

I will that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array...

The problem wasn't only with the women. The main problem was with the men. There was nothing for them any more.

Nothing? But they had...

There was nothing for them to do.

They could make money.

It's not enough. It's too abstract. I mean, there was nothing for them to do with women.

What do you mean?

What about all the Pornycarners, it was all over the place, they even had it motorized.

I'm not talking about sex. That was part of it, the sex was too easy. Anyone could just buy it. There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for.

We have the stats from that time. You know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel.

Do they feel now?

Yes. They do.

...But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived...

Are they old enough to remember anything of the time before, playing baseball, in jeans and sneakers, riding their bicycles? Reading books, all by themselves? Even though some of them are no more than fourteen - Start them soon is the policy, there's not a moment to be lost - still they'll remember.

And the ones after them will, for three or four or five years, but after that they won't. They'll always have been silent.

We've given them more than we've taken away. Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles bars, the meat market?

Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off.

And if they did marry, they could be left with a kid, two kids, the husband might just get fed up and take off, disappear.

They got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up on the whole business.

This way they're protected, they can fulfil their biological destinies in peace.

Notwithstanding she shall be saved by childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety.

I like to know what you think.

What I think doesn't matter.

Come now. You're intelligent enough, you must have an opinion. What we've done, how things have worked out.

I have no opinion.

You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs.

We thought we could do better.

Better?

Better never means better for everyone. It always means worse, for some.



Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own.

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will.

There were limits but my body was nevertheless lithe, solid, one with me.

Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping.

The wreath on the ceiling floats above my head, like a frozen halo, a zero.

A hole in space where a star exploded.
A ring on water, where a stone's been thrown.

Of all the dreams this is the worst.

It's a Saturday morning, it's a September.



We're going on a day trip,
that's what we are planning
to tell them at the border.



She thinks we're
going on a picnic,
that's what we told
her. We give her
a sleeping pill so
she'll be asleep
when we cross.



We have nothing with us, we
don't want to look as if we're
going anywhere permanent.
We have forged passports,
guaranteed, worth the price.









Time has not stood still.

It has washed over me, washed me away,
as if I'm nothing more than a woman of sand,
left by a careless child too near the water.

I am only a shadow now, far back behind the glib
shiny surface of this photograph. A shadow of
a shadow, as all dead mothers become.

You can see it in her eyes:
I am not there.



Up for a little excitement? I have a surprise for you.

Guess.



Animal, vegetable, or mineral?



Oh, animal. Definitely animal. I'd say.

Where did you find it? Weren't they supposed to have destroyed all that kind of thing?

I had to guess the size. I hope it fits.



You expect me to wear that?



It's a disguise. You'll need to paint your face too; I've got the stuff for it. You'll never get in without it.



In where?



Tonight I'm taking you out.

I feel stupid.



Charming! Now for the face.

For a moment I think I won't remember how to do any of this.



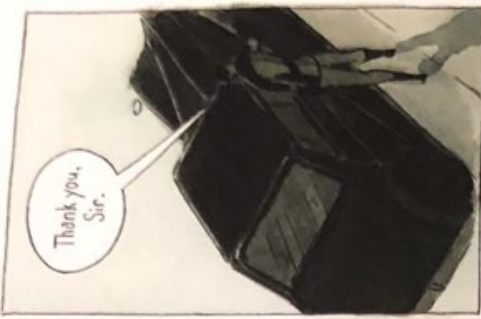
Terrific!



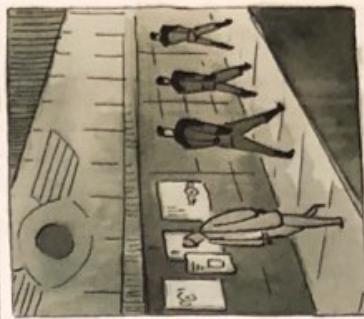
Is this -



Pull the hood down over your face. It's for getting through the checkpoints.



Thank you,
Sir.



Nick disapproves
of me, or am I
imagining it?



But what about
my pass?

