

The Tent

Margaret Atwood

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Thylacine Ragout

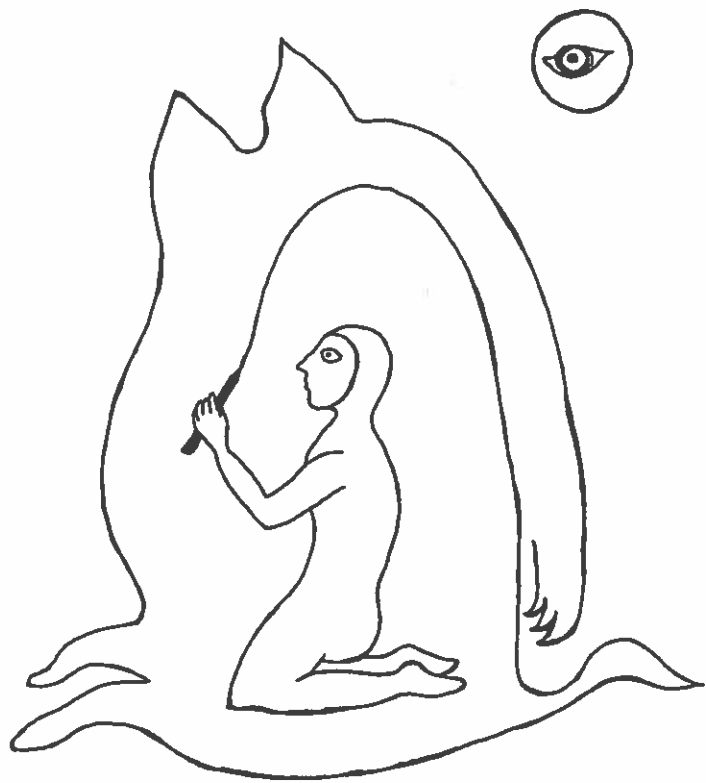
They cloned the Thylacine. They got some DNA out of a bone and they emptied the nucleus out of the egg of a Tasmanian devil and they put the Thylacine bone DNA into the egg, and it grew, and they implanted it, and it didn't work, and they did it again, and it didn't work, and they did it again, again, again, and they tried it a little differently, and they tweaked it this way and that, and finally they cloned the Thylacine. Out it came, the baby Thylacine, and they nurtured it tenderly and with great interest and there it was, running around with stripes on, frantic, as in the only remaining film of it, where it runs and paces and utters silent yelps because

the film is a silent film, and it stops to gaze into the camera with an expression both poignant and severe. It was a Thylacine all right, or it looked like one, or it looked like our idea of one, because it was an animal no one still alive had ever actually seen. Anyway, what they got was close enough. Why quibble?

This event made the headlines, of course it did, and they named the Thylacine Trugannini, a name you see on restaurant menus in that part of the world, as a gesture of respect perhaps, or a way of selling something, or a commemoration, as on tombstones. Anyway, they named it Trugannini, after the last fully Aboriginal inhabitant of that island, who was raped, or that is the story, whose sisters were killed, or that is the story, whose mother was killed, whose husband was killed in front of her eyes, whose father died of grief, who lived in solitude, solitude of a kind that would kill most people, whose bones were dug up and put on display for a hundred years, against her will, but she was dead so what will did she have, what right do the dead have to a will, they are dead after all, they are not present except in bone form, in a glass case, for people to stare at. Like the Thylacine bones, the ones that were stared at for

years, the ones they raided for the DNA to make the Thylacine clone.

Crowds visited. A documentary was made. Prizes were awarded. Then what happened? The Thylacine disappeared. It vanished. One day it was there, in solitude, in singleness, in its cage, or rather its large tastefully landscaped compound, running round and around as if looking for something, and then it was gone. It didn't die of solitude, however. It was sold. A bent scientist retired to Bermuda on the proceeds. A very rich person with refined tastes ate the Thylacine. He ate it in the form of a ragout. He had a yen for the unique, he wanted to be the only person ever to eat a Thylacine. It did not taste very good, despite the care taken in the preparation of it — well, there were no recipes — but it tasted very expensive, and the man who ate it wrote in his secret diary that it was good enough value for the money.



The Animals Reject Their Names and
Things Return to Their Origins

1.

It was the bear who began it. Said,

I'm getting out from under.

I am not Bear, l'Ours, Ursus, Bär

or any other syllables

you've pinned on me.

Forget the chateau tapestries

in which I'm led in embroidered chains.

and the scarlet glories of the hunt

that was only glorious for you,

you with your clubs and bludgeons.

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Forget the fairy tales, in which I was
your shaggy puppet, prince in hairshirt, surrogate
for human demons.

I'm not your coat, rug, glass-eyed trophy head,
plush bedtime toy, and that's not me
in outer space with my spangled cub.

