Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassination

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Wilson, Sharon Rose.  
Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassination: Recent Poetry and Fiction.  
The Ohio State University Press, 2005. 
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Although its performance possibilities have been recently recognized,1 *Good Bones* (1992) has been perhaps Margaret Atwood’s most neglected volume. Apart from a number of reviews when it was initially published in Canada and the United Kingdom,2 and some on the American and British editions, *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (1994, 1995)3 and *Bones and Murder* (1995), that combine pieces from *Murder in the Dark* (1983) and *Good Bones*, scholars have nearly ignored these innovative collections of what can be described either as prose poems or short-short, sudden, or flash fiction.4 As I mentioned in this volume’s “Introduction,” critics have never given Atwood’s short fiction as much attention as her novels; and recently, even Atwood’s poetry, which first attracted Canadian readers and made her famous, is slighted. In reference to *Good Bones and Simple Murders*, one reviewer thinks that Atwood “is always at her worst when her acerbic sneer overwhelms other elements” and that the volume not only “has more to do with brevity than quality” but demonstrates the “laundry-list mentality usually reserved for dead authors” (Review, *Kirkus*). Others mistakenly consider it either lacking in structure or “free from the structural demands of novels, short stories, and poetry”; call the collections “oddities and fragments”; and “feel pity for the author’s victims—men in particular” (Review, *Kirkus*; Seaman; Review, *The Atlantic*).

*Good Bones* and its interrelated volumes, *Good Bones and Simple Murders* and *Murder in the Dark*, all again postmodern metatexts, are
primary evidence of Atwood’s innovations of form: her often parodic and satiric remaking of traditional genres, plots, characters, and intertexts. In 1991, at the same time as she began to put together Good Bones, “another Murder in the Dark type book—short, weird prose and prose-poetry pieces,” Atwood conceived of a combination of the best of Murder and Good Bones for the United States (Atwood fax to Phoebe Larmore, 7 Aug. 1991). Before copyright considerations necessitated a smaller number, she decided in conference with Nan Talese that twenty-one out of twenty-seven selections would come from Murder in the Dark. Phoebe Larmore, Atwood’s U.S. agent, speaks of the planned volume as a “gift” inviting illustration (Letter to Atwood, 20 Sept. 1993); and James Adams of McClelland and Stewart suggests a “flipper edition,” with the Murder cover on one side and the Good Bones cover on the other, a “packaging” that would give the volumes new life (Letter 1994, Margaret Atwood Papers). While the volume changed over time—eventually including twenty-three selections from Good Bones, eleven from Murder in the Dark, and one new piece, “Simple Murders,” with ten illustrations—its genre and form are interwoven with those of its “parent” volumes.

Good Bones is one of the best examples of Atwood’s transgressive and subversive genre bending evident in early work but more radical in recent texts. Consideration of Atwood’s flash fictions in the contexts of the authors and texts with which they are anthologized—including Julio Cortazar’s “Continuity of Parks,” Jorge Luis Borges’s “Argentina,” Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl,” and works by Gabriel García Márquez, Patricia Grace, Richard Brautigan, Italo Calvino, and Clarice Lispector (J. Thomas; Shapard and Thomas)—should make her affinity with international writers and movements more recognizable, if no less controversial, to Canadian scholars. In addition, investigation of Good Bones, particularly Atwood’s Medusa and Snake Goddess imagery and trickster characters, indicates that, apart from differences of genre, style, tone, and a growing use of postmodern techniques and postcolonial themes (Wilson, “Mythological”), Atwood uses some of the same myths and other folklore intertexts in fairly consistent ways throughout her career. From early works such as Double Persephone (1961) to recent ones such as The Robber Bride (1993) and Alias Grace (1996), Atwood’s play with genres and intertexts is metaformal, metacritical, and thereby profoundly political.

Readers have focused more attention on Atwood’s themes than her extraordinary manipulation of genre, including its accompanying language, characterization, structure, costumes, and furniture. Few writers
so astutely mimic and parody forms, only to turn them inside out and
deconstruct them. *Murder in the Dark* (1983) uses a subtitle that calls
attention to the genres of short or flash fiction and the prose poem or
epiphany (Myers) that seem to fuse in *Good Bones*. Atwood uses the
prose poem earlier in “Marrying the Hangman” (*Two-Headed Poems*,
1978, 48–51) and “True Romances” (*True Stories*, 1981, 40–44) and
even in sections of “Circe/Mud Poems” (*You Are Happy*, 1974); but on
close examination, these and other Atwood poems and prose poems,
like the later, long-lined “Machine. Gun. Nest” (*Selected Poems II*,
137–38), share the narrative movement usually associated with fiction.

*For the Birds* (1990) features some very short children’s stories, but the
fairly new genre of the short-short story involves more than simply
being very short. Although it is impossible to differentiate precisely
between the prose poem and flash fiction, or among flash fiction, sud-
den fiction, and Allen’s name for the Canadian prose poem, the lyric
paragraph (13–15), flash fiction has been defined as a 750-word story
(instead of sudden fiction’s 1,750 words) that can be apprehended in a
flash, with “no enforced pause in the reader’s concentration, no break
in the field of vision. [It] would be apprehended ‘all at once,’” ideally
on a two-page spread (J. Thomas, 11–12). Flash fiction offers at least
the outlines of story plot (including temporal movement that may or
may not be chronological), scene, and characterization. In such short
shorts, all of these features are likely to be “archetypal,” as in the game
in which Bill, Louise, a nameless boy, a detective or critic, the book, the
reader, and the narrator/author in “Murder in the Dark” shift roles as
murderers, detectives, or murder victims (*GBSM*, 1–3; *MD*, 29–30) or
the ways that John, Mary, and friends in “Happy Endings” would
eventually end up dying in every conceivable plot, no matter how faked
(*GBSM*, 50–56; *MD*, 37–40). On the other hand, prose poems, like
other poems, highlight language and are often defined by their lyricism,
their calling attention to the signifier rather than the signified, or their
foregrounding of the relationship between form and content (Delville,
*The American*, 97–103; Gerlach, 82; Monroe, 12). Other defining fea-
tures might include the author’s previous identification with a particu-
lar genre and the presentation of the text, including whether it uses the
line breaks, stanzas, capitalization, and rhymes or rhythms identified
with poetry. But Atwood is among the many writers noted for varied
genres; and the majority of pieces in some collections of prose poems
(Myers) are written continuously or in paragraphs, like short stories.
Flash fiction, however, may also be lyrical, and it often seems to resem-
ble the prose poem more than an “ordinary” short story (whatever that
is) in its use of language, imagery, and rhythm. Many prose poems, such as Carolyn Forche’s “The Colonel” (792), also anthologized as flash fiction (Thomas, Thomas, and Hazuka, 84–85), are at least as narrative as lyrical. Some of the pieces in Good Bones, including “Bad News,” are shorter than the specified length of flash fiction; and because of its line form, “Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women” would be an excellent candidate for the prose poem label. If flash fictions may be as short as 250 words (J. Thomas, 11–12), length an arbitrary feature of writing (Baxter, 18), fiction poetic, and poetry narrative, however, then rigidly proclaiming that some of Atwood’s prose pieces are prose poems, some “flash,” and others “sudden” is not only hairsplitting but also an obvious invitation for Atwood’s famous satirical scrutiny of the academic scene. Apart from its pleasing alliteration and openness to puns, flash fiction appropriately describes the structural buildup to the ending “flash,” the operation of Atwood’s verbal brilliance and satirical wit, and the verbal play about fiction versus reality in Good Bones. In addition, flash suggests the reader’s flashes of insight or epiphanies while reading these fictions.

