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WITHIN THE LIGHTED CITY

By Lisa Lenzo

122 pp.

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Ann Beattie has always displayed some of the keenest vision in contemporary literature, and this time she's shown it by selecting Lisa Lenzo's masterful story collection for the 1997 John Simons Short Fiction Award. Ms. Lenzo's nine stories, set in and around Detroit, remove just enough of the solid foundation from beneath her characters to render their footholds on life unsteady. Some characters, like the white Detroit teenagers in "Stealing Trees," imperil themselves without outside help, slinking into a ghetto to filch trees they plan to replant elsewhere. More quirky, even divinely foolish, is the titular Angel Thomas of the second story who botches his between-lives assignments and suffers a series of unpleasant lives as a result, until he breaks free from the cycle, possibly into something far worse. The remaining pieces form a novel-in-stories about the Zito family, all but one told by daughter Annie. Of these, "Burning," "Waiting" and the title story stand alone brilliantly. These stories capture family love, personal tragedy and swelling disillusionment as preadolescent Annie steps into adulthood during the Detroit 1967 riots, learning that even her strong father can't make all things in the world safe and right. From there, we watch her father fall precipitously through infidelity, Annie's brother try to adjust to the loss of his legs, another brother try to obliterate his crack habit, and Annie herself lose a daughter immediately after childbirth. Ms. Beattie has said she admires stories that yield the "surprise" of a recognizable world freshly rendered. In Ms. Lenzo's collection that surprise is everywhere.