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Abstract
That's your hand sticking out of the rubble. I touch it, you're still living; to have this happen I would give anything, to keep you alive with me despite the wreckage.
‘Waiting for the Rescue’: a Discussion of Margaret Atwood’s *Bodily Harm*

That’s your hand sticking out of the rubble.
I touch it, you’re still living;
to have this happen I would give anything,
to keep you alive with me despite the wreckage.

I hold this hand as if waiting for the rescue
and that one action shines like pure luck.
Because there’s nothing more I can do I do nothing.

(Margaret Atwood, ‘Last Poem’ in *True Stories*)

*Bodily Harm* is encompassed within the framework of a three-week journey on an excursion fare from Canada to St Antoine, a West Indian country dogged by poverty and political instability. The traveller, Rennie Wilford, a Canadian journalist who specializes in ‘lifestyles’, describing and sometimes even creating fashionable trends, has been commissioned at her own request, by a magazine she writes for, to do a travel piece on having fun in the sun. Her comfortable existence in Toronto has been shattered by the discovery she has cancer and the consequent removal of part of her left breast. Awareness of her own mortality is further intensified by evidence of a mysterious intruder in her apartment, who, before being frightened off by the police, leaves on her bed a sinister-looking coil of rope. Dogged by her sense of death and menace, Rennie decides to make her escape. ‘As for the apartment, she just shut the door with its shiny new lock and walked out, since out was where she needed to be…. Rennie’s lucky that she can manage these sidesteps, these small absences from real life; most people can’t.’ But this working holiday offers no escape and ends by exposing Rennie to greater danger than she had faced in Toronto. Fear of death by a disease like...
cancer is weighed against those threats to life which result from human malice — poverty, malnutrition and political violence. Rennie’s privileged status as an educated, prosperous member of bourgeois society is eventually challenged when she is forced to recognize that, as a woman, she is constantly at the mercy of a whole host of oppressors in any society. Her trip to St Antoine proves to be a journey of the imagination, a transforming process whereby she passes from winter cold to summer heat, from fear into acceptance and from non-involvement to a state of serious social and political commitment.

Rennie’s previous experience of a third-world country has been a visit to Mexico with her former lover, Jake, but there she managed to remain detached from what she saw.

She loved Jake, she loved everything. She felt she was walking inside a charmed circle: nothing could touch her, nothing could touch them.... Rennie refused to feel guilty about anything, not even the beggars, the women wrapped in filthy rebozos, with the fallen-in cheeks of those who have lost teeth, suckling inert babies,... (p. 72)

Although she also attempts to distance herself from the suffering, poverty and cruelty surrounding her on St Antoine, the cancer, the rupture it has caused in her relationship with Jake, and the threat of personal violence posed by the man with the rope, have left her vulnerable and less well-armoured. Encounters with three different people draw her into the network of local politics against her will. The first is Dr Minnow, standing for election as leader of the party opposing the corrupt regime of the Prime Minister Ellis. Then there is the American Paul, who operates a drug-running business and whose lover Rennie briefly becomes. She also meets a fellow-Canadian, Lora Lucas, who assists Paul in his business and is in love with another opposition candidate known locally as the Prince of Peace. Lora and Paul inveigle Rennie across from St Antoine to the twin island of St Agathe during the election, in which Dr Minnow succeeds in winning enough votes to form a government in coalition with ‘the local excuse for communists’, the Prince of Peace and his campaign manager, Marsdon. Minnow, however, is murdered and Marsdon and the Prince start an abortive revolution. Paul gets Rennie safely back to St Antoine, but once there she is thrown into prison by Ellis’s government ‘on suspicion’ and finds herself sharing a cell with Lora.

On her initial arrival in St Antoine, Rennie notices only surfaces and outward appearances about which she composes in her head trendy articles with slick captions. When Dr Minnow urges her to write about social and political conditions she protests she only does lifestyles.
‘You know, what people wear, what they eat, where they go for their vacations, what they’ve got in their livingrooms, things like that,’ says Rennie, as lightly as she can.

