

THE TENT

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.

from The Tent

by Margaret Atwood, 2000

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 storey, with or without fretwork, wood, or painted iron, which now bear the word *Historic* on tasteful enamelled 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

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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 colourful, 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-storey 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

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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 waited 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 colourful 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,

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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.

Heritage House

The Heritage House is where we keep the Heritage. It wasn't built for that — it was once a place where people really lived — but the way things needed to be done in it was cumbersome, what with the water coming out of a well, and the light coming out of oil lamps and tallow candles, and the heat coming out of a stone fireplace, and then there were the chamber pots to be emptied and the tin bathtubs to be filled. Also it was so hard to keep the rooms clean. So people built newer houses, with plumbing and so forth, but the Heritage House was not torn down, and when we decided to have some Heritage we agreed that the Heritage House was a good place to store the stuff.