

DIANE WILLIAMS WILL NEVER BE DUTIFUL

Williams can write startling things about sex, relationships, and family. But her real project is to test the limits of fiction itself.

By Merve Emre

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“If I’m afraid while I’m writing, I think I do better work,” Williams said. Photographs by Meghan Marin for The New Yorker

The short-story writer and editor Diane Williams is often described in epic terms. Jonathan Franzen hails her as “one of the true living heroes of the American avant-garde.” Ben

Marcus calls her “a hero of the form: the sudden fiction, the flash fiction.” What does it mean to be a hero? “I was proud of myself like a hero should be proud, who risks her life, or who doesn’t risk her life, but who saves somebody, anybody!” Williams writes, in her story “Marriage and the Family.”

I would describe Williams as the writer who saved my life—or my soul, if one believes that such a thing exists. Williams began publishing fiction in her forties, after stints as a dancer and a textbook editor, and after raising two children in Chicago. Her early collections, “This Is About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate” (1990) and “Some Sexual Success Stories Plus Other Stories in Which God Might Choose to Appear” (1992), speak with savage comedy about how “dutiful” women repress their sexual desires and ambitions, and how they respond to the annihilating demands of husbands, lovers, and children. Her later collections, more playful and metafictional, reveal how fear and pleasure assert themselves in domestic situations: the terror of confronting a squirrel sporting a stern erection, the rapture of having sex with a woman named Diane Williams. Now, at the age of seventy-five, Williams is releasing her tenth collection, “How High?—That High” (Soho Press). Her work turns increasingly to the small cruelties of death and aging, yet the pain of living is always lightened by its absurdity, the sheer dumb luck of simply existing.

“One of the most deeply felt reasons I do my work is that I do not want to speak the way I am speaking,” Williams told me recently, of her reluctance to grant long interviews. Her stories, many no longer than a page, suggest that what is left unsaid between people remains more powerful than what they have the capacity to articulate. Williams studied with Gordon Lish (and, before that, with Philip Roth), but her minimalism is distinctive for its sublimity and its spirituality, its ability to evoke the laws of a world apart. One can see the influence of her convictions in the pages of *NOON*, the magazine that she edits out of her apartment in New York, which publishes some of the most interesting short-story writers working in English: Lydia Davis, Christine Schutt, Anya Yurchyshyn, Vi Khi Nao, Kathryn Scanlan, Gary Lutz, Lara Pawson, Lucie Elven, and Souvankham Thammavongsa, to name only a few. Williams and I spoke three times over Zoom, and we corresponded by e-mail regularly over several months. Our conversations have been combined and edited for length and clarity.

What compelled you to start writing fiction in your early forties?

Oh, God, I want to say I’ve forgotten! Because sometimes I have forgotten, and it spooks me—but I can go back and remember.

I wanted answers to questions I didn’t know how to ask. I felt quite unloved and failed. I read

books and this led to probes that had stalled out after university. I read Freud, which brought me to Jung, to psychology, philosophy, anthropology, history. I gave myself permission to have over-the-top ambitions—to tackle the big mysteries of life—to heal myself, educate myself. And I believed that I could speak as noisily as anyone who had ever spoken.

You said that you wanted answers. What were the questions you wanted answers to?

Those eternal questions: Is there a god? If so, what sort of god? What are we here for? How to live a good life? I had had a religious education, but that was shattered, too.

How?

The indoctrination proved to be too thin. It was parochial and sexist: dutiful daughter, wife, dutiful person. God is benign, and so forth.

What is the opposite of being dutiful?

The opposite is being a wild person. And you can be a wild person on the page. I have always felt that this is my obligation, to permit the wild person access to the page.

Why be a wild person on the page instead of a wild person off it?

You can't be a wild person in life. That's insanity. I have no interest in insanity. I do have an interest in being in a loving relationship. How do you do that? Find stability, have the most joyful and productive life possible?

In life, I am eager for sanity, courtesy, happiness, love. Others may have a taste for more adventure.

And how do you give the wild person inside access to the page?

Deliver a person who will recklessly tell the truth, for one thing. Nice manners are of no use here. Attempt to bring the lawless region of dreaming forward, while trying to maintain the plausibility of waking life.

I haven't much patience with the surreal in fiction, or with science fiction, which is the surefire way to welcome the wild. I'm much more interested in following the adventures of people who barely manage or bravely manage the circumstances that we're all stuck in. I have profound admiration for those writers who seamlessly bind the unbelievable to a world we recognize. Both Isaac Bashevis Singer and John Cheever work these wonders. I read somewhere—John Cheever discussing how best to perform this magic, what he learned from John le Carré. It was to introduce a homely and humble object into the vicinity of the fantastic. A grimy woman's girdle,

for instance.

