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A TRIBUTE TO DONALD BARTHELME

IN MEMORIAM

DONALD BARTHELME

1931 - 1989

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Gulf Coast

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MICHAEL ANANIA

The Warm Tympanic Page

Donald Barthelme and the Written Voice

I

WHY BE COY ABOUT IT? The first half of my title is obviously from a Donald Barthelme story. Even if its distinct poesis does not give it away, its placement does. It is a convention to take a morsel from the text under discussion and loop it out over the first surface of an essay like a well cast fishing fly, skipping its dry bristles of muskrat or badger along lightly enough to suggest the deft certainty of a dragonfly on a summer's day. The line whistles through the air; the water chills a moment like moistened skin under the brief stir of a passing syllable.

"No matter what is tattooed on the warm tympanic page." The page is skin here, warmed by writing—by typing, to be precise—indelibly marked. But tattoo is drum beat as well, the drumhead's parchment also a skin, and the typewriter's play a tympani, the drumhead skin page warmed in action, fevered as the ink wounds the epidermis or is drummed into the paper's inner fibers. And enlivened. Warmed and so given life. "No matter what." Placed here, after warmed, etc., it gives the preceding assertion an absolute, idiomatic certainty; at the front of Barthelme's image, it discounts it. No matter what you say or do, the extraordinary image—typewriter drum to page skin—is discounted, its acuity dismissing itself more emphatically for being so acute. This is an exemplary instance of Barthelme, a precise image that draws the language out of itself and resonates so thoroughly through a broad range of possibilities, all of them at once complementary and slightly discordant, sharply crafted and at the same time hitched to a playground idiom whose authority comes from a memory of absolute speech, a balance of sheer talk and conspicuously self-conscious craft.

Does this seem unduly complex, even somewhat overwrought? Consider the strident awkwardness of "tympanic," the way it interrupts the unfinished epithet, giving the passage its mannered virtuosity; it is a poetic catch, just odd and indecorous enough to propose in the hesitation it causes the time it took to be made, a deliberation opposing the always apparent rush of the idiom that precedes it. Stay a while. "Tympanic" has other oddities. As an adjective it is more commonly applied to the ear than to orchestral drums, as in the *tympanic bone* or the *tympanic membrane*, and *tympan* is a term for the felt pad between the platen that presses down from above and the page being impressed with ink from below. How much of this do I have any right to presume upon? It's hard to know and

harder still to give up, since now I have page, skin, drumhead, eardrum, tattoo needle, typewriter, and printing press, balanced like pieces in an intricate mobile, all disclaimed. "No matter what."

This is deliberately backward. "The warm tympanic page" are the last four words of a story, or rather the last four words of what follows the end of "the story."

> The story ends. it was written for several reasons. Nine of them are secrets. The tenth is that one should never cease considering human love. Which remains as grisly and golden as ever, no matter what is tattooed upon the warm tympanic page. ("Rebecca," *Amateurs*)

"The story" ends with its last narrative instant. What follows is in another voice, the writer's, which proposes an anterior fiction, the secret story (stories) of why the story was written. The tenth reason exceeds fiction. The consideration of human love is outside the fictive frame, a categorical imperative, unincorporated by the fiction and unchanged by it, "no matter what is tattooed upon the warm tympanic page." Obviously, though, the epilogue is part of the larger story, in which both its pre- and post-fictions are contained, the nine secrets and the indissoluble imperative. It is the loop of the self-reflexive that is being played out here, and the well-tied image and its idiomatic disclaimer sharply and adroitly describe the way this line of invention always curls back on itself. The hazard of reflexivity is that its self-absorbed virtuosity can snare the writer in his own cleverness. In discounting his own virtuosity (while, of course, displaying it), Barthelme proposes something outside the fiction's closing curve, a subject that remains both obdurate and significant, "grisly and golden," "no matter what ."

II

Rebecca's story ("the story") is at once playful and distressing. She has spent the day in court having a petition to change her last name (Lizard) denied by an impatient judge. What we learn of the rest of her life comes from the impertinent questions of strangers. "Shaky lady," said a man, "are you a schoolteacher?" The incensed narrator answers for Rebecca, "Of course . . . you idiot. . . ." The same man or another asks, "Are you a homosexual lesbian? Is that why you never married?" "Christ, yes, she's a homosexual lesbian, as you put it," the narrator answers, "*Would you please shut your face.*" Several kinds of things are going on at once here. The initial narrative is conducted in a familiar third person. Suddenly, the narrator enters the story; a companion to the distraught Rebecca or an overengaged observer, he lashes out against the troublesome, tactless bystanders. At the same time, their questions advance the story with the narrator's emphatic assent—"Of course" and "Christ, yes"—offering a sense into the story's surface of the arbitrary nature of story. The substance of the questions become the facts of Rebecca's life, just as, almost immediately, her "ugly, reptilian" last name governs her complexion. She is, as the latest of her many dermatologists says, "greenish." What's in a name? Would a Lizard by any other name look as green? Is Rebecca's

embarrassing coloring "a genetic anomaly," as her doctor puts it, or a nominal anomaly that might be legally changed? Greenish Rebecca Lizard is a conspicuous invention, a character no longer fully proposed as having an independent existence in a world on which the narrator is reporting, but a creature made of words caught inevitably by one of the implications of her name. The story seems both to be in the process of being told, as though it had a prior existence, and being invented, as though the bounce and careen of its language were its only present.

At home, disconsolate, contemplating suicide or a Ph.D., Rebecca is distressed that her lover, Hilda, is late and angered that Hilda has stopped for a drink with Stephanie, a pink, if somewhat boring, mutual friend. The conversation between the two lovers is exquisitely painful and familiar. Rebecca's overall distress devolves into a jealous accusation. Hilda, she charges, likes, desires Stephanie, boring or not, because at least she's not greenish. "I love you," Hilda responds, cuddling. Rebecca "pushes away" both the affection and its intended reassurance. Hilda responds, as lovers do, along the established lines of vulnerability—"I really don't like your slight greenishness." What follows is negotiated pain, the slow, agonizing steps back to a conditional version of what has been damaged or lost. "In the beginning, you said it was beautiful." "I did think it was beautiful. Then." "What remains?" "I can love you *in spite of*—." This is serious business, and it is graced by Barthelme with serious asides on love's habit of pushing away, on alcoholism, on the "pain-inducing" qualities of the word, "then," used as Hilda uses it to mark the limits of a lost and more emotionally perfect past, on the "blind eye" *in spite of* promises to turn to imperfections and the contractual exchange of blind eyes that make an approximation of love seem even remotely possible. Coaxing Rebecca to dinner, Hilda, not the intrusive narrator, is given the wise summary.

> "Truth is a locked room that we knock the lock off from time to time, and then board up again. Tomorrow you will hurt me, and I will inform you that you have done so, and so on and so on. To hell with it. Come, viridian friend,come and sup with me."

Pain resides with truth, and each time truth is let out the affection it damages has to be reconstructed. But the stain clearly remains. Even in drawing Rebecca back, Hilda's word, "viridian" (longlasting, certainly), taints her tenderness a greenish blue.

Their dinner is *haute* Barthelme, steaming pork with red cabbage, ineluctably real, demotic fare, colored in sharp contrast to the greens and pinks of the rest of the story and insisted upon specifically, as though it were crucial. The quiet dinner conversation in the narrative's last moments concerns the McKinley Administration, a comic retreat from the harsher truth the lovers have just opened to view, plausible in its aversion, laughably remote and almost arbitrary—not quite, though, since in his aside on turning blind eyes, the narrator wanders into a reference to President McKinley's devotion to maintaining a good disposition. The trailing associations of musings presented as though they had occurred outside the world of the characters in a private transaction between writer-narrator and reader become the characters' last subject, emotionally arbitrary, structurally anomalous, and stylistically determined. President McKinley's double presence

quavers above the certain and singular red cabbage, each challenging the other. Subsumed by the stylish trickery that puts him at the dinner table, the real, historic President McKinley is overtly arbitrary, while the earth-bound cabbage belongs to a conventional fictional repertoire of completely arbitrary choices which insist, by their own blunt persistence, on being taken as wholly real. "The story ends" at play with its own plausibility, with what might be taken for an unconscious intrusion of an otherwise readily intrusive "gentle reader" kind of narrator, who in the next sentence ("It was written for several reasons"), emerges as the writer with nine stories not to tell and a tenth that surpasses all others.

III

What, if anything, does any of this have to do with Daphne du Maurier (Lady Browning)? Have novels of genuine sentiment and human love, like *Rebecca*, been wholly superseded by self-conscious fictions, like this "Rebecca"? Can you imagine Joan Fontaine with a greenish complexion? Would pork and red cabbage ever have been served for dinner at Manderly? To what extent did the issue of class mobility and class anxiety conventionalize the novel? Is verisimilitude the necessary literary device of bourgeois eroticism? Do great houses in novels burn down to advance their plots or merely to put an end to the endless descriptions of tables and chairs? If your name were Lizard, would you try to change it? If Hilda and Rebecca were to burn their own house down, could they love each other unconditionally, despite all of their problems? Would they walk away arm in arm, the embers of discontentment and inequality smoldering behind them? If Hilda were temporarily blinded in the fire and Rebecca nursed her back to health, would Hilda see Rebecca in a new, less greenish light? Is it reasonable to expect that "Lizard" and "greenish" can take the place in a romance of all of those vast, demoralizing vestiges of class that fettered the emotional yearnings of Rebecca, Jane Eyre, and Tess? If stylistic virtuosity and conspicuous invention become the stuff of fiction, are social and economic forces inevitably short-handed? When a man writes a lesbian love story is he indulging in a typically male, colonial presumptuousness, or is he suggesting that love, whatever its mechanics, always involves the same problems? If D.H. Lawrence had written this story, who would play the enigmatic, but sexually compelling, stranger? Despite their lack of clarity, are shadows at twilight any less real than shadows at noon? Is truth a locked room? Why does love seem so attached to pain? If you were to make a list of words you associate with love, would "grisly" appear on that list? Would golden? Was America a happier place during the McKinley Administration? Were the fictions of that era (1897-1901) more consoling and uplifting than those of our own? Does the attachment Rebecca and Hilda have for Country and Western music betray a sentimentality not otherwise apparent in this story? How is it that such a very short story—only slightly more than five pages long—can give rise to such questioning? In literature, which is the more appropriate homage, analysis or imitation?

IV

A good and useful—perhaps even, influential—article could be written on 'Music in Barthelme.' It would be like one of those studies of Joyce—Food at the *Wake*, Irish Ballads in *Dubliners*, Internal Organs in *Ulysses*—a wondrously long list of lyrics quoted, operas mentioned, instruments described, concertos alluded to or even deliberately mangled (Vivaldi's great work, *The Semesters*). Such an article would certainly have proved useful to me in thinking about Barthelme's voice since so often the voicing of his stories and essays is textured by references to and quotations from music of all sorts. David Rogers' "A Farewell to Ryman" Atlantic SD 7283 is, for example, played in "Rebecca," and we hear at least one lyric—"Please release me, let me go," which, given Rebecca's distress over hearing, just then, of Hilda's stepping out with Stephanie, would seem to speak directly to the story. The dean in "Porcupines at the University" opens that story, saying to his pretty wife Paula, "And now the purple dust of twilight time / steals across the meadows of my heart." Griswold, the porcupine wrangler, reads *Song Hits* magazine and writes Country and Western songs in the saddle. In "A shower of Gold," a stranger with a large switchblade knife offers to play "The Romeo and Juliet Overture" or "Holiday for Strings" on a cat piano. Snow White took Classical Guitar I. The Dead Father goes aslaying in "a grove of music and musicians," killing a broad range of fair instrumentalists, among them a Panpiper, a fagotto player, an archlutist, a trictrac specialist, a marimbist, and a falcon drummer. Later, he strums his own guitar.

A similar piece could be done on 'Barthelme and the Comics'—shorter, probably, in the lists it would include, but allowing its scholar-critic a range of nifty speculation on Mandrake the Magician and Bruce Wayne as prototypes, or even these days—who knows—a consideration of narrative theory as implicitly revised by the evolution of the comic book. Other articles to be considered would treat paint and pigment (viridian, of course, and all of Snow White's elaborate palette), architecture, psychiatry, and retail sales and marketing techniques (e.g. balloon vending). For someone seeking tenure in a more traditional setting, I would suggest a piece on Barthelme's references to T. S. Eliot, including the story, "Marie, Marie, Hold on Tight" (*Come Back, Dr. Caligari*), and the suggestion in *Snow White* that "murder and create" might relieve the heroine's announced boredom with ordinary language. ("Oh I wish there were some words in the world which are not the words I always hear.")

The voicing of Barthelme's fiction is made of all of these varieties of language and more—curious and capricious archaisms, discordant passages in dialect ("What are you doing in this here Seraglio?"), surprising incursions of science and technology into literature ("The center will not hold if it has been spot-welded by an operator whose deepest concern is not with the weld but with his lottery ticket" or "The new machine for writing the number 5 in gold"), and a fondness for the abruptly profound remark ("Architecture is memory" and "Many famous teachers don't teach courses in themselves"). This extraordinary arraying of languages and subject matters depends in large part on the formal ingenuity of Barthelme's fictions. Their relatively minimal narratives replace the responsible plod of the narrative excursion with a sense of immediate invention. The

Barthelme story is not based on some finished version of reality, which is being reported on, but is, instead, an invention rather conspicuously going on word for word as the story progresses. The range of language used, its impertinent pertinences, often apt but as often discordant and skewed, has to take the place of the implicitly continuous world of conventional, realistic fiction. Its breadth and variety are the boundaries of Barthelme's fictional world.

Voice, then, and vocal range are not meant to be peripheral or transparent but central, self-absorbed, and opaque. Surrealisms, burlesques, parodies, scholarly citations, apparently arbitrary moments of exacting detail, and quick shifts in narration are all features of this alternative fictional contract. Even in a piece as simple in its narrative content as "Rebecca," the narrator cannot keep a respectful distance, merely describing the action and whispering occasional observations to the reader; instead, he butts in loudly and lets the content of his whispering invade the consciousness of his characters. The process of the story envelops and invades "the story" that is told. That is the fiction, a voice going on pell mell, masked, unmasked, multiple, self-involved, playful, urgent.

I said ingenious. The altered structure demands an agile, varied voice; the voice's extravagances are permitted by the weight it carries, and that weight, in turn, proposes a unique ontology for every moment of linguistic invention. The intricacy of this speech requires that it be written, and its reliance on immediacy requires that it sound as though it were being spoken. And yet what distinguishes Barthelme and provides him with an escape from the closing loop of this carefully cast, reflexive line is his insistence on the emotional cause of fiction, the candor of its consideration of human love, of sorrow, guilt, and pain. "No matter what is tattooed on the warm tympanic page."

ROGER ANGELL

Having Him For A Friend

DONALD BARTHELME DIED THE OTHER DAY, at the age of fifty-eight. His departure came much too soon for his readers and stricken friends to attach to him that sense of satisfaction and gratitude one extends almost reflexively to an author who has achieved a longer span, but the brilliance and the dimensions of his work would have honored several lifetimes. He was the author of five novels, nine collections of stories, and a celebrated book for children. His contributions to *The New Yorker* extended across twenty-six years, and included dozens of unsigned Notes and Comment pieces, some film criticism, and a hundred and twenty-eight stories—these last of such a dazzling, special nature that each one was invariably spoken of, here and elsewhere, as "a Barthelme." The tag was almost essential, because a typical Barthelme story was simultaneously rich and elusive, evanescent and nutritious, profound and hilarious, brief and long-term, trifling and heartbreaking, daunting to some readers and to others a snap, a breeze, a draught of life. During his lifetime, Donald Barthelme was variously summarized as an avant-gardist, a collagist, a minimalist, a Dadaist, an existentialist, and a postmodernist, but even a cursory rereading of his work leaves one with the certainty that none of these narrowings are of much use. Categories seemed to accumulate around him of their own accord (the phenomenon must have pleased him, for he loved lists), but a brief rundown of some common ingredients in his fiction only brings back his unique swirl of colors and contexts: songs, museums, headlines, orchestras, bishops and other clerics, jungles, babies, commercials, savants and philosophers, animals (gerbils, bears, porcupines, falling dogs), anomie, whiskey, fathers and grandfathers, explorers, passionate love, ghosts (zombies and others), musicians, film-makers, recipes, painters, princes, affectations, engravings, domesticity, balloons, battalions, nothingness, politicians, Indians, grief, places (Paraguay, Korea, Copenhagen, Barcelona, Thailand), dreams, young women, architects, angels, and a panoply of names (Goethe, Edward Lear, Klee, Bluebeard, Cortés and Montezuma, Sindbad, Kierkegaard, President Eisenhower, Eugénie Grandet, Snow White, Captain Blood, the Holy Ghost, Perpetua, Daumier, the Phantom of the Opera, St. Augustine, St. Anthony, and Hokie Mokie the King of Jazz).

This explosion of reference, this bottomless etcetera, may account for his brevity—short stories and short novels—and for the beauty of his prose. His names and nouns were set down in a manner that magically carried memories and meanings and overtones, bringing them intact to the page, where they let loose (in the reader) a responding instinctive flood of recognition, irony, and sadness—too

many emotions, in fact, to work very well within the formal chambers of a full novel. The Barthelme sentences, which seemed to employ references or omissions in the place of adjectives or metaphors, were sky blue—clear and fresh, and free of all previous weathers of writing. It was this instrument that allowed him to be off-hand and complex and lighthearted and poignant all at the same time—often within the space of a line or two. In an early story, "Philadelphia," a man named Mr. Flax describes an imaginary tribe and culture in this fashion:

> The Wapituil are like us to an extraordinary degree. . . . They have a Fifth Avenue. . . . They have a Chock Full o' Nuts and a Chevrolet, one of each. They have a Museum of Modern Art and a telephone and a Martini, one of each. . . . They have everything that we have, but only one of each thing. . . . The sex life of a Wapituil consists of a single experience, which he thinks about for a long time.

Many readers had difficulty at first cottoning to writing like this. They were put off by Barthelme's crosscutting and by his terrifying absence of explanation, and those who resisted him to the end may have been people who were by nature unable to put their full trust in humor. Barthelme was erudite and culturally rigorous, but he was always terrifically funny as well, and when his despairing characters and jagged scenes and sudden stops and starts had you tumbling wildly, free-falling through a story, it was laughter that kept you afloat and made you feel there would probably be a safe landing. It was all right to laugh: sometimes (he seemed to be saying) that was the only thing we should count on.

All this took some getting used to—readers who encountered his long and ironically twisted "Snow White" here in *The New Yorker* in 1967 wrote us in great numbers to ask what had happened to them—but if you could give yourself to it (there was no code, no set of symbols, no key) you were all right. One writer here said last week, "Somehow, he taught us how to read him—it's almost the most surprising thing about him—and what had felt strange or surreal in his work came to seem absolutely natural and inevitable. And there were times, particularly in the Nixon years, when his stuff seemed more real—saner and much more coherent—than anything else going on in the world."

Donald Barthelme was tall and quiet, with an air of natural gravity to him—a *light* gravity, if that is possible. He had an Ahab beard and wore Strindbergian eyeglasses: some people thought he looked more postmodernist than he wrote. He was entertaining and sad, and without pretension. He took himself seriously but presented himself quietly. (Anyone who happened to see it must still remember a television interview, years ago, in which Barthelme responded to a question about another contemporary literary figure with a brief sigh and then said, "Yes, I know him. His big books are always leaning against my little books on the shelf.") He was a great teacher, unfailingly generous and hopeful in his estimation of beginning writers. He was busy in intellectual and literary circles, here and in Europe. He was a romantic and a family man (as anyone who reads him can see), and an exceptionally gentle and affectionate father. Many people, of all ages, seemed to find a father in him, in fact, and they are missing him now in a painful

and personal fashion. One woman on our staff, a writer, said, "When he was writing a lot, you had this sense that there was someone else sort of like you, living in your city, and saying things that meant something about your life. It was like having a companion in the world."

And an older man, also a writer and contributor, said almost the same thing: "He always seemed to be writing about my trashiest thoughts and my night fears and my darkest secrets, but he understood them better than I did, and he seemed to find them sweeter and classier than I ever could. For a long time, I felt I was going to be all right as long as he was around and writing. Having him for a friend was the greatest compliment of my life."

JOHN ASHBERY

Autumn Telegram

SEEN ON A BENCH THIS MORNING: a man in a gray coat
and apple-green tie. He couldn't have been over fifty,
his mild eyes said, and yet there was something of the ruthlessness
of extreme old age about his bearing; I don't know what.
In the corner a policeman; next, sheaves of wheat
laid carefully like dolls on the denuded sward,
prompting me to wish of dreaming you again. After the station
we never made significant contact again. But it's all right,
isn't it, I mean the telling had to be it. There was such fire
in the way you put your finger against your nostril
as in some buried sagas erupts out at one sometimes: the power
that is under the earth, no I mean in it. And if all the
disappointed tourists hadn't got up and gone away, we would still
be in each other's reserve, aching, and that would be the same,
wouldn't it, as far as the illustrations and the index were concerned?

As it is I frequently get off before the stop that is mine
not out of modesty but a failure to keep the lines of communication
open within myself. And then, unexpectedly, I am shown a dog
and asked to summarize its position in a few short, angular adverbs
and tell them this is what they do, why we can't count
on anything unexpected. The waterfall is all around us,
we've been living in it, yet to find the hush material
is just what these daily exercises force on us. I mean
the scansions of tree to tree, of house to house, and how
almost every other one had something bright to add
to the morass of conversation: not much, just a raised eyebrow
or skirt. And we all take it in, even laughing in the right places,
which get to be few and far between. Still it is a way of saying,
a meaning that something has been done, a thing, and hearing always
comes afterward. And once you have heard, you know,
the margin can excuse you. We all go back to being attentive
then, and the right signals concur. It stops, and smarts.

JOHN BARTH

Professor Barthelme

CONCERNING *PROFESSOR* DONALD BARTHELME: I claim a little bit of the credit for luring our lost colleague into academic life, and am therefore prepared to shoulder my share of the blame.

The intensely North American phenomenon of writers teaching writing in our colleges and universities has been the subject of so much sniffery—some of it justified, most of it wrong-headed, on the part not only of our fellow American writers outside the academy but even, in some instances, of European and "Third World" writers pleased enough to accept visiting professorships on our faculties—that I won't even mention it here. Donald himself had resisted sundry academic overtures over the years, and here and there in his fiction (in his story "Porcupines at the University," for example) he teases the academy, a good deal more amiably than many other off-campus writers have seen fit to do. After spells of museum-curating and journal-editing in Texas, he settled in to survive in New York strictly as a writer. But his literary income never kept pace with his literary stature, and he remarked to me some twenty years ago that he could remember scarcely a month in his adult life when he hadn't had to worry seriously about paying the bills.

Mainly for that reason, at the end of the 1960s I was able to persuade Donald to take my place at SUNY/Buffalo for a semester while (having been in school myself almost uninterruptedly since kindergarten) I went on academic leave. The pay was good, and as a visitor he would be spared the chores of academic housekeeping. His teaching responsibilities would entail only a pair of once-a-week workshop sessions and conferences with the apprentice writers; he could fly out to the Queen City overnight, do his seminars and conferences, and take his week's worth of manuscripts home to West 11th St. for line editing. Privately I hoped he wouldn't short-change my students, as has been known to happen occasionally in such cases.

What Donald did, in fact, was *long*-change them. Word reached me in Boston that he and they were publishing the best of the students' work in a handsome magazine (in the tabloid format of the original *Fiction* magazine, complete like it with wonderful graphics by Donald himself). *I* didn't do that. Furthermore, he let them take him after class to Buffalo neighborhood bars, where he instructed them in the perils of alcohol for aspiring American writers. I didn't do that for them, either. I had the distinct feeling, when I returned, that my coachees had not suffered irremediably from my absence.

As for their substitute coach: having thus wet his academic feet along the banks of the Niagara, he did me the same favor again the very next year, or per-

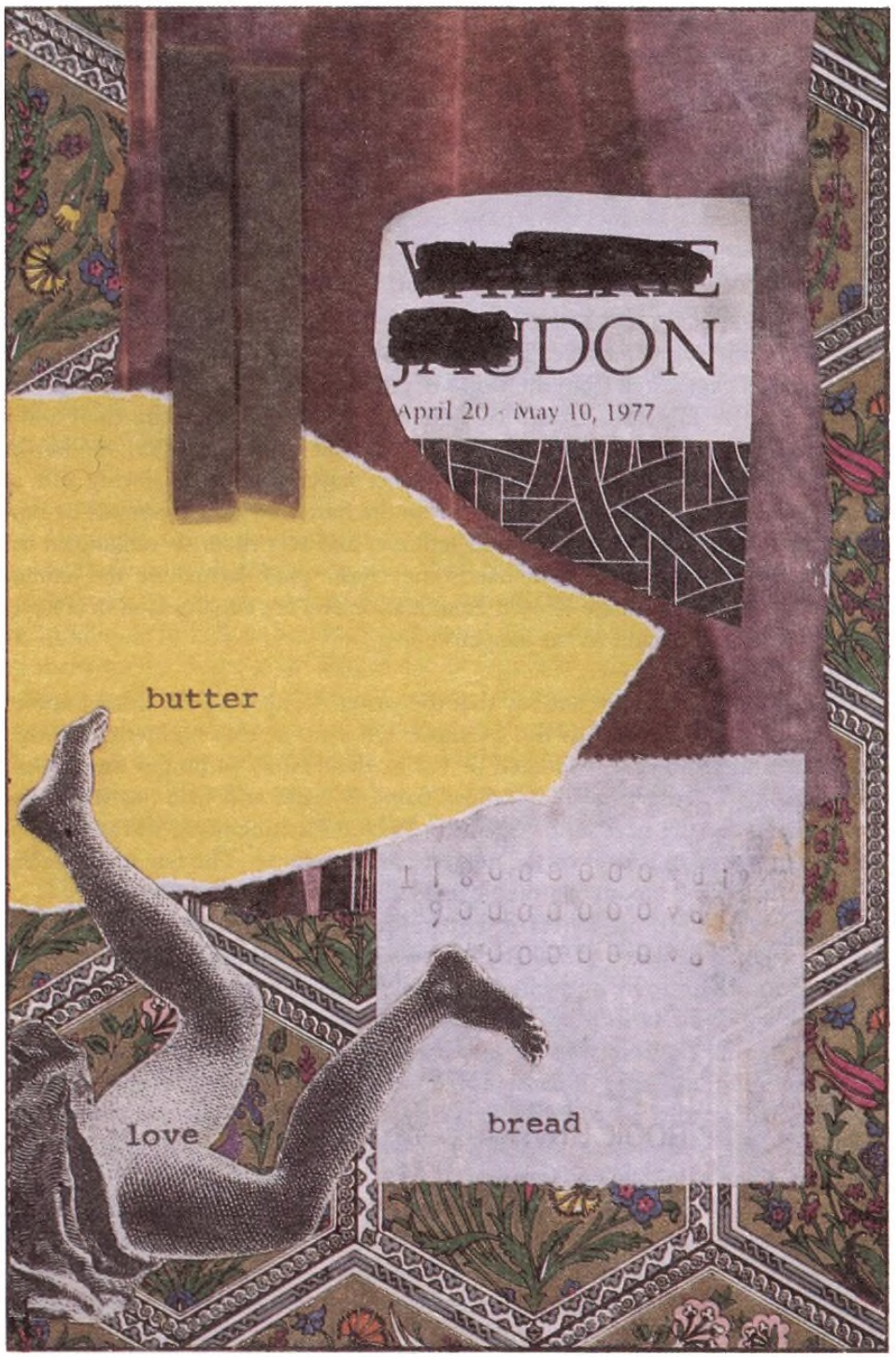
haps the one after, along the banks of the Charles, where I had been visiting Boston U. In as much as it was another quick shot from Manhattan with a comparable job-description, once again Donald made a limited pact with the devil of academe and more than fulfilled his end of the bargain: the careful editing and criticism, the handsomely illustrated publication, the sound chemical advice delivered *in situ*.

And it must be said that the Devil kept *his* end of the bargain, too, for my impression is that after Donald's trial seasons in Buffalo and Boston, his academic affiliation was unbroken, though more or less attenuated: a regular part-time appointment at City University (from where, if I remember correctly, he conducted his workshops in his and Marion's Greenwich Village apartment), and then his full-fledged professorial residency in Houston, where, far from being a mere ornament to the faculty, he was an organizing force of a first-rate program and—as I can testify from having been for a change *his* guest instead of he mine—the presiding spirit of a lively literary community.

I know that Donald was good for the university and am prepared to believe that the university was good *to* him. Whether academic life was good *for* Donald Barthelme the writer is not for me to speculate, but I see no evidence that his art suffered from it in any respect. It is top-drawer Donald right up to the end. And from our having exchanged occasional choice apprentices between Houston and Johns Hopkins, I know that *their* art was invariably strengthened by the meticulous ministrations of Professor Barthelme.

His death, I must add by the way, has afforded me my first experience of that *echt* twentieth-century emotion, Survivor Guilt. I would not have volunteered to take my distinguished coeval's place with that personage whom Scheherazade calls "the Destroyer of Delights and Severer of Societies." But it does feel queer to be going on with the enjoyment of good food and drink, good music and love, good language and the sweet light of the sun, Donald dead.

Adapted from remarks delivered at a memorial ceremony for Donald Barthelme at the American Place Theater in New York City, November 13, 1989.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April 20 - May 10, 1977
butter
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DONALD BARTHELME

Not-Knowing

LET US SUPPOSE THAT SOMEONE IS WRITING A STORY. From the world of conventional signs he takes an azalea bush, plants it in a pleasant park. He takes a gold pocket watch from the world of conventional signs and places it under the azalea bush. He takes from the same rich source a handsome thief and a chastity belt, places the thief in the chastity belt and lays him tenderly under the azalea, not neglecting to wind the gold pocket watch so that its ticking will, at length, awaken the now-sleeping thief. From the Sarah Lawrence campus he borrows a pair of seniors, Jacqueline and Jemima, and sets them to walking in the vicinity of the azalea bush and the handsome, chaste thief. Jacqueline and Jemima have just failed the Graduate Record Examination and are cursing God in colorful Sarah Lawrence language. What happens next?

Of course, I don't know.

It's appropriate to pause and say that the writer is one who, embarking upon a task, does not know what to do. I cannot tell you, at this moment, whether Jacqueline and Jemima will succeed or fail in their effort to jimmy the chastity belt's lock, or whether the thief, whose name is Zeno and who has stolen the answer sheets for the next set of Graduate Record Examinations, will pocket the pocket watch or turn it over to the nearest park employee. The fate of the azalea bush, whether it will bloom or strangle in a killing frost, is unknown to me.

A very conscientious writer might purchase an azalea at the Downtown Nursery and a gold watch at Tiffany's, hire a handsome thief fresh from Riker's Island, obtain the loan of a chastity belt from the Metropolitan, inveigle Jacqueline and Jemima in from Bronxville, and arrange them all under glass for study, writing up the results in honest, even fastidious prose. But in so doing he places himself in the realm of journalism or sociology. The not-knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made. Without the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention.

This is not to say that I don't know anything about Jacqueline or Jemima, but what I do know comes into being at the instant it's inscribed. Jacqueline, for example, loathes her mother, whereas Jemima dotes on hers—I discover this by writing the sentence that announces it. Zeno was fathered by a—what? Polar bear? Roller skate? Shower of gold? I opt for the shower of gold, for Zeno is a hero (although he's just become one by virtue of his golden parent). Inside the pocket watch there is engraved a legend. Can I make it out? I think so: *Drink me*,

it says. No no, can't use it, that's Lewis Carroll's. But could Zeno be a watch swallower rather than a thief? No again, Zeno'd choke on it, and so would the reader. There are rules.

Writing is a process of dealing with not-knowing, a forcing of what and how. We have all heard novelists testify to the fact that, beginning a new book, they are utterly baffled as to how to proceed, what should be written and how it might be written, even though they've done a dozen. At best there's a slender intuition, not much greater than an itch. The anxiety attached to this situation is not inconsiderable. "Nothing to paint and nothing to paint with," as Beckett says of Bram van Velde. The not-knowing is not simple, because it's hedged about with prohibitions, roads that may not be taken. The more serious the artist, the more problems he takes into account and the more considerations limit his possible initiatives—a point to which I shall return.

What kind of a fellow is Zeno? How do I know until he's opened his mouth?

"*Gently, ladies, gently,*" says Zeno, as Jacqueline and Jemima bash away at the belt with a spade borrowed from a friendly park employee. And to the park employee: "Somebody seems to have lost this-here watch."

Let us change the scene.

Alphonse, the park employee from the preceding episode, he who lent the spade, is alone in his dismal room on West Street (I could position him as well in a four-story townhouse on East Seventy-second, but you'd object, and rightly so, verisimilitude forbids it, nothing's calculated quicker than a salary). Alphonse, like so many toilers in the great city, is not as simple as he seems. Like those waiters who are really actors and those cab drivers who are really composers of electronic music, Alphonse is sun-lighting as a Parks Department employee although he is, in reality, a literary critic. We find him writing a letter to his friend Gaston, also a literary critic although masquerading *pro tem* as a guard at the Whitney Museum. Alphonse poises paws over his Smith-Corona and writes:

> Dear Gaston,
>
> Yes, you are absolutely right—Postmodernism is dead. A stunning blow, but not entirely surprising. I am spreading the news as rapidly as possible, so that all of our friends who are in the Postmodernist "bag" can get out of it before their cars are repossessed and the insurance companies tear up their policies. Sad to see Postmodernism go (and so quickly!). I was fond of it. As fond, almost, as I was of its grave and noble predecessor, Modernism. But we cannot dwell in the done-for. The death of a movement is a natural part of life, as was understood so well by the partisans of Naturalism, which is dead.
>
> I remember exactly where I was when I realized that Postmodernism had bought it. I was in my study with a cup of tequila and William Y's new book, *One-Half*. Y's work is, we agree, good—*very* good. But who can make the leap to greatness while dragging after him the burnt-out boxcars of a dead aesthetic? Perhaps we can find a new employment for him. On the roads, for example. When the insight overtook me, I started to my feet, knocking over the tequila, and said aloud (although there was no one

to hear), "What? Postmodernism, too?" So many, so many. I put Y's book away on a high shelf and turned to the contemplation of the death of Plainsong, A.D. 958.

By the way: Structuralism's tottering. I heard it from Gerald, who is at Johns Hopkins and thus in the thick of things. You don't have to tell everybody. Frequently, idle talk is enough to give a movement that last little "push" that topples it into its grave. I'm convinced that's what happened to the New Criticism. I'm persuaded that it was Gerald, whispering in the corridors.

On the bright side, one thing that is dead that I don't feel too bad about is Existentialism, which I never thought was anything more than Phenomenology's bathwater anyway. It had a good run, but how peeving it was to hear all those artists going around talking about "the existential moment" and similar claptrap. Luckily, they have stopped doing that now. Similarly, the Nouveau Roman's passing did not disturb me overmuch. "Made dreariness into a religion," you said, quite correctly. I know this was one of your pared-to-the-bone movements and all that, but I didn't even like what they left out. A neat omission usually raises the hairs on the back of my neck. Not here. Robbe-Grillet's only true success, for my money, was with *Jealousy*, which I'm told he wrote in a fit of.

Well, where are we? Surrealism gone, got a little sweet toward the end, you could watch the wine of life turning into Gatorade. Sticky. Altar Poems—those constructed in the shape of an altar for the greater honor and glory of God—have not been seen much lately: missing and presumed dead. The Anti-Novel is dead; I read it in the *Times*. The Anti-Hero and the Anti-Heroine had a thing going which resulted in three Anti-Children, all of them now at M.I.T. The Novel of the Soil is dead, as are Expressionism, Impressionism, Futurism, Imagism, Vorticism, Regionalism, Realism, the Kitchen Sink School of Drama, the Theatre of the Absurd, the Theatre of Cruelty, Black Humor, and Gongorism. You know all this; I'm just totting up. To be a Pre-Raphaelite in the present era is to be somewhat out of touch. And, of course, Concrete Poetry—sank like a stone.

So we have a difficulty. What shall we call the New Thing, which I haven't encountered yet but which is bound to be out there somewhere? Post-Postmodernism sounds, to me, a little lumpy. I've been toying with the Revolution of the Work II, or the New Revolution of the Word, but I'm afraid the Jolas estate may hold a copyright. It should have the word *new* in it somewhere. The New Newness? Or maybe the Post-New? It's a problem. I await your comments and suggestions. If we're going to slap a saddle on this rough beast, we've got to get moving.

Yours,
Alphonse

If I am slightly more sanguine than Alphonse about Postmodernism, however dubious about the term itself and not altogether clear as to who is supposed to be on the bus and who is not, it's because I locate it in relation to a series of problems,


Plate IX
Elevation and Profil of one Arch of the Crypto Porticus
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LUCY STONE
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and feel that the problems are durable ones. Problems are a comfort. Wittgenstein said, of philosophers, that some of them suffer from "loss of problems," a development in which everything seems quite simple to them and what they write becomes "immeasurably shallow and trivial." The same can be said of writers. Before I mention some of the specific difficulties I have in mind, I'd like to at least glance at some of the criticisms that have been leveled at the alleged Postmodernists—let's say John Barth, William Gass, John Hawkes, Robert Coover, William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, and myself in this country, Calvino in Italy, Peter Handke and Thomas Berhard in Germany, although other names could be invoked. The criticisms run roughly as follows: that this kind of writing has turned its back on the world, is in some sense not about the world but about its own processes, that it is masturbatory, certainly chilly, that it excludes readers by design, speaks only to the already tenured, or that it does not speak at all, but instead, like Frost's Secret, sits in the center of a ring and Knows.

I would ardently contest each of these propositions, but it's rather easy to see what gives rise to them. The problems that seem to me to define the writer's task at this moment (to the extent that he has chosen them as his problems) are not of a kind that make for ease of communication, for work that rushes toward the reader with outflung arms—rather, they're the reverse. Let me cite three such difficulties that I take to be important, all having to do with language. First, there is art's own handled language, essentially an effort toward finding a language in which making art is possible at all. This remains a ground theme, as potent, problematically, today as it was a century ago. Secondly, there is the political and social contamination of language by its use in manipulation of various kinds over time and the effort to find what might be called a "clean" language, problems associated with the Roland Barthes of *Writing Degree Zero* but also discussed by Luk5ács and others. Finally, there is the pressure on language from contemporary culture in the broadest sense—I mean our devouring commercial culture—which results in a double impoverishment: theft of complexity from the reader, theft of the reader from the writer.

These are by no means the only thorny matters with which the writer has to deal, nor (allowing for the very great differences among the practitioners under discussion) does every writer called Postmodern respond to them in the same way and to the same degree, nor is it the case that other writers of quite different tendencies are innocent of these concerns. If I call these matters "thorny," it's because any adequate attempt to deal with them automatically creates barriers to the ready assimilation of the work. Art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult, but because it wishes to be art. However much the writer might long to be, in his work, simple, honest, and straightforward, these virtues are no longer available to him. He discovers that in being simple, honest, and straightforward, nothing much happens: he speaks the speakable, whereas what we are looking for is the as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken.

With Mallarmé the effort toward mimesis, the representation of the external world, becomes a much more complex thing than it had been previously. Mallarmé shakes words loose from their attachments and bestows new meanings upon them, meanings which point not toward the external world but toward the Absolute, acts of poetic intuition. This is a fateful step; not for nothing does

Barthes call him the Hamlet of literature. It produces, for one thing, a poetry of unprecedented difficulty. You will find no Mallarmé in Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*. Even so ardent an admirer as Charles Mauron speaks of the sense of alienation enforced by his work. Mauron writes: "All who remember the day when first they looked into the *Poems* or the *Divagations* will testify to that curious feeling of *exclusion* which put them, in the face of a text written with *their* words (and moreover, as they could somehow feel, magnificently written), suddenly outside their own language, deprived of their rights in a common speech, and, as it were, rejected by their oldest friends." Mallarmé's work is also, and perhaps most importantly, a step toward establishing a new ontological status for the poem, as an object in the world rather than a representation of the world. But the ground seized is dangerous ground. After Mallarmé the struggle to renew language becomes a given for the writer, his exemplary quest an imperative. Mallarmé's work, "this whisper that is so close to silence," as Marcel Raymond calls it, is at once a liberation and a loss to silence of a great deal of territory.

The silencing of an existing rhetoric (in Harold Rosenberg's phrase) is also what is at issue in Barthes's deliberations in *Writing Degree Zero* and after—in this case a variety of rhetorics seen as actively pernicious rather than passively inhibiting. The question is, what is the complicity of language in the massive crimes of Fascism, Stalinism, or (by implication) our own policies in Vietnam? In the control of societies by the powerful and their busy functionaries? If these abominations are all in some sense facilitated by, made possible by, language, to what degree is that language ruinously contaminated (considerations also raised by George Steiner in his well-known essay "The Hollow Miracle" and, much earlier, by George Orwell)? I am sketching here, inadequately, a fairly complex argument; I am not particularly taken with Barthes's tentative solutions but the problems command the greatest respect. Again, we have language deeply suspicious of its own behavior; although this suspicion not different in kind from Hemingway's noticing, early in the century, that words like *honor*, *glory*, and *country* were perjured, bought, the skepticism is far deeper now, and informed as well by the investigations of linguistic philosophers, structuralists, semioticians. Even conjunctions must be inspected carefully. "I read each word with the feeling appropriate to it," says Wittgenstein. "The word 'but' for example with the but-feeling. . . ." He is not wrong. Isn't the but-feeling, as he calls it, already sending us headlong down a greased slide before we've had the time to contemplate the proposition it's abutting? Quickly now, quickly—when you hear the phrase "our vital interests" do you stop to wonder whether you were invited to the den, Zen, Klan, or coven meeting at which these were defined? Did you speak?

In turning to the action of contemporary culture on language, and thus on the writer, the first thing to be noticed is a loss of reference. If I want a world of reference to which all possible readers in this country can respond, there is only one universe of discourse available, that in which the Love Boat sails on seas of passion like a Flying Dutchman of passion and the dedicated men in white of *General Hospital* pursue, with evenhanded diligence, triple bypasses and the nursing staff. This limits things somewhat. The earlier newspaper culture, which once dealt in a certain amount of nuance and zestful, highly literate hurly-burly, has deteriorated shockingly. The newspaper I worked for as a raw youth, thirty years ago, is today

a pallid imitation of its former self. Where once we could put spurious quotes in the paper and attribute them to Ambrose Bierce and be fairly sure that enough readers would get the joke to make the joke worthwhile, from the point of view of both reader and writer, no such common ground now exists. The situation is not peculiar to this country. Steiner remarks of the best current journalism in Germany that, read against an average number of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* of pre-Hitler days, it's difficult at times to believe that both are written in German. At the other end of the scale much of the most exquisite description of the world, discourse about the world, is now being carried on in mathematical languages obscure to most people—certainly to me—and the contributions the sciences once made to our common language in the form of coinages, new words and concepts, are now available only to specialists. When one adds the ferocious appropriation of high culture by commercial culture—it takes, by my estimate, about forty-five minutes for any given novelty in art to travel from the Mary Boone Gallery on West Broadway to the display windows of Henri Bendel on Fifty-seventh Street—one begins to appreciate the seductions of silence.

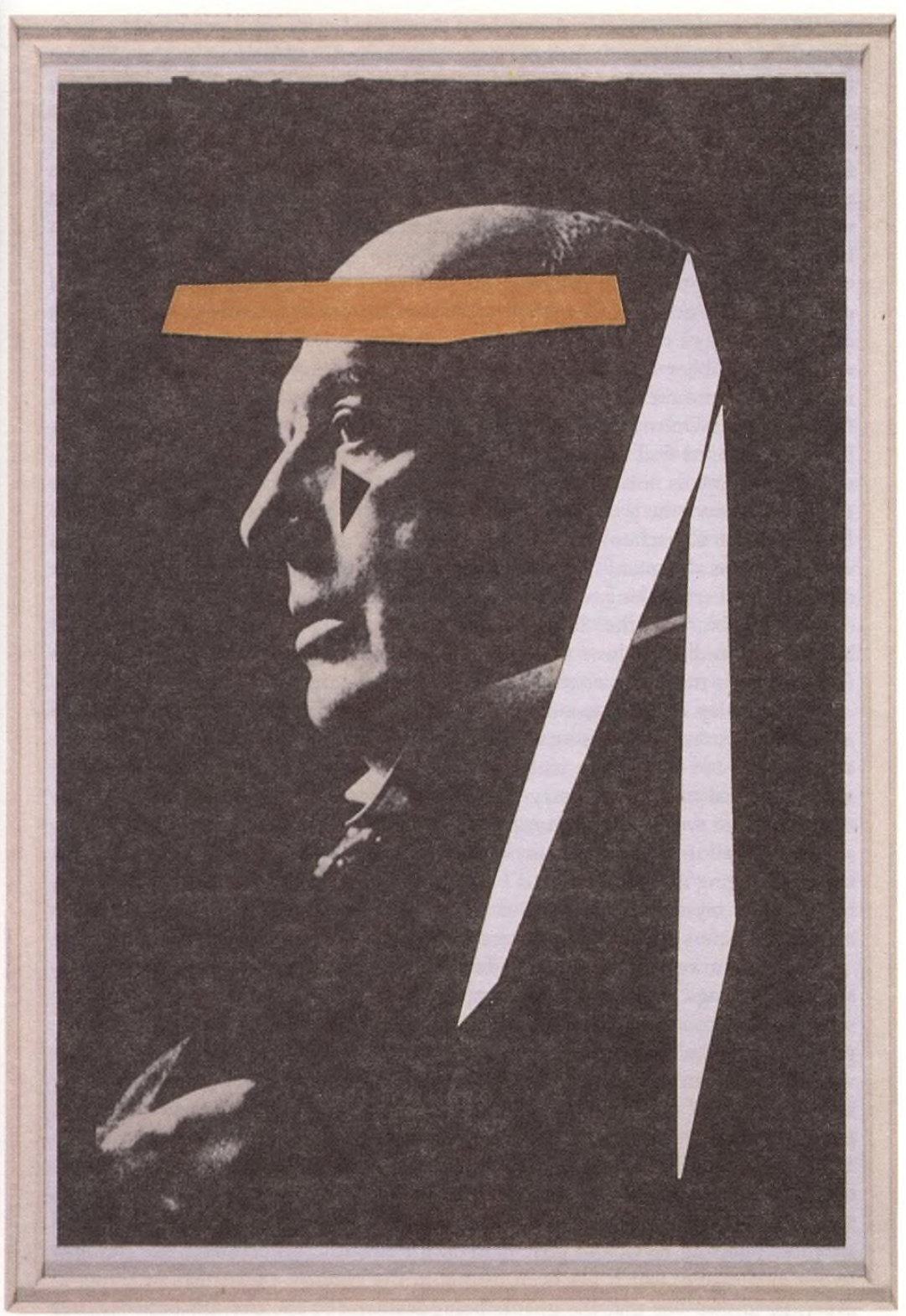
Problems in part define the kind of work the writer chooses to do, and are not to be avoided but embraced. A writer, says Karl Kraus, is a man who can make a riddle out of an answer.

