Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassination

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Ethnographic approaches centering on the wily trickster recommend themselves in dealing with the complex, dynamic subversions in Atwood’s newest work. Recent studies, such as Lewis Hyde’s thought-provoking *Trickster Makes This World* (1998) and Hynes and Doty’s collection, *Mythical Trickster Figures* (1993), investigate the amoral, creative energies that propel tricksters to transgress and redefine boundaries, and to shift shape. In the case of Atwood, a mistress of reversals and inversions, it is helpful to temper the ethnographic approach with the structural awareness of Tzvetan Todorov in *The Fantastic* (1973) and of Eric Rabkin in *The Fantastic in Literature* (1976). Rabkin’s binary model of fantasy as a subversive “reversal” of convention and authority, usefully extended by scholars such as Christine Brooke-Rose (1981) and Rosemary Jackson (1981), sheds light on the trickster’s complex rhetorical strategies and ability to deconstruct.

There is not space here to do justice to these approaches; essentially, as Elizabeth Ammons states tersely in her introduction to essays collected in Ammons and White-Parks’s *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature* (1994), “Trickster disrupts” (xii). The shape-shifting trickster’s sheer creative energy fuels its Protean resistance to formulations of all kinds. There is danger in any critical attempt to theorize tricksterism, since its essence is disruption.
Attempts to codify trickster narratives threaten to co-opt the trickster, to beat the joke-teller to the punch line. Accordingly, close readings of texts inhabited by tricksters are particularly illuminating, since they help us appreciate the tricks at close hand. It is well to remember that a trickster is a trickster only insofar as the tricks work, and that they may work on the reader as well as on other characters. W. R. Irwin’s *The Game of the Impossible* (1977) convincingly demonstrates the essential “conspiratorial bond” that ties the reader to the fantasy or trick; the “conspiratorial bond” amounts to coercion in what I have elsewhere called Atwood’s “trickster texts” such as “Rape Fantasies” and “Siren Song” (Van Spanckeren, 77–83).

Trickster texts—works that implicate and trick the reader—have long been a hallmark of Atwood’s writing. In trickster texts Atwood plays on the reader’s preconceptions, often exposing assumptions about power. Trickster texts are effective insofar as they manipulate the reader. They are witty and thought-provoking, and generally they are short enough to “trick” the reader in one reading. Atwood’s novels are too long and complex to do so, though they use trickster themes extensively, as Karen Stein notes in *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, which devotes a chapter to “Victims, Tricksters, and Scheherazades: The Later Novels.” The present essay investigates the trickster in Atwood’s poetry, particularly her recent work. Her subversion of convention is nowhere better revealed than in her poetry, in which she is free to play with language, the primary tool of the trickster. The fox, the quintessential Western trickster figure and often a stand-in for Atwood herself, reveals the development of tricksterism in Atwood’s poetry and sheds particular light on her recent volume, *Morning in the Burned House* (1995).

The fox as a trickster appears frequently in world mythology. According to Conner, Sparks, and Sparks (1997), in Japan the fox is *kitsune*, a great magician and shape-shifting trickster deity of the Shinto religion (203), while in China it is Hu Hsien, a dangerous shape-shifter who seduces humans and drains them of vital essence (179–80). In the West, Reynard (or, in French, Renart) is the trickster hero of medieval European fable, beast epic, and anti-clerical satire (Bercovich, 287–92). Through craft the subversive Reynard triumphs over the authorities and outwits Isengrim, the brutal, dull wolf. Reynard was not worshipped but, as Cox demonstrates throughout *The Feast of Fools*, the fox played a prominent role in that important medieval festival replete with theological overtones. Though Reynard purportedly commits rape and robbery, he is portrayed as an attractive, charming
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outlaw. Along with the Native American raven and coyote, the fox of most contemporary literature is an amoral, greedy trickster who is weak and defenseless and must rely on his wits.

Atwood’s fox, like most foxes in literature from Aesop on, is a blithe opportunist, an unsentimental realist who knows the good guy does not always win out in the end. More than raven or coyote, the stylish, elegant fox suggests an entrepreneurial instinct for survival. Atwood’s is an unscrupulous, wisecracking, twentieth-century, capitalist beast that prospers by cashing in on others’ errors. While foxy tricks may be essential for survival, too easy a reliance on tricks—deceptions, rhetorical techniques (including dramatic monologues), and deconstructions—undermine a work’s emotional depth. Atwood is increasingly taming the trickster, using it as an element in a larger, more humane vision.

