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*Winner of the Young Walter Scott Prize 2025*

*16 to 19 category*

## **The Porcelain Dragon**

**1942 - San Francisco, California\***

She knows what they want from her. She sees it in the posters that plaster the windows of grocery stores, screaming at passers-by amidst banners declaring the inflated prices of vegetables. She sees it in the cartoons that have bombarded her weekly newspapers and magazines every day since war broke out. Those garish yellow faces and narrow, vindictive eyes must haunt the dreams of every American child, malevolent buck-toothed grins with canines sharpened to rival the deadliest of blades.

This is what they mean for her to capture. Perhaps not as crudely or grotesquely, but she must still tell a story of their otherness. Or else, if they are so unfailingly human that this is impossible, she must make them forgettable; so that when the press inevitably pounces, readers will pass over their faces and it will be as if they never existed. Hide the crime in plain sight.

Stick to the narrative.

But standing on the sidewalk, observing the chaos and confusion unfolding around her, her camera - a lightweight Zeiss Juwel - is an unusually heavy burden. For the first time in her two decades as a photographer, she sees no photos to take.

A photographer's job - her job - is to take a thousand lives and condense them into a single moment. A whole life: all of its complexity, all of its vividness, all of its raw emotion - all captured within a single shot. She is an artist, a poet, a composer. But most importantly, she is a storyteller.

Across the street, a crowd is growing rapidly. Tightly packed heads the entire length of the sidewalk, many people left to linger on the dirt road at the mercy of the cars and motorcycles which fill the air with honks of irritation. Hundreds of people wait: babies, children, parents, grandparents. Families are easily identified as they huddle together, clinging tightly to one another as if they are afraid of being torn apart. The warm April breeze carries their fear through the street, rippling through the mass of people like a plague. She can see it etched all over their faces, clinging to their skin, in

their bodies as they cleave to piles of luggage scattered along the road - entire lives reduced to a few suitcases and sacks.

Right now, there is no story to tell. Not the one they want told. But if she means to be a good storyteller, she must know her characters better than she knows herself.

In all her photographs she makes a point of never catching her subjects unaware. Photography, she understands, is never one-sided. The best photographs are collaborations between the photographer and the subject, between the observer and the observed - they write the story together. However, her instructions were clear: no talking to the evacuees.

Sweeping her gaze across the street for an opportunity to melt unnoticed into the crowd, conscious of the ever watchful gaze of the military police, her well-trained eye catches upon a little man, the many wrinkles on his face indicating an age far beyond her own, fighting a useless battle with a suitcase more than half his height, as he tries to lug it off the road where it has already held up several cars full of drivers who hammer their fists on their horns.

She sees it happening before it does. Just as he makes one final desperate pull, heaving it up with the last of his strength, he trips on that unforgiving chasm where road meets sidewalk, stumbling backwards. Time seems to slow before her eyes. She can only stare helplessly as the handle slips from his grasp and the bulging suitcase tumbles back, landing on the road with a resounding *crash* as it splits open and she watches as handcrafted plates, cups, bowls, and vases in every colour imaginable tumble out, the force of the collision throwing them outwards and away from the case to form a rainbow mosaic - an explosion of colour amidst the monotonous greys and browns that paint the street.

She barely has time to register the sight before a young woman darts forward and swiftly begins gathering up the items which lie nearest the sidewalk with graceful, steady movements as a young man patiently helps the old man to his feet, his expression crumpling in dismay as he takes in the sight of his careful labour lying in pieces before his eyes. She imagines him gently moulding the curved spout of a teapot with calloused hands. She sees him, brush in hand, painstakingly painting every little detail, taking care to find the perfect shade of pink for each cherry blossom.

Patience exhausted, one of the drivers presses forward, barging past the young woman and the crowd that has formed around them. Led by example, the rest of the cars, which have been hovering about tentatively, soon follow. The crunch of ceramic under tire echoes through the street.

The disturbance has caught the attention of the military police. Three of them come over to investigate, waving their rifles around in warning. With no aggression or attempts at resistance apparent, their stony expressions soon turn to ones of amusement when they catch sight of the old man scrabbling around on his knees, desperately trying to salvage what he can.

It is a pitiful sight.

For a moment, she imagines immortalising the scene: defy her unspoken orders, tell a story of an oppressive government and a victimised race. Her hand reaches for her camera.

But what would she achieve? A photo which criticises US troops so openly could never become public. It would be confiscated immediately, maybe even destroyed - ultimately lost forever.

Instead, she takes advantage of the distraction to slip discreetly into the crowd. With her hat and large beige coat, she blends in seamlessly.

