

Joy Williams is the author of five novels and four short story collections. Among her many honours are a National Book Critics Circle Award, the Kirkus Prize for Fiction, the Paris Review's Hadada Award as well as nominations for the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award.

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'Among the strangest, most exciting authors at work today' *Daily Mail*

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Concerning
the Future *of*
SOULS

99 Stories of Azrael

JOY WILLIAMS



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For DD

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Concerning
the Future *of*
SOULS

1

THEY LIVED IN NEW YORK CITY IN AN APARTMENT overlooking a park. It was the park, his parents said. You were always supposed to say *the* park. His father was sick. He began being sick a year before when he had laryngitis. His father had been interested in the sickness for awhile but now he was not. His mother had never wanted to understand it and did not want to learn anything about the machines his father required. This was not because she didn't love his father, he was told. People who knew the machines and how to care for them came in every day but they did not spend the night. His father spoke little to his mother but he would talk to him in his strange new voice. He did not like it. He did not like trying to talk to

his father about school or soccer or the doorman's puppy which he had only seen pictures of anyway.

Every few weeks they would leave the city and visit his grandmother who lived with her brothers in a large house by the ocean. You could not see the ocean except for a tiny part of it and even that sometimes disappeared. Everyone in the house was old—or *elderly* was a word he had learned—and there were no children anywhere. Still, he did not mind these visits, he was somewhat hypnotized by them in fact.

They didn't seem to know each other well though they must have known each other better than anyone else. They would make popcorn for him in a pot on the stove and not the microwave. They didn't have a microwave. His mother had confided in him once that his father's family were rich oddballs and that their home was full of kitsch.

"Kitsch," his mother had explained, "isn't in itself beautiful but instead elicits its emotion from the beauty it depicts. Like that black ceramic panther in the bookcase."

"I love that panther," he said.

“Of course you don’t love it,” his mother said.

He did and one of his great uncles had given it to him but he broke it playing with the necklace it wore and he did not cry.

They showed him a photograph of his father as a boy. When he was the same age you are, they told him. His father’s eyes were dark, even disbelieving. He wanted to ask what he had been looking at, though he did not, because he didn’t believe it either.

KITSCH

2

WHAT IS YOUR NAME?

Alph.

Ralph?

Alph.

How do you spell that?

A. L. P. H. as in: *Alph the sacred river ran through caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea.*

I don't think you're right for this position.

HUMAN RESOURCES

3

HE HAD FOUR THOUSAND WINGS. THIS was simply a fact. The feathers of each wing—innumerable. As they should be. The wings sheltered the souls so they could not be viewed in transit. This too was correct. He also had a thousand eyes but not, as has been rumored, four heads. Azrael was spectacularly made and looked nothing like Jesus as was so tirelessly depicted though in truth the Nazarene was not at all as rendered either. Jesus and Azrael were not well acquainted. They traveled in different circles. Jesus was surprisingly unfamiliar with death other than his own.

The birds of the air were terrified of Azrael. His murmurs of assurance were incomprehensible

to them. Their bones were hollow and filled with
air. The sweetest air. Wasn't that enough?

IN LOVELY BLUE . . .
AROUND WHICH LIES MOST
LOVING BLUE . . .

*Hölderlin

4

THE DEVIL WAS ONCE CALLED SON OF THE Morning. He was the Morning Star.

Now he was a sop, a concession, an after-thought . . .

But this was just the inner voice talking, the still small voice, that little piece of God caught inside him like a fish bone, trying to make him feel bad. This was just God, who hadn't gotten over him and never would. He threw him out of heaven so he could reside on earth, what kind of reasoning was that? God had let jealousy overcome Him. Pique! He must have blanked out. And in the Devil's estimation, He had never blanked on again. He had doubled down in the loving-the-little-human-children department at

the expense of everything else. It was all so credulous and sentimental and people just lapped it up. Such love could not be overjustified. The situation was unsustainable.

The Devil clawed a bit at the site of the lodged fish bone which was hardly a torment but more than an irritation. His heart beat on unperturbed. He had a good strong heart still, one that had never given him any trouble.

MORNING STAR

5

A DREAMER IS DREAMING.

Two young men visit him. They are thin and blond. They wear jeans and a somewhat foreign looking blousy garment.

They are here, they tell him.

They lead him into a large arena with clean sawdust on the floor. It is pleasantly bright but he's unsure as to where the light is coming from. The windows that he notices are covered with black cloth or paper.

