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## Writing Sample

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Two stories. "Esther and 'The Impossible Colonization'" and "The Birds". First English publication in *Best European Fiction 2016*, Dalkey Archive Press (2015)

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Vladimir POLEGANOV

Two stories

### Esther and 'The Impossible Colonization'

Esther stares at the plaque:

*'The Impossible Colonization'*

Esther lets out a sigh, takes a few steps back and eases herself onto a bench. The blurry stain of her face, caught between her small black flats, grimaces back at her from the smooth, reflective museum floor. She holds her gaze for a moment, then closes her eyes, lifts her head and opens them again. It's become a ritual, almost, and she performs it diligently, day in and day out. When the museum is shut, she struggles through the anxiety and sense of dread and rehearses the motions in her living room. In those moments—days, even—she feels so pathetic and laughable, she's glad there's never anyone to look into her flat's ground floor window. But today is a workday, the museum is open, and she's not daydreaming, she's sitting on the bench in the middle of one of its vast exhibition spaces and staring. It is the most beautiful thing in this city, the most wonderful thing she's ever laid her eyes on. Not even beautiful, she sometimes catches herself thinking as the configurations on the other side of the glass shiver and rearrange, not really - but it is mine.

*1. It is known: the Master is always right. His Thoughts are the fastest, his Words—the most powerful. His Body, however, is weak. Much too weak. There's only one Master outside the Ship. One Master, submerged in a liquid, the essence of which is a mystery to everyone but the Ship's Computer. The other Masters move around freely, behind walls of star-stained black metal, away from the Planet's atmosphere, waging their War from a distance. We are not afforded such luxury—we're stuck on the outside, in the shadows of Sobremundo's vast mountains and forests, waiting for the War to end. It is strange, but you get used to it. They call it the War that Changes the World.*

Esther has long forgotten the first time she saw the Work, because she doesn't want to remember a time without it. There was never a before; her memory is unblemished by it. Life began with the Work, with the bodies behind the glass, locked in their movements that never seem to cease. She imagines, sometimes, a faceless husband figure who is scandalized, even hurt, by the thought of her coming here every day, watching them writhe. The Men. The beautiful, naked men. 'Art?! You call this art?!' he would scream and she would look down, as if in shame, and let her tongue glide across a coy smile. Her silence is sadistic, an act of outright violence. Her husband is a loser. He could never find his way to her or to anything else, for that matter. She is sure now, that even if he wanted to pleasure himself, his hand would get lost, feeling, grasping, clawing at thin air. Nothing but thin air. Not like the many hands in the Work. Hands are never left empty in the Work. There are no gaps there, just flesh. The men, the boys, the thinner figures—women perhaps? Or girls? No, no, definitely men, maybe boys—are full only of themselves, of each other. The way they are supposed to be. It is captivating watching them. She doesn't know exactly how many of them there are, but it's a lot. Their bodies are strong, sweaty, entangled, kinetic—a kaleidoscope of pure desire and she cannot take her eyes off it. She plays around with it, turns it over:

eyes, heads, many, many heads, lips, lips and anuses, fingers

Shakes it and the images rearrange:

a finger, eyes, many, many eyes, a head, lips and an anus

If her husband was to look at it, what would the pieces mean to him? Nothing, she smiles to herself - they would mean nothing because his views don't matter, he is not her husband and does not even exist.