Dr Minnow considers this for a moment. Then he gives her an angelic smile. ‘You might say that I also am concerned with lifestyles,’ he says. ‘It is our duty to be concerned with lifestyles. What the people eat, what they wear, this is what I want you to write about.’ (p. 136)

During her stay in St Antoine ‘what the people eat’ becomes increasingly significant for Rennie. Dr Minnow refers sardonically to ‘the sweet Canadians’ whose altruism is undermined by naiveté, indifference or unwillingness to become too involved in local politics, so that food supplies donated by the Canadian government are regularly misappropriated, with tins of Maple Leaf premium ham, intended for homeless victims of a recent hurricane, served up at a public banquet for leading citizens. Rennie too is a sweet Canadian, imbued with a sense of humane values and completely ignorant of political reality. On learning about the high cost of sugar, the diet-conscious Rennie considers that’s just as well because ‘it’s bad for you’, only to be told ‘that depends on what else you have to eat’. But in prison, it is junk food Rennie dreams about.

...not even real food, not spinach salads with bacon and mushrooms and a glass of dry white wine, but Colonel Sanders chicken, McDonald’s hamburgers, doughnuts film with ersatz chocolate and shreds of stale coconut, thick nasty cups of ancient coffee, the dregs, her mouth’s watering at the thought of it. (p. 280)

When she and Lora receive their first meal of cold rice and half-raw chicken, Rennie, as though in a restaurant, wants to send it back for further cooking, but Lora points out that it is better food than most ordinary people get to eat. Soon this meal becomes the high point of Rennie’s day and when Lora’s plateful is accidentally knocked over, the formerly fastidious Rennie picks up the chicken, wipes the dirt off it and puts it back on the plate: ‘«You should eat it,» she says. «We need to eat».’

Although the moral vision contained in Bodily Harm is undoubtedly secular, Atwood has chosen to present Rennie’s development in knowledge and understanding within a context of religious reference, so that her journey takes her, not merely from the material comfort of industrialized society into the deprivations suffered in the third world, but from the old dispensation, where life is lived under the law, into a new dispensation where it is lived under grace, and the image of the journey is itself weighted with symbolic and religious significance. Rennie flies to St Antoine at night and is flying blind in that she left
Canada in such haste there was no time to inform herself about her destination, so that her journey becomes a variant of the night-sea crossing, in which the heroic quest is seen as a descent into the darkness of the nether world to rise again spiritually illumined, just as the sun was believed to travel through an underground abyss each night to a daily resurrection. The ancient image of human life as a pilgrimage in which ‘man as a stranger in the world of manifestation journeys back to his true home’ has also acquired a specifically Christian connotation.

Any pilgrimage during the Middle Ages was ideally a figure for the pilgrimage of the Christian soul through the world’s wilderness toward the celestial Jerusalem. The pilgrimage of the soul was not in itself a journey from place to place, but an inner movement between the two cities so vividly described by St Augustine, one founded on charity, and the other on cupidity. Love moved the pilgrim’s feet and determined the direction of his journey.

Rennie, an unwitting pilgrim, identifies herself with the tourists she observes on the island: ‘like her they can look all they want to, they’re under no obligation to see, they can take pictures of anything they wish.’ She considers herself set apart by her transient status, and believes that as a tourist she remains exempt, although this is far from the case. Tourists even suffer their own special sickness, turistas or Montezuma’s Revenge, which Rennie herself contracts in prison, with a sense of gross injustice: ‘she’s not guilty, this is happening to her for no reason at all’, and once political trouble erupts, a number of tourists, Rennie included, are held as hostage by the various factions in an attempt to put pressure on their respective governments. Just as the traveller lodging at an inn is a long-standing symbol for the transience of human life, so imprisonment has come to signify the idea of the soul trapped in the world of material existence. Even though she is journeying blind, Rennie has intimations of the significance of her status as traveller when she first contemplates her room in the appropriately named Sunset Hotel: ‘Rennie feels momentarily that she may be spending the rest of her life in rooms like this. Not her own’ (p. 47). Later, in prison, Rennie longs to be back in a hotel bedroom, no matter how tawdry: ‘She’d give anything for a Holiday Inn. She longs for late-night television, she’s had enough reality for the time being’ (p. 269).