But wildness usually encompasses the unspeakable—an insistence on speaking what is too difficult to speak about. When one reaches this point of “Oh, no, *that’s what it was!*” there is horror. But then there’s relief and sometimes triumph—I’ve made something out of my wound.

Everything you’ve just told me about your philosophy of writing—would you also impress this upon a writer you were editing?

We are always measuring plausibility and authority. And, yes, I very often say, “You have to go deeper. You have barely climbed the ladder for the dive.” Sometimes, when I fear the writer is never going to come up with the ending, a new title can save the day.

Your stories have astonishing, sometimes very funny titles: “My Female Honor Is of a Type.” “Oh, My God, the Rapture!” “The Real Diane Williams Has Captured the Whole of Freud.” “Pussy.” “The Fuck.” “The Penis Had Been Plenty Decent.” Why is that?

The title is one’s first chance—*Please listen to me!* It’s a beckoning, the first opportunity to bewitch after I’ve written a story, done all this work. Here’s the opportunity to create more implication and latitude.

Gordon Lish used to exhort us with “If you want to piss with the big dogs” Which felt quite sexist, but was still, for me, exhilarating at the time.

What do you do if you want to piss with the big dogs?

You must have massive intent. You must have high ambition.

I once wrote a story set in a baseball park, which I think is one of my best. Gordon read it and said, “I like this, too, but you should set this one in the kitchen!”

Why was it supposed to be set in a kitchen?

I was agitated. His advice made no sense and I didn’t take it. I assumed he was playing with me. But there was a book on my shelf—still there now!—“The Origins of European Thought,” the subtitle of which is “About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate.” And I thought, I’ll show you! I’ll show everybody! I titled my first book “This Is About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate.”

That’s how you piss with the big dogs.

Yes.

Has the way you think about yourself as an editor been shaped by how Lish was as an editor? By your experiences with him?

Yes, definitely. I use lessons learned from him every day. When, years ago, Gordon took up a story of mine, perhaps retitled it, trimmed it, even altered the ending, I was fascinated and grateful for these deepening effects. Now when I can do this for others and this collaboration is joyfully received—this is a happy day.

I do a lot of invasive work, too. Apparently, invasive editing is a dirty secret. I think that's sad. It should be celebrated as a serendipitous collaboration between the writer and the editor. If it were not seen as one ego subjecting another, but as one elevating another, it would be applauded.

Why do you think writers feel that a relationship with an editor is a contest of egos?

Well, the relationship is hopeless if they don't share the same aesthetic perspective. I give my work in progress to Christine Schutt and consider myself extremely lucky. Of course, who wants to receive bad news? A transition is faulty, an ending is flat. It's just crushing. I think, Why didn't I see that? I've been doing this for so long. How could I not see that and someone else could? She is stronger, I am weaker. It's a torment.

But there is a consolation I can offer to myself and others: few writers achieve this longed-for mastery. Uneven results are the rule.

I am always shocked by how the possibility of violence and the promise of sex coexist in your stories—for instance, in “The Nature of the Miracle,” a story about marriage and infidelity.

What is the relationship between violence and sex for you?

Ah, the fusion of fear and desire nearly ruined my life. I think it's a disability that most of us have to learn about: if desire is only present when you're terrified, then any kind of happiness in love—or any kind of happiness, period—is doomed. There came a time when I thought, I can't live like this anymore. What can I do? But the condition had been mine for years and years. I knew I wasn't going to escape it with any kind of ease.

And there are often young children in your stories who are, on the one hand, innocent bystanders, and, on the other hand, bloodthirsty in their own way, “looking as if they could kill for a couple of seconds.” What are the children doing amid the debilitating relationship between sex and violence?

What are they doing? I can't answer your question without pointing to stories I've written that bear on this, such as “Baby” and “Dropping the Masters,” in my first book. Also “Boys!,” from my early

era, and “What Is Given with Pleasure and Received with Admiration?” in the new book.

There’s a phrase that repeats in “The Nature of the Miracle”: “The way one thing leads to another.” It appears three times in that story: “I could run home to my marriage afterward, which is what I did before, after we were done with each other; and the way one thing leads to another in my mind, this means I should run to the man for more of it, but the way one thing leads to another, first I will tell my husband, ‘I would not choose you for a friend,’ then I will run to the other man, so that I can hear him say the same thing to me.’”

