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Thrill Me: Barry Hannah in Memoriam

Yet another middling novelist was scheduled to lecture that afternoon at the Sewanee Writers Conference in 2003 and Barry Hannah wanted no part of it. After lunch we stood out beneath an unkind Tennessee sun as attendees and Hannah fanatics dispersed down sidewalks. We watched them go, not at all eager to follow. Hannah asked me if I had been fishing lately and I said, "Like a Nazarene." He had recently become reinvigorated by Christianity—born again lower case—and gone sober after a lifetime of being a venal Baptist and then nearly dying in an Oxford, Mississippi, hospital from too many maladies: lymphoma, pneumonia, organs napalmed by decades of cigarettes and booze. As a twenty-something sycophant and Hannah fanatic myself, I referenced Christ when I could—my Jesus-happy boyhood on me like a party hat—and even recited for him the religious sonnets of Donne and Hopkins. "Those bards are bent believers," he said. "Sing more."

He was used-up and feeble all that week, Band-Aids on the slack sun-wrinkled flesh of his arms. We ambled to his motel room to retrieve the fishing poles and right away he lit a Camel filter: out of view, the door bolted, since he knew that worried people were keeping watch and might attempt a rescue. The doctors had ordered him off tobacco and sin but Barry Hannah had a hard time abiding rules. (Rumor whispered of him still swilling whiskey and agitating the Christian calm of Oxford on his Harley Davidson.) This transgressive quality is what one experiences instantly on entering his fallen world: the sentences laid down as if by a Dionysian celebrant

invested equally in creation and destruction, a syntax in chaos and ecstasy; his South an almost-apocalyptic, near-dystopian swamp of shame from which the customary and commonsensical have fled for good. Step lively: God's grace is far from given. It's an unsafe world, a repository of ruin, waste, and doctrinal despair, shot through with the ominous sense that something sinister can occur any second, something outrageous and hellbent and beautiful, and that hazard is precisely what makes his fiction so exciting, "such a beloved reprieve from the usual," as the narrator of *Hey Jack!* (1987) describes snow in the South. Richard Ford recalls his first encounter with Hannah's stories: "His sentences had, among their teeming effects and emotions, a *perilous* feel; words running . . . between sense and hysteria; verbal connectives that didn't respect regular bounds and might in fact *say anything*." Those unpredictable and blissed-out sentences had made him the only living godfather of Southern literature, honored and sought after by eager scribes south of the Mason-Dixon line or anyplace in the nation where readers recognized mayhem as magic.

Hannah assembled the fishing poles in a cigarette fog, and I noted the phalanx of pill bottles on his dresser. It occurred to me then that the godfather could perish in my custody. When I asked if he felt well enough to fish, he said, "I'm tired. But I need to be tired, tired enough to sleep the night through since I can't seem to do it. I'm not complaining. I'm thankful to be alive." I was more an imposter-reporter than a new fishing pal: I scribbled his every other sentence into a notebook, aware that I would need to remember, to get it all down right. I could not afford to do without Hannah's wicked brand of acumen—in my life, in my work—and he didn't mind my furious scribbling. He was used to it by now. But how to capture that voice? And I don't mean the molasses Mississippi drawl but rather the slightly reptilian hiss that preceded his clipped clauses, the calculated elocution of someone who handles a sentence like a hatchet. Hearing him chat as he prepared a fishing pole was the same as sitting at the sandals of a heretic wizard half-bored with his abilities.

And why would this rebel of language, this mastermind who had zapped to life a generation of younger writers, choose to pass time with a toady unknown kid from Boston he had met only a few days earlier? Because during our previous conversations I never once

mentioned writing; because I spoke of bass fishing in the deep green of Maine; because I was a far-from-home melancholic whose heart was just then being howitzered by the woman he loved; and because Barry Hannah's own heart was as capacious and willing as his instinct for cyclonic phrases. Forget the ridiculous mythos of Wildman Hannah; his kindness could have cured the lame. What did Allen Tate say of Poe? "If he was a madman he was also a gentleman."

