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# Good Walls

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

# **Good Walls**

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

Connecticut College  
New London, Connecticut  
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# GOOD WALLS

Andrea Amulic

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

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Thank you.

*I.*  
*Barren Soil*

## Life Study

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She Makes Poems from Her Family's Table Scraps

"Madmen see outlines and therefore they draw them."

-William Blake

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

remodeled kitchen were  
never meant to become  
ink, grandfathers

are graveyards  
and they stay there.  
Whose nightmares

did you borrow  
for this one,  
eavesdropper?

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

Words overheard  
when cousins  
were strangers, advice-dealers—

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

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

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

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

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

## My Father: Etude De Ciel

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

he will hear me

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

## Marshal Tito

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

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

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

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

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

## Bridge, Tolerance

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

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

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

## Operation Deliberate Force

What noise burned  
through their brains what

bombs falling fell  
hard on concrete what hot

concrete flood filled  
the playgrounds whose

Pompeii is this whose  
inferno?

## Negative Capability

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Modest Proposal: Mladić In 1994

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

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

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

Confession: Mladić In The Hague, 2011

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Exhuming

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

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

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

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

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

## The City Of Her Birth Is No Longer Familiar

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

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

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

## Spent

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Thirty Minutes With Sofia

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Dubrovnik

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

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

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

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

## Lenses

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## To My Sister

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

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

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

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

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

## Baby Brother

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

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

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

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

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

*II.*  
*Remove Your Bones*

## Trapeze Artist

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

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

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

## My Hands Have Paused On A Keyboard

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

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

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

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

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

## Declining

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

-William Strunk, Jr.

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

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

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

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

## Bartender

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

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

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

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

Northeast Regional 48

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

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

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

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

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

## The Trevi Fountain

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

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

## Built For Discomfort

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

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

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

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

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

losing interest in kissing smokers

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

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

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

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

## Conditions Of Condolence

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

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

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

## Front Door

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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