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## Exile Vol. LXIV

Britanny Atkinson  
*Denison University*

Jaley Bruursema  
*Denison University*

E.B. Bordow  
*Denison University*

Jordan Cardinale  
*Denison University*

Imani Congdon  
*Denison University*

*See next page for additional authors*

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## Exile Vol. LXIV

### Authors

Britanny Atkinson, Jaley Bruursema, E.B. Bordow, Jordan Cardinale, Imani Congdon, Cassandra Fleming, Micah Frenkiel, Ellen Kajca, Molly Keisman, Yuliya Klishch, Allison Koneczny, Dingxi Lu, Sophia Menconi, Justine Morelli, Josi Miller, Anna Owens, Elizabeth Postema, Sam Rice, Mattie Shepard, Alexandra Terlesky, Aidan Van Suetendael, Amber Wardzala, and Jason Wesseling



EXILE  
2018

**E X I L E**

SPRING 2018

*Denison University's Literary and Art Magazine Since 1955*

*You of the finer sense,  
Broken against false knowledge,  
You who can know at first hand,  
Hated, shut in, mistrusted:*

*Take thought.  
I have weathered the storm,  
I have beaten out my exile.*

E z r a Pound

# MASTHEAD

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John from Patrick, Sydney & John  
*Anna Owens*

Crook and shake in your gaze.  
Unsure of where to break, and how.

Sense, and placate my days.  
Calmly push them close and guide me now.

Cry for quiet, afraid.  
Stumble, sleepy, silent, off the bow.

Sink so sweet and so grave,  
asking but what credence will allow.

I still have the pictures taken of us on those nights  
which flowed away like hot honey through a cheesecloth,  
sifted and strained through my memory, sweet and gold;

&

the pictures don't show your hickory smell,  
like a campfire, sharp— that you were dressed in stripes  
and denim jeans with mud all over your bare feet,

&

the night we carried a sick girl  
to the couch when she had too much at your party  
and I said I could watch over her till morning

&

the morning I'd seen the gap between your teeth  
when we drank sweet tea by the field of goldenrods  
and watched them turn from yellow to brown.

&

The laundry wrung and hung by the kitchen window  
was halved by a slant of August sunlight  
and the dust swirled in motes around it

&

I remember more now of those days.

How our friends danced Friday nights around the bonfire,  
picking music and drinking all of the good beer,

&

how from your room you brought me a dark wool  
blanket and a glass of water. Outside, the fields  
were dark, and beside me, the sick girl was soundly sleeping

&

I told her I loved you. She must've been awake,  
because the next morning walking back into town  
she asked me questions I didn't want to answer.

the year of my twelfth birthday, my mother's skin turned grey-ish blue  
her supple body slowly concaved,  
and she lay supine in bed, fixated on the whirring fan above

hushed tones rose from the TV room, kissing me goodnight instead of her  
i would get out of bed in the blackness and press cheek to carpet,  
deciphering this new language that had invaded our sanctuary,  
had taken up residence without permission

vomit, languor and tears were daily upstairs visitors,  
in the kitchen casseroles multiplied.

my mother retreated into veiled rooms

Cancer filled her abdomen, permeating the farmhouse with toxic fumes  
some days he poked at her vocal chords for pleasure,  
her speech garbled with confusion  
on others, Cancer begged me to spare some change

on those days, i mounted my sedentary basement bicycle and pedaled for hours.

and when my mother came downstairs,  
i leapt into a heap of broken, browned leaves  
and opened eyes to light streaming through the canopy above  
laser beams nudging my freckled face.

---

Gerald Thatch acquired the Clockmaker's Cottage in an estate sale, after the previous owner disappeared. No one in the town of Hadenbury had actually seen the Clocksmith in several years, but they made the reasonable assumption that he was alive based on the lazy curl of translucent smoke ever-present above the trees surrounding the Cottage. But one day, the chimney grew cold, and the townsfolk knew that something was wrong.

You'd think it would be a difficult business, declaring a death with no body to speak of. The Cottage was empty of any discernable life. There was no fire in the grate, no food in the icebox, no signs of habitation whatsoever besides the utter lack of dust. Most telling, of course, were the clocks left untended. By this, the folk of Hadenbury knew, irrevocably and unequivocally, that the Clocksmith was dead. The estate went up for sale in the middle of June, just as the heat of summer wrapped its cherry-red fingers around the town and squeezed. Three days later, Gerald Thatch signed a flimsy piece of paper in a dingy office and handed over \$1,325, granting him rights to the Clockmaker's Cottage and everything inside.

The road to the Cottage could only with a great deal of imagination and a not inconsiderable amount of charity be called a road. Trees pressed in on either side like leering spectators, branches forming a canopy overhead that allowed only a tiny amount of dappled sunlight to drip onto the path below. Vegetation nibbled at the edges of the road before attempting to devour it completely. As Gerald marched smartly up the slight incline, he reflected that the only reason the path was passible at all was thanks to the efforts of Hadenbury's lone policeman, who had hacked his way through the thick undergrowth to confirm what the residents already knew.

Gerald shrugged his small pack higher up on his shoulders, setting the ink bottles clinking and leafs of paper rustling. Already he could feel the wildness of the area beginning to fill him with inspiration, deep earthy scents of crushed leaves and spicy sap evoking something unnamable within him. Poetry, he had always known, reflected the world within and the world without in equal measure. Meter was in his heartbeat, and the fluttering wings of a hummingbird hovering to sip nectar from a lily. Rhyme was in his footsteps flowing together one after another, and in the synchronized movements of the V of geese passing overhead. Sound and eloquence were his turning thoughts, and the gentle



whisper of a warm breeze through emerald leaves. Yes, here he would at last make his mark on the world, create something so breathtakingly profound that all would marvel at the beauty of his words.

Gravel crunching satisfyingly under his boots, Gerald came around an elbow bend in the path and caught his first glimpse of the Clockmaker's Cottage. It sat nestled between two small hills, thinning trees allowing slanting sunlight to kiss the gray thatched roof. Rough-hewn stone blocks comprised stolid walls, two square windows on each side of the door the only interruption in its uniformity. The path from the front door was like a ribbon attached to a kite, the only thing keeping the Cottage tethered to the earth.

Gerald made his way up the hill, pausing every so often to admire the view. There was poetry here. He could smell it as surely as the honeysuckle lining the path, hear it in the air as clearly as the echoing birdsong. It was as though the birds sang of the sweet scent of the honeysuckle, and the honeysuckle in turn set the scent of song adrift in the air. Words speaking of rhythm, meter of rhyme. Never mind what the locals had muttered about the disappearance of the Clocksmith, touching their hats and tipping out a bit of their beers onto the floor to ward off evil. People didn't simply melt into the air or cross over to some other plane. The old man had undoubtedly just gone for a walk one day and fallen into a ravine, or something of that nature. Gerald nodded firmly. One had to keep their wits about them out here in the wilderness. As much danger as beauty out here, yes indeed.

When he reached the heavy oaken door he pulled a small brass key from his pocket and inserted it into the lock. He was surprised to find that instead of being rusted or sticky with disuse, the key turned seamlessly in the lock, with no sound except for a small, orderly click. He pushed the door slightly, and it swung open smoothly on silken hinges, as though they had been oiled only moments ago. Odd. Perhaps the small, nervous man from the estate sale had been up here to tidy up the place, a desperate bid to drive the price up at least a little. Gerald grinned, remembering the man's face turning a lovely shade of gray as Gerald haggled him down lower and lower. Adjusting his pack yet again, he strode confidently into the Cottage and allowed the door to swing shut behind him.

He paused for a moment, allowing his eyes to adjust to the relative darkness of the narrow corridor beyond the door. To his left was an open doorway revealing a modest bedroom, a cot sporting plain light-blue bedspread, a small desk, and a scarred wooden nightstand its only furniture. To the right

the passage opened up to a tiny kitchen, the woodstove cold and empty at the moment, chimney rising up through the ceiling and out of sight. Past these two side rooms, the hallway ran straight a short distance before opening up into the only other room in the house. The clock room.

At first Gerald thought the house must be swaying, and that somehow the rafters were responsible for the clicking, ticking, creaking. But the sound was far too regular for that, and as he moved to the end of the short passage and into the room beyond, he saw for the first time why this was called the Clockmaker's Cottage. A high, circular window set in each wall poured molten sunlight into the room, beams bouncing and refracting off the polished wooden floor and paneling on the walls. And everywhere, clocks.

They hung from the walls, rested on shelves, crouched on tables. Hundreds and hundreds of clocks of every possible description filled the room with an orderly riot of ticking and tocking. Brass faces gleamed in the golden light, hands throwing back brilliant pebbles sticking to the ceiling for a moment, before ticking once more into motion. Along the back wall, facing towards the passage, were seven grandfather clocks standing tall and proud, magnificently carved clawed feet planted firmly on the floor. The room smelled distinctly of wood polish, a sharp but not unpleasant aroma that reminded Gerald of the alcohol he used to clean the nibs of his pens.

Gerald wandered through the room in a daze, ears filled with the orderly sounds of smoothly whirring gears, the gentle swish of swinging pendulums, and of course the metronome clicking of the hands progressing in their endless looping journey. Here and there, he paused at a particular clock to gaze upon the intricate carvings on its body, the delicate crystals set perfectly into balance behind a small glass viewing door. Some clocks, he saw, were very near needing to be rewound, their internal mechanisms nearly having lost the touch of the last hand to set them into motion. As he drifted aimlessly past a mahogany clock cunningly carved into the shape of a roaring lion's head, his mind turned back to poetry. There was something here that caught his attention; the ticking brass spoke of ancient meter, the subtle swish of pendulums denoting flowing syntax. He found it immensely satisfying to survey several clocks at once, not focusing on one individually but allowing their collective synchronicity to reach out and bring order to his thoughts. It was only with great difficulty that he wrenched himself away from a tiny clock, no bigger than a hen's egg, set inside a glass sphere which seemed far too delicate to hold the brass gears visible within. Then, as he made his way slowly back towards the hallway, the clocks struck one o'clock.

It was fortunate that it had not been later in the day. The clocks sounded but once. Gerald was struck, buffeted, and shoved from all directions by the riotous stampede of sound. Cuckoo clocks shrieked their simulated bird-calls, small clocks on tables and shelves set high pitched chimes thrumming in teeth-rattling octaves. And beneath it all, the deep, bone-shaking basso of the great gongs set into the seven grandfather clocks standing in line. All semblance of the order he had felt only moments before disintegrated, crumbling before the auditory avalanche.

Even as Gerald sank to his knees, hands clapped over his ears, the sound began to fade. The last notes seemed to hang quivering in the air like dust motes. Silence reigned again, broken only by the peaceful, orderly clicking of hands marching onwards towards the next hour. Gerald rose slowly, a strange pressure on his ears like wads of raw, fluffy cotton. He staggered out of the clock room and down the hallway, collapsing heavily onto the cot. He lay there for a moment, unable to think over the echoes resounding in his head.

*I cannot stay in here now.* The thought finally broke through the hazy fog of remembered noise. He had always required peace for his poetry; it was one of the primary reasons he had purchased the Cottage, but there could be no peace under the strain of such hourly disturbances. And yet he could not leave. He had nowhere to go. He had spent his last pennies on the delivery of food and other essentials arriving from town in four days. After a few moments pondering his options, he resolved to simply drag the cot out to the small woodshed behind the Cottage and sleep there for the night. Most of the clocks within the clock room could not be more than a day away from grinding to a halt, with no one to rewind them. In fact, for the clocks to all still be functioning now, the bank man must have rewound them when he came to oil the hinges and clear away any dust. By the next morning, enough of the clocks should have stopped to make their hourly announcements bearable.

