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Good Walls

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Good Walls

An Honors Thesis
presented by
Andrea Amulic
to
the Department of Literatures in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Honors in the Major Field

Connecticut College
New London, Connecticut
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GOOD WALLS

Andrea Amulic

“The war is over. There are unburied bones
in the fields at sun-up, skylarks singing,
starved children begging chocolate on the tracks.”
-Robert Hass

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Thank you.

I.
Barren Soil

Life Study

Shuttle back through concave
glass of years ago, turn it
over: First you are infantile
and you'll never see the world
like this again. Then you are

four years old, cataloguing
clouds, trees, birds, etc., the way
they coincide in the blue
silence of your eyeballs, the way
the angles of the tree branches

caress the blue silence over
your eyeballs. Then the silence
is rent and your eyeballs
fix to a telescope and your ears
don't understand the new noise

because it sounds like fireworks,
but it's daytime. Maybe
someone covered the whole country
in bubble wrap a long time ago
and let the wrong people promise

not to pop it. Then you are
translated across an arbitrary border
in the dark and you can't see
anything. Your tongue picks up
dialect they've started calling

language, your fingers stop
writing Cyrillic, your knees go
to church on Sundays. Then you are
six years old and translated
again, into English, into

America. It's microscopic here
and you strain your eyes, your ears,
your everything to magnify it
into the plane of your
understanding. Every thing you had once

catalogued now has a different
name, and every part of your body
is out of place, and every part of your home
country is out of place, but you stay here
a while, writing words that are more familiar

than the words your parents told you when you
were small. They didn't tell you and they won't
tell you the important things because you couldn't
understand then and you can't
understand now, so you make them up.

She Makes Poems from Her Family's Table Scraps

"Madmen see outlines and therefore they draw them."

-William Blake

The shorter stories get
put down: the hours
of whispers in a post-war

remodeled kitchen were
never meant to become
ink, grandfathers

are graveyards
and they stay there.
Whose nightmares

did you borrow
for this one,
eavesdropper?

December 23, 1994: I Never Want to Tell You This

Words overheard
when cousins
were strangers, advice-dealers—

My father, the C.O.,
when enlistment
was massacring Muslims—

A night of unrest puzzled together
when history
is a junkyard of identity's sentence fragments—

Soldiers' uniforms
slammed open my front door,
barrels breathing: stand up friend,
get up, it's time to celebrate Christmas.

Bartender's apron
stood in line behind me to the work camp,
still holding the keys to the place he
never came back to. Now it's a flower shop.

Friend of my brother's friend
slipped me through the side door,
waving papers, waving
me into an alley: run home.

My Father: Etude De Ciel

My father tells me things
sometimes. He likes to tell me
things, but he doesn't always
tell me, only sometimes, and sometimes
I like to hear the things. I used to not
like to hear things, but now

I have learned how
to hear things, so I like to hear
the things my father tells me. He doesn't
need to tell me the sky is large; I know
it is large and I try not to look
at it, it is too large, so I look

away, like looking at a sequoia tree,
but I don't like to do that, either. A branch
of a sequoia tree on a wall at the Museum
of Natural History is large, like the sky
it grows to meet, large, like the ground
it rises from, so I look away. My father

doesn't tell me, and doesn't need
to tell me, war is large,
like the sky, like the ground, like a branch of a sequoia tree, or a sequoia tree, or even
larger. I know it is large, a lowly large,
like the ground, but it still makes me
feel small, smaller than the sky

or a branch of a sequoia tree
makes me feel, makes me feel four
years old and playing with dolls
on the floor, low, like the ground, but small
and closed-in, with my father, who was large,
who is large. We played with dolls

on the floor together, my father, large,
and I, small, shrinking together, becoming
smaller on the floor below the windows
together, and war, large, waited
outside, looking inside, for my father,
also large, now smaller-than-window-level

small, but large-hearted, large enough
to disagree, large enough
to get away. I know, and my father knows,
something somewhere is larger than war,
but it's hard to find sometimes, and the sky,
large, in America is too close. My father

