MARGARET ATWOOD THEYEAR OF THE FLOOD Reading Sample

THE GARDEN

Who is it tends the Garden, The Garden oh so green?

'Twas once the finest Garden That ever has been seen.

And in it God's dear Creatures Did swim and fly and play;

But then came greedy Spoilers, And killed them all away.

And all the Trees that flourished And gave us wholesome fruit,

By waves of sand are buried, Both leaf and branch and root.

And all the shining Water Is turned to slime and mire,

And all the feathered Birds so bright Have ceased their joyful choir.

Oh Garden, oh my Garden, I'll mourn forevermore

Until the Gardeners arise, And you to Life restore.

From The God's Gardeners Oral Hymnbook

THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD

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TOBY. YEAR TWENTY- FIVE, THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD

In the early morning Toby climbs up to the rooftop to watch the sunrise. She uses a mop handle for balance: the elevator stopped working some time ago and the back stairs are slick with damp, so if she slips and topples there won't be anyone to pick her up.

As the first heat hits, mist rises from among the swath of trees between her and the derelict city. The air smells faintly of burning, a smell of caramel and tar and rancid barbecues, and the ashy but greasy smell of a garbage-dump fire after it's been raining. The abandoned towers in the distance are like the coral of an ancient reef – bleached and colourless, devoid of life.

There still is life, however. Birds chirp; sparrows, they must be. Their small voices are clear and sharp, nails on glass: there's no longer any sound of traffic to drown them out. Do they notice that quietness, the absence of motors? If so, are they happier? Toby has no idea. Unlike some of the other Gardeners – the more wild-eyed or possibly overdosed ones – she has never been under the illusion that she can converse with birds.

The sun brightens in the east, reddening the blue-grey haze that marks the distant ocean. The vultures roosting on hydro poles fan out their wings to dry them, opening themselves like black umbrellas. One and then another lifts off on the thermals and spirals upwards. If they plummet suddenly, it means they've spotted carrion.

Vultures are our friends, the Gardeners used to teach. They purify the earth. They are God's necessary dark Angels of bodily dissolution. Imagine how terrible it would be if there were no death!

Do I still believe this? Toby wonders.

Everything is different up close.

The rooftop has some planters, their ornamentals running wild; it has a few fake-wood benches. It used to have a sun canopy for cocktail hour, but that's been blown away. Toby sits on one of the benches to

survey the grounds. She lifts her binoculars, scanning from left to right. The driveway, with its lumirose borders, untidy now as frayed hairbrushes, their purple glow fading in the strengthening light. The western entrance, done in pink adobe-style solarskin, the snarl of tangled cars outside the gate.

The flower beds, choked with sow thistle and burdock, enormous aqua kudzu moths fluttering above them. The fountains, their scallop-shell basins filled with stagnant rainwater. The parking lot with a pink golf cart and two pink AnooYoo Spa minivans, each with its winking-eye logo. There's a fourth minivan farther along the drive, crashed into a tree: there used to be an arm hanging out of the window, but it's gone now.

The wide lawns have grown up, tall weeds. There are low irregular mounds beneath the milkweed and fleabane and sorrel, with here and there a swatch of fabric, a glint of bone. That's where the people fell, the ones who'd been running or staggering across the lawn. Toby had watched from the roof, crouched behind one of the planters, but she hadn't watched for long. Some of those people had called for help, as if they'd known she was there. But how could she have helped?

The swimming pool has a mottled blanket of algae. Already there are frogs. The herons and the egrets and the peagrets hunt them, at the shallow end. For a while Toby tried to scoop out the small animals that had blundered in and drowned. The luminous green rabbits, the rats, the rakunks, with their striped tails and racoon bandit masks. But now she leaves them alone. Maybe they'll generate fish, somehow. When the pool is more like a swamp.

Is she thinking of eating these theoretical future fish? Surely not.

Surely not yet.

She turns to the dark encircling wall of trees and vines and fronds and shrubby undergrowth, probing it with her binoculars. It's from there that any danger might come. But what kind of danger? She can't imagine.

In the night there are the usual noises: the faraway barking of dogs, the tittering of mice, the waterpipe notes of the crickets, the occasional grumph of a frog. The blood rushing in her ears: *katoush*, *katoush*, *katoush*. A heavy broom sweeping dry leaves.

