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The Robber Bride

Margaret Atwood



MMARGARET **A**ATWOOD

THE ROBBER BRIDE

Margaret Atwood is the author of more than thirty-five works of fiction, poetry, and essays, published in more than forty countries. Her most recent works include the novels *Oryx and Crake* and the Booker Prize—winning *The Blind Assassin* as well as *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*. Ms. Atwood lives in Toronto.

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THE
ROBBER
BRIDE

MARGARET
ATWOOD



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NEW YORK

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A signed first edition of this book has been privately printed by The Franklin Library.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition of this book as follows:

Atwood, Margaret Eleanor, 1939—
The robber bride / Margaret Atwood.

p. cm.

I. Title.

PR9199.3.A8R6 1993

813'.54—dc20 93-24267

eISBN: 978-0-307-79797-1

www.anchorbooks.com

v3.1

For Graeme and Jess,
and for Ruth, Phoebe, Rosie, and Anna.

For Absent Friends.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the following for their help: my agents Phoebe Larmore and Vivienne Schuster; my editors Ellen Seligman, Nan A. Talese, and Liz Calder; David Kimmel, for helping with some of the historical details; Barbara Czarnecki, Judi Levita, Marly Rusoff, Sarah Beale, and Claudia Hill-Norton; Joan Sheppard, Donya Peroff, and Sarah Coope; Michael Bradley, Gerry Foster, Kathy Minialoff, Gene Goldberg, and Alison Parker; Ros Tornato. Thanks also to Charles and Julie Woodsworth, to Dorris Heffron, and to John and Christiane O’Keeffe, for premises rendered.

John Keegan’s *The Face of Battle* and *The Mask of Command* were most useful for background, as were *None Is Too Many* by Irving Abella and Harold Troper and *The Walls Against the Jews*, by Lucy S. Dawidowicz; and also for specific battles and events, Richard Erdoes’s *A.D. 1000* and *The Unknown South of France* by Henry and Margaret Reuss. The assassination of ballistics expert Gerald Bull is dealt with in *Bull’s Eye*, by James Adams, and in *Wilderness of Mirrors*, by Dale Grant.

The image of the body as a lampshade is courtesy Lenore Mendelson Atwood; the expression “brain snot” is courtesy E.J.A. Gibson. The red-and-white footprints recall a story told to me by Earle Birney; the toboggan incident and the black-painted apartment, from Graeme Gibson; the ghost as dry rice was suggested by an episode recounted by P.K. Page; the notion of a flesh dress came from James Reaney’s poem “Doomsday, or the Red-Headed Woodpecker”; the tale of the heroic German aunt was suggested partly by Thomas Karl Marx Schwarz; and the professor who disallowed military essay topics for women from an anecdote related by Susan Crean.

Zenia is pronounced with a long “e,” as in “seen”; *Charis* with a hard “c” as in “karma.” The Teutones (second century B.C.) are distinct from the Teutons (tenth century A.D.)

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Outcome

A rattlesnake that doesn't bite teaches you nothing.

—*Jessamyn West*

Only what is entirely lost demands to be endlessly named: there is a mania to call the lost thing until it returns.

—*Günter Grass*

Illusion is the first of all pleasures.

—*Oscar Wilde*

ONSET

The story of Zenia ought to begin when Zenia began. It must have been someplace long ago and distant in space, thinks Tony; someplace bruised, and very tangled. A European print, hand-tinted, ochre-coloured, with dusty sunlight and a lot of bushes in it—bushes with thick leaves and ancient twisted roots, behind which, out of sight in the undergrowth and hinted only by a boot protruding, or a slack hand, something ordinary but horrifying is taking place.

Or this is the impression Tony has been left with. But so much has been erased, so much has been bandaged over, so much deliberately snarled, that Tony isn't sure any longer which of Zenia's accounts of herself was true. She can hardly ask now, and even if she could, Zenia wouldn't answer. Or she would lie. She would lie earnestly, with a catch in her voice, a quaver of suppressed grief, or she would lie haltingly, as if confessing; or she would lie with cool, defiant anger, and Tony would believe her. She has before.

