

RUMOURS

OF

TRUE

THINGS

ISADORA
VAUGHAN



THIRD HAND SECOND LIVES

Written by
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I didn't know seeds had an expiration date until you told me the expiration date on a packet of seeds your sister had gifted you preceded your birth by several years, meaning if you were to plant them and they were to sprout they would outlive themselves, greening into the world well after their projected death several times your junior but always older than your lifetime entire and then some. Which is a fun thought, but one easily wafted away like bad air. Expiration dates belong mostly to consumer protection codes and speculation, so it seems appropriate a seed could outfox them. Besides, we divide entities along phases of growth—a foetus's life is tallied in weeks until it leaves the womb and the clock returns to 0. We count the rings on a tree without adding the seed's time spent in soil or idling inside fruit. We could keep going back, stitching each thing to its preceding form, scrambling time in a brawl of origin stories. We could, but this is the scale we're stuck with, or at least the scale informing even the teleologies glimpsed in the camaraderie between a seed packet and your birthday.

When a microscope orders depth in a series of blurs I descend with the focus dial—backlight burnishing edges out of nothing—I instinctively scale things up:

this one's a horse corpse galloping side-on, this one's a blown glass replica of a hot meal. Traversing a plip of pond water with the lens, one smeared intensity whipped whirlpools with its tendrils to direct satisfying flecks of green through itself. If I zoomed closer I'm sure the flecks would be engaging in equally tremendous digestion. But down there it's all beyond me, decipherable only in terms set by sizes I'm accustomed to.

Passing a model train shop on holiday, I was compelled to pause and inspect the tiny scenes they had displayed on shelves behind the glass. Since each of the scenes were sets you buy separately and configure into your own miniature landscape—sometimes imaginary, sometimes painfully precise—everything on display was relieved of the context ordinarily affixing it to the world. Transmission boxes neighbored farmer's markets. A swimming pool sat next to a ski lift. Most of the items chimed with my dim knowledge of popular model train environs: pastoral or mountain scenes, small relaxing towns, simple worlds at peace, islands enthralled by trains infinitely lapping them.

One scene stood out, a blend between a decrepit awards ceremony stage and a

sci-fi auditorium—a pit, with stairs running up to a balcony on either side. On closer inspection the pit was home to three polar bears. The front of the floor was blue and the rest, as well as the back wall, was made of rocks with carefully sculpted alcoves for the bears to rest in and enter and exit the enclosure. One bear lay in the alcove. Another stood on its hind legs in the middle of the blue floor, dark barrels on either side of them. There were some other rocks scattered about and a cub fallen on its side. The walls around the bear enclosure were brick with glass barriers atop them to prevent the absent crowds from falling in. I realised I was looking at a segment of zoo. There was a yellow cylinder at the base of the scene that two wires emerged from. Perhaps the bears moved electronically, maybe it could light up. A few of the fake glass barriers had tumbled into the enclosure. They lay angled against the foam rocks giving the whole scene the appearance of a zoo in the days after it was abandoned during a cataclysm, before all the animals that couldn't escape starved without their daily provisions.

We walk to get lunch and talk about how certain locations trigger memories of particular, most times innocuous, content consumed there. A scene from a podcast about two magicians who used to own tigers crops up every time I'm outside the sink warehouse near our studio. Behind my old house there's an alley I'd walk up to get to the shop. As I turned into it a horrific screeching would start up, so piercing it hurt to walk past. The culprits were a pair of macaws held in narrow cages with other parrots I didn't know the names of. It was a perennially disturbing sight, the birds growing pallid in their tiny enclosure, set off by any passing traffic. Every time I passed them a line Emma Jones wrote about a green macaw always swirled round my mind a while: *white eyes winched on a lamé collar*¹. On a corner near my current place, I get flashbacks to another podcast about

insects that can see more colours than humans. It all makes me feel that the body has its own mind, pulling phenomena into shape and line to keep me quiet, like giving a toddler an iPad, while it goes about some more cosmic business I wouldn't understand.

The parrots remind me that I was told birds see in a much faster frame rate than humans which is why they are slow to move off the road when you drive at them. In their vision world they have plenty of time. Which then, as now, sounds like a tidbit of animal wisdom that feels feasible but is flatly untrue, like dolphins being the only creature other than humans having sex for kicks or humans being the only animal capable of a laugh.

