

The Red Centre.

We slept in what had once been the gymnasium.

The Aunts patrolled.

They had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts. No guns, though, even they could not be trusted with guns.

Guns were for the guards, specially picked from the Angels. The guards weren't allowed inside the building, and we weren't allowed out.





Except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire.



The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us.



We learned to whisper almost without sound.

In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Angels weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space.



We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed:

Alma.

Janine.

Dolores.

Mona.

June.



SHOPPING



The Commander's House.

My name is Offred now, and here is where I live.

A chair.

a table.

a lamp.

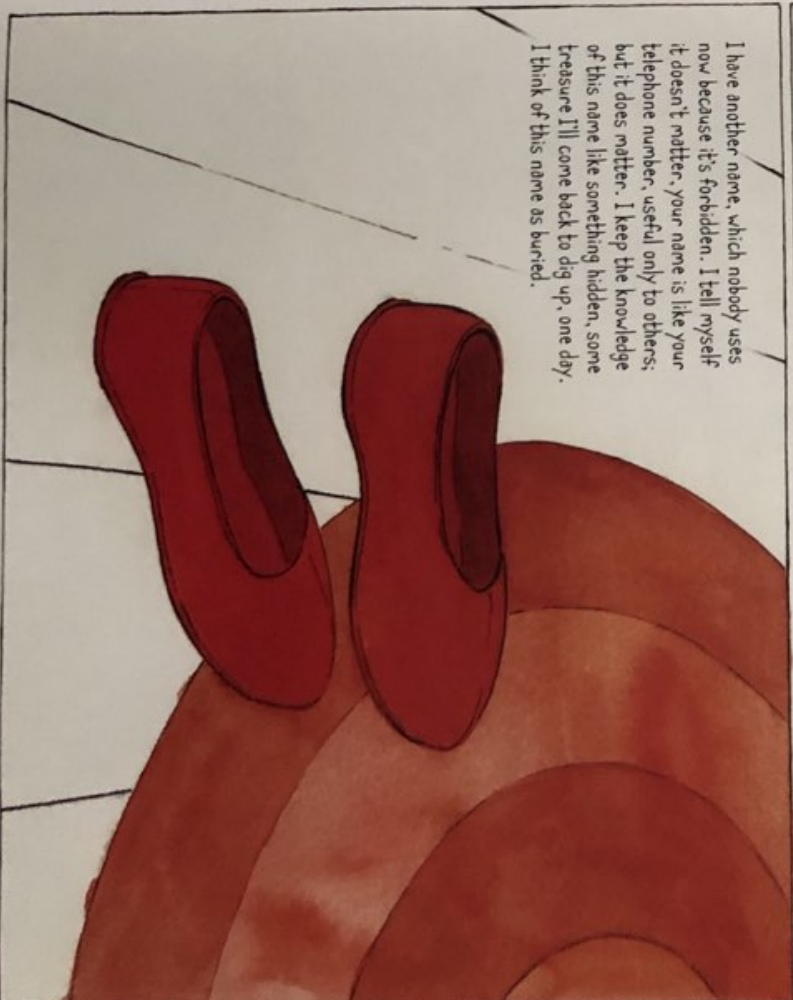
Above, on the white ceiling, a relief ornament in the shape of a wreath, and in the centre of it a blank space, plastered over, like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out. There must have been a chandelier, once. They've removed anything you could tie a rope to.

The door of the room — not my room, I refuse to say my — is not locked. In fact it doesn't shut properly.

There's a rug on the floor, of braided rugs. This is the kind of touch they like: folk art, archaic, made by women, in their spare time, from things that have no further use.

A return to traditional values. Waste not want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want?

I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried.





Does each Handmaid have the same print, the same chair, the same white curtains, I wonder? Government issue?

Think of it as being in the army, said Aunt Lydia.

I know why there is no glass, in front of the picture of blue irises, and why the window only opens partly and why the glass is shatterproof.

It isn't running away they're afraid of. We wouldn't get far. It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge.

But a chair, sunlight, flowers: these are not to be dismissed. I am alive, I live, I breathe.

Where you are is not a prison, but a privilege.



Everything Handmaids wear is red: the colour of blood, which defines us.

The wings too are prescribed issue. They keep us from seeing, but also from being seen.

I never looked good in red, it's not my colour.



...that she would
debase herself
like that.

Nobody asking
you, Rita. Anyways,
what could you do,
supposing?



Go to the
Colonies. They have
the choice.

With the Unwomen,
and starve to death and
Lord knows what all?
Catch you.

Anyways, they're doing
it for us all, or so they say.
If I hadn't of got my tubes tied,
it could of been me, say I was
ten years younger.