I'm not your totem; I refuse
to dance in your circuses; you cannot carve
my soul in stone.

I renounce metaphor: I am not
child-stealer, shape-changer,
old garbage-eater, and you can stuff
simile also: unpeeled,
I am not *like a man*.

I take back what you have stolen,
and in your languages I announce
I am now nameless.
My true name is a growl.

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(Come to think of it, I am not
a British headdress either:
I do not signify bravery.
I want to go back to eating salmon
without all this military responsibility.)

I follow suit, said the lion,
vacating his coats of arms
and movie logos; and the eagle said,
Get me off this flag.

II.

At this the dictionaries began to untwist,
and time stalled and reversed;
the sweaters wound back into their balls of wool,
which rolled bleating out into the meadows;
the perfumes returned to France
and old men there fell sweetly dead
from a surfeit of aroma.
Priests gave their dresses up again
to the women, and the women
ditched their alligator shoes in a hurry
before their former owners turned up to claim them.

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The violins of the East Coast shores
took flight from the fingers of their players,
sucking in waltzes, laments, and reels,
landed in Scotland, fell apart
with wailing into their own wood and sinew
and vanished into the trees
and into the guts and howls of long-dead cats
and the tails of knackered horses.
Songs crammed themselves back down
the throats of their singers,
and a billion computers blew apart
and homed in chip by chip
on the brains of the inventors.

Squashed mice were shot backwards out of traps,
brides and grooms uncoupled like shunting
trains,
tins of sardines exploded, releasing their
wiggling shoals;
dinosaur bones whizzed like missiles
out of museums back to the badlands,
and bullets flew sizzling into their guns.
Glass beads popped off gowns and moccasins

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and fell on Italy in a hail of dangerous colour,
as white people disappeared over the Atlantic
in a whoosh of pollution, vainly clutching
their power tools, car keys, and lawn mowers
which dove like metal fish back into the mines;
black people too, recapturing syncopation;
all flowers were suctioned budwise into their
stems.

The Native peoples made speedy clearance work
of cowboys and longhorns, but then took off
westward instead, chanting goodbye
to ancestral plains, which were reclaimed
by shaggy mastodons and the precursors of
horses
and everywhere
the children shrank and began to
drop teeth and grow hair.

III.

Well, there were suddenly a lot more flamingos
before they in their turn became eggs,
while people's bodies reverted through their own
flesh genealogies like stepping stones,

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man woman man, container into contained,
shedding language and gathering themselves in,
skein after skein of protoplasm

until there was only one of them,
alone at the first naming;
but the streetwise animals, forewarned
and having learned the diverse meanings
of the word *dominion*,
did not show up,
and Adam, inarticulate, deprived
of his arsenal of proper nouns,
returned to mud

and mud itself became lava
and lava the uncooled earth
and the uncooled earth a swirl of white-hot
energy, and the energy jammed itself
into its own potential, and swirled
like fluorescent bathwater
down a non-existent wormhole.

THE ANIMALS REJECT THEIR NAMES

IV.

I could end this with a moral,
as if this were a fable about animals,
though no fables are really about animals.

I could say: Don't offend the bear,
don't tell bad jokes about him,
have compassion on his bear heart;
I could say, Think twice
before you speak.
I could say, Don't take the name
of anything in vain.

But it's far too late for that,
because you can't read this,
because you can't remember the word for *read*,
because you are dizzy with aphasia,

because the page darkens and ripples
because it is liquid and unbroken,

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because God has bitten his own tongue
and the first bright word of creation
hovers in the formless void
unspoken

Three Novels I Won't Write Soon

1. WORM ZERO

In this novel all the worms die. That would include the nematodes. Also anything wormlike in shape, though it may not be a worm proper. Should grubs be included? Should maggots? I'll know better once I get thoroughly into this thing.

Worms, anyway. Those in the earth, and those in the water. Those inside fish. Those inside dogs. Those inside people, such as pinworms, roundworms, and

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tapeworms. They die, each and every one. It's not all downside.

Or it's not all downside at first. But quite soon – because the earthworms are now defunct, and that's important – the soil is no longer circulating in the usual fashion. Worm dung is no longer extruded at the surface, wormholes no longer allow rain to penetrate. Valuable nutrients remain sealed in layers of subsoil. Formerly productive fields turn to granite. Crops become stunted and then won't grow at all. Famine gets going.

Who shall we follow in the course of this doleful story? I vote for Chris and Amanda. They are a nice young couple who've had great sex in Chapter One, or possibly Chapter Two. Then realization has dawned on them, ruining their plans to renovate their kitchen and install a new round eco-friendly refrigerator that pops up out of the kitchen counter.

