What kind of person would best represent the human race to beings from another galaxy? Ursula Le Guin has imagined not a captain of industry but instead a “Space Crone,” a poor old woman found selling small items in a market—smart but lacking formal education, a wife and mother, and now a grandmother. Le Guin argues that her hard-earned wisdom and lifelong habit of observation would make her the best representative of the human race. Such a woman might not care much what others think. Social models for postmenopausal women lacking, she has had to “give birth to herself.” Her fund of stories would best instruct space beings about humanity.

Atwood has given us a galaxy of remarkable older women. In her fiction, mature women whose impassive surface hides a wealth of awareness appear in *The Robber Bride, Alias Grace*, and, one might argue, *Oryx and Crake* (Oryx’s appearance belying her harsh experiences). She appears in *Cat’s Eye* in the guise of an artist who can represent experiences (such as being a repressed suburban wife of the 1950s) that she never had. Ancient Iris Chase Griffen, a master storyteller, completes her family’s story of betrayal and victimization before

*The author wishes to thank the University of Tampa for a Delo Grant, which supported this research. She also wishes to thank Margaret Atwood for permission to use unpublished material, and the helpful staff of the Thomas Fisher Library.
Part II: Margaret Atwood

her own death by interweaving three narratives—as if she herself were a triple goddess or the three weaving fates—in *The Blind Assassin*.

There is something especially uncanny about the old women in Atwood’s poetry—one has only to think of Moodie and Circe in the earlier volumes. Strange crones also thrive in the cracks of the hybrid forms that Atwood has played with since *Murder in the Dark* was published in 1983. *Interlunar* (1984) features a spiraling sequence of snake poems and weird outer-space pieces such as “Valediction: Intergalactic.” *Good Bones* offers a female shape-shifter (“My Life as a Bat”); a representative from a female-only planet who foresees the extinction of humans (“Cold-Blooded”); and another female from outer space who tells of her people (“Homecoming”). In that book a witch warns: “I’m the plot, babe, and don’t ever forget it” (29–30). The voices of uncanny women carry over into her 1995 collection *Morning in the Burned House*, her first volume of traditional-looking poems since *Selected Poems II* came out in 1987.

Atwood’s poetry reveals recurring patterns in her artistry. Where novels are compounds, as it were, poems are elements in a periodic table. To adapt Baudrillard’s terms (though he is discussing modern versus postmodern stances), the novel suggests a map while the poem is a simulation, “nuclear and genetic, and no longer specular and discursive.” Denizens of the “dimension of simulation,” poems embody “genetic miniaturization” that allows them to combine and recombine. Poems are the smaller units that may be found in “matrices, memory banks and command models.” The poem space forms “a hyperreal” that informs the novels (Baudrillard 2–3). The notion of the hyperreal is analogous to the process through which variable, interchangeable motifs build up recognizable structures in folktales and myths from oral tradition. The complex, shifting, ambiguous hyperreal that poems inhabit, like a virtual reality, includes gaps, reversals, and paradoxes, yet remains identifiable. No single poem can completely articulate the whole of the shifting vision or any one of its stages; rather, the poems participate in a larger pattern beyond them. Insofar as the poems are artistically realized, they exist in and for themselves, but they also gesture to an imaginative space imbued with transformation.

In this essay the archetype of the female descent is treated as such a “hyperreal”—a temporary and unstable yet recurring combination of elements subject to inversion and reversal. To understand this hyperreal archetypal structure in the poems in Atwood’s most recent volume, it is helpful to explore their organization, combinations, and inter-
relationships. Atwood expended much energy on selecting, ordering, and reordering them. For example, the most accessible poems appear in its second part, a gallery of aging women of myth and popular culture who take their turns on stage. From the sphinxlike Sekhmet to movie stars such as Ava Gardner, Atwood’s personae speak in dramatic monologues—sardonic, witty, and sometimes rueful—that seem to explode patriarchal beliefs. It would be easy to feel that these poems represent mostly strong feminist voices. Nevertheless, none of these voices is truly free; all are casualties in the gender wars, victims and/or victimizers. They do not provide models for the aging, disillusioned speaker of the first part, nor do they help her work through the death of her father in the fourth part or go on without him in the fifth part. No individual poem offers an overarching narrative or easy solution. Rather, the book is indeterminate and open-ended. Taken together, however, one can make out an intertextual pattern like an electronic imprint. Attention to her revisions reveals her patterning vision at work. Her changes are too many and complex to do justice to in this article; I have confined myself to mentioning a few significant revisions.

From the beginning, Atwood’s works have issued from a profound engagement with mythology; for example, the last chapter of her book *Negotiating with the Dead* takes the descent myth as a master trope. The novel that first brought her a wide readership—*Surfacing*—traces a female descent, as well; although critics still debate whether the descent is ironic or not, the structure is explicit and recognizable, drawing as it does on Jungian images popularized by Joseph Campbell, Northrop Frye, and others. It is not inappropriate to turn to popularizations in dealing with Atwood’s use of mythology, since she employs them, as Beran has noted (86n1). In fact, she has perpetrated several herself (notably, *Survival*). Atwood’s recent poems develop what Jungian analyst Jean Shinoda Bolen, who has developed a psychology of women drawing on Greek mythology, has termed an “alchemical” vision of female creative potential. Associated with the powerful magnetism of Aphrodite, a goddess who was never victimized and who enjoys sensuality, alchemical vision allows women to enter freely into new relationships—with their raw materials, if they are artists—thereby “giving birth to” or reinventing themselves (Bolen 224, 241). Bolen, following Paul Friedrich, notes that the words traditionally used to describe Aphrodite—gold, honey, speech, semen—link fertility and verbal creation. For Bolen, alchemical vision allows a woman to
emerge from encounters intact yet imaginatively fertilized (not necessarily physically), like Aphrodite (224–27).