Yes, waiting was the thing to do. Gerald supposed he could return to the clock room and stop the clocks by hand, halting their pendulums mid swing and blocking up their gears, but he could not bring himself to interfere with their workings. There was a profound order to the way each hand moved in time with the other, the way gears shifted in harmony as though all driven by the same vast mechanical system. It was beautiful, and Gerald could not bear the thought of causing disorder in something so... poetic. He smiled and, regaining some of his earlier sense of purpose, went about transporting his pack, candles, and food supplies for the night out to the woodshed.

He was not quite finished dragging the cot over the uneven ground when the clocks inside the Cottage struck two o'clock. He flinched, expecting yet again to be bombarded by an assault of sound, but instead was pleasantly surprised. From outside, without the close proximity and hard echoing wood paneling amplifying the sound in the room itself, the effect was extremely pleasing. Birdsong from the cuckoo clocks rose lightly to settle in the rafters like a flock of starlings, while the high chimes of shelf and table clocks provided a counterpoint like sunlight striking a polished cup. The deep notes issuing from the grandfather clocks rolled forth like spring grass over a hillside, powerful but not overwhelming. As the second note washed over him in a warm, soothing wave, Gerald almost abandoned his plan to sleep in the woodshed and returned to the Cottage. He felt as though the clocks were calling him by name, apologizing for their earlier rudeness and inviting him back. However, he remembered the pain in his ears which had only gradually over the course of the last hour begun to fade. And besides, he had just spent an hour setting up the woodshed for a cozy night's sleep, and it made no sense to move back into the house now. He would move back in tomorrow, when the silence of at least some of the clocks might make the sound more bearable.

The rest of the afternoon passed slowly, as Gerald sat basking in the sunshine with his back against the rough timbers of the woodshed. In one hand he held a hardback with a piece of paper pinned in place. In the other, his favorite pen, dipped every few moments into the bottle of fine black ink at his side. The pen tip, however, remained poised above the paper, hovering. Every few minutes, he would begin to write a word or phrase, seeming at last to come upon some inspiration, only to scribble out what he had written mere moments later. More and more time passed in fruitless pursuit of poetry, and Gerald's dark brows furrowed heavily over dark eyes. His fingers tightened on the shaft of the pen until they were bloodless-white even against the creamy paper backdrop. The birdsong which had so inspired him during his journey now seemed a gibbering foreign tongue, the smell of pine logs and sawdust no longer touching the dusty corners of faded memory. The natural world unintelligible to the poetry within him.

As day pulled dusk from the east like a heavy woolen blanket, Gerald sighed and gathered up blank sheets of paper, corked his ink bottle, and wiped off his pen. He lay awake in the woodshed for some time, watching shadows shift through the rafters as the sun set fully behind distant hills. His frustration at being unable to translate his thoughts into words spun through his mind and

kept him from sleep, until finally, as the clocks struck eleven o'clock, he was lulled into unconsciousness.

Gerald dreamed a strange dream. He was back in the clock room, this time silver moonlight cascading from the windows instead of golden sun. The ticking of the clocks marched onward as always, but something was different. Gerald could *feel* them, as though the clocks were a part of his very body. The ticking was his heartbeat, pulsing life and movement through his veins in steady, unerring rhythm. The gears shifting and flexing were the tendons of his hands, the bones of his fingers, delicately maintaining order in perfectly balanced tension. The great pendulums of the grandfather clocks, swinging behind their polished glass doors, were his spine, his muscles, his brain, driving each of the other clocks in perfect harmony like the repeated lines of an expert poet, each repetition providing structure and depth.

At that moment, a wooden clock with a shining silver face no bigger than an apple stopped turning. Gerald felt as though it were one of his fingers gone numb, refusing to respond and upsetting the harmony of his body. Instantly, he glided to the clock and, with practiced expert precision, rewound the clock with a tiny silver key. On the opposite side of the room, high on the wall a cuckoo clock's pendulum swung to a stop. Gerald was there, fingers delicately tilting the pendulum back into perfect position before breathing life into it once more. As the dream continued, he was order in the clock room. Never did he move even a single step in the wrong direction. Never was a clock off time for more than a moment, and never did the perpetual momentum cease. He was a maestro at the head of an orchestra, every instrument an extension of himself.

When he awoke, sunlight filtering through gaps in the woodshed's walls, Gerald remembered very little of the specifics of the dream. He tried to grasp at the memories, but the very act of attempting to capture them swept them further away like dandelion seeds fleeing a child's hands. He rose and, almost without realizing what he was doing, found himself standing back in the clock room. Dawn light through the east window lent the wood a rosy hue, and set gleaming clock faces smoldering like coals in a campfire. He stepped lightly around tables, remembering now some of the dream and reveling anew in the immaculate order of the clocks, not a single hand out of harmony, each in perfect working condition.

Gerald paused in his circuit of the room, puzzled. Around him, the peaceful ticking continued unabated, just as it had from the moment he had entered the Cottage the previous day. The clocks had been rewound.

There could be no doubt. Hands shaking, Gerald reached out with hesitant fingers and touched a clock carved into the shape of a soaring eagle, twin faces set into its outstretched wings. He had taken note of it yesterday, both because of the exquisite detail in the carved wooden feathers and because one of its faces had been silent and still, hands refusing to budge from the incorrect time. Now, both faces showed perfect time, precisely the same as all the others. He turned to look around the room, and saw that each clock which had been out of time or nearly in need of being rewound had, without exception, been restored to function.

Possibilities ran wildly through his mind, each rejected in turn. No, the bank man could not have come and rewound the clocks; the door had been locked and Gerald had the only key. No, he could not have simply imagined some of the clocks stopping or being in need of tending; the smallest of them would need rewinding once a day. Besides, he had an excellent memory for detail, and could clearly recall that the pendulum of the cuckoo clock directly to his left had been only weakly clinging to life and movement, and now swung with steadfast vivacity. It was, he now recalled, the same cuckoo clock he had seen in his dream.

The clocks struck seven o'clock. At the first note he stuffed his fingers in his ears and crouched low to the floor, anticipating the horrible din he had experienced the day before. This time, however, the clocks did not assault him as an unwanted intruder. Seven times the notes flowed through him, keeping time with his heartbeat, each wave setting him more and more at ease. The sound swept the dusty miasma of confusion from his brain; the muddled disorder of his thoughts lined as neatly in a row as the grandfather clocks along the far wall. The clocks comforted him gently, easing away the fear that had suffused his mind. It was like music, but more than music, it was poetry. Emotion and eloquence in the melodic calls of the cuckoo clocks. Rhyme and rhythm in the soprano chimes. And meter, rolling meter as immutable as the earth's turning, in the resounding tones of the grandfather clocks along the wall.

Only when the last notes were soaked up by the walls could Gerald find the agency to stand. He stepped slowly from the room, feet barely seeming to touch the floor as his newly organized mind turned thoughts like brass gears. As he moved through the hall and out the front door, the feeling of perfect order began to fade, but did not disappear completely. Gerald strode to the woodshed, gathered his writing supplies, and sat upon the ground facing the Cottage.

Words flowed from mind to pen to paper like honey dripping from a honeycomb. Slow and sweet. Yet even as he filled the second line, his writing became labored. The inspiration which had set his mind afire only moments before faded entirely, and he stopped midway through the third line. He stared at what he had written, trying to recapture the feeling of harmony reflected in two elegant, perfect lines, but cut off in the third. Some measure of his earlier uneasiness returned. He could not explain how the clocks had been rewound, and the icy claw hooked in his throat denoted his fear. And yet...

Gerald glanced down again at the lines he had written. The rhythm was perfect, cadence rising and falling in organized melody. The meter was bold, binding together words like threads of unbreakable spider-silk. Even the letters upon the page looked as though if a single one was rotated, each would turn in time like gears of a clock, finally coming to rest back in perfect order. He read the lines aloud. The sunlight grew brighter, slanting between the trees. Notes of birdsong drifting through the branches slid to a purer pitch. The scent of wildflowers on the breeze grew sweeter, intoxicating yet delicate.

He could not leave. There was something strange, perhaps even terrifying, happening in the Cottage, in the clock room. But the best poetry was often strange, its inspiration stranger. He could not abandon the clocks, for if he did he was absolutely certain he would never be able to write another line of poetry as perfect as the two glistening on the page in his hand. Over the course of the next hour, he moved the cot, his pack, and his supplies back into the Cottage.

He sat at the small desk in the bedroom, sunlight from the window pooling on the floor to his left. A drop of ink fell from the tip of the pen poised over paper, suspended in the air for a moment before spattering the unmarked space next to the unfinished third line. Gerald hastily blotted the ink away, cursing his carelessness and checking to ensure that the two finished lines remained unsullied. He clenched his teeth, tendons in his jaw creaking. His hand formed a fist around his pen and dropped to his side, shoulders slumping.

He sat this way, unmoving, for five hours. Each time the clocks struck a new hour, he hoped the sound would snap him back again to his state of ordered clarity, unblocking the damned up river of poetry raging unreachable in his brain. Yet each time the clocks struck, they were less soothing, less harmonious, until finally he could hardly bear the discordant sound at all, missing so many notes. His eyes ached from staring at two written lines and an unfinished third as clouds gathered outside, prematurely darkening the room until it was

nearly impossible to see. Seeing no reason to light a candle, Gerald rose wearily from the desk, took two steps, and sank onto the cot.

The dream began much as it had the night before, except this time there was no moonlight falling in gossamer strands to illuminate the scene. Clouds in the night sky covered moon and stars so completely that, standing in the clock room, Gerald could see not even the vaguest outline of the table in front of him, nor the clocks resting upon it. Yet he knew that before him lay seven clocks; four carved like a troupe of dancing bears, one a smooth cube with no discernable face, and two shaped like delicate wooden hands, each cradling a clock face in its palm. He knew this the same way he knew the number and shape of his fingers without resorting to primitive sight; they were a part of him, and he them.

The clock room, his body, was in horrible, sickening disarray. It felt as though his joints had all come loose, fingers dislocated and useless, knees bent backwards and incapable of supporting weight. His breath rasped in his chest, lungs working at only half their usual capacity. Swiftly, he swept to the nearest source of disorder, a pyramid shaped clock which had, through some accident of movement or quirk of age, begun to show a time eight minutes faster than truth. This corrected, he moved to the next, pendulum hanging grotesquely sideways like a broken limb.

As is often the way with dreams, the passing of time was muddled to the dreamer. Gerald had no memory of how long he drifted from clock to clock, balancing, winding, tending. As he made his final correction near the back wall of the room, removing a miniscule piece of dust impeding turning gears and swinging closed the tiny porthole-window of a clock carved like a double-masted ship, Gerald saw that the hands read very nearly seven o'clock. The clock room was whole, and so too was he.

He awoke suddenly, roused by the chimes of the clocks striking seven. He was no longer lying on the cot as he had been upon drifting off to sleep; instead, he now sat slumped at the feet of one of the great grandfather clocks. Directly to his left, a large clock beautifully carved in the shape of a double-masted ship. He stared at his hands as the chimes continued, no longer the torturous half-realized sound he had heard the night before, but the full, rich melody of the clock room in perfect harmonious order. His fingertips were chafed raw, but his mind was singing, thrumming in time to the tones of the clocks. He felt as though the struggle he had experienced his entire life, the desperate battle to align the poetry locked in his head with the poetry all around him in the physi-



cal world, had finally been won. His eyes were little glass windows to the beautifully polished gears turning in the lobes of his brain. He felt the hands of each clock moving in perfect time with his beating heart, the gears and pendulums tensing and shifting like the muscles of his legs, power and poetry in motion.