Atwood’s title poem from the early volume, The Animals in That Country (1968), contrasts the realm of art (“that country”) with reality (“this country”) through treatments of animals. In art, the cat, fox, and bull carry human hopes and fears and have “the faces of people.” If they die, it is to some imaginative purpose: the fox is “run/ to earth, the huntsmen/ standing around him, fixed/ in their tapestry of manners.” In modern life (“this country”) the animals are drained of numinousness. They have “the faces of animals” and their “eyes/flash once in car headlights/ and are gone.” They suggest the extinction of inner life and loss of vision: “they have the faces of no-one” (SP, 48–49).

In her early work, Atwood connects art and its tricks with life. A life without make-believe and art is a dead life. In “Dreams of the Animals,” from PU (1970), wild animals project themselves into their own dream worlds—“birds dream of territories/enclosed by singing.” But captive animals are (like) captive minds. The “caged armadillo/ near the train/ station” runs in obsessive figure-eights and “no longer dreams/ but is insane when waking.” The crested iguana in the pet-shop window rules over “its kingdom of water-dish and sawdust.” The trickster fox in captivity would even kill its own young out of desperation: “The silver fox in the roadside zoo/ dreams of digging out/ and of baby foxes, their necks bitten” (SP 124). We are what we dream, or so the early Atwood would argue; keeping our imaginations alive is a life-and-death struggle. We are surrounded by hostile environmental, political and economic forces that threaten us with abusive families, criminal insanity, and sawdust. Like weak but crafty foxes, we must use our wits to survive.

Atwood realizes the pitfall of tricksterism—too much technical bedazzlement, too little emotional substance, and a desperate capacity
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for cruelty—quite early. In fact, the attempt to contain her art becomes one of her familiar topoi. At first, she attempts to overcome tricksterism by more trickery, generally involving viewpoint and speaker. She will use a mask to voice her own feelings as a creator, and then inveigh against the mask’s creations. In “Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein,” from *The Animals in That Country* (1968), her persona Dr. Frankenstein addresses his monster: “Reflection, you have stolen/ everything you needed:/ my joy,” and also, significantly, “my ability/ to suffer.” He blames the monster for being a trickster and usurping his own emotional life: “You have transmuted/ yourself to me: I am/ a vestige, I am numb” (*SP*, 67).

Atwood uses this strategy of projection in later volumes as well. In “The Wereman,” from *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), the speaker, a mask for Atwood, fears that her trickster husband will return and change her with a “fox eye” or “owl eye” (*SP*, 85). In the first of the “Circe Mud” monologues in *You Are Happy* (1974), she rejects the nonhuman trickster, writing, “Men with the heads of eagles/no longer interest me/ or pig-men, or those who can fly.” “All those [legendary figures, tricksters like Odysseus] I could create, manufacture/ or find easily.” Instead, the speaker searches for “the others,/ the ones left over, the ones who have escaped from these/mythologies with barely their lives.” These vulnerable survivors have “real faces and hands, they think/ they are / wrong somehow, they would rather be trees.” This seems to be a moving poem, but yet this is Circe speaking in a dramatic monologue. We cannot trust her unstable narrative, for she is a compulsive trickster and mythmaker. As if to confirm our suspicions, the next poem describes the dead men, who have turned into mute “drying skeletons” of animals, lying around her. She denies responsibility. “It was not my fault . . . these animals dying/of thirst because they could not speak” (*SP*, 202–3).

Atwood tries to bid farewell to mythic structures in *You Are Happy*’s concluding valedictory poem, “Book of Ancestors”:

So much for the gods and their
demandstatic demands . our demands, former
demands, death patterns
obscure as fragments of an
archeology, these frescoes
on a crumbling temple
wall we look at now and can scarcely
piece together. . . (*SP*, 239)
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The poet declares that “history/ is over, we take place” and looks forward to a personal present, “your spine, my arms around/ you, palm above the heart.” The meaning is clear enough: the past is static; the ways we were seem mythic, and our former selves assume the status of “gods” to us, inhabiting a crumbling and inadequate precinct we must escape from to save our emotional lives. Yet the declaration is not totally convincing. The elaborate fantasy metaphors out of She (archeology, frescoes, crumbling temple wall) remain artificial. They do not move as, say, Shakespeare’s shipwrecked old Prospero does, when he vows to sink his book, or (to look at a more recent example) as the rags and bones do in “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” where Yeats forsweares the glamour of “circus animals” that were “all on show/ Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,/ Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.” The great legends had ended up tricking him: they “took all my love,/ And not those things that they were emblems of.” Yeats’s great poem abjures the fantastic animals and the metaphors. Instead, the old poet becomes vulnerable, alone, mortal among us, surrounded by outworn containers (poetic forms): “Now that my ladder’s gone/ I must lie down where all the ladders start,/ In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart” (336). Human love, whether present or remembered, is what lasts. But the quality of that love is indicated in the state of the animals and how they are rendered.