It's not that bad.
It's not what you'd
call hard work.

Better her
than me.



I'll get the
tokens!

Tell them fresh,
for the eggs. Not like last
time. And a chicken, tell
them, not a hen.



Tell them who
it's for and then they
won't mess around.



The garden is the domain of the Commander's Wife.



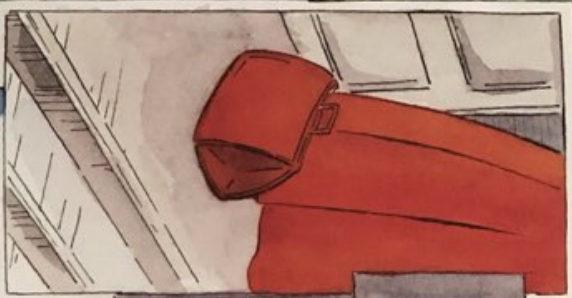
Many of the Wives have such gardens, it's something for them to order and maintain and care for.



She doesn't speak to me, unless she can't avoid it. I am a reproach to her, and a necessity.



We stood face to face for the first time five weeks ago, when I arrived at this posting...



So, you're the new one.

Yes.

You might as well come in. Shut the door behind you.



It's best not to speak unless the Wives ask you a direct question.

Try to think of it from their point of view. It isn't easy for them.





It's one of the things we fought for.

Suddenly I knew where I'd seen her before.

It was when I was little - eight or nine.

Sometimes when I couldn't find any cartoons on Sunday morning I would watch the *Growing Souls Gospel Hour*, where they would tell Bible stories for children and sing hymns.

One of the women was called Serena Joy. She was the lead soprano.

She could smile and cry at the same time, one tear or two sliding gracefully down her cheek, as if on cue, as her voice lifted through its highest notes, tremulous, effortless.

The woman sitting in front of me was Serena Joy. Or had been, once.

So it was worse than I thought.



I know his name: Nick.

He lives here, in the household, over the garage. Low status: he hasn't been issued a woman, but he acts as if he doesn't know this, or care.



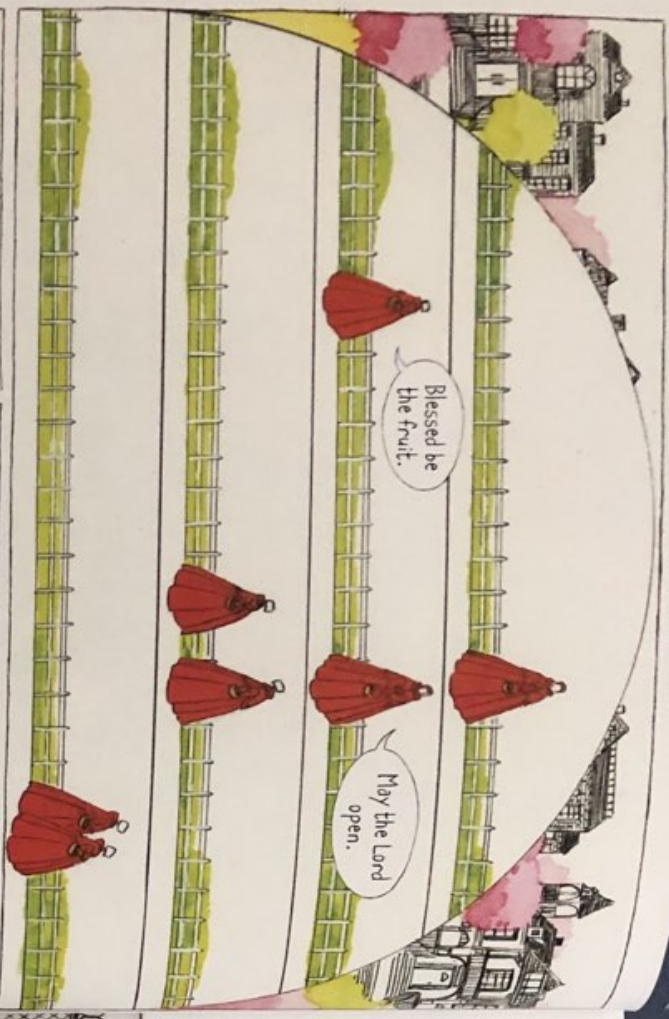
He's just taken a risk, but for what? What if I were to report him?



Perhaps he was merely being friendly. Perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do.

Perhaps he is an Eye.





Blessed be the fruit.

May the Lord open.

We aren't allowed to go out except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection.

This woman has been my partner for two weeks. I don't know what happened to the one before. Her name is Ofglen, and that's all I know about her.



