

Winter Chemistry:  
Joy Williams and the Art of Coldness

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Out of whose womb came the ice?  
And the hoary frost of heaven, who hath gendered it?  
–Job 38:29

A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.  
–Franz Kafka

The cold can teach us many things.  
–Joy Williams

## 1. Reading, Writhing

### 1.1 A certain coldness

In 2016, Joy Williams handed an interviewer a small, typewritten note, on which she had listed the eight essential attributes of the short story—and one way it differs from the novel:

- 1) There should be a clean clear surface with much disturbance below
- 2) An anagogical level
- 3) Sentences that can stand strikingly alone
- 4) An animal within to give its blessing
- 5) Interior voices which are or become wildly erratically exterior
- 6) Control throughout is absolutely necessary
- 7) The story's effect should transcend the naturalness and accessibility of its situation and language
- 8) A certain coldness is required in execution. It is not a form that gives itself to consolation but if consolation is offered it should come from an unexpected quarter.

A novel wants to befriend you, a short story almost never.<sup>1</sup>

We might first note what Joy Williams leaves out. We know we aren't reading some elementary guide to short stories, what with the usual mention of character and plot and setting. Nor are we reading the worn-out, Aristotelian talk of three-act this and that. Out even with the more practical, prescriptive guides, with their endless talk of "desire" and "opponent" and "self-revelation."<sup>2</sup> Williams's list is more poem than theory, more manifesto than manual. With it, she adds herself to that long line of writers who purportedly theorize a form but really theorize their own practice.<sup>3</sup> Williams's practice, at least as I see it, is oriented around an affective, aesthetic, and ethical *coldness*. This coldness is only explicitly mentioned in the eighth attribute, but all the attributes, in some way or another, serve it. This necessary coldness, then, is a kind of summary, or a promise—a promise kept.

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If the stories of Joy Williams were ice cream, every reader would be lactose intolerant. We'd eat them anyway, scoop after scoop, plastered on the couch, or, worse, in bed, seeking comfort and finding instead something that only resembles it. Commence the brain freeze, the stomach ache,

etc. But no, ice cream is sweet. Whatever happens afterwards, the moment of consumption guarantees comfort. Maybe ice itself is enough—a sheet of uncertain thickness atop a black lake. The surface is clean and clear. You put on a pair of skates and glide along, enchanted by that floating feeling but never unaware of the danger of falling onto, or through, the ice. That danger is part of the enchantment.

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In 2015, Joy Williams published *The Visiting Privilege*,\* an omnibus collection spanning forty stories and fifty years. Williams’s stories shimmer under a plain but severe prose style (see attributes #3 and #7). When summarized, they suggest only the gloss of realist domestic American banality—an old preacher, Jones, taking care of his sick wife; Jane and Jackson trying to sell their collie; a small boy, Tommy, crushing on his teenage brother’s ex-girlfriend. But, as when digging, deeper is darker. Dark as in bleak, but also dark in the literal sense—without light or sight. All is shadow and blur down here in the disturbed underbelly of Williams’s stories. Characters are loosely sketched, rarely described. Death flashes his cloak without reserve. “I’m dying,” says Jones’s wife, “It’s going to take me months to die.”<sup>4</sup> “I’m going to kill that dog,” Jane says, in front of her five-year-old son, while drunkenly stumbling across the living room to the kitchen, where she mixes Drano into ground beef (*VP* 37). Tommy, anyway, doesn’t miss his mom, who died in an absurd car accident: “The emergency vehicle [that caused the crash] had a destination but there hadn’t even been an emergency at the time” (*VP* 213).

In each of these stories, someone or something—a parent or child or spouse, plus an animal, always an animal (see attribute #2)—is dead or dying (the distinction matters, we’ll see<sup>5</sup>) though these deaths usually happen offscreen, occupying no more space than the bizarre details, the “minute particulars,”<sup>6</sup> that otherwise populate Williams’s stories. The rest of her characters

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\* After citing *The Visiting Privilege* once in the endnotes, I will cite it in-text as *VP*.

are bitter, baffled, bereaved, or some combination thereof, not to mention frequently subjected by their author to the copious ingestion of alcohol. As the narrator of the opening story puts it, “All objects here are perplexed by such grief” (*VP* 11). Perplexed, too, are the readers, or at least this one, reading and re-reading and wondering whether any of the death and dying adds up to anything. *Of course not*, I tell myself, while at the same time sensing that some particular message has been encrypted into the text so well that the code is impossible to crack (see attribute #2).

The closest we get to insight in these stories is via dialogue (see attribute #5), which briefly lifts us out of the highly restrained third-person narration characteristic of so many of Williams’s stories, the earlier ones especially. In speech, characters, especially minor ones, become off-kilter loose cannons of aphorism. A car mechanic, when asked whether a car is salvageable, tirades: “How can I make you nice people understand that it is hopeless? . . . [The car] is full of rust and rot. Rust is a living thing, it breathes, it eats and it is swallowing up your car. . . This brings us to the question, What is man? with its three subdivisions, What can he know? What ought he do? What may he hope?” (*VP* 140-141). The Marksman, an instructor of gun classes, warns his students: “[He] told the story about the barefoot, bare-chested madman with the machete on the steps of the capitol in Phoenix. This was his favorite story, illustrating as it did the difference between killing power and stopping power. The madman strode forward for sixteen seconds after he had been warned and his chest blown out. You could see daylight through his chest. You could see gum wrappers on the marble steps behind him right through his chest” (*VP* 303).

These “wildly erratically exterior” voices (see attribute #5)—voices like those of the mechanic and the Marksman—are sprinkled like gunpowder across Williams’s stories. Our gaze is all the fire they need. “Good writing never soothes or comforts,” Williams writes in an essay

on the craft. “It is no prescription, either is it diversionary, although it can and should enchant while it explodes in the reader’s face.”<sup>7</sup> But Williams’s control (see attribute #6) ensures these aphoristic tirades retain an uncertain relationship to each story as a whole. Her characters, no matter how polemical, rarely take over, nor are they mere mouthpieces for some underlying “moral.” The story in which the Marksman (briefly) appears, “Anodyne,” is not an instructional tale regarding the difference between killing and stopping power. Making it obviously so would compromise the anagogical layer (see attribute #2).

Dark, bleak, ruthless, disjointed, enigmatic—these are the words critics throw around when they talk about the work of Williams, and rightfully so. But despite her own repeated use of the word in interviews,<sup>8</sup> hardly anyone calls her work *cold*.<sup>9</sup> As I see it, coldness is its defining characteristic, that under which the other adjectives and attributes should fall. In her coldness, Williams radically opposes the empathy-based philosophy of reading espoused by the liberal humanist strain of American fiction writers and readers today. (I suspect this opposition may even account for Williams’s paltry scholarly attention among short story writers of her generation and acclaim.) By reckoning with her particular coldness, by paying close attention to how it operates—what kinds of feelings it seeks to evoke or avoid, what kinds of forms it takes, and, perhaps most importantly, what kinds of relations to others it suggests—we will discover the value of coldness, not as a model for living, but as a space of uncertainty to inhabit and learn within, as one might learn, for instance, within the uncertain realm of cruelty in art.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, I aim to discover something about the short story as a genre—putting to the test Williams’s claim that it is an inherently cold form, that its coldness imbues it with an ethics.

## 1.2 Thinking in odd and unemployable directions

To start, we need to define the cold. Normally, the cold is a lack: literally, a lack of heat; figuratively, a lack of feeling or affection toward another. Idiomatically, coldness acquires all sorts of related meanings. When we are indifferent, we give the cold shoulder. When we are doubtful, we get cold feet. When we are merciless, we act in cold blood. It goes without saying that coldness is hardly ever a pleasant thing.