feels small, afraid, closed-in, on the ground.
He feels smaller now than America, smaller
than new life, but I know he is larger even
than the something somewhere that is larger
than war, and the sky is not large enough
for him, but too large for me, and I don't

like to look at it because I am small, and feel
smaller when I look
at the sky in America, or the sky not in America, or war, or a branch of a sequoia tree.
Only a sequoia tree is large enough for the sky
it meets and the ground it rises from,
and my father is large, like a sequoia tree,

rising from lowly-large war-ground, but the sky
is not enough, so he must be larger, he must be
the something somewhere,
larger than war, and the sky, and sequoia trees, and me.
My father tells me about the sky
because it is too large to look at and I like

to hear the things he likes to tell me,
sometimes, and one day

he will hear me

tell my daughter about something somewhere
that is larger than the sky in America, and the sky not in America, and the ground, and
the sequoia trees, and the branches of the sequoia trees, and war.

Marshal Tito

I remain
your obediently ninth
son: Kiss my forehead
again, Josip, again, Godfather,

tell me: Which are the things
that remain? November 29th,
or brotherhood and unity
is a highway only

to my only daughter, or my only
daughter is American sometimes?
Why didn't you tell me and does it go away and mustn't it must it?
I hold

fast to Wednesday propaganda
in the *Times* and the times
and the time on Swiss-made
watch faces only. If you

were here, if you were
fireflies, I'd have a jar
and make you tell me:
Who was responsible who was responsible who was responsible who is responsible?

Bridge, Tolerance

They are building bridges across the Atlantic
and blueprints turn to
newsprint. A bridge is a structure
forming or carrying a road
over a river, a ravine, etc.,
or affording passage between two
points at a height
above the ground. A bridge
is a bloodshed.

They are building bridges across the Atlantic
and crane-lifting
tolerance. Tolerance is the disposition
to be patient
with or indulgent
to the opinions
or practices of
others. Tolerance
is a cat's nine lives.

They are building bridges across the Atlantic
and a grubby-nailed man
is still in Berlin
bricklaying,
because good fences make
good walls make good
citizens, and no one
told him the war
is over.

Operation Deliberate Force

What noise burned
through their brains what

bombs falling fell
hard on concrete what hot

concrete flood filled
the playgrounds whose

Pompeii is this whose
inferno?

Negative Capability

“but mostly travel is missing, by a narrow margin,
things desired”
-John Berryman

Everything is sticky
in the summer: Sarajevo, 3:00AM,
the passport checker’s double take, me,
and Sister Maria’s thumbs

on her rosary. *Why are we
here and what do we
want and are we traveling
together?* No, we are alone,

like their mothers and grandmothers
after 1992, like their houses
on their streets where their mosques
once were, and all we want

is reconciliation, like the houndstooth
man on his way to Provence
five months ago—weighed
in the balance and found

wanting—with a letter in his sorry,
wrinkled smile: *Having a Diet Coke
with you is better than having
a line of coke with anyone*

*else and I mean it. Wish you were
here where I wish I were
anyone else, and everyone.* Our hopes
suspended in the negative space

of midnight railed and rushing
forward, our suitcases years
heavy with misunderstanding,
we shoulder our reparations

in turn and alight. Here, I wish
I were anyone else, without
my name, without another’s
apology to make.

A Modest Proposal: Mladić In 1994

*The number of souls in this— being
usually reckoned— of these I
calculate— from which number
I subtract— although I apprehend
there cannot be so many,*

*under the present distresses
of the—but this being
granted, there will remain— I
again subtract— There only
remain— no,*

don't remove the flesh
from your bones, remove your bones
from the flesh of the land, your blood
makes barren soil where it hits, your souls
are unfit to be counted.

Confession: Mladić In The Hague, 2011

I lined them up, the thousands of men, and knew
about safe zones, I knew about national pride.
I don't see why I should have to say this to you,

you're an educated man, you read the news.
It was exactly how it looked from outside:
they lined up for me, nine thousand men. They knew

their crimes, their names, their birthright; he who
lives by the Quran, dies by dying, died
that day. Now I am saying this, and you

want facts: no census of vanished men, no true
account of unmarked graves. No names survived.
Nine thousand would have been too many, I knew

the boundaries of war; I thought it through.
Despite what you hope, I'm not uncivilized.
I'm benched behind your imposed defense while you,

up in arms a decade late, yell justice to
the masses. My form of justice, too, was untried:
I murdered thousands, yes, but suspect you knew.
Today, I have nothing more to say to you.