As a prisoner, she remembers an occasion when she was trapped all night by a blizzard in a bus station in Canada: ‘the snack bar isn’t open and the toilets don’t work, there’s a bad smell and no prospect of a bus out until dawn, maybe not even then.’ Atwood, while relating the traditional image of human life as pilgrimage to the situation of the modern
tourist, also links those long-standing symbols of the temporary and restrictive nature of human life, hotel-room and prison cell, with the twentieth century phenomenon of the air-port or bus terminal, which she represents as an image of transience and transition through which one moves from past to present to future. On St Antoine, the air-terminal, donated by the Canadian government, is the point where Rennie steps out of her Canadian past into the uncertainties of a situation she is unable to predict or control. For a cancer sufferer, the word 'terminal' has especially sinister connotations. 'Remission is the good word, terminal is the bad one. It makes Rennie think of bus stations: the end of the line' (p. 59). Mortal illness represents both journey's end and a prison sentence from which a remission may offer a limited hope of freedom. In contemplating her illness, Rennie has yet another vision of herself as traveller as she wonders whether she may eventually join the band of odd wanderers who search the world for cancer cures, eager to seize on any strange remedy, even faith healing: 'She doesn't want to be considered crazy but she doesn't want to be considered dead.' Only at the end of the novel does Rennie accept that the terminal can represent a beginning as well as an end: 'the terminal, the end of the line where you get off. Also where you can get on, to go somewhere else.'

Rennie’s journey to St Antoine originates, not in Toronto but in Griswold, the small Ontario town where she grew up. As its name suggests, it is, in her mind at least, a grey and grisly place where life is lived in accordance with a narrow, joyless moral code. It has something in common with the ‘selva oscura’, the dark wood where the speaker discovers himself at the opening of the Divine Comedy, although the name Griswold actually means ‘gravelly, pebbly woodland’. But Rennie thinks of it as an underground place: ‘...a subground, something that can’t be seen but is nevertheless there, full of gritty old rocks and buried stumps, worms and bones; nothing you’d want to go into’ (p. 98). Griswold contains the possibility of moral vision, but it is blighted and loveless, just as the flower garden cherished by Rennie’s grandmother as an image of heaven degenerates into a frostbitten ruin, Rennie later dreams of this garden.

...here it is back in place, everything is so bright, so full of juice, the red zinnias, the hollyhocks, the sunflowers, the poles with scarlet runner beans, the hummingbirds like vivid bees around them. It’s winter though, there’s snow on the ground, the sun is low in the sky; small icicles hang from the stems and the blossoms. Her grandmother is there, in a white cotton dress with small blue flowers on it, it’s a summer dress, she doesn’t seem to mind the cold, and Rennie knows this is because she is dead... (p. 115)
What should signify spiritual joy and fulfilment becomes transformed into an image of death. Life in Griswold is lived under the law, the old dispensation whereby humanity, judged for its sinfulness, has no hope of salvation. People there believe cancer is something you bring on yourself: 'In Griswold everyone gets what they deserve. In Griswold everyone deserves the worst.'