This freedom, which a virgin or mother may not be able to risk, is the crone’s for the taking. Alchemical purification from dross is a provocative metaphor for menopause in the case of older women, who need no longer feel defined by their bodies and roles involving fertility and childbearing. Earlier images of self as potential mate, wife, mother, and nurturer no longer fully describe a woman who has moved beyond menopause. She is freed to pursue new goals and embark on physical or spiritual adventures. She may start a business or school or foundation, pursue a new activity or sport or art, or enter onto a spiritual path. Whatever her pursuit, the older woman possesses a new source of strength from within and must learn to access and assert it skillfully.

While estrogen and oxytocin induce women of childbearing age to nurture, form associations with others, and cling to relationships, after menopause women become more assertive, independent, and vocal (Fisher 41, 124). Indeed, unlike men, older women do not lose their libido; after menopause estrogen no longer masks the woman’s testosterone, the main cause of desire (ibid. 204). Especially if her children are gone and she has achieved economic security, the older woman is a latent powerhouse whose wisdom and energy are sorely needed on many fronts. Atwood’s continuing activism in the public sphere makes her a model for older women in this regard. This essay investigates how the older woman sheds previous more or less externally imposed identities and actively rediscovers her own identity, which often appears in dream and artwork as the image of a child, usually a girl, alongside alchemical images such as burning, suggesting purification of flesh and earthly substance.

Wisdom is primarily associated with female goddesses in world mythology (Young xxii). Classical myths of the female descent of figures such as Persephone and Psyche, like the earlier Sumerian and Babylonian mythology surrounding the descent of Inanna, suggest that the price of wisdom, especially for women, is a descent to the underworld. Medical science indicates that the female sustains special risks of staying in a figurative underworld: madness, depression, or obsession. Numerous studies indicate that depression afflicts almost twice as many women as men (see Weissman and Olfson), and the madwoman in the attic has become a cliché. A descent may be particularly hard for the old woman: society does not value the crone, and men fear her. Demeter’s depression at the loss of Persephone brings famine.
Sumerian Inanna (Babylonian Ishtar) narrowly escapes being trapped in the underworld; Kore or Persephone endures a portion of each year in hell; Euridice is left behind through Orpheus’s error.

This story of a female descent to the underworld was associated with the story of Demeter and Persephone, celebrated for two thousand years until the destruction of the shrine at Eleusis in 395 C.E. The “Hymn to Demeter,” the central story of the Eleusinian Mysteries, tells of Hades’ rape of Persephone. After Persephone returned from the underworld, Demeter offered the Mysteries to humans. The Mysteries—fruits of the female descent—were secrets known only to initiates of this ancient cult that continued goddess worship into the Christian era. In its later forms, the Mysteries became a celebration of Eros and Psyche, a humanized version of the earlier body of myth.  

Psyche has relevance for many women: she is a lover (like Aphrodite), a wife (like Hera), a pregnant mother (like Demeter), and one who descends and returns from the underworld (like Persephone and Inanna) (Bolen 259). The initiates of the Mysteries were seekers of rebirth from death. Eros was not simply a beloved; rather, Psyche and the initiate sought the generative life force. In the ancient Orphic creation myth, Eros, the son of the goddess Night (a form of the ancient triple goddess) and the Wind, was hatched from a silver egg floating in the womb of Night. This ancient image of the cosmic egg of creation attracted Atwood’s attention at the time she composed most of the poems in *Morning in the Burned House*, as her sketches of it at the end of this essay indicate. Eros was the first-born god, and from him sprang all other gods and the universe (Graves 11).  

The Eros and Psyche myth was known to Roman writers such as Apuleius, an initiate of the Mystery Cult of Isis, whose version is the most familiar to us. The story has been retold in a number of versions, including *Till We Have Faces* (1956), the novel by C. S. Lewis, which is very close to Apuleius’s version. It has been interpreted for modern times by Jungian scholar Erich Neumann, who stresses the birth of love, incarnate as the female child, from the union of Eros and Psyche (137–42). Apuleius’s version of the tale, without its frame story, is translated in Neumann’s book *Amor and Psyche*.

The tale tells of Amor (“love” in Latin) and Psyche (“soul” in Greek). Aphrodite, jealous of Psyche’s charms, has asked Amor to destroy Psyche with his arrow, but instead, distracted by her beauty, he wounds himself on his own arrow in his attempt. Irresistibly attracted to her, he visits her at night. Psyche remains ignorant of her lover’s identity until one night, overcome with curiosity, she holds up a lamp
and sees that her lover is Amor (Eros), the handsome god of love. Some hot wax falling from the lamp wakes Eros, who flees. Psyche is determined to find him and consults his mother, but Aphrodite disapproves of her son’s liaison with a mortal and makes Psyche undertake four progressively more dangerous tasks ultimately leading to the underworld. In *Goddesses in Everywoman*, Bolen has provided a map for woman’s self-realization based on the four tasks that Aphrodite set for Psyche: the Sorting of Seeds (resistance to despair achieved through receptive intuition); the Gathering of Golden Fleece (wielding of compassionate power); the Filling of the Crystal Flask (emotional distance attained through perspective); and the Descent into the Underworld (learning to say no). At all four stages, an appropriate helper appears to assist Psyche. These helpers suggest instincts or latent strengths of the female psyche that await activation (Bolen 257–62).