Exhuming

I build a mountain
from this alphabet, the bones
of their sons, that reads
like a nightmare: sweat

on a gravedigger's shovel.
Something cloying
stains the laundry. All bones
make letters or I'm

only holding the blue fog
of mourning's ragged breath
on the newspapers. They collect
names from the femurs, *Amel, Salim,*

into the washbasin of salt
blinked down
their eyelashes. Glittering
in August, in the fever

of this preservation,
they tell me: Do not forget
them, do not let the dead
bury their own.

The City Of Her Birth Is No Longer Familiar

Banja Luka's purgatory baby checks
for landmines as she descends. What heaven
is homecoming? Only Daddy's
eyes and remember-whens, muttered
family tree mnemonics. She was

middle-of-the-city-square happy,
caretaken. Now, downtown's sidewalks
spew credit-debted government
construction catastrophe, no photos,
please, no babysitters. She is

fifteen years' transatlantic career-driven
mission statement. The city becomes
Hell headshaking, a beggar's birthright
table scrap. She feeds it, she won't be
staying.

Spent

Rubble-rough pavement breathes
listless now, sweats blood-money
skyscrapers toward a breakneck

stratosphere. I brace directionless
vocabulary-lesson refresher course
resentment against Cyrillic uncertainty,

credit economy. Hunched, happy pensioners
floating life's large chess piece
competition in the park clap

victory into a decade
of pause. Niche survival crawls
nine-to-five regularity

through post-transitional power
shift. Teenagers in ash-flick
rebellion fever dream America,

glare jealousy at my misfit
grammar. I am
apologetic nostalgia, homeless

discomfort. We only take
what we can carry, can never carry
anything worth taking.

Thirty Minutes With Sofia

Baka Sofia opens the door with a cigarette
in her hand and more in her voice.

The post-war apartment she has not left
in two years feels no less Communist,
with its straight-backed chairs, than I'd feel, sitting
unwelcome on the steps of the Capitol Building

in Washington, DC. The new government building
in Banja Luka's city center is as unwelcome as a cigarette
at a lung transplant but, from where we are sitting,
its stainless steel façade beams freedom. Sofia voices
Communist
ideology: gravelly cynicism, *Das Kapital*, left,

echoing in the chambers of her left-
to-rot lungs. She could do with some building
up of alveoli, but her pension, a relic of the Communist
era, affords only government façades and cigarettes.
I make coffee, squinting to follow the voice
drifting smoky from where Sofia sits

at the empty dining room table, always sits
in the creaky chair to the left
of her late husband's, the mayor's. Voicing
her concern, she declares her building
a stubbed-out, forgotten cigarette
in the post-war ashtray of downtown. Communist

is as Communist
doesn't. For two years, Sofia's arthritic bones have sat,
barely waving her slim Philip Morris cigarettes
any more from right to left,
never waving to her neighbors, never exiting the building,
only dreaming: she hears a chorus of voices,

of meetings, blending together, each voice,
"I am now and always will be a member of the Communist
party," a manifesto building.
She remembers seventeen years ago, when I would sit
every day, restless, at this table and learn to read, until I left
to learn to read English. Sofia smiles through her sixth cigarette,

builds the smokestack in her voice.
She sets down the cigarette, I pick up the Communism,
and then we stand, and then I leave.

Dubrovnik

There is no blue like the blue
of the Adriatic, she says,
as it swallows her
ankles, but New York stretches
skyscraper limbs and I know

we'll have a plane to catch
soon enough. Here, we breathe
clean air and buy figs
from a market full of somebody's
grandmothers, we swallow

salt and sand until the sun
sets, and trudge a quarter kilometer
of cobblestone to our temporary
home. These mountain
people, all seaside

accents, pull us in with their
raw fingertips, but their
honey hands give nothing
solid to hold, and we slip
away again.