Pick any strand and snip, and history comes unravelled. This is how Tony begins one of her more convoluted lectures, the one on the dynamics of spontaneous massacres. The metaphor is of weaving or else of knitting, and of sewing scissors. She likes using it: she likes the faint shock on the faces of her listeners. It's the mix of domestic image and mass bloodshed that does it to them; a mix that would have been appreciated by Zenia, who enjoyed such turbulence, such violent contradictions. More than enjoyed: created. *Why* is still unclear.

Tony doesn't know why she feels compelled to know. Who cares why, at this distance? A disaster is a disaster; those hurt by it remain hurt, those killed remain killed, the rubble remains rubble. Talk of causes is beside the point. Zenia was a bad business, and should be left alone. Why try to decode her motives?

But Zenia is also a puzzle, a knot: if Tony could just find a loose end and pull, a great deal would come free, for everyone involved, and for herself as well. Or this is her hope. She has a historian's belief in the salutary power of explanations.

Where to start is the problem, because nothing begins when it begins and nothing's over when it's over, and everything needs a preface: a preface, a postscript, a chart of simultaneous events. History is a construct, she tells her students. Any point of entry is possible and all choices are arbitrary. Still, there are definitive moments, moments we use as references, because they break our sense of continuity, they change the direction of time. We can look at these events and we can say that after them things were never the same again. They provide beginnings for us, and endings too. Births and deaths, for instance, and marriages. And wars.

It's the wars that interest Tony, despite her lace-edged collars. She likes clear outcomes. So did Zenia, or so Tony thought once. Now, she can hardly tell.

An arbitrary choice then, a definitive moment: October 23, 1990. It's a bright clear day, unseasonably warm. It's a Tuesday. The Soviet bloc is crumbling, the old maps are dissolving, the Eastern tribes are on the move again across the shifting borders. There's trouble in the

Gulf, the real estate market is crashing, and a large hole has developed in the ozone layer. The sun moves into Scorpio, Tony has lunch at the Toxique with her two friends Roz and Charis, a slight breeze blows in over Lake Ontario, and Zenia returns from the dead.

THE TOXIQUE

Tony gets up at six-thirty, as she always does. West sleeps on, groaning a little. Probably in his dreams he's shouting; sounds in dreams are always louder. Tony inspects his sleeping face: his angular jaw-line relaxed to softness, his unearthly blue hermit's eyes so gently closed. She's happy he's still alive: women live longer than men and men have weak hearts, sometimes they just keel over, and although she and West aren't old—they're hardly old at all—still, women her age have awakened in the morning to find dead men beside them. Tony does not consider this a morbid thought.

She's happy in a more general way, too. She's happy that West is on this earth at all, and that he goes to sleep every night beside her and not somewhere else. Despite everything, despite Zenia, he's still here. It seems a miracle really. Some days she can't get over it.

Quietly, so as not to wake him, she gropes for her glasses on the night-table, then slides down out of the bed. She pulls on her Viyella dressing gown and her cotton socks and her grey wool work socks over them, and stuffs her bundled feet into her slippers. She suffers from cold feet, a sign of low blood pressure. The slippers are in the form of raccoons, and were given to her by Roz, many years ago, for reasons best known to Roz. They're the duplicates of the slippers Roz gave her eight-year-old twins at the time; they're even the same foot size. The raccoons are somewhat ratty by now and one of them is missing an eye, but Tony has never been good at throwing things out.

On her insulated feet she makes her way stealthily down the hall to her study. She prefers to spend an hour in there first thing every morning; she finds it concentrates her mind. There's an eastern exposure, so she catches the sunrise when there is one. Today there is.