Atwood’s acclaimed book of poetry, Morning in the Burned House, is a memento mori, a skull on the desk, a look at death from a thousand angles. It traces a hard-won movement from a fox-like, self-oriented mode to a more human vision. This distinguished volume, the first since the publication of Selected Poems II in 1987, breaks new ground in its use of autobiographical material.

The book is vintage Atwood, deepening earlier themes, but with a major difference. Morning in the Burned House makes a claim to emotional authenticity, containing as it does a sequence of elegiac poems on the death of Atwood’s father. The tragic note dominates this book, dwarfing themes of the male/female relationship prominent in her earlier books such as Power Politics. “You grow out/ of sex like a shrunk dress/ into your common senses,” she writes in “Miss July Grows Older”; “after a while these flesh arpeggios get boring,/ like Bach over and over;/ too much of one kind of glory” (KVS 7). There is more to this older, wiser speaker than meets the eye: “Don’t confuse me with my hen-leg elbows;/ what you get is no longer/ what you see” (23). Taking the place of the love/sex poems are the darkly stained, moving elegiac poems about her father. The new book also develops a poignant
setting that earlier poems had touched on, the burned house of “The Small Cabin,” from Procedures for Underground (120). Morning in the Burned House has five parts recalling earlier phases of Atwood’s work. The personal subjects, impatient colloquial diction, and witty irony of the first part remind one of Atwood’s early poems from The Circle Game and The Animals in That Country. Part 2 consists of dramatic monologues spoken by women of myth, legend, or popular culture (Daphne and Laura, Helen of Troy, Sekhmet the Sphinx, Ava Gardner). It recapitulates earlier themes of identity seen, for example, in “Songs for Dr. Frankenstein” and “The Reincarnation of Captain Cook,” from The Animals in That Country, and in You Are Happy’s songs of the animals and Circe/Mud poems. The wide-ranging third part takes up real forms of death seen in cancer (“Cell”), the poisoning of the environment (“Frogless”), species death in the biosphere and in language (“Marsh Languages”), and political violence (“Owl Burning”). “Down,” reminiscent of the title poem of Procedures for Underground, reworks the descent-to-death theme. This third part reveals Atwood’s concern for the environment throughout her works, including the novels (Surfacing and Handmaid’s Tale especially) and short story collections such as Wilderness Tips. The powerful long poem in part 3, “Half Hanged Mary,” recalls The Journals of Susannah Moodie in its chronological construction and transformation from realistic woman protagonist to mythical figure (in this case a witch). It evokes a consciousness mysteriously continuing after death, as in Moodie’s final poem, “A Bus along St. Clair: December”: “I am the old woman/sitting across from you on the bus,/ her shoulders drawn up like a shawl” (116). “A Pink Hotel in California,” concluding part 3, introduces the father and the lakeside cabin where the speaker’s family stayed in 1943. It also recalls World War II and the war-oriented words the speaker, a child at the time, was learning: “smoke, gun, boots,” and (ominously) “oven,” leading by a chain of associations to key terms in the rest of the book: “The fire. The scattered ashes” (77).

Part 4 represents Atwood’s effort to deal with mortality and vulnerability. Atwood handles death by recourse to traditional images of nature and themes of rebirth, but their consolation is hard-won. The father endures the loss of his mental faculties in a nursing home where “Rage occurs, followed by supper” (“King Lear in Respite Care,” 86). Empathizing, the speaker alternates between memories and dreams. “A Visit” mourns “the days/ when you could walk on water./ When you could walk” (88). The father’s loss of recent memory is imagined as a wave that washes him back to 1947: “suddenly whole beaches/ were
simply gone" ("Wave," 83). Over the course of part 4 the scene shifts to the family’s forest cabin by Lake Superior, a cabin that burned long ago.

Part 5 takes place after the death, in the consciousness of the bereaved poet who at first subsists in a realm leached of meaning or moorings. In a moving sequence of mourning (a pun on the “morning” of the book’s title), death accompanies the speaker abroad ("Vermilion Flycatcher, San Pedro River, Arizona"), yet waits back at home on return, “in the center of your room” ("The Moment," 109). Death even lurks at the moment of waking: “You wake up filled with dread” ("Up," 110). Home, ownership, identity, even one’s work—in this case, the poet’s words—are revealed as the mind’s tricks, empty constructs over which the self has no final control. Death will transform all of them utterly (“Girl without Hands,” “The Signer”).

Tracing the use of viewpoint, one sees a sequence. The autobiographical “you” (occasionally “I”) in the first part becomes “I” in the dramatic monologues of the second part. The third, environmental part uses a mixture of viewpoints, while the poems about the death of the father in part 4 are uttered by an unobtrusive speaker who avoids “I.” In the fifth part speakers change place. The only consistently first-person poems are in the second part which explores the gendered female self, dramatized in a series of angry, dismissive tricksters who win their contests against males but remain isolated. The rest of the volume seeks ways to overcome such isolation. The viewpoint becomes more complex as it explores death. In the later poems there is a muted, newly humbled speaking voice tempered by tragedy that explores reversals of viewpoint in nature and physics (solstices, black holes) and discovers in destruction and transformation a hope for some sort of survival.