Although Rennie believes she has escaped Griswold by moving to Toronto, she is still living under the old dispensation. The city which offers a trendy world of fashion, smart friends and love affairs, is another Vanity Fair inhabited by Mr Worldly Wiseman and his associates, where the moral categories of good and evil that prevailed in Griswold have dwindled into canons of good and bad taste. Rennie's foxy, saturnine lover, Jake, is a Jew, and like Jacob, his old testament counterpart, a trickster. Just as the smooth Jacob falsely assumed a hairy surface to deceive his father Isaac into granting him the blessing due to his brother Esau, so Rennie's Jake is a designer of appearances and packaging: 'He decided how things would look and what contexts they would be placed in, which meant what people would feel about them.' Although Rennie herself becomes an expert on surfaces, cancer destroys her trust in appearances, and after her operation, she engages in an abortive love affair with her surgeon, Daniel, believing that, knowing what she is like inside, he must be able to accept her, only to find him devoid of self-knowledge and understanding. Daniel, whose family originated in Finland, one of the 'old' countries of Europe and who carries the name of another old testament character, meaning 'the Lord is Judge', also belongs to the old dispensation. His surgeon's knife is both the sword of justice and a phallic symbol associated with molestation and sexual violence. Rennie recoils from the idea of being buried piece by cancerous piece: 'it was too much like those women they were always finding strewn about ravines or scattered here and there in green garbage bags.' Daniel can recognize the corruption in Rennie's flesh and excise it, but he can offer no assurance of an ultimate cure. She must choose between sexual mutilation or death by cancer, so in Rennie's mind Daniel, as the man with the knife, is identified with 'the man with the rope', the bringer of death.

Throughout the novel the words 'malignancy' and 'malicious' denote evil, especially the cruelty and violence inflicted on the weak by the strong. When in prison Rennie assumes the tea she is given to drink has been salted accidentally until enlightened by Lora that it is done on purpose: «Why would they do that?» says Rennie.... this seems gratuitous. Malicious. Lora shrugs. «Because they can,» she says.' In Toronto
the knowledge she has cancer, like a sudden conviction of sin, leaves Rennie feeling alienated and less than human. Even in hospital she is convinced of a faint odour of decay seeping through the bandages of her would, and her sense of ‘rotting away from the inside’ is expressed in dreams of white maggots infesting her body. When in St Antoine she discovers a venomous-looking centipede crawling in the wash-hand basin, it inspires in her mind an image which could have come from a painting of Hell by Hieronymus Bosch. ‘The creature looks far too much like the kind of thing she’s been having bad dreams about, the scar on her breast splits open like a diseased fruit and something like this crawls out’ (p. 60). On her return to the bathroom the centipede has vanished, but like the cancer, she cannot really be sure it has gone for good. Similarly, the man who, in what appears an act of wanton malignancy, left a coil of rope on her bed in Toronto, represents an ever-recurring threat of danger and possibly a sense of guilt, since the police summoned to the apartment assume Rennie is in some way to blame for his entry. She associates him with her fear of death, regarding him as an ambassador from a place she would rather not know about, and his rope as ‘someone’s twisted idea of love’. The rope reaching down into darkness symbolises bondage and entanglement, but, like an umbilical cord, it also seems to be drawing Rennie toward some kind of new awareness.

It is in St Antoine that Rennie, whose complete name, Renata, means ‘born again’, takes hold on her life under the new dispensation and eventually recognizes that she is living under grace. The two islands which comprise the country are named after Christian saints, St Anthony and St Agatha. St Anthony Abbot, the Egyptian saint who distributed his worldly goods among the poor to live in the desert as a hermit, spending his time in prayer and meditation, was still obliged to wrestle with the temptations of the flesh, generally portrayed in medieval and renaissance painting as female demons. For all its tropical lushness, St Antoine is equated with a desert retreat where Rennie hopes to escape the sexual menace and anxiety which haunt her in Toronto, only to find herself more troubled by them than ever. Even the jungle, full of ‘obese plants with rubbery ear-shaped leaves and fruit like warts, like glands’ where the ground is pitted with the large holes of landcrabs, evokes suggestions of both sensuality and disease. St Agatha, patron saint of the other island, was a virgin martyr who had her breasts cut off with shears because she refused to accept the advances of Quintanus, consul of Sicily, and renounce her faith. The people of St Agathe campaign for Dr Minnow under the slogan ‘The Fish Lives’, and the fish symbolism indicates that Atwood may expect us to regard him as something of a
Christ figure, and his death as a form of martyrdom, even though she undercuts the symbolism by associating him with a very small fish, despite the T-shirts bearing the design of a whale worn by his followers. He may be the only hope for honest, stable government on the islands, but his chances of success are, as he himself knows, infinitesimal. '...it is my own belief that the British parliamentary system will no longer work in this place. It works in Britain only because they have a tradition, there are still things that are inconceivable. Here nothing is inconceivable' (p. 133). But, as Christ called His disciples to leave their accustomed occupations and follow Him, so Dr Minnow dums Rennie by calling on her to write about political corruption in St Antoine and particularly to expose the misappropriation of Canadian foreign aid.