"Go to sleep," she says out loud. But she never sleeps well, not since she's been alone in this building. Sometimes she hears voices – human voices, calling to her in pain. Or the voices of women, the women who used to work here, the anxious women who used to come, for rest and rejuvenation. Splashing in the pool, strolling on the lawns. All the pink voices, soothed and soothing.

Or the voices of the Gardeners, murmuring or singing; or the children laughing together, up on the Edencliff Garden. Adam One, and Nuala, and Burt. Old Pilar, surrounded by her bees. And Zeb. If any one of them is still alive, it must be Zeb: any day now he'll come walking along the roadway or appear from among the trees.

But he must be dead by now. It's better to think so. Not to waste hope.

There must be someone else left, though; she can't be the only one on the planet. There must be others. But friends or foes? If she sees one, how to tell?

She's prepared. The doors are locked, the windows barred. But even such barriers are no guarantee: every hollow space invites invasion. Even when she sleeps, she's listening, as animals do – for a break

in the pattern, for an unknown sound, for a silence opening like a crack in rock.

When the small creatures hush their singing, said Adam One, it's because they're afraid. You must listen for the sound of their fear.

REN. YEAR TWENTY- FIVE, THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD

Beware of words. Be careful what you write. Leave no trails.

This is what the Gardeners taught us, when I was a child among them. They told us to depend on memory, because nothing written down could be relied on. The Spirit travels from mouth to mouth, not from thing to thing: books could be burnt, paper crumble away, computers could be destroyed. Only the Spirit lives forever, and the Spirit isn't a thing.

As for writing, it was dangerous, said the Adams and the Eves, because your enemies could trace you through it, and hunt you down, and use your words to condemn you.

But now that the Waterless Flood has swept over us, any writing I might do is safe enough, because those who would have used it against me are most likely dead. So I can write down anything I want.

What I write is my name, *Ren*, with an eyebrow pencil, on the wall beside the mirror. I've written it a lot of times. *Renrenren*, like a song. You can forget who you are if you're alone too much. Amanda told me that.

I can't see out the window, it's glass brick. I can't get out the door, it's locked on the outside. I still have air though, and water, as long as the solar doesn't quit. I still have food.

I'm lucky. I'm really very lucky. Count your luck, Amanda used to say. So I do. First, I was lucky to be working here at Scales when the Flood hit. Second, it was even luckier that I was shut up this way in the Sticky Zone, because it kept me safe. I got a rip in my Biofilm Bodyglove – a client got carried away and bit me, right through the green sequins – and I was waiting for my test results. It wasn't a wet rip with secretions and membranes involved, it was a dry rip near the elbow, so I wasn't that worried. Still, they checked everything, here at Scales. They had a reputation to keep up: we were known as the cleanest dirty girls in town.

Scales and Tails took care of you, they really did. If you were talent, that is. Good food, a doctor if you needed one, and the tips were great, because the men from the top Corps came here. It was well run, though it was in a seedy area – all the clubs were. That was a matter of image,

Mordis would say: seedy was good for business, because unless there's an edge – something lurid or tawdry, a whiff of sleaze – what separated our brand from the run-of-the-mill product the guy could get at home, with the face cream and the white cotton panties?

Mordis believed in plain speaking. He'd been in the business ever since he was a kid, and when they outlawed the pimps and the street trade – for public health and the safety of women, they said – and rolled everything into SeksMart under CorpSeCorps control, Mordis made the jump, because of his experience. "It's who you know," he used to say. "And what you know about them." Then he'd grin and pat you on the bum – just a friendly pat though, he never took freebies from us. He had ethics.

He was a wiry guy with a shaved head and black, shiny, alert eyes like the heads of ants, and he was easy as long as everything was cool. But he'd stand up for us if the clients got violent. "Nobody hurts my best girls," he'd say. It was a point of honour with him.

Also he didn't like waste: we were a valuable asset, he'd say. The cream of the crop. After the SeksMart roll-in, anyone left outside the system was not only illegal but pathetic. A few wrecked, diseased old women wandering the alleyways, practically begging. No man with even a fraction of his brain left would go anywhere near them. "Hazardous waste," we Scales girls used to call them. We shouldn't have been so scornful; we should have had compassion. But compassion takes work, and we were young.

