

Fiction by Margaret Atwood

FOUR SHORT PIECES: *King Log in exile*, *Post-colonial*, *Salome was a dancer* & *Take charge*

King Log in exile

After he had been deposed by the frogs, King Log lay disconsolately among the ferns and dead leaves a short distance from the pond. He'd had only enough energy to roll that far: he'd been King of the Pond for so long that he was heavily waterlogged. In the distance he could hear the jubilant croaking and the joyful trilling that signaled the coronation of his celebrated replacement, the experienced and efficient King Stork; and then – it seemed but a mini-second later – the shrieks of terror and the splashes of panic as King Stork set about spearing and gobbling up his new subjects.

Margaret Atwood is the author of more than forty books of fiction, poetry, and critical essays. Her most recent novel, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize and the Giller Prize in Canada. Her other books include the 2000 Booker Prize-winning *The Blind Assassin* (2000), *Alias Grace* (1996), which won the Giller Prize in Canada and the Premio Mondello in Italy, *The Robber Bride* (1993), *Cat's Eye* (1988), and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Her latest collection of nonfiction, *Writing with Intent*, will be published this spring. She has been a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy since 1988.

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King Log – ex-King Log – sighed. It was a squelchy sigh, the sigh of a damp hunk of wood that has been stepped on. What had he done wrong? Nothing. He himself had not murdered his citizens, as the Stork King was now doing. It was true he had done nothing right, either. He had done – in a word – nothing.

But surely his had been a benevolent inertia. As he'd drifted here and there, borne by the sluggish currents of the pond, tadpoles had sheltered beneath him and nibbled the algae that grew on him, and adult frogs had sunbathed on his back. Why then had he been so ignominiously dumped? In a coup d'état orchestrated by foreign powers, it went without saying; though certain factions among the frogs – stirred up by outside agitators – had been denouncing him for some time. They'd said a strong leader was needed. Well, now they had one.

There'd been that minor trade deal, of course. He'd signed it under duress, though nobody'd held a gun to his head, or what passed for his head. And hadn't it benefited the pond? There had been a sharp upturn in exports, the chief commodity being frogs' legs. But he himself had never been directly involved. He'd just been a facilitator. He'd tucked his cut of the profits away in a Swiss bank account, just in case.

Now the frogs were blaming him for the depredations of the Stork King. If

King Log had been a better king, they were yelling – if he hadn't let the rot set in – none of this would have happened.

He knew he couldn't stay in the vicinity of the pond much longer. He must not give in to *anomie*. Already there were puffballs growing out of him, and under his bark the grubs were at work. He trundled away through the woods, the cries of amphibian anguish receding behind him. Served them right, he thought, sadly and a little bitterly.

King Log has retired to a villa in the Alps, where he is at present sprouting a fine crop of shitake mushrooms and working on his memoirs, one word at a time. Logs write slowly, and log kings more slowly than most. He has engaged a meditation guru who encourages him to visualize himself as a large pencil, but he can only get as far as the eraser.

He misses the old days. He misses the lapping of the water in the breeze, the rustling of the bulrushes. He misses the choruses of praise sung to him by the frogs in the pink light of evening. Nobody sings to him now.

Meanwhile the Stork King has eaten all the frogs and sold the tadpoles into sexual slavery. Now he is draining the pond. Soon it will be turned into desirable residential estates.

Post-colonial

We all have them: the building with the dome, late Victorian, solid masonry, stone lions in front of it; the brick houses, three-story, with or without fretwork, wood or painted iron, which now bear the word Historic on tasteful enameled or bronze plaques and can be visited most days except Monday; the roses, big ones, of a variety that were not here before. Before what? Before the ships landed, we all had ships landing; before

the men in beaver hats, sailor hats, top hats, hats anyway, got out of the ships; before the native inhabitants shot the men in hats with arrows or befriended them and saved them from starvation, we all had native inhabitants. Arrows or not, it didn't stop the men in hats, or not for long, and they had flags too, we all had flags, flags that were not the same flags as the flags we have now. The native inhabitants did not have hats or flags, or not as such, and so something had to be done. There are the pictures of the things being done, the before and after pictures you might say, painted by the painters who turned up right on cue, we all had painters. They painted the native inhabitants in their colorful, hatless attire, they painted the men in hats, they painted the wives and children of the man in hats, once they had wives and children, once they had three-story brick houses to put them in. They painted the brave new animals and birds, plentiful then, they painted the landscapes, before and after, and sometimes during, with axes and fire busily at work, you can see some of these paintings in the Historic houses and some of them in the museums.

