

F I C T I O N I N
R E V I E W



D A V I D G A L E F

American avant-garde writing comes in many different sizes, from expansive to minimalist, not just in style but also in projected scope. For every David Foster Wallace, there's a Lydia Davis: the whole world in great detail versus the universe in a grain of sand. One notable miniaturist is Diane Williams, whose longest works are the novellas *The Stupefaction* and *Romancer Erector* and whose shortest stories are just a few sentences. For over forty years, Williams's *modus scribendi* has been to make an arresting declaration ("Women were not a major ingredient in my thinking at the time"), follow it up with some narrative details, often about relationships ("Sometimes I'm over a barrel – my wife and I agree"), and end with a brief paragraph that sums up the perplex: "pettiness, a tendency to show off, and temporary stops to take a breath."

These excerpts are from a piece titled "Between Midnight and 6 AM," all of a page and a half, from the 2012 collection *Vicky Swanky Is a Beauty*, but they might just as well have come from her first collection, *This Is About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the*

Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, by Diane Williams (*McSweeney's*, 136 pp., \$20)

World, Time, and Fate, back in 1990, or her latest volume, the 2016 *Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine*. Often her book titles herald the tilted territory that Williams marks for her fiction: *Some Sexual Success Stories: Plus Other Stories in Which God Might Choose to Appear* (1992), for instance, or *It Was Like My Trying to Have a Tender-Hearted Nature* (2007). Some experimental styles, such as Virginia Woolf's mode of associationism and multiple perspectives, eventually filter into mainstream writing, albeit in watered-down form. It's a testament to the bizarre effects of Williams's work that her stories remain in a category all their own.

Williams's *Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine* contains forty stories ranging from a paragraph to a few pages. She can sum up a character with a puckishness that hovers over the whole narrative: "She had been lucky in love as she understood it" ("A Gray Pottery Head") or this portrait of a husband from "To Revive a Person Is No Slight Thing":

I turned and saw my husband naked, with his clothes folded in his hands.

Unbudgeable – but finally springing into massive brightness – is how I prefer to think of him.

Actually, he said in these exact words: "I don't like you very much and I don't think you're fascinating." He put his clothes on, stepped out of the room.

The story accomplishes a lot in a small space, including a biting portrait of middle age and ritual, as well as the innumerable minor irritations of long-term marriage, ending in armistice instead of romance. Yet her stories are rather funny. This one concludes:

I gave him a nod, made no apologies. Where were his?

I didn't cry some.

I must say that our behavior is continually under review and any one error alters our prestige, but there'll be none of that *lifting up my eyes unto the hills*.

Though Williams's stories are likely to surprise at any juncture, what binds most of them together is dissatisfaction, in many instances purposefully small, even petty: an unfortunate experience at the hairdresser ("At a Period of Exceptional Dullness") or being

blown by the wind while walking down a street (“Personal Details”). What turns them into something rich and strange – or fractured and disconcerting, depending on your point of view – is in part her jump-cuts bordering on surrealism: a small girl, a fountain in a conservatory, a rose of Sharon, and a “dead or disabled raccoon on the sidewalk” in “The Mermaid Pose”; back pain, a rec room, a sponge cake, and a gopher trap in “Cinch.” As Donald Barthelme observed, collage is *the* art of the twentieth century (and come to think of it, the organizing principle of the Web). In Williams’s juxtapositions, one or two lines near the end snap a seemingly random series into a pattern. In “The Mermaid Pose,” a small girl in the fountain pool contrasts with a bathtub at home that the elderly protagonist doesn’t fit into. In “Cinch,” a dead gopher is compared to the death of a friendship or marriage.