Together the poems show a progression from emotional death in the self (part one) and in tricksters involved in various survival strategies (part 2). There is no escaping death, which is considered in its complexity and variety in the world (part 3). By the end of part 3, the reader feels the might and terror of death, and the absence of meaning in the universe. The impressive long poem “Half-Hanged Mary” powerfully evokes cruelty and the human face of death. The reader sees no way out of the impasse of death. Unlike Hester Prynne, after all her suffering Mary remains emotionally dead and cut off from others. Paradoxically, it is death itself that provides a path. The self’s grief at the parent’s death (part 4) creates vulnerability, a chink in the emotional armor. The self begins to dream, vivid dreams that obviously come from the depths of the soul. After the death (part 5) the
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child/speaker/self who survives, like Hansel and Gretel, has accessed a rich sense of life informed by the mystery of death. The meaning of survival is shifted. It no longer means theft, but rather gift—of voice, dream, and self.

The movement from theft to gift, from a trickster’s psychology of survival to a new mutuality, may be seen in the changing treatment of the fox and related figures such as the cat from part 1 to part 5. The first section contains a quasi-narrative sequence of seven poems investigating the aging self, threatened by emotional emptiness. The first poem takes place in a hellish zone of isolation due to overwork and stress (“no time off”):

You come back into the room
where you’ve been living
all along. You say:
What’s been going on
while I was away? (“You Come Back,” 3)

The speaker has been sleepwalking, merely going through the motions of family life. Survival has been achieved at the cost of love. Later in the volume, the death of the father reminds us that we live this way at our peril. If one could come back from the dead, one would wish for more vital connection with our loved ones.

The rest of part 1, like a book of photographs, depicts a speaker resembling Atwood as she grows from childhood to maturity and old age. “A Sad Child” deconstructs sibling rivalry as a threat to the self. After the rude discovery that “I am not the favorite child,” the poem concludes tartly, “My darling, when it comes/ right down to it / and the light fails and the fog rolls in” at the moment of death, “none of us is;/ or else we all are.” (5) “In The Secular Night” compares night babysitting at age sixteen to trying to write in the middle of the night. Both are times of intense solitude. Fox-like, the speaker explains it’s “necessary to reserve a secret vice” (6)—cigarettes at age sixteen, and baby lima beans forty years later. “Waiting” takes a large cue from Elizabeth Bishop’s late poem “In the Waiting Room,” for it evokes an epiphany in childhood, among lampshades and periodicals and news of disasters, when the self first realizes that it will someday be old and die. “February” is a comic fulcrum: the book shifts into the adult present and takes up the low theme of a cat who “settles/ on my chest, breathing his breath/ of burped-up meat and musty sofas, / purring like a washboard” (11). (Atwood’s cats and foxes are often interchangeable; the
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title of *Cat’s Eye* suggests a trickster’s double vision.) This cat commands comical ways of telling “whether or not I’m dead. If I’m not, he wants to be scratched; if I am/ he’ll think of something” (11). The speaker is as crafty and greedy as the cat: “I think dire thoughts, and lust for French fries/with a splash of vinegar” (12). This poem comically anticipates the volume’s elegies, which try to work through sorrow:

Cat, enough of your greedy whining
And your small pink bumhole.
Off my face! You’re the life principle,
more or less, so get going
on a little optimism around here.
Get rid of death. Celebrate increase. Make it be spring. (12)

Spring appears with a vengeance in “Asparagus,” with all its unwieldy props: sunburn, falling tree pollen, crumbs, and infatuation. The speaker’s lunch companion complains that he is in love with two women. The older speaker imagines herself as a fox-like wise woman: “I could wrinkle up my eyelids/ look wise. I could get a pet lizard” (13). She greets his unruly spring with recognition—“messy love is better than none” and feels “wonder/ or is it envy” (14). Despite the asparagus of the title, spring still is not here, for the empty-hearted speaker at least.