Mick Jagger wailed at half-volume from a portable radio in the bathroom (Hannah once referred to the Rolling Stones in a story as "those skinny, filthy Lazaruses"). He ordered me to obtain the Blue Note albums of Jimmy Smith, jazz organist-genius—"You will want and need him," he said—and then classified Jimmy Hendrix as a god not fit for this foul world. In Hannah's short novel *Ray* (1980), the fighter-pilot protagonist rocks out to Hendrix over Hanoi; and in "Idaho," from the collection *Captain Maximus* (1985), the narrator seeks relief in Hendrix after being ravaged by a divorce and the cancer-death of a friend. Hendrix mattered to Hannah the way deliverance matters to a Pentecostal, and music—like tennis and flying—is everywhere in his work, center stage or stage right. In a 2005 interview Hannah told Daniel Williams: "Some of my pals are Bach, Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, and Mozart, ear perfect people. They stir me." In an essay for *Esquire* in 1993, Will Blyth wrote that "what Hendrix did with the guitar, Hannah does with prose: invent a whole new American music."[1] Are not all poets and fiction writers in some sense closeted musicians, those who wish to croon and jam but are held back by the daunt of instruments and audience? "Testimony of Pilot," from the inestimable *Airships* (1978), is equal to Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues" or Welty's "Powerhouse" at capturing the ostensibly ineffable transformative quality of song. The matchless lines in *Airships* put you in half-frightened awe at the altar of English: "Ruesome honks poured from his horn"; "what a bog and labyrinth the human essence is"; "I want to sleep in her uterus with my foot hanging out"; "profundity of the eternal sort had passed near." In "Green Gets It," the narrator wields "warp" as a noun to describe his ex-wife's loathsome aunt. Try that the next time you need to insult someone.

1. Though in a 1997 conversation with Rob Trucks, Hannah says: "People who try to make a direct connection between prose lines and music are fools. You can't write music."

Hannah's work is a postmodern fever dream of semi-free association, a theater of the absurd with overtones of Ionesco in which spiritual isolatos and vagabonds have become severed from civilization and the laws it requires to work.[2] In *The Tennis Handsome* (1983), one character says, "Neither of us is really from anywhere now," and another replies, "That happens to a lot of us." One narrator in *High Lonesome* (1996) ends his tale of emotional quarantine with: "I am dying for you, I have had hell so you may carry on. Love me, every breathing motherfucker around me. I give you my lungs and heart to eat therof. I taste like a sword." Hannah's is the unholy lyricism of an outraged id, verbal voodoo. You may hurl "lyrical" as a slur to mean plotlessness plus poeticism—all that prettiness in service of nothing, more blah-blah from the tenderhearted—but the twisted lyricism in Hannah always administers narrative, navigates through the rock-jagged darkness to the hub of us, and approximates the religio-mythical path from destruction to redemption: break it down to build it up; fertility from fire. Hannah's cosmos becomes a kind of backwards Babel where the assignation of new language permits not befuddlement but clarity, a Windexed view onto a once plush garden. He dismantles traditional American syntax and then constructs a bastardized hybrid of poetry and prose that is both riveting and irregular, a hell-for-leather homage to his first literary influence, Dylan Thomas.[3] Choose any book; fan to any page. Here's a bit from "Through Sunset into the Raccoon Night," from *High Lonesome*, Hannah's finest, fullest story because it achieves equal parts hilarity and heartwreck, every paragraph a marvel of linguistic bravado:

> Lovers are the most hideously selfish aberrations in any given territory. They are not nice, and careless to the degree of blind metal-hided rhinoceroses run amok. Multitudes of them cause wrecks and die in them. Ask the locals how sweet the wreckage of damned near everybody was around that little pube-rioting Juliet and her moon-whelp Romeo. Tornado in a razor factory, that's what sweetness.

2. Hannah didn't care for the term "postmodern" but don't let anyone tell you it has no meaning or does not apply.

3. In a 1999 essay called "Mr. Brain, He Want a Song," Hannah writes lovingly of Thomas: "God, to be Welsh and drunk and start hollering out surrealism."