There they are, they tell him.

Two elephants stand in one corner, their trunks entwined. His instinct is to speak, to ask a question but then he feels it is better to be quiet. He is quiet.

Touch them, one of the angels says.

He makes his way toward the elephants. He walks and walks. The light never wavers though surely darkness has fallen by now.

OPPORTUNITY

6

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT PHILOSOPHER theologians of Western Europe in the high Middle Ages was the Franciscan John Duns Scotus. He wrote on grammar, logic, and metaphysics and was praised for the nuance and complexity of his thought. Two of his most dazzling and beautiful concepts concerned *Haecceity* and the *Univocity of Being*. Haecceity is the “thisness” of every thing, that quality in all which is individualizing, particular. The Univocity of Being is the argument that we all are one in the oneness of God. All life—water, trees, animals—participate in the same Being and that Being is holy.

Certain renditions of Scotus show him wearing a snug vaguely conical hat and it might be more

than legend that he believed this assisted in the retention of metaphysical wisdom. His Franciscan followers, the Dunsmen, wore headgear that somewhat exaggerated the conical shape. By the 16th century the ideas of Renaissance humanism prevailed in European thought with its emphasis on the self and the centrality of the human in the cosmos. The philosophy of Scotus was mocked. Duns (the simple village of his birth in Scotland) became a word of scorn and dunce a contemptuous term for someone dabbling in sophistry and incapable of true scholarship. The Dunsmen's tell-tale hats were depicted by the enemies of Scotus' thought as more and more preposterous and elongated, a witch or wizard's adornment. It was considered quite the opportunity for mirth, the idea of Univocity.

DUNCE

7

PYRRHULOXIAS NEST EARLY AMONG THE THORNS, building neatly of twigs, coarse grasses and fine fibers for lining. If you approach too near they voice a worried little purring “cheek cheek” full of plaintive friendliness. No one can hear that sound and remain unmoved.

PLEA

**Birds of the Southwestern Desert*

Gusse Thomas Smith

8

SHE WAS LYING ON SOFT SHEETS IN AN OLD motel on the beach. The day was sunny and fresh with a clean sea breeze. It was the past, but she was immersed in it in the present. It was wonderful. She didn't mind in the slightest that her friends weren't there. But then she started thinking about whales and grew sad. There were no whales here, the waters were too warm and shallow, but there were sharks. These were killed whenever seen. By the pool there was a red Coca-Cola machine with an endless supply of cold Cokes. In the room, above the bed, was a print of *Foxes and Geese* by

Johann Heinrich the Elder Tischbein. She'd had to look it up, what it was. A peculiar choice for an old beach motel. Someone here was being a little eccentric, she thought. They were about to tear the place down any minute and they had actually. She had come here with friends or, in any case, a number of people she knew, but now she was alone, thinking about whales, worrying about them. They were in terrible danger. She couldn't grasp the enormity of the whale, the extraordinariness of their lives. Her own life had been quite unmysterious, but a whale's life in the ocean! Amazing. *Sound never ceases* in the water. She'd learned that in school and it stuck. Funny, certain things, the way they do after years and years. The depths were not silent at all. There was always sound—ticking and groaning and singing and shattering and the whales heard and comprehended it all. Whales did no harm and were possessors of the ocean's meaning. But they

were being slaughtered. Oh she didn't want to be thinking this. What if this were the last thing she'd be given to think?

ASYLUM

*In vain do they flee. No
longer have they any asylum
but in nothingness.*

* Bernard Germain de Lacépède
The Natural History of the Cetaceans

9



THIS IMAGE IS NO
LONGER AVAILABLE

10

ON SEPTEMBER 12, 2021, FOURTEEN HUNDRED dolphins in dozens of family pods were killed in the Faroe Islands. They'd been herded by motorboats, jet skis and all manner of personal watercraft into a bay to be slaughtered on the beach. This was not commercial whaling, this was a community event, a cherished custom that rather got out of hand. Six times more dolphins were killed in a single day than an entire year. Usually it's pilot whales who are tapped for this free food but a large number of dolphin were sighted by some mariner on September 12 and the community went delirious with excitement. As part of this cherished tradition there are people on shore poised to dispatch the gifts of the sea with an implement called a

spinal lance which is said to reduce killing time to One—well possibly two—second(s) but there weren't enough butchers on the beach—it's always more fun to be on the boats—and so very many desperate and terrified and dying mammals that the One (possibly two) second refinement of the spinal lance couldn't be humanely applied.