Her study has new green curtains in a palm-tree-and-exotic-fruit print, and an easy chair with matching cushions. Roz helped her choose the print, and talked her into paying the price, which was higher than what Tony would have paid if she'd been alone. *Listen to me, sweetie, said Roz. Now this—this! is a bargain. Anyway, it's for the place where you think! It's your mental environment! Get rid of those dull old navy blue sailboats! You owe it to yourself.* There are days when Tony is overwhelmed by the trumpet vines and the orange mangoes, or whatever they are; but she's intimidated by interior decoration, and finds Roz's expertise hard to resist.

She feels more at home with the rest of the study. Books and papers are stacked in piles on the carpet; on the wall there's a print of the Battle of Trafalgar, and another one of Laurier Secord, in unlikely white, driving her mythical cow through the American lines to warn the British during the War of 1812. Armfuls of dog-eared war memoirs and collections of letters and foxed volumes of front-line reportage by long-forgotten journalists are stuffed into the olive green bookcase, along with several copies of Tony's two published books, *Five Ambushes* and *Four Lost Causes*. *Meticulously researched; a refreshing new interpretation*, say the reviews quoted on the quality paperbacks. *Sensationalistic; overly digressive; marred by obsessive details*, say those not quoted. Tony's face, owl-eyed and elf-nosed and younger than her face is now, peeps out from the back covers, frowning slightly in an attempt to look substantial.

In addition to a study desk she has an architect's drawing board with a high swivelling stool that renders her instantly taller. She uses it for marking student term papers: she likes to perch up there on the stool, swinging her short legs, with the papers on a slant in front of her and correct from a judicious distance, as if painting. The truth is that she's getting far-sighted as well as the near-sighted she's always been. Bifocals will soon be her fate.

She marks with her left hand, using different-coloured pencils, which she holds between the fingers of her right hand like brushes: red for bad comments, blue for good ones, orange for spelling mistakes, and mauve for queries. Sometimes she reverses hands. When each paper is finished she drops it onto the floor, making a satisfying flurry. To combat boredom she occasionally reads a few sentences out loud to herself, backwards. *Seigolonh cet gnitepmoc . ecneics eht si raw fo ecneics eht*. How true. She has said it herself, many times.

Today she marks quickly, today she's synchronized. Her left hand knows what her right hand is doing. Her two halves are superimposed: there's only a slight penumbra, a slight degree of slippage.

Tony marks papers until quarter to eight. Sunlight floods the room, made golden by the yellow leaves outside; a jet flies over; the garbage truck approaches along the street, clanking like a tank. Tony hears it, slippers hastily down the stairs and into the kitchen, lifts the plastic sack from its bin, twist-ties it, runs to the front door with it, and scampers down the porch steps, hiking up her dressing gown. She has to sprint only a short distance before catching up with the truck. The men grin at her: they've seen her in her dressing gown before. West is supposed to do the garbage, but he forgets.

She goes back to the kitchen and makes the tea, warming the pot, measuring the leaves carefully, timing the steeping with her big-numbers wristwatch. It was Tony's mother who taught her about making tea; one of the few useful things she did teach her. Tony has known how to make tea since she was nine. She can remember standing on the kitchen stool measuring, pouring, carrying the cup upstairs, tenderly balanced, to where her mother was lying in bed under the sheet, a rounded mound, white as a snowdrift. *How lovely. Put it there*. And finding the cup later, cold, still full.

Begone, Mother, she thinks. *Rehtom, enogeb*. She banishes her, not for the first time.

West always drinks the tea that Tony makes. He always accepts her offerings. When she goes upstairs with his cup he's standing by the back window, looking out over the neglected and derelict autumn yard. (Both of them say they will plant things in it, soon, later. Neither of them does.) He's already dressed: jeans, and a blue sweatshirt that says *Scales & Tails* and has a turtle on it. Some organization devoted to the saving of amphibians and reptiles, which—Tony imagines—doesn't have a very large membership, yet. There are so many other things, these days, that require saving.

"Here's your tea," she says.

West bends in several places, like a camel sitting down, in order to kiss her. She raises herself on tiptoe.