Atwood’s *Morning in the Burned House*, published when Atwood was nearing sixty, leads deeper and deeper, like a stairway into the underworld. Most of its poems were written while on tour promoting *The Robber Bride*, and Atwood noted that she found hotels particularly conducive to writing poetry, since she did not frequent the hotel bars (“Mellower”). Hotel rooms’ eerie interchangeability may have encouraged her to shuffle times and places as intertexts, as she does in “A Pink Hotel in California” from that volume (76–77). She took special care in organizing the book, partly so that some pieces that had been written before, like “The Loneliness of the Military Historian,” published in *Harper’s* magazine in December 1990, where it appeared in part as a protest against the first Gulf War, could find appropriate placement. Age and infirmity were much on her mind; not only had she gone through the death of her father but also Graeme Gibson was recovering from a biopsy and operation in the summer of 1994. Early on she collected the poems about her father into one section. As the fourth, and penultimate, section the book leads up to it and goes beyond it. The death of the father prompts the poet’s descent and depression and catalyzes her ultimate rebirth through love in the final, fifth section of Atwood’s book. Note that while the myth describes four phases, Atwood’s volume is in five sections, allowing her poem sequence to move beyond known constructs and open out into an open-ended visionary dimension.

In this essay, “phase” refers to the myth, while “section” refers to Atwood’s book. The dramatic monologues in section two create an effect of psychodrama that rises, at times, to approximate ritual.
Atwood draws on contemporary performative techniques to enhance this effect. The strong rhetoric of her dramatic monologues is oral, colloquial, and persuasive. She takes liberty with the mythic material. She is irreverent and avoids clichéd versions of classical mythology, depicting the underworld as a realm of creativity as well as danger. Rather than referencing Psyche in reverential tones, Atwood’s poems introduce pop culture stars or burlesque artists voicing psychic truths in comic deadpan. There is a ghastly aplomb in these darkly humorous poems. The book is in part an elegy not only for Atwood’s father but also for the patriarchy. But it is much more, and that much more is particularly directed to women. The world does not stop when one man, or the power of Man, ceases. At the end of the book, as snow freezes all things, an old woman is still speaking, becoming a part of outer space. The crone voices set cackling in an early part of *Morning* (the anteroom of the book-as-hospital, as it were, where the father lies dying) are funny and bawdy, like feminist satyr plays relieving a Greek tragedy. They are also cautionary tales. They remind us of the dangers of female sympathy for needy men, a trap that a woman often runs willingly into and that lets her avoid the hardest task—to discover what she herself is and wants before she dies. This is a task that, for the old woman, must no longer be deferred.

**Phase I: The Sorting of Seeds**

For the first task in the myth, Aphrodite leads Psyche into a chamber and commands her to sort a heap of seeds—corn, millet, lentils, and so on—into different piles by nightfall. Even a casual reader would note the connection of seeds and growth. With the assistance of ants, Psyche is able to accomplish this impossible task. According to Bolen, the Sorting of Seeds—the initial stage of the female quest—involves resistance to despair achieved through receptive intuition. In this stage a woman must sort out a “jumble of conflicted feelings and competing loyalties.” This “inward task” involves an honest sifting through of the woman’s feelings, values, and motives, separating the dross from the truly significant “seeds” of creative change. This process requires “staying with” confused situations without acting until clarity emerges and a woman trusts “the ants.” Depending on the woman, the ants could be instincts, intuition arising from the unconscious, or logical analysis and prioritization (Bolen 259–60).
The first section of *Morning* takes place in this stage. The poems present a jumble of emotions that have been ignored for decades by the speaker, who wakes up to the fact that old age has crept up on her. “You Come Back” sets the scene, amid dirty tangled sheets (throughout this volume evoking the dreamworld/underworld). The second poem, “A Sad Child,” recalls unfinished business, the old hurt of not being the “favorite child.” The third poem, “In the Secular Night,” shows unfinished business again tugging at the speaker. The draft version in the Atwood Papers reveals her intent to make age a central issue. Atwood added the phrase “thirty years later” to the longhand version to emphasize the passage of time; the book version changes the thirty to forty, making the issue of age even clearer. The next poem, “Waiting,” calls up the dawning consciousness of future loss as Atwood’s aging speaker looks back at her childhood self and forward to the last poem in the book, “Morning in the Burned House,” another poem-scene of childhood recollected and in this case transfigured. In the fifth poem, “February,” addressed to her cat, the speaker is still in bed but knows she must rise up from the frozen torpor of self-pity. In “Asparagus” she sits at an outdoor café in spring, the season of asparagus, with a man torn between love for two women. Feeling old, she humorously wonders if she should look like a crone so her advice will improve, or if she should get a pet lizard. The seventh and last poem in section I, “Red Fox,” introduces the trickster with its modus operandi of subterfuge and theft; the fox suggests Atwood’s persona here and elsewhere (VanSpanckeren, “Humanizing” 103). These poems suggest a sifting through of old memories, ideas, and belongings, much like the sorting of feelings and belongings after a death. The seemingly random process culminates in a recognition of the self as a yet unfulfilled “lean vixen” crossing the ice, filled with “longing / and desperation” and “adept at lies,” desperate to “steal something / that doesn’t belong to her . . . one more chance / or other life” (16–17).

An absence—a poem left out of *Morning*, “Gathering,”—lies at the heart of this section and indeed of the whole volume. It was the original first poem in early stages of the book manuscript. The following reproduces the longhand manuscript draft; words and letters in parentheses were crossed out, and underlined words were added from the margins or above the lines in the original.

```
the people (I) you know are getting older
A great (thum) unseen thumb (p) is pushing
```
gently and relentlessly down on the tops of their heads
and they spread sideways.
They whiten, like raw wood in (the) a (cold) salt wind.
They silver.
Their eyes are no longer (wide pools) surprised & guile-(free)
free blue pools, but (great) small (berries) & peering,
and shiny as black berries
just before frost.
(Not me of course)
Walking into a roomful of them you think
you are in a roomful of (gnomes) gnomework,
of those who were once your friends, transformed
by (such a) some scentless but malignant power to those
puckered dreamhouse versions

Their smiles are Kodak shadows
The door is closing (on you)
& whatever, they ate, said, did
(to set the spell) (smelled) (touched) to get this way
is about to happen to you. (Atwood Papers)

The first title of this poem was “You Wanted a Birthday Poem,” and its subject, aging, is the thematic heart of the final book. Yet this poem was left out. In fact, no single poem directly addresses it; rather, all the poems and the moments they depict are shown to be a part of aging. As in this poem, old age—its mystery, inevitability, and terrible connection with death—is kept offstage. One of the book’s strengths is its intertextuality and multiple levels of meaning: had the poem “Gathering” been left in, the effect would have been mimetic and reductive. The book is better without it; now the reader must actively encounter aging in its shifting manifestations.