Increasingly, at a time when the word text displaces language specifying a single genre, the essay may also be a lyrical prose poem (see Neuman and Kambourali, for example); and prose poems/flash fictions may not only be performed as plays but also serve as highly metaphysical or theoretical arguments. One critic refers to the title piece of Murder in the Dark as an essay (Irvine, “Murder,” 268), another to the volume’s six “essay-fictions” (Gadpaille, 96), a third to the collection itself as “fiction théorique” (Verduyn, 124), and a fourth to it as a Baudelairean prose poem sequence (Merivale, 254). Atwood found it necessary to tell Larry Goldstein of Michigan Quarterly Review that the Male Body piece (“Alien Territory”) “is not an essay—better call it a piece” (Letter, 19 Feb. 1992); and Philip Marchand quotes her as saying much the same of the whole volume (Review 1992). In justifying her punctuation in Good Bones, however, “the rock on which the editing process always founders,” she tells an editor that “these are prose poems and they are punctuated for the ear” (Letter, 20 Sept. 1993 to Atwood; Letter, 7 Apr. 1994 to Jessie). Draper refers to “Making a Man” (Good Bones) as a five-part essay (40), and Phoebe Larmore speaks of the pieces in Good Bones and Simple Murders as essays (see also Campbell). Atwood, like fellow Canadians Diane Schoemperlen and Michael Ondaatje and Québécois writers of l’écriture feminine, including Lola Lemire Tostevin and Marie-Claire Blais, seems to write from the space in between—the Cartesian universe and the wilderness,
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forms and genres—what Hutcheon calls the “interzone” (Foreword, 
Likely Stories, 12–13). Many of the one hundred chapters in Schoem-
perlen’s In the Language of Love, each based upon one of the stimulus 
words from the Standard Word Association Test, read like prose 
poems or word collages; and form in Ondatjé’s In the Skin of a Lion 
is cinematic, poetic, cubist, surreal, or circular, anything but what 
what might be expected in a realistic novel. Tostevin’s ‘Sophie (1988) could 
be described as a collection of poems, a long poem, or theory; and 
Blais’s apocalyptic “The Forsaken” strips away character identity and 
definiteness of scene (354–56). Along with Atwood, such writers raise 
questions of genre that can best be understood in reference to post-
modernism. In a comment prepared for James Thomas of Sudden Fiction 
International, Atwood says of “Happy Endings” (MD, GBSM), 
described in the introduction to this volume as a “permutational fic-
tion” in the “‘If . . .then’ mode” (Baxter, 22), that she “did not know 
what sort of creature” the piece was—not a poem, short story, or prose 
poem, not quite a condensation, proverb, or paradox. “It was a muta-
tion,” like a white frog.

This is the way such a mutant literary form unsettles us. We know 
what is expected, in a given arrangement of words; we know what is 
supposed to come next. And then it doesn’t.

It was a little disappointing to learn that other people had a name 
for such aberrations, and had already made up rules. (Letter, 5 Sept. 

In what Michel Delville calls genre theory’s “crisis of legitimization” 
when “generic instability” and its exposure of “the arbitrariness and 
undecidability of generic boundaries” (“Murdering,” 57) is a fact of 
poststructuralism, terms such as “boundary works,” “prose pieces,” 
and “borderline literature” highlight the foolishness of insisting on 
rigid classifications of genre.

Despite Atwood’s overt efforts to revive female villains and refute 
claims of her “male-bashing” (“Spotty-Handed”; CE, RB), some crit-
ics of Good Bones also continue to misinterpret Atwood’s regendering 
of genre in her critique of patriarchal oppression. Much as Frank 
Davey does in speaking of “male and female space” in Atwood’s poet-
ry (16–36), Delville oversimplifies both Good Bones and Murder in 
the Dark by suggesting that a “penchant for binary and, ultimately, 
essentialist thought models,” an opposition between the male and 
female brain, may limit Atwood’s art. Missing her postmodernism and
misinterpreting the fourth victim position in *Survival* as determinism, Delville refers to “Atwood’s apparent lack of belief in the oppressed individual’s capacity for agency within a given socio-cultural dominant” (“Murdering,” 62–63, 66–67).

Through the interweaving, regendering, and parodying of varied genres and subgenres—including antifiction, metafiction, revisioned folk and fairy tales, myths, and other canonical texts; fables; parables; monologues; popular romance; biography; autobiography; theology; speculative, science or revenant fiction; recipes; advice; thriller, and adventure stories—Atwood’s intertextual play in *Good Bones* undercuts cultural determinism. The flash fictions in *Good Bones* use and parody such traditional intertexts as Great Goddess stories, including ones about Diana of Ephesus, Pandora, harpies, and sirens; Genesis and other Bible and creation myths; *The Aeneid*, “Bluebeard,” “Rapunzel,” “Cinderella,” and “Hansel and Gretel” fairy tales; nursery rhymes; Dracula, stump, and housewife folklore; war rituals; stories of alien invasion; and literary classics. As Merivale notes, *Good Bones* even intertextually echoes *Murder in the Dark* (255). Often evoked through the cover of this volume and the visual art of *Good Bones* and *Simple Murders* as well, these folkloric and literary references deconstruct stereotypical conceptions of men, women, nature, stories, literary tradition, and reader expectations.

The Great Goddess intertext in Atwood’s earlier visual art, including the female crescent moon (*Moon*, 1958, figure 2), *Termite Queen* (undated, plate 12), two harpies—*Mother Harpy and Chics* (1974, plate 13), *Male Harpy* (1970, plate 10)—(published in Wilson, *Margaret*, n.p.), and a spiral (*Circle Game* cover, 1966), sets the stage for the cover art of both *Good Bones* and *Good Bones and Simple Murders* as well as illustrations for the latter text. Most of these art works are parodies of, or associated with, the Great Goddess of earth, sea, sky, and seasons, whose importance in Canadian literature Atwood discusses in *Survival* (1972). Like *Murder in the Dark*’s cover collage of a woman seeking “cover,” the collage of the harpy on the cover of *Good Bones*, also constructed from magazine ads and once briefly lost in the mail from France (Wilson, *Margaret*, 63, 71; Cooke, 309), again highlights the mock gothic tone of both volumes. Sporting “a beribboned hat, grape-cluster hair, sun-glass breasts, a tail of mascaraed human eyes, a wing of lipsticked” smiling mouths, a grassy lower body, and a female head (Wilson, *Margaret*, 63) and perched on a female leg, the *Good Bones* harpy is the muse (Sullivan, “Afterword,” 113), messenger, and trickster creator of the volume. She is also a parody of
human fashion “goddesses” as well as mythical ones. Harpies or Valkyries, originally represented as beautiful winged maidens from the cave of the Cretan goddess, became associated with sirens and furies. As children of Electra, they avenged her father’s murder. As “the rob-
ers” who carry off souls of those who disappear without a trace, harpies again represent vengeance: the consequences of evil or irre-
sponsible actions. Although they could also suggest Atwood’s many serious or parodic Robber Brides and Grooms (See Wilson, Margaret, 63, 199–200), here they are also assertive women, tricksters unafraid to defy convention, and often morality, to get what they want.