And the story begins with a bottle of water exploding all over the kitchen—an apparently unconnected event, but telling nevertheless. There’s something funny and unsettling in the idea that people’s minds have their own internal logic, so that what appears illogical to one person is completely sensible to another.

Well, this narrator’s logic is not productive, but it’s mesmerizing and catastrophic. I love to read that story because it feels like a song. There was a real moment in my real kitchen when I’d lost hold of a bottle of water, and I thought I’d lost my way. Ours was a big kitchen—narrow and long. I was so amazed by what that bottle on the fly could do, by its great trajectory. It felt declarative. It felt fateful. It was visually stunning. How do you lose your grip on the neck of a bottle?

This is why I never drink sparkling water.

And in those days the water was in a bright-green glass bottle.

But what you’re describing, of course, is also the horror, the sublimity, of seeing a relationship shatter irreparably. I don’t think your mind is messy in how it tracks that shattering. The way you’ve explained the logic, given the context, makes a great deal of sense to me.

But I don’t often think like that, so when I do I am startled. My thoughts are usually unhelpful and refrain-like. I treasure logic, but it’s not on my mind when I’m composing, certainly.

I think the logic of your humor works in two ways, as we see in the story “Baby,” which is set at a child’s birthday party: “Nobody was getting up close to me, whispering, ‘Do you get a lot of sex?’ Nobody was making my mouth fall open by running his finger up and down my spine, or anything like that, or talking dirty about dirty pictures . . . Nobody was saying, ‘Everybody has slept with my wife, because everybody has slept with everybody, so why don’t we sleep together?’ so I could say it last, ‘Yes, please. Thank you for thinking of me.’ I would be polite.”

On the one hand, you have the possibility of sex and violence intruding into scenes that are polite. And, on the other hand, you have sex and violence, which are supposed to be sort of wild

and irrepressible, becoming polite occasions, eliciting polite responses. The word “polite” really struck me, as there’s something very funny about the decorous behavior in your story. How funny it is to be polite. How ridiculous it is to be civilized.

Yes, but also who wants to be shamed? Shame, I think, is the huge haunting factor in those stories. I didn’t want to be shamed, and I desperately wanted to be good. I once had huge ambitions to be appropriate—a word that I now see clutters my first book of stories. But that version of myself gave way to calamity.

No one was getting up close to you whispering, “Do you get a lot of sex?”

Somebody did at the time that I wrote that story. My life had drastically changed. On the page, at any rate, I went into the realm of the amoral.

But your stories aren’t amoral. You still retain the question of what it is to be good.

Well, I do think this alternate world can be anarchic—or evil, if you believe in evil. I think I do believe in evil.

Do you believe in evil in these ordinary situations? The situations you’re depicting, they don’t lend themselves to evil in a kind of grand sense. There’s the imagining of murder and violence, but they rarely come to pass.

Well, there’s the murderous advice in my story “What Is It When God Speaks?,” when the omniscient narrator suggests that a father should fling his daughter off his shoulders and smash her to the ground. So how do you want to characterize that?

It recalls one of God’s most infamous demands, that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac.

Exactly. That’s the tale I’ve heard over and over again, discussed and belabored on High Holy Days. The rabbi’s sermon on this subject never made any sense to me. Implausible exertions to excuse the inexcusable: the sacrifice of a child. What was ever going to redeem that?

What’s extraordinary about that story is its idyllic quality: a group of people sit in “tender” light on a porch, with “the handsomest man” and “the most beautiful woman” smiling at each other as their daughter plays nearby. And you think, This isn’t a Diane Williams story. Why are these people happy and serene? But then there’s that last line, when the man wonders if he should fling the child to the ground, and the voice of God responds: “He should.” You’re completely stunned because you don’t know where that voice came from. It just speaks through the clouds. What does it mean to be the voice of God in that situation?

Oh, I loved it. It's heady to be omnipotent. I might have shut God up, but I didn't. And I don't know why I didn't. I always find that stirring when I reread the story. Why didn't I? Why?

I've been wondering why I take on a male voice so often. My story "To Die" is one of my favorites to read publicly. It's narrated by a tyrant who believes he has everything he's ever wanted, but there should be so much more for him that he cannot conceive of. I get so excited speaking his lines, even as he offers himself up for slaughter at the tale's end. I do enjoy turning the tables on myself, but I'm afraid that a male voice also feels much more powerful than my own, that I'm power crazy. Girls are more often than not born doomed. I was.

Do you think that's still true? Do you think we're still doomed?

Worldwide? Yes.



“Wildness usually encompasses the unspeakable—an insistence on speaking what is too difficult to speak about.”

