

WILMER OR WESLEY

by Carol Emshwiller

Carol Emshwiller's latest books are *The Secret City* and *I Live with You* (both available from tachyonpublications.com). In her new story, she returns to one of her favorite subjects—people who live on the edges of society—and explores the wistful plight of someone who is either...

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One of his first memories is of a struggle. His mother was defending him from something loud and angry, but he couldn't see what. All he saw was her back. She was holding something big above her head as a weapon. He saw it swing and swing. He thinks it was a frying pan. There was a lot of noise, yelling and grunting and things falling. The window breaking. Dishes breaking.

Then there was quiet. For a long time. He was afraid to cry. Mother had put him in the laundry basket with a quilt under him. He could have climbed out but he didn't, not even after he was hungry and thirsty. It was quiet and there was nobody and he was quiet and nobody, too. He hardly moved at all. It got dark and then light. He didn't move.

Afterwards somebody came. Somebody he didn't know picked him up. It was better to let her do it though he wanted Mama. When more people came the person laughed. She said, "Look at this one. Just the right age."

She took him away from where he was supposed to be. From where he had little animals his mother had made for him out of wood. Lots and lots. Mother said, "Cock-a-doodle-do," and "Moo," and sang songs with ee-eye-ee-eye-oh.

Then a lot of other people came and laughed ... about him. They didn't even know his name. They called him Willy first, and then Willoughby for a joke, and then Wilmer. Sometimes they forgot and called him Wilber, but mostly Wilmer. He's been Wilmer ever since. What difference does it make? That's what they said, too. "It doesn't matter what we call him."

By now he's forgotten what his mother named him. Once in a while he hears a name that sounds familiar and he thinks that might be the name his mother called him by. Or there must have been a father. At least by now he knows there must have been one. So maybe one of those names that sound familiar was his father's name, though he likes to think it might have

been his own. He thinks his real name might have been something starting with W so they were right about that. Perhaps Wes or Warren. Every time he hears those he shakes for a few minutes. Has to stand still and recover.

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One of these days he's going to get out of here. Beyond the glass and mesh. He was too small to do it before. He tried, but he failed every time, and they laughed and laughed. When they found him in a tree and later on a roof, they laughed even more. He didn't give up, he knew he had to grow up more first. This place is beautiful and comfortable. There are books and trees. Food appears. She talks to him. She shows him off to people. They laugh. He still doesn't know why he's so funny.

She says, "Every so often we have to close off the park, but only when he hasn't been spending enough time in front. We want him on display."

She says, "Look how he does just what we always do. Sits on the chair just as we would. Drinks from the cup as we would do. Leans his head on his hands when sad. He can even ride that bicycle. He can use a spoon and knife and fork as well as you or I. He likes ice cream just as much as any kid.

"He was hard to capture. His mother fought just as any mother would. Afterwards we left him alone for a while. In fact a whole day. We didn't want to get bit and we thought he'd calm down once he got hungry and scared enough.

"He knows well over a hundred words. He can follow directions. I taught him to read. Of course nothing complicated. Here is a little peacock he carved from a piece of wood he found in his park. There's no harm in him having a little knife and we let him have hammers and saws.

"No, no, nothing else lives in his park with him. He's all alone there.

"He doesn't talk much but he can make himself understood. Actually, I don't think he wants to talk. I keep thinking if there was the right creature around, say another of his own kind, he might talk, but the senior members of the study don't want the expense. When the time comes we'll choose a suitable mate for him from some other park or zoo.

"I've taught him everything he knows. I wrote him up in *Science* magazine. I showed him the article and he seemed to like it, though who

knows how much he really understands.”

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They killed my mother. I can't imagine why. I can't imagine why this park and this confinement.

