

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Life Before Man

Margaret Atwood

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About the Book

Life Before Man explores the lives of three people imprisoned by walls of their own construction and in thrall to the tragicomedy we call love. Elizabeth, with her controlled sensuality and suppressed rage, has just lost her latest lover to suicide. Nate, her gentle, indecisive husband, is planning to leave her for Lesje, a perennial innocent who prefers dinosaurs to men. Hanging over them all is the ghost of Elizabeth's dead lover, and the dizzying threat of three lives careening inevitably toward the same climax.

About the Author

Margaret Atwood's books have been published in over thirty-five countries. She is the author of more than forty works of fiction, poetry, critical essays, and books for children. Her novels include *Bodily Harm*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, which won the Giller Prize in Canada and the Premio Mondello in Italy; *The Blind Assassin*, winner of the 2000 Booker Prize; and *Oryx and Crake*. Margaret Atwood lives in Toronto with writer Graeme Gibson. They are the joint Honourary Presidents of the Rare Bird Club of BirdLife International.

ALSO BY MARGARET ATWOOD

Novels

The Edible Woman
Surfacing
Lady Oracle
Bodily Harm
The Handmaid's Tale
Cat's Eye
The Robber Bride
Alias Grace
The Blind Assassin
Oryx and Crake
The Penelopiad

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The Circle Game
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The Animals in That Country
The Journals of Susanna Moodie

Procedures for Underground
Power Politics
You Are Happy
Selected Poems (1976)
Two-Headed Poems
True Stories
Interlunar
Selected Poems II: Poems Selected and New 1976-1986
Morning in the Burned House

Non-Fiction

Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature
Days of the Rebels 1815-1840
Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian
Literature
Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing
Moving Targets: Writing with Intent: 1982-2004

For G.

MARGARET ATWOOD

Life Before Man

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Instead of a part of the organism itself, the fossil may be some kind of record of its presence, such as a fossilized track or burrow.... These fossils give us our only chance to see the extinct animals in action and to study their behavior, though definite identification is only possible where the animal has dropped dead in its tracks and become fossilized on the spot.

- Björn Kurtén, *The Age of the Dinosaurs*

Look, I'm smiling at you, I'm smiling in you, I'm smiling through you. How can I be dead if I breathe in every quiver of your hand?

- Abram Tertz (Andrei Sinyavsky), *The Icicle*

Part One

Friday, October 29, 1976

ELIZABETH

I DON'T KNOW how I should live. I don't know how anyone should live. All I know is how I do live. I live like a peeled snail. And that's no way to make money.

I want that shell back, it took me long enough to make. You've got it with you, wherever you are. You were good at removing. I want a shell like a sequined dress, made of silver nickels and dimes and dollars overlapping like the scales of an armadillo. Armored dildo. Impermeable; like a French raincoat.

I wish I didn't have to think about you. You wanted to impress me; well, I'm not impressed, I'm disgusted. That was a disgusting thing to do, childish and stupid. A tantrum, smashing a doll, but what you smashed was your own head, your own body. You wanted to make damn good and sure I'd never be able to turn over in bed again without feeling that body beside me, not there but tangible, like a leg that's been cut off. Gone but the place still hurts. You wanted me to cry, mourn, sit in a rocker with a black-edged handkerchief, bleeding from the eyes. But I'm not crying, I'm angry. I'm so angry I could kill you. If you hadn't already done that for yourself.

Elizabeth is lying on her back, clothes on and unrumpled, shoes placed side by side on the bedside rug, a braided oval bought at Nick Knack's four years ago when she was still interested in home furnishings, guaranteed genuine old lady twisted rags. Arms at her sides, feet together, eyes open. She can see part of the ceiling, that's all. A small

crack runs across her field of vision, a smaller crack branching out from it. Nothing will happen, nothing will open, the crack will not widen and split and nothing will come through it. All it means is that the ceiling needs to be repainted, not this year but the next. Elizabeth tries to concentrate on the words "next year," finds she can't.

To the left there is a blur of light; if she turns her head she will see the window, hung with spider plants, the Chinese split-bamboo blind half rolled up. She called the office after lunch and told them she would not be in. She's been doing that too often; she needs her job.