Lenses

I wear glasses
on Tuesdays, when I'm in a rush,
and Sundays. Some days, I don't

like to be so close
to the world: If a clock
tower falls in a city

square somewhere away
and I don't wear glasses
that day, it might

not have happen. My father's
glasses bring him closer
to crossword clues

and grandma's gossip
magazines, airmail-delivered
on Wednesdays from a long-ago

world away. My mother gave
hers up after a year
of bifocal motion.

sickness. My grandmother wears them
all day, because she's old, and that's
what happens.

To My Sister

If you can see your breath
on a Thursday in November, you are
cold, but no colder than I
expected, unless you've forgotten

the sweet potatoes again. I arrive
with apple pie at 2:30, too early, interrupting
something: you speak to your daughter
like you understand, but you couldn't

have ever been thirteen, not with those
eyes. You blink too much, as if
you were born fifty-two and afraid
to look at the world

too long. I have the same eyes
and we were unprepared
for America's feasts by wartime
rationing, unprepared for unprepared

daughters who go out with the wrong boys,
and today is no different from any other. Every morning
the sun climbs over the bones
of the evening is a thanksgiving.

Baby Brother

We are home for the holidays
the kitchen counter at 8:00AM
swaddled in coffee heat
you drink it black now
a real grown-up.

At night you are chamomile
steeped in metaphor
and I the practical one
the good son watch CNN
as your pages turn.

I might have been windswept too once
but favored Daddy's five-year plans
of paychecks promising favor.

You brush away her shortbread offering
I see the Mama's baby bird
you could have been if not for
your rabid hunger for the other
denying every threat of closeness.

I test the waters of envy
an emerald coat on puppet strings
studying finance while you
listen to the pine trees
and write them back.

II.
Remove Your Bones

Trapeze Artist

I learned trust
with your hand
at my back fifty feet
above the ground
on a tropical island. You
never learned my name
but I believed

your grip on the harness.
The letting go
was the hard part. I learned
to hold myself up
with chalky hands
around a bar, the weight
of my world in my

shaking shoulders. You told me
you had run away
to join the circus, and I ran
away, back here, to my own
circus, where no one
can pull the ropes back
when I fall.

My Hands Have Paused On A Keyboard

Each fingerprint's ridges
claim millimeters of matte white
plastic, of flat, smooth squares, or clean,
hard edges. The open window's February
breeze meets my skin precisely, as if someone

had traced this border with an architect's pencil. My hands
are cold, they are always cold, and sometimes,
when they're bluish I swear
I can see capillaries. I swear the skin
on the knuckle of my left

index finger was etched by an abstract
expressionist while I was sleeping
one night, four years ago, the last time
we had a leap year, the last time I thought
I loved someone. He would wrap his fingers

around mine and play with their bones
clumsily, blurring our border into smudgy
charcoal. I have since defined my borders
pharmaceutically, the borders of those neat white
lines letting me appreciate my upper epidermis

for giving me the texture to feel my place
in the world, single out a clod of dirt
in the arboretum from its companions, or distinguish
silk from polyester, so I know
I'll know a good thing when I feel it.

Declining

“Make definite assertions. Avoid tame, colorless, hesitating, noncommittal language. Use the word *not* as means of denial, never as a means for evasion.”

-William Strunk, Jr.

I taste it and roll it
over my teeth, clumsy
like thirteen-year-olds
in a coat closet. I stutter
the syllable I haven't

rehearsed and it parachutes
into the falling snow: not.
I am not
a jack-in-the-box under
your Christmas tree. Stop

tearing at my ribbons.
I am not crying
or interested. I am not
now nor have I ever
been. I am not telling you

more. It is a Friday night
in Copenhagen and the women
are as cheap as the drinks
you're trying to buy me.
I do not

Bartender

Fighting the hard
battles, Harlem
paralegals hold their
heads in their hands

on the weekends. I pour
scotch and soda on
Ludlow Street. They take
drugs and cabs, and girls

home in cabs. I pour
tequila shots, they leave
me tips, I give them
safety, and hope

if any old and lonely
widows sob into their coat
lapels come Monday, they'll
give something back.