That night when the Waterless Flood began, I was waiting for my test results: they kept you locked in the Sticky Zone for weeks, in case you had something contagious. The food came in through the safetysealed hatchway, plus there was the minifridge with snacks, and the water was filtered, coming in and out both. You had everything you needed, but it got boring in there. You could exercise on the machines, and I did a lot of that, because a trapeze dancer needs to keep in practice.

You could watch TV or old movies, play your music, talk on the phone. Or you could visit the other rooms in Scales on the intercom videoscreens. Sometimes when we were doing plank work we'd wink at the cameras in mid-moan for the benefit of whoever was stuck in the Sticky Zone. We knew where the cameras were hidden, in the snakeskin or featherwork on the ceilings. It was one big family, at Scales, so even when you were in the Sticky Zone, Mordis liked you to pretend you were still participating.

Mordis made me feel so secure. I knew if I was in big trouble I could go to him. There were only a few people in my life like that. Amanda, most of the time. Zeb, sometimes. And Toby. You wouldn't think it would be Toby – she was so tough and hard – but if you're drowning, a soft squashy thing is no good to hold on to. You need something more solid.

CREATION DAY

CREATION DAY YEAR FIVE. OF THE CREATION, AND OF THE NAMING OF THE ANIMALS. SPOKEN BY ADAM ONE.

Dear Friends, dear Fellow Creatures, dear Fellow Mammals:

On Creation Day five years ago, this Edencliff Rooftop Garden of ours was a sizzling wasteland, hemmed in by festering city slums and dens of wickedness; but now it has blossomed as the rose.

By covering such barren rooftops with greenery we are doing our small part in the redemption of God's Creation from the decay and sterility that lies all around us, and feeding ourselves with unpolluted food into the bargain. Some would term our efforts futile, but if all were to follow our example, what a change would be wrought on our beloved Planet! Much hard work still lies before us, but fear not, my Friends: for we shall move forward undaunted.

I am glad we have all remembered our sunhats.

Now let us turn our minds to our annual Creation Day Devotion.

The Human Words of God speak of the Creation in terms that could be understood by the men of old. There is no talk of galaxies or genes, for such terms would have confused them greatly! But must we therefore take as scientific fact the story that the world was created in six days, thus making a nonsense of observable data? God cannot be held to the narrowness of literal and materialistic interpretations, nor measured by Human measurements, for His days are eons, and a thousand ages of our time are like an evening to Him. Unlike some other religions, we have never felt it served a higher purpose to lie to children about geology.

Remember the first sentences of those Human Words of God: the Earth is without form, and void, and then God speaks Light into being. This is the moment that Science terms "The Big Bang," as if it were a sex orgy. Yet both accounts concur in their essence: Darkness; then, in an instant, Light. But surely the Creation is ongoing, for are not new stars being formed at every moment? God's Days are not consecutive, my Friends; they run concurrently, the first with the third, the fourth with the sixth. As we are told, "Thou sendeth forth thy Spirit, they are created: and Thou renewest the face of the Earth."

We are told that, on the fifth day of God's Creating activities, the waters brought forth Creatures, and on the sixth day the dry land was populated with Animals, and with Plants and Trees; and all were blessed, and told to multiply; and finally Adam – that is to say, Mankind – was created. According to Science, this is the same order in which the species did in fact appear on the Planet, Man last of all. Or more or less the same order. Or close enough.

What happens next? God brings the Animals before Man, "to see what he would call them." But why didn't God already know what names Adam would choose? The answer can only be that God has given Adam free will, and therefore Adam may do things that God Himself cannot anticipate in advance. Think of that the next time you are tempted by meat-eating or material wealth! Even God may not always know what you are going to do next!

God must have caused the Animals to assemble by speaking to them directly, but what language did He use? It was not Hebrew, my Friends. It was not Latin or Greek, or English, or French, or Spanish, or Arabic, or Chinese. No: He called the Animals in their own languages. To the Reindeer He spoke Reindeer, to the Spider, Spider; to the Elephant He spoke Elephant, to the Flea He spoke Flea, to the Centipede He spoke Centipede, and to the Ant, Ant. So must it have been.