Existence is a matter of survival. At least so the fox would argue, as she makes off with yet another fat domestic fowl. Atwood explicitly puts this opportunistic argument into the fox’s mouth in “Red Fox,” the last poem in the first section, and by implication the last stage of the author’s career. “Red Fox” takes place in winter, the icy season reflecting the speaker’s paralyzing alienation and cynicism. The speaker watches a fox, a “lean vixen,” cross the “sheer glare” of an iced-over pond. The fox’s ribs show, and its “sly trickster’s eyes” are full of “longing and desperation” while its “skinny feet” are “adept at lies” (16). The speaker considers survival, concluding that in an extremity we would sacrifice others, even our own children, to save ourselves: Hansel and Gretel “were dumped in the forest/ because their parents were starving” (17). The poem continues,

*Sauve qui peut*. To survive
we’d all turn thief

and rascal, or so says the fox. (17)
The stanza break underscores the ambiguity of who is speaking, speaker or fox: *sauve qui peut* is the speaker’s idea, attributed belatedly to the fox with whom the speaker obviously identifies. Meanwhile the fox has saved her skin and rejoices in

... her coat of an elegant scoundrel,
her white knife of a smile,
who knows just where she’s going:

to steal something
that doesn’t belong to her—
some chicken, or one more chance,
or other life. (17)

The last line twists the knife: the poem has made us like and even identify with this murderous fox. This is a trickster text that draws one in without one’s being aware. The ending reminds us that we are imaginatively inhabiting a killer. The poem’s art involves us in an ethical dilemma. Perhaps the reader believes she would sacrifice for her child. If so, the end of the poem makes us question our authenticity and the strength of our love. We also must consider how many ways there are to steal another’s life. Not all of those ways involve physical killing.

But to be fully human and feel emotionally alive, should one focus on survival? Is life about success, new strategies for the theft of hens, the technology of survival? And what survival does one want, given that life must end—the survival of mere flesh, wavering and pitiful without mind and awareness, like the dying father in the book? Or do we want something more? The challenge, for Atwood’s poems, as for her red fox, is to address real issues and dare vulnerability. The red fox survives, but always alone in her early poetry and in the first part of *Morning in the Burned House*. It is a perennial outsider, looking on and scheming, so focused on survival that she loses her soul and participates in cruelty. By the end of the volume, Atwood’s fox has changed and become much more vulnerable.

The second part of *Morning in the Burned House* confirms the need for vulnerability. Its biting, hardboiled dramatic monologues explore manipulative, deathly relations between the sexes from the points of view of various female tricksters. This part recalls the Circe series from the view of an older Circe. It begins with “Miss July Grows Older” in Miss July’s voice: “How much longer can I get away/with being so fucking cute?” and recalls that “men were a skill” for her in her youth,
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“something I did well,” but which she has “grown out of” (21–23). Manet’s Olympia, the subject of the second poem, looks out at “You, Monsieur Voyeur” and tells this “you” or reader to “Get stuffed” (25). “Daphne, Laura and So Forth” portrays the fate of women harassed by men. Safely transformed into trees, they have lost their voices and even the desire for articulation: “Why talk when you can whisper?/ Rustle, like dried leaves./ Under the bed.” Only tricks, strategies for survival, remain interesting for them: I’m working on these ideas of my own/ venom, a web, a hat,/ some last resort” (26–27). “Cressida to Troilus” ends with a cursed offering (“Have some more body”) to the insensitive Troilus: “Drink and eat./ You’ll just make yourself sick. Sicker./ You won’t be cured” (28–29).

Only Ava Gardner, speaking from the dead and longing for “the flesh, the flesh” and “the joy” (32), is vulnerable. She softens us up for the next poem, “Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing,” a classic trickster text modeled on Atwood’s “Siren Song” from You Are Happy. The reader/voyeur is first flattered and drawn in (“Not that anyone here/ but you would understand”) and quickly victimized: “Try me./ This is a torch song./ Touch me and you’ll burn” (33–36). “A Man Looks” continues the theme of voyeurism; a maimed man attempts sex with a patient woman; “he’s nothing to her but luggage/she needs to haul from room to room,/ or a sick dog to be kind to.” Realizing he is not desired, the man thinks, “I am angry” and then “I will die soon” (37–38).

Part 3 considers death in its effect on the environment. “Marsh Languages” mourns the loss of biodiversity and the dying of languages, the
loss of “sibilants and gutturals” (54). It ends with a horrific vision of English as a survivor’s tongue, a colonial world language, and of all human languages threatened by an unfeeling binary computer code. The section includes “Half-Hanged Mary” (58–69), the striking sequence told from the viewpoint of Atwood’s ancestor hanged (but not killed) for being a witch in seventeenth-century New England. This poem introduces the possibility of survival in a state of madness, anticipating the father’s mental lapses in part 4. The cost of such a survival—alienated, isolated—is too great. Ironically, Mary becomes a sort of witch or trickster; her neck is saved at the cost of her humanity: “My audience is God,/ because who the hell else could understand me?/ Who else has been dead twice?” (69).

Part 4 evokes the father’s dying. The father takes on aspects of a trickster. In “King Lear in Respite Care” he will “have to be sly and stubborn/ and not let on” that he’s trapped in “snow, or possibly/wallpaper” (85). The father keeps to himself, like the fox: “who knows what he knows?/ Many things, but where he is/ Isn’t among them” (85).