The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers.



The war is going well, I hear.

We've been sent good weather.

Praise be.

I think of her as a woman for whom every act is done for show. She does such things to look good.



They've defeated more of the rebels, since yesterday.

Praise be. What were they?

Baptists. They had a stronghold in the Blue Hills. They smoked them out.

Praise be.

But that is what I must look like to her, as well. How can it be otherwise?



The Guardians of the Faith. They are supposed to show respect, because of the nature of our service.





They aren't yet permitted to touch women.



They touch with their eyes instead.

I move my hips a little as we pass.



I enjoy the power.



This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks, but this is the centre, where nothing moves.

The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you.



Luke and I used to walk together, sometimes, along these streets. We used to talk about buying a house like one of these, an old big house, fixing it up.



On the main street, there are other women with baskets.



Handmaids wear red.

Dull green is for the Marthas. They wear the veil too, but only when they're outside - I suppose nobody much cares who sees the face of a Martha.



The cheap and skimpy striped dresses mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they're called. These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything.

Sometimes there is a woman all in black, a widow. There used to be more of them, but they seem to be diminishing.



You don't see the Commanders' Wives on the sidewalks. Only in cars.

"Lies of the Field," "All Flesh," "Milk and Honey" - you can see the places where the lettering was painted out, when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone.



Nobody talks much, but our heads move furtively from side to side. Shopping is where you might see someone you've known in the time before, or at the Red Centre.



If I could see Moira, just see her, know she still exists. It's hard to imagine now, having a friend.



I know who she is. She was at the Red Centre with me, one of Aunt Lydia's pets.

Her name, in the time before, was Janine.

I never liked her.

A woman that pregnant doesn't have to go out.

...Blessed are the meek, for theirs is the Republic of Gilead.

Blessed are the silent, for they shall hear God...

She's come to display herself.

She doesn't need the walk. She should just be doing the floor exercises.

Of course. No, Of course.

Show-off.

A pregnant woman is a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire. She shows us what can still be done: we too can be saved.

A group of tourists, from Japan it looks like.

Oglen and I can't help staring.



We are fascinated, but also repelled.



They seem undressed.



Then I think: I used to dress like that. That was freedom.

It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this.

Excuse me. They're asking if they can take your picture.



Westernized, they used to call it.



I know better than to say yes.

Modesty is invisibility. Never forget it. To be seen - to be seen - is to be penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable.



幸せですか？



Excuse me. He asks. Are you happy?



Yes, we are very happy.



What else can I say?



We take the long way back.



Oglen would like to pass by the church.

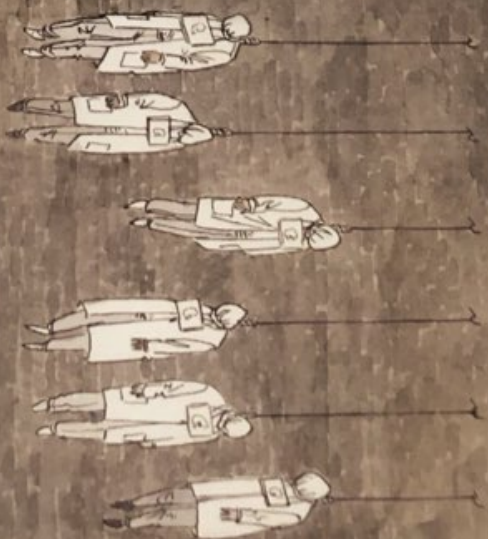


I know what she's really after. The Wall.





It doesn't matter if we look. We're supposed to look:
this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall.



Sometimes they'll be there for days, until there's a
new batch, so as many people as possible will have
the chance to see them.

They were doctors, then. These men, we've been told, have committed atrocities, and must be made into examples. It's no excuse that what they did was legal at the time.

What we are supposed to feel towards these bodies is hatred and scorn.



What I feel towards them is blankness.



What I feel is that I must not feel.

What I feel is partly relief because none of these men is Luke.



Ordinary is what you are used to.

This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary.



NIGHT

III



The night is mine, my own time,
to do with as I will, as long as
I am quiet. As long as I don't move.
As long as I lie still.



Where should I go?

Let's go for
a beer.

Moina, you're
getting ashes
in my bed.

If you'd make it
you wouldn't have
this problem.

I've got a whole
essay to write...

Sure, you could do
that. Or we could just
go get drunk - I know
which I'd pick...

How much time
do we have?

Just an hour.

Seriously?

I know, but it's
just for now.

Think, soon we
won't have to sneak
around like this, we'll be
together forever...

But then what happens, but then what happens?