She is not *in*. She's somewhere between her body, which is lying sedately on the bed, *on* top of the Indian print spread, tigers and flowers, wearing a black turtleneck pullover, a straight black skirt, a mauve slip, a beige brassiere with a front closing, and a pair of pantyhose, the kind that come in plastic eggs, and the ceiling with its hairline cracks. She can see herself there, a thickening of the air, like albumin. What comes out when you boil an egg and the shell cracks. She knows about the vacuum on the other side of the ceiling, which is not the same as the third floor where the tenants live. Distantly, like tiny thunder, their child is rolling marbles across the floor. Into the black vacuum the air is being sucked with a soft, barely audible whistle. She could be pulled up and into it like smoke.

She can't move her fingers. She thinks about her hands, lying at her sides, rubber gloves: she thinks about forcing the bones and flesh down into those shapes of hands, one finger at a time, like dough.

Through the door, which she's left open an inch out of habit, always on call like the emergency department of a hospital, listening even now for crashes, sounds of breakage, screams, comes the smell of scorching pumpkin. Her children have lighted their jack-o'-lanterns, even though there are still two days before Halloween. And it

isn't even dark yet, though the light at the side of her head is fading. They love so much to dress up, to put on masks and costumes and run through the streets, through the dead leaves, to knock on the doors of strangers, holding out their paper bags. What hope. It used to touch her, that excitement, that fierce joy, the planning that would go on for weeks behind the closed door of their room. It used to twist something in her, some key. This year they are remote from her. The soundless glass panel of the hospital nursery where she would stand in her housecoat for each of them in turn, watching the pink mouths open and close, the faces contort.

She can see them, they can see her. They know something is wrong. Their politeness, their evasion, is chilling because it's so perfectly done.

They've been watching me. They've been watching us for years. Why wouldn't they know how to do it? They act as though everything is normal, and maybe for them it is normal. Soon they will want dinner and I will make it. I will lower myself down from this bed and make the dinner, and tomorrow I will see them off to school and then I will go to the office. That is the proper order.

Elizabeth used to cook, very well too. It was at the same time as her interest in rugs. She still cooks, she peels some things and heats others. Some things harden, others become softer; white turns to brown. It goes on. But when she thinks about food she doesn't see the bright colors, red, green, orange, featured in the *Gourmet Cookbook*. Instead she sees the food as illustrations from those magazine articles that show how much fat there is in your breakfast. Dead white eggs, white strips of bacon, white butter. Chickens, roasts and steaks modeled from bland lard. That's what all food tastes like to her now. Nevertheless she eats, she overeats, weighting herself down.

There's a small knock, a step. Elizabeth moves her eyes down. In the oak-framed oval mirror above the dressing table she can see the door opening, the darkness of the hall behind, Nate's face bobbing like a pale balloon. He comes into the room, breaking the invisible thread she habitually stretches across the threshold to keep him out, and she is able to turn her head. She smiles at him.

“How are you, love?” he says. “I've brought you some tea.”

Friday, October 29, 1976

NATE

HE DOESN'T KNOW what "love" means between them any more, though they always say it. For the sake of the children. He can't remember when he started knocking at her door, or when he stopped considering it his door. When they moved the children into one room together and he took the vacant bed. The vacant bed, she called it then. Now she calls it the extra bed.

He sets the cup of tea down on the night table, beside the clock radio that wakes her every morning with cheerful breakfast news. There's an ashtray, no butts; why should there be? She doesn't smoke. Though Chris did.

When Nate slept in this room there were ashes, matches, ringed glasses, pennies from his pockets. They used to save them in a peanut butter jar and buy small gifts with them for each other. Mad money, she called it. Now he still empties the pennies out of his pockets every night; they accumulate like mouse droppings on top of the bureau in his room, his own room. Your own room, she calls it, as if to keep him in there.

She looks up at him, her face leached of color, eyes dark-circled, smile wan. She doesn't have to try; she always tries.

"Thanks, love," she says. "I'll get up in a minute."

"I'll make dinner tonight, if you like," Nate says, wanting to be helpful, and Elizabeth agrees listlessly. Her listlessness, her lack of encouragement, infuriates him, but he says

nothing, turns and closes the door softly behind him. He made the gesture and she acts as if it means nothing.

Nate goes to the kitchen, opens the refrigerator and pokes through it. It's like rummaging through a drawer of jumbled clothes. Leftovers in jars, bean sprouts gone bad, spinach in a plastic bag starting to decay, giving off that smell of decomposing lawn. No use expecting Elizabeth to clean it. She used to clean it. She will clean other things these days, but not the refrigerator. He'll tidy it up himself, tomorrow or the next day, when he gets around to it.