In a weird way, this very unpleasantness twists itself into a kind of asset. Because coldness is a “conceptual metaphor”<sup>11</sup> that guides our thinking at a basic level, it is subject to metaphor’s “unconscious logic,”<sup>12</sup> a logic which is not without its biases. In “Cold Hard World/Warm Soft Mommy,” psychoanalyst Burton Melnick teases out some of the “implicit entailments” of coldness. These entailments are, in our moment, gendered. With the male, Melnick associates “cool or cold,” “dry,” “uncomfortable,” “unsympathizing,” “solid,” “dependable,” “precise,” “distinct,” “sharp (or sometimes blunt),” “made for effort and difficulty (‘hard’),” “penetrative (hard, sharp).” Conversely, among the adjectives Melnick identifies as associated with the female: “soft,” “warm,” “moist,” “comfortable,” “sympathetic,” “fuzzy,” “imprecise,” “spongy,” “elastic,” “made for ease (‘soft,’ ‘easy’).”<sup>13</sup> One begins to see how, without our realizing it, prejudice worms its way into, or out of, our mouths.

I don’t dispute Melnick’s entailments, which, published twenty years ago, are still to me disconcertingly prevalent in our everyday use of language. I bring them up, rather, to reveal the way any talk of the cold is undercut by them. It is easy to see how, by calling Williams’s work “cold,” it might seem that I am giving backhanded, masculinist praise: *Williams is not like other woman-writers*. That is not at all what I am saying. At the same time, *dry, uncomfortable, unsympathizing, sharp, difficult, penetrative* are all words I would use to describe her work—some of which she, in interviews, has used to describe it herself.



Whatever their connotations, these “qualities” are not owned by men, nor can men be said with any certainty to actually produce more work in this vein. Maggie Nelson’s assessment of writers of cruelty applies here:

Perhaps because I find the prose of women writers such as Jean Rhys, Anne Carson, Lydia Davis, Marguerite Duras, Annie Dillard, Joan Didion, Octavia Butler, Eileen Myles, and their ilk often fiercer in form and effect than that of their male counterparts, from Ernest Hemingway to Raymond Carver, Western literary history’s habit of aligning men with tough rigor and women with a hazy “écriture féminine” . . . has always struck me as odd: more of a prescription or fantasy than a description or observation.<sup>14</sup>

Joy Williams, as I see her, is of that ilk. In any case, *cold*, as I use it, is not praise, just as *cruel*, as Maggie Nelson uses it, is not praise either.

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We now know, if loosely, what Williams might mean by *cold*. But we should not rely on everyday idioms or a psychoanalyst’s list of associations to define coldness. We must turn to Williams’s own fiction, to her own description of the cold therein, if we hope to find out what particular understanding of the cold we should bring to her work. “Winter Chemistry” (1981) offers perhaps Williams’s most extended engagement with the cold, so we’ll start there. I quote the first three paragraphs in their entirety:

It was the middle of January and there was nothing to look forward to. The radio station went off at dusk and dusk came early in the afternoon and then came the dark and nothing to watch but a bleached-out moon lying over fields slick as frosted cake, and nothing to hear at all.

There was nothing left of Christmas but the cold that slouched and pressed against the people. Their blood was full of it. And their eyes and the food that they ate. The people walked the streets wearing woolen masks as though they were gangsters, or deformed. Old ladies died of breaks and foolish wounds in houses where no one came, and fish froze in the quiet of rivers.

The cold didn’t invent anything like the summer has a habit of doing and it didn’t disclose anything like the spring. It lay powerfully encamped—waiting, altering one’s ambitions, encouraging ends. The cold made for an ache, a restlessness and an irritation, and thinking that fell in odd and unemployable directions. (*VP* 89)

The first sentence reveals a pessimism inherent to the cold. When it is cold outside, as it is cold in the middle of January, all is bleak, silent, dark. The moon is bleached—clean but poisoned,

dead, “lying” as only a body can. The field is frosted like a cake (maybe there is sweetness here after all?) but something gross lurks in its slickness. All hope from the holidays, their chaos and communion, is gone. In place of this hope and frenzy comes the cold itself, an *it* that somehow slouches, that penetrates blood and eyeballs and dinner plates, a great weight in and on the people. The cold is oppressive, anti-creative. What does the summer invent? What does the spring disclose? We can only speculate, and barely even that, considering the abstractness of these verbs. But we are at least told what kind of effect the cold has, how it encourages ends (suicides?), how it makes one ache, how it irritates, how it stunts clear thought. In surprising ways, then, the cold here counters our intuition. The coldness here is not that of a “cold hard logic.” It is not the coldness of dependability and precision. It is more gas than solid, more soft than hard. Here, the cold is not an absence of feeling, but an ache. The cold hurts. And yet an underlying gratitude pervades this passage—a scorn for that “habit” of summer, for the oversharing of the spring’s “disclosure.” What does this ache do for us?

It should be said that we willingly endure pain when we believe it serves us. Let us consider Kafka’s masochistic philosophy of reading: “I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us. . . we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.”<sup>15</sup> Maggie Nelson discusses a whole host of modernists who describe the writing process in similarly violent terms: Beckett’s aim, for instance, to “bore one hole after another in [language], until what lurks behind it—be it something or nothing—begins to seep through,”; Artaud’s hope of “cutting to the core.”<sup>16</sup> Williams, as we have seen, harbors her own violent hopes for reading: for the story to “explode” in the reader’s face. But it seems her agenda differs from that of Kafka and Beckett and Artaud in that it relies less on the shock-factor of overt cruelty. If you are not

paying attention, you might altogether miss the explosion in your face, only to later find shrapnel in your cheeks.

I'd guess that it is this restraint, or "control" (see attribute #6) amidst explosions, that motivates Williams's reception as one of the "least sentimental writers on the planet."<sup>17</sup> But I think there are more valuable ways to think of Williams than anti-sentimental. To explain, I will try to untangle sentimentality from coldness. I am tempted to say sentimentality is the inverse of coldness. Sentimentality is excessive feeling, feeling without basis, feeling about feeling.<sup>18</sup> Coldness could be characterized as the lack of feeling where there should be. (That is not how I am characterizing it, but bear with me.) In trying to find the value of coldness, then, we might then ask a question about sentimentality: what does sentimentality cost? We entertain this question to understand why "least sentimental" is supposed to be a compliment. Many have answered for us. For some, sentimentality costs the soul. (See Baldwin: "[Sentimentality] is the mask of cruelty."<sup>19</sup>) For others, sentimentality costs hope. (See Wilde: "Sentimentality is merely the bank holiday of cynicism."<sup>20</sup>) And for others yet, the inverse is true, and sentimentality itself embodies a kind of cynicism.<sup>21</sup>

But, as I've said, I am not characterizing Williams's coldness as an absence of feeling. Williams's coldness makes for an ache. In which case, *sentimental* is not quite its opposite. Critics of sentimentality have not themselves called for the removal of feeling from literature. Baldwin thinks sentimentality is a lie, an over-the-top authorly performance which precludes genuine feeling. As he puts it, the problem with sentimental nineteenth-century novels is that they gawk and gape at the horrors of slavery without venturing to hypothesize its cause. Wilde, meanwhile, sees sentimentality as cheap feeling; the sentimentalist, for him, "desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it."<sup>22</sup> Which assumes, of course, that emotions are luxurious to begin with—they simply need to be earned. So we must ask: how?

Ben Marcus might provide us with an answer. In the introduction to *New American Stories* (the anthology in which I first encountered the work of Williams), he writes, “The potent story writers, to me, are the ones who deploy language as a kind of contraband, pumping it into us until we collapse on the floor, writhing, overwhelmed with feeling.”<sup>23</sup> For Marcus, language is an earner of feeling. The writer must learn to deploy it properly, to act with the surgical precision of a clinician. There’s a kind of violence here, but it’s one we sign up for. We read in pursuit of earned feelings. We read to hurt.