*2. We have never seen the locals, the 'Aboriginals' as we are explicitly prohibited from calling them. They hide: in the jungle, in underground caves, in treetops and war stories. Not in cities or behind walls or in Ships, because they are Savages. Yes, Savages, that name at least we are allowed. 'Savages', we whisper across the void of the Ship's sleeping quarters, where the Dark envelops all, mercifully, making possible the step from one body to another. 'Savages', we exhale, taste the other's breath on our tongues, then their lips, the skin of their neck; the Dark renders us as one, uninterrupted. 'Savages' we repeat, fervently, and commit last night's lessons to memory—the map of our bodies grows ever clearer, ever more detailed, as the landscape remains alien, unknowable, impenetrable. We are the failed cartographers of the outside world. Who sent us here? Did they not know that all we are ever to explore we were born with? The geography of our own skin, it's not much. Not much at all.*

Esther doesn't remember when the Boy's face swims into focus in the centre of the Work, when he becomes the cynosure of her desire. He must have always been there, she reasons: if I could peer into the centre of my want, if that centre had a face, it would be the Boy's. I've been erected around him, I know him by heart. I can't count the number of breaths he has taken, but I can record everything else—every minute detail, every flinch, every movement. He never stops fucking. Never ceases giving himself away, flowing out: his semen and his urine, filling up the others' holes, flowing down their canals, leaving his trace in them the way he has in herself. The only difference is that he had entered her through her eyes alone, where she would have welcomed him everywhere: in her mouth, or in her vagina, or, really, wherever she could. And she could, oh, couldn't she just—her body is capable of so much, pay no mind that it sometimes feels dry— dry as kindling, as parchment, as...

'Excuse me' a voice snaps her out of her thoughts. She turns around slowly to face the Curator's apologetic smile. 'I'm interrupting you, I realize, but I simply cannot help myself...' he trails off until her nod lets him know he can continue. He sits down next to her.

'I've noticed you only ever look at 'The Impossible Colonization'. We have so many other installations, what is it about this one that holds your particular interest?'

What is it about this one?! She glances at him with disbelief, uncomprehending. 'I guess I just like it,' she says.

'I, for one, am horrified.'

Esther closes her eyes.

'They are horrific. All the bodies. All those men and boys. All those men and boys,' the man repeats, 'are nothing but death.'

### 3. WHAT

ARE YOU

DOING?

*The Master is standing in the entrance of the chamber, his elongated Shadow digging its nails into the wet walls of the corridor outside, trying to escape: even his darkest part refusing to bear witness to the scene in front of him. His reproach hits us headfirst, our armors, shiny with moisture and humming with information, trying desperately to reflect some of the impact back at him. Something flows between us, it's almost palpable, but we struggle to identify it. Is it guilt? Is it remorse that he expects? Whatever it is, we are either unable to feel it or don't realize we do—under the Master's gaze, inside the quarters' walls, the only regret we have is not being able to continue. So much regret. The Master begins to withdraw, perhaps having read something else in our reaction. We can't help but cry out, silently, for his approval, for a chance to stay in his eyes, in his thoughts, to make our way into his heart, but our repeated cries only echo in the empty halls of our own heads.*

Esther is alone. The Museum is about to close. Esther is ready to leave but hesitates. She recalls how two of her girlfriends, in the very same day yet independently of one another, have promised to finally find her a man.

*'Get a life!' 'Establish a connection!'*

Esther is horrified: as soon as the Museum closes, she will have to venture out into the street, into the city, into a world inhabited by her girlfriends and their kind. Esther doesn't want anything to do with that place and its abominable human fauna. But the Museum is closing and she has no choice.

'Madame, could I steal you for a moment...?' it's the Curator again. 'Forgive my impertinence, but maybe you would like to learn some more about the author of the installation?'

'The author?'

'Yes, of 'The Impossible Colonization'. He is widely regarded as a visionary, would you believe, and this particular work is the final chapter of a series called 'Statica.' You might have heard of another piece of his, 'Trolls'? Several heaps of stones under bridges in New York, London and Paris? And then maybe...'

'I haven't heard of it.' She really hasn't.

'Ah, then you should certainly investigate—they are all lovely, yes, not really suitable for a museum, but lovely nonetheless. Anyway, I digress. They are all lovely, apart from that last one. The last one is horrific.'

'You said so.'

'Look, I can see why it is provocative, illustrating stasis through movement, I get it. But it is just so... gaudy... And this extravagant fantastical landscape, the moons, the star at the top, the purple rocks.'