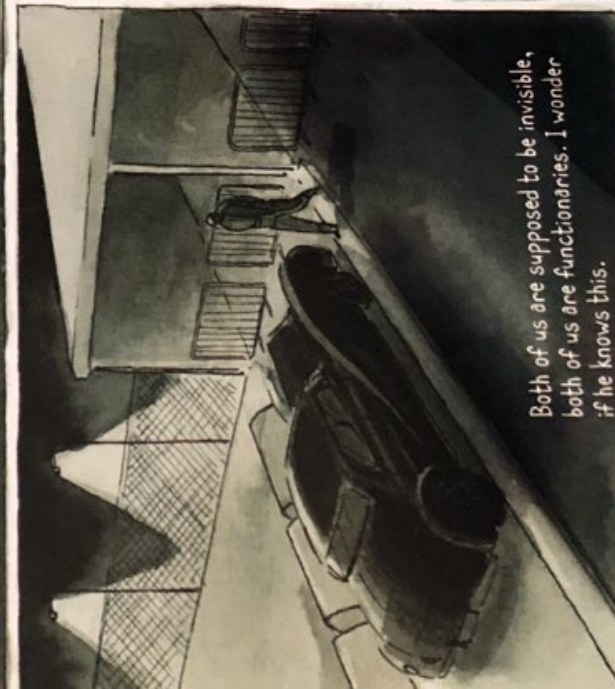
Don't worry
about that. I've got
one for you.



We do have something in common.



Evening, Sir.
May I see your
pusses?



Both of us are supposed to be invisible,
both of us are functionaries. I wonder
if he knows this.



If anyone asks you, say you're an evening rental.



On the hour, as usual, Nick.



May I see your pass, Sir?



Thank you, Sir. Enjoy your evening.



Now I'll have to ask you to get down onto the floor of the car.

Down?

Wives aren't allowed.



I've been here before: with Luke, in the afternoons, a long time ago. It was a hotel, then.



We'll have to be fast. This is a back entrance.







Have a drink!
They've got everything
here. Imported.

Who are
these people?

It's only for officers.
And senior officials. And trade
delegations, of course.
It stimulates trade.



Oh. Well, some of them
are real pros. Working girls
from the time before.

They couldn't be
assimilated; anyway, most
of them prefer it here.

And the
others?

Well, we have quite a collection.
That one there, the one in green,
she's a sociologist. Or was. That one
was a lawyer, that one was in
business, an executive position.
They prefer it here, too.

Prefer it
to what?



It's like walking
into the past.
Don't you think?

Well? What do
you think of our
little club?

I thought this
sort of thing was
strictly forbidden.

Well, officially.
But everyone's
human, after all.

You can't cheat
Nature. Nature demands
variety, for men.

It stands to
reason, it's part of the
procreational strategy.

It's Nature's
plan.



To the alternatives.
You might even prefer
it yourself.

to what
you've got.

You'd have to
watch your weight,
that's for sure.

They're strict about that.
Gain ten pounds and they
put you in Solitary...



Is there a
washroom?

Of course. It's over there.
If anyone stops you, just
show them your tag. They'll
know you're taken.



Fifteen minutes.
Rest break once
an hour.



Godawful.
You look like the
Whore of Babylon.

Isn't that the idea?
You look like something
the cat dragged in.

Yeah. Not my style and this thing
is about to fall to shreds. I wish
they'd dredge up someone who still
knows how to make them.

You pick
that out?



Hell no.
Government
issue.



What the hell are you doing here?
Not that it isn't great to see you.
But it's not so great for you.

What'd you do wrong?
Laugh at his dick?

I'm temporary.
It's just tonight.
He smuggled me in.

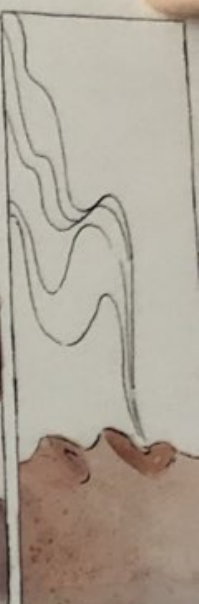


We don't have much time left.
Tell me everything.

What's the
point?



I almost
made it out.



Some of them do that,
they get a kick out of it.

