

Voice and Hand: A Story

by Orit Gat

You're talking to a friend. You're out, maybe drinking or there's dinner on the table you share or you're walking down the street side by side. Language flows between you unannounced. Then a question. "Oh, how did we get to this?" Then a process. Untangling sentences, tracing them back, trying to remember, hesitating, questions in your eyes. Whether you get there or not, this process builds intimacy simply by making meaning together, by following a logic only you share. Can things be explained to other people? Connections are a private thing, the links between thoughts fragile. How impossible it can be to share, how much we may want to.

The other day I spilled water on my laptop and it shut down. A long, hazy day followed: walks in the rain, worries, time passed waiting. The girl at the service desk says to me, "liquid damage will be your dark horse." It's not an expression I ever use, so it gains new, fearful power over me even though it's not the right idiom, it's just a little off, and makes no sense and requires explanation like a joke that didn't work. (Associations are made swiftly, like pulling off a band aid, lost meaning becomes reason if you let it.)

When my mother wants me to explain something, she'll sometimes say, "can you double-click on that?" Whenever she says that, I try to remember, do we even still do that? I try to think, what happens when her expressions expire, when what felt new and exploratory is so far removed from use that it becomes bewilderment; confusion when what she asks for is clarity, directness.

That time that I was with a French friend when he first tried peanut butter. His face twitched as he attempted to extricate his tongue from the roof of his mouth. How it made an unpleasant clicking sound. I remember: Language can be an unpleasant, sticky thing.

All of the above are stories of lack of conviction, of attempts to be understood, of those moments where you think, What just happened, and realize, it was language taking its own course, ending up not in understanding but in something else. Something like writing on the dust on top of the fridge, on the dirty surface of a car ("CLEAN ME"), on the humidity of the window of the top of a double-decker bus, or the condensation on a mirror after a warm shower. Writing a name, drawing a heart, something that will surely disappear, an image that won't stay.

The places and situations and moments where language does not equal description, where it cannot form an account, are the spaces in which Sophie Jung's voice thrives. Seductive and playful, hesitant but imbued with a strong sense of forward motion, the videos unfold as a feeling of rejoicing in the conflation of language and image in a place where they never meet, yet are also totally inseparable. Drawing in black on a white surface, the videos are simply the lines being created with a digital pen on a tablet, along with some short videos inserted of places, objects, or situations Jung collages into the scene she is making. One line joins another, and as they come together, Jung describes what they are, what they form. Or: Is she drawing what she is describing? Either, at times both.

Another thing: hesitation. A voice that starts then starts over. Trying so hard to be conscious of the world around it, the voice. Description fails as language prevails. The drawing hand makes a shape, the voice recognizes it: a foot. Or two feet. A feat. Defeat. Some expressions come back time and again; Thusly ends with the line “huge feet, and what do we do? We literally defeat them.” Language lulls, voice tries to find hand. (I try to type ekphrasis into my browser to make sure I’m spelling it correctly. It directs me immediately to the online egg timer I often use. Somehow, it all fits this logic: everything leads to an unexpected end.) Then hand takes over.

In *It Takes One to Know One*, as the shape of the Earth is slowly made: a circle, a squiggly line touching its diameter (that’s what continents are, yes), Jung’s voice describes the overview effect: an overwhelming sense of love that astronauts feel when they leave the atmosphere and see the earth from afar for the first time, and it’s beautiful and it seems fragile and in need of protection. NASA released the view of the Earth that has come to be known as “blue marble” as seen by the Apollo crew in 1972. It became one of the most reproduced and widely distributed photographic images in existence. Again: An overwhelming sense of love. Something we all share. (I think, there is a car in space now, a red Tesla, which will be there for hundreds of thousands of years, and can’t shake that image I realize, these connections and scattered different diverging thoughts come to mind because Jung’s voice gives me freedom to let my mind wander, wonder.)

Try and trace one moment: the earth, the pole, polar opposites, polar bears. As language swells, its mechanisms are stripped: of course, opposites, because the two poles are on the north and south ends of the axis of the earth. Polar bears only live in the North Pole, Antarctica is so cold few creatures are equipped to handle it. Some things never meet. Are voice and hand like that, or are they like thoughts, which run off, then return. Like that feeling of describing a dream and hurting over it in real life, at the end of Jung’s videos, the screen is full of lines and drawings, a diagram or a map to a nonexistent territory, a chart to an argument made but impossible to hold on to. Like a map of a place before a natural disaster (those paths don’t exist anymore); like imaginary maps in books (I always think of the kind of author who starts with a map and then plans everything through it, an author who builds a world before he starts to fill it); like a game of Snakes and Ladders: you climb up, then slip back, but never end up where you began.