Some say reading to feel is good for us and good for the world. Empathy—roughly defined: feeling *as* another—is held by many to be the bread and butter of fiction. As Zadie Smith puts it, “All storytelling is the invitation to enter a parallel space, a hypothetical arena, in which you have imagined access to whatever is not you. And if fiction had one belief about itself, it was that fiction had empathy in its DNA, that it was the product of compassion.”<sup>24</sup> For Smith, feeling with and for and as characters is integral to the fiction-reading experience. Fiction, for Smith, ought to facilitate affective intersubjectivity, an emotional breaching of the self. We see a similar hope for fiction in David Foster Wallace’s claim that “all good writing somehow addresses the concern of and acts as an anodyne against loneliness.”<sup>25</sup>

Wallace and Smith are describing experiences of what Rita Felski calls *recognition*, a process by which “a flash of connection leaps across the gap between text and reader.”<sup>26</sup> We can also place Smith and Wallace in what Terry Eagleton calls a literary tradition “for which morality itself is a question of imagination . . . It is by this divinatory power [of imagination] that we can feel our way empathetically into the inner lives of others, decentering the ego in order to grasp the world selflessly from their standpoint.”<sup>27</sup> Suzanne Keen synthesizes a whole tradition in favor of fiction-as-empathy: “Read Henry James and live well [suggests Martha Nussbaum] . . . Shed your prejudice through novel reading, suggests novelist Sue Monk Kidd . . . Azar Nafisi

affirms, ‘empathy is at the heart of the novel,’ and warns, if you don’t read, you won’t be able to empathize . . .”<sup>28</sup>

There are two assumptions about empathy’s relation to fiction: one, that reading fiction promotes empathy, and two, that empathy leads to moral behavior. Keen tests both, finding that, while the reading of (certain kinds of) fiction does indeed produce empathy in readers, the hypothesis that such shared feelings result in altruism is “inconclusive at best and nearly always exaggerated.”<sup>29</sup> Eagleton will go on to critique the lineage he presents as subject to the “empathetic fallacy,” arguing that “knowing what you are feeling will not necessarily inspire me to treat you benevolently. A sadist needs to know what his victim is feeling, but not so that he can cease to torture him.”<sup>30</sup> Namwali Serpell questions whether art promotes empathy at all—and joins these other critics in questioning whether promoting empathy would automatically make it moral. Serpell writes, “Narrative art is indeed an incredible avenue for virtual experience—we think and feel with characters. It simulates empathy, so we believe it stimulates it.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, for Serpell, art-as-empathy gets weird fast, as it “[bleeds] too easily into the relishing of suffering by those who are safe from it.”<sup>32</sup>

If empathy is dangerous or useless or, depending on whom you ask, impossible (at least via fiction), what should replace it? It is perhaps to be expected that, in a critique of feeling, or a critique of feeling as a motive, one turns to rationality. Serpell draws from Paul Bloom, who, in *Against Empathy*, puts it this way: “I want to make the case for the value of conscious, deliberative reasoning in everyday life, arguing that we strive to use our heads rather than our hearts.”<sup>33</sup> Serpell also draws on Arendt’s critique of empathy. For Arendt, what others call empathy—that affective breaching of self—should rather be a heady political endeavor: “The very process of opinion formation is determined by those in whose places somebody thinks and

uses his own mind, and the only condition for this exertion of the imagination is disinterestedness, the liberation from one's own private interests."<sup>34</sup>

But Williams is not some rationalist for whom feelings are a mere obstacle to truth or sound political action. (Besides, as Melnick has made clear, we should be careful not to unquestioningly conflate coldness and logic.<sup>35</sup>) Williams's description of the cold is far from utilitarian. As the narrator of "Winter Chemistry" has it, remember, the cold makes for a "restlessness and an irritation, and thinking that [falls] in odd and unemployable directions" (*VP* 88). Williams's anti-epiphanic stories grant the reader space for this very sort of unemployable thought. At the core of Williams's stories lies an aloofness toward character, an uncertainty—of whom/how to feel for—that prompts the reader's interrogation of empathy. Coldness may not be antithetical to sentimentality, but it is antithetical to empathy. We hurt, but not *as* anybody else, and not on anybody else's behalf.

Simply arguing that Williams critiques empathy is not my aim. Rather, I am interested in *how* Williams inhibits empathy, and the coldness she offers in its place. In what follows, I will argue that Williams's critique of empathy—while certainly a thematic concern in several of her stories—is afforded to the reader primarily via structure. First, I will argue that Williams's coldness inheres in her grammar, in what Gary Lutz calls the sentence as a "lonely place,"<sup>36</sup> and in Neel Mukherjee refers to as the "blank space" between her sentences.<sup>37</sup> Second, I will argue that Williams's coldness is afforded via techniques of narratorial distance from character. During this section, I will place Williams's work in conversation with an author to whom she is often compared, though for different reasons than mine: Anton Chekhov, that "big heart."<sup>38</sup>

## 2. The Cold: A User's Manual

### 2.1 The lonely sentence

*The Visiting Privilege* begins with an ending. It opens with “Taking Care,” which is placed last in Williams’s 1982 debut collection of the same name. But “Taking Care” is not just an ending. It is a story about ends. Early ends, loose ends. Jones’s wife, remember, is dying: “It’s going to take me months to die” (*VP* 4). Jones’s daughter has just birthed a child. She ends her time with this child, leaving her (and the dog) in the care of Jones and heading to Mexico, “where soon, in the mountains, she will have a nervous breakdown” (*VP* 4). That trip, too, will end. But most of all, “Taking Care” is a story of ends because it is a story of sentences, which are to some extent defined by their ends. “A sentence is followed by a pause,” says Lisa Robertson, in a paraphrase of Alan H. Gardner.<sup>39</sup> Like Robertson, I am interested in how such pauses occur, in what kinds of aches they afford.

In “Taking Care,” the pauses are long. Williams mostly does away with paragraphs and opts instead for blocks of text. Each block of text is porous, with gaping holes between the sentences. Although there is a general focus on Jones in the present moment, the narrator often leaps into the past or future tense, or into another psyche or terrain. The first three sentences give a sense of the resulting disorientation:

Jones, the preacher, has been in love all his life. He is baffled by this because, as far as he can see, it has never helped anyone, even when they have acknowledged it, which is not often. Jones’s love is much too apparent and arouses neglect. He is like an animal in a traveling show who, through some aberration, wears a vital organ outside the skin, awkward and unfortunate, something that shouldn’t be seen, certainly something that shouldn’t be watched working. (*VP* 3)

Deb Olin Unferth rightly calls the opening sentence “quintessential” Williams—in the “slight oddity of the ambiguous missing direct object [of love]. . . [the] implicit longing, and the narrator’s faint teasing tone.”<sup>40</sup> We are in what appears to be a distant and formal, if sardonic, third person. We are introduced to Jones’s profession, and we are given a grand pronouncement

about his life, neither of which he would likely think to himself in a given moment. Just imagine: *I, the preacher, have been in love all my life*. It doesn't work.

But in the second sentence we lurch into the interiority of Jones: "He is baffled by this because as far as he can see, it has never helped anyone, not even when they have acknowledged it, which is not often." Each qualifier in this sentence, marked by a comma, twists the sentence against itself. Being in love has never helped anyone, nor has being aware of being in love, which is nearly impossible anyway, or so Jones thinks—such is the hopeless bind nearly all of Williams's characters find themselves in. The sardonic tone of the distant narrator in the first sentence is, in the second sentence, co-opted by Jones, and we begin to feel situated in a free-indirect style.