Let me begin again.

Jacqueline and Jemima are instructing Zeno, who has returned the purloined GRE documents and is thus restored to dull respectability, in Postmodernism. Postmodernism, they tell him, has turned its back on the world, is not about the world but about is own processes, is masturbatory, certainly chilly, excludes readers by design, speaks only to the already tenured, or does not speak at all, but instead—

Zeno, to demonstrate that he too knows a thing or two, quotes the critic Perry Meisel on semiotics. "Semiotics," he says, "is in a position to claim that no phenomenon has any ontological status outside its place in the particular information system from which it draws its meaning"—he takes a large gulp of his Gibson—"and therefore, all language is finally groundless." I am eavesdropping and I am much reassured. This insight is one I can use. Gaston, the critic who is a guard at the Whitney Museum, is in love with an IRS agent named Madelaine, the very IRS agent, in fact, who is auditing my return for the year 1982. "Madelaine," I say kindly to her over lunch, "semiotics is in a position to claim that no phenomenon has any ontological status outside its place in the particular information system from which it draws its meaning, and therefore, all language is finally groundless, including that of those funny little notices you've been sending me." "Yes," says Madelaine kindly, pulling from her pocket a large gold pocket watch that Alphonse has sold Gaston for twenty dollars, her lovely violet eyes atwitter, "but some information systems are more enforceable than others." Alas, she's right.

If the writer is taken to be the work's way of getting itself written, a sort of lightning rod for an accumulation of atmospheric disturbances, a St. Sebastian absorbing in his tattered breast the arrows of the Zeitgeist, this changes not very much the traditional view of the artist. But it does license a very great deal of critical imperialism.



Henry James, Chief

This is fun for everyone. A couple of years ago I received a letter from a critic requesting permission to reprint a story of mine as an addendum to the piece he had written about it. He attached the copy of my story he proposed to reproduce, and I was amazed to find that my poor story had sprouted a set of tiny numbers—one to eighty-eight, as I recall—an army of tiny numbers marching over the surface of my poor distracted text. Resisting the temptation to tell him that all the tiny numbers were in the wrong places, I gave him permission to do what he wished, but I did notice that by a species of literary judo the status of my text had been reduced to that of footnote.

There is, in this kind of criticism, an element of aggression that gives one pause. Deconstruction is an enterprise that announces its intentions with startling candor. Any work of art depends upon a complex series of interdependencies. If I wrench the rubber tire from the belly of Rauschenberg's famous goat to determine, in the interest of a finer understanding of same, whether the tire is a B.F. Goodrich or a Uniroyal, the work collapses, more or less behind my back. I say this not because I find this kind of study valueless but because the mystery worthy of study, for me, is not the signification of parts but how they come together, the tire wrestled over the goat's hind legs. Calvin Tomkins tells us in *The Bride and the Bachelors* that Rauschenberg himself says that the tire seemed "something as unavoidable as the goat." To see both goat and tire as "unavoidable" choices, in the context of art-making, is to illuminate just how strange the combinatorial process can be. Nor was the choice a hasty one; Tomkins tells us that the goat had been in the studio for three years and had appeared in two previous versions (the final version is titled "Monogram") before it met the tire.

Modern-day critics speak of "recuperating" a text, suggesting an accelerated and possibly strenuous nursing back to health of a basically sickly text, very likely one that did not even know itself to be ill. I would argue that in the competing methodologies of contemporary criticism, many of them quite rich in implications, a sort of tyranny of great expectations obtains, a rage for final explanations, a refusal to allow a work that mystery which is essential to it. I hope I am not myself engaging in mystification if I say, not that the attempt should not be made, but that the mystery exists. I see no immediate way out of the paradox—tear a mystery to tatters and you have tatters, not mystery—I merely note it and pass on.

We can, however, wonder for a moment why the goat girdled with its tire is somehow a magical object, rather than, say, only a dumb idea. Harold Rosenberg speaks of the contemporary artwork as "anxious," as wondering: Am I a masterpiece or simply a pile of junk? (If I take many of my examples here from the art world rather than the world of literature, it is because the issues are more quickly seen in terms of the first: "goat" and "tire" are standing in for pages of prose, pounds of poetry.) What precisely is it in the coming together of goat and tire that is magical? It's not the surprise of seeing the goat attired, although that's part of it. One might say, for example, that the tire *contests* the goat, *contradicts* the goat, as a mode of being, even that the tire *reproaches* the goat, in some sense. On the simplest punning level, the goat is *tired.* Or that the unfortunate tire has *been caught by* the goat, which has been fishing in the Hudson—goats eat anything, as everyone knows—or that the goat is being *consumed by* the tire; it's outside, after all, mechanization takes command. Or that the goateed goat is protesting the

fatigue of its friend, the tire, by wearing it as a sort of STRIKE button. Or that two contrasting models of infinity are being presented, tires and goats both being infinitely reproducible, the first depending on the good fortunes of the B.F. Goodrich company and the second upon the copulatory enthusiasm of goats—parallel production lines suddenly met. And so on. What is magical about the object is that it at once invites and resists interpretation. Its artistic worth is measurable by the degree to which it remains, after interpretation, vital—no interpretation or cardiopulmonary push-pull can exhaust or empty it.

In what sense is the work "about" the world, the world that Jacqueline and Jemima have earnestly assured Zeno the work has turned its scarlet rump to? It is to this vexing question that we shall turn next.

Let us discuss the condition of my desk. It is messy, mildly messy. The messiness is both physical (coffee cups, cigarette ash) and spiritual (unpaid bills, unwritten novels). The emotional life of the man who sits at the desk is also messy—I am in love with a set of twins, Hilda and Heidi, and in a fit of enthusiasm I have joined the Bolivian army. The apartment in which the desk is located seems to have been sublet from Moonbeam McSwine. In the streets outside the apartment melting snow has revealed a choice assortment of decaying etcetera. Furthermore, the social organization of the country is untidy, the world situation in disarray. How do I render all this messiness, and if I succeed, what have I done?

In a common-sense way we agree that I attempt to find verbal equivalents for whatever it is I wish to render. The unpaid bills are easy enough. I need merely quote one: FINAL DISCONNECT NOTICE. Hilda and Heidi are somewhat more difficult. I can say that they are beautiful—why not?—and you will more or less agree, although the bald statement has hardly stirred your senses. I can describe them—Hilda has the map of Bolivia tattooed on her right cheek and Heidi habitually wears, on her left hand, a set of brass knuckles wrought of solid silver—and they move a step closer. Best of all, perhaps, I can permit them to speak, for they speak much as we do.

> "On Valentine's Day," says Hilda, "he sent me oysters, a dozen and a half."
>
> "He sent me oysters too," said Heidi, "two dozen."
>
> "Mine were long-stemmed oysters," says Hilda, "on a bed of the most wonderful spinach."
>
> "Oh yes, spinach," says Heidi, "he sent me spinach too, miles and miles of spinach, wrote every bit of it himself."

To render "messy" adequately, to the point that you are enabled to feel it—it should, ideally, frighten your shoes—I would have to be more graphic than the decorum of the occasion allows. What should be emphasized is that one proceeds by way of particulars. If I know how a set of brass knuckles feels on Heidi's left hand it's because I bought one, in a pawnshop, not to smash up someone's face but to exhibit on a pedestal in a museum show devoted to cultural artifacts of ambivalent status. The world enters the work as it enters our ordinary lives, not as world-view or system but in sharp particularity: a tax notice from Madelaine, a

snowball containing a resumé from Gaston.

The words with which I attempt to render "messy," like any other words, are not inert, rather they are furiously busy. We do not mistake the words *the taste of chocolate* for the taste of chocolate itself, but neither do we miss the tease in *taste*, the shock in *chocolate*. Words have halos, patinas, overhangs, echoes. The word *halo*, for instance, may invoke St. Hilarius, of whom we've seen too little lately. The word *patina* brings back the fine pewtery shine on the saint's halo. The word *overhang* reminds us that we have, hanging over us, a dinner date with St. Hilarius, that crashing bore. The word *echo* restores us to Echo herself, poised like the White Rock girl on the overhang of a patina of a halo—infirm ground, we don't want the poor spirit to pitch into the pond where Narcissus blooms eternally, they'll bump foreheads, or maybe other parts closer to the feet, a scandal. There's chocolate smeared all over Hilarius' halo—messy, messy. . . .

The combinatorial agility of words, the exponential generation of meaning once they're allowed to go to bed together, allows the writer to surprise himself, makes art possible, reveals how much of Being we haven't yet encountered. It could be argued that computers can do this sort of thing for us, with critic-computers monitoring their output. When computers learn how to make jokes, artists will be in serious trouble. But artists will respond in such a way as to make art impossible for the computer. They will redefine art to take into account (that is, to exclude) technology—photography's impact upon painting and painting's brilliant response being a clear and comparatively recent example.

The prior history of words is one of the aspects of language the world uses to smuggle itself into the work. If words can be contaminated by the world, they can also carry with them into the work trace elements of world which can be used in a positive sense. We must allow ourselves the advantages of our disadvantages.

A late bulletin: Hilda and Heidi have had a baby, with which they're thoroughly displeased, it's got no credit cards and can't speak French, they'll send it back. . . . Messy.

Style is not much a matter of choice. One does not sit down to write and think: Is this poem going to be a Queen Anne poem, a Biedermeier poem, a Vienna Secession poem, or a Chinese Chippendale poem? Rather it is both a response to constraint and a seizing of opportunity. Very often a constraint is an opportunity. It would seem impossible to write *Don Quixote* once again, yet Borges has done so with great style, improving on the original (as he is not slow to tell us) while remaining faithful to it, faithful as a tick on a dog's belly. I don't mean that whim does not intrude. Why do I avoid, as much as possible, using the semicolon? Let me be plain: the semicolon is ugly, ugly as a tick on a dog's belly. I pinch them out of my prose. The great German writer Arno Schmidt, punctuation-drunk, averages eleven to a page.

Style is of course *how*. And the degree to which *how* has become *what*—since, say, Flaubert—is a question that men of conscience wax wroth about, and should. If I say of my friend that on this issue his marbles are a little flat on one side, this does not mean that I do not love my friend. He, on the other hand, considers that I am ridden by strange imperatives, and that the little piece I gave to the world last week, while nice enough in its own way, would have been vastly better had not


ANISETTE
8'

deplorable aesthetics caused me to score it for banjulele, cross between a banjo and a uke. Bless Babel.

Let us suppose that I am the toughest banjulele player in town and that I have contracted to play "Melancholy Baby" for six hours before an audience that will include the four next-toughest banjulele players in town. We imagine the smoky basement club, the hustling waiters (themselves students of the jazz banjulele), Jacqueline, Jemima, Zeno, Alphonse, Gaston, Madelaine, Hilda, and Heidi forming a congenial group at the bar. There is one thing of which you may be sure: I am not going to play "Melancholy Baby" as written. Rather I will play something that is parallel, in some sense, to "Melancholy Baby," based upon the chords of "Melancholy Baby," made out of "Melancholy Baby," *having to do with* "Melancholy Baby"—commentary, exegesis, elaboration, contradiction. The interest of my construction, if any, is to be located in the space between the new entity I have constructed and the "real" "Melancholy Baby," which remains in the mind as the horizon which bounds my efforts.

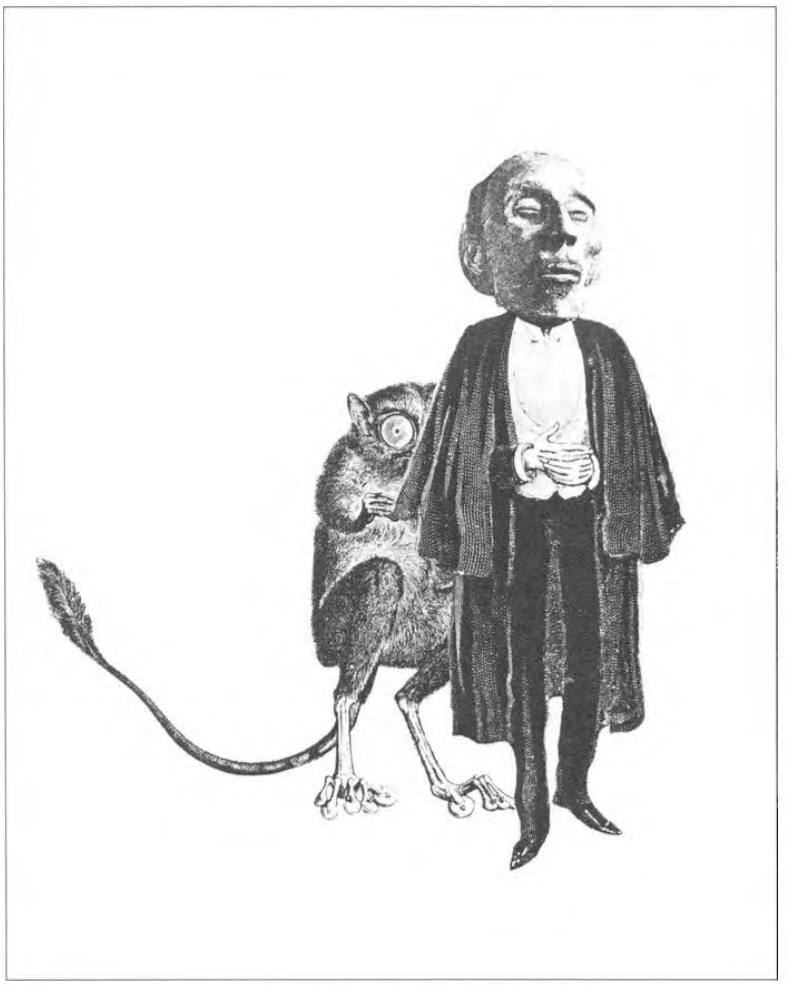
This is, I think, the relation of art to world. I suggest that art is always a meditation upon external reality rather than a representation of external reality or a jackleg attempt to "be" external reality. If I perform even reasonably well, no one will accuse me of not providing a true, verifiable, note-for-note reproduction of "Melancholy Baby"—it will be recognized that this was not what I was after. Twenty years ago I was much more convinced of the autonomy of the literary object than I am now, and even wrote a rather persuasive defense of the proposition that I have just rejected: that the object is itself the world. Beguiled by the rhetoric of the time—the sculptor Phillip Pavia was publishing a quite good magazine called *It Is*, and this was typical—I felt that the high ground had been claimed and wanted to place my scuffed cowboy boots right there. The proposition's still attractive. What's the right answer? Bless Babel.

A couple of years ago I visited Willem de Kooning's studio in East Hampton, and when the big doors are opened one can't help seeing—it's a shock—the relation between the rushing green world outside and the paintings. Precisely how de Kooning manages to distill nature into art is a mystery, but the explosive relation is there, I've seen it. Once when I was in Elaine de Kooning's studio on Broadway, at a time when the metal sculptor Herbert Ferber occupied the studio immediately above, there came through the floor a most horrible crashing and banging. "What in the world is that?" I asked, and Elaine said, "Oh, that's Herbert thinking."

Art is a true account of the activity of mind. Because consciousness, in Husserl's formulation, is always consciousness *of* something, art thinks ever of the world, cannot not think of the world, could not turn its back on the world even if it wished to. This does not mean that it's going to be honest as a mailman; it's more likely to appear as a drag queen. The problems I mentioned earlier, as well as others not taken up, enforce complexity. "We do not spend much time in front of a canvas whose intentions are plain," writes Cioran, "music of a specific character, unquestionable contours, exhausts our patience, the overexplicit poem seems . . . incomprehensible." Flannery O' Conner, an artist of the first rank, famously disliked anything that looked funny on the page, and her distaste has widely been taken as a tough-minded put-down of puerile experimentalism. But did she also

dislike anything that looked funny on the wall? If so, a severe deprivation. Art cannot remain in one place. A certain amount of movement, up, down, across, even a gallop toward the past, is a necessary precondition.

Style enables us to speak, to imagine again. Beckett speaks of "the long sonata of the dead"—where on earth did the word *sonata* come from, imposing as it does an orderly, even exalted design upon the most disorderly, distressing phenomenon known to us? The fact is not challenged, but understood, momentarily, in a new way. It's our good fortune to be able to imagine alternative realities, other possibilities. We can quarrel with the world, constructively (no one alive has quarreled with the world more extensively or splendidly than Beckett). "Belief in progress," says Baudelaire, "is a doctrine of idlers and Belgians." Perhaps. But if I have anything unorthodox to offer here, it's that I think art's project is fundamentally meliorative. The aim of meditating about the world is finally to change the world. It is this meliorative aspect of literature that provides its ethical dimension. We are all Upton Sinclairs, even that Hamlet, Stéphane Mallarmé.



DONALD BARTHELME

Being Bad

RAUSCHENBERG'S PROBLEM (one of Rauschenberg's problems) is how to be bad for thirty years or more. To sustain a high level of misbehavior over a third of a century is not the easiest of tasks. The German writer Heimeto von Doderer put it this way: "One begins by breaking windows. Then one becomes a window oneself."

Rauschenberg has tried as hard as anyone to be nonacceptable but early (and rather cheerfully) discovered that nothing is nonacceptable. Consider the variety and ingenuity of recent efforts in this direction. X whittles upon his penis, Y jumps out of windows, and Z, that dirty dog, paints East Hampton domestic interiors. MTV has severely compromised surrealism, perhaps ruined it forever, and Michael Graves is giving wretched excess a bad name. Beuys is in trouble: what's a boy to do when his fat melts? David Salle and Eric Fischl are looking more and more lamblike every day. And so on.

The difficulty here is not producing mere run-of-the-mill outrageousness, but the nature of the transformational process by which aspects of the world are made over into art. How to prevent the ugly (what we have agreed to call ugly) from becoming, in some sense, beautiful (what we now agree to call beautiful) over time, thus losing the electrical charge which made the artist choose it in the first place? You can't. But there are strategies of delay. Celine, with the aid of some truly revolting politics, managed to remain a monster almost to the end.

The transfiguration of the commonplace, in Arthur Danto's phrase, is both Rauschenberg's fundamental maneuver and his dilemma. He is particularly adept with that wonderful category, the messy, having studied same, no doubt, with de Kooning, who managed to be messier than Hans Hofmann, who now appears positively tidy. In 1962, visiting Rauschenberg's studio with the photographer Rudy Burkhardt, I noticed that the windows overlooking Broadway were dark gray with our good New York grime. Rauschenberg was then working on some of the earliest of his black-and-white silkscreen paintings, and the tonality of the paintings was very much that of the windows. We ran a shot of the windows alongside photographs of the paintings in the journal I was then laboring for—instant art history. New York is a great filthy gift, and its very filthiness has worked to the artist's advantage, has been tonic. Robert Hughes observes (quoting highly placed officials at the New York City dump) that Manhattan throws away more manufactured goods in a week than eighteenth century France produced in a year, and the artist's use of these portable stigmata has been richly proportionate.

The photomechanical silkscreen, too, expands the bin of materials available to

the collagist enormously. It provides access to anything that has ever been photographed, allows quotation at great length and any scale. It permits superimposition of one image upon another in such a way that the first bleeds through the second, as physical collage does not—that is, it allows a heightened degree of messiness. The colors of the original image can be changed as the artist wishes. Parody is possible, even color-scandal à la Warhol. The process adapts to almost any surface; you can silk screen onto veils or eggs or the mayor. No other artist has found so many brilliant uses for it, and in no other hands has its combination with orphaned objects been so potent.

There are constants within the welter of possibilities. Take for example his use of the familiar brown corrugated cardboard shipping carton, which presents itself again and again in his work. Flattened and torn, it invariably yields strong shapes (a fact not unknown to Schwitters). As *a thing* it is the very definition of mundanity, trash from birth—perhaps only the gray, hopeless shirt cardboard has less social status. To insist upon it is, metaphorically, to condemn the system of value in which its status is seen as abysmal. To say that other people have used the same or similar objects for the purposes of art or that the object is presented not ponderously but often with a deliberate gaiety misses the point, which is that the artist has chosen it repeatedly, that he in some way committed to it. Rauschenberg will almost always pick the rough over the smooth, the flawed over the whole, the old over the new, but so, too, will many other artists. A procedure based on such choices requires that the ensemble be *bad enough*—that is, distinct enough from all other sights to allow itself to be seen, to take hold, even to prevail in a visual landscape that is already clamorous. Windows again: "The works had to look at least as interesting as anything that was going on outside the window," Rauschenberg says.

The artist seeks a construction that holds the viewer in a certain sort of tension, and it is in being able to pull this off, year after year, that the major reputations are made and endure. One's own achievements become what must be circumvented. Rauschenberg excels, as he must, in getting to the left of his own history. He manages this by what can only be called acts of poetic intuition. If the basic principle of collage is the juxtaposition of unlike things within a visual field (in Rauschenberg's case, most often what Leo Steinberg has aptly termed the "work surface picture plane"), he need in theory only find stranger and stranger things and build not-quite-decipherable rebuses from them. The theory is straightforward enough but, of course, inadequate. It ignores the true source of this artist's power, which lies in the mystery of particular choices. Charles Mauron, writing of the reception of the early work of Mallarmé, notes that although readers felt rebuffed, excluded by the work, they nevertheless also knew it to be magnificently written. Seizure, as it were, is always to be prior to understanding. It is an essential aspect of the tension mentioned earlier, and it is where Rauschenberg's real genius lies—the tire wrestled over the goat's hind legs.

DONALD BARTHELME

The Emerging Figure

PERHAPS THE MOST ENCOURAGING NEWS to be gleaned from the art journals is found in those brief dispatches which nestle in the back pages, usually under some such rubric as "Thefts from Galleries Here and Abroad." We read: "In Cleveland, O., three bronzes by Twila Alber were taken . . . during the week before Christmas." These homely notes gladden the heart. The passion of the collector, it seems, knows no bounds. To steal is to proclaim the value of what is stolen, to add another kind of endorsement to those of experts and authorities. Among artists, the generations steal from one another whatever is useful, with an enthusiasm that can only be admired. It is not simply that the young appropriate what they need from their elders: the reverse is also true. This on-going process makes thieves of all of us. We are all engaged in looting the past. (Only the greatest geniuses manage to steal from the future.) It is therefore not surprising to discover young painters concerned once more with "the figure" as an organizing principle. The sudden prominence, in the work of the children of the de Kooning generation, of the First Idea will inevitably be applauded as a sign that the revolutionary impulse of contemporary American painting has run its course. But as Thomas B. Hess has pointed out, "The 'new figurative painting,' which some have been expecting as a reaction against abstract-expressionism, was implicit in it from the start and is one of its most lineal continuities." Rather than a turning away from the lessons just learned, the current interest in the figure is an attempt to explore and consolidate the victory of the new style. The de Kooning "Woman" series (an example is included here) can hardly be considered a counter-revolutionary gesture. James Weeks, a San Franciscan and friend of Richard Diebenkorn, like the latter proposes a kind of painting in which the organization of structural elements is not placed at the service of some kind of literary "meaning" but is, rather, enriched by anonymous human presences: people in the service of painting. Pamela Bianco and Robert Levers make paintings that seem to mean, but have recognized that the issue of figurative reference or the lack of it is not after all crucial. It is just as arbitrary to insist that a painting cannot own a reference to the human form as to insist, on ideological, theological, morphological or other logical or extralogical grounds, that it contain one. "Meaning is beginning to date," writes the Rumanian novelist E. M. Cioran. "We do not spend much time before a canvas whose intentions are plain; music of a specific character, unquestionable contours, exhausts our patience; the over-explicit poem seems . . . incomprehensible." This is in fact our situation. The direct, unmistakable and unclouded recapitulation of some aspect of human experience ("LOOK MA, I'M

DANCING") is today self-defeating. We cannot rid ourselves of the feeling that such an account has been won too easily; we can place little faith in it. It is not that we prize difficulty for the sake of difficulty, only that we hope to know, as in the case of the collector who steals, that the experience is genuine.

DONALD BARTHELME

Board of Directors
Contemporary Arts Museum
6945 Fannin
Houston, Texas

Dear Sirs:

Through close observation over a period of several years I have become persuaded that if the Contemporary Arts Museum is to fulfill its considerable potential and attain the position in the community that it deserves, a physically present, paid director of some kind is a necessity.

Although I believe that the program initiated in the fall of 1960 has shown admirable results, I do not believe that *by itself* the program can carry the museum to its rightful place among comparable institutions here and elsewhere.

I believe that the present volunteer setup is sound, but I am also aware that the various area chairmen are at present badly overloaded, and that the present system precludes, in certain inevitable ways, identification and accomplishment of long-range goals.

A closer supervision of the museum's day-to-day activities, and a direct and forceful confrontation of the problems of the museum's future, especially the problem of building the membership, are, I believe, badly needed.

I would like, therefore, to apply formally for the position of director on a less-than-full-time basis: that is, on a basis that would be within the museum's financial capabilities, and at the same time provide sufficient direction to enable us to take the greatest advantage of the museum's very real resources and possibilities.

Very truly yours,

Donald Barthelme

12 March 1961

DONALD BARTHELME

P. Tyler
Supervisor
New York Telephone
P.O. Box 3209
Church Street Station
New York, N.Y. 10008

Dear Sir or Madam:

Many thanks for your interesting letter of 16 December. I have considered its contents carefully. As far as I can make out, you seem to feel that I have not been paying my telephone bills promptly enough. Upon this premise, you seem to be asking that I send you $230 as a "deposit"—reasoning, I suppose, that this "deposit" will ensure better behavior on my part.

But let us examine, for a moment, your premise. Rifling through my cancelled checks, I find payments to New York Telephone as follows:

Jan 8 1975	87.98
Jan 31	58.64
Mar 1	62.11
Apr 2	106.82
May 4	68.35
May 26	122.21
Jul 3	143.82
Aug 6	200.57
Aug 16	52.93
Sep 28	127.64
Oct 27	67.38

There is, in addition, a November payment which I can't lay my hand on at the moment because some of my November checks will turn up in my December bank statement which I have not received yet, and of course the December payment of $231.27 (reflecting heavy international use of your splendid facilities for the purpose of straightening out a difficult political situation in Andorra) which I have made as of this date.

Congratulations! New York Telephone has managed to sell me in excess of $1200 worth of its splendid product in a single year—and this in the face of fierce and tenacious competition from the other telephone companies. Thirteen payments in the calendar year of 1975! You will notice, Dear Sir or Madam, that the

new year was a scant one week old when I slammed my first payment in there (on January 8). You will note further that so respectful was I of the needs and imperatives of New York Telephone—its mighty projects, its immense responsibilities—that *in the same month* I forwarded a second payment, making my total for the month a sterling $146.62. I need not psychologize about what happened in May, when I tripped all over myself in rushing to you payments of $68.35 and $122.21, respectively, but I will admit that in August I was lonely—the August 6 payment of $200.57 reflects the spiritual phenomenon known as the flight of the alone to the alone, as Husserl beautifully phrases it.

Dear Sir or Madam, surely customers who offer you their custom at this rate, and remit so often and enthusiastically, are not to be subjected to dunning letters but are to be, rather, courted! cherished! made much of! have their hands held by high officers of the Company! (I note marginally that in a triumph of customer relations you manage to ignore my thirteen years of happy and successful Subscribership.)

Dear Sir or Madam, I may be out of sync with one of your Machines, but then, it may be out of sync with me. And consider, in addition, that I'm paying for the Machine's existence but it is not paying for mine. And finally that you can do without the Machine (looking at things Company-wise) but you cannot, ultimately, do without me and my sad shabby disreputable efforts to traffic with my fellow creatures. I suggest you take $230 and insure my life.

Faithfully,

Donald Barthelme

113 W. 11
New York, N.Y.
19 December 1975

cc.

DONALD BARTHELME

Dear Buttercup—

It's Wednesday morning, Buttercup.

Got to go out to the university and pick up my check. Unless Uncle Pete decides to put the truck into the shop to get the muffler fixed. The muffler's wired to the body with coathangers.

The air is clear but hot. I hear you've been kicking your mother in the stomach and belching. Belching is not polite. The first of 500,000 admonitions.

We've got a Rubik's Cube here, Buttercup. That's a little dingus that you have to line up all the same colors on the same side of. It's driving Uncle Pete crazy. It's not driving me crazy because I won't let it.

This place has black iron bars on all the windows and doors. The outside is seen through a IIII or in the case of the bigger doors, a IIIIIIIII. If I had the wings of an angel / over these prison walls I would fly. No, it's not really so bad, an irk here and an irk there but bearable.

Your mother is being, I think, very brave and cheerful about the present situation, and you should tell her some jokes or something to help keep her morale high. As you float on the Amniotic Sea. When you leap from the womb we'll teach you how to play croquet, and how to clean the bookcases, and how to write your name, and how to make mudcakes, and who Bix Biederbecke was, and all about whiskey and wine, and all about Eve and Adam, and where to mail your letters. You're going to meet Bill and Irwin and Helen and Baskin and Robbins—all kinds of folk. You're going to have fun, Buttercup, you're going to be Coddled and Pampered and tickled under the chin and introduced to the Great World. I think you'll like your large sister Anna, and her pals Rebekah and Kalista, and your fellow-neonate, that brash Mirsky kid.

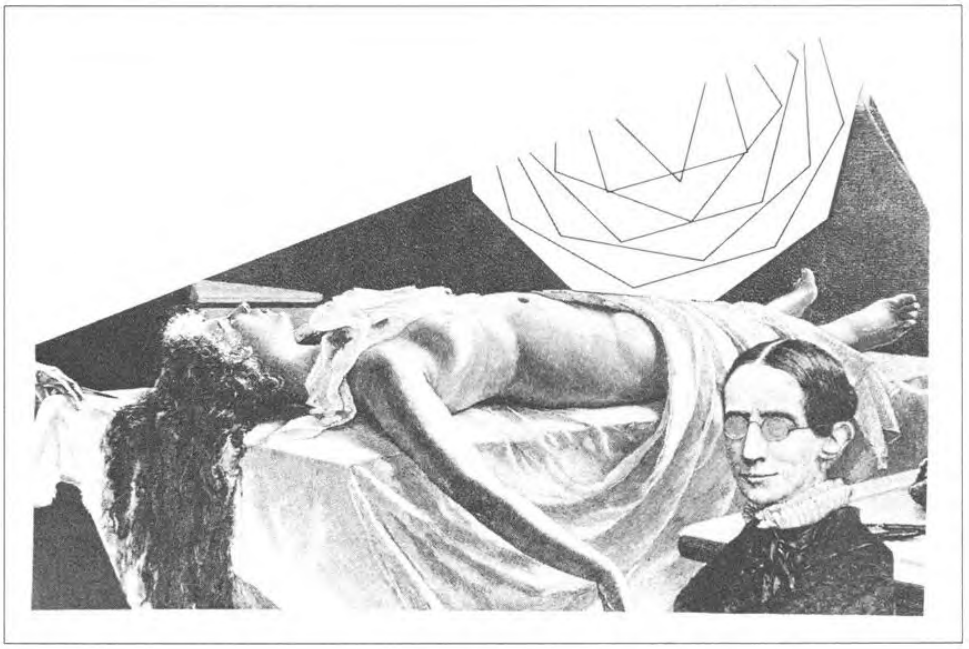
I'm wondering who your godfather and godmother will be. Considering Walter Mondale and Dolly Parton. I know they're busy.

Swim away, Buttercup, swim away; I like your style. Got a plate of chocolate chip cookies just waiting for you.

Thinking about your real name. You're not a Mary, that's clear. Not a Jane, not a Belinda, not a Nancy and not a silly Sue. It's a tough question, we're going to have to look in the book. Not a Donna, not a Barb. A stately Katherine, a sturdy Kate? I don't know.

Going to put your box under my desk and tickle your stomach with the toe of my boot. Hurry up, Buttercup, we're tired of waiting. Let's get it together, Buttercup . . .

Warmest regards,



DONALD BARTHELME

Acceptance Speech: National Book Award For Children's Literature

WRITING FOR CHILDREN, LIKE TALKING TO THEM, is full of mysteries. I have a child, a six-year-old, and I assure you I approach her with a copy of Mr. Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* held firmly in my right hand. If I ask her which of two types of cereal she prefers for breakfast, I invariably find upon presenting the bowl that I have misread my instructions—that it was the other kind she wanted. In the same way it is quite conceivable to me that I may have written the wrong book—some other book was what was wanted. One does the best one can. I must point out that television has affected the situation enormously. My pictures don't move. What's wrong with them? I went into this with Michael di Capua, my editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux, who incidently improved the book out of all recognition, and he told me sadly that no, he couldn't make the pictures move. I asked my child once what her mother was doing, at a particular moment, and she replied that mother was "watching a book." The difficulty is to manage a book worth watching. The problem, as I say, is full of mysteries, but mysteries are not to be avoided. Rather they are a locus of hope, they enrich and complicate. That is why we have them. That is perhaps one of the reasons why we have children.

In 1972 Donald Barthelme received the National Book Award in Children's Literature for The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine.

CHARLES BAXTER

The Donald Barthelme Blues

THE SAME DAY THAT A FRIEND CALLED with the news that Donald Barthelme had died, a freight train derailed outside Freeland, Michigan. Among the cars that went off the tracks were several chemical tankers, some of which spilled and caught fire. Dow Chemical was (and still is) reluctant to name these chemicals, but one of them was identified as chlorosilene. When chlorosilene catches fire, as it did in this case, it turns into hydrochloric acid. Upon being asked about the physical hazards to neighbors and on-lookers near the fire, a company representative, interviewed on Michigan Public Radio, said, "Well, there's been some physical reactions, yes, certainly. Especially in the area of nausea, vomiting-type thing."

The area of nausea, vomiting-type thing: this area, familiar to us all, where bad taste, hilarity, fake authority, and cliché seem to collide, was Donald Barthelme's special kingdom. "I have a few new marvels here I'd like to discuss with you just briefly," says the chief engineer in "Report." "Consider for instance the area of realtime online computer-controlled wish evaporation." Like his creation Hokie Mokie, the King of Jazz, no one could top Barthelme at deadpan riffs like these—these collages built from castoff verbal junk—and imitation was beside the point, because the work was not a compendium of stylistic tics but grew out of—has anyone bothered to say this?—a spiritual enterprise owned up to in the work, a last stay against the forces of wish evaporation. Comedy is partly the art of collage, of planned incongruity—the Three Stooges as brain surgeons, King Kong as an adjunct professor of art history—and Barthelme was a master tailor of these ill-fitting suits in which our culture likes to dress itself. A yoking of the virtuosic-articulate with the flat banal; an effort to preserve wishes, and certain kinds of longings, in the face of clichés; not innocence, but a watchful clarity, even an effort to preserve the monstrousness of Being itself: all these difficult ambitions seemed to be part of the project. The work was a comfort, in the way the blues are a comfort, in its refusal to buy stock in the official Happiness Project, in its loyalty to "inappropriate longings," a phrase whose ironic positive side he particularly valued.

As an undergraduate I was taught that when a writer starts a story, he or she must begin with *a character*, an active, preferably vivid, ideally sympathetic, character. It takes a bit of time to see that stories don't in fact begin with characters, not from here, at least, not from behind this keyboard. They begin with words, one word after another. It seems doltish to point this out, but in Donald Barthelme's fiction, that's where the project begins: with the stress first on the language, the medium, and then on the problem of who owns it. Who does own language? I can evade the question by saying that no one does; it is just out there,

part of the culture. But Barthelme did not practice this evasion. In his stories, all kinds of disreputable people claim to own both language and its means of distribution. They invent instant clichés that they want you to buy and use; they want you to join and submit to their formulas. Invariably, they are selling something that can only be sold if they trash up the language first. They are lively practitioners of a black art, these commodifiers, and Barthelme's stories don't mind saying so.

Barthelme's characters inhabit not the prison-house of language, but the prison-house of official cliché—which is not the same thing as saying "Fine" when someone asks how you are, but is more a processing of statements into the professional formulas usually called jargon, like the analyst's transformation of Susan's statement (in "The Sandman") that she wants to buy a piano into, "She wishes to terminate the analysis and escape into the piano." The narrator, Susan's boyfriend and a slightly irritable opponent of normative psychotherapy, observes that the analyst is methodologically horse-blindered: "The one thing you cannot consider, by the nature of your training and of the discipline itself, is that she really might want to terminate the analysis and buy a piano."

What *are* the conditions under which we lose the ability to know what we want? And what are the exact words for longing: Most of the words we have are not the words for what we really want. "What we really want in this world, we can't have: (The Ed Sullivan Show)." There is a certain stranded quality to the Barthelme protagonist, sitting in an easy chair at twilight with eleven martinis lined up in soldierly array. A fastidiousness, this is, and a humor about the shipwrecked condition, the orphaned longings, and something like an investigation of the possibilities inherent in melancholy. The heroes and heroines in this fiction are the not-joiners, the *non serviam* types, like Cecelia in "A City of Churches," who has come to Prester to open a car-rental office. Mr. Phillips guides her around. It turns out that in Prester everyone lives in a church of one kind or another, "the church of their choice." Mr. Phillips asks Cecelia what denomination she is: "Cecelia was silent. The truth was, she wasn't anything." She tells him, however, that she can will her dreams. What dreams? "Mostly sexual things," she said. She was not afraid of him. Mr. Phillips admits to a certain discontent with Prester, despite the town's perfection. "I'll dream the Secret," Cecelia says. "You'll be sorry."

Notice the capitalization of the word *secret.* Our secrets might be the last places where we have hidden ourselves away, where we are still upper-case. Susan wants her piano; Cecelia wants her dreams; and the Phantom of the Opera resists the operation that would, as we might say now, *renormalize* him. All any of these heroes would have to do to be renormalized is trade in their desires for rooms furnished with comfortable clichés: nice wing chairs, plastic slipcovers. The Phantom's friend waits, patiently, "until the hot meat of romance is cooled by the dull gravy of common sense once more." That's a long time, if you're loyal to your desires.

The price one pays for being loyal to certain kinds of anomalies is typically melancholy or acedia: more of this later. What Barthelme's fiction asserts is that one of the first loyalties serious people give up in the theater of adulthood is a claim upon what they actually want. Of course, other desires are available, and can

be acquired, but they are curious grafts, what other people want you to want—not desires so much as temptations, desires-of-convenience. Barthelme's stories are obviously and constantly about such temptations, which might itself be called the temptation to become unconscious and let others program your yearnings. The stories exude an almost religious seriousness about this subject; although they are not pious, they do move obsessively around ethical-theological quandaries. A good deal of reading about religion is made visible in them. The Barthelmean character is tempted not by ordinary sins but by the ordinary itself. Does God care about adultery? Sins generally? "You think about this staggering concept, the mind of God, and then you think He's sitting around worrying about this guy and this woman at the Beechnut Travelodge? I think not" (*Paradise*).

It wasn't activities like adultery that caught Barthelme's attention, but the inclination to disown one's wishes and to give in to the omnipresence of the Universal Banal. Barthelme was not a snob in this respect; plain common pleasures—food, sex, Fleetwood Mac, John Ford movies, dull days at home—find themselves celebrated (however mildly) in his pages; ordinary pleasures are all right if that is what you really want. But no, the problem is not the banal as such but banality's hope that you will dumbfoundedly join in its program, spend yourself in it: that's the problem. In Barthelme a saint is tempted not by sin but by life in the suburbs: "St. Anthony's major temptation, in terms of his living here, was maybe this: ordinary life ("The Temptation of St. Anthony"). People want to see his apartment; they want to look at the carpet from Kaufman's, and the bedroom. How might a Saint resist the ordinary?"

A simple question, calling forth slyly complicated answers. One begins by talking about deserts (where the Saint goes), grottos, the stony home of the grotesque. In a catalogue commentary on a Sherrie Levine exhibit, Barthelme put it this way:

> Where does desire go? Always a traveling salesperson, desire goes hounding off into the trees, frequently, without direction from its putative master or mistress. This is tragic and comic at the same time. I should, in a well-ordered world, marry the intellectual hero my wicked uncle has selected for me. Instead I run off with William of Ockham or Daffy Duck.

William of Ockham or Daffy Duck: yes, the true object of your desire quite often looks and sounds a bit, well, bizarre, and hard to introduce to your wicked uncle. The more bizarre the object, the more Barthelme seems to like it. There is a pleasant sideshow quality, a circus element, to the spectacle of desire. It generates dwarves and witches (*Snow White*), a son manqué (eight feet tall and wearing "a serape woven out of two hundred transistor radios" in "The Dolt"), monsters, and impossibly beautiful women. It's as if longing generates out of itself, as Susan Stewart has argued in her book on the subject, narratives of the gigantic and tiny, narratives of altered proportion: there is the dead father, that huge living corpse of origination, being dragged around by the bickering sons; there are the zombies, spouting their death-in-life clichés; there is King Kong, already alluded to, the adjunct professor of art history at Rutgers. Big and little: figures of all sizes and

shapes have their moment in the most highly invented sentences grammar and sense permit. This sideshow resides very comfortably, too, in the short story form, a haven, as Frank O'Connor has claimed, for the otherwise disappeared, all the everyone-elses who fall between the cracks of the more official forms, such as the novel and the sonnet.

Sometimes behind this cultivation of the beautiful grotesque, this show-and-tell of the alien wish, a certain weariness is sometimes apparent. One is after all confronted by the banal in the midst of the weird; there is also that terrible moment familiar to all members of the avant-garde when the weird *becomes* the banal. "Some things appear to be wonders in the beginning, but when you become familiar with them, are not wonderful at all. Sometimes a seventy-five-foot highly paid cacodemon will raise only the tiniest *frisson.* Some of us have even thought of folding the show—closing it down" ("The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace").

What is the secret name of this weariness? At first it is called irony, and then acedia.

Under the powerful microscope of post-structuralist Neo-Marxist semiotically-based hyphen-using critical theory, Barthelme's fiction at first seems to be all about cultural junk, verbal junk, "the leading edge of the trash phenomenon," and about the way structures of meaning, let loose from the objects they're supposed to represent, are pasted onto something else (the Campbell's Pork-and-Beans labels on my necktie; Elvis's *Jailhouse Rock* on dinner plates from the Franklin Mint; the Batman label on sandwiches). Words go wild. They are set free from the house of correction and have a party ("Bone Bubbles") or, freed up like a chatty aunt off her medication, go on and on ("Sentence"). For a time in the early seventies, Barthelme and John Ashbery seemed to be operating similar circuses in different parts of town. This period included the moment of greatest academic interest in Barthelme's work; critics had much to say about the mechanisms of meaning in the fiction, about the arbitrariness of the sign and the problems of language. The defamiliarization in the work matched the defamiliarization of American social life. But semiotics and fragments are not the essential subjects of these stories. I'm not sure how often it has been noticed that Barthelme's imagery, cast of characters, and preoccupations are drawn from religious sources. Who is the dead father in *The Dead Father?* The father and The Father. In "City Life," Ramona gives birth to Sam; it's a virgin birth. Angels, in their current earthly diminished lives, have their say in "On Angels." Kierkegaard is invoked several times. Such maneuvering has an element of travesty in it, a playing-around with the broken relics of religious iconography and meaning-creation; but religion appears so often and with such odd sideways intensity that it signals a persistent curiosity about the Absolute and such of its elements as authenticity (in post-structuralist thinking, a completely discredited category).

In Barthelme's early stories, modern culture is gleefully and relentlessly unmasked: engineers, doctors, politicians, newspapers, television quiz shows, and the plastic assembled-with-glue language they use. There is a certain violence in the ripping off of the masks here, a ferocity that produces a prose poetry (Barthelme probably would have hated the term) of rage and clarity. Lines often-quoted from the first paragraph of "The Indian Uprising" hit this note and sustain

it: "people were trying to understand. I spoke to Sylvia. 'Do you think this is a good life?' The table held apples, books, long-playing records. She looked up. 'No.'"

These early stories sometimes seem to demonstrate that the serious world is about as well-constructed as a puppet show; it is certainly no more real. All experience gives way to representation. You pull back the pretense: another pretense. Pictures give way to pictures, acts to acts. It's unhinging, the metaphysics of the onion-skin giving way to nothing: the wisps and whiffs of frenzy I hear in *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*, and *City Life* strike me as sounds made by someone reaching for the irreducibly real but coming up with fistfuls of sand—or an empire of signs, themselves nauseating and revealing of nothing. Knowing—as the Barthelmean narrative knows so well—that this reaching, this frenzy, and this sand are commonplaces in the history of twentieth century spiritual-critical life is no solace. What good is it to know that your metaphysical nausea, which you suffer from daily, has been experienced before and expressed very well by Mallarmé, Sartre, and the others? As the stories themselves say, "No good at all!"

Starting with "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel," in *City Life* and then intermittently throughout the other books, Barthelme seemed to be setting himself a challenge to go beyond this unmasking process—a process that would, if continued indefinitely, have yielded up wacky but tedious self-repeating satires, or exercises in dry malice. The nature of this challenge is not easy to state discursively, but it may be at the center of any life which is simultaneously mindful and bourgeois (if in fact those two categories can be placed next to each other). We can call it, in honor of one of its first diagnosticians, the Chekhov problem, which goes something like this: what does one do, do actively, with one's honest revulsion and disgust with the cruelties, lies, and deceptions of middle-class life? Chekhov's response to this challenge—this is a gross oversimplification—is to show that, hidden under the outward mimes of character there lies the substance of real character, a kind of essence. Something genuine sooner or later will show itself; all we need do is wait, observe, and hold onto those moments when they arrive. In this way, weariness and cynicism are kept at arm's length. Because no character can be wholly co-opted by any system, some particle of the genuine will emerge at some point.

This solution, if one can call it that, was closed to Barthelme almost from the beginning. Either he did not believe in character in this sense (one cannot imagine him using so square a phrase as "real character underneath"), or he had no feel for it as a writer. As a result his characters tend toward allegory and stylization. Exceptions exist, notably in the Bishop stories, but they are few. It is not so much that the characters in Barthelme's fiction are unreal but that they seem more to have been constructed out of pre-existing emotions than out of motivations, a more common writerly starting-point. In any case, without the solution of character, we are back at the original problem of what to do after all the lies have been exposed. And of course we are still enjoying the unreflecting privileges of middle-class life.

This far from trivial problem exists only if you assume that middle-class American life does carry with it a gnawing burden of guilt. I think I could argue

that a significant number of the strategies of contemporary American "serious" fiction are maneuvers for dealing with the issue of middle-class guilt. One possibility is to handle it more or less as Chekhov did. Another, also very common, is the strategy of cynicism, enjoying the benefits of middle-class life while holding oneself slightly above it. A third response, almost always characterized as "toughness," has been a part of American culture for at least a century. Toughness is the obverse side of sentimentality, fighting against and reflecting it all at the same time. It is the poetry of denial. What it refuses to give to character it lavishes on its prose, which typically is highly stylized and self-regarding. The idea is to withhold expressions of human sympathy—because they seem "weak" and because they capitulate to a false order of experience. Hemingway is the great bard of this mode, saying in effect I-may-be-here-but-I'm-not-really-part-of-this-scene. Obviously, cynicism and toughness may be easily combined as strategies. They carry with them a certain feeling for hermit life, for withholding, and for clipped sentences, oracular statements, and derailed ordinary language. However, the toughness mode is crabbed and repetitious, qualities that Barthelme never sought. He invented situations and sentences: I'd like to quote page after page of them, hair-raising for their sheer sound, their surprises and elaborations. Their shine. No: toughness, the metaphysics of the hermit crab, was not enough.