Esther looks back at the Work and sees the background for the first time. Phantasmagoric, indeed.

'It is an interpretation of one of the artist's earlier short stories, by the way. Published in *Amazing Stories* in 1957, which in itself is revolutionary for a sci-fi genre pre-occupied with sketching out the bright, anthropocentric future we were promised at the time... Forgive me, I seem to be wasting your time...'

*4. But before that he says the following:*

*'What is this? What has become of you? Instead of fighting the War that Changes the World, you spin around in circles! You atrophy! Look at yourselves, you are no longer human!' His last words get caught in the Ship's loudspeaker and thunder around its enormous antrum.*

*NO*

*around its hallways and chambers*

*LONGER*

*its control rooms and laboratories*

*HUMAN*

*its gymnasiums and shower rooms...*

*Oh yes, the shower rooms, where the Dark is even darker, because, and this is hardly a secret, humidity always makes the Dark darker and us—more whole. When the Master's amplified voice dies down, we look up, then at our feet, then to the people by our side and behind us, and wonder what we are expected to do now. We are here, aren't we? Finally knee-deep in this Alien world? What are we to do now?*

Esther is in her flat, asleep in an armchair in front of the TV. It's nighttime, there's a pornographic movie on. She is oblivious to what goes on. The light from the screen flickers off her eyelids: tongues, penises and lips abstracted to mere spots, lines and colours. Beneath the lids and reflections, Esther dreams. Her dream is so filthy that she won't be able to bear remembering it come morning—it will be replaced by the image of a man, her future husband maybe, and his harmless, vanilla-scented kisses. For now, however, she is weak with ecstasy as a skeleton fingers her, pinches the reddened skin between her thighs, his exposed jawbone with its small sharp teeth suckling blood from her breast. The skeleton's fingers are soiled, leaving dirt and mud between her legs. So much mud, it fills her up, it shuts her off, like an antique vessel just unearthed by the trembling hands of a young archeologist, full of the past, almost whole, almost preserved.

The Curator interrupts her ritual again 'You should know, the installation's time is coming to an end soon' 'But...' sentences refuse to form, but her surprise and... horror? are apparent. The two of them are sat side by side on the bench back in the Museum. It's the day after her dream.

'The artist's contract with us runs out in a matter of days. But at least he's not taking any of his materials, isn't that exciting? That's what he always does, leaves the used parts behind, for someone else to find.' It takes Esther a while to understand what he's trying to say. At first his words mean nothing, empty platitudes to make her feel like a valued customer of his institution. But then sounds pull back, like lips over teeth, to reveal their meaning:

'You can take something, if you want. As a memento, a present from the Museum'

Just like that: you can take something. Anything.

And then Esther remembers her dream. Naked female bodies slithering, rubbing against each other amidst rotten fish and octopus carcasses. It's not a dream, not really, but a memory, of another painting down the hall that she's only ever registered in her peripheral vision. But she doesn't know that.

*5. We're in the Chamber. The soft walls pulsate all around us. The hard, cold second skin of our suites embalms us, leaves no room for heat, or sweat or a tremor, even if we're scared to death, even if we're dying of fear. One of us is lying on the ground, three more standing in a circle around him. The recumbent one is waiting for the Chamber to exhale a mechanical sigh and spit out its medicine, the pills that make us strong enough to venture Out. But the other three are not thinking of the world outside, they are concentrated on him instead: how vulnerable his body looks, how pale and soft, how sensually exposed in the centre of the room's pulse. How his chest plate rises with every breath to meet them, in mid-air, to become one with the Dark, to enchant and lead them back down, like a siren song, to him, to something inside of him, something inside, not Out.*