It's like screwing
on the altar or something:
Your gang are supposed to be such
chaste vessels. They like to see you
all painted up. Just another
cummy power trip.



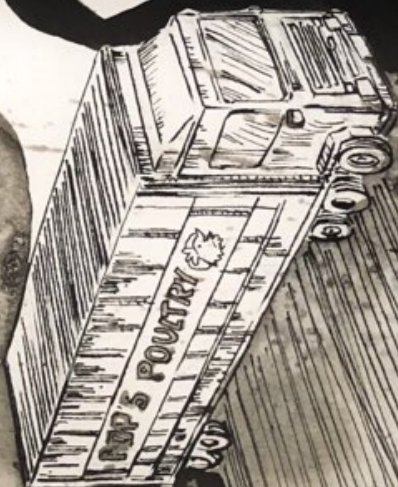
I guess
they thought
it was me.



The Underground
Femaleroad, you know?

They got me up as far as Salem, then
in a truck full of chickens into Maine.
I almost puked from the smell.

You ever thought about what it would
be like to be shot on by a truckload
of chickens, all of them carsick?



They were planning to get me across the border
there; not by car or truck, that was already too
difficult, but by boat, up the coast.



I don't know what happened. Maybe
somebody got cold feet about it, or
somebody outside got suspicious.



We didn't end up at the Red Centre,
though, we went somewhere else.
I won't go into what happened after
that. I'd rather not talk about it.

All I can say is they
didn't leave any marks.



When that was over they showed me a movie. Know what it was about? It was about life in the Colonies.



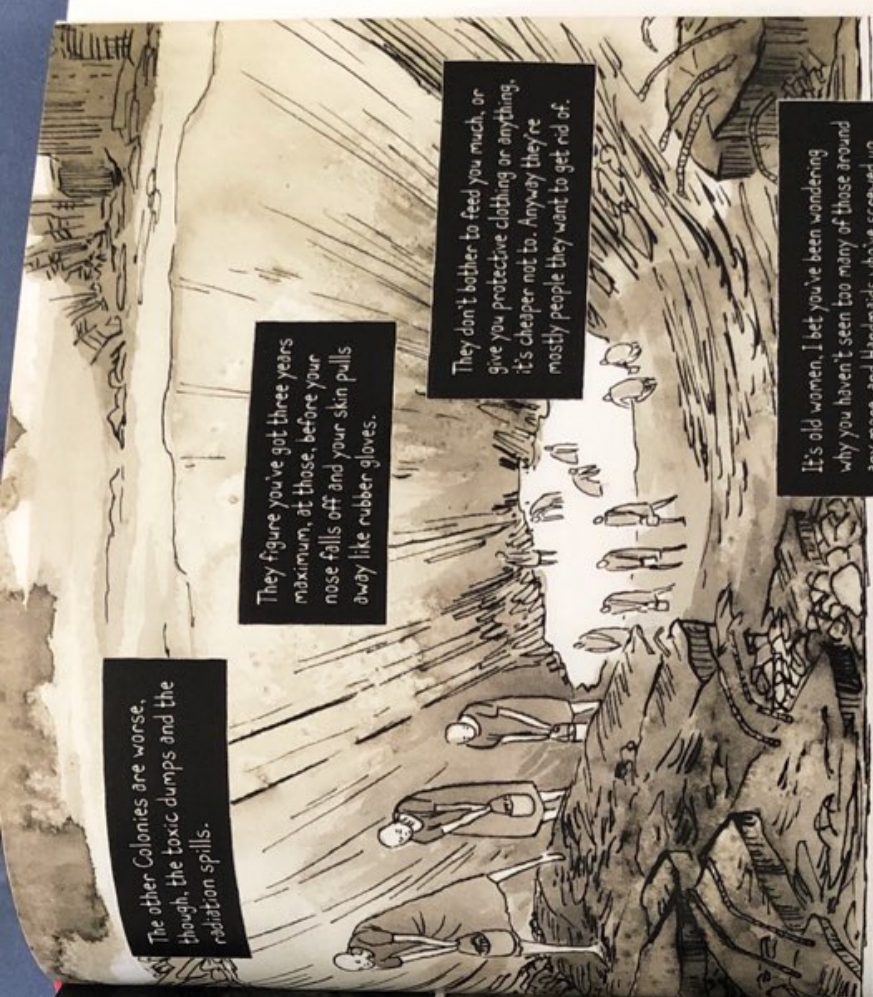
In the Colonies, they spend their time cleaning up.