One of my favorite of your techniques is when you have a character or narrator who’s speaking about Diane Williams. “How much fun I had with my prick up inside the great Diane Williams.” “To my surprise, Diane Williams wants me to hold her fucking ass.” Can you talk about that? It’s quite brave.

A very frightening tactic. And it's unbearable to read one of these stories in public, yet I do. Duty bound. Put my mouth where my credo is—what a jumble!

But if I'm afraid while I'm writing, I think I do better work. Have you ever listened to men disparage women they've slept with? "I can't believe I slept with that thing." I must have thought it was my duty to think on this. God! Dutiful again!

The idea of thinking about yourself as a character, or imagining yourself in another person's life, from his point of view, is one that Katherine Mansfield uses to great effect in "Feuille d'Album," a story I know we both admire. In it, an artist named Ian French sees a girl in the building opposite his and begins to fantasize about her. One day, he follows her when she's out, sees her buy an egg in a shop, goes inside after she leaves, and then follows her home. While she searches for her key at her front door, he says, "Excuse me, Mademoiselle, you dropped this." And he hands her an egg.

I think about this Mansfield ending a lot. It springs a trap.

What kind of a trap?

It's a Magritte-like trick. He was my favorite painter for a time, and he revelled in the double take. A very plain example: there's a wonderful self-portrait he did, a photograph, in which he holds a framed portrait of a woman's face in front of his head. And the woman's head is perfectly positioned in order to become his own. And there's his tableau "Recollection of Travels III," in which an open window reveals a cave wall of rough boulders. The interior window shutters are made of stone. The table, its tablecloth, a book, a bowl of fruit, the floor—all stone.

Thirty years ago, I had a dream in which everything I could see was made of stone, so I was astonished when I first saw this Magritte image. And this dream of mine was telling. It helped convince me to leave the Midwest and move to New York City.

So the double-take tactic is: seduce a stranger with an object that is alluring and familiar, then spring the trap. The viewer is perplexed, and the artist, in this way, gains time. Stay with me. Don't go away. You have never seen this or been here before!

The egg is a trap for both the reader and the woman, isn't it? Both are perfect strangers, the former to the narrator, the latter to Ian French.

Yes, although I find this very hard to talk about. I get mixed up. And that's why this interests me so much. I return to what is bewildering. The young man makes an impossible statement, holding the egg in front of the woman and saying, "You dropped this." Of course, she knows she didn't

drop it.

Part of what traps us is that we are left hanging, desperate to know what happens next. Your stories do this, too: teasing the reader to the point of absolute frenzy and then refusing to consummate. It's awful!

Isn't this the human condition, though? We're just completely smothered in mystery, and desperate to understand, and we never will.

The Mansfield story leaves the reader right on the edge of illusion and dissolution. Do you think about your stories in that way? "Upper Loop," the story that opens your new collection, reads as such: "I'm trying to think if there's any reason for having fun anymore on any level? I know that that's not the kind of thing people usually talk about. God forbid—so I scale the roof all the way to the ridge and I have never had to come down." The idea of not coming down seems to leave us in the same place as the end of "Feuille d'Album."

I came up with that line accidentally, and I was shocked. "Never come down?" Well, a person could say that, but could a person believe that? It's the ultimate untethering—something that puts you into an alternate way of thinking or being. And, of course, that's the great dream. It's what inspires me to do my work—that, if I keep at it, I won't have to come down. That's my view of my vocation.

That helps me understand "A Worthy Companion," another story from the new collection, which Christine Schutt described as "the better love story that you had to write." It's about a wedding, a marriage, that seems happy, which is unusual for you. And this sentence appears about toward the end: "In every language there is a story like this—how sometimes people will step out to get a boost from the gist of things."

It made me think that what lets you get that boost, what lets you stay high, suspended in the upper loop, is your work. And that's the better love story: not marriage, because we know enough about your writing to say that's not it, but your relationship with language.

Well, I could not have thought of that myself. I consider this a gift!

But what did you have in mind?

A much more conventional idea. These people are elated, toasting each other. There's laughter, singing. It's like a Paul McCartney song. "Here's a love song. I love you. Oh, we're in love." It's very easy.

I don't believe that coming from you. I don't believe it because it seems important, in this story,

that the marriage is said to have occurred after a funeral. Why that detail when we have this bright, beautiful day? The funeral throws a tiny wrench into this vision of happiness.

Well, yes, of course, there's the real world. There's the grieving and the wounding, the ragged selves that we bring to any kind of union. The suffering people that we all are.

Even the better love stories require a certain amount of illusion, of deception and forgetfulness.

I agree with that.