Meanwhile he'll have to improvise dinner. It's no large trial, he's often helped with the cooking, but in former times - he thinks of it as the olden days, like a bygone romantic era, like some Disneyland movie about knighthood - there were always supplies. He does most of the grocery shopping himself now, carting a bag or two home in the basket of his bicycle, but he forgets things and gaps are left in the day: no eggs, no toilet paper. Then he has to send the kids to the corner store, where everything is more expensive. Before, before he sold the car, it wasn't such a problem. He took Elizabeth once a week, on Saturdays, and helped her put the cans and frozen packages away when they got home.

Nate picks the dripping spinach out of the vegetable crisper and carries it to the garbage can; it oozes green liquid. He counts the eggs: not enough for omelettes. He'll have to make macaroni and cheese again, which is all right since the kids love it. Elizabeth will not love it but she will eat it, she'll wolf it down absently as if it's the last thing on her mind, smiling like a slowly grilling martyr, staring past him at the wall.

Nate stirs and grates, stirs and grates. An ash drops from his cigarette, missing the pot. It isn't his fault Chris blew his head off with a shotgun. A shotgun: this sums up the kind of extravagance, hysteria, he's always found distasteful in Chris. He himself would have used a pistol. If

he were going to do it at all. What gets him is the look she gave him when the call came through: At least *he had the guts*. At least *he was serious*. She's never said it of course, but he's sure she compares them, judges him unfavorably because he's still alive. Chickenshit, to be still alive. No balls.

Yet at the same time, still without saying it, he knows she blames him, for the whole thing. If you had only been this or that, done this or that - he doesn't know what - it wouldn't have happened. I wouldn't have been driven, forced, compelled ... that's her view, that he failed her, and this undefined failure of his turned her into a quivering mass of helpless flesh, ready to attach itself like a suction cup to the first crazy man who ambled along and said, You have nice tits. Or whatever it was Chris did say to get her to open the Love Latch on her brassiere. Probably more like, You have nice ramifications. Chess-players are like that. Nate knows: he used to be one himself. Nate can never figure out why women find chess-playing sexy. Some women.

So for a week now, ever since that night, she's spent the afternoons in there lying on the bed that used to be his, half his, and he's been bringing her cups of tea, one each afternoon. She accepts them with that dying swan look of hers, the look he can't stand and can't resist. It's your fault, darling, but you may bring me cups of tea. Scant atonement. And an aspirin out of the bathroom and a glass of water. Thank you. Now go away somewhere and feel guilty. He's a sucker for it. *Like a good boy*.

And he was the one, not her, not Elizabeth, who had to go and identify the body. As her stricken eyes said, she could hardly be expected to. So dutifully he had gone. Standing in that apartment where he'd been only twice but where she had been at least once every week for the past two years, fighting nausea, nerving himself to look, he'd felt that she was there in the room with them, a curve in

space, a watcher. More so than Chris. No head left at all, to speak of. The headless horseman. But recognizable. Chris's expression had never really been in that heavy flat face of his; not like most people's. It had been in his body. The head had been a troublemaker, which was probably why Chris had chosen to shoot at it instead of at some other part of himself. He wouldn't have wanted to mutilate his body.

A floor, a table, a chess set by the bed, a bed with what they called the trunk and limbs lying on it; Nate's other body, joined to him by that tenuous connection, that hole in space controlled by Elizabeth. Chris had put on a suit and tie, and a white shirt. Nate, thinking of that ceremony - the thick hands knotting the tie, straightening it in the mirror, God, his shoes were shined even - wanted to cry. He put his hands in his jacket pockets; his fingers closed on pennies, the house key.

'Any reason why he left your number on the table?' the second policeman said.

"No," Nate said. "We were friends of his, I guess."

"Both of you?" the first policeman said.

"Yes," said Nate.

Janet comes into the kitchen as he's sliding the casserole dish into the oven.

"What's for dinner?" she asks, adding "Dad," as if to remind him who he is.

Nate finds this question suddenly so mournful that for a moment he can't answer. It's a question from former times, the olden days. His eyes blur. He wants to drop the casserole on the floor and pick her up, hug her, but instead he closes the oven door gently.

"Macaroni and cheese," he says.