We go into the museums, where we muse. We muse about the time before, we muse about the something that was done, we muse about the native inhabitants, who had a bad time of it at our hands despite arrows, or, conversely, despite helpfulness. They were ravaged by disease: nobody painted that. Also hunted down, shot, clubbed over the head, robbed, and so forth. We muse about these things and we feel terrible. *We did that*, we think, *to them*. We say the word *them*, believing we know what we mean by it; we say the word *we*, even though we were not born at the time, even though our parents were not born, even though the ancestors of our ancestors may have come from somewhere else

entirely, some place with dubious hats and with a flag quite different from the one that was wafted ashore here, on the wind, on the ill wind that (we also muse) has blown us quite a lot of good. We eat well, the lights go on most of the time, the roof on the whole does not leak, the wheels turn round.

As for *them*, our capital cities have names made from their names, and so do our brands of beer, and some but not all of the items we fob off on tourists. We make free with the word *authentic*. We are enamoured of hyphens as well: our word, their word, joined at the hip. Sometimes they turn up in our museums, without hats, in their colorful clothing from before, singing authentic songs, pretending to be themselves. It's a paying job. But at moments, from time to time, at dusk perhaps, when the moths and the night-blooming flowers come out, our hands smell of blood. Just the odd whiff. *We did that, to them*.

But who are *we* now, apart from the question *Who are we now?* We all share that question. Who are we, now, inside the *we* corral, the *we* palisade, the *we* fortress, and who are *they*? Is that *them*, landing in their illicit boats, at night? Is that them, sneaking in here with outlandish hats, with flags we can't even imagine? Should we befriend them or shoot them with arrows? What are their plans, immediate, long-term, and will these plans of theirs serve us right? It's a constant worry, this *we*, this *them*.

And there you have it, in one word, or possibly two: post-colonial.

Salome was a dancer

Salome went after the religious studies teacher. It was really mean of her, he wasn't up to her at all, no more sense of self-protection than a zucchini, always

droning on about morality and so forth but he'd finger the grapefruits in the supermarket in this creepy way, a grapefruit in each hand, he'd stand there practically drooling, one of those gaunt-looking men who'd fall on his knees if a woman ever looked at him seriously, but so far none of them had. As I say, it was really mean of her, but he'd failed her on her midterm and she was under pressure at home, they wanted her to perform, as they put it, so I guess she thought this would be a shortcut.

Anyway, with a mother like hers what could you expect? Divorced, remarried, bracelets all up her arms and fake eyelashes out to here, and pushy as hell. Started entering Salome in those frilly-panty beauty contests when she was five, tap dance lessons, the lot, they'd slather the makeup on those poor tots and teach them to wiggle their little behinds, what can you expect. And then her stepdad ran the biggest bank in town so I guess she thought she could get away with anything. I wouldn't be surprised if there wasn't some hanky-panky going on in that direction too, the way she'd bat her baby blues at him and wheedle, sickening to watch her rubbing up against him and cooing, he'd promised her a Porsche when she turned sixteen.

She was Tinker Bell in the school play when she was twelve, I certainly remember that. Seven layers of cheesecloth was all she wore, there was supposed to be a body stocking underneath but whether there was or not, your guess is as good as mine. And all those middle-aged dads sitting with their legs crossed. Oh, she knew what she was doing!

Anyway, when she got the rotten mark in religious studies she went to work on the guy, who knows how it started but when they were caught together in the stockroom she had her shirt off. The teacher was growling away at her bra, having trouble with the hooks, or so the

Four short pieces

story goes, you have to laugh. If you want what's in the package you should at least know how to get the string off, is what I say. Anyway, big scandal, and then he started badmouthing her, said she was a little slut and she'd led him on, did some innuendo on the mother just for good measure. Everyone believed him of course, but you always knew with Salome that if anyone's head was going to roll it wouldn't be hers. She accused the poor jerk of sexual assault, and since she was technically a minor, and of course her banker stepdad threw his weight around, she made it stick. Last seen, the guy was panhandling in the subway stations, down there in Toronto; grown a beard, looks like Jesus, crazy as a bedbug. Lost his head completely.

