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Alexandria Bay, bibliophile

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Alexandria Bay, bibliophile

As a boy I used to marvel that the letters in a closed book did not get mixed up and lost in the course of a night.

—Jorge Luis Borges, “The Aleph”

Alexandria Bay is bibliophile—but
anyone who’s anything-*phile* is out of date
even if the passion’s timeless as it is
Latinated, Greekated: philatelists, philologists,
bibliophiles—alas! They’re as quaint
as my saying “quaint” or “alas!”—anyhow,

Alexandria Bay loves books in a guts sort of way,
but her brother, Ben, teaches her love for flow aesthetics:
curling quotations, ligatures, pages without widows
or orphans, words taken down in gorgeous fonts—
and she worries, tries to outread acid death,
nightmares libraries of ashes from internal fires.

Alexandria Bay turns to stacks, senses herself
among temple columns etched with hieroglyph,
gets this sort of reverent rush—careful not to spit,
she blows bona fide dust off books, gentles them open,
checks copyright dates, brain stumbling on spikes
of Roman numerals—checks for *S*’s that look like *F*’s . . .

[as in “*f*pirit”]

Alexandria Bay's heart beats in her fingers
 as she touches a 1777 *Paradise Lost* safe inside leather,
 lost in the stacks like any other book—but Elder James E.
 Talmage's signature diagonals the flyleaf—and for the name's
 sake she escorts it to special collections, wonders
 if it's rare enough—but anything old is rare, she says.

Alexandria Bay buys, inherits, gathers remnant books:
 old grammars, readers, a book with Blake's *Milton*—

[Bring me my Bow of burning gold:

Bring me my Arrows of desire:

Bring me my Spear: O clouds, unfold!

Bring me my Chariot of fire]—

she buys a Herbert, its 1856 dust scenting her finger
 as she runs it over “The Altar,” over “A. Bay 1859”
 quill-scratched on a flyleaf—she wonders if it's a relative,
 if the book has “come home”—her grandparents' books have, anyhow—

including three volumes of the *History of Utah*—
 with wrinkled skin, gold tattoos on their backs and chests, their leather
 flaking like dry blood on her shelf, they smell faintly
 of maple sugar, remind her how they scented afternoons when sun
 focused shafts through window panes, warming her grandparents'
 books—and she loves them, Alexandria Bay, bibliophile.

—Casualene Meyer

“Alexandria Bay, bibliophile” won third place in the 1993 *BYU Studies* Writing
 Contest, poetry division.