

MARGARET ATWOOD: OLD BABES IN THE WOOD.
STORIES (2023)

DEATH BY CLAMSHELL

+

HYPATIA OF ALEXANDRIA IS SPEAKING

But why clamshells? I had time to wonder, though not much time. Already I'd been pulled out of my carriage and had been dragged along the street—by my hair, some said later, but my arms and legs also came in handy to those doing the dragging. They must have brought the clamshells along on purpose. They certainly had a plan, they'd worked it out ahead of time. Why not just use knives? I ask myself now. So much more efficient.

But efficiency was never their first consideration. They were deeply concerned with symbolism. Therefore, the clamshells must have symbolized something to them, though I'm not sure what. Aphrodite was said to have been born from a bivalve of some kind. Two shells that open, revealing a pulpy, salty, but tasty interior. Make what you wish of that.

So, I was dragged along the street, a cobblestone street, by the way: very bumpy. All those doing the dragging were men, though there were some female bystanders, gazing at me in wonderment—wasn't I supposed to be the revered, trusted confidante of the rulers in this civilized, prosperous, vibrant, and tolerant queen city

of the venerable Roman Empire? And if this could happen to me, how much more so to them? Fear, not pity or indignation, would have been their first emotion.

None of these bystanding women rushed to my defence. They drew their veils more closely over their faces and turned away, pretending not to see or hear. I don't blame them. They would simply have become casualties in their turn—collateral damage, as you say now. (And had I not similarly turned away from those being hauled through the streets to their doom? I had. But those spectacles were lawful, a voice within me protests. They were executions decreed for criminal acts. Still, I did turn away. It's a fine line. From some perspectives it isn't a line at all.)

Did I say that by this time I was screaming? Of course I was. The body screams whether you want it to or not. To prevent screaming under these circumstances you must practise the most extreme self-control, and from an early age. You must train for it. I had not done this: I had not walked on burning coals, lived in a cave with scorpions, driven hot needles beneath my fingernails. I was a mathematician and a teacher, not an ascetic. I hadn't seen the need for any scream-control exercises. Therefore I screamed. A lot.

But screaming is surely the point of such tortures, indeed of any tortures: the reduction of a person to the basics. *See? There is no so-called life of the mind. That was merely an affectation of yours. Your real identity is no more than this wedge of suffering flesh and what can be extracted from it: howls, pleas, liquids of several kinds.* The options in this playbook are limited by the nature of the human body; there are only so many things that can be done to it.

Altogether it was a noisy affair. In addition to my screams there was a great deal of harsh yelling. When participating in a homicidal mob, people egg one another on with enthusiastic shouts. You yourselves have witnessed as much at football games. "Foul

abuse" is a standard way of describing what is shouted. In my case, the foul abuse consisted of aspersions on my virginity ("Degenerate whore!"), on my supposed religion ("Evil pantheist!"), on my inferred magical practices ("Filthy witch!"), and of brutal suggestions ("Tear her apart!").

I will spare you the details of what happened next, as it might be too distressing for you. Many in your world have the idea that there has been progress since my day, that people have become more humane, that atrocities were rife back then but have diminished in your era, though I don't know how anyone who has been paying attention can hold such a view.

Let me just mention that my garments were torn off. This is a banal rite at such fiestas, the violent removal of clothing; the point being humiliation. Then I was flayed alive with the clamshells, which were not very sharp, so the peeling off of my skin took longer than it might have done. This excoriation took place in a Christian sanctuary, as a sort of human sacrifice to their idea of their god, I suppose. Oh, and my eyes were gouged out, whether before or after I was dead I am not entirely sure. By that time I was watching from a location near the ceiling, so I was probably dead. But there was such an uproar going on during the eye-gouging—such fervour, such zeal, such impatience to be in on it—that I was not able to get a clear view.

In your day they would have taken pictures with their phone cameras: posing and holding up their scarlet clamshells. I am up to date on the latest technologies and practices, as you can see. They would have taken videos of my eyes coming out. One of the gentlemen threw them onto the floor and stepped on them. I was sad about that. I had enjoyed my eyes, they had helped me to observe the heavens, to chart the pathways of the divine spheres. "Good-bye, dear eyes," I whispered.

I can now see perfectly well without them. In this phase of

being, we can see through the eyes of others. I am now seeing through yours.

After the main action was over, my body was dismembered and the pieces of it lugged, or you might say paraded, through the streets to a location outside Alexandria where criminals were taken to be burned. What was left of me was then incinerated.

There was a lot of blood, as you may imagine. Some of these men smeared it on their faces. Some then licked their fingers. People get carried away. How many of them woke up the next day and could not quite remember what they had done? Some of them had wives. Did the wives ask, "What is this blood on your tunic?" Most likely not. A husband with blood on his tunic is liable to be touchy about it. Cloth was beaten against stones in the stream where the washing was done, and my blood flowed down into the river and out into the sea.