Paul, who has an even more decisive influence on Rennie’s life than Dr Minnow, is a far less admirable character, a drug-runner possibly working for the CIA who refuses to form close human ties. Unlike Jake, who tries to make her over into something else, or Daniel, who sees her as the answer to his emotional needs, Paul accepts Rennie for what she is. Because he himself lives constantly with danger and the threat of death, he can look at the mark of death on her body without flinching. 'He notes the scar, the missing piece, the place where death kissed her lightly, a preliminary kiss. He doesn’t look away or down, he’s seen people a lot deader than her' (p. 204). This enables Rennie to accept both her own body, damaged though it is, and her own mortality.

He reaches out his hands and Rennie can’t remember ever having been touched before. Nobody lives forever, who said you could? This much will have to do, this much is enough. She’s open now, she’s being opened, she’s being drawn back down, she enters her body again and there’s a moment of pain, incarnation, this may be only the body’s desperation, a flareup, a last clutch at the world before the long slide into final illness and death; but meanwhile she’s solid after all, she’s still here on the earth, she’s grateful, he’s touching her, she can still be touched. (p. 204)

Paul, who comes from Iowa, belongs to the New World, not the old, and the saint’s name Atwood has given him probably alludes to St Paul the Hermit, who spent many years in the desert with St Anthony Abbot, and possibly to St Paul the Apostle who, after a spectacular conversion, became a great missionary and teacher. Paul is continually trying to instruct Rennie in the political realities of life on St Antoine, though unlike Dr Minnow he does not expect her to do anything with her newfound knowledge. Paul’s chief virtue is his total lack of illusions. Having served in Vietnam, he recognizes that the cosy bourgeois life he led in the States was a mockery of what the world is really like: 'when
you’ve been living that way, day by day, never knowing when someone’s going to blow you in little pieces, that other kind of life seems fake, you can’t believe in it.’ His awareness of the suffering and wretchedness in the world has caused Paul to question social institutions and beliefs. For him the world consists of two groups of people, those with power and those without, even if, on rare occasions, the two groups do change places.

Through her association with Paul, Rennie learns to accept the touch of death on her body and her own powerlessness in the face of nature. But a still harsher lesson awaits her as she begins to realise her vulnerability within the framework of society. As epigraph to her novel, Atwood quotes from John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*: ‘A man’s presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman’s presence ... defines what can and cannot be done to her.’ On her arrival in St Antoine, Rennie notices two teenage girls wearing T-shirts with mottoes: ‘TRY A VIRGIN (ISLAND), PROPERTY OF ST MARTIN’S COUNTY JAIL’. The female body is captive territory, and in prison she is forced to recognize how much she shares in common with Lora whom she has previously regarded with distaste and mild contempt. By Griswold standards Lora is flashy and cheap, and by Toronto standards, tedious and tasteless. But like Paul, Lora contemplates life without illusions, acknowledging its injustice with grimly humorous resignation: ‘The worst times in my life I had choices all right. Shit or shit.’ In prison the two women swap stories about their past lives. Rennie is the child of a weak, irresponsible father who abandoned his family for a mistress in Toronto, leaving his daughter to grow up in a joyless, repressed female environment under the far-reaching shadow cast by her grandfather, a doctor who had driven ‘a cutter and team through blizzards to tear babies out through holes he cut in women’s stomachs’; a violent man who threatened to horsewhip his daughters for behaviour he deemed insufficiently decent. Lora, terrorised by a vicious stepfather, is the product of an impoverished, less respectable childhood which has made her sharply aware of the realities of male brutality and power: ‘He hit me because he could get away with it and nobody could stop him.’ Her mother is so emotionally dependent on her husband she refuses to take Lora’s part even when he threatens his stepdaughter with sexual assault.