The intoxicating orgy of killing will have to serve as its own reward for no one can really say how much of the flesh was processed and distributed to grateful Faroe Islanders. Or what was done with the carcasses of the families. There might be a tradition of respectful disposal though this is not likely. The remains were probably just dumped into the blood black sea.

SENTIENCE

11

Why not?

MAY THE JUDGMENT NOT BE
TOO HEAVY UPON US

*T.S. Eliot

12

SOME THOUGHT THAT AZRAEL WAS THE angel God had sent to earth to bring back the dust from which he would make a human. Azrael did not believe he was the one so chosen. Surely he would have remembered such a strange journey! Lost in the fogs of storytelling now—the identity of the one who delivered to God the fateful dust.

Anything else? the angel, whoever he was, might well have asked.

No, God said. Just dust.

Everyone assumed that He knew what he was going to do with it. One of God's favorite elements was water so that would undoubtedly be involved in turning dust into whatever He had in mind,

but what else might be added the angels had not a clue. Maybe nothing. The Divine was rumored to like working with very little.

. . . WHO ARE WE? WE ARE ALL
MADE OF MUD . . . WE ARE FULL OF
IT, WE ARE NOTHING BUT MUD.

*John Calvin

Dieu

13

THE DEVIL'S FAVORITE PARABLE CONCERNED the man who came to the marriage feast for the king's son but was not dressed properly and was thrown out. In general he preferred knowledge vs. understanding teachings and this one, where the pretender was cast weeping into the outer dark, was one of the best.

MATTHEW

22:2-14

14

HE BROUGHT HER A BUNCH OF SUNFLOWERS and a package of discounted hot cross buns for that day had passed. She found a jar that contained a few pickles, dumped them out and stuffed the flowers in. The effect managed to be splendid. She allowed the buns a plate.

He spoke about his despair.

"No, really," he said.

"If you take your life . . ." she began.

He laughed. "It sounds like marriage."

"It is a marriage," she said. "Like no other."

She looked at him stubbornly and he realized she'd been drinking. He stuffed a stale bun in his mouth. "Do you have any whiskey to go with this?" he asked.

She brought out a bottle of whiskey and they
drank and ate the Easter buns.

WYRD

15

IN THE BEGINNING HE WANTED TO WRITE poetry because he had fallen in love with words. What the words stood for was of secondary importance. "I tumbled for words at once," he said. His poems can be enjoyed without understanding them in the slightest. His later work tended to be a bit showy however. He adored drinking. His wife Caitlin adored drinking as well and once remarked that the bar was their altar. Sometimes he would get the shakes or what he called the horrors when abstractions—triangles, squares, circles and cones—would descend upon him. Earlier in the night that he fell into a coma, he claimed that he had drunk eighteen whiskeys at his favorite New York tavern but the bartender said this was

an exaggeration and he had only drunk eight. The cause of his death at thirty-nine was acute alcoholic encephalopathy with pneumonia and emphysema contributing. His gravemarker is nothing fancy.

His name is inscribed, followed by, R.I.P.

DYLAN THOMAS SPOKE NO WELSH

16

WHEN AZRAEL WAS AN INFANT HIS SIRE would sing *Ghost Riders in the Sky* to him at bedtime. His sire had a beautiful singing voice and Azrael could thrillingly picture the Devil's cattle with red and blazing eyes and hooves of steel stampeding across the heavens with the weary cowboys damned to pursue them for all eternity. These were cowboys who had lived an ungodly life and had never changed their ways when they'd been given multiple opportunities to do so. Azrael summoned up his courage and asked the Devil once if his stupendous and tireless herd were entirely red (as he had always imagined) and what did *yippie i oh yippie i ay*

mean anyway? but the Devil was in one of his moods and just ignored him.

THE DEVIL'S HERD

17

ONE OF THE TRIPS SHE'D ALWAYS WANTED TO take—she didn't understand why exactly—was to Australia. She intended to experience the interior, not the coast. She wanted to climb the red Uluru. She found the surround ghastly—the tour buses, the viewing areas, the crowds and suppers of barbequed emu and kangaroo, the dreadful wine. Still, she felt fortunate that she'd been able to climb Uluru because the aborigines—whom she found interesting though it was difficult to know much about them—had been considering closing the sacred prominence to visitors. This was for the usual reasons—the littering, defecating, and engaging in sex on the trail, as well as knocking off fragments of the half-billion-year-old stone for