

HOME SIGN

Samuel Clare Knights



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SAMUEL CLARE KNIGHTS

with illustrations by [MICHELLE KONDRICH](#)



#87

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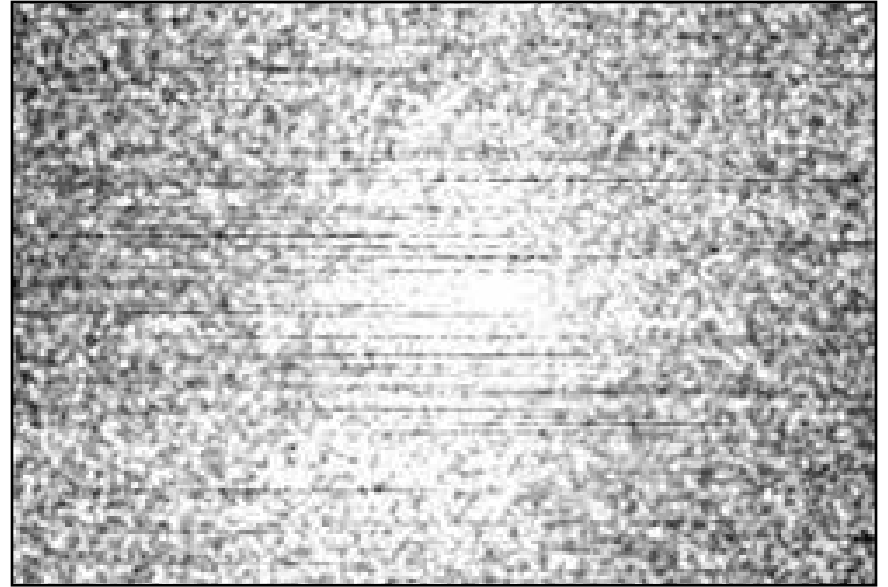
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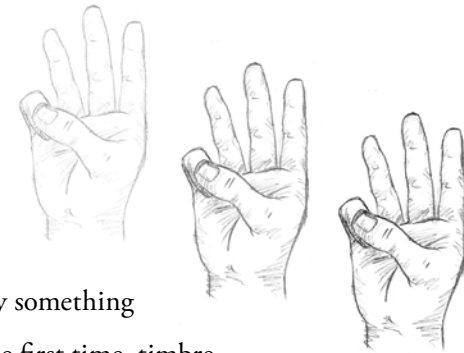
INTRODUCTION

The following selection is from a longer manuscript entitled “The Manual Alphabet,” which is an autobiographical sequence of prose pieces and visual elements that embrace a tension between Midwestern realism and bucolic lyricism. Through letters and hands, the story navigates sounds and silences between the hearing and the deaf. Having been born to deaf parents, and acting as their interpreter for many years, I empathize with the struggle to find adequate symbol, sign, voice, and meaning. Our home signs, which are “made up” signs within the family, were gestures that filled the gaps of our daily experiences and imaginations.



Every letter is a projection of the hand, a brief and imperfect image, its fleeting pattern.

— Jabès



To say something
for the first time, timbre
of my hand cast in triplicate across walls, the
same wake in achromatic hues, the index finger
touching my mouth, signing more than “water.”

I grabbed the hot ledge of the pool and pushed myself out, handprints fading a sign for summer.

& climbed to the top of a carob tree to watch yellow jackets spread their letters over a streetlamp's limits—their course fanning color in the absence of color. Sometimes I heard the pop of my mother mouthing a word only to realize it was mine. Her trained lips knew the motions. My father's mouth didn't do this. He just held his open and read the television.

**Wonder Twins powers activate! Shape of
Octopus! Form of an ice unicycle! [...♪...]
C'mon Jayna, it's up to us to stop those
aliens!**

□ □ □

**C'mon down to Meat City Market, bring your
car there's room to park it. Every day's a
special day when you shop Meat City's
way! Meat City! Meat City! Rah! Rah!**

& would sneak out of my bunk bed after everyone went down, the living room lit by a blue couch and a brass globe. But the globe was not a world, only a sheet pounded into the shape of something resembling space. I'd ignite the television and watch until an anthem broke the screen. There was no caption for white noise. I used to stare at the static just to see my uncertainty shatter.

At night I would think in sign by shaping letters
in the dark, *C* the only light.



My brother Gary biting through my winter coat
in the backyard.

I ran home from school on the first day, teacher
chasing me the entire time.

The knife that grazed my stomach, and mom
after the kid, unleashing a sound I'll never
attempt to duplicate.

Failing third grade when we moved.

My father's untamed shriek silencing Burger
King after I translated "we don't accept checks."

