

MARGARET ATWOOD

A Praise for Hagar Shipley and Others

I wrote this poem in 1964, when I was 24 years old and living in Vancouver. Jane Rule had told me about The Stone Angel by this very promising young writer, Margaret Laurence... and I had read it and was knocked out by it. I was writing The Circle Game at the time... I don't think it's a good or even a finished poem, but it certainly records how the book impressed me. I'd forgotten about it, but found it again shortly before Margaret's death. I thought of sending it to her to let her know she'd influenced my young mind, as if she didn't know it, and for what that was worth... but then I thought, No, she doesn't need all this stuff about hospitals and illness. So I didn't, and I think it was the right decision...

Where did she come from
this old woman
more familiar with weeds
than other flowers

She must have always been
living in one of those horizon
houses unpainted by gritty winds
furnished with mail-order
bargains and dishes from
oatmeal boxes.

In spring her primness
was poplar leaves, quickly brittle
in
summer there was brief sunheat
later she travelled
autumn railroad sidings
mumbling the much chewed
bones of her grievances
alone
holding knowledge of
winter and inert
green things in her
refrigerator mind

Where did she come from
energetic as weeds

Her hen's eyes
scrabble among the rubbish
of her neighbours' yards, histories,
for discards, anything of use

She wears a skin of
rummage-sale disasters
grown squamous with age
nothing fits her
on her head a parka
of withered hair

her tongue is a plebian clothespin
she clenches her fists like teeth
in pride
her flesh is fences

Where did she come from
her weedstrong body
has grappled with the land
hating it
perhaps, and the indifferent
land has borne down on her,
making her
tender as granite;

She spawned dead sons:
dead
in one way or another.

Now trees and strangers are
made to suffer
her solitary love

Where did she
come from, old woman
magnificent as weeds
muttering No to our lush
gardens

She has dug down to bedrock
and struck against our illnesses
and for some reason we never
fathom, still
wants to go on living

She insists on it:
ravenous, her eroded
hands forage among
the negations left by
roadside
bedside
tables.

We are afraid of that last
hungry journey

so we invented her

She steps from the wide winter
fields, our icy mirrors
walks towards out skulls
and disappears
into a whiteness vaster than hospitals