

# Stories of women on the verge of a nervous breakdown

By Joseph Coates  
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**S**hort stories by a single author, even when they are cyclically linked, like the ones in this book, sometimes work against one another when they're collected in one volume, and this is true in direct proportion to their excellence.

Any story that succeeds at all is a small, newly invented lyrical miracle, and each really good one, like most of those in "Squandering the Blue," is like another world or asteroid hurtling out of space to collide with your own, causing extinctions and new forms of life to appear on your altered landscape. You need time and space between each cataclysm before you're ready to look at them collectively as a solar system or galaxy.

The 12 stories here are about Los Angeles women on the verge of a nervous breakdown, except for one, the funniest, "Desert Blues," in which Diana Barrington is smack in the middle of her breakdown but still not excused by her spirited friend Carlotta McKay from joining a protest to shut down a nuclear facility in "Mercury, Nevada."

"Why don't we take your psychotic episode across state lines?" Carlotta suggests. "Give your nervous breakdown a break. . . . You'll be warm in Nevada. . . . You can't just sit on the kitchen floor shivering." Not that Carlotta doesn't see the dangers of this. "Do you think you'll be drooling soon?" she asks Diana on the bus taking them to the desert. "I don't want you to embarrass me with people I may well be jailed with."

In a second Diana-Carlotta story, "Falling in October," Diana reflects that nervous breakdowns are passe anyway as she contemplates Carlotta going through her own crisis with the Internal Revenue Service.

"No one gets to go to bed for six months anymore. . . . They expect you up on your feet after a weekend," and on their feet these women remain, though sometimes kicking and screaming, recovering from drugs, alcohol or both, sometimes not recovering, but in any case living lives of noisy desperation that define our times — or at least Los Angeles time, which usually turns out to be the near future for the rest of us — in some of the most supercharged prose ever put on the page.

Like the line of dark woods on the horizon of a Flannery O'Connor story, certain signature elements recur: the jungles and beaches of Kauai, the polluted squalor or smoggy dankness of Los Angeles, depending on the season and the interior climate of the central characters, who are sometimes the same person, as in the Diana cycle, or sisters in the same sorrowful sorority, like Jessica Moore, Laurel Sloane, Maggie Decker, Erica or just an unnamed "I" or "she."

Most are poets with strong affinities for drugs, jungles and dangerous men; all are haunted by the

blue: the blue of ocean or rain forest, or the cobalt blue they associate with cancer, which kills or is about to kill at least two of them and the sinister violet-blue of nuclear winter.

The book's one anomalous central character, who narrates the title story, is the daughter of one of these doomed women poets whose martyrdom, for her child's sake, the daughter recalls with a love that until the last line can express itself only as suspicion and hate, her need to distance herself from what looks like the accident scene of her mother's life. "My mother loved me" is the benediction-absolution that ends this first story, and it anticipates the one that will end the book, which is one of the most remarkable collections you will ever read.

**Title:** "Squandering the Blue."

**Author:** Kate Braverman.

**Info:** Fawcett Columbine, 241 pages, \$18.95.