They're very clean-minded these days. Sometimes it's just bodies, after a battle.

The ones in city ghettos are the worst, they're left around longer, they get rotten.



This bunch doesn't like dead bodies lying around, they're afraid of a plague or something. So the women there do the burning.



The other Colonies are worse, though, the toxic dumps and the radiation spills.

They figure you've got three years maximum, at those, before your nose falls off and your skin pulls away like rubber gloves.

They don't bother to feed you much, or give you protective clothing or anything, it's cheaper not to. Anyway they're mostly people they want to get rid of.

It's old women, I bet you've been wondering why you haven't seen too many of those around any more, and Handmaids who've screwed up their three chances, and incorrigibles like me.

Discards, all of us.

I'd say it's about a quarter men in the Colonies, too. Not all of those Gender Traitors end up on the Wall.



I had my choice, they said, this or the Colonies.



So here I am.

They even give you face cream. You should figure out some way of getting in here.

You'd have three or four good years before your snatch wears out and they send you to the boneyard. The food's not bad and there's drink and drugs, if you want it, and we only work nights.

Moina. You don't mean that.

Don't worry about me. I'm still here.

Anyway, look at it this way: it's not so bad, there's lots of women around.

Butch paradise, you might call it.

Here is what I'd like to tell.

I'd like to tell a story about how Moina escaped, for good this time. Or if I couldn't tell that, I'd like to say she blew up Jezebel's, with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would left her. But as far as I know that didn't happen. I don't know how she ended, or even if she did, because I never saw her again.



Thank God.

Why, thank God?

I thought she was dead.

She might as well be. You should wish it for her.



I think of my mother, sweeping up deadly toxins; the way they used to use up old women, in Russia, sweeping dirt. Only this dirt will kill her.

She will think of something. But I know this isn't true.

I saw your mother.

Where?

There was a close-up, in that film they showed us. It was her all right. She was wrapped up in one of those grey things, but I know it was her.

I've mourned for her already. But I will do it again, and again.



I thought you might enjoy it for a change.



I guess it was a sort of experiment.



Maybe I should turn the lights out.



Tomorrow, isn't it? The Ceremony.



I thought we could jump the gun.

Why did you bring me here?

XIII

NIGHT

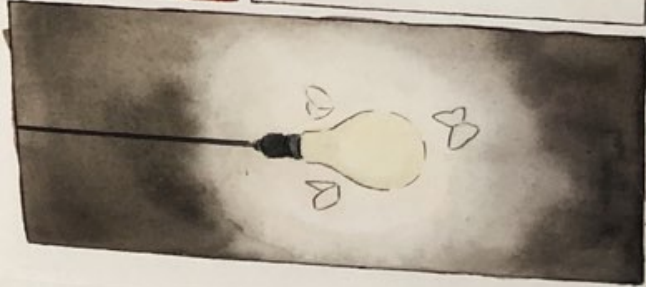


Serena Joy is here at midnight, as she said she'd be.

I have shed the spangles, scraped off the lipstick with toilet paper.
I hope nothing shows, I hope I don't smell of it, or of him either.







So...you come here often?



And what's a nice girl like me doing in a spot like this?

Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder.

We're quoting from old movies, from the time before. And the movies then were from a time before that.

Not even my mother talked like that, not when I knew her.

Possibly nobody ever talked like that in real life, it was all a fabrication from the beginning. Still, it's amazing how easily it comes back to mind, this corny and falsely gay sexual banter. I can see now what it's for, what it was always for: to keep the core of yourself out of reach, enclosed, protected.