The lover as aberration: somehow both hyperbolic and dead-on. The unexpected and inevitable choices of "territory" and "ask the locals." The clause "they are not nice": a child's simplicity with newfound might. The deliberately understated "careless" combined with the alliterative comic bedlam of "blind metal-hided rhinoceroses run amok." The Motown weirdness and collision of opposites in "how sweet the wreckage." And of course "pube-rioting Juliet" and "moon-whelp Romeo": the mind behind those two phrases just doesn't function like yours and mine. In the story "The Spy of Long Root," from *Bats Out of Hell* (1993), Hannah writes that high-tech bicycle helmets are "reminiscent of magnified sperm in full motility." In no one else save Updike could you discover an image even remotely comparable in sheer sexual brilliance and surprise.[4]

After we had prepared the fishing poles that afternoon and were ready to set out, Hannah asked me how the love of my life was leaving me. Not *why* but *how*, since the why is always the same: sacrifices regretted, promises ignored, emotional realities unacknowledged. Growing up factors in prominently. I replied with some forgettable gibberish my grief had forced on me. Hannah's philosophy of love was clear enough to anyone who studied his work: love often means compulsion wed to delusion. He is both a prophet of lust unafraid of semen and blood and an apostle of womanhood: many of his men confuse infatuation with ardor or neurosis with zeal, and they usually pay mightily for their mess-ups, as I was paying mightily for mine. "Love Too Long" in *Airships* ends with: "Nothing in the world matters but you and your woman. . . .I'm going to die from love." Good luck denying the truth of those lines. From his first book, *Geronimo Rex* (1972), to his last, *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (2001), Hannah deploys a vast knowledge of men and women in love and hate and what we do to one another in our worst moments, which are frequent, and frequently unforgivable.

Strangely, though, readers do not often regard Hannah as a scribe of the heart, a "love maniac," as Rick Bass dubs him. Female readers and scholars appear either to shun or abhor him.[5] His work might contain pro-female passages fit for a Sapphic rally, but his overall

4. About Updike, Hannah said to me, "He's a genius, okay? But I don't *get* him." Updike wrote a favorable review of Hannah's *Geronimo Rex* for *The New Yorker* in 1972.

5. The most notable exception is Ruth Weston in *Barry Hannah: Postmodern Romantic* (1998). Hannah himself admired the book.

depiction of sex and women, like his depiction of human behavior in general—unpleasant, duplicitous, sometimes savage[6]—has won him no fans among feminists or the easily unsettled. They tend to discount the goodness and compassion in his fiction—such as the scenes between the narrator and his pal's girlfriend in "Testimony of Pilot," or the human decency at the core of *Boomerang* (1989)—and instead make a show of turning on the wipers to clear away the gore (this despite Weston's assertion that the "spirit of Hannah's fiction" is "essentially optimistic." Hannah writes in "Carriba" that "we have to love each other . . . Even if we don't want to, we have to"). Academics in general have a hard time getting a handle on Barry Hannah, which has little to do with the fact that Hannah had scant regard for highfalutin' scholars—the narrator of "Idaho" dubs them "drudges working with computers against Shakespeare"—or that he was, like Richard Yates, always a writer's writer with a narrow appeal in the marketplace and the academy. Rather, his ferocious vision of the South and the oddities of his style and storytelling sensibility seem either to discourage academics or else inspire a cacophony of incoherence.[7]

I drove us in Hannah's old Jeep Cherokee to a spot he knew on a river not far from the conference, and once we sat on a grassy patch and began casting our lines into the current, he told me about a book he was halfway through: Edward Leslie's *The Devil Knows How to Ride* (1996), about William Clarke Quantril, the Confederate guerilla and mass murderer. "He was a killer," Hannah said, "a ruthless killer, nothing more. Killed as many people in Kansas as he could, mostly civilians. Makes you wonder how a demon like that gets born." He said this with a mix of admiration, contempt, and bewilderment, as if Quantril was an obstinate algebraic equation that needed immediate solving. The violence throughout Hannah's oeuvre is remarked on at least as much as his newfangled language; some readers and critics want to believe he invented brutality in literature. Hannah was indeed awestruck before human cruelty and chose to paint it in Homer's radiant red—no one complains of the

6. "Ride Westerly for Pusalina," from *Bats Out of Hell*, ends in sexual violence shocking enough to jolt drones deadened by the *Saw* franchise, and the narrator of "Carriba," from *High Lonesome*, christens one woman "a roving clamp."

