A Heart Beating Hard

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Published by University of Michigan Press

Goodman, Lauren Foss.
A Heart Beating Hard.
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same, all shining. She smiles, she takes wind in, blows wind out. She waits. She speaks.

Welcome.
Hello.

The door swings open, slides shut. Cold air blows in and feels good mixed with the hot air on Marjorie’s bare skin. Beside Marjorie are registers beeping and rows and rows of People lined up and needing things. Morning, night, always, the light in here is the same. Bright, white, beeping, everywhere. The light comes from long tubes up on the ceiling and sometimes when the day is slow Marjorie likes to look up at the loud lines of light and close her eyes and watch the ghosts of those lines cut across the black inside. Up, down, and across her departments. She does this now, looks up, stares until the bright lines hurt her eyes. Until she burns, until she needs to squeeze shut inside her self, to watch what happens there. Marjorie opens and closes, and closes. Because it is so cold outside that the People are few, because this is a different kind of pain, because this is something to do that belongs all and only to her.

8. MARGIE

Margie lived a long time without words.

We never sat with her and said, This is a circle, this is red, this is yellow. This is not a square. This is the shape of your hand held in your gram’s hand. This is the color of someone crying in secret. We never said, Look, Margie, this is the size and color and shape of the whole wide of the world.

But Margie saw. Margie did not speak and no one said much to Margie, but Margie heard everything she wanted to hear. High up in Apartment #2, in the bedroom Margie shared with Gram, in the big loud bed where Margie slept beside the warm of Gram, night was the sound of Gram’s snores, of her breath, loud, like thunder, like a storm, an engine, a monster, the sea, coming. The great big wind of Gram.

My wind, Gram said. I can’t catch my wind.

Margie rolling to the side of the bed was the sound of mattress springs screaming and waking up was Gram’s voice, low, whispered, reading from the red-and-gold of her book, one hand held over her chest. The sounds Margie knew best were the sounds of hearts, of her heart, beating, fast, light, and Gram’s heart, slow, booming, out and out under the blankets.

Gram said, My heart.
My pains, my heart.
Gram’s heart hurt her always. Maybe Margie could understand this, pain. Pain, the pinch of pain, pain a color of white unlike all the other whites. Pain was not something Margie learned or found or invented.

Did we? Did we learn about pain?

No.

Pain must be something we just know.

Pain was something Margie knew. Margie found out about pain by putting her fingers where fingers do not fit, by being picked up hard by the big black-haired friends her ma brought home. Pain was always there waiting to be let out and up and down and through Margie. She just knew, had, carried, understood, felt it. Pain. The never-ending lines and circles and ups and downs of pain.

We must all be born this way.

Born with it, with pain, that waits.

Margie’s words came later. Much later, and slowly, and sometimes wrong. Margie, growing, rolling against the rough red rug, eating her triangles of cake, her squares of purple-frosted pop tarts. Margie, growing, getting bigger, longer, just a little more every day.

Showing her words slowly, Margie made slow sense of what she saw and felt and held.

Gram, Margie’s first word.

For a long time, Gram. Gram and Gram and Gram. All that Margie heard and saw and felt and wanted, said with one long sound.

Gram.

And then, slowly, Ma.

Ma said mostly when Ma had gone away.

Ma, short, fast, the sound of Ma over before it had a chance to be.

Gram. Ma.

Words. Are these words? This naming, this calling out, this small sound of Margie down on the floor making her circles, making the shape of Ma, of Gram, with her lips, what was this? We don’t know if Margie was wanting, if Margie was trying to say something important to the world outside herself, or if these sounds were just there, easy, known. Was Margie asking for something? For someone? Or was Margie just rolling around in the familiar, just making the roundest shapes of sound she could find?

But no.

But then, one night, under the warm of the blankets, Margie’s first word.

Or third.

Margie’s first word that did not belong to Gram or to Ma. The first sound
Margie figured out for herself, the first time Margie heard and knew and saw and said.