Phase II: Acquiring Some Golden Fleece

In the myth’s second task Aphrodite orders Psyche to gather wool from the dangerous horned rams of the sun. These massive creatures aggressively butt against each other in a field. They are deadly and strong (and of course male). A green reed—something small and flexible that survives storms that destroy great oaks—helps by giving advice: at
sundown, time of the moon and darkness, Psyche can pluck strands of their wool off the brambles. In this way power is acquired and destruction averted. According to Bolen, this stage involves the gaining of power (the Golden Fleece) necessary for any woman. If a woman is not used to competing, she may easily become hurt or cynical and retreat into a shell. Having clarified her priorities, the female self in transition needs to use wiles and indirection while her strength and resolution grow (Bolen 260).

The eight dramatic monologues in Atwood’s section two exhibit observation and indirection on the battlefield of the gender wars. In “Miss July Grows Older” an aging woman (seemingly a Playboy centerfold) is devising crone strategies: “what you get is no longer / what you see” (23). In the second poem, “Manet’s Olympia,” Olympia thinks, therefore she is: “I, the head, am the only subject / of this picture” (25). As for “Monsieur Voyeur,” she addresses him as an object: “You, sir, are furniture. / Get stuffed” (25). In “Daphne and Laura and So Forth” victimized women with “eight fingers / and a shell” (27) are working on tricks for survival: “venom, a web, a hat, / some last resort” (27). In “Cressida to Troilus: A Gift,” the gift—the woman’s body—is a trick that kills. “Ava Gardner Reincarnated as a Magnolia” is an old hand at wiles and indirection, “a glass / of wine or two on the terrace, / bare leg against white trouser” (32). An example of Bolen’s Aphrodite consciousness, as a human Ava was able to move in and out of relationships freely, finding sex to be “the joy,” “that ancient ploy / and vital puzzle, water- / of-life cliché that keeps things going” (32). The final poems in the sequence portray increasingly powerful female personages. “Sekhmet, the Lion-Headed Goddess of War, Violent Storms, Pestilence, and Recovery from Illness, Contemplates the Desert in the Metropolitan Museum of Art” recalls the Virgin Mary’s transformation into a lion gnawing bones in *Cat’s Eye* (68), as well as Yeats’s slouching beast in “The Second Coming.” Sekhmet embodies power without compassion (40–41) and is imagined as a sardonic ancient statue in the Metropolitan Museum with a crone’s sense of humor: “if it’s selfless / love you’re looking for / you’ve got the wrong goddess” (40). “Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing” is a pivotal poem in this sequence because, like Plath’s “Daddy,” this curse poem, overflowing with bitter humor, acknowledges female power. Helen’s whole female identity is squeezed into a sexual role that she wields like a laser. Like Atwood’s much earlier poem “Siren Song,” this seductive trickster text draws the reader into a fiery doom
Helen’s objectification by male voyeurs has dehumanized her and emptied her of all feeling except rage. The cause of the wars in the *Iliad, Odyssey,* and *Aeneid,* the three great epics of Western literature, Helen—like Pandora and Eve in other foundational myths—is blamed for introducing destruction to the world. The poem recalls Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” that ends “Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air” (Plath 9). Atwood’s final version of the poem ends as follows:

Look—my feet don’t hit the marble!
Like breath or a balloon, I’m rising,
I hover six inches in the air
in my blazing swan-egg of light.
You think I’m not a goddess?
Try me.
This is a torch song.
Touch me and you’ll burn. (36)

Revisions in “Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing” reveal that the manuscript version originally was entitled simply “Counter Dancing.” Here and elsewhere in this volume Atwood revises to find titles that highlight the mythic and archetypal dimensions. For instance, “King Lear in Respite Care” was originally simply “Respite Care.” “Cressida to Troilus: A Gift” was originally simply “The Gift.” The wonderfully dismissive title “Daphne and Laura and So Forth” originally was “The Origin of Laurel,” referencing the tree. Other changes in “Helen of Troy . . .” make it more pertinent to women. The first line originally read, “The world is full of people / who’d tell me I should be ashamed of myself.” The book version changes “people” to “women.” The first draft lacked sensory detail. These lines—slightly altered in the final printed version—were added to the first draft from the margin:

the music smells like foxes,
humid as August, languorous as wilting bows
or crisp as heated metal, searing the nostrils:
the word sex plastered like
neon at belly level.

The reference to the fox suggests the trickster’s wiles. Perhaps unconsciously aware of Plath’s poem, Atwood added “breath or a balloon,
I’m rising” to the ending; the word “rising” recalls Plath’s “rise” (Atwood Papers).

Helen’s fiery power derives from her ability to manipulate male lust, something that she has learned over millennia of counter dancing. Like the fox in section one, she listens to the instructions of the flexible green reed, as it were, and gathers her shining tufts of Golden Fleece from brambles in the night. Helen, Sekhmet, and the other timeless figures of women of section two who hail from art, myth, and popular culture speak with the humorous, ironic, outraged voices of crones as they display their wounds and weapons.