In the midst of so many people, layer upon layer of voices blend together to form a discordant, lazy hum through which she catches snippets of conversation. Some speak rapidly in foreign tongues, others converse in accented English, but she finds most voices adopt a familiar Californian accent.

An unsettling feeling of being watched creeps over her. Looking down, she finds a pair of small, intelligent brown eyes staring back at her. Their owner is a young girl who cannot be older than eight, wrapped up in a green coat, dark hair divided into two neat braids secured with matching green bows, a doll cradled in one arm - blonde and clothed in layer upon layer of white lace. Round her own neck sits a tag which she knows will bear a number - they are easier to identify this way - as if she herself is on display at the toy store. She is suddenly overcome by the urge to wrap her up, to box her up like a china doll and carry her off far, far away.

The girl's face is glaring: unabashed and defiant. Accusatory, as if to say "I know you are not like us".

A strong sense of shame creeps up on her. She realises now how strange she must look to this child with her imposing camera. Most noticeably, the fear, uncertainty, and nervous anticipation does not cling to her as it does to so many around her; she walks with the knowledge that she will sleep soundly in her own bed tonight.

She finds herself marvelling at the way young children have the ability to confront you with your own failures as a human being, voicing the truths she herself is unwilling to see. And all of a sudden she knows she was wrong: this is not her story to tell. Nor is it shared, as if equally hers and equally theirs, but rather wholly, entirely their own. A life, a childhood, a family - she can never completely understand what has been stolen. And this little girl knows it.

Crouching down, she offers up her camera - her crown jewel - like a peace offering for the girl to inspect and attempts a weak smile.

“Hello,” she says, trying to appear as unthreatening as possible; talking to young children has never been her forte, “What’s your name?”

The girl’s eyes narrow, assessing her.

Averting her gaze, the girl begins to twist her doll’s dress round and round her finger until, still twisting non-existent fabric, she reluctantly mumbles, “Mika”

Relieved at being deemed acceptable, her face relaxes into a natural smile. She tells Mika her own name and that she is a photographer, come here to take pictures of people like her.

At this, Mika’s expression morphs into one of curiosity, verging on excitement.

“Do you want to take my picture?” Mika asks, “Nobody’s ever taken a photo of me before.”

She hesitates. Could this be the photo she is after? Her missing piece?

But before she can reply, a murmur ripples through the crowd. Heads turn towards the road where, at last, five large buses have pulled up. In an instant, the street loses its nervous boredom, coming to life with frantic calls for family members and friends who have been swallowed up by the masses, diminished by the ringing shouts of the military police for order.

She can hear one name above all others. Pushing his way through the swarms a man materialises before them, his eyes fearful and searching: calling for his daughter.

“Papa!” Mika calls, “I’m here”

Locking his sight upon his daughter, his body relaxes in relief.

“There you are. Quick, mama is waiting for us”

With an ease she almost feels jealous of, he scoops Mika up, shooting her a suspicious glare as he instinctively shields Mika with his body before charging back towards the jostling people. Over his shoulder, Mika’s bright eyes meet hers, taunting. She thinks: *I can’t lose her.*

Fumbling with her camera, she curses her slow hands as people rush by, obscuring her view. Whole minutes seem to pass before she finally hears the mechanical *click clack* and it is done. She has her photo.

Her world freezes. Now part of her will stand there, rooted to her spot as if she herself is a photo, trapped forever in the endless abyss of time. The barks of angry men, the buzzing of a thousand voices, the rumble of five engines departing one after another will fill her ears with a noiseless clamour. Until there is nothing.

Emptiness fills the road, seeping through the cracks in the sidewalks, squeezing out of windows, pushing up through drains, closing in on the one figure that remains. Eventually, even she will leave, crossing over to where her car has been waiting. Taking one last look around, she drives away.

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Across the street, a little girl walks by, clinging to her mother’s hand. She laughs to herself at the game she has created all on her own, kicking a small stone along the sidewalk in a one-woman game of soccer until her mother tells her to stop it as she will scuff her new shoes.

But something about the stone catches the girl’s attention.

She bends down to pick it up, only to find it is not a stone after all but a piece of porcelain. The design is incomplete, broken off from a larger shape, but she can make out the strange head of a beast with long twisting horns and cunning serpentine eyes, sharp claws bared out towards her. Entranced by its beauty, she picks it up and drops it into her pocket.

\* *Dorothea Lange was a photographer commissioned by the US government to document the relocation of Japanese Americans to internment camps across western America after the US declared war on Japan. She took*

*many photos over a series of months and although inspired by her work, this scenario is entirely fictitious and not written with any particular photograph in mind.*

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