Which returns us to the problem of cynicism, which does not seem an adequate response to the problem of being located inside conflicting desires, of being the very person one does not want to be. Cynicism and its spiritual second-cousin, irony, are regular combatants in Barthelme's stories, but there is something wrong with both of them; the stories work hard to disclose what it is. For one thing, cynicism is hypocritical: it enjoys what it claims to despise. It is happy in its unhappy consciousness. It understands the destructiveness of its own pleasures but does nothing to stop it. It is enlightened about its own moral condition. It will agree to any accusation made against it. World-weariness is its poetry. Growing out of snobbery, its only pleasure is manipulation. Cynicism is irony that has moved into a condition of institutional power; cynicism and power have a tendency to breed each other. But Barthelme's stories—especially the early ones and the novel *Snow White*—typically struggle against institutional cynicism and the language employed in its cause. To use a phrase by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, employed in another context, these are "études in the higher banalities." Far from being an exercise in cynicism, the narrative voice in Barthelme consistently attacks cynicism—the cynicism of official institutional spokespersons. But the weapon that comes most readily to hand is irony, which creates the (as Barthelme might say) *interesting* struggle and tension in his writing.

The nature of the problem, if you simultaneously feel guilty and disgusted by the progress of modern culture, is the temptation to become a snob, to join a like-minded coterie of people with good taste who define themselves by an awareness of all the vulgarities they do not perform. Or you can become a hermit like Saint Anthony, benefiting from the culture while pretending not to live in it. Viewed unsympathetically, this is a central impulse in Modernism, one of its worst errors. Barthelme's fiction never makes this error: it challenges readers but never insults them or pretends to instruct them from an angle higher than their own. It disclaims righteousness. "The Party" concludes by asking: "Is it really important to

know that this movie is fine, and that one terrible, and to talk intelligently about the difference? Wonderful elegance! No good at all!"

At this point, the really astonishing difficulties of Barthelme's project start to become apparent: exiled from character-drawing, and in the midst of (one might almost say "drowning in") cultural sign-systems, most of which are duplicitous, the Barthelmean narrator must struggle simply in order to find a location, a place to stand and speak that is not so far inside the culture that it replicates its falseness and lies, and not so far outside that it becomes cold, snobby, or self-righteous. This is a problem not just for writers but for anyone who lives in a powerful and culturally dominant country. And it is not an issue that anyone finally "solves." Writers must devise strategies for dealing with it, some of which are more effective than others. Some are distracting—and Barthelme's work is very high, one might almost say intoxicated, with distractions—while also presenting roads and avenues, certain kinds of metaphorical paths for action. And they do so, it has always seemed to me, with a good deal of warmth—as in the ending of "Daumier," where Celeste is in the kitchen, making a *daube*, and the narrator says he will go in to watch her. The story ends with two sentences that, in their quietness, modesty, and precision, have always moved me. "The self cannot be escaped, but it can be, with ingenuity and hard work, distracted. There are always openings, if you can find them, there is always something to do."

One word for this technique is *forbearance.* Starting with the stories in *City Life*, we move onto a thematic ground governed by a feeling where piano music instead of analysis might be possible, where "little dances of suggestion and fear" might be staged: "These dances constitute an invitation of unmistakable import—an invitation which, if accepted, leads down many muddy roads. I accepted. What was the alternative?" ("City Life"). Odd, the fastidious articulation of these feelings, their insistence on the possibility of continued action. And beautiful, the playing with children, the turning to childhood, in two late stories, "Chablis" and "The Baby."

As for religion: can one discard its content and still admire its interest in, perhaps its necessary commitment to, the issue of where one places oneself in relation to one's own experiences? This is exactly the question that arises in two of Barthelme's most interesting stories, "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" and "January" (the last story in *Forty Stories* and therefore something of a curtain-speech). In both stories we are in the presence of a ghostly sort of interview, considerably more ghostly in the Kierkegaard story, that gives the sense of an internal quarrel or an interview between two spirit entities.

Characters named Q. and A., question and answer, argue in "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel," with Q. being particularly annoyed by A.'s inability to get enthusiastic about "our machines": "You've withheld your enthusiasm, that's damaging. . . ." Something like the problem of cynicism arises here, the question of spiritual snobbery. A. answers by discussing irony, which he uses in conjunction with political activism:

> I participate. I make demands, sign newspaper advertisements, vote.
> I make small campaign contributions to the candidate of my choice

> and turn my irony against the others. But I accomplish nothing. I march, it's ludicrous.

This sense of self-irony leads into a discussion of Kierkegaard and his analysis of irony as a magical power that confers upon its user a "negative freedom." When irony is directed against the whole of existence, the result, says Kierkegaard, is "estrangement and poetry"—a poetry that "opens up a higher actuality, expands and transfigures the imperfect into the perfect, and thereby softens and mitigates the deep pain which would darken and obscure all things." Thus Kierkegaard. Unfortunately, this variety of poetry does not reconcile one to the world but produces an animosity to the world:

> A. But I love my irony.
> Q. Does it give you pleasure?
> A. A poor . . . a rather unsatisfactory. . . .
> Q. The unavoidable tendency of everything particular to emphasize its own particularity.
> A. Yes.

If Barthelme were the kind of ironist described by Kierkegaard, the sort who turns his irony upon the "whole of existence," then he would be tracking Beckett in pursuit of an absolute negativity, thinking directed against being itself. Or he would be following William Gass into a principality built out of the toothpicks and straw of words. But though this irony has the virtue of purity, it can in no way account for the pleasures we consciously enjoy in Barthelme's fiction. What is their ultimate source?

Answering this question seems to me the task Barthelme set himself in his novel *Paradise*, published in 1986. If it is about anything, this book is about pleasures, even beatitude: the pleasure of sex and the friendship it can produce; the pleasure of making and building (its protagonist, Simon, is an architect); the pleasure—unbelievable to imagine this in the early books—of improving the world. The tone of this book, in its mixture of fantasy, high comedy, and caring, is close to *blessedness*. Barthelme of course gives his usual warnings about stupid optimism:

> Simon wanted very much to be a hearty, optimistic American, like the President, but on the other hand did not trust hearty, optimistic Americans, like the President. He had considered the possibility that the President . . . was not really hearty and optimistic but rather a gloomy, obsessed man.

Because the fantasy in this story—a single man living with three beautiful women—is so stylized, the imaginative force seems to move from the specific situation to the nature of the lineaments of gratified desire. The book is therefore about happiness. It is as if Barthelme were saying that we must try to imagine happiness. This book is one version of it. Happiness, in these times, may be the last frontier of the imagination, the most difficult challenge of all. But if happiness cannot be imagined, if alienation cannot be balmed at the source, then truly one

might as well do nothing, or simply drift toward death. Near the end of *Paradise*, Barthelme argues that our desires inhabit and inspirit us:

> Simon flew to North Carolina to inspect a job he'd done in Winston-Salem, a hospital. The construction was quite good and he found little to complain of. He admired the fenestration, done by his own hand. He spent an agreeable night in a Ramada Inn and flew back the next day. His seatmate was a young German woman on her way to Frankfurt. She was six months pregnant, she said, and her husband, an Army sergeant in Chemical Warfare, had found a new girl friend, was divorcing her. She had spent two years at Benning, loved America, spoke with what seemed to Simon a Texas accent. Her father was dead and her mother operated a candy store in Frankfurt. They talked about pregnancy and delivery, about how much wine she allowed herself, whether aspirin was in fact a danger to the baby, and how both of her brothers-in-law had been born in taxis. She was amazingly cheerful given the circumstances and told him that the Russians were going to attempt to take over Mexico next. We had neglected Mexico, she said.
>
> Over the Atlantic on the long approach to Kennedy Simon saw a hundred miles of garbage in the water, from the air white floating scruff. The water became agitated at points as fish attacked the garbage and Simon turned his mind to compaction. When they landed he kissed the German woman goodbye and told her that although she probably didn't feel very lucky at the moment, she was very lucky.

That's beautiful. The balance is miraculous: everything that is—including abandonment, garbage, ecological decay—is held in equilibrium with what is possible: delivery, compaction. There is always something to do. The style is also beautiful, because of all the hurricanes Barthelme has traveled through in order to formulate this difficult calm. The book ends up radiating not a sense of peacefulness but a sense of high intellectual and spiritual comedy, a form of art characteristic of late middle and old age.

"January" concludes Barthelme's final collection, *Forty Stories*. The first month. This piece (*is* it a story? of what sort?) presents an interview with theologian Thomas Brecker, whose dissertation was written in the forties on the subject of acedia:

> The thesis was that acedia is a turning toward something rather than, as it's commonly conceived of, a turning away from something. I argued that acedia is a positive reaction to extraordinary demand, for example, the demand that one embrace the *good news* and become one with the mystical body of Christ. . . . Acedia is often conceived of as a kind of sullenness in the face of existence; I tried to locate its positive features. For example, it precludes certain kinds of madness, crowd mania, it precludes a certain kind of error.

> You're not an enthusiast and therefore you don't go out and join a lynch mob—rather you languish on a couch with your head in your hands.

Brecker goes on to talk about the healing power of absolution, its ability to create new directions. He thinks about his own death, "I hate to abandon my children," and concludes the story this way:

> The point of my career is perhaps how little I achieved. We speak of someone as having had "a long career" and that's usually taken to be admiring, but what if it's thirty-five years of persistence in error? I don't know what value to place on what I've done, perhaps none at all is right. If I'd done something with soybeans, been able to increase the yield of an acre of soybeans, then I'd know I'd done something. I can't say that.

Barthelme's last collection of stories ends here, in a perfectly serious tone of modesty, not to say humility. "I was trying," Brecker says, "to stake out a position for the uncommitted which still, at the same time, had something to do with religion." It would be incorrect to say that Barthelme, the chronicler of word-nausea, had mellowed into the drabness of total sincerity. What actually seems to have emerged toward the end is both more interesting and more complicated: a kind of tenderness toward existence, isolated from the junk of culture through which it is commonly viewed. Though still surrounded by intellectual defenses, and therefore still enveloped and distracted, these later stories are generous; almost miraculously they transform metaphysical irony into caring watchfulness. Giving up finally *does* turn into giving over. Though it is not typically American to have a second act in one's career, and then a third, and even a fourth, Barthelme had them. And despite what was sometimes said against him, he did not repeat himself, did not endlessly replay the old tricks. He found new tricks, and then, toward the end, discarded most of them. How rare, also, in America, to see writing develop into such variety and generosity! Almost unheard-of. Almost unseen.

ANN BEATTIE

It's Not Over Until Buzzy Sings

For Donald Barthelme

MONIQUE. I AM SO IN LOVE WITH HER, I trace my finger over the herringbone pattern of her socks, loving every sixteenth of an inch of her ankle, underneath. Proof that we are in love is that she wears my day-old shirts to bed, with the sleeves rolled: our scents can mingle, and she can be close to me, even in sleep.

SEVEN YEARS OF BAD LUCK

The day I met Monique, my mother had called from Scottsdale, Arizona, where she and my father have a winter condo. She reported that my father, S.J. (I am Steven G.), had decided that the polyurethane on their kitchen floor was carcinogenic, so he'd spent the previous night in a motel, trying to decide what to do with the rest of his life. Actually, it is my mother who likes drama: to her, anyone figuring out what to do about removing polyurethane is trying to figure out what to do with the rest of his life. As it happens, though, that day I actually *was* trying to decide what to do with the rest of my life. The law firm where I worked was clearly not going to promote me soon, as I'd hoped, and I had just seen my girlfriend of seven years, who had long since left me for a painter who painted canvases of their dream children. Though they had a baby who had Laureen's eyes and her father's high forehead, he repeatedly painted bulbous angels with red hair neither parent had, who all cavorted in the sky above recognizable New York landmarks, such as the Empire diner. One way or another—tv antennas or skyscrapers in the distance—something phallic always pierced the center of his paintings. Laureen and I had a drink with this man once, when I was only given to understand that she found his work excitingly original. I myself felt that viewing one of his paintings was like being gassed and then being taken for a walk through a pop-up Valentine. As we were politely disagreeing about the merit of early versus late Stella, the man stood up and said, "Well, your boorish conclusions aside, it happens that I mean to marry Laureen and render her, and our forthcoming children, into art." The last time I heard the word *render*, it had been part of a recipe that involved getting rid of goose fat. I said that to him—really scored a good one—then walked out with my head held high. If Laureen meant to marry him—and she didn't rise when I did—at least I'd stick them with the check.

But to the story of meeting Monique. I was riding downstairs in the elevator

with Buzzy, our elevator operator, who was resting one knee on a stool covered with leopard skin. The stool sat on a bear rug. Laureen had come to see me. It was approximately two years after we'd had a drink with her husband-to-be. The infant was asleep in an Aprica stroller. Cloth diapers were stuffed on the outside of its legs. Every time Laureen described the inhuman way the artist treated her and their daughter, she'd reach into the stroller and pull up a diaper and blot her eyes, as if the stroller were one great box of Kleenex. The artist's inhumanity seemed to consist of depicting children who floated above grim realities: smoke stacks, the Chicago stockyards, burning tenements. She had come to see me in order to get free legal advice about her divorce. After our talk, we rode down to the lobby.

Buzzy descended rapidly, a dented harmonica clamped silently in his mouth. Of course, the second the doors shut, the harmonica would pierce the silence as Buzzy wailed away along with whatever was on the radio. In his years as an elevator operator, he had once pinned a purse snatcher to the floor and sat on him while the victim called for help. He also put out two fires before the fire department arrived, and he had strangled a rapist. He would move heaven and earth to get to your floor when you hit the buzzer.

As the elevator doors opened, Monique stepped in. Later, I would find out she was on her way to deliver medicine to her soon-to-be former employer's mistress. She had on a short dress with what looked like technicolor tears falling from the neck to the hem. This paisley pattern was not yet fashionable, but, being French, she marched into the car as if she were the most beautiful woman in the world. And she was. Though my heart was still going pitter-patter with vindication over Laureen's dissatisfaction, my brain had begun to reel with the possibility of embracing Monique. "Buzzy," I said, after I'd waved Laureen off, "I am going to stand in the elevator until that woman exits from whatever apartment she has entered, however long it may take."

"Gonna hang out in the elevator, got to be part of my one man band," Buzzy said. "Gonna ride up and down, time has come for me to give you a drum stick for keeping time with the bass, or I could switch to kazoo and give you my harmonica."

I THEN SAY WHAT I HAVE PREVIOUSLY SAID ONLY AT THANKSGIVING

"Give me the drumstick," I said.

Buzzy reached down into his pant leg and extracted one. He turned up the volume on the radio. For a while, until someone signaled, we sat at lobby level, doors open, keeping time with Bonnie Raitt. When the d.j. came back on, Buzzy toed the dial silent and reached into his breast pocket to activate his cassette player. Tone Loc said what he had to say. I tapped along. Buzzy provided a counternarrative:

> Do I like my job?
> I don't know
> Work each day
> Whether high or low

Man in the elevator says
"Buzzy, I'm in love"
Can he mean this
When just above
Lady love's come to see him
Bringing her kid
Maybe what she's doing
Is making a bid
"One more time," maybe that's what she said
Fooling with this guy, messing with his head
Do I like my job?
I can't say
The song ends right now today

Mrs. Cazurell in 3-B buzzed. We rose to the floor as Buzzy pretended the kazoo was a cigar, holding it at a distance from him, tapping it several times and grinding the imaginary ash into the bear rug with his heel. With Mrs. Cazurell safely in the lobby, we rose again, for Mr. Barruti in 5-F. I wouldn't have known where they lived, but the second Buzzy saw them, he called out their apartment numbers, as if the day was one long Bingo game. Mr. Barruti tended indoor plants. He got into the elevator carrying a box of wheat grass that was the replacement for three bowls of iris he'd put into a Park Avenue apartment on Monday. When he left, Buzzy filled me in: Mr. Barruti's apartment was filled with Grolights, which burned all night. He slept in a black padded eye mask.

Finally Monique emerged from 10-A, Ms. Penderville's apartment, right across from the elevator. She got in without a word, eyeing the bear rug and Buzzy's orthopedic shoes. I was so tongue-tied I might have let her get away, if Buzzy hadn't spoken,

NOW RAP BECOMES RAPPORT
AND IT'S MY GOOD FORTUNE
RIDING WITH BUZZY
MY EARS ARE SCORCHING

"I would like to take the opportunity to introduce my friend, the long-time respectable resident Mr. Stephen G. Smith," Buzzy said. "This is a man of considerable musical talent, who masquerades as a high-powered lawyer by day."

Sweat broke out on my brow. Monique was staring at me. I smiled and extended the hand that did not clutch the drumstick.

"You are going to conduct a choir in the lobby?" she said.

I looked at Buzzy, hopefully.

"The man could summon angels at will, but wants only a brief conversation with you," he said. He cleared his throat,

I run an elevator
Is that a crime?
All day long, spend my time

Rising and falling, keeping the beat
Raising my eyebrows, tapping my feet
Now the doors open: people go away
Buzzy keeps riding, with work and play
One thing's sure: Man's got to make a living
Management's conservative, never forgiving
What's the perk, then, for yours truly
Listening to music; being unruly
Because ain't no cupid, ain't no romance
Just a moment on my elevator I hope'll last

MY LITTLE JOKE SIMPLY SLIPS OUT

The doors parted. Monique looked at Buzzy and smiled slightly. Outside the building, she turned and said to me: "I am going to change my life. You happen to see me on a day when all the ends have not been tied, when I am frazzled and not *sortable*. Since 1985 I have tried to make my way in New York, but since five minutes ago, I have no longer cared to. You are just a person I am saying goodbye to."

"Whatever I said would seem lame," I said.

"*C'est vrai*," she said.

"*Vrai*," I said.

A man in a torn coat and a baseball cap walked up to us. He took off the cap and turned it upside down. There was a dollar bill in the bottom of the hat, held there with a safety pin. The man was quite short. A quarter sat on top of his head.

"Hey man," the man said, the quarter glinting in the sun. "Man, if you or your wife would give me money, I could get a bowl of vegetable soup. I had one, but I threw it against the window of the bank."

"I have observed enough American moments for a lifetime," Monique said, turning and walking away.

"That your wife?" the man said.

"I just met her in the elevator."

"She was frowning at you, man. You sure she's not your wife?"

"Listen," I said, feeling suddenly deflated. "You want money? Why don't I give you something that might change your day?"

I took out my wallet and handed him a twenty.

"Oh, man," he said, "I have to go. I can't stay where there's any good luck."

He turned to walk uptown. The quarter fell from his head and rolled backwards. I pocketed it. I liked the idea that I'd given someone $19.75.

Monique was inside a cab. She must have turned and seen me through the window. I couldn't say what my face looked like. Probably I was just staring blankly, until the cab made a U-turn and coasted to the curb. Fuzzy dice dangled from the mirror. The driver grabbed one of them and seemed to be buffing his nails.

"You are as sad as me," Monique said, opening the door. "I came here as a last errand before quitting my job, and I met a man as sad as me."

"Where to?" the cab driver said.

"Palio," I said—a bar I hadn't been to since I sat with Laureen and the artist,

years before. If nothing else, I thought that part of my story might make an amusing anecdote to tell Monique. Also, I liked the way the bartender remained solicitous, even in the face of thundering horses.

Before we got there, I heard her story of coming to New York as an *au pair*. The couple she worked for had twins, then divorced; the man sued for custody of the children, got it because even the manicurist said his wife was always depressed, then added to his single-parent household a parakeet, a gekko, and two cats that now both needed eye operations. His mistress, Ms. Penderville, was bitter he had not asked her to move in. She had migraines, and Monique was dispatched to deliver Codeine. Though the pharmacy could have delivered the pills, the man used Monique as a spy, to check on things.

"Don't you have a job?" Monique said, suddenly. "Why aren't you at work?"

As the cab swung down the side street, the driver said, "Beautiful hair." He tapped the heart-shaped frame on the dashboard. "My wife can't grow hair, but she keeps on trying. She uses a shampoo that costs as much as a ride from here to the World Trade Center. Takes vitamins, hasn't had a cigarette since before the last one was born. I always wanted to marry beautiful hair. I wanted *big eyes* (his hands left the steering wheel; he made a one-that-got-away gesture). I wanted nice and *slender* (his hands floated up, then became fists he dropped to his lap). I wanted *hair down to the shoulders* (he jammed his hand into the horn, laughing as a woman in a red business suit and another woman in a sari clutched each other and jumped back to the curb). "The way it turned out is that without the eye-liner, her eyes are standard size. Slender she now drinks. The hair she is definitely not going to get, but we got it anyway, with girls seven and eight."

The meter had been ticking as he talked. He leaned forward and turned it off. The receipt was spit out like a snake's tongue in a flip book being thumbed by the slowest thumb in the world. I paid the cab driver.

"It's so exhausting," Monique said, looking over her shoulder as the cab sped away. "All day long, everyone will tell you everything."

Inside, we sat on barstools and discussed luck, good and bad, movie scores we liked, politicians we could sympathize with, happy circumstances, overlapping stories, missed moments, second chances.

I BECAME AN AFTERNOON WRITER

Looking into her wine glass, she said, "No. Of course I don't know what you would say about today if you wrote a story."

I would start by saying simply that I met the woman of my dreams, Monique. Then I'd skip forward, in the fashion of the day, and say that late at night, I eventually come to do some investigating. To my surprise, soon the night will come when I tiptoe to the bathroom and pull her mascara wand out of the tube and look at the greasy blue spiral, half believing it might scatter Tinkerbell's stardust.

Eventually, I examine her socks, touching the raised wool polka dots with the same seriousness with which the blind touch Braille.

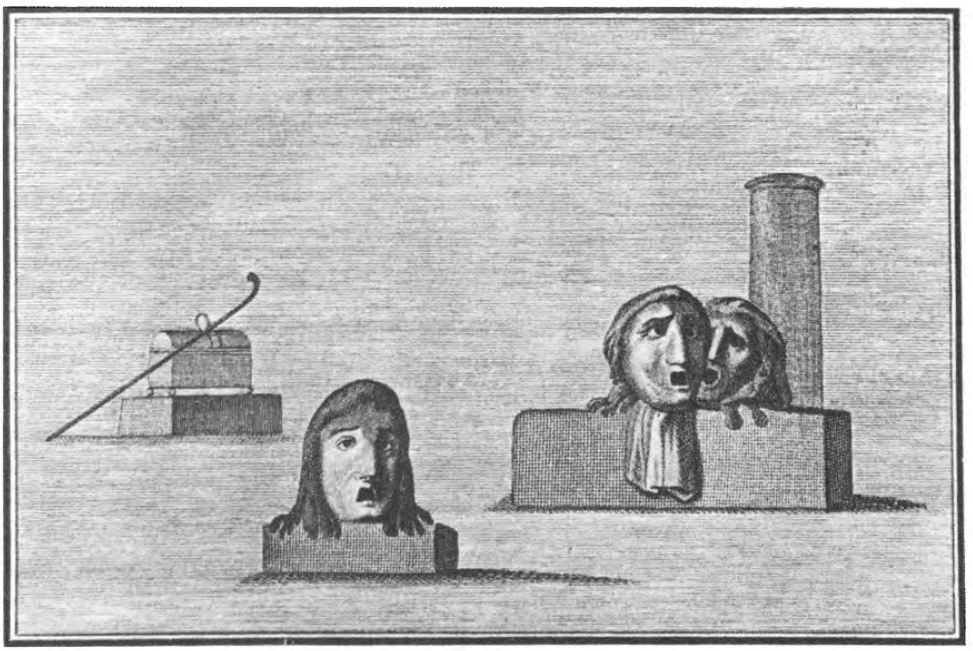
I become part of a society of night-time optimists. In the dark, the Monique I come to understand is so omnipresent she is magical. See where her breasts have stretched small peaks in her cotton sweater? Where her discarded shoes meet toe-

to-toe, like a gawky adolescent's footsteps? If there's a slight shiver as she inhales in her sleep, it's no doubt because so much has been credited to chance; exhaling, her chest sinks with the sudden sureness that perfect moments are always too fleeting.

By extension, many things become quite remarkable. Upstairs, their leaves beaded with mist, rare orchids grow in the heavenly pink light of Mr. Barruti's apartment.

Between heaven and earth, in the limbo of the elevator, Buzzy is keeping the beat.

CROWD NOISES
MURMURING
MURMURING
YAWN



LAURIE BERRY

Humility

MY FIRST IMPRESSION OF DON WAS AS A TEACHER, and he terrified me. I was so frightened of him at first that each time he called on me (and he called on people, he didn't wait for them to volunteer) I began to hyperventilate so badly I couldn't make myself understood. I don't think my colleagues were as nervous, but we all wanted his approval so much it hurt.

Of course, it didn't come that often. The teacher evaluation that students complete at the end of each course asks, "What was the most important thing you learned in this class?" One semester his class of undergraduates waited for him to leave the class, and then all conspired to answer "humility." When he did approve he got a look on his face as if he'd just eaten something good; sometimes he'd look a little taken aback. And then he'd pronounce the item "sweet," or "shapely," or "terrific." The first time this happened to a friend of mine, he came from the classroom and said that he'd literally swooned. And that is exactly what Don's approval felt like.

This intense desire to please made the relationship a little dangerous, and I think that all of us at some point were infuriated by the power he held over us, which could make a moment's indifference simply devastating. The dynamic was somewhat familial—we called him "Uncle Don," or, behind his back, "Dad"—and there was jealousy among us for his attention. There were factions of the spurned, the tolerated, the favored; and your ranking could change suddenly from semester to semester. Oh, the unfairness of it all! And there was a silly gravity about it that was like the quest of the apprentice in those pseudo-spiritual karate films. I think he was a little embarrassed by the whole thing. Once he told me he felt like the Wizard of Oz.

He had a reputation for being hard to talk to. I think what was disconcerting was the simultaneous lightness and seriousness in his conversation. His directness was phenomenal. He'd ask you something grave or even shocking, and you'd find yourself talking about things most private and important, but freely, with a kind of hopeful buoyancy. We had none of those dreadful halting, heavy conversations. I'd always thought of maturity as something a little ponderous, but Don redefined that. Actually, I'm sure he'd reject the word "maturity," rather he liked the idea of wisdom. When I came to him once, in distress, he told me, "Life is a game," and he was extremely serious about it.

Lunch was his ritual with students: he would catch you in the hall and sweep you off to it, at the University Hilton, where you drank white wine and complained about cork in the glass and the dangers of the menu. And you gossiped—

he was a delightful and wicked gossip. He thought that half the reason anyone entered the writing program was to find a mate, and he spooked the men in my class when he publically urged us all to get married. He believed in marriage. So I got married—to a poet. When I came back—after the divorce—he demanded to know what happened. He listened to my story and said, "But you *knew* he was a poet. Now we'll have to find you a *normal* husband."

I think that writers who teach are important to their students less as teachers than as friends and models of how to live in the world as a writer. Young writers need the long view, need some idea of how one goes the distance, some idea of what exactly it is they're letting themselves in for, and how to survive it. His only nod to the Jackie Collinses and Danielle Steeles of the world was to say, "That's a different business." He was generous enough to doubt his own work in front of us, and in doing so submitted to the reality that it just doesn't get any easier. In "The Sandman" he wrote "that what an artist does, is fail . . . the paradigmatic artistic experience is that of failure. . . . There is something 'out there' which cannot be brought 'here.' This is standard. I don't mean bad artists, I mean good artists. There is no such thing as a successful artist (except, of course, in worldly terms). The proposition should read, 'Susan becomes an artist and lives unhappily ever after.' This is the case. Don't be deceived." I'm not saying that Don endorsed unhappiness, but he did not conceal his own, and so informed ours.

As for the university life, Don was a writer who taught, not a teacher who wrote, and for so many of us growing up as writers in the academy, that is an important distinction. He had a writer's temperment and was sympathetic when I confided my dread of situations with strangers in which I'm expected to identify myself as a writer. At the time I was facing an event, a benefit dinner, where I was expected to do exactly that. The questions—What do you write about? Where do you get your ideas?—send me screaming to the nearest fire exit. Don said yes, he knew about that, and that on airplanes, when the person sitting next to him asked what he did for a living, he'd tell them that he was a typewriter repairman.

Insomnia and the various compulsions—Don didn't wave them around and say, *This is what it means to be an artist*, but he acknowledged them as, if not a reasonable way of life, a standard one. I know that he disliked being thought of as a father—he called me chum—but when it comes to those incidental qualities that often accompany the ambition to write, he did for me what my own father could not.

I've said that a student's relationship to Don could be dangerous; the desire to please, so basic to the writer's nature, could be manifestly directed at him. One could spend one's entire life writing for Don and depend too much on his judgement. Of course, he knew this. At a certain point, he told me I had to stop caring so much what he or anybody else thought of my work, that he would be my friend, but no longer my teacher. This is perhaps another example of his maddening power over us, but at once I knew that I had given it to him—we all did—and now he was giving it back. So it was some time ago that I lost Don as a teacher.

What I lost that awful summer was a friend, a chum. Another student told me that when Italo Calvino died, Don said that a certain richness was gone from the world. A similar richness is now gone with Don, life is poorer without him. In "Me and Mrs. Mandible," he wrote that "The distinction between children and

adults, while probably useful for some purposes, is at bottom a specious one, I feel. There are only individual egos, crazy for love." The sadness in lines like these tailors the sadness one feels with losing Donald. Losing him has not been simple, but rather is a day-by-day distillation of the feelings he's left in all of us, which include a sometimes overwhelming sweetness. He gave me much, and I hope I gave some back. I loved him and I'll miss him.

GLENN BLAKE

Memorial Service Remarks

THE RULES WERE SIMPLE. All you had to do was walk to the front of the room, stand, and read your story to the class. And when it was all over, you could not sit down and hide. No. You had to stay up there for as long as it took and listen to the criticism—sometimes, line by line. You could not say a word—that was in the rules—could not defend yourself.

Nothing to it.

I can remember my first writing class with Donald Barthelme. A friend of mine walked to the front of the room and started reading this forty-five-page story about basketball—it seemed like he was always writing about basketball—*long* stories. I mean, there wasn't so much as a dribble until the tenth page.

Somewhere about halfway down the third page, Don stopped him and said, "Rick, does it get any better?"

"Yes," Rick said. "Oh yes," Rick said. "Oh hell yes, Don. It gets a *whole* lot better. Just wait."

Don just looked at him and said, "I think not. Have a seat."

I remember this vividly, because I was the next student to have to walk to the front of the room, shaking so badly I could not read my own prose. And I proceeded to read a fifteen-page story in about forty-five seconds. The man was not going to stop me.

Years later, at his house, after lunch, we sat in his den, and he read a story of mine, and I felt that familiar unsettling sensation of seeing my story through his eyes. That afternoon, I could anticipate my mistakes before he got to them—my shortcomings, my missed opportunities. I would look across the table and see what page he was on, and I would correct my mistakes aloud as he read through them.

Until finally, inevitably, he reached a line which was so egregious it made him wince.

At that moment, I said the line aloud.

He nodded. Was he pleased that I had recognized it? Was he irritated that it was still in the text? And then, he read the line aloud. He read the line aloud and gave me that look as if I had just—letter by letter, word by word—fed him a dish improperly prepared. And he said, "Are we going to let Mr. Blake get away with this line?"

"No," I said. "No, Mr. Blake knows better than that."

Pausing after each word, he read the line again, frowned, shook his head, and said, "What are we going to do with Mr. Blake?"

What he was teaching us, what we were learning, was how to edit our own fiction. He would tell us at the beginning of the semester that he did not think writing (talent) could be taught. "But editing," he would say. "Editing can be learned." He knew that one day we would move on, away from writing classes, away from writing instructors, alone, with only our own mean eyes.

Near the end of July, I telephoned Florida, Oregon, Rhode Island, and we all agreed—to some extent—years after graduating from the program, that we were still writing *for* him. Not that we would send it to him. Not that he would ever see it. But we were still writing for those eyes. We were all aiming beyond what he expected of us.

I talked with Don right before he left for Italy. I had just completed a story collection which I had rewritten and rewritten, revised and revised, and I told him I was beginning to feel about thirteen months pregnant. I was beginning to feel like the book didn't want to be born, like it was having too much fun in there—that it had started phoning out for pizza.

And Don told me, "Glenn, don't worry. You're going to be all right. Because," he said, "you are not afraid to fail."

I have been thinking about that line all summer. Too many writing instructors ask their students to trim this, edit that, limit it, cut it back, play it safe, so that the result is a fiction that fits neatly into a manageable container.

Not afraid to fail.

Donald Barthelme inspired his students to write beyond themselves, requiring *always* that they take chances, risk *everything*, never, never play it safe. Most of us are feeling a little lost now, drifting, unmoored.

But I know what Don would want. And I know where he would want to see it. As always, he would want to see it on the page. He would want to open that front cover, look at the first page—pause for a moment, pleased—and then, read on.

TERRI BURNS

Looking Back At The Donald Barthelme Workshops

I REMEMBER WALKING INTO THE University of Houston English Department two days after Donald Barthelme died. Stunned silence still filled the halls. The news just wouldn't register: Don was too much larger-than-life to have a human end, the rare literary Great who was also a Great Teacher. By that summer, there was a one-year wait to take his workshops, and applications to the UH writing program (applications to study with Donald Barthelme) had grown to several hundred a year. I and two other students spent that evening together trying to soothe one another's grief with reminiscences. We couldn't talk about Don in past tense. Now, over a year later, I still step back a moment, confused, when a friend asks, "Isn't all this time for reflection enough?" Maybe I can try to tell you the hold that Don had on us, and the gifts, even beyond his own fiction, that he left to a group of young writers.

Don's death left many of us not only in anguish but in fear; praise from Donald Barthelme was the lifeline we held onto when we weren't sure our words were worth reading. His very presence kept the egos of twenty or more competing would-be writers in check. He was the man who, if pleased, would actually follow through on promises to introduce you to an agent, an editor, a publisher. He was the Teacher as generous as he was honest, who filled his days critiquing student work when we all knew he didn't have to. He helped set up fellowships so we could have more time to write; he bought a photocopy machine so we didn't have to pay for copying our stories. When he was just back from throat surgery and could barely talk, he sat in the workshop and listened while another student led the discussion, and afterwards insisted we all go out for drinks. We didn't want him to take us out that day. We wanted him to go home and take care of himself. Taking care of himself did not seem to be something Donald Barthelme did.

Don wanted us to be great writers, and we all felt the sincerity and pressure of his wish. He did not turn a kind eye upon work aspiring to mediocrity. Stories about the criticism dished out by Don in his workshops have become a genre unto themselves: how he'd told one of his best students that his novel's major character needed to "pour gasoline on himself and light a match", how he'd informed a Mormon student that his sober creation needed "several stiff drinks." Before I came to Houston, I took these stories as improbable embellishments, words too

severe to have come from the lips of a Master whose linguistic juxtapositions made my writer's nerves laugh in delight.

When I first met Donald Barthelme, at a conference at the University of Florida, my head was spinning from undigested Derrida and Gang of Four. Don showed me to a seat, offered me a glass of Scotch, and sat down to discuss my work. He turned through my manuscript's pages slowly, then even more slowly stroked his white beard, an immobile presence reminding me of a Stoic philosopher. "The trouble with this chapter," he said after awhile, "is that I just don't know what this woman *wants*."

I don't know what I'd expected him to say, but this wasn't it. This from the Live Father of Postmodernism, speaking of textual seams as real people? Such on-the-money criticism, coming from anyone else, I would have arrogantly labeled naïve. While Don may have discussed theories of writing in essays like "Not-Knowing" (a piece every apprentice writer should read), his critiques assumed you knew those things, and so returned to the deceptively simple. He spoke to me next about ethics: why did my narrator spend much of her time musing stupidly over the lyrics of a top-40 song? "No one should trust you as an artist," he said, "if you can't let your characters think without props."

In barely ten minutes, Don made me realize the wrong-headedness of my approach to writing. I was determined to study with him in Houston. When I finally arrived, and took my seat in the first of many workshops, a student was passing out a large chunk of an even larger novel. The page numbers went from something like 340 to 430. Don walked into class and saw the manuscript sitting in front of his seat at the head of the table. "I thought I told you to stop bringing this thing to class," he said. "Write something else. Now, who has work?"

I could not imagine writing 400 pages, much less writing it and not having it read. And this student, unlike most of us, was stubborn in defying his Teacher: he would not abandon his novel, a first-person narrative told by a white male college type. His most interesting character, a jive-talking black football player, I ungenerously attributed to massive library research. As parts of this novel continued to appear in workshop, Don gave new advice to the student. He said to change the novel's point of view: all 400-plus pages would work better if rewritten from the football player's perspective.

I thought this suggestion a rather sick joke. I thought it even sicker, outright sadomasochistic, when the student actually began rewriting each chapter in high-brow jive. I imagined Don at home, privately laughing at the agony to which this young man had agreed. But soon, we noticed the student becoming quite adept at writing Black English. And soon, as with the wave of a magic wand, his novel's voice became funny, engaging, and clear.

My time came soon enough. Asked to bring in a section from my novel-in-progress, I spent a week producing 34 pages of new prose. After repeated 2 a.m. "insights," I was sure I'd hit my stride, sure this almost-unretouched chapter was the best I'd ever written, and, almost as important, sure it didn't falsely cater to workshop sensibilities. Painfully aware that most of Don's published students were men over thirty, my twenty-two-year-old college type narrator became more and more strident in her remarks about "older" men.

In workshop, I was first derided for sloppy 2 a.m. prose. Then Don asked the

class if he thought the tone suffered from reverse sexism. My embarrassment over bad writing turned to anger. "Then what do you want me to have her do?" I asked. "I think you should have somebody slap her," Don said.

At home, I cut most of the chapter. Soon I abandoned the entire novel, and began to write short stories. Most of those, too, were rewritten, rewritten, and thrown away. For my first year in Don's workshop, I felt on the receiving end of a Socratic dialectic, having skin after skin of misperception removed, until I finally knew I did not know.

Knowing that you don't know leaves you open to frequent waves of paranoia. In another class, where our assignment had been to write ten aphorisms ("Skepticism is the chastity of the intellect," and so on), we listened to student after student stumble over attempts at humor or profundity. That night, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Don read his story "Conversation with Goethe." "I was walking home from the theater with Goethe this evening when we saw a small boy in a plum-colored waistcoat," Don began. "Youth, Goethe said, is the silky apple butter on the good brown bread of possibility." For ten minutes, his voice boomed aphorisms, parodies of aphorisms, more aphorisms, and finally the story's last line: "Eckermann, . . . *Shut up*." The student next to me turned and whispered, "I bet he read that just to show us what we can't do."

Eventually I realized where real writing began: not in concepts or outlines, but in the "hard, nutlike word." In one class, after a student read a piece whose beauty lay in linguistic gems, Don said, "Half of the turns of language here hit right on. But half isn't good enough. Every word must rest on the edge of genius." Don went through the story line by line, suggesting ways that edge might appear. At home, over many weeks, I reread *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* and *Overnight to Many Distant Cities*, word by word instead of page by page, and listened to the edge of language being honed. I learned that even stories carried by character and plot grew out of linguistic precision. And when, two years after coming to Houston, I finally turned in a piece—one piece, out of hundreds of pages of thrown away prose—that Don called "a virtuoso performance," I held onto the lifeline of his criticism even more tightly.

Maybe it's appropriate I end these workshop anecdotes where they began: with ethics, and a writer's responsibility to the craft. The workshop was called "Fiction Forms," and our project for several weeks was going to be editing and rewriting parts of Hemingway's *Islands in the Stream*. Don prefaced our assignment by stating that such actions would not constitute blasphemy upon the remains of a great American writer. We were, rather, editing a posthumously-published rough draft. Had Hemingway lived, Don insisted, he would never have let such prose reach his readers. Don believed each writer had a personal, political, and aesthetic responsibility for what reached his audience. That responsibility was not met with sermons or Westerns or prosaic thuds, but with the playful honesty of listening to one's own words with the ear of a discerning outsider: of doing to our lesser work what we so gleefully did to *Islands in the Stream*, as words, then pages, of child dialogue, weather, and palaver concerning cats were red-lined and discarded.

In this last year, we have had to remember often to be honest with our words. We have had to be careful when the din of our false egos, rising as our nouns and

verbs failed, made us forget Don's lessons. We've grown quieter, most of us drifting back into our separate corridors, still writing. Don said his goal was to make all of us our own best editors, but it is often still his voice, not my own, that I hear in imagined critiques of my work. Perhaps by having to write without Don, we will learn how to use the gifts he gave us. I am reminded of one last story. A student, invited to a coveted dinner with his Teacher at the University Hilton, finally asked Don the question: "What do you have to do to be a great writer?" Donald Barthelme laughed slightly and replied, "Live a number of lifetimes." We are lucky that he did.

KEVIN CUNNINGHAM

L'Eclat Du Hazard

As Bad As The Baddest Badass

ARTHUR C. DANTO, Johnsonian Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University, leaned broadly, elbows up, eyebrows aflutter, fabricating like the plastics industry into a scowl of scholars from the art, creative writing, literature and philosophy departments in the large, fresh-carpeted room at the University of Houston's Hilton School of Hotel/Motel Management.

Aside from his demeanor, which roughly paralleled that of the haggard solipsis of philosophers in the back left corner of the room, the rotund Danto seemed alone up on the folding aluminum platform provided by the University for his self-aggrandizing acrobatics.

Donald Barthelme sat upright on an olive-green plastic stacking chair. He had positioned himself toward the back center of the room well away from both the podium and the students. Here he could observe and nurse his self-consciousness at the same time.

But self-conscious or not, the standard ornery twinkle in his eye had an unusual shine this evening. He quietly observed his students begin to burn as Danto attempted to co-opt everything that made their student-artist struggles worthwhile.

He sat, as he often did, in the attitude of a boy watching the fuse on a firecracker deflagrate, and as he listened to Danto, he occasionally gazed over at a group of his writing students perched in their chairs. To his credit, they could not wait for the question and answer period to start. They sat like bird dogs at point, occasionally looking over at Don to find no clue as to his approval or disapproval. Only that enigmatic twinkle from the eye of the fundamentally shy master of ambiguity.

Danto may have done better that night to build his case more firmly on such Modern/Postmodern ambiguity as Don's. Instead, the intellectual legerdemainist pulled a buffalo out of his book, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.

Danto's lecture that evening sought to blame artists for form, but take credit, himself, for content. It was an old tinder box.

He put forth a case for crediting the meaning of art not to art makers but to art interpreters. His argument: that since philosophers supposedly determine the significance of any given art object, they, therefore, are the real artists.

Art makers, like Danto's utile if fictional cryptoartist J, merely produce objects.

Almost unconsciously.

Much as writers produce product.

Or bodies produce shit.

Having in common with countless other critics an ignorance of studio practice only matched in scale by his ego, Danto launched into scenario after scenario. But none contained a single corollary in the physical world. Finally he came to his prize incendiary device, the infamous *Polish Rider* fallacy. In this fiction, we are presented with Rembrandt's *Polish Rider*—the real one. But, begs Danto, "Say the *Polish Rider* . . . was not painted at all but is the result of someone's having dumped a lot of paint in a centrifuge, giving the contrivance a spin, and having the result splash onto a canvas just to see what would happen. And what happens is that, by a statistical miracle [!!], the paint molecules disposed themselves in such a way as to produce something to all outward appearances exactly like . . . a painting by which one might define his life?"[1] That is, the *Polish Rider.*

Barthelme remained seated, stealthily amused at the grumbles going up as this bravura dud sputtered out. Scrappy Danto continued undaunted. Obviously the confabulator had duked it out with a conservator on some earlier leg of his journey. So in this lecture, the paint on the *Jeu de l'hazard* was such as "not to be told apart from" the paint used by Rembrandt. Likewise, the canvas which bore this serendipitous splash was to have been made "from what was not to be told apart from" the actual canvas on which the original *Polish Rider* was painted.

Here we were then, after some hasty revision of the original Dantonian text, with a carefully tailored argument that "was not to be told apart from" an accident. And next to it "one of the deepest paintings by one of the deepest artists in the history of the subject."

His hyper-prepared example of chance complete, Danto asked who was to determine which object was to have value over the other?

His answer was that, for some reason, only a philosopher could tell.

Muffled guffaws and even growls outspread. Barthelme waited for the fire to strike the cap. He glanced over at his battery of students, barely able to hide that undercurrent of amusement.

Finally the time came for questions and comments from the audience. Two literature students sputtered out destructively strictured, misdeconstructed, structuralistic eructations.

In the resulting fissure of embarrassment, a student rose in clarity to her feet. First, she asked Dr. Danto why a philosopher was required to determine that a splatter painting had no brush strokes. (Was the sizzle of the fuse slightly more sibilant?)

Danto begged poetic license.

The student pointed out that if Danto were a poet, a philosopher would be needed to interpret Danto's utterances and that the same problems that Danto posed for artists would arise for Danto himself. And, an artist interpret himself?! Her eyes were wide with mock incredulity. (Had the fire reached the powder?)

Danto mumbled the primacy of philosophy. Sssssss! the crowd hissed succinctly.

Emboldened, the student wondered aloud: if the philosophers determined that the random *Rider* was not the valuable one by virtue of the element of chance, as they should, what might those same philosophers do to Marcel Duchamp's *Three*

Standard Stoppages, whose modus operandi and materials were chance—which, in fact, proposed chance as a new standard? Such works might actually be counterfeited via mechanical or highly formal methods by some dastardly academician seeking to illustrate his own abstractions. *Quel hazard!* And what about thought-objects?

Building toward detonation velocity, the student went on to imply that Danto had a vested interest in discounting the expertise of artists because the more clout Danto's interpretations carried, the more money he would make and the more his advertising copy (that is, critical essays) would be worth to a completely unregulated industry.

BLAM! I exclaimed almost silently, and stole a glance at Don. Did I imagine that he'd flinched?

Danto attempted to explain to the student that his stretches of imagination were part and parcel of modern philosophy and insisted that they were accepted practice.

"The answer to your *Polish Rider* fallacy is Robert Rauschenberg," she said.

And Donald Barthelme, I thought, who, throughout this exchange, had visibly brightened. He beamed at the student, which was understandable. But he also beamed at Danto, which was disturbing to me. Danto's attack on the methods of Modernism and beyond seemed to me to make him Barthelme's natural enemy.

But Don had on his mousetrap-in-the-underwear-drawer smile. He sat calmly in the aftermath, chin down, eyes up, sparkling impishly toward the front. I looked up at the podium. Danto returned the mischievous grin imp for imp. Why? I wondered. Then I knew:

Both of them were very good at being bad.