7. *Perspectives on Barry Hannah* (2007), for instance, in which most of the contributing academics offer what academics are famous for and oddly proud of: earless, obscurantist writing.

violence on the sand at Ilium[8]—but not because he was a sadist out for titillation. Philip Roth got it right when he described the cruelty in *Ray*: "the brutish, menacing, driven stuff of life." The narrator of that novel notes that "some days even a cup of coffee is violence."

Our lust for brutality is part of the human fabric, and this fabric—all the strands that compose it and how those strands are woven—is Hannah's great subject as it was Homer's. To shrink from accurate illustrations of the evil in men amounts to cowardice, an unfinished portrait of this ravening world and our uncertain place in it. Hannah's reality is our own, "a reality sufficiently terrible," as Tate said of Poe. Hannah told Smirnoff: "Privately we are all monsters, if we'd only look at our obsessions." The final paragraph of "A Christmas Thought," from *Bats Out of Hell*—a brief parody of inane bloodshed—captures perfectly Hannah's postlapsarian credo:

> When you read and wonder, for six seconds, about the random, pointless violence of these days, then are blissful it was not you, having, really, a better day, stop and think: Could not these felons be, really, God's children, loose, adept, so hungry and correct in our world?

Open a history book: see what God's correct children are capable of.

And yet for all his fearless rendering of human violence, Hannah is only one part of a contemporary Southern triumvirate of bloodscribes. Cormac McCarthy and William Gay practice a godless butchery that surpasses Hannah's. The cosmic carnage rampant in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) has no equal in American letters; and Lester Ballard nightmares through *Child of God* (1973) like a thing bubonic, a heinous, deliberate misfit unlike any of Hannah's baffled villains. In Gay's terrifying novel *Twilight* (2006), Granville Sutter, a devil without creed or cause, uses a switchblade to slaughter an entire family and their dog. That species of straight-faced sadism has no counterpart in Hannah's world; when his characters go gorily berserk, as they do in the novel *Never Die* (1991), the violence is usually satirical.[9] Even his battlefield tales of the Civil and Vietnam

8. Hannah told Marc Smirnoff in a 2001 interview that he is "a student of the myths, the true myths."

9. Hannah's tragicomedy and satire of savagery put him more in league with Harry Crews than either McCarthy or Gay.

Wars can't compare to the malaise and murder in Thom Jones's famous story "The Pugilist at Rest." In a 2002 speech he delivered at Bennington College (published as "Why I Write" in *Harper's*, June 2010), Hannah mentions his "need to listen to the orchestra of living," and the necessary "bursts of kindness in improbable times, the warm hand in dire straits." Those who miss this in his work miss much indeed.

So Hannah was a little uneasy about his reputation as a connoisseur of human calamity, and confused about why the violence in his fiction would be so off-putting to some. "This is the most violent era I've ever lived in," he told Smirnoff. "Mothers killing babies—I've never even touched that subject. I've never really gotten to the grizzly, hideous things that you read in the newspaper."[10] One shudders to think of the fiction Hannah might have shaped if he put his pen to the task. I can tell you how he released a five-pound catfish from a hook: with concern and Samaritan pity. "This one's got some growin' left in him," he said.

The following night Hannah gave his reading to a standing-room-only lecture hall, a flock of admirers, emulators, disciples, and those car-crash gawkers who came to hear how Wildman Hannah might blaspheme and spew. But the only mildly inflammatory mention was about how most of the student work he'd been reading at the conference didn't have "hope of finding even an elegant trash can." That's the thing about a words genius: he tends not to mince them. (Once, an untalented student of his in Oxford asked how she could make her story more interesting, and Hannah said, "Try becoming a more interesting person.") He then read from a half-finished essay about the vision he had of Christ while recovering from cancer, an essay that would appear in 2005 as "Christ in the Room" in *The Oxford American*. "I hesitate," he began, "but there's no argument or apology here. Four years ago in April Christ appeared to me in a dream firmer than a dream. He was six feet tall, dark hair to the shoulders, with the body of a working man." I'm not sure if it sounded to anyone like the man had gone mad and was now perched on an Evangelical soapbox, but some did glance around to gauge the reactions of others. His sentiments should have surprised

10. Hannah is no doubt referring here to Andrea Yates, the Texas mother who murdered her five young children in a bathtub in June 2001.

no one: Hannah's South was always as Christ-haunted as O'Connor's, and now it had simply gone from haunted to possessed.