Slowly, as if moving underwater, as if *this* were the dream and his night in the clock room the true reality, Gerald rose and drifted to the bedroom. He sat at the desk, dipped his pen, and began to write. He finished the third line. And wrote a fourth. And a fifth. The words poured out onto the paper like quicksilver from a pitcher, frenzied in their intensity but ruled by the perfect meter, perfect rhythm, perfect eloquence.

Gerald stopped writing.

It was as if an itch had flared up suddenly on a part of his body that he could not find to scratch. Wordlessly, he stood and walked to the clock room, where he knew without looking that the chain of a cuckoo clock had become twisted, and in precisely 37 seconds would create a snag causing its hands to halt. Fingertips aching, he untwisted the chain. No sooner had he taken a single step towards the door that he felt another impending impediment to his body's function, this time a tiny speck of dust drifting through an opening in a clock's face. If left uncorrected, in 4 hours and 32 minutes time the clock would be exactly one second out of harmony. He wiped away the dust tenderly as though removing a grain of sand from his own eye.

Gerald sank deeper and deeper into his awareness of the clock room, until it was impossible to tell where his own body ended and the clocks began. He was a master painter, creating perfect spectra through miniscule brush-strokes, the clock room his painting. He was a master musician, a thousand instruments kept perfectly in tune and thrumming in harmony, the clock room his orchestra. He was a master poet, ticking clocks and turning gears and swinging pendulums perfect in meter, rhythm, rhyme, eloquence, order. His own movements were a part of the poem, not a single gesture out of place, each strand of his muscles attuned to the precise march of time through the vast single mechanism of the clock room, himself.

On the desk in the bedroom, lines of writing shimmered like smoke, a pale reflection. Ink, pen, and paper lay cold and lifeless, as Gerald finally found poetry.



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Untouch  
*Yuliya Klishch*

Hear the traitor and tremble  
with the song of it— its symphony, cacophony.  
Stand amidst the rubble  
and try to piece it back together.  
Try to find the syntax in the destruction,  
the side of the hull splitting.

The trouble with unsinkable things  
is that no one calls them unsinkable until they've  
sank.

Listen to their song of solace:  
Save Our Souls / Save  
Our Ship / Save Our  
Souls /  
and the band playing on as the ship itself goes down.

This lake swallowed a town,  
or so the shopkeeper tells us  
as my family buys bread  
to throw to the carp.

We watch them come,  
so many the water is knotted  
with fish. I wonder if they  
came from the ruins of that town,

swam through a chapel laced  
with kelp, through empty doorways  
and open windows. I wonder if  
the villagers ever knew such quiet peace.

Beneath us, an ancient  
village yawns. Above us,  
there is only sky and  
a cradle of green mountains.

At the lake, there is just one  
carousing breath, a toothy  
smile, two warm arms  
wrapped tight around me.  
I bury myself in this world  
made simple, in the cold  
green water, in our single  
laughing pulse.



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Animikiig

*Amber Wardzala*

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I was on my way home from school one day when a plane fell out of the sky. In my head, it fell slow. Fluttering through the icy air like a tattered newspaper, weathering as it grew closer to the ground, and at some point, late in the game of falling to Earth, surrendering to the burning winds and scalding machinery that ate away at the metal bird from the inside out, sacrificing the boxy pleather suit cases, the tacky airport purchases from duty free emporiums, the plush hypoallergenic neck pillows, and then last, but certainly not least, like the burnt bits at the bottom of the pan, the tender, bleeding bodies, slicing the sky all at once — coach and first class descending to the world below at the same mind-bending speed, making way for some hard truth about the meaninglessness of money and wealth in the grand scheme of things, but really meaning and proving nothing at all, but the blistering toxicity of crisp air, when thirty-three thousand feet of it exist between you and a frosty, Ukrainian corn field.<sup>1</sup>

It was the seventeenth of July, the dead of an Australian winter. I wore a navy and scarlet pinstriped blazer. My braids were bound by two red ribbons. I was worn from a long day of trying desperately to be liked by my circle of hot blonde friends, by my rude English teacher, by a boy named Greg in my history class with dimples and straight Ds. It was my tenth month in Melbourne, and I had somehow managed to become simultaneously bored and over stimulated, an unlikely, yet apparently possible combination of emotional states. I'd trail planes overhead, following their frothy paths with my eyes, desperate to be on board. I could hear the hum of the engine, the crinkling of the ever-present, precautionary paper vomit bag as I fought to fit my water bottle in the mesh pocket against my shins. When I thought hard enough, I could cloud my vision with the orange glow of the seatbelt sign, I could see the dull mosaic of miniature televisions playing on and on in the rows ahead. I envied the passengers. I wanted to go home, or if not home, anywhere else, but suddenly the sky had proven itself unsafe, fair game for pro-Russian separatists and rebel militants, and I decided that I was stuck.

Flight MH17 was en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur.<sup>2</sup> I'd never been to either, but perhaps I'd been above the same open land in between, the same seas, the same forests and frozen lakes as I made the odyssey home

1           <sup>2</sup> Dir. CGTN America, *Cause of MH17 Crash by Dutch Safety Board* (San Bruno: YouTube, 2015)

and back each Christmas. I studied the flight maps, measuring my routes against that of the two hundred eighty three passengers and fifteen crewmembers on board. I scaled the curvy blue line with my pointer finger, tracing my path in the sky from Melbourne's Tullamarine Airport (MEL) to Abu Dhabi (AUH), and then from Abu Dhabi to New York (LGA). I looked for overlaps, and upon finding that there was, for a brief moment, a convergence in our paths above the North end of the black sea, preceded to devour a meat pie the size of a fist on the floor of my bedroom, an unsuccessful attempt at absorbing my horror with filo dough and ground beef.

The crash loomed heavy on my mind at school the next morning. Monique and I change into our gym uniforms. She talks about her date with Alex Keser. He touched her breasts last night, but she isn't sure whether or not he meant to because he just kind of grazed them with the palm of his hand when he reached for the television remote. She says he flinched. This leads her to question his sexuality. I wonder why it matters which gender Alex Keser would rather bone now that we know it's possible for us to die midair without warning. "It's different for her," I remind myself, "She isn't worried about getting home, she's *already* home."

I worry more about getting home when I get home to my so-called home on the eleventh floor of a modern apartment building in the heart of Melbourne's central business district. I eat my low-fat cottage cheese, a snack that I've recently come to believe is palatable, but am destined to lose interest in soon after my mother arrives home from the grocery store, having purchased the outcast dairy product in bulk. I track the calories on my smart phone, inputting the half-cup of cottage cheese alongside the rice cake and tablespoon of peanut butter I ate at lunch. I go about my mid-afternoon routine, suppressing the voice at the back of my mind that implores, "Who cares if you're skinny when there's a Soviet era Buk missile launcher quietly purring between you and everything you care about 10,359 miles away?"<sup>3</sup>

The missile travelled at three times the speed of sound.<sup>3</sup> The air was still as the guided warhead stalked its prey, searching the sky for a ten-year-old girl named Evie and her two brothers, Mo and Otis.<sup>4</sup> They were on their way home to Perth, a reasonably sized city on Australia's Western coast. The warhead

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2       <sup>3</sup> "MH17 Victims May Have Been Conscious After Missile Struck, Experts Say." (New York: Time Incorporated)

3       <sup>4</sup> Nina Galgowski, Michael Walsh, Meg Wagner, "Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 Crash Victims Revealed." (New York: New York Daily News, 2014)

made their acquaintance from just beyond the steel walls of the cockpit before reaching toxic orgasm, a ballistic, mile high tantrum. A close friend of the family speaks out in the days following the crash; she calls them “beautiful, beautiful kids. Gentle, kind, beautiful kids.”<sup>4</sup> It’s July 19<sup>th</sup> and I am awake in my bed, obsessing over the details of their last recollections of life on Earth as gentle, kind, beautiful kids with strong, beating pulses and arteries that balloon with blood at all the right times.

I wondered hard about what they saw if they saw anything at all, and if they didn’t see, what they heard, as their perfect, little bodies were removed from their control all at once. I wondered whether they drenched their city on the Western coast with the same adoring light with which I drenched mine, as I inhabited theirs joylessly, ignoring all that was home to them as I ached desperately for my own in an entirely separate hemisphere.

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Milk  
*Yuliya Klishch*

We sprawl under a sky  
scintillating with constellations  
we cannot name. After two  
bottles of champagne, our veins  
pulse with the energy of  
bottled-up stars. Our hearts beat  
with the vigor of flying corks

until night's drape weighs down  
our eyes, and our words begin  
to slip out gently, like a lullaby.  
I'm still half-asleep when you shake  
me awake, and I miss your goodbye;  
miss warning you that I am an Aries —  
I'll only burn you with my light.

You drive with ambrosia  
in your veins, oblivious to double  
yellow lines — ichor spills where  
you weave into a pair of blinding  
lights looming through fog like ghosts.

Memory haunts like spectral  
ink bleeding into the sky. Every letter  
I never sent finds its way towards  
the atmosphere, finds you there,

not here  
amongst the broken windshield —  
the champagne bottle shattered  
into a hundred glassy stars.

I count  
the visible veins in my wrist each morning now,  
poke one until blood stops pulsing.  
*Like a dam*, I imagine.  
I need to keep track of these things.

The doctor's pale blue walls  
remind me of a robin's egg,  
and I'm the baby bird,  
incubating within the stillness.

She enters, eyes me, says my mannerisms are *manic*,  
hands me a bottle of pills, and explains them.  
The pills are pale blue, like the walls.  
That's why I don't listen.

Four hours ago, the sun dragged itself over the horizon.  
*Sluggish*, I think.  
I stare at the sun until colored dots sting my eyes.  
I press the fat of my index finger hard  
against the glass, to catch the sun's veins,  
to stop its pulse.

In the quiet of misty eve,  
with my thick, thick head,  
and hands of gauzy cotton,  
and feet of spongy woodrot,  
    I laid myself upon the loam,

and saw the cool glaze of light  
reflecting rust from a starless sky  
and felt the plastic slick of grass  
beneath a slow-swung arm.

Ten thousand gusts of wind did come,  
stir and streak above my eyes  
and drape my hair in twists about,  
flush my face with soft invasion.

Lightly did I turn my back  
upon the gaze of rusty sky  
and press my cheek into the damp  
and felt it seep into my chest,

and let my heartbeat dig its way  
through the earth and to the stone  
and felt it echo back to me;  
a steady, heavy, honest drum.



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Sydney from Patrick, Sydney & John  
*Anna Owens*

The intense grey surrounds you as you lay in your “final” resting position. You had died only a day earlier, but you are already prepared, dressed in black tie, and put into position in the casket your mother ordered with such sorrow. Do you like seeing your mother like this? Her eyes are as red as yours were when you took that final noseful of Colombian Marching Powder, only she has a reason for the bloodshot. You now plead to be buried with a fifth of your favorite whiskey, or at least a few packs of cigarettes and a scandalous magazine, and I don’t blame you, how the hell else are you supposed to pass the time in here? Hopefully by now you know that death is not your final reward, that was not the case with anyone. The DA had been founded hundreds of year ago, tasked with keeping the brains of Da Vinci, Einstein, and Mozart “in circulation”, as they called it. Every person who has ever died has been through DA, and if you are lucky enough to make it through “sterile testing” (hint: you are not lucky enough to make it through “sterile testing”), then your significantly cell-deficient brain will be put back out there. How are you going to do it? What can you possibly come up with that will impress Death and convince him to let you keep going? You absolutely do not deserve to be put into this mythical category with the likes of a Hendrix or a JFK. But you will give it your absolute best, your 110 percent, not because you want to, but because you have to. That is how it goes when you die, so stop complaining. Please remember, the coffee is certainly strong enough to raise the dead, but it sure seems like you will be getting tea.