As I was rereading the new collection, I remembered that one of the funniest parts of your work is your epigraphs, which are marvellously deflating. Like the one that opens "Romancer Erector": "I must eat my dinner."—William Shakespeare."

That's Caliban speaking! When I see other people's epigraphs, I'm usually fascinated. Why did they pick it? And there's probably some envy. But when I think about my own books, I wonder: Why would I want to put somebody else's wisdom and poetry ahead of my own? I don't want to be upstaged on the very first page of my book!

And yet I never have any trouble finding an epigraph. I locate it instantaneously, I'm happy immediately. I usually laugh. This is mysterious.

That's wicked and I like it. And it gets to what we've talked about before—the sort of godliness of the author, their capacity to set up an artistic universe, where Shakespeare is just some schmuck talking about his dinner. And the real genius will begin to speak when his mouth is full.

That's very good.

When you create characters, do you think about their reality? Is that a criterion that is meaningful to you?

Well, a character is just little scratches of ink, and it's a long, painful wait until any of them is fortunate enough to take his or her first breath. For instance, the story I'm working on now is disappointing in the extreme because of the flimsiness of the whole thing. It's just so artificial. It's laborious to create the texture, the right details that will fool me into thinking, This is real. If I can't feel this way about what I've done, I don't want to do this work.

Traces of that agitation make their way into your stories, when narrators second-guess their word choices. For instance, in your novella "On Sexual Strength": "Blanche smoothed out her

blouse. Her blouse was very lavish. Lavish? I mean that her blouse was very large and very clean!" It's as if you're afraid that a single wrong word will throw the whole thing off.

It *will* throw the whole thing off. I have a lot of trouble with words, both on the page and off. As a girl, I remember my family waiting with impatience while I tried to say what I wanted to say. And, afterward, they appeared let down. But on the page I get to dawdle around until I get my word.

It seems like it would be impossible to sustain this in a novel. Do you think novel writers must be a little sloppy? Is it a requirement of the form?

Most are sloppy, yes. And one is forgiving if the author gets it right for long stretches.

Has anyone got it right through the whole stretch of a novel? Can you think of a single novel where every word feels perfectly placed to you?

"The Good Soldier." Kirsty Gunn's "Rain." Christine Schutt's novels. "The Pilgrim Hawk," by Glenway Wescott.

People are always asking me, "Why are your stories so short?" And I have a fantasy that, because I have been doing this for so many years, it'll get easier. That's part of the reason I can keep going back. There's always the possibility that, this time, it'll be different. This time, I'll sit down and just be able to write exquisite sentences, one after the other.

I do love a novel—the chance to become profoundly connected to people over time, while experiencing the sort of intimacy that it is dangerous to have in our own lives. And it's such a great escape! Take me away from where I am, and for a long, long time.

What you said about intimacy made me think about "On Sexual Strength." That novella, about a sexually insatiable husband and his long-suffering wife, has two exceptional lines that I want to ask you about. The first is when the husband looks out the window and sees a hawk: "I saw a hawk through the window lose its footing and fly." There's a wonderful contradiction between losing one's footing and flying.

And I delight in that contradiction. I am often watching birds take off and land on a school roof while I write. I also saw a red-tailed hawk perch nearby on a tall building's cornice, bearing up against an extra-strong wind. I think of a hawk as being athletic to a preternatural degree, but it does—we do—have to relinquish our foothold to take flight. This is true.

I am expressing anger here as well. I am not the bird of prey, in the real world; I am the frail prey. But in this fictional world I make the laws. This hawk—ready to soar—stumbles because I make the laws. It's a godlike statement, the voice of defiance and anger.

The second line, which comes soon after the husband observes the hawk and feels compelled to have sex with his wife, is “This is how love can be featured.” I’ve been thinking about this, bewildered, for several days now. What do you mean by “This is how love can be featured?”

Well, the husband’s lust has been aroused. “I sweated,” he says. He sees the claws of their pet dogs catch at his wife’s knees as they jump up on her. He then says, “It was like my trying to have a tender-hearted nature.” Next comes the husband’s comment: “This is how love can be featured.” And, fortunately, nothing I wrote here bewilders me.

Lovemaking—physical lovemaking—often feels nothing like any sentimental notion of love. It can be clumsy or fierce, yet we insist on calling it “making love.” We *can* call it “fucking.” But many prefer “making love,” which suggests a gentle engagement, soothing and inspiring. So, if this mode is not possible, exceptional skills might be a pleasurable alternative. I am certain there are people who make love in the most knowing and creative ways.

Do you really believe that?

I do. I think there are people who are quite professional about it and really, really good at it.



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