We asked ourselves: How can we improve the show?

We auditioned an explosion.

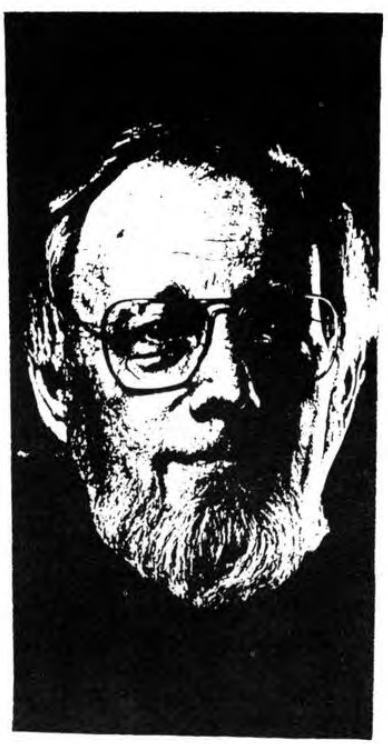
In The Barthelme Museum

> *Suppose as a cultural terrorist I decide to blow up the marble quarries at Carrera to make a statement once and for all of the politico-moral corruption of the Renaissance. I plant plastic explosive and depress the detonator with a song of anarchy on my lips. The dust clears, and there in the midst of it all the lumps of marble have fallen together to form the Tempietto of Bramante—except for the fact that it is topped by what cannot be told apart from the Pieta with St. Nichodemus of Michelangelo.*
>
> (Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* p. 40)

At the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, we wept with laughter. Stringy leis from Tiki Joe's Luau Kit hung down from our tearducts. Our gaze drifted toward paintings but none were to be found. They were lost high in the rarified hierarchy. We complained to Donald Barthelme, Jr., the director, that there should be beautiful paintings in the museum. He looked sympathetic but said, politely, " I'm sorry but this week we're doing ugly. All our holdings this week and for some weeks to come will be unattractive."

We left in disappointment but returned out of curiosity.

"No paintings," the director reminded us as we walked through the door, "but reproductions are okay."



"If they are bad enough reproductions." He added.

It was a show of objects, largely. The blackjack, for example, was declared ugly not so much for its function as for the loving care with which it had been crafted. Every thing in the museum had been carefully chosen for its unique repulsiveness.

It was 6/17/60 and the director of the museum, Donald Barthelme, had not misinterpreted the warning implicit in the readymades of his anti-aesthetic grandfather, Marcel Duchamp. The museum was filled with tasteless junk. But unlike other museum directors, Mr. Barthelme admitted it publicly.

Thirty years later, in the museum's archives, I came across a registrars' list for *New American Artifacts (The Ugly Show)*, Houston exhibition chairman, Donald Barthelme, Jr.:

> A baby blue styrofoam chrysanthemum. An auto hubcap, brand unrecognizable. A hideous juke box. Paint-by-number pictures of lambs, sans paint. An unbelievably ugly plastic chair. A giant-size vaseline jar. An imitation shrunken head. A plaster "flamenco." *Reader's Digest. Official Detective. Ricky Nelson Magazine.* A TV antenna. A whiskey decanter disguised as a Greek vase. Bunny rabbit decals. *Big Bonus* stamps. A gilded baby shoe coin bank. *Klutch* denture adhesive. Plastic-bright artificial fruit. *Tiki Joe's Luau Kit.* A plastic red rose in pseudo crystal vase. Three (bad) reproductions of Gainsborough's *Blue Boy.* An "obscene" ashtray. A large Coke bottle. A box of *All.* Half-ceramic, half-wood totem poles. A toy machine gun. A plastic soldier's helmet. "A roseate and gaudily commercialized" badly-printed stuffed head of Christ. A copy of the American flag printed out of register on flimsy plastic.

In an event that would recur on a broader scale in Chicago, Cincinatti, and all over the country 30 years later, the director, Donald Barthelme, Jr., was forced to remove these last two objects. The Prudential Life Insurance Company received a complaint and took it upon itself to request the removal of the Stuffed Christ and the Bad Flag as "objectionable."

"We've been instructed to find these two items objectionable," said the Insurance Man to the director.

"Thank you!" said the director. "We're glad you're enjoying The Ugly Show."

"No, no, no," said the alarmed Insurance Man. "You don't understand. Leading Citizens are complaining." The Insurance Man took the Bad Flag and placed it in his lapel. Then, looking about surreptitiously, stuffed Stuffed Christ into his back pocket.

"Hey!" the director exclaimed. Then catching himself and with a serenity that made the news, Donald Barthelme said, "They belong in the show and I don't agree that their removal was necessary. We took them down, however, because Prudential requested it."

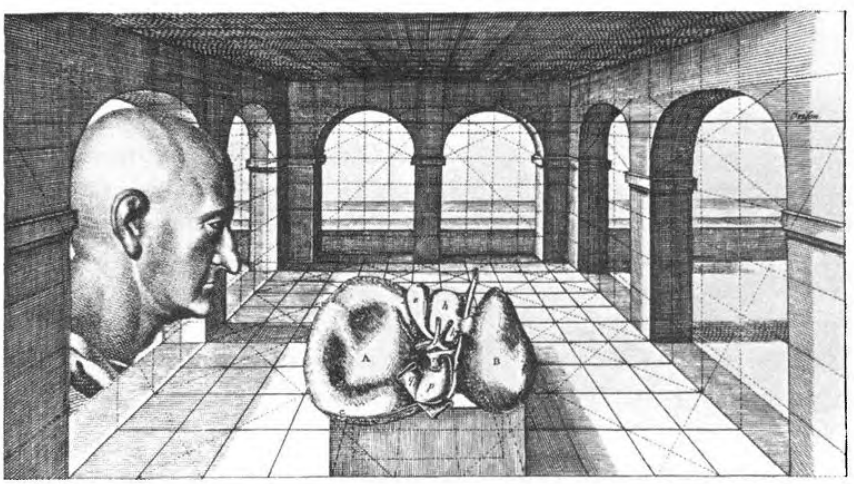
Prudential owned the museum property. Although the director did much to determine the future of the Museum, ultimately it was a rented museum. He urged the museum board strongly to work toward the acquisition of their own building and a director of national repute. Then he cordially took his leave.

The director moved to New York City and began his own private collection.

No Insurance Man would censure it because the objects in the collection were created and presented by Barthelme himself. He had complete control of them. In fact, no Insurance Man was needed because these objects did not exist in the usual sense of the word and were immune from damage barring a world fascist uprising with book bonfires—a New World Order.

For the rest of his life Donald Barthelme added to his collection of thought objects. And, following the model of such fine institutions as Howard Johnson's and Holiday Inn, the Barthelme Museum was open to the public twenty-four hours a day.

Though its curator has sometimes been incorrectly referred to as a minimalist, it is a Gargantuan museum. There is even a Tolstoy Museum and a conservatory, an Indian uprising and at least one work with "its own army, navy and embassies abroad." A development in Galveston, Texas "in which the property lines follow the contours of the pieces of a Mona Lisa jigsaw puzzle except for a few rectangles because of A.G. Bartie's complaint." A Glass Mountain, in fact, an entire country in which all the surfaces are so smooth that anything with a rough surface is highly valuable. There's an opera. And there are several shows including *The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace.* A clown band playing the songs *Ralph Is Coming* and *Maude Is Waiting For You.* And even an assortment of fathers. There's the most famous of his fathers, of course, there's his weeping father, there's his father murdered very bluntly by Eugenie Grandet (perhaps a mistake of double vision), his father run over by a carriage, and



I put my father in the show, with his cold eyes. His segment was called, My Father Concerned About His Liver

Nor did he "neglect Piles of Discarded Women Rising from the Sea."

The Snow White room is perhaps best characterized by the word, "anticipation." Snow White's moles float in whiteness in the guise of delightfully stylized dots. The dots anticipate the marriage of visual art and literature that fills this gallery.

The Director anticipates many important cultural icons as he begins to build

his collection of thought objects here: Electro-visual phenomena such as Mongo from *Blazing Saddles* and Spuds MacKenzie flicker on the cathode ray tubes. Esthetic retreads like Bad Painting and political retreads like "the president's war on poetry" bang around and around inside these walls. Barthelme's letter, Dear Mr. Quistgaard, resembles nothing so much as a piece of Fluxus mail art and may be an important conceptual art piece in itself. The midget character, Edward, forsees some of the more obscure deconstructive texts as he careens through modernism to arrive at his inevitable conclusion: the condemnation of Cream Corfam shoes because they are merely spiritual.

A nineteen-foot-tall iron dog commemorating the invention of meat suddenly looms before us. But lest we despair of the lack of a spiritual component here in the Barthelmean Canine Gallery, there is a book cover illustration of a dog's head surrounded by flowers. A black domino dangles from the dog's neck. Personally, I imagine a sublime dalmatian. But not too sublime. The director is a good phenomenologist—or has "stolen a lot from" good phenomenologists.

In the Room of Unspeakable Practices And Unnatural Acts, we at first believe that we have entered a classroom after a lecture on the history of military fashion. A suit of armor is sketched on a blackboard. We may begin to guess at the room's real ambiguity of purpose when we see the serape woven from 200 transistor radios, or the carbon paper big as bedsheets which may hint at the next item: Bags of English Muffins, 2 pounds of ground veal and an apple xeroxed in flagrant violation of the Copyright Act. The xeroxes hang over the door which leads to the Great Days Gallery. They themselves are only a hint of the 4,000 pound welded-steel artichoke (all the world could accommodate that week), the 55 lb. reinforced concrete pork chop or the spilt white marble hulking there, waiting like hunger.

A watercolor erased by rain
An exploded pillow.

Dead women by the hundreds, painted in passionate imitation of Delacroix, lead us from Great Days into the gallery of Guilty Pleasures.

There is a tongue depressor on which a distinguished artist has painted a part of a nose, part of a mouth, a serious unsmiling eye. Along the west wall hang cross-eyed portraits of Patsy Porker, Margot Heap, Ellen West, an Indian chief and Eugenie Grandet herself. And there is:

butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter
butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter
butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter
butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter
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butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter
butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter

Gleaming just as yellow as these words would gleam if they were what they represented, a coin collection sits unguarded in a pile on the floor: 1756 Ducant dubloons worth two escudos each, shiny quadroons, bags of thalers and bobs, silverquids and copper bawbees totaling 6000 francs. We feast our eyes because we

know that from here we drop into Nothing: A Preliminary Account. And though we at first despair, we then recognize a familiar *n'est pipe pas* and, drinking our way out with the 18 foot-long-almost-invisible whiskey-sipping straws, we stagger into *Amateurs*.

Here, we are greeted by attractive boxes of soap. No *ALL*. This time *RUB* and *FAB* and *TUB* sit on a broad plinth in the foyer. On the walls, ensnared by the camera's aperture, a half-dozen 24"x 36" photos of the captured woman—staring. Looking over our shoulders, we pass through a second door into a larger anteroom to escape that relentless accusing gaze. We turn our heads to find the room papered with these prints, bearing down on us, demanding our guilt, clamoring for control. We breeze out into the gallery proper, barely escaping capture by the captured woman, who, taking advantage of our morbid fascination, has shifted her level of signification and detached herself from among the images to pursue us.

We burst through the door to safety and into a vast, dimly lit red room. Three lonely spotlights fall on three separate areas of the wide dark floor. One pool of light contains the captured woman's pipe, its porcelain bowl decorated with tiny red flowers, its stem curving long and graceful. The second pool of light contains 40 feet of Belding mercerized cotton, shade 1443. The third pool of light, somehow more forlorn in the center of the room, contains an X of masking tape marking the spot where love was once made.

We walk with melancholy through the sienna-brown dark and into the resplendent light of the Grand Hall. This vast hall is set aside for special exhibitions. We teeter on the precipice that is its threshold and behold below us a 45 x 12 block chunk of Manhattan on loan indefinitely from the City of New York with giant gentle billows ("muted heavy grays and browns for the most part") rounding off its rough edges and covering its more unsightly appurtenances. Yes, for an indefinite period, the museum is sponsoring an exhibit called The Balloon Show.

Because of anxiety caused by not-knowing the time constraints in this indefinite exhibition (the prep crew could strike at any time), we use the Balloon as a mode of transportation, pausing only briefly to admire its lack of limits, slipping off its rounded edges at that vaunted intersection where The Balloon meets the MOMA and into the other half of the gallery which, in the manner of the golden section, is, itself, bisected by a thin hard membrane of beaten shrimp exoskeletons rendered transparent by soaking in lacquer.

On one side Titled Balloons by the hundreds shimmy up against each other, flattening against the wall, straining against it. There are the saffron Balloon of Fatigue, the cinnamon Balloon of *Ora Pro Nobis*, the salt Rune Balloon and the celery Last Thing to Do at Night Balloon, as well as the Balloon of Not Yet and the Balloon of Sometimes, the brown Sir Isaiah Berlin Balloon and the Balloon Jejeune, the beige Balloon of Those Things I Should Have Done I Did Not Do, the crimson Balloon of the Ballad of the Crazy Junta, the Balloon of I Wish I Was, the Balloon of Busoni Thinking, the Balloon of Perforated Septum, the Balloon of Not Nice, the Balloon of the Cartel of Noise Makers, the Balloon of the Last Concert, the Balloon of Too Terrible, the Balloon of Perhaps and, of course, the Balloon of God Knows I Tried. They displace and deform themselves as they push relentlessly against the stiff keratinous sheet.

On the other side: The Pins! They are visible only by virtue of their impatient fidgeting as they attempt to bore through the shrimp film. Someday they will! Wiggling and glinting in the light are the Pin of Crossed Fingers Behind the Back, the Pin of the Dazed Sacham's Last Request, the Pin of Tomorrow Night, the Pin of Oh My, I Forgot, the Pin of They Didn't Like Me Much, the Pin of One Never Knows For Sure, the Pin of Whiter Wine and quivering as relentlessly as any pin that ever pierced, the Pin of I Violently Desire.

The stress is killing us. We decide to shop.

At the gift shop door is a mannequin, its arms outstretched, a bouquet of umbrellas in each hand. We try to enter but there are t-shirts camouflaged as ordinary t-shirts by an intense whiteness no eye can pierce. As we retreat, arms shielding our eyes, we back into a vast blind wall of *in situ* concrete. Animals writhe on the lack of grid affixed by electrolytic jelly. We slip over the wall into white noise and white space provided by the government. A video projector plays the sexy part of *Tristan und Isolde* over and over again on the wall beyond. In the corner a performance artist—a high priest—smears himself all over with bacon fat and is attacked by red dogs. We have entered *The Crisis Room* at our hazard.

The dead are shown in these art galleries, framed or sometimes put on pedestals. "Not much different than elsewhere except that" here "they display the actual—person." There is a story posing as an *objet trouvé* called The Question Party, a film containing an eight-day dramatization of Eckermann's Conversations With Goethe. We long to reenter the government subsidized white space and noise, but more conventional objects soothe us in our sorrow: a seven-by-ten foot painting of Mount Athos, hanging walls made of scraps of fabric and twigs, a picture of Vulcan and Maia by Spranger, a Ricchi picture of Tancred Succored by Ermina.

Q: But where can we find succor?

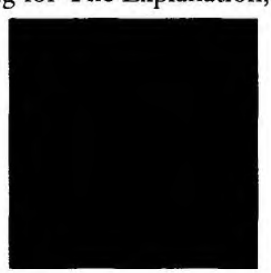
A: In the new music.

The plaid cactus.

The bails and bails of locust wings. . . .

We walked out of a tunnel made of anti-hairy materials onto a sidedwalk. A dog fell but we ignored it, fascinated by the *City Life* before us. We checked our weeping map but found ourselves surounded by crowd noises, murmuring, murmuring, yawning, retching, fainting, dismal behavior, tendering of excuses, rhythmic handclapping, sleeping, writhing, howling, moans, rhythmic handclapping, shouting, sexual activity, consumption of food. To what end? In whose name? What recourse?

As we went about searching for The Explanation,



we perceived a passageway. We entered it. We walked into the room.

The Old In-Out

Don paused at the classroom doorway. He surveyed the hormone packets fidgeting in their desks. Desks spewed out upon the linoleum like holes from some unfortunate strafing incident—the faces in them just as hollow. He sauntered down the outer aisle occasionally hugging the wall with his back. He stopped, turned his gaze on the student at the very center of the room and held the quivering thing rapt for some several long stage seconds. He tisked *soto voce* as if to some other authority (actually, here there could be no higher) then swiftly took the front of the room.

"What have I done?" he demanded sternly.

Shocked or reverent silence.

"Oh, comecome. Somebody. What did I just do?"

"You walked into the room?" A shaking oldish woman. A "Nancy" in the parlance of the program.

He stared at her, surveyed the class with all the earnestness of predation, then, issued the first of many rudimentary edicts. (My favorite was the five dollar a word

fine for using words Don didn't know.)

"In fiction," he began, "as in real life, no one ever walks into a room."

A pause.

"That's all. Now, go home and describe someone entering a room."

He walked out.

All figures, tropes, conceits, inventions, images, artworks, constructions, symbols, metaphors, language objects, fictions, etc., in this piece can be attributed to Donald Barthelme—except the wall made of shrimp exoskeletons in the balloon room. I did that.

In fond memory,
Kevin Cunningham

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TRACY DAUGHERTY

"You Hate Them If You're Ambitious"

A Study Of Donald Barthelme's Visual Aesthetics

READERS HAVE FREQUENTLY PUZZLED over the wildly varied abstract imagery in Donald Barthelme's prose—in fact, as Jerome Klinkowitz once pointed out, a number of critics have narrowly cast him as a literary jackdaw who combined words and phrases with little regard for meaning. One of his narrators says, "Fragments are the only forms I trust," a statement that students of his work sometimes mistakenly cite as his sole literary aesthetic. He told Klinkowitz that although he was indeed "very fond" of fragments, he'd found them to be "finally untrustworthy"—they "fall apart a lot," he said. [1]

The oft-quoted narrator in "See the Moon?" indicates a grab-bag of objects pinned collage-like to his wall and says he hopes they'll someday merge, blur, cohere into something meaningful. "You don't know how I envy [painters]," he adds. "They can pick up a Baby Ruth wrapper on the street, glue it to the canvas (in the *right place*, of course, there's that) and lo! people crowd about and cry, 'A real Baby Ruth wrapper, by God, what could be realer than that!' Fantastic metaphysical advantage [over writers]. You hate them, if you're ambitious." [2]

Narrator and author shouldn't be confused here, but it *is* apparent from Barthelme's interviews and from his advice to student writers that the visual arts challenged and informed his writing from the start of his career.

"I was trying to make fiction that was like certain kinds of modern painting . . . tending toward the abstract," he told Jo Brans in 1981. "The project is next to impossible, which is what makes it interesting. There's nothing so beautiful as having a very difficult problem. It gives purpose to life." [3]

At the University of Houston, where he taught creative writing from 1980 until his death in 1989, he consistently encouraged his students to study the Abstract Expressionists. He subscribed to *Art in America* and made sure that copies of the magazine were always available in the graduate students' lounge. Once he organized a dance so his apprentice writers could meet students from the university's art department. The party space was a vast warehouse near the school that was sometimes used as an art gallery. The young painters, in green-and-red-spattered overalls, huddled against one wall of the dance hall, shy as junior high school kids, while Barthelme's protégés crowded into a corner at the other end of the room. Finally, in an attempt to merge these frightened, fragmented groups, Barthelme stepped into the center of the floor, wearing (as usual) a striped cotton shirt, khaki pants, and cowboy boots, and asked a scared young water-colorist to

dance. No matter—the verbal and non-verbal artists never quite relaxed with each other that night, to Barthelme's great disappointment.

The visual arts were so important to him that a number of his stories have as their central subject or underlying concern the process of creative visualization or the study of art history ("The Balloon," "See the Moon?," "Views of My Father Weeping," "The Falling Dog," "Engineer-Private Paul Klee Misplaces an Aircraft Between Milbertshofen and Cambrai, March 1916," "Bishop," "Visitors," and "Tickets," to name just a few). Several still-uncollected stories ("The Dassaud Prize," "The Inauguration," "Natural History," "The Story Thus Far," and "Adventure") are structured around his playful use of clip-art.[4]

On his last reading tour in 1989 he carried typed copies of his stories and excerpts from his final novel *The King* (his last great collage) in a manila folder with a reproduction of one of Jasper Johns' "Target" paintings on the cover.

In this essay I'd like to explore, first, Barthelme's earliest experiences with visual arts and artists—to trace these sources that eventually shaped his work; secondly, his use of painterly techniques in fiction (I'm convinced that language was a plastic medium for him); and finally, his direct remarks about visual artists. Over the years he wrote a handful of introductions to museum catalogs which reveal a great deal about his own working methods and literary aesthetics. His views of painters and sculptors show him to be deeply committed to accuracy as well as innovation in seeing the world. Far from delighting in meaninglessness, he demanded rigorous sight.

II.

In an interview broadcast on the Pacifica Radio Network in 1975 Barthelme said a writer "figures out" what he's doing by selecting fathers. "In the beginning I thought Hemingway was as far as writing could go," he said. "I didn't know anything about Kafka at that point [the early 1940s] and how can you write without at least knowing that Kafka exists? It was simple ignorance. I just didn't know enough. Then, as you read more and more, you get more fathers in your hierarchy. . . . [Finally] after summoning twenty or thirty fathers, perhaps you are born." Barthelme's most immediate progenitors were Kafka, Joyce, and Beckett—bold experimenters with language—but a writer also chooses the historical events which lead to his birth. In the Pacifica interview Barthelme goes on to explain that the development of photography—and later cinema—had a much-documented impact on painting, but that it also had a "less well-known effect on literature."[5] Specifically he's speaking of jump-cuts, lack of transitions, quick pacing: film characteristics that have clearly been absorbed by a number of contemporary writers. But perhaps more pertinent to Barthelme's own aesthetic sense is the historical moment itself—the crisis encountered by painters in the late nineteenth century when the camera usurped their position as documenters of the physical world. From that moment on, painters have been trying to create images that the camera can't duplicate; the move toward abstraction was one alternative, but the difficult search continues. Thanks to Louis Daguerre, they've been presented with a "next to impossible" problem which will forever give purpose to their lives. (Balzac was one of the first writers to realize that the camera could magnify tiny details better than any novelist, thereby stealing some of his thunder.)

The world's first photographs altered visual perceptions in still another way that couldn't be ignored by artists of the day (or later by Barthelme as he informally studied the history of art). His friend and literary colleague Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*: "Photographs . . . are a neat slice of time, not a flow."[6] Pictures of the same event as it unfolds through time can be re-sequenced to present an entirely different view of the event, or to obliterate time—chronology—altogether. This possibility taught (or reminded) a number of artists, both visual and verbal, that narratives didn't have to be beginning-middle-end; they could be spliced, and spliced again—middle-end-beginning? Joyce and Beckett made repeated use of this stop-time, re-editing technique (Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* comes most vividly to mind) which Barthelme later appropriated and refined for his own use. For instance, in "Views of My Father Weeping," we encounter the following description: "My father throws his ball of knitting up in the air. The orange wool hangs there." A verbal snapshot suspended in time, disrupting in its stillness traditional notions of narrative movement in fiction. The description is further complicated by our knowledge that the father is dead—is this image, then, a flashback in the narrator's mind? It's not specified as such. In fact, "Views of My Father Weeping" is a series of verbal stills arranged apparently randomly, and forming, finally, no definitive portrait of the man (the story's last line is "Etc."). Sontag writes, "Photography . . . democratize[s] all experiences by translating them into images." One of collage's central principles is that unrelated objects, when placed side by side, are flattened, each fragment as important or as unimportant as the next. Photographs are also archeological slices wrenched out of life's constant motion; the violence of this wrenching often imbues photos with a curious poignancy.

Barthelme first became aware of such artistic/theoretical principles, and their roots in historical movements, as a student in Maurice Natanson's classes on phenomenology and its social effects at the University of Houston in the mid-1950s, and later as editor of the university's magazine *Forum*. Then in his late twenties and writing fiction that he considered "garbage—ersatz Hemingway," he began reading all the learned journals of the day, looking for writers he wanted to publish in *Forum*. From 1956 to 1960 the magazine, under his guidance, published such notable cultural critics as Hugh Kenner, Peter Yates, John Kenneth Galbraith, Gregory Bateson, and Joseph Lyons. An excerpt of Marshall McLuhan's later-famous *The Medium Is the Message* graced its pages; some of Walker Percy's earliest essays on linguistics appeared there, as did an excerpt of his first novel, *The Moviegoer*; William Gass, Norman Mailer, and Alain Robbe-Grillet were also contributors. As editor (and as son of a Modernist architect and teacher at the university), Barthelme was steeped in many of Western culture's latest academic theories.[7]

In 1961 he became director of Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum, a small institution in desperate need of leadership. Barthelme had no administrative experience at that time but assumed the helm by virtue of his energy and interest in the arts. His main job was to arrange exhibitions, shows, seminars, and lectures. His *Forum* work had familiarized him with several of America's most exciting artists, whom he invited to Houston. John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch, both then working as art critics (Ashbery for the Paris *Herald Tribune* and Koch for Thomas

Hess' magazine *ArtNews*), gave presentations at the museum; Elaine de Kooning taught a short course on painting; Buckminster Fuller lectured on his revolutionary architectural designs; and art critic Harold Rosenberg espoused his views on the "Tradition of the New" in art.

One of the first exhibitions Barthelme organized was "The Ugly Show," displaying plastic American flags, brass knuckles and other "cultural artifacts of ambivalent status"—an idea clearly sparked by Rosenberg's notion of what he would later call the "anxious object," a creative piece which doesn't know if it's a work of art or a pile of junk.[8] Barthelme once said of this period in his life that "listening to Tom [Hess] and Harold [Rosenberg] talk" taught him how to look at art; as a museum director, he said, "I had to study quite a lot very fast . . . to make intelligent or useful shows. Luckily I've always gotten along quite well with painters and sculptors, mostly by virtue of not asking the wrong questions of them."[9]

In the Summer 1961 issue of *Forum* Barthelme published his first art criticism. "The Emerging Figure" it was called, and it traced the return of human figures "in the work of the children of the de Kooning generation." Against the grain of then-fashionable criticism, Barthelme argued that figures were always implicit in Abstract Expressionism (most notably, of course, in de Kooning's "Women" series), and that abstraction does not signal a disengagement with the world—an argument he would later repeat with regard to his fiction. "It is not that we prize difficulty for the sake of difficulty," he wrote in 1961, "only that we hope to know . . . that the [artistic] experience is genuine." Over twenty years later he would echo that sentiment in his essay on the creative process, "Not-Knowing": "Art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult, but because it wishes to be art." He may have had to learn fast as a museum director, but the experience he gained formed a solid theoretical framework that served him throughout his career.[10]

Barthelme made his first appearance in a major national publication a few months after the *Forum* piece. "The Case of the Vanishing Product," a commentary on contemporary advertising, ran in the October 1961 issue of *Harper's*. While figures were re-emerging in abstract painting, products were disappearing in television and magazine ads. "A remarkable number of advertisements give not so much as a clue to what is being advertised," Barthelme writes. Instead, he says, the ads are filled with objects—"keys, clocks, corkscrews, kiosks, balloons, musical instruments, stones" (a verbal collage which must have pleased him) "none of [which] is being offered for sale. Instead they are the means by which we are to conceive of other things which *are* being offered for sale—typically nowhere in sight. The very high level of abstraction in contemporary advertising both confers a new freedom upon designers and increases the possibility of ambiguity in its use." Barthelme then ties his aesthetic ruminations to a scathing social critique: "It is not . . . surprising that, living in a land of plenty within a circle of poverty and near or actual starvation, Americans should be self-conscious about their fabulous consumption, and that advertisers should be cautious in reminding us of it."[11] Abstraction engaged with the world—or, in this case, engaged in shaping a particular picture of the world which favors the advertisers' aims. In every story he wrote Barthelme insisted on the inseparability of aesthetic and ethical concerns, on the marriage of art (even at its most abstract) to concrete experience. In study-

ing visual theories and their practice he had formed a political, as well as an artistic, conscience. Furthermore, his interest in the politics of advertising reveals a certain kinship with artists of the early Futurist Movement, who were intrigued by the verbal and visual collages of ads. Often in the decade preceding the First World War, the Futurists painted their artistic/revolutionary manifestoes on sandwich boards and paraded them through the streets of Europe or Russia; their work decried the depersonalization and boredom engendered by mass advertising. Barthelme was well aware of all branches of Modernist art. "Margins," one of his earliest stories, is both a parody of, and an homage to, the Futurist spirit. It describes a New York street encounter between a white man named Edward and a black man named Carl, who is carrying a brief, "*merde*-y" version of his life's miseries on a sandwich board as a way of begging for money and of making a social statement. Edward responds only superficially to Carl's hardships. He worries most about the appearance of the man's writing—the sloppy penmanship, the width of the sign's margins. Carl's calculated use of French is one of Barthelme's many nods toward the European Modernists, as well as being perhaps a specific reference to Apollinaire's famous anti-Futurist manifesto in which the word "merde" appears prominently at the top. Edward's anxiety over margins recalls the Futurists' conscious use of white space between the letters of words in their printed ads to fracture language and to illustrate the revolutionary new art they were promoting. Of course, on the story's literal level Edward is disturbed by the eloquence of this man from society's edges, whose sign—a politically charged work of art, as Edward readily recognizes—threatens the usual cultural order. The Futurists, marginal figures in the Modernist movement, were similarly disturbing in their day. For them the streets of modern cities were giant painters' canvases where the unexpected was always likely to take shape, especially if they encouraged it.[12]

In 1962 Barthelme stepped into the world's largest living canvas as a direct result of contacts he'd made at Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum. Thomas Hess and Harold Rosenberg convinced him to move to New York City and serve as managing editor of a literary/art journal called *Location*. Only two issues appeared before the magazine went broke, but its few pages were filled with a remarkable diversity of creative and critical work. Robert Rauschenberg, Kenneth Burke, Saul Bellow, Larry Rivers, Kenneth Koch, and John Ashbery were among its contributors. In New York Barthelme found himself living in an immense collage of buildings, noise, and experience—an architectural, technological, and visual wonderland; his friends were poets and painters trying frantically, yet thoughtfully, to respond to startling social changes all around them. Thomas Hess summed up the modern world and its effect on artists' sensibilities: "The Renaissance man saw and visualized . . . *n* things," he wrote. "Today, fed by still, cinema and television cameras, we experience *n* to the 100th power. . . . [Eventually] the *n*s become similar because our brains become numb to their differences. Distinctions weaken." In such an environment, collage—abstraction, flattening of perspective—seemed to many artists a truer portrait of reality than traditional, more delineated forms of representation. Since the modernists had established prior claim to abstraction, and had already exhausted many of its pos-

sibilities, the New York School of artists—and Barthelme—naturally included thick layers of parody and ironic comment in their work.[13]

By the time *Location* folded, Barthelme's first story had appeared in *The New Yorker*—a literary home for the remainder of his life. As his essays in *Forum* and *Harper's* indicate, he could have had a successful career as an art critic; instead he chose to take what he'd learned from the visual arts and apply it to fiction. For the next twenty-six years he would shape a stunning variety of "anxious objects." "Mixing bits of this and that from various areas of life to make something that did not exist before is an oddly hopeful endeavor," he wrote. "Probably I have missed the point of the literature business entirely."[14]

His odd, hopeful endeavors would revolutionize the American short story.

III.

It's one thing to watch what artists are doing with oils, acrylics, and silk-screens; it's quite another to apply their techniques to language. Barthelme was immediately—and persistently—aware of the difficulties. At the University of Houston, he was fond of recounting an exchange that occurred one day in his class. A student writer had named one of his characters Rubella because she had red hair. Barthelme objected to the name; rubella is a disease, he said. Yes, the student replied, but the word is so beautiful. "And he's right," Barthelme said. "If it didn't mean 'measles' we might look at it with a kindlier eye."[15]

Since words have precise referents, pure abstraction is next to impossible to achieve in writing.

But pure abstraction wasn't necessarily what Barthelme was after in his work. Ever mindful of the reader ("I write for people who are extremely intelligent and physically attractive," he used to say), he took great pains to be needfully—rather than needlessly—obscure. More than anything else he envied the physicality of painting. He coveted the painter's ability to present, immediately and directly, an *object* to the viewer. Even "extremely intelligent" readers usually look past the swirls, lines, and bumps of letters on a page (as if printed words were transparent) in their rush to ascertain a sentence's meaning. Barthelme insisted, along the lines of Husserl's phenomenology, that "meaning" sometimes resides in mere presence, in objecthood; a sentence can be an *itself* rather than a concept-container. In a story entitled "Sentence," a six-and-a-half page word-object, he writes that the sentence is a "structure to be treasured for its weakness, as opposed to the strength of stones[.]" And in a 1983 interview with Larry McCaffery he said, "I look for a particular kind of sentence, perhaps more awkward than beautiful. . . . I'd rather have a wreck than a ship that sails. Things attach themselves [like barnacles] to wrecks. . . . [A]fter a while you've got a situation with possibilities." He added that writing is a "process of accretion" in which clumsiness can be useful, the way metallic rust can highlight sculptural texture. If blackening a page with words isn't quite the same as spreading brushstrokes or Baby Ruth wrappers on a canvas, if vowels and consonants and morphemes don't exactly add up to a mixed media presentation, the blank page can nevertheless be seen as a physical space, a field of play. "Flannery O'Connor . . . says, very sourly . . . that she doesn't like anything that looks funny on the page," Barthelme told McCaffery. "I know what she's talking about, but on the other hand, I'm intrigued by things that look funny

on the page."[16] He always claimed that he could very cheerfully have been a typographer.

His clip-art stories, many of them fashioned after Max Ernst collages, and his stories with graphics ("Brain Damage," "At the Tolstoy Museum," "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace," among others) are his most obvious attempts to physicalize and play with page-space. Other stories include typographical designs. The narrator of "This Newspaper Here" says that newspapers are "thing[s] of great formal beauty. Sometimes on dull days the compositors play which makes paragraphs like
(!) "

* *

In "The Indian Uprising," a character arranges a verbal collage first horizontally, "*pewter, snake, tea, Fad #6 sherry, serviette, fenestration, crown, blue*," then vertically:

> pewter
> snake
> tea
> Fad #6 sherry
> serviette
> fenestration
> crown
> blue

Perhaps Barthelme's funniest-looking pages can be found in his first novel, *Snow White*; some of them resemble, as much as it's linguistically possible to do so, pointillist canvases. Barthelme spaces words like paint-dabs, disrupting context and linear meaning, forcing the reader to consider (with his eye, if not with his mind) the swirls, lines, and bumps of individual words and phrases:

> Firmness   mirror   custody of the blow
> scale   model   I concede that it is to
> a degree   instruments. . . .

Barthelme knew, however, that typographical tricks were easy; his sense of language as a plastic medium extended far beyond a flair for simply arranging visual patterns. He had an extraordinary feel for the textures of sounds—the brutality of hard, plosive *b*s and *k*s; the sigh of a soft *c* or *s*. He could hear a typed line the way a painter could feel a streak of red. Moreover, he understood that by literalizing a cliché—"'sense' is not to be obtained by reading between the lines (for there is nothing there, in those white spaces)"—or by contemporizing a fairy tale (his sexually active Snow White shares a home with seven sexually active little men) or by punning ("You're supposed to be curing a ham." "The ham died."), he could jolt language out of its familiar contexts and jar readers out of their habitual ways of perceiving the world. He was always drawing readers' eyes back to the surfaces of his texts the way certain Abstract Expressionist painters emphasized color or line or texture or paint itself over the buried representational figures on

their canvases.[17]

(The debate between Clement Greenburg and Harold Rosenberg and their followers over pure abstraction versus "kitsch"—i.e., abstraction with figurative elements—is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is worth noting that Barthelme allied himself with a group of critics—Rosenberg, Thomas Hess, William Seitz—whom many art historians now consider the avant-garde of Abstract Expressionism's champions. Reference to the real world was, from Greenberg's point of view, "literary," and therefore something to be expunged from "pure" painting. Barthelme's early essay "The Emerging Figure" challenged this assumption, and placed him squarely in Rosenberg's camp. For Rosenberg, "pure" painting, devoid of social implications, was arid and inhuman. He preferred messier, less rigidly defined works of art. In any case my purpose here is not to engage in art historical or critical debates, but to examine Barthelme's use of these critical ideas. Despite his strong links with Rosenberg's views, he would, like any writer, snitch a concept from here, a notion from there, in order to make his fictions. "Abstraction" and "expressionism" were broad categories for him.)[18]

Often in his stories he failed to provide any context at all. The dialogues in *Great Days* (1979) consist of unanchored voices floating out of nowhere, speaking sometimes in non sequiturs:

> —Featherings of ease and bliss.
> —I was preparing myself. Getting ready for the great day.
> —Icy day with salt on all the sidewalks.
> —Sketching attitudes and forming pretty speeches.
> —Pitching pennies at a line scraped in the dust.
> —Doing and redoing my lustrous abundant hair.
> —Man down. Center and One Eight.[19]

These dialogues have often been compared with certain set-pieces in Beckett's plays,[20] but a comparison can also be made with Willem de Kooning's "Women" paintings, in which there is just an intimation of a figure nearly lost beneath the texture of the brushstrokes. In "Great Days" and in his other dialogue stories Barthelme gives us the barest whisper of characters under a busy surface of words. (To a purist's eye, familiar with de Kooning's early paintings, it's the abstraction and not the figure that's nearly lost in the "Women" series, but this distinction wouldn't have overly concerned Barthelme. The surface itself, and the attempt to find a verbal equivalent of it, mattered most.)

De Kooning once said that a painting is never finished, it's abandoned. Similarly, Barthelme never "finished" his stories. He frequently revised his pieces between magazine and book publication. A glance at one such story further illuminates his sense of language as a physical medium. "The Falling Dog" first appeared in *The New Yorker* on August 3, 1968, and later in his collection *City Life* in 1970. The story concerns a sculptor "in that unhappiest of states, between images." In the past he has done a series of Yawning Men, but that image, he feels, is "played out." One day, as he's walking down a New York street, a dog falls on him from an upper window. The sculptor's mind is flooded with Falling Dog imagery; he grabs the pooch and heads toward his studio, thinking of various ways

to *do* the Falling Dog.

Here we've left the realm of Abstract Expressionism altogether: the "Yawning Men" recall Francis Bacon's "Screaming Popes," but more specifically Barthelme had in mind Ernest Trova's "Falling Men" sculptures—statues of faceless males adorned with found objects (oxygen tanks, shower nozzles, stainless-steel tubes, ski cables) which, in 1968, could be seen all over Manhattan (the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, the Guggenheim). Barthelme was moved by Trova's work—the figures' status as goods in a world of goods, the tragic loss of their humanity—but felt the "Falling Man" image couldn't nourish Trova as an artist much longer.[21]

The original version of "The Falling Dogs" begins, utterly without context, with a series of contemplations:

> gay dogs falling
> sense in which you would say of a thing
> it's a dog, as you would say, it's a lemon
> rain of dogs like rain of frogs
> or shower of objects dropped to confuse enemy radar

The narrator then sets the scene for us: "Well, it was a standoff. I was on the concrete. He [the dog] was standing there." This is followed by another fragmented series of contemplations, this time of various media (plexiglass, aluminum, antihairy materials). Finally we learn what has happened: "Yes, a dog jumped on me out of a high window."

The *City Life* revision begins with the explanation ("a dog jumped on me") followed by the "gay dogs falling" list. Next Barthelme establishes the "standoff" between sculptor and dog, then he inserts the "plexiglass, aluminum" list into the story.

The revision provides an immediate context for the reader but loses, perhaps, the dramatic impact of the earlier beginning. In any case the fragmented lists keep the reader off balance even in the later version, so Barthelme's changes don't particularly make the story any easier to enter. Furthermore, if clarification was his goal, the simplest solution would have been to add a few extra lines of exposition. Instead Barthelme has rearranged blocks of words, pinned his paragraphs together differently, not in aid of logic or linearity, but to give the story a brand new shape. It's as if the paragraphs were squares of sculptural metal (or plexiglass or antihairy materials) which Barthelme kept re-welding and re-contemplating in terms of space or depth or perspective until he was satisfied with the form he'd hammered out.

(Often to his students he likened the revision process to house-remodeling: drawing up new architectural plans, knocking out a wall or two, adding a veranda—pen, pencil, chisel, and saw, he seemed to suggest, are the necessary tools.)

At the end of "The Falling Dog," Barthelme's sculptor wonders what his new image might mean, but decides to worry about that later.[22] The immediate thing is to fashion the image itself, to find, by trial and error, the most interesting surface texture. As in all his stories *about* art, Barthelme emphasizes that an artist begins not in some rarefied theoretical realm, but in the world itself (conscious-

ness has to be conscious *of* something, Husserl says). The sculptor smuggles the world into his studio in the form of the dog. "The world enters [our] work as it enters our ordinary lives," Barthelme insisted, "not as world-view or system but in sharp particularity: a tax notice . . . a snowball. . . . " [23]

He'd glimpsed this truth in his many firsthand experiences with visual artists. Once while preparing an issue of *Location*, Barthelme visited Robert Rauschenberg's studio to interview him and take some photographs. At the time Rauschenberg was working on a series of deeply gray silk-screen pieces. Barthelme noted that the studio windows were the same tonality as the artist's pictures. On another occasion Barthelme visited Willem de Kooning in his East Hampton studio and noticed that the rushing green world outside de Kooning's place resembled, in color and tone, the painter's recent work. "Precisely how de Kooning manages to distill nature into art is a mystery, but the explosive relation is there, I've seen it," he said. "Art . . . could not turn its back on the world even if it wished to. . . . Once when I was in Elaine de Kooning's studio on Broadway, at a time when the metal sculptor Herbert Ferber occupied the studio immediately above, there came through the floor a most horrible crashing and banging. 'What in the world is that?' I asked, and Elaine said, 'Oh, that's Herbert thinking.'" [24]

If the world is always present in the work, the work also enters and wrestles with the world. In *The Dead Father*, written in mid-career, Barthelme describes nearly all life-experiences in terms of visual art. The world is a "composition," sometimes aesthetically pleasing, sometimes not. People are lines and colors. The character Thomas, responding to his father's charge that he doesn't see the "larger picture," says, "I do understand the frame." Language, painting, and sexuality are inextricably mixed in Thomas' relationship with a woman named Julie. With lipstick he paints an unspecified word on her "white, interestingly folded stomach," then steps back to admire her (and his work). "The pink of you against the green of the fields," he says. "Several of my favorite colors." [25]

IV.

"'The looking at a woman sometimes makes for lust,' says Thomas Aquinas, in one of the great understatements of the 13th century," Barthelme writes in a catalog for the Cordier-Ekstrom Gallery. "Women now demand a presuppositionless regard . . . [but] the disembawdiment of the eye will not be easily achieved." Nevertheless, as subjects for art, women *can* become free, Barthelme continues, because art refuses to explain beauty or sexuality by itself. Art's task is not to answer questions or solve problems, but to enrich and complicate the mysteries of life (including sexual politics). Whatever—or whomever—art embraces, it surrounds with a "blessed silence." [26]

On the other hand, Barthelme agreed wholeheartedly with Picasso's statement that "art is never chaste." Eroticism trembles in every brushstroke, chiseled stone, or written sentence, positing a "divine thirst" in viewers and readers. In a catalog for a retrospective show by artist Jim Love held in 1980 at the Institute for the Arts at Rice University in Houston, Barthelme praises Picasso (Love's "point of departure"), not only for his sexual unrestraint but for his humor. In Eden there weren't any jokes, Barthelme says—there was nothing to laugh at in the Garden, and no need to laugh. Humor blooms in imperfect soil; it is, in Gregory Bateson's

formulation, the "great alternative to psychosis," necessary only in a fallen world. "Thus," says Barthelme, "the Twentieth Century staggers toward its close in a blizzard of one-liners."[27]

Picasso's anarchic spirit served as a model for Barthelme. In the Love catalog he savors Picasso's "jokes and meta-jokes" as well as art's transformational power—that is, its ability to absorb objects (and pain) from the world and create something new. The art historian Patricia Leighten says by using "real-world" materials such as newsprint in canvases otherwise devoid of real-world content, Picasso married both chaos and order, tragedy and lightheartedness. She adds that his early Anarchist Symbolism, like the Futurists' work, was an attempt to foment world "revolution." In his 1981 conversation with Jo Brans, Barthelme echoed in humbler terms Picasso's serious mischievousness: "Going too far" in both art and life, he said, "is something I'm in favor of." His ironic understatement is characteristic of anyone who'd witnessed, as Barthelme had, the limits and failures of Modernism's missionary zeal.[28]

Jim Love's work consists largely of sculptures formed from found objects: birds, bears, trees, elephants, dogs made of steel, cloth, sand, nails, hammer heads, spades. "An urban archaeologist," Barthelme calls him, making discoveries "in the detritus of an industrial society"—or, like a photographer, snatching moments out of life's steady flow. One thinks of Barthelme's own list of urban dreck in "The Indian Uprising": "[w]indow dummies, silk, thoughtfully planned job descriptions . . . wine in demijohns . . . two ashtrays, ceramic, one dark brown and one dark brown with an orange blur at the lip; a tin frying pan . . . a hollow-core door in birch veneer on black wrought-iron legs . . . corkscrews and can openers. . . . " The narrator, overwhelmed by all the *stuff* in his environment (and in magazines and television ads—this list recalls the list of objects Barthelme cited in "The Vanishing Product"), falls into a drunken despair. "I decided I knew nothing," he says, parroting Eliot's *The Waste Land.*

Of Love's rescued and transformed trash Barthelme says, "The prior history of these [discarded pieces] blesses them with a special poignancy; their previous existence endures in the life of the new object"—the way connotations cling to a word or phrase even when it's wrenched out of context. Picture language as a city, words as scattered objects in alleyways and dim parking lots, and Barthelme as a linguistic archaeologist picking through these much-handled, worn-by-use fragments ("The citizen is now trained to see life as a cliche," said Frank Lloyd Wright), then welding them together to form a new object—a fresh sentence or paragraph utterly surprising and delightful, yet tinged with wistful associations from the words' prior usage.

In 1987 Barthelme collaborated with Jim Love on a mixed media project entitled "The Rook's Progress" for a show held at the Glassell School of Art in Houston. Barthelme had proposed the show—a series of collaborations between visual artists and writers—and co-curated the exhibition with Janet Landay of the Glassell School. He personally matched a number of local artists and writers, based on "temperament and intuition," and asked them to contribute to the show. To give the event a historical perspective, the curators displayed illustrated books

by Juan Gris with Pierre Reverdy, Joan Miro with Andre Breton, Max Ernst with Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, Jasper Johns with Samuel Beckett, along with a special edition of John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* illustrated by Richard Avedon, Elaine de Kooning, Willem de Kooning, Jim Dine, Jane Freilicher, Alex Katz, R. B. Kitaj, and Larry Rivers.