And for Adam himself, the Names of the Animals were the first words he spoke – the first moment of Human language. In this cosmic instant, Adam claims his Human soul. To Name is – we hope – to greet; to draw another towards one's self. Let us imagine Adam calling out the Names of the Animals in fondness and joy, as if to say, There you are, my dearest! Welcome! Adam's first act towards the Animals was thus one of loving-kindness and kinship, for Man in his unfallen state was not yet a carnivore. The Animals knew this, and did not run away. So it must have been on that unrepeatable Day – a peaceful gathering at which every living entity on the Earth was embraced by Man.

How much have we lost, dear Fellow Mammals and Fellow Mortals! How much have we wilfully destroyed! How much do we need to restore, within ourselves!

The time of the Naming is not over, my Friends. In His sight, we may still be living in the sixth day. As your Meditation, imagine yourself rocked in that sheltering moment. Stretch out your hand towards those gentle eyes that regard you with such trust – a trust that has not yet been violated by bloodshed and gluttony and pride and disdain.

Say their Names. Let us sing.

WHEN ADAM FIRST

When Adam first had breath of life All in that golden place, He dwelt in peace with Bird and Beast, And knew God face to face.

Man's Spirit first went forth in speech To Name each Creature dear; God called to all in Fellowship, They came without a fear.

They romped in play, and sang, and flew – Each motion was a praise For God's great Creativity That filled those early days.

How shrunk, how dwindled, in our times Creation's mighty seed – For Man has broke the Fellowship With murder, lust, and greed.

Oh Creatures dear, that suffer here, How may we Love restore? We'll Name you in our inner Hearts, And call you Friend once more.

From The God's Gardeners Oral Hymnbook

TOBY. PODOCARP DAY YEAR TWENTY- FIVE

It's daybreak. The break of day. Toby turns this word over: break, broke, broken. What breaks in daybreak? Is it the night? Is it the sun, cracked in two by the horizon like an egg, spilling out light?

She lifts her binoculars. The trees look as innocent as ever; yet she has the feeling that someone's watching her - as if even the most inert stone or stump can sense her, and doesn't wish her well.

Isolation produces such effects. She'd trained for them during the God's Gardeners Vigils and Retreats. The floating orange triangle, the talking crickets, the writhing columns of vegetation, the eyes in the leaves. Still, how to distinguish between such illusions and the real thing?

The sun's fully up now – smaller, hotter. Toby makes her way down from the rooftop, covers herself in her pink top-to-toe, sprays with SuperD for the bugs, and adjusts her broad pink sunhat. Then she unlocks the front door and goes out to tend the garden. This is where they used to grow the ladies' organic salads for the Spa Café – their garnishes, their exotic spliced vegetables, their herbal teas. There's overhead netting to thwart the birds, and a chain-link fence because of the green rabbits and the bobkittens and the rakunks that might wander in from the Park. These weren't numerous before the Flood, but it's astonishing how quickly they've been multiplying.

She's counting on this garden: her supplies in the storeroom are getting low. Over the years she'd stashed what she thought would be enough for an emergency like this, but she'd underestimated, and now she's running out of soybits and soydines. Luckily, everything in the garden is doing well: the chickenpeas have begun to pod, the beananas are in flower, the polyberry bushes are covered with small brown nubbins of different shapes and sizes. She picks some spinach, flicks off the iridescent green beetles on it, steps on them. Then, feeling remorseful, she makes a thumbprint grave for them and says the words for the freeing of the soul and the asking of pardon. Even though no one's watching her, it's hard to break such ingrained habits.

She relocates several slugs and snails and pulls out some weeds, leaving the purslane: she can steam that later. On the delicate carrot fronds she finds two bright-blue kudzu-moth caterpillars. Though developed as a biological control for invasive kudzu, they seem to prefer garden vegetables. In one of those jokey moves so common in the first years of gene-splicing, their designer gave them a baby face at the front end, with big eyes and a happy smile, which makes them remarkably difficult to kill. She pulls them off the carrots, their mandibles chewing ravenously beneath their cutie-pie masks, lifts the edge of the netting, and tosses them outside the fence. No doubt they'll be back.

On the way back to the building, she finds the tail of a dog beside the path – an Irish setter, it looks like – its long fur matted with burrs and twigs. A vulture's dropped it there, most likely: they're always dropping things. She tries not to think of the other things they dropped in the first weeks after the Flood. Fingers were the worst.

Her own hands are getting thicker - stiff and brown, like roots. She's been digging in the earth too much.