

Another photo by Max Aguilera-Hellweg is an image of abandonment. A single tiny baby sits curled in a jar, alone on the barren concrete floor by an empty chair in a sparse utility room or basement. The child's hand shields its face as if in protection or shame. It is hiding after being punished, perhaps exiled for being different. It's difficult not to feel disheartened by this gloomy view.

William Wegman, whose Weimaraner dogs appear in all of his photographs, takes a more lighthearted approach. A colour photo shows one of

his dogs hiding its head in a skeletal pelvis. In another, two of his dogs stare at a floating specimen of conjoined twins from behind a plate of glass. The twins are attached at the belly, and a slight reflection in the glass gives the appearance that the dogs themselves are joined at the belly.

Together these images provide sufficient diversity of perspective to alleviate the guilt we feel when gawking in amazement at their contents. The serene still life of a scoliotic spine or the shadows cast by the fluid in a specimen jar layer

even the most blatant images with subtlety. The result was a show best avoided by the faint of heart or narrow of mind.

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A photographic exploration of the Mütter Museum, edited by the museum's director, Gretchen Worden, was published in 2002 by Blast Books in New York City (www.blastbooks.com).

Room for a view

Seeing more, seeing less

Looking through a microscope in histology class was a new experience.

I tried to keep both eyes open, one on the monocular eyepiece, the other on the outside world. I had a second-hand Olympus bought from my cousin Bob for three hundred dollars. Before class, I practised on hairs and bits of skin, tiny garden bugs and spiders, and my own blood. It was remarkable what you missed with the naked eye and what you saw with the microscope. I looked at a drop of water from a pond and saw a zoo of animals. I looked at a fly's wing and saw a crystal palace.

I looked at a crystal and saw perfect geometry.

I figured histology would be a snap: everything would be hundreds of times bigger. Most of the time I saw the world at normal size. I had never seen the smallest things.

I had to concentrate as if I were learning a new language.

When I looked at specimens in class, I saw colours and shapes that had no names.

"This one is definitely a Jackson Pollock," I said.

"No," Doug, my lab partner, corrected. "That's a glomerulus, from a kidney."

"You don't say!" I looked closer.

The blood vessels were stained black and the tissues were blue and red. "Mmm, so that is a glomerulus."

It looked almost poetic.

Doug said that similar cells did not look always the same. Illumination and stains changed them, and so did diseases. Power was deceptive. Doug had studied histology and anatomy as an undergraduate. He was four years older than me and had travelled through Europe. He'd grown a beard and lived on a Greek island with his girlfriend. He might have stayed there forever, if he hadn't been accepted into medicine.

The closer you observed something, the more confusing it became, Doug said. But the strangest pictures were the ones made with electrons. They were like nothing you ever saw.

The first day Professor Travers held up Ham's green textbook of histology. We were setting up our microscopes, adjusting eyepieces, and plugging in light sources.

"For those who read, this is gospel, a masterpiece." Travers stared at us.



Fred Sebastian

"Who's read Ham's textbook of histology? Raise your hands."

There was no movement. No sound. Travers stared at us as if we were fugitives from justice. "You mean to say *no one* has read Ham?"

Some students fingered their microscopes. "Stop fiddling," Professor Travers said. He walked to the window. "Now, what do you see out there?"

I looked across the street. There was a garden with maple trees and hedges.

"Well? What do you see?" he asked.

I figured it was a trick question.

"Maple trees," Doug said.

"Good." Travers spun on his heel,

away from the window. "Maple trees, yes. What is a maple tree? Tell me. Speak up, speak up," Travers said. "What is a maple tree?"

"A maple tree is a plant," Doug said.

"A plant. Good God, yes. Who can tell me what a plant is?"

"Doug," I whispered. "What is a plant?"

I felt stunned, as if a rock had hit my skull and knocked the sense out of me. I started thinking of tomatoes and wondered if a tomato was a fruit or vegetable.

"You — the one whispering." Travers pointed in my direction.

I pointed to myself. "Me?"

"You." Travers smiled. "What is a plant made of?"

Words multiplied in my mind. Molecules. Mitochondria. Mitosis. Meiosis. Nucleus. Asexual reproduction. At last I spit out, "Seeds. A plant is made out of seeds."

"I am sorry," Professor Travers said. "Seeds is not the right answer."

He turned his back, picked up some chalk and drew a circle on the blackboard.

When his back was turned, the class clown stood up and held up a *Playboy* magazine, pointing to the nude in the centrefold as if she were the answer. Students smirked. The clown returned to his seat. Travers picked up his worn copy of *Ham* and held it aloft. "For those of you that don't read. Look."

Seconds had elapsed since my answer, but to me it seemed like hours. Professor Travers continued. "Teach your eyes to see. What have I drawn on the blackboard?"

"Atoms, sir," another student said. "Everything is made up of atoms."

"True," Travers sighed. "But wrong. All matter is made of atoms, but I am talking of *living* matter here. Not inanimate matter. Perhaps I need to be explicit. All plants and animals are made up of ... ?" Professor Travers pointed to the circle drawn on the blackboard. "Of ... ?" He waved his hands counterclockwise, as if he were conducting an orchestra. "Of ... ?" He waited for a response.

"Electrons, sir?" A tall spectacled student stood up. "Electric charges

make up the universe. Animal. Vegetable. Mineral. It's all charges. It's been proven, sir."

"Indeed," Professor Travers said. He faced the blackboard and drew a larger circle with dots and smaller circles on the inside. The class clown stood up and lifted up a banana in his right hand and the *Playboy* magazine in his left. Then he closed the centerfold on the banana and rubbed the two together.

Meanwhile, Professor Travers drew arrows to the dots and lines on the inside of the circle. In large letters he spelled out all the names.

At the top of the blackboard he wrote four letters: C E L L.

Professor Travers said, "All living matter is made up of cells."

He let the idea sink in for a few seconds.

Then he picked up his copy of *Ham's Histology* and read aloud: "The first few minutes a student looks down a microscope ... are not likely to be encouraging ones ... he can derive comfort from realizing that there are only 3 categories of material in the human body: [1] cells, [2] intercellular substances, [3] fluids."

Professor Travers repeated this three times.

It was our first day in histology. We were learning to see the world again.

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Acromegaly narrative silenced

A two-roomed vestigial,
sandwiched between giants:
the house she didn't want to leave,
with its wooden screen door, torn
mesh flapping, its lime green
linoleum pieced together under years'-
worn braided rag rugs, plastic
sheeting tacked over her windows'

view of poured concrete glass; where
she sat upright, behind the bedroom
door, waiting for evening to issue her
daughter home to cook their meal on a
cast-iron stove (the type now back in
fashion), her elephant feet spilling over
loosely knitted slippers, her gravelly
voice propelled by a gargoylian
tongue (emerging as a dogfish from the
ocean), and her facial pallor so

cold; where the home lab
arrived for blood;
where the internist phoned
to promise a better life, with
CT scans and interns and IV
fluids and bromocryptine and
radiotherapy and a hospital bed
in a white room clad with fear.

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