Despite her apparent liberalism and sophistication, Rennie is much more confused about the nature of male power than Lora. Before her operation she had been writing a magazine article called ‘Chain-Reaction’ promoting a trend in drain-chain jewellery which, with its
notions of bondage and being chained to domesticity, implicitly endorses female servitude: ‘You could get it for pennies at your local Woolworths ... make the chains as long as you like ... wear them on any part of your anatomy: wrists, neck, waist, even ankles if you wanted the slave-girl effect.’ Her relationship with Jake verges, however playfully, on the sado-masochistic. He pretends in jest to be a crazy man who sends obscene letters to unknown women or jumps out on them from dark doorways, and he asserts that all women should be locked in cages. ‘Jake liked to pin her hands down, he liked to hold her so she couldn’t move. He liked that, he liked thinking of sex as something he could win at. Sometimes he really hurt her, once he put his arm across her throat and she really did stop breathing’ (p. 207). Rennie gradually realises that Jake is trying to package her, urging that she wear nothing but white linen jump suits, and furnishing her apartment in accord with his own sexual fantasies. As frontispiece to her volume of poems *Power Politics* (1971), Margaret Atwood devised a design of a man totally encased in armour, his visor obscuring his face, with his right arm extended, and hanging from it, with her left ankle bound by rope to his wrist, is a woman in the pose of the hanged man in the Tarot cards, her body swathed in bandages one of which has worked lose to mingle with her hair trailing on the ground, so that each figure balances the other in reverse.³ The man’s armour imprisons him, concealing his individuality and rendering him rigid and impenetrable, while the bandages clinging to the soft contours of the woman’s body resemble the dressings on a wound or the grave-clothes wrapped round an Egyptian mummy, as well as evoking ideas of confinement and restraint, further emphasized by the woman’s hands being tied behind her back. The poem relating most directly to this drawing presents the picture of a couple locked within an oppressive power structure which isolates each from the other.

My beautiful wooden leader
With your heartful of medals
made of wood, fixing it
each time so you almost win,

you long to be bandaged
before you have been cut.
My love for you is the love
of one statue for another: tensed

and static. General, you enlist
my body in your heroic
struggle to become real:
though you promise bronze rescues
you hold me by the left ankle
so that my head brushes the ground,
my eyes are blinded,
my hair fills with white ribbons...  