This free-indirect style is then ruptured: "Jones's love is much too apparent and arouses neglect." We again see Jones from the outside. We are seeing his love, which, in its obviousness, paradoxically provokes neglect. No explanation is provided. Three sentences in, and where are we, physically? Who knows. And what does this neglect-arousing love look like? In the next sentence we find out. The narration zooms out even further, providing us a bizarre image of Jones which he would almost certainly never have of himself: "He is like an animal in a traveling show who, through some aberration, wears a vital organ outside the skin, awkward and unfortunate, something that shouldn't be seen, certainly something that shouldn't be watched working." We are talking about love. We are talking about the heart. As the narrator of "Hammer" will later say about Angela: "[Her] heart was pounding hard and insistently, distracting her a little, making a great obtrusive show of itself" (*VP* 346). But Jones's aberrant, fleshy heart is exposed like the rippling lungs of that unfortunate Blood Eagle in Ari Aster's *Midsommar*. As we look at Jones from afar, we judge him—the organ *shouldn't* be seen, we are told, *shouldn't* be watched working.



The first block goes on this way, each sentence somehow as disorienting as the last. This disorientation is inflicted via the great pauses that exist between these sentences. These pauses are what Neel Mukherjee is referring to, I think, when he describes the “blank space” between Williams’s sentences.<sup>41</sup> The reader must traverse this blankness to weather the unannounced shifts in narratorial perspective.<sup>42</sup>

The pause, the blank space—both make for a fragmentary reading experience. As Stefano Ercolino says of fragmentation in the maximalist novel, “It is in the typographic space that separates one fragment from another that a gamma of *morphological potentialities* is arranged to be actualized in accordance with narrative contingencies” (emphasis his).<sup>43</sup> This typographical space, for Ercolino, lives between blocks of text. We know that “Taking Care,” in its anti-paragraph blockiness, utilizes this space. But, as Mukherjee’s comment suggests, and as we have seen, fragmentation also occurs *within* Williams’s blocks, in that space between the end of one sentence and the beginning of the next.

Ercolino’s three typologies of fragmentation also apply here: “(1) *variation of point of view*; (2) *transition in time or in space*. . . (3) *introduction or resumption of a narrative thread*.” In this “tale which concerns the dangers and rewards of connecting with other people,”<sup>44</sup> a structural fragmentation evokes the very fragmentation of Jones’s world—his failure to connect to his daughter or to understand his ill wife—who, in the hospital, “waits to be translated, no longer a woman, the woman whom he loves, but a situation” (*VP* 8). If writing, as Lisa Robertson defines it, is the search for a sentence,<sup>45</sup> we can say that Williams starts the search anew each time.

The pause, the blank space, the fragment: these are all ways of saying that Williams’s sentences are *lonely* (see attribute #3: “Sentences that stand strikingly alone”). I borrow this adjective from the short story writer Gary Lutz. In his essay, “The Sentence is a Lonely Place,”

Lutz imagines a kind of fiction that honors the sentence first and foremost. Lutz admires (fetishizes, one might say<sup>46</sup>) “narratives of steep verbal topography, narratives in which the sentence is a complete, portable solitude, a minute immediacy of consummated language—the sort of sentence that, even when liberated from its receiving context, impresses itself upon the eye and the ear as a totality, an omnitude, unto itself.”<sup>47</sup> (If Lutz’s sentence, in all its anaphoric, comma-dense glory, isn’t a totality and an omnitude unto itself, I don’t know what is.) Lutz is interested in a poetics of the sentence, a poetics of what he calls “consecution: a recursive procedure by which one word pursues itself into its successor by discharging something from deep within itself into what follows.”<sup>48</sup> He derives this poetics from Gordon Lish, the “editorial ambassador” of the 1970s avant-garde,<sup>49</sup> who published the likes of Raymond Carver, Barry Hannah, Don DeLillo, and Joy Williams—particularly her early stories.<sup>50</sup>

Lutz omits Williams from his discussion of the “portable solitude,” despite discussing her Lishite peers—namely, DeLillo and Hannah. Maybe he omits her because, despite attribute #3, a good number of Williams’s sentences do *not* stand strikingly alone. Abrupt shifts into lyric notwithstanding, much of Williams’s prose is apparently plain and economic. A few random page turns produce the following examples: “Louise got the dog” (*VP* 275). “I’ve had a comfortable life” (*VP* 425). “It is not a peaceful spot to sit” (*VP* 53). Lutz seeks in every sentence “the force and feel of a climax . . . a vivid extremity of language, an abruptness, a definitive inquietude.”<sup>51</sup> Lutz analyzes sentences with a microscope warmed up in a New Critic’s office, as we see in his discussion of the following sentence by Christine Schutt: “I once saw a man hook a walking stick around a woman’s neck. This was at night, from my mother’s window. The man dropped the crooked end behind the woman’s neck and yanked just hard enough to get the woman walking to the car.” Lutz here describes a “courtship of characters,” in which the “w

seems warily feminine; the *k* seems brashly masculine . . . the two characters mate and marry in the unexpected but beautifully apposite participle *winking*.”<sup>52</sup>

We can approach Williams, even at her most plain, with our ears perked for music, our eyes scanning for the courtship of letters in the most unexpected alleyways. Let us look, briefly, at “Preparation for a Collie,” (1974), a short story which first appeared in *Esquire* under then-editor Lish’s “uncanny pencil.”<sup>53</sup> The first paragraph reads as such: “There is Jane and there is Jackson and there is David. There is the dog” (*VP* 32). These two sentences are starkly minimalist, which might seem to preclude the music of a sentence like Schutt’s. But these two sentences sing their own song. Note the alliteration of the parents *Jane* and *Jackson* on the one hand, the child *David* and the *dog* on the other, everything thickened by *th* sounds, all pared down to monosyllable. Even so, we must admit these sentences are anything but striking. The simple subject-verb structure, the repetition of “to be,” and the generic names of American suburbia are drab, drab, drab.

There is a sense in which the loneliness of these sentences is situated precisely in—and not despite—their sparseness. Mitchell astutely observes that in “Preparation for a Collie” we witness an altered consciousness “embodied through a spasmodic paratactic syntax, alerting the reader to the romper room mentality that reduces parents’ tired mentality to their children’s broken thought processes.”<sup>54</sup> The nature of this altered state is hinted at in Williams’s claim that “the short story, as a form, excels in is the depiction of solitude and isolation.”<sup>55</sup> Instead of saying, *There is the \_\_\_ family*, the narrator lists each character (Jane, Jackson, David, and the dog), as if to suggest that they exist only as individuals. Their isolation from each other is exacerbated by the distant tone; the narrator refuses to specify the name, or even the breed, of the dog.

At the same time, we see an ambivalence about the extent of their loneliness even in these two sentences. The dog's loneliness is of its own kind; the dog is relegated to its own sentence. The humans, Jane and Jackson and David, are lonely in their own sentence. Only a period marks this great rift between subjects, which will become all too apparent when Jane and Jackson, as we know, drunkenly plot to kill the dog—and are stopped only by their wailing child, David. The alliteration of these nondescript sentences foretells this alliance: the *d* in *David* and *dog* breaches the otherwise impermeable period. For Williams, thus, the sentence is not only a lonely place. The sentence is a place, a grammar, through which loneliness is theorized.