"Sorry about the garbage," he says.

"It's all right," she says, "it wasn't heavy. One egg or two?" Once, during the morning garbage race, she tripped on her dressing gown and took a header down the front steps. Luckily she landed on the bag itself, which burst. She didn't mention this to West, though.

She's always careful with him. She knows how frangible he is, how subject to breakage.

While boiling the eggs Tony thinks of Zenia. Is it a premonition? Not at all. She frequently thinks of Zenia, more frequently than when Zenia was alive. Zenia dead is less of a threat and doesn't have to be shoved away, shoved back into the spidery corner where Tony keeps her shadows.

Though even Zenia's name is enough to evoke the old sense of outrage, of humiliation and confused pain. Or at least an echo of it. The truth is that at certain times—early morning or the middle of the night—she finds it hard to believe that Zenia is really dead. Despite herself, despite the rational part of herself, Tony keeps expecting her to turn up, stroll in through some unlocked door, climb through a window carelessly left open. It seems improbable that she would simply have evaporated, with nothing left over. There was too much of her: a certain malign vitality must have gone somewhere.

Tony slides two slices of bread into the toaster, then rummages in the cupboard for the jam. Zenia is dead, of course. Lost and gone forever. Dead as a cinder. Every time Tony thinks this, the air goes into her lungs, then out in a long sigh of relief.

Zenia's memorial service was five years ago, or four and a half. It was in March. Tony can recall the day perfectly, a wet grey day that turned to sleet later. What surprised her at the time was that there were so few people there. Men, mostly, with their coat collars turned up. They avoided the front row and kept trying to get behind one another, as if they didn't want to be seen.

None of these men was Roz's runaway husband Mitch, Tony noted with interest and some disappointment, though she was glad for Roz. She could sense Roz craning her neck, riffling through the faces: she must have expected him to be there, and then what? Then there would have been a scene.

Charis was looking too, in a less obtrusive way; but if any of these men was Billy, Tony wouldn't have been able to tell, because she'd never met Billy. He'd arrived, then vanished during the interval when she hadn't been in touch with Charis. True, Charis had shown her a photo, but the focus was bad and the top of Billy's head was cut off, and he'd had a beard then. Men's faces changed more than women's did, over time. Or they could change them more, at will. Add facial hair and subtract it.

There was no one at all that Tony knew; except Roz and Charis, of course. They wouldn't have missed it for anything, said Roz. They wanted to see the end of Zenia, make sure she was now fully (Tony's word) inoperational. Charis's word was *peaceful*. Roz's was *kaput*.

The service was unsettling. It seemed a patched-up affair, held at a funeral parlour chapel with a lumpy, magenta clumsiness that would have filled Zenia with scorn. There were several bunches of flowers, white chrysanthemums. Tony wondered who could have sent them. She hadn't sent any flowers herself.

A blue-suited man who identified himself as Zenia's lawyer—the same man, therefore, who

had called Tony to tell her about the service—read out a short tribute to Zenia’s good qualities, among which courage was listed foremost, though Tony didn’t think the manner of Zenia’s death had been particularly courageous. Zenia had been blown up during some terrorist rampage or other, in Lebanon; she hadn’t been a target, she’d just been in the way. An innocent bystander, said the lawyer. Tony was sceptical about both words: *innocent* was never Zenia’s favourite adjective for herself, and *bystanding* was not her typical activity. But the lawyer did not say what she’d really been doing there, on that unnamed street in Beirut. Instead he said she would be long remembered.

“Damn right she will be,” Roz whispered to Tony. “And by *courage* he meant *big tits*.” Tony felt this was tasteless, as the size of Zenia’s tits was surely no longer an issue. In her opinion Roz sometimes went too far.

Zenia herself was present only in spirit, said the lawyer, and also in the form of her ashes which they would now proceed to the Mount Pleasant Cemetery to inter. He actually said *inter*. It had been Zenia’s wish, as stated in her will, that the ashes should be interred under a tree.