Like a sorcerer, he sees things that others don’t: “better to watch the fireplace/ which is now a beach” in “A Visit” (89). Dreams of seeking for the father in water (diving into a lake) and fire (in the burned cabin) herald the death in “Two Dreams.” In “Two Dreams, 2,” the speaker and her sister compare dreams of unfinished tasks concerning the dying father. Death is two-sided and involves imaginative transformation and empathy. In a brilliant reversal of viewpoint Atwood shows how dying is known to us through our grief: “from under the water/ they clutch at us, they clutch at us,/ we won’t let go” (100). The dying father has already let go. He is imagined embarking on a solitary dream journey upriver into a wilderness underworld in “The Ottawa River by Night.”

Part 5 takes place after the death. It begins by another river, in a dry wasteland. In “Vermilion Flycatcher, San Pedro River, Arizona” only a tiny trickling desert river remains after a recent flash flood that has left wreckage, “trash caught overhead in the trees” (107). Recently submerged, this spot is envisioned as the locus of death (envisioned as immersion in “Wave” from part 4). The speaker, standing in trash, recalls Yeats’s speaker in “Circus Animals’ Desertion.” Sekhmet and company are notably absent. Instead there is a small, but real, bird, a blood-red Vermilion Flycatcher (whose name suggests corpses). It has been attracted by the dense weeds and sings despite or because of death, imagined as an indeterminate
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man with brown
or white skin lying reversed
in the vanished water, a spear
or bullet in his back. (107)

The speaker imagines the deer drawn at dusk to “cross and drink/and
be ambushed.” The red bird, like a singer/poet, continues singing, as if
magically: “how he conjures.” Like the inscrutable dying father, the
bird remains mysterious. Atwood refrains from anthropomorphizing
this bird. In her early poems, she would have told us what the bird was
dreaming, but this is a real bird—specified as to species—not a trick-
ster or mouthpiece in a dramatic monologue. With its mate, it sings,
but not in human language. The birds are part of nature:

He and his other-coloured mate
ignore everything but their own rapture.
Who knows what they remember?
Birds never dream, being their own.
Dreams, I mean. (108)

Listening to the bird-poet, the speaker grasps that she, too, is mor-
tal. She reminds herself and us: “As for you, the river/ that isn’t there
is the same one/ you could drown in, face down” (107–108). The poem
“Up,” about depression, reintroduces the bird: “You wake up filled
with dread” and though “morning light sifts through the window” and
“there is birdsong,” still “you can’t get out of bed” (110). The poem
ends with a koan-like question that points up the need to work
through grief by accepting responsibility. Trickster-like, Atwood poses
it as a joke (“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? (111)

One must cease to be a victim (to use Survival’s terminology) without
becoming a hollow-hearted victimizer like the fox, cat, or sphinx.

Atwood’s “The Signer” imagines an interpreter using sign language
who is standing behind the speaking poet. This poem elides Atwood as
a poet-singer with the singing Vermilion Flycatcher. The poem captures
the vulnerability inherent in creating poetry that will be interpreted or
misinterpreted. Like the forest after a burn, the place (poem) will become unrecognizable. The interpreter is a numinous presence suggesting death and the future: “Unable to see her, I speak/ in a kind of blindness, not knowing/ what dance is being made of me (114). Death will erase and collapse everything; it is “the place where all the languages/ will be finalized and/ one; and the hands also” (114–15).

In “Statuary” the dead, memorialized in statuary (themselves art works, like poems), speak to the living and begin to exchange places with them. The poem’s ending is a poetic tour de force, pulling the statues into the rubbish heap reminiscent of that in Yeats’s “Circus Animals’ Desertion.” It uses viewpoint so fluidly that I and you, subject and object, are reversed and then become indistinguishable in the vortex of existence inflected by death. Death is envisioned as a black hole. An entropic existence that erases distinction lies on the other side of reality defined as time—on the other side of the black hole. Atwood whirls her viewpoint around like a vortex or knothole in time to recreate entropic erasure. A lengthy quotation is necessary to show the syntax’s shape-shiftings:

You won’t be content until we’re toppled,
like you, by frost-heave or vandals, and lie melting
in the uncut grass, like you. In the tall weeds. In the young trees.
Until we’re rubble. Like you. Until we’re pebbles
on the shore of a vast lake that doesn’t (like you)
exist yet.
Until we’re liquid, like you; like the small whirlpools
an oar makes drawn slowly through water,
those darkly shining swirls the shape of a galaxy,
those knotholes the world turns itself
inside out through
for us, for a moment, the nothingness
that by its moving
edges defines time. That lets us see down
and into. That lets us fly
and embody, like you. Until we are like you. (119)

The leap to the burned house at the end of the volume is made possible by the beautiful long poem that precedes it, “Shapechangers in Winter.” In this poem, Atwood uses animal imagery in the service of the vulnerable and human. She rejects the trickster fox. In the first section the
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speaker majestically locates us in space through guided imagery. From her bedroom in a snowstorm, the poet imagines her house from the attic to the cellar, and below that the earth and bones of ancestors, down to the earth’s core. From there she imagines the land and oceans and animal species and wavelengths of human emotion, “hatred and love infra/red, compassion fleshtone, prayer ultra/-violet.” Beyond these waves lie peace and war, and air, and stars. “That’s where/we are” (122). The poem gracefully speaks for all life on earth, as well as for the speaker.