There is no preferred path for you to take. How ignorant of you to think that Death himself sticks to a specific regiment. There is no method to his affairs, you should have noticed that during your very first Dead Anonymous meeting. No one cares about your name; here you are Overdose21. That is the only detail that matters here. For Christ’s, the person standing in front of you is called HippoAccident37. Do you see how many ways there are to die? This man, well maybe a man, now he is just simply there, was killed by a fucking hippo. Do not assume for a second that death has an organized timeline and color coded schedule. And please do not suggest that to him. He will send you away with a cup of tea before you even have time to decide if you would rather have honey or raw sugar. Suicide33 welcomes you to your first meeting with a purple button

as you pass through the door. Maybe you are still getting acclimated to being dead, but it seems like you are not occupying any space. The closest real-world word it could be compared to is virtual, and for that case, virtually not. This place only exists when you and the rest of today's batch are here. When you leave, this grey room disappears into unbeing. While there are still things happening around you, and other "people" to interact with, you are not anywhere to be found in the real world.

As you take your seat, you are greeted by the "woman" next to you. She introduces herself as Janet, but is quickly reminded with a sharp pain to her wrist that her name is Stroke63. Whatever you do, do not follow her lead. She is going to try to seduce Death in order to sip on that wonderful cup of coffee, but it is guaranteed to fail. The only one who could pull that stunt was Marilyn (Overdose36), and Stroke63 looked like a failed painting of Overdose36's cancerous cat. Sorry, but stay away from that idea. Suicide33 has switched roles from hostess to "head trainer" of your small group of death siblings. She tells you that your group of 20 will train, test, compete, and attempt to win the heart of Death. Suicide33 has taken the ultimate sacrifice in remaining dead to train you, so you should be very thankful of that. She does not get the chance to come back, but you do, you lucky bastard. Her first assignment for you is to take the rest of the "day" to think of the five best qualities about yourself, or rather, the alive version of yourself. Death wants your alive traits to be shown in full color during judgment, so choose wisely, this is your only chance to dance with the Devil.

If you were to list the 5 greatest traits about yourself when you were alive, they would probably go something like this: 1. Drinking 2. Objectifying women 3. Watching porn 4. Yelling obscenities at people who do not deserve it whatsoever 5. Joint rolling. Now this is a great list if you are first and foremost alive, and in a very specific trope of college douchebag. Why don't you ask the infamous AlcoholPoisoning20 about his plight to Death? Well since he is not around anymore maybe you should take that as a word of warning. Just please do not challenge Death to a game of beer pong. It's like the "head trainer's" instructions just go in one ear and out the other with most people. Death wants individuality for god's sake. HeroinOverdose27 (Kurt) brought only a guitar with him, and played Death a song about living a full life. That was the only time in his history of existence that Death cried. You are absolutely nowhere near as talented or inventive as he was, all faith in you is already lost. At least you fit in, no one has hope here. There has to be something truly spectacular about the way you once were. Come on think! It will literally save your life!

“Yu knows, wen I’r wuz bout 22 I wen an’ get tooken by de military,” Dementia<sup>83</sup> exclaimed with great pride. His dialect was one of extreme slowness. It was obvious as to the extent of this thing’s dementia, but you take note of his peacefully quiet, long-drawn voice. Before you can go and complete your assignment, you have to listen to this man’s story. “32nd Vermont infantry. I dun spend wut I reckon ter be my entire live up til’ den on mi unncle’s ranch. I had ben’ raisin de cattles in the mawrnin, and done de hunted in de afanoon. One day I wuz out in de woods real deep, so fars that i reckon I had to star turnin back. Az I star makin my wayz back, i start heerin de strangist beetin of what i think to be certin deat. Nex thing i knows’ I’s bein lift off de groun wit some grimmy lookin muder fuckas yellin at me, an’ handin’ me a autermadic rifle. Now i knows dese boys was militry becuz of de--” I can tell you are bored with this old being, so leave if you want. It’s all up to you. This man is a coffee drinker, but you have decided to go occupy some other meaningless space. Good for you, an independent mind is something you want in your scenario.

Well your first “day” is over and now you have to get some sleep. What an interesting concept. You spent a third of your life asleep and vulnerable, and now it’s time to try that again. Something odd happens here when you dream though. You are laying in your bed, which of course is not actually a bed but just a bunch of jumbled ideas floating around about what something that you lay on to relax is. So now it is time to let your mind wander. It’s essentially dreaming, but instead of dreaming about naked girls and cocaine, you are dreaming about your dog that got sick when you were 9, and your older sister picking you up from elementary school with a car full of her babbling bimbo friends. Do not fret, there is no chance they will make it through up here. Death has an incredibly acute ability to sniff out bullshitters and assholes. Even though the “King of Pop” did so much for music with his incredible array of talents, SleepDeath<sup>50</sup> ended up drinking a cup of chamomile with extra honey.

The power of your dreams in this state of being is incredibly underrated. A while back there was a young girl, BikeAccident<sup>11</sup>, who dreamed only of her teacher at school. She was distraught by the fact that Mrs. Lewis would have to go to class the next day and explain what had happened to the poor girl. In her dream, BikeAccident<sup>11</sup> saw Mrs. Lewis getting out of her car to get a coffee, light brown and weak, unlike the extreme, full-flavored blend up here. A patch of black ice sends Mrs. Lewis slipping on the ground, and results in an oncoming car making her CarAccident<sup>56</sup>. When Death heard of this, he immediately--



Oh! You are having a dream! This was not to be expected from you, maybe you are on your way. This is the first step for many of the “regular randies” who get chosen for “recirculation”. You are in a car with your mother going to your very first soccer game. Pretty clichéd, but it is a good start. You better dream up some twist, or this is going to go nowhere. You see the cars passing by, you eagerly shake your foot as your first athletic competition draws ever closer. “Just a minute honey, we are going to stop at the store, and get you something to drink,” Your mother suggests. Between your boredom in the hot car, and the incredibly long line at the store, something prompts you to take the car for a little spin. Oh my god! This is terrific. You drive down the road with numerous signs of childlike excitement, but you are incredibly skilled as a driver. You throw on a pair of sunglasses, take your pants off, and stick your bare ass right out the window, exposing the world to the blue moon of your behind.

This was an excellent development for you, you have pretty much categorized yourself from that dream. You are destined to make Death laugh. While it is great that you now know where you stand in terms of convincing Death, you are up to your ears in expectation. Not many people can make death laugh, but you have real potential. Beware: Making stupid, drawn out jokes and expecting Death to giggle at the punchline is no way to go about this excruciatingly difficult task. “You have to make him laugh with the way you are,” Suicide33 tells you “That was an excellent dream you had, it’s those types of things that will make Death laugh. Focus on how to bring an image like that into your mind.” Now don’t worry, you will do plenty of this in your “free time”, but there are more pressing matters right now. Your test with Death is in 19 “hours”, and you need to figure out what to wear. You want something appealing, maybe not colorful as Death prefers greys and blacks, but something that is going to catch his eye. Do not embroider a jacket with a large phallic shape on the back, Death will actually throw the tea at you, it has happened before. You decide to wear a black button down with grey accents, good. A good pair of shoes does not go unnoticed either, so you made a great choice by picking those dress shoes. Sleek but comfortable. A simple pair of charcoal corduroy should do. You look great! You look like a man ready to look Death in the eyes and ask for a fucking cup of black coffee.

You need to get in one more dream before your test. Yes, you’ve had extensive time with Suicide33, and she has taught you fairly well. The real lessons you should be taking into account is that of your death sibling Starvation41. It sure is a shame he was starved to death, he was as incredibly funny. He is much

funnier than you are, the man dreamed of a tamed lion he kept in his backyard to scare off the ravens that keep stealing his dinner. Of course, he did everything wrong, and instead of feeding him the prescribed "lion food", he thought it would be funny to give the beast extreme doses of homemade tranquilizer. In no world would that be a rational idea, but who cares? He took a rather sad story of his own starvation, and turned into an idiotic, cartoon-like story. He's dead but he's having fun! You can not be put off by being dead, just have fun with it. Now let's go, get to your dreaming!

You have had your final dream, which is good. Rumor has it you dreamt up something hilarious, and you should absolutely pull out all the stops during your plea to Death. No matter what you do, please do not swear. Impure minds do not impress Death in the slightest, and unless you can make Him fall in love with you, which again you can not, you will be drinking tea with every other failure. Before you get in "final line", you notice Stroke63 running over her pre recorded verses, and trying, as she put it "sexy up". How foolish of this woman, continually being told not to try to seduce Him, but pushing that she would succeed anyhow.

"Listen honey, I had a stroke at 63. I was found dead surrounded by three naked men and 35,000 dollars on the bed. No one can mow them down like Janet." She was interrupted again by the sharp pain in her wrist.

As you inch forward in line, you can't help but wonder what all these people are doing to appease Death. "Surely one of these sad saps came up with something He will enjoy," You think to yourself. You are wrong. Of the 27 people who have appeared in front of Death from your line, 27 have gotten a cup of steaming tea. Even Starvation41 got a cup of tea. His plain black tea came after he tried to impersonate life, Death's impish cousin. It was hilarious, the "head trainers'" sides ached with laughter, but Death did not once change his stoic expression during the performance. He was sent to the left, and given the piping cup of tea.

An "hour" has passed and it is finally your time to beg death to move on to the next stage. If you make it to "sterile testing", you may go through hell or you may not. That is for circulators to know. That is for you to know. It is your time now, make death laugh and you will enjoy the hot brew that is waiting to the right of Him. You still have absolutely no reason to be in that category, amongst King and Gandhi. You will most likely fail, you have not changed much. Sure, you had a few good dreams, but nothing out of the ordinary. So step up and get ready for your-- Oh my god you haven't. Have you forgotten

everything you have learned? You imbecile! Where are your fucking dress shoes? Why are you wearing cargo shorts? Is that a beer in your hand? Put your goddamn cigarette out! You are doing everything wrong, everything. What are you going to ask Death? How can you look him in the eye in your state?

“I am here because I have to be, not because I want to be. I am Overdose21, this is who I am, do with me what you will.”

You fool! You just gave Death permission to serve you tea! You asked him to pour it down your throat for you. You have learned nothing! Why must these trainers put in such copious amounts of work, only to see hard skulled morons like you utterly fail. How selfish of you to take advantage of your trainer's death, she should be in your position asking for “recirculation”. You have done nothing to deserve even a shred of consideration for another life. Step forward and receive your punishment, you ignorant fool.

As you inch towards Death, you are confident with your tiny strides. At least you have some meaningless credence in yourself before you plunge into infinite nothingness. You hear a whisper from Death, reach up for your cup, and catch the faint odor of Sumatran beans through your nose. Head to the right side, you lucky fucking punk.

Hello, big yellow sky,  
and mother's hair whipping  
as she pulls garbage cans  
inside, out of the wind.  
If the windows blow in,  
goodbye grand piano  
and goodbye wood floor that  
Father had polished.  
Red blossomed tree swaying  
like a great pendulum,  
yes, it'll go this time.

When the great storm passes,  
we paddle next door to  
our neighbor's blue house.  
All their pictures, flooded.  
Father's face is a blue  
puddle that leaks onto  
Mother's white wedding gown.  
The picture of their first  
dog with their second son  
is a Technicolor  
oil slick, falling apart.

