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## **ESCAPES: STORIES**

**By Joy Williams**

*Atlantic Monthly Press. 180 pp.*

Our best contemporary story writers erase the line between prose and poetry, and each does it in his or her unique way. Alice Munro, like Frost, creates a universe of depth beneath her visible surface. Lee K. Abbott, like Dylan Thomas, wraps sensation in a dazzling swirl of language. Ann Beattie, like Keats, stuns with her inevitably perfect choice of words.

Since her 1973 novel *State of Grace*, Joy Williams has been numbered among our most poetic fiction writers, and in this her second story collection she exemplifies what her Iowa Writers' Workshop classmate Raymond Carver meant when he said, "Short stories are closer in spirit to poems than they are to novels." Each of her stories is a flash of light catching an exposed human soul. Each story gathers its meaning from the cumulative swell of its images.

Carver's comment comes from his introduction to *Best American Short Stories 1986* which included Williams' ironically titled, "Health," contained in this new collection. Yet "health" is the last thing this book is about. Were it not that the creation of an exquisite artwork is itself a supreme act of affirmation, this would be a volume of wrist-slashing despair.

In the O. Henry Award-winning "Rot," Lucy watches her husband, Dwight, 25 years her senior, pull an ancient rusting Ford Thunderbird into their driveway. Determined to preserve his old car as well as his old girlfriends, Dwight knocks down a living room wall and moves the car into the house. But it is hopeless, his mechanic tells him. The car "is full of rust and rot. Rust is a living thing, it breathes, it eats and it is swallowing up your car. . . . How can I save you from your innocence and foolishness and delusions. . . . Once rot, then nothing." The car is the central metaphor in a story filled with imagery of decay and the ravages of time, of rusting bodies and organ transplants and amputated legs. At its center, Lucy and Dwight face conflicting terrors about time. To him it is a force to stand toe-to-toe against in doomed battle. To her, aware "that something has robbed this world of its promise," time is an inevitability to be raced against. In either case, time becomes a tragedy looming inexorably before and beside us.

In most of these stories people search for escapes—in alcohol, magic shows, tanning parlors, death—from the knowledge that they are lost and cannot be saved, from time, loneliness, the terror of everyday life. Modern life, Tom realizes in "The Skater," is like ancient myth where "there were two ways to disaster. One of the ways was to answer an unanswerable question. The other was to fail to answer an answerable question." Williams' world is an agonizing labyrinth offering no escape, not even in the places where it used to exist.

Escape does not lie in art, certainly. In "Gurdjieff in the Sunshine State" a haunted wanderer in Florida, possessed by fear of Germans and Thugs, views life as a play in which we are like horses, mistreated and spiritless, driven by a cruel and ignorant coachman, tugging a carriage in need of repair. In Gurdjieff's world to think or show compassion causes us to go crazy and to do neither leaves us in a living death. Standing before daVinci's *The Holy Family* in the Louvre, Gurdjieff can only yell, "I see the vulture, do you see the vulture!" In "Health," 12 year-old tubercular Pammy had watched a chunk of a Goya fall off the canvas and land at her feet. Even "clouds aren't as pretty as they used to be."

Nor does escape lie in love. Here, love is "hopeless," trust is holy only when it is misplaced, passion turns to fear, women marry because "when we first met I thought he knew a lot about love but now it's clear he knows only as much as I do," and life with such husbands becomes "a long twilight of drinking and listless anecdote." The most poignant image for what we love occurs to the dying Gloria in "The Little Winter" who has seen "decoys . . . objects designed to lure a living thing to its destruction with the false promise of safety, companionship and rest."

Half of the stories in this book have already appeared in *Best American Short Stories* and *O. Henry Award* collections, with good reason. "Bromeliads," using characters from Williams' earlier story "Taking Care," is a wrenching study of a man whose wife, daughter and even baby granddaughter are unable to partake in life and of how he shares his heart with them, as that seems to be all the heart that exists among the four. "Health" creates a brilliantly effective wash of images juxtaposing beauty and decay, its central preadolescent character moving through her life like "a party . . . [with] no one there but strangers" until she realizes she "can be seen but not discovered" in this chilling depiction of the anxiety and alienation of daily life.

Joy Williams' language, as always, is a poetic wedding of the surprising and the true. Men run "as though through rain, but there was no rain." A baby "looks severely at the toe and then stops looking at it without moving her eyes." A woman at an airport pay phone appears "the very picture of someone who recently had ceased to be cherished."

In these haunting tales "what it boils down to soul-wise is simple. If things cry, they got souls. If they don't, they don't." Yet underlying the anguish within them is the masterful percipience of Joy Williams the mature artist, itself always cause enough for hope and, most ironic title of all, joy.