Phase III: The Filling of the Crystal Flask

In this task, Aphrodite sets a small crystal flask into Psyche’s hands and tells her that she must fill it from water flowing from a dangerous river. This river leaps off a precipice at the world’s summit and falls to the deepest part of the underworld. The waters have etched deep marks into the cliffs, and dragons guard them. Psyche despairs, but an eagle aids the protagonist; it has long-range sight, or perspective, and it can see overall patterns. Through the eagle’s help, transparency and objectivity are gained. Bolen sees these waters as an image of the “circular flow of life.” She interprets the eagle’s aid as “emotional distance gained through perspective” and speaks of the importance for women to be mindful and gain an awareness of “what is significant” (260–61). It is also possible to see in this story of an individual trying to fill a small flask from overpowering, cascading waters the necessity of understanding one’s own personal limits and to take from life’s flow exactly that which one needs, no more and no less, so as not to be swept away by the universe’s multiplicity and force, imagined as an incessant and powerful cataract.

The nine poems in the third section raise issues of damage. The poems do not suggest solutions but instead point out danger areas, injustice, and dislocation, particularly for women. “Romantic” warns women against self-sacrifice for men. “Cell” envisions cancer cells that, like humans, want more life. “Marsh Languages” explores the ways in which Western dualism and binary opposites (as in computer language and electronics) have eradicated all other, more organic languages. “Frogless” explores pollution and extinction. “Half-hanged Mary” recalls an innocent woman—Atwood’s ancestor—who is hanged for witchcraft but survives; her victimization turns her into a witch. In
“Owl Burning” villagers burn another woman for witchcraft. “Down” envisions victims as unsatisfied ghosts. In the last poem, “Pink Hotel in California,” the speaker recalls her family cabin in the woods in Canada during World War II, when words like “smoke, gun, boot, oven” tasted “pure” (76–77). From the perspective of age and the deathly hotel room with its dresser showing “antique man-bored wormholes,” Atwood recognizes that no one is innocent or spared: “The fire. The scattered ashes. The winter forest” (77).

The crystal flask suggests transparency and objectivity, the essence of the military historian in section three. Changes in “The Loneliness of the Military Historian,” originally entitled “The Military Historian Speaks Frankly,” reveal some of Atwood’s concern with women and power. The poem manuscript—a war protest, as noted before—criticizes women’s traditional roles in war, specifically the idea that “women should not contemplate war / should not weigh tactics impartially, view either side and denounce nothing” (Atwood Papers). In the gender wars, men have a vested interest in keeping women emotional and ignorant of tactics. The rough draft puts these issues up front, bringing up the speaker, a female military historian, at the end. The final version begins with her, describes her in more detail, and presents her as an expert on war. The effect is to empower her, and women. The revision also makes the poem more effective as a dramatic monologue (Atwood Papers).

Poems from this section challenge the reader to see with an eagle’s eye and address real issues—personal, but also historical and ecological—with clarity, the necessary precondition for the older woman’s spiritual adventures. These adventures may take the form of working on unresolved personal trauma (as in “Half-hanged Mary”), or the adventure may be social or political, in which case the older woman may work in the world, pitting her energy against dragons such as cancer (“Cell”) and environmental degradation (“Marsh Languages,” “Frogless”). In any case the adventure will issue from a space of spiritual clarity that opens up after stages of patiently sifting through old matters and quietly gathering one’s nascent powers.

**Phase IV: The Descent into the Underworld**

(Learning to Say No)

For the fourth and last test, Aphrodite commands Psyche to descend to the underworld to fill a small box for Persephone to fill with beauty
lotion. Psyche fears this last task will end in her death. Again, she is offered advice, which she heeds. The far-seeing tower advises that she will encounter pathetic persons who will cry out for her assistance, but that she must “harden her heart to compassion” three times and continue on her journey lest she stay in the underworld forever. Psyche manages to set aside the calls for her aid, thereby exercising choice. Bolen notes that “many women allow themselves to be imposed on and diverted from doing something for themselves. They cannot accomplish whatever they set out to do, or what is best for them, until they say no” (261–62).

The box recalls a casket or an urn for ash, yet it ushers in rebirth: through negating and reversing the status quo, Psyche gains her authenticity, autonomy, and sense of personal destiny. This alchemy underlies even the wrenching poems of section four, which comprise a wavering descent into the underworld during the father’s slow dying. The series of dreams and memories about the father recall the series of three persons to whom Psyche must harden her heart lest she also stay in the underworld. “The Ottawa River by Night” constitutes a great third dream, one that resolves the lesser dreams in “Two Dreams” and “Two Dreams, 2.” The poem marshals dualities: the father’s leave-taking and the speaker’s last glimpse of his spirit, heading down the Ottawa River in a small boat at night out to a mythical, hoped-for sea of “safe arrivals.” Both the original handwritten manuscript and the printed one begin, “In the full moon you dream more” (103). Atwood’s original manuscript ended with references to the moon as well, which were left out of the final version. Words in parentheses were crossed out and underlined words were added, all in the longhand draft:

The moon, mystery,
governs illusion. (But) why is that bad?
Master of illusions, they say, of magicians.
It’s only children who are not impressed
When the (egg) dove appears out of pure air.
After all, the moon does that,
night after night, (and is hardly noticed)
it (simply) exists simply here
(this) (a) (oh yes, an illusion, I think, waking.
It takes you a minute, waking,
to decipher where you are
they can see no reason)
it is because it ought to be there.  
there is no reason why it shouldn’t be there. (Atwood Papers)

The draft associates the father with the moon and its regenerating mystery as well as with a magician’s dove (originally an egg, suggesting rebirth and the orphic egg from which Eros, the creator of the universe, emerged). The moon presides over the whole rough draft, including the end. Atwood’s final, printed version reverses this optimistic, moon-drenched vision. It leaves us in the dark, with a blank sense of nothingness and disorientation as of waking in a strange place (as Hades would be):

Only a dream, I think, waking  
to the sound of nothing.  
Not nothing. I heard: it was a beach, or shore,  
and some one far off, walking.  
Nowhere familiar. Somewhere I’ve been before  
It always takes a long time  
to decipher where you are. (104)

Revision made the poem stronger and more uncompromising; the death in the draft was described in abstractions and linked with the moon, while the dark final draft seems to end in the netherworld. Only sound (raw material of poetry and transformation) remains

as while the speaker waits in like a tower in darkness to find her bearings.