Esther knows nothing about Art, never has. There's a picture hanging above her bed, a calendar cutout of a cherub (the month of May) in a cheap plastic frame. On the desk in her bedroom, which she never uses, sitting as she does in an office for most of the day (when not stealing an hour to go back to the Museum), she keeps a cube the size of a child's fist. Each of its six sides is a famous painting - the *Mona Lisa*, the *Water Lilies*, the *Starry Night* and then three more she no longer remembers. That's what Art is for Esther. She does not haunt the halls of the Museum as an expert or a connoisseur or even a casual hobbyist. The Work is the only thing that draws her there and she cannot recall a single second of her life before the Work became a part of it. If she were to be questioned, if her testimony is to be taken seriously, Esther and the Work materialized together, out of the thin air of the Before, each on the opposite side of the glass, not a reflection but an assemblage. So when Esther agrees to take a piece of the Work home, she does not think of herself as an artist, or even as an instrument of some aesthetic gesture. In fact, her mind is completely blank as her arms extend to accept the Boy's body from the Curator, she simply desires.

*(6) But before we've rushed headstrong into the new day, into the future the Masters' fingers point towards; before we've opened the apertures and crossed the threshold of the Ship's titanium doors; before we've zipped up our suites, before their needles and tubules have pumped us full of energy and purified and sanitized us; before we've heard the last of their orders and before we've even begun to imagine what the Battle would be like; before we've really seen the Outside, before we've heard the Savages battle cries' respond to ours, before we've managed to take one last look back and remembered the bliss of being uninterrupted, before we've realized how painfully we want to return; before we've closed our eyes to imagine the Trophies we would come back with to lay at the feet of our friends and loved ones, before we've started composing the stories we would whisper in the Dark - stories of cosmic beasts and killer labyrinths and monstrous scientists and viscid tentacled aliens—and smile in embarrassed modesty at our own courage and resolve, something stops us in our tracks.*

Esther carries the Boy in her arms. He is so thin and light as to be almost immaterial. Esther herself feels invisible, insubstantial, like a character in a mime's sketch—on the streets, on the subway, in the elevator and on the stairwell— a stylized action of no consequence. No one pays attention to a woman holding up a naked male body all by herself. The whole trip feels eerily make-believe, so much so that when she finally collapses into her armchair, she is surprised to actually find herself there. The Boy's face is covered, his body naked and white. Esther wants his features to remain hidden to everyone but herself. That's why she's wrapped his head up, without thinking, with the large men's handkerchief a former colleague gave

her in one of several attempts to earn her friendship. It was a strange gift, is all Esther remembers, but here it is now, proving useful. The Boy's face is hers and hers alone. The Curator is wrong: Death is grand; Death is a vast open space; it cannot be contained in a body so thin, so frail, so translucent. What IS inside his body, she asks herself as she lays him down on the bed and starts to change into her house clothes. For a moment she pauses, naked, between the twin eternities of her work and house selves, but there's no mirror in the room to certify her nakedness. I will find out in a second, she says to herself, best to try the eyes first. But when her fingers lift his eyelids, gently and lovingly, the eyes beneath are black, matte black, and entirely opaque—she can't see through them, she can't see herself reflected. They are not a window, nor a mirror.

7. *And it is something we cannot find words for.*

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### The Birds

#### One:

If she just looks long and hard enough through the grimy pane of the southern window, she is sure to see one of them returning to its nest. That's what she's been told, though it is unclear to her how to make out the exact location against the towering mountain slope. She has been staring into the distance for several hours now, to no avail—not a single bird, not even a feather. Only the words flutter about in her head that she remembers from when she was a child, her grandmother's words probably: "Good birds fly south." If they were to ask her now, she'd tell them: not good, but dark birds, black stains on the evening sky with crimson in their beaks. She doesn't know what good looks like, feathered or not, but good these birds are not, she is sure of it. Then again, none of them ever leaves this place; they just fly to the mountain and back.

The empty room slumbers behind her. Further behind that: a wall. Behind the wall, in the other room: dust, drain flies, and the sound of words drying and shriveling. He's at his desk, his typewriter devouring the paper sheet, his wound probably bleeding again. She will take care of it later; just stay here for a little while longer.