I remember what she looked like, hair the same brown as mine. Eyes, greenish gray like mine. Or have I just made her up out of how I look myself? (There's a mirror in my hut.) I know she mostly wore greens and blues and browns, but she dressed me in brighter colors. I had a striped shirt. Red and blue and yellow. She smelled of her cooking: cinnamon, lemon, gingerbread ... for me. Back then everything was for me, the toys she carved, and even her pots and pans, cardboard boxes and paper bags, all mine to play with.

I must say, though, that this person, this Roberta Haskell, has made me a very nice park. The one in back. That it's full of flowers is her doing. That there's not only my little hut, but also a treehouse, is her doing. That there's an apple tree and an apricot tree, pines, even raspberries and strawberries ... all her doing. I know cameras watch me, I see them turn, I hear the buzz of the focus change, but I know where the secret places are where the cameras don't reach.

She looks after me, you could say, like a mother, but it isn't like a mother. I'm her dissertation. Her claim to fame. The topic of her lectures. Sometimes I'm brought on stage beside her. People laugh though she tells them not to. "Almost human," she says, and, "Please, a little respect."

Usually I sit at a desk beside the lectern. Sometimes I speak, too. I know better than to say I won't do it. (Since the beginning, back in Mother's laundry basket, I've been as quiet and as much a "*nobody*" as it's possible to be.) "My name is Wilmer," I say, knowing full well it isn't. "I am the research project of Dr. Roberta Haskell. Most of my kind are found living in woods and copses and grasslands in what might best be described as the north west quadrant of the Midwest."

They try to hide their laughter behind their hands.

"Bravo, Willy," Roberta says, and, "You may sit down now."

Do my eyes protrude? Are my feet splayed? Is my forehead too lumpy? My nose too long? As to the color of my skin, I see no difference between mine or theirs, and they have many colors. Am I spotted? Am I too

light or too dark? I don't see it. My toes are no more grasping than theirs. I have no tail.

If there's ever a chance to get away it will be just before or just after one of these lectures. I'll need different clothes and a hat Roberta hasn't seen before.

If there are more of my kind, where are they? I suppose incarcerated in other parks. And where is this "north quadrant of the Midwest"? Would I be free if I found that place? She has said she will bring me a mate when I'm older. From where? She even asked me what my preference was. So there must be others in other zoos and every town has a zoo.

I have the thought that I'd rather find somebody on my own.

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I have a small "front yard" where people watch me from behind glass. They point and giggle. (Especially when I lean back and put my feet up on my desk and my hands behind my head, or whenever I make any such gesture that reminds them of themselves.) I don't mind the children giggling, but grown-ups?

The "front yard" is where they used to put the toys when I had toys, my fire engine and little cars, and it's where they bring the food tray. In front I live mostly on a platform so people can see me better (under my plaster tree and next to my phony rocks). There's a table and chair, a desk, and lately a rocking chair. One of my bookcases is out there. Other bookcases are not only in my hut, but even in my tree house. I have a radio and TV set. All the programs are chosen for me. A lot of my schooling comes from them, but I've had to learn to read between the lines. I know more than Roberta suspects. At least I hope so.

I've been here so long now it seems the faces behind the glass wall are as the world is and always will be. I can pay attention to them or not.

For a while there was a girl who came often and just stood there. First behind everybody else. I didn't notice her until I saw she never laughed at me. Later, when she waved and smiled it was *to* me, not just to get me to move or react. She looked to be about my age. (They thought I was twelve or thirteen then. We don't know what my exact age is.) I smiled back at her. I thought of her as my friend. Sometimes I held a book up to her, close to the glass. (Once I showed her the picture of a crow making a tool out of a wire.) We wrote notes to each other. We would stand close to the glass

and hold up our tablets. I wanted to write, I LOVE YOU, but I didn't dare though once I did write, YOU'RE NICE. That made her shy. She stepped out of sight for a few minutes. By the time she came back and wrote, YOU ARE, TOO, I'd almost forgotten what it was about.

We exchanged names. She wrote: I'M SARAH, and I wrote: THEY CALL ME WILMER BUT THAT'S NOT MY REAL NAME. Then I wrote that my real name was Wesley but I also wrote that I wasn't sure about that. She made a gesture of feeling sad.

