

HALF-HANGED MARY

("Half-hanged Mary" was Mary Webster, who was accused of witchcraft in the 1680's in a Puritan town in Massachusetts and hanged from a tree - where, according to one of the several surviving accounts, she was left all night. It is known that when she was cut down she was still alive, since she lived for another fourteen years.)

7pm

Rumour was loose in the air
hunting for some neck to land on.
I was milking the cow,
the barn door open to the sunset.

I didn't feel the aimed word hit
and go in like a soft bullet.
I didn't feel the smashed flesh
closing over it like water
over a thrown stone.

I was hanged for living alone
for having blue eyes and a sunburned skin,
tattered skirts, few buttons,
a weedy farm in my own name,
and a surefire cure for warts;

Oh yes, and breasts,
and a sweet pear hidden in my body.
Whenever there's talk of demons
these come in handy.

8pm

The rope was an improvisation.
With time they'd have thought of axes.

1. What types of people were vulnerable to these kinds of charges during this period?

Up I go like a windfall in reverse,
a blackened apple stuck back onto the tree.

Trussed hands, rag in my mouth,
a flag raised to salute the moon,

old bone-faced goddess, old original,
who once took blood in return for food.

The men of the town stalk homeward,
excited by their show of hate,

their own evil turned inside out like a glove,
and me wearing it.

9pm

The bonnets come to stare,
the dark skirts also,
the upturned faces in between,
mouths closed so tight they're lipless.
I can see down into their eyeholes
and nostrils. I can see their fear.

You were my friend, you too.
I cured your baby, Mrs.,
and flushed yours out of you,
Non-wife, to save your life.

Help me down? You don't dare.
I might rub off on you,
like soot or gossip. Birds
of a feather burn together,
though as a rule ravens are singular.

In a gathering like this one
the safe place is the background,

2. Define "trussed".

3. How is she similar to a flag being raised?

4. Who are "the bonnets"? Why are they afraid?

5. What favors had she done for these women?

6. What could happen if they try to help her? What would "rub off"?

pretending you can't dance,
the safe stance pointing a finger.

I understand. You can't spare
anything, a hand, a piece of bread, a shawl
against the cold,
a good word. Lord
knows there isn't much
to go around. You need it all.

10pm

Well God, now that I'm up here
with maybe some time to kill
away from the daily
fingerwork, legwork, work
at the hen level,
we can continue our quarrel,
the one about free will.

Is it my choice that I'm dangling
like a turkey's wattles from this
more than indifferent tree?
If Nature is Your alphabet,
what letter is this rope?

Does my twisting body spell out Grace?
I hurt, therefore I am.
Faith, Charity, and Hope
are three dead angels
falling like meteors or
burning owls across
the profound blank sky of Your face.

7. What are her
feelings toward
God right now?
How do you
know?

12 midnight

My throat is taut against the rope
choking off words and air;
I'm reduced to knotted muscle.
Blood bulges in my skull,
my clenched teeth hold it in;
I bite down on despair

Death sits on my shoulder like a crow
waiting for my squeezed beet
of a heart to burst
so he can eat my eyes

or like a judge
muttering about sluts and punishment
and licking his lips

or like a dark angel
insidious in his glossy feathers
whispering to me to be easy
on myself. To breathe out finally.
Trust me, he says, caressing
me. *Why suffer?*

A temptation, to sink down
into these definitions.
To become a martyr in reverse,
or food, or trash.

To give up my own words for myself,
my own refusals.
To give up knowing.
To give up pain.
To let go.

8. How is Death like
a crow? A judge? A
dark angel?

9. What is she trying
to convince herself to
do?

2am

Out of my mouth is coming, at some distance from me, a thin gnawing sound which you could confuse with prayer except that praying is not constrained.

Or is it, Lord?

Maybe it's more like being strangled than I once thought. Maybe it's a gasp for air, prayer.

Did those men at Pentecost want flames to shoot out of their heads? Did they ask to be tossed on the ground, gabbling like holy poultry, eyeballs bulging?

As mine are, as mine are.

There is only one prayer; it is not the knees in the clean nightgown on the hooked rug
I want this, I want that.
Oh far beyond.

Call it *Please*. Call it *Mercy*.

Call it *Not yet, not yet*,

as Heaven threatens to explode inwards in fire and shredded flesh, and the angels caw.

3am

Wind seethes in the leaves around me the tree exude night birds night birds yell inside my ears like stabbed hearts my heart stutters in my fluttering cloth body I dangle with strength going out of me the wind seethes

10. What two different kinds of prayers is she talking about? What is HER prayer?

11. Why is the wording here so deliberately awkward here? What is the poet trying to show us?

in my body tattering
the words I clench
my fists hold No
talisman or silver disc my lungs
flail as if drowning I call
on you as witness I did
no crime I was born I have borne I
bear I will be born this is
a crime I will not
acknowledge leaves and wind
hold onto me
I will not give in

12. What does she see as her only crime? What is the significance of the repetition of the word "born/borne"?

6am

13. How long has she been hanging?

Sun comes up, huge and blaring,
no longer a simile for God.
Wrong address. I've been out there.

14. Why is the sun no longer a simile for God?

Time is relative, let me tell you
I have lived a millennium.

I would like to say my hair turned white overnight, but it didn't.
Instead it was my heart:
bleached out like meat in water.

Also, I'm about three inches taller.
This is what happens when you drift in space listening to the gospel of the red-hot stars.
Pinpoints of infinity riddle my brain,
a revelation of deafness.

At the end of my rope
I testify to silence.
Don't say I'm not grateful.

Most will have only one death.
I will have two.

8am

When they came to harvest my corpse
(open your mouth, close your eyes)
cut my body from the rope,

surprise, surprise:
I was still alive.

Tough luck, folks,
I know the law:
you can't execute me twice
for the same thing. How nice.

I fell to the clover, breathed it in,
and bared my teeth at them
in a filthy grin.
You can imagine how that went over.

Now I only need to look
out at them through my sky-blue eyes.
They see their own ill will
staring them in the forehead
and turn tail

Before, I was not a witch.
But now I am one.

16. Why does she say this?

Later

My body of skin waxes and wanes
around my true body,
a tender nimbus.
I skitter over the paths and fields

15. How might the
townsfolk have felt when
they found her still alive?

mumbling to myself like crazy,
mouth full of juicy adjectives
and purple berries.
The townsfolk dive headfirst into the bushes
to get out of my way.

17. How do the
townsfolk feel about
her now? Whv?

My first death orbits my head,
an ambiguous nimbus,
medallion of my ordeal.
No one crosses that circle.

Having been hanged for something
I never said,
I can now say anything I can say.

18. How have things
changed since her
hanging? How has
she changed? What
is her mental state?

Holiness gleams on my dirty fingers,
I eat flowers and dung,
two forms of the same thing, I eat mice
and give thanks, blasphemies
gleam and burst in my wake
like lovely bubbles.
I speak in tongues,
my audience is owls.

My audience is God,
because who the hell else could understand me?
Who else has been dead twice?

The words boil out of me,
coil after coil of sinuous possibility.
The cosmos unravels from my mouth,
all fullness, all vacancy.

By Margaret Atwood