



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE WILSON

on a widowed author of cult fantasy fiction, Constance, the first tale is 'Alphinland' — named after the river Alph in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan*, a symbol of human mortality that flows into a "sunless sea". Alphinland is the fictional realm that Constance has crafted, with the artist's perennial aim of cheating sex and death by creating alternate universes. 'Revenant' and 'Dark Lady' trace the final days of Constance's once-youthful poet-lover and the insubstantial muse who succeeded her. Constance tries to imprison them all fictionally in Alphinland, but cannot halt time in the real world.

From here the tales venture into stranger territory. In 'Lusus Naturae', the genetic lottery goes awry, creating an erudite woman whose congenital abnormality makes her resemble a vampire. The eponymous 'Stone Mattress' was originally cooked up by Atwood as a campfire tale on a trip in the Canadian Arctic. In it, we follow the ageing Verna on a tour boat in the Arctic. She has made a career of marrying elderly men with weak hearts, then hastening their deaths by giving them tacit permission to satisfy every forbidden desire. Confronted by a sexual predator from her past, she graduates to full-on murder using a 2-billion-year-old stromatolite, the fossilized remains of biofilms created by some of the very earliest forms of life.

Only once does Atwood turn to a larger stage, in 'Torching the Dusties' — my personal favourite. In it we meet Wilma, who lives in a comfortable retirement community. She is afflicted with Charles Bonnet syndrome, in which visual hallucinations of remarkable clarity — in this case, colourfully dressed little people who dance on windowsills — emerge as sight fades. Wilma is doted on by Tobias, a courtly fading romantic. They live an idyllic life, until news begins to filter in of angry mobs torching retirement communities around the world. The dusties, as the mobs refer to the elderly, are taking up too much time, space and money. When crowds gather at the gate, Wilma and Tobias make a run for it — to what end, we can only imagine.

Atwood is an author of remarkable gifts. Poet, storyteller and scientific acolyte, she ponders the inevitable end that awaits us all, and with great courage flushes her quarry out into the open. I feel about *Stone Mattress* the way I imagine Atwood feels about life: with the end in sight, I am ready to begin again. ■

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FICTION

Transgressive treats

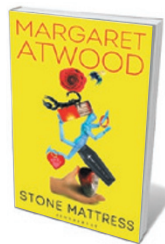
Paul L. McEuen relishes Margaret Atwood's acerbic tales of sex, hallucinations and death by stromatolite.

Sex and death are the pole stars of *Stone Mattress*, Margaret Atwood's fine new collection of nine dark, witty tales. The first three form a mini-trilogy; the remaining six constitute a smorgasbord of horror and crime inflected with science, not least characters with rare medical conditions, and a murderous use for one of Earth's oldest fossils.

Many of Atwood's most famous works, such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985, McClelland and Stewart) or the MaddAddam trilogy, look at individuals struggling under the yoke of a technologically fractured, dystopian society. *Stone Mattress* follows in this tradition, but the oppressor here is sex, along with its dark partner, death.

Sex is an innovation as old and

revolutionary as eukaryotic life itself. Each new generation is a risky shuffle of the genome, rolling the dice of variation in spectacular fashion. To complete the deal, the previous model needs to exit the stage — a strategy that is successful for the species, but wreaks havoc on the individual. So the trio of stories at the start centres on elderly ex-lovers for whom death lies directly ahead, and sex is a signpost in the rear-view mirror. Centring



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