In section two of “Shapechangers in Winter” Atwood’s speaker—who seems close to Atwood here—bids farewell to her fox, her favorite animal, which she sees as an outgrown aspect of herself. “Some centuries ago,” when they “lived at the edge of the forest,” “on nights like this” her mate would have put on his “pelt of a bear,” and

I would have chosen fox;
I liked the jokes,
The doubling back on my tracks,
And, let’s face it, the theft. (122)

A thief “doubles back on his tracks” and hides his crime from his victims, just as a fox doubles back to trick its hunters. The fox’s humor, duplicity, and unapologetic lust for thievery retain their appeal for her. Like Offred in The Handmaid’s Tale (108), whose survival hinges on her ability to trick the Commander, this speaker likes theft. She recalls her youth as a time of “many forms” when she and her mate were “all sleight-of-hand illusion.” Animal images proliferate: “Once we were lithe as pythons, quick/and silvery as herring, and we still are, momentarily,/except our knees hurt.” Now they “huddle” under a quilt (“the shed feathers of duck and goose”), staying out of the wind by keeping “still,/like trout in a current” (122–23).

Age has transformed the speaker and her beloved back into humans hastening toward inorganic death. They have had to drop their tricksters’ disguises, imaged as other-worldly animal skins, snaky or fish-like scales. “Every cell/ in our bodies has renewed itself/ since then, there’s not much left, my love/ of the originals.” They are, instead, “footprints/ becoming limestone” or “coal becoming diamond,” less flexible, but more condensed;
and no more scales or aliases,
at least on the outside. (123)
Humanizing the Fox: Atwood’s Poetic Tricksters

Atwood’s speaker has been unable to maintain her fox shape under the press of tragedy, age and time. Moreover, she sees that she does not need it—“we’ve accumulated, / despite ourselves, other disguises.” The new disguises (hair like a “bramble bush,” failing eyesight) are part of the human condition. By this point the tragic and sobering fact of the father’s death has worked itself into the newly sensitive language. The poem gently reminds us that we are all shape-shifters, moving through our lives and our changing bodily states. Atwood tames the trickster in this poem, the penultimate in her book, and uses the trope of shape-shifting to profound and moving effect. “The eye problem: too close, too far, you’re a blur./ I used to say I’d know you anywhere,/ But it’s getting harder” (124).

Section three of “Shapechangers in Winter” occurs at the solstice, when the sun seems to stand still at the cusp of seasons and where the “past/ lets go of and becomes the future.”

The walls of the house fold themselves down, and the house turns itself inside out, as a tulip does in its last full-blown moment, and our candle flares up and goes out, and the only common sense that remains to us is touch. (124)

Life is like a house or body that deconstructs, a mortal trick which we will not survive. Only human feeling, our “common sense” that “touch-es” us (the selves, the you and I blur here) remains when all is dark.

“Shapechangers in Winter” ends with beautiful, simple language, musical internal rhyme, and a new vulnerability seen in the gentle conversational tone that carries the speaker’s genuine commitment to the individual beloved. The title is ironic—aging and changes in appearance are a form of shape-shifting—yet also deeply meant. Love is not a matter of evasions and disguises. The disguises come naturally enough, and the ultimate one will be death, imagined here as ultimate entropy or nuclear winter. The “trick is just to hold on/ through all appearances; and so we do.” I do—words rhyming with the marriage vow unify the flowing passage: “and yes, I know it’s you;/ and that is what we will come to.” The poem ends on an affirmation. When “candles are no longer any use to us/ and the visibility is zero: Yes./ It’s still you. It’s still you” (124–25).

At the end of the volume the painful loss of the father is accepted in a meditation on the way nature reforests after a burn. In “A Fire
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Place,” the fourth poem from the end, the speaker remembers revisiting the place in the forest where the family’s cabin had burned. When she had visited the charred site as a child, poplar, purple fireweed, and blueberries grew on the ashes; now “that bright random clearing/ or burn, or meadow” is gone and a new forest is growing. Only humans “can regret/ the perishing of the burned place./ Only we could call it a wound” (116–17). Nature is revealed as the great shape-shifter, the ultimate artist/trickster who cannot reverse time or restore individual life, but can console if we will become emotionally open.