I know I lost time.
There must have been
needles, pills, something
like that. I couldn't have
lost that much time
without help. You have
had a shock, they said.

Where is
she?

What
have you done
with her?

She's in good
hands. With people
who are fit.

You are unfit.
but you want the
best for her.

Don't you?

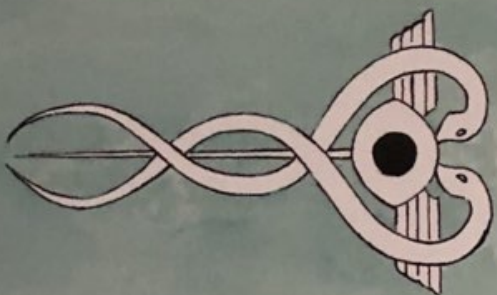
I would like to believe this
is a story I'm telling.

I need to believe it. I must believe it.

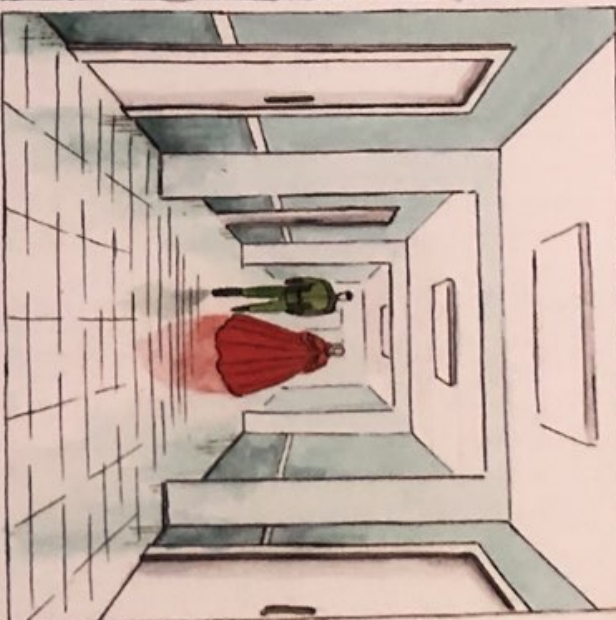
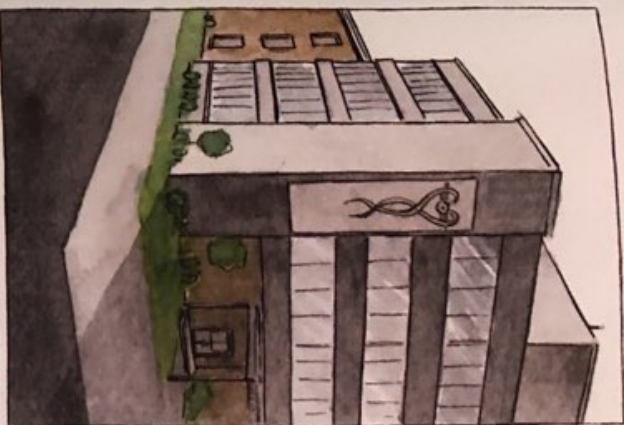
If it's a story I'm telling, then
I have control over the ending.
Then there will be an ending,
and real life will come after it.
This isn't a story I'm telling.

WAITING ROOM

IV



I'm taken to the doctor's once a month, for tests: urine, hormones, cancer smear, blood test; the same as before, except that now it's obligatory.



But this doctor is talkative.





How are we getting along?

Open up now, honey.



Nothing wrong with you, my pain, honey?

No.



I could help you.

What?

Shh. I could help you. I've helped others.

Help me? How?

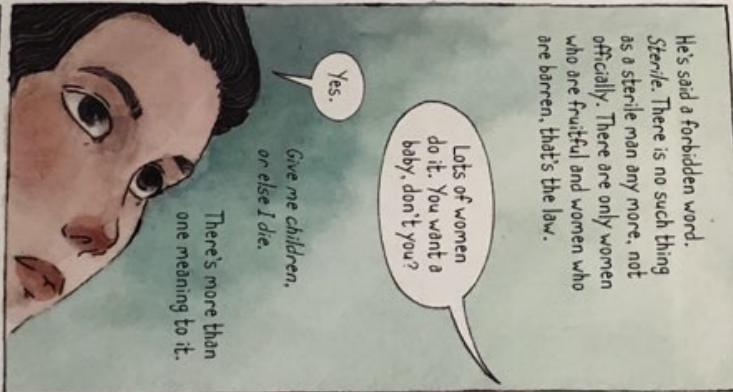
How do you think?



The door's locked. No one will come in. They'll never know it isn't his.

Most of those old guys can't make it any more. Or they're sterile.

