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WIND: Stories

By Leigh Allison Wilson

William Morrow, 256 pages

In the title story from this strong collection the narrator's father tutors her in basketball: "'That jump shot was rejected by your opponent and he scored on a lay-up at the other end.'" The lesson makes an impression. "'Opponents' was his word. They were everywhere . . . alarmingly invisible. . . . They could ruin you, like evil spirits in the wind. . . . What it did was make me see the world the way my father saw it: a place full of danger you couldn't see, of forces at work like riptides against you."

Opponents are everywhere in this group of one long and five short stories. Whether the character is 10, 28 or 40, the opponent is often loneliness. Many of Wilson's characters are displaced, usually from Tennessee to upstate New York, and at its most frightening, their loneliness is amplified by a fear of aging, of growing old with no one at their side. Dale, the forlorn 40 year-old main character in "Obscene Callers," newly-abandoned by her husband, approaches a male neighbor simply because he is the only man in the world she is confident did not make an ominous call she'd just received. She invites herself along on a fishing trip this stranger is about to take only to wind up hours later lying desolate in the woods the victim of an assault, wondering what she could possibly have done to deserve her loneliness and abuse.

These are stories about trying to gain some control over a world that affords us little say in its capricious events, about driving toward a new life only to see a tornado churn up land and sky before your eyes, about single parents staving off empty hours with partners their children cannot stand, about women being deserted by men and by other women because of men, about our fear of "chaos."

Chaos is the opponent for Janice, the narrator of "Masse," the best of the shorter pieces. Janice drives a UPS truck by day and hustles pool games by night. She thinks in billiard images, owns a poster of Minnesota Fats and thinks smokestacks look like pool cues, for to her pool is the metaphor for her life. She wants to play the angles with control and finesse, but when the chaos of a genuine emotion enters the game she loses at both pool and intimacy.

With this collection, Leigh Allison Wilson pays the first note on the promise of her 1983 Flannery O'Connor Award-winning "From the Bottom Up," justifying the expectations of the many readers who found hers the most accomplished story in Debra Spark's important 1986 anthology of young writers, *20 Under 30*.

Her stories have admirable depth, a keen sensitivity to the distances between people and our chary hope to bridge those distances. Wilson's greatest talent, though, is how vividly she brings her characters to life. She has a gift for voices that faintly echoes Bobbie Ann Mason, whether the voice is cliché-ridden like Aileen's in "Missing Persons" or breezy like Janice's in "Masse." But she approaches her characters with more compassion and affection than Mason, and we find ourselves caring about them more.

She conveys their pain and fear in a tone often richly comic. "My vision is a comic one," Wilson has said, "possibly because . . . it is one way of being deadly serious without being deadly dull. Mostly, it's because I can't help it. . . . The comic is a way of approaching things without despairing of them."

By far the most gripping piece in this book--novella in length but story in design--is "WIND." The story's length allows Wilson to show her range of insight, as when fifteen year-old Harriet reflects on her pretty and flirtatious 13 year-old sister: "I . . . could barely speak coherently to strangers, made friends only with difficulty, and didn't understand the ways of men and women. And, of course, Ann knew that, too, which is probably why her flirtations bothered me. You could call it a rivalry, but you'd be wrong. Two people who have certain abilities for completely different things--even things like living their own lives--can't compete. They can make each other miserable, but they can't compete."

This sense of nuance appears in character after character, and, with the rest of this book's virtues, leads us to suspect that Wilson belongs to a select group--one that includes Mona Simpson, Lorrie Moore, Madison Smartt Bell--those remarkably accomplished writers who have just moved past their thirtieth birthdays and whose greatest work still lies ahead.