In addition, a number of Atwood’s provocative illustrations for Good Bones and Simple Murders (1994), all but two accompanying stories also published in Good Bones, are associated with Goddess intertexts and enhance the meaning of the stories in both volumes. Both the Talese/Doubleday and Wheeler covers of Good Bones and Simple Murders depict goddess-queens, one debased and one revised. The ten illustrations in Good Bones and Simple Murders, originally designed to be watercolors and limited to five or six, go with the mood rather than specific details of the pieces (Atwood letters to Lennie at Virago, 1995, and Nan Talese, 7 Jan. 1994). They were given titles not used in the published volume (U.S. edition drawings, Table of Contents; Atwood letter to Nan [Talese], 28 Feb. 1994). The drawings include another harpy (“The Goddess of Rumour”), a punk-haired and breasted hen on an egg (“Hen Brooding on Cosmic Egg”), a fluid female appearing to blow across a landscape with crescent moon (“Fleeing Heroine”), a toothed stump awaiting a fish and possibly the fisherman (“Fishing”), and a female Medusa snake holding an apple in one hand and the letter a in the other (“Invention of the Alphabet”). Other goddess images are a Pumpkin Woman pregnant with an image of herself pregnant with a pumpkin (“Pumpkin Shell”), a trilobite and two cephalopods with female heads (“Life in the Burgess Shales”), a double face enclosed in a free-standing womb (“Double Heads”), an angel of death or suicide hatching an egg surrounded by flames (“Angel of Suicide Incubating Her Egg”), a flower with a face in its bulb (“Tulip/Woman”), and an earth/sea goddess whose body is the land (“Waterscape”; see figure 4, p. 6, in this volume and Nischik’s discussion). The snake body and hair of the woman in “Invention of the Alphabet” identify the Snake Goddess, and the Goddess of Rumour and an earth/sea goddess are also easily identifiable. Each of the illustrations for Good Bones and Simple Murders, however, not only mythologizes females in the manner Atwood identifies as characteristic
of Canadian literature in *Survival* (1972) and *Strange Things* (1995), but also highlights or connects to an image or theme in the fiction it accompanies. For example, the queen on the cover of the 1994 edition of *Good Bones and Simple Murders* is a variation on Atwood’s earlier *Termite Queen* (Wilson, Margaret, plate 12), a parodic goddess wearing a gas mask. Although the later queen, whom Nan Talese refers to as “the Termite Queen—transfigured” (Letter to Atwood, 17 Feb. 1994), may have a Medusa hairdo more evident in preliminary drawings (Atwood Papers), she is still the socialized prom queen, or a Queen for a Day, as on the old radio and television quiz show that selected queens based on the sadness of their life stories. Reminding us of the captured photograph trophies in *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, and other novels (Wilson, “Camera Images,” 29–57), she is one of this volume’s many static, trussed-up snivelers who make perfect victims for the simple murders. Inexplicably, the lesser-known 1995 large-print edition features a quite different cover, uncredited like all of the art in this edition. Contrasting to and even revisioning both *The Termite Queen* and later posing queen, the cover of this edition depicts a much more dynamic figure: a running woman fleeing the “death” of both role and Hecate moon, a better candidate for the prepublication title, “Fleeing Woman,” later “Fleeing Heroine,” than the illustration that Atwood designed to accompany “Women’s Novels” (Table of Contents, U.S. edition drawings; Letter to Nan Talese, 28 Feb. 1994). Although she is not the trickster of the *Good Bones* cover, she is one of these volumes’ sassy women—the opposite of the victim archetype. Her hands are extended; and her face, hands, and feet, like the crescent moons on her dress, are the dark purple of royalty. This figure, more woman than queen, has active hands and feet and is a much more positive image than either of the passive-looking, eternally pregnant Termite Queens and Atwood’s many initially “handless” subjects (See Wilson, Margaret, 61–62, 47–48, 313).

Foregrounded by the visual art, the intertexts in *Good Bones* are evident in plot, characters, point of view, motifs, and themes. Characters in *Good Bones* are mostly parodic versions of ones already familiar to us from popular culture, mythology, and literature: the harpy, the red hen, Gertrude, the ugly stepsister, the witch, the stepmother, Eve, Pandora, Red Cap, the Muse, the Pumpkin Woman, Rapunzel, an angel of suicide, created Gingerbread and biblical men, Bluebeard, and Dracula. But here we often get to hear the story from the usually submerged points of view of “shadow” or Medusa selves, including the sometimes nameless, unlucky, and unloved “unpopular gals.” Animals
disguised as stumps, airheads whose ignorance causes harm, male and female bodies, alien moths, and bats all have their say (“Mythological,” 211). The Goddess harpy underlying all the pieces, on the cover of Good Bones and opposite the first page of Good Bones and Simple Murders (also rpt. Wilson, Friedman, and Hengen, Approaches), is kin to the running woman on the alternative cover of Good Bones and Simple Murders. As deceptive as Persephone in Double Persephone, both dancing girl and withered crone, whose own breath, rather than that of Hades or his horses, is “impatient for her death,” she is still a survivor, both Goddess and trickster (“Persephone Departing,” “Double Persephone”; see Wilson, Margaret, 61).