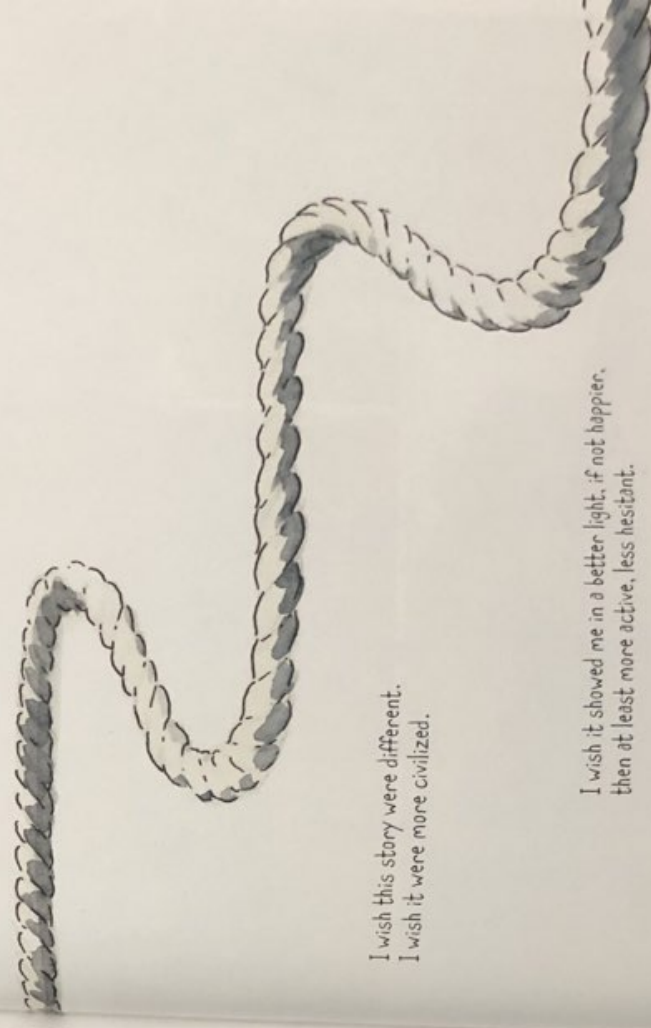


I'm sad now, the way we're talking is infinitely sad: faded music, faded paper flowers, worn satin, an echo of an echo. All gone away, no longer possible.



XIV

SALVAGING



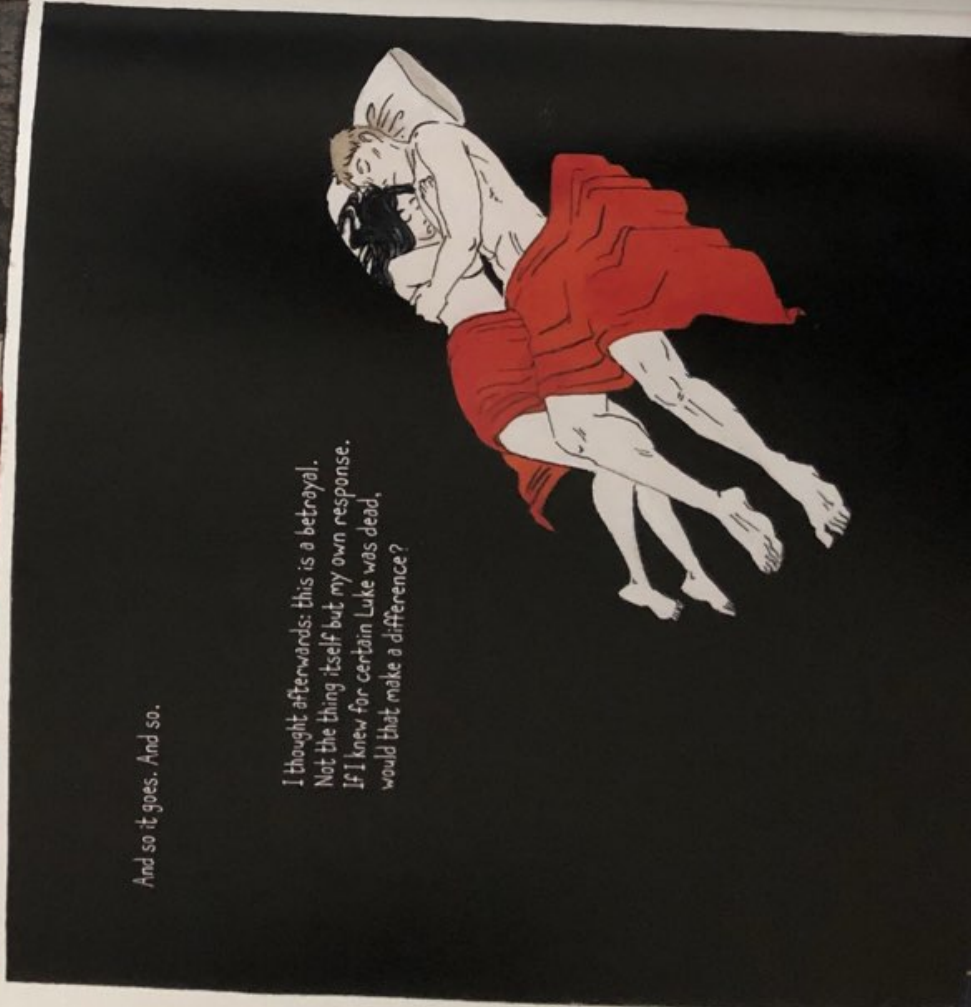
I wish this story were different.
I wish it were more civilized.