You're soft. It's time. Today or tomorrow would do it, why waste it?



He's said a forbidden word. Sterile. There is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law.

Lots of women do it. You want a baby, don't you?

Yes.

Give me children, or else I die.

There's more than one meaning to it.



It'll only take a minute, honey. I hate to see what they put you through.

It's too dangerous. No. I can't.



The penalty is death.

Think about it.

I've seen your chart. Third posting, isn't it?

There are three new bodies on the Wall. One is a priest, still wearing the black cassock. The two others have purple placards hung around their necks: Gender Treachery. Their bodies still wear the Guardian uniforms. Caught together, they must have been.



It's a beautiful May day.

Yes. Praise be.

Mayday used to be a distress signal, a long time ago, in one of those wars we studied in high school.



Do you know what it came from? Mayday?

No. It's a strange word to use for that, isn't it?

It's French. From *Madez*.



Help me.



Nice walk?



He isn't supposed to speak to me. What is he thinking?



All flesh is weak. Of course some of them will try. They can't help it. God made them that way, but He did not make you that way. He made you different.

It's up to you to set the boundaries. Later you will be thanked.



Serena Joy,
what a stupid name.

It was never her real name,
not even then.



Her real name was Pam.
I read that in a magazine.



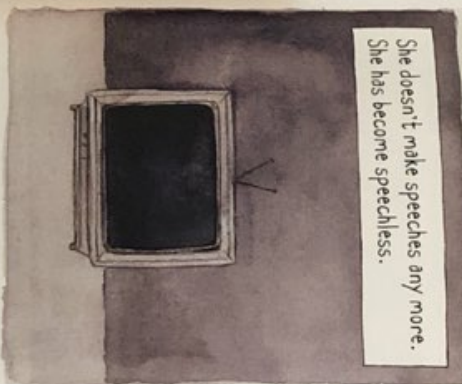
She wasn't singing any
more by then, she was
making speeches.

Her speeches were about the sanctity of the
home, about how women should stay home.
Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made
speeches instead, but she presented this
failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making
for the good of all.

Around that time, someone
tried to shoot her and missed.



She doesn't make speeches any more.
She has become speechless.



She stays in her home, but it
doesn't seem to agree with her.

How furious she must be,
now that she's been taken
at her word.



Someone else planted a
bomb in her car, but it
went off too early.

Though some people said
she'd put the bomb in her
own car, for sympathy.
That's how hot things
were getting.





...stabbed her with a knitting needle, right in the belly. Jealousy, it must have been, eating her up...



Bath day.

Yes.



Who's doing the bath?

I'll do it later. After the dusting.

Just so it gets done.



To them I'm a household chore, one among many.



There's someone standing near the door to the room where I stay.



It's the Commander.

He isn't supposed to be here.

He is violating custom, what do I do now?

Something has been shown to me, but what?



Was he in my room? I called it mine.

I'm waiting, in my room, which
right now is a waiting room.

First for the bath.
Then for dinner.

Then for the Ceremony.

They also serve who
only stand and wait,
said Aunt Lydia. She
made us memorize it.

Not all of you will
make it through. Some of
you will fall on dry ground or
thorns. Some of you are
shallow-rooted. Think of
yourselves as seeds....

Someone has lived in
this room, before me.

I discovered it three days
after I was moved here.

I had a lot of time to
pass. I decided to explore
the room. Not hastily.
I wanted to make it last.

I saved the cupboard
until the third day.

There it was, scratched with a
pin or maybe just a fingernail.

I didn't know what it meant,
or even what language it was in.
I thought it might be Latin.

Still, it was a message, and it
was in writing, forbidden by that
very fact, and it hadn't yet been
discovered. Except by me, for
whom it was intended.

It was intended for
whoever came next.

It pleases me to think I'm communing
with her, this unknown woman.
Sometimes I repeat the words to
myself. They give me a small joy.

WOLITE E
BAS TARDIS
LAKRONNORNN

I wonder who she was or is,
and what's become of her.

Coni has run the bath. She sits on a chair outside in the hall, to see that no one else goes in.

The bath is a requirement, but it is also a luxury.

I avoid looking at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it.

I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely.

I am a national resource.

My nakedness is strange to me already.

My body seems outdated.

Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach?

Shameful. Immodest.



I close my eyes, and
she's there with me.

Suddenly, without
warning, it must be
the smell of the soap.

She comes back to me
at different ages.

This is how I know she's
not a ghost. If she were
a ghost she would be the
same age always.

