

Poetry by Margaret Atwood

I. The Moment

The moment when, after many years
of hard work and a long voyage
you stand in the centre of your room,
house, half-acre, square mile, island,
country,
knowing at last how you got there,
and say, I own this,
is the same moment when the trees
unloose
their soft arms from around you,
the birds take back their language,
the cliffs fissure and collapse,
the air moves back from you like a wave
and you can't breathe.
No, they whisper. You own nothing.
You were a visitor, time after time
climbing the hill, planting the flag,
proclaiming.
We never belonged to you.
You never found us.
It was always the other way round.

II. Habitation

Marriage is not
a house or even a tent
it is before that, and colder:
The edge of the forest, the edge
of the desert
the unpainted stairs
at the back where we squat
outside, eating popcorn
where painfully and with wonder
at having survived even
this far
we are learning to make fire

III. More and More

More and more frequently the edges
of me dissolve and I become
a wish to assimilate the world, including
you, if possible through the skin
like a cool plant's tricks with oxygen
and live by a harmless green burning.
I would not consume
you or ever
finish, you would still be there
surrounding me, complete
as the air.
Unfortunately I don't have leaves.
Instead I have eyes
and teeth and other non-green
things, which rule out osmosis.
So be careful, I mean it,
I give you fair warning:
This kind of hunger draws
everything into its own
space; nor can we
talk it all over, have a calm
rational discussion.
There is no reason for this, only
a starved dog's logic about bones.

IV. It is dangerous to Read Newspapers

While I was building neat
Castles in the sandbox,
The hasty pits were
Filling with bulldozed corpses

And as I walked to the school
washed and combed, my feet
stepping on the cracks in the cement
detonated red bombs.

Now I am grownup
and literate, and I sit in my chair
as quietly as a fuse

and the jungles are flaming, the under-
brush is charged with soldiers,
the names on the difficult
maps go up in smoke.

I am the cause, I am a stockpile of
chemical
toys, my body
is a deadly gadget,
I reach out in love, my hands are guns,
my good intentions are completely
lethal.

Even my
passive eyes transmute
everything I look at the pocked
black and white of a war photo,
how
can I stop myself

it is dangerous to read newspapers.

Each time I hit a key
on my electric typewriter,
speaking of peaceful trees

another village explodes.

V. Late Night

Late night and rain wakes me, a
downpour,
wind thrashing in the leaves, huge
ears, huge feathers,
like some chased animal, a giant
dog or wild boar. Thunder & shivering
windows; from the tin roof
the rush of water.

I lie askew under the net,
tangled in damp cloth, salt in my hair.
When this clears there will be fireflies
& stars, brighter than anywhere,
which I could contemplate at times
of panic. Light years, think of it.

Screw poetry, it's you I want,
your taste, rain
on you, mouth on your skin.