By recognizing Atwood’s many folklore intertexts, we can begin to see that most of Atwood’s main characters—including Circe, Joan, Zenia, and Grace—are tricksters; and Atwood herself sometimes enjoys playing this role (Wilson, Margaret, 135; “Mythological,” 208–9). Tricksters in The Robber Bride, Alias Grace, and Good Bones, like those in The Odyssey and Native American mythology, however, cannot simply be equated with Jung’s shadow selves, themselves more complex than the “dark sides,” or the evil aspects of the human personality, that Barbara Zimmerman opposes to “light” sides (71–72). Atwood does present the shadow selves of both Zenia and Grace, but she also deconstructs oversimplified binary oppositions. As she points out in her review of Lewis Hyde’s Trickster Makes This World, tricksters are imaginative artists, often culture heroes. They may lie, like Odysseus; or steal, like Prometheus; or be cunning, like Daedalus, but they are the ones who are subversive and transgressive—they are the ones responsible for change (2, 3). Like the Hecate phase of the goddess cycle (Survival, 199), shadow selves are also not “negative” in themselves. As true doubles of the hero in myths, shadow selves may also have good qualities and, in order to triumph (i.e., overcome the dragon), the ego must assimilate the shadow (Henderson, 110, 112, 117). By using tricksters and shadows, in Good Bones as elsewhere, however, Atwood parodies not only a traditional story, in this case the hero myth, but even traditional archetypal analysis by reversing the usual hidden gender assumptions enacted in [male] heroes (Perseus) becoming heroic by decapitating or dismembering female monsters (Medusa) in order to rescue a [socialized] female: the anima (Andromeda) (Wilson, Margaret, 17–19).
Where she suggests archetypes, Atwood generally shifts characters or perspectives so that we conceive of both female and male playing hero, shadow or villain, victor, victim, trickster, and tricked. Tricksters in *Good Bones* are usually either genderless or female; and they contrast to the “good daughters,” such as Ophelia and the queen of the *Good Bones and Simple Murders* cover, who are “so good. Obedient and passive. Snivelling” (29), paper dolls consigned to housework who can easily end up drowned or thrown out of a tower. As we shall explore, preeminent tricksters in *Good Bones* include Gertrude of “Gertrude Talks Back” and both the evil stepsister and witch of “Unpopular Gals.” Atwood’s tricksters in *Good Bones* again fill their traditional role as storytellers or Scheherazades, resembling the ones throughout Atwood’s work, including *Life before Man, Interlunar, The Handmaid’s Tale,* and recent novels (Wilson, Margaret, 175, 248, n. 14; Stein, 86–109). Thus, *Good Bones* is again metafiction, about storytelling, tricking, and surviving in a patriarchal, colonizing, environmentally ruined world. As in many folktales, her tricksters create oral epic situations to involve what here often fails to be a community. Ironically, Atwood uses postmodern techniques to uncover a traditional subtext—the survival theme—that has been evident throughout her career, introduced in *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* and discussed in *Survival* as the main theme in Canadian literature. Despite its subversions, in *Good Bones* Atwood’s tricksters are often ironic culture heroes in tales that, together, are about saving, transforming, global human culture.

*Good Bones* opens with both reader and the Medusa-Snake Goddess harpy of “Bad News” awaiting a violent event—“a slip of the knife, a dropped wineglass or bomb,” decapitation (9–10)—much as *Good Bones and Simple Murders* begins with the expectation of murder, signified by the harpy drawing (“The Goddess of Rumour”) preceding the first fiction, “Murder in the Dark.” In both cases, Atwood parodies readers who relish thrillers, ironically including such Atwood characters as Joan Foster and Rennie Wilford and, judging from her comments on John Le Carré and fiction about Raymond Chandler (GB, 47–48), Atwood herself. “[B]loodlessness puts her to sleep,” says the harpy of “Bad News” (GB, 9), introducing the blood and red motifs running throughout the volume and implying the many kinds of “hunger” and “war” that threaten human survival. “Howling like a siren,” the pun suggesting both another mythological female bird and an ambulance siren, this reconfigured Goddess of Rumour from Virgil’s *Aeneid* (Merivale, 258) does trick readers into paying attention. Again
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ironically, however, the reader who relishes “bad news” in this “metagossip” text (Merivale, 256), the “you” who “settle[s] back in your chair, folding the rustling paper” and wishing to remain detached (GB, 10), is also the reader of this book who cannot resist becoming involved. This and the following “flash” nicely illustrate “the often anecdotal, tightly organized, refrain-shaped . . . short prose pieces, turning on a point at the end.” Merivale sees the structure as an “inside-out sandwich,” with the fifteen middle poems framed between six opening ones about Woman and Story and six elegiac closing ones (Merivale, 254, 256). Not everyone would agree about what constitutes “the meat” of the book, however, and the volume as a whole, rather than just some pieces (Merivale, 261), is both feminist fabulation and metafiction.

The second flash fiction in the volume, “The Little Red Hen Tells All,” is based on the well-known folktale and children’s story. Hens appear in many other folktales, such as “Jack and the Beanstalk” and “The Death of the Little Hen,” and generally “are emblematical of God’s providence” (Funk and Wagnall’s, 490). Hens do, of course, lay eggs and thus are also associated with the female fertility that marks folktale victims such as Fitcher’s “Birds” before transformation. The accompanying illustration in Good Bones and Simple Murders, the full-breasted hen on a gigantic egg whose yoke contains letters of the alphabet, foregrounds not only femininity and fertility, but also the hen’s ability to hatch a story. In the numerous retellings and updatings, the red hen usually teaches lessons about the benefits of hard work and individuality, the importance of sharing work as well as rewards, and the consequences of laziness. More subliminally, the folktale may teach wifely virtue. But it has always been possible to see the hen as smug, selfish, self-righteous, and unforgiving, an Auntie Muriel clone (LBM). Characteristically, in Atwood’s version, we get the first-person hen’s side of the story and hear her resentment about being an advertisement for capitalism: the pattern of individual effort, capital investment, then collection. “It’s not easy, being a hen,” being rejected by her friends, denying herself gratification, constantly smiling despite her beak, being blamed for others’ problems (11). Much as Circe in “The Circe/Mud Poems” defies the written story that denies individual choice and dictates her words and actions, the red hen essentially “swallows” the story rather than the bread. Apologizing for her ideas, luck, qualities, actions, words, and identity as a hen, she gives even her own portion away. Atwood thus satirizes the North American penchant for Horatio Alger stories of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps and cleverly parodies
associated adages: “A grain of wheat saved is a grain of wheat earned” (12). Unless the hen is lying about her renunciations (interesting thought!), however, she also satirizes the hollowness of societal conditioning, especially of the female type, to be humble, giving, meek, and “good.” Unlike the harpies who satisfy their “tastes” and give us the news we may not want to hear, unlike the creators who open new stories and identities and plots, the hen stays red: She chooses the role of female martyr, a variation of the willing victim role also played by the good Ophelias of this volume, and chooses to complain or “cluck” rather than to claim “telling all” as an identity. Although some reviewers of the book consider these fictions fables or parables, thus suggesting a heavy-handed moralizing Atwood usually shuns, “The Little Red Hen Talks Back” is clearly a parody of a fable rather than a fable or parable.

Gertrude of “Gertrude Talks Back” also calmly gives Hamlet “bad news”: She, not Claudius, killed his priggish father. Like the harpy and the red hen, Gertrude revisions Shakespeare’s Hamlet and, in a sense true for other fictions here, too, “murders” the intertext by finally not only talking, but talking back. Introducing the bone motif and elaborating on the murder motif before she makes her shocking revelation at the end, she tells the prudish Hamlet that he needs a roll in the hay with someone who is not, like Ophelia, “trussed up like a prize turkey.” Ironically, her speaking about sex is, in her straight-laced society, also a kind of murder that precipitates the actual one: Every time she suggested sex to the King, “just to warm up my ageing bones, it was like I’d suggested murder” (17–18). As Gertrude demonstrates here, women in literature may become survivors who take care of their bones and, indeed, Lady Macbeths, acting rather than being acted upon (Atwood, “Spotty-Handed”); but within this volume, the transformative “murder” is verbal. Unlike the legless, hand-wringing “stupid women,” Gertrude is a trickster-creator.