We paddle past debris,  
fallen electric lines,  
don't touch the dark water.  
When the floods all recede,  
fish gasp there on the wet pavement.  
We throw them back,  
one by breathless one,  
and say goodbye to the  
hurricane, standing in

the mud, small beneath the  
shuddering trees, waving.



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deception

*Anne Karasarides*

there's a pit that you  
dug one day about five  
months ago  
looking for  
treasure  
i let you indulge  
but now  
you sip sangria  
and i am in stuck in ohio  
alone amongst barren fields  
and the bittersweet fall  
so i pick up a shovel  
and begin to fill  
this cavity  
gravel mud mulch leaves  
dirt, decay  
i have danced with debris  
for hours so i think it's  
getting deeper  
sinkhole sinking  
and when i make that long  
distance call it grows  
smaller softly  
but when you came  
back to me  
everywhere i looked  
little sinkholes emerged  
all over the landscape  
just as before  
tectonic plates  
cracking  
along fault lines



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Woven Dreams of Ecuador  
*Ellen Kajca*



In subway cars packed so tightly  
that people were one body of matter,  
we barreled through infinite black tunnels,

and here, in self-imposed limbo,  
mom devised the word game  
and I investigated her sentences  
as the car tipped from side to side.

“The man bought a red apple at the supermarket.”  
Elbows in my face and the whirl  
of concurrent conversations faded  
and I only noticed  
noun, verb, adjective.  
I picked them off one by one until  
the sentence was a skeleton  
and the train rattled and shook like a seizure,

And as the body of matter swayed in a perfect wave,  
I searched her eyes as she listened to my answers.  
My hip bumped against her leg,  
And the gap between us widened and narrowed.

The wise bird watcher knows  
A specie will only expose  
Itself from a place within its feathers.  
Inexperienced watchers will endeavor  
To listen for a song and then follow  
With eager eyes the deep yellow  
Of the little barn swallow.  
But one must always remember,  
The wise bird watcher knows,  
That a plumage is just for show;  
That one must first close  
Their eyes and rely on clever  
Ears to find the chirping notes before  
Allowing the eyes to see the hues of fowl.  
The wise bird watcher knows.

Angie stood with the box in her palms, staring at its gruesome contents. Inside was a milky eyeball encased in bloody tissue. The iris was a watery sea green, the color of sand through water, and was practically swallowed by its dilated pupil. Angie wondered how long it took a human eye to decompose, and then, shuddering, snapped the small wooden box shut. She set it back down and pushed it to the back of her mother's dresser, through tubes of blue eyeliner and piles of seashell jewelry, until it rested against the mirror. Angie closed her eyes and felt for the phone in her pocket. She had thought about calling the police to bring her mother to the hospital before, but she had never actually done it. She came very close once at the aquarium, when her mother climbed into a pool of stingrays and Angie had to help security guards drag her out, and once again when she found her mother pacing in circles around a neighbor's dead cat in the middle of their kitchen. Today was different. Angie had cared for her mother since childhood and knew that she was volatile, strange, and sometimes violent, but she never imagined she was capable of something so horrific.

Angie glanced up at her reflection, set her jaw, then turned and left the room. The beaded curtain clattered as she passed through it. She walked through the shadowy hallway, picking her way between stuffed cardboard boxes, to the cramped kitchen. It smelled like chicken nuggets. Her mother stood inches from the microwave, her back to Angie. Tangled pastel hair grazed her hips and her long green dress clung to the rolls along her sides. She opened the microwave and shifted her weight on her bare feet, humming to herself. Angie felt a nostalgic pull in her chest and took one more breath before she spoke.

"Mom. Why is there an eyeball on your dresser?" The humming stopped.

Angie's mother turned to face her, plastic plate of dinosaur nuggets in hand. She opened her mouth in a cherry circle and let glassy tears well up, threatening her coated lashes. "Angie, why would you say something like that?"

"Mom, a bloody, human eyeball. A bloody human eyeball!"

"You're hurting me, Angelina." Her mother's breath quickened. "Where's my sea water?" She set the plate on the cluttered card table and looked about frantically at the glass jars scattered around the room. She

reached up to the open cupboard and pulled down a jar nestled between cans of old soup, cradling it like a newborn.

“Mom.” Angie reached into her pocket, wrapped her fingers around her phone, then stepped towards the table.

Her mother unscrewed the jar’s lid, her secondhand rings colliding with the metal, and dipped her hand into the saltwater.

“Why do you have an eyeball in a box on your dresser?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Angie lunged across the kitchen and squeezed her mom’s ringed fingers in her own. She turned and pulled her mom down the hall. The water from the jar jammed into the crook of her mother’s elbow splashed onto Angie’s back as she marched towards the light at the end of the hall. Her mom blinked hard as they passed into her room, as if she had never seen the cramped space before. Angie tightened her grip on her mother’s hand, pulling her past the unmade bed, to the dresser along the right wall of the room. She tugged the open jar from her mother, set it on the stained carpet, then guided her mom’s hands to the very back of the dresser, wrapping her fingers around the rough wooden box. When the box was secure in her mother’s hands, she let go. In the mirror, she watched her mother open it. She watched her eyes widen, then narrow, before a small smile unfurled on her face. “This is for my friends.” She closed the box and clutched it against her heart.

“Your friends?”

“Yes, Aquata and them.”

“Aquata?”

“Oh, Aquata’s the best. She spends her days in the water, like all my friends. I wish you could meet her, but you can’t. Unless you join the Order.” Her mother turned and grinned at Angie.

Angie stepped back. “Mom, we’ve talked about this since I was little. The order isn’t real.”

“What? Angie, of course the Order of Merpeople is real.”

“It’s not. You don’t have mermaid friends.”

“I do, dear. Merfolk stick together.” Her smile grew proud.

“Mom!” Angie’s hands balled into fists. “You’re acting crazy. You are not a mermaid. Look! You have legs. Human legs. Human legs that you rarely use to swim. If these people are real, they are lying to you, Mom, lying to you. Why would they want an eyeball as a gift? I want to know where you got it.” Ever so slightly, her mother tilted her head to the side. It made Angie scream.

“Answer me, Mom! Where did you get it?”

Angie’s mom watched their reflections in the mirror, opening and closing her mouth as if her voice had escaped her. “It’s for Aquata,” she murmured, and opened the box again, before closing it and setting it down.

Angie stood and pulled her phone out of her pocket. “I’m leaving.”

“Don’t!” Her mother spun around and grabbed Angie’s wrists, kicking the jar on the floor in the process. Seawater soaked the bottom of Angie’s socks. Her mother ignored it. Her eyes were a frantic amber and she trained them on Angie. “Don’t leave. Don’t. You can’t leave.”

Angie’s throat tightened, she took a small step backward. Her mom stepped toward her. “Let’s get some air, Mom.” Her mother nodded, but did not let go. “I need some air.” Angie continued backing towards the hall, her mother following, not blinking or looking away from her daughter. She was whispering to herself, a soft “No, no, no,” and shuffling her bare feet through the cluttered hall to the door. Farther down the corridor, Angie stopped, shook one hand away from her mother’s grasp, and pushed the apartment door open to a narrow set of stairs. They walked down the steps and went outside onto the lamplit porch. Ahead of them, a dizzy firefly danced above the cracked sidewalk to the sound of a distant siren. Angie sat down on the top step. Her mother let go of her wrist. They sat silently for a moment.

“Why?” Angie closed her eyes and hoped for a lucid response.

“My little Angel, I have to do some unpleasant things to earn my tail.”

Angie hugged her knees to her chest and glared at her mom, suppressing shouts. “Your tail?”

“My friends already have theirs. Now they’re helping me earn mine.”

Angie almost began to argue with her mother, to try to convince her that she was confused, delusional. Instead, she pushed her words to her stomach and focused on the immediate problem. “How did you get the eye? Did you kill someone for it?”

“I didn’t kill anyone.”

Angie’s restraint was fleeting. “All for a tail that will never exist?”

“It will exist.”

“It won’t!” A dog barked in the distance. Angie swallowed her words again. “Whose eye?”

“A man. He was walking along the beach the other night.”

Angie shook her head. “Mom. What did you do to him?”

Her mother looked down. “I took his eye.”

Angie could not look at her mother or keep her voice to a reasonable level. "I know that Mom, but how?"

"It didn't hurt him, Angie. I swear. I threw a rock at his head, I swear. He was asleep before I took it." Angie's mother saw the revulsion on her daughter's face.

"Did you plan this?"

"What?"

"The man. Did you choose him ahead of time?"

Her mother was quiet.

Angie's voice rose. "Did you?"

"I met him online."

"You planned for him to meet you at the beach so you could harvest his eye?"

Her mother whimpered and looked down.

Angie stood and swallowed. Fear burned her throat and settled in her gut.

Her mother reached up towards her daughter. "Don't leave, Angel. Don't."

Angie looked down at her mother. She took in her hair's faded Easter colors, her downturned mouth in a cherry stain, and her neck's emerging wrinkles. There was always something wild in her mother's eyes, but now the wild was consuming them. Angie was afraid it would get worse. She looked at her phone, reminding herself that the police would come peacefully to take her mother to the hospital. She would get help there. Maybe the wild would fade. She would be better. Angie lifted her phone.

Her mother's face drained of color. "Don't, Angel."

Angie turned away from her mother and dialed the number.



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bloom

*Anne Karasarides*

*My father built this cabin here  
himself, back in nineteen and, and—*  
he can't remember, the man who  
was selling them his little house,  
where he was born up in the attic  
like a baby bat in the rafters,  
surrounded by thousands of acres  
and the Blue River to the east  
and all of Virginia to the south.

He told them they could buy  
the house but that old house  
would always *own itself*.  
*What do you mean?* The new family  
Asked. He shook his gray head.

The girl was ten when they moved in,  
and her room was the attic room. She  
heard footsteps on the stairs when  
no one at all was there. But the house  
owned itself, she figured. That's part  
of the deal when you buy it. Nightly,  
the ghost climbed to the attic and  
opened her bedroom door to check  
on her, like a spectral father,  
then left, softening the click of  
the lock by turning the doorknob  
as he closed her door and then creaked  
his way down the staircase, sighing.



My right thigh is a galaxy of crushed muscle  
fibers and ruptured capillaries, the skin  
calcified from repeat hits with *épée* tips.

Red and purple bloom into my leg,  
each bruise evolving from cabernet  
to Riesling as iron seeps through injured tissue,

colors like a slow-burning supernova  
in the blossoming of a constellation,  
in the broken connective tissue healing.

Two weeks later, I run my thumb  
along the bruise, still tender to the touch,  
and wince like it's the center of the universe.



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Monprint  
*Yuliya Klishch*

It starts with a boy I love, searching for his third eye.

“Some say it’s right there on the back of your hand.” He laughs like the siren of a fire truck, telling me the eye is only visible in the split second before falling asleep. “I have also read that it may be on the back of the head, or below the navel.”

We cross the street, passing the church  
that no one attends.

He is my parish, my flock, and I know this means I must take him in my hands and bury him like a pistol in the yard.  
The purest form of denial, of confession, of pretending  
you don’t spit out blood in the sink every morning. Dirt smells like dirt smells

like dirt under my fingernails, and everything should be safe here among the apple cores full of seeds and the roses rooting down along the side of my house.

Women dressed all in black stare at us from the side of the road, and I stop, and I look, and they are gone. “Or maybe,” he is still laughing at all of the hiding places that exist within his own body, “it’s like an extra tooth in the back of your jaw—”  
and I kiss him to stop him from talking more.

I can admit to moments in which I wanted to devour this boy, wanted his mouth, his hands, his ribs, all within me safe. This boy I love is original sin, I carry him, shielding his body with my own. I suffer him.