I looked at myself in my mirror after that. I wondered what she could see in me that might have seemed nice. To myself, I looked anxious and frowning. I have a mousy kind of face, but then she does, too. Maybe that's another reason why I liked her so much, aside from the fact that she seemed to care about me as if I was a real person.

For years she came almost once a week, but hasn't for a long time. I think she must have moved away. I wish she'd said goodbye so I'd have known not to keep waiting for her. That was so long ago I wonder if we'd recognize each other anymore.

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I'm going to escape. I've started getting ready. I've made myself a hat. Not a very good one, but it'll disguise me some. I sewed a blanket into a jacket. By hand. It took a long time. I made a phony pair of glasses out of wire and clear plastic. I wondered about ways to dye my hair. I gave up on that, but I'm bringing along scissors so I can cut it as soon as I get away from Roberta.

I picked out a name for myself. One of those that makes me tremble every time I hear it. Wesley. Wes.

I bring my knife, and one of my favorite books. I had asked Roberta for an astronomy book. She said I wouldn't understand it but she got it for me anyway. I'll bring that one, though it's rather large. When I go off with her to her lectures, I always carry a plastic bag with a book or a magazine and a drink and a snack.

This time Roberta is giving her slide show and talk about me in a large lecture hall. By now we trust each other ... or, rather, she trusts me. I always help carry her briefcase and her slides. She dismisses me near the end of her talk. Usually I wait in the wings and read until she finishes. Then she calls me to come out for a final bow.

This time I change clothes and cut my hair in the men's room. Then I actually come and sit with the audience, looking at slides of myself. "Watch his opposable thumb. Watch his fingers on his flute. We gave him a recorder and look what he did with it. Here's a song he made up all by himself."

Needless to say, I don't appear for my bow. Roberta looks worried and runs off stage and doesn't even take her own last bow.

I leave with the crowd.

I'm so happy and excited to be out with the regular people—to be walking along as if I was one of them—I actually skip and then I jump straight up. I can't help myself, but then I see nobody else is hopping around as I am and I try to walk as they do.

I'm bold. I talk to people. I never wanted to before, but now I want to. They answer just as if I was one of them.

I say, "How did you like the creature?" and they say, "Remarkable." "And Roberta Haskell? How did you like her?" "Doing interesting and important work," they say, and, "She sure gives her all to this project."

It's dark. I'm out and away. On my own. I walk as fast as I can. I want to run but I think I'd better not. I stay in the crowded places. I have no money. I wonder how hard it is to get a job. Maybe I can just do things for people, carry their bundles, clean their houses, wash their dishes. I know there are people who do such things for others but I don't know how to begin.

I see a beggar on the corner. I don't think I should ask him, though. He's exactly *not* doing what I *do* want to do.

As I walk, I look at young women in a whole new way. I've looked at them from my front yard, it's true, but here they are, right in front of me. I could touch them. Could talk to them. Woo them even. Any of them might be a possible mate. Do I want a blonde or a brunette or what? Did it matter, blue jeans or high heels? Lipstick or no makeup?

But first I have to find a way to make a living. How does one proceed? How did all these people come to be able to do all the things they're privileged to do?

If I had my choice, I'd like to work in a zoo. Take care of animals. Of course I've never had anything to take care of so I really don't know much about it. Once I asked Roberta for a kitten or a puppy. She thought it would be a mistake for me to have one. I wonder why.

But where is this "northwest quadrant of the Midwest" with its copses and groves, full, as they said, of prairie chickens and pheasants, where I would find "my own kind"? In what direction is that?

West, I think, toward the setting sun.

I ask which way is the setting sun? I have to ask three people before somebody knows.

I start in that direction and walk a long time.