"Yum," she says, her voice remote, guarded, giving a careful imitation of pleasure. "With tomato sauce?"

"No," he says, "there wasn't any."

Janet runs her thumb across the kitchen table, squeaking it on the wood. She does this twice. "Is Mum resting?" she says.

"Yes," Nate says. Then, fatuously, "I took her a cup of tea.' He puts one hand behind him, against the kitchen counter. They both know what to avoid.

"Well," Janet says in the voice of a small adult, "I'll be seeing you soon!' She turns and goes back through the kitchen door.

Nate wants to do something, perform something, smash his hand through the kitchen window. But on the other side of the glass there's a screen. That would neutralize him. Whatever he does now will be absurd. What is smashing a window compared with blowing off your head? *Cornered*. If she'd planned it, she couldn't have done it better.

Friday, October 29, 1976

LESJE

LESJE IS WANDERING in prehistory. Under a sun more orange than her own has ever been, in the middle of a swampy plain lush with thick-stalked plants and oversized ferns, a group of bony-plated stegosaurus is grazing. Around the edges of this group, protected by its presence but unrelated to it, are a few taller, more delicate camptosaurus. Cautious, nervous, they lift their small heads from time to time, raising themselves on their hind legs to sniff at the air. If there is danger they will give the alarm first. Closer to her, a flock of medium-sized pterosaurs glides from one giant tree-fern to another. Lesje crouches in the topmost frond-cluster of one of these trees, watching through binoculars, blissful, uninvolved. None of the dinosaurs takes the slightest interest in her. If they do happen to see or smell her, they will not notice her. She is something so totally alien to them that they will not be able to focus on her. When the aborigines sighted Captain Cook's ships, they ignored them because they knew such things could not exist. It's the next best thing to being invisible.

Lesje knows, when she thinks about it, that this is probably not everyone's idea of a restful fantasy. Nevertheless it's hers; especially since in it she allows herself to violate shamelessly whatever official version of paleontological reality she chooses. In general she is clear-eyed, objective, and doctrinaire enough during business hours, which is all the more reason, she feels, for her extravagance here in the Jurassic: swamps. She mixes eras,

adds colors: why not a metallic blue Stegosaurus with red and yellow dots instead of the dull greys and browns postulated by the experts? Of which she, in a minor way, is one. Across the flanks of the camptosaurus pastel flushes of color come and go, reddish pink, purple, light pink, reflecting emotions like the contracting and expanding chromatophores in the skins of octopuses. Only when the camptosaurus are dead do they turn grey.

After all it's not so fanciful; she's familiar with the coloration of some of the more exotic modern lizards, not to mention mammalian variations such as the rumps of mandrills. Those bizarre tendencies must have developed from somewhere.

Lesje knows she's regressing. She's been doing that a lot lately. This is a daydream left over from her childhood and early adolescence, shelved some time ago in favor of other speculations. Men replaced dinosaurs, true, in her head as in geological time; but thinking about men has become too unrewarding. Anyway, that part of her life is settled for the time being. Settled, as in: the fault settled. Right now *men* means William. William regards them both as settled. He sees no reason why anything should ever change. Neither does Lesje, when she considers it. Except that she can no longer daydream about William, even when she tries; nor can she remember what the daydreams were like when she did have them. A daydream about William is somehow a contradiction in terms. She doesn't attach much importance to this fact.

In prehistory there are no men, no other human beings, unless it's the occasional lone watcher like herself, tourist or refugee, hunched in his private fern with his binoculars, minding his own business.

The phone rings and Lesje jumps. Her eyes spring open, the hand holding her coffee mug flies into the air, fending off. She's one of those people unduly startled by sudden

noises, she tells her friends. She sees herself as a timorous person, a herbivore. She jumps when people come up behind her and when the subway guard blows his whistle, even when she knows the people are there or the whistle will be blown. Some of her friends find this endearing but she's aware that others find it merely irritating.

But she doesn't like being irritating, so she tries to control herself even when nobody else is with her. She puts her coffee mug down on the table - she'll wipe the spill up later - and goes to answer the phone. She doesn't know who she expects it to be, who she wants it to be. She realizes that these are two different things.

By the time she picks up the phone the line is already open. The hum on the phone is the city's hum, reverberating outside the plate glass, amplified by the cement cliffs that face her and in which she herself lives. A cliff dweller, cliff hanger. The fourteenth level.