And then he finds his third eye.  
And it is in his wrist.  
And he has to peel back the skin to find the truth  
of the thing, of the apple seed’s cyanide  
pulsing through the yard.

The white bathroom tile begins to glow scarlet and the boy I love becomes the constant flickering of lights, cabinets left open like a yawning mouth.

This altar I have laid his body upon,

this knowledge I keep from him and give to you:  
If you are not always watching for the Devil, you deserve it  
when He takes root in your jaw.

I.

great blue heron  
with his great yellow beak  
spears a fish from the waterway,  
between  
the slick reeds,  
green as a thunderstorm.  
he drips it down his  
great gray throat,  
shaped like an archer's bow,  
and swallows  
like a loosed arrow.

why do I see you  
in everything?

II.

some things  
are just hard.

that's that.

no fanfare  
just the firmness  
of a stone, sharp  
on one edge,  
pressed  
into the riverbed;

the cold water says  
goodbye, goodbye,  
as it winds off  
into the world.

I.

Holding my pen between  
two fingers by the side

of the kitchen window,  
I grow afraid of the amount

of water the two sunlit  
succulents are conserving.

To think of all the other things  
I would rather be doing on a Sunday

morning brewing coffee, patting  
the dog's head but out of fear

I count the number of stems  
and think of the blades of grass

in the square yard outside the glass.  
Sometimes I see the grass waving

like a friendly village cut out of paper,  
but I also believe the cactus has been

holding out more water than usual.  
Maybe the plant is growing more

each day, centimeters at a time.  
Maybe next autumn the plant will

be flowing over the edges  
of the breakfast table,

pots and plates crashing to the floor  
as the stems bend into the window light,

pushing impeding books over  
with pale green, plump waves.

II.

There was a succulent I meant  
to buy your mother. I promise, I did.

The little green flower  
did not make it into my bag.

I never gave a nursery cashier  
fifteen dollars and some change

for a small plant in a plastic pot.  
I told her I was sorry.

Don't worry, I promise  
this is for the best.

The plant would probably rest  
on your mother's work desk,

distracting her with its silent  
movement, the winding

of turquoise tentacles wrapped  
around the wooden legs.

At this point her papers are  
falling across the floor

while she wrestles the stapler  
from the arms of a cactus.



None of that sounds pleasant,  
does it darling?

No, it is better that she rests  
at a clean oak desk

while I sit at the breakfast table,  
arm wrestling a succulent

and holding my breath,  
sonorously cheered on.

The underlayer of hair  
that rests against the back of my neck  
reminds me of the bottom of the ocean  
where the creatures are mutated,  
hidden from the sun,  
where a black strand  
buried beneath the blondes and reds  
is marvelous in its existence.

Hunting  
for split ends, I find  
most resemble forked roads  
but every once in a while  
one diverges, a hair that  
that mirrors the legs of a centipede.  
Its delicacy is thrilling,  
and I run my fingers along the soft edges  
before plucking off each strand  
with a patience and focus  
reserved for such moments.

I sort through strand after strand,  
each a distinct personality,  
a point to fixate on.  
They are simple. Calming.  
Beautiful creations  
waiting to be admired,  
and then destroyed  
like sand paintings.



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Patrick from Patrick, Sydney & John  
*Anna Owens*

I crack her legacy open like a walnut,  
cupping my great aunt's nesting dolls  
in my hands several years after she's died.  
Six sapphire dolls, each self cocooned  
inside another. I shelter them  
in the hollow of my palm as if  
I can somehow apologize  
for letting her die alone while  
I am growing old.

Every woman in my family keeps secrets  
like this, wrapped inside, and I can only guess hers.  
She was a stranger to me, no matter how much I loved her  
ruby lipstick. I am trying to become totally  
honest, to strip until the child in my rib cage  
finally climbs free, and to take her little hand in mine.  
To watch her marvel at that opal sky,  
and to tell her the secrets of the world,  
starting with the name of every star.

On my first New Year's Eve in Hong Kong, a Vietnamese woman came up and stroked my hand. I was down at Chiang's, a back-alley food stall two blocks from my flat, sipping a warm beer while minding my own business, when she turned the corner and walked toward me. She was young. Not very tall, wearing a platinum wig and a black dress that stretched above her knees. With one of her straps down, she seemed as though she had just rolled out of bed. I felt slightly disoriented lying on my arm, when she approached and took my other hand.

Her thumb pressed hard against my palm. "You like that, sweetie?" she said in accented English, her voice soft and flat.

I felt the top of my ears redden as I searched in pocket for cash. "I'd like that," I replied in English, and tucked a folded bill under an unopened bottle.

"You're alright," she said in a flat tone, letting loose of my hand. She then ran her fingers through the bottles, found the one with its cap intact, and plucked it from the table. Her jade bracelet, slid down, looped tight around her wrist.

Mother died on November 2, 1997. Between us, from Kowloon to Canton<sup>4</sup>, there were eight train stations. I couldn't go back. I was at the warehouse stacking sausages over dry duck feet, when uncle came up and told me he got a call from a mainland hospital. She was hit by a truck when crossing at a red light. They found in her little black purse a notebook with uncle's number labeled as "son." At the time, I resided in what uncle called the "dorm," the living room of a bachelor flat he rented out to his employees, and used to call her from his landline.

I imagined most people my age had anticipated at least once the death of a parent. The news came abruptly, but I thought I took it well. No chest pain or tears. I felt calm. All I had in mind was where to go for dinner.

I went to Chiang's that night, feasting while watching people pass. A solemn young man with glasses and a suit. A plump Filipino mom in jeans and flip flops. An old bum in a ragged tank top. Their faces softened beneath the yellowish street lights. I liked a late-night meal on the street. It made me feel

4 Romanized spelling of Guangzhou, a Southern city northwest of Hong Kong.

less alone, guessing strangers' stories as they brushed by, wearing their masks. Sometimes I wondered if they would do the same, passing while guessing my story, if they could guess I was an immigrant worker sleeping in my uncle's apartment, if I share the space with four greasy middle-aged men, whose deafening announcements of *peng!*<sup>5</sup> caused me migraines.

I had tried to get her to talk, even when our hours ended. "No talks after business," she said. "Mama told us that." She didn't mean her real mother, obviously. But despite what Mama said to her, if the hotel bed sheet was mold-free, and the toilet bowl didn't let out a smell of aged pork, she would stay till I got dressed. "I had no idea," I put on a surprised face when she first told me she was Vietnamese. "You're fluent in English." She smiled and lowered her head. "I don't know about that," she said. I knew she wasn't from around here the first time she came on to me. Small things—from her twiggy legs, broad forehead, to her rich, dark lips—details as such gave a person's story away. And her English was just alright.

We met again a week after mother died.

"What's your story?" I said, pulling at one of my socks. "We have done this for, what, four times now? I don't even know your name."

She sat still on the bed, turning the jade bracelet round her wrist.

"How about we trade?" I dragged my voice on the last word. "I'd tell you something about myself, and you do the same."

She hesitated, arms crossed before chest. Her gaze jumped, as though measuring the room, measuring me. "O.K.," she finally said.

I looked at the wall for a moment. "Last week, my mother passed," I said slowly. "I didn't get to see her last."

She sat there, her lips quivered, but she didn't utter a word. There was something gleaming in her eyes. I was surprised to see at how strongly she had felt toward a total stranger. It almost seemed like it was her mother instead of mine.

"That's awful," she choked up a bit, hand stayed on her bracelet, "I am sorry, sweetie."

"Please quit calling me that," I said, and took her into my arms.

After mother's death, I took a week off before coming back to work. Uncle, who sat behind his squeaky office desk in the back of the shop, eyed me

5 A scoring announcement in the game of Mahjong.

as I stepped behind the register. He walked over when I put on my apron. "How do you feel, Dan?" he asked, his face all grey and concerned.

I shrugged. "I ate well and slept well," I said. "I guess that means I'm okay."

"Good," he leaned over and patted me on the shoulder, "You're a good worker. Strong-minded." He paused for a moment, tapping himself on the neck. "I'm leaving for Canton in a few days," he said. "Her funeral is next week."

I searched in my head for an appropriate response. You could think of as many filial obligations as you wished, but in truth, you only got to fulfill a few, and before some older relatives put you on the spot, anticipating a reaction of which they found graceful and apt, you have about ten seconds to pretend that you had it all figured out.

"Say something to mother," I told uncle. "Say 'I'm sorry'."

I couldn't go to her funeral without getting myself arrested. In 1995 I left Canton and moved to Hong Kong to work for my uncle, after having lost my job as an English teacher at the textile factory. He owned a small grocery store on Argyle Street, selling cheap bread and dry meat to housewives in the neighborhood. He didn't charge me for renting a bunk in his apartment, for which I was grateful. Although I slept in a cage home—a bunk bed fenced in by mesh wire, which separated the top deck from the bottom. It was better than nothing.

Uncle's free lunch did turn out to be an expensive meal, as I realized that he used the free rent to justify not paying me well. I had tried to remind him how many extra hours I'd worked driving his cargo van. "We can certainly discuss the pay," he said slowly, his eyebrows raised. "Once you settle in your own place." I didn't make much effort to negotiate. I was illegal, having overstayed my visitor visa. A mainlander on British soil. No ID, no taxes. Illegal through and through.

It became a habit of mine, eating late at Chiang's while waiting for her to show. Some nights we would end up in bed. Other nights we just chatted. She was a good company, knew more about Kowloon than I ever had. We ordered fried herrings and beers, and together we guessed others' stories as they stroll by. There came the baldly in a green bowtie—he traded stocks and devoured raw oysters to reclaim his manliness. Behind him, the scar-faced woman ran a pork chop cartel that was the equivalent of the Triad syndicate, for butchers. The tall waiter with caved in cheeks put up a long face, shoving a table of ribs and bones into a plastic bin. His wife had left him, came home, but only to take the cat. She

had good teeth, but an even better smile, of which she wore when we came up with stories so absurd that it became unnatural holding our laughs.

From wait-till-I-got-dressed, to a lunch together, then a real date, it took us roughly a month. I taught her to say her name in Cantonese. "Lan," I said. "Lan," she repeated. "Your name means orchid," I told her. "Like an orchid, one of the four gentlemen flowers, you are a gentle woman." She smiled her usual smile, her long black hair curled above her shoulder.

I'd told her about myself, and in return I came to know her rather well. Like me, she was an immigrant, but with legal standing. She was one of those boat people — refugees who fled Vietnam on cargo ships couple year after Saigon fell. Her folks didn't make it, I didn't ask why.

Once, at Chiang's she told me she had been roaming the street of Kowloon since sixteen. "They all call me 'sweetheart,'" she said, dipping her noodles over the broth. "Mama told us to smile more. I had the best smile."

"How much dues do you have to cut her?" I asked.

"Plenty," she said, staring blankly at the people passing behind me. "But I make good bucks. Dollars sometimes, when I wear a blonde wig."

"Maybe I should meet this 'mother' of yours sometimes," I said. "I could help you cook up a union or something."

"Ai-ya," she shook her head. "Mama treats us well. She's practically my step-mother."

It left a bitter taste in my mouth, having heard her talked about her business, about her other clients. No women should commercialize her body like that, I leaned that studying Marx back in the factory I worked.

"When can you show me where you live?" she leaned across the folding table and wiped with her sleeves something off my cheek.

I paused and thought for a second. "You don't want to see it," I said. "Sometimes my roommates would have people over for cards. You wouldn't like the hustle."

Lan said nothing, but I could tell something snuck out in her breath. Like water in a leaking bucket, her excitement escaped her, and her smile slowly turned into a forced smile.