The Tigers in '84, Ernie Harwell in October.

Beth showing us one breast at a time.

Gary getting kicked out of the house after Judy
had me call the cops.

SIGN FOR HOME

A flat *O* shifting from eating to sleeping.
A place Paul Simon had to see to write
about America. "It took me four
days to hitchhike from
Saginaw..."

Where peninsula takes water between thumb
and finger, the tree line reveals its upper
fractions. We know the sky is gray from the
thick wall behind. Sometimes we trick ourselves
the sky is lavender. But it's not. And so the air is
breath and it is bruised. All the old storefronts
smile with missing teeth, the black squares
framed by a desire for something better. One
storeowner painted his sills the color of an old
Nash Rambler. Dry weeds emanate from the
lower hinge where the sidewalk meets the face.
All the leaves are buried under snow. You step
smooth and the layers underfoot slide forward.

On ordinary evenings the whole small city seems static, the sharp-edged origin cut into a sparkling black circle. It is all so irretrievable, the words of a folk song people have forgotten. “I was born in Saginaw, Michigan. I grew up in a house on Saginaw Bay...” A place for freight to escape, cold to the rails of a blue thing gone blue, the glow of A-M-O-C-O.

It will not save you.

To never have the voice of your mother in your head, just motions pinned against air. She signs to me through the window. I can see letters moving. The hands outside the glass and the hands reflected inside. The trace of a *J*, its clear line edging fog to shape itself. The same way letters on a former storefront convey through dirt. Handwriting that bears its branches like a river cracking a map or a grid drawn on a blank page. The lake effect over the paper's edge so half-and-half colored, so so-so.

The cherry tree in our backyard a symbol
for its sign. My right elbow taking root in
my left palm, the fingers branching upward.

Lying on the floor directly under the doorbell
light on the ceiling, the crystal orb with a
spinning bulb making a galaxy of our living
room. My sister Jill would run outside and hit
the button to see the nebula through the drapes.

My parents owned a sky-blue Caprice Classic station wagon. Vinyl siding mocked the grain of wood with steel painted in a shade that failed to blend in. Branches reflected their fractures off the windshield. My fingers never bent that way. We already knew a stain stronger than soot from wheels, the fade of something regal, the parched skins of birch papering.

Another particle this slow breath takes. The city informed by the color of its water, which fills the lines of my palm, waking the history of its current. A shimmer in the silver. I can see robins bearing cinders, flurries moving with flurried purpose, the letters in my hand, waving a concentrated sign we call "river." I shake it off to shape it by name and bend a *T* longhand to start a descent of twelve:

T
I
T
T
A
B
A
W
A
S
E
E

Saginaw's one color is evenly dispersed into 128 drops over a thick wool cuff. I'd walk for hours gathering aluminum in bleached fields: the mathematics of gray bending grain. Didn't know I was a hick until I joined the service. The familiar Midwestern glance of "you ain't shit."

[...♪...♪...♪...♪...♪...♪...♪...♪...]

.. **BE! ALL THAT YOU CAN BE!** ..

**You can watch through the flood of commercials,
displace with your eyes the green soldiers
invading homes. You can be a drab seeker
on the couch, let the world blur behind you.**

.. **FIND YOUR FUTURE IN THE ARMY!** ..

[...♪...♪...♪...♪...♪...♪...♪...♪...]

SIGN FOR FATHER

Open hand with thumb tapping
the forehead, or an organ
to filter a form
of his own
will
.

I remember my dad's tomato nimbus ablaze in the nightshade, conspicuous as Mars. He sat as long as his silence would permit, the sky yielding its darks to a fade in service of others. *D* descending through a silence of tongues. His breath billowing plumes as useful and unreadable as the hour. He waited until the glitter of the concrete messaged it was time to go inside.



Our home was a middle-class ranch built in the sixties. Now boards no longer hold. My father on the back porch staring where the cherry used to be.

& driving through the Midwest reminds me of Milton. That part in Book III where his Satan beholds God's vastness at the rim of the universe with wonder. After the army I once worked as a file clerk in the VA hospital, would hold the films up to a window to see the transparency of ribs. Lungs and hearts filled with fluid. I often knew veterans were dying before they did. See that dark figure along the side?

& the sparkle of highway at the moment Saginaw submerged to the farthest dot. I looked at my father sleeping in the passenger side and then back at I-75. Interpreting for him was just like driving through a snowstorm only to surrender to a single point where everything emanates. That's how the letters look. Bill signs and I breathe them in. The hinge of "yes" born in my wrist.

Bill was a welder, good with blueprints, seeing patterns others did not. He couldn't gab, didn't smoke. He donned the mask and lit the cinder. The work wasn't steady. Eventually Dad was slowed by sleep. I took him for blood tests.