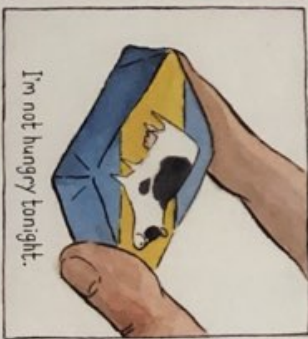
She fades. I can't keep her here with me, she's gone now.
Maybe I do think of her as a ghost, the ghost of a dead girl,
a little girl who died when she was five.

They must have told her I was dead.
They would say it would be easier
for her to adjust.

Eight, she must be now.
I've filled in the time I lost.
I know how much there's been.

Why bash your head
against the wall?

It is easier to think
of your children as dead.
You don't have to hope then,
or make a wasted effort.



I'm not hungry tonight.



I feel sick to my stomach.



I will use the butter later. It would not do, this evening, to smell of butter.



N A P

I wait.
washed,
brushed,
fed,
like a prize pig.



There's time to spare.
This is one of the things
I wasn't prepared for – the
amount of unfilled time, the
long parentheses of nothing.



You can always
practise.

Several sessions
a day, fitted into your
daily routine.



Arms at the sides.



knees bent.



lift the pelvis...



...roll the
backbone down,
Tuck. Again.

Breathe in to
the count of five,
hold, expel.



In the afternoons we lay on our beds for an
hour in the gymnasium, between three and four.

They said it was a period of rest and meditation.
But now I think that the rest also was practice.
They were giving us a chance to get used to blank time.

The strange thing is we needed the rest. Many of us went to sleep.
We were tired there, a lot of the time. We were on some kind of pill
or drug I think they put it in the food, to keep us calm. But maybe not.
Maybe it was the place itself. After the first shock, after you'd come to
terms, it was better to be lethargic. You could tell yourself you were
saving up your strength.

I must have been there three
weeks when Flora came.





Two-thirty comes during Testifying.



HER FAULT HER FAULT

HER FAULT

I committed abortion.

I was raped.

But whose fault was it?

I was fourteen. A group of men...

Who led them on?

SHE DID SHE DID SHE DID



Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?



CRY BABY CRY BABY

I used to think well of myself.

I didn't then.



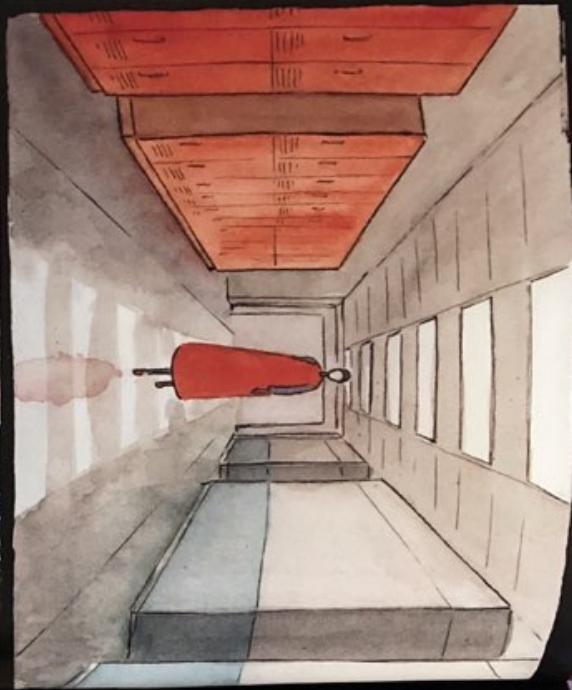
It was my fault. It was my own fault. I led them on. I deserved the pain.

Very good, Janine. You are an example.





I have to wait until this is over before I put up my hand.



The stalls are wooden. Of course there are no longer any locks.



In the wood there's a small hole. Everyone in the Red Centre knows about this hole; everyone except the Aunts.



Mam?



Is that you?

Yes.



God, do I need a cigarette.

Me too.

HOUSEHOLD

VI



The sitting room, in which I never sit, but stand or kneel only. The household has assembled. They all need to be here, the Ceremony demands it.



I would like to steal something from this room. I would like to take some small thing, hide it in the folds of my dress or in my zippered sleeve.



Every once in a while I would take it out and look at it. It would make me feel that I have power, though that would be an illusion.



Late as usual.



Nick is so close that the tip of his boot is touching my foot. Is this on purpose?