Although “There Was Once” may be viewed as a parody of political correctness, this story is one of several texts here and elsewhere that ironically demonstrates the survival of storytelling through antilanguage, anticharacter, antiplot, and antistructure characteristic of Beckett’s antifiction and drama (see Wilson, “Deconstructing,” 65). The story is a comic flash of the self-conscious narrator’s quest for the word as it slips away and erases. The second voice could be internal as well as that of an external reader or critic, and the third, a male voice, known by his “oar,” ironically resembles the second in inappropriately expecting a literary work to satisfy personal biases. Resembling voices in the fiction of Conrad, Cortazar, Borges, and especially Beckett,
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whose verbal echo closes the volume, those in “There Was Once” struggle not only to say, to speak against the silence, but to speak in a world that censors speech as it is uttered and questions or dictates each element of the storyteller’s craft, including setting, description, characterization, and plot. Confusing the author with the character and assuming that authors deliberately and consciously present messages in literature—two annoyances Atwood frequently addresses (“Me,” 7)—the second voice paradoxically both succeeds and fails, as does the first. Beckett’s The Unnamable tragicomically ends at the beginning of the Unnamable’s story:

[You must go on, I’ll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, . . . you must go on, perhaps it’s done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am. . . . (414)

More comically in Atwood’s story, although the first voice finally anticipates the second by questioning the word there, thus erasing it, this story, too—the story of storytelling—does get told. Despite interruptions and deconstructions, it does paradoxically survive in silence.

“In Love with Raymond Chandler” and “Four Small Paragraphs,” appearing later in the volume between “Death Scenes” and “We Want It All,” also focus on language; and “Four Small Paragraphs” is one of many of this volume’s fictions depicting the generation of life out of death. Both are tributes to two well-known writers, Raymond Chandler and Albert Camus. Atwood has previously admired Chandler’s humanization of furniture, his knowledge that “furniture could breathe, could feel, not as we do but in a way more muffled, like the word upholstery, with its overtones of mustiness and dust” (47). In “Four Small Paragraphs” Atwood plays with the literal translation of Camus’s name, Flat, as well as his pseudonym, Monsieur Terrasse or, in English, Mr. Patio. The landscape that Camus loved and where he was buried symbolizes the life cycle, regeneration, “the ochre and rust, that has been used and reused, passed through mouth and stomach and gut and bone, and out again into earth and then into stem and bud and ripe fruit” (137). Thus, it is appropriate that we get more—or less, depending upon outlook—than we expected, real roses left on the grave of one who says, “This is what there is. . . . You are what you do. Don’t expect mercy” (139).
“Stump Hunting” is a joke “how to” advice column, in this case guiding gullible readers in seeing through stumps’ disguises as wild animals in order to kill them. The story resembles a northern Ontario tall tale, a form that is often about hunters, fishermen, and weather (Fowke, Tales, 74) and features disguise, another kind of folklore deception predominant among tricksters. Like the illustration accompanying it in Good Bones and Simple Murders, showing a toothed stump awaiting a fish and possibly the fisherman (34), this piece is a parody of the malicious nature theme, Atwood’s Nature the Monster of Survival, so prevalent in Canadian literature before 1970, including Sinclair Ross’s “Lamp at Noon” and “The Painted Door,” Joyce Marshall’s “The Old Woman,” and E. J. Pratt’s “Toward the Last Spike.”

“Unpopular Gals” and “Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women” are again metafictions told by deceptive unreliable narrators. The evil sister or stepsister and stepmother/witch of “Unpopular Gals,” never even given names in well-known fairy tales such as “Cinderella” and “Snow White,” now “get a turn” to assume subject rather than object positions (25). Illustrating the cruel sister and stepmother folk motifs, subcategories of unnatural cruelty (Thompson), these women wish to overcome prejudice against their trickery. Like the stepsisters of “Cinderella” and many other fairy-tale false brides, the sister is in virtually the same situation as the False Bride in the second section of Atwood’s unpublished story “Three Jokes” (PP manuscripts, Margaret Atwood Papers). The sister disguised and amputated her foot, and both ugly women used magic to deceive the prince in unsuccessful attempts to get him; but they came to the same kind of bad end as the maid of “Little Goose Girl” and the bad mothers and witches of “The Juniper Tree” and “Snow White.” Like Circe of You Are Happy, the witch of the second and third sections of “Unpopular Gals” is characteristically double or even multiple: not only the witch of the Grimms’ “Hansel and Gretel” and “Rapunzel,” she is the many-breasted Diana of Ephesus and other earth or fertility goddesses and, in section three, the stepmother who often doubles with the witch. Like the harpy of “Bad News” and the stupid women of the following story, however, these tricky “unpopular gals” would have us believe that they are the ones who “stir things up, get things moving”; as the witch explains, “I’m the plot, babe, and don’t ever forget it” (29–30). Similarly, in “Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women,” a poetic joke, the flippant narrator invites “stupid” readers to believe that the Foolish, rather than Wise Virgins and Eve of the Bible, Pandora of myth, and Red-Cap of the fairy tale, “have given us Literature” and deserve praise. The Wise and the Foolish is
another of Thompson’s folk-motif categories; and although Eve, Pand
dora, and Red-Cap, connected to numerous folk motifs, are also asso-
ciated with the Great Goddess and matriarchal power, this fiction
presents them as the airheads and bubble-brains of patriarchal versions
(e.g., Wilson, Margaret, 277–78). The illustration accompanying this
fiction in Good Bones and Simple Murders appropriately pictures a
female Medusa/Eve snake holding an apple in one hand and the letter
a in the other (58). In addition to talking with snakes and wolves,
wishing to please, and uselessly wringing their hands, stupid women
seem legless: “running involves legs, and is graceless” (35–36). As
Atwood has said, innocence may be equivalent not only to stupidity
but to evil (cited in Wilson, Margaret, 279). Although the running
woman cover of Good Bones and Simple Murders’ large-print edition
and the fates of the good daughters and dutiful wives directly refute
any stupid need to praise stupid women, the trickster narrator charm-
ingly traps our attention.

“The Female Body,” an especially rhythmical and clever flash,
begins in first person and shifting to an impersonal third, uses
a number of familiar Atwood images, motifs, and themes. Atwood’s
work is full of power politics linked to eating and being eaten; and here
is the hungry female body, equipped with fichu (also LO), modesty
panel (also BH), and a head as accessories. A doll, here a Barbie, is
thrown down the stairs (40–42, also EW), and the illustration in Good
Bones and Simple Murders even features a Pumpkin Woman (also
EW), here pregnant with an image of herself pregnant with a pumpkin
(70). “The Female Body” is the companion piece to “Alien Territory,”
both written for Female and Male Body issues of Michigan Quarterly
Review; and both satirize societal dehumanization and gender scripts
inherited from fairy tales, myth, (“Rapunzel,” “Fitcher’s Bird,” the
Bible, Aphrodite myth), literature, and our new mythology—advertis-
ing: “Is this the face that launched a thousand products?” The female
body can be a door knocker or something to hold up lampshades (also
BH); it sells and is sold (43). If the connections between the two halves
of the female brain mean that women listen in to their internal con-
versations, then the brains of men contribute to their “objectivity,”
“Aloneness,” and mythologizing of the female body, which thus must
be trapped, leashed, chained.