This image is echoed in a variety of ways throughout *Bodily Harm* where it signifies a woman’s relationship not only to one individual man, but to the hierarchical power structures of society. The coil of rope left on Rennie’s bed in Toronto is a sign that she has long been confined, fettered and placed at risk by her situation as a woman, and the gallows standing so prominently in the prison yard is yet a further reminder of this. The man with a rope supersedes Jake in her life and is linked with a series of uniformed men reminiscent of the man in armour in *Power Politics* — the two policemen summoned to deal with the intruder in Toronto, and the two others in St Antoine who twice solicit money for the Police Benefit Dance and who may be identical with the prison guards Rennie and Lora have to deal with. Throughout the novel Rennie is haunted by the idea of a faceless aggressor. In St Antoine she notices a number of men, including the Minister of Justice, masked by their mirror sunglasses, and on one occasion even Paul puts on a pair. The men’s magazine which commissions Rennie to write about St Antoine is called *Visor*. When men obscure their individuality behind a mask of anonymous authority and power, women are stripped of their identity and reduced to so much raw material. In Toronto Rennie had done research, at her editor’s request, for an article on pornography, going to see a collection of seized pornographic objects held by the Metropolitan police. She watches a number of films of women copulating with animals or being sexually mutilated by men wearing Nazi uniforms: ‘but Rennie felt it couldn’t be real, it was all done with ketchup.’ Her detachment, however, is completely shattered by a film clip showing a black woman’s pelvis and the tops of her thighs: ‘The legs were slightly apart; the usual hair, the usual swollen pinkish purple showed between them; nothing was moving. Then something small and grey and wet appeared, poking out from between the legs. It was the head of a rat’ (p. 210). Like Rennie’s fantasies of a monstrous insect emerging from her scarred breast, this is a powerful emblem of mortality, but, as an image deliberately contrived by a film-maker for sexual titillation, it also indicates the utter depths of human depravity and cruelty.

Although Lora and Rennie in their prison cells symbolise how women in all walks of life are restricted and oppressed by male power and authority, the ultimate victim in the novel is an islander, a deaf and dumb man who represents the vast mass of people in the world crippled by poverty
whom ignorance and political tyranny have deprived of the capacity to proclaim the suffering and injustice of their plight. Rennie encounters him several times. Initially he frightens her by running after her to shake her hand, a gesture he believes will bring her luck, and later she sees him in the street being beaten by the police. When a noise in the prison yard prompts her to climb up and look out of the cell window, she sees the male prisoners who had been involved in the rebellion having their hair cut off with bayonets. One policeman is careless, a prisoner, severely gashed, starts screaming, and Rennie recognizes him as the deaf and dumb man 'who has a voice but no words'. For her it is a moment of profound and terrifying revelation.

It's indecent, it's not done with ketchup, nothing is inconceivable here, no rats in the vagina but only because they haven’t thought of it yet, they’re still amateurs. She’s afraid of men and it’s simple, it’s rational, she’s afraid of men because men are frightening. She’s seen the man with the rope, now she knows what he looks like. She has been turned inside out, there’s no longer a here and a there. Rennie understands for the first time that this is not necessarily a place she will ever get out of, ever. She is not exempt. Nobody is ever exempt from anything. (p. 290)

Detachment, neutrality, non-involvement are no longer possible after this: such knowledge compels action. In recognizing the face of oppression, Rennie simultaneously realizes she herself is among the oppressed. They cease to be objects of fear and aversion and become people she herself must relate to.

When Lora, who has traded with the prison guards for news about her lover, Prince, using the only currency available, her body, discovers she has been tricked into believing him still alive when in fact he has been shot, turns on them, they attack her viciously, trampling and kicking her unconscious. Rennie watches, too terrified to protest, but when the guards leave she pulls the inert body to the dryest corner of the cell, sits down and, taking Lora's head in her lap, gazes at the face, battered out of all recognition: 'Rennie wants to throw up, it’s no one she recognizes, she has no connection with this, there’s nothing she can do, it’s the face of a stranger, someone without a name.' She then looks for something to wipe away the blood, but there is no clean piece of cloth in the cell. The only thing to do is to lick Lora’s face clean with her tongue. Atwood leaves it unclear whether Rennie performs this action or merely contemplates it: ‘she can’t do it, it will have to do, it’s the face of Lora after all, there’s no such thing as a faceless stranger, every face is someone’s, it has a name’ (p. 299). Taking hold of Lora’s hand, Rennie, through an act of willpower, seems to pull her back to life: ‘there’s an invisible hole in the
air, Lora is on the other side of it and she has to pull her through.' The lucky, restorative or healing handclasp is a recurring motif in the novel, symbolizing human beings reaching out to one another in mingled hope and desperation.