Lesje holds the phone for a minute, listening to the hum as if to a voice. Then she puts it down. Not William in any case. He's never phoned her without having something to say, some pragmatic message. I'm coming over. Meet me at. I can't make it at. Let's go to. And later, when they'd moved in together, I'll be back at. And lately, I won't be back until. Lesje considers it a sign of the maturity of the relationship that his absences do not disturb her. She knows he's working on an important project. Sewage disposal. She respects his work. They've always promised to give each other a lot of room.

This is the third time. Twice last week and now. This morning she mentioned it, just as a piece of conversation, to the girls at work, women at work, flashing her teeth in a quick smile to show she wasn't worried about it, then covering her mouth immediately with her hand. She thinks

of her teeth as too large for her face: they make her look skeletal, hungry.

Elizabeth Schoenhof was there, in the cafeteria where they always went at ten-thirty if they weren't working too hard. She's from Special Projects. Lesje sees a fair amount of her because fossils are one of the more popular museum features and Elizabeth likes to work them in. This time she'd come over to their table to say she needed a little of Lesje's material for a display-case series. She wanted to juxtapose some of the small items from Canadiana with natural objects from the same geographical regions. *Artifact and Environment*, she was calling it. She could use some stuffed animals to go with the pioneer axes and traps, and a few fossil bones for atmosphere.

"This is an old country," she said. "We want people to see that.'

Lesje is against this eclectic sort of promotion, though she sees the need for it. The general public. Still, it trivializes, and Lesje registered an inner objection when Elizabeth asked, in that competent maternal manner of hers, whether Lesje couldn't find her some really interesting fossils. Weren't all fossils interesting? Lesje said politely that she would see what she could do.

Elizabeth, adept at cataloguing the reactions of others, for which Lesje holds her in some awe - she herself, she feels, cannot do this - explained carefully that she meant visually interesting. She really would appreciate it, she said.

Lesje, always responsive to appreciation, warmed. If Elizabeth wanted some outsize phalanges and a cranium or two she was welcome to them. Besides, Elizabeth looked terrible, white as a sheet, though everyone said she was coping marvelously. Lesje can't imagine herself in that situation, so she can't predict how she herself would cope. Of course everyone knew, it had been in the papers, and

Elizabeth had not made much of an effort to hide the facts while it was going on.

They all scrupulously avoided mentioning Chris or anything relating to him in front of Elizabeth. Lesje caught herself blinking when Elizabeth said she wanted to use a flintlock in the display. She herself wouldn't have chosen guns. But perhaps these blind spots were necessary, were part of coping marvelously. Without them, how could you do it?

To change the subject she said brightly, "Guess what? I've been getting anonymous phone calls."

"Obscene?" Marianne asked.

Lesje said no. "Whoever it is just lets the phone ring and then when I answer he hangs up."

"Wrong number, probably," Marianne said, her interest flagging.

"How do you know it's a he?" Trish asked.

Elizabeth said, "Excuse me." She stood up, paused for a moment, then turned and walked steadily as a somnambulist across the floor towards the door.

"It's awful," Trish said. "She must feel terrible."

"Did I say something wrong?" Lesje asked. She hadn't meant to.

"Didn't you know?" Marianne said. "He used to phone her like that. At least once a night, for the last month. After he quit here. She told Philip Burroughs, oh, quite a while before it happened. You'd think she would've known it was building up to something."

Lesje blushed and brought her hand up to the side of her face. There were always things she didn't know. Now Elizabeth would think she'd done that on purpose and would dislike her. She couldn't figure out how that particular piece of gossip had slipped by her. They'd probably talked about it right here at this table and she hadn't been paying attention.

Lesje goes back to the living room, sits down in the chair beside her spilled coffee, and lights a cigarette. When she smokes she doesn't inhale. Instead she holds her right hand in front of her mouth with the cigarette between the first two fingers, thumb along the jawbone. That way she can talk and laugh in safety, blinking through the smoke that rises into her eyes. Her eyes are her good point. She can see why they wore veils, half-veils, in those Middle Eastern countries. It had nothing to do with modesty. Sometimes when she's alone she holds one of her flowered pillowcases across the lower half of her face, over the bridge of her nose, that nose just a little too long, a little too curved for this country. Her eyes, dark, almost black, look back at her in the bathroom mirror, enigmatic above the blue and purple flowers.