Interred was very unlike Zenia. So was the tree. In fact, it seemed unlike Zenia to have made a will, or to have had a lawyer at all. But you never knew, people changed. Why, for instance, had Zenia put the three of them on the list of people to be informed in the event of her death? Was it remorse? Or was it some kind of last laugh? If so, Tony failed to get the point.

The lawyer had been no help: all he had was the list of names, or so he’d claimed. Tony could hardly expect him to explain Zenia to her. If anything it should be the other way around. “Weren’t you her friend?” he’d said, accusingly.

“Yes,” said Tony. “But that was so long ago.”

“Zenia had an excellent memory,” said the lawyer, and sighed. Tony had heard sighs like that before.

It was Roz who insisted they go on to the cemetery after the service. She drove them in her car, her large one. “I want to see where they’re putting her, so I can walk the dogs there,” she said. “I’ll train them to widdle on the tree.”

“It’s not the *tree*’s fault,” said Charis indignantly. “You’re being uncharitable.”

Roz laughed. “Right, sweetie! I’m doing it *for* you!”

“Roz, you don’t have any dogs,” said Tony. “I wonder what kind of a tree it is.”

“I’ll get some, just for this,” said Roz.

“Mulberry,” said Charis. “It was in the vestibule, with a label on.”

“I don’t see how it can possibly grow,” said Tony. “It’s too cold.”

“It’ll grow,” said Charis, “as long as the buds aren’t out yet.”

“I hope it gets blight,” said Roz. “No, really! She doesn’t deserve a tree.”

Zenia’s ashes were in a sealed metal canister, like a small landmine. Tony was familiar with such canisters, and they depressed her. They did not have the grandeur of coffins. She thought of the people inside them as having been condensed, like condensed milk.

She thought there would be some sprinkling involved, of what the lawyer had referred to as the cremains, but the canister was not opened up and the ashes weren’t sprinkled. (Afterwards—after the service, and after her October-morning egg-cooking as well—Tony had

occasion to wonder what had really been in there. Sand, probably, or something disgusting like dog turds or used condoms. That would have been the sort of gesture Zenia would have made, once, when Tony first knew her.)

They stood around in the fine cold drizzle while the canister was planted, and the mulberry tree on top of it. Earth was tamped down. There were no final words said, no words of dismissal. The drizzle began to freeze, and the men in their overcoats hesitated, then wandered off towards their parked cars.

“I have the uneasy feeling that we’ve left something out,” said Tony, as they walked away.

“Well, there wasn’t any singing,” said Charis.

“So, like what?” said Roz. “A stake through her heart?”

“Maybe what Tony meant was that she was a fellow human *being*,” said Charis.

“Fellow human being, my fat fanny,” said Roz. “If she was a fellow human being, I’m the Queen of England.”

What Tony meant was less benevolent. She was thinking that for thousands of years, when people died—especially powerful people, especially people who were feared—the survivors had gone to a lot of trouble. They’d slit the throats of their best horses, they’d buried slaves and favourite wives alive, they’d poured blood into the earth. It hadn’t been mourning, it had been appeasement. They’d wanted to show their good will, however spurious, because they knew the spirit of the dead one would be envious of them for still being alive.

Maybe I should have sent flowers, thought Tony. But flowers wouldn’t have been enough for Zenia. She would have sneered at flowers. What was needed was a bowl of blood. A bowl of blood, a bowl of pain, some death. Then maybe she would stay buried.

Tony didn’t tell West about the memorial service. He might have gone to it, and fallen in pieces. Or else he might not have gone and then felt guilty, or been upset that she’d attended without him. He knew Zenia was dead though, he’d seen it in the paper: a small oblong hidden in the middle. *Canadian Killed in Terrorist Blast*. When they’d been young, *blast* had been a name for a party. He hadn’t said anything to Tony, but she’d found that page with the piece cut out of it. They had a tacit agreement never to mention Zenia.