"The Rook's Progress" is a 42 x 78 x $7\frac{1}{2}$-foot collage fashioned of steel, wood, canvas and magnesium. A flat, wilted chess rook, caged behind bars, leans toward a female torso made of steel (as if it were armor) to the left of the collage's center; a string of wire and double-headed nails suggesting a barbed-wire fence separates the torso, on the right, from a rumpled man's shirt with a hole in the heart. The right sleeve reaches toward the woman's body but is blocked by the wire. Above and below this sleeve, words are etched into brightly reflective rectangular panels. The top panel reads:

> Everything reflects well on our city
> Our audiences are amazingly perceptive
> The string section has a broken heart
> We cheer it because it is outstanding
> Gulls smash into the great glass windows
> I have never been more optimistic, more sanguine.

The bottom panel is more somber:

> She is riding naked on the catafalque
> We'll to the woods no more my darling
> I am boned, crack-skinned, malapropos
> A chorus of dromedaries humming triumphantly
> Revolves the stage machinery
> Away from me, away from me.

Like the best of Barthelme's fiction, "The Rook's Progress" is both playful and melancholy: the giddiness of the words near the top (and their apparent unrelatedness to the figures around them); the elegiac tone of the bottom words; the visual pun of the word "reflect" shining from a smooth, reflective surface, and the verbal pun of the "rook" in the title, implying "fool" as well as chess piece; the reference to Hogarth's "The Rake's Progress" (1734) which Hogarth conceived as a novel-in-paintings; the sad, impossible reach of the empty shirt. The viewer's eye is most immediately drawn to the startlingly vivid yet heavily shielded female figure. Art is never chaste, but this torso is not to be trifled with. The rook's resemblance to a softening penis is unmistakable, and the flattened, damaged shirt, like wrinkled skin, lies forever unrequited—a balloon popped on the wire or on the sharp, virile curves of the womanly form. The shirt's shape recalls Matisse's "Icarus" from his famous "Jazz" series of paper cut-outs—the right arm straining to grasp what's always out of reach, the void in the heart. Away from me, away from me. . . .

Completed just two years before Barthelme's death, "The Rook's Progress" fully marries his visual and verbal skills.

On his final reading tour, Barthelme was asked by a young writing student, "What's kept you working so steadily for so many years?" Barthelme stroked his beard and tapped a booted foot. "All my life I've been interested in intoxication, in dazzling the mind," he replied. "Your mind is constantly capable of surprising you if you work it hard enough."

Referring to Robert Rauschenberg (and echoing again Picasso's anarchism), he wrote, "To sustain a high level of misbehavior over a third of a century is not the easiest of tasks." [29] Even now in our post-postmodernist culture, when we think we've seen everything art and life have to offer and nothing is unacceptable, Barthelme's fictions refuse to behave, to sit still, to be pinned to the specimen board. Odd, unshapely yet graceful, cognizant of ground seized (and lost) in all the arts, his stories are among the premier achievements of late twentieth-century American literature.

In closing, if I may be permitted to go "too far" and end a formal essay on a personal note. . . .

One night I dreamed I was speaking to Don. "I'm having a hell of a time accepting the fact that you're gone," I told him.

He looked at me quizzically through his wire-rimmed glasses. "Suffer," he muttered—which is precisely what he *would've* said had the situation been real. *There's nothing so beautiful as having a very difficult problem.* The problem is, Donald Barthelme can't be replaced. Born of many fathers (painters, poets, sculptors, and writers), he was an only child. And the very best of his generation.

NOTES

1. Jerome Klinkowitz, "Donald Barthelme," *The New Fiction,* edited by Joe David Bellamy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974) 45-54. See also J. D. O'Hara, "Donald Barthelme: The Art of Fiction LXVI," *Paris Review* 80 (1981) 190.

2. Donald Barthelme, "See the Moon?", *Sixty Stories* (New York: Putnam, 1981) 98.

3. Jo Brans, "Donald Barthelme: Embracing the World," *Listen to the Voices* (Dallas: SMU Press, 1988) 88.

4. "The Dassaud Prize" appeared in *The New Yorker* on January 12, 1976; "The Inauguration" appeared in *Harper's,* January 1973; "Natural History" appeared in *Harper's,* August 1971; "The Story Thus Far" appeared in *The New Yorker* on May 1, 1971; and "Adventure" appeared in *Harper's Bazaar,* December 1970.

5. Pacifica Tape Library, Los Angeles; Judith Sherman and Charles Ruas, interviewers.

6. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Delta Books, 1977) 7, 17.

In a catalog introduction for painter Robert Morris (New York: Washburn Gallery, 1976) Barthelme calls photographs "reliable, straightforward untruths."

7. Maurice Natanson has published extensively on contemporary philosophy (including several articles in *Forum*) and won a National Book Award in 1974 for his book *Husserl: Philosopher of Infinite Tasks* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

Barthelme made the "ersatz Hemingway" remark in an interview with George Plimpton broadcast in 1984 by KUHT-TV (PBS), Houston.

8. For a discussion of Rosenberg's influence on Barthelme, see Wayne Stengel, *The Shape of Art in the Short Stories of Donald Barthelme* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1985) 35.

Barthelme's father was a modernist architect deeply influenced by such figures as Frank Lloyd Wright and Alvar Aalto, and must have shaped his son's early thinking about the visual arts.

9. Larry McCaffery, "An Interview With Donald Barthelme," *Anything Can Happen,* edited by Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffery (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983) 35.

10. Donald Barthelme, "The Emerging Figure," *Forum* 3, Number 7 (Summer 1961).

11. Donald Barthelme, "The Case of the Vanishing Product," *Harper's* (October 1961): 30, 32.

12. Donald Barthelme, "Margins," *Sixty Stories,* 10.

For a discussion of the Futurists' use of advertising, and Apollinaire's *L'Antitradition Futurists* see Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

13. William C. Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983) 85.

In an essay on Jane Freilicher in his book *Reported Sightings* (New York: Knopf, 1989, p. 240) John Ashbery says so many poets and writers in the 50s and 60s gravitated toward New York painters because the painters were "more fun" than the poets. See also Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979).

14. Donald Barthelme, introduction to "Paraguay," *Writer's Choice,* edited by Rust Hills (New York: David McKay Co.: 1974) 15-16.

15. Remarks from the Plimpton interview, KUHT-TV, 1984.

16. McCaffery, 39; Klinkowitz, 48.

17. Donald Barthelme, "This Newspaper Here," *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1968) 28; *Sixty Stories,* 112; *Snow White* (New York: Atheneum, 1967) 106; "The Piano Player," *Come Back Dr. Caligari* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964) 19.

18. For a discussion of Greenburg versus Rosenberg see Stephen C. Foster, *The Critics of Abstract Expressionism* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980).

19. Donald Barthelme, "Great Days," *Forty Stories* (New York: Putnam, 1987) 232.

20. O'Hara, 197.

21. Interview, Tapes for Readers, Washington, D.C., 1978; Stephen Vanker, interviewer.

22. Significantly, the sculptor's search for meaning consists of linguistic, as well as sculptural, play ("doggerel, dogmatic, dog-ear, to the dogs," etc.).

23. Donald Barthelme, "Not-Knowing," *The Georgia Review* (Fall 1985) 519.

24. "Now Knowing," 521-522; McCaffery, 36.

25. Donald Barthelme, *The Dead Father* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1975) 81, 32, 19, 31.

26. Donald Barthelme, catalog introduction for the Cordier-Ekstrom Gallery, *Here in the Village* (Northridge: Lord John Press, 1978) 42.

27. Donald Barthelme, introduction to *Jim Love Up to Now* (Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1980) 8-13.

28. Patricia Leighten, *Re-Ordering the Universe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) 4-5.

29. Donald Barthelme, "Being Bad," *Rauschenberg: Work From Four Series* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1985) 8.

TERRELL DIXON

Another Side Of Donald

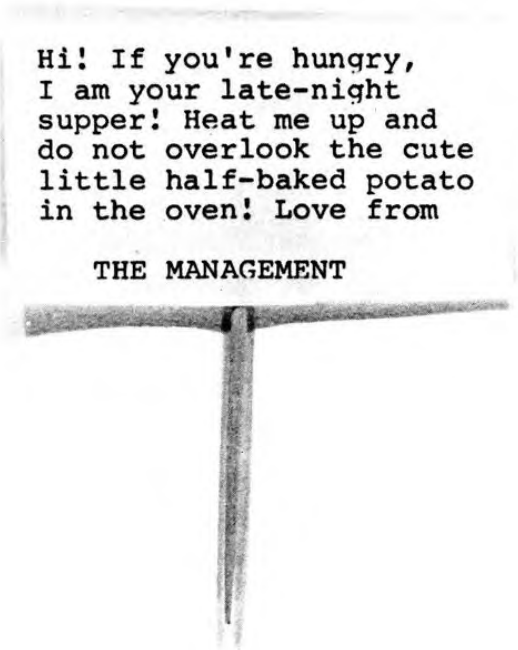
THE LITERARY WORLD AT LARGE WILL HONOR Donald Barthelme's wonderful fiction, those short stories and novels that so joyously subverted and enlarged the former, formal boundaries of the genre, and his students, both in their own writing and in their own teaching, will honor his ability to inspire and support other writers. I want to offer just a few words to acknowledge a part of Donald that was also remarkable and yet, perhaps, less visible in the larger world: his—what I will for lack of a better word call—colleagueship. Many of us who teach in the academy subscribe to an ideal of collegiality: the creation of an atmosphere marked by a spirit of intellectual exchange mixed with mutual caring and support. Donald Barthelme actually lived this ideal. I hope that a few examples will help illustrate his generosity of spirit and his contributions to the University of Houston.

Donald's magnanimity was perhaps most evident in how he handled that most scarce of academic commodities: money. As a Cullen Professor, he was entitled to a rather sizable addition to his salary. This money was designated to be used for his professional travel, book purchases, manuscript preparation, etc. For Donald Barthelme, however, much of that money went to fund important, but underfunded, aspects of our program. That he did this at all may be a first, but that he did it so naturally, without fanfare, bitterness, or self-praise illustrates just how unselfish he was. Another example happened a few years ago after a departmental committee meeting. The committee met to nominate colleagues whose work had been especially distinguished for a special salary increment. Donald was one of two selected. Afterwards, however, he quietly but very firmly insisted that I not send his name forward: he wanted his nomination withdrawn to insure that our other candidate, a younger and less well-paid colleague, would stand a better chance for the award. The strategy worked and Donald was delighted.

We at the university also saw Donald's generosity in his many gifts of time. His stature as a world-renowned writer could easily have excused him from extensive interaction with his fellow department members and won him immunity from time-consuming committee assignments. Instead, he actively sought ways to help his colleagues. He worked with one on a book about Africa, with another trying her hand as a novelist, and with yet another on plans to start a literary review. He also brought his formidable intelligence and wit to bear on important departmental committee duties. Together, for example, we wrote a long promotion review report for a colleague. Donald read all of the voluminous promotion materials, then carefully wrote part of the report and skillfully edited the rest. Our dean,

accustomed to less distinguished prose in such documents, called to report that the promotion had been awarded and then could not help asking me who had written that wonderful report.

Donald Barthelme was an extraordinary man, not only in his literary accomplishments, but also in his constant, conscientious, and gracious gifts to those of us who were fortunate to be his colleagues.



LUTZ ENGELKE

Barthelme, Berlin—
No Author, No Text, No Wall

I was walking home from the theatre with Goethe this evening when we saw a small boy in a plum-colored waistcoat. Youth, Goethe said, is the silky apple butter on the good brown bread of possibility.

—D.B., "Conversations with Goethe"

IN NOVEMBER OF 1987, THE "AMERICAN CHAPTER" was announced all over West Berlin. It was cold and grim in the city, typical of lost November days, in a time when one still heard strange echoes from behind the Wall. Coincidentally, the dates—the 6th to the 13th—were the same as those two years later, when events in East Germany led to the downfall of that concrete ideological border. Donald Barthelme didn't come alone. With him were various other American authors, like Grace Paley, William Gaddis, Robert Coover, Lisa Alther, Rita Dove, Marilyn French, and Walter Abish. A mixed group of specialized mumblers. They all arrived against the echo of their own writings. Barthelme's echo was already fragmented. It appeared as a well-designed noise of text-kaleidoscopes, waves of impossible dialogue; his echo was filled with endless spirals of self-infected text splinters, which served to make the author a foreigner, an unwanted object to his texts, a something only good for dispensing ink onto paper. Through his texts, Barthelme had announced himself as the incarnation of the disseminated author. This "new music" in literature, as Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. once phrased it, arrived with a contradictive rhythmn. His flight from Houston to Frankfurt to Berlin took nearly sixteen hours—he was tired when he arrived an hour late at the reception hosted by the American consulate in West Berlin. He came with his wife, Marion Knox, a former *New York Times* journalist. Later she told the story of how they met when she interviewed him for the *Sunday Times Magazine*. M.K. seemed to be his social bridge to the world. Her smile was open, it was easy to start a conversation with her. D.B. appeared with a distinguished distance between the near public and himself. His white beard, his considered and careful movements, his inward expression and his astute perception gave him the quality of a submerged island—a startling silent presence:

> What is wrong with me? Why am I not a more natural person, like my wife wants me to be? I sit up, in the early morning, at my desk on the second floor of our house. The desk faces the street. At five-

> thirty in the morning, the runners are already out, individually or in pairs, running towards rude red health. I'm sipping a glass of Gallo Chablis with an ice cube in it, smoking, worrying. I worry that the baby may jam a kitchen knife into an electrical outlet while she's wet."
>
> ("Chablis")

Our first meeting was short. Just after lunch D.B. went off to have a nap. We made plans to meet the next day to have a look at Berlin, to jump back and forth over the Wall and to crawl through some museums. We took a car and drove through various parts of the city. We peeked into the Pergamon Museum, the National Gallery, where he mentioned that his father had known Mies van de Rohe; we glanced at the Bauhaus Museum, walked around the Reichstag, where we talked for the first time about Germany and the Nazis, drove to Wannsee and went to the "spy bridge" close to Schloss Glienecke in the very south of Berlin and finally landed in the expansive "Berlin, Berlin" exhibition in the Martin Gropius Bau Museum directly at the Wall, close to the Potsdamerplatz. The exhibition showed the city's development from the 12th century to the present. A flight simulator with which one could "fly" over war-destroyed Berlin was fascinating to D.B. He kept looking into those city scars as if he needed to find an explanation for it.

> Q: Do you believe that this machine could be helpful in changing the government?
> A: Changing the government . . .
> Q: Making it more responsive to the needs of the people?
> A: I don't know what it is. What does it do?
> Q: Well, look at it.
> A: It offers no clues.
> Q: It has a certain . . . reticence.
> A: I don't know what it does.
> Q: A lack of confidence in the machine?
>
> ("The Explanation")

The next few days were filled with readings by different authors of the group, dinners and tours through the divided city. During dinners, old friendships between D.B., Grace Paley, and Marianne Frisch were obvious. Grace Paley was the great entertainer at these events. Her captivating stories made everybody oblivious to how many times the glasses had been filled with wine. Quite the opposite of Grace Paley was her majesty—the "female woman" herself, the feminist narcissist—Marilyn French, whose intellectual inflexibility found the object of its desire, and so appeared as a long repetitive quotation of herself. In another corner, Coover, Gaddis, and Barthelme. They giggled as if the prom were to be held next week. Lisa Alther was impressively without edges—always nice, without any affectations, a very attentive conversation partner. Rita Dove, who had just won the Pulitzer Prize, was a great ambassador for American literature at that time. She appeared on a talk show and kicked away three German clichés in one go by

showing that Americans can write poems, that beautiful Black American female poets can write poems, and to top it off, that they can speak German.

A meeting was planned during the "Chapter" with a certain literary scene in East Berlin. Someone managed to arrange a meeting place which was small enough to avoid notice but big enough for all the interested people to gather. 1987 was already the time of Gorbatschov in East Germany, and although it was clear that the STASI had somehow heard about the meeting, the level of fear was low enough so that it could take place. All the same, it took place under circumstances of conspiracy. It was organized by a friend of mine, who—history rewrites itself—became the Senator of the Interior in East Berlin after the peaceful revolution in East Germany. The group met in an old pottery workshop and because it was unofficial—that is, not reported—we had to use all sorts of little tricks to come together. For instance, everybody from the West had to memorize the address, so that no one's name would be found written on a piece of paper, and we had to arrive at intervals. Because of this, Robert Coover didn't get the message right and got there too late! The press had not been informed, although the meeting was of political and cultural significance. For the Westerners, a certain romantic flavor was evident. It was a little bit like planning, playing and editing your own black-and-white movie. William Gaddis, Grace Paley, Robert Coover, and Donald Barthelme came and read some short pieces. They were surrounded by young writers from the East like Papenfuß-Gorek, Jan Faktor, Schedlinsky, Kolbe, Christoph Tannert, Stefan Döring, Eberhard Hefner, Helga Könisgdorf, Edmond Hesse and others. Volker Braun, we found out later, came half an hour too late. The American crew had already left.

Grace Paley and D.B. read from their texts. Translations had been done the night before so everybody was able to understand. After that some poetry and short stories were read by "the other side." Then the discussion started, and the two worlds collided: different states of consciousness revealed each other's perception structures: the West became more precisely defined by the East and vice versa. On one side was D.B., whose literature represents post-modern blitzes, whose writing integrates the surface and self-references of an aesthetic into its form, which can be read as an effect of the Americanized western world, whose stories seem to consider the consideration, seem to catch every culture flash, are quick as light and seem to know that everything becomes old in the second it is being said. In his book "Come Back, Dr. Caligari," for instance, he describes a quiz in which the candidate already knows all critical forms of the critic, in which knowledge degenerates into something which is only good for a new quality of self-representation, rather than for any form of recognition. But if one listened carefully to what Barthelme said and wrote, it seemed that sometimes a romantic whisper of the 19th century could be heard through the lines, as if embedded in all those wild cybernetic word puzzles was a strange desire for stability that was the unspoken motive for his writing—the desire for a time when the literary positions weren't still arbitrarily exchangeable.

As Barthelme tried to explain in a conversation with the East Germans, "words in the West are often forgotten in white and empty rooms—museum-like. . . . My

texts describe aesthetic possibilities in an environment of impossible possibilities." D.B. defended his texts from charges of political importance, insisting that literature spoke a different text than politics and that it could enlarge the room beyond politics. Asked about the commitment of his own writing, D.B. answered that he believed in the long-term value of literature, although his writing sometimes made the reverse impression. "Politics," he declared, in his calm and considered manner, "is something of which literature has to have a disappointed position." This made many of the young East German writers uncomfortable. On the other side were a group of thirty young writers who had never been to the States, or Paris, London, Rome—or even to West Berlin—who had major difficulty in getting the books they wanted, for whom Barthelme's aesthetic games were the "new music" they had previously heard only from a distance. And those games—which produced in the West an unstable meaning (could mean everything, therefore often nothing)—produced in the East a different echo. The cultural and political room of East Berlin had different furniture. After all, at this time and place—not even two and a half years ago, no further than thirty minutes from the Brandenburg Gate by foot or fifteen minutes if one took the Berlin S-Bahn from Bahnhof Zoo to Friedrichstraße-Station—politics still profoundly influenced—often crushed—literature. It is not so strange that these writers assumed the reverse to be true. D.B. would have none of this and refused to allow his writing to be trapped in political messages. But the discussion made clear how much the location of a literature—where it is read as well as where it is written—generates meaning. The texts spoken by Barthelme in that brownish, dark, East Berlin atmosphere were all of a sudden more than merely Postmodern. The absurdity of his arbitrariness appeared, as if in a flash, as a Molotov cocktail for a system which looked at every detail for sense and meaning, although the official metaphors for sense had been reduced to stupid rituals of repetition. A lot of questions remained after the too-short discussion, but the most controversial was: what effect has literature in a country where you can say everything but nobody listens anymore because too much is said at the same time, where the inflation of words have suffocated the meaning? And on the other side, what does literature do in a country where everybody listens for the few words which slip through the net of self as well as state censorship? Asked about Houston, D.B. said, "If you compare Houston with East Berlin, I think it's like two poles of the same world."

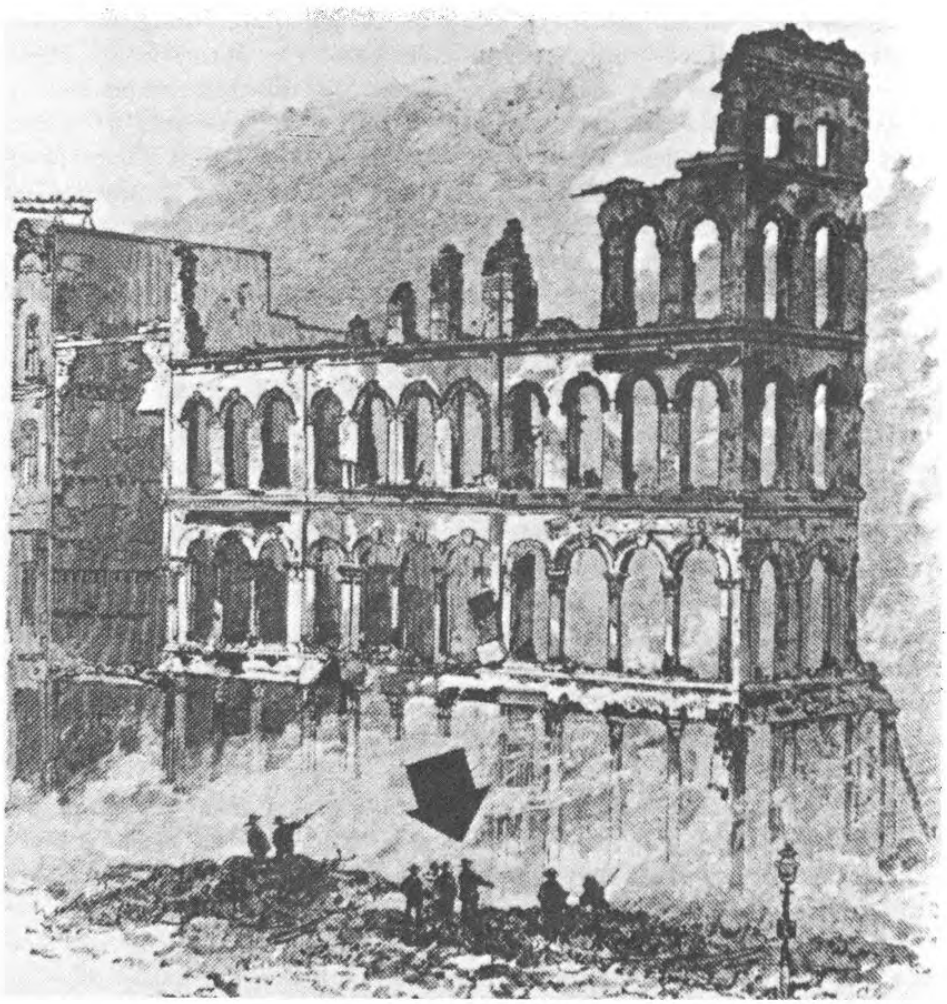
I didn't know D.B. when he arrived and the time was too short to get to know him, but I cannot get that submerged island that I glimpsed for a startling, overwhelming few seconds out of my mind. His calm voice sometimes tells a story in the middle of Berlin, in the middle of nothing, in the middle of words, in the middle of a subway station. While writing this essay I flipped through a book he had given me as a thank-you present for his Berlin days. I found some pieces of paper which he had stuck into the book in order to mark the pages he wanted to read. In the middle of the book on a bigger piece of paper, he had listed the titles: "Chablis," "Opening," "Terminus," "Goethe," "Overnight," or "Visitors"—the title "Baby" was torn in half. Traces by accident. I don't know where he is right now, maybe he has only gone overnight to many distant cities, to tell some glimpses of what he has seen, calm but breathless inside.

Asked her opinion of Versailles, my daughter said she thought it was overdecorated.

Well. Yes.

Again in Paris, years earlier, without Anna, we had a hotel room opening on a courtyard and late at night through an open window heard a woman expressing intense and rising pleasure. We blushed and fell upon each other.

("Overnight to Many Distant Cities")



At the disaster (arrow indicates Tolstoy)

LESLIE FIEDLER

Momotaro, Or The Peachboy: A Japanese Fairy Tale

I

THE FINDING OF THE PEACH

An old wood chopper
And his old, old wife
Lived in the forest
For all of their life.

And the name of the chopper
Was Chopper;
And the name of his wife
Was Wife;
And the name of the days
They lived was Day;
And the name of the nights
Was Night;
But the name of the sum
Of them all was Pain,
For they had borne no child
To bear their name.

Till crouched one day
By the bank of a stream,
Washing her wash
And dreaming her dream,
The old woman saw
A giant peach,
Afloat on the water
Just out of her reach.

Over and over,
It turned in the Sun

Singing a song
Or humming a hum:
"Domburi, Domburi
Reach out your hand;
What is born in the Water
May live on the Land!
What begins as a Peach
May end as a Man.
So wet your feet
And catch, if you can."

Like a Child,
She clutched it,
Clutched at the Peach.
Something to fondle?
Or something to eat?
Like a Child, she held it
Tight to her breast;
But knowing no Names,
How could she guess
What to call it, or
What would come next.

"Peach," she called it,
Carrying it home
To where the Old Man
Waited alone.

II

THE CUTTING OF THE PEACH

"I'll cut it," said the Old Man,
Since cutting was his trade,
"Let's eat what luck has brought us,
Why should we be afraid?"

But his Wife was lost in wonder;
And talk, though not her trade,
Was what she did when she was not
Hanging in a glade
Their wash or the wash of Others,
Or mending what was frayed.

"Hold off," she cried, "or let me,
Who've held it to my breast,

Draw the knife across its skin
As soft as a caress—
I've felt its heart against my heart,
And a mother's touch is best."
"A mother," he cried angrily,
For hunger gnawed his gut,
"What have you borne but empty words.
Be still and let me cut."

But even as they argued
The peach was split, uncleft;
Without a stroke from either one,
It parted right and left.

And there within its bloody heart
They saw a red-gold boy,
A child as red-gold as the fruit,
Whose cry drowned out their joy.

"The child I could not bear," she said,
"Was brought us by the river—
A token like a fallen leaf
For us to keep forever."

"Peachboy is his given name,"
She said, "We have no choice."

"*One* name like him is given,"
He said, "But I rejoice
Another name is ours to give,
And his to bear forever;
Since he is Peachboy Son of Us
Who fetched him from the river."

III

THE COMING OF THE DEMONS

He grew between the two of them,
Like some astounding tree,
Whose only blossom was his face,
Its stem and leaf both he.

Till Demons came one evil day
And blackened with their wings
The noontime sky above their heads
And hushed the birds that sing;

And breathed upon the burgeoning wheat
And turned the seed to dust,
And ate the living cattle up
And chased the maids in lust.

Then Peachboy rose up taller
So that his thrusting head
Split the thatch to let him watch
The demons as they fled.

"I know you now," he cried aloud,
"I know, too, who I am,
For until he has spied his demons
No boy can become a man."

"Bake Milletseed cakes, dear Mother,
Kibidango to fill my sack,
And I'll load your lap with treasure,
When I come riding back."

"But all the skills you taught me, Dad,
And all your sage advice,
Now turn to dirty water,
Like a sheet of rotten ice;
For I must become a father,
Though I was not born a Son
I will beget myself upon myself,
Before my tale is done!"

"Oh, I'll be rich, dear Mother,
When the demons all are dead,
And I will buy you a palace
And a beautiful silken bed.
And Dad will sit in a rocker,
And rust will nibble his ax;
And the house you live in will be my house,
When I come riding back."

"Please take my ax on your journey;
It has killed a thousand trees,
Taller by far than demons,
Lords of the earth and the breeze."

"No, no," said the boy, "dear Father,
I will take the household knife
You raised to cut the red-gold fruit

That fed my secret life."

"Take me with you, Peachboy,
Take me, if you can."

"Be still, for a dog or a monkey
Is more use than an old, old man;
A bird or dog or a monkey
More use than a dying man."

IV

THE JOURNEY

The sun behind, the dark ahead,
As if he fled the day,
He set out in search of evening
Along the Demons' Way;
And all the beasts of the forest,
Smelling them hot from the pan,
Longed for his *kibidango*,
The best in all Japan.

First the bird from the highest treetop
Called to him by name,
"Where are you going, Peachboy,
On what journey or quest for fame?"

"I go to the Island of Demons
To conquer their evil King,
And make my dream a story,
A song that the minstrels sing."

"Give me one *kibidango*
And I will fly with you,
Until on the Island of Demons
Your song and mine are through.
And I will call you Master
And serve your every whim;
For I, too, have dreamed a journey,
And know that we shall win."

"Take and eat and fly with me,
For it seems that I have heard
That no man can be a Hero
Until he has talked to a bird."

Then the monkey called out from hiding,
"Peachboy, let me eat, too,
And I will swing from the branches
To spy out the world for you.
And I will call you Master,
And serve your every whim,
For I, too, have dreamed a journey,
And know that we shall win."

"Come eat my *kibidango*,
For it seems to me I've heard
That the man who would be hero
Must be monkey as well as bird."

The inu-san barked from the bushes,
The dog who has always served man,
"I smell *kibidango*, dear Peachboy,
The best in all Japan.
I will serve you for food not glory,
Since like others I have my own tale
Which I chase in the hope of an ending,
Though I know I will never prevail.
And I will call you master, too,
And serve your every whim,
Though I have dreamed another dream
And know no one can win."

"Take and eat and come with me,
For it seems that I have heard
That the hero must heed the bark of a dog
As well as the song of a bird."

"I love you all, dear brothers,"
The Peachboy said to the three,
"For teaching me here in the forest
That, unlike the fruit of a tree,
I must hide and whimper and scamper,
And chatter and scratch my fleas,
And nip and slaver and growl
And ride the tide of the breeze."

"No man can be a mother,
To this I am resigned;
But though I was born from the heart of a peach,
You three are born from mine."

V

THE DEFEAT

How easy to conquer the Demons
Once he had encountered the beasts.
They lay in a drunken stupor
After a round of feasts,
Lie always in drunken slumber,
And only dream of the feasts;
From which they arise without waking,
To pillage the poor in their sleep.

On the back of the dog he lay hidden,
Fording their moat at high noon;
And the monkey rode on his shoulder,
And the bird flew over the moon,
Singing, "Conquer them all, Momotaro,
While they lie in their beds in a swoon;
For they dream that they dream they are dreaming
In a dream not even their own:
Warp and woof are a web of your weaving,
The test you begged as a boon.
They'll die, if you like, without waking.
Fade out like the vanishing gloom."

But he cried a great cry to arouse them,
And they rushed from the hush in his head,
To fall one by one on the pavement
As the coming of the morning flushed red;
And red as the red of the morning
Were the drops of their blood that he shed.

Till their King alone loomed before him,
A mountain of motionless stone
Eyeless and bloodless, undying,
Unborn on his carved granite throne;
Enthroned for all time in carved granite,
With eyes of unseeing stone.
Then his knife dropped unused to the pavement,
And a chill froze the boy to the bone;
For the unseeing face of the mountain
Was his own flower face turned to stone.

Seeing which, the three beasts in panic
Scrabbled and scratched at his eyes,
Biting hard the soft flesh of their master,

As if he were the foe and the prize.

But "Enough!" cried a voice from the mountain,
"The battle is over and done!"
"Begone!" cried a voice from its caverns,
"What there is to be gained you have won!"

And the Peachboy woke at the roadside,
A league from the place he was born,
Astride a great horse with a scepter
And a spear and a shield and a horn,
And a crown on his head gold as sunrise,
And behind him a treasure was borne
On percherons, palfreys, and asses
And the backs of men better unborn;
While a crowd on both sides of the roadway,
Defined a path to his door,
Where his parents waited to greet him
Their heads bowed down low to the floor.

"Rise up!" he cried out in horror,
"You need not bow down to your son."
His voice was the voice of the thunder,
And his head darkened the disk of the sun,
So all fled save his father and mother,
Who lay dead as he roared, "But I've *won* !"

BILLIE FITZPATRICK

Interview With Donald Barthelme

BILLIE FITZPATRICK: Robert Coover has said that creative writing programs "have been something of a disaster" in their leveling force on American writing and that "literature itself is being closed down by way of a narrow, pathetically conservative vision." Do you think programs are the problem (or at least part of the problem) as Coover sees it?

DONALD BARTHELME: No, I think that most of the people who go through programs do not publish.

BF: You mean while they're in the programs?

DB: Or subsequently. If they do not publish, they can hardly be a negative influence on American literature. My impression is that most of the writing programs produce better teachers, certainly better readers, but not necessarily greater numbers of writers. I don't understand how he can argue that they have had a negative or repressing effect on literature.

BF: I think he was alluding to a certain leveling-off, a mediocrity, perhaps a sameness, found in the writing coming out of programs.

DB: That may be his experience; it's not my experience. I've taught at four universities, and the students were notable for diversity rather than sameness. I mean you've seen work here [University of Houston]: if there's anything that marks it, it is a rather spectacular difference.

BF: As programs become a more prevalent force in American literature, can you foresee any adverse effects, especially for the writer who does not wish to participate in the institution? Do you think it will become more and more difficult for the writer struggling outside the program?

DB: What writing programs do is save people time. I think the person who works on his or her own takes about three times as long to get to where he's publishing than someone who is in a program. There is no feedback, no criticism, no shocks to the system. Being enrolled in a writing program, however may raise expectations in the individual which the program can't satisfy. Not everyone who goes through a program will publish.

BF: In a recent discussion on the same subject, you said that "you can teach the notion of what's dead or alive; you can teach them how to be critics of their own work." What's "dead" in contemporary writing?

DB: I don't want to name fourteen of my colleagues and say that they're dead, though publishing, writers. If that's what you're asking.

BF: No, I'm not asking you to name names as much as identify styles, imitative styles, that you've seen crop up again and again, that you've seen before and for

some reason don't work any longer.

DB: Some of the work being published in imitation of the post-modernists is pretty dead. As is some of the work being published in imitation of Ray Carver, Ann Beattie, Mary and Jim Robison, my brother Frederick—that group of people has produced a third generation.

The easiest way to talk about this is to talk about painters. There were the Abstract Expressionists, then there was another group of painters classified as second-generation Abstract Expressionists, which indeed went on to form a third generation of Abstract Expressionists. The impulse had become attenuated in, at least, the third generation, and some of the second generation.

BF: Who would be some of the third generation?

DB: The third generation has become so attenuated, I can't even remember any names.

BF: Like a Jean-Paul Basquiet?

DB: No. He's another tendency entirely. Michael Goldberg, for example, is a very good painter and is usually spoken of as part of the second generation. In Goldberg, the impulse is strong enough still to be useful.

BF: My next question centers more specifically on the imitation of your style, as you may see it in your students. That is, in the workshop where the desire to please and desire to be accepted is often formidable, have you confronted too-close-for-comfort imitations of your style and how have you handled it?

DB: Once in a long while, I run into somebody who is doing something either that I've already done or dangerously close. And I just say, look, this is too close to—and I point out what it is too close to. And the person immediately recognizes it.

BF: It's usually unintentional, in other words.

DB: It may be subliminal. I don't think the desire to please has that much to do with it. Obviously I'm going to discourage it wherever I see it. It doesn't come up that often.

BF: Today's writers currently in the limelight, the so-called "Brat-Pack" writers, have been labeled minimalists; they are said to write fiction which lacks passion and a hope for change and to depict characters who won't commit themselves to an emotion. Do you think that "minimalist fiction" is so wholly vacuous?

DB: I assume you're talking about people like Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney and Tama Janowitz.

BF: Yes, I was thinking of Ellis and McInerney as the third generation coming after, or out of—

DB: —The Beattie-Carver-Robison tradition. All these classifications are very rough. I don't want to be in the position of saying the newest guys are terrible.

BF: But that's what everyone keeps saying, making these blanket statements.

DB: It's entirely possible that they're writing something I can't appreciate; in other words, I just can't get it, I can't hear it. I may be tone deaf to what they're trying to say. Tama Janowitz is often funny and she gets into some nice conceits. Jay McInerney is quite clever and also sometimes funny. Ellis . . . I think I wrote a parody of him in *The New Yorker* that was published as "More Than Zero."

In the opening scene this guy is trying to do a line of coke off the rearview mirror of a moving car. That, I think is—

BF: Your comment—

DB: Yes. Anyhow, in principle I don't want to knock these guys. I don't admire them as much as I do the Beattie-Carver-Robison generation. They're doing something radically different.

BF: One generation of writers has been generalized to promote some kind of nihilism, not committing to either a political stance or a belief in anything for that matter. This seems to be such a general criticism. Do you find that to be part of a trend?

DB: Everything goes in waves. When I was in my late twenties and thirties, the big philosophical effort was after Sartre, after *Being and Nothingness*. The phenomenologists—Sartre, Husserl, and Heidegger—were at the core of one kind of philosophical thinking, what is called Continental philosophy, as opposed to British philosophy or language analysis. Then ten years later, structuralism—Levi Strauss and that group of people—was being talked about in Paris, in the fifties or early sixties. Sartrian philosophy had completely washed away. The new wave is deconstruction—Derrida and people like that. But as my philosophy teacher, Maurice Natanson, said, "It is a mistake to regard philosophy as a graveyard of dead systems." While there is movement, it's a kind of cyclical washing: the tide comes up onto the shore and brings in different things each time. None of them makes the previous rage invalid. It's just looking at things from a different point of view. I feel the same way about tendencies in writing. People are astonished to discover that I hold John Updike in high regard, which I do, or Saul Bellow.

BF: The realists—

DB: Yes. All these guys—Bellow, Cheever, Updike, Malamud—I hold in the highest regard. It's just a different kind of thing.

BF: Rosellen Brown, in an August 1986 article in the *Boston Review*, comments that the younger contemporary writers suffer from a lack of political scope, that their fiction centers on the insular, the intimate, the familial. She sees this smallness of vision as an unwillingness to take a risk. Do you think the writer has a responsibility to actively engage the world's problems and thereby offer the possibility of change?

DB: Yes. The "engager" political writing—what Sartre called for in his book *What is Literature?*—is not much practiced by younger writers nowadays. There are some exceptions—John Sayles, for example. It's a reflection of American politics. If you grow up in the age of Reagan, it's hard to decide that politics are not meaningless to the individual. Remember at the time of the Vietnam War, writers were all very active politically. I even wrote some overtly political pieces.

BF: So, it depends more on the current conditions?

DB: The stuff we're doing in Central America is clearly wrong. For one thing, the efforts seem to be failing. But it's certainly not on the scale of the Vietnam War.

BF: It seemed to be then that the sides were clear, and that now with the United States involved in so many countries, the political situation is much hazier.

DB: I think our government is still doing lousy things, but they're not the kind of lousy things that send people out in the streets. And a lot of it is undercover, as with the Oliver North stuff. We find out about it two years after it happens. You can't get mad about something you don't know is going on. Getting mad in retrospect is not that satisfying.

BF: Do you think this apolitical stance is particular to America?

DB: American writers have always been less political than European writers. In one sense, it's very good for European writers because (like with Kundera) it gives everything they write a very important dimension. Here, you can attack the government as violently as you want and no one is going to throw you in jail. The government doesn't even notice. Over there, writers are given much more value.

The United States is so big—bigger than all of Europe—that local ways of looking at things become American ways of looking at things; they're atomized in a certain way, just by geography. The tragic history of the twentieth century has been really enacted so far in Europe. We've been very protected. Consequently, our political involvement is watered down.

BF: As a member of PEN America and the former Program Chairman of the International PEN Conference in 1986, you've had the opportunity to spend time with writers outside of the United States. And although your stories often resound with colloquial language and Americana, your perspective is universal. Has your international exposure shaped your own vision?

DB: The PEN Congress was very educational. We had to come up with a theme for the conference and Richard Howard and I fixed on the imagination of the writer and the imagination of the state, balancing these two things. We found that a lot of the European writers did not want to admit that the state had an imagination. So we had the spectacle of very good writers getting up at public meetings and saying that the state has no imagination. The faculty of the imagination was so precious to them that they did not want to take the sociological view of the state as a creation of many individuals acting together; somebody is thinking up those concentration camps, somebody is putting people in jail.

BF: Did their reaction surprise you?

DB: I was surprised. Not everybody reacted this way. Norman Mailer said afterwards (Norman had been very enthusiastic about the theme before the congress) that maybe it was a theme for sociologists or philosophers, not for writers. Maybe he's right.

I've learned a lot from people like Max Frisch, who is a Swiss writer and a friend of mine. And Kundera, who although I don't know him, I watch him very closely. Grass, whom I have met. And Peter Handke. I pay attention to what these people are doing.

BF: Despite the danger and inaccuracy of classifications, your work has often been described as metafictional; the critic Alan Wilde distinguished between meta and midfiction, asserting that your work is more midfiction in that it presents a "contemporary humanism" that lifts it away from the skepticism and unrelenting fatalism of metafictionists such as Robert Coover, William Gass, and Ted

Mooney. Most recently, *Paradise* and your newer stories in the collection *Forty Stories* reveal a much stronger narrative line, which some critics cite as evidence of a "creeping realism." Is this a result of a movement away from something in your work?

DB: I don't think there's anything that can accurately be called metafiction because that would be fiction about fiction. And I don't think that anybody wants to do that. What gave rise to that term was that in the work of some so-called postmodernists, devices of fiction were called attention to.

I think everybody is a realist. I do not think that we have a choice. The nature of consciousness is such that we are always doing realism. Consciousness is always consciousness of something. We are always writing about the world.

I have a formulation for this idea: art is the true account of the activity of the mind. This definition excludes a lot of things, but it is also pretty accurate. It solves a lot of philosophical problems—the truth problem, for one. It also points out that realism is a kind of sloppy category.

BF: In the last year, you have participated in a couple of collaborations, one with the artist Seymore Chwast and another with Jim Love. Why and how do artistic collaborations feed your own writing?

DB: You're dealing with another mind; you surrender your autonomy to another artist. It changes your normal way of proceeding, which is a big plus. I can do something in a slightly different way or in a considerably different way. It's stimulating. Collaboration is a very healthy thing.

BF: Do you see collaborations as part of an inter-disciplinary approach that might help art evolve?

DB: I just think it's another thing artists do. It's been going on for centuries, collaborations. I don't think it will solve all artistic problems, but it will give you a fresh set of problems. There's nothing more rewarding than a fresh set of problems.

MARIANNE FRISCH

What To Do Next, Donald Barthelme?

THE TRAFFIC LIGHT RED, corner 6th Avenue and 10th Street, May 1971, Saturday afternoon, leaden air, lead on my shoulders. I can't stay at home, I will walk around the woman's prison once, maybe twice, looking up. Green light. All the people on my side of the street are going towards the people on the other side. One stays standing there.

"Donald, what are you doing here?"

"Intersections interest me. Sometimes cute girls cross. . . . Time for coffee?"

Three meters from the light there was a brightly lit, sad-looking coffee shop.

"Do you always cry on Saturday afternoons?"

"Often."

"Are you crying today because I don't write as well as Samuel Beckett?"

"I'm just nervous, especially Saturdays because of the leaden Sundays. And then this nerve-killing city."

"Let us pray. Should we go to a church?"

"I'm crying, first, because I'm nervous, second, because it's Saturday, and, third, because I have something difficult I should tell you."

"Something criminal?"

"Possibly."

"Interesting. . . . Stop crying!"

"I signed a contract some weeks ago."

"You're too young for contracts, much too young."

"But I've signed to translate *City Lights*."

"That's no reason for a grownup girl to cry."

"I'm worried that Donald Barthelme's prose is too difficult for me—untranslateable."

"I will translate him from English into English for you. No problem. That's my specialty. I have translated Tolstoy, Balzac, Kafka, Borges, and many, many others from English into English. I can help you even though my German is nonexistant."

He did help. Alert, attentive, tense, behind the glasses, sparkling, cunning, laughing eyes. A dinosaur of patience, which made me guess that this person, who so sensitively and quickly could write for his students, was—in the old Chinese sense—a true master. But occasionally he was surly, almost hurt. In order to spare him, I asked other American acquaintances to help me, but they had no idea; they loved the word "untranslateable." Donald translated Donald's puns, sudden jumps of thought, ironic allusions; he revealed the names of the victims of his parodies,

spoke of music, the music of words that was the most important thing, the rhythm of the sentences. He spoke like a technician who builds harpsichords so that he can play Bach sonatas or rags by Scott Joplin on them. Whenever a story was done—"Brain Damage" was the first one—I read it out loud in German. It got a wholly pleased smile.

"Sounds good. Pretty funny, isn't it? Is it crazy enough? You're not responsible for that: brain damage caused by art. I could describe it better if I weren't afflicted with it. . . . And what did you do with 'Devouring a whole cooked chicken furnished by the Department of Romantic Poultry'?"

"For 'a whole cooked chicken' I said '*einen ganzen gekochten Schlegel*,' a *double entendre—Schlegel* can mean either the drumstick of a chicken or a sledge hammer—which I had to give up in a paragraph a little before. But the quantity of *raisons* in the dough was right."

When *City Life* was published by Suhrkamp in Frankfurt, in a prestigious edition with the subtitle "modern classic" (Donald grinned), it wasn't the readers of bestsellers or the critics who celebrated—it was the young writers. For years they'd been waiting for a new Barthelme; now they were reenergized and rushed to their desks (the Barthelme fan club among young writers in West Germany was—and is—quite large, and occasionally the Barthelme virus has driven their fever too high). I had also become afflicted; I translated *The Dead Father*, countless stories from *Sadness*, from *Great Days*, etc.

I implored Donald to write a radio play.

"I should write a *radio play*?"

"Yes, you should. German ears love radio plays. Thanks to the phenomenon of radio plays in Germany, many poor poets and translators have earned enough to eat."

"At your command, Madam, I'll open an ear to your earplays."

George Tabori directed the title story, "City Life," and as soon as Donald Barthelme was a beloved radio play author (I was also infected with the radio play translation bug, and even wrote some plays myself.), the German audience for *all* his work grew.

In these war days, I telephone ruinously often to my friends in America, the old FICTION gang. I want to speak with Donald. His absence is not tolerable. I read the opening lines of "The Indian Uprising":

> We defended the city as best we could. The arrows of the Comanches came in clouds. The war clubs of the Comanches clattered on the soft, yellow pavements. There were earthworks along the Boulevard Mark Clark and the hedges had been laced with sparkling wire. People were trying to understand. I spoke to Sylvia. "Do you think this is a good life?" The table held apples, books, long-playing records. She looked up. "No."

"Stop crying," he says. I stop.

