

THE TESTAMENTS

MARGARET ATWOOD

VINTAGE

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Vintage
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Vintage is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

Copyright © O. W. Toad, Ltd. 2019

O. W. Toad, has asserted its right to be identified as the author of this
Work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

First published in paperback by Vintage in 2020

First published in the United Kingdom by Chatto & Windus in 2019

penguin.co.uk/vintage

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781784708214

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



I

Statue



The Ardua Hall Holograph

1

Only dead people are allowed to have statues, but I have been given one while still alive. Already I am petrified.

This statue was a small token of appreciation for my many contributions, said the citation, which was read out by Aunt Vidala. She'd been assigned the task by our superiors, and was far from appreciative. I thanked her with as much modesty as I could summon, then pulled the rope that released the cloth drape shrouding me; it billowed to the ground, and there I stood. We don't do cheering here at Ardua Hall, but there was some discreet clapping. I inclined my head in a nod.

My statue is larger than life, as statues tend to be, and shows me as younger, slimmer, and in better shape than I've been for some time. I am standing straight, shoulders back, my lips curved into a firm but benevolent smile. My eyes are fixed on some cosmic point of reference understood to represent my idealism, my unflinching commitment to duty, my determination to move forward despite all obstacles. Not that anything in the sky would be visible to my statue, placed as it is in a morose cluster of trees and shrubs beside the footpath running in front of Ardua Hall. We Aunts must not be too presumptuous, even in stone.

Clutching my left hand is a girl of seven or eight, gazing up at me with trusting eyes. My right hand rests on the head of a woman crouched at my side, her hair veiled, her eyes upturned in an

expression that could be read as either craven or grateful—one of our Handmaids—and behind me is one of my Pearl Girls, ready to set out on her missionary work. Hanging from a belt around my waist is my Taser. This weapon reminds me of my failings: had I been more effective, I would not have needed such an implement. The persuasion in my voice would have been enough.

As a group of statuary it's not a great success: too crowded. I would have preferred more emphasis on myself. But at least I look sane. It could well have been otherwise, as the elderly sculptress—a true believer since deceased—had a tendency to confer bulging eyes on her subjects as a sign of their pious fervour. Her bust of Aunt Helena looks rabid, that of Aunt Vidala is hyperthyroid, and that of Aunt Elizabeth appears ready to explode.

At the unveiling the sculptress was nervous. Was her rendition of me sufficiently flattering? Did I approve of it? Would I be *seen* to approve? I toyed with the idea of frowning as the sheet came off, but thought better of it: I am not without compassion. “Very lifelike,” I said.

That was nine years ago. Since then my statue has weathered: pigeons have decorated me, moss has sprouted in my damper crevices. Votaries have taken to leaving offerings at my feet: eggs for fertility, oranges to suggest the fullness of pregnancy, croissants to reference the moon. I ignore the breadstuffs—usually they have been rained on—but pocket the oranges. Oranges are so refreshing.

I write these words in my private sanctum within the library of Ardua Hall—one of the few libraries remaining after the enthusiastic book-burnings that have been going on across our land. The corrupt and blood-smearred fingerprints of the past must be wiped away to create a clean space for the morally pure generation that is surely about to arrive. Such is the theory.

But among these bloody fingerprints are those made by ourselves, and these can't be wiped away so easily. Over the years I've buried a lot of bones; now I'm inclined to dig them up again—if only for your

edification, my unknown reader. If you are reading, this manuscript at least will have survived. Though perhaps I'm fantasizing: perhaps I will never have a reader. Perhaps I'll only be talking to the wall, in more ways than one.

That's enough inscribing for today. My hand hurts, my back aches, and my nightly cup of hot milk awaits me. I'll stash this screed in its hiding place, avoiding the surveillance cameras—I know where they are, having placed them myself. Despite such precautions, I'm aware of the risk I'm running: writing can be dangerous. What betrayals, and then what denunciations, might lie in store for me? There are several within Ardua Hall who would love to get their hands on these pages.

Wait, I counsel them silently: it will get worse.

II

PRECIOUS FLOWER



Transcript of Witness Testimony 369A

2

You have asked me to tell you what it was like for me when I was growing up within Gilead. You say it will be helpful, and I do wish to be helpful. I imagine you expect nothing but horrors, but the reality is that many children were loved and cherished, in Gilead as elsewhere, and many adults were kind though fallible, in Gilead as elsewhere.

I hope you will remember, too, that we all have some nostalgia for whatever kindness we have known as children, however bizarre the conditions of that childhood may seem to others. I agree with you that Gilead ought to fade away—there is too much of wrong in it, too much that is false, and too much that is surely contrary to what God intended—but you must permit me some space to mourn the good that will be lost.

At our school, pink was for spring and summer, plum was for fall and winter, white was for special days: Sundays and celebrations. Arms covered, hair covered, skirts down to the knee before you were five and no more than two inches above the ankle after that, because the urges of men were terrible things and those urges needed to be curbed. The man eyes that were always roaming here and there like the eyes of tigers, those searchlight eyes, needed to be shielded from the alluring and indeed blinding power of us—of our shapely

or skinny or fat legs, of our graceful or knobbly or sausage arms, of our peachy or blotchy skins, of our entwining curls of shining hair or our coarse unruly pelts or our straw-like wispy braids, it did not matter. Whatever our shapes and features, we were snares and enticements despite ourselves, we were the innocent and blameless causes that through our very nature could make men drunk with lust, so that they'd stagger and lurch and topple over the verge—The verge of what? we wondered. Was it like a cliff?—and go plunging down in flames, like snowballs made of burning sulphur hurled by the angry hand of God. We were custodians of an invaluable treasure that existed, unseen, inside us; we were precious flowers that had to be kept safely inside glass houses, or else we would be ambushed and our petals would be torn off and our treasure would be stolen and we would be ripped apart and trampled by the ravenous men who might lurk around any corner, out there in the wide sharp-edged sin-ridden world.