“Making a Man,” “Men at Sea,” and “Alien Territory,” later in
the volume, focus on male conditioning. “Making a Man,” which
might remind some readers of Susan Swann’s “The Man Doll”
(1985)(Hutcheon and Bowering), is a wonderfully funny parody of
creation myths, including the Genesis story; of making men (but not women) from dust; of the English folktale “The Gingerbread Man”; and of media “how to” programs and columns. Charlotte Sturgess suggests that “Making a Man” also overturns “the cultural/sexual practice of ‘making’ women” (91). Reminding us of cannibalistic fairy tales and myths that frequently figure as Atwood intertexts, the flippant narrator turns a pun on female “ribs” into a joke about eating women and adds four other methods, some similarly cannibalistic, for making men: gingerbread, clothes, marzipan or wedding cake, and folk art. In addition, although many readers will miss the irony, this story parallels “The Female Body” in blatantly revealing dehumanization for what it is. Men, too, can be reduced to utilitarian or decorative function, serving as doorstops or figures on a wedding cake. They, too, can become “food” or plaster of Paris statues. Epitomizing Atwood’s preference for open-endedness, as in Bodily Harm, “Circe/Mud Poems,” and “Book of Ancestors” (YAH), “Making a Man” offers no period at its ending. Again, form cancels or “cracks” the constructed mold.

“Men at Sea” and “Alien Territory” are about male dis(ease), the male body, male conditioning, and men’s alienation. “Men at Sea” is an extended pun. Language in this wonderfully rhythmical flash is “bracing” in its effort to show “Something more definite, more outward then, some action to drain the inner swamp, sweep the inner fluff from under the inner bed, harden the edges” before we return to the men now socially rather than adventurously adrift at the “eternal table” (71). The illustration for “Alien Territory” in Good Bones and Simple Murders shows an optical illusion: two interlocking faces—twins exchanging dominance—enclosed in a furry, free-standing womb (96), the not-to-be borne origin of the man (76). Thus, an exile and explorer with a body both undependable and detachable, he is afraid of the bodies of other men; as in “Epaulettes,” he kills them in war. Like Bluebeard, he may kill the bodies of the females who adore him in “love.” Bluebeard has been a central concern of Atwood’s writing, evident in the Fitcher’s Bird watercolor (Wilson, Margaret, plate 3), Power Politics, and Bluebeard’s Egg; and the Bluebeard section here resembles both “Hesitations outside the Door” (PP) and the third section of Atwood’s unpublished story “Three Jokes” (Wilson, Margaret, 257–70; Margaret Atwood Papers, PP Manuscripts). In the three texts, the real secret behind the door of the forbidden room is not the chopped-up bodies of previous wives, which in “Alien Territory” are ironed flat and folded in the linen closet (83), but the secret self of the man. In “Three Jokes” this self is empty, and in “Alien Territory” it is
the dead “child” to which he gave birth. Illustrating the mirror imagery
and narcissism evident in early works such as “The Circle Game,”
Power Politics, and “Tricks with Mirrors” (SP), in “Three Jokes” the
man exists only in a mirror, in this case the eyes of the woman. As the
Bluebeard of “Three Jokes” says,

I don’t exist and never
have, it’s one of my problems,
I’m only a curved surface
highly polished, I
will reflect anything.

(Margaret Atwood Papers, PP Manuscripts)

While offering nothing, however, some men are creators, able to ver-
balize their bodies so that they have weight. Reminding readers of early
Atwood love poems and of the end of Interlunar, the end of “Alien
Bodies” paradoxically offers hope: “[I]f they can say their own bodies,
they could say yours also . . . they could put their empty hands . . . on
your body, and bless it, and tell you it is made of light” (88).

“Adventure Story,” resembling John Barth’s “Night-Sea Journey” in
a volume meant to be “received all at once” (Barth, ix), revisions what
seems to be the story of conception as a distillation of the archetypal
adventure in myth, fairy tale, literature, and history. “Adventure Story”
is supposedly told by “our ancestors, and those before them,” and as
the narrator admits, it could also be a memory; but at the same time it
is apocalyptic, one of the futuristic flash fictions. It begins with the
“intrepid band” shooting through a dark tunnel into, again, “alien ter-
ritory,” where magic turns the gate to jelly and one enters the “pink
paradise” of the garden to cast “the imprisoning skin of self” while the
world “explodes, doubles, revolves, changes forever” (90–91). Where-
as Barth’s story is narrated from a gendered perspective, by a sperm,
this narrator of undisclosed gender assures us that half of the adven-
turers are females, who swim and help and sacrifice the same as the
rest. The adventure ends in a new beginning very unlike the toxic
world of “Hardball” and wars of “Alien Territory”: “a fresh-laid star
. . . harbinger of a new order, a new birth, possibly holy; and the ani-
mal will be named again” (92).

Other futuristic fantasies in Good Bones also contrast creators and
destroyers in the struggle for survival that marks human existence.
“Epaullettes” and “Hardball,” earlier published with “Cold-Blooded”
as “Three Chronicles” (1990), are all about the possible extermination
of the earth, through war, pollution, or the sneaky takeover of a supposedly inferior species. In satirizing the societal predilection for wars that no one can win, “Epaullettes” humorously uses another folk motif, the creation of a substitute, in this case for war once it becomes too dangerous and expensive. According to the male reporter-narrator, the world leaders consider various sports, including the Mayan ball game with decapitated losers’ heads, and finally select bird-display play-offs, featuring especially strutting and dancing. Displacing megadeaths and genocides and serving the same purposes as war, including clear winners and losers, two days of rape and pillage, modified looting, and ritual drunkenness, bird display not only creates a new kind of world leader—funnier, more musical, wearing epic epaullettes—but it positively revises history and cultural values, preventing the disasters predicted in “Hardball.” Rather than rolling our strength and sweetness into a ball, as in this fiction’s allusion to Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress,” in “Hardball” the future rolls toward us like “a giant iron snowball” of death. This world, also without Kubla Khan’s stately pleasure dome surrounded with “gardens bright,” lacks any possibility of making our sun either run hedonistically or stand still (326–27; Coleridge, 683). Ironically, “Hardball” also realizes the latent menace of the lifeless ocean and caves of ice in “Kubla Khan.” As the speaker in the poem does, this whole fiction cries “Beware!” Like The Handmaid’s Tale, “Hardball” parodies adages, biblical texts (“by their fruits ye shall know them”), and canonical literature by supplying horrifying contexts and effects for heedless actions. This man-made world recycles and cannibalizes the dead, and the only “fruits” are those that can be grown in the little breathable air, in the small amount of “living,” as opposed to dead, space. Atwood’s characters, as in Life before Man, often play survival games in which they must rescue themselves, but here the survival is literal and global: We are invited to “[t]hink of the earth as an eighteenth-century ship, with stowaways but no destination,” “as a nineteenth-century lifeboat, adrift in the open sea, with castaways but no rescuers,” and, finally, “as a hard stone ball, scraped clean of life” rather than packed with joy. The narrator, more reliable and with a much more explicit message than is usual with Atwood, is indeed blunt in calling for readers’ action: “You don’t like this future? Switch it off” (93–95).