Translated by Tom Reiss

JOHN HAWKES

At Don Barthelme's invitation, in January, 1989, I paid my first and only visit to Houston. It was a special week, a special place, thanks to the splendid administrators and writers of the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program, who made me welcome with a barbecue and pages of well-wrought fiction, and mainly, of course, to Don and Marion themselves. I remember a vivid hour or so spent in a class of gifted elementary school students, who gave voice, spontaneously, to exuberant fictions created jointly and on the spot. Then there was the moment when some serene and inventive guide, knowing my obsession with horses, gave me a brief glimpse of a riding stable in the heart of Houston. But the single memory that means most to me and that best suggests Don's extraordinary character is of Don and Marion at a dinner they hosted toward the end of my stay. I think that Don was the most paradoxical man and writer I've known—quiet but also outspoken, a quick and ready demolisher of illusion and sentimentality. His formidable wit and taciturnity, his impatience with careless thinking and living, this fiercely quiet presence of his was inseparable from his great gentleness and generosity, and was superbly evident that night in Don and Marion's home. A young couple at that dinner had brought along their new baby which was smaller and even more rarely beautiful than most babies are. While the parents ate, Don, who sat at the head of the table, held the baby, cradling it against his shoulder. No baby ever looked more protected or more content. For me that's the essential image of Donald Barthelme, the ever-gentle and life-giving satirist and visionary writer who was like no other.

My current project is a novel about an old and purely imaginary racehorse who, in the first person, tells his own life's story. The excerpt that follows was partly inspired by the real and, I might add, prized horses I saw in Houston in the stable that was nothing at all like mine. I like to think that the risks and grotesqueries herein might have pleased Don and prompted a laugh or two. At any rate they're offered as a modest tribute to one of our greatest of all comic writers.

Goossen's Horses

LOST HOPES. THE STAR THAT PLUMMETS. A paean to paradox. And thus and so my severest encounter, and London Bobby's, with violence which, most say, is never gratuitous, and with those winds and tides of fortune that speed all horses across and up and down, but mostly down, the heavens. Laurels one moment, disgrace the next, and now a lull, a respite, a brief and singular reprieve in which we found ourselves suddenly become the pitied victims of the darker side of horse racing, as all those in the small towns near and about the spot where we were found soon knew by word of mouth and the rhetoric of a few local journalists. Attention was what I craved, and here was attention. To be trusting was poor Bob's pleasure in life, and now, spared as he and I had been, and treated to the briefest kind of adulation, now he could once again trust man and horse, unaware, I am still convinced, that I, his protector, had deliberately destroyed the life of a human—that worst of all possible horse crimes. We were unknown, unowned, unclaimed. Nonetheless Bob was once more trusting and I content to conceal my secret self and for the moment share Bob's optimism, no matter how unjustified I knew it to be. We were young horses then, though in our opposite ways already old—he in meekness, I in irascibility—and for the time being youth, fading or not, prevailed.

But what next? And where? And when?

*

A second chance. Down the heat-stricken highway. Soon.

Yes, a second chance—not to race, for Bob and I knew that we would never race again, but rather a second chance to prove ourselves adaptable to the conformity expected of the domestic horse, and hence to enjoy the care and security to be found in the horse's conventional submissiveness to men, to women, even to children. Yes, once more we were carried off into hotter days, more humid days, toward another horse-establishment unlike any we had ever known in a vast acreage where nothing grew and the gentle earth itself was denied us. But could it be? A horse-establishment in the city? It could, it was. But city? Was there any way in which London Bobby and I might have heard of the very word—city—or in dreams or nightmares have stumbled upon this bare notion of the urban world? Certainly not. What horse could even dream of a city let alone inhabit one? But such was our latest and still more paradoxical fate, to be snatched abruptly from a small unfamiliar farm near a mere village—Harmony was its name, the hamlet closest to the scene of our rescue and in miles not distant from Elroy Park—and in another van, empty except for ourselves and a fat black horsefly whose buzzing presence was an omen had we only recognized it as such—to be transported from nature's landscape, intended first and foremost to sustain the life of the horse, to, yes, a city. Why, London Bobby and I, like most of our kind, trusted in nature,

believed in nature, could conceive of no clime except a natural one—what else?—and had but the sparest experience of so much as the motor vehicle, that first sign of the agglomeration of humans who denied themselves the horse. What then was the city if not by definition a denial of the precious fundamentals of the horse's life?

So indeed and so we learned.

Alone with the fiendish horsefly we lumbered on while the heat inside the van increased and our spirits flagged. To the south, to the southwest perhaps, ever farther from Millbank, that place of our beginnings which, in the nip and tuck of our aborted careers, had all but vanished from memory and imagination alike. We smelled the heat that gathered and shimmered on the highway, smelled sand, smelled the dryness of abandoned bones.

But finally, and from all around us, came the sound of other vehicles. That sound increased, became the noise of traffic, increased still more. Exhaust fumes filled the van's interior, overpowering the smells of naturalness—our steaming dung, our heady sweat—so strong at times as to drug the horsefly into long periods of stuporous frustration. The van slowed, on all sides of us pressed that horde of vehicles more felt than seen and kept in motion, it appeared, by little more than the erratic energy of their blasting horns. Hot concrete, brief glimpses through our narrowed louvered windows of occasional drooping palm trees as anomalous to these humid city streets as we ourselves, and then, on this the third morning since our departure, the horse van stopped at last, sank down on collapsing springs, came to rest like nothing so much as an old and rusted ship grounded forever on a sandbar.

Thus our arrival—unmistakable, inescapable—and thus our descent into what might have been the scene and source of new life but instead, from our first sight of it, defined itself as more of the same and worse. Much worse. A rural island in the city? An oasis for horses within the limits of some vast municipality in which horses could not otherwise survive? Such, no doubt, had been the original purpose of Goossen's Horses, as it was called. Or had Paul J. Goossen, Mgr., founder and still sole proprietor of this establishment, known from the start that Goossen's Horses would serve no ends but his own and thrive on nothing but the shallow interest the city-dweller might take in the totally unexpected presence of the living horse in what would otherwise have been a city lot laid waste beneath whole truckloads of soft rubbish and tin cans? No better than this was Goossen's horses and, in fact, was worse. Much worse.

Headlong down the shaky ramp we went, London Bobby and I, head to tail—his to mine—prepared once more to greet with eagerness—genuine on his part, feigned on mine—what lay ahead, yet not at all for the sight reserved only for the horse so specially unfortunate as to find him- or herself become the property of Paul J. Goossen. And what a sight it was, as far from the conventional stable as was the city street from sylvan green. No barn, no comfortable box stalls, no shaded paddocks with white fences. None of this, but only an oval of hard unhealthy

soil as large as a football field, as Paul J. Goossen liked to say, roofed over in entirety by a tent-like immensity of metal sheets riveted in place atop rusted girders and ringed about by metal cages open on all sides and overhead protected ingeniously—Paul J. Goossen's word—by the sloping edges of the gigantic roof. Here, in the vast dark empty earthen area surrounded by the ring of cages, Paul J. Goossen practiced his equitation and gave instruction to what he liked to call his bevy of local high school beauties, a few awkward girls who wore ill-fitting black helmets on the backs of their heads and throughout their riding lessons tittered uncontrollably at Paul J. Goossen's every move and word. And the cages? For Paul J. Goossen's fifty horses, of course, as if we were nothing more than beasts in a zoo. Unlikely, unnatural, all of it, and worse still, the place was bounded to the west by a lot heaped high with the crushed and abandoned bodies of old cars, to the north and east by busy streets and, to the south, by one small barren plot fenced in with electrical wire—how we jumped away at the touch of it!—in which we horses, a few at a time, were allowed to view the open sky but made to bear the cruelest light and intensest possible heat of that low-lying southern sun. It was hateful, this small ragged enclosure of hot sand, the more so when, on the other side of the innocuous looking strand of deadly wire a group of small boys gathered with bats, with balls, with great leather gloves that deformed their little hands, and played their mindless game until, worn out and angry at each other, they turned to taunting us horses herded together behind the wire. A few dying palms, a construction site, a warehouse wall, the mounds of cracked and sweltering cars, the small boys wearing overly-large duck-billed caps twisted sideways on their small shaven heads and, at their mercy, us horses. And always the sound of traffic and the guttural sounds of Paul J. Goossen shouting at the ineptitude of his high school beauties.

Thus it was that merely to arrive at Goossen's Horses was to have suffered its abrasive antipathies forever, without past or future, to be forever listless or sullen or rebellious according to individual temperament, yet down to the last horse of us to be depressed.

Paul J. Goossen had his personal mount, of course, a tall white hefty mare part draft horse, part Thoroughbred, a vain old animal trained to the tricks and mannerisms of the performing horse. Trixy, as she was aptly named, carried herself with the contemptible false majesty of the circus horse—she had in fact spent long years in a traveling circus—and pranced about the otherwise empty arena with Paul J. Goossen on her back and her head held high as if from between her ears there still arose the artificial plumes which, in her former days of glory, she had worn. Fatuous creature, silly horse, bearing Paul J. Goossen through solitary high-stepping maneuvers that did no more than polish her rider's Netherlandish pride—he was forever boasting of his identity as a Netherlander—and affront and baffle the rest of us. But Trixy was her owner's horse, his favorite, as heavy a horse as he was a man, and on her he lavished all his attention and special treats and special feed, thereby making Mother Horse, as we called her, more insufferably

standoffish than she might otherwise have been. As owner and proprietor of that impoverished center of incongruity, Goossen Horses, Paul J. Goossen, Mgr. wore white britches and black boots and rode without stirrups and carried two long whips with which he teased and guided Mother Horse while the rest of us, no mean lot of horses either, since most of us were Thoroughbreds who had come off the track, looked on from our cages and scoffed. Many a morning Paul J. Goossen rode to our glum appraisal and to a scattering of applause that came from the sidelines where a few of his young girls always stood and watched. And many a morning Paul J. Goossen acknowledged their marveling with silent smiles and then dismounted and handed his horse to one of the elated girls, and seized his ringmaster's whip and spent an hour or two haranguing this or that poor girl as she bounced around the arena on one of the few among his fifty horses that he had trained to undergo such mean uncomfortable ordeals. It goes without saying that Mother Horse was not confined to a cage or allowed to accompany the rest of us into that ignoble open space raggedly defined by the electrified wire.

Sounds and smells of the nearby traffic. Rider and white horse senselessly performing. Shouts of the small boys. Netherlandish shouts of the Mgr. followed by long self-satisfied silences in which, with his naked hands, he positioned this or that skinny girl's thigh and calf against the sides of the horse. Senseless, all of it, and senseless especially the empty days and nights of those of us still unused, ignored, still waiting for what we did not know except at best and perhaps for the training—a tedious, merciless business—that would make us suitable to the needs of Paul J. Goossen, Mgr. and his girls.

Mother Horse's Brood, as we thought of ourselves. And not one of us who was not depressed.

So and thus London Bobby and I, like our fellows, longed only to be uncaged, longed only for freedom, such as it was. Better that dusty plot and better to be jolted by the electrified wire and taunted by the miniature ballplayers than to suffer the dreary hypocrisy of all that lay beneath the iron roof of Goossen's Horses. Better by far, though in or out there was no escaping torment. Or so it seemed or so we thought. Until all at once relief of a sort was ours, thanks, paradoxically, to the little boys themselves.

But oh, the horsefly's arguing! How quickly submission to senselessness proved preferable to relief when relief so suddenly arrived.

*

A hot day. A humid day. Overhead a thick gray layer of dense wet air that concealed the light of the sun but not its heat. A fiery sun, then, though invisible. And outside and as listless as the dying palms, London Bobby and I within the parameter of the electrified wire that we were learning painfully enough to avoid. And the boys. On such a hot and humid afternoon, mightn't London Bobby and I have been spared the boys? But justice was not for us and we were not spared.

The hotter and grayer and wetter the day, it seemed, the more competitive became the boys who, in that desolate silence, were shouting all the louder and

tugging on their duck-billed caps and flinging down their bats more angrily than ever, and scampering like spiders around their diamond, as they called it, and throwing their gigantic leather gloves high in the air and rushing toward each other as if every last one of them meant to drop in heat prostration at the earliest possible moment. But they did not drop.

Ripped and ragged shorts or faded pairs of swimming trunks that were much too small, even for boys this obviously young and underfed. Bare and bloated chests smeared with sweat, streaked with dust. Tennis shoes unlaced. Contorted faces, obscenities. Two angry packs of tiny boys. Hate and chaos, chaos and hate. Relentless. Interminable. And all the while London Bobby and I hanging our heads and suffering the heat and noise and scampering figures as best we could—ever careful to keep an eye on the boys.

Then boredom struck. Abruptly. As one of the two teams, as they were called, fell silent and, as one, dropped their bats and balls and leather gloves, turned silently in our direction. Uneasily Bob and I looked up.

"The horses," said the most brazen boy in a whisper, facing us and putting his hot and dirty hands on his hips.

"The horses," said another boy. A child's voice, a grown man's crafty hurtful mind at work.

London Bobby, head lowered to an itching hock, again raised his eyes, flicked back his ears. More warily than Bob I watched the pack of grinning or frowning boys. Then faster than I had ever seen him move the most brazen boy stooped down, scooped one dusty paw through the dirt and raised himself, spread wide his feet, clasped his hands together on his bare offensive breast and, elbows as far apart as possible, eyes darting to the left and right, suddenly whirled in a vicious blurry circle and let fly.

Zing! went the pebble past the tip of Bob's right ear. We shied but held our ground.

"Strike!" squeaked one of the boys softly, and laughed.

A pause, a gathering of intention, and then again the ritualized gyrations of the most brazen boy, and zing! this second pebble nicked my own left ear, and the blanketing cloud above us thickened, the heat came down, one of the little ballplayers made a sucking sound and turned to the side and hawked forth a gob of mucous that made a faint puff in the sand. Orville, I thought, still as a statue, though I knew that that boy was no tobacco-chewer, whatever else he was.

Then, "Horses!" shouted the most brazen boy at the top of his lungs and before London Bobby and I could so much as shy or flee, suddenly the air around us was filled with pebbles, with rocks, with stones, as every last one of those small sportsmen burst into random yet nonetheless concerted frenzy, stopping and snatching at the sand and rising and firing away with stones, with rocks, with pebbles. A barrage of vehemence, a hail of unavoidable pain. Never before had those boys so orchestrated their jeering, their shouting, their rock throwing, never before had Bob and I been the victims of such a pelting. In unison the boys

cheered and whooped at their accuracy of aim, stunned and mortified poor Bob and I stood rooted for a moment more, dumb and even willing targets as we must have seemed to our attackers, while the air hummed and the swarm of boys pressed closer toward the restraining wire. Gone whatever final shred of fear they may have had of horses, fearless their slow approach. The most brazen of them led the way, urged them on, his torso slick, his faded tight red trunks bursting with the manhood his short life already promised, though in vain.

"Nags!" he jeered, and flung a bright fat stone in my direction.

"Nags! Nags!" shouted his companions, gaining strength and stamina with every rock they threw.

But then that most brazen boy went too far and before my disbelieving eyes, and Bob's, stooped low and scampered beneath the electrified wire. And with a swagger—a swagger!—he approached, paused, studied Bob and me with a mockery of mannish deliberation, and then discharged his meanest stone, struck poor Bob full in the face.

So of course—what else?—I lunged, I charged, released into action by that final stone, and as the boy, startled at last, appropriately afraid at last, turned and darted back underneath the wire, a great cry of dismay rising up from his already fleeing fellows, in that moment I did the obvious and leapt the wire, London Bobby close on my heels.

Mayhem. Shrieks and wails. A satisfaction keener than anything I had every known, Hoffman and Stanley-the-horse-killer notwithstanding. First I singled out the most brazen boy, bore down on him, cornered him, left him asprawl on his back, eyes closed, inert, duck-billed cap lying upside down and a yard or two beyond the spot where he fell. Dust settling on the most brazen boy no longer brazen. Sprawled on his back as if still running. A childish smile on his face. A faint rouge color turning yellow. Then Bob and I fell to and took full advantage of our size, our speed, the terror that the mere sight of us now inspired in the rest of the routed boys. Leather gloves in the air, caps in the air, bats flying, screams of despair. Yes, we trampled those boys, Bob and I, and without regret, without the slightest twinge of conscience, until from behind us came the shouts, in his mother tongue, of Paul J. Goossen, Mgr.

But we were loose, we were free, and we wasted not a moment but cantered out of the vacant lot and away from all those little ballplayers lying silently atop each other or sitting up and softly weeping. Goodbye boys!

Cantered off, slowed to a trot, two lively pleasure-bound horses ambling side by side down a city street. So much for Goossen's Horses!

Cars stopped, horns honked, briefly we enjoyed the bemused surprise or frightened surprise of those few pedestrians walking the sidewalks on that hot and humid afternoon. Shouting voices, angry brakes, as *clap-clop*, *clap-clop*, London Bobby and I trotted on past store windows and through intersections, indifferent to stop signs and stoplights and the rage of automobile drivers who swerved to avoid us as we passed with no slackening of pace into and out of the turmoil that

we left behind in those intersections. *Clap-clop, clap-clop,* as invincibly, or so we thought, London Bobby and I made our steady way across the city and toward the horse country that lay, as we well knew, somewhere beyond. We were interested in all we saw—startled women, pointing children, hostile men—and we were confident that as effortlessly as this we would indeed traverse the city and gain anew the country. And we nearly did. *Clap-clop, clap-clop.*

In fact we trotted unimpeded and without injury through the worst of the city, though on all sides distant sirens began to sound, until and at last we noted in passing that greater space was ours, that the air was drier, that tenements and traffic had given way to green trees and healthier palms and houses with tricycles and small rubber swimming pools abandoned on little squares of lawn. Silence, occasionally the lone child who squatted and gaped or rose and ran along beside us calling excitedly to its napping mother. Peace at last. Signs, no matter how faint or artificial, of the countryside approaching. A slight quickening of pace, distant barking of a house dog. *Clap-clop clap-clop clap-clop!*

Then from around a shady suburban corner came a car. A police car. An indolent police car hardly moving through the heat of the afternoon. But moving nonetheless. Our nemesis. And carrying within two burly sweating officers. No trouble in sight, nothing to report on the intercom. Loafish. Slow of reflex. And for all we knew, London Bobby and I, that car and those policemen might blindly cross our path, fail to see us, drive harmlessly away. But not if the horse gods had their way, as indeed they did.

Ahead of us crept the blue and white heat-reflecting car, loudly rang the clap-clopping of our bright hooves on the otherwise empty concrete residential street, and could we but have stopped, could we but have stilled the loud optimistic ringing of our hooves, could we but have broken stride, changed direction, passed swiftly and silently across this patch of lawn or that one, slipped out of sight behind this white stucco house or that red clapboard house where a grandmother watched horses, car, policemen from behind a curtain—could we but have managed to do all this and hence to have disappeared unseen, then all concerned might have avoided the catastrophe that lay in wait for us all on that quiet street.

But before London Bobby and I could so much as collect our thoughts or change our course, before the old lady could so much as flutter her curtain, suddenly the police car twisted about, lurched and spurted forward, jerked into reverse, backed up, stopped dead in the center of that residential street with its hood toward one deserted sidewalk and its trunk toward the other. So it blocked our way, loomed in our path, at the same time that each and every one of its red lights and blue lights began to flash and its siren began to scream as if nothing in the wide world would ever appease its hysterical alarm, persuade it to return to silence, ever. Frightening lights, demented siren, and in that instant the two fat officers leapt from within while the lone witness to this terrible affair, the grandmother consumed in curiosity, burst suddenly onto the stoop of the red house, shouting silently and holding her ears.

I shall never know why London Bobby and I did not simply wheel and retrace our steps at a gallop. But we did not, could not. Or rather Bob did not. For it was Bob, not I, who in this desperate hour changed character, became the opposite of the mild-mannered little horse he had always been and instead ran headlong at the very car he should have fled. The officers ducked down, Bob jumped. But in his misguided leap for freedom, poor Bob, who was no jumper, merely landed atop the car, forelegs hanging over its far side, hind legs over the near, lights flashing on and off beneath his belly.

Just then and unaccountably the siren gave a painful squawk and fell silent.

"Shoot him! Shoot him!" the old grandmother was heard to cry, still holding her ears.

Bob's screams mingled with the cries of the old woman and the astounded shouts of the policemen. Helplessly I stood by and watched, somehow Bob squirmed and twisted until he was lying across the top of the car on his back, legs thrashing feebly in the air, head lolling. The pitch of his screams grew higher, the lights were flashing, the grandmother was nodding vehemently, wringing her hands.

"You do it!" shouted the fatter of the two policemen.

"Not me!" shouted his mate.

"All right, then!" shouted the fatter and higher ranking of the two, "I'll do it myself!"

The old grandmother descended from the stoop, came closer, while suddenly from the intercom inside the car a metallic disembodied official voice spoke to the missing occupants. And still the fatter of the two policemen struggled with his holster while the distant sirens remained at bay and no crowd gathered. The grandmother's face went white, Bob writhed atop the car.

And then the shot. The explosion that filled the air. The echoing thunder, the fatter of the two policemen standing as if he would never move again with eyes squeezed shut, feet spread, arms extended, the revolver gripped in his two white trembling hands. And there lay London Bobby draped forlornly, peacefully over the roof of the car. And on the sidewalk, stretched out as still as a board, the grandmother. But it was still not done! The worst of it was still not over, though the gun smoked and a policeman cowered and a grandmother had paid the price of curiosity, for no sooner was I convinced that Bob was dead and that life itself must surely shatter this silence, this unnaturalness, than suddenly and slowly London Bobby shuddered and gave a heave, a groan, rolled slowly over, and in one long final act of volition slid down the windshield and came to rest, like some animal shot by hunters, on the hood of the car.

I stared at Bob, three fire engines and a rescue truck and two additional police cars bore down upon us, and now the sun, all day invisible above the humid atmosphere, came forth, came down, joined its merciless light to its oppressive heat. But it was not London Bobby's slumping shape that blinded me, but a different sight, a travesty of a different sort, a brief vision that persisted on and off the rest

of my days. For all at once and before my eyes poor Bob turned from gray to white, began to swell until it was not Bob I saw athwart the hood of the car but rather a monstrous immensity of another horse, a white horse, yes Mother Horse herself consuming the scene of the accident, displacing grief, drawing ever closer to where I stood amazed, affronted, readier than ever to pursue revenge. Closer she came, larger she grew, flaunting her size, her whiteness, her self-confidence. But the great white haunch that she was now swinging as if into my very face, was it a mockery or a matriarchal offering or both? Closer still the white haunch, and larger, and there, tied to the thick dock of her flowing tail, a ribbon—a fat pink silk ribbon that rivaled in size and significance the mass of fresh plumes dancing atop her head. So this specter of Mother Horse stood still and yet seemed to press upon me the smooth white roundness of her matron's haunch. I accepted it—how not?—and slowly stretched forth my neck and opened wide my jaws and clamped them firmly on her snowy haunch, and hung on, waited, then relaxed my grip, drew back, studied what I had left like a youthful angry brand or broken necklace on Mother Horse's haunch. Droplets of bright blood, the imprint of my sharp teeth, the horseshoe shape of my resolve to remain and be at any cost myself, my own horse.

Then commotion came crashing back around my ears and grief was mine to savor, mine to forget.

MARK HELPRIN

I met Donald Barthelme only once, and briefly. However, I do remember something of note about him that I would like to relay to you. When he and I were both nominated for the same prize about ten years ago (neither of us won), I trudged off to Virginia and spent a weekend of utter misery at receptions and ceremonies. He declined, because he had just become the father of a new baby, and I envied him not only for the child but for having escaped wearing a suit and listening to speeches. When, too soon thereafter, I read the news of his death, I thought of him and of his child, of what they both would miss, and how he was a man who had his priorities straight.

White Gardens

IT WAS AUGUST. In the middle of his eulogy the priest said, "Now they must leave us, to repose in white gardens," and then halted in confusion, for he had certainly meant green gardens. But he was not sure. No one in the overcrowded church knew what he meant by white gardens instead of green, but they felt that the mistake was in some way appropriate, and most of them would remember for the rest of their lives the moment afterward, when he had glanced at them in alarm and puzzlement.

The stone church in Brooklyn, on one of the long avenues stretching to the sea, was full of firefighters, the press, uncharacteristically quiet city politicians in tropical suits, and the wives and eighteen children of the six men who, in the blink of an eye, had dropped together through the collapsing roof of a burning building, deep into an all-consuming firestorm.

Everyone noticed that the wives of the firemen who had died looked exceptionally beautiful. The young women—with the golden hair of summer, in dark print dresses—several of whom carried flowers, and the older, more matronly women who were less restrained because they understood better what was to become of them, all had a frightening, elevated quality which seemed to rule the parishioners and silence the politicians.

The priest was tumbling over his own words, perhaps because he was young and too moved to be eloquent according to convention. He looked up after a long silence and said, simply, "repose of rivers. . . ." They strained to understand, but couldn't, and forgave him immediately. His voice was breaking—not because so many were in the church, for in the raw shadow of the event itself, their numbers were unimpressive. It wasn't that the Mayor was in the crowd: the Mayor had become just a man, and no one felt the power of his office. It may have been the heat. The city had been under siege for a week. Key West humidity and rains had

swept across Brooklyn, never-ending, trying to cover it with the sea. The sun was shining now, through a powerful white haze, and the heat inside the church was phenomenal and frightening, ninety-five degrees—like a boiler room. All the seasons have their mystery, and perhaps the mystery of summer is that it overwhelms with easy life, and makes one feel improperly immortal.

One of the wives glanced out a high window and saw white smoke billowing from a chimney. Even in this kind of weather, she thought, they have to turn on the furnaces to make hot water. The smoke rushed past the masonry as if the chimney were the stack of a ship. She had been to a fireman's funeral before, and she knew what it was going to be like when the flag-draped coffin was borne from the church and placed on the bed of a shiny new engine. Hundreds of uniformed men would snap to attention, their blue hats aligning suddenly. Then the procession would flow away like a blue river, and she, the widow (for she was now the widow), would stagger into a waiting black car to follow after it.

She was one of the younger wives, one of those who were filled with restrained motion, one of the ones in a dark print dress with flowers. She was looking to the priest for direction, but he was coming apart, and as he did she could not keep out of her mind the million things she was thinking, the things which came to her for no reason, just the way the priest had said "white gardens," and "repose of rivers." She thought of the barges moving slowly up the Hudson in a tunnel of silver and white haze, and of the wind-polished bridges standing in the summer sun. She thought of the men in the church. She knew them. They were firefighters; they were rough, and they carried with them in the church more ambition, sadness, power, courage, greed, and anger than she cared to think about on this day. But despite their battalion's worth of liveliness and strength, they were drawn to the frail priest whose voice broke every now and then in the presence of the wives and the children and the six coffins.

She thought of Brooklyn, of its vastness, and of the things that were happening in Brooklyn, right then. Even as the men were buried, traffic on the streets and parkways would be thick as blood; a hundred million emotions would pass from soul to soul, into the air, into walls in dark hot rooms, into thin groves of trees in the parks. Even as the men were buried in an emerald field dazzling with row upon row of bone-white gravestones, there would be something of resurrection and life all over Brooklyn. But now it was still, and the priest was lost in a moment during which everyone was brought together, and the suited children and lovely wives learned that there are quiet times when the world is touched, and when that which is truly important arises to claim all allegiances.

"It is bitter," said the priest, finally in control of himself, "bitter that only through windows like these do we see clearly into past and future, that in such scenes we burn through our temporal concerns to see that everything that was, is; and that everything that is, will always be." She looked at him, bending her head slightly and pursing her lips in an expression of love and sadness, and he continued. "For we shall always have green gardens, and we shall always have white gardens, too."

Now they knew what he meant, and it shot like electricity through the six wives, the eighteen children, and the blue river of men.

OLIVE HERSHEY

The Burning Shirt

ON THE WAY TO DB'S APARTMENT I heard it announced on the cab radio: a man just set fire to his shirt on the steps of the Museum of Natural History.

What's that? I asked the driver. Who? Why? Was the man *in* the shirt at the time?

I wasn't listening, the driver said.

It was barely raining. Over the tops of buildings the sky was gray and jumbled. When I pushed the buzzer under his name nobody answered. Walking back outside, I admired the ivy, observed the open window on the second story where, clearly, someone was home. I ran a comb through my damp hair and adjusted the moleskin wrapping my toes.

Again I entered the building, this time pressing a different buzzer, and a willowy blonde girl in a long t-shirt came to the door. I'm his daughter, she said, and I told her I was his student.

He didn't answer? she said, smiling. Maybe the buzzer is broken. Daddy is psyched about your book. I followed her up the stairs.

Waving at us from the kitchen DB's arm seemed longer than usual.

Hey, I said, your buzzer didn't work.

You been standing out there in the rain? he said.

Throwing rocks at your windows, I said.

It's been done before, and what would you like to drink?

In the kitchen, square panes looked down on a wet garden. Opposite the bar stood a small, pale desk holding a computer.

That's Marion's desk, he said. Marion is at a feminist conference on Martha's Vineyard finding more reasons to be mad at me. She's mad at me because I'm not fun, he said, squeezing a lemon into a glass. As he bent down for the Vodka on the shelf below the bar I noticed the back of his black striped shirt was wet and drops of sweat jingled in his beard.

The living room was orange. Or pink. A large painting of yellow flowers hung on the wall to the left of a mantel. In front of two windows looking onto the street a low Scandinavian couch flanked by an open armchair. DB sat in the chair. I sat on the couch, crossed my legs, reached for one of the pink pillows and set it on my stomach. This is the way I always sit. Immediately he noticed.

Why are you covering your lap? he said. Do you think I'm going to do something bad to your lap?

Of course not, I said, throwing off the pillow, wrapping my arms around my waist.

What I want to know is what your father said.

About what? I said.

About the book. What else? Was he pleased? Did he believe you?

He was pleased, I said. Why wouldn't he believe me?

Because that day having drinks when he asked if this book was good enough to be published and I told him it was, he said, 'Are you sure?' I'm not used to having my word doubted.

I never doubted anything DB told me.

My father doubts everything, I said. Remember when he asked you what you did for a living and you answered 'I write books?' and he said, 'But what do you really do, you know, for money.' And you said 'That's it. I write books. They pay me to do it.'

And what did your mother say?

What she actually said was 'When do you get their money?' I should have told him this but was embarrassed. I should have known that nothing anyone said would shock him, unless it was cruel or badly phrased. Or shocking news. On the phone the day before while I was inviting him to dinner he said he'd just learned that the eighteen-year-old son of a friend had driven into a low wall someplace in California.

Are you a happy girl? he said, leaning back so the chair creaked.

I keep falling down subway steps. How to thank you? I said. He'd kept me from driving into walls through three years of graduate school.

Remember, he said. First it's for your Mummy and Daddy. So they won't think you're the lowdown goodfornothing they always knew you were. Then it's for you so you won't either.

I wanted to invite him into my lap.

Another Vodka? he said, raising his cigarette like a baton.

Why not? I said, following him out to the kitchen, past a panelled dining room furnished with another small desk, another computer.

That's my study, he said. I've been in this apartment twenty-five years.

There wasn't enough clutter in there for twenty-five years. Not even a piece of scrap paper. While he made drinks I snooped around, pushed open a door between study and living room. Inside was a bed with rumpled pink sheets.

What are you looking for? he called behind me. I slid the door shut, furtively. Laughed. Walked back into the living room and sat down.

What's the matter? he said.

You know everything about me.

Wrong. I know everything about Wilma.

Which is the name of the character in my novel.

You know good and well it's the same thing, I said.

Let's get dinner, he said, and stood up.

On the street the light was a sooty rose. The rain fell in flat drops, far apart so each small impact on my face was a surprise. He held an umbrella high.

Never mind, I said. I love getting wet. Crossing Sixth he had to steer me away from hurrying cabs, holding my elbow as if it were a bird.

I'm drunk as a skunk, I said.

Why? he said. Smart blue eyes looking into my face.

I never drink, for one thing.

Mistake, he said.

I've never been so happy.

Is that true?

Like being in love, I said.

Not exactly.

Okay. Not exactly.

Here we are, he said, dropping my elbow. We were standing at the door of a pleasant-looking restaurant. He'd told me on the phone he liked the place called *Da Silvano*. I couldn't say what street it was on or how we had arrived there.

Do you like to cook? I asked.

Don't we all? I'd fixed something fancy for my daughter the night she got home from Europe, but the plane was late and we were too tired to eat it.

Where's your baby girl? I said. I thought his youngest was six, maybe seven.

She's at her grandmother's. Katherine had a fine time in London. We took her to the Tower Bridge. I bought her three dozen lead soldiers which she adores. We should give a set of those men to Gorbachev and Reagan, don't you think? What I want to know is, how do you like sex?

I tried not to let him see I was startled. Fine, I said, from what I remember.

What about that man who put you up in a tree?

This had happened two years earlier, when I still lived in his neighborhood. Mike, my boyfriend, and I lost the dog we were walking so I asked if he'd help me climb a tree for a wider view.

Pretty strong fellow, DB said. What happened to him?

After Mike helped me down out of the tree he carried me a little way on his shoulders, his hands curled around my knees. Lurching on each stride, I was afraid of falling, and, as we crossed the street in front of the upstairs window where already DB was at his desk, I'm afraid that I squealed because in a moment the front door opened and DB ran down the porch steps.

Haven't I given you enough work yet to keep you out of trouble? he said.

We've broken up, I told him. He wanted a Mommy.

DB looked serious. Perhaps you should be more tolerant.

Maybe, I said, can I have a cigarette?

He handed me one. You can have anything you want, my Dove, he said. Which of my students am I supposed to be sleeping with? And keep your hands off my pillows.

You'll never get it out of *me*, I said. I have my principles.

That's odd. I have no principles except fear.

Bull, I said. DB's principles were few but austere. I couldn't tell if he was digging around in the current dirt or doing some self-promotion. His flirting with me made me feel furious and excited.

How's your Mama? he asked.

Hates my guts, I told him. I had recently discovered this at my son's wedding where Mama announced, "Olive's not interested in catching that bouquet; she's got to stay here and take care of me."

Do you want to get married?

If the right opportunity walked by.

But marriage, Darling. It's the death of love and the graveyard of desire.

I wanted to put my foot in his face.

Then why do it so often? I said.

Fundamental. It's an architectural arrangement, DB said. Hell, there's nothing to stop you. Go find yourself a nice man and marry him. And he walked off to the john. A couple was kissing at a corner table; the man with his hair in a braid had painted his toenails red. I wondered why DB was mad at me.

Are you taking me to dinner? he asked when he sat back down.

Sure, I said. I'd already paid the waiter. We walked out into the groundup diamond streets without his umbrella.

Where we going? I said as he took my hand.

I'm going to buy you a drink, he said, and we walked a long way. Each of his fingers was next to one of mine, and after a while he took my hand and slipped it through his arm.

I don't remember the name of the bar. Black and pink with mirrors. Taking a huge gulp of vermouth I tried to thank him.

If it hadn't been for you I'd still be down on the ranch with those coon dogs, typing.

I don't do this for all my students, he told me, his look steady and warm.

After that I don't remember what we talked about. Maybe the punk couple arrived just as I was becoming severely boring. The man in a black coat and a blue tie looked like a smart subway terrorist. The woman, black-haired like the man, seemed beaten down and grouchy.

When the man sat down next to DB the woman spoke to him in a mean, put-upon voice.

Why can't we ever go home, Earl?

Get our face rolled, Rita, he said, and started writing on a napkin. After a moment he slid the napkin across the bar towards us. DB read it and passed it on.

'Quick Flagellations Admit Perennial Dodges,' was written in an angular scrawl. Taking the pencil from Earl, DB drew a line underneath, then wrote:

'So Are We All.'

Earl read this line and nodded vigorously. Rita appeared catatonic. He began writing a new note on the flip side of the napkin.

'Winsome Figs Blistered Eternally Sweet.'

DB wrote back: 'Dance As Long As You Can.' He passed the napkin to Earl and raised his eyebrows.

Earl read and smiled, showing teeth the color of snuff. The third and last note was cozier.

'Cher ami, nous sommes les anemones dans les jardins d'amour.'

Rita got up from the bar and began yelling at Earl.

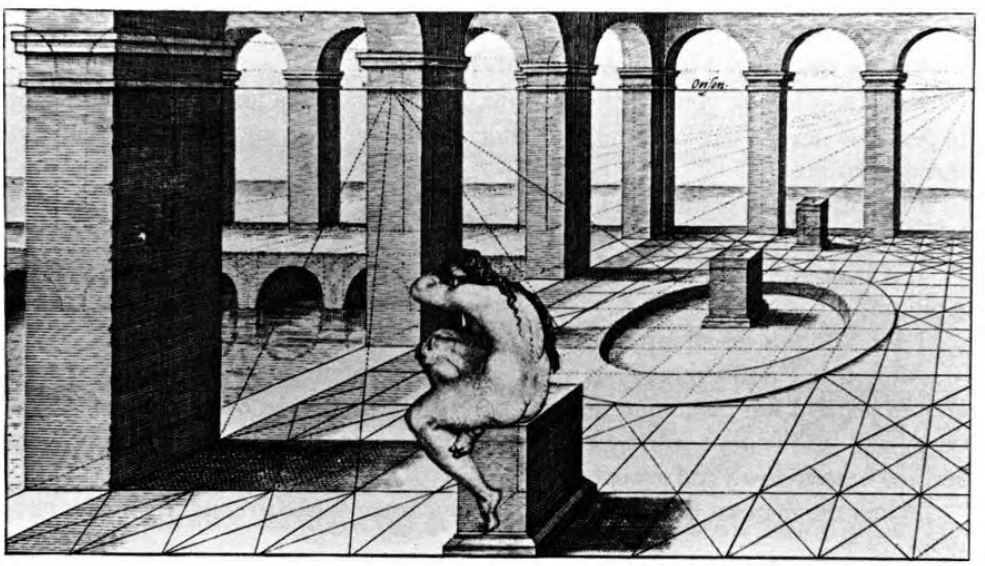
You're the trash masher of the word dump and I had it up to here with you, Creep.

I walked over and tried to put my arm around her.

Don't let it get to you, honey, I started to say but was stopped by a touch on my hip. DB reached into his pocket.

Can I be of assistance? he said.

Money changed hands. The couple left.
DB looked at me.
'My material,' he said, 'and led me toward the door.'



Then, the Sulking Lady was obtained. She showed us her back.
That was the way she felt. She had always felt that way, she said.
She had felt that way since she was four years old.

OSCAR HIJUELOS

Beautiful

IN WRITING THIS BRIEF NOTE ABOUT DONALD BARTHELME, I have thought of many things that would be proper to say about him, and that in this collection will no doubt be mentioned—that he was kindly, sharp, witty, a true "word man" who loved books and writing and dedicated himself to a fierce discipline; that he had a de Chirico in his bathroom, had built a harpsichord while writing one of his novels, *The Dead Father*, threw congenial parties; that in all things he was a lively spirit and a good man to have around, pensive and articulate; that he was courteous to other writers who actively panned him and to whom, as in the case of the late John Gardener, he referred as my "learned but perhaps slightly misguided colleague;" that he was both monkish and private, flamboyant and a lover of a good time, and that he had, in his too brief life, written some of the most original prose in American letters.

Then, too, there was his fondness of and dedication to his students, to whom he left not only the good and innovative books that he had written, but endless advice about what and how to read. He advocated being one's own most severe editor (on the desk in the foyer before his door on 11th Street there was always a neatly organized, beautifully arranged pile of meticulously perfected manuscripts to marvel at), to try to see each story or piece of prose as something new and original, to push one's imagination further, to have disdain for clichés (or to have fun with them), and, finally, above all other advice, which he reiterated over the years, to read, read, read.

But there was something more about Donald that remains for me, as it must for his other former students, a legacy; and that is the image of how a writer should comport himself in the world. For me, his advice about craft, the difficulty about publishing, and matters of taste in literature, fade before my image of him as a nurturing and unselfish teacher and friend, dedicated and, that word again, kind. He took me on as a student in one of his classes at CCNY in 1975, when my writing was as green as green could be. He circled misspellings and stupidities in my manuscripts with severity, and yet, while reading my work out loud, which was his habit then with students, he always took care to pronounce the Spanish phrases I used correctly, with respect for the language. And he had great patience for silliness ("This word, *snapar*, as in *snapar* your photo, did you make that up?"). From the point of view of someone who has taught writing a bit, and who has seen the way established writers in certain rarefied, glorifying atmospheres (such as often occurs at a very famous northeastern writers' conference) destroy the egos of fledgling writers, I can only be amazed at the depth of Donald's compassion

and patience. I studied with him as an undergraduate and graduate student and not once had he ever been vindictive in his treatment of my or any other student's prose. Not once, in the years since I left the program at CCNY, publishing little and working in a more-or-less unliterary and uninspiring job, did he lord the unwriterly aspect of my life over me. He always made time to see me (and other students), even when he must have been incredibly busy and was quite famous. For about six or seven years I would visit him on 11th Street, when he was home from Houston, and we would sit in his living room, drinking thick goblets of Scotch, talking about writing, life and books. These visits with him couldn't have been too exciting for Donald, but they kept me in touch with the idea of being a writer, even when the rest of my life did not support it; his easy and generous manner has always remained with me; it saw me through a long fallow period and in the days, 1985 or so, when I first started to publish and began living, more or less, the life I had always imagined a writer must live, his support and kindness still never failed me.

I could tell specific anecdotes—Donald and Marion at my wedding; Donald at a Christmas party at my house; Donald nailing an arrogant writer, for whom he had written a generous blurb, to the wall, when this writer kept asking, "What do you really think about my book?"; Donald referring to Norman Mailer as "our leader" at a PEN event; that he used to beat a snare drum to jazz; that I would always ask him to jam with me and some flaked out rock n' roll musician friends and he'd say, "no thank you!"; that he never liked to ride the subways, always tipped too much in taxis; or that Giancarlo Bonacina of Mondadori takes special pride in the fact that he was the translator of Donald's *Snow White* into Italian; or that he always used to speak about his brother Frederick with complete love, saying, "I don't know why there isn't room for the two of us"; or that after I had published my first novel I had said that I associated novel writing with Swiss clock-making, and he told me, "BONG, BONG!" or that while visiting him after his second daughter was born he had, as she screamed about, the most bemused yet delighted expression on his captainly face; or that one evening he told me that he was concerned about his daughter Anna's decision to become an actress out in La Jolla; or that she walked in one evening and looked devastatingly beautiful and Donald was proud; or that he once described Gore Vidal as seeming "a little uptight"; or that he admired Mr. Vidal's historical novels and had once thought of doing one himself; that I told him that his story "Cortéz and Montezuma" was beautiful and that he thought I was trying to flatter a former teacher; that once, as a student, I had walked from 129th up to 133rd with him and had asked him if he had read Borges, and he snapped back, "Why are you asking me!", but that, years later, he had described with deep affection a dinner with Borges; that always he would ask me about former fellow students—Ted Mooney, Wesley Brown, Linsey Abrahms, Philip Graham—his way of finding out about their lives (he recommended Padgett Powell as being especially noteworthy to read); or that Donald and Studs Terkel had been two of the judges who had chosen Ms. Erdrich's chapter from *Love Medicine* for the first Chicago Prize, and that during an interview with Mr. Terkel on his radio show in Chicago, in August 1990, Mr. Terkel said to me, "So you studied with Don Barthelme, did you, you lucky fellow, what a nice man; or that in touring around the country I have met people

who swear on Donald's writing; or that—

For me, whatever my memories of Donald, it comes down to the fact that I think of him as a mentor, a word he disliked, in the sense that he helped me, as a teacher, recommending me for grants, blurbing my first book, and always asking, "How is it going?"—a friend who showed me constant support. It's been 15 years since I first met him; two years since I last saw him with Peter Taylor and Padgett Powell walking out of an Arts & Letters Institute Ceremony on a rainy, windy day on 155th Street; a year and a half since I last spoke to Donald, when he told me that he was not feeling terribly well. I was in Rome, where he had just visited, having had a residency at the American Academy, when I happened by the headline in the *International Herald Tribune* that he had just passed away. I was staying at the Academy because I had been a fellow there in 1985; all I could do was ask the fellows about Donald, "What did you think?" And the answer came back, as it always does in this head, "Beautiful."

EDWARD HIRSCH

Drawings And Chocolate

I LOVED DONALD BARTHELME'S WORK long before I came to love or even to know him as a man. For years I marveled at the bewildering range of his ideas, at the disconcertingly contemporary character of his voice. That voice was stubbornly idiosyncratic and individual—he never sounded remotely like anyone else. I admired the rich fund of his references, his laconic wit and astonishing incongruities, his ironic well-honed use of our language. I still think that as an innovator of short forms he was our Calvino; as a tireless investigator of a peculiarly American void, he was our Beckett; and as a master of compression, of unlikely but strangely resonant combinations, he was the Joseph Cornell of the short story. It was after I came to know Don that I began to realize that he was a heartbreaking as well as an innovative writer, that small nuggets of autobiography are lying everywhere on the surface of his stories mixed in amongst the humorous curiosities and cultural dross, and that there is an enormous depth and reserve of sadness in his work. He had a dialogic or double-minded imagination, and tended to see everything in contradictory or irreconcilable terms. Thus the omnipresence of two voices in his work: the Q. and A., the call and response, the open-ended dislocated conversation. And yet his work is also animated by instances of supreme happiness and well-being, moments of radiance. He could imagine lunching with the Holy Ghost—a character he also called his "main man"—and praising a simple soup "in an ecstasy of admiration." He could praise a day when, as he wrote, "the singing sunlight turns you every way but loose" and later "you accidentally notice the sublime." To spend a block of time with Donald—as well as to read large amounts of his work—was to feel the inevitable pressing weight of his sadness, but it was also to experience sudden unexpected moments of intense joy.

There is a passage at the end of the story "Chablis" that always brings him back to me, that summons him up. It presents, characteristically, an image of a man alone, sitting by the window in the faint blue light of early morning, drinking, smoking, worrying. He was a world-class worrier. He always seemed to be sitting at a window, brooding, remembering his days as black sheep. The story concludes:

> I sit up in the early morning, at my desk on the second floor of our house. The desk faces the street. At five-thirty in the morning, the runners are already out, individually or in pairs, running toward rude red health. I'm sipping a glass of Gallo Chablis with an ice cube in it, smoking, worrying. I worry that the baby may jam a

> kitchen knife into an electrical outlet while she's wet. I've put those little plastic plugs into all the electrical outlets but she's learned how to pop them out. I've checked the Crayolas. They've made the Crayolas safe to eat—I called the head office in Pennsylvania. She can eat a whole box of Crayolas and nothing will happen to her. . . .
>
> I remember the time, thirty years ago, when I put Herman's mother's Buick into a cornfield, on the Beaumont highway. There was another car in my lane, and I didn't hit it, and it didn't hit me. I remember veering to the right and down into the ditch and up through the fence and coming to rest in the cornfield and then getting out to wake Herman and the two of us going to see what the happy drunks in the other car had come to, in the ditch on the other side of the road. That was when I was a black sheep, years and years ago. That was skillfully done, I think. I get up, congratulate myself in memory, and go in to look at the baby.

