

✘ Lucy ✘

✘ In the beginning was a name burnished onto the landscape itself—and Lucy is that name. Lucy already has a burnt face, spindly legs, and arms that hang down by her thighs. Lucy walks, upright, along the river banks, where she seeks out frogs and nesting birds. She does not know her age, Lucy, although of age to conceive—they had banished Lucy to a distant hill that Spring and plastered her body in kaolin, mingled with green leaves and blue-black berries, in honour of her first blood. ✘ Lucy steepes her body in the peat bogs along the river, having spent the morning foraging, from dawn to high noon. She is keen on the damp smells, all decaying leaves and gassy eruptions and she sinks into the sludge, dislodging hogs as they thrash about before taking flight. The pit in which she curls up is cool, and midges can no longer alight on her splattered skin. She loses her scent in the pond, and there is now only her slight breath to betray her to the lurking apes. ✘ Lucy dreams of a tenebrous cavern, capped by twinkling stars. In her dream, Lucy reposes on her back. In front of her rise translucent walls and on the other side of this partition, phantasma press forward, measuring her up with their gaze. These apparitions seem themselves to be holding their breath—as if they did not wish for Lucy to wake up. ✘ Lucy does stir. She is remembering headlong races in the savannah. The sound of the crackling leaves consumed to a crisp during the dry season fires. Lucy thinks back to the breathless escapes from the inferno, as she and hers crash through the bushes, in the company of antelopes and hyenas. The horned beasts no more afraid of Lucy and her ilk, than they themselves are fearful of brushing up against the hyena—as long as the fire lasts. It is the truce of the savannah. Flee, as fast as possible, as far as your legs, your wings, will carry you. The blaze petering out against a barren stretch, the animals slink away, abashed. The antelope make for the hursts and the hyenas for their caves, while Lucy's muster in a clearing. Who is missing? Who stumbled? Who is lying on the savannah floor? That night, one of hers picks up a red ember and places it in the middle of the glade, and they sleep soundly. Lucy recalls happy days in the bush; scrambling from branch to branch, squabbling with monkeys over dove nests lined with chicks. They tear out the fluff from the birds' chests before biting into them, like warm figs. The apes are harder than Lucy's kind, and they are nimbler in the trees. But it is they, Lucy and her clan, who push the apes back toward the forests when they discover a charbroiled zebra on the plain. They tear off shreds of skin and flesh, eating these meats as much with their fingers as with their teeth. They gnaw on the bones, smashing them with rocks to suck on the marrows. Lucy looks up. She glances towards the heights to the west, a green and white wall, a mix of cliffs, boulders and foliage. This barrier marks the end of the plains, with their alluvium-laden rivers and vast herds, in which she and hers range, from rains to dry season, between overflowing waters and the droughts and their fiery thunderstorms. ✘ In the dry season of the year of her blood, a dust laced simoon began to blow, such as the hot tongue which precedes the lick of the flame harrying you forward. This wind blew even before the fire so that it made the grasses as brittle as dragonfly wings. When the sky's fire came down—the black clouds on the northern wall had been massing for several days—the plains erupted in a sea of flames. The escape of her tribe, and of all that had leg and wing was desperate. A bangarang of dust, smoke and flame full of the acrid smell of the fire and of a thousand beasts pressed up against one another. The jackal bolted alongside the hyrax, while the leopard fled in lockstep with the baboon. ✘ The quag, as black as an inkwell, alone seemed untroubled in the midst of the fury, as Lucy slid her body into the mire. There only remained the smoke seeping into her nose and throat, and the fiery reflections above the trees of the riverbank, to remind her of the raging firestorm. Lucy never knew the exact moment in which her nose stopped tingling. She never knew if she were waking or entering a long sleep, in which jewels glittered for all eternity. Lucy was writing herself into the landscape—a long process—for before becoming a diamond, she would be mud. ✘

✘ The Abyssinian Syllabary ✘

Ethiopia in 33 characters, from **U** to **T**

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