Salome didn't come to a good end either. Tried out for ballet school, modern dance was what she thought would suit her, show a lot of skin, center your thoughts on the pelvis, bare feet, fling yourself around, but she didn't get in. Left home after some sort of blowup between the mom and the stepdad, midnight yelling about Miss Princess and her goings-on, furniture was thrown. After that she took to stripping in bars, just to annoy them I bet. Got whacked in her dressing room one night, right before the show, too bad for management, clobbered her over the head with a vase, nothing on but her black leather macramé bikini and that steel-studded choke collar, used to get the clients all worked up, not that I'd know personally. Saw two guys running out the stage door in bicycle courier outfits, some sort of uniform anyway, never caught them though. Hit men set on by the stepdad is one rumor, wild with jealousy. Guys get like that when their hair falls out. It was all the mother's fault, if you ask me.

Take charge

I

– Sir, their cannons have blown a hole in the ship. It's below the waterline. Water is pouring into the hold, Sir.

– Don't just stand there, you blockhead! Cut a piece of canvas, dive down, patch it!

– Sir, I can't swim.

– Bloody hell and damn your eyes, what wet nurse let you go to sea? No help for it, I'll have to do it myself. Hold my jacket. Put out that fire. Clear away those spars.

– Sir, my leg's been shot off.

– Well do the best you can.

II

– Sir, their antitank missiles have shredded the left tread on our tank.

– Don't just sit there, you nitwit! Take a wrench, crawl underneath the tank, fix it!

– Sir, I'm a gunner, not a mechanic. Anyway that wouldn't work.

– Why in hell do they send me useless twits like you? No help for it, I'll have to do it myself. Cover me with your machine gun. Stand by with grenades. Hand me that spanner.

– Sir, my arm's been burnt off.

– Well do the best you can.

III

– Sir, their diabolical worm virus has infected our missile command system. It's eating the software like candy.

– Don't just lounge there, you dickhead! Get going with the firewalls, or whatever you use.

– Sir, I’m a screen monitor, not a troubleshooter.
 – Shit in a bucket, what do they think we’re running here, a beauty parlor? If you can’t do it, where’s the nerdy spot-faced geek who can?
 – Sir, it was him wrote the virus. He was not a team player, Sir. The missiles have already launched and they’re heading straight for us.
 – No help for it, I’ll have to do it myself. Hand me that sledgehammer.
 – Sir, we’ve got sixty seconds.
 – Well do the best you can.

IV

– Sir, the makorin has malfunctioned and set off the pizzlewhistle. That has saddammed the glopzoid plapoodle. It may be the work of hostile nanobacons.
 – Don’t just hover there, you clone-drone! Dopples the magmatron, reboot the fragebender, and insert the hi-speed crockblade with the pessimal-point attachment! That’ll captcha the nasty little biobots!
 – Sir, the magmatron is not within my area of expertise.
 – What pixelwit deployed you? No help for it, I’ll have to do it myself. Hand me the mutesuck blandplaster!
 – Sir, I have been brain-napped. My brain is in a jar in Uzbekistan, guarded by a phalanx of virtual gonkwarriors. I am speaking to you via simulation hologram.
 – Well do the best you can.

V

– Sir, the wild dogs have dug their way into the food cache and they’re eating the winter supplies.

– Don’t just squat there, you layabout! Pick up your stone axe and bash them on the head!
 – Sir, these are not ordinary wild dogs. They are red-eyed demon-spirit dogs, sent by the angry ancestors. Anyway my stone axe has a curse on it.
 – By my mother’s bones, what did I do to deserve such a useless duck-turd brother’s nephew’s son as you? No help for it, I’ll have to do it myself. Recite the red-eyed-demon-spirit-dog-killing charm and hand me my consecrated sacred-fire-hardened spear.
 – Sir, they’ve torn my throat out.
 – Well do the best you can.

Four short pieces