I didn't think it would be so hard. Then I think of hiding on a train. I ask a beautiful woman the way to the station. She smiles and tells me how to get there. "It's kind of a long ways," she says. And I say, "That's all right." "Take care," she says. And I say, "I will and you take care, too."

After that I lean against the wall for a minute, dizzy with joy. It was so nice. She was so pleasant. Her eyes were blue.

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It takes a long time but I make it to the train station before dawn. I did spend a lot of time looking in store windows and examining plants that aren't in my park. It's spring. There are sparrows.

I'm pretty excited but even so I fall asleep for a while on one of the benches in the waiting room.

I wake up hungry. There's food for sale all around the station. Things I've never eaten before or even seen. I know stealing is a bad thing, but no harm in asking. Or is there? "All I want is a piece of bread." (Ask for the smallest thing.) "And just a glass of water." (I know to say please.)

The man says, "The cup'll cost you five cents," but the other man says, "Oh for Heaven's sake, give the guy the cup," and that man hands me a sandwich, too. He didn't call me a creature, he said, "the guy."

The sandwich is all wrapped up tight so I can put it in my pocket.

Then I find the train for Chicago. I know where towns are in this country but I don't see any trains for farther west. I thought if I got on, then even if I lasted only a little while, at least they'd throw me off in some other place than here and in the right direction.

I'm good at avoiding the conductors. Where they find me and put me off is Kalamazoo.

"Young man," they say. (Young man!) "get yourself a job and then buy a ticket. Or go hitchhike if you must."

Hitchhike. Why didn't I think of that?

But I'm thinking I'm lucky now, because, from its name, I think there must be a big zoo. I can visit it and see if there are any of my kind there and maybe I can let them out and then I'll have company while looking for the rest of us and maybe they'll know where the rest of us are.

But on the way out of the station, I see my own picture up on the wall, but not with my phony glasses and my hat, and my new haircut. VALUABLE, it says. VALUABLE SPECIMEN. Specimen! REWARD. \$30,000 for return unharmed. If I returned on my own could I get the money? I don't suppose so. And then where could I spend it?

Even though the picture doesn't look much like me now, I pull my hat lower and hurry out of there, walk a while and then ask the way to the zoo.

When I get there I'm disappointed. It's just a little zoo and I don't see anybody at all like me. There are little free packages of mixed grains for feeding some of the animals. I take some for myself. Not very pleasant eating. Some of it's oatmeal. That isn't so bad raw.

I stay after the zoo has closed and go to sleep on a bench not far from the elephant. She had spilled her peanuts. I got more food that way. Funny thing, when she saw me picking up the ones too far for her to reach, and eating them, she picked up some she could reach and handed them to me. What do you say to an elephant? I nod and thank her.

Later somebody in a uniform comes by. He hits the bottoms of my feet with his night stick, pretty hard, but even so he isn't a bad person. He says, "Hey, fella, you can't sleep here." Then says, "Haven't you got a place to go?" Then he sees my three empty little bags of llama treats. "Those are a little hard on the stomach." Then he takes pity on me. "Come on, Joe..." (why does he think my name is Joe?) "I have a little place behind the

ostriches.”

But first he says hello to the elephant and pats her trunk when she reaches out to him, and then leads me to his little office, sits me down and makes me tea.

I want to ask him if he has any creatures in the zoo at all like me, but I think maybe I shouldn't. Besides, I don't know what my kind is. Except for “those creatures living in the western quadrant of the Midwest.”

He gives me one of his ham sandwiches. Then he says if I want I can curl up on his floor, he'll wake me when his work is over and we'll go out for breakfast together. His name is Vern. I say Joe is fine with me but he looks at me funny. He knows it isn't true. Then I say, Wesley. Wes. For a minute I can't say anything more because it's so wonderful to be able to say that name.

He pours me more tea and I calm myself down with a few sips. He's halfway out the door when I think to call him back to ask if there's a job I can do in the zoo, and he says, maybe so. He'll see about it. There might be. Even though Roberta said you weren't supposed to use that word, I say, “I'll shovel shit.”