The final, title poem, “Morning in the Burned House,” like a coda, takes place in death, in the burned cabin; only here can regeneration occur. The poem is spoken by a longing, vulnerable voice that is simultaneously the poet as child and as aging adult; there is no need to imagine a trickster, because the consciousness of the aged and dying is double, half in the present and half in the past. The speaker is alone and simultaneously near imagined loved ones. Though everything “in this house has long been over/ including the body I had then/ including the body I have now,” the speaker still sits “at this morning table, alone and happy,” her “bare child’s feet on the scorched floorboards,” wearing “burning clothes, the thin green shorts” like a nature sprite or phoenix, cheerful amid destruction in her “grubby yellow T-shirt/ holding my cindery, non-existent,/ radiant flesh. Incandescent” (127).

The book’s last poem links loss of consciousness with larger cultural losses—nuclear war, Hiroshima’s burned spots in which large vivid flowers grow. All is “over.” Still, like the Vermilion Flycatcher, or like the birds in so many elegies (Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” Keat’s “Ode to a Nightingale”), the poet sings despite death and celebrates “radiant flesh.” The diction determinedly adheres to convincing incidental details, the child’s bare feet, “thin green shorts” and the “grubby yellow T-shirt,” because they are not the stuff of trickery or fantasy costumes. Rather, they are the very essence of grubby, vulnerable humanity. The book’s title assumes new meaning. We witness an elegiac new “morning” within “mourning,” the long-anticipated advent of spring, precisely in the locus of death, the “burned house.” We are what we most love; trickster fox has been left behind for human child. We celebrate the mortal body, both in ash (ashes to ashes) and “incandescent” flame.

Though seemingly unrelated and in various distinctive forms, the poems of Morning in the Burned House all touch on aspects of dying, imagined as various forms of loss (of oneself, a cabin, the past), moving from self to others to the world. When it finally comes, the death
of the father seems naturally to grow out of what has come before. The book is masterfully structured as an elegiac sequence leading from the tragedy and horror of death through grieving to the consolation that art (poetry), nature, and contemplation of the cosmos offer. Atwood’s subject, the death of a parent, is one of the most moving topics a poet may address. In this anti-heroic age of serial marriage and serial divorce, it may be our most tragic topic, after the death of a child. It is not surprising that Atwood would plumb new depths in her tricksters and trickster texts for the occasion.5

M. L. Rosenthal and Sally Gall suggest in *The Modern Poetic Sequence* (1983) that the poetic sequence is the “decisive form toward which all the developments of modern poetry have tended,” one that “fulfills the need for encompassment of disparate and often powerfully opposed tonalities and energies” (3). It is clear that in constructing the elegaic sequence *Morning in the Burned House*, Atwood combines many such opposed tonalities and viewpoints. In the face of death, she finds the artistic resources effectively to humanize the fox. Like Yeats, in her late work Atwood sees in the trickster a profound humanity.

**NOTES**

The author thanks the University of Tampa for the Dana Summer Grant which supported the research and writing of this essay.

1. This and all subsequent references to poems by Atwood in the first section of this essay are to the Canadian edition of her *Selected Poems*, here abbreviated as *SP*.

2. This and subsequent unattributed page references to poems by Atwood in the second section of this paper are to the Houghton Mifflin edition of *Morning in the Burned House*.

3. The cat and fox are interchangeable protagonists in some of the same folktales, such as “Puss in Boots” and “The Fox-Matchmaker,” Aarne Thompson 545B, where the fox features in most Asian versions, and the cat appears in more of the European versions. Some scholars have argued that Puss in Boots was originally a fox. (Kaplanoglou, 57–61).

4. Atwood uses magic birds and serpents, as well as foxes and cats, frequently throughout her work. In mythology around the world, birds and snakes (denizens of other realms, air and earth) are frequently associated with the shaman, and also with tricksters as totemic animals, as Beidelman points out. See Sharon Wilson’s useful appendices on Atwood’s folk tale types and folk motifs on pp. 314–46, especially “Animals” pp. 326–27, in *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (1993).

5. The death of a parent presents a particular challenge to women poets of Atwood’s generation, the first beneficiaries of birth control and abortion rights and the first to have been able confidently to pursue writing along with parenthood. It will be interesting to see whether their elegies for parents will address death in ways earlier women (celibate, gay, or without children) did not. Atwood’s volume bears
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comparison with Sharon Olds’s *The Father* (1992), in which Olds memorializes her father’s death, and Heather McHugh’s rich poetic sequence “Not a Prayer,” about the death of her mother-in-law, which begins the poems in *The Father of the Predicaments* (1999). All three poetic sequences set the death in a framework interweaving present and past time. More than the others, Atwood see the dying parent as a trickster, psychopomp, or guide to the next world.