Phase V: Alchemical Power

The story of Eros and Psyche continues with the return to the upper world of Psyche, who almost is trapped in the underworld since, giving in to curiosity like Pandora, she opens the casket of beauty ointment, hoping to make herself more attractive to Eros. Eros saves her, and their divine marriage or hieros gamos symbolically unites heaven and earth. Psyche is made divine, and the union issues in the birth of a divine female child named Pleasure. But Apuleius’s story of Eros and Psyche is a tale within a tale. An old woman is telling the story of Eros and Psyche to console a young girl who has been kidnapped on
her wedding day by robbers who hope for a ransom from her parents. Apuleius’s frame story is a veiled version of Hades’ rape of Persephone; the inner tale is a humanized version of the myth. The old woman who tells the tale is from Thessaly, home of witches, Hecate, and the pre-Hellenic mother goddess. Apuleius’s novel ends with his own initiation into the rite of Isis; the ritual involves a symbolic death, journey to the underworld moving through four elements, return, and redemption from death (Neumann 145–47).

Apuleius’s organization, like Atwood’s, consists of a pattern repeated in several dimensions, including time and space (the world of the gods, or spiritual rebirth, is imagined as above the world—in space, as it were—and deathless). Psyche, now immortal, becomes an exemplar of Aphrodite’s alchemical vision: autonomous, she is involved in a love relationship. She may be understood as the type of a female artist; her immortal child is the creative work. In “alchemical” fashion, storytelling choreographs movements of the spirit. This alchemical power is imagined as a result of a long effort to purify the self from the “base metal”—in contemporary terms, of one’s neuroses and victimization—and gain sufficient traction in the world to freely choose one’s own destiny. The four stages previously described are a way of imagining the cycle of growth. The seeds have been sorted and the priorities established. Planted, they will yield life. The wool of the rams of the sun has become threads woven into patterns fit for use, like a nest or womb protecting the seed. The waters of life from the crystal flask water the seed, the crystal suggesting the seed’s spiritual nature. The descent into the underworld and return recalls the plant driving its roots downward firmly in many root paths, asserting its place and right to thrive. From this firm unseen foundation the plant rises and bears fruit.

The last section is told in a vulnerable human voice, rather than the voices of mythic or pop culture personae. Having undergone a figurative descent and depression by accompanying her dead father to the underworld in her imagination, the speaker has returned with new, as it were, alchemical powers over dimensions of time and space. These powers ripen over the last sequence of nine poems; at first the gift of new vision is frightening, and the speaker is obsessively drawn to sites that retain traces of unresolved death. Gradually, the poetic gift is harnessed, issuing in a reevaluation of the past, a new acceptance of mortality, and a deepened appreciation of the possibilities that remain. In some ways these poems answer the questions about devastation in
the world that were raised by the third section. This sequence suggests art’s power to transform life by retelling it with new stories that substitute for the old while retaining their structures. Death and loss cannot be changed, but they can be transformed in our awareness, and this transformation has its own invisible power that radiates out in time and space.

“Vermillion Flycatcher, San Pedro, Arizona” offers a vision of timeless destruction in a streambed after a flash flood (rivers and drowning here, as in the icy ravine’s stream in *Cat’s Eye* that flows from the cemetery, suggest death and the past). The bird introduces the possibility of song; however, it “conjures” and, with its mate, focuses on “rapture.” The fiery red bird embodies the new alchemical state, the self purified by fire. The bird suggests the need to follow one’s own dream: “Birds never dream, being their own. / Dreams, I mean” (107–8). In “The Moment” the desire to own and conquer is seen as a response to existential terror. “Up” sees the future as outer space. The speaker wakes up “filled with dread” and cannot get up out of the “crumpled sheets” like “jungle / foliage”:

What prevents you? The future. The future tense,
immense as outer space.
You could get lost there.
No. Nothing so simple. The past, its density
and drowned events pressing you down . . . (110)

The poem ends with a riddle like a koan that cuts to the heart of the alchemical vision. One must absolve oneself, reject the toxic devaluation of self that one has introjected:

Now here’s a good one: you’re lying on your deathbed
You have one hour to live.
Who is it, exactly, you have needed
all these years to forgive? (110–11)

This last section of Atwood’s book explores the alchemy of destruction and creation. “Girl Without Hands” imagines a victimized double of the speaker’s self. Since we victimize ourselves, the victimized part needs to absolve the victimizer. If she reached out to touch you, despite her “absent hands,” you would “feel nothing / but you would be / touched all the same” (113). One needs to be an archaeologist of one’s
own life, and to touch, and allow oneself to be touched by, aspects of one’s victimized, buried self lying in one’s own river of the past. The way back is also the way forward out of depression and stasis. “You can go no farther than this, / you think, walking forward” (112–13). In this poem the speaker also forgives herself for surviving the father’s death. “The Signer” imagines her art in the hands of the signer who translates Atwood’s poems into sign language like the weaving of destiny by the female fates. In their patterns art, artist, and translator are

practicing
for the place where all the languages
will be finalized and
one (114–15)

This poem restores the “lost syllable for ‘I’ that did not mean separate” from “Marsh Language” in section three (54). The last four poems excavate the past and reveal its pain and promise. “A Fire Place” reminds us that, for the earth, destruction and creation can be all one process, as, after a burn, new forests emerge. The earth is a model of transformation, “furrowing, cracking apart, bursting / into flame” (116–17). “Statuary” envisions the weathering down of the past self until its atoms merge with universal forces.