    Heart, Margie said.

    Margie, in the dark, in bed with Gram, with Gram’s pains, heard the word and for the first time wanted to hold onto it, to feel it, to hear it inside and outside herself.

    My heart, Gram said.

    Oh, Margie, my pains.

    Margie heard all the words. Pains and my and Margie and heart and oh. Oh. Margie heard Gram making these words again and again in the dark and Margie picked one and the one she picked was heart.

    Heart, Margie said.

    Yes, Margie, Gram said. Oh, I can’t get my wind.

    Pains, in my chest. My heart, I think. My heart, it’s bad, Margie, it hurts.

    Heart, Margie said.

    Margie and Gram and the sounds that showed they were some parts of the same.

    Heart, Margie started saying.

    Margie, pointing to frogs sitting on stones in the brook, said, Heart. Pointing to blue paint chipping on the slanted porch steps, said, Heart. Up at the big black of the mountain, Ma. Heart. Touching her face to the blue soft of her bunny, her fingers into the centers of her donuts, her nose to the cool glass of bedroom window, Margie said, Heart.

    A necessary word but not nearly wide enough to name the whole world.

    We think.

    Once Ma noticed Margie talking, she started teaching her the wrong words for things. We don’t know why. Because she was bored, because it was funny, because she figured Margie would figure it out eventually.

    Margie pointed to a circle and Ma said, Square.

    The green carpet, Ma called, Red.

    Dogs, Ma said, say Meow.

    Cat, Ma said. Cat. Cats say Woof.

    Say what a cat says, Margie.

    And Margie, slow and smiling and always on the floor, learned to say, Woof.

    We laughed. A little fun. Some joy we did not expect from the day.

    On an up-day, Gram might have tried to teach Margie the right way. That cats say Meow and dogs say Woof and that the kitchen table was a square, not a circle. To chew her cookies with her mouth closed and wash her hands after
doing her business in the bathroom. Some days, Gram tried, but Gram had her pains to pay attention to. Gram had her book to read and her church to go to and her yard sales. Gram, like Ma, must have figured that Margie would learn. That Margie was fine, that Margie would catch up, that Margie would sooner or later find her way into the true, real, right of the world.

Margie learned to leave words alone. Ma said Cat and Gram said Dog and Margie stopped listening. Margie looked, instead. Margie saw small, big, soft. Noses wet, noses dry, ears made of lines and circles. Margie learned that making words made her loud. That she could only hear or see or taste or smell the world when she was quiet, when she did not try to remember the shapes of the sounds and the names for what surrounded her.

Margie sat on the floor of the bedroom in the hot of the sun coming in through the window and with her skin felt the different of this through-glass hot, different from the hot of hot dog on her tongue, different from the hot of hot water on her hands. She lay in bed beside Gram and felt the warm wind that came from Gram’s mouth as she moaned and rolled and rumbled. Margie smelled the sour of Gram, the pinched-nose smell of Gram’s sour different from the sour of milk left out, different from the sour smell that lived in the dark below the sofa.

At night, in the warm and sour air beneath the blankets, in the next-to of Gram, Margie put her small hand over her mouth and breathed out and in and smelled her own air, the nothing of it, the smell she could not match to any other smell, the smell of herself, what seemed to belong to her and only her. Margie felt her wind blowing through her and knew it was different from Gram’s, different from the wind that shook the trees outside the window, different from the wind that went through Ma and the slow wind that moved from room to room in the open-window summertime of Apartment #2.

Margie shut her eyes and rolled slow from side to side, listening to her heart making sounds. Not words, but sounds. Her inside, sounding, pounding. Margie, little Margie, staying quiet, slowly building the world in her inside, the world that was only for her, a place built in shapes and colors and sizes that no one but Margie would ever know existed.

9. MARJORIE

Marjorie sits in the low pink and blue and yellow and green light next to the wall of signs at the bar at the back of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks and inside her sneakers she is secretly moving the pains down and out and