After the essay, he read from a short story about two friends, both archetypal Hannah heroes, beguiled and trying to be better. Three-quarters of the way through he began to weep. "I'm sorry," he said. "I've never cried during a reading before, never." The story reminded him of a beloved friend who had died. I suspect he was weeping also because he could smell his own death in that room, all of us staring at him, waiting for his legendary vitality to wilt. It felt to me like a very Hannah moment: the source of his grief was *human*—his affection for another mad traveler—and not some spiritual crisis. The pieces he read might have been disjointed that evening, but they reduced half of the listeners to silent sobbing. At the end he said goodbye to his Sewanee friends, some of whom he had known for decades. He seemed to believe he didn't have much time left, and he wasn't the only one.

In fact he had nearly seven more years—seven more years to extend the language with his wizardry. But he didn't or couldn't produce another book and had sworn off short stories for essays. He had told me on the river that he had abandoned short fiction because no one but other writers cared for it and because there was no money to be had. "Essays are creative," he said, "the same thing." Hearing this caused a quick stab of panic beneath my ribs because of course they are not the same thing.[11] The few essays Hannah published between the time we met in 2003 and his death in 2010 have their invaluable moments of Hannah mischief and shine but they cannot touch the effulgence of his best fiction and are mostly alternate riffs on his comprehension of scripture.[12] In 2009 the journal *Gulf Coast* published an excerpt from a novel in progress called *Sick Soldier at Your Door*—a Hannah title if ever there was one—and *Harper's* reprinted the excerpt, but thus far no word that *Sick Soldier* is finished and forthcoming. It became difficult to determine over the years how much Hannah was writing—no new stories appeared in

11. In November Grove will release a new and collected stories called *Long, Last, Happy*. Let's hope that Hannah was bluffing me and by "new" Grove doesn't mean old and previously unpublished.

12. In addition to "Christ in the Room" there's a piece he did for the magazine *Paste* called "The Maddening Protagonist," about biblical illiteracy, the Virgin Mary, and, for good measure, Beckett and Blake.

the magazines and journals—or how he was feeling. Friends in the South would send word to me every now and again; either Hannah was thriving on his Harley or tethered to an oxygen tank indoors. In the few letters we exchanged he wrote of his students and the many books he was reading—the Gospels, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus—but only vaguely of his work and never of his health. After a long time feeling ambivalent about teaching, Hannah had come to treasure his students; they were his darlings now. During his fiction workshop at Sewanee a student had asked Hannah for the best advice he could give, and Hannah said, "Thrill me."

When I returned from Sewanee that year I sent him some CDs of various musicians I wanted him to hear—Ike Reilly, Joe Henry, Boris McCutcheon—and photos of him holding up the catfish to the camera. His return letter, all vintage Hannah humor and wit, revealed that the man was incapable of writing sentences without a blaze in his veins. Near the end, he jokes about being "a minor James Brown without the musical talent but all the moves," and then declares, "I did it my way." He certainly did, and we will remember him just like that, always, as someone who had the guts to live, and returned to tell us of the thrill he had found.

4 Sept.03

Dear Billy,

Thanks for the cds--good stuff, good. Who is it? I listened to it tired last evening and thought it was all one man, one band. Is it you? What? Anyway it was good to kick back to after a long seminar class with very fine students. Teach Dos's Underground, Kafka's The Trial, six other modernist books that moved this old boy and sent him out to try and make the team. Your conversation at Sewanee was most welcome. Glad we could share some heroes, which is always fun. The pictures are fine, but I've got to buff up, dye my hair, and wear a much larger jeweled Las Vegas cross on the outside of my shirts. I see myself clear now, as an ageing perfect ass, perhaps a mi nor James Brown without musical talent but all the moves, only much slower, perhaps like a muscular disease kicking in. This I will do instead of readings, which are tiresome. Everybody will want me, making lit travel this way. You will study my moves, go back to Boston, vomit, and renounce much. I did it my way.

What a ramble, but I'm clearing the board for actual work here in the old old lit game. Thanks for listening.

Your Pal,