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From Our Own

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In Eric Miles Williamson’s first collection of stories, *14 Fictional Positions*, characters find themselves trapped in cars, motels, and snowstorms, cornered by ex-wives and girlfriends, dogged for decades by friends and nemeses, haunted by houses, pursued by devils, specters, and phantoms down highways, across mountain passes to the swamps of Louisiana or the mudflats of eastern Texas and driven back to the desolate landscape of industrial Oakland and back on the road again. Whether personal, literary or aesthetic, the past is prologue to future manic hilarity and the exhilarated despair of these stories. There is no escaping others—even in their absence, by exile, divorce or death, they live on even more powerfully in memory, because there is no escaping oneself, not through booze, sex, philosophy, friendship, courtship, marriage or cars. One of the most striking images in the book is a cat with “an ashtray strapped to its back” that walks from room to room. Unlike the humans, the cat “does not mind” its predicament. “It has been to parties before.”

In “Kickshaws,” two nameless interlocutors discuss a letter that’s arrived addressed to Occupant, with “don’t open it” written on the envelope. A sweepstakes prize, a letter bomb? In “Rhoda’s Sack,” a branch manager becomes obsessed with a slovenly employee’s purse, while the miserly Rhoda’s obsession with exacting minutes of the company’s “due labor” by being consistently late only enflames the manager’s obsession with discovering the contents of her purse. Each is trapped in a game neither is aware the other is playing. During a mock symposium in “The Professor Asks His Students if They Agree With the Conclusion: The Table Is an Imitation and Therefore Not Real,” the bored student Meletus “picks his nose...[and] rolls a substantial booger between his index finger and thumb, applies it to the underside of the table.” The table may not be real, but Meletus’s boredom and booger are inescapable and no philosophy can undo them. “HANGMAN” is a story of love and betrayal, a metafictional word game about language and the inescapability of death: “for each wrong choice, a body part is added to the stickman on the scaffold; for each correct choice, a

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14 FICTIONAL POSITIONS

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Reviewed by
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letter is revealed.” The letters spell the title of the story. Wrong choices: hanged. Correct choices: the hangman. A combination of right and wrong choices makes no difference. You die by different means.

In “Mr. Murphy’s Wedding,” the wrong choices are legion and hereditary, with generations of divorces, near incest and dozens of “step-brothers and step-sisters and half-brothers and half-sisters and ex-step-brothers and ex-step-sisters and foster brothers and foster sisters and ex-foster brothers and ex-foster sisters and adoptive brothers and adoptive sisters” finding the eponymous character of the story watching his newlywed bride in Reno kiss a Texan in front of the Clown of Fortune, to receive a coupon for another free-wedding, same-day polygamy at The Hitching Post for yet another bottle of cheap champagne.

“Skaters” is the most poignant story in the collection, ending with a grown-up debt to pay to the memory of an admirable man who was once kind to the narrator and with a hope deliberately absent in the first story, “Hope, Among Other Vices and Virtues,” where two friends are exiled by their significant others to a dilapidated apartment complex beside a railroad track, where Duke, only a block from the house he built and where his wife lives, makes his own ammunition and looks for “the perfect bullet,” while the narrator is refused “the diamond-tucks” of his girlfriend’s “custom upholstery” and dread rises “in delicate tendrils” from the sump-tank of his soul.

Perhaps the strongest story is “A Wise Man is Known by His Laughter.” We meet in an earlier incarnation of T-Bird Murphy of *East Bay Grease* (1999) and *Welcome to Oakland* (2009). In tone and spirit, the story is closer to the second novel than the first, with comic rants—“Aesthetics burns my asshole like Texas chili” interwoven with the beautifully sustained and musical invocations of

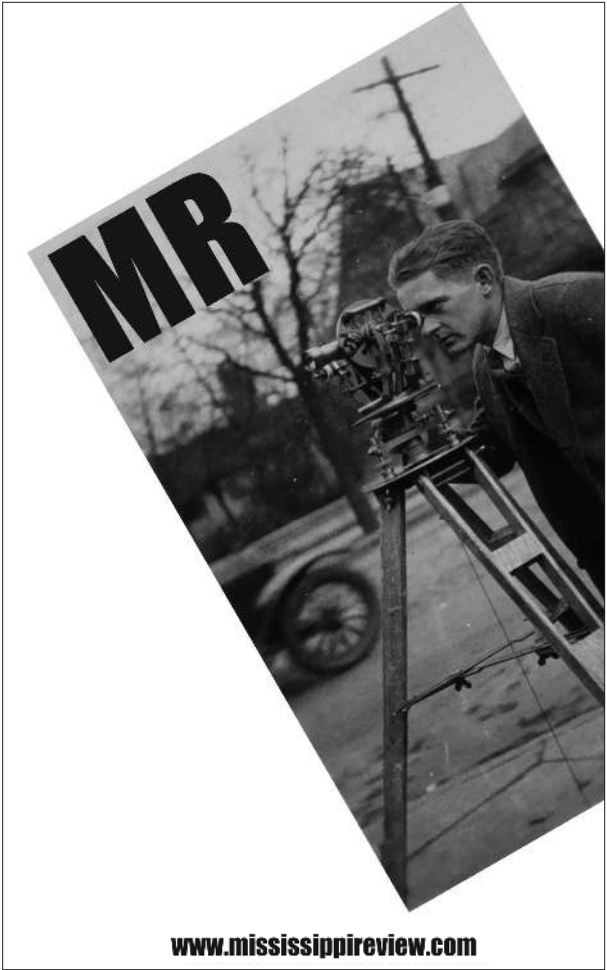
Oakland at nighttime or sunrise or the landscape of the West and lyrical and brutal descriptions of construction work—“skulls split open and splattered like hammer-beaten watermelons”—in this story and in his novels, unmatched by any writer. T-Bird is inspired by a boy who writes an obscenity on the side of a rundown building to leave Oakland on the right terms for the right reason. T-Bird “turned the key” and the reader feels the escape from no escape, “the low rumble of the engine, the steady massage of pistons and valves...the sound of air being sucked into the carburetor, the fan flooding the engine with a stream of dusk.”

In Eric Miles Williamson’s first collection of stories, characters find themselves trapped.

14 Fictional Positions are filled with characters making wrong choices: the wrong friends, women, marriages, jobs, cities. But in any given story, it is either the writer or the characters’ rebellion against bad choices—or a combination of both—that give these stories their manic brio, their hot and cold lightning flashes of phrases that dazzle and amuse, their abrasive wit, their moments of brilliant Rabelaisian laughter against either the writer’s or a character’s inability to make sense of the world, and their pathos, since every choice precludes another, and they all add up in the end to exhilarated despair, groans of laughter, and a pity maddened by grief, stupidity, and horror.

As the narrator of “Third Person on a Bed Built for Five” says, “And I always find him sitting there, punching the escape key, again, and again, and again.” The character doesn’t know the best escape is good fiction, and there is an abundance of it in this compact collection.

George Williams’s novel *Degenerate* was published by Texas Review Press in February. His stories have appeared in *Boulevard*, *The Pushcart Prize*, and *The Hopkins Review*, among others. A collection of stories, *Gardens of Earthly Delight*, was published by Raw Dog Screaming Press in June. He teaches at the Savannah College of Art and Design.



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SHORT FICTION BY
Eric Miles Williamson