What I am calling the *loneliness* of Williams's sentences—their fragmentary, uncertain relation to each other (as in “Taking Care”), their structural conveyance of isolated consciousness (as in “Preparation for a Collie”)—draws also from what Mitchell calls their “disjointedness.”<sup>56</sup> Mitchell argues there is a “schizophrenic quality” to Williams's vision, a “disjointed breakdown that often occurs at the level of the sentence itself.”<sup>57</sup> This breakdown reflects, or refracts, consciousness gone awry. It is a strategy, per Mitchell, of crafting “indeterminacies of narrative.”<sup>58</sup> That is, Williams delights in “provoking uncertainty: about what is genuinely true and what is otherwise merely imagined; about bizarre, otherworldly events and what they might otherwise actually mean.”<sup>59</sup>

Mitchell's account of Williams's indeterminacy is spot-on. When I read Williams, I often wonder what is really going on—sometimes, as Mitchell notes, whether a given narrator is living or dead. But what Mitchell overlooks is that Williams's lonely sentences create not only an indeterminacy of narrative, but an indeterminacy of the relation between reader and character—that is, the reader's uncertainty of whether and how to empathize with a given character, an uncertainty that makes for a coldness, a coldness that makes for an ache. I want to feel for Jones, but to feel for him I must find him, and to find him I must sift through the narrator's disparaging

asides and abrupt shifts in perspective and tense. I do feel for Jane—whose husband, when he is mad at her, “takes off his glasses and breaks them in front of her” (*VP* 34)—but I get a similar sense that she is unknowable, a sense which is only intensified when, at the story’s end, she attempts to kill the dog.

Mitchell’s notion of “indeterminacy” might also benefit from a reader-oriented, temporal reframing. As Namwali Serpell argues in *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*—a *Seven Types of Ambiguity* for the twenty-first century—terms such as *indeterminacy*, *ambiguity*, and *difficulty* do not refer to the reader’s mental state.<sup>60</sup> *Uncertainty*, on the other hand, centers the reader’s “agonistic unsettling experience over time.”<sup>61</sup> Serpell remains committed to specificity, analyzing distinct modes of literary uncertainty in an era during which, under what Dorothy Hale calls the New Ethics, an unquestioning submission to uncertainty paradoxically renders “ambiguity unambiguous.”<sup>62</sup> Mitchell’s “indeterminacy,” as I see it, is but one mode of uncertainty—what Serpell calls *mutual exclusion*: an either/or structure that provides two opposing explanations for the same events, neither of which is verified.<sup>63</sup> But Mitchell has adeptly covered that ground; it is not my concern here. What interests me more is Serpell’s notion of *multiplicity*, or the “presence of several perspectives about an event, object, or person... [which] precludes an objective view.”<sup>64</sup> Williams’s lonely sentences, as we have seen, impede an objective view of character.

I mobilize Serpell’s tri-fold approach to analyzing uncertainty, which considers ethics, aesthetics, and affect in tandem to trace the way a text “negotiates between imperatives of sameness (connection, empathy, likeness) and difference (distance, alterity, opposition).”<sup>65</sup> Uncertainty is afforded when an author disturbs the sameness-difference ratio that usually grants a kind of narrative stability.<sup>66</sup> These terms—*ethics*, *aesthetics*, *affect*—are, for Serpell and for me, more instrumental than indicative of value. Ethics, for instance, does not merely mean

“beatific” but remains open to the “risks and the threats” of literary uncertainty.<sup>67</sup> As she puts it, “*Ethical* no more means *good* than *aesthetic* means *pretty* or than *affective* means *pleasurable*.”<sup>68</sup>

My engagement with Williams is thus ultimately an engagement with structure. Serpell riffs on Virginia Woolf’s comparison of a novel to a building, arguing that, just as a building’s structure divides space, so too does a literary structure “not enforce movements but [make] them available.” This sort of movement—available but not mandated—is called *affordance*, a term which Serpell borrows from cognitive psychology.<sup>69</sup> We might characterize *Seven Modes*, then, as an attempt to describe the blueprints of uncertainty-affording structures in (mostly contemporary) novels. So I aim to do with stories. As Beckett said of Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* in 1939, “It is not to be read—or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not about something; it is that something itself.”<sup>70</sup> And as Morrison said of Faulkner’s engagement with race: “So the structure is the argument. Not what this one says, or that one says. It is the *structure* of the book.”<sup>71</sup> So I said of Williams: the very pillars of her stories are cold to the touch.

## 2.2 A burning pain in my heart

Joy Williams: literary heir of Anton Chekhov.<sup>72</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell doesn’t quite buy it. As Mitchell puts it, “[Williams] hardly resembles Chekhov, though drawn to inessential details deftly woven into revelations of lives ridden out day to day.”<sup>73</sup> Mitchell’s skepticism is warranted. He is right to suggest that Williams better sits alongside Kafka and Beckett, “notable for their artfully disjunctive techniques, bizarre predicaments, and surreal effects.”<sup>74</sup> But who are we kidding. They’d all rather be alone anyway.

The stories of Chekhov and Williams do indeed dance. Alongside Williams’s affinity for both the “holiness of minute particulars” and the anagogical level we might place Chekhov’s

“epic poetics of representation of reality, an art disclosing the organic relationship that exists between the seemingly unimportant detail or aspects of everyday surface reality and the essential drama of life underlying it.”<sup>75</sup> We can also draw on Mitchell’s earlier characterization of Chekhov in our thinking about the stories of Williams: “Chekhov described characters fleetingly, rarely brought things to a close.”<sup>76</sup> Instead of striving for Poe’s single effect, Chekhov’s stories “present us with ambiguous possibilities.”<sup>77</sup> Another critic describes a “magic simplicity to Chekhov’s word and style”<sup>78</sup>—what Nabokov called Chekhov’s “dreadful prosaisms”<sup>79</sup>—which resonates with Williams’s first attribute of a short story: “A clean and clear surface with much disturbance below.” (Attribute #7 is also relevant here: “The story’s effect should transcend the naturalness and accessibility of its situation and language.”) In one of Williams’s stories, Chekhov even shows his face.<sup>80</sup>

We could go on and on like this. The most important parallel to be drawn between Chekhov and Williams’s work, for our purposes, is not in their approach to incident, style, tone, or even their subject matter, but rather in the way they unsettle relations between characters and readers. In his structural approach to coldness, Chekhov is a key precursor to Williams.

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Every Joy Williams story is a love story, so I’ll turn to Chekhov’s “About Love.”<sup>†</sup> A group of visitors gathers for a meal and the cook, Nikanor, asks them what they’d like to eat. When Nikanor leaves, the host Alyokhin tells the guests about Nikanor’s abusive relationship with the “beautiful Pelageya.” Why does she stick around with that “ugly snout” Nikanor? The question is rhetorical. As the storyteller Alyokhin, quoting Ephesians, concludes before he even starts: “So far only one incontestable truth has been uttered about love: ‘This is a great mystery.’”<sup>81</sup> (We might remember the preacher Jones, baffled by his own love.) This mystery is at the heart of

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<sup>†</sup> After citing “About Love” once in the endnotes, I will cite it in-text using *AL*.

Alyokhin's own tale of romance, which the guests agree to hear rather reluctantly, considering they have nowhere to go; rain patters on the trees outside the window.

But before we lock into Alyokhin's tale, the narrator interjects, wedging something between us and Alyokhin: "People who lead a solitary existence always have something in their hearts which they are eager to talk about. . . they unbosom themselves to their guests" (*AL* 372). We here witness our first gesture of narratorial distancing from the protagonist; we enter at a remove.

