leg." He said with a straight face. I laughed uncomfortably even though I felt like I shouldn't. He was not averse to jokes that made everyone uncomfortable. Phyllis laughed loudly, used to his dark humor by now. She always laughed at his jokes. He used to say that she escaped from the "asylum for the easily amused."

I was going through my awkward preteen phase and felt tense every time I had to hold a conversation with him. His jokes seemed less funny then, and I prefered to do teenage things like listen to music on my iPod and text my friends as an excuse to not engage in the agony of social interaction. I should spend more time with Uncle Burt, I remember thinking as we drove out of Baltimore after visiting his new apartment for the first time. Next time I see him it will be different. I didn't want it to be awkward. I could sense that he was disappearing into the background of our lives. Despite this, I kept hoping that things would change, that our relationship would grow. But I never got the chance.

It was my older sister who found them, tucked away in his bedroom. I never saw them, but heard about them second hand. They were classy photos, in black and white, of naked men in cowboy hats, boots, and nothing else. They draped their muscular bodies across each other in artful poses.

"That doesn't necessarily mean he was gay," Phyllis said, trembling slightly. "If he was, he would have told me." Tears began to collect in her eyes. Her metal bracelets clattered as she wiped the moisture away. She usually had a strong, put-together demeanor that never slipped. She always knew what was right and wasn't afraid to disagree with colleagues, doctors, or experts of any sort. I had never heard her voice tremble before.

"Would Grandma have been mad if uncle Burt came out to her?" I asked my dad, six years after they had both passed away. I had always assumed that it was because of the shame that my grandma might have placed on him that he never came out. From my perspec-

tive she was a woman of traditional values. She was a Hebrew teacher for most of her life and was very active in her synagogue. My dad was silent for a moment as we sat together at a midtown restaurant.

"I don't know," he said. "I think she would have been okay with it."

This was not the answer I expected. I wanted a concrete reason he had kept this hidden his whole life. He never married, never had kids. Why did he never tell my aunt or my dad? They both would have been open and accepting. Why did he live his whole life alone? There had to be a reason. There had to be someone to blame. It was only two years after I had come out to my mom as she helped me move into my freshman dorm. It had taken months for me to muster the courage, but afterward, I regretted not doing it sooner. It's possible that maybe he could never even admit it to himself. Maybe his internalized shame was so deep that it lasted his whole life.

"He ran away from school and hitchhiked to New York," my dad said, interrupting my train of thought. I now imagined him, young and scared, traveling to a new city. What was his life like? Was he happy there? Was he alone there, too?

He left school without telling anyone. I imagined my grand-ma's face as she paced in her small duplex, phone pressed against her ear, pushing up her cat-eyed glasses as anger and fear began to rise from somewhere in her stomach. I could see my dad as a young teenager, with his curly brown hair, which would eventually spread out into a Jew 'fro. I imagined him playing football with the neighborhood boys, oblivious to what was going on until he entered the house and felt the stress emanating from Grandma.

The waiter brought us our food and the check. My dad's round face and graying short hairs were beginning to look strikingly similar to Burt's.

"Eventually, he got a job and an apartment for himself. I went up to visit him a few times. He really didn't have any money then. He would steal silverware and condiments from the diner down the street. Yet he still saved up enough money to take me to a Broadway play while I was visiting."

My dad smirked as he told me this anecdote. He had always loved musical theater and would sing show tunes with me and my sister when we were younger, but it was his older brother Burt who originally showed him Broadway.

"He used to say that it didn't matter whether you had money

or not, the theater was too important not to go."

As my dad talked, some of the lost pieces began to form back together. I could now picture Burt's young smiling face as he watched the lights on the stage. Remaining questions, however, still swirled in my head. Did he find what he was looking for in New York? Was he even looking for anything? The images of gay men in the magazines and magnets that were hidden in his apartment floated above these questions like a threatening dark-gray storm cloud about to burst. But rather than rain, the gray clouds thinned out and spread across the horizon. There was no cathartic release, only endless gray skies.

How early did he know he was attracted to men? I knew since the 7th grade, around the time when Justin Bieber transitioned from sweet teen heartthrob to bad boy. I watched the "Boyfriend" music video on repeat that year. Even though I grew up in a liberal suburb in New Jersey I still kept those feelings hidden in the dark back rooms of my brain, sheltered by the clutter of everyday life. It wasn't until later, when those feelings grew even stronger, that I decided to open the blinds. I didn't want someone to discover the truth by searching through my collection of artifacts after I died. I remember the anxiety and fear that pushed me to keep myself hidden. I couldn't imagine having those same feelings in Virginia in the sixties. It made sense that he wouldn't come out, but the truth is that I don't know what Burt went through. I wanted to believe that maybe he lived freely for that brief time in New York. Maybe he wasn't alone. Was he ever able to be honest about himself to anyone? I wanted so badly to know about this side of his life. I hoped that maybe a close friend or old lover that we never knew about would try and get in contact with us and all of my questions would be answered, but there has only ever been silence.