Williams’s trademark diction and syntax make for another level of defamiliarization. The wind in “Personal Details,” for instance, comes across this way: “On the avenue, I was unavoidably stuck inside of an uproar when the wind locked itself in front of my face.” As for the hairdresser scene in “At a Period of Exceptional Dullness,” it opens, “The influence of the early evening’s sunset was much less bloody inside of the salon, spreading itself like red smoke or like a slowly moving red fog, unbounded.” This is either prose poetry of a high order or a studied awkwardness or both. It contains echoes of Gertrude Stein, whose effects were disruptive in several directions. It reminds one of T. S. Eliot’s injunction from “The Metaphysical Poets” that the modern poet must “force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.” But an opening sentence like “She bears the problems inherent in her circumstance that are not suddenly in short supply and she sways while guessing who really looks at her impatiently while she faces all of the faces – the multiple rows of the pairs of persons – the prime examples in the train aisle” (from Williams’s “The Great Passion and Its Context”) is not much of an invitation to proceed.

When Williams’s sentences work, it’s as if the words are arranged at a slightly different angle to reality from what we’re used to. She even has a neat trick resembling poetic enjambment, but in prose, as in the opening of “Beauty, Love, and Vanity Itself”: “As usual, I’d hung myself” are the first five words, followed by “with snappy necklaces” and an anticipated date with a man. Syncope

makes us plug the gaps between sentences and whole incidents, and time passes in a Beckettian blink: “An hour passed. Why not say twenty years?” (“The Specialist”).

The title of the collection, *Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine*, represents the kind of repetition that calls into question the very terms it’s stressing. It occurs as a line in the story “A Little Bottle of Tears” and emphasizes the central irony of the collection, that the characters in *Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine* are anything but. Williams’s people tend to be from the privileged set who have time to prepare elegant food and are emotionally invested in their furniture. One can’t help but occasionally wish (as with another era and author, Henry James) that some of these people worked for a living.

That said, the most emotionally resonant pieces in the collection are portraits: a patriarch in “Lamb Chops, Cod,” for instance, goes to his death, juxtaposed with the food he loved: “He died while he was still glossy and smooth at the dinner table between the fish with dill – a great favorite – outstanding with butter – and the boiled blue plum dumplings.”

Another strong relationship story, “Sigh,” presents three characters: “To be civil, this man had asked to meet with his wife’s new husband.” Yet as the story continues, the discomfort grows, and the man wants desperately to know how his ex-wife behaves in bed with her new husband. The sketch ends in a gross interrogative, to put it in a Williams key. Two other standouts: “Greed” is a fine miniature, less than one page, about inheritance and incest. And in “The Romantic Life,” Williams shows that she can serve up a ghost story, this one featuring a shade named Gunther.

As always, the details that Williams chooses are key and often damning, the viewpoint a bit superior and amused: “A man they called Mike smoked a maduro and he had a urine stain on his trouser fly. He was very attentive to the host and his wife Melissa.” Appropriately, in a Williams way, the piece from which this detail is taken is called “Lavatory.”

How does Williams accomplish her effects? It’s a matter of focusing on significant details that others don’t catch, as outlined in a sentence from “A Mere Flask Poured Out”: “The little incident of the accidental spill had the fast pace of a race, hitherto neglected or unknown.” It involves the speaker in “Personal De-

tails,” who overhears someone talking – “this, while I was raising and rearranging memories of many people’s personal details, trysts, locales.” A little farther on is the insistent claim, like a writer defending her regimen, “This is regular work with regular work hours that I do.”

Williams’s reputation has amassed over decades. For years, she was a co-editor of *StoryQuarterly*, then the editor of the avant-garde journal *NOON*, which continues to publish experimental literature and visual art of many stripes, including a lot of flash fiction and vignettes, Williams’s own stock-in-trade.

If Williams’s work has changed over the decades, it’s only insofar as an earlier preoccupation with sex has slowed to a bemused pondering of long-term relationships and aging. Stories from previous collections include “Orgasms,” “The Fuck,” and “The Masturbator.” The first story of the more recently published *Vicky Swanky Is a Beauty* opens, “I’m happy at least to do without a sexual relation and I have this fabulous reputation and how did I get that in the first place?”

Getting a handle on Williams remains difficult, partly because the sentences are beguiling but keep shifting in context. Perhaps the most apt sum-up comes from the last line of “Human Comb,” the final story in *Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine*: “And many have said of me, I hear – She’s very charming.” One can apply this sobriquet to Williams, but only in the original meaning of *charm*: an element that bewitches and transforms, with effects that remain a bit unsettling, even mysterious.