The long and short of Alyokhin's tale: he falls in love with his so-called friend's wife and doesn't tell her until it's too late for either of them to do anything about it. Fresh out of the university and back on his father's failing farm, a young man bent on "reconcil[ing] this life of toil with my cultured habits" (*AL* 372), Alyokhin falls for Anna Alexyevna, the wife of Luganovich, a local official whom Alyokhin initially introduces as a "most *charming* personality" (*AL* 373, emphasis mine) and eventually, unsurprisingly, as "uninteresting, almost an old man" (*AL* 376). Alyokhin hangs around often with his new friends, whose reasons for befriending him are unclear to him. "There is a proverb that if a peasant woman has no troubles she will buy a pig," Alyokhin says, in a self-disparaging aside; "The Luganovichs had no troubles, so they made friends with me" (*AL* 375). As much as he enjoys their company, it is painful to go on pretending he doesn't want Alexyevna. He can't quite say what distinguishes her, but he admits this much: "I saw a lovely, young, good, intelligent, fascinating woman, such as I had never met before; and I felt her at once someone close and already familiar, as though that face, those cordial, intelligent eyes, I had seen somewhere in my childhood, in the album which lay on my mother's chest of drawers" (*AL* 373). They cherish their time together: "We talked together for hours, were silent, thinking each our own thoughts, or she played for hours to me on the piano" (*AL* 375). Despite and because of his desire for her, Alyokhin is deeply



unhappy: “At home, in the fields, in the barn, I thought of her; I tried to understand the mystery of a beautiful, intelligent, young woman’s marrying someone so uninteresting . . . and having children by him. . . I kept trying to understand why she had met him first and not me, and why such a terrible mistake in our lives need have happened” (AL 376). But Alyokhin prides himself for his dignity and integrity—even at his poorest, he refuses loans from the Luganovichs—so he doesn’t act on or even confess his desires. As he explains it,

We were afraid of everything that might reveal our secret to ourselves. I loved her tenderly, deeply, but I reflected and kept asking myself what our love could lead to if we had not the strength to fight against it. It seemed incredible that my gentle, sad love could all at once coarsely break up the even tenor of the life of her husband, her children, and all the household in which I was so loved and trusted. (AL 376)

Nor does Alexyevna confess: “If she abandoned herself to her feelings she would have to lie, or else to tell the truth, and in her position either would have been equally terrible and inconvenient” (AL 376). As the years pass, Alyokhin’s inaction prompts a coldness, an “irritation” (AL 377) from Alexyevna, who is eventually to be sent off to Crimea by the doctors—presumably as a result. It is only when she is sitting in her compartment, about to leave, that Alyokhin runs to her: “I took her in my arms, she pressed her face to my breast, and tears flowed. Kissing her face, her shoulders, her hands wet with tears—oh, how unhappy we were!—I confessed my love for her, and with a burning pain in my heart I realized how unnecessary, how petty, and how deceptive all that had hindered us from loving was” (AL 378).

On the surface, it seems Williams and Chekhov take radically different approaches to character. Alyokhin’s characterizations of his peers reveal his confidence in a deep knowledge of them. He generously applies adjectives to both Luganovich and Alexyevna—*good, beautiful, intelligent, uninteresting, cordial*. Alyokhin, at least in hindsight, is able to analyze and justify his actions—and even Alexyevna’s actions—at every step of the way with an astounding psychological acuity. His tale ends in a burst of feeling, an epiphanic climax, which is as

satisfying as it is heartbreaking, and from which he extracts a moral for his guests, and therefore (if inadvertently) for us too. When I reach the ending, I feel with him that “burning pain in my heart.”

Williams’s characters, meanwhile, hardly know each other, let alone themselves. The narrator of “Taking Care,” for instance, never describes the characters’ physical characteristics, nor, aside from a few harsh quips, does the narrator make simple character judgements. Jones’s wife “waits to be translated, no longer a woman, the woman whom he loves, but a situation” (*VP* 8). Jones and his wife are never granted the outpour of feeling Alyokhin and Alexyevna arrive at. Instead, when Jones picks up his wife from the hospital at the end of “Taking Care,” we are only given a vague sense of how he has changed: “Surely things are different for Jones now.” He is grateful to see his wife but still “confused.” In the final final line of the story, they approach the house and “enter the shining rooms” (*VP* 12).

Chekhov’s characters, however briefly sketched, feel more solid—both more fleshed out and, perhaps as a result, more decent. It is easier to empathize with Chekhov’s characters because they appear to have personalities and histories and coherent selves. But beneath the surface, Chekhov complicates our relation to his characters in service of a different kind of coldness. Alyokhin’s tale, which comprises the bulk of “About Love,” is framed on both sides by the guests’ responses. We could describe these responses, at best, as exhibiting a sort of mild curiosity. Indeed, Chekhov introduces a profound uncertainty in the text’s final paragraph: that the two primary listeners have perhaps not been physically present after all. After Alyokhin’s tale drifts off in an ellipsis, we are immediately given the following information: “While Alyokhin was telling his story, the rain left off and the sun came out. Burkin and Ivan Ivanych went out on the balcony, from which there was a beautiful view over the garden and the millpond, which was shining now in the sunshine like a mirror” (*AL* 378). Burkin and Ivan

Ivanych went out *while Alyokhin was telling his story*. We have to wonder—have we been listening to a man talking to himself? How does that change the tenor of the tale? Is Alyokhin pitiable or merely self-absorbed?

Burkin and his buddy choose the former, allowing their mild disinterest to morph into mild pity. They glance out at Alyokhin's pond: "They admired it, and at the same time they were sorry that this man with the kind, clever eyes, who had told them this story with such genuine feeling, should be rushing round and round this huge estate like some hamster on a wheel . . ." (*AL* 378). In the final lines of the story, they pity Alexyevna, too, and perhaps without innocence: "what a sorrowful face [she] must have had when [Alyokhin] said good-bye to her in the railway carriage and kissed her face and shoulders. Both of them had met her in the town, and Burkin knew her and thought her beautiful" (*AL* 378). This kernel of uncertainty—how does Burkin know her? why hasn't he said anything about it?—strikes me as ominous. I am distanced from Alyokhin, invited to speculate about Alexyevna's life beyond him, a life that shockingly includes Burkin. As warm as Alyokhin's tale got—if we can call that "burning heart" warm—the ending leaves me doubtful. As Williams's said of the ending of "Taking Care," "It carries the story into the celestial, where it longs to go"<sup>82</sup>—and where, we might add, all is cold.

### Appendix: Is Joy Williams Obsolete?

When people ask me what I am up to, when I say I am writing a thesis, when they ask me, “On what?” and when I say, “Joy Williams,” then, if I am being asked by an English major, and most creative writing majors, too, I nearly always get this reply: “Haven’t heard of her.” So it goes. Undergraduate English and creative writing majors in my friend circle have not read every American author worth studying. I myself, at the intersection of creative writing and English, had never heard of her before the summer preceding senior year, when I read Ben Marcus’s 2015 anthology, *New American Stories*. (Williams’s story anthologized there, “The Country,” was my gateway drug to *The Visiting Privilege*.) The extent of my ignorance then became clear to me. Joy Williams has been a big deal for a long time. But I still wondered: why was a writer with so much prominence among short story writers, so many accolades, so many decades writing—why was she not on the radar of most of my friends, nor on any of our syllabi?

Being at least capable of using a database, I found the scholarship on Williams to be quite sparse too. Here is a writer who has earned the unqualified praise of DeLillo, Carver, and William H. Gass, and yet has received a fraction of their scholarly attention. Maybe it is because she works primarily in the short story, which—Carver aside—has for a long time, less so as of late,<sup>83</sup> received scant attention compared to the novel. Maybe it has to do with Williams’s style, with the way, as James Wood puts it, that she writes “at a slight angle to the culture, literary and otherwise. Her fiction is easy to follow and hard to fathom; easy to enjoy and harder to absorb.”<sup>84</sup> Williams is far from what Sontag would have called an “overcooperative author” who injects her work with pre-packaged interpretation.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, Williams writes in the tradition of what Sontag calls “stubborn authors”—Kafka and Beckett—the former, at the time of Sontag’s writing, having “been subjected to a mass ravishment by no less than three armies of

interpreters,” and the latter having “attracted interpreters like leeches.”<sup>86</sup> What makes Williams’s own strain of difficulty less appealing to literary scholars?