The gesture of human contact and compassion by which Rennie seeks to save Lora's life is an assurance of her own salvation. 'She can feel the shape of a hand in hers, both of hers, there but not there, like the afterglow of a match that's gone out. It will always be there now' (p. 300). She is also committed now to writing about what she has seen on St Antoine: 'She will pick her time; then she will report.' Atwood's vision of the new dispensation, life lived under grace, is significantly different from that of orthodox Christianity. Rennie, noticing a pair of scissors lying on Dr Minnow's coffin, is uncertain whether they are there by accident or design. Scissors, an emblem of St Agatha, are perhaps a sign that Dr Minnow has died a political martyr, but they may just as easily represent the blind workings of fate, the abhorred shears' which slit the thin-spun thread of human life. *Bodily Harm* portrays the world not as under the guardianship of a benevolent deity, but as a place where human beings are at the mercy of nature — the hurricane which has devastated St Antoine, the cancer which corrupts Rennie's flesh — compounded by terrible acts of human cruelty and oppression. To be spared the worst horrors of human existence is a stroke of luck. But luck is a blessing only if one has the capacity to feel lucky, and this Rennie initially lacks: 'She's lucky. Why then doesn't she feel lucky.' Her experiences on St Antoine change this, so that by the end of the novel she is totally convinced of her own good fortune: '...suddenly, finally, she's overflowing with luck, it's this luck holding her up.' For Atwood, luck is the equivalent of divine grace, a totally undeserved blessing which the recipient can in no way earn or command. But to recognize that the blessings of one's own existence are a matter of luck is to acknowledge the arbitrariness and precariousness of human life. It also means one must regard with compassion the existence of others who through no fault of their own are unlucky.

But although the novel appears to end on a note of hope, with Lora still alive and Rennie safely on her way back to Canada, these outcomes are represented as tentative and uncertain. Atwood's narrative techniques give an effect of circularity as she demonstrates how Rennie's life in Canada interpenetrates with her experiences on St Antoine. The novel opens with Rennie's first-person narrative, 'This is how I got here'. 'Here' is probably the prison cell where she and Lora exchange accounts of their past lives extending right back to their Canadian childhoods, but
these sections of first-person, past-tense narrative are incorporated into the text well before the prison episode. The bulk of the novel is written in the third person though from Rennie’s point of view, with the Canadian episodes recounted in the past tense and those set on St Antoine described in the present. Past actions and events are immutable, so the narrative presents them with a greater air of authority, while events in the present are fluid, less readily definable, and the future is merely a maze of possibilities. Rennie, for example, is haunted by speculation about whether the cancer is still active in her body. ‘She thinks of the cells, whispering, dividing in darkness, replacing each other one at a time; and of the other cells, the evil ones which may or may not be there, working away in her with furious energy, like yeast’ (p. 100). Rennie’s release from prison, which is recounted in the future tense, ‘This is what will happen’, is similarly problematic. By introducing this tentative note into her narrative, Atwood draws attention to the mythic and allegorical aspect of Bodily Harm. When Rennie asks Dr Minnow why, given the odds against him, he persists in his efforts to bring just and stable government to St Antoine, he replies: ‘You do it because everyone tells you it is not possible. They cannot imagine things being different. It is my duty to imagine, and they know that for even one person to imagine is very dangerous to them...’ (p. 229). Bodily Harm involves not only its central character, but also its readers in a journey of the imagination where they are asked to contemplate both the fact of individual mortality and the conditions under which the great mass of the world’s population have to live, so that through the exercise of imagination they may be led to a more aware, more compassionate, politically committed view of life. As Atwood herself has said in her address to the 1981 world meeting of Amnesty International:

Oppression involves a failure of the imagination: the failure to imagine the full humanity of other human beings. If the imagination were a negligible thing and the act of writing a mere frill ... regimes all over the world would not be at such pains to exterminate them.9

NOTES

1. Margaret Atwood, Bodily Harm (Toronto: Seal Books, 1982), p. 16. Subsequent references will be in brackets immediately following quotations.