Saturday, October 30, 1976

ELIZABETH

ELIZABETH SITS ON the grey sofa in the underwater light of her living room, hands folded in her lap sedately, as if waiting for a plane. The light here is never direct, since the room faces north; she finds this peaceful. The sofa is not really grey, not only grey; it has a soft mauve underfigure, a design like veining; a batik. She chose it because it didn't hurt her eyes.

On the mushroom-colored rug, near her left foot, there's a scrap of orange crêpe paper, a spillover from something the children are doing in their room. A scrap of flame, jarring. But she lets it lie. Ordinarily she would bend, pick it up, crumple it. She doesn't like anyone disturbing this room, the children or Nate with his trails of sawdust and spots of linseed oil. They can make as much mess as they like in their own rooms, where she doesn't have to cope with it. She once thought of having plants in this room as well as in her bedroom but decided against it. She doesn't want anything else she will have to take care of.

She closes her eyes. Chris is in the room with her, a weight, heavy, breathless, like the air before a thunderstorm. Sultry. Sultan. Sullen. But it isn't because he's dead, he was always like that. Backing her against the door, his arms clamping around her, shoulders massive when she tried to push him off, face heavily down on hers, force of gravity. Leaning on her. I won't let you go yet. She hates it when anyone has power over her. Nate doesn't

have that kind of power, he never had. She married him easily, like trying on a shoe.

She's in the room on Parliament Street, drinking wine, the slopped glasses making mulberry rings on the linoleum of his rented table, she can see the design on the oilcloth, tasteless wreaths of flowers, lime-green on yellow, as if it's been burnt into her eyes. They always whisper in that room, though there's no need to. Nate is several miles away from them and he knows where she is anyway, she leaves the number in case of an emergency. Their whispers and his eyes with their flat hot surfaces, a glint like nailheads. Copperheads. Pennies on the eyes. Gripping her hand across the table as though, if he lets go, she will slide down past the edge of the table, the edge of some cliff or quicksand, and be lost forever. Or he will.

Listening, her eyes on the wrinkled surface of the table, the squat candle he bought from some street peddler, the deliberately tacky plastic flowers and the owl he'd stolen from work, not even mounted, eyeless, his macabre joke. The wreaths turning slowly on the surface of the table as on an oily sea, floating out; somewhere they did that as a blessing. Then rising, the violence in his hands held back, everything held back, falling, salt body stretching along her, dense as earth, on that bed she would never stay to sleep in, the sheets always a little damp, smoky, holding back until nothing could be held back. She has never seen that room by daylight. She refuses to imagine what it looks like now. The mattress bare. Someone would have come, cleaned the floor.

She opens her eyes. She must focus on something simple and clear. There are three bowls on the sideboard, pinkish mauve, porcelain, Kayo's, he's one of the best. She's confident in her taste, she knows enough to have earned that confidence. The sideboard is pine, she bought it before

pine became fashionable, had it stripped down before having things stripped down became fashionable. She couldn't afford it now. It's a good piece, the bowls are good pieces. She wouldn't have anything in this room that was not a good piece. She lets her eyes slide over the bowls, over their subtle colors, their slightly asymmetrical curves, wonderful to have that sense, where to be off balance. There's nothing in them. What could you possibly put into such bowls? Not flowers or letters. They were meant to hold something else, they were meant for offerings. Right now they hold their own space, their own beautifully shaped absence.

There was your room and there was everything else outside, and that barrier between the two. You carried that room around with you like a smell, it was a smell like formaldehyde and the insides of old cupboards, mousy, secretive, like musk, dusky and rich. Whenever I was with you I was in that room, even when we were outside, even when we were here. I'm in it now, only now you've locked the door, brown door with scaling paint, varnish, the brass-colored lock and the chain, two bullet holes through the wood where, you told me, they'd been shooting in the hallway the week before. It wasn't a safe neighborhood. I always took taxis, asked the driver to wait until I'd pressed the buzzer and was safe in the foyer with its gap-toothed mosaic floor. Safe, always a joke. The door's locked, not for the first time; you don't want me ever to get out. You always knew I wanted to get out. But at the same time we were conspirators, we knew things about each other no one else will ever know. In some ways I trust you more than I've ever trusted anyone.

I have to go now, she says. He's twisting a length of her hair, twisting and untwisting it. He runs his index finger between her lips, left-handed, across her teeth; she can