Uncle returned on a windy morning, and I sensed something fishy from his blinking stares. "Did it go well?" I walked over to his office desk and asked.

"Sure, sure," he was scribbling down some numbers on a piece of paper. "It was small. Only her side of the family came. But it was nice."



“Did anyone ask about me?”

“One of the aunts asked about your job,” he shoved the paper into a drawer. “I told her you were doing great with me.”

“Was there anything they said that you don’t want me to hear?” I raised my voice a little.

Uncle sat up in his chair and cleared his throat. “Don’t beat yourself over this,” he said carefully. “You are your own person now, Dan, I’m sure they understand your choice.”

I wondered if mother left a will, and if uncle knew anything about it. When the factory closed, they let her keep the apartment assigned to her when she got remarried.

Uncle let me go early that day. I climbed the five floors to my dorm, unlocked the door, and found myself standing in a dark hallway. On the floor stood three offering candles waxed to a steel plate. Sitting on their own bunk, my roommates let out a deafening laugh.

“Again?” I shouted into the dark.

“They said the outage will end at ten,” my bunkmate Soo, a sturdy warehouse worker in his late forties, waved at me and said. “Maintenance.”

“Maintaining what?” I sidled to find my bed, trying not to tip over the candles. “How come no one come to maintain my well-being?”

They laughed again. “Sounds like a personal problem to me,” one of the younger guys said. “Soo was just telling us about a gal he met down at Chiang’s. She really got his muscles smoothed.”

I felt a shiver from head to foot. I didn’t need to hear more. “Come on, Soo,” I said, trying to sound calm. “Nobody needs to know about your nasty business.”

“Goddamn, how come my stories are always nasty while yours aren’t?” Soo gave his feet a quick jerk. “Give us something not nasty. Tell us about that communist factory you worked it.”

“I don’t remember much,” I said and collapsed onto my bed, hitting my back against something metallic. Damn clock. I shoved it under my pillow. “Nothing really happened there.”

“Come on,” Soo snapped his finger at me. “Your uncle told us you were a *gong gu lau*<sup>6</sup> back in your factory in Canton. There’s no way you can’t think of a

6 Literary, “storyteller.” A Cantonese slang for men who tells classic Chinese tales to a mass group of people as a form of entertainment.

story or two from the back of your head.”

How often did uncle talked behind my back? He never ceased to amaze me on how sly a man could be. “Okay,” I said. “I got one I heard from one of my coworkers.”

The men all sat up in their bed, their face gleaming with curiosity.

“Once upon a time, no, scratch that, in 1980, my friend, who was the clerk at a textile factory north of Canton, almost got himself decommissioned arranging a collective wedding.”

“What the hell is a collective wedding?” Soo interrupted. “Is that one of those communist orgies?”

My other roommates shushed Soo. “Don’t interrupt the storyteller,” they said.

“You would have known if you lived in a factory,” I said. “Everyone lived together, worked together, shared everything. They were games, ping-pong, soccer matches, fishing, and occasionally, range shooting. The factory was a small town—you had hospital, school, barber shop, all packed into one massive compound—people fell in love there, made babies, and some died.”

I paused, adjusting my voice. In the dark, someone’s throat rumbled. His coughs were thick with phlegm, but he didn’t spit.

“Speaking of this friend—one of his jobs was to arrange weddings, efficiently. How could you handle so many people falling in love in one day? You get them married all at once. If getting all the food and tables set up for two families is a hustle, imagine the logistics involved marrying three couples with six families. But my friend there, he was excellent at his job, ran the whole process like an assembly line. He sent some people on bikes to send invitations, checking on the kitchen to make sure they had enough food, measuring sizes for wedding dresses, and he got almost everything done in less than a week.”

“But there was only one problem. One of the brides was a widow. Her first husband died fixing an electronic cable, face all torn up, body burned to the bones. It was a real gruesome way to go, and the worse part was, some of his co-workers, you know, though they all studied Marxist materialism, were incredibly superstitious. A rumor started to fly around, saying that the woman had jinxed her husband. Her bridegroom, also a widower, was a quiet guy. Ever since his wife died of childbirth, he had spent most of his time in the kitchen. My friend didn’t think the rumor really bothered him, but in case he got cold-feet, he paid him a visit the day before the wedding, telling him not to worry about

what other people said. The cook took it well, gave my friend a bag of fried peanuts as drinking snacks, and walked him out as he left his house.

“The cook didn’t show up at the wedding. Along with the other two couples, the widow stood on the stage alone, all dressed in red, snuggling in the bouquet in her arms. Her face — my friend said it was the saddest thing he had ever seen.”

Everyone sat in silence, the only silence I had ever seen among them. We sat there for a while, until Soo broke the silence, saying: “What happened to the woman?”

“They lived happily ever after,” I said quietly.

“Don’t bullshit me, kid,” Soo said with a grunt.

“I don’t know. It’s a story,” I curled up in my bed, my back against the candles. “Maybe the factory closed, and everyone she ever come to know left. Maybe she moved to Canada. Maybe she is selling herself, maybe she is dead. You be the judge.”

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Something went wrong. Suddenly I couldn’t get it on with Lan. “What’s the matter, sweetie?” she asked, showing me her bare back and the zipper of her dress.

“The money thing made it all sour,” I said, brushing my finger up her shoulder blade as I zipped her up. “You should quit this. You know, I could buy you out.”

She turned to me. “It doesn’t work like that,” she said. “It’s not like I was sold or something — I chose to do this.”

“For how long?” my voice broke up a little. “This is a business of the youths. What are you going to do when you get old?”

“I’d figure something else,” she said with a serious tone. “Refugees and immigrants, they always know their ways around.”

I paused. My mind went empty. She watched me for a while before she lay down, took my hand and put in on her bare belly.

“I can’t, Lan. I told you,” I sighed and said.

“Only mother and I made it to the boat,” she said, drawing a circle on her stomach with my palm. “The cargo box was deep and dark, and I knew something was eating at her.”

“It could be anything, the stress, the hunger, I mean, everything was preying on everyone.” she said with a pale smile. “All I saw was black, all I heard were breathing, light and heavy, coming in from all direction. No one said a

word. We were all so quiet, as if waiting for someone to break.”

“Did you?” I asked.

“I was the first one,” she nodded. I felt the hair on her stomach scratch against my palm. “My crying echoed in the tiny chamber. It was so loud, I almost thought it was going to pierce through my ear drums.”

“It was then I felt someone take my hand. Mother had been lying unconscious the entire time, but then she was awake, holding me in one hand, rubbing my stomach with other, muttering ‘Shhh. We will live. You will live.’” Lan dropped my hand and rolled out of bed. Her bracelet greened under the dim street light fell through the window. “If you want to buy me out of what I do for a living, at least show me your price.”

I sat there, feeling numb. “What happened to your mother?” I asked.

She shook her head.

..

I left the hotel and walked against the night wind of Kowloon, holding a bottle of beer. I looked up at the sky. Very thin, very dark. Like a narrow stream of ink framed by the edges of the cement walls. Above the orange street light, a bright window suddenly blacked. A few night owls were still awake, perhaps watching soccer matches or TV shows from the 70s. Pale rays of light pierced through their living room windows, brightening the starless sky. I couldn't provide a home for Lan. The cage I lived in would suffice only if we were rabbits, (and it did look a bit like a cage for animals). But then it dawned on me that there was a way, something I thought my uncle had been hiding from me, something I would not dare to do if it wasn't for Lan.

I practically broke into uncle's office in the morning. The man nearly choked on his congee when he saw me barge in, reeking of liquor. “I knew she gave it to me,” I said, catching my breath. “Mother left her apartment to me.”

“Oh,” uncle forced himself into releasing a short laugh. “That. Absolutely. Uh. But, my dear nephew, how does that help you in any way? It's not like you could go back and live in mainland again.”

“I can, of course,” I walked closer to him. “It just the matter of whether I want to do it or not.”

“Listen,” uncle pressed his hands firmly on the edge of the table, his leg propped against the bottom drawer. “I was going to cut your in on this. I got same fake paperwork going. We could sell the place and split the pay. What do you say?”

“No more deals.” I said slowly, and dropped my fist on his table each

time I uttered a word. "Give. Me. Her. Will."

Lan bent over and crawled into the metal cage that was my bunk, balancing herself on a bed of debris and small things. Dry towels, can sardines, water bottles and plastic bags, every night I shoved my belongings to the sides to dig a slim hole customized for my body size. "This is what you have been hiding from me," Lan said as she looked around the room. "Did you think we could possibly live here?"

"No," I took a deep breath. "But there's more. My mother left me an apartment in her will, in Canton, where I am from. It's slightly smaller than the living room here, but we will have our own bed, own bathroom. Maybe even a cat or two."

She stood with her mouth half opened, mixed surprise and perplexity showing on her face.

"The thing is, I am an illegal worker here. I will have to spend time in jail for a while if I go back. But it won't be too long. Maybe a year or two. Once I get out, you can take a bus north, and we could move in together."

I stood and stared at her absent-mindedly, my gaze chasing after her. When I finally caught her eyes. She was wearing her usual smile: a smile I saw the first time we met, the smile she had on when I taught her how to say chair, chopsticks and Kowloon in Cantonese.

"This is great, sweetie," she finally said, turning her bracelet. "I will be waiting."

But I saw no sign of love in her eyes. "See you around," I said.  
We kissed and waved good-bye.

The night we split up, I went down to Chiang's, feasting and drinking while watching people pass. It was nice, guessing their stories and their pasts. In the back of the restaurant, they were showing on TV a documentary on cage home dwellers, on how they spent the whole life there, alone, with only other dwellers as their companies. It sounded sad, but none of the old bones in the show shed a tear. All of them had their face turned away from the camera, changing clothes, smoking a cigarette, minding their own business. I wondered if I still counted as one, even with the chance of moving out. As the power flickered, the TV slowly lost its volume, rendering the voice over static murmuring, of which unfolded in my ears into a soft, flat voice, *farewell sweetheart*. The line repeated itself, again and again.

Metal teeth, my metal  
hands, which nothing  
give, which nothing  
hold, which gentle  
eyes have named as  
gold, which silver  
cries; so bright, so  
cold.

Metal ears, I'm banging  
through, I'm bouncing  
'round my head of  
tin; I slip  
despite a steady  
grip, my head is  
light and softly  
spins.

Metal hair, a brittle  
crown, that melts with  
sun, which snaps in  
cold, whose needles  
drag across my  
neck, of whom I  
brag; whom I  
respect.

Metal arms, my iron  
feet are pounded  
down; they can't be  
lead away from  
you, away from  
bed, and from the  
blue that through me  
threads.



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untitled  
*Anne Karasarides*



She thinks it is something with the water, and she  
is right. She is standing in the kitchen,  
over the sink, and her hands are shaking.  
And then she turns the water off, and goes to sleep.  
She wakes up and it is like nothing has happened. Except

it has. In her dreams she is running along the bank of a river,  
and there are bodies wrapped in plastic and none of them are him;  
none of them are the one she is looking for.

Sometimes it is easier for love to vanish into the night  
than it is to stand for one more moment  
in the same kitchen in the same house. She wants a better story,  
wants him to stay and hold her hand while standing in line at the store.  
She wants love to dry the dishes as she washes them.

Caleb sat in his car the day his tooth fell out  
and smiled in the little fold down mirror  
in his car and counted his white teeth, seven,  
and his gray teeth, four, then folded up the mirror  
and called a number he wrote on a scrap of paper,  
asked to come in right away, then hung up  
and closed his mouth, pressing his lips together.