A wife should keep it zipped and do the cleaning up of any messes that might prove troublesome. So on the home front lips were pressed together, topics were avoided. "Did you hear about the murder of our respected and beloved wise woman, astronomer, philosopher, jewel of Alexandria, and adviser to the Prefect?" This sentence was not spoken.

The ringleader was a lector. These lectors were educated men: you are not to imagine a rabble of ignorant peasants. In any case, they knew how to read. Or many of them did. Though once the thing got going, all sorts joined in, which is par for the course. When there's something exciting going on, who wants to feel left out?

So that's it. Why did it happen? Political, some have said. A power struggle between the Roman-appointed Prefect and the Christian bishop over who would have the final say in matters concerning Alexandria. Shock and horror were expressed; apologetic though mild reprimands occurred—"That is not the core message

of our faith," and so on. A commission was set up to look into it. The bishop's bodyguard was implicated, no surprise there—those bodyguards were a notorious band of thugs and assassins—but no one was ever put on trial. There's safety in numbers. Who gouged out the first eye? And after that, who cared who exactly did what?

In the Afterlife it's a different matter, by the way. There are no more secrets; everything is known. There are trials. Evidence is presented: I proffered my ruined eyes, my wrenched-off limbs. (Such images gave rise to several iconic saints, it was later believed. Saint Catherine of Alexandria, for instance, with her severed head. Saint Lucy, with her eyes on a plate, or, in some images, on a stem with two branches and an eye on each one, like a lorgnette.)

I have never been a vengeful person. I forgave my killers, though the retribution they then faced in this other world was not under my control.

Some have said that my murder was the turning point, that it signalled the end of the so-called ancient world. Certainly a general iconoclasm followed. The incoming Christians destroyed anything that might remind people of the gods and demigods the people had once trusted and revered. Statues, inscriptions, fountains, mosaics, frescoes, vases, scrolls, papyri—all must go. When you dig up the fragments of our shattered world—Artemis minus her nose and arms, Zeus with a broken penis, a nereid with no hands, a dryad with no feet—you rejoice over the treasure you have found. Priceless, you say. And so it will be with your world in its turn. The wrecking ball is already diligently at work, though not in the name of religion, or not as such.

But though old art is destroyed, new art is created, and some of it has been created from me. Over the centuries I have been the subject of many works; noble-browed classical statues prevail, showing me as very much younger and handsomer than I actually was. Do the math: I was at least fifty at the time of my death,

and frankly closer to sixty. Since no one could remember what I actually looked like—even my image in the memories of my closest associates had been blurred by their knowledge of my blood-smeared end—the sculptors had free rein, and they'd seized the opportunity. What a lot of hair I have been given! What graceful postures! What becoming drapery! Not that I'm sneering. Ask yourself: Would you rather be memorialized as your actuality, warts and all, or as an enhanced version? Be honest now.

In addition to these statues there have been several paintings of a quasi-pornographic variety, mostly from the nineteenth century—an especially pornographic era, I have observed. What interested these painters was evidently the fact that my clothes were torn off, which allowed them to paint a naked woman in distress, always of interest to a certain kind of man. In several of these paintings the woman's body has no clothes on at all; yet despite my being hauled over the cobblestones in the manner I have described to you, there is not a scratch visible on me.

In the most alarming of the paintings, my body—that of a twenty-five-year-old—is a dead-fish greenish white. It has been gifted with floor-length hair, orange in colour, which it is holding in front of its pubic area with one hand while raising the other hand and arm in a defensive gesture. Ineffectual, as history has so emphatically told us. History is always telling us such things, painters are always painting them, or they did back in the days when they were still painting images of people and incidents instead of wrapping up trees in pieces of cloth and so forth. Napoleon on the morning of Waterloo. The raft of the *Medusa*. The charge of the Light Brigade. Myself, just before being skinned and dismembered. We know how these things turned out.

But now that I've been dead for so long, what is my meaning? To you, that is, in your world, the land of the temporarily living? You might consider me lucky to have a meaning at all: most people

who have been dead for as long as I have mean absolutely nothing because no one left knows anything about them at all. They have melted like ice, they have drifted away like smoke.

I, on the other hand, continue to exist among you, but as a multiplicity. Patron of female scientists. Last of the Hellenes. Minor figure in the history of Neoplatonism. Martyr to philosophy. Icon of feminists, though you'd think they'd choose someone luckier. Heroine of several not very good plays and novels, though not yet a film or streamed series. Subject of various bad though earnestly intended poems. And, ironically, example of Christian virtue. Now that should make you think.

But you called me here for a reason. You wanted me to tell you what really happened, and I've done that. Now you're asking another question: Was it worth it? My life. The life I chose to lead. Would I have been happier if I'd never been a respected public figure, if I'd followed the standard path for a woman then—got married, had children? I can't answer that, except to say that once a single choice is made it excludes the alternatives. I would probably not have ended up as a butchers' workout, but you never know. Many obscure women have been done to death merely for existing.

I try to look on the bright side: I did not have to endure the indignities of extreme old age. Which is better, I ask myself, a puddle or a sunset? Each has its charms.