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EAT

ANGELA STEVENSON

I

The light is blinding, as my cover, tight and taut, splits and peels back. My arms ache and I am gasping, blinking, trembling, as I finally spill out. At least it's warm; so warm, the air greeting my skin. I'm a little giddy; light-headed, too fresh. I slump down next to someone else and feel flesh next to mine. I'm comforted and close my eyes. I just need to sleep.

Hunger opens my eyes for me. I stand up, stiff, and stretch my arms and legs out, knocking the girl next to me in the head. I can see a group of girls crowded around a white table with a grey pipe expelling food. I jostle in and eat. It's tasteless, gritty and everyone has the same.





I search, scanning the faces for someone I am supposed to meet, snapping my head this way and that, but no one looks to be looked for. It's none of them and there are so many. So many. "Whoever you are, I'm over here! Over here!" Wait! They are all asking too, using the same words, and our voices mesh together, unrecognisable. Are we all looking for her?

VII

We eat, we drink, we shit, we sleep. There are people that come by occasionally, but they all seem the same – their faces partially covered. When they arrive, the girls make noises in hope, but all they do, these people, is take away those of us that no longer breathe. The food keeps coming, as much as we can eat, and the water runs, but the smell has begun to rake at my nostrils. The light is still on. At least I am warm and I have food. My legs are a little longer and I'm walking properly now, but they itch constantly. They need. I stretch my arms out, as wide as they will go, and I hold them up to the warmth. Then I sit down, most likely on someone else's shit. I'm tired again and I shuffle closer to the others seeking touch. I recognise the girl I draw next to as the one with a bad temper. She has recently stopped pushing in to eat. She is quiet. Her eyes are closed and she is cooler than me. I move around a little and find someone else who is warmer.

XIV

I've eaten all day again, all day and all night, and my breasts are beginning to swell and hurt. We squabble and squabble, generally over the food, but sometimes over a space in a





huddle. Even though there are fewer of us there's less space, and it's never clear whether this girl or that girl is the boss. A larger girl took charge last week and told us where we could sleep, but now she has developed a rash on her face, dark red and creased, and I don't want to look at her. She is unable to walk. Her eyes are dull and an even larger girl pinches at her flesh, over and over, perhaps hoping to assert her position, perhaps to bring her back to life. It doesn't matter. It won't last. She'll be next.

A girl I know as the 'Corner Girl', because she tends to hang around in the corners, picks at my arm because I wandered close to her, and I am not sure whether it is fondly or cruelly. I'm not sure she knows.

XXI

The room remains lit, the food is still gritty, the shit we walk on deeper, the stench more noxious, but the way we die is far different. Hurriedly. Profoundly. Crying out, arms flailing, chest pumping, falling backwards, jerking. Imploding. Then the panting stops, the eyes relax and the flesh sags. Blessed relief. No one pays much attention. Some girls chatter and tug at the lump that remains - the open eyes, the sores - but I'd rather keep eating.

My feet hurt. My toes are curled up under my arches and to walk the few steps to food is difficult. I stretch them out again, pushing my legs out, one by one, behind me.

XXVIII





I don't want to die like the others, because 28 is young. It's young and I feel old and my chest is huge and my legs and hips are grossly plump and I can barely move. Which is probably just as well, because everyone else is enormous and moving around has become far too hard. I decide to sit still rather than drag myself to the water tube. But I'm so thirsty. I can barely see the tube now anyway as my eyes are burning and keeping them closed is easier. People continue to come and take away the still, twice a day now. They're not even looked at, just grabbed by the legs and dragged out. I need to get out. Out, out! What is that? Where is out? I debate this with Corner Girl who has slept next to me now for weeks. She tells me off. She picks at my feet and warns me not to bother. According to her, there is no out. We argue a lot. She argues with everyone. In fact, everyone argues with everyone. But I think she's still my friend.

XXXV

I can barely breathe; the air is fetid, and the pain of my stinging lungs is made worse by the weight of my chest. I can't say how many of us have stopped breathing this air, but now I wish I was one of them. I pick some food off the floor, then close my eyes and sleep, again.

XLII

I'm bickering with Corner Girl again, over her leg in my face, her sores putrid. Now some food has fallen between us and we quarrel over that. I go to move away and the light, without warning, becomes brighter. Why? Never before. I





spin my head around. There are people everywhere, moving quickly around huge containers that have dozens of holes in the sides. They're not looking at the dead, they're looking at us! They are snatching the living women by their legs and heaving them into the containers. The collective screeching of our voices slashes at my ears. Screaming, screeching, I lurch towards a corner, knowing there is nowhere to go. Corner Girl is too stunned to move, crouching down where she is, waiting, just waiting. I hear bodies slapping against others in the bins. Frantic, clawing tussles for space and air. The people move towards my corner. I tuck my fat legs under my fat body as best I can, but they just push me over and wrench them from under me, jerking me up and into a container.

The containers are shut tight now and stacked on one another. Women staring out, limbs askew. The woman I am on top of has stopped breathing. Another woman's leg has been sliced off because it was poking out of a hole when another container slid by. There's not an inch of space to catch a deep breath.

The containers are lifted into an even larger area. Women are crying out for air, for room, for others to get OFF THEIR HEAD. I'm lucky; I am on top and I have access to air. My arm is jammed at right angles to my body; I can't correct it, no matter how I try. There is a loud crack and startling darkness. Now all I can do is feel and hear the bodies around me. Writhing, struggling for relief from the crush. The whole room is shuddering.

The light is on again, but this time it comes from only one direction. The women, in stunned silence from the deep





black or from not breathing, turn their heads in its direction. Their containers are being unloaded. I can see something moving overhead. The containers are wrenched open and the women are once again grabbed by the legs, screaming. From the hole near my head I catch sight of her, my arguing, arm-picking, foot-picking Corner Girl, snatched up and jammed into leg clamps, hanging, upside down, her eyes wide and her head darting back and forth trying to make sense of this new place.

This is what 'out' is. This is it.

I watch her, the girl with whom I spent 42 days eating, growing, sleeping, and fighting, now ingloriously hanging upside-down. Arms and body wildly resisting, flapping, flailing, too terrified to scream now, she is shoved along and dipped into a large body of water in which she convulses and then grows surprisingly still, her eyes open. More women follow, but I keep my eyes on my friend. She hangs and the clamps move her along. I can't take my eyes from her as she floats away from me and the blade that I had refused to see before is now upon her. So fast it moves, so stained it appears black. Her head, her bickering head, falls and I watch it, silent.

My eyelids close. The lid on my container is open and I am the first. I know what to expect now and welcome the rough hands as they snatch at my bloated, relieved flesh.





CONTRIBUTORS

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Ellery is a postgraduate student of Creative Writing at Deakin University who is currently living in Melbourne. He participates in Olympic Weightlifting and listens to Thomas Ligotti short stories while he sleeps. This is his first published work.

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Ella is a researcher and teacher in Melbourne. She has published articles for the *Day of the Girl* website, as well as being a member of the Clifton Hill writers group. As part of her Honours year in Contemporary Arts, Ella completed a thesis on how poetry relates to the body. She is a qualified Yoga teacher and is part way through her Tantra teaching qualification. In her spare time, she enjoys rock climbing and writing on her website: ellabaxter.squarespace.com

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Erica Williams: Hair & (De)constructing Trauma

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