“Shapechangers in Winter” introduces the first love poem to the collection. Its placement suggests that authentic love is only possible after the authentic, integral self has been activated. The poem’s first title was “Shapechangers in Snowstorm,” and an alternative title was “Shapechangers at Solstice.” The final title is simpler and focuses attention on aging and mortality, seen as winter envisioned as outer space (both death and the future). The longhand rough draft contains the kernel of the poem in its beginning. Words in parentheses were crossed out and added ones underlined:

Through the open window, the wind
comes in & flows around us, nothingness
in motion. the enormous power of what is not there You could read it as indifference, on the part of the universe or else a relentless
forgiveness.

Holding hands like children,
we step across.
The walls of the house fold themselves down, & the house turns itself inside out, as a tulip does, its last full blown moment of ecstasy, & our candle flares & goes out, & the only common sense that remains to us is touch (skin) (Atwood Papers)

The rough draft continues with a flashback by recalling their shape-shifting pasts as younger selves (that is, younger bodies) and past moments of intimacy when the two were “lithe as pythons.” The third stanza of this rough draft was moved to the end of the published version. It imagines the snowstorm and gathering dark of approaching death that obliterates individuality, and concludes that, despite these destructive elements,

we will be able to say, when its even darker than it is now, when its moonless, when the snow is colder, when it’s darkest and coldest, and candles are no longer any use to us, and the visibility is zero (and the only sense that remains is touch,) yes.
It’s still you. It’s still you. (Atwood Papers)

In both rough draft and final version the speaker and her beloved are at the center of an infinite circle embracing roots and stars, and are themselves only one shape among younger selves likened to shifting shapes: bears, foxes, and snakes, which could also be constellations (there is a movement into the heavens, paralleling Psyche’s attainment of the divine). However, the draft version ended with the descriptions of shape-shifting. The final, printed version places the shape-shifting in the middle. By moving the powerful early stanzas previously quoted to the end, the love is made to seem a dynamic outcome of the shape-shifting, which is revealed to be deeply transformative. “It’s still you. It’s still you” now coming at the end resonates like an echo or bell in the chill snow. The doubled “you” takes on multiple meanings, and the ego-driven “I” of the first section vanishes. It has taken the speaker the whole book to arrive at this vision of an Eros, who is envisioned as a person and also as a creative, empowered force (the two readings duplicating the two versions of Eros in ancient myth, one abstract and one concrete). Eros appears at the very scene of past destruction and
makes it flower, like the reforestation in “A Fire Place.” The final version clarifies this connection: “Taking hands like children / lost in a six-dimensional / forest, we step across” (124). This other is envisioned as someone the speaker can hold hands with as she steps across a threshold into the future—into another dimension—folding the house of the past down in an image reminiscent of collapsing a carton, one she had used in much earlier poems, including “Small Cabin” (SP I, 120) and “Two Fires” (SP I, 88–89).

The final poem, “Morning in the Burned House,” presents the striking image of the speaker as a divine child. Her family is gone, but their “clothes are still on the hangers”—perhaps they are “off along the shore” where the dead father’s footsteps crunched on gravel in “The Ottawa River by Night.” The scene takes place simultaneously in the past (the house is burning) and in the future (when the “body I have now” will have “long been over”). It is an image of loss and also freedom. All times are present, as seen in her “bare child’s feet on the scorched floorboards,” her “burning clothes,” and “cindery, non-existent, / radiant flesh. Incandescent” (126–27). The burning child is a powerful alchemical image of rebirth that illuminates the darkness of the underworld like a torch. In this last moment of the volume, the speaker accepts destruction as a part of creation. Time and mortality are revealed as the burning that consumes her, her childhood house, the forest, and loved ones. Yet all that is loved and lost is like the dross that, kindled in the *athanor* or alchemist’s vessel, creates meaning. The poem sounds the ancient, elegiac *ubi sunt* theme: “Where have they gone to, brother and sister, / mother and father?” The lovely, transitory nature of life is then celebrated in crystalline detail recalling Vermeer. Every detail is “clear, / tin cup and rippled mirror.” This poem issues from an imagined, creative space outside time in which everything is already lost and yet found “including the body I had then, / including the body I have now / as I sit at this morning table, alone and happy.” The sensation of being sufficient in oneself, in the midst of destruction, is the mark of rebirth. The burning girl is unknowable to the old self, and the speaker cannot “know if this is a trap or blessing.” This final poem gestures to a new way of being that may be compared to the rebirth granted to spiritual initiates in the Eleusinian Mysteries and encoded in later female descent narratives such as that of Eros and Psyche. The title is a metaphysical pun: mourning becomes morning.

Instead of merely describing a quest into the unknown, the poems constitute this journey. Text and journey, subjective and objective
reality, upper and underworlds are not sharply defined by modernist binary oppositions. The speakers are sometimes human, sometimes animal, sometimes tricksters; their words can be songs, cries, or tricks. Powerful structures, magical boxes like the one that Psyche was sent to retrieve from the world of the dead, these poems pose challenges and trials in themselves. They are active participants, catalysts in the alchemical process. The poems’ strategies and deployment are experimental and self-questioning, and draw on what poet Kathleen Fraser has called a female poetic “tradition of marginality.” Fraser rejects mainstream confessional and rhetorical modes associated with Lowell and Plath, as well as highly personal poetry associated with feminism; her influential magazine HOW(ever), which published avant-garde feminist poetry from 1983 to 1992, furthered spatially, linguistically oriented, inventive avant-garde feminist poetry that takes its cue from Gertrude Stein and Charles Olson. Fraser suggests that feminist poetry, having been excluded from most canons, tends toward innovation if it is authentic. However enduring their themes, Atwood’s poems are similarly innovative and self-aware. Though they are reasonably accessible, they wield postmodern tools and lead readers to no firm conclusions or closures. Instead, they pose new problems and open up new recognitions. Never programmatic, her poems exist as psychic steps toward an alchemical vision. In particular, her recent poems about older women trace pivotal moments, such as the death of a beloved, and suggest unexplored possibilities and strategies for further creative development.