I fall asleep right away, happy, thinking everything is solved.

What wakes me is the fax machine clicking. I get up to see how it works. I know about them, but I've never seen one in action, and here comes my picture with the WANTED on it. It would be nice for Vern to get the reward, he helped me, but I'd rather be free. Good I didn't say my name ... or, rather, the name they call me. It says right on it, answers to the name of Willy or Wilmer.

I sneak away. My watch says 5 AM—the watch Roberta gave me. I'm sorry about not having breakfast with Vern and more so about not working here. Maybe it's exactly the zoos and the railroad stations where my picture will be.

So then it's off to hitchhiking. I think I should get out to the main road West. I ought to figure out the next nearby towns and I ought to have a map, but if I had any money I'd get breakfast instead. I don't know how people get along. How do they get started? Except, I almost did at the zoo. I guess it's not so hard if you're in the right place and know to ask.

Then I remember there are libraries where you can look up everything

there is.

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The lady there helps me find a map, but I don't even have paper and pencil. Is it all right to ask for those in the library? I do it and it's okay. She even has little papers and pencils that seem to be just for giving out. I write down towns all the way to Denver. That should be more than far enough.

But I should have known that, if my picture was some places, it will be everywhere. Cops pick me up standing on the shoulder with my thumb out. That man, Vern, called in that I'd been there. I wasn't sleeping in my hat and I'd left my phony glasses back by the elephant so he suspected I was me. Roberta tells me that after. She's very disappointed in me. She thought we were friends and trusted each other. She says she can never trust me again. Also I'll not be able to go on stage with her anymore. She said she thought of herself as my mother ... at least to some extent. Wasn't she the one who rescued me, way back then, from my laundry basket? Didn't she pick me up and hug me? Didn't she feed me my first meal after they took me? Didn't she buy me almost everything I asked for? She says I should have known escape was impossible.

I had thought they wouldn't dare put me in chains or any such things while on display but they do. There's a big new sign saying that I tried to escape so now I'm shackled "to ensure that I'll be here for your pleasure." I lasted less than three days out there.

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Will I grow old here? Chained, so that even limping out to my park is a chore? I can't climb to my tree house and the books I left up there. I think they want to display me chained. They could just as well have put an ankle bracelet on me. Perhaps they want the chains to be visible to punish me for trying to escape and to humiliate me in front of the viewers. Now there's a warning sign. MAY BE DANGEROUS. I've never hurt anybody or anything. Not even the bugs in my park. I've looked at them with interest.

I think to find a way to get even with Roberta. I might do something to sabotage her dissertation, but I don't know if I really want to do that. She's not at all like a mother, but we've worked together for so long ... I can't say I don't like her. And I'm not that kind of man. (I'm thinking, Man.) Would a proper man be so vindictive?

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Then Sarah comes back. I'd not have recognized her if she hadn't stood at the back and smiled (the exact same shy smile) and waved exactly as she used to, a little sideways motion of her hand. A secret wave. She has the same little pointy face but all grown up.

She has her tablet with her and I go get mine. She comes close and writes: JUST FOR A VISIT.

She writes that she's on her way to a summer workshop in Peru.

I'M A BOTANIST NOW. I LOVE THE MOUNTAINS. DO YOU?

I'VE NEVER SEEN THEM.

WHAT DID YOU DO TO HAVE CHAINS ON? I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU DID ANYTHING BAD.

I DIDN'T. I ESCAPED. FOR THREE DAYS.

She makes a sad face.

But she's gone way beyond me. I can hardly even deal with life outside my park let alone with a botanist going to Peru. Even so, seeing her, I can't help but feel happy and even hopeful. I think maybe she can do something to help me. Maybe I can escape some way—with her. She's the one who always looked at me as if I was a real person. But then she brings a man up to the glass. She writes: THIS IS JOEL.

I nod and smile. I make the okay sign.

So that's that, then.