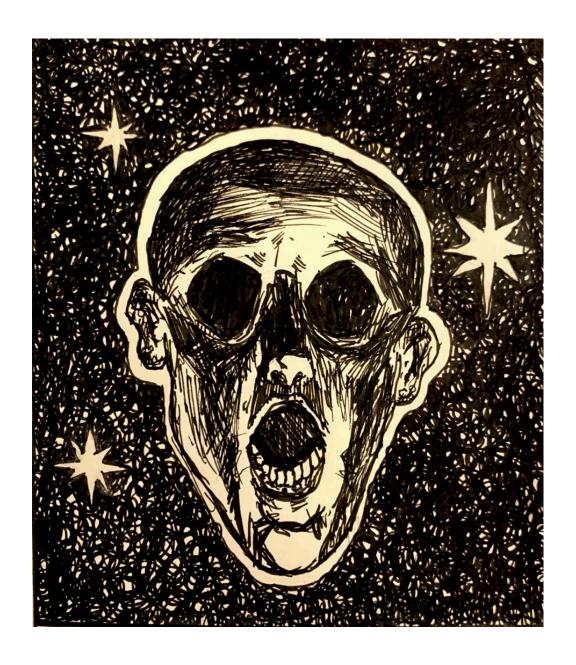


Image by Robert Stott





Image by Eva Sturm-Gross

THE LAST HUMANS ROBERT STOTT

We are the Homo sapiens, the only humans. We're able to communicate complexly, coordinate over vast distances, pass down and preserve knowledge and ideas, build tools and shelters, and bend nature itself to our will. We were not always alone as we are now. For millions of years there were other human species living on Earth, long before we existed. Archaic hominin species often possessed abilities or skills considered to be solely "human" in nature. Homo Habilis, were hitting rocks with other rocks and building crude tools some two million years ago. Homo Heidelbergensis were likely making (terrible) shelters to protect themselves from the elements seven hundred-thousand years ago. Neanderthals were making jewelry four-hundred and thirty thousand years ago, and probably buried their dead. Around 200,000 years ago, when good ol' Homo sapiens waded out of the primordial soup, there were at least six different human species living at the same time. So what happened to the others? What wiped out all of our closest relatives, many of whom did things uniquely "human?" And, not that I'm complaining, but why didn't Homo sapiens die with them?

The answer is elusive, but a big part of it lies within our capacity for language. There is no doubt that some of our human ancestors were intelligent, at least to the degree that they were capable of communicating, making shelters and clothing, and cooking and hunting with tools among other things. It is likely though, that our sibling species could not use language as a tool. It is important to note the difference between language and speech. Language is the abstract use of symbols in order to represent and explain the environment around us. It also involves the combination of symbols into increasingly complex chains of thought that are representative of ideas or concepts, which can then be conveyed to others. Speech is the physical act of using language through vocal muscles. Language doesn't have to be spoken, and can be conveyed through gestures, body language, non-verbal vocalizations, and writing. For example, Chimpanzees are our closest living relatives and have what is best described as a protolanguage. They have very little

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ability to control vocalizations and therefore rarely rely on calls or "speech." Instead, they have over sixty distinct gestures and are able to communicate to each other through body language and signs. "The communication practices of the Deaf community also illustrate this distinction. Many hearing-impaired persons use a complex system of physical signing in order to communicate—this is language without speech. There is evidence indicating that Neanderthals, some of our most recent ancestors, may have been physically capable of speech. Language, on the other hand, and the symbolic intuition it requires, was probably impossible for them.

Homo sapiens evolved with the physical potential for speech, and more extraordinarily, the cognitive dexterity required for language. This ability to speak and create language allowed us to strengthen our social and cultural bonds as well as organize and coordinate. In turn, we were able to out-compete any other species for food, land, and other resources. Although individually we are physically weak, together human beings are the most powerful species on the planet, and our ability to "do language" allowed us to link together and become a global superorganism.

The capacity to use language is an extremely complicated and rare phenomenon and the truth is that linguists and anthropologists aren't even sure how it evolved. There are a number of leading theories, but because brains don't fossilize and there are no records of the origins of language, we can't know for certain. One thing that is certain is that if there is a singular difference that can be pointed at to represent what makes us unique, it is our capability for thought. Our self reflexive insight and what we call our consciousness stem directly from our ability to produce and understand language. Without the capacity for symbolic thought and organization both required by and produced by language, we would lack the capacities for mental abstraction and symbolism required to be 'conscious' - to understand our own thoughts and the distinctions between the external world and our perception of it. Our "doing language" is a curious process because it both requires our proficiency with symbolic thought, and provides for it, increasing and amplifying our ability to adopt, synthesize, and alter more symbols in a way that seems to be the spark for what we consider consciousness. In fact, what seems to be the epitome of human cognito-uniqueness is that Homo Sapiens exist in realities that they construct in their own minds by absorbing, structuring, symbolizing, and organizing the world around them. All other creatures, (most likely including Neanderthals as well) live in the worlds presented to them.