Tony presents the eggs in two ceramic eggcups shaped like chickens that she picked up in France a few years ago. The French liked to make dishes in the shapes of the things that were going to be served in them; when it came to eating they rarely beat about the bush. The menus read like a vegetarian’s nightmare—hearts of these, brains of that. Tony appreciated this directness. She has a French fish platter too, in the shape of a fish.

Shopping in general is not her thing, but she has a weakness for souvenirs. She bought these eggcups near the site of the battlefield where General Marius of Rome wiped out a hundred thousand Teutones—or two hundred thousand, depending on who was doing the chronicling—a century before the birth of Christ. By dangling a small advance contingent of his forces in front of the enemy like bait, he’d decoyed them to his chosen slaughtering ground. After the battle, three hundred thousand Teutones were sold into slavery, and nine thousand others may or may not have been thrown into a pit on Mont Sainte Victoire at the urging of a possibly Syrian prophetess, whose name may or may not have been Martha. She was said to have worn purple robes.

This clothing detail has been passed down through the centuries with firm authority.

despite the vagueness of other parts of the story. The battle itself, however, definitely took place. Tony has inspected the terrain: a flat plain, hemmed in on three sides by mountains. A bad place to fight if you were on the defensive. Pourrières is the name of the nearby town, but it's still called that, after the smell of the rotting corpses.

Tony does not mention (and has never mentioned) this eggcup connection to West. He would be dismayed, not so much by the rotting Teutones as by her. She once remarked to him that she could understand those kings of old who used to have their enemies' skulls made into wine cups. This was a mistake: West likes to think of her as kind and beneficent. And forgiving, of course.

Tony has made coffee, grinding the beans herself; she serves it with cream, in defiance of her cholesterol. Sooner or later, as their arteries fill with sludge, they will have to give up cream, but not just yet. West sits eating his egg; he's absorbed in it, like a happy child. The bright primary colours—the red cups, the yellow tablecloth, the orange plates—give the kitchen a playground air. His grey hair seems a fluke, some unaccountable transformation that's been worked upon him overnight. When she first knew him he was blond.

"Good egg," he says. Small things like good eggs delight him, small things like bad eggs depress him. He's easy to please, but difficult to protect.

West, Tony repeats to herself. She says his name from time to time, silently, like a charm. He didn't use to be West. Once—thirty? thirty-two years ago?—he was Stewart, until he told her how much he hated being called *Stew*; so she reversed him, and he's been West ever since. She cheated a little, though: strictly speaking, he should have been *Wets*. But that's what happens when you love someone, thinks Tony. You cheat a little.

"What's on your agenda for today?" says West.

"Want some more toast?" says Tony. He nods and she gets up to tend the toaster, pausing to kiss the top of his head, inhaling his familiar scent of scalp and shampoo. His hair up there is thinning: soon he'll have a tonsure, like a monk's. For the moment she's taller than he is: isn't often she gets such a bird's-eye view.

There's no need for West to be told who she's having lunch with. He doesn't like Roz and Charis. They make him nervous. He feels—rightly—that they know too much about him.

"Nothing very exciting," she says.

After breakfast West goes up to his third-floor study to work, and Tony changes out of his dressing gown, into jeans and a cotton pullover, and marks more papers. From upstairs she can hear a rhythmical thumping, punctuated by what sounds like a mixed chorus of mating hyenas, cows being hit with sledgehammers, and tropical birds in pain.

West is a musicologist. Some of what he does is traditional—influences, variant derivations—but he's also involved in one of those cross-disciplinary projects that have become so popular lately. He's mixed up with a bunch of neurophysiologists from the medical school; together they're studying the effects of music on the human brain—different kinds of music, and different kinds of noises, because some of the things West comes up with can hardly be thought of as music. They want to know which part of the brain is listening, and especially which half of it. They think this information may be useful to stroke victims, and to people who have lost parts of their brains in car accidents. They wire people's brains up to play the music—or noises—and watch the results on a coloured computer screen.

