

Brittle Sobriety in L.A.

SQUANDERING THE BLUE

By Kate Braverman

Fawcett Columbine; 241 pages; \$18.95

REVIEWED BY LAURIE MARKS

The rocky, perilous journey from intoxication to sobriety is the overwhelming theme in "Squandering the Blue," a book of 12 powerful short stories by Los Angeles writer Kate Braverman.

Braverman, author of "Lithium for Medea" and "Palm Latitudes," seems to know all too well.

She is a poet. She is on the verge of 40. She wears aerobic suits and eats Mrs. Fields cookies. She is picking up children from ballet lessons, is seeing a psychiatrist and she has stopped smoking, drinking and doing drugs. Maybe she has a large home in the hills, with gardens flowing with bougainvillea, or perhaps she's been banished to a small, rug-stained apartment on the tawdry fringes of her Beverly Hills homeland.

And "every day she gets down on her knees and prays to a god she doesn't believe in to keep her sober one more day."

Though most of the stories in this fascinating collection are about different women, they could easily be seen as alternate angles of the same character.

In "Over the Hill," Jessica Moore's husband takes her to tony, cheap apartment buildings in the valley every time she mentions divorce. He is reminding her that these are the only kinds of places she could afford without him — places without dining rooms, without space for a piano and a maid. Once there, he forces

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her onto her hands and knees for rough sex. "Did I hurt you today?" Frank asks. "In the apartment?" He seems somehow hopeful.

In "A Touch of Autumn," creative writing teacher Laurel Sloan takes an inventory of her life as she prepares to turn 40. "My best work is behind me," she thinks — and yet she only feels contempt for the girl who was "willing to live or die for a single stanza, or one glimpse of a dissected moment infected by the moon." Now her life is articulate and fits nicely into the organized footholds of society. Yet she wonders if she has lost some vital connection, some spontaneity — and if a bottle of Russian vodka



might enable her to "find some stance that would make turning 40 alone endurable."

In "Tall Tales From the Mekong Delta," a sweaty, fast-talking drug dealer falls into step with Diana Barrington on her way to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. "You want to get in over your head?" he asks her. "You want to see what's on the other side? I'll show you." Though she is repulsed by him, his offer of seduction back into intoxication strikes an exposed nerve.

In "Temporary Light," alcoholic Suzanne Cooper, banished from her home in Beverly Hills, is readying herself for Christmas with her children, who will visit for the day. She has practiced the

Christmas-tree cookies with the green sugar that she will make with her daughter and has bought matching aprons they will wear when baking. In this passage she's driving down Wilshire Boulevard during the thick of Christmas rush.

"It is Suzanne Cooper's second sober Christmas. She has learned to recognize the voice of her illness, the demonic chorus it employs and the genius motivating its attempts to destroy her. The voice could be articulate, brilliant and seductive. It is the disaster that never sleeps.

"I have a killer disease that wants me dead, she remembers. I have a daily reprieve based on the maintenance of my spiritual

life. She repeats the slogans she has memorized in Alcoholics Anonymous, the banalities designed to provide a rudimentary form of counterattack against the onslaught of her alcoholism. It is like a chess game played by two computers to a series of perpetual stalemates. She is always black and on the defensive. Her sickness is aggressive and white, the color of vodka, gin and wine."

Braverman's writing is steady and deliberate. There's something Didionesque about the style, certainly in the dry, paper-thin quality of her female characters.

But there is also a richness that is distinctively Braverman. Her L.A. is under the spell of the Santa Ana winds; there are dangers rustling in nearby bushes and rippling beneath cool, blue waters.

Stories are laced, bordered and punctuated with the lush intoxication of bougainvillea, of orange and lemon trees, hedges of red and yellow hibiscus, bird of paradise, magenta orchids, bluebirds, avocados and papayas.

It is in these places that her characters live, on the edge of intoxication. They come to us with nothing but an almost invisible, sheer instinct for the grace of sobriety.

Fragile as candles, they have an ability to be blown out in a single breath, yet each is seeking the subtle strength of being lit from within. ■

Oakland writer Laurie Marks has contributed to *Metier* and *Soma*.