The owner of the model shop told me the polar bear scene cost \$59 and the wires coming out of the base allowed the polar bear to move around the enclosure by way of magnets. He told me it needed some TLC. I didn't have \$59 to spend on the enclosure but, given that I'd told him I was interested in the zoo scene, he went into a backroom and emerged with a set depicting an orangutan enclosure. Some lay in hammocks, others in palm trees. There was a banana emblazoned on the fake granite of the enclosure's far wall, as though the apes were part of some secret fraternity or sect—primate freemasons. Like the polar bear's, this enclosure was bordered by steps that lead to a viewing platform at the back of the scene. No visitors were in this model either, though it was in better nick than the polar bear scene. Perhaps in this

Opposite and inside front cover (detail)

Third hand: *Wahlenbergia Stricta*
metal, wire, apoxie, artificial flies, 2023

Page 4-5, 8 and inside back cover (detail)

Third hand: *Austrostipa Elegantissima*
brass, glass, themida triandra, tape, artificial flies, copper, wood, wax, 2023

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Third hand: *Eucalyptus Olida*
Bougainvillia wood, glass, wire, resin, foam, bronze, artificial flies, pike hook, 2023







instance a catastrophe hadn't beset the city, the orangutans were just waiting for the doors to open for the day. The owner told me they were both replicas of Hagenbeck zoo. Which, he continued, had very distinctive architecture.

In assembling the replicas, I pictured folks with magnifying glasses and tiny paintbrushes, items held in place by Third Hands to stop human ones from trembling while the glue or paint is applied. Third Hands are equipment you introduced me to in your soldering frenzy—metal bases sprouting posable arms which culminate in crocodile clips to bite onto and hold items steady.

One time a hospital waiting room I was in was filled by a water filter sound effect. It was barely noticeable for the other patients but from where I was sitting, directly below the source, it swallowed the room. A screen above my head was framed in gold with a small plaque saying *In Loving Memory*. No name followed the dedication. Extraordinary tropical fish crossed back and forth on the screen which depicted a CGI fish tank. Intermittently, a crab made a friendly swipe at a low passing fin, pinching its vicinity so the animated fish quickly wiggled away. Plastic sea grass and a fake cave adorned the tank's floor. The background was the kind of deepening blue you see when opening your eyes and looking down underwater, as though the fish tank was floating in the Mariana Trench. Why would you animate a fish tank? With limitless possibilities wouldn't you animate an unimaginably vibrant coral reef? A nature scene beyond belief, instead of a moderately accurate fish tank complete with a sound effect of a whirring filter and perfect pebbles across the floor? Marx reckons the "The whole history of the development of machinery can be traced in the history of the corn mill."² Which I think about while considering the digital water wheel diligently spinning to prevent algae accumulating in the digital tank, and think



also of the smaller wheel just behind the LCD screen spinning to keep it cool, and the much larger wheels, massive even, pumping electricity out of wind or white water and into the hospital, and the hub caps whirring on the power company's maintenance truck speeding to fix a problem or perform a check up at the plant, and, since we are discussing power, it takes only a small leap to solder all this in my mind to the crocodile clips at the tips of the Third Hand's arms which I recognised mostly from primary school where we once were charged with connecting wires tipped also with crocodile clips to a battery and small bulb to form a circuit and bring brightness into being.

I tell you about a short film I watched recently composed entirely of found scientific and industrial imaging called *The Rumour of True Things*³. I tell you I'm excited by considering images from inside the body or footage from thermal cameras or satellites—any technology that makes the internal external, that traverses multiple registers of time, size, perception and industry—as rumours of true things. They deliver two images, these technologies. One is illegible unless you know what scale to consider it at, where and how to integrate it. Once you know this information the second image reveals itself: it's not a horse-corpse galloping side on, it's a nematode. It's not an abstraction, it's a heat map. Though I like living in the thrall of the first image.

The seeds you were given were lobelias. I hope you plant them and I hope they grow, despite what the label says. If they do, the purple they make in spring will feel more intimate than it otherwise might, will feel bigger than it otherwise might, at least for the few of us who know when your birthday is and know when the seeds were meant

to die and know they were a gift from your sister. It's not even a coincidence, but the unsubstantial can easily bump the ordered world into very different registers of order. To some it's just a purple flower, to others, a miracle seed, for others still, a landing pad. From our vantage, we try to hold all these scales at once but this is mostly impossible. We end up with something partial, with rumours.

There's another line by the poet who wrote about the macaws that goes *I live in you like a paradisaal ape / lives in a garden, walled, with onlookers*.⁴ In my copy of the book is an inscription: *Happy Christmas to my dearest and most poetic Tracy from Steve xxx*. Tracy didn't find Steve most poetic I suppose and turfed the collection. Which then found its way to me in a secondhand shop and their dead love got a second life. Steve's love for Tracy lives now like a scientific image of a body's organs, a resurrected lobelia, a water wheel, an expiration date, a slide under a microscope—decipherable only through a stitching of scales, a cavalcade of rumours hemmed into cohesion. It lives like a model train version of a paradisaal ape living in a model train version of a garden, walled, with model train onlookers, and some other, bigger, warmer, onlooker above.

1 Emma Jones, *The Striped World*. (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 45.

2 Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*. (London: Penguin, 1990), 464.

3 Paul Bush, "The Rumour of True Things," 1990, 26:31, <https://vimeo.com/335626509>

4 Jones, *The Striped World*, 14.





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RUMOURS OF TRUE THINGS

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