“Cold-Blooded” and “Homelanding” both use alien, female, first-person narrators and the device of defamiliarization, common in science fiction, to examine, once again, “home ground, foreign territory”
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(Surfacing, 14). The narrator from the all-female planet of prospective colonizers in “Cold-Blooded” is cold-blooded in a double sense: She predicts the eventual extinction of the blood creatures (human beings) on the Planet of the Moths (earth) when they “have succeeded at last in overbreeding themselves, as it seems their intention to do, or in exterminating one another” (69). Also, the references to patterned carapaces, diaphanous wings, pupation, and cocoons suggest that she has become a butterfly and is thus symbolic of the metamorphosis foolish human beings should seek. In Good Bones and Simple Murders, however, “Cold-Blooded” is accompanied by an illustration of other cold-blooded females, including a trilobite and two cephalopods with female heads (78). By contrast, the apparent ambassador of “Home-landing” represents a nation of metamorphs who assimilate and change parts of their surroundings into themselves when they eat. In order to establish some common ground, which turns out to be the knowledge of death, she tells someone not on earth—or perhaps not from Canada!—about her country and people. Resembling early Atwood poems that use the extended metaphor of “that country” as an ironic distancing device (e.g., AC; “True Romances,” SP II), “Home-landing” ironically reverses the ideas of “home” and “away,” making “here” “there” and withholding the landing at home suggested by the title (see also BH). Several features of this country, such as the small population despite its largeness, are identifiably Canadian; and the images of reflections, dissolutions, and rockiness are prevalent in other Canadian literature as well as in Atwood’s works. Deconstructing the many science fiction films that assume hierarchy in any civilization (“take me to your leaders”) and hostility between different cultures, this fiction also reduces gender politics between prong (male) and cavern (female) people to the absurd (122–23). As in many of Atwood’s poems, including “Against Still Life” and “You Begin” (SP, 37–39, SP II, 54), this fiction ends with images of the concrete and important, including the life cycle with its hope for survival: the red of leaves (rather than of the violence elsewhere in this volume), trees, breakfast, sunsets, dreams, shoes, nouns, fingers, and deaths.

Regeneration or rebirth and the deconstruction of unquestioned ideas are also themes in the rest of Good Bones. “My Life as a Bat” again shifts point of view, offering another unpopular first-person narrator to puncture absolutist religious and cultural mythologies, including the beliefs that reincarnation as an animal is either silly or a punishment, that sanity is a general consensus about the content of reality, that light is life and darkness nothing, that God appears in our
form (in this case, as a bat), that we must loathe skin and flesh unlike our own, and even that vampires suck neck blood. The trickster narrator of “My Life as a Bat,” who says she was a bat in a previous life, educates about bats in the same way as the narrator of “Snake Poems” does about snakes. She points out that money can be made from believing in reincarnation and that, unlike human beings, bats kill without hate or gloating. “My Life as a Bat” turns on reversal of expectation and parody of both popular conceptions and portrayals of bats, including Bram Stoker’s Dracula and Dracula films. It is the former bat, not the person, who has nightmares and prays to the Goddess to be “delivered from evil” and the person, not the bat, who is the monster with unseeing cyclops eye, as blind as his or her flashlight. Recalling the mock romanticism of vampires and other projected masks in Power Politics and Lady Oracle, the narrator engages in an orgy of mock-heroic, mock-gothic rhetoric concerning the main intertext of this piece:

O Dracula, unlikely hero! O flying leukemia, in your cloak like a living umbrella, a membrane of black leather which you unwind from within yourself and lift like a stripteaser’s fan as you bend with emaciated lust over the neck, flawless and bland, of whatever woman is longing for obliteration, here and now in her best negligee. (101)

“Theology” also deconstructs unreasoning absolutism and both conservative and liberal Christian intertexts, questioning whether murdering good people can be bad if it causes them to get to heaven earlier and whether, if God is the good in people, God would cease to exist if everyone died.

“Third Handed” extends folk beliefs that a hand can be a charm, a means of healing, or “bad”—taboo or unclean for certain activities—to create a cause or scapegoat for otherwise unexplained events. In folklore and societal practice, hands are severed as a punishment for breaking a taboo or a law. Hands may also be used for sign language and, as I have discussed previously, hands signify wholeness in Atwood’s work (see Margaret, 136–228). Ordering, performing magic, and writing—as in E. Fitzgerald’s translation of “The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam”—the third hand not only can help save us in a blizzard and lead us onward, but is one of the means of “dissolving boundaries” (131) necessary to survival.

“An Angel,” “Poppies: Three Variations,” and “Death Scenes” all deal explicitly with death and, in some cases, possible rebirth. Again
paradoxically, the faceless angel of suicide that illustrates “An Angel” in *Good Bones and Simple Murders* is another of this volume’s many “birds” and is coupled with two images of birth: it is hatching an egg, akin to her “face of a grey egg” (*GB*, 110). The flames that surround it can also suggest those from which a phoenix rises: mythic rebirth or eternal life (*GBSM*, 144). Depending upon the reader, the death skull inside the egg may undercut the possibility of a rebirth, enforce the ironic hatching of death, show the life cycle, or serve as another warning. This voice of suicide, here “a rebellious waitress” believed only because of her wings (110–11), is a messenger who appears in *Cat’s Eye* and elsewhere in Atwood’s work and one of the many messengers in this collection. Offering only rebellion, she illustrates the folklore motif of the rebel angel. “Poppies: Three Variations” varies its epigraph words from its intertext, the well-known Canadian poem “In Flanders Fields” (1915), by John McCrae, to rework images and ideas so familiar that they no longer provoke thought. By the end of this flash, written without paragraph indentations in three sections, however, the sound of the guns—one kind of destruction that threatens human survival—becomes part of the undertone in the volume as a whole, “below thought, below memory, below everything” (120).

“Death Scenes” offers several perspectives on a woman’s death, that of the woman who thinks about planting rose bushes as she lies in a coma and wants her friend to talk about normal things, of the medical establishment, and of the friend who weeds the dying woman’s garden. Like the illustration for “An Angel,” the one accompanying “Death Scenes” in *Good Bones and Simple Murders* also appropriately joins death and birth or rebirth in picturing a tulip with a female face (presumably of death) in its bulb (144).