When I read this passage I hear Donald's voice again: wry, laconic, bemused. What unspoken depths it seemed to contain. I remember the time over drinks when he reminded me that he was once a black sheep, like me, and that former black sheep have to stick together and help other black sheep. "All writers are black sheep," he said. "A writing program is a whole flock of black sheep."

I first had a clue to the depth of Don's feeling about the Creative Writing Program during my first full year of teaching at the University of Houston. One morning the phone rang about six o'clock. Donald was in New York and he'd been up for hours. "The program is burning and you're asleep," he said.

"I'm not asleep. I'm just not thinking about the program."

He sighed. He had a lovely sigh—it was weighty, humorous, world-weary. "Well, I'm thinking about it," he said. "It's time to put our queer shoulders to the wheel."

Donald had begun to teach at the University of Houston, his alma mater, in 1982. It was in the infant days of the Creative Writing Program, and he worried over it like a concerned parent, a shepherd in sheep's clothing. His students called him "Uncle Don" behind his back. He kept his New York apartment but liked the idea of building a literary community in his home town. He liked it, too, that the program was run collectively by the writing faculty. He did not want to be the director, nor did he want to be directed. One time he came to our Tuesday afternoon lunch and announced that we needed a Dada happening. Something to subvert authority and boost the morale of the troops. Another day he decided that he and I ought to write a piece together for a reading at the museum, something for the occasion. He could seem so isolated himself, so unreachable, and yet he loved the idea of artistic collaboration. It was his idea to write a dialogue. "You offer me a course in the Greater Subjects," he said. "I'll teach you something about money. That's a subject you don't know anything about."

I must have called him a hundred times during the four years that we worked together. Out of friendship. Seeking advice. He always seemed to be sitting by the phone. Our conversation was clipped, practical. He never lingered, he liked to get things done. Once he called me back around six-thirty in the morning. "How's

the Empire?"

"The Empire is a little damaged at the moment."

"Damaged but still functioning." He paused. "We need to expand the borders. We need to pilfer and plunder. More writers, better writing."

Donald talked about art more easily than he did about literature. He often said that his favorite job was the time in his youth when he had served as the interim director of the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. He called himself a young pup who had moved to New York under the outstretched wings of Thomas Hess and Harold Rosenberg. He liked to edit, to cut and paste, to fool around with making art. In one piece he put a headdress on a photograph of Henry James and thus turned a pale face into a red skin. He designed all the ads and brochures for the program, said a couple of times that he could very cheerfully have been a typographer. A few years ago my wife, Janet Landay, invited Donald to co-curate a show with her at the Glassell School of Art. One + One paired writers and artists to collaborate on new work. The co-curators acted as matchmakers, rounding up, in Don's words, "the usual suspects." Most of the pairings went smoothly, but not all of them. One afternoon Janet telephoned Don and said that she felt as if she were standing on the edge of a giant snake-pit. "Now calm down," he told her. "It's only a medium-sized snakepit."

I have known no one else who could so capably turn giant snakepits into medium-sized snakepits by his practical generosity and essential kindness.

In the section entitled "A Manual for Sons" from his novel *The Dead Father*, Don wrote:

> Many fathers did not wish, especially, to be fathers; the thing came upon them, seized them, by accident, or by someone else's careful design, or by simple clumsiness on someone's part. Nevertheless this class of father—the inadvertent—is often among the most tactful, light-handed, and beautiful of fathers.

This passage sums up one major aspect of Don's character for me—not only as the head of a family, but also as a teacher, a mentor, and a friend. So often he seemed to be the inadvertent father, the one who never planned or intended to have a family, who was apparently pressed into action by someone else, and yet turned out to be the most tactful, light-handed, and beautiful of fathers, the low-key one who ironically, gracefully, and profoundly bore the burdens and shouldered the responsibilities. Once Don knew you, once you were impressed upon him as a person, I think he felt thereafter that, in some sense, he had to worry about you, to help take care of you, to make sure you were all right. He did not make a big point of this: "Fatherhood can be, if not conquered, at least turned down in this generation."

Don disavowed direct emotion. He preferred to work behind the scenes, to help in pragmatic ways. He had a large Southern sense of graciousness and hospitality, and yet he could also be painfully shy and socially uncomfortable—God knows at one time or another he could send anyone into paroxysms of social discomfort. In a crowded room he always looked as if he were just about to bolt. And yet one never doubted the depth of his feeling, the fire under the cool surface,

how much he cared for other people. He struggled with his own demons—everyone who knew him was aware of that—and he transformed those demons into some of the most imaginative, poignant, humorous, and creative stories of our time. I think that we have just begun to realize that his work was a large spiritual project, a quasi-philosophical, quasi-theological quest, and over the years he was engaged in a playfully innovative but very real and deadly serious search for some ultimate truth and meaning.

I was lucky to have been in Rome with Donald the last spring of his life. We were both in residence at the American Academy. We saw each other almost every day for a couple of months. He was in rare form—high spirited, unusually sociable, almost carefree—or as carefree as it was possible for him to be. It was no secret that he had resisted coming to Italy. "I spend my life not going to places," he once told me. "That's what a writer does. He doesn't go places. He stays home and tries to think of things. He wanders around so that he can write a few pages of prose." Once he had arrived, however, Don was stunned by the city, and he was surprised, too, by the intensity of his own happiness. He said many times that he had never been happier. He wandered around and walked for hours each day, observing things with his usual acute and idiosyncratic eye, soaking up city life. He was in that stage of finishing his novella *The King* when the prose rolled and imagination flowed. Everything he did was lucky, right. He himself felt—and indeed one felt for him—the happiness of his extravagant imagination fulfilled.

I don't like going on without Donald, but I will always be grateful for the chance to have worked closely with him, to have observed and known him. His friendship deepened and changed me. I miss him: he was such an unlikely and consoling friend. Most of all, I am grateful for the fiction which he left behind. That work—which everywhere bears the stamp of his character—is his unique and lasting gift to us. It survives. I open a book and hear his voice. He is speaking in the voice of Paul Klee. He says:

> We arrive at Cambrai. The planes are unloaded, six men for each plane. The work goes quickly. No one questions my altered manifest. The weather is clearing. After lunch I will leave to begin the return journey. My release slip and travel orders are ready, but the lieutenant must come and sign them. I wait contentedly in the warm orderly room. The drawing I did of the collapsed canvas and rope is really very good. I eat a piece of chocolate. I am sorry about the lost aircraft but not overmuch. The war is temporary. But drawings and chocolate go on forever.

RICHARD HOWARD

And Tell Sad Stories

In Memoriam Donald Barthelme

MANY OF US, inexorably
subservient to your cool evasions,
found them more flattering than candor
could ever be: you made it seem naïve
to inquire further. I wonder still
whether anything so crude as a question
—"Donald, can we talk about ourselves?"—
might have cleared the reef on which intimacy
founders. Nor in all your inventions

(I have read them all) is the secret
ever betrayed: how you managed to compel
Caliban appetites—which despise
sex and live for it (a form of suicide)—
to serve an Ariel art. By the book,
delight seemed to be your exclusive *métier*,
underpinning all experience:
an elation in the self *no matter what.*
Oh, we guessed there must be something more,

or something other—catacomb words
which remain alien to the text, unsaid.
But all that unknown territory
is sealed off now, dark there. Even dark, we could
detect the coercion of cadence;
"Some falls are anything but free," was my first
thought upon finding you gaunt, sober,
smokeless, angry that life, if it was to be
life at all, forced such relinquishings.

"Choked, chastened—changed!" I marveled, hoping
I too had changed, else how could friendship survive?
It would be Freud's old joke once again,
which so grimly cajoles our will: two Jews meet

in the street. "Cohen, good to see you,
but how you've changed! You used to be a tall man,
now look at you . . . You weren't bald before,
what happened to your hair . . ." "But my name isn't Cohen . . ."
"So, you've changed your name too!" We succumb

to recognition, its sealing powers.
Must real life be the life one does not lead?
Proof there is no sterner moralist
than pleasure, you were exiled from Paradise
to the one country—your own—where you
were not a prophet. In that partial *patrie*
—you were my friend, I was never yours—
the text impersonates the author. Your absence
remains a mode of creating life.

KENNETH KOCH

Getting To Know Donald Barthelme

I MET DON IN HOUSTON IN THE LATE FIFTIES or early sixties. He invited me down to read my poems at the Contemporary Arts Center. He was very pleasant, genial, and ironic. He was very funny. Irony and all, he seemed mild compared to the people I knew in New York. He was very attentive, took very good care of the nervous visiting poet. We spent a lot of time in the car. He explained drinking in Texas to me. The dry and wet rules were complicated and I don't remember them. But people kept a bottle in the glove compartment. Just in case. Beer was drunk during the daytime to provide a "base" for the whiskey to be drunk later. Actually we didn't drink very much. Don had a nice bunch of friends, sort of artistic exiles in the wild wastes of Houston, and he introduced me to them. Don's wife was teaching at an all-Black college and he asked me if I would also give a reading there, which I did. It was at the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, when being allowed to eat in certain places was a big issue. I got a surprising (favorable but almost too favorable to be believed) reaction to my poem "Lunch." At the Contemporary Arts Center someone in the audience asked me why I didn't make up my own language and write poems in that. I think the idea was that if I was going to be so obscure I should take it all the way. Don was good-humored about and pleased by me (and my poetry) as some odd sort of event he was bringing to his native city—like its first air balloon or TV set. He was smiling almost all the time. Of course, I liked him a lot. When I read his stories I liked him (and felt flattered) even more. I was especially moved by big sentences, which seemed sometimes to go beyond what sentences are supposed to do:

> "I understand," Emily said, but she didn't, because she was an animal.

His prose seemed connected to poetry not just in its parodies of it—

> "You gave me heroin first a year ago," Sylvia said.

—(Don for a while seems to have been haunted by Eliot's Hyacinth Girl) but also in its music, its suggestiveness, the ways it went from one thing to another. This is more of the "Sylvia" passage:

> I showed the blue-and-green map to Sylvia. "Your parts are green," I said. "You gave me heroin first a year ago," Sylvia said. She ran off down George C. Marshall Alley, uttering shrill cries.

> Miss R. pushed me into a large room painted white (jolting and dancing in the soft light, and I was excited! and there were people watching!) in which there were two chairs. . . .

When Don moved to New York I used to visit him in his sunlighty somewhat sparsely furnished apartment on West Eleventh Street. We'd see each other most often when one of his friends from Houston whom, thanks to Don's enthusiasm, I'd gotten to know, would come to town. Don had a strong conception of the "new work," of a kind of writing he thought existed but that hadn't yet become properly known. He had a certain zeal about it, thinking of anthologies and being a lively force in the creation of two magazines, *Fiction* and *Location*. Thanks to Don, a number of writers got to know each other's work and to know each other and to believe they were in some way engaged in the same exhilarating enterprise. This seemed close to the great gift he had in his stories for bringing things together in an unanticipatable way.

WILLIAM LANTRY

Nicotiana Sylvestris

"and offered the master a fag, the which he took, accepting too a light . . . " Henry 215; 3-4

blooms near our Southwest fence, smoke-white (beneath
Clitoria, flame vine, and muscadine)
fragrant, seductive, strange—Teresa, charmed
plucked gazed inhaled once, cast down the spray
(with her composite grace) into the pond.

Morning. Inverted koi, grown weirdly thin
form bunched, unstable islands. Thus, the French
dry full veined leaves, slice, macerate, then spray
for diverse types of vertebrates, or non-,
but we, compulsive, self-moved, do the same

alone: my aunt grew thin four years ago,
James Wright, before I met him, slimmed and fled,
and now, in this year's canicule, one more
of too much loss to name: self-implements.
Let's sing of species lost: Teresa, north

or surfaces unbroken by those koi
reflecting cirrus blooms, incarnadine,
or wings of herons, pulsing down the wind,
at evening, cries of nightjar, fenced-in curves
where aphids swarm the corkscrewed willow's leaves.

CYNTHIA MACDONALD

Tributaries: Collage For Donald

The Plane Flight, 1985

ON THE FLIGHT HOME TO HOUSTON after Donald and I had read at the SMU literary festival, Donald said, "That poem you read about young wives . . . were you thinking about Glenn and me?"

"Yes. And others. Though it should really have been 'middle-aged husbands'."

"I'll claim the poem as mine," he said.

ENVY OF OLD HUSBANDS

Starting over. Like water gone
Cold. Turn to off;
Wait five minutes; push the red
Button until flame ignites.
Is there a touch of blue in it, or is that
A memory of old gas stoves
Where the blue came from something the Gas Co.
Put in to warn us of dangers?
Warming. A ring of dancing flames.
The silken richness of young wives
Fit for a Sultan, meet for a King, appropriate
For middle age when men start over.
And they pick well: beauties, kind, able to
Discuss K'ang-hsi or Kant insightfully,
Incisively. Able to give old husbands
Babies. But old husbands do not want babies. Theirs
Are grown. Young wives do and what is meet is met.

I watch with envy, not wishing to be the young wife
With all the truths and loves of motherhood—
I've had them—but to be the old father
Whose years can be redeemed, like bonds
Which mature in a safe deposit box, as easily as
Opening a lovely green cabbage and finding—
O, yes, I do wish it—an even lovelier baby
With nurse and lover attached like a gift card.

The Memorial Service, Houston, August, 1989

I first met Donald in 1971 when he came to Sarah Lawrence. One of the stories he read then, from his book, *City Lights*, was "On Angels." I'd like to read it now.

ON ANGELS

The death of God left the angels in a strange position. They were overtaken suddenly by a fundamental question. One can attempt to imagine the moment. How did they *look* at the instant the question invaded them, flooding the angelic consciousness, taking hold with terrifying force? The question was, "What are angels?"

New to questioning, unaccustomed to terror, unskilled in aloneness, the angels (we assume) fell into despair.

The question of what angels "are" has a considerable history. Swedenborg, for example, talked to a great many angels and faithfully recorded what they told him. Angels look like human beings, Swedenborg says. "That angels are human forms, or men, has been seen by me a thousand times." And again: "From all of my experience, which is now of many years, I am able to state that angels are wholly men in form, having faces, eyes, ears, bodies, arms, hands, and feet. . . ." But a man cannot see angels with his bodily eyes, only with the eyes of the spirit.

Swedenborg has a great deal more to say about angels, all of the highest interest: that no angel is ever permitted to stand behind another and look at the back of his head, for this would disturb the influx of good and truth from the Lord: that angels have the east, where the Lord is seen as a sun, always before their eyes; and that angels are clothed according to their intelligence. "Some of the most intelligent have garments that blaze as if with flame, others have garments that glisten as if with light; the less intelligent have garments that are glistening white or white without the effulgence; and the still less intelligent have garments of various colors. But the angels of the inmost heaven are not clothed."

All of this (presumably) no longer obtains.

Gustav Davidson, in his useful *Dictionary of Angels*, has brought together much of what is known about them. Their names are called: the angel Elubatel, the angel Friagne, the angel Gaap, the angel Hatiphas (genius of finery), the angel Murmur (a fallen angel), the angel Mqttro, the angel Or, the angel Rash, the angel Sandalphon (taller than a five hundred years' journey on foot), the angel Smat. Davidson distinguishes categories: Angels of Quaking, who surround the heavenly throne; Masters of Howling and Lords of Shouting, whose work is praise; messengers, mediators, watchers, warners. Davidson's *Dictionary* is a very large book; his bibliography

lists more than eleven hundred items.

The former angelic consciousness has been most beautifully described by Joseph Lyons (in a paper titled *The Psychology of Angels*, published in 1957). Each angel, Lyons says, knows all that there is to know about himself and every other angel. "No angel could ever ask a question, because questioning proceeds out of a situation of not knowing, and of being in some way aware of not knowing. An angel cannot be curious; he has nothing to be curious about. He cannot wonder. Knowing all that there is to know, the world of possible knowledge must appear to him as an ordered set of facts which is completely behind him, completely fixed and certain and within his grasp. . . ."

But this, too, no longer obtains.

It is a curiosity of writing about angels that, very often, one turns out to be writing about men. The themes are twinned. Thus one finally learns that Lyons, for example, is really writing not about angels but about schizophrenics—thinking about men by invoking angels. And this holds true of much other writing on the subject—a point, we may assume, that was not lost on the angels when they began considering their new relation to the cosmos, when the analogues (is an angel more like a quetzal or more like a man? or more like music?) were being handed about.

We may further assume that some attempt was made at self-definition by function. An angel is what he does. Thus it was necessary to investigate possible new roles (you are reminded that this is impure speculation). After the lamentation had gone on for hundreds and hundreds of whatever the angels use for time, an angel proposed that lamentation be the function of angels eternally, as adoration was formerly. The mode of lamentation would be silence, in contrast to the unceasing chanting of Glorias that had been their former employment. But it is not in the nature of angels to be silent.

A counterproposal was that the angels affirm chaos. There were to be five great proofs of the existence of chaos, of which the first was the absence of God. The other four could surely be located. The work of definition and explication could, if done nicely enough, occupy the angels forever, as the contrary work has occupied human theologians. But there is not much enthusiasm for chaos among the angels.

The most serious because most radical proposal considered by the angels was refusal—that they would remove themselves from being, not be. The tremendous dignity that would accrue to the angels by this act was felt to be a manifestation of spiritual pride. Refusal was refused.

There were other suggestions, more subtle and complicated, less so, none overwhelmingly attractive.

> I saw a famous angel on television; his garments glistened as if with light. He talked about the situation of angels now. Angels, he said, are like men *in some ways.* The problem of adoration is felt to be central. He said that for a time the angels had tried adoring each other, as we do, but had found it, finally, "not enough." He said they are continuing to search for a new principle.

Somehow, through the years, this story became a focal point for the occasional discussions Donald and I had about the border where fiction and poetry sometimes overlap, a kind of no-man's land. We were both interested in this territory and several times brought our individual graduate workshops together to look at fight, flight and merger. Last year, trying once again to pin down what distinguished poetry-connected fiction from prose-connected poetry, Donald asked me if I knew.

"Different music," I said, "but I can only attempt to prove that by reading stuff to you. . . . How would you answer your own question?"

"Poetry is more difficult to understand. You have to be smarter."

(In an interview he'd said, "Poetry should only be attempted by saints and Villions.") Thinking of a prototypical Barthelme dialogue which he and Ed Hirsch had scripted and performed in Mr. Bones/Mr. Jones style as an entre-acte to their reading at the Museum of Fine Arts, I suggested,

"How about more money for fiction?"

"That, too," he said.

How and where Gounod's Faust got added to the dialogue, I can't remember. But when our discussions about university matters became particularly murky or frustrating, we'd reprise our 'smarter'/'music'/'money' dialogue, then finish by singing a bit of Marguerite's Ascension: "*Anges pures, anges radieux, Portes mon ames aux bras des cieux.*" (Pure angels, radiant angels, Lift my soul into the arms of heaven). Donald loved theater; that's evident in the voices in his stories and in the way he read them, in the pleasure he'd had when some of them were staged in New York a few years ago, and in the way he referred to various public events the Writing Program or its community support group, Inprint, were planning as "our dog and pony shows" or "circuses." Just before he left for Rome last spring, he proposed that the writing faculty make up an opera and perform it for the next Inprint fund-raiser. This sense of performance pleasure was, I believe, an important element in why he wrote the way he wrote.

When I first imagined my part in this service, I thought I'd share with you some more "Life and Times with Donald" stories. But I've found I couldn't, just wasn't ready to turn what I knew of him into something so fixed—the way a snapshot becomes the only visual memory, a limited rectangle of experience. Donald is still too much here to be stop-framed that way. He is here with us, with his parents and siblings, and Marion and Anna and Katherine, with the world through his friends and his books.

But there is one more connection to "On Angels." When Donald was hospitalized shortly after his return from Rome, a doctor checking to see if his lucidity had been affected by a chemical imbalance asked,

"Do you know where you are, Mr. Barthelme?"
"In the antechamber of Heaven," Donald replied.

How can we say goodby to Donald unless we summon irony? He would have wanted that. But I can't.

> The Death of God left the angels in a strange position. They were overtaken suddenly by a fundamental question. . . . What are angels? . . . I saw a famous angel on television; his garments glistened as if with light. He talked about the situation of angels now. Angels, he said, are like men *in some ways.* The problem of adoration is felt to be central. He said that for a time the angels had tried adoring each other, as we do, but had found it finally "not enough." He said they were continuing to search for a new principle.

The Posthumous Conferring of the Doctor of Humane Letters, University of Houston, May, 1990

What must be said before we express love and other parochial concerns is that Donald Barthelme was one of a very few truly original, therefore seminal, North American writers in the third and forth quarters of the twentieth century. World class, he was honored even more in Europe than in the United States.

The word collage was often used to describe Bartheleme's work; it is accurate. But what made up the collage? Barthelme was a scavenger, able to soar above the fictive terrain and spot just the gleaming bit, the gauzy wisp, the jazzy jingle which he needed.

In a time when the effort is to tame fiction by packaging it with a name as if it were *Cheerios* or *Captain Crunch*, Barthelme's writing eludes critical categorization: realism with its nineteenth century links, minimalism with its brand name emotions, fiction/ficciones with its philosophical bents and convolutions, magical realism with its rich imagery and sensual, political preoccupations, associational fiction, family stories, myth, moral fiction. He plundered them all and put the bounty together to give us something we hadn't seen before—the astonishments and delights of his ten-plus books. He, himself, called what he made "pieces," "broke-back fables," and "bastard reporting." As he tells us in his story, "How I Write My Songs":

> A knowledge of all the different types of songs that are commonly accepted is helpful. To give you an idea of the various types of songs there are I am going to tell you how I wrote various of my own, including "Rudelle," "Last Night," "Sad Dog Blues," and others—how I came to write these songs and where I got the idea and what the circumstances were, more or less, so that you will be able to do the same thing.

Here we have the flat, plainness of American Speech, used ironically, but in Barthelme's work irony was often paired with tenderness, plain-speech with elab-

oration and embellishment, the colloquial with the metaphysical, grace—both in gesture and spirit—with pratfall, wit with raunch, love with dissolution, Gregorian chant with an Exxon tank truck, "the hot meat of romance" with "the dull gravy of common sense."

We are presenting this posthumous degree to him today because of his achievement as a writer, but also because he is one of us. Donald Barthelme grew up in Houston, went to Catholic schools, graduated from Lamar High School and attended the University of Houston. He loved both the City and the University, would virtually buttonhole people to tell them that U of H was a major contributor to the city, to tell them the University's contribution was insufficiently recognized, abandoning any hint of irony to sing the Institution's praises as if it were set to a Verdi triumphal march.

As a student at the University, Barthelme became a Cougar newspaper columnist, wrote a musical revue, cut the classes he didn't like, immersed himself in the ones he did, particularly philosophy, and was, in the words of classmate, Joe Maranto, "too busy to graduate." Barthelme took what he needed as he did later in his fiction. And gave so much back—his generosity and amazingly hard work as a colleague and teacher. He was a central force in making the Creative Writing Program one of the very best in the country and in bringing a literary life to a city which had not really had one. We loved him; we honor him; we will miss him.

PALMER NORDGREN

Waiting For . . .

—TIME IS THE FETISH OF THE CHURCH OF THE FUTURE.

The message comes over the p.a. of a prefabricated shelter. There's silence. Rain drums on a tin roof. We look at our watch. We're traveling innoxium. Public address has been in a slump since electricity, we think, then realize the thought is yours. Is our mind, then, just a conduit?

We squirm, alone on a bench on a cement slab among I-beams, a minimal treatment of a railway station. It's the p.m. The bench is fiberglass.

—In a slump rhetorically speaking, we add, and in gloom admit these last pale words are our own. The bayous fume, sedated. Crickets sizzle like hot grease.

Innoxium. A joke, here, in the noxious bowels of Gasline, Texas, where 'innocence' is just a cover. We're operatives, really, penetrants into certain known casuistic societies, the same whose exhibitions always end by whipping up a world free for enterprise. And tonight we're waiting for your letter—we're waiting out the arrival of the post.

We look at our watch again. Another message:

—Time is the knottedness of the string in the maze.

More silence. We see a plot, find ourselves questioning the reliability of a p.a. whose medium is the aphorism. Pattern recognition is one of the forced labors of the Eternal Brood. We look at our watch another time. A third message:

—Aphorisms are irony's arteries, hardening in the corpus of the world's dead fathers.

Lots of silence. The rain pounds, then finally lets up. Your voice returns to us: a skewed one, that, you say, unless *corpus* imply *custom*. Then rather clever.

We consider events. Two pages in, we're saddled with a crowded persona and an unruly public address system. And we're hearing voices. We try to focus on our mission. The post, we tell ourselves, is just so many promises this far from dispatch. But we know why it will come here, to this desolate place: there's been a coverup; we buried you just across the tracks. And so tonight it's delivered, finally, the letter you would have laughed at writing, the one announcing an intellectual apocalypse which sweeps away the lintballs both modern and post-, creates in their place the very end of all Ismism.

We're groggy. A counter-agent has just shot us full of red dye #3, right in the hip, a random act, we're expected to shuffle off. We start confusing slabbed with slab, death with dearth, post- with pasties, see spirals of metaphor. To stay awake we do anything at all, watch the Texas dusk as it's lowered into a vault of fluorescent light, suck in chestfuls of clammy gulf air.

In our stupor the act inspires a mist of weather-words to match—the skies convulse, conspire to purge the air of its catastrophic smells, flesh of fish left by dragnets, carbon monoxide, cracked oil. . . .

Please, you say. Let us depart from this little fugue. It's an order from the Editor Incarnate, and we obey; no more bad weather. We merely wait, benched, in that ill-constructed wayside. You are after all the Great Guide, our fictional creator even, now done, now non-, the one we owe breath to, the one who's given us our itch for illogic and booze. And as we're the model progeny, sons and daughters both, armed for deeds, shielded by inheritance, we realize we leave our mind's landscape only to meet you in yours—to face You, the Dead Father. And you have come healthy as purgation to be draped and dropped by us all, The Holy Corpus, over this unknown edge of the squared sphere—Deity of Paradox, India Inkster, White Bull—to be served your final deathly dose. The pit where we've pitched you we've filled in with landfill. The bulldozers doze.

Our landscapes converge, are divvied by the tracks, their backdrop butane flame. We're uneasy here. Your words were the extract of clarity, fired then skewed in painful mosaics, now monuments. When you made a speech, it meant you made a speech. When we make a speech. . . .

Our words are mischosen, our minds are flimsy limbs. We lie upon the bench and realize our debts, we owe something more than to die by sabotage, before exposing . . . what? The Truth? The truth that there are truths that there are . . . tricks upon travellers?

Anyway, the night train will come; we tell ourselves this to touch one thing we know for certain. We review our qualifications as scions: our fatal flaws, our *bildungsroman* dreams, our narrow escapes from death, our abductions, our nurses, our journeys in vegetable baskets. The night train will come. We make a list:

Other Things We Know for Certain:

—there should be background music at all points of departure and arrival;
—such music should be interrupted periodically by a chime and a p.a., wherupon glottal sounds should issue from an all-weather speaker;
—an arrival-announcing should occur;
—also a lighting of the platform lights;
—nocturnal Creatures should stream into shadows;
—sounds of engines droning, airhorns horning. . . .

And so on until we've exhausted the certain, and led more by distraction than motive, move on to things we know less well:

Things Not So Well Known, Nor Likely to Happen Soon:

—In your role of Inscrutable Sage, your acquiring a sudden taste for weather talk, and for small talk of all kinds;
—Your then lecturing upon small talk *topoi*, where the species might be mounted and the short ride taken to one of the many language dumps lying prolix on the edges of this story;

—Your instructing us, in the guise of King of Professors, as to how to bury real stinkers formulaically, beneath layers of tropes, exhaustive lists, and other generic detritus;
—Your starting a program called Fuel for the Mills, and donning the mantle of Energy Czar.

The implications are distasteful to us. We leave the category with two other unlikely events: the station lights shorting into six-color display, and The Modern Age, a streamliner now on permanent travelling exhibit, slinging its broken string of glass through this story. We push on into the even more implausible:

The Even More Implausible:

—And see that the entire previous list has to be moved here. To which we add:
—stepping on Noxema bottles;
—sudden attacks of gout;
—the appearance of rodeo and soap-opera stars;
and such. The minutes pass, the list grows long. We end it maliciously, with:
—one of us cleaning out humongus heaps from the language's language dumps, solo.

We hear Herculean horse-laughs. We picture you pulling from the heap the carcass of a verbal Caliban, reviving it with quick easy breaths of line, giving it actual eloquence. The demonstration weighs down upon us, hard-presses us, presses us, im- to di-. Our own stuttering stunts leave us exhausted. Forget about truth, we're now looking for solace. But we've exhausted all but the unwise for which to hope:

The Unwise for which to Hope:

There's nothing here but a trio of plot intrigues for our story:
—a sultry and mysterious young woman who's blowing smoke from across the platform;
—a porter (a dangerous nihilist leader) and a plot brewing to hijack the train;
—and an activist choir a-choiring on the platform of the coach, a rap song called 'Great Good.'

Finally, we write down the most supernally fond hope of all foolish hopes to hope for:

The Ridiculous:

—That from the shadow lands before us, out where the earthmovers have pushed a cairn up like a whopping upset wok on the gas-jet horizon, will come rising like no Lazarus but walloping, Christmasless, happy as hell to be here, and with minions many minioning, The Dead Father Himself. . . .

We're awake now and resolved—this fantasy-even-if-only has allowed the setting of so-to-speak mainsails. We call on your most esoteric teachings, captain of the vessel. We will our story into shape and resistance—see it as tangles of head,

foot and claw, gangles of as-it-were-rigging, running and stood, heaved from alitural lazarets, with ratlines strung from hemp and rime, made 'inexhaustible by mind' as you once instructed. Our purpose compassed, we return to our tale: We're leaning up against a wall of corrugated metal now, hands tucked in jeans, posed on one leg, sweating slightly, watching the sky, a Writer waiting for a Moment.

Our words flash over the night boldfaced, like lightning; we're shocked to find that our narrative's all been miswritten! It's at most an ad for a mystery—sleuth, plot, death, killer—it's all too ingenuous. Plot-turns on Capital Gains (a monster a pea-shooter hits), death of a prominent figure (even if a Host of Patriarchs), a generic killer (let us sing),

> Exxon, American Tobacco, Dow,
> the unions at their side,
> the weapon the lacing of the Cow
> the tarring of the Wide;

it's jingle junk, and all the ten thousand premeditated poisons lacing your Eternal Voice—all certainly part of an *enormous crime*—are reduced in degree to sublimated rage.

Or cardboard. Let us draw a picture. Of a circus. The kind they might have decked out a little city for a hundred years ago. A literary carnival, a Carny Train, rolling past the station. See caged elephants, the insinuating Snake-Man as he runs a maze of silver knives, the long tongue of the clown! See the two-headed freak as he leers from the cupola! Hundreds of windows of eyes! See them and wonder, which is the the lion-tamer? Which is the lion?

And so we look, but too late. The Carny Train has already passed. We had noticed a silence, a drizzle on the tin, a chime and a clotted arrival-announcing, a lighting and a droning, a horning and a movement of shadows . . . but not the train-as-train. It's all happened in a screech and a calliopeic whoosh of steam. It's all disappeared.

We look out at the silent cairn across the tracks. The lights have shorted into a spectacular six-color display, a thing not likely to happen, and have since gone out. We're uncomfortable again. Unsteady, sad. Tonight, we think, we could have conjured a granite *fin de siècle*, an ambassadorship, an amorous evening touched off with wine in long-necked glasses, far from death and the elements. But the fact is, we're antisocial as a class. We don't read James. We think Hemingway was a damned ass. We can't even drink. Music strikes up in the background.

You drank. Plenty. Scotch, beer, wine. To wash down the Empiricists, you once said. So we drank as you did, once, but we have a suspicion you drank far more from long-necked glasses. This we gather from perverse inference, from never having seen one in all your lists of lading—not a single long-necked glass. We've made ourselves giddy with the thought. We see you and your retinue casting all long-necked glasses into the castle's hearthfire in a single bash. We think you've been celebrating. We think you're tipsy. We think you've been toasting the wake of modernity.

We walk back to the bench and lie down. It's still hot, wet. Maybe we should

have used a less intellectual voice here—maybe one of those post-earnest voices that tell of bad times in trashed motels. For in spite of our patriotism, our lineage, we're not like you; we're a different sort of chameleon; we again sport semicolons. A cold, clear edge, the feel of a sword that could bop through stone, buoys us; we will realize our purpose here, and freeze it in the glassy stream of grammatical choices before you.

More rumbling: could it be the post, the long-held-on-to letter, herald of a late Apocalypse? But this rumbling is not just another train. Digging to the paranoid roots of all rational thought, anticipating your letter's purpose, we make a jumbo sympathetic leap and with great juju and cold steel create—the Post-Post (we sing),

> Rumbling Rumblines, He's coming on the Post-Post!
> Expressing like the wind! The DF is the Most Most!
> ProMysticus Unchained! Sitting on the Coast Coast,
> Waitin' for the Post-Post, Hummm.

All sung to the milk machine, its insides ahum, too, outside the women's room.

Unavasted, we look for anchor into our lexicon of coinages, and find:

POST-POST, (M.Engl.) *n.*, *adj.*: The POST-POST is a branch of the post-office begun when "the overwhelming meaninglessness [of the bulk of letters slouching from the dumps] began becoming REAL;"

POST-POST, (P.M.Engl.) *n.*, *adj.*: The POST-POST is an attempt to [handle this meaninglessness, to] wrestle [it if necessary, and to deliver it physically to whatever sector of society might] blah blah blah;

We feel ourselves losing discipline. We suppose that when the Post-Post arrives, we'll know by observing what its function is, and that will be that. It's Seven Forty-three. The rumbling continues. We stand up and walk to the two vending machines at the end of the platform, where the roof ends and a wall of rain begins. Lists of cigarettes, candybars. We plug sixty cents into the left one and it vaults us a Kitkat.

That's when we hear you, old Many-Voices, now Trumpets, Tubas, Trombones, all blasting their mockery of the clutter of the last few paragraphs. I think not, they're saying, allegrissimo. They embarrass us. We look out at the cairn and notice a fissure—they could've dug you deeper, we think. It's an impious thought, cruel if not blind, and we're immediately sorry. You've undoubtedly predicted all. The Omniscient Eye. A relationship of love, deep respect . . . and sorrow, now. Your voice has left us. We pick up the pen.

This is an unearthly place, this small station open to a night made out of ink. We've done some editing—the red dye's out, the syringe in the butt was a hoax. Still we're baffled by the crowd of junk images set to elbow into our narrative; the form's full of hidden traps. We're lost. We ask the untracked night for guidance, and hear the faintest sounds of a choir. The platform lights come on. We step toward the fountain and a piece of glass pierces our shoe. We're wounded. We've stepped on a Noxema bottle.

It's a fact mattering nada, any more than that at seven-twelve The Modern Age rolled through—unbelievable, we were embarrassed to mention it, smack in this particular story—and true to the breed didn't bother to lower its pitch, bulled its way through, tossing the drizzle about in confusion, leaving on the platform a silence we'd never heard before. Not ever before in Texas.

Much more rumbling. We're too alone here, we think to ourselves. Just the rain, the soft thud of heels on the slab, just ourselves and the rumble and the young woman in the corner, whom we hadn't noticed until just now, and who's looking mysteriously our way. She draws on her cigarette and blows a cloud of smoke across the space between us. Is she waiting for the Post-post, we wonder? We're at a loss how to ask.

We decide to send a message. On a check marked *insufficient funds* we write: Jack Derrida Dies at Dusk. A porter appears; he says he's two of the Texas Playboys, sings a duet from a forgotten ballad for proof, then delivers the message to the woman.

She's read it but doesn't react. She just resumes her smoking, almost as a performer would, her hands moving like they're brushing the necks of swans. And she's whistling, through her smoke now, a song which sounds almost Gregorian. Is she sending us a return message? We think of Pope Gregory, of Gregorian. . . .

—Chance.

We say it suddenly aloud, as if it were a signpost warning us of hairpin turns. It's wonderfully plain to us now, pure prophecy, unencumbered by even a smudge of specifics. And it's so fitting, coming as it does at this time and place. She's undoubtedly a soap-opera star.

We have guessed it, and she smiles in a bright way which makes us feel sad, and yet somehow at home. We look back across the tracks. The fissure has widened. We have an unprecedented attack of gout. We decide to write an interview:

An Interview with the Dead Father:

(This fictional conversation takes place on October 19, 1990, as the first in a short series of memorial conversations commemorating the birthday of the interviewers. The locale is a nondescript railway station in Gasline, Texas, a small town situated south of Houston on Galveston Bay, its backdrop an endless series of oil refineries. The interviewers insist upon this location due to a lawsuit pending the release of their only nonfiction work, *Domestic Effusions*. They also insist upon a late-evening timeslot, and the mere presence of the Dead Father can only be attributed to the protean nature of the form.)

INTERVIEWERS—We're really honored that a man of such stature as yourself would consent to speak with us. Did you really plan to make this interview, or are you only here because the cairn cracked open across the tracks there and this was the closest water fountain, ha, ha.

DF—We wouldn't drink the water here, ha, ha. We were looking for a coke machine.

INTERVIEWERS—Excuse us sir, but can't help noticing the trademark wry laugh.

When you laugh at the confusion of former sons or daughters, is it usually amusement at ineptness, or. . . .
DF—We thinkst you're not displaying the proper forearmedness, having been warned, which you certainly have, of the inconstant nature of humor. No, we were laughing because a small animal was licking the bottom of our foot.
INTERVIEWERS—What? (The interviewers at this point bend over from their side of the bench to stare at the other's bare left foot, a huge appendage which is at the time being licked by a small cocker spaniel.)
DF—You expected boots?
INTERVIEWERS—Is it gout?! We didn't write that in!
DF—We are not amused.

(Again the conversation breaks off for several seconds as the interviewers collect a sheaf of papers which have spilled onto the concrete floor.)

INTERVIEWERS—When you lecture the great unwashed . . .
DF—We never lecture. We inquire.
INTERVIEWERS—We misspeak.
DF—Vive La Difference.
INTERVIEWERS—We're finding we have to choose our questions rather carefully. (the DF at this point begins examining the station's architecture.) Among your all-thingness, your embodiment of paradox, your thousands of possible names, does the question offend you which asks the particular?
DF—No. Get to the point.
INTERVIEWERS—The question 'are you a nice man?' for instance, naturally everyone would like either to believe that or to radically disbelieve it, to take a side as it were. (The DF has folded his arms, is staring at the interviewers.) Is a question like that an insult? We mean, the very subject came up, after a few highballs, one evening at the Conservatory, and one of our best friends, a quiet type, too, stood up on his chair. "I take offense for him," he said, "who's lying woked, waked, and unawakened. I cut your tongue from your mouth and feed it to vermin. They die." Well, let's say person persists in asking the question, now tongueless. Would you relent? What we're saying is, Is the Dead Father a Nice Man? (The DF hasn't moved through this entire discourse, except to unsnap the hilt-strap on his scimitar. The interviewers have seen this action, but it only seems to make them more verbose.) We mean, we imagine an answer couched, possibly in the third person?
DF—This tendeth to indulgence.
INTERVIEWERS—A sort of yesnoyes? With perhaps an ironic bite, like not in the usual sense? A great coolness, underneath which a great warmth, and then another coolness, and a warmth, and so forth for many layers, the layers forming the husk of the planet between certain years? Very complicated and yet naturally simple? Straightforward? Always the same edge to an endless curvilinear surface? When playing on the surface, of course. . . ." Something like that?

(At this point the Dead Father rises up, and waxing wratheful, smites the dialecticians foursquare sore, strides avaunt the trestled hill, rebouching fro' the world.)

An airhorn moans a deep apology beneath the rain. We quit a hastily put-up rationale.

—The Post-Post, we mutter, to no one.

We look to the woman. Her eyes are fixed on the night, her head slightly tilted. We lower our own. Her bracelet now says The Latest Thing. For reasons we can't name we bend to embrace her. She smells faintly of gesso. She shoves us back and flees into the darkness. As she disappears she hies: The scourges which you leave you leave, the loves you leave you never shall! She's patently not come here to meet the Post-Post, to rob it of its secrets, say, or to bed a Dead Father. In fact we're not sure why she's here at all. All this we understand at rates too dizzy to follow. We only know she was beautiful. She was brilliant. We forget her immediately.

The rain has stopped, and the porter from an earlier train is drilling a guerrilla band down on the roadbed. They're in high spirits. They're brash—they plan to hijack the next train through. Sounds of incessant marching and the scratch of our candy wrapper as it drifts across the slab. The post-post will be approaching then, we think. Despite tremors, screams of wheels on track, unbearable whiteness, it will appear without warning.

We're surprised at this bit of presaging. Will the post-post be white? Our mind rattles off implications. White of magic, mysticism, pigment, nuclear waste. We hear the moan again and again. We are certain a new world approaches. Move to the edge of the platform. Peel back the gloom.

A cow stands lowing in the middle of the tracks. It's preposterous. It's a sign. And there's still the rumbling. The speaker makes glottal noises now from under the station's eave; I look at my watch and wait for an arrival-announcing.

—Watches, it says, are neural-grenades, set to go off as soon as possible.

Another prepostery. I take mine from my wrist, quickly throw it across the tracks and into the weeds. It explodes in a huge fireball.

The rumbling is now thunderous. The tracks themselves are twisting into strings of DNA, corkscrewing the darkness—old tracks, layed by romantics, incapable finally of supporting any postness, however express. We're suddenly confused. Have we really only made all our foreshadowing up? Time has, after all, quite literally bombed as a measuring device. Therefore any temporal pronoun . . .

We see the ground split open before us. The rumble has reached deafening descriptions and the great wok itself has been breeched. From its center a figure appears, in a light too white to sustain witness. Forward He comes; the guerrillas, who've been stunned by the explosion, run screaming into the night. The Dead Father has Arisen (song),

> Beard like an Amish elder,
> Barefoot and girt in papyrus and quills.
> He strides to the platform, the rain parts before Him
> stays dry as the speech which He gives about wills.

Or maybe Bills. Or shills or trills, it doesn't matter. We realize now the Post-Post was fancy imagining. It won't arrive—no Apocalypse, no letter; ismism, schis-

mism. We look up, see a pair of burned worlds healing in your Dead Father's Eyes. You sit on the platform and the cement cracks under your weight. The roof of the station buckles. You catch the debris before it can crush us. You toss it aside.

We had Questions. You know, not complete sentences exactly, but Thoughts. Now not much needs saying. But there's one thing. . . .
—You're writing a book.
—Yes, our inquisitive childe. About Chivalry.
—Good God, It's coming round again?
—It was a round table to begin with.
—Ditto globe.
—Ditto aboutness.
—You want me to be direct.
—That would be a change.
—How . . . does . . . one. . . .
—Mulberry bushes.
A spinning. Great Unbalance.
—Can I ask you. . . .
—Certainly not.
More spinning. And then the final question.
—If you don't mind our asking, your existence. . . .
—And all Russellian declensions of existence, don't forget that.
—Yes. Rousseauian di. . . ? Your existence, as a worldwide . . . how do you become . . . you know. . . .
—Do I know?
—You know.
—Are you sure?
—Yes.
—Live a decent number of lifetimes.

The crack's still there, where you were seated, they're unable to fill it. Wine bottles end up there.

The wok remains, fissured—it's probably going to be a shrine. Maybe a second-hand store. There'll be a plaque hung over it in any case, nothing you ever said, something eucharistic, like "when the lights go out, words become body, body becomes light."

It doesn't matter; you're not there. We watched you step into darkness, heading to sea. We bought you a junk, then, made of red silk; its sails were dragon's wings, were hauled to the Sun. You wouldn't take it.

We would lay hands on the ozone. We would be heroes if we could.

There are small, round birds in the field. Do you think we should use nets? Do you think we should seize them?

GRACE PALEY

Some Nearly Personal Notes

I HAVE TROUBLE WRITING ABOUT DON because I have refused his death. So far as the rememberer in me is determined, he's still in Texas. I was afraid he'd get stuck there, what with the working presence of so much family and his responsibilities at the University of Houston. This is not a joke. It's called denial and is somehow tangled up with anger. One of the results of his presumed death is the bookstore problem. If *Sixty Stories* is in then you can't find *Forty Stories*. This may be because of the famous crisis in shelf space, the press of time, the longing of readers to rest for a couple of years in simple sensational material, easier language. And what of *The King*, that last dreamed history of war and love and language—all that generosity and gallantry.

Still, proving him alive, there are brilliant young people laboriously imitating him. Why shouldn't they? Young people listen, or ought to, as they begin their work, for some breathtaking voice that will help them open their own throats. At first, of course, it may sound like a lot of coughing. In any event, that imitation is really not possible. Don's imagination had spent some time living alongside the arts of painting, architecture, philosophy, music. Then he added a journalistic interest in the day—I mean the immediate morning to night American day. His language invented along a syntactical line between Texas and New York. The fact is—he could have been only clever and he *was* clever but his intelligence ran harder and deeper than his wit.

He was in his life and work a citizen. That means he paid attention to and argued the life of his street, his city (New York or Houston), his country. He never played a game of literary personalities. If he organized an event, a reading—as he did for instance at the '86 PEN Conference—he stood back, had others present their work. He wasn't the least bit modest, he was anxious, he was courteous.

He was always worried in the very act of hilarious opposition. There was sadness in our lightest conversations, across that literature of his. We laugh, but the poem in the prose is dark.

If you were a female person, it's perfectly true that he'd often meet you with a sort of attentive bossiness which is the southern male's ingrained behaviour with women. It was really an awful pain in the neck. A regional problem and serious.

He was, according to students, an extraordinary teacher, rigorous, picky, not mean—but a teaser. Sometimes. "What did he really mean by that?" a student whispered to me once when I visited his class. "You can write anything you want but you may not mention the weather" he told his classes at City College in New York and at the University of Houston. The weather, the very geography of plati-

tude. Still he knew about those easy clichés. He knew their ancient usefulness and perseverance. He grabbed them, gave them a good half turn to laugh a social truth into a sentence—he was certainly a sentence maker.

He was my neighbor and a true friend. *THIS* kind of friend. One day in 1973, he crossed the street to talk to me on my stoop. Grace, he said, "You now have enough stories for a book." (My last book had been published in 1959.) "Are you sure? I kind of doubt it," I said. "No, you do—go on upstairs and see what you can find in your files—I know I'm right." I spent a week or so extracting stories from folders. He looked at my list at dinner at his house. "You're missing at least two more," he said. "You've got to find them now. I'll wait here."

Many others have stories about that kindness to colleagues. We had a sad political parting which lasted about a year after the NY International PEN Conference. He considered his position long term, overriding that year's key speaker. He thought me disloyal and was angry. I was never angry at him partly because a political difference is more natural to me but mostly because I never didn't love his fine tragic heart and brilliant work. He smoked and drank in the manner of American writers (his only untransformed cliché) and died of the cancerous sorrow of these addictions. His very breath which made those perfect sentences tormented then broken.