West is very excited about all of this. He says it's become clear to him that the brain itself is a musical instrument, that you can actually compose music on it, on someone else's brain, or you could, if you had free rein. Tony finds this idea distressing—what if the scientists want to play something that the person with the brain doesn't want to hear? West says it's only theoretical.

But he has a strong urge to wire up Tony, because of her left-handedness. Handedness is one of the things they study. They want to attach electrodes to Tony's head and then have her play the piano, because the piano is two-handed and the hands both work at the same time, but on different notations. Tony has avoided this so far by saying she's forgotten how to play, which is mostly true; but also she doesn't want West peering in at anything that might be going on in her brain.

She finishes the set of papers and goes back to the bedroom to change for lunch. She looks into her closet: there isn't a lot of choice, and no matter what she wears, Roz will narrow her eyes at it and suggest they go shopping. Roz thinks Tony goes in for too much floral wallpaper print, although Tony has carefully explained that it's camouflage. Anyway, the black leather suit Roz once tried to convince her was her real self just made her look like an avant-garde Italian umbrella stand.

She finally settles on a forest green rayon outfit with small white polka dots that she bought in the children's section at Eaton's. She buys quite a few of her clothes there. Why not? They fit, and there's less tax; and, as Roz is never tired of remarking, Tony is a miser, especially when it comes to clothes. She would much rather save the money and spend it on airplane tickets for visits to the sites of battles.

On these pilgrimages she collects relics: a flower from each site. Or a weed rather, because what she picks are common things—daisies, clovers, poppies. Sentimentalities of this kind seem reserved, in her, for people she does not know. She presses the flowers between the pages of the Bibles left by proselytizing sects in the dresser drawers of the cheap hotels and *pensions* where she stays. If there's no Bible she flattens them under ashtrays. There are always ashtrays.

Then, when she gets home, she tapes them into her scrapbooks, in alphabetical order: *Agincourt. Austerlitz. Bunker Hill. Carcassonne. Dunkirk.* She doesn't take sides: all battles are battles, all contain bravery, all involve death. She doesn't talk about this practice of hers to her colleagues, because none of them would understand why she does it. She isn't even sure of herself. She isn't sure what she's really collecting, or in memory of what.

In the bathroom she adjusts her face. Powder on the nose, but no lipstick. Lipstick is alarming on her, extra, like those red plastic mouths children stick onto potatoes. Comb through the hair. She gets her hair cut in Chinatown because they don't charge the earth, and they know how to do straight black short hair with a few straggly bangs over the forehead, the same every time. A pixie cut, it used to be called. With her big glasses and her big eyes behind them and her too-skinny neck, the effect is street urchin crossed with newly hatched bird. She still has good skin, good enough; it offsets the grey strands. She looks like a very young old person, or a very old young person; but then, she's looked that way ever since she was two.

She bundles the term papers into her oversized canvas tote bag and runs up the stairs to wave goodbye to West. *Headwinds*, says the sign on his study door, and that's what his answering machine says too—*Third floor, Headwinds*. It's what he'd call his high-tech recording studio if he had one. West has his earphones on now, he's hooked up to his tape deck and his synthesizer, but he sees her and waves back. She leaves by the front door, locking it behind her. She's always careful about the door. She doesn't want any drug addict getting in while she's away, and bothering West.

The wooden porch needs repairing; there's a rotting board. She'll have it fixed next spring, she promises herself; it will take at least that long to get such a thing organized. Someone has tucked a circular under her doormat: another tool sale. Tony wonders who buys all these tools—all these circular saws, cordless drills, rasps, and screwdrivers—and what they do with them really. Maybe tools are substitute weapons; maybe they're what men go in for when they aren't waging war. West is not the tool-using type, though: the only hammer in the house belongs to Tony, and for anything other than simple nail-pounding she looks in the Yellow Pages. Why risk your life?