How did we get from learning how to make weird sounds with our mouths and throats and gesturing to each other to being a comprehensively interconnected and integrated network of super-intelligent primates?

The linchpin of human civilization is built directly on top of language, in the form of myths. With language, you can create myths. With myths, you have complete control over the world. They allow intricate social and political structures to form throughout the species and in turn create a linked culture. In this context, I don't just mean myths as in stories about vengeful gods or old folk tales from the ancient past. Myths are shared ideologies that arise when a social group decides to make some shit up and most of them agree to play by the same rules. Money, political systems or governments, educational systems, and social codes are all myths. For money, we all agree that a certain object is arbitrarily worth something universally agreed upon, and then can be traded in exchange with other arbitrarily valued objects. Political systems and governments are made up of vast systems of completely conceptual abstractions put into practice, like economies, laws, and social codes. All of these things are fictions, concepts made up and agreed upon collectively. Herein lies the strength of the human union.

Humans as we are today first appeared some 200,000 years ago. After a bit of dicking about and sitting on our bipedal behinds, we end up starting to really comprehend--symbols begin appearing in our minds and, soon after, we find we can manipulate them. We experience the outside world not as passive bystanders but as perpetual builders. The world is constantly being classified, organized, and reconstructed in our minds. We see things around us, give them representations in our heads: we see a tree and we can identify that it's a tree. When we see other trees, we know they're trees. Then we start to move these symbols around, come up with new combinations or variations: there are different kinds of trees, trees can be a source of food, trees are made of wood, wood makes shelter, and so on. After that we start to use hand motions and then vocal projections to universalize and give physical form to the symbols we have in our minds. Symbolic representation is more complex than simply reproducing an object and its relations in our head. Concepts are symbolically realized as well. Things like sadness, pleasure, death, and colors all lack a distinct physical form, but are nonetheless still presented in our psyche as having meanings, relations, implications. Because of this new method of describing and understanding abstract conceptions like these, we become able to explain and share ideas beyond the practicality of staying alive—practices involving the dead, spirituality, and art all became possible. We share these symbols with others of our kind, and we are able to convey things about the world around us not only to ourselves but to others.

So, we develop language that gets more complex as time goes on. After some more standing around with our thumbs up our collective ass, gener-

ally being killed on a near-constant basis by most things, we start strengthening our social coordination, allowing us to greatly expand our individual lifespans. We form families beyond biology. Tribes develop social codes and ideas, coalitions of members of our species living together and sharing ideas and feelings on a mass scale. Social systems start to become more complex, and soon we end up in an era where there's agriculture, towns, cities, huge gatherings of humans trading ideas and beliefs. Then there's a rapid acceleration of human development, both in population and socially. We end up forming cities and then nation states and then countries, until we have a linked civilization across the globe. We've become the rulers of the planet, a species with unprecedented power.

Let's take a step back. Although we may be doing fairly well as a species now—insofar as were not dying faster than we are being born—it has been an extremely unpleasant journey for us. Archeological evidence shows that there was a point around seventy-five thousand years ago where the human species bottlenecked to somewhere between 3,000 and 10,000 people, making us an endangered species. For a time, we were unbearably close to dying out and losing thousands of years of progress, growth, future lives, and civilizations. Through sheer luck, stubbornness, ingenuity—or possibly a combination of the three— we managed to bounce back from the bottleneck, exploding into the future and developing more rapidly than the planet that created us could ever hope to keep up with.

We evolved over millions of years, growing and changing through time. We came into existence as the Homo sapien, and spent the majority of 200,000 years shitting our pants and dying because of disease, famine, hardship, and nature, all of which had literally been killing us at every possible opportunity until now. We may still have those problems but by and large we've pushed back death, conquered the planet and mowed the lawn, put nature in a cage and maybe accidentally killed it. It took us 200,000 years to get to the first billion Homo sapiens in 1804. In 1927, the population reached 2 billion, then 3 billion in 1959, 4 billion in 1974, 5 billion in 1987, 6 billion in 1999, 7 billion in 2012, 8 billion in the few years, and we will eventually level off around 9-10 billion (assuming the planet isn't plunged into a nuclear winter in the near future.)

Without our ability to wield language as a tool and as a weapon, Homo sapiens might have died out with the rest of the humans in the last two hundred millennia and millions of years of human evolution, the rise of sentience and sapience, may have come to an end before it even had a chance to truly develop.