I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier,
then at least more active, less hesitant.

I wish it had more shape.



That would have meant something
else, once. Once it would have meant:
no strings. Now it means: no heroics.
It means: don't risk yourself for me.



And so it goes. And so.

I thought afterwards: this is a betrayal.
Not the thing itself but my own response.
If I knew for certain Luke was dead,
would that make a difference?

I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story.

I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in
crossfire or pulled apart by force.

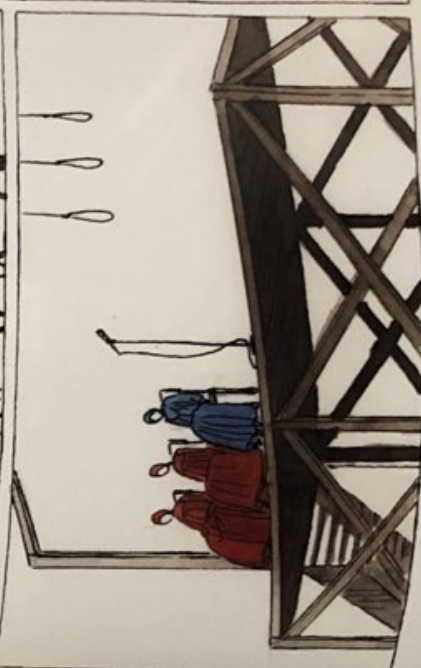
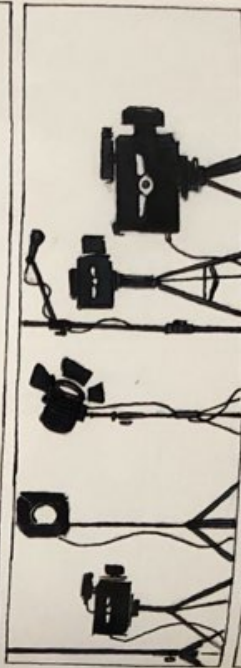


By telling you anything at all
I'm at least believing in you,
I believe you're there.

Because I'm telling you
this story I will your
existence.



I tell, therefore you are.







Today's Salvaging is now concluded.



You know the rules for a Particution.

You will wait until I blow the whistle. After that, what you do is up to you, until I blow the whistle again.

Understood?

I'd like to call upon the Handmaids now, to stand up and form a circle. Orderly, now.



This man has been convicted of rape.

He was a Guardian. He has abused his position of trust.



I might add that this crime involved two of you and took place at gunpoint. It was also brutal.

I will not offend your ears with any details, except to say that one woman was pregnant and the baby died.



It is too much, this violation. The baby too, after what we go through.

I didn't...

I feel my hands clench.







Don't be stupid. He wasn't a
rapist at all, he was a political.
He was one of ours.

I knocked him out.
Put him out of his misery.
Don't you know what they're
doing to him?

I saw what you did.
Why did you do that? You!
I thought you...

Don't look at me.
They're watching.