Northeast Regional 48

Halted in Albany for redistribution,
they are scribbling. A man crosses
the tracks at my feet, careless
or carefree, all suede jacket, shoulder-slung
weekender bag, all aboard!

The hours between here
and there don't count once my
wheels start to click. What
will they lose here, in this church
of iron and steel mill

transcontinentalism? Crumpled
tissues and gum wrappers, treasure
buried beneath? Last month's newspapers,
next week's bestsellers, yesterday's
grocery store receipts? I read

biographies from their rubbish heaps
and know I've carried them
all: the postmen and the gravediggers,
they take shape for me
only in the moments before

their station stops. My script
is the hashmark trail across America
dotted with quaint red-brick
towns and signs that swing in the wind
as I blow by them, unimpeded.

The Trevi Fountain

The tritons tell you to save
your cents, meaning well, meaning
well-meaning well-wishers—pockets
penniless now and the backs
of their necks wet
with the waters of the Holy Roman
rise and fall— have fallen too far

into aqueducts of wishes
with no hands to pull them back
to terra firma. Back away, they say,
you must back away, sweet boy,
from its lusty stare, you must not
be one of them: transfixed
tourists with no embassy.

Built For Discomfort

In a small café, in a small town, in one of the smaller states, the owners, having discovered that business is most profitable when customers don't linger for hours over coffee, have developed an inclination for a certain sort of chair. Here, there is no philosophical debate or poetry reading, only the seventeen-degree downward slope of the seat and

the first-date shakes
the nice-to-meet,heard-so-much-about
the regulars' regulars
the ice-breaking
the been-so-long can't-hardly-believe-it
the barely-there distraction
the lean-in of distressing interest
the is-it-just-me-or
the seeing-things,feeling-things things
the slipped-grip footnudge,fumbleback
the mumble-mumble-must've-mumbled
the shuffle,scoot,throat-clear
the to-go cup guess-I'll-just
the double-shot double-back
the had-a-great,call-you-later
the car-door slam
the car-door slam.

Tonight, there will be no
hesitant doorstep, no fingers
fidgeting pocket lining, no

shuffling soles or shrugging
shoulders, no lingering
pupils, no keys clinking

concrete: no hand-grab
as the ship goes down. But in
another place

losing interest in kissing smokers

your heart weighs heavy
on my heart, you breathe
heavy on my lungs, my

lungs heave with the breath
of you, your lungs
blackened by a year

of emptied cartons, the filters'
flickering tips lighting
quick, then pulling in to hit

spit-licked sticky lips—
your heart weighs too heavy
on my heart.

Conditions Of Condolence

The boy two doors down, the summer
suicide headcase, could have been
a suitcase full of sonnets
if we had let him— I might have envied
his manic homilies. My sister
would be falling in love with him
now, but he missed

February, that Ansel Adams
exhibit, and she should start
dating nice boys, anyway, the kind
that wouldn't have walked so fast
past the *Trailer Park Children*,
Richmond, California. I shouldn't
be crying here or here at all,

but I knew too much: I couldn't
tell them, but he told me he couldn't
breathe between the same sheets
of carbon paper as everyone else
on the street for long before he choked
on a Snickers bar or a sentence fragment,
before he disappeared.

Front Door

I stand
with all of my feet
on your steps and all

of my steps
at your feet. Turn,
and I will kneel

here, now, before
you, forehead kissing
concrete because it is

yours. Today: I shouldn't
have. Tomorrow: you will
exit and reach for cold

newsprint, fumbling
my sleepless knees.
And the next day:

i like you more than some things, but less than other things

some days you are
an artist. usually you are
a sailor. when it's cold

my shoes fall off. do you ever
see people? your hands only
shake at lunchtime. my hands shake,

too, it's okay to drop
the salad fork sometimes.
i say my name slowly, i set

my watch slow: i wish
you would. i wish you were
braver than your father, i wish you

well. i hear you whistle
through the wall's plaster barrier.
i lean in.

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