The sky has nothing to give her. Nor does time, apparently. Minutes, then hours glide across the blue—those that fly high soon evaporate in the heat, the rest get ripped to shreds by the towers of the town. You can't say that time is standing still here—she wished she could, but she can't. Still, its infiniteness is reassuring—*sine terminis*, there's always some more of it left. There's some for her to take now, to sit here, watching. To get up from the chair, turn and face the room, to look around, fix her skirt, and move towards the door. To open it slowly and step through, into the dust, the flies, and his words. To dress his wound again and take care of his stomach. To take care of herself.

Time to figure out what's going on.

#### Two:

As she enters his office, the desk is unoccupied. He's lying on the bed, asleep. The window is open. There is a black feather on the sill. She closes the window, picks up the feather, and puts it in the narrow vase next to the typewriter. There are several others there just like it. He opens his eyes.

"I wrote a little today," he says.

"I can see that." She turns toward the typewriter and its half-chewed prey. The white is not enough, there

is too much ink. It will always be too much, how could it not be—these words are eating her husband, day by day.

ENOUGH!

The bandage is torn, red stains creeping down each individual thread—barely large enough to cover the wound. The ointments, creams, and disinfectants she uses to clean and dress it have long since been moved from the bathroom to this room, on the shelf next to his books.

*“They took me by surprise again. Every single time. I had closed the window, barred it shut . . . Do you see that cardigan? I was wearing it over another one, and a shirt . . . I thought that the layers would slow them down, that . . .”*

*“Of course they won’t,”* she interrupts, telling him to keep quiet and sit still as she removes the dripping bandage and rinses out the raw flesh beneath it. *“Have they ever?”*

Never, he concedes.

In the beginning, they would both cry each time they had to re-dress the wound. Their nights have been sleepless since he told her he was meant to write. The fury of her screams and the blows from her fists on the day they delivered the typewriter seem distant now, inconceivable. The curt confirmation telegram that the Mayor’s office had sent some days later is now but one of many scars.

He has resigned himself to this new life all too quickly, but she’s not going to follow suit. Oh, he has no idea. One day she will knock the photographs off the wall, breaking their frames, letting all that has been flowing out of them flow out even quicker. What use is it to her anyway? Some pre-writerly past, paralyzed moments in time, impossible now under the tyranny of words.

It is all in her head anyway:

The afternoon walks in the town’s only park.

The midsummer nights’ concerts.

The chocolate ice cream he never quite warmed up to.

The yellow boat in the lake.

It’s all in her head, it clawed its way into her open mouth and curled up in the darkest corner of her brain as she read out the telegram for the first time:

*Builder of Society*

*Category: Writer*

*From: March of the current year.*

They were making a writer out of him. They *had* already made him a writer. She read the telegram again, hoping the act would invert the meaning of the text, erase the words from the piece of paper, stop the world from turning, or at least make it take a step backwards.

His groans rouse her out of her thoughts. When did he manage to get back to his desk? Whatever happens, I can’t let this moment pass me by.

The next day, when she finds him in a puddle of blood, with several pages of writing stacked neatly next to the typewriter, she decides she has to do something. But first she finds some time to take care of his wounds.

**Three:**

The woman upstairs lost her mind several years ago. As many years as the pearls in the necklace she never lets out of her grip, she claims, though her medical records probably say otherwise. The writer’s wife visits often, for the comfort of their shared silences: the madwoman’s silence is heavy, imposing, almost operatic in scale; the wife’s: brittle, sinking to the bottom like residue. In the wordless haze of their afternoon silence, each of their heads is like a tower in a drowned city: seen a lot, knows a lot, but mute as a tombstone.