Get control
of yourself!

I don't
care.



You will find your partners and re-form your line.



One of us. A Guardian.
It seems impossible.



Hi there.
How are you doing?

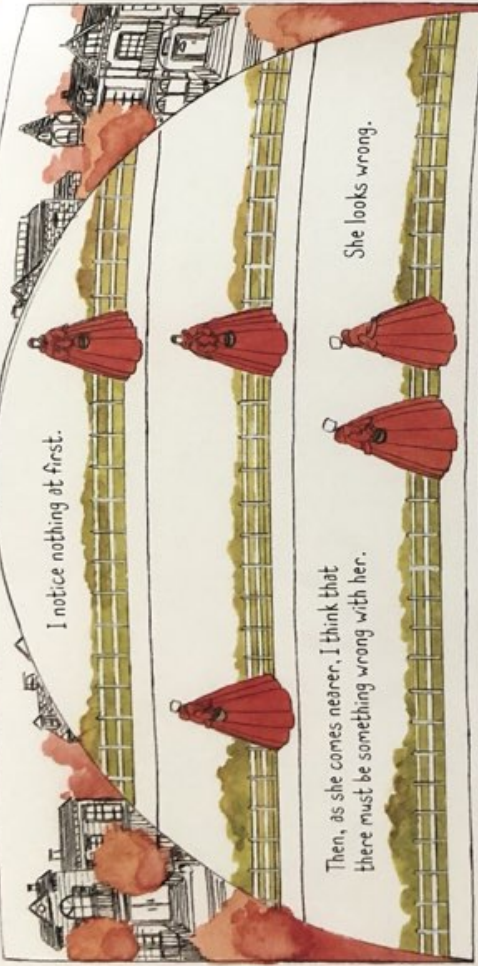
Janine...

You have
a nice boy.

Easy out, is what I think.

I don't even feel sorry for her,
although I should. I feel angry.

I'm not proud of myself for this, or for
any of it. But then, that's the point.



I notice nothing at first.

Then, as she comes nearer, I think that there must be something wrong with her.

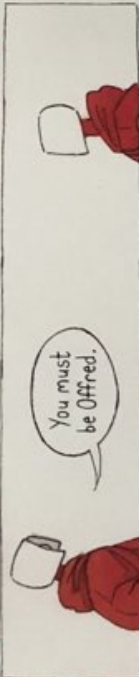
She looks wrong.



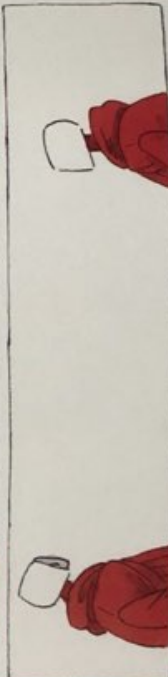
Blessed be the fruit.



May the Lord open.



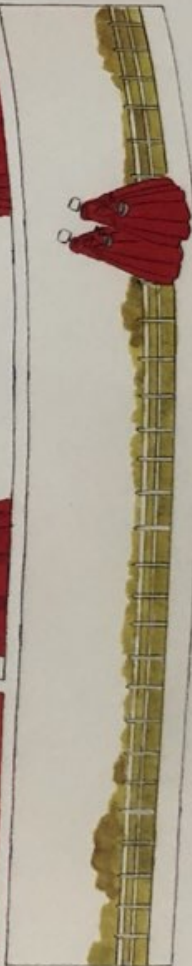
You must be Offred.



We've been sent good weather.



Which I receive with joy.



I know she hasn't. I saw her only this morning. She would have said.

Has Ofglen been transferred, so soon?

I am Ofglen.



I didn't know Ofglen very well. I mean the former one.

Oh?

I've only known her since May. Around the first of May I think it was.



Let that be a reminder to us.

Yes.



What they used to call May Day.



Under His Eye.

Under His Eye.



She hanged herself.

After the Salvaging. She saw the van coming for her.

It was better.



You ought to make an effort to clear your mind of such...echoes.

Did they? That isn't a term I remember. I'm surprised you do.



She isn't one of us. But she knows.



All I did was know.

All I did was not tell.