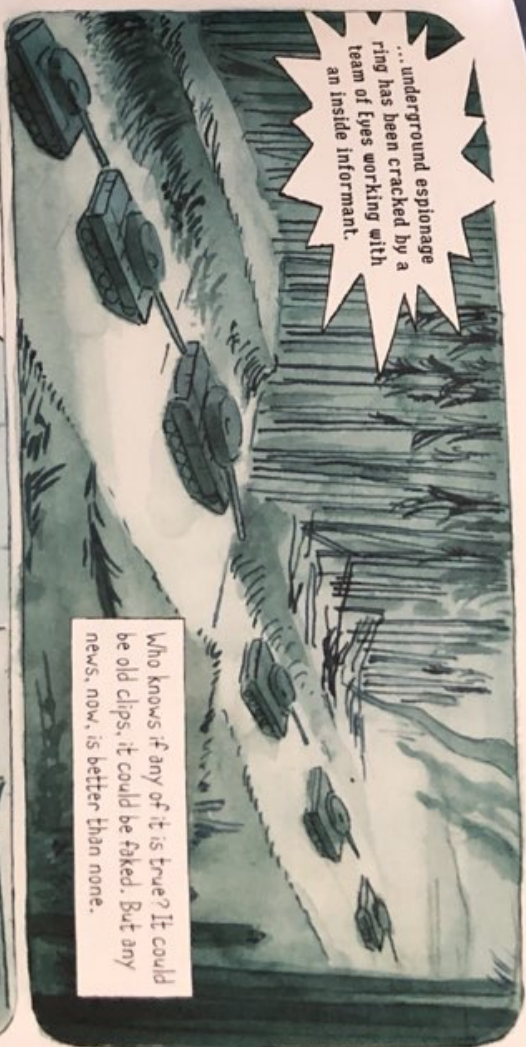


...reporting from
the front lines, the
Appalachian Highland



where the Angels of the
Apocalypse, Fourth Division,
are smoking out a pocket of
Baptist guerrillas, with air support
from the Twenty-first Battalion
of the Angels of Light...

This is the one good thing about the evenings of
the Ceremony: I'm allowed to watch the news.



... underground espionage
ring has been cracked by a
team of Eyes working with
an inside informant.

Who knows if any of it is true? It could
be old clips, it could be faked. But any
news, now, is better than none.



The ring has been
smuggling precious national
resources over the border
into Canada. Five members
of the heretical sect of
Quakers have been...



They show us only victories, never
defeats. Who wants bad news?



They tell us what
we long to believe.



The Commander.

If he were to falter, fail, or die,
what would become of us?



The Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept
tea locked up, so the servants wouldn't steal it. It is
an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it,
if we ever got our hands on it? We can be read to
from it, by him, but we cannot read.

Our heads turn towards him, we are expectant,
here comes our bedtime story.

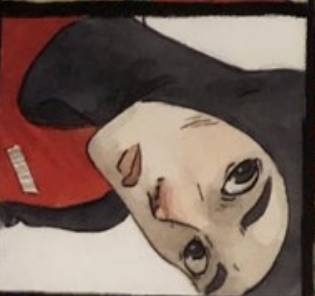


Ahem....

And when Rachel saw that
she bore Jacob no children, Rachel
envied her sister, and said unto Jacob,
Give me children, or else I die.

... And Jacob's anger was
kindled against Rachel; and he said,
Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld
from thee the fruit of the womb?

And she said, Behold my maid
Bilhah, go in unto her; and she
shall bear upon my knees, that I
may also have children by her.



I've got to
get out of here,
I'm going bats.

No! No, Noira,
don't try it. Not
on your own.





I'll take sick.
They send an ambulance,
I've seen it.



...And Leah said,
God hath given me my hire,
because I have given my
maiden to my husband.



She always does this.

So be it



Now we will have a moment
of silent prayer. We will ask for
a blessing, and for success in
all our ventures.

How she must hate me.

So be it



I pray silently:
*Notre te bastandes
carbonandorum.*
I don't know what
it means, but it
sounds right.
When I imagine
the woman who
wrote it, I turn
her into Moira.
I saw her go out,
to the ambulance,
on a stretcher,
carried by two
angels. A fever.



...Blessed be the poor
in spirit, for theirs is the
kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the merciful.
Blessed are the meek.



Blessed are the silent.
Blessed be those that
mourn, for they shall
be comforted...





Eat your dinner.

They took her into the room that used to be the Science Lab. It was a room where none of us ever went willingly.

Afterwards she could not walk for a week, her feet wouldn't fit into her shoes, they were too swollen.

It was the feet they'd do, for a first offence. They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that the hands. They didn't care what they did to your feet and hands, even if it was permanent.



Remember, for our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential.



I am still praying but what I'm seeing is Maria's feet, the way they looked after they'd brought her back.

Her feet did not look like feet at all.

They looked like drowned feet, swollen and boneless, except for the colour.

They looked like lungs.

Oh God, I pray.
Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.
Is this what you had in mind?

For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, whose heart is perfect towards Him.

Amen.

Amen.

Amen.