I could speculate all day about the causes of Williams’s mostly lackluster scholarly reception, but that would be a lousy way of doing something about it. Besides, I am no excavator of the forgotten. As Paul Winner notes, her stories are “frequently passed around M.F.A. departments with something like subversive glee.”<sup>87</sup> There is a lively conversation going on around Williams’s work, particularly following the publication of *The Visiting Privilege* and the 2018 relaunch of her long-out-of-print second novel, *The Changeling*. In her 2014 *Paris Review* interview, Williams said, “Only once in my career will I appear in *The New Yorker*. And as Ann Beattie said, the only thing worse than never appearing in *The New Yorker* is being accepted only once by *The New Yorker*.”<sup>88</sup> Since then, and as recently as September, she has appeared in the *New Yorker* four times—and has been written about in its pages at least that many.<sup>89</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell’s *Late Style* dedicates a whole chapter to *The Visiting Privilege*, and I expect it is only the beginning of a more substantial scholarly reckoning with her work. Yet another generation is discovering Williams. This essay, I hope, is just another droplet in that swelling pond.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lincoln Michel, “Joy Williams Explains How to Write a Short Story,” *VICE* (blog), July 18, 2016, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/avav9b/joy-williams-ninety-nine-stories-of-god-how-to-write-a-short-story](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/avav9b/joy-williams-ninety-nine-stories-of-god-how-to-write-a-short-story).

<sup>2</sup> John Truby, *The Anatomy of Story: 22 Steps to Becoming a Master Storyteller* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 39–40. John Truby’s seven key steps of story structure are as follows: “1) Weakness and need 2) Desire 3) Opponent 4) Plan 5) Battle 6) Self-revelation 7) New equilibrium.”

<sup>3</sup> See Edgar Allan Poe, “Review of Twice-Told Tales by Nathaniel Hawthorne.” *Great Short Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. G. R. Thompson (Perennial Classic, 1970), 522. Poe argues that the short story ought to have a single effect: “A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect.” See also Gary Lutz, “The Sentence Is a Lonely Place,” *Believer Magazine*, January 1, 2009, <https://believermag.com/the-sentence-is-a-lonely-place/>. Gary Lutz argues for lonely sentences, and writes them masterfully.

<sup>4</sup> Joy Williams, *The Visiting Privilege: New and Collected Stories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 4. Hereafter cited in-text as *VP*.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, 303. Williams’s narrator, in a paraphrase of the Marksman: “The distinction between dead and dying was an awful one. . .”

<sup>6</sup> Paul Winner, “Joy Williams, The Art of Fiction No. 223,” *Paris Review*, no. 209 (Summer 2014), <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6303/the-art-of-fiction-no-223-joy-williams>. Williams describes the tension in her own work between the anagogical level and the bizarre details: “The Bible is constantly making use of image beyond words. A parable provides the imagery by means of words. The meaning, however, does not lie in the words but in the imagery. What is conjured, as it were, transcends words completely and speaks in another language. This is how Kafka wrote, why we are so fascinated by him, why he speaks so universally. On the other hand, there’s Blake, who spoke of the holiness of minute particulars. That is the way as well, to give voice to those particulars. Seek and praise, fear and seek. Don’t be vapid.”

<sup>7</sup> Joy Williams, “Uncanny the Singing That Comes from Certain Husks,” in *Why I Write: Thoughts on the Practice of Fiction*, ed. Will Blythe (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), 9.

<sup>8</sup> See also Winner, “Joy Williams, The Art of Fiction No. 223.” Williams is asked to place her favorite living writers. She praises Don DeLillo, who is “first among them. A writer of tremendous integrity and presence. . . His later works are fierce, demanding. His work can be a little cold perhaps. And what’s wrong with that? The cold can teach us many things.”

<sup>9</sup> Some critics do indeed describe Williams’s work as cold. See Stephen Metcalf, “‘Honored Guest’: The Small Chill,” *The New York Times*, December 19, 2004, sec. Books, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/19/books/review/honored-guest-the-small-chill.html>. Metcalf writes that to Williams, the world is a “cool, obdurate, grotesque place.” See also Lisa Zeidner, “‘The Visiting Privilege’ Review: The Chillingly Honest World of Joy Williams,” *The Washington Post*, September 2, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/the-visiting-privilege-review-the-chillingly-honest-world-of-joy-williams/2015/09/02/bfac72ba-42ab-11e5-8e7d-9c033e6745d8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/the-visiting-privilege-review-the-chillingly-honest-world-of-joy-williams/2015/09/02/bfac72ba-42ab-11e5-8e7d-9c033e6745d8_story.html). Even so, it strikes me that these passing “cool” adjectives are less common than the others I’ve identified, and I have yet to encounter a critic who, following Williams’s lead from interviews, places coldness at the core of her work.

<sup>10</sup> See Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2011). I am unable to produce page numbers for this source, as I am using an unpaginated, electronic version. (I left my copy of the text in New York.) I will reference the chapters in which these quotations appear. In the opening chapter, Nelson shares her aim “to attend closely to the different excitements and effects of this “pure cruelty” (such as precision, transgression, purgation, productive unease, abjectness, radical exposure, uncanniness, unnerving frankness, acknowledged sadism

and masochism, a sense of clearing or clarity), while also staying keenly attuned to the various sophistries and self-justifications that so often attend its valorization.” The art of cruelty that interests her is by definition uncertain, “specifically not art that expressly aims to protest, ameliorate, make meaningful, cast blame, or intervene in instances of brutality.”

<sup>11</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 2008). Quoted in Melnick, 226.

<sup>12</sup> Burton Melnick, “Cold Hard World\Warm Soft Mommy: The Unconscious Logic of Metaphor,” in *The Annual of Psychoanalysis*, V. 28, ed. Jerome A. Winer, vol. 28 (Routledge, 2000), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203779903>.

<sup>13</sup> Melnick, 238.

<sup>14</sup> Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty*. See the chapter, “Inflicted.”

<sup>15</sup> Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty*. See “Inflicted.”

<sup>17</sup> Ben Marcus, “‘The Visiting Privilege,’ by Joy Williams,” *New York Times (Online)*, September 22, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/27/books/review/the-visiting-privilege-by-joy-williams.html>.

<sup>18</sup> I thank Prof. Spiegel for the description of sentimentality as *feeling about feeling*.

<sup>19</sup> James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 14.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Tanner, “Sentimentality,” *Art and Morality*, 2003, 95.

<sup>21</sup> Tanner, 107.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Tanner, 95.

<sup>23</sup> Ben Marcus, ed., *New American Stories*, Vintage Contemporaries Original (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Penguin Random House, LLC, 2015), xvi. See “Introduction”

<sup>24</sup> Zadie Smith, “Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction,” October 24, 2019, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/10/24/zadie-smith-in-defense-of-fiction/>.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Burn, *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2012), 16.

<sup>26</sup> Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Pub, 2008), 23.

<sup>27</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (London: Yale University Press, 2012), 60.

<sup>28</sup> Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), vii.

<sup>29</sup> Keen, vii.

<sup>30</sup> Eagleton, *The Event of Literature*, 61–62.

<sup>31</sup> Namwali Serpell, “The Banality of Empathy,” *The NYR Daily* (blog), March 2, 2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/03/02/the-banality-of-empathy/>.

<sup>32</sup> Serpell.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York, NY : Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2016), 5.



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<sup>34</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 556. Quoted in Serpell, “Banality of Empathy.”

<sup>35</sup> In addition to Melnick, see Siri Hustvedt, “Borderlands: First, Second, and Third Person Adventures in Crossing Disciplines,” *Salmagundi*, no. 178/179 (2013): 103.

<sup>36</sup> Lutz, “The Sentence Is a Lonely Place.”