If Ofgen's been caught, she will talk. She won't be able to help it. But I haven't done anything! Not really.

They know where my child is! I can't bear to think what they might do.

Or Luke, or my mother, or Moira...

Dear God, don't make me choose. I'll say anything they like, I'll confess to any crime. I'll end up hanging from a hook on the wall.



Dear God, I will do anything you like.

I'll obliterate myself, if that's what you really want, I'll empty myself, truly, become a chalice. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice.



I'll repent.

I'll abdicate.

I'll renounce.



I don't want to be a doll hung up on the wall. I don't want to be a wingless angel.

I want to keep on living, in any form.

I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am object.

I feel, for the first time, their true power.

Offred.



I trusted you. Tried to help you.



How could you be so vulgar? I told him...



Behind my back. You could have left me something.



Pick up that disgusting thing and get to your room.

Just like the other one. A slut.

You'll end up the same.

XV

NIGHT



This could be the last time I have to wait.
But I don't know what I'm waiting for.

I am in disgrace, which is the
opposite of grace. I ought to
feel worse about it.

But I feel serene, at peace,
pervaded with indifference.

Don't let the bastards grind you down.
I repeat this to myself, but it conveys
nothing. You might as well say, Don't
let there be air; or, Don't be.

I suppose you could say that.



Behind me I feel her presence,
my ancestress, my double.

Turning in mid-air under the chandelier,
in her costume of stars and feathers,

a bird stopped in flight, a woman made
into an angel, waiting to be found.

By me this time.

How could I have believed
I was alone in here?

There were always two of us.

Get it over, she says.
I'm tired of this melodrama,
I'm tired of keeping silent.

There's no one you can protect,
your life has value to no one.

I want it finished.





The world is full of weapons if you're looking for them. I should have paid attention. But it's too late to think about that now.



It's Nick.



It's all right. It's Mayday. Go with them.



Worse is coming, then.

I've been wasting my time.



I should have taken things into my own hands while I had the chance.



Why shouldn't he know about Mayday? All the Eyes must know about it; they'll have squeezed it, crushed it, twisted it out of enough bodies, enough mouths by now.

I need to see your authorization. You have a warrant?

But I snatch at it, this offer. It's all I'm left with.

Not that we need one, Sir, but all is in order. Violation of state secrets.

BITCH.

After all he did for you!

What has she done?

There have already been purges among them, there will be more.



Whether this is my end or a new
beginning I have no way of knowing:

I have given myself over into the hands
of strangers, because it can't be helped.

And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.



HISTORICAL NOTES



...This item was unearthed on the site of what was once the city of Bangor, in what, at the time prior to the inception of the Gileadean regime, would have been the State of Maine.

There were some thirty tapes in the collection, with varying proportions of music to spoken word. In general, each tape begins with two or three songs, as camouflage no doubt; then the music is broken off and the speaking voice takes over.

The voice is a woman's and, according to our voice-print experts, the same one throughout.

We held out no hope of tracing the narrator herself.



She does not see fit to supply us with her original name, and indeed all official records of it would have been destroyed upon her entry into the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre.

"Offred" gives no clue, since it was a patronymic, composed of the possessive preposition and the first name of the gentleman in question.

The other names in the document - "Luke," "Nick," "Moiré," and "Janine" - are equally useless for the purposes of identification, as these were likely pseudonyms, adopted to protect these individuals should the tapes be discovered.

If we could identify the elusive "Commander," we felt, at least some progress would have been made.

The evidence on the whole favours Frederick R. Waterford. We know, for instance, that he met his end in one of the earliest purges; he was accused of liberal tendencies, of being in possession of a substantial collection of heretical literary materials, and of harbouring a subversive.

Most likely this was "Nick," who, by the evidence of the very existence of the tapes, must have helped "Offred" to escape.



As for the ultimate fate of our narrator, it remains obscure.

Was she smuggled over the border of Gilead, into what was then Canada?

Did she reach the outside world safely and build a new life for herself?

Or was she discovered, arrested, sent to the Colonies or to Jezebel's, or even executed?

Our document is on these subjects mute. As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes.



Voices may reach us from it, but, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day.

Are there any questions?