They flee to their summer cottage, as civic order breaks down in the once-thriving town where they live and

THREE NOVELS I WON'T WRITE SOON

people start eating their cats and goldfish and the dried ornamental sunflowers in their dining-room floral arrangements.

Amanda, who is the optimist of the pair, tries to grow some Tiny Tim tomatoes in the pathetic little patch of ground they once used only for petunias. Chris is a realist. He looks disaster squarely in its wormless face. (Yes – it's come to me! – the maggots have perished as well, which explains the various animal carcasses littering the cottage premises, gnawed on by crows and such, but not cleaned up neatly the way the maggots would once have done it.)

Last scene: Amanda is trying to poke holes in the flint-hard soil with a knitting needle. Chris comes out of the house. He has a cup containing their last scrapings of decaf instant coffee. "At least we're together," says Amanda.

Or should I have Chris yell, "Where are you, fucking worms, when we need you most?"

Maybe Amanda should yell it. That would be unexpected, and might show that her character has developed.

Now that this has happened – this cathartic, revealing, and somehow inspiring yell – a small, still-wriggling worm might be discovered in the corner of the garden, copulating with itself. It would sound a note of plangent hope. I always like to end on those.

2. SPONGE DEATH

In this novel, a sponge located on a reef near the coast of Florida begins to grow at a very rapid rate. Soon it has reached the shore and is oozing inland, swallowing beach condos and gated communities as it goes. Nothing is able to stop it. It shows no respect for roadblocks, state police, or even bombs. A sponge on the rampage is a formidable foe. It has no central nervous system, not like us.

"It's not like us," says Chris, from the top of his condo, where he has gone with his binoculars to reconnoitre. Amanda clings to him fearfully. What a shame this is – they just bought the condo, in which they had great sex in Chapter One, and now look. All that decor gone to waste.

"Could we sprinkle salt on it?" Amanda asks, with appealing hesitation.

"Honey, it's not a slug," says Chris masterfully.

Should these be his last words? Should the sponge fall upon him with a soft but deadly glop? Or should he be allowed to defeat the monstrous bath accessory and save the day, for Florida, for America, and ultimately for humanity? The latter would be my own inclination.

But until I know the answer to this question – until I'm convinced, in my heart, that the human spirit has the

wherewithal to go head to headless against this malevolent wad of cellulose – because as a writer loyal to the truth of the inner self you can't fake these things – it might be as well not to begin.

3. BEETLEPLUNGE

I heard it as if in a dream. "Beetleplunge." I often get such insights, such gifts from the Unknown. They just come to me. As this one came.

That word – if it is a word – might look quite stunning on the jacket of a book. Should it be "Beetle Plunge," two words? Or possibly "Beetle Plummet?" Or perhaps "Beetle Descent," which might sound more literary?

Let's think outside the box. Scrap the title! This is now a novel without a name. Immediately I am freed from the necessity of having to do something about the beetles. I saw them so clearly when I was first thinking about this book – all the beetles in the world plunging over a cliff, like lemmings, driven by some mysterious instinct gone

wrong – but they did pose a problem: that is, what was to follow as a result?

Maybe I misheard. Maybe it was "Bottle Plunge." Maybe it was Chris and Amanda, in Chris's green Volkswagen, being forced off the road, and perilously close to the edge of an escarpment, by a black Mercedes driven by Amanda's drunken husband. Chris and Amanda had great sex in Chapter One, but Amanda's husband arrived in Chapter Two, in the Mercedes, just as Chris – who is their student gardener, at the gated community – was giving Amanda a post-coital explanation of the infestation of Coleoptera (red and black, with orange mandibles) currently ravaging the herbaceous borders.

As Chris was pronouncing the word *ravaging*, the husband sprang in through the French doors, in an advanced state of inebriation, with murder in his heart. Chris grabbed Amanda by the hand and made a dash for his own battered vehicle, a green Ford pickup: I've reconfigured the Volkswagen, it wasn't muscular enough. Cut to the chase. (Chris will drive very skilfully despite

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the distracting screams let out by Amanda, and he will swerve at the last moment, and the husband, whom we have never liked – he was a dishonest oil-and-gas executive and a sadistic foot fetishist – will go over the cliff instead. Chris and Amanda will end up shakily but gratefully in each other's arms, exactly where we want them to be.)

But maybe it wasn't "Bottle Plunge." Now that I think of it, the phrase may have been "Brutal Purge."

Where does that get us? Down to earth. But which brutal purge? There are so many to choose from. Those in the past, those in the present, and, unfortunately, those yet to come. Anyway, if it's "Brutal Purge," I can't see a way forward. Chris and Amanda are very likeable. They have straight teeth, trim waists, clean socks, and the best of intentions. They don't belong in a book like that, and if they stray into it by accident they won't come out of it alive.