But this time it is different. This is an afternoon of words, unleashed like a cork being popped with the visitor's cry: "I can't take it any more"—a tempest that neither of them is able or willing to end. "Let me tell you how I lost my mind," begins the madwoman. "It was the very last thing I lost. I held on to it by my fingernails, clutched it till I was blue in the face, but it would not stay. We lose everything in the end, remember—even my mother told me that: that's the way the world works: all will flow out of you. You, young lady, you have no valves, no doors. But look at me, I'm like a sieve! That's what she told me and it was all true. I, the fool, went out looking for truth, found it and went mad. Everything you see of me now, every fold and every crease of my once smooth skin is a letter. But let me spare you the reading: it was finding out where he had gone that drove me mad. Wait, WAIT! Let me tell you about the birds first: you can't defeat them. Not the big ones, not the small ones either—they fly, while we only drag ourselves across the ground. All we can do is look up at them. That and curse them. And I cursed, oh, I cursed them for so long I ran out of words. It wasn't my voice that had gone; it was the words—as if I had squandered them, drank them away. I mean, they came back, of course—anger is what remains when all else abandons you. Still, I'm keeping my words to myself these days. And for you, I guess, on occasion.

*I hated you in the beginning, did you know that? I wanted to strangle you—wrap my hands around your delicate neck, there, in that corner . . . I could have done it too, I was stronger then. But because I had once lost my words, I was afraid I'd also lose whatever strength I had, so I let it go. And then you turned out alright, there aren't many decent people left living in this building . . . So let me tell you what I saw. I don't know what it was: salvation or just an escape; whether I should feel fortunate or just sit here and cry. I never figured it out, as much as I mulled it over in that ever-decelerating windmill creaking in my head. I left it in the end, told myself there was no point in trying—I'm mad already, what is it to me to look for his reasons? We need to get used to the feeling of ending, we do, for the end is coming and it's all we have left to look forward to."*

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The writer's wife descends the stairs, replaying the conversation with the madwoman in her head. "You need to go to the other side of the mountain." The other side? "Of the mountain, yes." It sounds fantastical, somehow, like a fairytale bent out of shape. "It does, but it isn't. And you'll lose him, it is inevitable." Lose what, she thinks to herself as the ground floor draws near, or whom? Man or mind? And isn't it the same anyway?

She leaves the useless thoughts at the door and steps inside, the madwoman's presence following her like a trailing odor. What did you see there?

*"What I saw is only for me to know. Whether I remember it, however . . . It's still somewhere inside me, spinning and smoldering, simmering slowly until, one day, it explodes. I won't think about it till then."*

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She tells him there is something she needs to attend to, it will be no more than a couple of days. He is not to write, if possible, and should notify the neighbors, any neighbor, if he absolutely has to. She'll leave a key in the flowerpot next to the door, and really, he should ask his brother to tear himself away from his precious factory for once and come keep him company. Don't move too much, only short trips to the bathroom or the kitchen; there's soup, a pot of casserole, two loaves of bread, and some dessert in the fridge. She kisses him on the cheek. The wound weeps.

#### **Four:**

The road to the mountain is straight, tree-lined, and perfect. The wind's mischievous fingers sway the tops of the poplars, their shadows licking the asphalt's glistening skin. She walks straight down the middle, trying not to let them get her, as if they weren't shadows but holes in the pavement, as if she could fall straight through and into nothing. Her eyes are fixed on the mountainside in the distance, on the cloudy

tapestry above it. She herself will soon be there, she will soon understand. Or the madwoman will turn out to be a liar, jealous, deceitful . . .

She doesn't want to think about it, now is not the time. She will just keep walking, up to the end of the paved road, on to the mountain trail and up to the cliffs, then down to the valley beyond. She will not look back, this is no place for regret. She will not look up at the monstrous beaks carrying pieces of her husband and god knows how many other people, which would only make her angry. Oh, how gladly she would set fire to their nests! Or no, not fire—they are already the color of dirty smoke. No, she will choke the infernal throat they fly out of and let them tear each other to shreds. Yes.