The Ceremony goes as usual.





You can get up now. Get up and get out.

GET OUT!



She's supposed to have me rest, for ten minutes, with my feet on a pillow to improve the chances.



This is meant to be a time of silent meditation for her, but she's not in the mood for that.



Which of us is it worse for, her or me?

This is what
I do when
I'm back in
my room.

I take off my clothes and put on my nightgown.

I look for the pat of butter,
in the toe of my shoe, where
I hid it after dinner.

Whenever there
is butter or egg
margarine, I eat
some in this way.

I rub the butter over my face,
work it into the skin of my hands.

There's no longer any hand lotion or
face cream, not for us. Such things are
considered vanities. We are containers,
it's only the insides of our bodies that
are important. The outside can become
hard and wrinkled, for all they care,
like the shell of a nut.

My predecessor in this room must
have done this too. We all do it.

As long as we do this, butter
our skin to keep it soft, we
can believe that we will some
day get out, that we will be
touched again, in love or desire.

We have ceremonies of
our own, private ones.

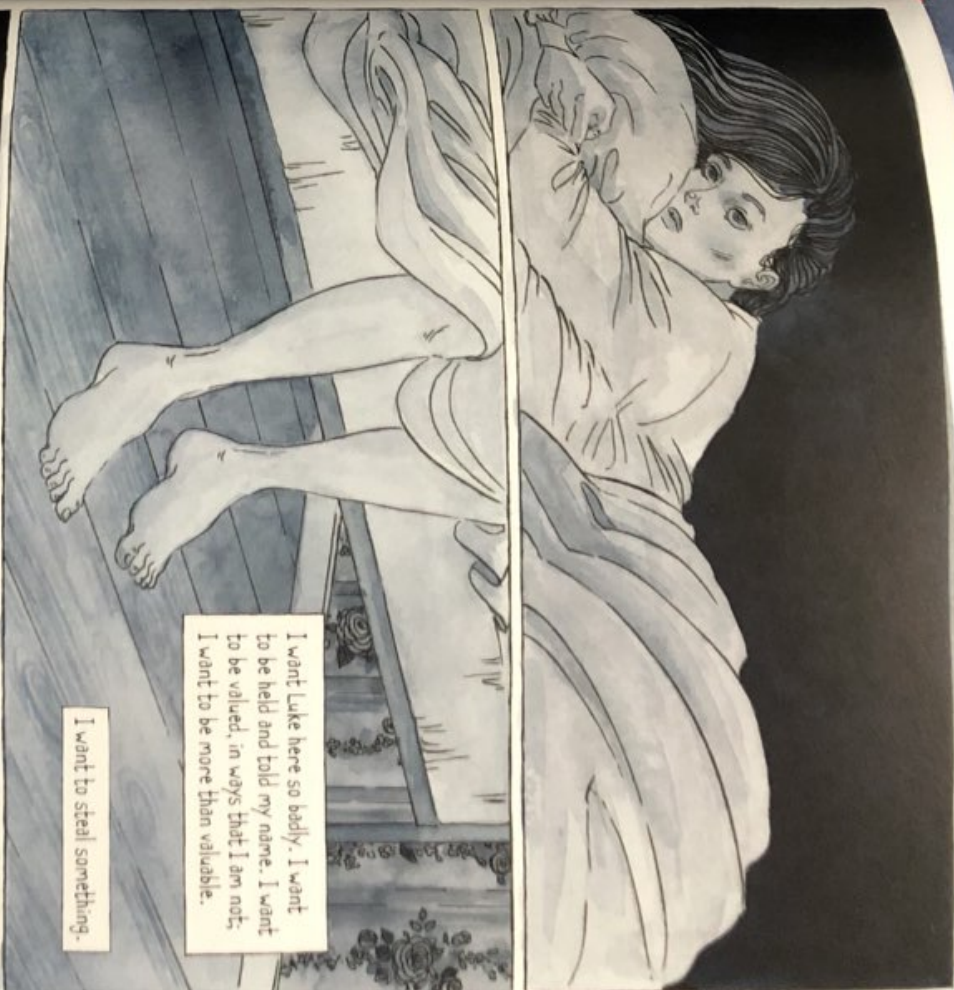
To such devices
have we descended.

VII NIGHT

Buttered, I lie on my bed, flat, like a piece of toast.

I can't sleep.

In the semi-dark I stare up at the blind plaster eye in the middle of the ceiling, which stares back down at me, even though it can't see.



I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not, I want to be more than valuable.

I want to steal something.

I like this. I am doing something, on my own. The active tense.

Tensed.



What I would like to steal is a knife, from the kitchen, but I'm not ready for that.