Along with the immediately preceding flash fictions, “We Want It All” and “Dance of the Lepers” prepare for the volume’s concluding and title story, “Good Bones.” As its trickster narrator says, calling attention to her story of story-telling, although we insist that we love the earth, “We Want It All” is still “the same old story” of human greed: irresponsibility concerning overpopulation, pollution, and disappearing species. We seem to hear the voice of the harpy from “Bad News” and the volume’s cover as she warns us about cannibalism of the eye, the colonizing gaze suggested by the harpy’s tail of eyes on the cover, and the consequent danger of being cannibalized ourselves, evident in the harpy’s wing of mouths. Although the dancers in “Dance of the Lepers” are not lepers and are wrapped like mummies, their dance is nevertheless real and something the rest of us should emulate. It is “a
continuation, a dance of going on despite everything, a stubborn
dance” (147).

The central image of “Good Bones,” the title story, and of the
whole volume brings together the twin themes of death and life evident
in the book’s focus on survival. Bones are what’s left when an animal
dies and its flesh shrivels, but, like Atwood’s own facial “good bones,”
bones are also the “bedrock. Structural principles,” that “come out like
flowers” in the right light. The narrator pours ashes of her friend,
including dissolved bones, under the tulips so that other things “can
grow” (152), recalling the dying gardener in “Death Scenes” and the
illustration for that story in Good Bones and Simple Murders. In that
volume, “Good Bones” is accompanied by an illustration of an
earth/sea goddess whose body is the land, the structure reflected in the
sky (160), and, as Nischik suggests in this volume (figure 4, pps. 6–7),
part of the “bone” that is good. Neither the narrator of this flash fic-
tion nor the goddess of the drawing is just a paper-doll dupe, the kind
that the stepmother of “Unpopular Gals” tricks (29) or that Atwood
satirizes in her self-portrait of author as paper doll (“Me,” 6). Nor are
they this volume’s destroyers of life. Speaking to her bones as to a dog,
the trickster narrator tricks her bones into performing yet another
trick. While alluding to The Unnamable in the final lines of both story
and volume, she demonstrates the flashes of insight and open structure
that move both readers and book from murder to survival: “Good
bones! Good bones! Keep on going.”

NOTES

1. One recent performance, also including selections from Murder in the Dark,
was directed by Urjo Kareda and featured Claire Coulter at the Tarragon Theatre in
Toronto on 28 Nov. 1999 (Laframboise). Atwood herself read from Murder in the
Dark and Good Bones in the BamBoo nightclub; and, judging from Donna Lypchuk’s
review (1992), she gives quite a performance of these pieces. Neta Gordon adapted
Good Bones as a play, “Loud Skirts,” and directed a 1995 Toronto performance
(Crew). Ensemble 9’s adaptation, “Gute Knochen,” was performed in Germany in
1996, and a compilation, “Alla Tiders Kvinnor,” including material based on Good
Bones with selections from Euripides, Aristophanes, Brecht, and other writers, was
performed in Stockholm (Atwood Papers, Collection 335, GB Theatrical Adap-
tations). Murder in the Dark has also been performed, once by the Rotterdam Theatre
Company (Independent Theatre Company) in Toronto in 1987, and Claudia Shaffer
and Curtis Brown of Haymarket House produced “Strange Fish,” later called “Once
Upon a Time,” a dramatic adaptation of Murder in the Dark and Good Bones (Letter

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from Shelley Noble, Larmore’s assistant, to Claudia Shaffer and Curtis Brown, May 1996, Atwood Papers, GB).

2. See reviews by John Bemrose, Eve Droboth, and Nancy Wigston. Rejecting “Good Bones and a Little Bit of Murder” and fearing “being twee’d and cutie-pied out of existence” [sic], Atwood proposed “Good Bones and Little Murders” as a possible title and wrote “Little Murders” to be the thirty-fifth piece (Letter to Nan Talese, 7 Feb. 1994). That title was abandoned and “Simple” substituted when “Steve” pointed out that Jules Feiffer has a book of that name (Atwood Letter to Nan Talese, 28 Feb. 1994). The 1992 Bloomsbury and 1993 Virago editions are identical to the first Toronto one; and the New Canadian Library 1997 edition, with an introduction by Rosemary Sullivan, has the same cover and stories in a smaller-print, shorter layout.

3. The 1994 Talese/Doubleday edition of Good Bones and Simple Murders was also published in London, Toronto, Sydney, and Auckland. Surprisingly, as described in the text, where I also discuss the covers of Good Bones and Good Bones and Simple Murders, although Atwood’s other visual art is the same in the 1994 editions, Wheeler’s 1995 large-print edition features a different cover from the Talese/Doubleday one, a fleeing woman illustration. The 1995 Virago edition, Bones and Murder, also has a different cover, a photograph of another “goddess.” Showing only the upper part of Atwood’s face and head in a sophisticated hat, it highlights her eyes and suggests mystery and intrigue. Before publication, the 1994 edition of Good Bones and Simple Murders had been titled Good Bones and Small Murders, also expected in 1994, and a few Web sites still reference this title even though a book of this name was not published. A table of contents for Good Bones and Small Murders appears in the Locus Index to Science Fiction but is identical with both the 1994 Wheeler and Talese/Doubleday editions of Good Bones and Simple Murders. This description incorrectly states that most of these pieces were published in “two small-press collections in Canada.” Book reviews slated for Good Bones and Small Murders, including those in The Atlanta Journal and The Atlantic, became, upon publication, reviews of Good Bones and Simple Murders.


6. Although John Gerlach says that “demarcations between modes of narrative, and between genres themselves, are not firm,” and admits that the form of prose poems is “virtually indistinguishable from that of a very short story,” he goes on to discuss how fascination with language “interferes with the progression of story,” how development of story causes poems to become unlyrical, and how stories, but not poems, must have a point (74, 80, 83–84). Presumably, however, the prose poems
collected in Myers’s *Epiphanies* all have points, too. More reasonably, Delville dis-
cusses degrees of lyricism or narrativity. See him for an overview of critical discussion
on prose poems and short fictions (*The American*, 97–149).

7. A drawing of a female dragon with breasts and a long tail, not used in the
book, also suggests the Snake Goddess, associated with dragons killed by mythic
heroes such as St. George. Her claws seem to write _ano_, nearly a part of her tail, and
the word _but_ also forms part of the composition. Atwood also did rough sketches of
women wearing sea-creature hats, probably for “Cold-Blooded,” and an unfinished
one labeled “Diana of Ephesus” (Margaret Atwood Papers, *Good Bones and Simple
Murders*).

8. Nan Talese suggested that Gertrude could be the Termite Queen-transfigured
(Letter to Peggy [Atwood], 17 Feb. 1994).

9. In examining the galleys, Sarah Evans of Coach House Press wrote to
Atwood that “Making a Man” ends abruptly (Letter, 3 June 1992, Atwood Papers),
something that Phoebe Larmore had previously questioned. Atwood says that “yes,
it is supposed to end that way” (Fax to Phoebe, 7 Aug. 1991).

10. Other projected stories for *Good Bones* were “Bearfeet,” “Bondage,” “Grun-
nugs,” and “Freeforall.” When Atwood decided that the latter didn’t fit the book’s
format, she added “Third Handed” as the twenty-seventh piece since she has a pref-
ERENCE for odd numbers (Margaret Atwood Papers, *Good Bones*; faxes to Joan [Shep-
pard], 5 and 6 Feb. 1992).