Caleb lay back in the dentist chair and breathed in  
the cold smells: fluoride, disinfectant, air freshener,  
unfamiliar and uncomfortable smells that made him  
feel out of place, like an inconvenient and awkward guest.  
The dentist came in with his cloth mask and Caleb  
could hardly tell if he was smiling behind his mask,  
and wished desperately to know whether or not he was.

With his hidden perfect dentist teeth like a white  
picket fence around his hidden sanitized pink tongue,  
the muffled dentist said the options, the prices as  
high as lottery winnings, digits and digits, and Caleb  
thought of how the dentist's teeth were a small fortune  
in his perfect mouth, a sterile opulence crowning his jaw.  
Porcelain, enamel, silver, gold; denture, bridge, crown.

The dentist gave him a little hand mirror, and asked  
for his choice, *perhaps the most affordable option?*  
and Caleb set his jaw, looked at the two eyes above  
the white cloth mask, and said with sterile certainty:  
Gold.

they found bodies in the brown bog  
smothered in peat and debris  
a leathery woman, wrinkled lips curled upwards,  
from 8,000 BC.

for sure she willed for life,  
a death preserved by organic matter  
its acid froze her strife,  
and claimed her bones for feeding  
leaving but a shell of thick skin, organs  
showing signs of a brutal beating.

the bog breathed in her pain,  
inhaling shame, injustice, sorrow  
the bog will only gain,  
from sacrifice again tomorrow

the bog does not discriminate,  
it sees only blood, guts and cartilage  
it will accept punishment or wait  
for a suicide, a walk gone wrong.

the bog will not grieve when it is given  
a young child dismembered  
the bog keeps bodies to remind us,  
that violence is always remembered.

Our ghostly reflections gaze back  
through a foggy mirror— blurred  
figures painted in oil pastels.

Your towel still envelops your hips  
as my hands descend your ribcage,  
imprinted ridges on a seashell.

Rivulets roam down your back,  
as I comb through locks still laced  
with conditioner and soap. Mother

always pulled too hard on my ends,  
so I slowly climb the comb upward,  
until I'm so far into you that

I discover your mother's early grey  
strands strewn through, and your  
father's thick roots. My breath

grows goosebumps on your neck—  
grains of sand on your skin. You take  
the comb from me, while I wrap

a towel around your shoulders  
to harbor your heat, then move  
my palm in circles to erase

the steam. The porthole reveals  
a portrait of naked hands  
detangling my hair.



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Sunflowers  
*Josi Miller*

“I Could Stop for Death”

(A response to Emily Dickinson’s “Because I Could Not Stop For Death”)

*Jordan Cardinale*

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Knock knock. Death came a-knocking at my door.  
My porch windows let in the cool breeze.  
He wanted me – I had much to live for.  
But I love my friends and our memories.  
I fought and I fought to keep my lovely life.  
He tried to convince me to go with him,  
But I have a family – I’d keep my life.  
I refused, but he dragged me by a limb.  
I tried to escape, but my soul collapsed in.  
I felt my life ending – I knew it’d be –  
Hard my love, worse than it had ever been.  
And yet, I ask you to look and to see –  
I did not want to go – honestly.  
It seems I could stop for death. Truthfully.

# WHAT IS THE P O W E R OF LANGUAGE? \*

## Kirk COMBE

What is the power of language? Grunts normalized. A dialect with an army and a navy. Making you think you're talking about reality. But you're not.

## James WEAVER

Language's power resides in its ability to shape how we perceive the world around us, and literature's power resides in its capacity to teach us more responsible, more empathetic ways for understanding our relationships to each other and to the places we inhabit. In an era when our environment, our democratic traditions, our value of reasoned discussion, and our ideas of science and the humanities are all under assault, I think it's crucial to highlight the centrality of being someone who thinks critically, who argues logically, and who acts empathetically. Reading and thinking about literature equips us with those skills.

## Fred PORCHEDDU

Along with children and art, language has the supreme power to prevent human existence from being nasty, brutish, and short.

## Margot SINGER

"Writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life: they feed the soul." — Anne Lamott

## Peter GRANDBOIS

Language is one of the most powerful tools we possess. When used wisely and well, language can make us feel in ways we have never felt before. It can make us see things we didn't know were there. More importantly, it can make us see things we didn't want to see or avoided seeing. In that way, language is the first weapon against oppression because it forces us to look where we wouldn't before. However, language can also be used to bury or cover up, to conceal our crimes. We hide behind euphemisms or abstract and sterile language designed to distort our humanity. It's up to us to guard against those who misuse language to gain power. And it's up to us to read books that demand we pay attention. Embrace those writers who make us look at ourselves, even when it makes us uncomfortable, rather than those writers who simply make us feel good. As Kafka said, "we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for? ... We need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, . . . like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us." Language is that axe, and it should hurt.

## Linda KRUMHOLZ

Language can open our eyes, open our minds, and open our hearts. Language can hurt and frighten, it can make us hide from others, it can make us scared of ourselves. Language is completely inadequate for communicating the things we want others to understand about who we are, what we know, and how we feel. Language is powerful magic that can conjure other worlds and other people, grab hold of our imagination, take us beyond ourselves into beauty and possibilities, change how we know the world and ourselves.

## David BAKER

David Baker: "Language must suffice. First, it doesn't. Then, of course, it does." from "Murder" by David Baker.

## Regina MARTIN

The peculiar power of language lies its ability to both enable and disable; language allows us to express ourselves and create social bonds; but it also delimits possibilities for expression, identity, and social forms.

## Sylvia BROWN and Sandy RUNZO

With all of its wordplay and quiriness, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has been translated into 174 languages. In fewer than 281 characters, a world leader can put the entire planet in jeopardy. Koko the gorilla knows over 1,000 words in American Sign Language. Marine biologists tell us that female sperm whales near the Galapagos Islands form clans distinguished by their dialects. Language builds bridges. Language injures. Language liberates and oppresses, divides and unites.

## Diana MAFE

Language is our primary means of communication with one another so it carries immense power. Of course, language takes many forms so it doesn't have to be spoken or written. The beauty and indeed power of language is precisely that we create and then share it.

## Brenda BOYLE

Language is everything.

\* Collected from current faculty of the English department at Denison University 2017-2018.



## BIOGRAPHIES

**Britanny ATKINSON** is a senior creative writing major. She enjoys sunflowers, honeybees, and hot coffee. Her mantra for life is to be kind.

**Jaley BRUURSEMA** is a sophomore from Chicago studying Anthropology & Sociology with a minor in Spanish. On campus, you can find her practicing Spanish at the Language & Culture House, making milkshakes at the Bandersnatch, or drinking chai in the Open House. Jaley is very excited to see her work appear in *Exile*.

**EB BORDOW** is a current sophomore at Denison from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, majoring in an IDM in Language Functionality in Society. EB worked as the mascots Bernie Brewer and the Racing Sausages of the Milwaukee Brewers!

**Jordan CARDINALE** is a sophomore with a major in English Literature and a minor in Spanish. Within her major, she is concentrating on Medieval and Renaissance British Literature and is learning Old English. She enjoys the outdoors, soccer, ballet, reading, and writing. Jordan is also involved in Kappa Kappa Gamma, HerCampus, TedxDenisonU, is the Vice President of Club Soccer, and works as an ARC Spanish tutor.

**Imani CONGDON** is a sophomore at Denison University. She has spent much of her life involved in the arts, starting violin and voice training at a very young age, and writing creatively throughout primary school. She majors in both Classical Studies and English, with a Black Studies minor.

**Cassandra FLEMING** is a Communication Major and Creative Writing minor at Denison. Her two great passions, besides writing, are hedgehogs and Harry Potter. Cassandra would like to thank her family: Marc, Pamela, Rachel Arianna, and Scott, as well as her boyfriend Ben for always supporting her writing, and more importantly putting up with her puns.

**Micah FRENKIEL** is a sophomore creative writing major and French minor. Outside of her major, she is really interested in film and photography.

**Ellen KAJCA** is a junior global commerce major. She created the piece, "Woven Dreams of Ecuador" while abroad in Ecuador and was constantly inspired by the nature around her.

**Molly KEISMAN** is a junior communication major with a concentration in narrative nonfiction writing. She is currently studying abroad in Rabat, Morocco.

**Yuliya KLISHCH** is a first-year PPE major with a Studio Art minor. Her two great passions are painting and *The Office*. She is originally from Ukraine.

**Allison KONECZNY** is a senior Psychology major and Creative Writing minor at Denison University. On campus, she is involved in the Doobie, DCA, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and is currently conducting senior research in Psychology. Although her life is quite lovely, Allison has a tendency to write of the dark and disturbing. This may stem from her obsession with Sylvia Plath at the age of 16 that she could never quite shake. Now, Allison spends her days drinking fruit smoothies, taking care of her plants, and reading too many love poems.

**Dingxi Dennis LU** is a native of Guangzhou, China. Dingxi enjoys long walks, Hong Kong films from the '90s, and cleaning his room. He speaks Mandarin, Cantonese, and English, and writes creatively in English mostly. He double majors in English and philosophy.

**Sophia MENCONI** is a 19-year-old writer and Washington, D.C. native. Presently, she lives in rural Ohio, where she has accidentally killed two beta fish, and also studies English: Creative Writing and Theatre at Denison University. Her work has previously appeared in *Pulp*, *Literary Orphans*, *Exile*, and *Mangrove*.

**Justine MORELLI** is a Senior Anthropology Sociology and Women's & Gender Studies double major from Pepperell, Massachusetts. She enjoys going on long runs in the Bio Reserve and writing in her free time. She plans on pursuing a degree in Public Health after graduation.

**Josi MILLER** is a sophomore from Indianapolis, Indiana studying Anthropology/Sociology and Spanish. She likes to work with oil paints, ceramics, and watercolors, and most of her pieces contain flowers with contrasting and vibrant colors. Her work is mainly experimental that contain elements of nature. In her free time, she enjoys traveling with friends and family, cooking, and playing soccer.

**Anna OWENS** is currently a Junior at Denison University. She is a studio Art Major pursuing her BFA. She created the pieces, “Patrick,” “Sydney,” and “John” the Fall of 2017 while studying abroad at the Marchutz School of Fine Art in Aix en Provence France.

**Elizabeth POSTEMA** is a senior Biology major and English Literature minor. She is deeply in love with art, science, nature, and the intersections between them. On most days, she can be found either birding in the Bioreserve or baking bread in her apartment.

**Sam RICE** is a junior studying English, Music, and German. He is from Columbus, Ohio and is currently spending a semester in Bath, England. He plans on attending graduate school for Creative Writing, focusing on poetry.

**Mattie SHEPARD** is a senior Creative Writing major and Spanish minor from Indianapolis, Indiana. She is a fencer and an avid board game player. Her life goal is to open a small independent bookstore.

**Alexandra TERLESKY** is a sophomore studying English Creative Writing with two minors in French and Studio Art. She has absolutely no idea how those three will combine into a profession, but she’s just hoping for the best! To distract herself from worrying too much about it, she partakes in the Fencing Club and listens to her favorite movie scores.

**Aidan VAN SUETENDAEL** is a senior Creative Writing major and Bluegrass Music minor from Stuart, Florida. When she isn’t writing poems, she’s playing banjo.

**Amber WARDZALA**, class of 2021, is an English Creative Writing major. Of Anishinaabe ancestry from White Earth Reservation, she is a resident of Burlington, Wisconsin. In her free time, she reads, writes, fences, practices various art forms, and goes for walks in nature.

Jason **WESSELING** is a senior English literature and political science double major, with a minor in classical studies. He plans to attend law school after graduation and is a member of the men's swimming and diving team.