

## Half-Hanged Mary

This poem is based upon a true story.

"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.)

One of Mary Webster's descendants is the now well-known Canadian novelist and poet, Margaret Atwood, who wrote a poem, "Half-Hanged Mary," (1995) about her notorious ancestor, and one of her most popular novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), is dedicated to her. The poem has also been made into several stage productions and interpretations. Atwood's poem is in sections, each chronicling an hour of Mary's hanging from the tree, beginning at 7 at night and concluding at 8 the next morning.

## HALF-HANGED MARY

by Margaret Atwood

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.

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8pm

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

Up I go like a windfall in reverse,  
a blackend 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.

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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,  
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.

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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 his  
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.

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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.

2 a.m.

Out of my mouths 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.

3 a.m.

wind seethes in the leaves around  
me the trees 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 the wind seethes  
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 on to me  
I will not give in



6 a.m.

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

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 only have one death.  
I will have two.

8 a.m.

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.

Later

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

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.

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?

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