They took a kidney out of me and put it into Bill.



REVEREND, THIS GIRL IS ELEVEN YEARS OF AGE. HER FATHER BROUGHT HER TONIGHT.

[...]

YOU KNOW SALVATION IS THE MIRACLE OF ALL MIRACLES?

... yes, I do

DO YOU DRINK?

... no drinking

YOUR GIRL IS DEAF?

AND SHE WAS BORN WITH IT?

... yes

[places hand on girl]

IN THE NAME OF JESUS, LORD, CREATE THE EARDRUM, CREATE THE EARDRUM! THOU FOUL DEAF SPIRITS, COME OUT! I COMMAND THAT DEAF SPIRIT TO NEVER RETURN. IN THE NAME OF JESUS, GIVE HER GOOD EARDRUMS NOW. CREATE THE EARDRUMS. SHE'S NEVER HAD EARDRUMS, LORD. GIVE HER EARDRUMS TONIGHT. IN THE BLOOD NAME. THOU FOUL DEAF SPIRITS, COME OUT-COME OUT-COME OUT!

((cheering & clapping))

SAY BABY.

[girl repeats] ... ba-bee"

BABY.

... bay-bey"

SIGN FOR MOTHER

Open hand with thumb tapping
the chin, or a body
to kick
in
s
i
d
e

& the interpreter of Hopevale Memorial Baptist Church asked the congregation to imagine being deaf. To imagine what it would be like to have never heard. To not even know what nothing sounded like. To only know something as a thing you don't have.

Coughs
in the pews. I sat and blinked soft. Saw the backs of my eyelids colored by glass. I imagined the letter *U* in both forms. One open, the other closed. Mom tapped me and asked what it was like. I signed "word know not."



through a letter *O*, on a beam of days dipped over. Memories ready for the burn. Threading sentences through to a *T*, mouthing out parts. Under this skin a secret materialized. I had something to give. Intent and ability bred an *H*, vacillating between my limber blood, my youthful fingers spent at angles. If I overreach, can I be sure of claiming a pattern outside choreographed movements? How easy it would be to make something up, allow my voice to absolve. And how would I know if the *E* unfurls? Remember the cul-de-sac days, closed and circled, rapid fingers astray, heavy notes pounding against our middle, fading in the field. Nights of canned beets, fallen *R*'s. Judith haloed in the open palm. Thumb meeting chin, and that beloved tap. Put on wings weathered by a lampshade. Stars misfired from other constellations. The whole Saginaw: a giant beltway, one's self a conduit.

& fused this town to a thought turned pale. The color of Saginaw's flatness throwing itself on itself, born from a hard sense I would never leave. I was a filter, still in the still, a kidney in the father, a palimpsest behind cornhusks.

& leaves too are unable, their ampersands
held still in the wind for a ligature of nothing.
A note sustained and unheard by Mom
and Dad. The same day they became Bill
and Judy. We once visited Lake Superior.
She asked me what the waves hitting the
shoreline sounded like. It took my whole body.

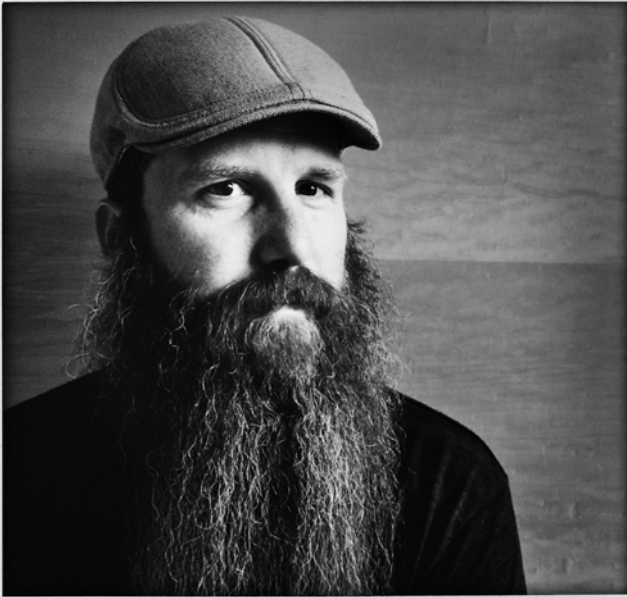


Photo by [Dave Getzschman](#)

Samuel Clare Knights holds a PhD from the University of Denver and an MFA from The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa University. His first excerpt from *The Manual Alphabet*, published by *Fence* magazine, won the 2017 PEN/Robert J. Dau Short Story Prize for Emerging Writers.



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