That was the kind of thing runny-nosed Aunt Vidala would tell us at school while we were doing petit-point embroidery for handkerchiefs and footstools and framed pictures: flowers in a vase, fruit in a bowl were the favoured patterns. But Aunt Estée, the teacher we liked the best, would say Aunt Vidala was overdoing it and there was no point in frightening us out of our wits, since to instill such an aversion might have a negative influence on the happiness of our future married lives.

“All men are not like that, girls,” she would say soothingly. “The better kind have superior characters. Some of them have decent self-restraint. And once you are married it will seem quite different to you, and not very fearsome at all.” Not that she would know anything about it, since the Aunts were not married; they were not allowed to be. That was why they could have writing and books.

“We and your fathers and mothers will choose your husbands wisely for you when the time comes,” Aunt Estée would say. “So you don't need to be afraid. Just learn your lessons and trust your elders to do what is best, and everything will unfold as it should. I will pray for it.”

But despite Aunt Estée's dimples and friendly smile, it was Aunt Vidala's version that prevailed. It turned up in my nightmares: the shattering of the glass house, then the rending and tearing and the trampling of hooves, with pink and white and plum fragments of myself scattered over the ground. I dreaded the thought of growing older—older enough for a wedding. I had no faith in the wise choices of the Aunts: I feared that I would end up married to a goat on fire.

The pink, the white, and the plum dresses were the rule for special girls like us. Ordinary girls from Econofamilies wore the same thing all the time—those ugly multicoloured stripes and grey cloaks, like the clothes of their mothers. They did not even learn petit-point embroidery or crochet work, just plain sewing and the making of paper flowers and other such chores. They were not pre-chosen to be married to the very best men—to the Sons of Jacob and the other Commanders or their sons—not like us; although they might get to be chosen once they were older if they were pretty enough.

Nobody said that. You were not supposed to preen yourself on your good looks, it was not modest, or take any notice of the good looks of other people. Though we girls knew the truth: that it was better to be pretty than ugly. Even the Aunts paid more attention to the pretty ones. But if you were already pre-chosen, pretty didn't matter so much.

I didn't have a squint like Huldah or a pinchy built-in frown like Shunammite, and I didn't have barely-there eyebrows like Becka, but I was unfinished. I had a dough face, like the cookies my favourite Martha, Zilla, made for me as a treat, with raisin eyes and pumpkin-seed teeth. But though I was not especially pretty, I was very, very chosen. Doubly chosen: not only pre-chosen to marry a Commander but chosen in the first place by Tabitha, who was my mother.

That is what Tabitha used to tell me: "I went for a walk in the forest," she would say, "and then I came to an enchanted castle, and there were a lot of little girls locked inside, and none of them had any mothers, and they were under the spell of the wicked witches.

I had a magic ring that unlocked the castle, but I could only rescue one little girl. So I looked at them all very carefully, and then, out of the whole crowd, I chose you!”

“What happened to the others?” I would ask. “The other little girls?”

“Different mothers rescued them,” she would say.

“Did they have magic rings too?”

“Of course, my darling. In order to be a mother, you need to have a magic ring.”

“Where’s the magic ring?” I would ask. “Where is it now?”

“It’s right here on my finger,” she would say, indicating the third finger of her left hand. The heart finger, she said it was. “But my ring had only one wish in it, and I used that one up on you. So now it’s an ordinary, everyday mother ring.”

At this point I was allowed to try on the ring, which was gold, with three diamonds in it: a big one, and a smaller one on either side. It did look as if it might have been magic once.

“Did you lift me up and carry me?” I would ask. “Out of the forest?” I knew the story off by heart, but I liked to hear it repeated.

“No, my dearest, you were already too big for that. If I had carried you I would have coughed, and then the witches would have heard us.” I could see this was true: she did cough quite a lot. “So I took you by the hand, and we crept out of the castle so the witches wouldn’t hear us. We both said *Sbb, sbb*”—here she would hold her finger up to her lips, and I would hold my finger up too and say *Sbb, sbb* delightedly—“and then we had to run very fast through the forest, to get away from the wicked witches, because one of them had seen us going out the door. We ran, and then we hid in a hollow tree. It was very dangerous!”

I did have a hazy memory of running through a forest with someone holding my hand. Had I hidden in a hollow tree? It seemed to me that I had hidden somewhere. So maybe it was true.

“And then what happened?” I would ask.

“And then I brought you to this beautiful house. Aren’t you happy here? You are so cherished, by all of us! Aren’t we both lucky that I chose you?”

I would be nestled close to her, with her arm around me and my head against her thin body, through which I could feel her bumpy ribs. My ear would be pressed to her chest, and I could hear her heart hammering away inside her—faster and faster, it seemed to me, as she waited for me to say something. I knew my answer had power: I could make her smile, or not.

What could I say but yes and yes? Yes, I was happy. Yes, I was lucky. Anyway it was true.