In the same folder as the draft manuscripts of the poems that went into Morning in the Burned House are four small mythological sketches on lined notepaper torn from a small booklet. They suggest the search for rebirth of the female through art that lies at the heart of this volume. Since drafts of some of the poems in Morning in the Burned House, such as “Sad Child,” are written on similar paper and they are archived together, they may be of interest. At the least, we know that Atwood was in an artistic phase, having around this time supplied original watercolors and sketches for Good Bones and Simple Murders (1994), a compilation of texts for the American market drawn from her previous works of prose poetry and flash fiction, Murder in the Dark (1983) and Good Bones (1992).
Figure 1

Figure 2
Figure 1 depicts a female figure with waving hair and a long spiral-like tail, who holds the letter *a* in one hand and an apple in the other, as if she were displaying the phonetic sound of the first letter of the alphabet. Her scales are sketched like letters, and *b, c, d, e,* and *f* trail down the point of her eel-like tail. This sketch resembles a sketch Atwood supplied for *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (58), and Atwood gave it a title not used in that volume: “The Invention of the Alphabet” (Wilson 24; Atwood letter to Nan [Talese]). It is relevant to recall that Aphrodite was associated with apples, especially golden ones, and pomegranates, as was Persephone (Bolen 233, 263–64).

Figure 2 offers another mythical female figure like a harpy perched on a large egg. It has many feathers, definite wings, and a fluffy tail; perhaps it hatched from such an egg. This picture suggests the self-nurturing its own rebirth. It is a substantial egg that casts a shadow, and the harpy, though smaller, is perched assertively on the egg in the pose of a sphinx. This sketch is similar to one with the unused title “Hen Brooding on Cosmic Egg,” one of ten illustrations in *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (Atwood letter to Nan [Talese]; qtd. in Wilson 24). Atwood considers “Hen Brooding on Cosmic Egg” to be the “real title” of this sketch (personal communication with the author, December 13, 2004).
Figure 3

Figure 4
Figure 3 shows a statuesque and pregnant goddess with flowing hair who holds up a torch or spear in her left hand. She wears what seem to be boots. A warrior crouches upside-down within her womb wearing full armor and a helmet, and holding a sword and a shield. The sketch may be an inversion of the birth of Athena, who was supposed to have sprung full grown and armed from Zeus's brow. The idea also reverses Greek myths in which the patriarch Cronos swallowed his children, the Olympian gods, in fear of a prophecy that one of them would dethrone him. Pregnancy is depicted, in this perhaps ironic sketch, as a magical and heroic state.

Figure 4 depicts a large egg cracking, sitting on a coiled snake whose tongue flickers. Both the tongue and the cracking egg open to emit letters or sounds that float into the air, in loosely alphabetical sequence moving from a to e. The letters are reminiscent of rhyme schemes of poetry: $aaabbc$ and so on. They seem to disperse into the sky. In the bottom right is a coiled snake with a woman’s head that looks back on a large egg. The snake/woman seems to be nurturing this egg, which hatches into song.
Notes

1. Reorderings of tables of contents, Atwood Papers, Thomas Fisher Library, University of Toronto, MS Coll. 200, Box 163, Folder 5.

2. Known as Venus in later Rome, Aphrodite ruled over sexual love and beauty in ancient Greece and was connected with the Middle Eastern Great Goddess, known as Inanna, Ishtar, and Astarte, who, like Aphrodite, consorted with the dying god Adonis (Attis). See Graves (28).

3. Numerous scholars, notably the Hungarian classicist Kerenyi, have detailed the interweaving of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the story of Persephone, and also Pandora, whom he identifies with Hecate, the pre-Greek queen of Hades (232). Bolen follows Erich Neumann in identifying the myth of Amor (or Eros) and Psyche as the archetypal female quest.

4. Later Greek myth demotes Eros to Aphrodite’s companion and son by an uncertain father (Graves 17). Roman authors preserve both of these versions. In one, Eros issues from the egg of Night and is the progenitor of Gaea (Earth) and Pontus (Sea); in another version Eros is the arrow-shooting son of Venus. This duality—which enables storytellers to personify the creative force as a human being—was continued by Bulfinch, whose mid-nineteenth-century version has been most influential and is still in print today.

5. The Platonic philosopher Lucius Apuleius (c. 124–170 C.E.) included the tale of Eros and Psyche in the work he titled Metamorphoses, and which we know as The Golden Ass, where it forms books 4 through 6. Other imitations are by William Morris—in The Earthly Paradise (1868–70)—and Robert Bridges in 1885 and 1894.

6. This and all subsequent page numbers of poems refer to Atwood, Morning in the Burned House (1995).

7. This poem distills much of the character and vulnerability of Tony, the female historian interested in warfare in The Robber Bride. Materials including first publication appear in the Atwood Papers, Box 163, Folder 1.

8. Letters regarding this period are to be found in the Atwood Papers, Box 6, Folder 2.

9. Atwood Papers. References to the manuscript of “Gathering,” as well as “In the Secular Night” and other poem drafts, are to Box 163.

10. It is beyond the scope of this essay to go into Atwood’s methods of revision or multiple drafts in detail. Discussion is confined to the earliest longhand manuscripts found in the Atwood Papers, Box 163, Folder 5.

Works Cited