There's another tool circular cluttering the tiny front lawn, which is weed-ridden and needs cutting. The lawn is a neighbourhood blot. Tony knows this, and is embarrassed by it from time to time, and vows to have the grass dug up and replaced with some colourful but hardy shrubs, or else gravel. She has never seen the point of lawns. Given the choice she'd prefer a moat, with a drawbridge, and crocodiles optional.

Charis keeps making vague mewling noises about re-doing Tony's front lawn for her, transforming it into a miracle of bloom, but Tony has fended her off. Charis would make a garden like Tony's study drapes, which she calls "nourishing"—rampant blossoms, twining vines, blatant seed pods—and it would be too much for Tony. She's seen what happened to the strip of ground beside Roz's back walk when Roz gave in to similar pleas. Because Charis has done it, Roz can't possibly have it re-done, so now there's a little plot of Roz's yard that will be forever Charis.

At the street corner Tony turns to look back at her house, as she often does, admiring it. Even after twenty years it still seems like a mirage that she should own such a house, or any house at all. The house is brick, late Victorian, tall and narrow, with green fish-scale shingles

on its upper third. Her study window looks out from the fake tower on the left: the Victorians loved to think they were living in castles. It's a large house, larger than it looks from the street. A solid house, reassuring; a fort, a bastion, a keep. Inside it is West, creating aural mayhem, safe from harm. When she bought it, back when the neighbourhood was more run down and the prices were low, she didn't expect anyone would ever live in it except her

She goes down the subway steps, drops her token into the turnstile, boards the train, and sits on the plastic seat, with her tote bag on her knees like a visiting nurse. The car isn't crowded so there are no heads of tall people blocking her view and she can read the ads. *Hcnurc!* says a chocolate bar. *Pleh uoy nac?* pleads the Red Cross. *Elas! Elas!* If she were to say these words out loud people would think it was another language. It is another language, an archaic language, a language she knows well. She could speak it in her sleep, and sometimes does.

If the fundamentalists were to catch her at it, they'd accuse her of Satan worship. They play popular songs in reverse, claiming to find blasphemies hidden in them; they think you can invoke the Devil by hanging the cross upside down or by saying the Lord's Prayer backwards. All nonsense. Evil doesn't require such invocations, such childish and stagy rituals. Nothing so complicated.

Tony's other language isn't evil, however. It's dangerous only to her. It's her seam, it's where she's sewn together, it's where she could split apart. Nevertheless, she still indulges in it. A risky nostalgia. *Aiglatson*. (A Viking chieftain of the Dark Ages? An up-market laxative?)

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She gets off at St. George and takes the Bedford Road exit, makes it past the handout menu and the street flower-seller and the boy playing the flute on the corner, avoids getting run over while she crosses at the green light, and heads along past Varsity Stadium and the grassy circle of the main campus. Her office is down one of the dingy old side streets and around the corner, in a building called McClung Hall.

McClung Hall is a solemn block of red brick, darkened to purple-brown by weather and soot. She lived in it once, as a student, for six years straight, when it was still a women's residence. She was told it was named after somebody or other who'd helped get the vote for women, but she didn't much care about that. Nobody did, back then.

Tony's first memories of the place are of an ancient fire-trap, overheated but drafty, with creaking floors and a lot of worn-out but stolid wood in it: massive banisters, heavy window seats, thickly panelled doors. It smelled—it still smells—like a damp pantry suffering from dry rot, with sprouting potatoes forgotten in it. At the time it also had a lingering, queasy odour that filtered up from the dining room: lukewarm cabbage, leftover scrambled eggs, burnt grease. She used to duck the meals there and smuggle bread and apples up to her room.

The Comparative Religion people got hold of it in the seventies, but since then it's been turned into makeshift offices for the overflow from various worthy but impoverished departments—people who are thought to use mostly their minds rather than pieces of glossy equipment, and who don't contribute much to modern industry, and who are therefore considered to be naturally adapted to seediness. Philosophy has established a bridgehead of

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