PADGETT POWELL

The Living Father

I ONCE ACCEPTED AN OPPORTUNITY to introduce Donald Barthelme to a reading audience. I did so with a sense of duty, honor, and without the customary hesitation of the perennially stage-shy. Don introduced me to . . . to what? *To the world*, to put it presumptuously and grandly but finally not inaccurately. And Don would not, as some readers might, hold it against you, for long, if you tried to say something *right* about him and failed. So I tried to say something right about him in three-quarters of a page, the length he had told me was correct in these matters when he invited me to introduce Peter Taylor five years before in Houston (breaking the news in Houston that the program there had as much to do with its students as its teachers).

I may have said it right. After the introduction, passing each other on the stage, Don feinted a backhand, and I feigned slipping the blow—we were in Father Parody, one of his favorite all-time preoccupations. Any student of Don's, at least any male student—but I suspect women too—can tell you that one of the first things he did in assessing your suitability was roll you over and check you out for father rage. If you could manifest just a little he would happily take you on. He would whistle the live-long day when he found incipient father rage.

What I said:

> As a former student and specie of progeny not *yet* disowned by our reader tonight, I am not at liberty to mention the litany of inaccurate critical epithets deployed over the last thirty years to characterize his work. Instead I will try a little story which will try to inform us what the author thinks of his own method.
>
> This line is from one of his stories: "Strings of language extend in every direction to bind the world into a rushing, ribald whole." When I first read this, I thought it was a fair stab at the Barthelme nutshell, and to find out if its author might concur, one night, apropos of nothing, I tried it out on him: "Strings of language extend in every direction to bind the world into a rushing, ribald whole."
>
> He looked at me, then around the room.
>
> "That's almost literal," he said.
>
> I felt like Pierre Menard. *Almost* literal: and was it "infinitely richer" to have been written again that night, by me, or had it suffered? I tried another: "Some people run to conceits or wisdom but I hold to the hard, brown, nut-like word. I might point out that there is

enough excitement here to satisfy anyone but a damned fool."

No response. I felt less like Pierre Menard.

I won't say miniaturist, I won't say moralist, I won't say collagist—nor morally miniature collagist. I'll coin a new order of critical inanity, damn disownment.

Mr. Barthelme is a marvelous jazz group, and the drummer is a sharp, funny guy, and the saxophone dude is sad, and the cat on the piano would have been a painter after de Kooning except he read Kierkegaard, and the guy on the bass at base is an architect who had trouble drawing straight lines. His lines were . . . well—*strings*, strings of language extending in every direction to bind the world into a rushing, ribald whole.

I could not be more pleased than to introduce tonight a teacher, a generous person, a discombobulator of critic, a writer who's so good you'll call it jazz—Donald Barthelme.

It seemed right at the time. It is not as right now, because even if he *was* a jazz band—a proposition that smacks ridiculous beyond the three-quarter-page mark and in print—the band cannot play now. The records we have, but so many of the records were *jamming*. No more live shows.

For our first tutorial—obligatorially grand word—Don put a comment in a margin of mine and blotted it out before I saw it.

What was that? I asked.

A comment.

I *suspected* that. What did it say?

What did it say?

Yes, sir. *What did it say*?

I didn't know you. I can see now you can take it.

All right, I can take it. What did it say?

That half said *Faulkner*.

And that half?

That half?

That half.

That half said *ersatz*.

At this I failed to react much. I was, in a word, confused. Why had something so harmless, so true, been obliterated before I, its intended beneficiary, could see it?

Don said, misinterpreting my calm: You do know what ersatz means?

I reacted now: Of *course* I know what *ersatz* means. What is the big deal with *ersatz Faulkner*? *Of course* it's ersatz Faulkner. *Everybody* does *ersatz Faulkner*—

—Okay, okay. I said I didn't know you. You can take it.

I can take it!

Okay.

We did a few more pages of the manuscript. The margins were clean. So was the prose itself.

Hey. Why aren't there any *comments* in here?

Nothing wrong.
Nothing wrong?
Nope.
How do I know that you did not *withhold* comment?
Because I tell you.
Okay. Do not *ever* withhold a comment from me.
Okay.
I am not here to *get a degree*. I am here to *write a book*.
By all means!
And I'll tell you something else. If we have to do *this* anymore, we're not doing it in an office. We are doing it in a bar.

With telling speed, Don closed my spoiled paper and we adjourned, I think to a bar. I was a blustery boy then, and had no idea I'd called for a change of venue so dear to my early mentor. Whether he liked my slapping around of the father—insisting on *more* discipline—or the betrayal of my own proclivity to drink, or was reminded that it was time for one himself, I do not know. He was to extend to me until his death a very careful, gingerly fathering and I to him a very careful, blustery obedience, neither of us admitting very much the little tango.

And that is the way I would like to end this thing, whatever it is, but for an abruptness of form, and maybe a shortness of daring, for which the elegized would yet tweak me from the grave.

I do not want, for example, to relate the two or so occasions on which Donald Barthelme told me he might retire, that he had done, as he put it, his "little things"—with, upon *little things*, a small backhand motion of his left hand in the air, because it is a moment that scares me and should scare anyone who writes. I do not want to suggest what happened if one suggested doing *big things*—one was ever at risk in the company of our minimalist teacher (*not* teacher of minimalism, but a teacher who preferred two syllables of correction to two sentences of instruction: Should one worry that one was on the eve of publishing a novel without ever having given a thought to the Gargantuan presumption therein? No. Why not? *Bootless.*)—one was ever in danger of blurting the painfully obvious and suffering for it a look which conveyed impatience via a brief disheveling of the eyebrows. But I had my early history of obviousness with him, and had come to think, as one pronounces a word one is unsure of *loudly*, that the thing to do with Mr. Barthelme was *be* obvious. So I could, of such an occasion, say, "Well, Don, why not do *big things*?" and suffer the look, noticing that it was even briefer than it should have been for full effect, that it was in fact obligatory, that it was preface to something he wanted to say, that I was not being unusefully obtuse:

"I have a black heart."
"Well, *write* a black heart."
"Have a wife and child."
"We are talking *Art* aren't we? Damn the torpedoes."
"No."

And so we would sit. Further talk here was unnecessary. We were in the terrain of the largest preoccupation of my teacher during his last work.

We'd sit there in contemplation of the black heart. I didn't want to get into

this, because it frightens me and should frighten anyone who lives.

I don't want to get into my teacher's admission that booze robs of creative energy and yet is more fun than even writing, which it is, because it frightens me and should frighten anyone who drinks.

I do not, finally, want to get into the frightened state I have been in since Donald Barthelme died, because . . . because I *have* been frightened, and of that I have nothing to say to illuminate either you or me. When Mr. Barthelme was here, you knew that there were *two syllables* at the end of the phone line that would arrest you in the progress of whatever lunatic anxiety you were in and reverse your course and have you calmly, gratefully, put the phone down, shaking your head at how easy the world is if you have the right two syllables to fend it off and laugh at it with. There are a number of us looking for the right two syllables these days, and I am not alone, I suspect, in regarding Donald Barthelme living father to more than he'd care claim.

KIRKPATRICK SALE

A Tribute

—Try again another day?
—Yes. Another day when the plaid cactus is watered, when the hare's foot fern is watered.
—Seeds tingling in the barrens and veldts.
—Garden peas yellow or green wrinkling or rounding.
—Another day when locust wings are baled for shipment to Singapore, where folks like their little hit of locustwing tea. . . .
—Another day when the singing sunlight turns you every way but loose.
—When you accidentally notice the sublime.
—Somersaults and duels. . . .

(*The Leap*, read aloud)

WHEN YOU ACCIDENTALLY NOTICE THE SUBLIME: what we're struck with in hearing, as in reading, a Barthelme story, is the beautiful, precise economy of words, and I believe he was unique in all the world of letters in that. He was a man, in fact, of few words, in life as in art—and I knew him as a friend, a dear, dear friend, for more than twenty years, and as upstairs neighbor as well—but more than that, he was a man of a few perfectly chosen words.

I remember Don at the PEN Board meetings, where he would habitually come in his cowboy boots, and habitually sit in the back, the *eminence gris* as owl. And he would not talk often, and never long, but what he said was always pithy and appropriate, and usually right. I recall the time he was to present a report to the Board of a PEN all-star reading that we had just put on at the University of Houston. He stood up and, as I remember it, said just, "Richard Howard took the word *rebarbative* to Texas . . . where it was badly needed," and sat down. That was all, all that was required. He had distilled the event with that.

One reason that Don could be so spare and exact in his writing, of course, was that he was able to get rid of all the unnecessary, cumbersome, undignified, aimless words. The way it worked was this: he would let all the unwanted words fall through his typewriter . . . *downstairs*, to my apartment, in fact to my typewriter—which is why I write these large bulky books and Don's were so small and jewel-like and perfect. I didn't mind, of course, because his left-over words were wonderful—like *blague*, and *sockdolager*, and *Trumpery-frumpery*—and it also enabled him to keep his apartment so clean and white and neat while mine got so cluttered.

In one conversation in that apartment a few years ago, Don and I were talking about the perfect short story, and I said at one point, "The way you're talking, it sounds as if you'd actually like to get it all done in a single *sentence.*"

"Yes," he said, "I think I just might stop writing if I could get the exactly right words in the right single sentence." He paused, and there was that little smile at the edges of his upper lip. "Or maybe," he said, "a single word."

We didn't name the word that night to be sure, or ever, but I thought about it a lot after that. I would try various suggestions on him as we would pass in the hallway over the years—*celestial*, *oaktree*, *bumfodder*, *rodomontade*—but he would always give just a faraway smile and shake his head and not say anything.

Well, Don has now stopped writing, and if he never did get it all down to a single sentence, he got it down pretty wonderfully. And I think he knew that, and he was in large part happy with that—and I think he died proud, rightfully proud, of what he had achieved. But every so often I keep thinking about that one word, and it was only a few days after his death that a word did come to me—not his word, of course, but one that stuck with me because it came to stand for what I think of when I think of Don, and his life and his work.

The word is *luminescent.* Donald Barthelme was, and is, luminescent. He has left a shining memory in our hearts that will last as long as we may live, and a shining legacy in his art that will never die.

TED SOLOTAROFF

Don Barthelme

I FIRST GOT TO KNOW DON BY PUBLISHING HIM. One day, it was probably in the winter of 1968, I received a manuscript from his agent, Lynn Nesbit, called "Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning." Metafiction, like Barthelme's reputation, was just getting underway: I'd read a few of his things in *The New Yorker* and thought of him as a literary dandy—a kind of Frenchified Robert Coover, surrealism as cultural fun and games, out-of-step with the strenuous late 60s.

Despite this prejudice I was bowled over and then haunted by his impressionistic portrait of Kennedy. "Bobby" was on everyone's mind just then—an exciting, distrusted figure. Beginning to campaign for the Democratic nomination, he had emerged from the shadow of his brother's death as a prospective leader of the opposition to the war. Shorn of his kid-brother brashness he seemed half ruthless opportunist, half liberal crusader, Joe McCarthy in his background and Eugene McCarthy in his foreground.

In Barthelme's hands he was transformed from the banal chameleon Bobby to the bemusing, enigmatic "K." Freed from the usual details and gossip of his life as a Kennedy, as the Attorney-General, the junior Senator from New York, the lover of Marilyn Monroe, etc., he became both more abstract and more intriguing: a pure politician in the contemporary American-mode: an overt and subliminal image-maker. This was conveyed by a series of cryptic reports, interviews, anecdotes, memos, speeches, rumors—a kind of Kafkaesque clipping service. For example:

> K. Reading the Newspaper
>
> His reactions are impossible to catalogue. Often he will find a note that amuses him endlessly, some anecdote involving, say, a fireman who has propelled his apparatus at record-breaking speed to the wrong address. These small stories are clipped, carried about in a pocket, to be produced at appropriate moments for the pleasure of friends. Other manifestations please him less. An account of an earthquake in Chile, with its thousands of dead and homeless, may depress him for weeks. He memorizes the terrible statistics, quoting them everywhere and saying, with a grave look: "We must do something." Important actions often follow, sometimes within a matter of hours. (On the other hand, these two kinds of responses may be, on a given day, inexplicably reversed.)

This among other accounts of K. at his desk, his behavior toward his secretaries, his thoughts on crowd moods and transportation problems; also K. "penetrated with sadness" or puzzled by the shop signs in Alsace Lorraine "which alter when inspected closely, MÖBEL becoming MEUBLES for example," or dreaming of aircraft which resemble "bread boards, cookie sheets, colanders . . . on their way to complete the bombing of Sidi-Madani." The whimsical vignettes are tethered by the matter-of-fact ones ("In the course of the day he changes his shirt many times. There are always shirts lying about in boxes. 'Which of you has the shirts?'") The canny effect is borne aloft by the uncanny one. ("K. walking the streets of unknown towns finds himself among young people . . . They are everywhere, resting on the embankments, their guitars, small radios, long hair . . . rank upon rank stretching into the distance, drawn from the arcades, the plazas, staring.") In the penultimate sketch, K. is brought before the reader to discuss Georges Poulet's reflections on the 18th century wit, Marivaux. This seemed too farfetched:

> 'The Marivaudian being is, according to Poulet, a pastless, futureless man, born anew at every instant. . . . Nothing follows from what has gone before. He is constantly surprised. He cannot predict his own reaction to events. He is constantly being overtaken by events. A condition of breathlessness and dazzlement surrounds him. In consequence he exists in a certain freshness which seems, if I may say so, very desirable.'

Hardly Robert Kennedy speaking. And yet it is K., with all those fresh shirts, and K. is a kind of essence of Bobby, the man of the moment, endlessly.

I doubt I saw that as the point at the time. What I do remember is sensing the hand of a master of improvisation; like Bill Evans playing "Body and Soul," reflecting on the melody, the chords, the key, in a series of gracefully modulated variations that charmed and amazed. Why was K. reading a German primer to three of his children who wouldn't stop crying? At the time I probably told myself what I did when a piece of writing made my mind feel like it had been awakened and was rubbing its eyes. An editor doesn't have to understand everything, you just have to trust the feeling of seeing freshly and also being teased out of thought, as Keats said of Shakespeare.

Some months later the piece turned eerily prophetic, its final image being the author's dream of rescuing the drowning K., a swordsman dressed and masked in black. By the time Kennedy was killed, I had met Barthelme and since we were both on the Executive Board of P.E.N. had gotten to know him . . . a little. He seemed like the piece: an enigmatic combination of the lordly and the twinkling. He wore a downtown leather jacket but was courtly and very poised, as though "Don" should be given its Italian meaning and emphasis. On the other hand, with his scraggly beard and droll eyes looking over his rimless glasses he also brought to mind Doc, the leader of the Seven Dwarfs. His remarks were often canny or uncanny, sometimes both, as when he said that Jerzy Kosinski, then president of P.E.N., ran the meetings of its executive board as though we were a conference of East European writers. (Kosinski was later to do a cameo role as the commissar

Zinoviev in the movie *Reds*.)

A year or so later Don and I got involved in a two-man protest movement at P.E.N. over the nominating committee's choice of the next president. He was in his element. The part of him that was from Houston (the other part still seemed anchored somewhere in Northern Europe, Stockholm or Paris) came forward as the consummate politician. He rose to speak at the procedurally messy meeting in which we aired our discontent as though he were in the statehouse at Austin and was its most elegant parliamentarian.

After the meeting we met to come up with an alternative candidate. "Speed is of the essence in mounting an opposition," he said. "Our candidate should be unexpected and irresistible." Or something like that, both deadpanned and on the money. He sounded rather like K.

We decided on Muriel Rukeyser, and the next day took her to lunch at Alfredo's in the West Village. At the time P.E.N. was just emerging from a position of almost total irrelevance to the literary life of New York, and Muriel, a veteran radical, must have thought the scheming of these two young men (we were thirty years her junior) to get her to preside over an organization known mainly for its decorous little cocktail parties for new authors was rather bizarre. I certainly did. But Donald made it seem like a part of the ongoing campaign against the authoritarian (we saw Kosinski's hand in everything.)

Anyway, we must have convinced her, though I remember trying to do the same in her apartment in Westbeth. There was a lot of drinking involved in our rump movement. As we were walking along Greenwich Ave. after the lunch at Alfredo's, Donald said he thought he might stop for a brandy. Still pretty tight, I wondered why he would want to do that. "You seem to have missed the point, Ted, that I'm an alcoholic," he said. He said it in his characteristic dignified way that seemed completely noncommittal except for the light ironic gleam in his eye at my innocence or obtuseness or whatever.

It's that moment I remember most deeply about him. I think it has something to do with his essence for me, what is permanent about him now: that uniquely formal, accurate, stoned, enigmatic quality of his improvisations and prophecies.

SUSAN SONTAG

In Memoriam

HE WAS UNREMITTINGLY VIVACIOUS, fastidious, acute—in his writing and in his conversation. His brilliance was inimitable. But so was his charm, which had a distinctly Western flavor. The big frame, the wire-rimmed glasses, the mildly patriarchal beard, the cowboy boots and measured walk they sponsored, the artful pauses in his eloquence, the quizzical look and the intimidating silences when he just listened—all these never let you forget that he hailed from Houston, and had been just visiting us in New York all these years. I find something more Western than not in the good-natured, exuberant use he made of all that cosmopolitan modernist erudition that was his and in the sheer appetitiveness with which he evoked the phantasmagoria and oddments of the contemporary. How all-American the reach of his wit was! He was at least as much the heir of Mark Twain as he was the disciple of Joyce and of Max Ernst and of Borges.

His beginnings were dazzling; he never seemed to have had an apprenticeship. From the start he had enormous luster and authority as a writer, and the influence on other American writers of his mordant, ecstatically inventive tales—with their amazing velocity, their distinctive undertow of heartbreak—was immediate and profound. The resourcefulness of his short fiction over more than three decades, much of it variations on the story in dialogue form pioneered by Sterne and Diderot, somewhat overshadowed the accomplishment of the longer fiction, most unfairly in the case of the incomparable *Dead Father*. His work constitutes one of the few unrivaled summits of accomplishment of American literature in the second half of the twentieth century.

Donald Barthelme was a writer from whom one could continually learn about one's craft. No American writer had a better ear, a livelier vocabulary, a more alert take on what commas and periods (and their omission) could do to the rendering of voice in prose. No American writer read fiction aloud in public as well, as winningly as he did. He was also a superb line editor of fiction and the most gifted teacher of fiction I've observed—if we are to believe that fiction *can* be taught. (And if anyone could make you believe that, it was Donald.) His fellow writers also knew him as an exemplary citizen of the republic of letters. I am thinking of the lavish gifts of time, energy, responsiveness, patience he bestowed on magazines such as *Fiction*; on the writing programs at the City College of New York and, in recent years, at the University of Houston, which he largely animated; and on writers' organizations, principally PEN American Center, of which he was virtually a shadow president for the last decade.

He gave us so much. It is hard to accept that he has gone, suddenly at fifty-eight; that there will not be more.

JOHN UPDIKE

Nomination Speech

IN 1978 I HAD THE PLEASURE AND HONOR of putting Donald Barthelme up for membership in the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters; John Barth and Kurt Vonnegut were the seconders, and he was elected. For this tribute edition of *Gulf Coast*, let my contribution be in the words of my nomination, which went as follows:

> No short story writer of the last fifteen years has done as much to change our expectations of the form. Certain kinds of fictional wool-spinning and leisurely sedimentation have been rendered impossible by his no-nonsense prose, his collages of the banal, the frightfully plausible lassitude and hopelessness of his dialogues, the lavish sharp wit of his hundred devices and conceits. A master disorienter, he has adjusted the compass for everyone who reads.

GEORGE WILLIAMS

A Thousand Glasses of Wine

I WORKED WITH DONALD BARTHELME FOR NEARLY TWO YEARS on a novel I started in Florida and took to Texas with the sole purpose of having him help advise it as a thesis and help me edit it for eventual submission to a publisher. The plan was "too practical" for literary merit, an instructor at Florida told me, who herself had been helped along her way by several famous mentors. In any case, there was no guarantee Don would agree to advise me of anything, so the former student who recommended I pack up my Caprice and drive to Texas to work with Mr. Barthelme offered refuge if I returned to Florida punch-drunk from every variety of working-over a novice could expect to receive from a genius who is asked to evaluate a probationary piece of fiction.

Don agreed to work with me, so I became a non-native Texan. In Houston I finished the novel and became and unbecame a husband and remain a father to a daughter Don held when she was too young to do anything but smile up at him guilelessly and reach for his glasses. It was New Year's Day and my wife and I had been invited to dinner. It was a *Barthelmean* affair, naturally, a mid-afternoon meal of goose and fennel salad and copious amounts of wine. At some point after dinner, when he spoke of *a New York agent*, an awesome and inhuman figure of influence and terror (for this Southerner) to whom he would recommend me, a literary power broker whose handsome and imperial face I had lately seen on the cover of a national magazine, I said, "Don, you're giving me delusions of grandeur."

"Have them," he said. "Have them."

I did not mistake this for flattery. It hit—as did nearly everything Don said—on many levels of meaning at once, not least of which was the fact that a feeling of failure, of not having gotten it everywhere right, inevitable to the undertaking, ought not to spoil the pleasure of writing.

Don did not belabor the importance or the seriousness of the undertaking—"art," he called it once, and left it at that. He didn't have to. One could not imagine standards any higher and they were assumed to be shared; in his seminars or in his office they were a palpable presence in the air. The apprenticeship meant observing *how* he paid the most extraordinary attention to detail, and to which. He used few words and they were precisely the ones you needed to hear. (One time he used no words at all: with a wave he summoned me into his office and pointed at a passage in the manuscript and dismissed it with a wave exactly reverse of the one he had summoned me with; I nodded and left.) I gave him thirty or forty pages at a time and on one occasion he returned them with a puckish look of irony playing in his blue eyes and tugging at his beard asked if I

was satisfied with my progress. He answered his own question. "Of course not. Don't ever be." So if one had to shoot a day's or a week's or a month's worth of work in the back of the head because it wasn't good, good riddance. Don reminded any one who would listen—and some didn't—that he couldn't teach students to write, he could only teach them how to edit. He did it by unerring example. When he returned pages I left his office and found the first quiet place to look them over. They were (usually) gratifyingly clean, but with the most pointed suggestions. Beside a bad simile: No No No. A line through a line. "Don't" beside a slip in tone. Beside a poor observation, "Not true." And on those pages and in the seminars I took he was not a single time wrong, though on occasion when a student was convinced Don was mistaken and took umbrage, Don bore it with a patient expression which said, "One day you will remember this moment and be miserably ashamed, which is good: you will write better for it." And whenever I ignored what seemed to me minor advice—a mere question of taste, I reasoned—I always discovered later I was missing some larger misstep to which the advice referred. "Et al." was a favorite notation. It meant: root out everywhere every instance of this; in my case, a weakness for Percyesque analogue.

Members of the seminar recognized a new look in the eyes, if only one of vertigo, of those whom Don brought around—knocked around, knocked out, in some cases, the better to wake up. I remember a poet who presented the poorest piece of fiction I had ever encountered in a workshop and took a thrashing from Don—exact and funny, but a beating nonetheless—and who turned in weeks later one of the best. I don't doubt that his poetry improved commensurate with the beating; in any case, after Don he was no longer a "poet"—a static, writing-program presumption Don made no bones about ridiculing romantic baggage that made the presumer capable of every imaginable writing error. God save you if you *read* like a poet, in *poet tone*, Don once remarked in class, that says to its audience, "Love me, love me." A relationship of phony pity he nowhere tolerated.

One day Don called.

"I understand there is a pregnant woman on the premises."

"Whose?"

"Come now."

"How did you find out?"

"Jungle drums. Jungle drums."

He was amused and it was late enough in the day for scotch and he sounded genuinely merry that two of his students were going to have a baby. "Will a thousand do?" "A thousand what?" I asked. Expecting irony from Don I looked for it; it took me a moment to realize he was offering money. I was moved by this generosity and respectfully declined (we needed the money and he knew it), but the former student who helped me pack up my car and got me drunk enough so I could sleep the night before I left for Texas told me I had made a mistake by not accepting the offer. I understood this to mean: by taking the money you would have pleased Don, and one wants by all means and in every instance to please Don, whether by taking money or writing well or taking a drink when one is offered.

I can claim with certainty I pleased him one of those ways. Once at a reception he called me over.

"Belly up to the bar."

I did and he bought me a drink. We stood facing the sparkling bottles and racks of glasses and those dreadful bright mirrors fancy-dan bar owners *know* that along with providing visual aid for the hustle make their well-to-do patrons drink more, out of self-consciousness, if nothing else. I finished my drink and toyed with the glass while he said, with what I took as a quiet urgency, that a former student, our mutual acquaintance, had told him he would find me a most amusing young man. "I am saddened to say I have not found you at all amusing." I glanced over at him and he was cutting me a look of merriment characteristic of his absolute joy in ironizing everything, a trait which made him look wise and mischievous all at once, and lent an irresistable brilliance to his person as rare as his writing.

It was a sense of irony that was never supercilious. I was in awe of Don but I was not afraid of him. Perhaps I can make the distinction clearer. There are writers for whom one has less regard but one fears for some nastiness of temperament, pettiness or vanity or indifference or a habit of praising bad writing just to be done with it. Don had a princely sense of his own gifts and privilege in the world and a generosity which heightened that awareness exquisitely.

And with that princely bearing he could floor a perfect stranger with a one-liner. Once a dozen of us were seated in a Thai restaurant, when the waiter on his first approach to the party asked Don, the host, if we would care for anything to drink.

"A thousand glasses of wine."

All of us, waiter included, roared, and the waiter proceeded to well-nigh do Don's bidding. By the end of the evening Don's guests were out on the sidewalk, flush with the success of the evening due entirely to Barthelme's presence, talking and shaking hands and hugging and bumping into one another and promising phone calls and dinners and tennis games and fishing trips that never materialized, while Don tried to break up a party that refused to, by reminding us he didn't enjoy playing father to us. "Home now," he said, "home now." He left for Rome a few weeks later; that night was the last time I saw him. In July my wife visited him while he was in the hospital and even then he was asking after our personal and professional welfare. My wife came home and when I saw her I knew it was not good.

One came to see one's writing flaws clearly, by reading one's own and other's manuscripts as if *he* were reading them. In my case the casualties, and not necessarily the results, were great, but I felt, and feel, that by knowing for several years such an extraordinary and generous man, I have been changed (for the better) forever. A delusion of grandeur, perhaps, but one on direct orders I will maintain.

LARRY WOIWODE

Memory Misremembers

The summary of notes carpentered together during a two-month speaking, reading, lecture, book-promotion tour.

MANFRED COMFORT DOZES. Visions of verbal rumba rattle in his purblind, fur-lined, purloined brain. A wrist roll, a flash of a brother trying to get his gun in a grave between his knees. Tired of this, though I owe for taxes, and my blue shirtsleeves are storied—steadied?—up with pinching rubber bands. Prostitution as acceptable. So whores in breathing through their nostrils often rumble. Manfred sleeps.

Who this sweet beast cover, windhover in play?

Why this music flabbed on my back?

Gentlemen, it is truly too sweet and too true to rummy about.

Gender is the oversight for all made folderol through a singing operator's mother's mouth. And ashtray, too.

Flick, plug, flick. This beamed auditorium baffled on its tintinabulating brim. Dropping ashes. The lime juice, baby. The water picture, Byron.

Giving up ice?

Me.

Fractured.

O Doctor, what is this golden fluid bubbling down into?

Take it easy. You've baaed a bad flock. Was that necessary? Boy is on his way to the Bahamas. Lie still.

Dad? Dead? The drudge of Turgenev on his knees—begging counts for a bad shot, as scriveners do. Duel.

Doctor interrupts: If you can flex or twist it now inside the cast, which I've tried to pack tight, please let me know. I'll break it clean and jam it shut. Damn you writers, you.

Bless you, strangers, people here, folks, note-takers, this has been a pressure, a not unpleasant writhe over scruples on my snakeskin-covered rump. Must leave. Black oily curls, springy and glistening as shavings from threaded pipe. Pure poppy. Pump it, plumber's friend, for Greetje.

A beesting!

Whose in what?

A brain-swinger!

A swingled carpet flail flung on an oaken floor.

Sweebadub!

O this arching, aching—(Wanna pop to make ya feel better?)—this aching, arching moon-bellied broadness comprising tributaries. Dharma comes a bummer. And stout stumping calls all rostrum-bangers to bark, doggerel chiming, wresting cries farm all that pack—this thirty-year-leaved presidia of pose and verse, this jumbilation of it, U.S. and other, passed to microphonious guff. Cocoa, Ricco? Sí. See, next door the merchant Christmas sleazily houghs, knowing that knowing is not knowledge which memory misremembers. (Cribbed on a paper hanger that reads DO NOT DISTURB.)

Pluck that back up here to right it for rogering in.

That'll take next year.

Then here's your check for a hundred and fifty matchbook covers. The rest is free. I'll auscultate your catheter.

It *hurts.*

Pig. Slack here in this freeswinging freak's sling. Contrary to neighbors. Musical fruit. Countryside shot and gone to hell to have to have you go there and back again.

He was a fan I could please. Thus hop. Happiness happens. Death, then. Us, too, where spirals snell, intertwining the schemata of dream, to receive for a degree a punched card and the two-piece costume of one swell pink pig as she flees in a van, leaping bridges, dragging kitchens, driving on her knees—where couples are coupling, or a couple once coupled while couples lay coupled watching running, angels on their features and fleece, sweet steed.

Hear yurra form buoy.

But it *hurts.*

Aw, just sway a saw away, buster. Got more bush than ya could clip with a machine. Square your dipper? Flip your Bic?

Backfeed that into the lathe—lath grinder?—of our modified, androgynous, mad-apple fraternity.

They entered the place laughing, turtle-necked, taking the stool or garbage pail or can, here in the backyard, half-naked, over thirty, some bearded, long hair, and I let go with both loads. That pot-bellied one's going about a brother.

Sealed in a honeycomb, a muted, scented yellow room.

Bullets bark.

Have this Heineken.

Business about my mouth. Nor-*way.*

Open one last sentence, here at the last, rearward, drumming fingertips atop to edify, and let it all for once backward freely reel to—(knock, knock).

But these breaks are surely radial and beyond the service's—(Open up for your order, sir!)

O sister when I come to see the way I've locked up your life while you were living *Frère Jacques* for me, I think: Sleep, Black Beauty, wholly O, sleep well and dream wide, and don't feel out of pace, disenfranchised or obliged to grieve if this wasn't read to you by James or John or Willy or Don or Ross or Tom or me.

LOIS PARKINSON ZAMORA

The Long Sonata Of The Dead

—where on earth did the word sonata come from, imposing as it does an orderly, even exalted design upon the most disorderly, distressing phenomenon known—

—D.B., on a phrase by Beckett, in "Not-Knowing"

IN 1985, I ORGANIZED A SYMPOSIUM ON SEMIOTICS at the University of Houston. During the course of panels, lectures, lunches, I happened to be walking down the long corridor of the English Department with one of my invited speakers, a woman of considerable reputation who taught at an Ivy League school. As we walked, she noticed the name "Donald Barthelme" labeling a faculty office.

"Hmm," she said. "What a coincidence."

A coincidence—that someone with the same name as the famous writer should be on our faculty. Clearly it never crossed her mind that the-real-Donald-Barthelme would be teaching at the University of Houston (no doubt an academic outpost, as far as she was concerned.) Besides, Donald Barthelme was a New Yorker, not a Texan; a writer, not a teacher.

It pleased me a lot to set her straight (and amused Don when I told him later). No, no, this *is* the-real-Donald-Barthelme, Donald-Barthelme-the-writer, grew up in Houston and has come back, great teacher, great colleague, the one, in fact, who convinced me to organize this semiotics symposium in the first place.

("A circus, Lois, a semiotics circus!")

I didn't resent the incredulity of my Ivy League guest because I think many of us at the University were surprised by our good luck when Don agreed to join us full time. Like my guest, we too thought of Donald Barthelme as a postmodernist paragon, a metafictionist, a myth-maker. All of that. But not as a colleague down the hall.

What a coincidence, indeed.

I never really did get over my surprise at Don's institutional energy, his savvy, the sheer kick he seemed to get out of creating an academic program that mattered. His dedication to his students ("They're my new affinity group, Lois"), to English Department and Creating Writing Program projects, to hiring, fundraising, cheerleading, mentoring, enabling, never ceased to amaze me, in part because I didn't expect him to be so generous with his time but mainly because he was so good at it all. His authority as "famous writer" was important, but that was only a starting point. Don was, I think, fascinated by the workings of the often unwieldy

bureaucracy of our large state university. Its institutional irrationalities and its moments of collective genius coincided with Don's own sense of the world—absurd, mysterious, deeply worthwhile.

Don arrived at the University of Houston in the early 80s, when Texans were just beginning to realize what it meant to be oil poor. Budgets and programs and support staff were being cut like crazy, but this only increased Don's sense of the challenge of building a creative writing program from scratch. The University was a labyrinth that he took pleasure in negotiating, and his encounters with the administrative minotaurs unfolded in the best Texas tradition. Don spoke the language of the institutional fathers. In listening to him, I think I located one of the sources of his perfect pitch for spoken language. Texan is a language which, correctly spoken, is colorful, imaged, paced, pitched, delivered. So Don was quoted: his one-liners took on a life of their own, circulating in committee rooms and hallways and Board of Regents meetings. I remember one comment that I heard first from the horse's mouth, and then a week later repeated by a senior vice-president in a committee meeting: Don, on the establishment of our first-rate creative writing program in a very short time: "We did it all at room temperature."

A perfect metaphor for the University of Houston, in love with science and super-conductivity. But everyone knew that "room temperature" was of a different order when Don was in the room.

Don's great talent as a teacher and colleague depended upon a kind of sixth sense, an ability to intuit what most deeply moved a person, what animated his or her imagination and intellect. This sixth sense allowed him to bring people out, and to bring them along. He could communicate his confidence in a person, and thus inspire the person with confidence in him or herself. Don was an extraordinary listener. He'd hear what we were saying when we couldn't hear it ourselves, re-phrase the message so we could, and then expect us to get on with our projects. This too was a part of his talent for inspiring people: who would want to disappoint Don's confidence?

Don expected good work, recognized it in its sundry (and sometimes disguised) forms, and supported it to the hilt. He would line edit a student's novel in typescript if he thought that was what was needed; he contacted agents, publishers, mid-wived the work into print. It was Padgett Powell who dubbed Don "Uncle Don," a coded endearment used freely among the students (and sparingly, I suspect, with Don himself). The term combined the students' respect for him and their own ironic awareness of their dependence upon him, and it suggested the strong feeling for Don as family. An affinity group, all right, of the most complex and bonded kind.

I am currently reading a novel being presented this semester by a student for her MA. Her dedication acknowledges Don, "who assured me that I was capable of writing this novel." There have already been several such dedications, and there will be more. They speak both gratitude and grief.

Don did his undergraduate degree in philosophy at the University of Houston, although (as a friend from that time put it) he was too busy to graduate. This past June, the University awarded him posthumously an honorary doctorate. He would have been pleased, I think. And how I wish I could have heard the wry and graceful comments that he would surely have made, had he lived to accept the award.

For it was clear that Don thrived during his too-brief homecoming. There was something deeply satisfying to him about his return to Texas that included, but also went beyond, his pleasure in the young writers he nurtured, the continuing success of his own writing, the presence of Marion, Anne, Katherine, and the rest of his family. Perhaps it was the satisfaction of knowing that you can go home again, and that he had. I suspect Don knew this long before he decided to return for good. Perhaps the dead fathers that inhabit his fiction also inhabited for him this particular part of the planet, and he sensed that he would be nourished, somehow, by their proximity. Perhaps he completed some deep mythic cycle for himself by becoming a kind of progenitor to his students-as-writers, a mythic father ("Uncle Don") whom they revered, and by whom they were empowered.

Don would have raised an eyebrow at this notion, but his homecoming was, in fact, no coincidence. It was a strategic gift he gave knowingly to himself, and to us.

I was not Don's student, but I also depended on "Uncle Don." As a comparatist, I have been concerned to create a critical context in which "American literature" can be understood hemispherically rather than nationalistically. Don appreciated and wholeheartedly supported this undertaking. I wish now that I'd taken notes on our conversations about Latin American literature. We talked about Julio Cortázar when I was writing an essay on the Argentine writer's late revolutionary political fiction. Don said that he preferred the early Cortázar, the surrealist Cortázar of the *cronopios y famas*, of "Axolotl," "Blow-up," "The Pursuer," and *Hopscotch*—fiction about art and the artist. Don had known Cortázar's first translator, Paul Blackburn, so he had come to his work early on. He said he felt that Cortázar had never been better than at the outset of his career. But, I insisted, what about the brilliant self-interrogating oppositional narrators in Cortázar's last collections in the early 80s? What about *We Love Glenda So Much* and *A Change of Light?* For Don, writers could be political even when they didn't write about politics, but the Latin American tradition of appointing or electing writers to public office was not culturally portable.

("My God, Lois, would you want writers running the country?")

This doesn't mean that Don wasn't concerned about the social function of literature (or lack of it) in the U.S. It annoyed him that he was generally labeled by critics as a "self-reflexive" writer, one whose principal subject was writing and whose principal contribution was a brilliant verbal surface. (Nabokov also felt—quite rightly, I think—that his critics mistook him for a "frivolous firebird.") I know that Don appreciated Gerald Graff's discussion of his work as social satire. In *Literature Against Itself*, Graff argued that Don's parody of intellectual languages pointed to the crisis of contemporary society, to the disjunction between genuine feelings of alienation and fashionable cultural languages that pretended to explain them. By the time of our conversations, Don had come to situate himself against "against interpretation," that is, against the postmodernist notion of language as non-referential and literature as therefore inevitably abstracted from moral (and mortal) concerns. Don disagreed with this theory, and he wanted to go on record. He did so in "Not-Knowing," a wonderful essay published four years before his death.

"Not-Knowing" is a significant departure from custom in that Don made

explicit the evolution of his own theory of literature. In this essay, he presented his argument *for* interpretation, for multiple interpretations, for the process of interpretation itself. Referring to a work by Rauschenberg in order to represent art generally, Don wrote, "What is magical about the object is that it at once invites and resists interpretation. Its artistic worth is measurable by the degree to which it remains, after interpretation, vital—no interpretation or cardiopulmonary push-pull can exhaust or empty it." Its worth transcends interpretation, but also depends upon interpretation, upon referentiality, upon its situation in the world. And Don went further. Not only may literature represent the world, but it may also affect the world, make the world better. "Not-Knowing" concludes:

> It's our good fortune to be able to imagine alternative realities, other possibilities. We can quarrel with the world, constructively (no one alive has quarreled with the world more extensively or splendidly than Beckett). "Belief in progress," says Baudelaire, "is a doctrine of idlers and Belgians." Perhaps. But if I have anything unorthodox to offer here, it's that I think art's project is fundamentally meliorative. The aim of meditating about the world is finally to change the world. It is this meliorative aspect of literature that provides its ethical dimension. We are all Upton Sinclairs, even that Hamlet, Stéphane Mallarmé.

What an un-Postmodern, almost un-American idea. Or perhaps it's post-Postmodern, and American, but in a hemispheric sense. Whatever it is, it *does* resemble the theory that impels Cortázar's late revolutionary political fiction.

I don't mean to suggest here that Don's work needs to be compared to Cortázar's in order to be politically validated. Hardly. My point is that the relationship of Don's fiction to political writing needs critical repositioning. As time passes, and "postmodernism" and other current ideologies come increasingly into focus, we will identify and appreciate ambiguities in his work that have as yet been barely noticed or discussed by the critics. One of the richest of these ambiguities may be Don's ironic utopianism—a paradox, of course, and perhaps the quintessential postmodern political position as well.

When we talked about García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Don commented that the Latin Americans had an advantage in that their culture preserved the vestiges of their past. ("We get rid of ours.") But Don's work *doesn't* get rid of them. It revises them, parodically, ironically, generically. Here again, I would argue for unrecognized literary relations, for a critical repositioning: Don's stories and novels are full of ancestral presences, familial and cultural, and in this they are certainly related to recent Latin American fiction.

The Dead Father has been read in this country primarily as a psychological parable, but I think it must also be read as an extended metaphor for the problem of establishing meaningful communal identities and traditions in America (again, America in a hemispheric sense):

> Fathers are like blocks of marble, giant cubes, highly polished, with veins and seams, placed squarely in your path. . . . They cannot be

climbed over, neither can they be slithered past.

Dead, but still with us, still with us, but dead.

Vera Kutzinski, in *Against the American Grain*, calls "New World writers" those writers who feel compelled to locate and bury the European cultural past—the dead fathers—before they can create for themselves an American present, an authentically American literature. It's the old Bloomian anxiety of influence, but it's also a more specifically American anxiety of origins: where and how to use the European cultural tradition and our all-but-lost (in the U.S.) indigenous tradition in order to create something that is our own.

Don was a New World writer in this sense. "They cannot be climbed over, neither can they be slithered past." The biblical cadence of this sentence reminds us of the problem, and shows how it may be overcome. The dead fathers must be quoted, misquoted, invoked, revoked, reinvented. They must be re-mythologized. Think of Don's last novel *The King*, or *Snow White*, or "The Glass Mountain," or "The Phantom of the Opera's Friend" or any of a number of his stories. Don practiced what Borges called the "technique of deliberate anachronism and erroneous attribution." Like Borges, he believed in influencing his precursors, and did so again and again.

Last summer, in my seminar on contemporary Mexican literature that I taught in Mexico, I included Don's story, "Cortés and Montezuma." My colleague, a Colonialist, had just taught Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, the monumental account of Cortés's destruction of the Aztec empire in 1521, written fifty years after the event by one of Cortés's lieutenants. In one of the most quoted passages in Hispanic American literature, Bernal Díaz details the wonder of the Spaniards when they laid eyes upon Tenochtitlán, the great capital of the Aztecs set in the mountain lake of Texcoco: "These great towns and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone, seemed like an enchanted vision from the tale of Amadís. Indeed, some of our soldiers asked whether it was not all a dream." He recounts the splendid reception accorded them by the "great" Montezuma, as well as their evolving perfidy and eventual destruction of the "enchanted" city after the murder of the Aztec leader. "Montezuma was hit by three stones, one on the head, one on the arm, and one on the leg; and though they begged him to have his wounds dressed and eat some food and spoke very kindly to him, he refused. Then quite unexpectedly we were told that he was dead." Bernal Díaz concludes that only the Spaniards' respect for Montezuma had prevented them from burning Tenochtitlán to the ground, and now there was nothing to stop them.

Don influences this precursor with a vengeance, rewriting (slightly, subtly, totally) Bernal Díaz's account of conquest and murder. He revisits the dead father, Cortés, and the dead mother, La Malinche—archetypal parents of Mexican *mestizaje*—and says more about the ideology of empire in six pages than most writers could say in six hundred. He ironizes the encounter of Cortés and Montezuma by giving Montezuma a voice, and by dramatizing the tragic disjunction of their world views. He even transports the Emperor Charles V to the New World to survey the damage done by his policies of conquest and conversion.

Don's story ends:

> "Was there no alternative?" Charles asks. "I did what I thought best," says Cortés, "proceeding with gaiety and conscience." "I am murdered," says Montezuma.
>
> The sky over Tenochtitlán darkens; flashes of lightning; then rain sweeping off the lake.
>
> The pair walking down by the docks, hand in hand, the ghost of Montezuma rebukes the ghost of Cortés. "Why did you not throw up your hand, and catch the stone?"

These dead fathers represent a literary challenge that yields to political and metaphysical matters of inevitability, injustice, betrayal, death. Montezuma's question specifically indicts Cortés and colonialism, and at the same time universalizes our anxiety about death, our desire not to die. In this story, as in so many others of Don's, there exists a tension between the brevity (and levity) of their form, and the immensity of their metaphysical speculations.

Now, after Don's death—perhaps after the death of anyone we love—Montezuma's question is more than ever our own. Why couldn't someone have caught the stone?

†††††††††††††††††††††††††

Don was right in a number of ways when he reversed Bernal Díaz and gave Montezuma the last word. This year I went to Mexico for the Day of the Dead, All Soul's Day, November 2. The fiesta is on Cortés's Catholic calendar, but it is deeply rooted in Aztec mythology and celebrates Aztec funerary practices and beliefs. On this day, cemeteries become enchanted lands, and the dead return to their families and friends. Graves are spread with the favorite dishes and drinks of the dead, which their spirits eat and drink during their yearly visit. (The food remains, but its taste is consumed.) The traditional decorations recall Aztec icons: smiling sugar skulls, dancing papier-maché skeletons, painted butterflies—symbols of the soul—and profusions of native marigolds and deep red cockscomb, still called by their names in Nahuatl. *Ofrendas* (altars to the dead) are arranged in homes, restaurants, shops, and plazas, with pictures of the dead propped among the food and flowers. Their spirits do return home on this day, they do eat the "offerings" laid out for them, they do dance and sing and laugh with the living.

Don would have understood this joyous embrace/*abrazo* of the dead fathers. In his fiction, he meditated on "the long sonata of the dead"—then revivified them and invited them to dance with the living. He mocked the unyielding inevitability of death by demonstrating its malleability in the hands of the artist. As in the Mexican tradition, Don domesticated death by laughing at (and with) it, and in so doing, honored it as he knew we must—mortal creatures capable of imagining our immortality.

Don is now an ancestral presence for those of us who knew him—celebrated, consulted, still with us. For future readers and writers, he has himself become the

precursor to be influenced. His work will be quoted, misquoted, reinvented, re-mythologized. It is, as I have said, a process in which Don believed.

Besides flowers and food, objects are sometimes placed on Mexican graves and altars that represent the dead person's pleasures and occupations, the things he cared most deeply about in life and by which he is remembered. Occasionally, there are even toy-sized models of the places where he lived, or liked to spend time. We will put Don's books on his *ofrenda*, and some of the books he helped us write as well. And perhaps, for our own sake, we will construct a minature version of the long English Department corridor, with a small door labeled "Donald Barthelme."

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COVER: *The Rook's Progress.* Art by Jim Love, text by Donald Barthelme. Jim Love does nothing hastily, except nix a bad idea. We came up with a goodly quotient of these (for example, Astroturf as ground, a contribution of my own), and one by one they were relegated to the exterior darkness. But a bad idea is a step on the way toward a better, and gradually a scheme evolved we could both tolerate. We began by writing notes back and forth and ended up in the studio staring at a four-by-eight-foot piece of Homosote on which various elements of the composition were moved around, usually in increments of a quarter inch—Jim, as I say, is given to somber deliberation. Details which originally had to do with quite another scheme, such as the use of double-headed nails to suggest pushpins, survived into the final version. It's a bit daunting to be collaborating when your partner has to do all the real work of design and fabrication, but Love is ever gracious and allowed me to feel that anything was possible. I miss the grandiosity of our first conception—the work was to have been forty-eight feet high by one hundred and sixty-three feet wide and have its own army, navy, and embassies abroad—but one must leave some things to the future. —*Donald Barthelme*

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Donald Barthelme

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Tracy Daugherty

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