**Five:**

She's approaching the end of the road. She wants to go on, only a few steps more, but she can't. She wants to rest her eyes, for just a moment, but she can't. She wants to turn to stone there where she stands, a delicate calcified tribute to grief and longing, but she won't. She wishes she were already insane and hallucinating, but she is painfully lucid.

Then she sees it: the house in the forest, white, beautiful, superimposed onto the landscape, out of place yet unthinkable anywhere else, timeless. Spring, summer, autumn, winter chase each other around its pristine walls without daring to touch them, like bashful suitors uncertain of their paramour's favor. This house is the safest place in the world. She can move now, the paralysis has suddenly drained down her leg, slithered away like a snake, and hidden under a stone somewhere. She takes a few steps forward, slowly at first, then almost running, towards the bright wooden door with its shining brass handle.

The stern look of the windows stops her in her tracks: *we lead to the soul of this house, they rumble, you can't run towards the soul of anything. Souls are to be approached reverently, carefully, quietly.* Yes, of course, she nods, of course. She remains still.

How is she only seeing them now? There are several of them, perched on the roof, on the sills, one hops a few feet from the door. Their eyes are curious, their beaks full. Her movements have not alarmed them. Only the cold wind seems capable of ruffling their impeccable assembly of feathers. She tries to scream at them and realizes her voice is gone. She's not surprised, somehow it seems logical. One by one, the birds disappear into the house, through the windows, phasing through the walls, through the door, through the chimney, as if sinking into the reflected image of a house on the surface of the world's calmest lake. A pestilence wherever they go, she thinks, and takes a careful step towards the windows.

She sees them: the man and the woman.

He is lying on the right side of their bed. She is sitting on a low chair next to him, a wet cloth in her lap and a metal basin by her feet. Her legs are slender, elegant under a short, green dress, a shade of green that evokes autumn, dark and rich next to the hazel of her hair. The man appears to be naked, his lower body under a grey blanket that matches the bedroom's thin curtains. Grey like the carpet under her delicate feet. The writer's wife imagines his legs are as strong and muscular as his shoulders and chest, and just as specked with the blood of many open wounds. The pain he must be in is all too familiar. She lets out a muffled sigh and looks on as the birds fly into the room.

One by one they appear, turning their heads around to take in the surroundings, looking for a place to leave their plunder, in order to tear into his flesh again. But no, she is wrong—instead, they hop across the carpet, making their way to the basin. Carefully, without spilling a drop of blood, they empty their beaks into it, by the woman's feet. She leans down and soaks the cloth in the water, wrings it out and gently runs it across the man's heaving chest. The skin sizzles and slowly closes, not even a scar to blemish the flawless curve of his torso. The man looks at her. She smiles, then breaks into laughter. Both of them are laughing now. They look happy. They look familiar. The woman outside can't hear anything; she can only read their faces.

And then she sees the details:

Every single detail suddenly looms into focus. Every line around the man's eyes, every wrinkle in the white sheets, every speck of dust on the chest of drawers by the door, every spider in every corner and every nook, every color in the photographs of children on the walls, every letter in the book lying open on the bedside table, every intricate outline in the wardrobe's woodwork, every hair on his body and on the

body of the cat sleeping on the left side of the bed, every key of the broken typewriter on the desk. The details wash over her, flow into her body and fill up the space left vacant by paralysis, rush up her veins and arteries and storm her head, devouring her thoughts. It is the details that make this world, this new, terrible world over the mountain, real. Real and impossible for her to be in. She can only stare, or read its signs, but never be of it. Even if she were to reach out, she wouldn't be able to touch anything. Even if she were to open her mouth, no sound would come out. Even if she were to leave, there would be nowhere to go. *You can't move in a place where you don't belong*, the windows tell her. And she doesn't nod, because she can't.

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*Both stories translated from the Bulgarian by Peter Bachev*

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