<sup>37</sup> Neel Mukherjee, “The Visiting Privilege: New and Selected Stories by Joy Williams Review – Masterful,” *The Guardian*, November 26, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/26/the-visiting-privilege-new-and-selected-stories-by-joy-williams-review>. Quoted in Lee Clark Mitchell, “Disjointedness in ‘The Visiting Privilege,’” in *More Time: Contemporary Short Stories and Late Style* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 115.

<sup>38</sup> I thank Prof. Spiegel for this perfect epithet.

<sup>39</sup> Lisa Robertson, *A Form of Sentences: Speaking with the Dead or Grammar Is Not Abstract*, The Leslie Scalapino Lecture in Innovative Poetics (UC Berkeley, 2015), 14:29, <https://youtu.be/Qhk8wjXrdiQ>.

<sup>40</sup> Deb Olin Unferth, “The Divine Comedies,” *Bookforum*, 2015, <https://www.bookforum.com/print/2203/joy-williams-s-stories-about-death-dogs-and-god-14955>.

<sup>41</sup> Mukherjee, “The Visiting Privilege.” Mukherjee writes, “Like some subatomic particle, Williams can be in two states simultaneously: compassionate and ruthless. Her vision is angular, undeluded, astringent. The blank space between each of her sentences is loaded with intelligence and surprise, because you can never tell what the next sentence is going to be, or bring.”

<sup>42</sup> Perhaps this is why “Taking Care” is especially moving on audiobook, where the pauses between sentences are performed by the reader.

<sup>43</sup> Stefano Ercolino, *Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño’s 2666* / (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 50.

<sup>44</sup> Gwen Crane, “Joy Williams (11 February 1944-),” in *American Short-Story Writers Since World War II: Fifth Series*, ed. Richard E. Lee and Patrick Meanor, vol. 335, Vol. 335 (Detroit, MI: Gale, 2007), 320.

<sup>45</sup> Robertson, *A Form of Sentences: Speaking with the Dead or Grammar Is Not Abstract*, 15:30.

<sup>46</sup> Jan Mieszkowski, *Crises of the Sentence, Crises of the Sentence* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 223.

<sup>47</sup> Lutz, “The Sentence Is a Lonely Place.”

<sup>48</sup> Lutz.

<sup>49</sup> Olin Unferth, “The Divine Comedies.”

<sup>50</sup> Christian Lorentzen, “Gordon Lish, The Art of Editing, No. 2,” *The Paris Review*, no. 215 (2015), <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6423/the-art-of-editing-no-2-gordon-lish>. According to Lorentzen, Lish was the fiction editor at *Esquire* from 1969-1977. I am certain he edited “Preparation for a Collie,” which appeared in *Esquire* in 1974. Unfortunately I have not been able to determine whether Lish edited “Taking Care.” I was hoping to visit the Joy Williams Papers at Washington University in March. For obvious reasons, I could not.

<sup>51</sup> Lutz, “The Sentence Is a Lonely Place.”

<sup>52</sup> Lutz.

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- <sup>53</sup> Tao Lin, "An Interview with Joy Williams," *Bookslut*, November 2008, [http://www.bookslut.com/features/2008\\_11\\_013681.php](http://www.bookslut.com/features/2008_11_013681.php). On Lish, Williams says, "The editor Gordon Lish was the maestro of minimalism and under his uncanny pencil, many an ordinary story became a very good one."
- <sup>54</sup> Mitchell, "Disjointedness in 'The Visiting Privilege,'" 122.
- <sup>55</sup> Winner, "Joy Williams, The Art of Fiction No. 223."
- <sup>56</sup> Mitchell, "Disjointedness in 'The Visiting Privilege.'" "
- <sup>57</sup> Mitchell, 142.
- <sup>58</sup> Mitchell, 117.
- <sup>59</sup> Mitchell, 114.
- <sup>60</sup> Namwali Serpell, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 17.
- <sup>61</sup> Serpell, 9.
- <sup>62</sup> Serpell, 17.
- <sup>63</sup> Serpell, 23–24.
- <sup>64</sup> Serpell, 24.
- <sup>65</sup> Serpell, 28.
- <sup>66</sup> Serpell, 23.
- <sup>67</sup> Serpell, 19.
- <sup>68</sup> Serpell, 7.
- <sup>69</sup> Serpell, 22.
- <sup>70</sup> Serpell, 9.
- <sup>71</sup> Serpell, 10.
- <sup>72</sup> Zeidner, "'The Visiting Privilege' Review: The Chillingly Honest World of Joy Williams."
- <sup>73</sup> Mitchell, "Disjointedness in 'The Visiting Privilege,'" 114.
- <sup>74</sup> Mitchell, "Disjointedness in 'The Visiting Privilege,'" 115.
- <sup>75</sup> Robert Louis Jackson, "Part and Whole: The Ethics of Connection," in *Anton Chekhov's Selected Stories*, ed. Cathy Popkin, Norton Critical Editions (W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 562.
- <sup>76</sup> Mitchell, "Disjointedness in 'The Visiting Privilege,'" 4.
- <sup>77</sup> Mitchell, 5.
- <sup>78</sup> Jackson, "Part and Whole: The Ethics of Connection," 565.
- <sup>79</sup> Quoted in Radislav Lapushin, "The Poetry of Chekhov's Prose," in *Anton Chekhov's Selected Stories*, ed. Cathy Popkin, Norton Critical Editions (W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 577.

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<sup>80</sup> When asked about his circumstances, the character Deke says, “This is what I got to say to that remark. I don’t know if you read much, but there’s a story by Anton Chekhov called ‘Gooseberries.’ And in this story one of the characters says in conversation that there should be a man with a hammer reminding every happy, contented individual that they’re not going to be happy forever. This man with a hammer should be banging on the door of the happy individual’s house or something to that effect.”

<sup>81</sup> Anton Chekhov, “About Love,” in *Anton Chekhov’s Selected Stories*, ed. Cathy Popkin, trans. Constance Garnett, Norton Critical Editions (W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 371. Hereafter cited in-text as *AL*.

<sup>82</sup> Winner, “Joy Williams, The Art of Fiction No. 223.”

<sup>83</sup> Mitchell, “Disjointedness in ‘The Visiting Privilege,’” 3.

<sup>84</sup> James Wood, “Joy Williams’s Refractory Brilliance,” *New Yorker*, August 22, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/08/22/joy-williams-refractory-brilliance>.

<sup>85</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (New York: Octagon Books, 1978), 8.

<sup>86</sup> Sontag, 8.

<sup>87</sup> Winner, “Joy Williams, The Art of Fiction No. 223.”

<sup>88</sup> Winner.

<sup>89</sup> See Williams’s *New Yorker* stories: “Chicken Hill,” *The New Yorker*, September 7, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/09/14/chicken-hill>. ; “Stuff,” *The New Yorker*, July 18, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/07/25/stuff-by-joy-williams>. ; “Chaunt,” *The New Yorker*, December 10, 2018, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/12/10/chaunt>. ; “The Fellow,” *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2019, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/09/30/the-fellow>. For Williams’s recent critical resurgence in *The New Yorker*, see Wood; Dana Spiotta, “Dana Spiotta Reads Joy Williams,” *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/podcast/fiction/dana-spiotta-reads-joy-williams>. ; Karen Russell, “The Bracing Wisdom of Joy Williams’s ‘The Changeling,’” *The New Yorker*, March 30, 2018, <https://www-newyorker-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/books/second-read/the-bracing-wisdom-of-joy-williamss-the-changeling>. ; Jeanie Riess, “‘The Quick and the Dead,’ A Prescient Ode to Political Hopelessness,” *The New Yorker*, August 24, 2019, <http://www.newyorker.com/recommends/read/the-quick-and-the-dead-a-prescient-ode-to-political-hopelessness>.